CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DARKNESS AND DAWN

"My Captain—"

Winter did not answer.

"Are you all right, my Captain?"

The Englishman raised his head and nodded, but he did not speak. Franz took a flask from his pack and held it out to him.

"Here—drink some tea," he said.

"There isn't enough, is there?"

"Yes, there is enough."

Winter took the flask and raised it to his lips. But even with two hands he could not hold it steady. The tea sloshed down his chin and onto the front of his jacket.

They were on the broadest part of the shoulder, well in from the Needle, resting on a flat rock that broke the surface of the snow. For several minutes that was all they had done—rested—with no strength in them for talk, or even for looking ahead. But now, as Winter drank, Rudi's eyes moved up to the peak above him, and instantly his tiredness was forgotten in the bright promise of what he saw.

For, as they had hoped, there were no major obstacles between the shoulder and the summit. There would be

difficulties, of course. The way was steep and exposed, and at the altitude they had now reached even straightforward climbing was no simple matter. But at least there were no further barriers like the Fortress or the Needle. The final reach of the Citadel climbed upward in a vast broken pyramid—first of snow, then of rock, then again of snow—and for the first time since they had been on the mountain the top itself was visible, gleaming white and radiant against the empty sky.

It was now—what? Two hours above them. Perhaps three. Surely not more than three. . . .

Saxo had stood up and was also staring at the peak. "We had best be going on," he said. "It is getting late."

And, as he spoke, Rudi realized with shock how long it had taken them to get past the Needle. Morning was long since gone; even noontime was gone; it was already well into midafternoon. Allowing three hours to reach the top, it would by that time be almost dusk, and they would never get down even this far before nightfall. They would have to make a second bivouac somewhere on the pyramid above, and it was lucky indeed that they had decided to carry the extra burden of the tents.

He got to his feet. Franz got to his feet. But Winter did not move. He was sitting hunched over, with his eyes closed and a hand pressed to the bandage on his head.

"It is hurting again, my Captain?" Franz asked.

Winter opened his eyes. "A little," he said. Then abruptly he stood up. "It's nothing, though. I'm ready. Let's go."

As he slung on his pack, however, he was seized with a spasm of coughing. He struggled to control it, but couldn't, and for a few minutes stood bent almost double, retching and gasping for breath.

Franz watched him with troubled eyes. "Perhaps we should rest a while longer," he suggested, when Winter at last turned and faced them.

The Englishman shook his head. "No, let's get going. I'm all right now."

But as they worked their way up the snowslope above the shoulder he was obviously anything but all right. Even though the going here was easy, he slipped and stumbled at almost every step; his breathing was labored, and his eyes showed the pain that was throbbing behind them. Twice Franz, who was leading, turned back and looked at him questioningly, but each time Winter gestured to him to go on.

Then another coughing fit seized him. He leaned forward against his ax while his body shook with convulsions. Hard as he tried, it was a long while before he could stand straight again, and, when at last he did, it was only to sway and almost fall.

This time Franz came down to him, shaking his head. "No, it is no good, my Captain," he said. "We have done enough for today. Up ahead the snow ends and there is a good place for the tents. In the morning, when you are better, we will go on to the top."

"No," Winter murmured. "We must go now."

Saxo had stood by, listening and frowning. "If we camp

here," he said, "we may lose our chance. Rest again, *Herr* Captain, and in a little while—"

"In a little while it will be too late," Franz interrupted. "Even as we are going now we could not reach the top before dark. . . . And the Captain is not strong enough. It is too risky. . . . No, we must stop here: it is the only thing. And in the morning—"

"By morning," argued Saxo, "the weather may change. It may be impossible."

Franz shrugged. "That is a chance we shall have to take."

Winter started to protest, but his words were lost in yet another spasm of coughing. And when it had passed, leaving him weak and shaken, he was forced at last to recognize the bitter truth. There was no choice for him about going on. He simply *could* not go on.

"At least you go," he told the others. "Leave me here. Go to the top. I'll wait for you."

Franz shook his head.

"Please. Go on. Go now."

He looked from Franz to Saxo. And Saxo wavered. His eyes went from one to the other and then up to the heights above them. "If the Captain insists," he began—

"It is not a question of what the Captain insists," said Franz, "but of what a guide must do. A guide of Kurtal does not leave his *Herr* on a mountain. What a guide of Broli does, I of course do not know."

Still Saxo hesitated. Then his lips went tight. He started to speak, changed his mind, and was silent.

"Come," said Franz. "There is the place." He pointed. "Up to the left. You see it?"

He went first and the others followed, and soon they were off the snow and in a sheltered hollow between two slabs of rock. "Here there is room for the two tents," Franz said. "Even if the wind blows it will not be too bad."

He set about the work of pitching them. Rudi helped, and after a few moments Saxo joined in with sullen reluctance. Winter, too, tried to do his share, but was almost immediately seized by another coughing fit and had to sit by wretchedly, watching. Whatever his physical distress, he was obviously suffering even more from frustration and anger at what had happened to him.

When the first tent was up, Franz helped him crawl inside. He put a blanket beneath and another over him, placed a pack as a pillow, and made him as comfortable as possible. Then he rejoined Saxo and Rudi, and the three put up the second tent. By the time they had finished it was getting on toward late afternoon, and the sun was sloping away toward the ranges in the west.

"The *Herr* Captain should have something hot to drink," said Franz. "And it is best if we all eat now, before it is dark." He set up the little oil stove and sorted out the remaining food. "There is enough for tonight," he commented, "and for tomorrow morning. But by tomorrow night, whatever happens, we must be back down at the hut."

There was a patch of snow at the rim of the hollow, and, scooping up several handfuls, he put them into a pot and

set the pot on the lighted stove. Then they sat and waited. At that altitude the snow began to simmer almost as soon as it had melted; but boiling water did not mean hot water, and the wait was a long one. They sat in silence. Franz watched the pot. For a while Saxo kept his eyes on the ground, then raised them and for several minutes stared fixedly at the peak that rose above them into the fading light. Suddenly he rose and paced restlessly back and forth across the hollow; then he mounted to its upper rim and climbed the rocks to a crag some thirty feet above. Here he stopped and stared upward again, remaining for several minutes before he turned and descended.

"There are no obstacles," he said. "None. It is clear going all the way to the top."

Franz said nothing. Rudi said nothing. Indeed, the boy had now not said a word since they had left the shoulder. For what was there to say? Or even think or feel? For a glorious few minutes at the Needle's Eye, he had known the intoxication of being a hero. He had been preeminent among the four of them, the essential one, the leader on whom the others had depended. But no sooner had they reached the shoulder—and Winter had become sick—than everything had changed. The fate of their venture had been wholly in his hands. Now, suddenly, it was wholly out of them. Whatever would now be done—or not done—was not for him to decide. For him there was now nothing but to wait numbly; to hope and fear; to stare up at the great summit which now loomed so tantalizingly near, and which, yet, they might never reach.

The sun sank. The water hummed in the pot. At intervals the sound of coughing came from the tent where Winter lay. Then at last the water was hot enough, and Franz, after mixing it with tea, sugar and a few drops of brandy, took it in to him. Saxo and Rudi followed, carrying bread, meat and cheese, and the three of them crouched beside the Englishman in the brown dusk of the tent.

"Here, my Captain," Franz said, "this will make you feel better."

Winter stirred and raised himself on one elbow. He slowly sipped the steaming tea and forced himself to swallow a few mouthfuls of food.

"Already it makes you stronger, does it not?" said Franz.

Winter nodded. "I'll be all right," he murmured. "In the morning—"

But his appearance belied his words. Under its stubble of beard his face was pale and sunken. His lips were bloodless, his eyes dull, and he was obviously a man who was near the end of his strength. Partly, of course, it was the result of his injury in the avalanche; partly of the lack of oxygen (which affected him more than the others) and his long struggle on the wall of the Needle. But even more—it seemed to Rudi, watching him—it was simply that he had worn himself out. Not so much physically as inwardly. Not so much in the actual climbing of the mountain as in the expenditure of will and spirit that had made the climb possible. He had given all of himself; too much of himself.

And now the flame that sustained him was fading. The man who had dreamed the dream of the Citadel—who, of all men, deserved the prize of its conquest—lay haggard and spent on its desolate heights, defeated by the very intensity of his effort.

"I'll be all right," he murmured again. "I won't let you down." Then he lay back in the blankets, closing his eyes, and the others left the tent.

Outside the sun was gone. The peak rose bleak and forlorn into the darkening sky. The two guides and the boy ate their own meal in silence, and by the time they had finished it was almost night.

"We, too, had best get our rest," Franz said. "In the morning it will be hard going—whether up or down."

Saxo merely grunted. But now, at last, Rudi spoke. "What do you think, Uncle?" he asked. "Can Captain Winter go on? Can he make the top?"

No sooner had he asked the question than he regretted it—so afraid was he of the answer. But Franz simply shrugged and said, "There is no telling yet. In the morning we will know." He arose and for a few moments stood looking up into the night. A slight wind had risen with the darkness, but it was from the north—which was good—and the stars were sharp and gleaming. "At least the weather will be all right," he said, "for whatever we must do."

Saxo had risen too. Again he was to share the tent with Winter, and taking his pack, he went to its entrance.

"Call me if he gets worse," Franz told him.

"*Ja,*" said Saxo.

He disappeared, and Franz and Rudi crept into the other tent. They arranged their packs and blankets, took off their boots and lay down, side by side.

"Goodnight, boy," said Franz.

"Goodnight, Uncle."

Then there was silence. There was darkness. But, tired as he was, Rudi could not sleep. An hour passed—perhaps two—and still he did not sleep, and he could tell from his uncle's breathing that he was not sleeping either. Outside, the wind whined, cold and thin, over the rocks. At intervals he could hear the sound of Winter's coughing in the other tent.

Later—how much later he did not know—he heard footsteps. They came closer and stopped, and from beyond the tent-flap came the sound of Saxo's voice.

"Lerner—" he said.

"Yes?"

"I must speak with you."

Franz sat up, pulled on his boots and crawled outside. Rudi was about to follow; then thought better of it and remained in the tent. Through the canvas he could hear the two men talking.

"He is worse?" Franz asked.

"Perhaps not worse," said Saxo. "But no better. He will not be able to go on."

"It is not likely," Franz agreed.

"He cannot go up, but only down, and that is the end of it for him."

Franz said nothing.

"But it does not have to be the end for us," said Saxo.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it is still possible that *we* climb the Citadel."

"We? Without him?"

"Yes. It is, at most, three hours to the top. If we start at first light we can be there by eight o'clock."

"Leaving him here alone?"

"Alone, or with the boy. It will be for only five or six hours. We will be back before noon and can then take him down."

There was a pause.

"Will you do it?" Saxo asked.

Another pause.

"No," said Franz.

"Why not? He will be all right here. And he will not object. Before we stopped, he himself said we should go on without him."

"It does not matter what he says. He is weak. He is sick. A guide cannot go on without his *Herr.*"

"No harm can come of it, I tell you. We will not be gone long, and we will leave the boy with him. The weather is good—"

"The weather can change. We could be delayed. Also, if he gets worse, we will need all our strength to get him down."

"All our strength—bah! Why do we not have strength enough for both?" Franz started to speak again, but Saxo cut him off abruptly. "Do you know what is the matter

with you, Lerner? You are afraid of this mountain. But *I* am not afraid. I am not looking for excuses to turn back. For years it has been my dream to climb the Citadel. Now at last I have my chance, and I will not give it up. Not for you and your stupid fear. Not for a coughing Englishman. Not for anyone, or anything!"

"If you do a thing like this," said Franz—and now his voice, too, was angry, "you do not deserve to be called a guide."

"And you do not deserve to be called a climber. . . . All right, have it your own way. Stay here. Go down with your coughing *Herr.* Go down beaten, defeated, and see how you feel in Kurtal when a man of Broli stands victorious on the top of the Citadel!"

"You are a fool, Saxo! A madman! You cannot climb to the top alone."

"No? We will see about that."

There was a silence. Then the sound of receding footsteps.

"Saxo—" said Franz.

But there was no answer. He had returned to the other tent. After a little while Franz raised the flap and crept back in beside Rudi. He removed his boots and lay down in his blanket. He did not speak. Nor did the boy.

For, again, what was there to say? He could talk all night without budging his uncle an inch from his conviction and decision. This he knew. And he knew something else too—something even more shattering—and this was that his uncle was right. It was the very heart and essence

of a guide's code that he must not leave his *Herr*. Least of all when that *Herr* was sick or injured. Unthinkably least of all if his going were not to the *Herr*'s advantage, but only his own. Yes, Rudi knew it. He knew it with a knowledge that was deeper than mere learning; that was part of his heritage, part of his blood and bone. A guide could *never* leave his *Herr:* that was the first and great commandment.

And yet . . .

Yet this knowledge did not help him now, as he lay silent and rigid in his misery. Captain Winter could almost surely not go on. His uncle must stay with him; and he with his uncle. They had come all this way—up the snow-slopes and the glaciers, up the cliffs and the ridges, past the Fortress, past the shoulder-wall and the Needle—laboring, struggling, winning their way to the very threshold of conquest, only to have it turn, at the last moment, into bitter defeat. And bitterest of all for him—Rudi. For if it was Winter who had brought them to the Citadel, it was *he* who had led them up it; who had found the way past the Fortress and threaded the Needle's Eye; who was alone responsible for having brought the summit within reach. Winter was unable to go on. His uncle was not willing. But he was both able and willing—he was burning with desire. It was more than he could bear to come so close to the fulfilment of his life's dream, only to have it mercilessly snatched away.

It was too cruel. Too unfair.

He lay in silence. He lay in torment. The wind whined,

and the night crept on, and, beside him, his uncle breathed rhythmically in sleep. And then at last he, too, slept . . . and where darkness had been was the shining sky, where the tent walls had been was the white pinnacle of a mountain, and for the hundredth time—and the last time—he was dreaming *the dream.* Only now the dream was not the same as before. He was not on the pinnacle, but beneath it, struggling toward it, and the more he struggled the farther away it seemed to grow. Something invisible but monstrous had twined itself about his legs, was pressing down upon his back, seeping like a black cloud into his throat and lungs. He strained forward, but remained where he was; cried out, but made no sound. And now, through the cloud, the peak was no longer white but dark and brooding; it was no longer a peak at all, but something else—a figure—the giant figure of a man. Strangling, paralyzed, he lay at the foot of a nightmare mountain while the face of Emil Saxo looked down on him with cold and mocking eyes.

Then all was dark again. He was awake again. At first he thought it was the dream that had awakened him, but in the next instant he knew it had been something else. It had been a sound. . . . He listened, and heard nothing. Even the wind was gone. . . . But still he knew it had been a sound.

Carefully, so as not to rouse his uncle, he sat up and lifted the flap of the tent. It was still night outside, but the darkness was thinner than before, and he could tell that dawn was not far away. A few feet off, across the hollow,

he could see the dim outline of the second tent. No sound came from it. There was no movement. And yet he felt—he knew—that something was different; something had *happened.* For a long moment he sat watching, listening. Then he crept noiselessly from the tent. In stockinged feet he crossed to the other tent—stopped—listened again. He lifted the entrance flap and peered in. On the left, where they had put him the night before, Captain Winter lay motionless and asleep under his blanket. But the blanket on the right was empty.

Saxo was gone.

Rudi stood in the dark hollow between the tents, his mind as numb and frozen as it had been in the dream. He looked up at the rocks above him, but there was only darkness; back at the tents again, crouching low in the night. His first impulse had been to shout, to waken Winter and his uncle, to tell them what had happened. But even as he thought of it he knew what the result would be. Winter could not go on. Without him, his uncle would not. They would remain there, miserable and impotent, while Saxo climbed on, alone in triumph, to the summit. . . . It was a thing he could not face; that he would rather have died than face. . . . For another moment he stood motionless in the darkness. Then, without willing it—almost without knowing it—he was approaching his own tent. He was raising the flap, reaching cautiously in, taking his boots and pack and ax. He was sitting on a rock, lacing the boots; rising and slinging on the pack. The pack was so light that he scarcely felt it, for now it no longer

held food and equipment, but only a single piece of clothing. Only an old red flannel shirt—and, lashed to its straps, a hand-carved pole.

He did not pause. He did not hesitate. For the waking dream in which he now moved was even more powerful than the dream of sleep. Mounting to the rim of the hollow, he began to climb the rocks above. They were steep, but the holds were sound and plentiful, and he made good progress. Around him, the night was fading. The contours of the peak emerged slowly into an ashen half-light. Every few moments, between steps, he paused and peered upward; but there was no sign of Saxo, no hint of movement in the gray frozen world that rose before him.

Once—only once—he turned and looked back. He stared down at the two tents, now far below him, and thought of Winter and his uncle lying within them, still asleep. For one shuddering moment the force that gripped him seemed to loosen its hold. The coils of the dream fell away, his mind was clear, and, for the first time since he had awakened, he was aware of just what he was doing. Cold panic filled him. What would his uncle say—and do? What would Captain Winter think of him? . . . And then came another thought, even worse than these; the thought that Old Teo had left with him when he said good-bye . . . *What would his father have done in such a situation?*

Not what he was doing. That he knew.

But even knowing it, he could not stop. The moment of clearness passed; the force, the compulsion returned. The consequences did not matter. Right and wrong did not

matter. Nothing in all the world mattered, except that he must go on. If it was the last thing he did in his life, he must climb on after Saxo—catch Saxo—pass Saxo; he must go on and on, up and up, bearing his shirt and pole, bearing his hopes and dreams, until he stood at last, victorious, on that white summit in the sky.

He was climbing again. It grew lighter. He moved up through gray stillness into the day that was being born.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE DAY

The first beams of the rising sun struck the summit of the Citadel and kindled it into white fire. Moments later they touched the tops of the lesser peaks, and a tide of light flowed from the heights, down the cliffs and ridges, along the snowfields and glaciers, over the forests and meadows, into the valley below. Last of all it reached the village of Kurtal. Its bright rays glittered on the church spire, the shop windows and the polished brass of the telescope that stood on the terrace before the Beau Site Hotel.

Even at this hour there was a crowd around the telescope—and greater crowds in the streets and square—for Kurtal had borne no resemblance to its usual peaceful self since Paul Tauglich had come down with word that the climb had begun. The southeast ridge of the mountain was not visible from the town. But the shoulder and all above it were in plain view; and since noon of the day before (which, according to Tauglich, was when the climbers might first have appeared) a steady procession of watchers had been peering up at the heights.

So far, however, they had seen nothing. They had remained at the telescope until night closed in. Now, with the sunrise, they were back again. But they had still seen

no hint of life or movement on the soaring pinnacle of the mountain.

Overnight, the mood of the town had changed. On the previous day it had had a holiday atmosphere. There had been a buzzing of excitement, a joyful pride—almost as if the peak had already been won. But now, in the first morning light, voices were muted and faces tense. True, there was not yet real cause for worry. These were mountain people, and they knew that on a mountain there can be all manner of obstacles and delays. But they knew, too—from Tauglich—that the climbers had food for only three days. If they were to succeed—if they were to appear on the shoulder and go on to the summit—it must be this morning. Or not at all.

The sun climbed the sky. It grew brighter. A hush lay upon the town.

There were hundreds of searching eyes, but only the one telescope, and this was reserved for the use of the senior guides. The single exception was Herr Hempel, the fat proprietor of the Beau Site Hotel, who, as owner of the instrument, had first priority of all, and who stayed at it twice as long as anyone else—focussing, more often than not, on an entirely wrong part of the mountain.

"Where are they? *Where?*" he demanded, his moon-face clouded with worry as he reluctantly stepped aside.

The guides did not answer. Hans Andermass, then Paul Tauglich, then Johann Feiniger peered in turn through the lenses, and no one spoke until Herr Hempel took over again.

"It is that Saxo," he declared. "The man from Broli. He has delayed them."

And a moment later:

"He could not go on. The others have had to bring him down."

"If they came down yesterday," said Hans Andermass, "the men in the hut would have known it. They would have sent word here."

The crowd thickened. Every man, woman and child was in the streets.

And among them, coming along the main street toward the central square, was Frau Ilse Matt. She had been to early Mass at the church and prayed for the safety of her brother Franz. And as she now walked along she murmured another prayer: this one of thankfulness that at least her son was safe. For two days following Rudi's disappearance she had suffered agonies of uncertainty and fear, but with Paul Tauglich's appearance the worst of them, at least, had ended. For Tauglich had assured her that the boy was not on the mountain. Franz had gone, yes—he had said. Franz and Captain Winter and Saxo: those three. But Rudi had stayed safe in the hut with the support party. Though she was upset and concerned about Franz, he was at least a grown man; he could take care of himself. But Rudi—with Rudi it was different. He was a boy. Her son. Her own and only son.

And she was thankful.

Now she reached the square in front of the hotel and approached the crowd around the telescope. She did not

need to ask questions. She could tell without asking that they had seen nothing yet.

"Do not worry, Frau Matt," said Johann Feiniger gently. "They are all right. They will soon appear."

"Your brother will get them there," Hans Andermass assured her.

"If only that Saxo does not spoil it all," muttered Herr Hempel.

There was a silence. The men took their turns at the telescope, and as each left it he slowly shook his head. Frau Matt stood by with the others for a while and then turned quietly to go on her way.

"Yes, it is better you wait at home," Herr Hempel told her. "Be calm. Be hopeful. And we shall call you as soon as—"

He never finished. His glance moved suddenly past her to Johann Feiniger, who was now at the telescope. For Feiniger's body had gone rigid. His hands gripped the shaft. In the next instant one hand was raised, commandingly, and a deathly stillness filled the square.

Then—

"They're there!" Feiniger cried. "I see them! They're there!"

The stillness exploded into a roaring shout. Through the mass sound came a volley of individual voices. "Where?" they demanded. "Where? . . . Where?"

Feiniger's hand was still raised. And now others were raised too, for silence.

"On the shoulder," he said. His eye remained glued to

the telescope. "A little above the shoulder. On a slope of snow under the summit ridge."

The crowd hummed with excitement.

"How near the top?" they yelled.

"How many of them?"

"Are they moving?"

"Yes, they are moving," said Feiniger. "Up the snow. They are only specks, but I can see them clearly. Two small black specks—"

"Only two?"

"Yes, only two."

"Which two? Where are the others?"

"I cannot tell which two. I can see nothing but—"

The rest of what Feiniger said was lost in the hubbub. Herr Hempel was trying to push him from the telescope, but he would not budge. Voices sounded from all sides—questioning, clamoring.

"Where can the others be?"

"They have turned back."

"Or fallen."

"You told us they went four on one rope," said Hans Andermass to Paul Tauglich.

"Yes—when they started. But they could have changed higher up."

"If they changed, how would they split up?"

"Captain Winter with Saxo, probably."

"And Franz with Rudi."

"Yes."

"Perhaps the boy could not make it," said Andermass. "Then Franz would have had to stay with him and—"

He stopped. His words hung in the air. He realized that Frau Matt had not left, but was standing there watching him.

"I—I mean—" he stammered—and again stopped.

There was a silence. For a moment the telescope was forgotten, and all eyes turned to the small, faded woman who stood there alone among the guides of Kurtal.

"You mean," said Frau Matt very quietly, *"that my son is on the Citadel."*

Andermass did not answer. No one answered. And her gaze moved slowly to Paul Tauglich, who stood awkwardly among the others.

"You lied to me," she said.

Her lips trembled. Her face was chalk white. In the next instant, it seemed the storm within her would break out in a flood of anguish and anger. . . . But the instant did not come. Instead, a strange thing happened—a remarkable thing happened—that the people of Kurtal were to remember for years to come. . . . The trembling of her lips ceased. Her face grew calm. And her voice, when she spoke again, was even quieter than before.

"You lied to me," she repeated. "You all have lied to me. . . . But that is all right. I am not angry. . . . It was kind of you to try to spare me worry for my son."

She paused.

"No, I did not want him to go. I have not wanted him

to be a guide. And all of you know the reason. . . . But it was not a good reason. I know that now. I think I have known it in my heart all along. No, it was not you who were wrong in lying, but I in causing you to lie. In being afraid to face the truth. In trying to live my Rudi's life for him, instead of letting him live his own."

Again she paused. Her slight body grew more erect. Her eyes looked out at them, clear and proud. "Very well," she said, "now he is living his own. He is on the Citadel. He is doing what he must do—what he was born to do—and if it is God's will, so be it. . . . I am a woman of Kurtal; the widow of a guide; the sister of a guide. Now I am to be the mother of a guide. May he be the best and bravest."

For a moment she looked up at the shining mountain, then back at the men around her.

"I shall go again to the church," she murmured.

Five thousand feet up, the four men at the high hut were also watching the mountain. Unlike those below, they could not see the summit pyramid, but only the southeast ridge as far as the shoulder; and, having no telescope, they could not, in any case, have been able to locate the climbers. Yet still they stared up from outside the doorway—as if the rising sun would reveal some sign or portent on the heights above.

"The weather still holds."

"*Ja.*"

"The upper snow should be firm."

"*Ja.*"

"If they camped last night above the shoulder, they should already be—"

They talked, not because they had anything to say, but rather to break the stillness. For the stillness had deepened until it was monstrous and unendurable. It was almost impossible to believe that human beings lived and moved in that dead, frozen wilderness that soared above them into the sky.

The previous day, according to plan, Andreas Krickel, Peter Tauglich and Klaus Wesselhoft had gone up to the base of the ridge. They had reached it about noon and remained for five hours, their eyes straining upward for some sign of the descending climbers. But there had been no sign. And in the late afternoon they had had to start down, in order to reach the hut before dark. Meanwhile Old Teo had waited. And waited. He had stared up at the peak until his neck ached and he was almost blinded by the fierce sunlight, and then he had gone into the hut and with loving care prepared a welcoming supper. But when at last, toward nightfall, he had heard footsteps and rushed outside, it was to find only the three who had set out that morning. And they had scarcely eaten at all. Teo himself had scarcely eaten.

"We will celebrate tomorrow night," they had said.

"Yes, tomorrow."

And then they had lain down in their blankets, to toss and turn through the endless night.

Now it was tomorrow. The third day. . . . The last day. . . . Once again they laced their boots, slung their ropes, picked up their axes. But this time, as they came out from the hut, there were not three of them, but four.

The other three looked at Teo Zurbriggen. "No," said Andreas Krickel. "It is too far for you. Too steep."

Teo shook his head. "I can make it."

"But—"

"I will not hold you back—I promise. I have done it before. And I can do it again."

The others argued, but it was no use. "If not with you, then I will go alone," said Teo. "I cannot sit here another day, waiting, like an old woman." He looked at them steadily, and a light kindled in his sunken eyes. "I was a guide of Kurtal when you could not climb to your mothers' laps. And I say to you that I am coming."

"All the way to the ridge?"

"Yes, to the ridge. And if necessary, farther. *Up* the ridge—to the Fortress—straight on until we find them."

The three younger men were silent. Teo jerked his rope tight over his hunched shoulder. "Come on," he said. "What are we waiting for?"

At dawn of that day Franz Lerner had awakened in his tent, above the shoulder. For long hours after the argument with Saxo he had been awake and brooding in the darkness; but at last the tiredness of his body had outbalanced the turmoil of his thoughts, and he had slept. Then, the next thing he knew, he was awake again, and

the tent was filled with gray twilight. He raised himself on one elbow, turned—and saw that Rudi was not there.

At first this did not startle him. The boy could have gone out to prepare breakfast, or to relieve himself, or simply because he was awake and restless. But then Franz saw something else. Rudi's pack was not there either. . . . Sitting up with a jerk, he pulled on his boots and, without pausing to lace them, crept quickly from the tent. The hollow outside lay empty in the dawnlight. The rocks above it rose empty to the sky. Crossing to the second tent, Franz lifted the flap and peered in. Captain Winter lay where he had last seen him, wrapped in his blanket. But Saxo, like Rudi, was gone.

As Franz stood there, Winter stirred and mumbled. Then he opened his eyes.

"What is it?" he asked.

Without answering, Franz dropped the flap and turned away. For a moment he stood as if rooted to the rocks. Then, mounting to the rim of the hollow, he followed it around, searching. He looked on all sides. Clambering onto a nearby crag, he stared up at the walls of rock above. His lips were compressed into a thin bloodless line, and his hands opened and closed at his sides.

There was a movement below, as Winter crawled from his tent. "What is it?" he asked. "What's happened?"

Franz came down to him. "You must not move about, my Captain," he said. "Go back inside and rest."

"What's happened?" Winter persisted. He looked about him. "Where are they?"

"They have only—" Franz hesitated; stopped. There was no use lying, he thought. There was no lie to tell. "They have gone," he said.

"Gone?"

Franz nodded.

"You mean up?"

"Yes."

"How do you know? Have you seen them?"

"No. But where else would they go?" Franz recounted briefly what Saxo had threatened the night before. "And now he has done it," he said. "And the crazy boy has gone with him."

"Rudi—with Saxo? Like this? I can't believe it."

"Where is he then?" asked Franz grimly.

There was a silence. The dawn was brightening. Above them the rocks rose bleakly into gray stillness.

With a sudden movement Franz leapt back onto the crag on which he had stood before. "Rudi!" he shouted. "Rudi!"

His voice reverberated and echoed, but there was no answer. He cupped his hands and yodeled. But there was no answer. For perhaps five minutes he remained on the crag, calling and peering upward. Then he descended slowly to the hollow.

Winter had disappeared into his tent. Franz approached it, stopped and stood motionless, in terrible indecision. The Englishman was his *Herr*—and too weak to go on. It was his first duty as a guide to stay with him. But if he was a guide, he was also a man. And the boy was his sister's

son—his own blood kin—climbing now, wildly, crazily—perhaps to his death.

Or perhaps—he thought suddenly of Saxo—perhaps not to death at all, but to the summit with the Boaster of Broli. For a moment he thought not of the boy, but only of Saxo—Saxo, in his pride and his arrogance, standing triumphant on the crest of the Citadel—and his fists clenched to whiteness and the veins throbbed in his temples.

No, he could not stand by, helpless and beaten. It was more than flesh and blood could bear. . . .

He reached for the tent flap. But at the same instant it was opened from within and Winter emerged, carrying his ax and pack.

"All right," he said quietly. "I'm ready."

Franz stared at him. "Ready?"

"To go after them."

Still Franz stared. He shook his head slowly. "No," he said. "No, my Captain. You are too tired. Too weak."

"The weakness is over. I'm better now."

"Yes, better—and that is good. But still you must rest. You must save your strength for the descent." Franz paused. "This is what we will do, my Captain. The weather is good. You are no longer so weak. Though I do not like to leave you, you will be all right here for a few hours, and I shall go up alone—"

"No, Franz," said Winter. "We shall go up together."

"But—"

"But nothing. I am better. I can make it."

The two men stood facing each other in silence, and for the first time that morning Franz really looked at Winter. Outwardly he was much the same as on the previous night. There were the tattered clothes, the bandaged head, the hollow cheeks under the stubble of beard. And yet, Franz recognized, watching him—yet there was unmistakably a change. It was not an outer but an inner change; a thing that could not so much be seen as simply felt. It was in his bones, in his blood, in his heart. And in his eyes. . . . Yes, Franz thought—most of all it was in his eyes: no longer dull and clouded as on the night before, but burning again with their old bright fire.

"Come on," said Winter in his quiet voice. "We're going to the top."

For one last long moment Franz wavered. Then he turned abruptly and went to his own tent. He laced his boots and got his ax and pack and rope. Returning to where Winter waited, he tied them both on to the rope and tested the knots.

"We will go slowly, my Captain," he said. "Slowly and carefully. And when you are tired we will rest."

Winter nodded. Franz studied the rocks above, chose his route and began to climb.

There was bare stone, then patches of snow, then stone again. The gradient was not too steep, the going not difficult, but at the height which they had now reached the air was so thin that they gasped and panted at every step. Every few minutes they paused and leaned motionless on their axes, breathing deeply. And at intervals, as on the

previous day, Winter broke out in fits of coughing. But after each brief rest he was again ready to go on, and when Franz turned and looked at him questioningly he nodded and murmured, "All right."

It was not, as Franz had feared, a matter of hauling up "a bundle of firewood." For the Englishman, through the sheer force of his will, had made a remarkable recovery; and the guide was now having his troubles too. Mountain man though he was, he had never before been so high. Already, with perhaps a thousand feet to go, the summits of the surrounding peaks were well below them, and it seemed they were no longer in the earth's atmosphere at all, but in the blue ether of outer space.

They climbed on. The tents vanished below them. Soon, through the distortion of distance, the broad snow-covered shoulder appeared as far beneath them as the glaciers and valleys. There was no wind. Only stillness and space. And minute by minute, space grew brighter, bluer—until at last there was a great golden glow and the sun was cushioned on the ranges to the east.

There was a chimney, slabs, a crag, more slabs. Then they came to a long strip of snow, and here they stopped again, staring down at the footprints in its surface. There were two sets of prints—one large, one small—and both bore straight up the snow and vanished among the rocks above. They craned upward, but saw nothing. They tried to shout, but only a hoarse croaking came from their throats. Then they were coughing: this time not only Winter, but Franz as well. They leaned forward, heads bent

against their axes, until their breathing eased. Then they moved on again.

Above the snow there was a stretch of more difficult climbing, and they moved one at a time while the other belayed the rope. Beyond this was more snow, more footprints. And still farther on, a steep pitch of ice-coated rock. Franz climbed it first—very slowly, very cautiously—then turned at the top and held the rope for Winter.

"Easy now. Watch it," he said.

"I can do it," said the Englishman.

And then the only sounds were the deep rasp of his breathing and the scraping of his boot nails against the ice and rock.

The top of the pitch marked the end of the particular section of the peak on which they had been climbing. Standing side by side, they looked at the awesome prospect ahead. Directly before them, the mountain narrowed. Its cliffs and buttresses seemed to fall away, to vanish, and all that was left was a thin ridge twisting on into space. The slant of the ridge was not steep—considerably less steep, indeed, than the stretch over which they had just come—but on either side the walls dropped off almost vertically into the immense chasms of the north and east faces. For perhaps a hundred feet that was all there was: a saw-edge of rock, a catwalk in the sky. Then the mountain broadened again. Mighty ribs of granite flared up from the abyss and joined together to form the base of a

solid pyramid. It was a snow-covered pyramid: huge, symmetrical, gleaming. It rose in a gentle slope to a white point in the sky, and ended—in the summit of the Citadel.

The two men stopped. They sat on a slab and rested. Above them the sun, now well on its morning journey, burned like a great eye in blue-black space. And around and beneath them the world of the Alps spread in a vast panorama of peaks, glaciers and valleys. There was no cloud, nor even a shred of mist. Every major summit of the range stood up clear and glittering in the crystal light. To the west, in distant France, the dome of Mont Blanc seemed to fill half the horizon. To the north and east rose the tall hosts of the Swiss Pennines and the Oberland—Monte Rosa, the Dom, the Weisshorn, the Jungfrau and scores of others—incredibly white and vivid against the blue immensity of sky. Beyond them the land rolled away endlessly toward Germany, toward Austria; to the south, for uncounted miles across the plains of Italy.

But it was not at the world beneath them that the two men looked. It was at the narrow, slanting ridge that lay ahead—and at the shining pyramid beyond the ridge. The side of the pyramid was a smooth slope of unbroken snow, and, from the distance at which they saw it, any moving shape should have been visible. But they saw no shape; no movement. In the white stillness there was no sign of the two climbers who had gone before them.

They did not speak. Whatever their private thoughts may have been, they kept them to themselves. Perhaps

Saxo and Rudi had circled to the far side of the peak. Perhaps they were resting, and hidden by a drift. One thing certain was that they were up there somewhere.

Or else . . .

They sat in silence. They got up. They went on. Franz leading, Winter following, they inched out onto the spine of the narrow ridge. It was climbable—of that there was no question—but it was also a tightrope no more than a foot in width. One slip, one misstep to either side, and they would have been twisting in space for a fall of a vertical mile. Franz moved, and Winter belayed. Winter moved and Franz belayed. They got a third of the way across—halfway—two-thirds of the way. Only ten yards or so separated them from the base of the pyramid. . . . When, suddenly, Franz stopped. . . . For a long moment he stood motionless, looking at something at his feet. Then he gestured, and Winter came up behind him. The two stared at the knapsack that lay before them on the ridge.

A roughly cut staff was lashed to its straps.

Crouching, Franz opened the pack. It contained only one item—an old red flannel shirt. The men's eyes met, held, broke away. Instinctively they looked down into the emptiness on either side of the ridge. To the left, above the east face, was a smooth vertical wall; to the right, another wall, not quite vertical, slanting down to a narrow ledge some twenty feet below. But the ledge was empty, and beneath it the north face dropped away so steeply that it could not be seen.

Franz stood as if stunned—frozen. But Winter's face

was clouded with the thoughts that struggled in his mind. "No, Franz," he said at last. "He didn't fall. He couldn't have."

The guide looked at him numbly.

"If he'd fallen, the pack would still be on his back. How could he have taken it off first?"

"But—"

"Think of it. It's impossible. That he took off the pack and *then* fell. . . ." Winter's voice was hoarse and strained. "No. He didn't fall. He took it off and went on. He decided he could climb better without it and left it here, to be picked up on the way down."

Franz thought it over, and hope kindled in his eyes. For what the Englishman had said was well reasoned.

"Yes," he murmured. "That is possible. He could have—"

Then he paused. He was again looking at the pack. And slowly he shook his head.

"No," he said. "No." He pointed at the staff; at the red shirt. "These he carried the whole way up the mountain; the whole way from Kurtal. And we knew why he carried them. He would not leave them here."

There was a silence. Winter started to speak—and stopped. Then at last he muttered: "Still—he couldn't have fallen. It doesn't make sense."

"Nor does the other," said Franz.

They stared dumbly at the pack. At the ridge. At the gulfs of space beside the ridge. At the white crest of the Citadel that rose beyond it.

They raised their heads and shouted. But there was only the croaking of their own voices. And then silence.

They shouted again. And again. And still there was silence.

"They must be ahead," said Winter. "They must be!"

Franz said nothing, but after a moment moved slowly forward. The Englishman started to follow, then paused and looked once more at Rudi's pack.

"Wait," he said.

Stooping, he took out the red shirt and tied it around his waist. He unfastened the staff from its bindings and secured it to his own pack.

"All right," he said.

And they moved on.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE HEIGHTS

There was the stillness. There was the mountain and the sky.

The sky was bright now. The sun was up. But when it had risen—and how far he had come—Rudi did not know. He had climbed beyond time, as he had climbed beyond the world, and all that existed were rock and sky; the next step . . . and the next . . . and the next. Sometimes he looked down, but what he saw had no meaning. Beyond an ocean of space, the earth spread vague and formless, like a landscape in a dream. And sometimes he looked up, but the peak of the mountain gleamed so brightly in the sun that he quickly had to turn his eyes away.

Yet each time he was nearer to it: at least he could see that.

Nearer and still nearer. . . .

His legs were all right. His lungs were all right. He did not cough or gasp. But he knew that the altitude was affecting him, for there was a pace beyond which he could not force himself—and the pace was slow. The rocks glided by. Patches of snow glided by. In the snow, at intervals, were the footprints he was looking for, and then

again he would look up. But all he could see was a white glare filling the sky.

"He is already there," he thought despairingly. "Saxo is there, standing alone on the summit, and I shall meet him coming down in mocking victory.

"And the others are now awake," he thought. "They know I am gone. And what I am doing."

A wave of guilt rose through him and passed, and where it had been were pride and defiance. Why should he not be doing it? he asked himself, almost fiercely; he who, alone among the four of them, had found the way up the mountain. He was doing what he had to do—what he had been born to do—and nothing could stop him . . . nothing. The staff was lashed to his back. The red shirt was in his pack. Soon now he would be carrying them up that final white crest in the sky, as he had so often before in his dreams.

Only this time it would be no dream.

There were steep slabs, crags, a chimney, more slabs. There were rock, snow, footprints, rock again. There was the next step . . . and the next . . . and the next. Once he thought he heard a sound—above? below?—and his body tensed as he listened; but as soon as the sound of his own footsteps stopped there was only immense unbroken stillness. He had never known such stillness before. It was a thing that did not exist in the familiar world of men and animals, life and growth, but only in this high secret world above and beyond it.

"But I am not afraid," he thought. "No, I am not afraid."

He climbed on. Through the stillness. Through the terrible aloneness. Up and up, toward the blue shining sky. He came to a pitch of steep ice-glazed rock; scaled it; reached its top; stood on the top, looking ahead at the thin saw-edged ridge that led on to the final pyramid of the mountain. . . . And now, suddenly, he was no longer alone. . . . For halfway up the ridge was Emil Saxo.

The guide's back was turned to him. He was moving slowly up the rocks between the precipices of the north and east faces. Rudi stared at him. His mouth opened, but his voice seemed frozen in his throat. For hours he had been hoping and struggling to catch up with the man from Broli, but now that he had at last done so he did not know what to say or do.

At last two words came:

"*Herr* Saxo—"

In the stillness his voice did not seem his own at all.

The guide stopped, turned and looked back at him, motionless. Standing above the boy on the ridge, he seemed not a man but a giant. Against the white glare of the summit beyond him his face appeared almost black.

He stared down at Rudi, but did not speak.

"*Herr* Saxo—wait—"

Still the other did not speak. Rudi hesitated a moment and then began climbing toward him. As he moved he had to keep his eyes fixed on the thin edge of rock, but when

he stopped and looked up again he was within a few feet of Saxo. The guide was still watching him, and now he could see not only his outline but his features. The broad leathery face; the small cold-blue eyes; the lips drawn tight across his face like two white strips of ice.

"What are you doing here?" Saxo asked.

"I have come—to join you—"

"Join me?"

"To go to the top."

The man's glance moved past him, down the mountainside. "Where are the others?" he said.

"They are back at the tents."

"You came alone?"

"Yes."

Saxo was still scanning the rocks below, as if he suspected a trick. Then he looked back at Rudi. "That is too bad, boy," he said. "For now you will have to go back alone."

"Go back?"

"Yes—go back. To the sick Englishman. To your old woman of an uncle. You are better than either of them, boy: that I will say. You are a good climber, and one day you may be a great one. But that day is not yet. The Citadel is not for you—yet. I am going to climb it alone, do you understand? Not with a kitchen-boy from Kurtal. Not with any Kurtaler. Or any foreigner. I am going to climb it myself, only I—for the honor of Broli—and the name of Broli will be known in the world as long as the Citadel stands."

There was a silence.

"No," Rudi murmured. "No—"

"Go back, boy," said Saxo. His eyes were like blue stones.

"No—"

"Go back!"

Saxo turned. He began to move again along the knife-edge of the ridge. For a moment Rudi stood where he was, and then quickly moved after him. "*Herr* Saxo—" he pleaded.

The guide paid no attention.

"I cannot go back. Let me come with you. Please—"

He was close behind Saxo now. He reached out and touched his arm. And Saxo wheeled on him in anger. . . . Or rather he started to wheel. . . . For at his first motion his foot caught between two stones, and he was jerked violently to one side. His ax clawed the air; his free hand groped for support. But he found none. The full weight of his body sprawled on the ridge, struck a loose rock and dislodged it; and in the next instant the rock, and Saxo with it, were sliding down the precipice of the north face. There was a hoarse, choked-off cry, the crash of stone on stone, then silence. And Rudi was alone on the ridge.

For a moment he could not move. He could not even breathe. Mountain and sky spun around him, and he thought that he, too, was going to fall; but with a convulsive effort he managed to throw himself flat, to grasp a boulder, to cling to it until the spinning stopped. Then, numbly, he raised his head. He crept to the edge of the

ridge. He looked down the north face. . . . *And saw Saxo.* . . . The rock that had slid off with him was gone; apparently it had fallen—or was still falling—all the way to the base of the mountain. But the guide had landed on a ledge not more than twenty feet down the face, and though the ledge was narrow it had been enough to hold him. He was there—and he was alive. As Rudi peered down, he pulled himself up slowly from the sprawling position in which he had fallen and crept in as far as he could from the rim of the ledge.

"Are you all right?" Rudi called.

There was no answer.

"Are you hurt?"

Still no answer. Leaning out from the ridge; he saw that Saxo was crouched close in against the mountain wall; and with one hand he was pressing his arm tightly against his body. Yes, Rudi thought, he was hurt all right. Not dead, by a miracle. But hurt. Perhaps badly.

His eyes moved over the twenty feet of rock that separated them. They were almost vertical—but not quite. Almost smooth—but not quite. There was sufficient angle, and enough cracks and holds, for a good climber to make it, either up or down. If he had had a rope there would have been nothing to it. He could have belayed it around a rock and lowered an end to Saxo, and the guide would have been up in a minute. But, climbing alone, he had brought no rope. Saxo had no rope. And whether the latter, with an injured arm, could climb the delicate stretch on his own was, to say the least, doubtful.

The boy looked at the guide, at the wall, back at the guide again. The climb, the summit, even the fierce resentment of Saxo that only a few moments before had burned inside him: all were now forgotten, or at least pushed off into a remote corner of his mind. Whatever the cause, whoever the blame, the helping of another climber in trouble must always—*always*—take precedence over everything else.

Saxo was getting slowly to his feet. He was looking up at the wall. "To the left," Rudi told him. "Here on the left the holds are best."

The guide swayed a little. His left arm, which he had been holding, dangled limp at his side, and there seemed also to be something wrong with one of his legs. Moving along the wall, he selected a place, paused a moment and began to climb. He got one foot onto a narrow projection and his good hand into a crevice above. He pulled himself up, found two more holds, moved up again. Then he stopped. Directly above him, now, the rock was perfectly smooth. To the right it was smooth. Only to the left, at almost arm's length, was there a series of cracks to which a man's fingers might cling. But it was Saxo's left arm that was the injured one.

For several moments he stood motionless; then slowly tried to raise his arm. But it was no more than a foot from his side when he dropped it again with a hoarse gasp of pain. He did not raise it again. Instead, he tried to maneuver himself, so that he could reach over with the right hand. But it was no good. His footholds, alone, were not

enough to hold him, and the instant he let go his present handhold he began to slip. Peering down, Rudi could see that his face was covered with sweat. He began to curse in a harsh rasping whisper.

He let himself down. He tried again at another point. And then at a third. But each time he soon came to a place where it was necessary to use the left hand. And each time he ended up motionless, pinioned to the wall. Back on the ledge, he tried another tack. Instead of challenging the wall head on, he moved off toward one end, then the other, searching for a route that might lead off to either side. On the right, there was only smooth rock and space; but to the left of the ledge (Rudi could not see this section, because it was blocked off by an overhang) there was apparently some hope of escape, for Saxo spent a long while there before reappearing directly below.

"It does not go?" asked Rudi.

"No," said Saxo.

It was the first reply he had made since he had fallen. And he said no more. For a while he stood motionless, holding his injured arm. Then again he moved slowly back and forth along the ledge. He was not like a mountaineer any more. He was a prisoner. A caged animal.

"I will come down," Rudi said.

Just how he could help he was not sure. But at least he must make the attempt. It had now been perhaps a half hour since Saxo fell. He had tried every way to get up, but could not, and there was no choice as to what Rudi must do.

He studied the wall beneath him. It was far too sheer to descend facing outward, so he swiveled himself around until he was lying prone on the ridge with his feet dangling. He searched for a foothold, found it, and let himself slowly down. But the hold was shallow, the wall steep, and as he leaned out to look for the next step below, the pack and staff on his back, light though they were, seemed to be pulling him relentlessly off into space. Creeping back onto the ledge, he unslung them and laid them on a rock. He would retrieve them when he came up again.

Then again he was prone, dangling, groping with his toes. He found the first hold, then a second, then a third. When he looked down the ledge seemed no more than the merest ribbon against the gulf of space. But he contrived not to think of space. Only of the ledge. Of the next hold—and the next. And at last he was half-climbing, half-sliding down onto the band of rock beside Saxo.

He was there. Now what? The trick, of course, was to make it possible for Saxo to climb the wall. He could not carry him. He could not support even a fraction of his great bulk. All he could hope to do was to substitute in some way for Saxo's left arm; to act as a lever and a balance; to hold him against the rock when he could not hold on for himself. He studied the wall from below. Then he looked at the guide. Sweat still covered his broad face. His eyes were clouded and his lips twisted with pain. His left arm was not only limp, but hung at a peculiar angle that made Rudi sure it was broken.

"I have a big handkerchief," he said. "I will make a sling for you."

But Saxo shook his head. "I am all right. I do not need your help."

Rudi tried to reason with him, but it was no use. "Then if you will go first up the wall," he said, "I will try to help you from below."

The guide hesitated. He did not want this help either. But he had no choice. Approaching the wall, he climbed up to where he had been before, and Rudi, coming up after him, tried to support his feet while he swung his sound hand over to the holds on the left. It was no good, however. The instant Saxo's weight came down on his shoulder he began to slip and slide, and no effort of will, no straining or clawing of rock, could stop it. When they returned to the ledge they were both panting heavily, and there was an ugly bruise on Rudi's shoulder where Saxo's boot nails had ripped through to the flesh.

They tried again—this time with Rudi going first. Climbing halfway up the wall and holding on precariously by one hand and one foot, he leaned far down and sought to support Saxo by grasping him under the bad arm. But this, too, was no good. For one thing, the pain to Saxo was so great that he groaned aloud. And, also, they could not get the proper leverage to swing him over to the crucial holds. The guide ground his teeth; his face contorted; with all the mighty strength of his good arm he struggled to thrust himself up and over. But it was not a question of strength. It was one of balance. And balance they could

not attain. They made a final effort. Rudi leaned down until one hand reached Saxo's belt. The guide strained upward. They slipped. They swayed. For one ghastly instant they lurched out from the wall, and it seemed that the two of them, clinging together, would topple off into space. Then Rudi let go. They clung to the rocks and grasped for air. And again they returned to the ledge.

Through all of it they had not spoken. They did not speak now. They sat on the ledge, and Saxo held his injured arm, and Rudi looked up at the wall above them. It was no prison wall for him. The holds were there, plain to view, and he could go up it more easily than he had come down. In less than a minute he could be back on the ridge, slinging on his pack and staff, moving on along the ridge—to the summit pyramid—up the pyramid. . . .

His eyes fixed on the shining crest of snow. Then he tore them away. He saw that Saxo was watching him.

"Go on," said the guide.

Rudi said nothing.

"Go on. You have won; I have lost. Climb to the top. Claim your victory."

Still Rudi said nothing. He sat motionless, and his face was without expression. But within him there raged a struggle fiercer than any he had had with the mountain. Thought and emotion met, conflicted, tangled, and seemed almost to tear his mind to shreds. . . . He had left the others; why not Saxo? But that had been wrong, and two wrongs did not make a right. . . . This was different, though: Saxo was not a *Herr.* Not even a friend. He was

a ruthless enemy. But (again *but*) he was crippled. He was alone. . . . The top was so close. So close! He could climb quickly, return quickly, rejoin Saxo. But (always *but*) then what? Then he would have to go on down, get his uncle, bring him up. But by that time it would be late in the day. And would his uncle leave Captain Winter?

His brain spun. He closed his eyes. When he opened them he looked at Saxo, and the guide was sitting hunched over with his bad arm dangling to the ground and the other hand covering his face.

Rudi stood up. He moved to the right end of the ledge and looked down into space. He peered from the outer rim, and there was only space. Then he edged to the left, onto the section of the ledge that, from above, had been hidden by the overhang. He reached the end, looked down again—and froze, motionless. *For on this side there was a way out.* From the very corner of the ledge a deep fault in the east face slanted down through the solid rock toward the distant shoulder where the tents were pitched. It went all the way to the shoulder: Rudi could see that for certain. And it appeared everywhere climbable; in fact, easier and less steep than the ridge up which they had come.

Obviously this was what Saxo had seen before, when he had disappeared under the overhang. He had said, "No, it does not go," and for himself alone he had probably been right. But for the two of them it was a different matter. It would go. In the whole stretch of the great crevice there was nothing as steep or difficult as the twenty feet of wall

above them. Even with a broken arm a climber could make it—if there were a second climber to lead and steady him.

Still, it was not with joy, or even relief, that Rudi stood there staring, but rather with the bitterest disappointment. For though the cleft was a way out, it was not a way up—but only down. Its slanting course descended unbroken across the mountainside, with no access to the main ridge until it joined it at the shoulder, about a thousand feet below. With Saxo's injury it would take them hours to reach the tents. There would be no time to start again that day. Nor would he have the strength; nor would his uncle let him. With two men incapacitated—and their food gone—there would be no next day. They would go down, defeated.

Here, at this place and this moment, was his last chance for the top. His only chance. It was now or never.

He came back to the center of the ledge. Saxo was again holding his injured arm, and his face was twisted with pain.

"Go on," he said, "Go on up, you fool!"

Rudi stood silently.

"You've won, boy—don't you understand?" The guide's voice grated like iron on stone. "Go on. Get your damned shirt and pole. Carry them up. Put them on the top."

Rudi scarcely heard him. He scarcely saw him. A cold numbness had closed around him, and within the numbness he stood alone. Once more his eyes went up to the

wall above the ledge, to the jagged line of the ridge, to the junction of the ridge and the summit pyramid. They moved up the pyramid, up the white slopes, up the gleaming pinnacle to a point in the sky—and stopped. And that was all there was in the world: the point and the sky, the goal and the dream, the white dream rising into the blue stillness of space.

Then, through the dream, through the stillness—a voice. But whether it was Saxo's voice, or his own, he did not know.

"Go on," it said. "To the goal. To victory. All Kurtal will hail you; all Switzerland will hail you. You will be a hero. The conqueror of the Citadel. Your father's son."

His father's son.

Rudi lowered his eyes. The mountaintop was gone; the dream was gone; the numbness of dream was slowly dissolving, and in its place was clearness. Clearness as deep and cold and pure as the mountain sky.

He turned, looked at Saxo and pulled his handkerchief from his pocket.

"I will make a sling now," he said quietly. "Then we will go down together."

The ledge receded above them. They crept and slid and stumbled down the long slanting cleft in the mountainside.

As Rudi had judged, it was climbable. It "went." But their progress was terribly slow. With Saxo's useless arm, even the simplest of maneuvers became a formidable problem, and, besides, the guide's leg, which he had also hurt

in his fall, now began to trouble him seriously. He limped, lurched, seemed to have lost all sense of balance. Rudi had to help him almost constantly: now going ahead and leading him by his good hand, now following behind and gripping him by his belt. Soon his own arms were aching from the strain. His shoulder, already bruised by Saxo's boot nails, seemed shot through with darts of fire.

Suddenly he remembered something. His pack. He had left his pack on the ridge before climbing down to Saxo, and there it still was. . . . All right, he thought, there it was. What matter? . . . It contained only one thing. Only an old red shirt—and, slung through the straps, a rough-cut pole. He had no need of them now. There they would stay, lost and forgotten, as high as he had been able to bear them. High on the great mountain where his father had died. And his dreams.

He bent to the next rock, the next step. He was going first now, descending a few feet at a time and then turning to help Saxo down after him. The process was repeated ten times, twenty, thirty times, each almost exactly the same. And then, suddenly, not the same—for Saxo slipped. His good hand reached out for Rudi's, but missed it; reached for a hold, but missed it; and the next instant his weight bore down on the boy and the two slid together down the rocks. Luckily they did not slide far. There was a level place a short way below, and they landed with a jolt. But the jolt alone was enough to make Saxo cry out in agony. And when Rudi regained his feet his own body was trembling with shock and tiredness.

They rested. Saxo sat motionless, pressing his broken arm, and his usually red face was as gray as the mountain rocks. After a few moments he bent his head and closed his eyes. He seemed almost to be sleeping. Rudi, too, sat still, except for the spasmodic twitching of his muscles and the quick panting of his lungs. He struggled for air, for control of his body. He struggled with all his strength, but now at last, he realized, his strength had begun to ebb.

"I can do it," he thought fiercely. "I can do it. . . . Because I *have* to do it."

He looked down, along the great cleft in the mountainside, and there below was the shoulder, jutting white and immense against the distant valley. Then he looked up, to see how far they had already come: along the slant of the cleft—to the ledge—to the thin line of the ridge above the ledge. And suddenly his body was no longer trembling, but rigid. His heart seemed to have stopped. For on the ridge were two human figures. Outlined against the sky, they were moving slowly along its crest toward the base of the summit pyramid.

He could not, of course, see their faces. But he did not need to. They could not possibly be any other than his uncle and Captain Winter. He sprang to his feet. His mouth opened to cry out. In that stillness of rock and ice they would surely hear him. If he waved they would see him. In half an hour—perhaps less—they could work their way down to the ledge, down the cleft, to where he now stood. Then there would be three of them to help Saxo. There would be a rope, a whole team of climbers.

To reach the shoulder and the tents would be no problem at all.

His mouth was open—to shout. But no shout came. Instead, his eyes moved on past the two figures: to the end of the ridge, to the snowslope beyond, up the white flanks of the slope to the shining point that was its summit. That, too, they could reach in half an hour, or less. . . . If he did not call.

Only if he did not call.

Still he gazed upward, motionless. The figures had reached the upper end of the ridge, the base of the pyramid, and now they were no longer outlined against the sky, but against the whiteness of snow. They crept slowly higher . . . And, abruptly, Rudi turned away. Saxo was still sitting with head bent and eyes closed. The boy approached and touched his shoulder.

"Come," he said. "We will go on."

The guide looked up at him, and his eyes were clouded. "I cannot," he murmured.

"You must."

Saxo shook his head. "No, I am done in—finished. Leave me here, boy. Save yourself."

"Come! Come!" Rudi pulled at his good arm. "Give me your hand. I will help you. I will get you down."

"You cannot do it."

"Yes, I can do it."

Somehow he got Saxo to his feet. They were moving on again. They were climbing, slipping, stumbling, crawling, inching down the endless rock of the mountainside. Now

he was holding Saxo by the hand; now by the belt; now supporting what seemed the whole of his weight by a shoulder propped under his armpit. For a while the guide muttered and groaned. Then he was still. His eyes, though open, were glazed and unseeing, and he had lost all control over his movements. Rudi maneuvered him along the deep slant of the cleft: allowing gravity to pull him downward, using his own strength to brake and prevent a fall.

Or at least a bad—a fatal—fall. For they were falling constantly. They were lurching, slipping, falling a foot, two feet; scraping against rough rock walls, clawing for holds, landing among sharp stones; creeping on again, slipping again, falling again. There was blood on their hands, on their faces. Their clothes were in tatters. And still they crept, stumbled, fell: on and on, down and down. How long it went on Rudi did not know—and would never know. Time had ceased to exist. Even pain and tiredness no longer existed. Now there was only numbness. Only the gray rock slipping past. Only the next step, and the next, and the next, and the blind instinct to go on.

It was steep: terribly steep. Then not so steep. Then steep again. The rock bulged; they swung out over space; Rudi knew he could not hold on. . . . And held on. . . . They fell and lay sprawled upon a crag; he knew he could not stand up again. . . . And stood up. . . . Then the angle eased off once more. It was almost level. It stayed level. He was half-dragging, half-carrying Saxo across a broad shelf of rock. He was looking down again—down the mountainside—searching for the shoulder. But he

could see no shoulder. *They were on the shoulder.* Ahead was snow; beyond it the sharp, flaring point of the Needle. To the right, and a little above them, was the rim of the hollow in which the tents were pitched.

Rudi turned toward it. He took a step—and a second step—dragging Saxo after him. But Saxo staggered and fell. Rudi bent to help him up. And fell too. He tried to rise, but couldn't. He lay still, while mountain and sky spun around him. He closed his eyes, and there was darkness.

Then at last, beyond the darkness: sounds—voices. His eyes were still closed, but he knew that two figures were bending over him. They were picking him up, carrying him, laying him down again, but this time not on the cold rock of the mountain.

The world came back. He was in a tent. He looked up at his uncle and Captain Winter, and he tried to speak.

"Don't talk now. Rest," said Winter.

But there was something before rest.

"You went after me?" he murmured.

"Yes," said the Englishman.

"You went—all the way?"

"Yes, all the way, Rudi."

"That is good, my Captain." His eyes moved slowly to Franz, and he tried to smile. "Yes, that is good, Uncle," said the son of Josef Matt. "We are guides of Kurtal, and we got our *Herr* to the top."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE CONQUEROR

Down . . . down . . . down. . . .

They had fed him tea and chocolate. They had made him rest for an hour. But an hour was all; for their food was now gone, and they had to be off the mountain by nightfall.

"You can do it, boy," his uncle had said.

"Yes, I can do it."

And they had started off.

They left the tents where they were, so as to travel as light as possible. They roped up, all four together. Rudi went first, Winter second, Saxo third, Franz last. Franz's position was the hardest, for Saxo was all but a dead weight on the rope, and often, after letting Rudi down, Winter would turn and, from below, help maneuver the guide over the steeper pitches. They moved slowly, but steadily. And they moved in silence.

The Needle, where before they had struggled for so long, took only a few minutes to descend; for now there was no need to bother with the eye. Rudi crept out to the edge of the projecting rock, let himself over, dangled—and was gently lowered to the platform below. Then came Winter. Then Saxo, hanging limply. Finally Franz, by

means of a second rope doubled over a crag. On the platform Saxo swayed and fell. Winter and Franz picked him up.

"I—I cannot—" murmured the man from Broli.

"Come on. Move," said Franz.

And they moved on.

Down . . . down . . . down. . . .

There was the wall below the shoulder. The endless wall. There was the rock gliding past—cliffs and ledges, knobs and crevices, crags and clefts—as if in the gray blur of a dream. Again and again Rudi slipped and stumbled; a dozen times he was on the verge of falling; but he scarcely knew it until he felt the bite of the rope around his ribs. In the numbness of dream through which he moved, only the rope was real. The rope that held him, grasped him, sustained him. The rope that was life itself.

"To the right now—"

"To the left—"

"Straight ahead—"

At intervals a voice came down to him, and he obeyed blindly, mechanically. From the Needle on, he scarcely saw his uncle, for Franz remained always above, directing and supporting them. But at the end of each pitch another familiar figure appeared beside him—a lean, haggard figure with a bandaged head and a wracking cough. "Good boy," came Winter's voice. Over and over: "Good boy." Then he braced himself and belayed the rope, while Rudi descended.

"He is done in too," the boy thought. "As done in as I. I must not make it hard for him. I must not slip or stumble."

Then he was slipping again, stumbling again. He was not climbing down the mountain, but simply being lowered down—"like a bundle of firewood." At last they came to the base of the wall and the beginning of the ridge. The shoulder was high above them; they were passing their first campsite; then the place where Franz and Saxo had stopped and argued. . . . Saxo. He had not thought of him for hours. What had happened to him? Was he still with them? . . . He looked up. Yes, he was still with them. There he was, about fifty feet behind, swaying drunkenly on the rope while Franz held him from above. Another "bundle of firewood."

Left. Right. Straight ahead.

Down. Down. Down.

Or was it down? It no longer seemed to him that he was moving at all, but rather that the mountain was flowing up past him. It flowed in a gray stream—a stream of rock—endlessly repeated, endlessly the same. And then, at last, no longer the same, for they had again reached a place which he recognized. He was on the flat slabs on top of the Fortress. He was descending the cleft through the Fortress. He was on the ledge below the cleft, edging around the bulge above the precipice of the south face. The rope steadied him from behind, but it was not enough. He was losing his grip, slipping, falling. He was reaching out blindly, despairingly . . . groping, grasping, cling-

ing . . . clinging at last, safe and secure . . . not to the rock, *but to a hand.* The hand pulled him on. He was on the platform below the Fortress. "*Lausbube*—" a voice was saying, "Dishwasher. Kitchen rat—"

Teo Zurbriggen held him in his arms, and tears streamed from his old sunken eyes.

Ridge. Snowslope. Glacier.

Sunlight. Dusk. Dark.

Then the hut. Lights and voices. And sleep—sleep—sleep.

When he awoke it was light again. The hut was full of men. There were his uncle, Winter, Saxo. There were Old Teo, Andreas Krickel, Peter Tauglich, Klaus Wesselhoft. They made him eat and drink, and slowly he felt the strength returning to his body. They thronged about him, talking, and slowly their words took form and meaning through the fading numbness of his brain. Krickel was shaking his hand. Then Tauglich. Then—awkwardly, almost shyly—Klaus Wesselhoft. "Hello, Angel-face," said his old tormentor. But this time he said it differently.

Then Krickel and Klaus were leading Saxo toward the door. Two slats of wood held his bad arm motionless. His left leg was swollen and rigid. But he was able to walk slowly, with only a little help from the two beside him.

"We will have him down in Broli by noon," said Krickel. "Then we will come around by the valley and be in Kurtal in time for tonight's celebration."

They reached the door, and the others watched them in

silence. Then Saxo turned. For a long moment he looked at Winter, for another at Franz. And the silence deepened. "Come," said Krickel. But still he stayed where he was. His gaze moved to Rudi. Limping slowly back across the room, he stopped before him and put out his good hand.

"Will you take it, boy?" he asked.

Rudi hesitated. He looked up into the grim face; into the eyes that were no longer cold as stone, but clouded and filled with pain. The hand waited. And he took it.

"You saved my life," said Saxo. "You could have climbed to the top, but instead you saved my life. I thank you. I salute you." He turned to Franz and Winter, and for an instant the old defiance glowered in his glance. "And you thank him too," he said, "you conquerors of the Citadel!"

He limped back to the door, and the two men waiting there led him out.

There were crowds as high as the base of the Blue Glacier. There were crowds on the boulder-slopes, on the forest trail, on the green meadows below. It was no mere file of weary climbers that made the descent to Kurtal—but a triumphal procession.

And the town itself was as it had never been before in all the years of its history. The church bells pealed. A band played. Every shop was closed, every human being on the streets: men, women and children, guides and hotel workers, tradesmen and housewives, natives and tourists. The

air was split with shouts, cheers and singing, as Kurtal went mad in its pride and its joy.

In the main square stood the mayor and the town council. But Rudi scarcely saw them. All he saw—suddenly—was the small figure darting toward him through the crowd; the figure of his mother, the face of his mother; his mother flinging herself upon him, embracing him, holding him tight. And now he was holding her too. Her shoulders trembled under his hands. He was trying to comfort her, speak to her. But the din was too great. Then she raised her face. He saw her eyes, and her tears. But in the same instant, too, he saw beyond the tears—to what lay behind them—deeper and stronger and more shining than tears. And he knew that there was no need to speak.

The crowd surged around them, bore them on. Ahead, a group of guides had hoisted Captain Winter and Franz onto their shoulders and were carrying them across the square toward the terrace of the Beau Site Hotel. The mayor had already reached the terrace. He was waving his arms and calling for order. Herr Hempel was calling for order. But their voices were lost in the shouts of the crowd, the blare of the band, the clanging of bells. A stagecoach rumbled into the square—then a second, then a third—and their occupants poured out and swelled the throng already there. "There are more coming!" voices cried. "Dozens more! Hundreds more!" From down the valley they came. From neighboring valleys. From the plains and cities to the north. Already the news of the

great event was spreading across the length and breadth of Switzerland.

A roar like the ocean. A cheer like a wave. . . . Then suddenly, magically, silence. . . . On the hotel terrace, before the crowd, stood the conquerors.

"Herr Captain Winter, Guide Franz Lerner," said the mayor, "—we hail you with pride. Soon all this country—and your country, my Captain—and all the world—will hail you. Your feat will be remembered and honored as long as mountains stand and there are men to climb them." He paused and pointed upward: beyond the crowd, beyond the rooftops, beyond the valley, to the great peak that soared above them. "There it is," he said. "The Citadel. Unclimbed, unconquered through all the ages, until you, by your skill and courage, have won it. There it stands above our valley of Kurtal; there it will stand forever; and all men will know it by your names. As your triumph and your prize. As your mountain."

Captain Winter was slowly shaking his head.

"No, you are wrong," he said. "Not our mountain."

The mayor stared at him. The crowd stared. Not a whisper broke the stillness that filled the square.

"*It is Rudi's mountain,*" said Captain Winter.

A murmur ran through the packed throng.

"Rudi's?"

"Rudi Matt?"

"How? Why?"

"Did the boy reach the top?"

Winter walked to where Rudi stood beside his mother.

He put a hand on his shoulder and led him out to the center of the terrace.

"Here is the conqueror of the Citadel," he said.

Rudi could scarcely breathe. His bones were like water. The crowd and the square spun around him. "I?" he whispered. "No, my Captain—not I. I only—"

His voice faded. He no longer had a voice. Winter was leading him again. Then they had stopped again, and before him was the long brass telescope of the Beau Site Hotel.

"Look," said the Englishman. "You will see. . . . Then all the world will look, and it will see."

Rudi bent to the eyepiece. There was a circle—a circle of blue—and, rising into the circle, a wedge of dazzling whiteness. . . . "It is the dream," he thought wildly. "I am asleep, and it is the dream again." . . . But he was not asleep. It was not a dream. The brass of the telescope was hard and real to his touch; Winter's hand was tight and warm on his shoulder; the image in the lens did not fade, but grew steadily brighter. Across the miles of space he saw the mountaintop, clear and gleaming. From its highest point there rose a pole. And from the pole, tied by its two sleeves, a red shirt streamed out like a banner against the shining sky.

He straightened slowly. He stared at Winter and at his Uncle Franz, standing beside him. "You carried it up," he murmured. "You put it there."

"No, Rudi," said Winter, "you put it there. You and your father."

The crowd was stirring again. The mayor was talking. Herr Hempel was talking. Around them everything was turmoil and confusion. But in the midst of it Rudi stood dazed and motionless, and once more his eyes went up to the distant summit. Without the telescope there was no pole, no shirt; only the whiteness of snow and the blueness of sky. And then even these were gone. His eyes were blurred and sightless. He turned quickly away.

An arm was around him. Winter held him close. "You'll climb it many times, son," he said.

"Yes, all through your life," said Franz. "Wait and see."

His eyes cleared and he looked at them. He looked past them at his mother. He looked at the guides of Kurtal, standing in the front rank of the crowd. Off to one side was the small gnarled figure of Teo Zurbriggen, and somehow, amid all the excitement, he had contrived to slip into the hotel and put on his cook's cap and apron.

The mayor was waving his arms again. Cheers shook the square. "They are taking us to the town hall," said Franz. "The governor of the canton is coming. And later—"

"Yes—later," said Rudi suddenly. "I will come later, Uncle. But first, please—you will excuse me—I must go now—"

"Go? Go where, boy?"

"With Old Teo. He is waiting—see?" He turned and darted off through the crowd, and the others looked after him in bewilderment. "There is work to do," he called

back. "I must help him. I promised. After so long a time there must be a thousand dirty dishes."

That is the story they tell of the old days in the valley of Kurtal; of the conquest of the great mountain called the Citadel; and of how Rudi Matt, who was later to become the most famous of all Alpine guides, grew from a boy into a man.