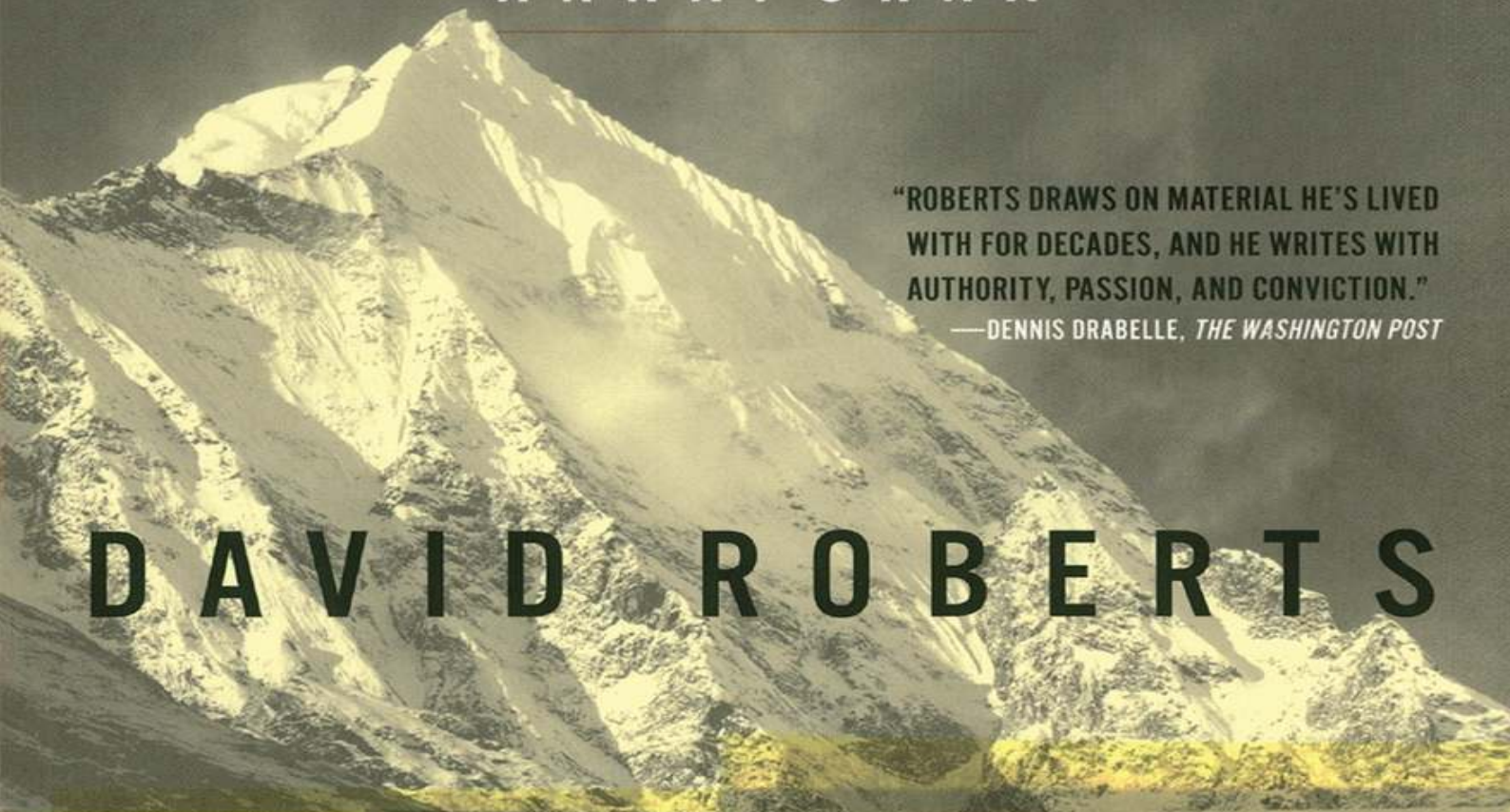




T R U E

S U M M I T

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED ON
THE LEGENDARY ASCENT OF
ANNAPURNA



"ROBERTS DRAWS ON MATERIAL HE'S LIVED
WITH FOR DECADES, AND HE WRITES WITH
AUTHORITY, PASSION, AND CONVICTION."

—DENNIS DRABELLE, *THE WASHINGTON POST*

DAVID ROBERTS

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TRUE SUMMIT

*What Really Happened
on the Legendary Ascent
of Annapurna*

DAVID ROBERTS

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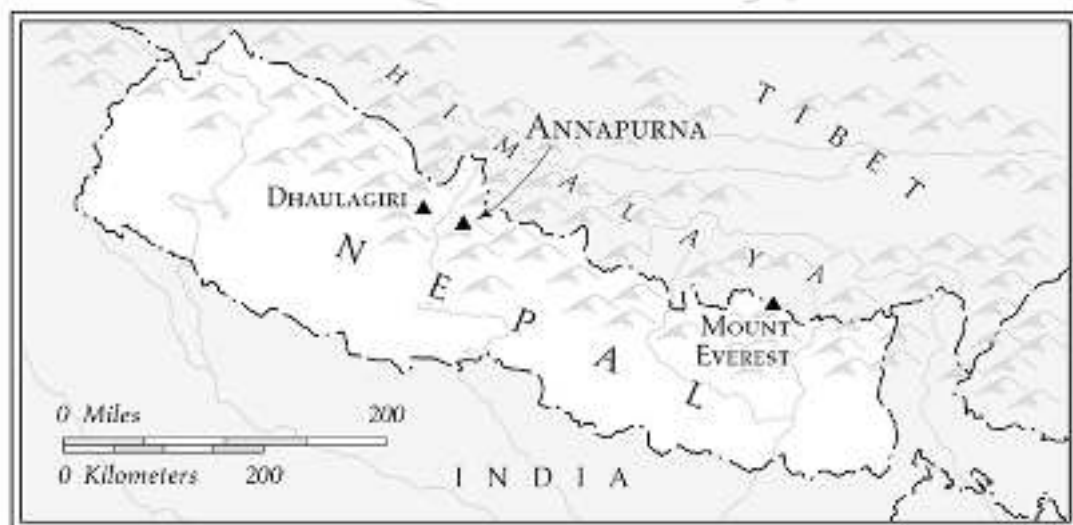
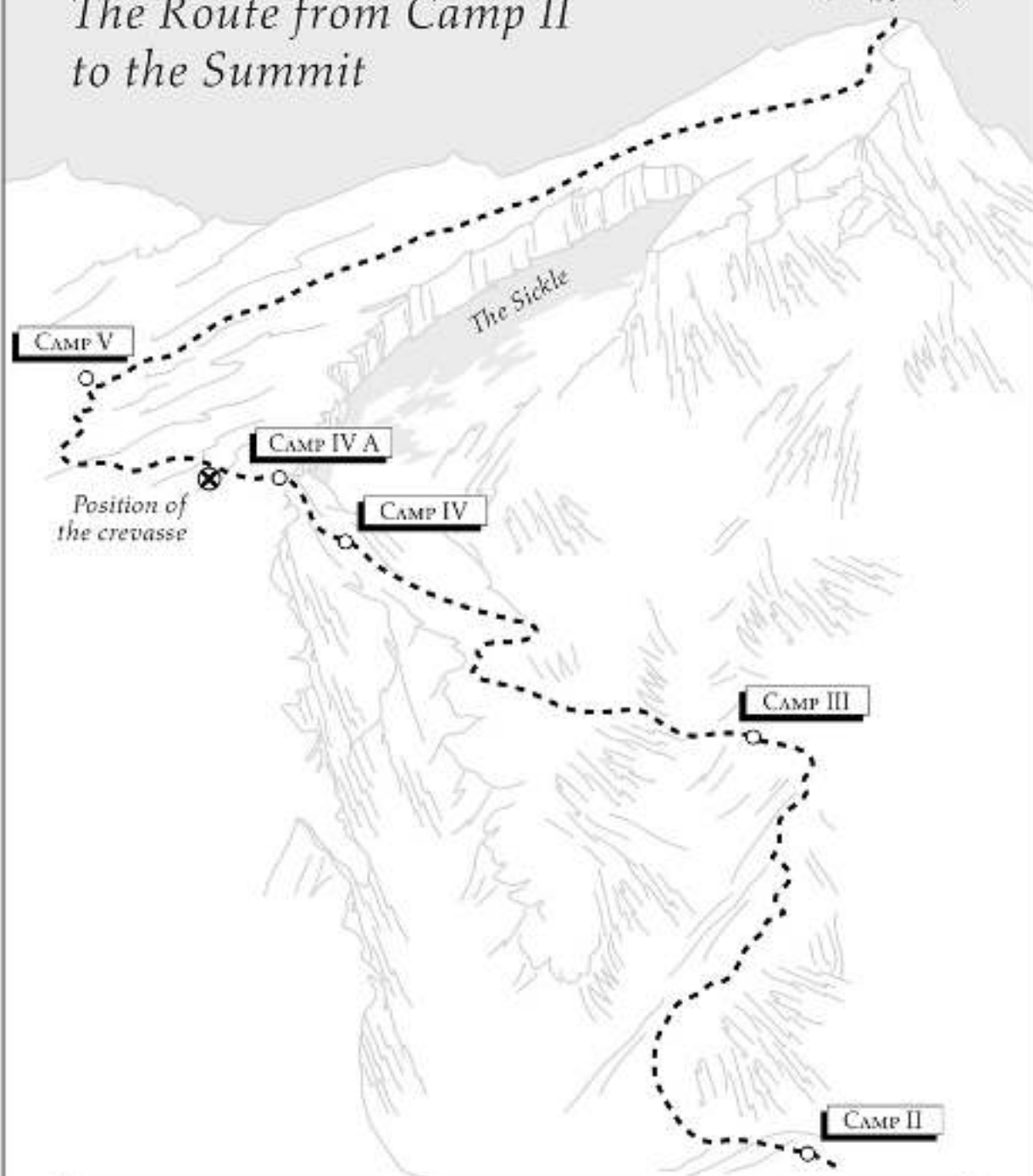
Gaston Rébuffat

Lionel Terray

Louis Lachenal

The Route from Camp II to the Summit

SUMMIT
(26,493 FEET)



June 3



IN THE FIRST LIGHT OF DAWN, at 6:00 A.M., the two men left their tent at 24,600 feet and headed up the broad, glaciated slope, their crampons biting crisply into the hard snow underfoot. The summit of Annapurna gleamed in the morning sun, only 1,900 feet above them. The wind that had raged all night had died with the dawn, leaving a piercing cold to rule the stillness.

For Louis Lachenal, a brilliant, impetuous mountaineer of twenty-eight, and Maurice Herzog, three years older and the expedition leader, it had required a long struggle that morning simply to jam their feet into frozen boots. Herzog had managed to lace up the gaiters that covered his ankles, but Lachenal had given up trying to fasten his. Neither man had slept a minute through the terrible night, as the gale threatened to rip the tent from the pitons and ice axes that anchored it to the 45-degree slope and send the men hurtling down the mountain. Through long hours in the darkness they had clung to the tent poles, in Herzog's words, "as a drowning man clings to a plank," just to keep the fragile shelter from being torn apart by the wind.

The evening before, Herzog and Lachenal had brewed a few cups of tea for dinner, but they had been too nauseated by the altitude to eat. In the morning, even making tea proved too arduous a task. At the last minute, Herzog stuffed a tube of condensed milk, some nougat, and a spare pair of socks into his pack.

It was June 3, 1950, and the monsoon would arrive any day, smothering the high Himalaya in a seamless blanket of mist and falling snow, prohibiting human trespass. For the past two months, the French expedition had wandered up one valley after another, simply trying to find Annapurna. The maps were all wrong because no Westerners had ever before approached the slopes of the tenth-highest mountain in the world.

At last, in late May, with less than two weeks left before the monsoon, the team had discovered the deep gorge formed by the torrential current of the Miristi Khola. Having breached its defenses, they had emerged beneath the north face of Annapurna. Racing up glacier-hung corridors, menaced at every hand by massive avalanches that thundered over the cliffs, the team placed four camps in a leftward crescent that followed a cunning line up the mountain. On June 2, Lachenal and Herzog, aided by Sherpas Ang-Tharkey and Sarki, slipped through a notch in the ice cliff the team had named the Sickle and crossed a steep, dangerous slope to pitch Camp V beside a broken rock band. Herzog offered a place in the summit team to Ang-Tharkey, the sirdar or head Sherpa, but the man, frightened by the cold that had already numbed his feet, declined. The two Sherpas headed back to Camp IVA, leaving Lachenal and Herzog to their windy ordeal.

Now the two men clumped slowly up the interminable slope, shrouded in silence. Wrote Herzog later, "Each of us lived in a closed and private world of his own. I was suspicious of my mental processes; my mind was working very slowly and I was perfectly aware of the low state of my intelligence."

It did not take long for both men's feet to go numb. Abruptly Lachenal halted, took off a boot, and tried to rub his stockinged foot back into feeling. "I don't want to be like Lambert," he muttered. The great Swiss climber Raymond Lambert—a friend of Lachenal's—had lost all the toes on both feet to frostbite after being trapped in winter on a traverse of the Aiguilles du Diable, near Chamonix, France.

The climbers emerged from the mountain's shadow into the sunlight, yet the iron cold persisted. Again Lachenal stopped to take off a boot. "I can't feel anything," he groaned. "I think I'm beginning to get frostbite."

Herzog too was worried about his feet, but he convinced himself that wiggling his toes as he walked would ward off frostbite. "I could not feel them," he would write, "but that was nothing new in the mountains."

The men marched on, at a pitifully slow pace. Herzog's dreamy isolation reclaimed him. "Lachenal appeared to me as a sort of specter—he was alone in his world, I in mine."

Suddenly Lachenal grabbed his companion. "If I go back, what will you do?" he blurted out.

Unbidden, images of the party's two months of struggle flashed through Herzog's mind: lowland trudges in the jungle heat, fierce rock-and-ice pitches climbed, loads painfully hauled to higher camps. "Must we give up?" he asked himself. "Impossible! My whole being revolted against the idea. I had made up my mind, irrevocably. Today we were consecrating an ideal, and no sacrifice was too great."

To Lachenal, he said, "I should go on by myself."

Without hesitating, Lachenal responded, "Then I'll follow you."

Herzog lapsed back into his private trance. "An astonishing happiness welled up in me, but I could not define it," he would later write. "Everything was so new, so utterly unprecedented. . . . We were braving an interdict, overstepping a boundary, and yet we had no fear as we continued upward."

THERE ARE FOURTEEN MOUNTAINS in the world higher than 8,000 meters (about 26,240 feet)—all of them in the Himalaya. The first attempt to climb one came in 1895, when Alfred Mummery, the finest British climber of his day, attacked Nanga Parbat. Radically underestimating the size and difficulty of the mountain, Mummery and two Gurkha porters vanished during a reconnaissance of the west face. Their bodies were never found.

By 1950, twenty-two different expeditions had tackled various 8,000-meter peaks, yet not one had succeeded. The boldest efforts during the 1920s and 1930s, on Everest, K2, Kanchenjunga, and Nanga Parbat, had been launched by British, American, and German teams. Although France counted among its climbers some of the leading alpinists of those decades, the country had made no great showing in the Himalaya, with only a single expedition to Gasherbrum I to its credit. For fourteen years, the highest summit reached anywhere in the world had remained that of 25,643-foot Nanda Devi in India, climbed by an Anglo-American team in 1936. The Second World War had interrupted the Himalayan campaigns, and it was not until 1949 that Europeans again turned their attention toward the highest mountains in the world.

Despite the fact that only one member—cinematographer Marcel Ichac, a veteran of Gasherbrum I—had ever been to the Himalaya before, the 1950 Annapurna expedition comprised as strong a party as had ever been put in the field in Asia. Herzog himself was an accomplished mountaineer, with a number of daring climbs in the Alps under his belt. The two junior members, Marcel Schatz and Jean Couzy, showed great promise (Couzy would go on to rack up a roster of first ascents equaled by only a handful of his contemporaries).

But the heart of the Annapurna expedition—its core of competence so assured as to verge on genius—lay in Lachenal and his two fellow Chamonix guides, Lionel Terray and Gaston Rébuffat. Throughout the 1940s, even during wartime, these men had pulled off one blazing ascent in the Alps after another. By 1950, they were unquestionably the three finest mountaineers in France, rivaled in the rest of the world only by a handful of German, Italian, and Austrian peers (no American or Briton was even in their league).

Yet through most of April and May 1950, as the team wandered aimlessly trying to sort out the topography and find its way toward 26,493-foot Annapurna, the expedition threatened to collapse into utter fiasco. With the solving of the Miristi Khola, all the expertise embodied in the team's six principal climbers came to the fore. The choice of which pair would make the summit bid had seemed to depend as much as anything on the luck of who happened to reach the right camp on the right day. That luck put Lachenal and Herzog in Camp V on the morning of June 3.

Now, well above 25,000 feet, sometime after noon, the pair traversed toward the right beneath the final rock band that blocked the way to the summit. Suddenly Herzog pointed, uttering a single word: "Couloir!"

"What luck!" rejoined Lachenal. In front of the men, a steep snow gully angled up through the rock band.

"Let's go, then!" Herzog urged, and Lachenal signaled agreement. "I had lost all track of time," Herzog later recalled. Facing the couloir, he felt a moment of doubt: "Should we have enough strength left to overcome this final obstacle?" Kicking steps in the hard snow, their crampon points biting well, the men trudged upward.

Herzog later described those climactic moments:

A slight detour to the left, a few more steps—the summit ridge came gradually nearer—a few rocks to avoid. We dragged ourselves up. Could we possibly be there? . . .

Yes! A fierce and savage wind tore at us.

We were on top of Annapurna! 8,075 meters. . . .
Our hearts overflowed with an unspeakable happiness.
"If only the others could know . . ."
If only everyone could know!

As he stood on the summit, Herzog was awash in a mystical ecstasy:

How wonderful life would now become! What an inconceivable experience it is to attain one's ideal and, at the very same moment, to fulfill oneself. I was stirred to the depths of my being. Never had I felt such happiness like this—so intense and yet so pure.

Lachenal, however, was in an entirely different state of mind. He shook Herzog, pleading "Well, what about going down?"

His companion's impatience puzzled Herzog. "Did he simply think he had finished another climb, as in the Alps?" he wondered. "Did he think one could just go down again like that, with nothing more to it?"

"One minute," Herzog spoke, "I must take some photographs."

"Hurry up!"

Herzog fumbled through his pack, retrieving his camera and several flags. For long minutes, he posed with one pennant after another attached to his ice axe, as Lachenal snapped photos. Then Herzog changed from black-and-white to color film.

Lachenal exploded: "Are you mad? We haven't a minute to lose: we must go down at once."

Vaguely, Herzog sensed that his friend was right. Glancing at the horizon, he saw that the perfect day had deteriorated. A storm was moving in—perhaps the leading edge of the monsoon itself. Yet Herzog stood there, unwilling to let go of his transcendent moment, lost in a whirl of emotions and memories.

"We must go down!" Lachenal cried once more, then hoisted his pack and started off. Still Herzog lingered, drinking a bit of condensed milk, taking a reading with his altimeter. At last he put on his own pack and followed Lachenal.

Of all the qualities that had made Lachenal such a matchless climber, it was his speed on difficult terrain that was paramount. Now Herzog watched his friend dash down the couloir, then hurry along the traverse beneath the rock band. Stumping downward far more carefully, Herzog saw the gap between him and Lachenal grow.

At the base of the rock band, Herzog stopped to catch his breath. He took off his pack and opened it, then could not remember what he was about to do. Suddenly he cried out, "My gloves!"

To open his pack, Herzog had laid his gloves on the snow. As he watched, dumbfounded, they slid, then rolled toward the void below. "The movement of those gloves was engraved in my sight," he later wrote, "as something irredeemable, against which I was powerless. The consequences might be most serious. What was I to do?"

THUS THE FIRST CONQUEST of an 8,000-meter peak began to take its toll on the victors. In his trance Herzog forgot all about the spare pair of socks in his pack, which he could have used as gloves; instead, he descended barehanded. The two men regained Camp V only just before dark, in the middle an all-out storm that severely reduced their visibility. Lachenal had slipped and fallen past the tent before scrambling back up to the shelter. Left to their own devices, Herzog and Lachenal would probably have perished there. But during the day, Rébuffat and Terray had climbed to Camp V, hoping for their own summit push on the morrow. As Terray seized Herzog's hands to wring

them in congratulation, he was struck with horror. "Maurice—your hands!" he cried out.

"There was an uneasy silence," Herzog later recalled. "I had forgotten that I had lost my glove; my fingers were violet and white and hard as wood. The other two stared at them in dismay."

Forgoing their own chance for the summit, Terray and Rébuffat stayed up all night brewing hot drinks for their comrades and whipping Lachenal's bare toes and Herzog's toes and fingers with rope ends, in an effort to restore circulation. (Because of the damage it does to frozen tissue and cells, the treatment is now known to cause more harm than help.)

The next day, as the storm increased its fury, the four men staggered down toward Camp IVA just above the ice cliff of the Sickle. But in the lashing whiteout they lost their way. With dusk approaching, carrying no tent and but one sleeping bag among the four of them, the men circled helplessly looking for a familiar landmark. A night without shelter would undoubtedly prove fatal.

Then Lachenal broke through a snow bridge and plunged into a hidden crevasse. The mishap turned into salvation. Unhurt, Lachenal called out to the others to join him. The snow ledge at the bottom of the crevasse would serve for an emergency bivouac.

Huddled together for warmth, shivering against the snow that relentlessly filtered into their clothes, rubbing each other's feet to ward off further frostbite, the four men spent as miserable a night as mountaineers have ever endured in the Himalaya. After two nights in a row without sleep, Herzog and Lachenal had neared the end of their endurance. In the morning, Rébuffat was the first to poke his head out of the crevasse. Terray anxiously inquired about the weather. "Can't see anything," Rébuffat answered. "It's blowing hard."

But after Lachenal thrashed his way to the surface, in Herzog's words, "he began to run like a madman, shrieking, 'It's fine, it's fine!'" The day before, trying to find the route down, Terray and Rébuffat had removed their goggles. Despite the storm that smothered them, at an altitude above 24,000 feet the sun's ultraviolet rays had penetrated the murk and left the two men snow-blind. Rébuffat had mistaken the gray smear of his blindness for a ceaseless storm.

The weather was windy but clear. Yet now the four men faced a cruel fate: the blind could not lead the lame down the mountain. Pitifully, Lachenal began to cry out for help. The others joined in. And then they heard an answering call. It was Marcel Schatz, who had come out from Camp IVA to look for the companions he feared he would never see again. As Schatz clasped Herzog in his arms, he murmured, "It is wonderful—what you have done."

Though the men were saved, the rest of the descent unfolded as a grim ordeal. At one point Herzog and two Sherpas were swept 500 feet by an avalanche and partially buried. As the survivors approached Base Camp, even Terray—the sahib whose strength had made him a legend among the porters—had to be helped down the mountain like a baby, his arms around the shoulders of a pair of Sherpas who held him up and guided his steps.

Herzog and Lachenal could no longer walk. During the next month, a succession of Sherpas and porters carried the men through mile after mile of lowland ravine and forest. Jacques Oudot, the expedition doctor, gave them agonizing daily abdominal injections of novocaine in the femoral and brachial arteries. It was thought at the time that the drug could dilate the arteries and, by improving the flow of blood, forestall the ravages of frostbite; today, the procedure is known to be worthless. As their digits turned gangrenous, Oudot resorted to amputations in the field. Eventually Lachenal lost all his toes, Herzog all his toes and fingers.

The team members arrived at Orly airport in Paris on July 17, where a huge crowd hailed them as heroes. *Paris-Match*, which owned exclusive periodical rights to the story, rushed into print a special issue, with a cover photo of Herzog hoisting the Tricolor on the summit, that broke all the

magazine's sales records.

As he recuperated in the American hospital at Neuilly, Herzog, who had never before written a book, dictated his account of the expedition. Published the next year by Arthaud as *Annapurna Premier 8,000*, the book at once became a classic. The story Herzog had brought back from the mountain was a stirring saga of teamwork, self-sacrifice, and—in the two-week push to the summit—brilliant mountaineering against long odds. The descent and retreat from Annapurna figured as a tragic yet heroic coda, which Herzog narrated in a peroration saluting the highest ideals of loyalty and courage.

What moved readers beyond all else in *Annapurna*, however, was the transcendental optimism of the book. The euphoric trance that had seized Herzog on the summit persisted through all his convalescent tribulations. With only stumps left where he had once had fingers, for the rest of his life Herzog would find the simplest tasks—tying his shoelaces, buttoning his shirt—almost beyond him. Yet not a trace of bitterness or self-pity emerged in the pages of his book.

Quite the opposite. In the foreword, he wrote of his ordeal, "I was saved and had won my freedom. This freedom, which I shall never lose, has given me the assurance and serenity of a man who has fulfilled himself. . . . A new and splendid life has opened out before me." Of his brave teammates, he wrote, "My fervent wish is that the nine of us who were united in face of death should remain fraternally united through life." And in the book's last pages: "Annapurna, to which we had gone emptyhanded, was a treasure on which we should live the rest of our days."

The book closes with a line as resounding and memorable as any in the literature of adventure: "There are other Annapurnas in the lives of men."

Fifty years later, *Annapurna* remains one of the canonic works in exploration literature. Published in forty languages, it has sold more than 11 million copies, making it the best-selling mountaineering book of all time. Though he would never again do any serious climbing, Herzog went on to become mayor of Chamonix and Minister of Youth and Sport under Charles de Gaulle. Today, at age eighty-one, he is the only surviving climber from Annapurna 1950 (the liaison officer, Francis de Noyelle, who never got above Camp II, also survives). In France, Herzog remains a household name, one of the country's eternal heroes of sport and exploration, in a league with the late Jacques Cousteau or Jean-Claude Killy. In contrast, as one mountaineering journalist estimates, only about five to seven percent of the French public has ever heard of Rébuffat, Terray, or Lachenal.

As for Herzog, the sense that despite—even because of—his personal tragedy, a marvelous new life had thereby opened to him seems to have tided him well into old age. In 1998, he published a memoir called *L'Autre Annapurna (The Other Annapurna)*. In its opening pages, Herzog declares that nearly half a century after his "rebirth," the sense of having discovered a new life still infused him with an "indescribable happiness." He considered it his duty to share that revelation with his readers.

FOR THIS READER, growing up in Boulder, Colorado, in the late 1950s, *Annapurna* came as a stunning revelation. Since the age of thirteen or fourteen, I had checked out of the public library a number of classic Himalayan expedition narratives—Paul Bauer on Nanga Parbat, Sir John Hunt on Everest, and the like—and devoured their sagas of brave men at altitude. But mountaineering books were for me a kind of escape literature, not unlike the Hardy Boys mystery novels or Albert Payson Terhune's fables of faithful collies, such as *Lad* and *Lassie*. It never occurred to me, reading about Nanga Parbat or K2, that I might some day go on a mountaineering expedition myself.

Annapurna hit me hard. By the time I read the book, at age sixteen, I had started hiking up some of the inimitable “talus piles” of the Colorado Rockies—shapeless lumps of scree and tundra strung along the Continental Divide, peaks such as Audubon, James, Grays, and Torreys. It took stamina to push on at 14,000 feet, and judgment to descend in the face of a July lightning storm, but I knew that what I was doing was a far cry from real mountaineering. Staring at a true precipice, such as the 2,000-foot-high east face of Longs Peak, I felt an ambivalent longing: surely it took the competence and arrogance of the gods to inch one’s way, armed with ropes and pitons, up such dark landscapes of terror.

Annapurna ratcheted that uncertain longing into full-blown desire. When I put down the book—swallowed in one sitting, as I recall—I wanted more than anything else in the world to become a mountaineer.

Over the decades, Herzog’s narrative has had precisely that effect on an inordinate number of adolescents of both sexes. It might seem curious that a tale fraught with near-death, with fearful trials by storm and cold, and finally with gruesome amputations of fingers and toes turned black and rotting, should encourage any reader to take up the perilous business of climbing. Yet so exalting were the ideals that Herzog lyrically sang—loyalty, teamwork, courage, and perseverance—that rational apprehension was drowned in a tide of admiration. Those Frenchmen—Herzog, Lachenal, Terray, and Rébuffat—*were* gods, or at least mythic heroes.

So I became a mountaineer, and then a writer about mountaineering. In 1980, having survived thirteen Alaskan expeditions of my own, I wrote an article for the Sierra Club’s semiannual journal *Ascent*, called “Slouching Toward Everest,” that tried to identify the finest mountaineering expedition books yet written, giving readers a taste of each. Summing up my roster of twenty-one classics, I concluded that *Annapurna* was the best of them all.

A decade and a half later, in February 1996, I met Michel Guérin for dinner in the French ski town of Morzine. A specialty publisher of mountaineering books based in Chamonix, Guérin and I had struck up an epistolary friendship based on many a mutual enthusiasm in the climbing world.

Our long evening’s conversation took place mostly in French, for while Michel proved to be an elegant conversationalist in his native tongue, his spoken English tended to emerge in gnostic bursts of decidedly unidiomatic phraseology. Over our second Armagnac, the talk turned to *Annapurna*. Michel reminded me of my paramount ranking of Herzog’s book in “Slouching Toward Everest,” which he had recently read.

I nodded and said, “Don’t you agree?”

It took a long moment for a wry smile to form around his cigarette; then he shook his head.

“Why not?”

I listened to the careful disquisition that spilled from Michel’s lips, first in shock, then in dismay. It is a hard thing to have one’s hero of forty years’ standing dismantled before one’s eyes.

The essence of what Michel told me was as follows. *Annapurna* was nothing more than a gilded myth, one man’s romantic idealization of the campaign that had claimed the first 8,000-meter peak. What had really happened in 1950 was far darker, more complex, more nebulous than anything Herzog had written. I found myself resisting Michel’s strictures: historical revisionism is an all too faddish trend of the day, especially in France.

Michel persisted. Before they had left France, the members of the expedition had been required to sign an oath of unquestioning obedience to their leader. This was not news to me, for Herzog had mentioned that pledge in his book, even recording the somewhat timid acquiescence of his teammates: “My colleagues stood up, feeling both awkward and impressed. What were the

supposed to do?"

What I didn't know before that evening in Morzine was that, along with the oath of obedience, the team members had been required to sign a contract forbidding them to publish anything about the expedition for five years after their return to France. During those first five years, by prearrangement, the only version of the Annapurna story that might emerge would be Herzog's.

As soon as the moratorium expired, Lachenal had made plans to publish an autobiographical memoir, to be called *Carnets du Vertige* (*Notebooks of the Vertiginous*). The book had come out in 1956. Years ago, I had found a copy in a used book store in the States. (*Carnets* has never been translated into English.) The last quarter of the book consists of Lachenal's diary from Annapurna. As I read it, I perceived no real discrepancy between his account and Herzog's, except that Lachenal was a far more laconic, down-to-earth narrator than his vision-haunted leader.

Now Michel told me that, just as *Carnets* was going to press, Lachenal had been killed when he skied into a crevasse on the Vallée Blanche above Chamonix. I knew all about that too-early death of one of my Annapurna heroes, but nothing about what its timing signified. As soon as Lachenal had died, Herzog had taken charge of the manuscript and turned it over to his brother, Gérard, for editing. In the process, both Maurice Herzog and Lucien Devies—the president of the Club Alpin Français and the man who had devised and administered the oath of obedience to the Annapurna team—carefully combed the text. Among the three of them, they pruned Lachenal's account of every scrap of critical, sardonic, or embittered commentary the guide had penned. The published *Carnets du Vertige* was a sanitized, expurgated whitewash.

In Chamonix, Michel had befriended Lachenal's son, Jean-Claude, who for decades had held the original manuscript that his father had written. Though furious at Herzog's intercession, Jean-Claude was deeply torn in his feelings, for on Lachenal's death, Herzog had assumed the role of *tuteur* to the bereaved family—an official post mandated by French law. The same man who betrayed his father's truth took Jean-Claude and his brother on many a childhood forest walk and supervised their rocky passage through a series of schools.

After years of friendship and discussion, Michel had persuaded Jean-Claude to let him publish an unexpurgated version of the *Carnets*. The book would be out in a few months; already it was causing a stir in mountaineering circles. At the same time, journalist Yves Ballu was about to publish the first biography of Rébuffat, to be called *Gaston Rébuffat: Une Vie pour la Montagne* (*Gaston Rébuffat: A Life for the Mountains*). Ballu had received the full cooperation of Rébuffat's widow, Françoise, who had enjoined her husband not to write about Annapurna in his lifetime. In particular, Ballu would benefit from Gaston's long and acerbic letters to Françoise from the expedition, and from private notes and marginal commentaries he had jotted down in subsequent years.

The upshot of Rébuffat's and Lachenal's uncensored commentaries, Michel told me, was to paint an utterly different picture of the 1950 expedition from Herzog's. According to Lachenal and Rébuffat, the team had been frequently and rancorously divided; Herzog's leadership had been capricious and at times inept; and the whole summit effort and desperate retreat lay shrouded in central mystery.

Herzog himself, now the father figure of French mountaineering, was about to undergo scrutiny that would deeply trouble his old age. The grand fête of French celebration, so long anticipated, on June 3, 2000—the fiftieth anniversary of the summit—might turn instead into a *agon* of reappraisal. As the only survivor among the six principal climbers, Herzog would have every chance to get in the last word. But would his most eloquent protestations silence the

posthumous oracles of Rébuffat and Lachenal?

~~Among the cognoscenti of French mountaineering, Michel told me, there had long been murmurs and doubts about Annapurna; but few if any of these hints had leaked abroad. Certainly before this evening I had never heard a gainsaying word about Herzog's *Annapurna*.~~

Listening late into the night to Michel's disquisition, I felt my shock and dismay transmute into something else. The true history of Annapurna, though far more murky and disturbing than Herzog's golden fable, might in the long run prove to be an even more interesting tale—or, fraught with moral complexity, with fundamental questions about the role of "sport" in national culture, perhaps even with deep veins of heroism quite different from those Herzog had celebrated.

The revelations from the grave of Lachenal and Rébuffat, Michel suggested, might be only the tip of the iceberg. What really happened on Annapurna 1950—and everything that issued from that cardinal triumph of mountaineering—was a story that had never been told. As a narrative, it promised to bear a closer kinship to Melville's *Billy Budd* than to the Hardy Boys. As we sat stirring our coffee in Morzine, I realized that Michel had led me to a story that, no matter how hard it might be to separate the "truth" from all the layers of ambiguity in which it lay cloaked, cried out for a chronicler to grasp and tell it whole.

Resistance



WHY WAS MAURICE HERZOG THE LEADER of the 1950 Annapurna expedition? His record of ascents in the Alps was strong, but not of the very highest rank. Among French alpinists a decade or more older than Herzog, two in particular—Pierre Allain, the driving force on the first ascent of the stern north face of the Petit Dru, and the superb Chamonix guide Armand Charlet—might have seemed more qualified for leadership. Among Herzog's contemporaries, Lachenal, Terray, and Rébuffat had all made more and bolder climbs.

The reasons for the choice of Herzog as leader were several, the consequences far-reaching. By 1950, there was already an established tradition of heading up Himalayan expeditions with men whose expertise at overland travel or whose proven record of commanding others outstripped their abilities as technical climbers. In 1924, for instance, George Leigh Mallory was the sole man who had twice before attempted Everest and he was unquestionably Britain's finest mountaineer. Yet Mallory was passed over for leadership of the fateful 1924 expedition, on which, with his young partner Andrew Irvine, he would vanish into the clouds above 28,000 feet. Instead, fifty-eight-year-old General Charles Bruce, whose main qualifications were an extensive knowledge of India and long service in the army, was put in charge. Even after a malarial attack forced Bruce to abandon the expedition, another climber, Colonel E. F. Norton, was designated leader ahead of Mallory.

The choice of leader for a Himalayan expedition was usually made by some national advisory body of senior mountaineers and explorers. In Britain, that group was the Mount Everest Committee, an ad hoc assemblage recruited chiefly from the ranks of the Alpine Club. In France

the body was the Comité de l'Himalaya (or Himalayan Committee) of the Club Alpin Français (CAF), dominated by the autocratic Lucien Devies.

The rationale behind choosing a leader such as General Bruce was that logistical acumen and tactical judgment were more vital to the role than climbing ability. In addition, it was tacitly understood that a less-talented mountaineer might more readily submerge his own ambition and choose the strongest pair of teammates for the summit attempt. Herzog, however, had less experience at logistics, less mountaineering judgment than men such as Terray and Rébuffat; and on Annapurna, Herzog would prove every bit as ambitious to reach the summit as his comrades.

Another factor at play in the Annapurna expedition—all but obsolete today, but powerfully felt from the origins of mountaineering in the Alps in the 1780s all the way through 1950—was the distinction between guides and amateurs. The guide was a professional, born in the mountains where he earned his living, steeped in the nuances of weather and snow conditions. The amateur was a man who lived elsewhere, who climbed for pleasure and passion in his spare time. Even though amateurs such as Edward Whymper on the Matterhorn or Alfred Mummery on the Grépou had spearheaded the finest climbs performed in the second half of the nineteenth century, they routinely climbed with guides. Well into the twentieth century, many pundits considered it scandalous and irresponsible to undertake “guideless” climbs.

At the heart of this distinction lay a class bias. Guides were hired hands, technicians of rock and ice, closer in status to rural artisans than to the urbane milieu of the gentleman alpinist. It would never do, then, to entrust the leadership of a Himalayan expedition to a guide. Terray, Rébuffat, and Lachenal were guides. Herzog was a Parisian (born in Lyon), an executive in Kléber-Colombes, a tire manufacturing company: in short, everything that a mountaineering amateur ought to be.

Finally, and most importantly, Herzog was Devies's good friend. Both men were staunch Gaullists. Terray and Rébuffat had served as soldiers during World War II, but Herzog had been a captain, commanding a battalion of volunteers against the Nazis in several heroic campaigns. On such stuff, the Himalayan Committee concluded, leaders were made.

This class bias is overt in the preface Devies contributed to *Annapurna*: there he characterized the redoubtable Terray and Lachenal as “locomotives,” as if all one had to do on the mountain was fire up their boilers and set them in motion. In contrast, Herzog is a saint of conquest: “Spending himself to the limit, reserving for himself the hardest tasks, deriving his authority from the example he set, always in the vanguard, he made victory possible.”

With Devies pulling the strings offstage and Herzog in charge of the expedition, Annapurna was conceived as a grand nationalistic effort. Devies, one of the foremost French climbers of the 1930s, was highly sensitive to the prevailing notion that France had done next to nothing in the Himalayas. And in 1950, the whole country still lay mired in the humiliation of World War II—a once-proud nation conquered so easily by the Third Reich, liberated not so much by the Résistance as by the Allies.

Even before the war, in 1939, Devies had written an essay called “Alpinisme et Nationalités.” A bizarre mélange of chauvinism and defensiveness, the piece makes for fascinating reading in the light of Annapurna. At the time Devies wrote, the two “last prizes” of the Alps had recently been plucked, with the first ascents of the Walker Spur on the Grandes Jorasses and of the north face of the Eiger, both in 1938. The former had fallen to a strong team of Italians led by the visionary Lecco cragsman Ricardo Cassin; the latter to a pair of Germans and a pair of Austrians (including Heinrich Harrer, later the author of *Seven Years in Tibet*) who had met by chance low on the wall and joined forces.

In his essay, Devies is aggrieved that these formidable walls had fallen to foreigners, for, he insists, “Today in France there are certainly climbers of the same quality as the best Germans and Italians”—adding parenthetically, “(I count the Austrians as Germans).” He enumerates the usual excuses for his countrymen: bereft, for instance, of playgrounds such as the Dolomites in which to learn their craft, the French lagged behind their rivals in the mechanics of aid-climbing with pitons. With war clouds gathering, Devies notes disdainfully that Hitler had publicly congratulated the Eiger foursome, Mussolini the victors on the Walker Spur.

Devie’s polemic ends with a clarion call to French mountaineers to match the deeds of those foreigners, who would, within the year, become their literal enemies in war. Throughout his essay he contrasts French and German cultural attitudes, arguing, for example that the French have the disadvantage of being slightly more cautious “because we do not attach any mystical value to death.” Instead, the best Gallic climbers, in contrast with their German and Italian peers, have “a much purer experience” in the mountains. “Their deeds are freer and more individual, they earn instead a truth that is personal and human.”

Rhetoric of this sort had everything to do with the conception of the Annapurna expedition. On March 28, 1950, just before departing for Nepal, the chosen team members met with the Himalayan Committee in the offices of the Club Alpin Français in Paris. Devies gave the team a stirring pep talk, outlining the history of Himalayan exploration, reminding the men of the objectives. In *Annapurna*, Herzog quotes Devies’s speech at length, then observes the “solemn air” in the “dull and dreary office in which we were meeting.” All nine of the expeditioners “devoutly longed to go to the Himalaya, which we had talked about for so many years. Lachenal put it in a nutshell: ‘We’d go if we had to crawl there.’ ”

Then Devies abruptly announced that each member must take an oath of obedience, which he recited: “I swear upon my honor to obey the leader in everything regarding the Expedition in which he may command me.” A silence followed. Comments Herzog, “Mountaineers don’t care much for ceremonies.”

At last Marcel Ichac, the cinematographer and sole veteran of the 1936 Gasherbrum I expedition, recited the pledge, with Terray softly murmuring in unison; then the others, one by one, pronounced the oath.

For Herzog, the ceremony was deeply moving:

They were pledging their lives, possibly, and they knew it. They all put themselves completely in my hands. I should have liked to say a few words, but I just couldn’t. . . . In that moment our team was born. It was for me to keep it alive.

Writing in 1996, Rébuffat’s biographer, Yves Ballu, benefiting from Rébuffat’s own notes on the occasion, put the evening’s events in a very different perspective. Reading Herzog, one pictures the ceremony taking place in a small office, attended only by the Himalayan Committee and the team members. In fact, the first half of the event, featuring Devies’s speech, was a press conference in the CAF’s *grand salon*, with many journalists and officials present. Ballu underlines Devies’s absolute tyranny over the French climbing scene: at the moment, he was simultaneously president of the CAF, president of the Fédération Française de la Montagne (FFM), and president of the Groupe de Haute Montagne (GHM). Sitting at his right hand was Herzog, secretary of the GHM.

Along with the stirring exhortations quoted by Herzog, Devies emphasized for the press that the colossal fund-raising effort bolstered by a national subscription campaign had raised 14 million francs (\$350,000 in today’s dollars) for the expedition. The implication became explicit: Annapurna was a campaign of national honor.

Later, in comparative privacy, Devies announced the oath of allegiance. The silence that greeted him owed less to the reticence of simple climbers, thought Rébuffat, than to sheer surprise. For Rébuffat himself, and apparently for Lachenal, the demand went beyond surprise: it was a shocking and distasteful requirement. Unquestioning obedience was not characteristic of the alpinism the two Chamonix guides had perfected over the last decade.

Against their own instincts, the men went ahead to recite the oath. They had no choice if they wanted to go to Annapurna. It was in this context—not in bland affirmation, as Herzog would have it—that Lachenal murmured (in literal translation), “On our knees, we would go!” At once Rébuffat chorused, “With joy in our hearts!”

That these two independent-minded mountaineers thus mocked the very oath they were forced to pledge emerges even more clearly in Rébuffat’s notes. Rébuffat characterized Devies as a “*victoriste*” (a coinage of Rébuffat’s own). Of the unpleasant charade culminating in the pledge of obedience, he jotted down: “Depersonalization. . . . A certain Nazification.” In 1950, no epithet could have been more inflammatory. When Rébuffat’s note was first published by Ballu, forty-six years later, the guide’s sour judgment on the expedition style of Devies and Herzog reverberated throughout France.

GASTON RÉBUFFAT was born in Marseille on May 7, 1921, the son of a workaholic bank official and an overpossessive mother. No less likely background for a great mountaineer could perhaps have been imagined—although that domestic conventionality may itself have driven Gaston from the nest. From his earliest years, the boy was consumed with wanderlust. At every chance, he set out on promenades among the limestone sea cliffs near Marseille called the Calanques; and a visit when he was still very young to a cousin’s farmhouse in Provence imbued him with a love of nature.

At a Catholic summer camp to which his parents sent him for the school holidays, Gaston discovered, in sports and organized hikes, the joys of comradeship. For the rest of his life, Rébuffat would sing the praises of the brotherhood of the rope as no mountaineer before him had ever done. Comradeship would center his life, and in 1950, on his greatest adventure, setting off for the Himalaya with his good friends Terray and Lachenal, he hoped to distill the elixir of shared toil and commitment.

Gaston grew up tall and lean, with a great bushy crown of dark hair brushed back from his forehead and a famously craggy face: all but concave, the jutting chin triangulating his features, thick full eyebrows guarding his mountain squint, a cigarette (later a pipe) often clenched between his lips in mid-climb. On Annapurna, he was a full head taller than any of his teammates.

Not until he was fifteen, on a long hike out of Briançon, did the young wanderer discover the Mont Blanc massif. At sixteen, he quit school to take a menial job, joined the Haute-Provence section of the CAF, and befriended his first climbing partner, a modestly talented alpinist eight years his senior named Henry Moulin. With Moulin, he made his first ascents of real mountains. On top of his first major summit, during a traverse of the Ecrins, west of Briançon, he was transported. “What happiness!” he wrote later. “My dream realized. I’d done the Ecrins. Was it possible? . . . My first great summit. And now, may many others follow.”

It was then, in late adolescence, that Gaston conceived as his ambition to become a member of the Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix, the most prestigious fraternity in mountaineering. That goal, as he knew, amounted to an all-but-impossible fantasy for a boy from the seashore.

The ancient village at the headwaters of the Arve, clinging to its narrow valley far beneath the soaring glaciers and aiguilles of the Mont Blanc massif, was, despite its role even in the 1930s as

world-renowned resort, one of the more xenophobic towns in France. Chamonix fiercely guarded its claim to have been the birthplace of mountaineering, from which the first ascent of Mont Blanc by Paccard and Balmat in 1786 had unfolded. The proudest office one could hold in the town was to be a mountain guide. Father passed down his expertise to son: certain families, such as the Simonds, the Charlets, the Ravanel, counted dozens of guides among their number. (In the Chamonix cemetery, the memorial to guides killed in the mountains names thirteen Simonds who lost their lives between 1866 and 1987.)

Only once before, in the case of Roger Frison-Roche (later to write the bestselling novel, *First of the Rope*), had the company of guides relaxed its vigilance and admitted an “outsider.” The idea of a first-class mountaineer hailing from Marseille, however, would have seemed to most Chamoniards a rich joke.

Yet by 1940, at age nineteen, Rébuffat had indeed become a first-class climber. His hallmark was balance and grace on rock. He seemed to flow effortlessly up cliffs where others floundered; rather than seize a handhold in a death grip, he seemed to caress it with his fingertips.

By 1941, Gaston’s record of climbs included a third ascent and a second ascent of two challenging routes in the western Alps. That year, as he pondered enlisting in the service of his country, he was instinctively drawn to a special division called Jeunesse et Montagne (Youth and Mountains). Since by now France had already been conquered and occupied by the Germans, all such service branches were officially civilian rather than military outfits. The rugged curriculum of the JM (as it was called)—eight months of spartan training in skiing and alpinism, with the aim of turning its graduates into instructors of other young men in the mountains—embodied a kind of French anticipation of the Outward Bound movement. JM aimed not so much at preparing men for mountain warfare as at building their characters, inculcating such virtues as manliness, industriousness, and team spirit. The service could not have been more appealing to the young Rébuffat.

On one of his first assignments, as he rode the train toward a regional climbing center, he met another partisan of the mountains, Lionel Terray, who was the same age. Gaston’s first impressions were mixed. “He is nice,” he wrote in his notebook, “but has an egotistical air. I spent the whole ride standing up: not for one second did he offer me his seat.” Years later, Terray recorded his own first take on Rébuffat: “His narrow features were animated by two small, black, piercing eyes, and his somewhat formal manners and learned turn of phrase contrasted comically with a noticeable Marseille accent.”

As soon as the two twenty-year-olds realized that they shared a consuming passion for hard routes on big mountains, a bond was formed. According to Terray, they spent the whole train ride comparing notes and talking of alpine projects. Soon they were climbing together, licensed by the JM to set off on little-traveled ridges and walls as partial fulfillment of their official duties.

With Terray in 1942, Rébuffat achieved his first new route, on the Aiguille Purtscheller. Later that year, the two men pushed a brave new line up the northeast face of the Col du Caïman, which Terray would call “my first really great climb.” The somewhat obscure but very dangerous route angled up not to a summit but to a saddle between two peaks. By now the pair had agreed that Terray would lead all ice and snow pitches, Rébuffat all rock.

The Col du Caïman came close to being a debacle. A nervous Terray dropped his ice axe low on the route, after which his partner had to make do with a piton hammer. Twice, trembling on tiny nicks of footholds on steep ice, Terray started to lose his strength; twice he avoided potentially fatal falls only with desperate lunges. With the route in perpetual shade, the pair climbed in brutal cold

Night overtook them, but they climbed on by starlight. At last Terray cut his way through the cornice cresting the col and the men emerged on that lonely saddle. Wrote Terray, "We shouted our joy to the moon like a couple of madmen." For more than twenty years after this epic climb Terray and Rébuffat's route on the Caïman went unrepeated.

Between the two men there was lively competition as well as happy camaraderie. Rébuffat was gratified to finish a particularly demanding mountain course set by the JM in first place, while Terray finished third. And in 1942, the highest honor he had ever sought was granted the twenty-one-year-old, when he was invited to join the Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix. His mentor, proffering the invitation, said, "You have great integrity, and you climb well." For Gaston, that his moral qualities were cited ahead of his technical ability formed a lasting point of pride.

All the while he was serving his alpine apprenticeship, Rébuffat was forming his own highly original aesthetic of mountaineering. After their initial spell of enthusiasm, both he and Terray grew disenchanted with Jeunesse et Montagne. By the end of his service, Terray later wrote, he was "completely disgusted with the organization." For Rébuffat, the rhetoric on which JM was founded began to seem highly distasteful. The unabashed aim of the division's architects was to form a "sportive elite . . . to exalt the finest French virtues." Climbers were to become "knights of the sky" through "the secularization of the chivalric virtues," ultimately creating "an army of true alpinists."

Ever since the first ascent of Mont Blanc, the struggle of men against the heights had been conceived of and narrated in martial terms. A team "laid siege" to a mountain; it "attacked" its objective by the likely "weaknesses" in its "defenses"; reaching the summit was inevitably "victory," even a "conquest."

All this chest-thumping was anathema to Rébuffat. From his early years on, he had gained his remarkable proficiency on slab and serac not by battling against the natural world, but by embracing it. The mountain was not an enemy: it was a magical realm of peace and harmony entered into in a spirit of communion, not of war.

Even though he had dropped out of school at sixteen, Rébuffat was intellectually ambitious. He wanted to write about his adventures in the mountains, and to pass on his vision of the Alps not as a battlefield but as (in the subtitle of a later book) a "*jardin féérique*"—an enchanted garden. Eventually he would become not only an author but a prize-winning photographer and cinematographer.

As he came into the prime of life after the war ended, Rébuffat grew as skilled and daring as any mountaineer in Europe. Without announcing to anyone his goal, he set about becoming the first climber to succeed on the six great classic north faces of the Alps, all first ascended in the 1930s. His initial blazing success in this campaign came in 1945, with the second ascent of the magisterial Walker Spur on the Grandes Jorasses, the "last great problem" solved by Ricardo Cassin seven years earlier. There followed the north face of the Petit Dru, the northeast face of the Piz Badile, the north face of the Matterhorn, and the north face of the Cima Grande in the Dolomites, the last two accomplished in 1949. By the time he left for Annapurna, Rébuffat lacked only the deadly Eigerwand in Switzerland, which had killed eight of the first ten men to attempt it. In 1952 he would round out his sextet, after a life-or-death struggle on the Eiger, during which he and the Austrian Hermann Buhl—meeting by chance and joining forces, just as the first ascenders had done in 1938—led seven teammates who might otherwise have perished to the top.

In his masterpiece, *Etoiles et Tempêtes* (*Starlight and Storm*), published in 1954, Rébuffat savored those six great ascents. Yet where nearly every other mountain writer in Europe (including Terray

would have narrated those tales in terms of all-out battles against enemies conjured up out of an unforgiving cliff and icefield, Rébuffat stayed true to his vision.

A famous aside in the book, titled "The Brotherhood of the Rope," pushes that vision to a height of mystical ecstasy:

Together we have known apprehension, uncertainty and fear; but of what importance is all that? For it was only up there that we discovered many things of which we had previously known nothing: a joy that was new to us, happiness that was doubled because it was shared, a wordless friendship which was no mere superficial impulse. . . .

I wish all climbers an Elder Brother who can always be looked up to with love and respect, who will watch the way you rope yourself up, and who, as he initiates you into an exacting life, looks after you like a mother hen.

The one who shares with you his fleeting sovereignty at 12,000 feet and who points out the surrounding peaks as a gardener shows his flowers.

The one at whom we all gaze with envy, for the mountain hut is his lodging and the mountain his domain.

The friendship of a man as rich as that cannot be bought.

ANNAPURNA HAD FIRED ME, by the age of sixteen, with the passion to become a mountaineer. Under its influence, exploring the ranges of my native Colorado, I graduated from easy "walk-ups" such as Mount Elbert (the state's highest peak) to more challenging objectives: a solo traverse of the treacherous Maroon Bells, near Aspen; a winter attack on the east ridge of Pacific Peak, in the Tenmile Range. Yet I continued to hesitate short of the real plunge—learning to climb with rope and piton and carabiner and the tight-fitting special footgear called *kletterschuhe*.

One day in 1959, in a local bookstore, I held in my hands *Starlight and Storm*. I knew Rébuffat from *Annapurna*, but had no sense of his individual voice or character. The nine climbers in that heroic saga remained in Herzog's telling little differentiated one from the other; they were an idealized "knights of the sky." Now, as I browsed through the small book, Rébuffat began to assume his own personality. Of the six great north faces of the Alps, I knew nothing, but the photos in *Starlight and Storm* made it clear that these savage, dark walls were far more daunting than any mountain in Colorado.

In the book, I could see, Rébuffat had somewhat chimerically adjoined his accounts of the six north faces to a pragmatic manual titled "The Beginning Climber"; perhaps the French publisher had thereby beefed up an otherwise dangerously slender volume. It may have been that how-to-treatise that made me dig deep into my pockets and buy *Starlight and Storm*, for I was still too green to know that you couldn't learn to climb from a book.

Yet it was not the Chamonix guide's succinct advice about sunglasses and shoulder stands that captivated me, but the lyrical prose in which he recounted the harrowing bivouacs, the gutsy lead up frozen pitches, that had won him his great faces. The author himself had evidently wearied of the pedestrian job of explaining how to climb, for time and again in "The Beginning Climber" he burst into philosophy: "Of course, technique is a poor thing, even a wretched thing, when separated from the heart which has guided it: this is true in rock climbing, or playing a piano, or building a cathedral."

In these deftly romantic pages I found a view of climbing utterly different from what I had discerned in the pages of *Annapurna*. Yet at sixteen I was still too naive to comprehend that those two views were fundamentally incompatible. Nor did I entertain even a glimmer of a suspicion that Rébuffat's *Annapurna* might have made for a different story from Herzog's. No one in America, as I was to find in subsequent years, doubted the veracity of Herzog's perfect saga of the world's first 8,000-meter ascent.

Starlight and Storm became for me a sacred text. The book closed with an affirmation every b

as revelatory as Herzog's famous final words, "There are other Annapurnas in the lives of men." "Life, the luxury of being!" Rébuffat pealed, then laid down his pen.

Still without any inkling that I might ever climb a big wall myself, I thrilled through each rereading of the author's struggles on the Walker Spur and the Eigerwand. A few years later, at the age of twenty, by then a junior instructor at Colorado Outward Bound School, I was asked to give dawn inspirational reading to the ninety-six students it was our job to toughen up in the Elk Range. With trembling voice but the passion of an acolyte, I read "The Brotherhood of the Rope" from my favorite mountain book.

It might seem odd that a Colorado boy should have taken as his climbing heroes men from far off France. By 1959, on the crags only a few miles outside of Boulder, a six-foot-five bricklayer named Layton Kor was putting up the hardest and most daring routes ever climbed in Colorado. One of my high school classmates even climbed with Kor—or rather, was dragged bodily up pitches far beyond his ability by a demon so possessed he would pair up with anyone capable of tying in at the other end of the rope. Kor would go on to become a climber every bit as legendary as Rébuffat. Though I was in awe of his deeds, however, I never chose Kor as a hero.

Similarly, at age fourteen I had gone on a hike with Charley Houston, an Aspen physician who was a friend of my father's. Houston, I knew, had led the 1938 and 1953 American K2 expeditions with gallant failures on the world's second-highest mountain. And with longtime partner Bob Bates, Houston had written an account of the latter journey, called *K2: The Savage Mountain*, that would become a classic. Houston would later serve as a mentor to me—but never as a hero in the sense that Rébuffat became on first reading.

I was hardly alone in my infatuation with the men of Annapurna. As I grew into my mountaineering prime, I encountered one American climber after another who confessed that reading Herzog's book as a teenager had turned him irreversibly toward alpinism. After 1951, Rébuffat published a series of gorgeous picture books, such as *Neige et Roc (On Snow and Rock)*, *Entre Terre et Ciel (Between the Earth and Sky)*, and *Mont-Blanc, Jardin Féérique (Mont Blanc, Enchanted Garden)* that by themselves created a kind of cult. The photos of Rébuffat in action—always wearing the same patterned pullover, caught in profile against a vertical cliff, rope dangling from his waist into the void, hands resting gently on wrinkles of granite while toes clung to invisible holds—adumbrated an alpine acrobatics far more graceful than any climbing his readers had performed. The dreamy lyricism of the text elaborated further on the radical aesthetic of the Alps as an "enchanted garden" that Rébuffat had invented.

It was the poet of the mountains who had inspired me at sixteen, writing, in *Starlight and Storm*, "I am immensely happy, for I have felt the rope between us. We are linked for life." That the same man could have penned, in his private notebook, "Depersonalization . . . a certain Nazification," after the oath-swearing at the CAF, would have utterly surprised me.

All his life, even as his books made him mildly famous, Rébuffat kept his other side—the skeptical individualist, distrustful of all things grandiose and chauvinistic; the satirist, armed with a gift for the mordant phrase—under close wraps. His friends knew that side, but not the public, and so it came as a great surprise to learn, with the publication of Ballu's biography in 1996, just how disenchanting Rébuffat had been on Annapurna.

In April 1999, pursuing the "other Annapurnas" that Michel Guérin's confidences had alerted me to, I met Françoise Rébuffat, Gaston's widow, in Paris. Rébuffat had died in 1985, a rare male victim of breast cancer, after an agonizing deterioration stretched over ten years. Françoise had remarried, but she continued to guard her husband's legacy with a fierce loyalty.

In her chic apartment high above Montparnasse, I encountered an elegant and forceful woman seventy-five. Françoise had met Gaston rather improbably one day in 1946 in Chamonix, in the *salon de thé* of the Hôtel des Alpes, a favorite hangout of both climbing guides and modish tourists that doubled as a dance parlor. The daughter of an architect from the Côte d'Azur, studying fashion at an elite school, she was on holiday with her friends. At twenty-two, Françoise was a great beauty.

"I'd like to meet a mountain guide sometime," she impulsively told her friends.

One of them pointed out the tall, angular Rébuffat, who was dancing with a Dior model. "That one there," she said.

Françoise thought her friends were teasing her, the *méditerranéenne* ignorant of the mountains. In her conception, a guide would be dressed in ragged trousers, wearing hobnailed boots, his visage leathery with exposure to sun and wind, sporting perhaps a fine mustache—no, that young man in elegant tweeds with his face expressive of urbane character. "That one," she said with a laugh, "he must be a *guide d'opérette*"—a vapid know-it-all.

Thus Françoise and Gaston met, fell in love, and married. He took her climbing; she introduced him to her world of artists and aristocrats and fine restaurants.

As we talked on in her Paris apartment, and later, as I read a moving unpublished memoir Françoise had written about her husband after his death, I realized that despite the social inequalities in their upbringings, theirs had been that rare union of two souls as devoted to one another thirty years after they met as when they had first plunged into the delirium of courtship, a pair who had never begun to fall out of love.

As he headed off to Annapurna at the end of March 1950, Gaston was twenty-eight years old, Françoise twenty-six. She had given birth to a daughter, Frédérique, two years before. Supporting the couple with his earnings as guide, Gaston had begun, if rather tentatively, to realize his ambitions as a writer. In 1946 he had published a book for aspiring climbers called *L'Apprenti Montagnard*; in 1949, a picture book about the Calanques.

Two days after the press conference at the CAF, culminating in the pledge of unquestioning obedience to their leader, the Annapurna team met at Orly airport to board the first of a series of planes that would eventually disgorge them in New Delhi. Françoise, there to see her husband off, remembered the moment vividly.

"I was standing behind a glass window. Just before they got on the plane, I saw Maurice [Herzog] hand Gaston a contract to sign. I saw Gaston read it, then I saw them arguing."

If the oath of obedience had come to Rébuffat as a shock, the contract seemed a far more stunning blow. With rising incredulity, he read the legalese that forbade him from utilizing his Annapurna adventure for "publication in any form, public speeches, radio or television broadcasts, books, articles, interviews, conferences, official statements, published photos or films." It was this coerced abnegation, designed by Devies and Herzog to keep the story of Annapurna the property of the expedition's patron and its leader, sprung on the team at the very last moment, that Herzog obliquely alluded to in the pages of *Annapurna* as if it demonstrated the voluntary altruism of his teammates: "From the start every one of them knew that nothing belonged to him and that he must expect nothing on his return. Their only motive was a great ideal."

"Gaston came very close to turning around and leaving, right there, in the airport," said Françoise. In the end, with the deepest reluctance, he signed.

So, even before the expedition members left France, the team was torn by conflict and resentment. Lachenal was similarly disenchanted. It was a hardship for the three Chamonix guides

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