

PETERBROOK'S PERIL. PRIZE STORY. BY E. W. THOMPSON. 'Still there was a wall at your back, observed Jack. 'That made it worse! The cliff seemed to press outward against me. It did, in fact, incline very slightly outward. It seemed to be thrusting me off. Oh, the horror of that sensation! Your toes on the edge of a precipice, and the implacable, calm mountain apparently weighing you slowly forward. Heads of sweat broke out over his white face at the horror he had called before him. Wiping his lips nervously with the back of his hand, and looking askant, as at the narrow pathway, he paused long. I saw its cruel edge and the dark gleams of its abysmal waters. 'I know,' he resumed, 'that with my back to the wall I could never reach the rope. I could not face towards it and step forward, so narrow was the ledge. Motion was perhaps barely possible that way, but the breadth of my shoulders would have forced me to lean somewhat more outward, and this I dared not and could not do. Also, to see a solid surface before me became an irresistible desire. I resolved to try to turn round before resuming the desperate journey. To do this I had to nerve myself for one steady look at my footing. 'In the depth, below, the myriad sea-fowl then rested on the black water, which, though swelling more with the rising wind, had yet an unbroken surface at some little distance from the precipice, while further out it had begun to jump to whitespots, and in beneath me, where I could not see, it dashed and churned with a faint, pervading roar that I could barely distinguish. Before the descending sun a heavy bank of cloud had risen. The ocean's surface bore that appearance of intense and angry gloom that often heralds a storm, but save the deep murmur going out from below my perch, all to my hearing was dead still. 'Cautiously I swung my right foot before the other, and carefully edged around. For an instant, as my shoulder rubbed against the rock, I felt that I must fall. I did stagger, in fact, but the next moment stood firm, face to the boisterous cliff, my heels on the very edge, and the now sensation of the abyss behind me no less horribly than that from which I had with difficulty escaped. I stood quaking. A delicious horror thrilled every nerve. The skin about his ears and neck, suddenly cold, shrank convulsively. 'With wild fear, I thrust forward my head against the rock, and rested in agony. A whirl and wind of sudden wings made me conscious of outward things again. Then a mad eagerness to climb swept away other feelings and my hands attempted in vain to clutch the rock. Not daring to cast my head backward, I drew it tortoise-like between my raised shoulders and chin against the precipice—gazed upward with straining of vision from under my eyebrows. 'Far above the dead wall stretched. Side-wise glances gave me glimpses of the projected summit coping. There was no hope in that direction. But the distraction of scanning the cliff-side had given my strained nerves some relief; to my memory again returned the promise of the Almighty and the consciousness of His regard. Once more my muscles became firm-strung. 'A cautious step side-wise made me know how much I had gained in ease and security of motion by the change of front. I made progress that seemed almost too rapid for some rods, and even had exultation in my quick approach to the rope. Hence came freedom to think how I should act on reaching it, and speculation as to how soon my comrades should hurt me up. 'Then the idea rushed through me that they might even yet draw it away too soon, that while almost in my clutch it might rise from my hands. Instantly all the terrors of my position returned with ten-fold force; an outward thrust of the precipice seemed to grow distinct, my trembling hands told me that it moved bodily towards me, the descent behind me took an unpeakable remoteness, and from the utmost depth of that sheer air seemed to descend steadily a deadly and chilling wind. But I think I did not stop for an instant. Instead, a delirium to move faster possessed me, and with quick, sidelong steps—my following foot striking hard against that before—sometimes on the point of stumbling, stretched out like the crucified, I pressed in mortal terror along. 'Every possible accident and delay was presented to my excited brain. What if the ledge should narrow suddenly to nothing? Now I believed that my heels were unsupported in air, and I moved along on tip-toe. Now I was convinced that the narrow pathway had sloped outward, that this slope had become so distinct, so increasingly distinct, that I might at any moment slip off into the void. But denominating every consideration of possible disaster was that of the need of speed, and distinct amid all other terrors was that sensation of the dead wall ever silently and inexorably pressing me outward. 'My mouth and throat were choked with dryness, my convulsive lips parched and arid; much I longed to press them against the cold, moist stone. But I never stopped. Faster, faster—more wildly I stepped—in a delirium I pushed along. Then suddenly before my staring eyes was a well-remembered edge of mossy stone, and I knew that the rope should be directly behind me. Was it? 'I glanced over my left shoulder. The rope was not to be seen! Wildly I looked over the other, no rope—no rope! Almighty God! and hast thou deserted me! 'But what! Yes, it moves! it sways in sight! It disappears—to return again to view! There was the rope directly at my back, swinging in the new strong breeze, with a motion that had carried it away from my first hurried glances. With the relief tears pressed to my eyes and—face bowed to the precipice, almost forgetful for a little time of

the hungry air beneath—I offered deep thanks to my God for the delivery that seemed so near. The old man's lips continued to move but no sound came from them. We waited silent while, with closed eyes and bent head, he remained absorbed in the recollection of that strange minute of devoutness. 'I stood there,' he said at last, 'for what now seems a space of hours, perhaps half a minute in reality. Then all the chances to be run crowded upon me. To turn round had been an attempt almost desperate before, and certainly, most certainly, the ledge was no wider where I now stood. Was the rope within reach? I feared not. Would it sway towards me? I could not hope for that. 'But could I grasp it should I be saved? Would it not yield to my hand—coming slowly down as I pulled, unrolling from a coil above, trailing over the ground at the top, running fast as its end approached the edge, falling suddenly at last? Or was it fastened to the accustomed stake? Was any comrade near who would summon aid at any signal? If not, and if I grasped it, and if it held, how long should I swing in the wind that now bore the freshness and tremors of an imminent gale. 'Now again fear took hold on me, and as a desperate man I prepared to turn my fears once more to the vast expanse of water and nothing beyond that awful cliff. Closing my eyes, I writhed, with I know not what motions, easily around till again my back pressed against the precipice. That was a resolute sensation. And now for the decision of my fate! I looked at the rope. Not for a moment could I fancy it within my reach! Its swaying went hot, as I had expected, even slightly inward, but when falling back against the wind, it swung outward as though the air was eddying from the wall. 'Now at last I gazed down steadily. Would a leap be certain death? The water was of immense depth below. But what chances of striking it feet or head first? What chance of preserving consciousness in the descent? No, the leap would be death; that at least was clear. 'Again I turned to the rope. I was not perfectly desperate, but steady, never beyond the best moments of my life, good for an effort surpassing the human. Still the rope swayed as before, and its motion was very regular. I saw that I could touch it at any point of its gyration by strong leap. 'But could I grasp it? What use if it were not firmly secured above? But all time for hesitation was gone by. I knew too well that strength was mine but for a moment, and that in the next reactor of weakness I should drop from the wall like a dead fly. Bracing myself, I watched the rope steadily for one round, and as it returned against the wind, jumped straight out over the heaving Atlantic. 'By God's aid I reached, touched, clutched, held the strong line. And it held! Not absolutely. Once, twice, and again it gave, gave with jerks which tried my arms. I knew these indicated but tightening. Then it held firm and I swung turning in the air, secure above the wave that beat below. 'To slide down and place my feet in the loop was the instinctive work of a moment. Fortunately it was of dimensions to admit my body barely. I slipped it over my thighs up to my armpits just as the dreaded reaction of weakness came. Then I lost consciousness. 'When I awakened my dear mother's face was beside my pillow, and she told me that I had been tossing for a fortnight with brain fever. Many weeks I lay there, and when I got strong found that I had left my nerve on that awful cliff side. Never once have I been able to look from a height or see any human being on one without shuddering. 'So now you know the story, Mr. Fraser, and have had your last walk on the factory wall. 'Hoopoke truer than he knew. His story has given me such horrible nightmares ever since that I could no more walk on high brickwork than along that narrow ledge in distant Cornwall.

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