The Stunt

ANNE SAUVY

(Translated by Edward Peck)

'Must find something to do,' grumbled Meriadoc.

'Yes, but what?' groaned Ethelbert.

'Dunno. You're the clever one. Use your brains. Me, I can't bear to think in this heat.'

It really was very hot. The needle on the barometer had reached the second 'R' in 'Very Dry' and, something that had never happened before, a family of marmots had been seen coming down from the Charlanon screes to cool off in the swimming-pool. Snow and ice were melting so fast that Wilfrid, Meriadoc's great rival, had just succeeded in making the first descent of Mont Blanc by sail-board.

Meriadoc hadn't thought of that one in time. 'You know,' he reminded his usual climbing partner, 'you know that my publisher insists that I get myself mentioned three times in the press this summer before the book comes out.'

'I'm ever so sorry for you! There can't be many lads who have been asked to write their memoirs before they're twenty-one. What about the descent of the couloir of the Tour des Courtes by kayak? There were two dailies who put you on the front page for that.'

'Three,' Meriadoc corrected him. 'But there's one article I didn't care for. The one where it said that we were nothing but a bunch of ascetics who thought only about keeping fit and training for success. I know we do 250 pull-ups on each little finger each morning before even going for a pee. But the pleasures of life, we know about them as well as anyone else. We know what it's like to have a good blow-out on yoghurt!'

'Quite right,' agreed Ethelbert, his eyes suddenly gleaming with greed. 'But never mind what stories they tell. The main thing is that they should talk about you. After all, you have opened up a mass of firsts this summer, both on the cliffs and in the mountains – nothing less than Grades 7(c) and 8. Let's see . . . there was "Nietzsche's Nick", and then "No Edelweiss for Mrs Wilkinson". And "Saussure's Assassination". And don't forget "Another one Edlinger won't get"!'

'Pooh! And the papers didn't even mention them, there are so many new routes being opened up nowadays. What I need, don't you see, is to manage one really big success, pretty quick.'

'Well,' suggested Ethelbert, 'suppose you did something funny . . . eye-catching, of course, but entirely comic. Say a first on the SSE face of the buttress of Gendarme 3876, wearing flippers and a diving-mask. You could call it the

"Saint-Tropez Gendarme". Headline in the press: "So hot in the Alps that climbers think they are on the *Côte d'Azur*." The mask would be a bit of a nuisance, but not too much. And there ought to be enough room under the flippers for the edge of a climbing boot to stick out. I'm sure it's possible. Are you listening?'

'Hm. You don't say. What a lot of eyewash,' protested Meriadoc. 'Know what I think? I think it would look just a bit artificial!'

'Well, then, what about a descent on skis of a completely rocky face? That hasn't been done yet. Say the W face of the Dru! Not joking. Why not? With a film tacked on to it, as well!'

'Bah! You know – skiing, skiing, that's all old hat. You can ski down an overhang, and it wouldn't surprise anyone any more. As for the W face, even on a monoski . . .'

'Oh, you make me tired. I don't know what else to suggest. Perhaps you could beat the endurance record for the Rubik Cube, hanging on an étrier? On the side of the Aiguille du Midi so that the journalists could watch?'

'But I don't know how to do the Rubik Cube.'

'That's just the point! If you did, it would be over too quickly. And with a bit of luck you might get into the *Guinness Book of Records*.'

'No, that wouldn't cut any ice.'

'Well, then there are only the three other possibilities that I've told you about. The Frêney Pillar in 59 minutes . . .'

'So what's new?'

'Something on the N face of the Aiguille du Goûter, where the rock is so rotten that almost all the routes still have to be done.'

'Pah!'

'Or set off an avalanche on the Verte after the first fall of powder and go down on top of it on a surf-board.'

'I've already told you that that gives me the pip.'

'Well, what the hell do you want me to dream up for you? Blast it! How about a sex-change, and do as a ladies' first something you've already done first as a man. That would make a splash! You could call yourself Marinette. No other climber would have managed that one before you! And you'd be likely to keep the exclusive rights for ages.'

'You're pulling my leg,' said Meriadoc in a threatening voice.

'Well, then, go up the Italian side of the Matterhorn with a rising parachute and come down the N face in a barrel.'

'I think that's already been done,' sighed Meriadoc. 'No, you see . . . the public, the newspapermen, they need to be taken by surprise . . . to be *really* surprised! Get it?'

'That's it!' exclaimed Ethelbert suddenly. 'I've got a super idea. The walk round Mont Blanc!'

'What do you mean – walk round Mont Blanc?' Meriadoc asked thoughtfully. 'Surely that isn't done any more? With all the impossible stunts people are racking their brains to invent, are there really any types left who want to just plod around Mont Blanc?'

'I believe so, I'm sure of it!' replied Ethelbert.

'But how should I do it? In less than five hours? Backwards, or hopping on one foot?'

'No, quite the opposite. Make it absolutely simple. Take a week over it. Just the normal way. To prove that you're not only a demi-god, but also human like everyone else.'

'Perfect. Absolutely perfect! Out of this world. It takes someone like you to dream up a ploy like that!'

The undertaking was a tremendous success. Accompanied by a few journalists, Meriadoc touched the heart of the crowds by the human side of his act. All the papers published the photo where, sitting by the edge of a path, his forehead bathed in sweat, he was dressing his blisters. It was the start of his real career.