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FIRST ON THE ROPE

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climbing novel;
immersive, emotive
and sometimes
savage.'*

CHRIS BONINGTON



— **ROGER FRISON-ROCHE** —

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TRANSLATED BY JANET ADAM SMITH



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Roger Frison-Roche

Translated by Janet Adam Smith

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Translator's introduction

In dealing with the measurements and climbing terms in this novel, I have aimed at using the forms that would be most natural to English-speaking mountaineers climbing in France. So I have kept the heights of mountains in metres and not converted them into feet; also the length and diameter of ropes. But when it is a question of walking so many yards, or moving a few inches, it seemed more natural to use the English measure.

For readers who are not mountaineers the following brief glossary may be useful:

Aiguille: sharp peak, usually rock.

Alp: mountain pasture.

Belay: hitching the rope over a projection; the projection itself.

Bergschrund: the great crevasse which separates the glacier from the rocks on upper snowfields.

Cornice: projecting mass of snow on a ridge, generally formed by the prevailing wind.

Crampons: iron or steel frame with spikes, fitted on to the boot for use on steep snow or ice.

Föhn: south wind.

Névé: snowfield above the snow line.

Piton: spike of iron or steel which can be driven into rock or ice.

Rappel: descent of steep slope or rock face by means of a double rope round a belay.

Sérac: pinnacle of ice, found mainly in icefalls.

Verglas: thin coating of ice on rocks.

Rope attaches the members of a party together; *line*, which is thinner, is used for rappels.

Chapter IX

They were now moving at top speed up the broken rocks leading to the summit when suddenly the mist came down. At the same time, from the direction of the Dent du Géant came a peal of thunder.

‘Quicker, Georges, quicker! And if the sky falls down on us, well that’s just too bad.’

Warfield climbed on unperturbed, with only one idea in his head: to reach the top.

They realised they had reached it by the great gust of wind that forced them to crouch down among the summit rocks. Then it died down, and in the ensuing hush they discerned through the mist the wavering outline of a human figure leaning towards them; the weird silhouette in its flowing robes glowed gently, delicate bluish flames caressed it on every side, vanishing and reappearing, and the grey head was haloed with fire.

‘Lightning on the Virgin!’ muttered Georges.

This unearthly vision, looming enormous through the veil of mist, dwindled as they approached. Nearby, it resumed its normal size. It was after all only a modest statue of the Virgin, made of light metal and clamped on to a granite pinnacle some 3,700-odd metres above the plains, which was now transfixed and disfigured by the lightning. Little blue lights flickered continuously up and down the draperies and the whole statue, charged with electricity, crackled incessantly. Plainly, the electric disturbance about them was exceptionally intense. The storm played on all the highest peaks and the flashes of lightning followed each other so rapidly that there was no break in the succession of thunderclaps.

The Dru threatened to become the epicentre of the disturbance. The will-o’-the-wisps crackled on the skirts of the Virgin, as if

an invisible transmitter was exchanging messages with space. Strange noises filled the air; the climbers were deafened by a buzzing in their ears, while an unseen hand seemed to be plucking at their hair.

‘Georges, the bees! Do you hear it, it’s the bees buzzing – get down quickly – the thunder’s right on top of us.’

Jean Servettaz recognised all the signs that precede a thunderbolt. The others obeyed, realising how close the danger must be, and the three men flung themselves down the steep rocks up which they had just come, shinnying down the great slabs in a frenzy. When they had put some distance between themselves and the summit, Jean pushed his two companions under the shelter of an overhang. Just in time. For with a sound like the clash of titans, a thunderbolt struck the summit they had just left. The mountain seemed to rock on its foundations, and to the climbers it felt as if the Dru had reeled under the impact of some gigantic battering-ram. The thunder rumbled on for a long time, its cannon-roar echoing from side to side of the gullies. Then followed a silence that seemed even stranger than the uproar. Jean’s face, seen through the murky atmosphere, looked to Warfield quite extraordinarily grave; his features were drawn and he gave his client a look eloquent with reproach. Warfield tried to make excuses. Jean gave him no time.

‘We’ve escaped that one,’ he said. ‘Now we must get away! It’s not healthy here! Georges, you go first. You will fix the rappel. You, Mr Warfield, must try to go down as well as you came up. There’s just a chance we may see the valley again. Only a chance – this is just the beginning.’

A second clap of thunder set the unseen artillery roaring again.

‘That one struck the Sans Nom,’ declared Georges, taking the rappel line out of his sack.

‘If only it would snow,’ said the guide. ‘I’d rather that than thunder.’

Mist wrapped the narrow platform between earth and sky on which the three men stood. They felt themselves prisoners of the mountains, and the American waited in absolute silence,

not wishing by an ill-timed word to bring down on his head the reproaches he so richly deserved. Georges placed the rope for the first rappel. The remains of an old loop of bleached, worn rope were rotting round a block of granite, and he replaced it by a loop of new rope, through which he threaded his fifty-metre line. Standing on the edge of the drop, and straining to see something of the rock below, he cast the line as far out as possible, so that the two ends should not get entangled. It whistled through the air like a lasso, uncoiling as it went, then fell down against the rock face exactly where the young fellow had intended. By this tenuous line the three men slid down.

They climbed down desperately in the milky half-darkness, endlessly repeating the same manoeuvre of coiling up the line, fixing the rappel, throwing the line, and pulling it after them. They cast about for the right way, only recognising the route by the merest details – a stance, a rusty piton in a crack, or an old rope end already stiff with frost.

It was calm again and their casual remarks, amplified by the mist, seemed to come out of a loudspeaker. Two or three more lengths of the line would bring them to the hardest part of the climb. Already the stances were smaller, and several times they had to make extremely hazardous traverses across the face of the rock.

Just as they reached the top of a wall eight or ten metres high, the air hummed very quietly, as if a liquid were being poured. The humming grew louder, and once more they heard that bee-like buzzing. This fatal sound, heard for the second time, made the two guides turn pale under their tan, for this humming and buzzing were once again unmistakable evidence of an abnormal amount of static electricity. The mist, the mountain, they themselves, were so charged with electricity that a thunderbolt was inevitable.

‘Quick, man, quick!’ yelled Servettaz. ‘Georges, chuck down the rappel! Slide down it! And you, Mr Warfield, don’t lose a second, just grip the rope with your hands and jump over, hurry, man, hurry ... Ah, here it is, my hair’s standing up. Get on, can’t you, get on.’

Warfield tumbled rather than slid on to the lower platform where the porter caught him. Above their heads the rope disappeared into the mist. They were waiting for the guide to join them when a frightful flash completely blinded them. An unknown force plucked them off their feet and dropped them again heavily on the granite slab where they lay full length, inert and battered dummies. Neither heard the appalling explosion that accompanied the electric discharge, nor the sullen rumblings of the echo in the gullies.

When they came to, dazed and haggard, the snow was falling steadily, covering the rocks and glazing over the cracks. The flakes were melting on their blackened faces, and the chill soon restored their power of thought. Georges at once looked for his friend. The rappel line was still hanging down the wall, so he stood up and grabbed it, then shook it and yelled:

‘Jean! Jean! Answer me! Are you hurt?’

Nothing answered but the wind.

A chouca circling round croaked shrilly, and this sound seemed to give life to the desolation.

‘The client’s all right,’ yelled Georges again, as if this bit of luck could make Servettaz answer them. ‘I’ll have to go up,’ he thought, ‘he must have been knocked out.’ He untied himself from the climbing rope, not without difficulty, for by now it was wet; then, after tugging sharply at the rappel line, he decided it was holding all right. So up he went, up the smooth face, his legs at right angles to it, the soles of his feet pressed against the rock, to the accompaniment of groans and grunts that seemed to issue from the very depths of his being. When his head reached the level of the upper platform, Georges received a shock that nearly made him lose his hold. A horrified ejaculation died on his lips, and he halted, clutching his rope, with no strength left for the last heave up. The wet rope slipped slowly through his numb fingers. At last he forced himself to move and, finding a hold for the tip of his boot, he managed to heave himself face downward on to the narrow ledge where Jean Servettaz, of the Chamonix Corps of Guides, had just finished his career.

The guide had been struck by lightning at the very instant when he was preparing to straddle the rappel line. He had been struck while standing upright, with his right hand grasping a hold, his left flat against his body, feeling for the rope, and his head bent slightly forward. His whole attitude betokened movement and life. He looked as if he were still on the way up, watching the progress of his party. The fingers of his right hand still gripped the rock. The lightning, entering by the wrist which it had marked with a small dark stain, had come out by the left foot, for the boot was half-scorched. The body was intact, arrested in that attitude so familiar to climbers; only the eyes had taken on a glassy look, and their uncanny stare terrified Georges. He came up to the corpse, and spoke piteously to it.

‘Jean, old man, Jean – it can’t be possible. After all these climbs we’ve done together, you can’t leave me like this. It’s not true, is it? Oh, speak to me, can’t you?’

And the porter shook the strange, frosted effigy, unable to believe such a thing could happen. The wind tore at the ends of the red handkerchief that Servettaz had knotted round his neck. This helped to give the dead man a horribly lifelike appearance, just like the waxworks at the Musée Grévin that visitors have to touch before they will believe they are not real. A faint shout from below brought the porter back to reality: it was the American calling. Disdaining to answer, Georges tried to lay the body down on the platform. After a gruesome struggle, he had to give it up. The corpse was apparently stuck fast to the rock. He had not the nerve to force open those clenched fingers and gave up this ill-matched struggle between a dead man and a living. Cutting off several metres of rope, he tied the body firmly to the mountain, so that the wind could not topple it over the abyss. Then, taking off his helmet, he spent a few moments in silent contemplation of his partner on the rope.

Poor old Jean! What a number of peaks they had conquered in the five years they had been climbing together! They knew each other so well, they complemented each other admirably. Jean used to say of his porter, ‘He knows what I’m up to so exactly that he’s

always there to hold my foot when it might slip, or to safeguard the client when I can't do it. I'll never have anyone else with me!' He was nearer than he knew to the truth. Already he had begun to wonder how he would manage next season, since Georges would by then be a guide. Certainly he would do nothing, out of selfishness, to stop the porter from graduating to the leadership of a party: he was capable of taking anyone up anything, and Jean was proud of his pupil. Georges repaid, in friendship and devotion, the priceless gift Jean had made him in teaching him his trade so well. Thinking of the day when their partnership would cease, the porter had often suggested that Servettaz should then take on his own son. The guide would have none of it: 'Pierre? Don't you go putting such an idea in his head! I'm going to replace you by a chap young enough for me to lick into shape according to my own ideas.' Now all need of a successor to Georges was past. The rope that had linked the partners so closely had been cut, and death, in striking down Jean, had made Georges a leader. He must take over his command in the hour of danger, in the heat of action, just as a private soldier, seeing his officer fall, at once assumes the necessary responsibilities and duties.

The porter shuddered. It was not death he was afraid of! Death was an old acquaintance. You don't spend your life on the mountains from the age of sixteen, as he had done, without rubbing shoulders almost daily with that old swindler: up till now he'd had the best of it, as had Jean Servettaz. But like all guides, like all airmen, like sailors who don't believe they can ever be shipwrecked, in short like all other men who risk their lives daily, the possibility of a fatal accident never entered his head. Yet here, and in a matter of seconds, death had struck down the most experienced of them all, the very one who should have been safe from its blows and stratagems.

'Oh God,' he groaned, 'what can even the best of us do?'

A fainter cry from his client interrupted his reverie. He shook the snow off his clothes and got ready to go down: slowly and deliberately he checked up the rappel; the lightning had spared it, it was all right. Passing the line round his thigh and arm to act as

a brake, he slowly started down the face. He had some trouble with the wet rope which would not run easily. With some bitterness he reflected that they still had 600 metres of this face to go down, in bad weather; the fun was by no means over. Death had won the first round, and now they simply had to win the second, and the match.

Now that the snow had come, Georges knew they ran no more risk of lightning; the only deadly enemy was the snow itself. Already the ledges were carpeted with a soft white layer, and the ice glistened ominously in the chimneys.

