CHAPTER SIX

MASTER AND PUPIL

It rained. For three days sun and mountains alike disappeared, and the valley of Kurtal was wrapped in a cloak of gray mist.

On the morning of the second day Captain Winter had asked Franz to meet him at the hotel. "Climbing will be impossible for a while," he told him. "So I am going on a short trip to Geneva."

"Then you will come back, sir?"

"Yes, then I'll come back." The Englishman paused, and his gray eyes studied the guide's face. "And I don't have to tell you, do I," he asked, "why I'm coming back?"

Franz said nothing.

"We could do it, you know. You and I, together. You're the best guide in the valley, Franz, and I'd rather do it with you than any man in the world."

Franz was shaking his head slowly.

"All right," said Winter, "you're still not convinced, and I'm not going to argue. . . . Let's leave it this way. I'll be gone only a few days. Think it over while I'm away; decide what's really in your heart; and when I come back—"

The sound of a horn came from the coach in the square outside. Winter shook hands and made ready to leave. "One other thing," he said, turning. "About the boy. Don't be too hard on him."

"The boy is all right," said Franz gruffly. "He is back where he belongs."

"Back where he belonged," Rudi scraped the dishes. He soaked them, scrubbed them, dried them, stacked them and put them on the shelves. A few hours later he did it all over again. And that evening. And the next morning.

The rain beat against the kitchen windows. Mist filled the streets beyond. And he was glad of the mist and the rain, because they shut out the mountains. He did not want to see the mountains: reminding him, mocking him.

His Uncle Franz had told no one of what had happened on the Wunderhorn, but whether from kindness or from family pride Rudi didn't know. When his mother had asked how things had gone, Franz had merely shrugged and said, "He is back all in one piece. Now he can return to his proper work." And the next day she had told Rudi to take his ax, pack and boots over to Franz's house. "If he can sell them, you will of course get the money," she said. "But it is a shame that they should lie idle in a cupboard when you have no more use for them."

In the hotel kitchen, Teo Zurbriggen watched him and said nothing. But he knew that something had gone wrong, and Rudi knew that he knew, and on the third morning he could keep his misery to himself no longer and

told the old man the whole story. When he had finished the cook shook his head and muttered, "Yes, that was bad. Bad. That is the trouble with you young ones. Once you have learned a little, then you think that you know it all."

Rudi worked. He ate and slept and got up and worked again. He did not see his uncle. He avoided his friends. His mind felt numb—frozen—and in it was only one small light, one corner of warmth. This was the thought of Captain Winter's return. Just how it would affect him, or for what he could hope from it, he could not have said. But still it was there. The waiting. The hope. Without it, he thought, he could never have faced each dreary day as it stretched before him.

On the fourth day the weather cleared. First the rain stopped. Then the mist lifted slowly, disclosing the high world above the valley: the meadows, the forests, the boulder-slopes, the glaciers, and finally the great circle of the peaks. Up on the peaks, of course, it had not been rain that had fallen, but snow, and the host stood white and gleaming in the returning sun. High above all the rest rose the Citadel, its summit a vast, blinding dazzle in the cloudless sky.

Teo stood at the open window and sniffed the air like an old bloodhound. Then he turned and looked at Rudi, who was at his usual place at the dishpan.

"Tomorrow is your day off?" he asked.

"Yes," said Rudi listlessly.

"I will make it my day off too. Gretchen can manage. Meet me at my house at eight o'clock."

The boy stared at him, uncomprehending. "Your house, sir?" he repeated.

"Yes, we will start from there."

"Start? What do you mean? Where are we going?"

"You are going to school," said Old Teo.

Leaving the town, they followed a twisting path up through the pastures. It was not the path that led toward the Citadel and Wunderhorn, but another one, on the opposite side of the valley. Old Teo went first and, in spite of his limp, kept up a strong and steady pace; and in two hours they were out of the forest and on the boulder-slope above. Directly in front of them now was a small peak known as the Felsberg. Dwarfed by the greater peaks around it, it was scarcely noticeable from the valley, and its summit was not even high enough to have caught snow in the recent storm. But, though small, it was steep and rugged, and it was often used as a "practice mountain" by guides and visiting climbers.

"Well," said Teo, peering up at its crags, "now we will see if you are a climber or a dishwasher."

Skirting the base of the Felsberg, they came to the foot of a tall cliff, and Teo sat down on a boulder. "All right," he said. "To the top and back, please. I will watch."

"Yes sir," said Rudi.

For a few minutes he studied the cliff, picking out his route. Then he started off. He did not, of course, have his fine new boots, and with smooth-soled shoes he had to be extra careful; but he concentrated closely and made

good progress. He did not hug the rock, as an amateur would, but leaned well out from it, so that he could see what he was doing. He tested each hand and foothold before he trusted his weight to it and made sure that, whenever possible, he had three sound points of support. After each section of the climb he paused and again studied the rocks above him, so that he would not, by haphazard climbing, get himself into some impossible position from which he could neither go on nor descend. Reaching the top of the cliff, he rested briefly. Then, with equal care and concentration, he climbed back down to where Teo was waiting.

"Was it all right?" he asked.

"Yes, of course it was all right," said the cook. "And how else should it be? On such a little thing a cow could go all right—with three legs."

They moved to another point, and he had Rudi climb again. He had him climb a cliff face, on slabs, in a steep chimney, on a knife-edged ridge. "That was a little harder," he conceded, when the boy returned to him again. "For that it would take a four-legged cow."

They circled to another side of the peak, and Teo looked up at it. "Can you do this one?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so," said Rudi.

"All right—do it with this." Unslinging his pack from his shoulders, Teo emptied out the few things that were in it and refilled it with heavy stones.

"But—but that will throw me off balance—"

"Of course it will throw you off balance. On a real

mountain, what would you rather be: a little off balance or dead from cold or starvation?"

Rudi slung on the load, and it almost buckled his knees. As he climbed, it swung maddeningly from side to side; it caught on projections and got wedged into clefts; on the steeper pitches it seemed to claw at his back like a live thing, trying to pull him loose from his delicate holds in the rock. But he made it. Up and down again. His shoulders ached, his knees shook, his body poured out sweat—but he made it.

"You want to be a guide," said Old Teo, as he rested. "A guide carries a pack. When he is a real guide he does not think of it as a load or a burden. It is as much a part of him as his rope or his boots or his clothing. It is like part of his body. Do you understand?"

Rudi nodded.

"All right, do it again."

Rudi did it again.

Then Teo uncoiled his rope. "Show me your knots," he said.

The boy tied and untied knots, and the old man told him what was wrong with them. He had him practice until they were right. Next they turned to belaying—the technique of holding another person on a rope. First they worked on the rock belay, in which the rope is hitched around a projection in the mountain, to take the pull if a climber should fall; then on the body belay, used when there is no such projection, in which the rope is supported by the climber's own shoulders and arms. "Now let us see

you rappel," said Teo, when that was over. And for a half-hour, while he watched and criticized, Rudi practiced lowering himself down unclimbable cliffs by means of the doubled rope wound around his body.

By now it was past midday. Teo squinted up at the sun. "Let us eat lunch," he said. "Afterwards we will do the more important things."

Rudi had no idea what "the more important things" were; but he let it go. He would find out soon enough. Side by side, he and the old man sat on a flat rock at the foot of the Felsberg, munching their bread and sausage and looking out over the valley.

"Do you think I will ever learn, Teo?" he asked.

"Learn? To climb?" Teo rubbed a gnarled hand slowly along his jaw. "If by climbing," he said, "you mean putting one foot in front of the other and going up and down a mountain, you have learned already. Or perhaps you did not need to learn, but were born knowing." He paused, searching for the words for his thoughts. "But if you mean more than that—if you mean climbing as a guide climbs, as a true mountaineer climbs—then the answer is still to be seen."

"I want to learn, Teo. Teach me. Please teach me."

"I am not sure it is a thing that can be taught. Rather does it come with living—with growing. These climbs you have made just now: you did well on them, yes. But it is not important. It does not really matter. Do you know why it does not matter? It is because you made them alone."

Rudi started to speak, but the old man went on: "To climb alone, as one person—to find a way up steep places and not fall off: that is a part of mountaineering, of course. But only a small part. On a big mountain one does not climb alone. A guide does not climb alone. What does the word *guide* mean? It means to lead others. To help others. The other day, with that foolishness on the Wunderhorn. How did it happen? Why did it happen? Was it not, perhaps, because you had not yet learned this? Because you were thinking, not of others, but only of yourself?"

Teo was looking at Rudi, and the old eyes were not unkindly. But the boy could not meet them.

"Yes," he murmured.

"And so you did a thing to be ashamed of."

"Yes."

They were silent awhile. The sun gleamed on the mountains. High in the sky across the valley, it struck with white fire on the crest of the Citadel, untouched and inviolate since the beginning of time.

"You did not know your father—" said Old Teo quietly.

Rudi shook his head.

"So I will tell you something about him. Your father was the best climber there has ever been in Kurtal. He was strong. He was sure. He could go places on a mountain that other men would not even dream of. But it was not only this that made him the best. It was that—how shall I say it?—that he had a flame in him; a thing inside; not

of the body but of the heart. Alone of all the guides in the valley, he believed that the Citadel could be climbed, and it was the hope of his life that he would be the one to do it."

Teo paused and smiled a little. "Perhaps you have heard," he said, "that your father, when he climbed, always wore a red shirt?"

"Yes, I have heard," Rudi murmured.

"And do you know why he wore it? He wore it, he said, because he knew that someday he would stand on the summit of the Citadel. He would stand there and put a pole in the snow, and then he would take off the shirt and tie it to the pole like a flag, and the red flag in the sky would be seen from all the valleys and cities of Switzerland. When your father said this, he smiled. He pretended he was making a joke. But, inside, it was not a joke. It was what he dreamed of; what he lived for."

Teo stared out at the great mountain. "Then at last," he said, "he had his chance. There came to Kurtal the great English climber, Sir Edward Stephenson, and he too believed the Citadel could be climbed, and wanted to do it. He and your father talked. They made their plans. They searched and explored. And then they set out. I was the only man in the valley who would go with them, and they took me along as assistant guide and porter."

Again he paused. He looked at Rudi's face. "Yes, you know the story. And you do not want to hear it again. But now you must hear it again, because it is the story of what

I have been saying to you. It is a story that any boy who would be a guide must know and never forget as long as he lives."

Rudi did not speak.

"We started out," said Old Teo. "They had decided that the southeast ridge gave the best chance for success, so we went up the Blue Glacier and spent the night at the old hut at the top. The next morning we began climbing the ridge. It was hard, but not too hard. It went. By midday we had gained perhaps two thousand feet and an hour later were at the base of the big cliff that is called the Fortress. Here it was much harder; perhaps impossible." He pointed out across the blue miles of space. "Even from here you can see how the walls stand up. There was no way over them, so we looked for a way around. First we went to the right, then to the left, and on the left, far out, almost overhanging the south face, we saw what looked like an opening. We started up for it; we were nearly there. And then the accident happened. High up on the Fortress there was a great roar, and we knew that rocks were falling. We tried to run for shelter. We almost made it. But not quite. Suddenly the great rocks were crashing around us, and, though your father and I were not hit, Sir Edward was. A rock fell beside him and rolled against him, and his leg was broken.

"For an hour we stayed there. We did what we could for him, but it was not much. And of course two men alone could not get him down. Others would have to be brought up from the village, with slings and a stretcher.

Your father decided that I should go down. 'And you?' I asked. 'I will stay here,' he said. It was getting late, and soon it would be dark. At the best it would be noon the next day before help could arrive. But there was nothing else to do. One of us had to stay with Sir Edward, and your father, who was chief guide, insisted that it be he. So I left them there and started down. Night came, and I lost my way. I slipped and fell." Teo paused and looked down at his misshapen body. "I fell, not all the way, but thirty feet, onto my left side. And since then I have been what you see now.

"But I was not dead. I was able to crawl on to the hut, and in the hut were two chamois hunters, and they hurried down to Kurtal. In the morning the rescue party arrived. But meanwhile a storm had come up. For two days no one could set foot on the mountain, and on the third, when they started up, they already knew what they would find. Sir Edward and your father were in a little cave beneath the Fortress, where I had left them. They were dead. Frozen."

During his recital the old man had kept his eyes fixed on the mountain, but now once more he turned and looked at Rudi. "Now do you understand," he said, "why I have again made you hear this story? Your father did not die because a mountain was too steep. He did not die for conquest or for glory. Waiting there on that ridge, he himself was strong enough to go on up, or to go down. But he would not go, because he would not leave his client. He was thinking, not of himself, but of another. His red

shirt—the flag that was to fly from the top of the Citadel—do you know where they found it? On Sir Edward Stephenson. While he himself was freezing to death, your father had taken it from his own back to try to keep another man warm."

There was a long silence.

Then Teo stood up. "Well, it is getting late," he said. "And there is still one more climb to be made."

He picked up his rope and handed one end to Rudi. Then, to the boy's astonishment, he tied the other end around himself.

"You—you will climb too?" asked Rudi.

"Yes, I will climb too."

Rudi looked up at the sheer cliffs rising above them. Then back at Teo. He looked at the crippled leg, the hunched shoulder, the withered arm. "But—but you cannot—" he protested.

"I know I cannot," said the cook. "Not alone, without help. . . . But I will not be alone. And you will help me."

Rudi stared at him.

"You will be my guide," said Teo.

"You mean—you would trust yourself—"

"To the son of Josef Matt? Yes, of course I will trust myself."

Seconds passed; perhaps a minute. Man and boy stood motionless, facing each other. Then they turned and walked together to the base of the cliff.

"So, up with you," said Teo.

Rudi began climbing. He climbed watchfully and carefully, while Teo paid out the rope, and presently a call from below told him that it had almost reached its full length. When he came to a good stance he turned and looked about him, and, finding a sound knob of rock, he passed the rope around it for a belay. "All right, come on!" he called. And Teo came. Rudi pulled the rope in smoothly and firmly around the rock, his body tensed for any pull or jerk. But there was none. The old man climbed slowly—very slowly—but he did not slip or stumble, and in a few minutes he was standing beside the boy on the ledge.

They went on to the next pitch. And the next. Each time Rudi went first, climbing as far as the rope would let him, and then stopped and secured it while Teo came after. Sometimes the belay was around rock, sometimes, when no rock was available, around Rudi's own body. But still Teo made no use of the support. Peering down at him from his perches, the boy marveled at how he maneuvered his crippled body on the delicate hand and footholds: keeping his strong side always in toward the rock-face, turning his handicaps into assets, moving always at a strange lopsided angle in order the better to keep his balance. And when he came up beside Rudi it was only to nod and say, "All right—go on."

But by now they were high on the cliff. And the going grew harder. Rudi had to climb one stretch, first by jamming an elbow and knee into a crevice in the rock, then

by reaching up with his free hand and pulling himself onto a ledge above. Here there was no rock projection, and he used the body belay, bracing himself as best he could. There will be trouble this time, he thought. And there was. Teo got his good elbow and knee into the crevice and somehow managed to hoist himself up, but when it came to grasping the rim of the ledge, his crippled arm could not make it. He reached out and missed. Reached again and missed. Then his body made a lunge. His hand touched the ledge. It clawed at it—but could not hold it. At the same instant his voice came up to Rudi, as quietly as if he were talking to him from the stove in the hotel kitchen. "Steady now," he said. "Hold me."

There was a slight scratching sound: that was all. Then the pull came. Teo's hand slipped down from the rim, his elbow and knee lost their hold in the crevice, and he dangled free against the mountainside. The rope bit into Rudi's body like a circular knife. It would cut through him, he thought. But it did not cut through him. Nor did it pull him from the ledge. Braced and straining, he held fast. Then he pulled. He pulled in a foot of rope and hitched it around him; pulled again, hitched again; and again. He could hear Teo's feet scraping for support on the wall below. His hand reappeared on the rim, and then his other hand: the good hand. Rudi pulled and hitched, pulled and hitched. And then suddenly it was over; the strain and bite and tearing pressure were gone, and Teo crawled up onto the ledge beside him.

"That was not bad, boy," the old man said to him. "For a young *Lausbube,* not bad at all."

Twice more he slipped before they reached the top of the Felsberg. And three times on the way down. But each time Rudi held him; and each time, though he sweated and strained, the shock and the fear were less. Where did *he* come off to be afraid, he thought grimly, when Old Teo, struggling and dangling below, was trusting his life to him without a murmur?

At the bottom, they untied themselves from the rope. Teo coiled it carefully and stowed it in his pack.

"Not bad," he said again.

And that was all he said.

But on the way down through the forest Rudi's heart sang like the birds in the berry bushes. He had done all right, he thought, over and over. He had learned to climb as a guide climbs and atoned for the disgrace of the Wunderhorn. He had done all right—and things would be all right. Teo would tell his uncle; he himself would tell him, plead with him, show him what he could now do. And when Captain Winter came back—his mind raced forward—yes, when the Captain came back: that was when everything would really change. The Captain was on his side. He would persuade his uncle, convince his uncle. And then—the boy raised his eyes. He held them, fixed and shining, on the great shape that filled the sky on the far side of the valley. Yes, yes, he thought exultantly—*when Captain Winter came . . .*

Then they were in the town, in the streets, back at last in the hotel kitchen. As he was tying on his apron, Gretchen, the waitress, came in from the dining room.

"There was a gentleman here looking for you," she said in a bored voice. "He looked like an Englishman. He said he wanted to tell you good-bye."

"Good-bye?" Rudi's voice was a whisper.

"He said he had come back here this morning but was leaving again on the afternoon coach. There was something about talking to your uncle—I don't know. Anyhow, he left."

"Left? Left Kurtal? You mean for good—"

Gretchen took a stack of dishes from a shelf and yawned. "That's right," she said. "For good."

CHAPTER SEVEN

A PRISONER ESCAPES

Franz Lerner sat in his sister's parlor and slowly shook his head.

"He is a strange man, this Captain Winter," he said. "As a climber, he is the best *Herr* I have ever had. He can do things that some of the best guides cannot do. But he is too ambitious. He is like a man possessed."

"He thinks only of the Citadel?" said Frau Matt.

"Yes, only of the Citadel. Do you know what he did, Ilse? He offered to pay me twice the usual guide's fee if I would go with him. *Twice,* mind you! For four days it would have been enough to buy a calf or two shoats. Only what good would calves and shoats do me if—" He broke off, shrugged and puffed thoughtfully on his pipe.

"You did right, brother," said Frau Matt.

"Yes, I did right." Then he said it again, almost angrily. "I did right! . . . I said to him, 'My Captain, it is a privilege to climb with you. It is not like climbing with other clients, who must be pushed and pulled up a mountain; but like with another guide, a companion, an equal. Do you know what I will do, my Captain?' I said to him. 'I will climb with you not for twice the usual fee, but for *half.* We will climb all the mountains you like, by whatever routes you

like. The Dornelberg by the west ridge. The Täschhorn by the north face. Anything. Any peak from Mont Blanc to Austria.' " Franz shook his head again. "But no, he does not want that. All he wants is one peak. That accursed peak. . . ."

His eyes moved to the window. He gazed up past the roof-tops, past the sloping meadows, the forests, the boulder-slopes, the glaciers, to where the great fang of the Citadel pierced the shining sky. " 'There are some things, my Captain,' I said, 'that God intended for men; and there are some things that He did not. He did not intend men to swim the oceans, or to reach the center of the earth, or to fly. And He did not intend them to climb the Citadel. The Citadel He is keeping for Himself, untouched—forever. And I do not believe,' I told him, 'that men should set themselves against the will of God.' "

Frau Matt, too, was looking from the window. Then, suddenly, she turned away and hid her face in her hands. After a moment her brother got up and came over and stood beside her. "I am sorry, Ilse," he murmured, putting a big hand gently on her shoulder. "I will not talk of these things again."

Rudi listened and did not speak. He went about his work and did not speak. In the hotel kitchen, he soaked and scrubbed and dried and stacked the endless heaps of china and pewter, and, like his mother, he kept his eyes from the windows.

He wished that it would rain. He wished that the mist

would close in over the village streets, shutting out everything beyond. But it did not rain. The sky remained flawlessly clear. Even though he kept turned away from the window, the great image beyond it filled the kitchen with its presence, and when at night he went home and to bed it followed him relentlessly into his dreams.

"Cheer up, boy. Be patient," Old Teo told him. "You're young, and all the world's before you."

But it was cold comfort. What good did it do to have the world before him, when he couldn't get to it? When he was like a prisoner staring at it from behind the bars of a cell?

One day he broke five dishes. The next day, seven. Then Old Teo left him to watch a cheese fondue that was simmering on the stove, and he forgot about it and let it burn. And this time even the patient cook lost his temper. "By the Virgin and three hundred saints!" he shouted angrily. "You are like some silly girl in love—that's what you are. You are a nincompoop—a *dummer Esel*—"

His mother spoke to Herr Hempel, and the proprietor gave him a lecture. "Yes sir," he answered. "No sir," he answered. But it had no effect. Nothing had any effect. He did what he was told to do, spoke when he was spoken to, moved like a sleepwalker through the blankness of the days.

The worst ordeal was walking back and forth from his home to the hotel, for it was then that he would meet the other boys of the town. Even with his friends it was hard enough—with their questions about what had happened

and why his uncle had not taken him climbing again. And with those who were not his friends it was unendurable. "Hey, here comes the master guide!" they would taunt him. "All hail the conqueror of Mount Dishpan! Where's your apron, guide? Where's your mop?"

Then it was Sunday and his mother was off visiting, and he was sitting alone in his room. Going to his clothes-chest, he took from the bottom his father's old red flannel shirt, spread it on the bed, and once again examined the moth holes. . . . Well, there was nothing else to do. . . . Downstairs he found his mother's sewing basket, and, taking it and shirt outside, he sat down on the front steps and set to work on the bigger holes in the armpits. The afternoon sun was bright, the little sidestreet quiet and empty.

And then, suddenly, not empty; for, looking up, startled, he saw that Klaus Wesselhoft had come by and had stopped, staring at him. Klaus stood with his legs wide-spread and his hands on his hips, and his thick lips were spread in a mocking grin.

"Well, now," he said, "if it isn't the young ladies' Sunday sewing circle."

Rudi said nothing.

"Fawncy finding Master Rudi Matt, the famous boy guide, busy doing his crocheting."

Still Rudi said nothing.

"Or is it embroidery, Angel-face? Do tell now? Some lovely Swiss lace, maybe?"

Rudi put down the shirt and pushed the basket aside. Then he stood up and rushed him. Klaus was eighteen. He was taller and broader than Franz Lerner and had hands like two hams at the butcher's. But Rudi rushed him just the same, arms flailing. With one fist he hit Klaus on the chest and with the other on the shoulder, and then something big and hard exploded between his eyes, and he was sitting in the street with blood gushing from his nose.

"Naughty naughty," said Klaus, wagging a finger. "The great guide Angel-face had better stick to his embroidery."

Then, while Rudi got to his feet, he sauntered off, whistling, down the street.

The weather held fine. The town was full of visiting climbers, and the guides were busy: climbing all day, sleeping up in the huts, returning home every second or third night, only to start off for another climb the next morning. As the foremost guide of Kurtal, Franz Lerner was the busiest of all. In one week he made an ascent of the Wunderhorn with a client from Zurich, one of the Rotalp with two Americans, and a traverse of the Dornel Glacier with a young couple from England. Twice he used Toni Hassler as porter; once—and this filled Rudi's cup of bitterness—Klaus Wesselhoft. Each time his uncle returned to the town Rudi resolved to speak to him, reason and plead with him, take him to Old Teo, who would tell him how well he had done on the Felsberg. But each time

something held him back. Pride? Fear of rebuff? He wasn't sure. Or perhaps it was neither of these, but rather that where his uncle would take him, if he consented, was not where he wanted to go. He did not want any mountain, but only one mountain. *The* mountain. And the chance for that was gone.

Then, late one afternoon, he came home from the hotel and found Franz, back from the Rotalp, talking with his mother on the steps of the house.

"There are more climbers this summer," he was saying, "than I have ever seen before in Kurtal."

"Yes, I have noticed," said Frau Matt. "Not only the hotels but the huts must all be full."

"So full there is hardly room to sleep. . . . Even the old hut—you know, the one beneath the southeast ridge of the Citadel that has not been used for years—even that now has someone in it. Today I passed near the foot of the Blue Glacier and looked up, and there was smoke coming from its chimney."

They continued talking, but Rudi went on in. He went up to his room and sat on his bed and for a long time he remained there, motionless, while his uncle's words repeated themselves over and over in his mind. For if his uncle did not know what those words had meant, he, Rudi, did. As clearly as if it stood before him, he could see the old hut, bleak and lonely against the evening sky. He could see the thread of smoke above it. And within the hut, *Captain John Winter*. . . . Yes, Winter: that he knew. . . . Perhaps alone. Perhaps with a guide from Broli,

on the far side of the mountain. For that, of course, was what had happened. Captain Winter had not really left at all. He had merely gone around the mountain and up the valley beyond, to Broli. He had seen the famous Broli guide, Emil Saxo, whom he had talked about that first day on the glacier, and they had gone up to the hut together. Or, if Saxo had refused, he had gone alone. One or the other. But he himself had gone. That was certain. He was there because he had to be; because he could not leave the Citadel; because it was *his* mountain.

As it was Rudi's mountain. . . .

The boy ate his supper in silence, then returned to the hotel for his evening chores. Later, in the darkness, he came back home, kissed his mother goodnight, went up to his room again and lay on his bed. But he did not undress, and he did not fall asleep. He lay quietly through the hours until the clock reached exactly two, and then he rose and, going to the chest, took out his heaviest clothes and, from the bottom, his father's flannel shirt. These he wrapped into a tight bundle. Then, finding a pencil and scrap of paper, he wrote a brief note: *Dear Mother, do not worry. I will be all right. Love, Rudi.* Without light and in stockinged feet, he left the room. He slid the note under his mother's door. Then he descended the stairs. In the kitchen he found a piece of sausage and another of cheese and stuffed them in his pockets. A moment later he was out the front door. He did not pause to put on his shoes until the house was out of sight around a corner.

The next step was the dangerous one. Rounding a sec-

ond corner, he came to his Uncle Franz's house and stopped. He looked sharply, but there was no light; listened, but there was no sound. Now his shoes came off again, and, putting down the bundle of clothing, he approached softly and tried the door. In the memory of the oldest inhabitant, there had never been a burglary in Kurtal, and few houses had locked doors. This one was not locked. Lifting the latch, Rudi stepped inside.

It was pitch dark, but he knew what he was looking for, and where it was: the large cupboard in the hallway where his uncle kept his mountain gear. In a few moments he had found and opened it. But now for the first time he needed light, and cautiously he struck a match. The contents of the cupboard showed in a dim yellow glow: lengths of coiled rope on a row of hooks; on other hooks, knapsacks and clothing; against the wall, ice-axes; on the floor, boots and crampons. One match was enough. What he was looking for was there. Quickly he took the ax, the boots and the pack that Captain Winter had given him; then, closing the cupboard, moved through the blackness toward the door.

A plank creaked under his foot. He stopped and listened. There was no other sound. But now suddenly his heart was pounding, his hands were damp, and where his stomach had been was a cold hollow emptiness. Now at last there was a thief in Kurtal, he thought. And it was he. A thief in the night. In his mind's eye he could see his uncle asleep in his room upstairs; his mother asleep, the whole village asleep; only himself awake in the darkness,

sneaking, prowling. Suddenly he wrenched his mind away. He must not think like that, for to think would be to end it all. He clutched the things he carried in his hands. "They are mine," he thought fiercely. "I am not a thief. They were given to me. They are mine!"

Now he was out of the house. He closed the door gently. Once again he rounded a corner and stopped, and this time he sat down and put on his boots. He stuffed the bundle of clothing in his pack; his father's shirt, the sausage and cheese. Grasping the ax, he started off. When he had gone about a block he remembered that he had forgotten his regular shoes. He had left them where he had taken them off, beside the stoop of his uncle's house. For an instant he hesitated; then he went on again. Where he was going he would not need them. And besides, it was too dangerous to turn back.

The streets were deserted. There was no sound anywhere except the tread of his own boots on the hard-packed earth. Once he was startled by a moving shadow, but it proved to be only a foraging dog. In five minutes he was at the edge of the town, and a few minutes later across the stream and following the path on the far side. He needed no light. The stars were enough, and the path showed ghostly gray between the dark slopes of the meadows. A cow lowed. The stream roared and faded and was gone. His boot nails clinked against the gravel. Strongly and steadily he pushed on.

Then a thicker darkness loomed ahead. The forest. And at the forest's edge, the shrine. Here, as he had done so

often before, he paused and kneeled; and this time he remained kneeling for a long while, his head bowed, his lips murmuring the ancient prayer of the mountain guides.

Rising, he stood looking at the shrine, but the cross and the Virgin were the merest shadows within it, and the name carved in the wood beneath them could not be seen at all. Why Rudi did what he did next he could not have said, except that he needed to do it. Lighting a match, he held it up to the shrine, and there in the flickering light was the old lettering: Josef Matt, 1821–1850. He touched the letters lightly with his finger. Then the match went out, and he climbed on.

A little later he made his second stop. In the forest it was far darker than on the meadows, but, even so, he had no difficulty in finding the blue spruce and the stout stick that lay hidden in its branches. This time, though, he did not carry it in his hand but fastened it on his back into the straps of his pack. With his new ice-ax, he no longer needed it as a staff. It was for something else that he needed it; something he scarcely dared dream of. . . .

The path steepened.

He climbed on.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHITE FURY

It was still night when he came out onto the boulder-slopes above the tree line. Far below and behind him the lights of the village glinted like motes in a well of darkness. But by the time he reached the junction of the Blue and Dornel glaciers the eastern sky had begun to pale, and as he worked his way to the left, up the Blue, the world around him emerged slowly into gray dawnlight.

As often happens in the high mountains, dawn brought, not warmth, but increased cold, and for the first time Rudi paused to put on one of the extra sweaters that he carried in his pack. Even with its protection, however, the chill gnawed through to his bones. An icy breath rose from the white waste of the glacier. High above him, the ramparts of the Citadel rose into the twilight like the outposts of a lost and frozen planet.

But it was not on the Citadel that the boy's eyes were fixed. It was on the crest of the glacier beyond him; on the black dot of the old hut that stood there; on the thin plume of smoke that rose up from the hut into the still, windless air. . . . Yes, he had been right, he thought exultantly. Captain Winter was there. He was surely there. . . . Plodding on, he zigzagged his way between the great crevasses.

No snow had fallen for several days, and there was little danger of his breaking through into a hidden chasm; but still he moved watchfully and carefully. Two lessons—one from Old Teo and one from his own stupidity—had been enough. Never again was he going to risk either his own life or another's by blundering first and thinking afterwards.

Halfway up the glacier he passed the crevasse from which he had rescued the Englishman. The holes dug by his toes were still visible in the blue ice of its lip. Beyond it, the glacier narrowed and steepened between huge converging walls of rock, and here his progress was slower, as for perhaps half an hour he had to chop steps with his ax in the smooth slanting surface. As he climbed, the sky grew brighter. Already the heights of the Citadel, far above him, were gleaming in the first rays of the sun. But he moved on steadily, and the sun had not yet struck the glacier when its containing walls fell abruptly away and he came out on the broad saddle of its upper snowfield.

Here, for a moment, he stopped. He stared at the hut that now lay close before him: no longer a minute dark speck, but a solid mass of stone and timber, perched on a rocky ledge above the highest level of the snow. It was an ancient hut—weathered, bleak and gray—and although the thread of smoke still rose from its chimney, there was no other sign of life about it. Rudi tramped across the snowfield and clambered up a few boulders to the ledge. Approaching the door of the hut, he stopped and listened,

but heard only the crackling of a fire. Then he opened the door and went in.

Directly before him was the fireplace and a small blaze. And bending over them with his back turned—a man. As Rudi entered the man looked around and rose; at full height, his head almost touched the beams of the low-ceilinged room. He was a man the boy had never seen before: a giant of a man, with massive shoulders, a broad red face and small, piercing eyes, as blue and cold as glacier ice. He wore a guide's feathered hat, tipped back on his head, and held a steaming pot in one of his huge hands.

He looked at Rudi without speaking.

"Is—is not Captain John Winter here?" asked the boy.

"What do you want of Captain Winter?"

"I have come to find him."

"So?" The giant looked him up and down slowly, then turned his back and set the pot on a table.

"You are Herr Saxo?" asked Rudi.

"That is right," said the man. "I am Emil Saxo." Again he turned and eyed Rudi. "And who are you, boy? You are not from Broli?"

"No sir, I am from Kurtal. And I—"

"From Kurtal, hey?" Saxo grunted. "I thought all Kurtalers were too afraid of their skins to come so close to the Citadel."

Rudi started to answer, but stopped himself. There was a moment's silence. Then he said. "I am looking for Captain Winter, Herr Saxo, and if you would please—"

But there was no need to go on, for at that moment the door opened and Winter came in. He wore boots and climbing clothes and was stowing a small telescope into a case slung over his shoulder. "The sun is up, Emil," he said. "I had a good look at the ridge, and I think—"

Seeing the boy, he broke off and for a moment simply stared. Then he stepped forward with hand outstretched. "Rudi! My old friend, Rudi!" he exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"I have come to join you, sir," said the boy.

"Join me?"

"To—to make the ascent of the Citadel."

Again Winter stared. But the guide Saxo guffawed loudly. "Yo ho, that's a good one!" he said. "To make the ascent of the Citadel—that's really a good one!"

Winter looked at him briefly, and then back at the boy. He was still struggling with surprise and trying to marshal his thoughts. "Well," he murmured. "Well, I'll be—" Something that was half a smile touched his lips, and he put his hand on Rudi's shoulder. "Anyhow, first things first, boy. You must be tired and hungry. Sit down. We're just ready for breakfast."

He took three tin cups from a shelf and set them beside the pot on the table. From a pack Saxo produced bread, preserves and a slab of dried meat. "You have met Emil Saxo, of Broli?" Winter asked, as they sat down. "This is Rudi Matt," he told the guide. "Son of the great Josef Matt, of Kurtal."

"So?" Saxo's thick eyebrows went up a little. "He was

a good man, Josef Matt," he conceded grudgingly. "The best of the Kurtalers."

"And his son here is going to be a good man too," said Winter. "Already he has done some fine climbing. Not to mention saving my life."

He told briefly of what had happened on the glacier, and the guide listened in silence. They ate and drank steaming tea, and Rudi glanced around the interior of the hut. It was a tiny and decrepit place, far different from the other, newer huts, like the Blausee. There was no loft; only the one room. For furnishing, there was the warped table, a bench and a lopsided shelf. In a corner was a thin layer of mouldy straw, on which Winter's and Saxo's blankets were spread. High on one wall, the mortar between two stones had fallen away, and the hole was stuffed with old sacks and shreds of clothing.

"We had to spend the first hour," said Winter, "clearing away the cobwebs."

"When did you come up, sir?" asked Rudi.

"Yesterday—during the afternoon." Winter looked at the boy curiously. "And you?" he said. "You must have climbed half the night."

"I left early this morning."

"Ummm. . . . And what about your mother and uncle? What did they say about your coming?"

Rudi swallowed. He was prepared, but still he swallowed. "They said it was all right, sir."

"You mean they gave you permission?"

"Yes sir."

Winter was still watching him with a curious expression. Rudi could not tell if he believed him or not.

"With you—if I was with you, sir," he murmured, "they said I could go."

Silence filled the room. His lie seemed to fill the room. "First I was a thief," he thought. "Now I am a liar. Dear God," he prayed—"dear Jesus and loving Mary—forgive me. I am wicked. I am evil. But I cannot help it. Forgive me."

"How did you know I was here?" asked Winter.

"I was sure that you could not leave the Citadel, my Captain, and I remembered what you once said about perhaps going to Broli. Then we heard there was someone in the hut, and I was sure that it was you."

"And your uncle?"

"My uncle?"

"He still wouldn't come?"

"No sir."

"But he allowed you to?"

"Yes sir."

There was another silence, and Captain Winter sipped his tea.

Then Saxo spoke. "Perhaps it is good to have the boy here," he said. "He can keep the hut clean and have food ready for our return."

Rudi's heart sank. He looked from the guide to Winter. "But, sir, that is not why—" He fumbled. "I mean, I came to—"

"I know why you came, son," said Winter quietly.

He finished his breakfast without speaking again. Saxo had risen and was coiling a length of rope.

"It is time we got going," he said.

Winter nodded and rose too.

"You are starting today, sir?" asked Rudi.

"For the actual climb—no. Today we're just going to reconnoitre. Up to the base of the ridge, and then following it for a way. As far as the Fortress, perhaps, if we can make it. Then, if it looks all right and the weather holds, we'll make our real try in a couple of days. But first we'll have to go down to the valley for more food and equipment."

"And I—I may—please—?"

"Come outside," said Winter. "I'll show you what we're planning."

They went out, and the sun was up, and it was much warmer. Standing side by side, they peered up at the great mountain that tiered above them into the cloudless sky. The southeast ridge seemed to loom almost directly overhead; and yet, Rudi knew, it was not so close as it looked. In terms of time and human effort it was not close at all, for its base was separated from them by a savage slanting wilderness of ice- and snowslopes, slag and boulders, cliffs and chasms.

"I think the best way," said Winter, pointing, "is across the col above the Blue Glacier and then up that smaller glacier, on the left until we reach the icefall. Through the telescope there looked to be a good enough route up the icefall, and beyond it we'll have our choice of a snow-

slope—you see it?—or of climbing the cliffs along its side. Either way would bring us out close to the foot of the ridge, and from there on it will be simply a matter of following it. We know it can be climbed at least as far as the Fortress—thanks to your father and Sir Edward Stephenson."

Emil Saxo had come from the hut and stood beside them, squinting upward. "I think maybe we will not stay on the ridge all the time," he said. "There are places where it may be better on the south face."

"Perhaps," said Winter. "That we can decide when we get there." He turned away from the mountain. "Well, are we ready?" he asked.

"*We,*" he had said.

Rudi waited. . . .

"Come on, boy. What are you dawdling for?"

Rudi's heart swelled. He could hear it thumping in the stillness. But then there was another sound, and it was Saxo's voice.

"Boy?" he said. "You do not mean the boy is coming?"

"Why not?" asked Winter.

"The Citadel is a great and fierce mountain. It is no child's play."

"And Rudi here is no child. Wait until you see how he climbs."

"You have told me yourself there is no guide in Kurtal who would venture on the Citadel. And now this boy comes—not even a grown man—"

"We're not climbing the Citadel today," said Winter quietly, "but only reconnoitring. The boy is his father's son. Josef Matt's son. Remember that. Let him come with us, and we'll see what he can do."

Saxo hesitated. His sharp blue eyes studied Rudi as if he were some sort of unfamiliar insect. Then he looked back at Winter and shrugged. "You are the *Herr,*" he said. "If it is what you want—very well. . . . But only for today," he added, "only for reconnaissance. I am not going to pull some young *Lausbube* six thousand feet to the top of the Citadel."

"Truly, sir—" Rudi began. But Winter interrupted him.

"All right," he said. "We won't plan beyond today." He turned and gazed steadily at the boy. "But one thing must be understood, Rudi," he added. "There will not be any experiments, any individual climbing, any route-finding on your own. You will be an apprentice porter, that is all. And you will do exactly as Emil and I tell you to."

"Yes sir," Rudi murmured.

Winter stood watching him for another moment; then turned away. "Well then, let's go," he said.

Reentering the hut, they got their axes, and Saxo slung his rope over his shoulder. Since they would return that same evening, there was no need to carry packs, and they merely stuffed a few pieces of cheese and chocolate into their pockets. They put out what was left of the fire. Then they started off.

For the first hour or so the going was easy. Following the route Winter had pointed out, they moved along the crest of the Blue Glacier, cut across a slope of tumbled boulders, and came out on the smaller tributary glacier that descended from the east face of the Citadel. Here, however, the gradient steepened sharply, and they paused to rope up. And for the next two hours they zigzagged slowly up the long incline of ice.

As he had done with Franz on the Wunderhorn, Winter alternated with Saxo in the lead, but this time Rudi's position was in the middle of the rope. On such a slope the work of the leader was arduous, for almost every move required the cutting of a step before their feet could gain a hold in the smooth surface. The bright prong of the ax rose and fell. Chips of ice flew out and slithered down the white chute beneath them. The leader cleared the step, tested it, moved up and chopped again. The others followed him.

Rudi would have been glad to take his turn in the lead; indeed, he was burning with desire to show the two men what he could do. But he was mindful of what Winter had said to him. He did not volunteer, or even speak at all, but concentrated on each step, on his balance, on making no move that would disturb the climber above or below him. He took particular care to keep his body well out from the slope, so that there would be no outward pressure of his feet that might result in a slip.

The gradient increased from forty degrees to forty-five,

from forty-five to more than fifty. It seemed no longer a slope they were ascending, but an immense white wall, to which they clung like ants. But still the bright ax-head rose and fell. Still they stepped up, waited, stepped up again. And at last the steepness eased off before them and they came out on the uppermost level of the glacier.

Here was what is called a *Bergschrund:* the great final crevasse that separated the main section from the icefall above. Standing on its lip, they looked down into a bottomless cavern of blue ice; then set about the next step of finding a way to pass it. A quick glance showed that there was no way around to the side. Here at its apex the glacier was no more than a hundred yards wide, and the *Bergschrund* extended the whole way across it, ending against smooth and vertical rock-walls. Nor could it be jumped, because its farther rim was much higher than the one on which they stood. The only possible way was across a natural snow-bridge that spanned the crevasse near its center . . . *if* the bridge would hold them.

Edging out to the last inch of solid ice, Saxo drove his ax down into the snow. It went through, unchecked, for perhaps a foot; then struck firmer snow underneath and held fast. The guide moved to another position and tried again. Winter moved up beside him and drove in his own ax. The results were the same.

"It should go," said Saxo.

And the Englishman nodded.

Then he hitched the rope around his ax and paid it out

slowly, while Saxo moved out onto the bridge. The guide put out one foot and rested it on the snow. It sank in for an inch or two. Then the snow tightened and held. He took a second step, and a third. On the third his leg went in almost to the knee—but then stopped. And with the fourth he reached the upper rim of the crevasse. Winter nodded to Rudi; and now the boy went across, while the two men belayed him from either side. And finally he and Saxo held the rope on the upper rim, as Winter followed in their tracks.

"So far, so good," said the Englishman.

The *Bergschrund* was behind them.

Next came the icefall, or upper glacier: a steep, tumbled labyrinth of ice that cascaded down the flank of the mountain. Here they were no longer on a smooth open surface, but in a wilderness of towers, ridges and deep gullies, through which they had to grope their way as if through a trackless forest. For a while Saxo led, then Winter, then Saxo again, threading the maze like bloodhounds on a spoor. Sometimes they followed a blind alley that ended in a deep chasm or unclimbable wall, and they had to retrace their steps. But always, in the end, they found a way up and over, and their progress, though slow, was steady and sure. When, after an hour or so, Rudi turned to look back, the glacier was a mere streak of white, flattened and remote. The *Bergschrund,* at its apex, showed only as a thin bluish line, almost directly below.

It was close to noon. The sun was high and warm. It shone in dazzling prisms on the ice-towers, or seracs, that

rose around them, and they moved on as quickly as they could, knowing that this was the time of day when these towers might melt and fall. None fell nearby, however. Occasionally they would hear a hollow rumbling off to the right or left, but the frozen pinnacles around them loomed massive and motionless, as if made of stone. They climbed on, steadily and in silence.

And at last they came out on the upper margin of the icefall. The bristling white forest of seracs fell away behind, and before them, instead of cliffs and gullies, was a long smooth slope of snow. It was the slope, Rudi recognized, toward which Winter had pointed from in front of the hut. At its crest, now not more than an hour's climbing above them, was the southeast ridge of the Citadel, thrusting jagged and immense into the sky.

They rested briefly and ate their cheese and chocolate.

"All right, son?" asked Winter, smiling.

"All right, sir," said Rudi.

"Not tired?"

"No, not tired."

And it was true. Even though he had had no sleep the previous night—and had climbed through half of it—it was still true. In part, perhaps, it was simply because he was young and strong; in part, because there was no pack to carry. But mostly it was because the joy and excitement within him left no room for tiredness. Now, on this day, after years of hoping and dreaming, he was to set foot on the Citadel at last. He felt as if he could climb to the foot of the ridge in a few easy bounds; as if he could go on and

on, without resting, without pausing, until he stood at last on the summit itself.

The two men were studying the terrain above them: the snowslope that lay directly ahead and the rocky cliffs on either side.

"It will have to be the slope," said Winter.

Saxo nodded. "*Ja,* the rocks are too steep."

"It's not a good time of day for steep snow, of course. But if we keep well in toward the southern cliff, where it's shaded—"

"It should be all right," said the guide. "It should go."

They got up and started off again. Saxo went first, Rudi second, Winter third, and they were still on the rope, though on the stretch ahead there seemed no real need for it. For the slope was not nearly so steep as that of the glacier below. And its surface was not ice, but soft, powdery snow. True, it called for considerable effort in kicking and scuffing, particularly for Saxo, who was breaking trail; but there was no step-cutting, no long waits, no slippery toeholds, no danger of falling. Reaching the lee of the southern cliffs, they turned parallel to them and plodded upward.

They climbed in absolute silence. On the ice there had been the steady rhythmic clink of axes and boot nails, but here in the white drifts there was no sound at all. Up they went. . . . And up. And up. . . . Each step was the same as the last; and as the next. The snow churned up by their feet hung in the windless air like a shroud of crystal. Beyond the shroud, ahead of Rudi, were Saxo's shoulders,

swinging slowly to his powerful stride. Beyond them, and above, the vast ridge of the Citadel seemed to swim in stillness against the gleaming sky.

Then for a moment the sky was gone. The ridge, Saxo, the snow crystals, they were all gone, and where the brightness had been was darkness. Rudi's head jerked up. He forced his eyes open. Perhaps he was tired after all, he thought, if they could close that way without his willing it. Or if not tired, sleepy. Yes, that was it—sleepy. The slow measured pace, the warm air, the soundless snow: all of them seemed to be drawing him softly into an embrace of sleep. His eyes closed again—opened again. He watched the snow gliding slowly past beneath him. And that was all there was in the world. The snow, the gliding, the stillness.

Then, beyond the stillness, a sound. A rumbling.

And a second sound: a shout from Saxo.

He stopped. He looked up. And what rose above them was no longer a slope, but a wave. A white wave, tumbling and plunging; a wave so huge that it seemed the whole mountainside had peeled off in foaming whiteness and was descending directly upon their heads. The rumbling swelled to a roar. Through the roar he could hear Winter, behind him, calling out: "To the left! Up on the rocks! Quick!" Then the voice was gone. There was only the roar. The thunder. He tried to turn—to run. He saw Saxo's form lunging before him. He felt the jerk of the rope, and he *was* running. He was running, stumbling, falling, rising, running again. And then the avalanche hit him. It

lifted him gently up, then flung him fiercely down. The rope jerked again—agonizingly. His feet flew from under him. The sky spun and was gone. Everything was gone, except the white thundering fury of the Citadel that bore him on and on, down and down. . . .

CHAPTER NINE

THE CHALLENGE

Franz Lerner, that day, had taken a novice client for a practice climb on the Felsberg. By midafternoon they were back in town, the client had been deposited at his hotel, and Franz, as was his custom, walked on down the main street to the Edelweiss Tavern.

The Edelweiss was the favorite resort of the guides of Kurtal. Indeed, it was almost a club; for few visitors came there—and no wives—and a man could enjoy his beer and pipe quietly in the company of his own kind. On this particular afternoon there were perhaps a dozen men there. Some had not climbed that day; others, like Franz, had returned early from short excursions. At one of the tables was a group of older men: Andreas Krickel, the Tauglich brothers, Johann Feiniger, Hans Andermass. At another sat several younger guides and porters—Klaus Wesselhoft and his like—who patronized the Edelweiss because it made them feel important and who hoped some day to be promoted to the senior table.

It was all the same as usual. And yet, somehow, not the same. As Franz came in, he was aware of a tenseness in the atmosphere; of an absorbed conversation suddenly interrupted while all the men looked up at him.

"Well, here you are," said Peter Tauglich. "Have you heard the news?"

"News? What news?"

"Your friend the Englishman is climbing the Citadel."

For a moment Franz simply stared at him. "Climbing—the—Citadel?" he repeated slowly. Then he shook his head. "No, you must be mistaken. It is not possible."

"Very likely not possible," said Andreas Krickel. "But he is nevertheless trying."

"No," said Franz again. "He is ambitious, Captain Winter. About the Citadel he is perhaps a little crazy. But not so crazy that he would try it alone."

"He is not alone."

"What? You mean he is with a guide? What guide?"

"He is with Emil Saxo."

"Saxo? Of Broli?" Franz looked from one to another of his fellow-guides. "How do you know?" he demanded. "Who told you this?"

"Hans here told us." Krickel nodded at Andermass.

"Hans?"

"I was in Broli today," said Andermass. "I had to go there on a matter of business, but no one would talk business. All they would talk about was this Captain Winter and Saxo. How they had left yesterday to go up to the Citadel."

There was a silence. All eyes were fixed on Franz. Franz ordered a beer, sat down at the senior table, and filled and lighted his pipe. When his beer was brought he sipped it slowly.

"They are fools!" he said suddenly.

"Yes, of course they are fools," agreed Johann Feiniger.

"They will be killed," said Paul Tauglich.

"They will be destroyed before they even set foot on the mountain."

"Have they been seen?" asked Franz.

"Seen?"

"Through the telescope at the Beau Site. Have you looked for them?"

"Yes, we have looked," said Krickel. "Since Hans returned from Broli we have taken turns looking. But we have seen nothing. Teo Zurbriggen is now at the telescope, and he will come and tell us if he sees them."

"But he will not see them," said Peter Tauglich.

"Because they are already dead."

"Because the demons of the Citadel have destroyed them."

The man who had last spoken crossed himself, and a few others did the same. At the next table the younger guides listened tensely, eager to enter the conversation; but not daring to break in on the older men.

Franz drank from his beer glass and set it down with a thump. His face was dark, his eyes filled with smouldering anger.

"Saxo!" he said. "One might have known it. Emil Saxo!"

"He is a bad one, that Saxo," said Krickel.

"He is proud and treacherous."

"And a boaster."

"But the best of the guides in Broli."

Klaus Wesselhoft, at the other table, could contain himself no longer. "There are *no* good guides in Broli!" he shouted. "They are *Lumpen*—no-goods! There are twenty guides in Kurtal who can climb better than this Saxo—"

The older men paid no attention to him. Or at least they pretended not to.

Again there was silence in the tavern. Beyond the window, people went by along the street, and then one of them stopped and looked in. Someone nudged Franz, and, glancing up, he saw that it was his sister, Frau Matt. At first he merely nodded and expected that she would move on. But, instead, she gestured to him, and, rising, he crossed to the door and went out.

"You are back early," she said.

"Yes. Today I went only to the Felsberg."

"But Rudi is not yet home."

"Rudi? Why should he be home?"

"If he came back with you—"

"Back with me?" Franz stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

"You mean—" said Frau Matt—"You mean he was not with you today?"

"Of course not. He was at the hotel, the same as always."

Frau Matt shook her head. "No," she murmured. Her face had suddenly gone pale, and her brother took hold of her arm.

"What is it, Ilse?" he demanded. "What are you talking about?"

"He is not at the hotel. He has not been there all day. I thought he was with you."

"With me? On the Felsberg? Why should you think that?"

"Because he left me a note. When I woke up this morning there was a piece of paper under the door. It said he would be all right; that I should not worry. So I thought of course—"

Her voice faltered—stopped. She looked up at Franz with worried eyes.

"The fool!" he muttered. "The damned crazy young fool!"

"If he was not with you, then where—?"

"I'll tell you where. He has gone with—" Franz caught himself. When he continued, his voice was under control. "He has gone on another of his wanderings. Up to the glaciers or somewhere. It is the sheerest disobedience and defiance; we must be hard with him when he comes back. But—" Franz patted his sister's arm, "—but it is nothing to fret about. He will be all right. He has only gone to the glaciers, I tell you. At most to one of the huts."

He went on reassuring her, comforting her.

But when she had gone on and he went back into the tavern, his eyes were hard and his face drawn and grim. While the others continued talking about Winter and Saxo

he sat silently with hunched shoulders, staring at the stained wood of the table.

Then there was the sound of footsteps outside. The door was flung open and Teo Zurbriggen burst in. "I have seen them!" he cried. "I have seen them!" Limp and all, he had obviously been running. His usually pale old eyes were glittering with excitement.

A spark of tension leapt through the room. Half the men got to their feet.

"You've seen them?"

"How?"

"Where?"

"A minute ago. Through the telescope. I had it trained on the icefall above the Blue Glacier, and suddenly there they were at the top of it, heading up the snowslope toward the ridge."

A few of the men started toward the door.

"No, it is no use looking now," said Teo. "I watched as long as they were in sight, and then they moved in behind the cliffs."

The men stopped.

"You are sure of this?" someone asked. "You can swear you saw them?"

"Of course I can swear. Do you think they were spots in my eyes? For almost five minutes I watched as they climbed up in a row: one, two, three. . . ."

"Three?"

"Yes—three."

All eyes went to Hans Andermass.

"But you said—"

"That there were two, yes. The Englishman and Saxo. That is what they told me in Broli."

"They did not speak of another?"

"No."

"Then who is the third?"

"A friend of the Englishman's, perhaps?"

"Another guide? A porter?"

There was a silence. Up to this point Franz Lerner had sat motionless at the table, taking no part in the questioning. But now he raised his head and spoke quietly. "No, it is none of those," he said. "I will tell you who the third is. It is my nephew."

The others stared at him.

"Your nephew?"

"Rudi Matt?"

"Angel-face?"

"Yes," said Franz.

"It is ridiculous. Impossible."

"Ridiculous, yes. But impossible—no." Franz turned to Old Teo. "Was he at the hotel today?" he asked.

"No," said the cook.

"Where was he then?"

"His mother came and said that—"

"—that he was with me. But he was not with me. He is up there, I am telling you. Up on the Citadel with that madman!"

Old Teo looked at him. The others looked at him. For a long moment no one spoke or moved. Then Teo limped

over to where the barmaid stood behind her counter. "A beer, please, Maria," he said.

The girl set one out for him. Teo turned and raised his glass, and his glance moved slowly over the men in the room. "I drink to Rudi Matt," he said, "—the only true mountaineer in Kurtal."

His words hung in the stillness. Then an angry murmur arose.

"What are you talking about?"

"A mountaineer?"

"Angel-face?"

"He is a crazy boy, that is all." Franz Lerner stepped forward. "A wild fool of a boy, who must be taught his place."

"I think perhaps," said Teo, "that he knows his place better than you do."

"Watch what you say, old man."

"I am watching what I say. And what I say is this. You call yourselves guides. You call yourselves mountain men. But you are not. You are like a herd of sheep, a crowd of old women. There is just one real mountain man in all the valley, and he is a boy of sixteen called Rudi Matt."

Franz glared at him. The others glared too. Every man in the room was on his feet, facing the angry little cripple who was mocking and defying them.

"You call him crazy," said Teo. "You call him a fool. But do you know what I call him? I call him the son of his father. Yes, I have seen it. I know. He has the blood of his father—the spirit and courage of his father—and he

is the only one in Kurtal, man or boy, who deserves to wear the badge of an Alpine guide."

A dozen voices tried to break in on him, but he went on relentlessly. "You are the great mountaineers—yes, of course. Each day you go out and climb peaks that have been climbed a hundred times before; that a mule could climb, or an old grandmother. And then you come back and drink your beer and tell yourselves how good you are. . . . Well, maybe now you will find out you are not so good. . . . While you sit and swill your beer three climbers are on the Citadel. An Englishman; a man from Broli; and from Kurtal—what? A man? No, a boy. A sixteen-year-old boy, who alone among you is not afraid—"

"Who's afraid?"

The voice was Klaus Wesselhoft's. Old Teo wheeled on him. "You are, you lout." He surveyed the others. "You all are. Since Josef Matt died, fifteen years ago, not one of you has dared set foot on the Citadel. It is too high, you say; too dangerous. It is impossible. . . . All right. Sit here in the Edelweiss. Swill your beer. And see how you feel when the 'impossible' summit is climbed by others. When the world no longer knows the Citadel as the mountain of Kurtal, but as the mountain of Broli. Of Emil Saxo . . ."

Again he raised his glass. He looked around the room. "Come, gentlemen," he said. "Let us drink to the success and fame of the great guide of Broli—Emil Saxo."

No one spoke. No one moved. And then, at last, one man moved. Franz Lerner came slowly forward, stood beside Old Teo and faced the others.

"You have heard what Zurbriggen has said," he told them quietly. "And there are not many men who can speak as he has without our raising our hands against him. I will tell you this: I am not a coward. No guide of Kurtal is a coward. But neither are we fools who wish to throw our lives away. In years past many men have died on the Citadel. Josef Matt, who was the greatest among us, died on the Citadel. It has never been climbed, and I do not believe it ever will be. Neither by us, nor anyone else."

"Especially not by Emil Saxo," put in one of the guides.

"No, never by Saxo," said another.

"The showoff—the big mouth—"

"The boaster of Broli—"

"Tomorrow morning," Franz continued, "I shall start off for the Citadel. There is no use starting now, for one cannot get up the glacier in the darkness. I shall go on until I find the three who are up there. They will not have got far, I promise you that. And when I do, I shall bring down my nephew. I shall talk Captain Winter out of his foolishness."

"And Saxo?"

"Yes, what about Saxo?"

"We'll show him. We'll pull him down."

"Yes, we'll go with you. We'll pull him down together."

"Together—the guides of Kurtal!"

Suddenly everyone in the room was talking at once. The voices grew louder. Fists thumped on the table.

"Very well," said Franz. "The more the better. Those who are coming be in the square at five in the morning."

"I'll be there," said Andreas Krickel.

"And I," said Paul Tauglich.

"I too," his brother added.

"And I," said Klaus Wesselhoft.

"One—two—three—four—" Franz counted. "With myself, five."

"Six," said another voice.

All eyes went to Old Teo, who had been standing to one side, unnoticed and forgotten.

"Do not worry—I will not hold you back," he said. His pale eyes, which a few minutes before had been filled with anger, now seemed almost to be smiling. "It is my day off from the hotel, you see. And this is something, I think, that I would not like to miss."

CHAPTER TEN

THREE TO MAKE READY—

High on the mountainside, the avalanche poured down in white billows. The three climbers caught in its path were tossed like ships in a storming sea.

Instinctively Rudi struck out like a swimmer, struggling to keep near the surface of the flowing tide. But the tide was too strong. It threw him head over heels, flinging his arms and legs about as if he were no more than a rag doll. Its deep roaring drummed in his ears. He seemed to be spinning through space. . . .

And then, suddenly, the spinning had stopped. The roaring was gone. He lay still; and around him the snow was still. He lay motionless in a tomb of white silence.

Once again his mountaineer's instinct had come into play, and this time it probably saved his life. At the last instant before coming to rest he had thrown his bent arm over his face, and its protection left a tiny pocket of air for his nose and mouth. For the moment at least, he could breathe. When he opened his eyes the snow brushed the lids; but he was nevertheless able to see a little; and he

could tell from the brightness of the light that he was not buried deeply.

Still there was danger. Great danger. For he knew that if he tried to dig out his movements might only sink him deeper in the drift; or, worse yet, might stir the delicately balanced snow into a fresh avalanche. For a while he lay motionless, listening for sounds of the others. But there was only the white silence. He thought of trying to cry out, but in the same instant knew that his strongest effort would be no more than a whisper.

There was nothing for it: he *had* to move. He was lying on his back, with his head down the slope at a lower level than his feet, and his first attempt was at least to get up even. This he managed at last, by a series of careful twists and wriggles. Then he set about raising himself still higher. Once again he used a swimmer's motions—this time a sort of backstroke, pushing the drifts down and away from him—and slowly he made progress. His body, though encased in snow, was soon wet with sweat from his efforts. No longer able to keep his arm over his face, he was sometimes close to suffocation. Now and then the snow shifted beneath him and he lost a few precious inches that he had gained. But it did not give way altogether. And it did not avalanche. Gradually he worked his way upward, until at last the great moment came when his head broke the snow's surface. A dazzle of light filled his eyes. A rush of air filled his lungs. In another few moments he had maneuvered himself into a standing position—still

hip-deep in the snow, but upright, in control of himself, able to move and function. Looking down, he realized with astonishment that he still held his ax in his hand.

He rubbed the white veil from his eyes and gazed around at the tumbled drifts. The others? Where were the others? The two lengths of the rope that joined him to them disappeared into the snow in opposite directions, and there was no sign of where—or how deep—their ends might be. Grimly, almost desperately, Rudi pulled at one of the lengths and dug at the snow around it—and then in the next moment saw, with a flood of relief, that there was no further need to. For suddenly, a few yards off, there was a movement on the slope. A dark shape was materializing out of the whiteness: first an arm, then a head, then a broad pair of shoulders and a man's whole body. Before Rudi could reach him Emil Saxo was standing upright in the drift, brushing the snow from his face and swearing angrily under his breath.

The guide barely glanced at Rudi. His eyes went quickly to the other length of rope. And then the two of them were hauling, digging and probing, uncovering the buried strand foot by foot, following it diagonally across the slope toward the rock wall that bounded it, coming at last to the edge of the wall where Captain Winter lay buried under some four feet of snow. He was conscious. He had managed to keep breathing. But he had been thrown in such a position that he had been unable to work himself free, and, as they dug him out, they saw that he was bleeding from a gash in the head. He had been flung, he

said, against one of the rocks of the wall, but luckily it had been only a glancing blow. It was nothing, he assured them. He would be all right.

But as they sat on a ledge of the wall, resting, the blood still dripped down across his forehead and cheek, and presently Saxo took a cloth from his pack and made it into a rough head-bandage. "It's nothing, I tell you. Nothing," Winter insisted. And after a few minutes he seemed wholly himself again. . . . Was Rudi all right? he asked. Yes, the boy assured him. . . . And Saxo? Yes, the guide was all right too.

"It was stupid, trying such a slope in the afternoon sun," the Englishman said ruefully.

"*Ja,* it was stupid," Saxo agreed.

"That old Citadel is a fierce one."

"*Ja,* it is a fierce one."

There was no question of going higher that day. Apart from their mishap, the sun was already low over the western ridges, and they had neither food nor shelter for a night out. Circling the avalanche area, they reached the bottom of the slope and then worked their way through the icefall and down the upper glacier. Though they moved far more swiftly than on the ascent, darkness had already fallen when they reached the hut.

They built a fire, and while their supper cooked Rudi sat watching the flames. Then, the next thing he knew, someone was speaking his name, his eyes jerked open, and Winter was standing before him smiling, as he held out a plate and cup.

"Tired—eh, boy?" he asked.

"No sir," Rudi assured him.

But he *was* tired. Bone tired. The previous sleepless night and the long day's climbing had at last caught up with him, and it was all he could do to keep his eyes open while he ate his food. Ten minutes later he was lying on the straw in a corner of the hut. Captain Winter and Saxo sat at the table, talking, and he wanted to join them—or at least listen to them. But his body could not move; his ears could not hear; his eyes could not see. Beyond his closed lids the fire flickered dimly. Then it was dark.

And then it was light. The sun was shining. Again a fire was blazing in the hearth and Winter and Saxo were sitting at the table. I have overslept, Rudi thought, as he bounded up.

The two men glanced at him, and Winter smiled. "Good sleep?" he asked.

"Yes sir."

"Rested?"

"Yes sir."

And this time it was the truth. All his tiredness was gone. He was ready for the day and the day's work. Ready for—anything.

Leaving the hut, he splashed his face and hands in the nearby stream. Then, back inside, he ate his breakfast. The two men were still at the table, talking; or rather, at the moment, Captain Winter was talking and Saxo was listen-

ing. The Englishman looked somewhat the worse for wear. Blood had soaked through the bandage which he still wore around his head, and his face appeared drawn, under its layers of stubble and windburn. But, if the flesh was a bit battered, nothing had happened to the bright flame of his spirit. His voice was strong and sure, his eyes gray and gleaming, as he spoke of the goals and problems that lay ahead.

"Even after what happened yesterday," he was saying, "I'm convinced that the snowslope is the best approach to the mountain. Now that we've cut the steps in the glacier and know the best route through the icefall, we can get up to it in half the time; and until afternoon there's no danger of avalanche. Once we reach the ridge it will be simply straightforward rock-climbing for the next few hours. Perhaps there'll be a few tricky stretches, but they shouldn't bother us. We know it can be done because it's been done before."

His eyes shifted briefly to Rudi and then away again. "It's at the base of the Fortress," he went on, "that things will get interesting, for from there on we're on our own. A lot of people, of course, think that there's no way past the Fortress; but there has to be—and it's up to us to find it. My own hunch is that it won't be straight up and over, but off to the left, to the south of the ridge. . . ."

Up to this point Saxo had listened silently, his broad face expressionless. But now suddenly, for the first time, he spoke.

"That is the way the first climbers thought to go."

"Yes, that was Josef Matt's way. The way he was about to try before—" Winter hesitated "—before the accident to Sir Edward Stephenson."

"I do not think Josef Matt was right," said Saxo. "I think the best way is either straight up along the line of the ridge or over to the other side, toward the east face."

"But Matt and Stephenson tried there first. And their porter said later that they could find no route."

Saxo shrugged. "Perhaps they did not look hard enough. Or did not have the skill."

Winter's face clouded. He started to speak, changed his mind and got up from the table. "Well, there's no use arguing about it," he said. "We'll see how it goes when we get up there. Now we'd better be on our way."

Rudi had risen, too, and stood expectantly beside him. "We will start today—?"

"For the Citadel? No." Winter turned to him. "Today Emil and I will go back down to Broli for more supplies. We'll have to spend at least one night on the mountain—maybe two—and we'll need tents, food and other things. Tonight we'll stay in Broli and come up again tomorrow morning. Then the next day, if the weather's good, we'll make our start."

"Emil and I," he had said. Rudi looked at him questioningly. "And I, sir? I will go down with you too?"

Winter shook his head. "No, there's no point in that. You will go down to Kurtal."

"To Kurtal?"

"Yes. There's not enough food here even for one person, and you can bring up some of your own. And also—also there's a thing that's been on my mind ever since you came up here. I'd like you to make one last try with your uncle."

"With—my—uncle?"

"Yes. To persuade him to come too. To join us."

"But—but—"

"If he allowed you to come he can no longer be so strongly against it. Tell him that we've found a way; or at least a beginning. That now at last is the chance—the big chance—and that I ask him to come with us."

Rudi stood motionless, speechless. His body and mind seemed frozen. He was scarcely even aware of the movement beside him, as Saxo rose and faced Winter.

"Come with us?" the guide repeated. "Who is to come with us?"

"The boy's uncle—Franz Lerner."

"From Kurtal?"

"Yes, from Kurtal."

Saxo shook his head. "No, that cannot be. I cannot agree to that."

"Cannot agree to it? What do you mean?"

"I am a man of Broli. A man of Broli does not climb with a Kurtaler."

"Not climb with a Kurtaler? That's ridiculous. Franz Lerner is one of the best guides in Switzerland. I've made dozens of climbs with him. On the Weisshorn, the Dom, the Dornelberg—"

"Yes, on the Weisshorn, the Dom, the Dornelberg. But

now we are not speaking of these. We are speaking of the Citadel. And what happens when you ask him to go on the Citadel? He will not go, will he? He is afraid—as all the Kurtalers are afraid. You have to leave Kurtal and come to Broli to find a guide who will do it. All right, I said to you: I, Emil Saxo, am not afraid. I will climb the Citadel with you. I will climb for the honor and glory of my village. But I will not drag up with me some Kurtaler who has not the skill or courage to do it himself."

"Drag? Drag a guide like Lerner? What are you talking about?"

"I am—"

"You're talking nonsense, that's what." Winter's voice was sharp. His eyes were suddenly angry. "Like a stupid provincial villager who can't think beyond his own doorstep. . . . So Franz Lerner is not from Broli, but from Kurtal. What of it? Does that make him any the worse guide? Any the worse man? He's one of the best guides in the Alps, and you know it, and if he'll come with us he'll make us just that much the stronger. Give us just that much better chance of reaching the top."

He paused. Saxo didn't answer. The guide's broad face was set in stubborn lines and his small eyes were fixed on the floor.

When Winter spoke again his voice was no longer angry, but quiet and earnest. "Look, Emil," he said, "you want to climb the Citadel. You've dreamt of it for years—you've told me so. And so have I. Ever since I can remember I've said to myself: if there is one thing you must do

in your life it is to climb this wonderful, terrible mountain that no man has ever conquered. . . . All right, I want to climb it. So do you. So does this boy here. And his uncle. Yes, I know Lerner refused to come. He's superstitious; full of old taboos and traditions. But in his heart he wants to, and now I think he'll come. . . . You're a big man, Saxo—big in body. Be big in mind too. Forget your prejudices, and if Lerner will come, accept him. Let's go after this mountain in the strongest way; the wisest way. Not as an Englishman and a Swiss. Not as a man from Broli and a man from Kurtal. Simply as human beings, working together. The Citadel is too great for anything else. Too important . . ."

Still the guide looked silently on the floor. Such ideas were obviously new to him, and his indecision showed on his face.

Winter put a hand on his arm. "Come on," he said, "it's time to go. We'll talk more about it on the way down."

He slung on his pack and picked up his ice-ax, and slowly Saxo followed suit. Rudi watched them as if from the depths of a dream. Ordinarily he would have been angry at what Saxo had said about his uncle and his village. He would have listened tensely to the conversation and perhaps even have joined in. But, as things stood, he had scarcely heard it. All he could hear were Winter's words: "*You will go down to Kurtal.*"

He couldn't. . . . He couldn't.

Winter was halfway to the door when he stepped before him. "Please, sir—please—" he murmured.

The Englishman looked at him curiously.

"Do not send me down to Kurtal. It is no good."

"No good?"

"About my uncle. When he sees me—"

Winter smiled. "No, I think you're wrong," he said. "I think your uncle will come. Wait and see."

"I do not mean that. I mean—" He couldn't say it. "Please," he begged. "Let me come with you to Broli. I can be useful. I will carry a pack—"

"Emil and I can manage the packs." Winter shook his head. "No, Rudi—go down to Kurtal. Talk to your uncle and bring him back with you. Tell him that I want him, and need him. That climbing the Citadel wouldn't be the same without Franz Lerner."

He glanced at Saxo, nodded and went to the door. Then he looked back. "Better start down soon," he added, "so you'll arrive early and have a good rest. Tell your uncle to bring his high-climbing and bivouac equipment. We'll meet you back here at noon tomorrow."

He went out, and Saxo followed him. For a moment Rudi stood rooted, and when he reached the door the two men were already swinging down the path. He started to call, but no words came. He had a hundred things to say—and nothing to say. Silently he watched while the others moved down the boulder-slope toward the Broli Glacier. The last thing he saw was Winter's bandaged head bobbing whitely against the grayness of the rock.

The breakfast fire burned out. The sun climbed the sky. Down by the stream a marmot rose on its hind legs, shrilled and darted off. Then it was silent again. For a long time Rudi sat alone on the steps of the old hut.

He looked at the worn boulders beneath his feet. Raising his head, he looked at the great mountain that towered above him. At the stone-slope, the upper glacier, the ice-fall, the snowslope. At the southeast ridge slanting up to the grim walls of the Fortress.

Then he turned away. What was the use of looking? . . . His lie had caught up with him. His sneaking and thieving had caught up with him. There was nothing to do but start down. Down to the village. To his mother's tears and uncle's anger. To the mocking laughter of Klaus Wesselhoft. To the dirty dishes of the Beau Site Hotel.

He stood up. Going into the hut, he got his ax and pack. Slung through the pack-straps was his old hand-cut staff, and this he removed and stood in a corner, for he would not need it now. Nor would he need the old red flannel shirt that was inside the pack.

He went out and closed the door and climbed down through the boulders to the glacier. There was a thin covering of snow on the ice, and he could see the footprints of Captain Winter and Saxo bearing westward in the direction of Broli. He turned east, following the crest of the glacier. For perhaps half an hour he moved on with slow, mechanical steps; and then he stopped. For he had

reached another turning-off place. Directly ahead, the main stream of the Blue Glacier dropped steeply downward: to the boulder-slopes, the lower hut, the tree line, the valley. To the left, climbing higher, was the upper tributary they had followed the previous day. At its apex was the *Bergschrund;* beyond the *Bergschrund,* the icefall; beyond the icefall, the snowslope; beyond the snowslope . . . the Citadel.

For several minutes Rudi stood there, motionless.

Then he turned left.