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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CRYSTAL HUNTERS: A BOY'S ADVENTURES IN THE HIGHER ALPS ***

George Manville Fenn

"The Crystal Hunters"

Chapter One.

Two Men and a Boy.

"Steady there! Stop! Hold hard!"

"What's the matter, Mr Dale?"

"Matter, Saxe, my boy? Well, this. I undertook to take you back to your father and mother some day, sound in wind and limb; but if you begin like that, the trip's over, and we shall have to start back for England in less than a week—at least, I shall, with my luggage increased by a case containing broken boy."

There was a loud burst of hearty laughter from the manly-looking lad addressed, as he stood, with his hands clinging and his head twisted round, to look back: for he had spread-eagled himself against a nearly perpendicular scarp of rock which he had begun to climb, so as to reach a patch of wild rhododendrons.

There was another personage present, in the shape of a sturdy, muscular-looking man, whose swarthy face was sheltered by a wide-brimmed soft felt hat, very much turned up at the sides, and in whose broad band was stuck a tuft of the pale grey, starry-looking, downy plant known as the Edelweiss. His jacket was of dark, exceedingly threadbare velvet; breeches of the same; and he wore gaiters and heavily nailed lace-up boots; his whole aspect having evoked the remarks, when he presented himself at the door of the chalet:

"I say, Mr Dale, look here! Where is his organ and his monkey? This chap has been asking for you—for Herr Richard Dale, of London."

"Yes, I sent for him. It is the man I am anxious to engage for our guide."

For Melchior Staffeln certainly did look a good deal like one of the "musicians" who infest London streets with "kists o' whistles," as the Scottish gentleman dubbed them—or much noisier but less penetrating instruments on wheels.

He was now standing wearing a kind of baldric across his chest, in the shape of a coil of new soft rope, from which he rarely parted, whatever the journey he was about to make, and leaning on what, at first sight, seemed to be a stout walking-stick with a crutch handle, but a second glance revealed as an ice-axe, with, a strong spike at one end, and a head of sharp-edged and finely pointed steel, which Saxe said made it look like a young pick-axe.

This individual had wrinkled his face up so much that his eyes were nearly closed, and his shoulders were shaking as he leaned upon the ice-axe, and indulged in a long, hearty, nearly silent laugh.

"Ah! it's no laughing matter, Melchior," said the broad-shouldered, bluff, sturdy-looking Englishman. "I don't want to begin with an accident."

"No, no," said the guide, whose English seemed to grow clearer as they became more intimate. "No accidents. It is the Swiss mountain air getting into his young blood. In another week he will bound along the matt, or dash over the green alp like a goat, and in a fortnight be ready to climb a spitz like a chamois."

"Yes, that's all very well, my man; but I prefer a steady walk. Look here, Saxe!"

"I'm listening, Mr Dale," said the lad.

"Then just get it into your brain, if you can, that we are not out on a schoolboy trip, but upon the borders of new,

almost untried ground, and we shall soon be mounting places that are either dangerous or safe as you conduct yourself."

"All right, Mr Dale; I'll be careful," said the lad.

"Never fear, herr," cried the guide; "I will not take you anywhere dangerous—only to places where your fellow-countrymen have well marked the way."

"Thank you," was the reply, in so peculiar a tone that the guide looked at the speaker curiously.

"Yes," continued the latter; "I'll have a chat with you presently."

"I am ready, herr," said the man, rather distantly now. "You have seen my book of testimonials, written by many English and German voyagers who love the mountains!"

"Yes," said Richard Dale quietly; "and I want this boy to know what he has to do."

"All right, Mr Dale," said the lad; "you may trust me."

"That's understood, then. You must obey me without question instantly, just as I shall have to obey Melchior Staffeln. I have been out here a dozen times before, and know a great deal; but he has been here all his life, and has inherited the existence of his father and grandfather, both guides. Now, is this understood!"

"Yes, of course, Mr Dale," said the boy, who had been impatiently throwing stones into the middle of the little river flowing through the valley; "but you are not going to take me for a walk every day, and make us hold one another's hands?"

"I'm going to make you do exactly what Melchior thinks best," said his companion, firmly. "And let me tell you, young fellow, there will be times, if you care to go with me, when we shall be very glad to hold each other's hands: up yonder, for instance, along that shelf, where you can see the sheep."

He pointed toward where, high up the side of the narrow valley, a group of white-woolled sheep could be seen browsing.

"What, those?" said the lad. "That's nothing. I thought these mountains and places would be ever so high."

"Ah! I suppose so," said Dale dryly. "Why, you young ignoramus—you young puppy, with your eyes not yet half opened—do you know how high those sheep are above where we stand?"

"Those?" said the lad, who had been looking rather contemptuously at everything he had seen since he had been on the Continent. "Perhaps a couple of hundred feet—say three."

"Three hundred, Saxe? Why, my lad, they are a thousand feet if they are an inch."

"Two thousand," said the guide quietly.

"What!" cried the boy. "Then how high is that point just peeping over the hills there, right up the valley?"

He pointed to a dazzling snowy peak which ran up like a roughly shaped, blunted spear head glistening in the morning air.

"Das Dusselhorn," said the guide. "Hochte spitze? Nein."

"What is the height, Melchior?"

"How high, herr?—how tall? Eleven thousand English feet."

"Why it does not look much higher than Saint Paul's."

"You must remember that you are amongst the great peaks," said Dale, "and that it takes time to educate your eyes to the size of everything about you."

"But it looks as if you could get to the top in an hour," said Saxe.

"Does it?" said Dale, smiling. "Then what do you say to this?" And he pointed up at the huge mass of rock, streaked with ravines full of snow, which formed one side of the valley in which they stood.

"Lenstock," said the guide.

"How long would it take us to get up to the top, Melchior?"

"Too late to-day, herr. Start at three o'clock with lanthorn while the schnee-snow is hard. Ten hours to go up, seven to come down."

Richard Dale looked at his young companion, whose forehead was wrinkled, as he stared up at the huge mass of rock from its lower green alps or pastures, up over the grey lichened stone, to where the streakings of white snow began, and then higher and higher to the region of everlasting ice.

"Well," he said at last, as he lowered his eyes to the guide and the strong, resolute-looking man beside him, "I—"

A quick change came over him, and with a laughing look he continued quickly:

"Not travellers' tales, eh?"

"Travellers' tales?" said the guide slowly.

"He means, are you deceiving him?" said Dale.

The guide shook his head gravely.

"The great mountains are too solemn to speak anything but truth in their shade."

"Well," said Saxe slowly, "then it's the mountains that deceive."

"Wait a bit, boy, and you'll soon learn how great they are. It takes time. Now, understand this: I do not want to interfere with your enjoyment; but if we are to carry out my plans, it must be work and not play."

"Why not both?" said Saxe merrily.

"Because we must husband our strength, so as to always have a little left to use in an emergency. Now, then, we understand each other, do we not?"

"Yes, Mr Dale."

"Then forward."

The guide nodded his head good-humouredly; but he did not stir.

"Well?" said the Englishman.

"Let us understand each other," said the guide quietly. "Those who go up into the mountains must be brothers. Now your life is in danger, and I save you; next my life is in peril, and you save me. A guide is something more than one who goes to show the way."

"Of course," said Richard Dale, eyeing the man curiously: "that is why I have chosen you. Friends told me that Melchior Staffeln was a man whom I might trust."

"I thank them," said the guide. "And the herr wishes me to be his guide for days and weeks or months, and show him the way up the great mountains as I have shown others?"

"No!" said Dale sharply. "I want you to take me right in among the heights, passes and glaciers where the visitors do not go."

The guide looked at him fixedly.

"Why? what for?" he said. "You did not tell me this when you came up to the chalet last night, and sent for me."

"No. I tell you now."

"Why do you wish to go? There may be danger."

"I'll tell you. I want to see the mountains and study them. I would search for metals and specimens of the stones in the higher rocks."

"Crystals?"

"Yes."

"Hah!" said the guide. "To see if there is gold and silver and precious stones?"

"Yes."

"If it is known you will be stopped by the magistrate of the commune."

"Why? I do not want to rob the country."

"But the gold—the silver."

"Let's find them first, man; and see what the chief magistrate says then. Can you lead me to places where I can find these?"

"Perhaps."

"Will you?"

The man was silent for a few minutes. Then,—*"Will the herr be straightforward and honest to my country, and if he finds such treasures in the mountains, will he go to the magistrates and get leave to work them?"*

"Of that you may be sure. Will you come?"

The man was silent and thoughtful again for a minute.

"If the people know, we shall be watched night and day."

"They must not know."

"No, they must not know."

"Then you will come?"

"Yes," said the man, "I will come."

"Then, once more, forward," said Dale. "Saxe, my lad, our search for Nature's treasures has begun."

Chapter Two.

An Alpine Valley.

The track for some distance up the valley was so rugged and narrow that the little party had to go in single file; but after a time they came upon a more open part, less encumbered with rock, and, with the lad on ahead, Richard Dale strode up abreast of the guide, and, taking out his case, lit a cigar, and offered one to the Swiss.

The guide shook his head.

"No, thank you, herr," he said; "I seldom smoke anything but my pipe."

They went on for a while in silence, the only sound falling upon their ears being the continuous roar of the torrent-like river which rushed down the valley in a narrow chasm far below their feet—one series of thundering cascades, all foam and milky glacier water.

Patches of pine forest, with the trees crowded close together, every stem straight as an arrow, ran for some distance up the sides of the vale; but there was no sign or note of bird. All was solemn and still, save that deep-toned roar.

Saxe stopped suddenly, waited till they came near, and held up his hand.

"What is it?" said Dale.

"Isn't it wonderful, Mr Dale? Only two days ago in London, and here we are in this wild place! Why, you can't hear a sound but the water!"

Almost as he spoke he bounded from the spot where he was standing, and ran a few yards in alarm.

For from somewhere unseen and high above, there was a sudden roar, a terrific crash, then a rushing sound, followed by a dead silence of a few seconds, and then the earth seemed to receive a quivering blow, resulting in a boom like that of some monstrous gun, and the noise now ran up the valley, vibrating from side to side, till it died away in a low moan.

The boy looked wildly from one to the other, to see that his uncle was quite unmoved and that the guide was smiling at him.

"Then that was thunder?" he said inquiringly.

"No; a big piece of rock split off and fell," replied the guide.

"Is there no danger?"

"It would have been dangerous if we had been there."

"But where is 'there'?"

"Up yonder," said the guide, pointing over the pine-wood toward the top of the wall of rock, a perpendicular precipice fully three thousand feet in height. "The rock split off the mountain somewhere, rushed down, and then fell."

"Can we see?"

"Oh yes; I could find the place," said the guide, looking at Dale.

"No, no: we will go on," said the latter. "It would take us two or three hours. That sort of thing is often going on out here, Saxe."

"But why did it fall? Is any one blasting rock over there?"

"Yes, Nature: blasting with cold and heat."

Saxe looked at him inquiringly.

"You'll soon understand all this, my lad," said Dale. "The rocks high up the mountains are always crumbling down."

"Crumbling? I don't call that crumbling."

"Call it what you like; but that was a crumb which fell down here, my lad. You see the snow and ice over yonder?"

"Yes."

"Well, of course that means that there is constant freezing going on there, except when the sun is blazing down at midday."

"Yes, I understand that," said Saxe.

"Well, the rock gets its veins charged with water from the melting of the snow in the daytime, and at night it freezes again; the water expands in freezing, and splits the rock away, but it does not slip, because it is kept in position by the ice. By-and-by, on an extra hot day, that ice melts, and, there being nothing to support it, the mass of rock falls, and drives more with it, perhaps, and the whole comes thundering down."

"I should like to see how big the piece was," said Saxe; "it must have been close here."

"No," said the guide; "perhaps two miles away."

Dale made a sign, and they went on again.

"Wait a bit, Saxe, and you'll see plenty of falling rock. I dare say we shall be cannonaded by stones some day."

"But shall we see an avalanche!"

"It's a great chance if we see one of the great falls which fill valleys and bury villages; but if you keep your eyes open I dare say we shall see several small ones to-day."

The lad glanced quickly up, and the meaning of that look was read directly.

"No," said Dale quietly, "I am not joking, but speaking frankly to one whom I have chosen as my companion in this enterprise. Come, Saxe, you and I must now be more like helpmates—I mean, less of man and boy, more like two men who trust each other."

"I shall be very glad," said the boy eagerly.

"Then we start so from this moment. We'll forget you are only sixteen or seventeen."

"Nearly seventeen."

"Yes. For, without being gloomy, we must be serious. As Melchior says, 'the mountains are solemn in their greatness.' Look!"

They had just turned the corner of a huge buttress of rock, and Dale pointed up the valley to the wonderful panorama of mountain and glacier which suddenly burst upon their view. Snowy peak rising behind green alps dotted with cattle, and beyond the glittering peak other pyramids and spires of ice with cols and hollows full of unsullied snow, like huge waves suddenly frozen, with their ridges, ripples, and curves preserved.

"It is grand!" cried the boy, gazing excitedly before him at the most wondrous picture that had ever met his eyes.

"Yes," said Dale; "and it has the advantage that every step we take brings us to something grander. That is only your first peep into Nature's wilds, some of which are as awful as they are vast. There goes one of the inhabitants."

For at that moment, soaring high above the valley, a huge bird floated between them and the intensely blue sky.

"An eagle!"

"Yes; the lammergeyer—the Alpine eagle."

"But what a name!" said Saxe.

"Suitable enough," said Dale quietly. "We call our little bird of prey a sparrow-hawk. Well, this bird—lammergeyer—is the one which preys on lambs."

The eagle soared higher and higher till it was well above the perpendicular wall of rock on their left, and then glided onward toward the snow, rapidly passing out of sight; while the trio tramped on, passing a chalet here and another there, with its wooden shingled roof laden with great stones to keep all intact against the terrific winds which at times sweep down the valley from the ice ahead. Now their way lay down by the foaming torrent, half choked with ragged pine trunks, torn out of their birthplaces by tempests, or swept away by downfalls of snow or rock; then they panted up some zigzag, faintly marked, where it was impossible to follow the bed of the stream; and as they climbed higher fresh visions of grandeur opened out before them, though the path was so rugged that much of the view was lost in the attention that had to be given to where they placed their feet. But from time to time a halt was called, a geological hammer produced, and a piece of the rock, that had come bounding down from half a mile above them, was shifted and examined—pure limestone, now granite of some form, or hornblende, while the guide rested upon the head of his axe, and looked on.

"You English are a wonderful people," he said at last.

“Why?” said Saxe.

“A Frenchman would come up here—no, he would not: this would be too difficult and rough; he would get hot and tired, and pick his way for fear of hurting his shiny boots. But if he did he would seek two or three bright flowers to wear in his coat, he would look at the mountains, and then sit down idle.”

“And the English?” said Saxe.

“Ah, yes, you English! Nothing escapes you, nor the Americans. You are always looking for something to turn into money.”

“Which we are not doing now,” said Dale quietly. “But very few people come up here.”

“Very few, but those who have cows or goats up on the green alps.”

“And you think this is one of the grandest and wildest valleys you know?”

“It is small,” said the guide, “but it is the most solitary, and leads into the wildest parts. See: in a short time we shall reach the glacier, and then always ice, snow, and rock too steep for the snow to stand, and beyond that the eternal silence of the never-ending winter.”

Two hours' climb more than walk, with the sun coming down with scorching power; but in spite of the labour, no weariness assailing the travellers, for the air seemed to give new life and strength at every breath they drew. But now, in place of the view being more grand, as they climbed higher the valley grew narrow, the scarped rocks on either side towered aloft and shut out the snowy peaks, and at last their path led them amongst a dense forest of pines, through whose summits the wind sighed and the roaring torrent's sound was diminished to a murmur.

This proved to be a harder climb than any they had yet undertaken, the slope being very steep, and the way encumbered by masses of rock which had fallen from above and become wedged in among the pine trunks.

“Tired, Saxe?” said Dale, after a time.

“I don't know, sir. That is, my legs are tired, but I'm not so upward. I want to go on.”

“In half an hour we shall be through,” said Melchior; “then there are no more trees—only a green matt, with a chalet and goats and cows.”

“That means milk,” said Saxe eagerly.

“Yes, and bread and cheese,” said Melchior, smiling.

“Then I'm not tired. I'm sure of it now, sir,” said Saxe merrily; and the next half-hour was passed in a steady tramp, the guide leading as surely as if he had passed all his days in that gloomy patch of forest, never hesitating for a moment, but winding in and out to avoid the innumerable blocks which must have lain there before the pines had sprung up and grown for perhaps a hundred years.

Then there was bright daylight ahead, and in a few more strides the last trees were passed, and they came out suddenly in an amphitheatre of bare rocks, almost elliptical, but coming together at the head, and bending away like a comma turned upside down.

At the moment they stepped on to the green stunted pasture, dotted with flowers, the roar of the torrent came up from a gash in the rocks far below, and to right and left, from at least three hundred feet up, the waters of no less than five streams glided softly over the rocks, and fell slowly in silvery foam, to form so many tributaries of the torrent far below.

The effect of those falls was wonderful, and for the first few minutes it seemed as if the water had just awakened at its various sources, and was in no hurry to join the mad, impetuous stream below, so slowly it dropped, turning into spray, which grew more and more misty as it descended, while every now and then a jet as of silver rockets shot over from the top, head and tail being exactly defined, but of course in water instead of sparks.

“Will this do, Saxe?” said Dale, smiling.

“Do! Oh, come on. I want to get close up to those falls.”

“Aren't you tired?”

“Tired!” cried Saxe. “What fellow could feel tired in a place like this!”

Chapter Three.

Further Ideas of Magnitude.

The guide had already started off, and for the next half-hour he led them on and upward, gradually ascending a rocky eminence which stood like a vast tower in the middle of the amphitheatre.

Every now and then he stopped to hold out his ice-axe handle to help Saxe; but the latter disdained all aid, and contented himself with planting his feet in the same spots as the guide, till all at once the man stopped.

It was the top of the eminence; and as Saxe reached Melchior's side he paused there, breathless with exertion and wonder, gazing now along the curved part of the comma, which had been hidden for the last hour.

Right and left were the silvery veil-like cascades: down below them some five hundred feet the little river roared and boomed, and the junction of the silvery water of the falls with the grey milky, churned-up foam of the torrent was plainly seen in two cases. But the sight which enchained Saxe's attention was the head of the valley up which they had toiled, filled by what at the first glance seemed to be a huge cascade descending and flowing along the ravine before him, but which soon resolved itself into the first glacier—a wonderfully beautiful frozen river, rugged, wild and vast, but singularly free from the fallen stones and earth which usually rob these wonders of their beauty, and looking now in the bright sunshine dazzling in its purity of white, shaded by rift, crack and hollow, where the compressed snow was of the most delicate sapphire tint.

"Is that a glacier?" said Saxe, after gazing at it for a few minutes.

"Yes, lad, that's a glacier, and a better example than one generally sees, because it is so particularly clean. Glaciers are generally pretty old and dirty-looking in the lower parts."

The guide rested upon his ice-axe, with his eyes half-closed, apparently watching the effect the glacier had upon the visitors; Dale gazed at it contemplatively, as if it were the wrinkled face of an old friend; and Saxe stared wondering, for it was so different to anything he had pictured in his own mind.

"Well, what do you think of it?" said Dale, at last.

"Don't quite know, sir," said Saxe, sitting down, drawing up his knees to rest his chin, and throwing his arms about his legs. "It wants looking at. But I'm beginning to understand now. That's the upper part of the river which runs down the valley, only up here it is always frozen. Seems rum, though, for the sun's regularly blistering my neck."

"You have something of the idea, but you are not quite right, Saxe," replied Dale. "That is the upper part of the river, and yet it is not, because it is a distinct river. You speak of it as if the river up here had become frozen. Now, it is frozen because it has never been otherwise."

"Must have been water once, or else it couldn't have run down that narrow valley."

"It has never been anything but ice, Saxe," said Dale, smiling; "and yet it has run down the valley like that."

"Ice can't flow, because it is solid," said Saxe dogmatically.

"Ice can flow, because it is elastic as well as solid."

"Mr Dale!"

"Proof, boy. Haven't you seen it bend when thin, and people have been on it skating?"

"Oh! ah! I'd forgotten that."

"Well, this ice is sufficiently elastic to flow very slowly, forced down by its own weight and that of the hundreds of thousands of tons behind."

"Oh, I say, Mr Dale—gently!" cried Saxe.

"Well, then, millions of tons, boy. I am not exaggerating. You do not understand the vastness of these places. That glacier you are looking at is only one of the outlets of a huge reservoir of ice and snow, extending up there in the mountains for miles. It is forced down, as you see, bending into the irregularities of the valley where they are not too great; but when the depths are extensive the ice cracks right across."

"With a noise like a gun, sometimes," interpolated the guide, who was listening intently.

"And I know, like that," cried Saxe, pointing to a deep-looking jagged rift, extending right across the ice-torrent: "that makes a crevasse."

"Quite correct," said Dale.

"But stop a moment," cried Saxe: "this is all solid-looking blue ice. It's snow that falls on the tops of the mountains."

"Yes; snow at a certain height, while lower that snow becomes rain."

"Well, then, this valley we are looking at ought to be snow, not ice."

"Snow is ice in the form of light flocculent crystals, is it not? Why, at home, if you take up moist snow and press it hard in your hands, you can almost turn it into ice. If you placed it in a press, and applied much force, it would become perfectly clear ice. Well, there's pressure enough here to turn it into ice; and besides, the snow is always melting in the hot sun, and then freezing again at night."

"Yes, I see!" cried Saxe; "but it does seem queer. Why, we've got summer here, with flowers and bees and butterflies, and if we go down to that glacier, I suppose we can step on to winter."

"Yes, my lad; and if we like to climb a little higher up the ice, we can place ourselves in such severe winter that we should be frozen to death."

"Then we will not go," said Saxe, laughing. "You told me one day— No, you didn't, it was in a story I read, 'man is best as he is.' But I say, Mr Dale, how about the river? doesn't it come from the glacier?"

"Yes, of course. These vast glaciers are the sources of the great Swiss and Italian rivers. The Rhine and the Rhone both begin up in the mountains here, and the Aar and the Reuss start pretty close to them. When we get down here you will see how this stream runs from a little ice-cave."

"But what makes it so dirty?"

"My good fellow, we have come to climb, and my name is not Barlow. You must read and search out these things. You know how that stone or mass fell with a roar lower down?"

"Not likely to forget it, sir," replied Saxe, with a laugh.

"Well, the stones are always falling from the bare sides of the gorge; they drop on to the glacier, and in course of time are washed by the melting ice into the crevasses and down to the bare rock beneath the glacier. There they glide down, with its weight upon them, right over the rock, and the surface is worn off from the fallen stone and the bed rock in a thin paste, which is washed away by the glacier. Then, as it descends, it of course discolours the water."

"Shall we go down to the toe of the glacier!" said the guide.

"Yes; come along."

"Can we trust the young herr to descend?"

Dale leaned forward to gaze down the rugged slope, which was excessively steep, but broken up into rift and gully, offering plenty of foot and hand-hold.

"What do you think, Saxe?" he said. "Can you manage to get down there?"

"Get down there?" said the lad contemptuously; "why, I'd race you to the bottom."

"No doubt, and be down first," said Dale quietly; "but I should be ready to go on, and you would want carrying to the nearest chalet to wait for a surgeon."

"What, after getting down that bit of a place?"

"You stupid fellow," said Dale testily; "that bit of a place is a precipice of five hundred feet. How am I to impress upon you that everything here is far bigger than you think? Look here," he continued, pointing: "do you see that cow yonder, on that bit of green slope beside those overhanging rocks?"

"No; I can see a little dog by a heap of stones."

"That will do for an example," said Dale. "Here, Melchior, is not that a cow just across the stream there?"

"Wait a moment," cried Saxe eagerly. "I say it's a little dog. Who's right?"

"You are both wrong," said the guide, smiling. "There is a man here has a chalet behind the pines. He comes up the valley with his cattle for the summer, when the snow is gone."

"Is there snow here in winter, then?" said Saxe.

"The valley is nearly full in winter. No one can come up here."

"But that isn't a cow," cried Saxe, pointing.

"No," said the guide, smiling; "it is Simon Andregg's big bull."

"Well!" cried Saxe, shading his eyes and staring down at the animal, which looked small enough to be a dog.

"You don't believe him?" said Dale, laughing.

"Oh, I don't know," said Saxe; "I suppose I do. But I was thinking that he might have made a mistake. Shall I go first?"

"No, herr; I am the guide," said Melchior quietly; and he began the descent pretty rapidly, but stopped at the foot of each more difficult part to look up and wait for the others. Sometimes he drove the sharp end of his ice-axe into the earth or some crevice, and held it there to act as a step for the others to descend; and at other times he pressed himself against the rock and offered his shoulders as resting-places for their feet, constantly on the watch to lessen the difficulties and guard against dangers in a place where a slip of a few feet might have resulted in the unfortunate person who fell rolling lower with increasing impetus, and the slip developing into a terrible accident.

"It is farther than I thought," said Saxe, as they reached the bottom of the steep bluff from which they had viewed the glacier; and he stepped back a few yards to look up. "The places really are so much bigger than they look. Why, I say, Mr Dale, the glacier seems quite high up from here, and ever so much farther off."

"And it will look bigger still when we reach the cave where the river comes out."

"So!" said Melchior quietly; and he went on, now down the stony slope of the valley, to reach the river bed near its source, with the sides of the thal seeming to grow steeper and higher, and one of the waterfalls they were near

infinitely more beautiful, for they had now reached the point necessary for seeing the lovely iris which spanned the cascade, turning its seething spray into a segment of an arch of the most vivid colours, at which the lad seemed disposed to gaze for an indefinite time.

"Vorwärts," said the guide quietly; and they obeyed, following his lead till they reached the spot where the clear waters of the fall glided into the dingy stream, and then followed the latter up and up for quite half an hour before Saxe stopped short, and took off his straw hat to wipe his steaming forehead, as he gazed up at the end of the glacier; he was now so low down that the surface was invisible, and facing him there was a curve rising up and up, looking like a blunted set of natural steps.

"Well?" said Dale, inquiringly.

"I can't make it out," said Saxe, rather breathlessly. "It seems as if that thing were playing games with us, and growing bigger and shrinking away farther at every step one takes."

"Yes," said Dale, "it is giving you a lesson that you will not easily forget."

"But it looked quite small when we were up there," cried Saxe, nodding toward the tower-like bluff they had climbed, again at the top of the glacier.

"Yes, and now it looks quite big, Saxe; and when you have been on it and have walked a few miles upon its surface here and there—"

"Miles?"

"Yes, my boy, miles. Then you will begin to grasp how big all this is, and what vast deserts of ice and snow there are about us in the mountains. But come along; we have not much farther to go to reach the foot."

But it took them quite a quarter of an hour over rounded, scratched and polished masses of rock which were in places cut into grooves, and to all this Dale drew attention.

"Do you see what it means?" he said.

"No," said Saxe, "only that it's very bad walking, now it's so steep."

"But don't you see that—?"

"Yes, I do," cried Saxe, interrupting him; "you mean that this has been all rubbed smooth by the ice and stones grinding over it; but how could it?—the ice couldn't go up hill."

"No, it comes down."

"Then—was it once as far as here?"

"Ever so much farther when I was a boy," said the guide. "It has been shrinking for years. Mind, herr; it is very slippery here. Let me help you."

He hooked his ice-axe into a crevice, and held out his hand, by whose help Saxe mounted beside him, and here descending close to the water they stepped from stone to stone, with the ice towering more and more above their heads, till they were close up, and even below it, for they had entered a low, flat arch, which just admitted them standing upright, and after a few steps into what Saxe called a blue gloom, they stood gazing into the azure depths of the cavern, which grew darker till they were purple and then utterly black. Then they listened to the gurgle and babble of the tiny river, as it came rushing and dashing over the rock in many an eddy and swirl, while from far away up in the darkness there were mysterious whisperings and musical echoes that were strange to hear.

"Like to go in any farther, Saxe?" said Dale.

"Yes, much—very much," said the lad, in a low voice, "just because I don't want to."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I can't exactly explain it, because the place makes me feel nervous and a little shrinking, but I want to try and get over it."

"Better not stay any longer, herr," said the guide; "you are hot with walking, and the place is damp and cold."

"Yes, it would be wiser to go out in the sunshine again. I should like to explore this, though, with a lantern and candles."

"Whenever the herr likes," said the guide quietly. And they passed out again, the icy arch above them looking exquisitely beautiful with its blue tints, some of which were of the delicious brilliancy to be seen in some of our precious stones.

It was a wonderful change from the cool gloom of the cavern to the glaring sunshine outside, where the heat was reflected from the ice and glistening rocks; and now, striking up to the right, Melchior made for where the ice ended and the steep slope-up of the valley side began.

Here with a little difficulty they mounted—sometimes the rock growing too steep and the ice appearing the easier path, then the reverse, till at last they stood well up on the surface of the frozen river and began its toilsome ascent.

"Now you'll find the advantage of your big-nailed boots, Saxe," said his leader merrily. "Go cautiously, my lad; we mustn't spoil our explorations by getting sprained ankles."

The warning was necessary, for the ice surface was broken up into ruts, hollows, folds, and crags that required great caution, and proved to be laborious in the extreme to surmount.

"Is there much more of this rough stuff?" said Saxe, after half an hour's climbing.

The guide smiled.

"The ice gets bigger and wilder higher up," he replied. "There are smooth patches, but it is broken up into crags and seracs."

This was another surprise to Saxe, to whom the surface of the glacier, when seen from above on the bluff, had looked fairly smooth—just, in fact, one great winding mass of ice flowing down in a curve to the foot. He was not prepared for the chaos of worn, tumbled and crushed-up masses, among which the guide led the way. Some parts that were smoother were worn and channelled by the running water, which rushed in all directions, mostly off the roughly curved centre to the sides, where it made its way to the river beneath.

It was quite a wonderland to the boy fresh from town, entering the icy strongholds of nature; for, after ascending a little farther, their way was barred by jagged and pinnacled masses heaped together in the wildest confusion, many of the fragments being thirty, even forty feet high.

"Have we got to climb those?" said Saxe, in dismay.

The guide shook his head.

"No, herr: it would be madness to try. Some of them would give way at the least touch. Stand back a little, and I'll show you why it is dangerous to climb among the seracs."

He stepped aside, and, using his axe, deftly chipped off a piece of ice from a block—a fragment about as large as an ordinary paving-stone.

"Hold my axe, sir," he said; and on Saxe taking it, the man picked up the block he had chipped off, walked a little way from them, and, after looking about a little, signed to them to watch, as he hurled the lump from him, after raising it above his head. As he threw it, he ran back toward them, and the piece fell with a crash between two spires which projected from the icy barrier.

There was a crash, and then the effect was startling. Both the spires, whose bases must have been worn nearly through by the action of sun and water, came down with a roar, bringing other fragments with them, and leaving more looking as if they were tottering to their fall.

Then up rose what seemed to be a cloud of diamond dust, glittering in the bright sunshine, a faint echo or two came from high up the rocky face of the valley, and then all was silent once more.

"You see?" said Melchior. "Why, often a touch of a hand, or even a shout, will bring them tumbling down. Always keep away from the seracs."

He led them now at a safe distance across the glacier to the left, till a wide opening presented itself, through which they passed on to comparatively smooth ice; but even this was all piled together, wedged in blocks, which made the party seem, as Saxe said, like so many ants walking about in a barrel of loaf sugar.

Then there was a smoother stretch, all longitudinal furrows, up which they passed fairly well—that is to say, with only a few falls—till they went round a curve; and there they paused, breathless and wondering.

"Why, that was only a peep down below," cried Saxe. "Look, Mr Dale! look!"

He had cause to exclaim, for from where they stood they had an opening before them right up a side valley running off from the glacier at a sharp angle. This, too, was filled by a glacier, a tributary of the one they were upon, and with the sides of the minor valley covered with snow wherever the slope was sufficient to hold it. Beyond rose peak after peak, flashing pure and white—higher and higher; and even the hollows between them filled with soft-looking pillows and cushions of dazzling snow.

"Those are the mountains you told me about, then?" cried Saxe.

"Some of the outposts, lad. There are others far greater, miles behind those; and you are now having your first genuine look into wonderland."

"I never thought it was like this."

"No one can imagine how wonderful the mountains are," said the guide solemnly. "I looked up at them as a little child, and I have been up amongst them from a boy, while I am now thirty-five; and yet they are always changing and ever new. Sometimes they are all light and sunshine, though full of hidden dangers. Sometimes they are wild and black and angry, when the wind shrieks and the lightning flashes about their shattered heads, and the thunders roar. Yes, young herr, you never thought it was half so wonderful as this. Shall we go on?"

"I was thinking," said Dale. "I only meant to come a little way to-day, and let my companion have a glimpse of what is before him; so we will not go much farther, as it is so far back to the chalet."

"If the herr does not mind simple fare and a bed of clean hay, we could sleep at Andregg's to-night, and be ready for a start in the morning early."

"The very thing," said Dale. "How long will it take us to get from here to Andregg's?"

"An hour," said the guide; "so we have several good hours before us to go on up the glacier, or to cross over the valley ridge, and come back down the next."

"Can we go up the glacier for another mile," said Dale, "and then cross?"

"Easily."

"Then we will do that."

The ascent of the glacier-filled valley was continued, and they toiled on. A mile on level ground would have meant a sharp quarter of an hour's walk; here it meant a slow climb, slipping and floundering over ice, splashing through tiny rivulets that veined the more level parts, and the avoidance of transverse cracks extending for a few yards. Sometimes they had to make for the left, sometimes the right bank of the frozen river; and at last, as they were standing waiting while the guide made his observations as to the best way of avoiding some obstacle in their front, there was a sharp, clear crack.

"What's that?" said Saxe quickly.

"Stand back!" cried the guide. "No! quick—to me!"

They stepped forward to his side; and as, in obedience to a sign, they turned, there was a peculiarly harsh, rending noise, a singing as of escaping air, and to their astonishment, just where they had been standing the ice began to open in a curious, wavy, zigzag line, gradually extending to right and left. At first it was a faint crack, not much more than large enough to admit a knife-blade; but as they watched it slowly opened, till it was an inch—a foot—across, and then all sound ceased, and they could look down for a short distance before the sides came together, the whole forming a long wedge-shaped hollow.

"The opening of a crevasse," said the guide gravely. "It will go on growing bigger, till it will be dangerous."

"You are lucky, Saxe," said Dale. "You have had a fall of rock, seen an ice-cave and the birth of a big river, heard seracs fall, and now watched the opening of a crevasse. We must have that avalanche before we go back."

"When we get up on the ridge we shall see the Bluthenhorn," said Melchior; "the afternoon sun will be full on the high slopes, and we shall hear some of the ice-fall. Hark!"

He held up his hand, and they stood listening to a faintly booming sound, evidently at a great distance before them.

"Was that one?"

"Yes; but right over among the mountains, herr. It was a great fall, though, or we should not have heard it here."

He plodded steadily on, and Saxe noted that he kept his eyes down and seemed to make a business of every step, measuring exactly where he should plant it, and keeping hold, as it were, with his other foot till he was sure that his new step was safe. Not that this took long, but it appeared to be all carefully studied, and the boy learned that such caution must be the result of experience and mean safety in his arduous climbing.

The glacier wound in serpentine fashion along the valley, growing wilder and grander as they ascended. There were masses of piled-up ice, and crevasses into whose blue depths they peered as they listened to the hollow echoing sounds of running water. Some of these were stepped over in an ordinary stride, some had to be jumped; and, though the distance was short, Saxe felt a curious shrinking sensation as he leaped across a four or five feet rift, whose sides were clear blue ice, going right down to what would in all probability mean death to one who fell. Then on again, till it seemed to the lad that they must have journeyed that one mile upward several times over; and, at last, before them there was snow filling up all the irregularities, and offering them a soft smooth path.

It was not snow, though, such as he had seen in England, for it looked more like a thick layer of softened hailstones, which he could scoop up and let fall separately, or scatter at large to glisten in the sun, while upon trying it the particles crackled and crushed under their feet, but felt pretty firm.

"What are you stopping for?" said Dale.

"I don't quite like the look of the snow on beyond this first old part," said the guide. "You have no alpenstock or ice-axe either."

"Shall we give up going any farther to-day?" said Dale.

"No, herr: because I want to get round that piece of rock which runs out from the side. Beyond that there is a couloir running right up to the ridge, and it will be the easiest place for us to mount."

As he spoke he took the coil of rope from across his chest, and began to unfasten the end.

"Is that necessary?" asked Dale; while Saxe looked wonderingly on.

"Who knows, herr? It is the duty of a guide to take care his people run no risks. I want to be a good guide to mine."

"What are we going to do?" asked Saxe.

"Rope ourselves together in case the snow covers a crevasse."

"But if one goes through, he'll pull down the others," cried Saxe. "Is that wise?"

"He will not pull down the others," said Dale, "for they will pull him out."

Melchior said nothing, but slowly unfastened his rope as they stood there with their feet in the depth of a rigid winter and their heads in the height of summer. When he had it ready, hanging in loops on his left arm, he held out one end to his companions with a smile.

"Alpen rope. Good. Best," he said. "English make," and he pulled open one end, to show them a red strand running through it. "Now!"

He fastened one end by a peculiar knot round Saxe's waist, arranging it so that it should not slip and tighten, whatever stress was given. Then, bidding the lad walk away till told to stop, he deliberately counted over a certain number of rings.

"Stop! Keep the rope out of the snow."

Then, with Dale and Saxe holding the rope taut, the middle was attached by similar knots to Dale's waist, and Melchior walked on, and on reaching his end secured the rope to himself.

"Keep it nearly tight," he said, "holding the rope in your right hand. If any one goes wrong in the snow, the others are to stand firm and hang back, so as to hold him firmly. Keep to the steps of the man before you as much as you can. Now, then. Vorwärts!"

He started off now through the snow, with Dale and Saxe following.

"Been better if you had placed him in the middle, wouldn't it, Melchior?" said Dale.

"Yes, herr, I was thinking so. Shall I alter it?"

"No: let's go on as we are this time. Forward again!" And they went on over the dazzling untrodden surface.

Chapter Four.

On the Rope.

"I say," cried Saxe, after they had gone on crunching through the snow, which was soft and melting fast.

"Yes: what is it?"

"Don't you feel as if we were horses haltered together for market?"

"I might answer, sir— Don't you feel like a donkey being led?"

"No. Why?"

"Because you ask such an absurd, childish question, and that at a serious time."

Saxe was silent.

"Mr Dale needn't be so gruff," he said to himself, as he tramped on, looking up at the rocky sides of the valley, which grew more and more snow-clad as they went on, and giving himself greater trouble by missing the footsteps of his leaders. Once he nearly stumbled and fell, giving a jerk to the rope; but he recovered himself directly, and tramped on in silence, finding the going so arduous that he began to wish for the time when they would leave the glacier and take to the rocks.

But he could not keep silence long.

"Shall we have to go back along the mountain?" he said. "Or will there be some other track?"

"I expect we shall cross the ridge into a similar valley to this, and go down another glacier; but— Ah! Hold tight!"

He threw himself backward, tightening the rope, and as soon as he could get over his surprise at the suddenness of the accident, Saxe followed his companion's example. For all at once Melchior disappeared, passing through the snow, and a hollow, echoing, rushing noise fell upon their ears.

"Haul away, gentlemen!" cried the guide's voice; and as they dragged at the rope, they saw his arms appear with the ice-axe, which was struck down into the snow, and directly after the man climbed out, rose from his hands and knees, and shook the snow off his clothes.

"We wanted the rope, you see," he said quietly. "I ought to have known by the snow that this part was dangerous. No harm done, gentlemen. Let's strike off for the side."

"But you went through," said Saxe excitedly. "Was it a crevasse?"

"Yes, of course," said the guide, smiling.

"Was it deep?"

"Deep? Oh yes! Would you like to look?"

Saxe nodded, and the guide drew back for him to pass, but took hold of the rope and held it tightly.

"Go on," he said encouragingly. "I have you fast."

"But how near can I go?" said Saxe, hesitating.

"Nearly to where I broke through the snow crust. You will see."

Saxe went on cautiously, still seeing nothing till he was close upon the hole, which was a fairly wide opening, a quantity of half-frozen snow having given way as the guide's weight rested upon it, and dropped into the black-looking rift, which was lightly bridged over on either side by the snow.

"Lean over if you like, and hang on by the rope," said Melchior, "if you want to look down."

Saxe could not say he did not want to look down, for there was a strange fascination about the place which seemed to draw him. But he resisted, and after a quick glance at the thick snow which arched over the crevasse, he drew back; and Melchior led on again, striking the shaft of his ice-axe handle down through the crust before him at every step, and divining, by long practice and the colour of the snow, the direction of the crevasse so well, that he only once diverged from the edge sufficiently for the handle to go right down.

"We can cross here," he said at last.

"Are you sure?" said Dale.

The guide smiled, and stamped heavily right across.

"We are beyond the end of the crevasse," he said; and once more they went on upward.

"These cracks make the glacier very dangerous," observed Dale, after a few minutes.

"Not with a rope and care," said Melchior, as he trudged on, shouting his words and not turning his head. "But what will you? See how much easier it is. It would take us hours longer to keep to the rocks. There is a crevasse here: walk lightly—just in my steps."

They followed him carefully, without realising when they were passing over the opening, the difference in the appearance of the snow being only plain to the guide; and then onward again till the place was opposite to them where they were to leave the ice river and climb to the rocks.

"One moment," said Dale: "let's take one look round before we leave this part. Look, Saxe! the view is magnificent."

"Yes; and you can see better from here," cried the boy enthusiastically, as he stepped forward a few yards.

"Ah! not that way!" cried Melchior.

The warning came too late, for Saxe dropped through suddenly, tightening the rope with a jerk which threw Dale forward upon his face, and drew him a little way on toward the crevasse, whose slight covering of snow had given way.

But Melchior threw himself back, and stopped farther progress, as Saxe's voice came up from below in a smothered way—

"Ahoy! Help! help!"

"Get to your feet," cried Melchior to Dale; "I'll keep the rope tight."

"Yes," cried Dale, scrambling up; "now, quick!—both together, to draw him out."

"Draw him out? No," said the guide quietly. "Now plant your feet firmly, and hold him till I come to your side."

Dale obeyed at once, and shouting to Saxe that help was coming, he stood fast, waiting for the guide.

Meanwhile, Saxe, who had felt the snow suddenly drop from beneath him, and had been brought up breathlessly with a sudden jerk, was swinging slowly to and fro, clinging with both hands to the rope, and trying vainly to get a rest for his feet on the smooth wall of ice, over which his toes glided whenever he could catch it; but this was not often, for the ice receded, and in consequence he hung so clear, that the line turned with him, and he was at times with his back to the side from which the rope was strained, gazing at the dimly-seen opposite wall, some six or seven feet away. Above was the over-arching snow, which looked fragile in the extreme.

Far below him as he fell he heard the snow and ice he had broken away go hissing and whispering down for what seemed long after he had dropped; and this gave him some idea of the terrible depth of the ice crack, and a cold chill, that was not caused by the icy coldness of the place, ran through him, as he wondered whether the rope, which

now looked thin and worn, would hold. Then he thought that it might possibly cut against the sharp edge, and after a sharp glance upward, to see nothing but the blue sky, he could not keep from looking down into the black depths and listening to the faint musical gurgle of running water.

He shuddered as he slowly turned, and then strained his ears to try and make out what his companion and the guide were doing. But he could hear nothing for some minutes. Then there was a vibration of the rope, and a slight jerking sensation, and to his horror he found that he was being lowered down.

Saxe was as brave as most boys of his years, but this was too much for him. It struck him at first that he was being lowered; but the next moment it seemed to be so much without reason that he jumped to the conclusion that the rope was slowly unravelling and coming to pieces.

An absurd notion, but in the supreme moments of great danger people sometimes think wild things.

He was just in the agony of this imagination, when the small patch of light twenty feet above him was darkened, and he saw the head and shoulders of Melchior, as the man, trusting to the strain upon the rope maintained by Dale, leaned forward.

"Can you help yourself at all?" he said quietly.

"No, no!" cried Saxe hoarsely.

"Be cool, my lad," said Melchior. "I shall drive the head of my axe into the ice, and leave the handle so that you can grasp it when you are drawn up."

Saxe made no reply, but he heard a dull sound, and directly after the rope began to move, and he knew by the jerks that it was being hauled in hand-over-hand by the guide.

A minute later, and the lad's head was level with the snow, and he saw the handle of the ice-axe, which he grasped. But it was almost needless, for Melchior caught him by the portion of the rope which was round his chest, and by a quick exercise of his great strength raised him right out of the crevasse, to stand trembling there, as Dale now ran up and grasped his hand.

"Saxe, my boy! What an escape!"

"Oh no," said the guide quickly. "It was nothing. The rope is good and strong, and all we had to do was to draw him out. It would have been dangerous for one man—he would have died—but we are three, and we help each other; so it is nothing."

The two travellers exchanged glances, wondering at the man's coolness; but they were given no time to think, for Melchior quickly examined the knots of the rope which secured it about Saxe's chest, and strode on again, so that they were obliged to follow.

A few minutes later they had reached the rocky side of the glacier valley, and a stiff ascent was before them. Here they found more than ever the value of their guide, for his climbing powers seemed almost marvellous, while almost by instinct he selected the easiest route.

But the easiest was very hard, and every now and then he threw himself back against the rock in difficult places, planted his feet firmly wide apart, and steadily hauled upon the rope, making the ascent of the others much more facile than it would have been.

This was repeated again and again till they had reached the top of the ridge, which had seemed the summit from below on the ice; but here a fresh slope met their eyes, and Melchior made straight for a rift which ran up into the mountain, and, being full of snow, looked at a distance like a waterfall.

"We will go up this couloir," he said; "it will be the best, and it will give the young herr his first lesson in climbing snow."

"But we have been climbing snow," said Saxe, whose trepidation had now passed off, and who was feeling once more himself.

"Walking upon it," said the guide, smiling; "not climbing."

"Rather a steep bit, isn't it, Melchior?" said Dale, looking upward.

"Yes, it is steep; but we can do it, and if we slip it will only be a glissade down here again. The rocks are harder to climb, and a slip there would be bad; besides, the stones fall here sometimes rather thickly."

"But they'll be worse down that couloir," said Dale.

"As bad—not worse, herr; but I will go which way you like."

"Go the best way," said Dale quietly.

Melchior nodded, and strode on at once for the foot of the narrow rift, which looked like a gully or shoot, down which the snow fell from above.

"Use my steps," he said quietly; and, with the rope still attached, he began to ascend, kicking his feet into the soft snow as he went on, and sending it flying and rushing down, sparkling in the sunshine, while the others followed his

zigzag track with care. There were times when the foothold gave way, but there was no element of danger in the ascent, which did not prove to be so steep as it had looked before it was attacked. But the ascent was long, and the couloir curved round as they climbed higher, displaying a fresh length of ascent invisible from below.

As they turned the corner Melchior paused for them to look about them, and upward toward where the gully ended in a large field of snow, above and beyond which was steeply scarped mountain, rising higher and higher toward a distant snowy peak.

"But we are not going right up that mountain, are we?" cried Saxe, panting and breathless.

"Not to-day," replied the guide. "No: up to the snow yonder, and along its edge for a little way, and then we descend on the other side, where it will be all downward to Andregg's chalet. Hah! Down close! Quick!"

He set the example, flinging himself upon his face and extending his hands above his head, as a whizzing sound was heard; then a dull thud or two and directly after there was a crash on the rocky side of the couloir a few feet above their heads, followed by a shower of slaty fragments which fell upon them, while a great fragment, which had become detached far above, glanced off, struck the other side of the gully, and then went downward, ploughing up the snow.

"Take care!" again cried the guide. "No," he said directly after, "it is only a few bits."

The few consisted of what might easily have been a cartload of snow, which passed them with a rush, fortunately on the opposite side of the gully.

"I say, Mr Dale," said Saxe, rather nervously, "if that piece of slate had hit either of us—"

"Hah!" ejaculated Dale, drawing in his breath with a hiss, "if it had hit us—"

They neither of them finished their sentence; and just then Melchior started once more, lessening the difficulty of the ascent by zigzagging the way.

Snow was dislodged, and went gliding down the gully, and for a moment a great patch began to slide, taking Dale with it, but a few rapid leaps carried him beyond it; and tightening the rope as soon as he had reached a firm place, Saxe was able to pick his way after the snow had gone by him with a rush, but only to stop a little lower down.

Another climb of about a quarter of an hour's duration brought them to the edge of the field of snow, which Melchior examined pretty carefully, and ended by rejecting in favour of a rugged ridge of rocks, which they had hardly reached when there was a quick roar like thunder, and the guide cried sharply—

"Look!"

He pointed upward toward the snow peaks, which seemed to be a couple of miles away; and as they followed the direction of his pointing hand, toward quite a chaos of rock and ice to their left, and about half-way to the summit, they looked in vain, till Dale cried—

"There it is!"

"Yes: what?" cried Saxe eagerly. "Oh, I see: that little waterfall!"

For far away there was the semblance of a cascade, pouring over the edge of a black rock, and falling what seemed to be a hundred feet into a hollow, glittering brilliantly the while in the sun.

They watched it for about five minutes; and then, to Saxe's surprise, the fall ceased, but the deep rushing noise, as of water, was still heard, and suddenly the torrent seemed to gush out below, to the left, and go on again fiercer than ever, but once more to disappear and reappear again and again, till it made one bold leap into a hollow, which apparently communicated with the glacier they had left.

"Hah!" ejaculated Saxe, "it was very beautiful, but— Why, that must have been snow! Was that an avalanche?"

"Yes; didn't you understand? That is one of the ice-falls that are always coming down from above."

"I didn't take it," said Saxe. "Well, it was very pretty, but not much of it. I should like to see a big one."

Dale looked at Melchior, and smiled.

"He does not grasp the size of things yet," he said. "Why, Saxe, my lad, you heard the clap like thunder when the fall first took place?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then don't you grasp that what looked like a cascade tumbling down was hundreds of tons of hard ice and snow in large fragments? Hark! there goes another."

There was a deeper-toned roar now, and they stood looking up once more, with Saxe troubled by a feeling of awe, as the noise came rumbling and echoing to where they stood.

"That must have been a huge mass down," said Dale at last, after they had looked up in vain, expecting some visible token of the avalanche.

"Yes, herr: away over that ridge. The snow falls at this time of the day. We shall not see any of that one. Shall we go on!"

"No, no!" cried Saxe excitedly, "I want to see another one come down. But did you mean there were hundreds of tons in that first one, that looked like water?"

"Oh yes—perhaps much more," said Dale. "That fall was a couple of miles away."

"Here, let's go on, sir," said Saxe, who seemed to have changed his mind very suddenly. "It all puzzles me. I dare say I'm very stupid, but I can't understand it. Perhaps I shall be better after a time."

"It is more than any one can understand, Saxe," said Dale quietly; "and yet, while it is grand beyond imagination, all the scheme of these mountains, with their ice and snow, is gloriously simple. Yes," he added, with a nod to Melchior, "go on," and an arduous climb followed along the ridge of rocks, while the sun was reflected with a painful glare from the snowfield on their left, a gloriously soft curve of perhaps great depth kept from gliding down into the gorge below by the ridge of rocks along which they climbed.

The way was safe enough, save here and there, when Melchior led them along a ledge from which the slope down was so steep as to be almost a precipice. But here he always paused and drew in the rope till those in his charge were close up to him; and on one of these occasions he patted Saxe on the shoulder, for there had been a narrow piece of about fifty feet in length that looked worse at a glance back than in the passing.

"That was good," he said. "Some grown men who call themselves climbers would have hung back from coming."

"That?" said Saxe. "Yes, I suppose it is dangerous, but it didn't seem so then. I didn't think about it, as you and Mr Dale walked so quietly across."

"It's the thinking about it is the danger," said Dale quietly. "Imagination makes men cowards. But I'm glad you've got such a steady head, Saxe."

"But I haven't, sir, for I was horribly frightened when I hung at the end of that rope down in the crevasse."

"You will not be again," said Melchior coolly, for they were now on a slope where the walking was comparatively easy, and they could keep together. "The first time I slipped into one I, too, was terribly frightened. Now I never think of anything but the rope cutting into my chest and hurting me, and of how soon I can get hold somewhere to ease the strain."

"What!" cried Saxe, staring at the man's cool, matter-of-fact way of treating such an accident, "do you mean to say I shall ever get to think nothing of such a thing as that?"

"Oh yes," said Melchior quietly.

"Oh, well, I don't think so," said Saxe. "Oh no. I shall get not to mind walking along precipices, I dare say, but those crevasses—ugh!"

"The young herr will make a fine mountaineer, I am sure," said Melchior. "I ought to know. Along here," he added; and, after a few minutes, he stopped at what was quite a jagged rift in the mountain side.

"There is an awkward bit here, herr," he said, "but it will cut off half an hour's hard walking."

"Down there?" said Saxe, after a glance. "Oh, I say!"

"It is an ugly bit, certainly," said Dale, looking at the guide.

"With a little care it is nothing," said Melchior. "The herr will go down first. He has only to mind where he plants his feet. When he reaches that ledge he will stop till we join him."

As Melchior spoke he unfastened the rope from Dale's breast and placed the end from his own breast there instead; after which he set himself in a good position by the edge.

"Hadn't we better get the youngster down first?"

"No, herr, you are heavy, and if you slip he can help me to hold you. We can do it easily. Then you will untie yourself, and I can let him down."

"And what then?" cried Saxe merrily, to conceal a feeling of uneasiness at the awkward descent before him. "Are we to come up again and let you down?"

"The young herr speaks like a gentleman Irlandais who was with me last year. He made John Bulls, his friend said."

"Irish bulls, Melchior," said Dale, smiling.

"Ah, yes, the herr is right, they were Irish bulls; but I do not quite know. Are you ready?"

"Yes," said Dale, preparing to descend the precipitous piece.

"Better keep your face to the rock here, herr. Go on. Take hold here, young friend. That's it. The rope just touching, and the hands ready to tighten at the slightest slip. Confidence, herr. But I need not speak. You can climb."

Dale reached the ledge below without a slip, unfastened the end of the rope, and Melchior began to attach it to Saxe.

"But, I say," cried the latter, "how can you get down?"

"There?" said the guide, with a little laugh. "Oh, that is not hard climbing: I can easily get down there."

"I wish I could without thinking it was terrible," said Saxe to himself, as he prepared in turn to descend, for in spite of the confidence given by the rope about his chest, he found himself fancying that if the knot came undone by the jerk he should give it if he slipped from one of those awkward pieces of stone, he would go on falling and bounding from rock to rock till he lay bruised and cut, perhaps killed, at the bottom of the mountain.

"It's no good to stop thinking about it," he muttered; and lowering himself down, he began to descend steadily, with the feeling of dread passing off directly he had started; for the excitement of the work, and the energy that he had to bring to bear in lowering himself from ledge to ledge, kept him too busy to think of anything but the task in hand; so that, in what seemed to be an incredibly short space of time, he was standing beside Dale.

Then came a warning cry from Melchior, who threw down his end of the rope, and directly after began to descend with an ease that robbed his task of all aspect of danger. Every movement was so quietly and easily made, there was such an elasticity of muscle and absence of strain, that before the man was half down, both Dale and Saxe were wondering how they could have thought so much of the task, and on Melchior joining them, and after descending a little farther, roping them for other steep bits, they went on easily and well.

And now for about a couple of hours Melchior took them on rapidly down and down and in and out among bluffs and mountain spurs which he seemed to know by heart, though to those with him the place grew more perplexing at every turn. There was a gloomy look, too, now, in the depths of the various gorges, which told of the coming of evening, though the various peaks were blazing with orange and gold, and a refulgent hue overspread the western sky.

"Is it much farther?" said Saxe at last. "I am getting so hungry, I can hardly get one leg before the other."

"Farther!" said Melchior, smiling. "Do you not see? Up there to the right is the foot of the glacier; there is the hill from which you saw the top, and yonder is the patch of forest. Andregg's chalet is just below."

"I am glad!" cried Saxe. "I thought I was hungry, but it's tired I am. I shall be too weary to eat."

"Oh no!" said Melchior. "The young herr will eat, and then he will sleep as we sleep here in these mountains, and wake in the morning ready for another day. The herr still wants to hunt for crystals?" he added, glancing at Dale.

"Yes; if you can take me to them," said the latter eagerly.

"I will try, herr; but they have to be sought in the highest solitudes, on the edge of the precipices, where it is too steep for the snow to stay, and they say that there are spirits and evil demons guarding the caverns where they lie."

"And do you believe them?" said Saxe sturdily.

"The young herr shall see," replied the guide. "Ah! there is Andregg. The cows have just been brought home, and here come the goats. I heard the cry in the mountains. We shall have bread and milk and cheese, if we have nothing else. Do I believe that about the demons who guard the crystal caves?" he continued thoughtfully. "Well, the young herr shall see. Hoi! hola, Andregg! I bring you friends!" he shouted to a grey-haired man standing in the evening twilight, which was declining fast, just outside the plain brown pine-wood chalet, with two women and a boy leisurely milking cows and goats.

"The herrs are welcome," said the man gravely. "It has been fine among the mountains to-day. I was fearing we should have a storm."

Chapter Five.

Strange Quarters.

Milk, bread, butter and cheese in the rough pine verandah, seated on a homely bench, with the soft pleasant smell of cows from beneath, and the melodious chiming tinkle of many sweet-toned bells—not the wretched tin or iron jangling affairs secured to sheep or kine in England, but tuneful, well-made bells, carefully strapped to the necks of the cattle, and evidently appreciated by the wearers, several of which stood about, gently swaying their heads, blinking their great soft eyes, ruminating, and waiting their turn with the brawny milkmaid, who rose from her crouching position from time to time, taking her one-legged stool with her, fastened on and projecting like a peculiar tail.

The light was dying out fast on the peaks around, and they ceased to flash and glow, to become pale and grey, and then ghastly, cold and strange, as the little party sat enjoying the simple meal and the calm and rest of the peaceful scene. Everything around was so still that there was hardly a murmur in the pines; only the hushed roar of the restless river, but subdued now, for its waters were shrinking fast from the failure of the supply; for the many thousand trickling rivulets of melting snow, born of the hot sunshine of the day, were now being frozen up hard.

The weary feeling that stole over Saxe was very pleasant as he eat there, with his back against the rough pine boards of the chalet, watching the shadows darkening in the valley, and the falls grow less and less distinct, while a conversation, which did not trouble him, went on close by his elbow.

"I think I have pretty well explained what I want, Melchior," Dale was saying. "I have seen a few specimens of the crystals found up in the mountains, and I am convinced that far finer pieces are to be obtained in the higher parts that have not yet been explored."

The guide was silent for a few minutes as he sat now smoking his pipe.

"The herr is right," he said at last. "I have often seen places where, such treasures may be found. But you are a stranger—I am a Swiss. Is it right that I should help you?"

"When I tell you that I am moved by no ideas of greed, but solely as a discoverer, and that, as I have before said, your country would be the richer for my find, you ought to be satisfied."

"I should be, herr, only that I do not quite like the secrecy of your movements. It is not like anything I have done before, and it troubles me to think that I ought not to tell anybody the object of our excursions."

"Tell any curious people that we are making ascents because I am studying the mountains. It will be the truth; for, understand me, I am not going alone for this search. I want to find out more concerning the forming of the glaciers, and the gathering of storms on the mountains. There are endless discoveries to be made, and ascents to be attempted. You will show me mountains that have not yet been climbed."

"I will show the herr all he wishes, and keep his counsel loyally," said Melchior. "No one shall know anything about our search. Look, herr: the Alpen glow!"

A slight rustling sound beneath the verandah had just taken Saxe's attention, and he was wondering whether any one was in the low stone cowhouse over which the chalet was built—from the economical ideas of the people, who make one roof do for both places, and give to their cattle an especially warm winter house—when the guide's words roused him from his drowsy state, and he started up to gaze at the rather rare phenomenon before him.

A short time before the various mountain peaks had stood up, dimly-seen, shadowy grey and strange, the more distant dying out in the gathering gloom. Now it was as if a sudden return of the golden sunset had thrown them up again, glowing with light and colour, but with a softness and delicacy that was beautiful in the extreme.

"All that's bright must fade," said Dale, with a sigh. "I wonder what our English friends would say to that, Saxe!"

"What I do,—that it's lovely. Is it like this every night?"

"No," replied Melchior, refilling his pipe; "it is only at times. Some say it means storms in the mountains; some that it is to be fine weather."

"And what do you say, Melchior?" asked Dale.

"I say nothing, herr. What can a man who knows the mountains say, but that this is a place of change? Down here in the valley it has been a soft bright summer day, whilst up yonder in the mountains storm and snow have raged, and the icy winds have frozen men to death. Another day I have left the wind howling and the rain beating and the great black clouds hanging low; and in an hour or two I have climbed up to sunshine, warmth and peace."

"But you mountaineers know a great deal about the weather and its changes."

"A little, herr," said the guide, smiling—"not a great deal. It is beyond us. We know by the clouds and mists high above the mountains when it is safe to go and when to stay; for if we see long-drawn and rugged clouds hanging about the points and trailing down the cols and over each icy grat, we know there is a tempest raging and we do not go. There is not much wisdom in that. It is very simple, and— Look! the young herr is fast asleep. Poor boy!—it has been a tiring day. Shall we go to rest?"

"Yes," said Dale, laying his hand on Saxe's shoulder. "Come, boy, rouse up and let's go to bed."

"Eh? What? Where? Sliding down and— Did you speak, Mr Dale?" said Saxe, after starting up and babbling excitedly for a moment or two, just fresh from his dreams.

"Wake up! I'm going to bed."

"Wake up, of course," said Saxe tetchily. "Mustn't a—?"

He stopped short, colouring a little; and at that moment he turned sharply, for there was a loud sneeze from below, and directly after a youngish man, with a lowering look and some bits of hay sticking in his hair, came out from the cowhouse and slouched by the front, glancing up with half-shut eyes towards the occupants of the verandah, on his way to a low stone-built shingle-roofed place, from which sundry bleatings told that it was the refuge of the herd of goats.

Saxe was too sleepy to think then, and their host being summoned, he showed them through the chalet into a long low room with a sloping roof and boarded floor, in two corners of which lay a quantity of clean hay and twigs of some dry heathery-looking plant.

"Gute nacht," he said briefly, and went out, leaving the door open.

"Do we sleep here?" said Saxe, yawning. "No beds no chests of drawers, no washstands, no carpets."

"No, boy: nothing but clean hay and a roof over our heads," replied Dale. "Shall you mind?"

"Mind?" said Saxe, plumping himself down in the hay. "Well, it seems so queer. I can't undress and lie in this stuff: see how it would tickle. It is pretty soft, though, and— Oh! murder!"

"What's the matter?" cried Dale excitedly: "some insect?"

"No, it's a jolly old stumpy thistle, like the top of a young pineapple. It did prick.—Yes, it is pretty soft, and it smells nice, and heigh ho hum! how tired I am!"

"You'll take the other corner, Melchior," said Dale; "I'll lie here. There is no occasion to fasten the door, I suppose?"

"Fasten the door!" said the guide, with a quiet laugh. "Oh no. The only intruder likely to come is the wind, and he might open it and bang it, but he will not be abroad to-night. Look!"

"Look! what at?"

The guide pointed to the corner where Saxe had lain down, making a pillow of his arm.

Dale smiled.

"Comfortable, Saxe boy?"

There was no reply. The hay made a pleasant, sweetly scented couch. Saxe was fast asleep.

Chapter Six.

A Try for Gold.

Strange places bring strange dreams, and often some hours of complete oblivion. Saxe began to dream with all his might. Body and Brain had been having the thorough rest which comes to those who have been walking far in the glorious mountain air; but toward morning Brain woke up and began to act on its own account, while Body lay asleep; and when Brain does this without the balance given by Body, its workings are rather wild.

In this case it began to repeat the adventures of the day before, but in a curiously bizarre manner; and in consequence Saxe found himself being disappointed in the heights of the mountains, which were exceedingly small—mere anthills covered with snow, up which he began to climb so as to stand on their tops; but as he climbed they began to grow, so that there was always a piece more to get up, and so he went on, finding that there was no getting right to the top. Then avalanches began to fall rumbling and roaring down, and covering people at the bottom—hundreds of them, so it seemed to him; and he could hear them moaning under the snow, which by some curious chance of circumstances was just below him. But the odd thing was that they did not seem to mind it much, only moaning piteously and impatiently, as if they were in a hurry for a thaw to come and set them free. Then one of them began to ring the bell for dinner; and another did the same; and Saxe felt that he ought to be doing something to take them food to eat—coarse bread, butter, cheese like Gruyère, full of holes, and a jug of milk, but he did not do it, and the people went on moaning and ringing the bells.

Then he was high up, watching the waterfalls with the silvery rockets slowly descending, and trailing after them their sparkling spray, which kept lighting up with glorious rainbow colours.

Then he was stepping from stone to stone in the ice-cave below the glacier, listening to the gurgling and whishing of the water as it came rushing down over the grey, dark rock from out the narrow arching tunnel which shut up behind him.

How he got out of that place he did not know; but soon after his eyes were aching with the glare of the snow around him. A huge eagle, a hundred times bigger than the one he had seen, was soaring round and round, and coming lower and lower, till it was so close to him that he could feel the wind of its wings wafted pleasantly over his face. The bird's back was soft and cushiony, and it seemed to be inviting him to take his place upon it for a ride up in the air; and he was thinking of doing so, and gliding off over the silver-topped mountains to look out for caves where they could chip out crystals, and perhaps discover valuable metals; but just as he was about to throw a leg over the feathery saddle and take his seat, there was a fearful yell, that sounded like an accident in a trombone manufactory, where all the instruments had been blown up by an explosion of steam. He was hurled back upon the snow, and held down by some monstrous creature, which planted its feet upon his chest; and the people buried in the snow began to moan more loudly and ring the bells.

Then Saxe opened his eyes, and in his half-awake condition he felt the wafting of the great bird's wings, heard the moaning of the people buried beneath the avalanche, and listened to them ringing the bells in an impatient way.

"What nonsense, to dream such stuff!" he said impatiently. "Why, it's the cows lowing in the place underneath, waiting to be milked, and shaking their bells."

But, all the same, he felt a thrill of horror run through him, and tried to pierce the gloom by which he was surrounded, for certainly something was holding him down with its feet upon his chest, and stooping by him so that he could feel its breath.

The sensation to him was horrible, for it raised its head now, making a strange noise; and he could faintly see by a pencil of light a hideous-looking head, with tall curved horns and a long beard, and though he could not see them, he seemed to feel that a pair of glowing eyes were fixed upon his not a yard away.

There was no time to think or reason in such a position. He could see the head, and feel the pressure of the feet; and he knew that he was not dreaming now. Frightened he was naturally, but he acted at once as a lad of manly character might be expected to act: he struck out with his doubled fist, giving the object a heavy blow just beneath the horns.

The effect was instantaneous. The creature gave a bound, there was a pattering sound on the floor, and something rushed out through the open door, uttering a dismal b-a-a-ah!

"Why, it was a jolly old goat!" said Saxe, half aloud. "I wish I wasn't such a coward."

The next moment he was lying back laughing silently, fully grasping his position now, and listening to a rustling movement away to his left.

"That you, Melchior?" he said.

"Ah, herr: awake? Good morning."

"Not time to get up, is it?"

"Oh yes; it is getting late. Why, it will soon be full day!"

"Oh, will it?" muttered Saxe rather grumpily, for the bed he had despised overnight now seemed temptingly pleasant for another hour or two's snooze. "What nonsense!" he thought. "Soon be day! I hope we are not always going to get up at such ridiculous times. Well, if I'm to get up, he isn't going to be snoozing there."

He leaned over and stretched out his hand; but that was not sufficient, for their bed was wide, and he had to creep a yard or two before he could grasp his companion's shoulder.

"It's to-morrow morning, Mr Dale," he said.

"Eh? yes! All right. Where's Melchior?" cried Dale, springing up.

"Here, herr," said the guide from the door. "A beautiful morning, and I think a fine day."

"That's right," said Dale, shaking the hay from his clothes.

"Shall I ask where the dressing and bath-rooms are?" said Saxe, grinning.

"No," said Dale quietly; "I'll show you."

He led the way out of the chalet, where they met the furtive-looking man they had seen overnight. He gave them another sidelong look, said Guten morgen surlily, and then, as it seemed to Saxe, began to put on his tail—that is to say, he strapped on his one-legged milking-stool, and went to meet one of the cows.

"This way to the bath-room, Saxe," said Dale; and he led the way to the foot of the nearest fall, whose icy water came showering down softly as if it were from a cloud. Here there was a pool of the greatest limpidity, broad, deep, and ground out of the solid rock by the constant dropping that wears a stone.

There were no remains of sleep about Saxe's eyes after his ablutions, and they walked back towards the chalet, meeting Melchior.

"There is some breakfast ready, herr," he said; "and I should like to know whether it would be wise to get your things up here and stay for a few days."

"An excellent proposal; but how are we to get them?"

"Oh, there are men who would fetch them; or Andregg would send Pierre with his mule."

"Who is Pierre?—that man we saw milking?"

"Yes, herr. I don't like him, but he is honest, and will do that very well. Shall I send? After you have done here, I can get them carried farther over the mountains, or, if you liked, we could hire Andregg's mule for use at once."

"But the mountains? Can he climb?"

Melchior laughed.

"Almost anywhere. I think he could even beat us. He is a wonderful beast."

The proposal was agreed to, and after they had partaken of their homely breakfast, Andregg was questioned about the mule.

Oh yes, he was quite willing to lend it, for as many days or weeks as the herr liked.

"Then I'll have it to carry our little tent, rugs and provisions. I promise you I will feed the animal well."

"The herr need not trouble himself," said Andregg; "Gros will feed himself."

"Well, then, I will not work him too hard."

"I am not afraid, herr," said the sturdy grey-haired old Swiss, smiling; "he always lies down when he is tired."

"Then I will not beat him."

"No, herr," said Andregg; "he will not let you."

"Here, I want to see that mule!" cried Saxe.

"Oh yes, the young herr shall see him," said the old Swiss; and he went to the door and uttered a peculiar jodel, which was answered directly by a horrible bray which Saxe recognised as the yell he had heard before he was awake.

"Nein—nein—nein—nein!" shouted the old Swiss, and the donkey's bray died off into a sobbing moan. As this was ended, the old man jodelled again, apparently without result; but soon after there was a snort, and a peculiar-looking animal came trotting down from the mountain, whisking its long tail from side to side and pointing its long ears forward. But as it came close up, it suddenly stopped, and spun round as if upon a pivot.

"Here, come round and let's look at your head," cried Saxe.

"No; he will not turn till he knows you well," cried the old man; "he's very bashful, is Gros. You must make friends with him by degrees, and then he is quite a brother to any one in the mountains."

"But how am I to make friends with him?" cried Saxe.

"Get a piece of bread for the young herr, Melchior Staffeln," said the old man. "When it comes," he continued, "you may tempt Gros to come to you; but he is very particular, and may not like you, because you are foreigners."

The bread was brought. Saxe took it, and held it out to the mule, which slightly turned its head, gazed at it wistfully, but kept its hind quarters toward the would-be donor, turning as he turned, in spite of sundry coaxing words.

"Here, turn round," cried Saxe: "you can't eat with your tail."

"Don't go too close, herr," said the old Swiss; "I don't think he would, but he might kick."

"And I think it's very probable that he will," said Dale sharply; "that right hind leg is all of a quiver. Why, the brute's vicious, Melchior!" he said, in German.

"No, no—not vicious," said the old Swiss; "it's only that he's frightened and bashful: he isn't used to company, herr. Be patient with him, and he's a beast that would almost lay down his life for you."

"Looks more like laying down our lives," said Saxe, making a sudden dart round, as the mule was watching Dale, and then, as the animal turned sharply, holding out the bread.

Perhaps the wind bore the scent of the piece of loaf to the mule's nostrils, and the temptation was too great to resist. At any rate it stretched out its neck and extended its muzzle, so that head and neck were nearly in a straight line, and uttered a shrill, squealing whinny, which was answered at once by the donkey with a sonorous trumpeting bray, as the lesser animal came cantering up with tail and ears cocked.

"Ah! child of the evil one!" shouted old Andregg, "go back to your pasture;" and stooping down, he picked up a piece of freshly cut pine-wood, and threw it at the offending animal, missing him, but making him put his head down between his fore legs, and kick out his hind legs in defiance, before cantering off again.

By this time the mule was sniffing at the bread, and drawing nearer and nearer to Saxe's extended hand, consenting finally to take it and begin to eat.

"Is it not beautiful?" cried old Andregg, smiling. "Behold, you have made a friend who will serve you like a dog."

"I can't see anything very beautiful in it, Mr Dale," said Saxe, who had now advanced so far that he was permitted to pat the mule's neck; "and what does he mean by 'serve you like a dog'? Bite! He looks as if he could."

"He will be very useful to us, herr, and save us many a long weary tramp," said the guide, smiling. "I am willing and strong, but I cannot guide and carry much as well, and if you share the load with me, your climbing will be too laborious. With the mule to drive before us, we can take water, food, and blankets, beside a kettle for coffee; and sleep for one, two or three nights in the mountains, if we like. Shall we take him to-day?"

"I thought he was to be sent down the valley for our portmanteau and things," said Dale.

"Andregg can send the donkey," replied Melchior.

"Then by all means let us take the animal. I wish, though, that we had our ice-axes and rope, that I left at the chalet below."

"They will be ready for our next journey," said Melchior. And after due instructions had been given to old Andregg and his man Pierre, preparations were made for a fresh start up the mountains.

These did not take long. A kind of basket was secured firmly on the mule's back, and old Andregg, under Melchior's directions, produced a couple of worn ice-picks or axes, blankets, bottles, a kettle for coffee, and a little ready-chopped wood to supply the first start to the twigs and branches they would collect before leaving the forest.

By the time the mule was loaded with everything deemed necessary, Pierre was ready with the donkey, and the start

was made together up and down the valley. At least, that was intended; but there were objections raised by the two four-footed friends, both wanting to go together; and when at last, after a volley of angry language from Andregg, the donkey was dragged by Pierre along the track, it began to bray loudly.

This was sufficient to attract the mule, which whinnied and tried to follow the donkey.

Melchior seized the bridle and checked him, just as they were ascending the first of a series of zigzags leading out of the deep valley, with the result that the donkey brayed again and had to be held by main force by Pierre's arm round his neck, for he had dragged his head out of the bridle; while Gros began to kick and back and behave so obstreperously that Dale gave him a sharp prod with the end of his alpenstock.



"Scattering bottles, wood, and tins from the basket."

Misplaced prod! It was an unhappy touch, making, as it did, Gros give a tremendous plunge off the narrow mule-track, to come down on a slope so steep that he lost his footing, fell, and rolled over and over in a wonderful way, scattering bottles, wood, and tins from the basket, all of which went careering down the side of the valley with the mule, leaping, bounding and rattling and creaking in a way which drove the poor beast nearly frantic with fear, the catastrophe being in no wise bettered by the shouts of Andregg and the dismal brayings of the donkey, which seemed to be frantic in the endeavour to join his unfortunate friend.

The roll down was neither long enough nor dangerous enough to do any harm to Gros; but the state of the scattered cargo, as it was collected and carried to where the mule stood shivering, stamping and kicking at the basket as it hung down now between his legs, was deplorable, and meant a delay of half an hour before a fresh start could be made.

"You must be kind to Gros, herr," said the old Swiss reproachfully. "He always hated to be pricked by the iron point of an alpenstock. I have known him bite boys who used their alpenstocks to him."

"That's a hint for you, Saxe," said Dale merrily. "Worse disasters at sea," he cried. "Now, Melchior, are we all ready once more?"

"Yes, herr," replied the guide.

"Then which way do you propose going, after we get up out of the valley?"

"Over yonder, between those two peaks, herr," said the man, pointing.

"With the mule? Is it possible?"

"I think so, herr; and if you like we will try. I don't think there will be much snow in the pass—no more than the mule can manage. And, once there, I think we can descend into a wild valley below the snow-line—one where man very seldom treads."

"Excellent," said Dale. And they started, leaving old Andregg and his wife collecting the broken bottles and damaged articles below.

They had not ascended above half a dozen of the many zigzags of the path, when the bray of the donkey came faintly from behind, and Gros set up his ears, stopped, whinnied, and looked as if he were about to turn back; but this time kindness was tried, Melchior snatching a piece of bread from his pocket and walking on, holding it behind him.

The result was excellent. The bray of Gros's relative was forgotten, and he increased his pace, sniffing at the bread till he could succeed in taking it from the guide's hand, and, steadily journeying on, munch the sweet, fresh food.

In spite of the delay it was still early; and, feeling no trace of his last night's weariness, Saxe tramped on along the zigzag shelf in the valley side, till the edge of the steep part was reached. Melchior strode off to the right, and then to the left, so as to reach the narrow valley down which the stream came that had supplied them with water for their morning's bath.

This was a mere crack running up into the mountains, but with a little care a path was found upon the steep alp which formed one side, and when this became too precipitous, they descended into the rocky bed, and slowly made their way on till an opportunity for ascending to higher ground presented itself.

The progress made was very slow, but wonderfully interesting, from the variety of moisture-loving plants which took Dale's attention, and the brightly coloured insects, which took that of Saxe, while the mule was perfectly content to wait while a halt was called to capture insect or secure plant; the solemn-looking animal standing fetlock-deep in the water, and browsing on the herbage in the various crannies among the stones.

One of these halts was in an opening out of the narrow gorge running nearly east and west, so that it was flooded by the morning sun; and here, as the limpid water trickled and glided over the sandy bed, Dale took a shallow tin from the mule's pannier and lowered himself down to the edge of the stream.

Taking hold of a piece of rock so as to reach out, he bent down and scooped out half a panful of sand, where there was an eddy; and as the mule began to munch, and Saxe watched his leader's acts, Melchior pulled out his pipe, struck a match, and began to smoke.

"The herr is going to try for gold," he said quietly to Saxe; but Dale heard it.

"Yes. Is there much here, do you think?"

"It is too much to say, herr," replied the guide. "There may be, but I have never known any to be found on this side of the mountains."

"Is any found on the other side, then?"

"Oh yes, on the Italian slope, herr, and down in the valleys, they seek for and find gold—not much, but some."

"Got any, sir?" said Saxe.

"I don't know myself," replied Dale, who was washing the heavier gravel away, and picking out the stones he brought to the surface by a skilful motion of the pan beneath the water. "I must wash out all the sand first before I look to see if there is colour, as the American gold-finders call it."

"Is there another pan, Melchior?" said Saxe; "I want to try too."

"No, herr, there is only one."

"You wait, and let's see what I find, my lad. I expect it will be nothing. There's a nice fragment of onyx," he continued, picking out and pitching up a piece of flinty-looking rock to the lad. "I dare say there are some good agates here too, if we searched for them."

Dale spent about a quarter of an hour getting rid of every scrap of the granite; then held the pan in the bright sunshine, so that the water drained off and the rays shone full upon the bottom of the vessel.

He turned it about at different angles, shook the fine sand, and turned it over with his fingers; but ended by shaking his head.

"No luck, sir?"

"Not a speck. Never mind; I'll try again."

He dug down with the edge of the tin, scooping out a good deal of sand, so as to get a tinfule from as deep down as he could.

"Gold is heavy, and would sink low if it were washed down," he said; and for the next quarter of an hour he repeated the washing process, while Melchior smoked, the mule browsed on the succulent herbage, and Saxe devoted himself to creeping farther along by the stream, and peering down into the pools in search of trout.

"That old fellow at the chalet said the mule would feed himself, Mr Dale," said the boy suddenly.

"Yes, he will not be much trouble to us that way," replied Dale, still plying the pan vigorously; when the mule suddenly reared its head, cocked its ears forward, and whinnied.

Chapter Seven.

Melchior grows Suspicious.

"Hallo! another donkey coming," cried Saxe, and he looked up, and then at Melchior, who had thrust his pipe into his

wallet and was peering up the sides of the valley.

"I don't see one," he said; "but there must be something to take the thing's attention."

The mule whinnied again.

"It is not another mule or donkey," said Melchior, peering upward. "They would have answered his challenge. It must be a man."

He began to climb up to get to a position where he could look up and down the gorge; while Dale, being more interested in the contents of his pan, went on till he had washed enough, and began now to search for specks or tiny scales of gold.

"Must have been some one Gros knew," said the guide to himself, as he still looked about sharply.

"Anything the matter, Melchior?" cried Saxe.

"No, sir, no. I was only trying to make out who was coming up this way."

"Not a speck," said Dale, rinsing his pan in the pure water.

"Will the herr try again?"

"No, not here," replied Dale. "Let's get on: I'm wasting time."

"No," said Melchior; "the herr is making his researches into the wonders of Nature. It cannot be waste of time."

"Well, no, I suppose not, my man. It is all learning. But what was the mule whinnying about!"

"I don't know," replied the guide in a peculiar tone. "It seemed to me that some one he knew was following us."

"What for?" said Dale.

"Ah! that I don't know, sir. From curiosity, perhaps."

"But there is no one who could come but old Andregg; and he would not, surely?"

"No, sir; he is too simple and honest to follow us, unless it were to make sure that we were behaving well to his mule. It must have been that. The animal heard or smelt him, and challenged."

"But you would have seen him, Melchior."

"I might, sir, but perhaps not. There are plenty of places where a man might hide who did not wish to be seen."

"I say, young man," said Dale, "have you a great love for the mysterious?"

"I do not understand you, herr."

"I mean, are you disposed to fancy things, and imagine troubles where there are none?"

"No, herr; I think I am rather dull," said the guide modestly. "Why do you ask?"

"Because that mule made a noise, and you instantly imagined that we were being followed and watched."

"Oh, that! Yes, herr. Our people are curious. Years ago we used to go on quietly tending our cows and goats in the valleys, and driving them up to the huts on the mountains when the snow melted. There were the great stocks and horns and spitzes towering up, covered with eternal snow, and we gazed at them with awe. Then you Englishmen came, and wanted to go up and up where the foot of man never before stepped; and even our most daring chamois hunters watched you all with wonder."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Dale, smiling, as he looked in the guide's frank face.

"You wanted guides to the mountains, and we showed you the way, while you taught us that we could climb too, and could be as cool and daring. We did not know it before, and we had to get over our suspicions. For we said, 'these strangers must want to find something in the mountains—something that will pay them for the risk they run in climbing up to the places where the demons of the storm dwell, and who wait to hurl down stones and dart lightning at the daring people who would venture up into their homes.'"

"And very dangerous those bad spirits are—eh, Melchior!" said Dale, smiling.

"Terribly, herr," said the guide. "And you laugh. I don't wonder. But there are plenty of our simple, uneducated people in the villages who believe all that still. I heard it all as a child, and it took a great deal of quiet thinking, as I grew up, before I could shake off all those follies, and see that there was nothing to fear high up, but the ice and wind and snow, with the dangers of the climbing. Why, fifty years ago, if a man climbed and fell, the people thought he had been thrown down by evil spirits. Many think so now in the out-of-the-way valleys."

"Then you are not superstitious, Melchior?"

"I hope not, herr," said the guide reverently; "but there are plenty of my people who are, and suspicious as well. I am

only an ignorant man, but I believe in wisdom; and I have lived to see that you Englishmen find pleasure in reading the books of the great God, written with His finger on the mountains and in the valleys; to know how you collect the lowliest flowers, and can show us the wonders of their shape and how they grow. Then I know, too, how you find wonders in the great rocks, and can show me how they are made of different stone, which is always being ground down to come into the valleys to make them rich. I know all this, herr; and so I do not wonder and doubt when you ask me to show you some of the wildest places in the mountains, where you may find crystals and see glaciers and caves scarcely any of us have ventured to search. But if I told some of our people that you spend your money and your time in seeking and examining all this, they would only laugh and call me a fool. They would say, 'we know better. He has blinded you. He is seeking for gold and diamonds.' And I could not make them believe it is all in the pursuit of—what do you call that!"

"Science?"

"Yes, science; that is the word. And in their ignorance they will follow and watch us, if we do not take care to avoid them."

"You think, then, that some one has been following us?"

"Undoubtedly, sir; and if it is so, we shall have trouble."

"Pooh! They will, you mean. But I'm not going to worry myself about that. There—let's get on."

Melchior gave a quick glance backward, and Saxe followed his example, his eyes catching directly a glimpse as he thought, of a human face high up, and peering down at them from among some stones which had fallen upon a ledge.

But the glimpse was only instantaneous, and as he looked he felt that he could not be sure, and that it might be one of the blocks of lichened stones that he had taken for a face.

They went on slowly and more slowly, for the path grew so difficult that it was easy to imagine that no one had ever been along there before, and Saxe said so.

"Oh yes," said Melchior; "I have often been along here. It has been my business these many years to go everywhere and find strange wild places in the mountains. The men, too, who hunt the chamois and the bear—"

"Eh? what?" cried Saxe, plucking up his ears. "Bears! There are no bears here."

"Oh yes," said the guide, smiling. "Not many; but there are bears in the mountains. I have seen them several times, and the ibex too, more to the south, on the Italian slope."

"Shall we see them?"

"You may, herr. Perhaps we shall come across a chamois or two to-day, far up yonder in the distance."

"Let's get on, then," said Saxe eagerly. "But hallo! how are we to get the mule up that pile of rocks?"

"That!" said the guide quietly; "he will climb that better than we shall."

He was right, for the sure-footed creature breasted the obstacle of a hundred feet of piled-up blocks very coolly, picking his way patiently, and with a certainty that was surprising.

"Why, the mule is as active as a goat!" cried Dale.

"Well, not quite, herr," said Melchior. "But, as I said, you will find that he will go anywhere that we do, except upon the ice. There he loses his footing at once, and the labour is too great to cut steps for an animal like that."

The great pile of loose blocks was surmounted, and at the top Saxe stood and saw that it was evidently the remains of a slip from the mountain up to their right, which had fallen perhaps hundreds of years before, and blocked up the narrow gorge, forming a long, deep, winding lake in the mountain solitude.

"Fish? Oh yes—plenty," said the guide, "and easily caught; but they are very small. There is not food enough for them to grow big and heavy, as they do in the large lakes."

"Well," said Dale, after a few minutes' study of their surroundings, "this is wild and grand indeed. How far does the lake run up there? Of course it winds round more at the other end!"

"Yes, herr, for miles; and gets narrower, till it is like a river."

"Grand indeed; but it is like a vast stone wall all round, and as far as we can see. Must we go back again?"

"Yes," said Saxe promptly; "there's no means of getting along any farther."

The guide smiled, went a little to the left, and plunged at once into a long crack between two masses of rock, so narrow that as the mule followed without hesitation, the sides of the basket almost touched the rock.

"We can't say our guide is of no use, Saxe," cried Dale, laughing. "Come along. Well, do you like this rough climbing, or would you rather get back to the paths of the beaten track?"

"I love it," cried Saxe excitedly. "It's all so new and strange. Why didn't we come here before?"

"You should say, why do not the tourists come into these wild places instead of going year after year in the same ruts, where they can have big hotels and people to wait upon them? Look, there's a view!" he continued, pointing along a narrow gorge between the mountains at a distant peak which stood up like the top of a sugar-loaf, only more white.

"I was looking at that view," said Saxe, pointing downward at the hind quarters of the mule, which was the only part visible, the descent was so steep, to where they came upon a sheltered grove of pines, whose sombre green stood out in bright contrast to the dull grey rocks.

Then onward slowly for hours—at times in the valley, where their feet crushed the beautiful tufts of ferns; then the hoofs of the mule were clattering over rounded masses of stone, ground and polished, over which the patient beast slipped and slid, but never went down. Now and then there was a glimpse of a peak here or of another turning or rift there; but for the most part they were completely shut in down between walls of rock, which echoed their voices, bursting forth into quite an answering chorus when Melchior gave forth a loud, melodious jodel.

"But doesn't any one live here?" said Saxe at last.

"No, herr!"

"No farmers or cottage people? Are there no villages?"

"No, herr. How could man live up here in these solitudes? It is bright and beautiful now, with moss and dwarf firs and ferns; but food would not grow here. Then there is no grass for the cattle; and in the winter it is all deep in snow, and the winds tear down these valleys, so that it is only in sheltered places that the pines can stand. Am I leading the herrs right? Is this the kind of scenery they wish to see?"

"Capital!" cried Saxe.

"Yes," said Dale quietly, as his eyes wandered up the wall-like sides of the gorge they were in; "but there ought to be rifts and caverns up in these narrow valleys where I could find what I seek."

"After awhile, herr, after awhile. When we get to the end of this thal we shall come upon a larger lake. We shall go along one shore of that to where it empties itself. There is much water in it, for three glaciers run down toward it. At the other end, beyond the schlucht, we shall be in the greater valley, between the mountains I pointed to this morning; and there you will find steeper places than this, wilder and stranger, where we can camp for to-night, and to-morrow you can choose."

"Very good: I leave it to you; but if we pass anything you think would be interesting, stop."

They had zigzagged about, and climbed up and up as well as descended, so that Saxe had quite lost count of the direction.

"Which way are we going now?" he said at last.

"Nearly due south."

"Then that's toward Italy?"

"Yes. As the crow flies we can't be many miles from the border."

"How rum!" said Saxe to himself. Then, aloud, "Over more mountains, I suppose?"

"Over those and many others beyond them," replied Dale; and then, as they followed each other in single file, Melchior leading and the mule close at his heels like a dog, weariness and the heat of the narrow sun-bathed gorge put an end to conversation, till Saxe noticed that the waters foaming along far down in the bottom were running in the same direction as they were going, whereas earlier in the day they met them.

"We are in another valley, going toward a different lake," said Dale, in answer to a remark; "and look: that must be it. No, no—that way to the left."

Saxe looked, and saw a gleam of silver between two nearly perpendicular walls; and half an hour afterwards they were traversing a narrow ledge running some few feet above the dark blue waters of a lake shut in apparently on all sides by similar walls of rock, which it would have been impossible to scale.

"The herr will be careful along here," said Melchior, pausing for a minute at a slightly wider part of the shelf to let the mule pass him. "Shall we have the rope!"

"What do you say, Saxe?" said Dale. "If it is no narrower than this, I think we can keep our heads."

"Oh, I can manage," said Saxe. "Besides, if one fell, it is only into the water. Is it deep, Melchior?"

"Hundreds of feet, I think," said the guide; "and it would be bad to fall in. I could soon throw you the rope, but the waters are icily cold, and might make you too helpless to swim. Still, it is better to grow accustomed to walking places like this without the rope."

"Oh yes," said Saxe, coolly enough; "I don't feel frightened."

"I hope you would speak out frankly if you were nervous," said Dale: "it might save an accident. False shame would be folly here."

"Oh, I'll speak," said Saxe, as his eyes wandered over the blue water that lay like a mirror reflecting the mountains round. "What a place it looks for fish! There are plenty here, eh, Melchior?"

"I have seen small ones leap out—that is all."

"But what's the matter with the mule? He can't get any farther."

"Oh yes; there is a good path to where the river runs out. He does not like to go on by himself. I must get by him again, and lead."

It was easier said than done, for the path was so narrow that Melchior had to press the mule close to the perpendicular rock, and hold on by the pack-saddle and then by the animal's neck, to get by. Once he did slip, his foot gliding over the edge; but by throwing himself forward he saved himself, clung to the path for a few minutes as he hung over it, his chest and arms resting thereon till he could get one knee up.

The rest was easy, and he rose once more to his feet.

"Hah!" ejaculated Saxe, "I thought you were gone, and we had no rope to throw to you."

"It was rather awkward, herr," said the guide coolly. "It is bad, too, to get wet when one is hot with walking."

Chapter Eight.

An awkward Accident.

"I sat!" cried Saxe, as the guide led on again, and the mule followed patiently enough.

"Yes, herr."

"Suppose two goats were to meet here, what would they do!"

"One would lie down and the other jump over him."

"But suppose it were two mules?"

"I don't know, herr. One of them might make the other back all the way; but mules are stubborn, and I'm afraid that one would push the other off."

"And what then?"

"He would swim for awhile, and then drown."

"Why," said Saxe, "I thought this lake was very beautiful; but you seem to be taking all the blue out of it. Ugh! why, it would be like falling into a well and trying to get out. I shall be glad to get away from this place."

"That's imagination, Saxe," said Dale; "and imagination is something all mountaineers should leave behind."

"Why?" said Saxe argumentatively.

"Don't go so near to the mule's heels: if he kicks you, nothing could save you from a fall into the lake."

"That's imagination, sir," said Saxe, laughing; "and imagination is something all mountaineers should leave behind."

Dale frowned, but laughed directly after.

"Pert, but smart, Saxe," he said. "Seriously, though, a mountain climber, who must naturally be often walking along risky places, has enough to think about without indulging in fancies of what might be if this happened or that took place. Such thoughts may unnerve him; and you may depend upon it, some of the bravest things are done by those who think the least. I remember, one day in London, seeing the men taking down one of those vast scaffolds formed, not of poles, but of square timbers bolted together; and I saw one man, about a hundred and fifty feet from the ground, standing on one of these pieces of timber, which was fastened to an upright at each end. He was looking on while another workman unscrewed one of the bolts which held it."

"How wide was it?" said Saxe, looking down at the narrow shelf of rock upon which he was walking.

"About ten inches, I suppose. There was nothing near him, for he was on the very top of the scaffolding, which swayed a little with the weight of the wood; but he seemed perfectly cool and comfortable up there, and after a few minutes he turned and walked along it to the other end, while I, who have often gone along dangerous ledges of ice, felt my hands turn wet inside."

"With fright?"

"Call it nervousness," said Dale. "No: call it fear or fright. Of course I imagined that at any moment the poor fellow might turn giddy and fall. But if that beam had been lying on the pavement, any one would have walked or run along it without hesitation, for there is no question of balancing on a piece of flat wood ten inches wide. The imagination is the danger."

"Then sailors can't have any imagination," said Saxe thoughtfully.

"It is to be hoped not, of that kind. If they ever thought of falling, they would never be able to run along the yards of a big ship as they do."

"Well, I'll try and not have any imagination," said Saxe. "I shouldn't like you to say you wished that you had not brought me, for you could not go anywhere you wanted because I was such a coward."

"I trust to you to be neither cowardly nor rash," said Dale, "and you may trust to me not to take you into more dangerous places than I can help. But it really is a matter of habit. Why, people never think of the danger, but every time they run up or downstairs they risk a severe fall; and I once knew of a sailor lad, accustomed to go aloft and climb over the bulwarks into the main chains or the rigging under the bowsprit, who would pull all the clothes off his bed of a night and make them up on the floor, because he was afraid of tumbling out of bed in the night. Hah! we are getting near the end of the lake. Why, Saxe, it does look black and deep!"

"But I don't see any place where it runs out," said Saxe. "There ought to be a river or a waterfall here, oughtn't there!"

"Wait a few minutes, and we shall see. Ah! to be sure—there it is; the sides are so close together that they hardly show, but you can see now where the ledge runs, right to that corner."

A hundred yards farther along the narrow ledge—a fault in the strata which formed that side of the lake—and all doubt of their being at the exit of the waters was at rest, for Melchior stopped short where the ledge widened into a little platform at the angle of the rock forming one of the sides of a mere crack in the titanic wall of perpendicular mountain, which in places actually overhung them, and ran up fully a thousand feet.

The opening where they stood was some twenty feet wide, and through it the waters of the lake poured with a low rushing sound, which seemed to deepen farther in to a roar.

Saxe was pressing forward to look in at the opening; but Melchior met them and pointed back over the lake, at the head of which rose a huge mountain mass, snow-clad and glistening, on either side of which glaciers could be seen running sharply down, while away on the left another winding, frozen river descended.

"Grand!" exclaimed Dale; but the next moment he turned to the opening by which they stood, the rushing waters having a weird fascination for them both.

"The schlucht," said Melchior quietly.

"I say," said Saxe: "you don't mean to say we've got to go through there?"

"Yes," said the guide calmly. "I have never taken a mule through, but I think we can manage it."

"But is it all like this?" said Saxe, looking aghast.

"Oh no, herr; it runs together a few yards farther in, and is so narrow that in one place you can stretch your arms and touch both sides at once."

"Then it is open right through?"

"Yes, herr. The mountain must have split open at some time or other, to let the water of the lake run out."

"Yes; and how far is it through?" said Dale.

"About a mile: less than half an hour."

"And this ledge goes right along?"

"Just as it has run by the side of the lake, herr. A little narrower sometimes."

"But you say the gorge—the crack—gets narrower directly."

"Oh yes—much, herr. It is never so wide as this."

"But the water: is there room for it?"

"The crack or split in the rocks must be very deep down, for all the water from the lake runs through here, and it's quite a big river on the other side."

"And what other way is there, Melchior?" asked Saxe.

"The way we came."

"No other?"

The guide shook his head.

"What do you think of it, Saxe? Will you venture?"

The lad drew a long breath, and said, through his teeth—

"Yes. I'm not going to be beaten by a mule!"

"Go on, then," said Dale quietly, "and as soon as we are through we must have a halt for a meal."

"Not as soon as we are through, herr," said Melchior, smiling; and he began to unfasten the mule's girths.

"What are you doing?" cried Saxe.

"Taking off the pannier," replied the guide. "The ledge is narrow farther in, and it would be awkward if the basket caught against the rock. It might cause him to make a false step, and it would be a bad place to fall in."

"Bad place? Horrible!" said Dale, frowning.

"But, I say, you can't leave the basket behind with all the victuals," cried Saxe.

"No, herr; as soon as the mule is through, I shall come back and fetch it."

"We two must carry it between us, slung on the alpenstocks," said Dale.

"No, herr, I will manage it all," said Melchior quietly. "I can soon fetch the basket, and it will be better. The young herr will want all his activity to get along without a load. I have been here four times before. I should have been five times; but one May the snow had melted after a great rain, and the lake was so full that the waters were feet above the pathway, and they rushed through, so that the great walls of rock shook as if they would fall in. There," he said, removing the mule's load and carrying it two or three yards back, to place it against the natural wall. "It will be quite safe there," he continued, with a smile; "nobody will come. Ah, Gros, my friend, is that cool and restful?"

The mule whinnied, arched up its back, and shook itself, swung back its head, first one side then on the other, to bite at the hot place where the basket had been, but apparently without allaying the hot irritation which troubled it.

"Ah! come along Gros," cried Melchior, twining the rope bridle about his arm; "that will soon be better. Follow pretty close, gentlemen: it is rather dark, but cool and pleasant after the hot sunshine."

"Well done, Saxe!" said Dale, with a smile; "that's brave."

"What is, sir? I did not say or do anything."

"Yes, you did, boy," whispered Dale; and the lad flushed a little. "You bit your lips and then set your teeth, and you said to yourself, 'he sha'n't see that I am afraid!' Didn't you?"

Saxe looked at him inquiringly, and took off his cap and wiped his brow, while his alpenstock rested in the hollow of his arm.

"Something like it, sir," said Saxe, rather dolefully. "I couldn't help it."

"Of course not."

"Ach! Dummkopf! What do you do?" cried the guide angrily; for just at that moment the mule uttered a loud squeal, arched its back, and leaped off the rock; came down on all fours, and then threw itself upon its flanks, in spite of a jerk at the bridle; squealed again, and threw up its legs, which fell back against the rocky wall; threw them up again, and for a moment they were perpendicular, so well was the balance kept, as the animal wriggled its spine so as to get a good rub on the rock. Then, while the two travellers realised the danger of this taking place on the narrow platform, not a dozen feet above the rushing water, and Melchior still jerked at the bridle, over went the animal's legs toward the edge, and it tried to gather them up for another roll.

It had another roll, but it was a roll off the edge, and almost before Dale and his companion could fully grasp the extent of the accident, the mule fell with a tremendous splash into the stream, jerking Melchior after it by the wrist. Then they both disappeared. But only for a few moments.

"Look! look!" yelled Saxe, as the mule's head shot up in the shadow thirty or forty feet farther in, so swift was the current. Then up came its forelegs, and it began to paw the water like a drowning dog, just as Melchior rose to the surface, but only in time to receive the hoofs of the struggling mule on his chest, and he disappeared again, while the water rolled the mule over and down out of sight.

The next moment both were swept right into the gloomy cavernous place, to what was evidently certain death.

Chapter Nine.

The Horrors of a Schlucht.

Saxe stood now paralysed with horror, and it was not until Dale had shaken him twice that his fixed, wild manner began to pass off.

"Stop here," cried Dale: "you are too much unnerved to come."

"Where—where are you going?" cried the lad; and before an answer could be given, he cried: "Yes; yes, go on: I'm ready."

"I tell you that you are too much unnerved to venture!" cried Dale angrily. "Am I to lose you both?"

He turned and hurried out of sight; but he had not gone fifty yards along the narrow ledge into the gloomy crack before he heard a hoarse sound, and turning sharply back, there was Saxe close behind.

"Don't send me back," cried the lad: "I can't stand here doing nothing. I must come and help."

"Come, then!" shouted Dale, his voice sounding smothered and weak in the echoing rush of the waters, which glided in at the funnel-like opening smooth and glassy, now leaped forward and roared as they careered madly along, leaping up and licking at the rugged but smoothly polished walls, charging into cracks and crevices, and falling back broken up into foam, and ever forced onward at a tremendous rate by the mass of water behind.

The place itself would in bright sunshine have made the stoutest-hearted pause and draw breath before adventuring its passage; but seen in the weird subdued light which came down filtered through the trees which overhung the chasm a thousand feet above, it seemed terrible. For only at intervals could a glimpse of the sky be seen, while as they penetrated farther, the walls, which almost exactly matched in curve, angle and depression, came nearer together, and the place darkened.

"Take care—take care!" Dale cried from time to time, as he found portions of the ledge narrower and more difficult; but Saxe did not speak, only crept on, with his left hand grasping every inequality of the rock, and, like his leader, glancing down into the mad race of foaming water, in the hope of catching sight of Melchior's upturned face and outstretched hands.

It never occurred to him that they could render no help, even if they did catch sight of their unfortunate companion; for they were never less than twenty feet above the narrow hissing and roaring stream, and there was not a spot where a rock could be grasped: everything was worn too smooth by the constant passage of the water, which doubtless carried with it stones from the lake as well as those ever loosened by frost and crumbling down from above, to aid in grinding the walls quite smooth.

But there was the possibility of the unfortunate man being thrown into one of the vast pot-holes or cauldrons formed cavern-like in bends of the chasm, where as it rushed along past the zigzag of the broken rock the water glanced from one side, and shot almost at right angles across to the other, to whirl round and round, ever enlarging a great well-like hole, the centre of which looked like a funnel-like whirlpool, with the water screwing its way apparently into the bowels of the earth, and down whose watery throat great balls of foam were constantly being sucked.

From time to time, as Dale rested for a few moments to peer into one of these, he raised his eyes to look back hopelessly at Saxe, who could only shake his head in his utter despair, knowing only too well that it was hopeless.

Then on and on again, with the horror of the terrible place seeming to crush them down, while to Saxe it was as if the waters were trying to leap at him to wash him from the narrow ledge and bear him away. And the farther they went on the more fearful the place seemed to grow. The walls dripped with moisture, as a result of the spray which rose from the hurrying race, and shut them in back and front with a gloomy mist, which struck cold and dank as it moistened their faces and seemed choking to breathe.

Again Dale paused, to peer down at one of the great whirling pools beneath the rock, which was being undermined in this place more than ever; and as Saxe clung by him and gazed down too, there was the perfectly round pool of water, with its central pipe, which, by the optical illusion caused by the gloom and mist, looked reversed—that is, as if the concavity were convex, and he were gazing at the eye of some subterranean monster, the effect being made more realistic by the rock overhanging it like a huge brow.

"Come on," cried Dale. But Saxe was fascinated, and did not hear his voice in the hollow, echoing, pipe-like roar.

"Come on, boy—quick!" he shouted again. But Saxe still bent down over the racing waters, to stare at that awful similitude of an eye, which moved strangely and bemused and fascinated him so that he looked as if he would be drawn down into it and be a victim to the awful place.

"Saxe! Saxe!" shouted Dale, seizing him by the arm; and the boy started and gazed at him wildly. "Can you see him!"

"No, no," cried the boy.

"What were you looking at!"

"That! that!" gasped Saxe.

"Ah! yes. Like some terrible eye. Come along. I can't think that anything would stay here. It would be swept along at a tremendous rate. That water is going almost at the rate of a great fall. They must have been borne right through long ago."

"Think so?" Saxe tried to say. Certainly his lips moved; and roused now from the strange fascination, he crept on after his leader, their progress being very slow in spite of their anxiety, for all was new and strange, and the next step, for aught they knew, might plunge them down to a fall like their guide's.

Then the way was dangerously narrow at times, one dripping place forcing them to stoop—so heavily overhung the rock above.

At last, just in front of them, the gorge seemed to end, for the place was blocked by a wall that ran across the narrow rift at right angles, and against this the whole body of water was propelled, to strike straight upon it, and rise up like

a billow of the sea and fall back with a furious roar. Here the foam formed so dense a mist that Dale had crept right into it before he realised that, as the water fell back, it shot away through the gloom to his left, forming a fresh billow against a perpendicular wall before it again darted onward.

“Has this awful place no end!” he said, as he grasped the meaning of this fresh disturbance of its course; and he peered forward again for the path, it being absolute madness to think of seeing anything in the watery chaos below. Then, looking back, it was as if some icy hand had clutched his heart, for he was alone.

For the moment he felt that Saxe must have slipped and fallen, and in the agony he suffered he fancied himself back again in England facing the boy’s father and trying to plead some excuse for the want of care. Saxe was entrusted to him for a few months’ visit to the Alps—a visit to combine pleasure and instruction, as well as to gain more robust health.

As he thought this he was already on his way back to the sharp angle he had passed round, and as he reached it his horror and despair became almost unbearable.

But this part of his suffering had its termination; and he fully grasped that, like as in a dream, all this had occupied but a few moments of time, for a hand was thrust round the stony angle and searched for a projection, and as Dale eagerly grasped the humid palm, Saxe glided round and then followed him into the corner, beneath which the water roared and churned itself into foam, passed this in safety, and once more they crept on, thinking now only of getting out into the daylight and following the stream in the hope of finding poor Melchior’s remains.

The same thoughts occurred to both of them: suppose the poor fellow was beyond their reach, swept right away into the depths of some lake miles away—what were they to do? Retrace their steps to the mouth of the gorge, where their provision was left, or try to find their way somehow over the mountains? It would be a fearful task, ignorant of their way, faint from want of food, weak from exhaustion. It was now for the first time that Saxe realised how terrible the mountains were, and how easily a person might be lost, or meet with a mishap that would mean laming, perhaps death.

Then their thoughts of self gave place again to those relating to their poor guide.

“We must find him!” Saxe cried involuntarily, and so loudly that Dale turned and looked back at him wildly, for the thoughts had been exactly his own.

“Yes,” he said, his voice muffled by the roar of the waters; “we must find him. The place is not so very large, after all. Wait till we get out: I can’t talk here.”

For the roar had seemed to increase and the darkness to grow deeper for the next few yards. The water, too, was nearer, the path having a steep incline downward, with the natural result that the ledge was dripping with moisture, and from time to time some wave would strike the opposite wall with a heavy slap, and the spray fly in quite a gust, as of rain, full in their faces.

“It can’t be much farther,” thought Saxe, as he went cautiously down the incline, to see that the rock on his right now bent right over, and had caused the darkness. Then the path bent to the left, struck off to the right again, and was now down within three or four feet of the water, after which there was a fresh corner to be turned, where the wave that rose up seemed somehow illuminated; but they were quite close up, with the water almost running over the path, before they fully grasped that the light came from the side, bringing with it some hope, even if it were little; and at the same time Saxe felt the possibility of going back the same way now that the full extent of the danger could be grasped.

“Poor Melchior!” he muttered—“it must have been impossible for him to have led the mule through here;” and as he thought, this, the full light of day came streaming in, making Dale, a few yards before him, stand out like a silhouette clearly cut in black, while for a hundred yards the water now ran, rapidly widening and growing less like a torrent, till right away he could see it flowing smoothly between the towering rocks that were piled-up on either side of its bed.

Chapter Ten.

Being used to it.

Dale hurried on, with Saxe close behind him, till they were out of the gloomy schlucht, and scrambling over the rocks by the rapidly widening stream, whose waters had now grown turbid, and were bearing great patches of grey froth upon their surface.

They could see for a couple of hundred yards down the narrow way along which the stream ran; then it bore off to the right and was hidden; and to command a better view, as they eagerly searched the surface for some trace of Melchior, they mounted the tumbled-together rocks, and saw that they were at the head of a widening valley, surrounded by nearly level mountains, forming an oval, which looked like the bed of an ancient lake similar to the one they had lately left. But, in place of deep water, there was a plain of thinly scattered grass growing amongst fragments of rock that looked as if they had been swept down from the mountains round, and serpentine through the level was the swift river, whose course they could trace till it passed through a narrow gap at the far end.

Saxe climbed the higher, and balanced himself on the top of a rough block, which rocked slightly, like a Cornish logan, as he stood shading his eyes and following the course of the stream amongst the huge boulders which often hid it from view; while from his lower position Dale searched the windings nearer to them, hoping to see that which they sought stranded somewhere among the stones.

But they looked in vain.

"Can you see anything, Saxe?"

"No," replied the boy in a despondent tone: "can you, sir!"

"Nothing. We must follow the stream down. I dare say we shall find some shallows lower down. Come along quickly."

He began to descend.

"We must find him, Saxe, and then make the best of our way back for help. Poor fellow! I'd freely give all I possess to see him safe and sound."

"Then hurrah! Come up here, sir. Look! look!"

"What! you don't mean? Saxe, boy—speak!" cried Dale excitedly, trying to mount beside him.

"Hi! don't! You'll have me overboard!" shouted the boy, as the great block of stone rocked to such an extent that he nearly came down headlong. "Now, steady! Give me your hand."

The rock was kept in position now by the pressure on one side, but as Dale sprang up to Saxe's side, it began to rise again, and they had hard work to preserve their balance, as they stood straining their eyes to where they could see a man mounted upon some animal riding slowly across the green level lying in a loop of the stream.

"No, no," said Dale sadly, "that cannot be Melchior. It is some herdsman; but we'll go and meet him and get his help."

"It is Melchior," said Saxe decidedly.

"I would to Heaven it were, Saxe! Impossible! That man is a mile away. Distances are deceptive."

"I don't care if he's a hundred miles away," cried Saxe; "it's old Melk, and he's safe."

"You are deceiving yourself, boy."

"I'm not, sir. I'm sure of it; and he's all right. You see!"

He snatched off his hat, and began to wave it, bursting out at the same time into the most awful parody of a Swiss jodel that ever startled the mountains, and made them echo back the wild, weird sounds.

"There! Look!" cried Saxe excitedly, as the mounted man took off his hat, waved it in the air, and there floated toward them, faintly heard but beautifully musical, the familiar jodel they had heard before. Then, as it ceased, it was repeated from the rocks to the right, far louder, and made more musical by the reaction nearer at hand.

"There!" cried Saxe, "what did I tell you?" and he capered about on the moving rock, waving his hat and shouting again, "I—o—a—a—de—ah—diah—diah— Oh! Murder!"

Dale was in the act of saying, "Take care!" when the mass of stone careened over, and Saxe was compelled to take a flying leap downward on to another piece, off which he staggered ten feet lower, to come down with a crash.

"Hurt yourself!" cried Dale anxiously.

"Hurt myself, sir!" said Saxe reproachfully, as he scrambled up slowly: "just you try it and see. Oh my!" he continued rubbing himself, "ain't these stones hard!"

"Here,—give me your hand."

"Thankye. It's all right, only a bruise or two. I don't mind, now old Melk's safe."

"Don't deceive yourself, Saxe," said Dale sadly.

"What! Didn't you hear him jodel?"

"Yes, and you may hear every Swiss mountaineer we meet do that. You hailed him, and the man answered, and he is coming toward us," continued Dale, straining his eyes again to watch the slowly approaching figure. "Bah! How absurd! I'm as bad as the sailor who put his cutlass into his left hand, so that he could have his right free to knock an enemy down with his fist."

As he spoke, he dragged at the strap across his breast, took a little field-glass from the case, adjusted the focus, and levelled it at the distant figure.

"Hurrah, Saxe, you're right!" he cried, lowering the glass, seizing the boy's hand and wringing it vigorously.

"Hurrah! it is," cried Saxe; "I knew it. I could tell by the twist of that jolly old mule's head. I say, you owe me all you've got, Mr Dale. When are you going to pay?"

"When you ask me as if you meant it, boy."

"Ah, then! I can't ask!" cried Saxe. "Let's have a look at Melk."

He took the glass extended to him, rested his back against a block of stone, and carefully examined the figure.

"I say, isn't he wet! You can see his clothes sticking to him. But, Mr Dale, what a swim he must have had. Ah—ae—e—oh—diah—di—ah—diah—"

"Don't, boy, for goodness' sake!" cried Dale, clapping his hand over Saxe's lips. "If Gros hears that, he'll take fright and bolt."

"What, at my cry? That's jodelling I'm learning."

"Then practise your next lesson in a cornfield, when we get home. Any farmer would give you an engagement to keep off the crows."

"Oh, I say, Mr Dale!" cried Saxe, "you are too bad. Just you try whether you can do it any better."

"No, thanks," said Dale, laughing: "I am full of desire to learn all I can, but I think I shall make an exception with regard to the jodel. Come along down, and let's meet him."

They descended the rock so as to get on to the rugged plain; and ten minutes after Melchior rode up on his bare-backed mule, soaking wet, and with the mule steaming; but otherwise, as far as they could see, neither was any the worse for the late adventure.

"Melk, old chap!" cried Saxe, seizing one hand.

"Melchior, my good fellow!" cried Dale, seizing the other; "I thought we'd lost you."

The guide's sombre face lit up, and his eyes looked moist as he returned the friendly grasp.

"Thank you, herrs," he said warmly, "thank you."

"But you are hurt," cried Dale.

"I thank you, no, herr; not much."

"But tell us," cried Saxe, who had been scanning him all the time, "where are you hurt?"

"Hurt? I am not hurt," said the guide quietly. "A few bruises and a lump on my head—that is all."

"But the mule,—he struck you down with his hoofs."

"It was more of a push, herr."

"But tell us—we thought you were drowned in that awful place."

"Yes, it was bad," said Melchior, quite calmly. "It is so swift and the water so full of air that you cannot swim, and one was turned about so and rolled over, but I held on to Gros here, and it did not take long before we were through."

"But your breath? Did you keep on the surface?" said Dale.

"I don't know, herr. It was all darkness and confusion; but we were rolled up against the rock sometimes, and I managed to get my breath. Then we were driven on and on very fast. You see the rock is worn so smooth, there is nothing against which you can catch. The stones swept down by the water have worn that all away, and one goes quite quick, holding one's breath, till one is shot out as if from a gun, and the water gets smoother. Then we got our breath easily, and Gros here began to swim while I held on by his mane; but we had to go a long way down before there was a place for the mule to land."

"But do you mean to tell me," cried Dale, "that you both came through that horrible place and are none the worse for it?"

The guide smiled.

"Well, herr," he said, "I am very wet, and there were moments when I thought I could not hold my breath any longer, but there are no bones broken and no cuts or grazes."

"Then there is nothing else the matter with you?" cried Saxe.

"Well, yes, herr; I am very hungry."

"Hungry!" cried Saxe excitedly. "Yes, of course: I'd forgotten; so am I. Here, Mr Dale, let you and me go and get the basket whilst he dries himself in the sun."

"No, no," cried Melchior firmly, "neither of you could carry that pannier through the schlucht. I am wet, and it will do me good to get warm carrying the load."

"No, Melchior, it would not be right," said Dale. "I will go."

"No, herr," said Melchior firmly; "as your guide I should be disgracing myself by letting you run the risk. I have been used from a child to carry loads upon my back along ledges and places where an Englishman would shrink from going. I am not hurt or tired: it is my duty; so with all respect to you I will go."

“But—”

“Answer me, herr, as a gentleman,” cried Melchior warmly: “do you feel that you could safely carry that pannier through the schlucht?”

“I should try to,” said Dale.

“Ah! that shows weakness: you cannot say that you would.”

They went back to a spot where there was a rich patch of grass, and here the guide alighted and took off the mule’s bridle to turn it loose, when it immediately proved that nothing was the matter in its direction by having a good roll in the grass and then proceeding to crop it with the best of appetites.

“Light your pipe, herr,” said Melchior, smiling: “I dare say I shall be back before you have got through it twice;” and springing from rock to rock, he soon reached the ledge nearly flush with the water, and they watched him enter the low narrow long chasm till his figure grew dim in the gloom; and a minute later had disappeared.

“I don’t feel comfortable at letting him go, Saxe,” said Dale.

“I do, sir,” began Saxe.

“Stop!” cried Dale.

“What’s the matter, sir?” cried Saxe, wondering.

“This, my boy! Never mind the sir while we are out here as companions. We are friends and helpmates—brothers if you like. Now what were you going to say?”

“Oh! only that I don’t feel uneasy about him. A man who could tumble into the water at the other end and be shot through like a pellet from a popgun, can’t come to any harm. I say, how long do you think he’ll be?”

“Nearly an hour,” replied Dale.

“Nearly an hour,” cried Saxe dolefully—“an hour to wait before we can get anything to eat. Ah! you lucky beggar,” he continued, apostrophising the mule, “you’ve got plenty, and are enjoying it, while I’ve got none. But I mean to—”

“Here! what are you going to do?” cried Dale.

“Climb down to the water’s edge and have a good drink. I’m as thirsty as a fish.”

“Then we must look out for a spring. You can’t drink that water.”

“Can’t drink it?” cried Saxe; “why, I’m so thirsty, I could drink anything.”

“Not that. Why, it’s full of stone and snow. Bad as bad can be. Come along, and let’s see what we can find. It will be better than doing nothing; and I’m thirsty too. Let’s try that little rift in the mountain. It looks the sort of place for a rivulet to come sparkling down amongst moss and ferns. Let’s try.”

He led the way toward the rift, which looked like the beginning of a similar chasm to that through which they had so lately come, Saxe following closely behind, while the mule went on crop, crop at the thin fine grass, with his coat rapidly drying in the hot afternoon sun.

Chapter Eleven.

A Glissade is not all Bliss.

It took a long time to find that bubbling spring; but they discovered it at last, coming down from hundreds of feet above their heads, over vivid green moss and under fern fronds, to form into tiny pools in the crevices of the rocks; and from one of these they drank with avidity long cooling draughts of the sparkling water dipped out in the flask cup, and then they turned to go.

As they walked back, it was to find that Melchior had just returned with the pannier, and had been spreading part of his clothes in the sun to dry.

“We have been after water,” said Dale.

“Ah! you found it all right, then?” said the guide eagerly.

“Yes; but it is a good way off, and I only had my flask with me.”

“Good way off!” said Melchior. “Why, it is close here.”

“But we could not drink that,” cried Saxe.

“Why? It is beautiful water. I will show you.”

He took a tin from the basket as he spoke.

"Well, you can drink it if you like," said Saxe. "I wouldn't have minded it out of the lake; but this thick stuff—why, it's horrid."

"From the lake? No, not good," said the guide. "Bad for the throat. See here!"

He took a dozen steps toward the schlucht, and passed round a huge mass of rock, behind which a pure fount of water gushed out from a rift, at whose foot Gros was drinking where the water ran down to join the river.

"Some people say that they like to travel without a guide," said Dale quietly.

"Yes, herr; there are plenty who come here, and think they know in a day all that it has taken me more than twenty years to learn."

He led the way back to the basket, and busily spread their homely dinner on a smooth block of stone, Saxe vowing that he had never eaten such bread and cheese before.

When the meal was ended, and the basket once more placed on the mule's back, Dale looked inquiringly at the guide.

"Over yonder, herr," he said, pointing at the wall of rock away to their left.

"But we can't get up there with the mule," cried Saxe: "we're not flies."

"Wait and see, herr," replied Melchior. "We shall mount yonder, and then go right over the col between those two peaks. There is the valley on the other side that we are seeking, and there we must rest for the night."

"Then the sooner we start the better," said Dale, "for the day is getting on."

"Yes, herr; and the mists come down into the col where the snow lies. Are you ready?"

The answer was in the affirmative, and the guide started straight for the wall of rock, which still looked quite impassable as they drew near, till Melchior turned sharply round into a cleft, which looked as if a huge piece had been cut down from the mountain, and left guile separate and still standing.

Up this cleft they mounted steadily, till, to Saxe's surprise, he found himself high above the mighty wall which shut in the valley, and only now, as it were, at the foot of the mountains, which rose up fold beyond fold, apparently endless, and for the most part snow-capped, with snow lying deeply in the hollows, and filling up the narrow col or depression between the peaks where they were to pass.

Saxe looked up at the snow, and then at Dale, who also seemed to have his doubts.

"Can we pass that before dark?" he said.

"Yes, herr. Trust me: I know."

"But how far have we to go on the other side? If it is very far, had we not better camp here for the night?"

"When we reach the summit of the col, herr, our task is done. There is a deep hollow, well sheltered, and where the snow never falls."

"I leave myself in your hands, Melchior," said Dale. "Go on."

The climb over the rugged ground was very laborious, but there was a brisk freshness in the air which kept fatigue at a distance, and they toiled on up and up, with the sloping rays of the sun making the snow above them indescribably beautiful.

"Yes," said Saxe, "but I'm getting too tired and out of breath to enjoy it now. I'll do that to-morrow."

"The young herr shall come and see the sun rise on the snow passes," said Melchior. "I will call him."

"No, don't, please," said Saxe. "I shall want two days' sleep after this."

The guide laughed, patted Gros, who trudged on as fresh apparently as ever, till they reached the rough culm of a ridge, to look down at once on the snow slope to which they had to descend for a couple of hundred feet, the ridge they were on acting as a buttress to keep the snow from gliding down into the valley.

"Is that the last?" asked Saxe.

"Yes, herr. One hour's quiet, steady work. Half an hour after, the fire will be burning and the kettle boiling for our tea."

"What! up there in that snow!"

"No, herr: we shall have descended into the warm shelter of which I spoke."

They soon reached the foot of the snow, which rose up in one broad smooth sheet, pure and white beyond anything existing lower down, and as, now thoroughly tired, Saxe gazed up at the beautiful curve descending from the mountains on either side, it seemed to be a tremendous way up.

"The snow is pretty hard," said Melchior. "Use my steps."

He clapped the mule on the haunch, and the sturdy beast set off at once up the laborious ascent, with its hoofs sinking in deeply, as instinctively it sloped off to the right instead of breasting the ascent at once.

"But what about the rope, Melchior?" said Dale sharply.

"There is no need for a rope here, herr. This snow lies on the solid rock, and every crevice and hollow is full, with the snow harder and more strong the deeper we go."

"Of course: I had forgotten. This is not a glacier. Come, Saxe! Tired?"

"Wait till I get to the top," was the reply; and they climbed on, with the snow gradually changing colour as it was bathed in the evening sunshine, till they seemed to be tramping up and up over grains of gold, which went rushing back as Gros plunged his way upward, turning from time to time, and retracing his steps at an angle, thus forming a zigzag as regular as if it had been marked out for him at starting.

"Seems to grow as one climbs," grumbled Saxe at last, as he grew too tired to admire the glorious prospect of gilded peaks which kept on opening out at every turn.

"But it does not," replied Dale. "Come: do your best! It's splendid practice for your muscles and wind. You are out of breath now, but a week or two hence you will think nothing of a slope like this; and to-morrow I am thinking of ascending that peak, if you like to come."

"Which?" cried Saxe.

"That to the right, where the rock is clear on one side and it is all snow on the other."

"Yes, I see."

"It is not one of the high peaks, but the rocks look attractive, and it will be practice before I try something big. But you'll be too much done up with to-day's work."

Saxe frowned, and they went on in silence for a time, till, at one of the turns made by the mule, Dale paused.

"Like a rest?" he said.

"No," replied Saxe; "we may as well get to the top first."

Dale smiled to himself.

"He has plenty of spirit," he muttered; and he watched Saxe toiling on, with his feet sinking in the snow at every step, and how he never once glanced up at the top of the col for which they were making; but he gave a start and his face lit up as Melchior suddenly uttered his peculiar jodel.

"The top of the col," he cried; and, as the others joined him where he stood, with his arm over the mule's neck, he said, "Would the herrs like me to tell them the names of the different peaks?"

"Yes, after tea," said Saxe, laughing. "But, I say, I thought this was a sharp ridge, like the roof of a church, and that we should go down directly off the snow."

"Patience, herr," said Melchior. "Come along, then. It is colder up here. See how low the sun is, and feel how hard the snow becomes."

Saxe glanced at the great ruddy glow in the west, and saw how the different peaks had flashed up into brilliant light; he noted, too, that if he trod lightly, his feet hardly went through the crust on the snow.

"Why, it's beginning to freeze!" he cried suddenly.

"Yes, herr; on this side it is freezing hard. On the other side it will be soft yet. That is the south."

They went on for three or four hundred yards, over what seemed to be a level plain of snow, but which they knew from what they had seen below, hung in a curve from the dazzling snow peaks on either hand, and to be gracefully rounded south and north.

So gradual was the descent that nothing was visible of the valley for which they were making; and Saxe was just about to attack the guide about his declaration respecting the short time after reaching the top of the col before they would be at tea, when Melchior suddenly stopped, and as Saxe joined him where he stood, the snow ran down suddenly, steeply, and with a beautiful curve into a tiny valley, whose floor was green, with a silver rivulet winding through it, and several clumps of dwarfed pines turning it into quite a park.

"There is our resting-place, herr," he said, "with a perfect bit of snow for a glissade."

"What, slide down the snow!" cried Saxe. "To be sure! Shall I be able to stop myself! I don't want to go rolling down into that water like a ball."

"Come behind me," said Dale quietly; "I'll show you how. Stand up as I do, and hold your alpenstock behind you like this. Some people say it is wrong, but I always get on so."

He pressed his alpenstock into the snow behind him, holding it under his left arm with both hands; and leaning back upon it, he waited till Saxe had imitated him exactly.

"If you find you are going down too fast, lean back more, so as to drive your pike down into the snow. Try and keep your balance. If you go over, hold on to your alpenstock and try to stop yourself the best way you can. Ready?"

"Yes."

"Then off! Steady, slowly, as you can. There's no hurry."

"Well, I don't want to hurry," muttered Saxe, as he began to glide down the beautiful sloping curve, with the crisp large-grained snow hissing and flying down before him. It was glorious. He felt as if he were flying; then as if he were having a splendid skate without the slightest exertion. The bottom of the valley began to fly up to meet him, and he had some slight consciousness of Dale being close before or behind him, he could not tell which, for his mind was concentrated upon his descent, which grew more and more rapid and delightful. Every sense of weariness was gone, and he was just thinking of lammergeyers in their flight, when he heard his companions shouting to him, just as he lost his balance and came down on his side. Then, he lost his alpenstock and directly after his temper, as he found he was rolling down head first till he gave himself a tremendous wrench, and contrived to get his feet foremost, with his heels down in the snow, and by degrees rose into a sitting position, finishing his descent more deliberately, for fortunately the slope grew less and less, till he was brought up by the stones at the foot, and able to look up.

"Hurt?" cried Dale, who came down to him directly after.

"Haven't had time to see yet," said Saxe gruffly. "Here are my trousers got right up my legs."

"No skin off your knuckles?"

"I think not," said Saxe. "Are you all right? But what did it?"

"You."

"No. There must have been something sticking up out of the snow to upset me: a piece of rock, I think."

"You'll think differently after a few more tries," said Dale, laughing; and returned to see how Melchior was getting down with the mule.

They were coming far more gently, the mule having tucked its hind legs close beneath it, and slid steadily down, while by means of his ice-axe Melchior regulated his pace to that of the quadruped, till they, too, were at the bottom.

"Saxe thinks there was a piece of rock sticking out of the snow ready to upset him," cried Dale.

"Hush! Don't make him laugh at a fellow," said the boy hurriedly.

Melchior smiled.

"It was his first lesson," he said quietly. "Now, there is a clump of rocks between those two patches of pines, and water and wood in abundance. Will you have the fire there?"

Half an hour after they were all seated round a crackling fire, well sheltered on all sides, and with the rock projecting far over their heads in case of rain. The kettle was singing, the coffee ready, the rest of the provisions spread, and the mule cropping the grass close by, never once trying to leave the vicinity of his human companions.

An hour after the fire was out the stars shone brilliantly, and the little party slept beneath their rugs on a couch of pine boughs as soundly as in the most luxurious couch that had fallen to their lot.

Chapter Twelve.

First Mountain Climb.

The loud crack of something breaking awoke Saxe to the knowledge that a grey light was peering through the pines, and that, though he was comfortably warm, there was a crisp coldness in the air he breathed.

Then there was another sharp crack, and another, as of sticks being broken; and he raised himself up to begin looking cautiously round. For Melchior had said that there were bears about still in the mountains, and the first idea that occurred to him was that a savage beast was breaking his way through the thick pine-wood with inimical intent.

Another crack and another, very close at hand, and then a faint sighing sound—evidently the expiration of some living creature's breath.

Saxe felt a catching sensation at the breast, a tingling in the temples and cheeks, as if his veins were startled and his blood running wild; and he stole his hand softly out from under the rug, to try and reach his companions and rouse them to a sense of the impending danger—trying to recollect at the same moment where the ice-axes had been placed when they lay down overnight.

But at that moment there was a sharper crack than ever, and a faint odour of burning, followed by the quick crackling so familiar when a green pine bough is thrown upon the flames.

"Oh, what a coward I am!" thought Saxe, sinking back and placing his enlaced fingers beneath his head, as he gazed straight up at the dark branches above. "Just as if a bear would come and attack us, even if there was one anywhere near! He'd scuffle off as soon as he smelt man."

"Perhaps not if he was very hungry," he thought, after a few minutes. "But I do wish I could feel brave, like men do, and not turn shaky and queer at the least thing. Here was I imagining all that rubbish just because I heard a stick broken by old Melchior to make the fire. Yesterday all I had to do was to walk along a shelf of rock, with some water running down below me. If it had been out in the open sunshine I shouldn't have minded a bit; but because it was a little dark I fancied all sorts of stuff. Of course it was a bit startling to see a fellow go head over heels into a torrent along with a moke and be swept away; but I don't believe old Melk was half so much frightened as I was."

"It's very silly lying here," he said to himself again, as the scent of the burning pine-wood increased. "Bit cold outside the rug; but we left the door and the windows open last night, and that's healthy all the same. I do wish, though, I could get on without being scared so soon. Perhaps it's all through being ill last year and feeling so weak. But I didn't seem weak yesterday. I was precious tired, but so was Mr Dale. I'm afraid I'm a coward, and I suppose all I can do is to hide it and not let people see."

"They sha'n't see!" he muttered, after a few minutes; and then he lay still, thinking of home, his mother and father, and of their ready consent when Mr Dale offered to take him as his companion in an experimental trip to the high Alps.

"I wonder what they are all doing now?" he thought. "Asleep, of course. I don't believe my mother would sleep comfortably, though, if she knew I was lying out here like this, with no bed-curtains and the snow just over us. It is rum, though—summer and winter all muddled up together so closely that you stand with your right leg in July, picking flowers and catching butterflies, and the left leg in January, so that you can turn over and make a snowball or pick icicles off the rocks."

A pleasant, drowsy sensation began to steal over him, and he was about to give way to it, when the idea came like a flash that it would be idle and cowardly; and this thought made him spring up, and fold the rug in which he had been rolled; and after a glance at where Mr Dale still slept, he went softly out of the clump of trees in the direction where he could hear the crackling, to find Melchior in the act of placing the tin kettle they had brought upon the fire.

"Good morning, herr. A fine day."

"Not much day about it," said Saxe, with a slight shiver. "What time is it?"

"I don't know, herr; but the sun will soon be up. Look!"

He pointed overhead to where, grim-looking and grey, one of the mountains towered up: and right away, at a great height, there was what looked like a broad streak of pale—very pale—red, apparently a piece of cloud just over the mountain top.

"What's that?"

"Snow, herr, beginning to be lit up by the sun. That is where we are going by-and-by—the mountain with the enow on one side but bare rock on the other."

Saxe stood gazing upward with a feeling of awe creeping over him. There was no mistake about height here. The line of snow, which ended as quickly as if it had been cut square at one end, seemed terribly far away; and Saxe was thinking that it seemed almost madness to try and reach such a spot, when Melchior drew his attention to first one and then another flake of ruddy light in the distance.

"Clouds?" asked Saxe; though he felt what the answer would be.

"No," replied the guide—"mountain peaks. Will you awaken Mr Dale, or shall I?"

"I am awake," said that personage. "Is there any water near here? Oh yes, I remember. Well, Saxe, had your bath?"

Saxe looked confused, and said nothing.

"I asked you if you had had your bath, my lad," said Mr Dale, looking at him wonderingly.

"Well, the fact is," stammered the boy, "there was no jug or basin, and I—"

"Forgot it?" said Dale.

"Yes, I forgot it," replied the boy, with an effort; and as he spoke he felt to himself that this was a touch of moral, though it was not physical, cowardice, for he ought to have spoken out frankly.

"Well, I'm going to have mine. How long will the coffee be, Melchior?"

"Not a quarter of an hour, herr."

"Right. We'll soon be back," cried Dale; and a few minutes after he and Saxe were having a good scrub about the neck and shoulders, and glowing as if from an electric shock, so brisk and sharp was the water that came tumbling down over the rocks in the middle of one of the clumps of pines whose tops were freshened by the little cascade.

Back to the alfresco breakfast, which Dale ate with his back resting against a block of stone nestling in a mass of

whortleberry, and gazing up at the mountain, while he and Melchior discussed the plan of their ascent.

"Yes," said Dale, "you are right. We ought to take to the snow there, cross to that arête, and—"

"What's an arête?" said Saxe, who was listening eagerly.

"That ridge along the summit of yonder spur or buttress," said Dale. "That will bring us back to the main part of the mountain, and we ought to reach the shoulder from there."

"No, herr," said the guide quietly; "the climbing would be too steep, and there is a slope there which later on will be swept by loose stones. Better take to the snow again, then work up it."

"But suppose it is in bad condition?"

"It will be shaded from the sun till the afternoon, and quite hard. From there, you see, we can easily get to the shoulder, and then choose our way up the last part by the rocks or the snow. You see that either can be reached: that is plain enough from here."

"Yes, it looks easy," said Dale thoughtfully. "The rock for preference, for I want to see the structure, and we may find specimens of what I am seeking."

"Yonder will be most likely," said Melchior, pointing to a huge mass of dark mountain a few miles away, part of which was now glowing in the morning sun, whose bright rays made the ice and snow glitter on a score of peaks.

"We'll, try that later on," said Dale. "Have you never been up it?"

"No, herr; but I have been on others, where little crystals have been found in cracks; and they were mountains like that—very steep-sided, and having little snow."

"There's plenty of time," said Dale, raising his glass to examine the farther mountain attentively. "We'll try that by-and-by. Has it any name?"

"The Black Nun, herr. That is the White Nun, on beyond it, to the right."

"Yes, I'll keep to my original plan," said Dale, looking up once more to the mountain at whose foot they sat, "and in half an hour we'll be off. How many hours will it take us?"

"Eight or nine, herr. It depends on—"

He paused and looked at Saxe.

"To be sure, yes," said Dale thoughtfully. "I think," he continued, to Saxe's great relief, "that, as this one is rather difficult and dangerous—"

"It ought not to be dangerous, herr, if we are careful."

"Well, then, difficult," continued Dale—"you had better content yourself, Saxe, by staying here in camp and watching us with the glass."

Saxe changed his position viciously.

"I wish you would not think me such a coward, sir," he said, with a display of temper. "I am to learn to climb: why not let me begin now?"

As soon as he had spoken he repented; for he felt nervous about so steep a climb, and he told himself that, by his hasty words and assumption of eagerness, he had made his feelings clear to those who listened.

Dale looked at him searchingly, and Saxe coloured beneath his gaze.

"If it would be more satisfaction to you to come with us, do so by all means. It will be hard and toilsome, but Melchior and I will take care of you."

"Oh, if they would not think me such a cowardly child!" thought Saxe. Then, aloud—

"I should like to come, and I'll do the best I can to keep up with you."

"And if there is a bit of extra difficult climbing, why, you—you must wait till we come back."

"Yes, I could do that," replied Saxe; and as soon as the breakfast was ended a wallet was filled with food, a couple of bottles with water, and Melchior took the rope, passed his head and right arm through it, and looked at Dale as much as to say, "I am ready."

"Will these things be all right?" said the latter, taking an ice-axe from where it hung up on a tree; and he pointed to the basket.

"There is no one here to touch them, herr."

"And the mule?"

"He will not wander far from the basket, herr. We shall find him close at hand."

"Then, forward!" said Dale; and the little party began the ascent almost directly, their way being back up the snow slope down which, on the previous day, Saxe had made so rapid a descent; and it was only now that the boy realised how far he had come.

"It will be easy coming back, herr," said Melchior, as they stopped for a few minutes to rest, "and you must not lose your balance this time."

"Only a little out of breath," replied Saxe; but as he spoke he could not help giving a glance up at the huge pile of granite, ice and snow towering high above his head.

Dale laughed.

"Well, Saxe," he said, "are you beginning to find out how high the mountains are?"

Saxe nodded.

"Yes," he said; "they deceive you at a distance. Is this the highest?"

Dale laughed again.

"Well," he replied, "it is not quite the smallest. Say the medium. On again, Melchior!"

"Yes, herr: let's get as high as we can while the morning is young and the snow hard. We can take our time on the rock."

The guide was following the custom that seems to have come natural to man and beast—that of zigzagging up a steep place; but instead of making for the centre of the col, where it was lowest, he kept bearing to the left—that is, he made the track three times the length of that to the right, and he drew on toward where the slope grew steeper and steeper.

The snow was far better to walk upon now, for the surface was well frozen, and they had only to plant their feet in the deep steps the guide made by driving the soles of his heavily nailed boots well into the crust.

"Take care! take care!" he kept on saying to Saxe, who was in the middle. "There is no danger, but a slip would send you down, and you could not stop till you were at the bottom."

"I'll mind," said Saxe, as he stole a glance now and then up at the steep white slope above him, or at that beneath, beyond which the pines among which they had slept the past night now looked like heather.

"Yes, it is all very big, Mr Dale," he said suddenly.

"Wait a bit. You don't half know yet. Say it's bigger than you thought. Getting harder, isn't it, Melchior?"

"Yes, herr. If it gets much harder, I shall have to cut steps; but only here and there, where it's steepest."

"Isn't it steepest now?" said Saxe, who felt as if he could touch the surface by extending his right hand.

"Oh no, herr. You don't mind?"

"Not a bit," cried the lad: "I like it."

"What's the matter?" said Dale, as they still mounted the dazzling slope of snow, far now above the dip of the col over which they had come.

"Bad piece here, sir. We'll have the rope. I'll fasten my end and hand the rest to you, to secure yourselves while I begin cutting."

"Right!" replied Dale; and a minute later he caught the rings of hemp thrown to him, and rapidly knotted the middle round Saxe, the end to his own waist; and as he knotted, *click, click! chip, chip!* went the ice-axe, deftly wielded by the guide, who with two or three blows broke through enough of the crust to make a secure footing while the ice flew splintering down the slope in miniature avalanches, with a peculiar metallic tinkling sound.

"Will there be much to cut?" said Dale.

"No, herr; only a step here and there to make us quite safe,"—and he chipped away again after a few steps, and broke in others with the toes of his boots.

"I say," whispered Saxe, "suppose he slipped while he's swinging that axe round, he'd drag us both down too."

"And by the same argument, if you or I slipped, we should snatch him from his place."

"Yes; that's what I thought.

"That would only be in a very extreme case; and you may as well learn your mountaineer's lesson at once. When we are roped together, and one slips, he generally saves himself by rapidly sticking the sharp pick of his axe into the snow. He gives the others ample warning by this that something is wrong before the jerk and strain come upon the rope."

“And what do they do?”

“Drive their ice-picks right into the snow, hang back against the slope, and tighten the rope from one to the other. So that generally, instead of a fall, there is only a short slip. Do you understand!”

“Yes, I think so.”

“So it is that three or four who understand mountaineering, and work together and trust each other, go up and down places that would be impassable to the unskilful. Hah! we are getting to the top of this slope. Tut, tut! cutting again. Look out!”

The last two words were roared out; and chip, chip, there came close upon one another the sound of two ice-picks being driven into the snow, the guide's like an echo of Dale's, for his axe was raised to cut a fresh step, but he changed the direction like lightning, drove it in high up the slope, and held on forward, Dale backward.

For, in the most unexpected manner, one of Saxe's feet had slipped as he stepped short, and down he went to lie helplessly a dozen feet from where he had stood, hanging suspended from the two ends of the rope—fortunately for him tight round the waists of his companions.

“Herr, herr!” shouted the guide reproachfully, as he looked back over his shoulder, “where's your ice-axe?”

“Here,” said Saxe dolefully, raising it a little, and vainly trying to drive his toes through the hard crust, newly frozen in the night.

“‘Here,’ sir!” cried Melchior: “but it has no business to be ‘here.’ Strike! strike hard! and drive it into the snow.”

Saxe raised it in both hands, and struck.

“No, no!” cried the guide; “take hold right at the end, and drive it in as high up as you can reach. Hah! that's better. Now hand over hand. It will hold. Pull yourself up as high as you can.”

“That do?” said Saxe, panting, after obeying the orders and contriving to get a couple of feet.

“Yes,” said the guide, tightening the rope in company with Dale. “Now then, again! A better one this time.”

The boy struck the pick in again as hard as he could, and was more successful. The rope was tightened to support him after he had climbed higher; and after three or four minutes he stood once more in his old place panting.

“Wait till he gets his breath, Melchior,” said Dale. “There, boy, it has been a splendid lesson for you, in a place where the worst that could have happened to you was a sharp glissade and some skin off your hands and face. That ice-axe ought to have been driven like lightning into the snow, or the pick held towards it downward. It would have ploughed in and anchored you.”

“I'll try better next time,” said Saxe. “I'm sorry I'm so stupid.”

“The young herr did well,” cried Melchior warmly. “Why, I have known men hang from the rope helpless and afraid to stir at such a time. Ready? Vorwärts!”

He started again, cutting a step here and there, but very few now; and a quarter of an hour later a long path took them to where the smooth slope gave place to piled-up masses of rock, which looked as if they had been hurled down from above.

Then came a couple of hours' toilsome climb over broken stones, and up masses that were mastered by sheer scrambling. Now and then an easy rock slope presented itself, or a gully between two buttresses of the mountain, as they won their way higher and higher. Only once was there a really dangerous place—a mere ledge, such as they had passed along on the previous day, but instead of a raging torrent beneath them there was a wall of nearly perpendicular rock running down for about a thousand feet to a great bed of snow.

But the distance was short, and Saxe stepped out bravely, perfectly aware, though, that his companions were keeping the rope pretty tight and watching his every step.

“Well done!” cried Melchior.

“Bravo, Saxe!” said Dale, as soon as they were safely across: “I see your head is screwed on right. Forward!”

“But he don't know what a weak screw it is,” thought Saxe. “Why, they must have seen how white I was! I shall never dare to get back that way.”

Three or four awkward bits were circumvented; a couloir or gully full of snow mounted; and then there was a long climb up a moderate slope toward where a ridge of rocks stood out sharply, with snow sloping down on either side, the ridge running up far into the mountain; but before they could get to this a deep bed of old snow—“firn” Melchior called it—a great sheet, like some large white field, had to be passed.

But this was mastered, and the climb began up towards the ridge.

“The herr remembers this?” Melchior said.

“No,” said Saxe.

"Oh yes, you remember: that is the arête," said Dale.

"That? What! right up there?"

"Yes. Are you surprised?"

"Yes: I thought we had passed that, down below somewhere, hours ago."

"More faith in the size of the mountains," said Dale merrily. "Well, Saxe, how do you feel now? Will you sit down and wait!"

"No," said the boy, through his set teeth, "I'm going right to the top."

Chapter Thirteen.

Saxe goes to the Top.

"Ten minutes' rest, herr," said the guide.

"And lunch?"

"No, herr—only for a pipe;" and Melchior drew out his big tobacco holder and filled up, while Dale took out a cigar. "Here's a sheltered place to get a light," continued the guide, leading the way to a niche in the rocks and striking a match.

"Well," said Dale, "what do you think? Will he do it?"

"Shall I speak the truth, herr?" said the guide, puffing quietly away.

"Of course."

"He's horribly frightened, herr; but he would sooner die than show it."

"Exactly: you are right. Will he hold out?"

"That he will, if he is a long time doing it."

"Will you stand by me, Melchior?"

"Of course, herr. I am your servant, and I am more: we are all brothers in the mountains, ready to stand by each other to the end."

"Then, if he has the pluck that every English boy should have—the pluck that English boys always have had—he shall go right to the top, even if we have to sleep somewhere half-way down."

"If we can get him to the top, herr," said Melchior, laughing in his quiet, grave way, "never mind about the coming down. Bless him! I'll carry him down what you English call pig-a-back, if he's worn out."

"Then we'll take him. Is it a very stiff climb higher—dangerous?"

The guide shrugged his shoulders.

"The herr is a mountaineer, and sees as much as I do. I have never been up here, but the mountains are much alike on the whole. I think we can do it."

"Yes, alone: but with that lad?"

"Well, herr, if we come to a very dangerous bit I should say give it up for his sake. But we shall see."

They stood smoking and looking about at the different parts above them, marking out the way they would go when they had mastered the arête, and then returned to Saxe, who was lying down in the sunshine resting.

"Well. Saxe: ten minutes nearly up. Will you stop or go on?"

Saxe looked rather pale, but he laughed.

"Wait here, getting cold?"

"No! there will be plenty of sunshine."

"Yes, but—wait here hours while you two go up to the top and sit down, see the view and eat all the lunch. No; I'm coming with you."

"Right: you shall. Ready, Melchior!"

"Yes, herr. I think we'll have the rope again: I can give you both a bit of a haul sometimes."

"He means me only," thought Saxe, "and I won't let him."

"Now, gentlemen!" the guide went on, as he stood shading his eyes, "that snow's pretty firm, I think, and will not slip. We ought to master the arête in an hour."

"An hour to do that little bit!" thought Saxe, as he looked up; but he did not utter his thoughts; he was really beginning to understand that dots meant big rocks, and snow patches that seemed the size of the hand great beds.

"Vorwärts!" cried Melchior; and he began to climb with the activity of a monkey, getting up to the extent of the rope, and then seating himself and drawing it in as Saxe followed him and fully grasped now that it was like getting up the sloping ridge of some mighty roof all in vast ruins. For the rocks rose out of the snow which fell away steeply on either side—how far the curve prevented him from seeing; but once, when he took hold of a great projecting piece of rock about double the size of his head, it came away and went rolling down the slope to his right, carrying more and more snow with it, till all disappeared with a curious hissing rush, which was followed many seconds later by a low reverberating roar.

"I ought to have tried that stone," said the guide quietly. "That's right, herr: steady. Shall I pull?"

"No, no!" pleaded Saxe.

"Good! That block—now this. Well done! Get behind me and sit down and rest."

Saxe felt disposed to refuse; but he took his place, and in a minute or two Dale was up by them, and the guide went on again, repeating the slow cautious process.

It was necessary, for the way up grew steeper and some of the rocks looser and far larger than that which Saxe had started, gave way at the first touch of the guide, and had to be turned off sideways to prevent mischief to those who followed.

As they rose higher the slope down on either hand seemed more appalling; and once, as Saxe climbed to him, Melchior said, with a smile—

"Never mind the two snow slopes, herr."

"I don't—much," panted Saxe.

"Don't look at them, and don't think of them at all. Think of what you are doing. There is plenty of room for us, good foothold, and nothing to mind. That's the way: hook on firmly with your ice-axe. It is better than a hand."

Over and over was this slow process repeated up and up that arête—the little serrated blocks they had seen from below proving mighty masses worn by frost and sunshine till in places they were quite sharp. But, as Melchior said, they gave excellent foothold; and at last the snow above them, a great bed surrounded by rock, was gained, and they all sat down to rest while Dale drew out his watch.

"An hour and five minutes, Melchior," he said. "And good work, sir. That was a very stiff climb. What are you thinking, young herr?"

"Of how terribly steep the mountain seems from up here," replied Saxe, who was holding by a piece of granite and gazing down.

"No more steep than it was coming up, lad," cried Dale. "Now, Melchior! what next?"

"Right across this snow, sir. It is perfectly safe; and then we can take the slope above there, and we are on the shoulder. Then, as we arranged, we'll take to the rock or the snow again, whichever seems best."

"Ready, Saxe?"

"Yes," said the boy shortly; and for the next hour they tramped over snow like hailstones, and then zigzagged up a slope beyond it, where in the steepest places a little cutting became necessary; but this was all mastered in time, and the shoulder was reached, from which half a mile away the final peak arose—a blunt hillock with perfectly smooth snow on one side, bare rock, broken and rugged, on the other, while the snow at the top seemed to have been cut clean off perpendicularly.

Half an hour's rugged walk brought them to a point where they had to decide whether to turn north and climb the snow, or south and take to the bare steep rock.

"What do you say, Melchior?" said Dale, giving the guide a meaning look at the same time.

"The snow is too steep, and it looks dangerous there. It is now well on in the afternoon, and our weight might start it; and if it did—you know."

"What!" said Saxe excitedly. Dale was silent for a few moments.

"I do not want to scare you, lad, but you have to learn these things. If we started the snow at that angle, it would all go down with a rush into the nearest valley."

"And what would become of us!"

Neither of the men answered; but Saxe knew.

"That is going to be a stiff climb, Melchior," said Dale, after a few minutes' searching the place with his eyes.

"I dare say it will be, sir," replied the guide. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

They started again, taking to the rocky face where the steepness kept the snow from hanging. The sun was now shining full upon them, adding its heat to that produced by the exertion. The advance was slow and tentative for some time, resulting in several failures; and so painfully steep had the place become that Dale twice, to Saxe's great relief, suggested that it would be better to give it up, and the guide seemed to be unwillingly about to agree, when all at once a narrow rift opened out before them.

"We're at the top, herr," he cried joyfully; and, stepping out, he stopped in the furrow carved in the mountain's side, and prepared to climb.

"Can you get up there?" said Saxe, wiping his streaming face and gazing skyward.

"Yes, herr, and you can too. Once up there, the rest will be easy."

Dale looked doubtful, but he said nothing—only stood watching while Melchior crept right into the narrowest part and began to ascend, taking advantage of every crack and prominence, rising higher and higher without a moment's hesitation, though so narrow was their standing-place, that unless Dale and Saxe could stop him in case of a slip, the unfortunate man would glance off and shoot into space.

Melchior was still climbing on when this idea struck Dale, who turned sharply to his young companion.

"Why are you staring down there!" he said, as he noticed that Saxe had turned from watching the guide and was looking down the tremendous series of precipices stretching step-like from where he stood to the valley southward.

"I was thinking how deep it is."

"Think of how far it is to the top, and let the rest take care of itself. Here," he whispered, "stand close in with me. If he slips we must stop him somehow. Well," he cried aloud, "can you manage it?"

"Oh yes, herr; and so will you," cried Melchior. "It is not so very hard. This rift seems as if made on purpose."

The task looked very laborious all the same. But the man's climbing skill was wonderful; nothing seemed to daunt him, and at the end of a few minutes there came a triumphant jodel from the invisible spot to which he had made his way.

Directly after the rope fell in rings from above.

"Let the young herr fasten it round him before he begins to climb," cried Melchior; and he was obeyed.

"You will never climb that, Saxe," said Dale. "It was a hard task for him."

"But I must try," said the boy huskily; and he started at once, desperately and in haste.

"Bravo! one does not know what one can do till one tries," cried Dale. For with the rope always kept taut to help him and give him confidence, Saxe climbed on, his nerves in such a state of exaltation that he forgot how dizzy it had made him feel to see Melchior mount, but at the same time remembered almost exactly how he had planted his feet in the critical places.

This went on till he was three parts of the way up, where a projecting rock overhead had to be passed; and the boy now felt, as he rested for a few moments, that if he slipped there or failed to cling sufficiently tightly, he must fall to the broad shelf where Dale was standing, and rebound into the awful depths below.

In fancy he saw himself bounding from place to place, always gathering speed, till he lay a shapeless mass among the stones of the valley; and, in spite of himself, he turned his head and looked down.

The view was so appalling, as he clung there, that a low hoarse sigh escaped him; his nerves tingled; a curious sensation ran up his spine, and as he wrenched his head away from the sight which fascinated him, he closed his eyes.

A tug at the rope roused him, and brought him back to himself, just as Dale was pressing forward into the gash in the rock, ready to seize him as he fell.

"Come, herr," Melchior shouted, from his invisible resting-place. "Are you at that bit of sticking-out rock? Come along: it's very easy."



"A great hana seized the rope round his chest."

Saxe raised his arms, which had felt nerveless the moment before, took a fresh hold, and began to climb desperately. The first movements were horrible, and he felt the creeping sensation of horror once more, and stopped, clinging hard, thinking that he could do no more; but the rope was against his face, and as it vibrated he knew that even if he slipped it would hold him, and the cold, dank sensation passed away again as he got a good foothold and was helped by the strain on the rope; and just while he was saying to himself, "I shall never do it—I shall never do it!" a great hand seized the rope round his chest, and he was drawn right on to a rocky platform, where Melchior was seated with his legs widely apart, and his heels against two projecting corners.

"Well done, herr!" cried the guide, laughing, as he proceeded to untie the rope: "you and I will do some of the big peaks yet."

Saxe said nothing, but seated himself twenty feet farther up the rock, with his heels planted in the same way as the guide's, and letting the rope pass through his hands as it was gathered into rings.

"Ready, herr!" shouted Melchior.

"Yes," came from below; and the rope was thrown over the edge.

"Make it fast round your waist, herr," cried Melchior; and then, turning to Saxe, he said, with a smile meant to inspire confidence, "We can pull him up if he likes."

"Now!" came from below.

"Ready," shouted the guide; and then to Saxe—"Pull as I pull, herr, steady and strong, always keeping a tight grip, in case of a slip. It gives him confidence."

Saxe nodded; the rope was kept tight, and drawn in foot by foot, till, just as the lad was thinking of what a tremendous jerk it would be if Dale slipped, the latter's head appeared above the rock, with his ice-axe projecting over his shoulder, it having worked up in the climbing till it threatened to escape from the belt and fall.

"Take a good grip of the rope with one hand, herr," said Melchior quietly: "we have you. Now get hold of your ice-axe and push it on before you."

Dale obeyed without a word, as mountaineers do follow out the instructions one gives to another without question; and this done, he finished the climb and stood up.

"Rather a bad bit," he said; "that projecting rock was awkward."

"Yes, herr, it teased me a little," replied Melchior quietly, "but I found good hold for my feet. What do you think of it now?"

"Why, there's no more to do but walk quietly up this slope."

"And in ten minutes we shall stand on the snow at the very top."

Saxe drew a long breath full of relief as he looked behind him; and, gathering up the rope, Melchior trudged on ahead, picking the best path among the weathered and splintered rocks, till in a short time he climbed up over the last slope, dug his ice-axe in the thick stratum of snow, which began suddenly and sloped down toward the north,

and uttered a loud jodel.

The others joined him directly, a peculiar sensation of nervousness still affecting Saxe, though the place was perfectly safe, and he could have run some distance in any direction without risk of a fall.

“Grand!” cried Dale, as he looked round. “What a view! and how strange that we should be able to stand here on the dividing line one foot on snow, one on rock. Well, Saxe, I congratulate you on your first ascent. You have done wonders.”

“Have I?” said the boy nervously.

“Yes, wonders, herr. Bravo! Bravo!”

“Have I?” said Saxe faintly, as to himself he thought, “Oh, if they only knew!”

“Yes, my boy; but what’s the matter?”

“I—I don’t know,” he panted; “I—I feel as if I had overdone it, and broken something.”

“Eh? What? Where?” cried Dale, anxiously catching him by the arm.

“Here,” said Saxe, striking his chest: “I can’t breathe enough; it comes short, like that.”

The others burst out laughing; and Saxe stared at them angrily: it seemed so unfeeling.

“Sit down, boy. Come, Melchior, lunch or dinner. We’ve got to descend. Why, Saxe lad, where’s your school teaching?”

“My teaching?”

“Yes. Don’t you know you are about eleven or twelve thousand feet above sea-level?”

“I know we are terribly high.”

“Yes, and the air is so thin and rarefied that breathing is hard work. That’s nothing. Now for a good rest and refresh. We must not stay up here very long.”

“No, herr,” said the guide, spreading the contents of the wallet on the rocks in the sunshine. “The weather changes quickly up these mountains. Look! yonder the mists are gathering already.”

He pointed to the clouds hanging round the nearest peak, as they sat down and ate with mountaineers’ appetites, till, just as they were ending, Melchior rose—rather excitedly for him.

“Look!” he said, pointing: “you do not often see that.”

He pointed to where the landscape, with its peaks and vales, was blotted out by a peculiar-looking sunlit haze, in which were curious, misty, luminous bodies; and as they looked, there, each moment growing more distinct, were three gigantic human figures, whose aspect, in his highly strained state, seemed awful to one of the lookers-on.

“Change of weather, Melchior,” said Dale.

“Perhaps, herr; but I think we shall have plenty of time to get down first.”

“What is it?” said Saxe, whose eyes were fixed upon the strange apparition.

“Only our reflections on the face of that mist,” said Dale. “Lift up your alpenstock and wave it.”

Saxe did so, and the central giant did the same.

“Both hands.”

This was imitated, and every other movement, in a weird fashion that was impressive as it was startling.

“It is only one of Nature’s own looking-glasses,” said Dale laughingly.

“But there are some of our people who look upon it as a warning,” said the guide gravely. “They say it signifies that those who see it will soon die in the mountains.”

Saxe turned pale. He was in such an exalted condition, mentally as well as bodily, that the slightest thing threatened to upset him; and at the guide’s words a profound sensation of horror attacked him, making him feel utterly unnerved:

“They had all those dreadful places to descend.”

Chapter Fourteen.

A Mountain Mist.

"Hah!" ejaculated Dale, as he watched the strange phenomenon; "people will talk superstitious nonsense and believe in ghost stories, portents and other old women's tales. But don't you take any notice of them, Saxe. They will not do for Englishmen. Why, you have no faith in such things, Melchior?"

"Not much, herr," said the guide, smiling: "I have seen the 'spectre of the Brocken,' as people call it, twenty times at least. But I do fear mists."

"Yes; those are real dangers. And you think we shall have them here!"

"Yes, herr. I should like us to descend at once. We can do nothing in a fog."

"Come along, Saxe: we'll go down."

"Can't—can't we stop a little longer?" said the lad hesitatingly.

"No. You will have plenty more chances of seeing views like this, or finer. What is it, Melchior?"

"We were forgetting all about the rocks, herr. There are some curious bits here."

He picked up two or three fragments and handled them, but Dale threw them aside after a glance.

"Only very fine, hard granite, with scarcely a grain of felspar," he said. "What about this?"

As he spoke he stooped down over a narrow crevice running up a portion of the summit.

"Yes. There may be something here, but it would require blasting tools and power to open it out. Look here, Saxe!"

He pointed to the narrow split, in which it was just possible to get the end of his ice-axe handle; and as Saxe bent down he saw that the sides were lined with tiny quartz crystals, which grew bigger lower down.

"I want to find a rift in the mountains leading into a cavern where we may find crystals worth saving. Yes, Melchior, I will not waste time. These are of no value. Lead on."

The guide had been giving an anxious look round, for there was a faint sighing of the wind, and clouds were floating around them now and then, shutting off the sun.

"I should like to get well down, herr, before the weather changes. The young herr would find it terribly cold."

"Hadn't we better wait till it gets clearer," said Saxe, "and go down then?"

"If we did we might not be able to get down at all," said Dale quietly.

"Why?"

"We might be frozen to death. Come, Saxe, you must not be greedy. You've had a splendid ascent on a lovely day, and you will have others. Always pay respect to your guide's opinion about the weather. Come along."

Saxe could hang back no longer, though the sensation of dread he suffered from was terrible. Try how he would, there was the horror of that first bit of the descent before him; and, shuddering and feeling cold, he followed to the edge of the rock where he had found the guide sitting, and a fresh access of horror came over him as Dale said coolly:

"Now, Melchior, it is your turn to go first and have the use of the rope. I'll come last."

"We can all use it, herr," said the guide. "It will be quite long enough if I pass it round this block and let both ends hang down. I can draw it after us when we are down."

He threw the rope over a great block of granite, and proceeded to draw it along till the ends were equal, when he lightly twisted the rope and threw it over the precipice.

"Then I'll go first," said Dale; and, seizing the twisted rope, he lowered himself over the edge, hung in sight for a few moments, and then, as soon as his hands were clear of the edge, allowed himself to slide down, while Saxe's palms felt cold and wet.

He watched the rope intently and strained his ears, and then started, for Melchior gently laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"What is it?" cried Saxe excitedly. "Has he fallen?"

"No, herr; and nobody is going to fall. You are fancying troubles. I know. I have not led strangers up the mountains for twenty years without studying their faces as well as the face of Nature. I can read yours. You are scarcely yourself, and feeling fear where there is no need. Come now, take a long breath. Make an effort, and be calm. I'll draw up the rope and fasten one end round you, and lower you down."

"No," cried Saxe excitedly; "I can get down without. Is he safe yet?"

"Safe? He is down: look at the rope shaking. Shall I draw it up?"

For answer Saxe stooped down, and rose again to get his ice-axe well behind him in his belt. Then he stooped again,

seized the lightly twisted rope, lay down upon his chest, thrust his legs over the edge of the precipice, worked himself back till he was clear, and began to glide slowly down.

He shuddered, for the rope began to twist; and directly after, instead of gazing at the rough granite rock, he was facing outward, and gazing wildly down at the step-like series of precipices below.

"Not too fast," came from Dale; and this brought him back to his position, and, twisting his legs about the double rope, he slipped down more slowly, wondering the while why the rope had ceased to turn and swing, till he saw that it was being held tightly now.

"Well done!" cried Dale: "you are getting quite at home at it. Right!" he shouted to Melchior, whose two legs appeared directly after, then his body, and he slid down rapidly, as if it were one of the most simple things in the world—as it really was, save that, instead of being close to the level, it was twelve thousand feet above.

As Melchior joined them, he rapidly untwisted the rope, held the two ends apart, and, as he drew with his left, he sent a wave along from his right, and threw the end up, with the result that the rope came away easily, and was rapidly coiled up.

The mists were collecting on the summit as they reached the snow bed, but they followed their old track easily enough; and when at last, in what seemed to be a surprisingly short space of time, they came to the head of the arête, the white, spectral looking fog was creeping down in long-drawn wreaths, toward which Melchior kept turning his eyes.

"Look as if they will catch us soon," said Dale quietly.

"Pray Heaven they may not till we are clear of this ridge, herr!" said the guide piously. "Now, quick—the rope! You will go first."

The rope was rapidly attached, and, as Dale started to descend, it seemed to Saxe that he was disappearing over the edge of a precipice; and as this was repeated again and again while they reversed the way by which they had ascended, the guide sitting fast and holding on till they were down, the place seemed far more terrible, and the snow slopes on either side almost perpendicular.

They made good way, however, Melchior keeping on inciting them to fresh exertion.

"Go on, gentlemen—go on!" he said. "I have you safe. The rope is good. Go on, herrs—go on!"

But the descent over those rugged knife-edged ridges was so perilous, that Dale went slowly and cautiously; and when he reached each stopping-place he held on till Saxe had passed down to him. Once the boy seemed to totter as he was passing from one of the rocks to the other, over a patch of snow between them; but the firm strain upon the rope gave him support, and he reached the rock and began to lower himself.

In spite of their hastening, that which Melchior had apprehended happened: a cloud of mist suddenly started in advance of the rest, which had formed upward, and now completely veiled the summit. This mist-cloud rolled rapidly down when the party were about two-thirds of the way down the ridge, and just as Saxe was being lowered down.

An ejaculation from the guide made the lad look up; and he saw the stern, earnest face for a moment, then the fog rolled over it, and the guide's voice sounded strange as he shouted:

"Go on, young herr; and directly you reach Mr Dale sit fast. Don't move."

Five minutes later Melchior was with them, and they crouched together, partly on rock, partly in snow.

"We must not move, herr," said Melchior. "It is unfortunate, but I was rather afraid. If it had held off for another quarter of an hour, I should not have cared."

"Will it last long?" asked Saxe.

"Who can say, herr! Perhaps for days. In the mountains, when the weather is bad, we can only wait and hope."

"Had we not better try to get down off this edge?"

"As a last resource, if the mist does not lift, herr. But not yet."

Dale uttered an impatient ejaculation; but the guide filled and lit his pipe, settling himself down quite in the snow.

"Wind may come later on," he said, "and then perhaps we can get down. It is a pity, for this is the worst place in the whole descent. But there: the mountains are mountains, and anything is better than an icy wind, that numbs you so that you cannot stir."

He was scarcely visible, close as he was; but he had hardly finished speaking when Saxe saw his head, at first faintly, then clearly—for the cloud of mist had been still descending, and literally rolled down past them, Saxe himself standing out clear, then Dale, and the rocks below them one by one as far as the curve permitted them to see.

It was bright sunshine now once more, and as the rays from the west shot by, it was between two strata of clouds, glorifying that which was below and lighting up that above.

"Quick, herr!" said Melchior, in an authoritative tone. "We have this bad piece to finish, if we can, before another cloud rolls down."

The descent was continued, seeming to Saxe almost interminable. Then they were hurrying along over the snow, after passing the morning's resting-place, and on and on till the shelf was reached with the precipice running down so steeply, just as mist came rolling down from above and also up from the depths below, meeting just where the party stood roping themselves together.

But, to the surprise of Saxe, the guide took no heed—he merely went on fastening the rope till he had done.

“You will not venture along that shelf while it is so thick, Melchior?” said Dale.

“Oh yes, herr. We must not wait here.”

“But the danger!”

“There is scarcely any, herr,” replied the guide. “The great danger is of going astray. We cannot go wrong here. We have only to go along the shelf to the end.”

“But it is like going along the edge of a precipice in the dark.”

“It is like darkness, and more confusing, herr; but we have the wall on our left to steady us, and where we are is terribly exposed. Trust me, sir.”

“Forward!” said Dale quietly. “Keep the rope fairly tight.”

Melchior stepped at once on to the ledge, and the others followed, all three going cautiously and very slowly through the opaque mist, which looked so solid at Saxe's feet that more than once he was ready to make a false step, while he wondered in himself that he did not feel more alarm, but attributed the cause rightly to the fact that he could not see the danger yawning below. To make the passage along this ledge the more perilous and strange, each was invisible to the other, and their voices in the awful solitude sounded muffled and strange.

As Saxe stepped cautiously along, feeling his way by the wall and beating the edge of the precipice with the handle of his ice-axe, he felt over again the sensations he had had in passing along there that morning. But the dread was not so keen—only lest there should be a sudden strain on the rope caused by one of them slipping; and he judged rightly that, had one of them gone over the precipice here, nothing could have saved the others, for there was no good hold that they could seize, to bear up against the sudden jerk.

“Over!” shouted Melchior at last. “Steady, herr—steady! Don't hurry! That's it: give me your hand.”

“I can't see you.”

“No? Come along, then, another yard or two: you are not quite off the ledge. That's it. Safe!”

“And thank goodness!” said Dale, with a sigh of relief, a few minutes later. “That was worse than ever. Saxe, my lad, you are having a month's mountaineering crowded into one day.”

“Yes, herr,” said Melchior; “he is having a very great lesson, and he'll feel a different person when he lies down to sleep.”

“He will if we have anywhere to sleep to-night. It seems to me as if we must sit under a block of stone and wait until this mist is gone.”

“Oh no, herr,” said the guide; “we will keep to the rope, and you two will save me if I get into a bad place. I seem to know this mountain pretty well now; and, if you recollect, there was nothing very bad. I think we'll go on, if you please, and try and reach the camp.”

“You asked me to trust you,” said Dale. “I will. Go on.”

“Forward, then; and if I do not hit the snow col I shall find the valley, and we can journey back.”

For the first time Saxe began to feel how utterly exhausted he had grown. Till now the excitement and heat of the journey had monopolised all his thoughts; but, as they stumbled on down slope after slope strewn with débris, or over patches of deep snow, his legs dragged heavily, and he struck himself awkwardly against blocks of granite that he might have avoided.

The work was comparatively simple, though. It was downward, and that must be right unless Melchior led them to the edge of some terrible precipice right or left of the track they had taken in the morning.

But matters began to go easier and easier, for at the end of another hour's tramp they suddenly emerged from the mist, coming out below it, and after a few more dozen steps seeing it like a roof high above their heads.

Here the guide stopped, mounted a stone, and stood looking about him in the evening light.

“I see,” he cried: “we are not half an hour out of our way. Off to the right we shall reach the snow, and then our task is done.”

Melchior was right: in less than the time he had named they reached the place where they had left the great snow slope, up which they had had to zigzag; and after descending it diagonally for some distance, the guide proposed a glissade.

"The young herr shall come down behind me this time," he said; and after a few preliminary words of advice they started, and rapidly descended safely to the débris at the foot of the snow, from which the walk to the camp was not long.

Melchior soon had a good fire burning, with Gros standing near contemplating it solemnly, while Dale placed their provisions ready.

"Now, Saxe, my lad," he said, "I congratulate you on your display of honest English pluck to-day. I don't see that any boy of your age could have behaved better. Come along: coffee's ready. You must be half starved."

There was a pause.

"Ready, Melchior?"

"Yes, herr: the coffee smells heavenly, and I have an appetite for three."

"You shall satisfy it, then. To-morrow we'll go back and fetch all our traps, and then come over here again; for I do not think we can get a better part for our search. Come, Saxe, wake up."

But there was no reply: Saxe was sleeping with all his might after the tremendous exertions of the day.

Chapter Fifteen.

Caught in a Trap.

The mist on the mountain had not been without its meaning, and a heavy persistent rain kept them all the next day close in under the shelter of the rock, where the fire had to be lighted too, and after a great deal of difficulty this was accomplished by Melchior getting a few stout dead branches and bringing them under cover.

These he whittled into shavings, and these shavings served to start the green pine boughs which had formed their beds; and once a pretty good glow was obtained, with plenty of embers, the wetness of the branches brought under cover mattered very little, especially as the guide ranged them close to the fire to dry, ready against they were required; and had contrived that the blinding smoke should sweep right out at once, a few broad branched boughs stuck in the ground or propped upright helping to establish a draught.

The feeling of restfulness and the hot coffee were sufficient to make the first hour tolerable, in spite of the constant dripping of the trees and the rush of water down from the natural eaves of their shelter; but after a time it began to grow monotonous.

The outlook was not extensive either, for beyond the thick driving rain the hollows were filled with dense mist, and the mountains around were quite invisible; and Saxe turned from gazing out between two little shoots of water to look rather appealingly at Dale.

"What's the matter, Saxe?" said the latter.

"It's so horribly wet."

"Well, it's wet everywhere sometimes. Sit down near the fire and rest. You'll be all the better for it when the rain is over."

"But it looks as if it never would be over."

"But it will be. There: help keep up the fire, and be patient. We can't always be climbing."

"I say, look at that," cried Saxe, laughing; for just then the mule, which had been grazing a short distance away, troubling itself not in the slightest degree about the rain, came slowly towards them, with its shaggy coat looking as if it had been oiled, and the water trickling from it in streams, as if it were a walking reservoir filled a little too full.

It was evident that it considered the rain a little too heavy now, for it thrust its head under cover, and blinked for a few moments at the fire before giving itself a tremendous shake, sending the water flying from its ears, and then drooped them low down, as if holding them out to the fire to dry.

In this position its head was in shelter, but the rain streamed down upon its back and hind quarters, while a perfect deluge, like that from a waterspout, ran down a long gully in the overhanging rock right on to the spine just between the shoulders, and there divided to trickle on either side down the fore legs, and then run down through the pine needles, which formed too thick a bed for any of the water to make a pool.

To the surprise of all, the mule was perfectly satisfied so long as it could keep its head and ears in the warmth and shelter, and never once attempted to creep in nearer; and so another hour passed, only broken by the low murmur of Dale's voice as he talked to the guide, and the splash and rush of water. For the dripping was drowned now by the enormous amount which fell, and this went on increasing till there was quite a heavy roar, as of many falls.

"Is that anything?" said Saxe at last, as a low booming noise fell upon their ears—a sound which gradually increased.

"A waterfall," said Melchior. "The waters on the mountains are gathering together and plunging into the valley. Listen, and you can hear others," he continued, as he held up his hand.

From apparently close at hand what sounded like the echo of the first fall could be heard, and beyond that, farther away, another, and again another, and so on, fainter and fainter, till the whole valley seemed to be filled with the noise of rushing waters.

It was somewhat awe-inspiring, and suggested the possibility of a great flood coming down upon them to sweep everything away; but at the hint of such a catastrophe Melchior shook his head.

"Oh no," he said. "If we were on the bank of a big stream that might be, and we should have to climb up to a place of safety; but here the waters divide a hundred ways, and will never reach us. Hah!—snow."

He held up his hand as a rushing noise was heard somewhere high up among the dense mists. This rapidly increased to a terrific roar, followed by a deep booming crash; and so tremendous was the sound, that the noise of the falling waters seemed for the moment to be hushed. Then the thunderous crash rolled right away among the mountains, dying in faint echoes, and the rush of the waterfalls filled the air once more.

"A heavy avalanche, Melchior," said Dale.

"Yes, herr; there is a great deal of snow up in the mountains, and this will make more."

"What, this rain?" said Saxe.

"It is snow a thousand feet up, herr. When the clouds pass away you will see."

Melchior's words were correct, for toward evening the rain ceased quite suddenly, and the sun broke through the mists, which rolled their way up the mountain sides as if to reach the snow peaks. And all the lower slopes were now powdered with newly fallen snow, where they had been green on the previous day.

Every tiny-looking cascade had been turned into a furious torrent, whose waters came leaping and bounding down from far on high, one running into another, till the last was vastly swollen and plunged into the valley, to turn its stream into quite a large river for a few hours.

"Well?" said Dale, inquiringly, as he returned with Saxe from watching the rush of waters and the beauty of the fresh snow.

"Well, herr?" said the guide quietly.

"What do you think? Could we start back now and get to Andregg's chalet to-night?"

"It is not impossible, herr; but the walking would be slippery and bad, every stream so swollen that they would be dangerous to wade, and the distance is so great that—"

"Well, go on. Why do you stop?"

"I had forgotten the schlucht, herr. We could not get through there. It would be terribly swollen. The water is close up to or over the path, and— No, I should not like to be answerable for your safety. No, herr, we must wait till to-morrow."

"But we shall not have enough to eat," said Saxe.

"Plenty, though only simple," said Dale, smiling. "Come, Saxe, that's not like talking like a mountaineer. To-morrow morning, then: will that do, Melchior?"

"I think so, herr. I am sure about our way to the mouth of the schlucht. Then we can see."

The morning dawned with the different falls wonderfully reduced; and after a breakfast that was exactly what Dale had said overnight, an early start was made, so that they were well on their way by the time that the sun began to tinge the tops of the mountains, which, seen now from a different point of view, seemed more beautiful than before.

Then by degrees the various familiar parts came into sight, till they neared and descended into the open valley along which the river ran, and at last came to a halt close to the mouth of the gorge, where the fount gushed down and joined the water at their feet.

The horror and dread they had felt came back to their memories as they gazed down at the murky stream, rushing furiously along, now evidently many feet deeper than when they had passed that way; and Melchior drew their attention to the fact that it must have been much higher up the rocks on the previous day.

"What do you think of it?" asked Dale.

"There is a great deal of water, herr; but I think the path will be all clear. Now it is so full, the water will flow more quietly."

"But the mule: do you think you can get it through?"

"Oh yes, herr."

"But suppose it falls from one of these narrow places?" said Saxe excitedly.

"Oh, then we should have to go back and get it ashore, and try again, herr. Gros knows the way by water."

"But surely that animal will never get through, Melchior?"

"Oh yes, herr. Certainly he has no hands, but his feet are as true, or truer, than a man's. You will see he will get through. And I shall carry the basket; it is light now. You see I can shift it as I like,—he cannot."

"Well, you know best," said Dale. "How do you feel for the journey, Saxe?"

"Don't like it," said the lad bluntly, "but I'm ready. It isn't so bad as what we did up the mountain."

"No: you are getting your head, my boy, fast. Ready, Melchior?"

"Yes, unless the herr likes to sit down and rest for half an hour first."

"By no means," cried Dale. "We should be thinking of the ugly bit of work we have to do—eh, Saxe?"

"Yes, let's go on at once, please. I don't like waiting."

"How shall you go—leading the mule or driving it?" asked Dale.

"Neither, herr. I shall tell him to go on, and he will lead us."

The guide shouldered the basket, which was somewhat lightened by Dale and Saxe each taking out some of their belongings and slinging them on by straps. Then Melchior led the mule down to the ledge at the opening, said a few encouraging words, and waited.

The mule hesitated. The water was right over the track here, and the animal bent down, sniffed and pawed at it as if uneasy; but a few more words from Melchior made it go on a few steps very slowly, and continually trying its way, so as to get a good foothold before going on, and acting in a wonderfully human way by pressing itself very close to the rock.

"I hardly think we ought to venture, Melchior," said Dale.

"Oh yes, herr. We know the extent of the danger. Gros swims like a dog, and you know he was none the worse for the last fall."

"Go on, then."

The mule was already going on. Finding the water more shallow on the ledge, it progressed with a little confidence, for the ledge eloped upward, and it could see the damp stone clear of the water a short distance on.

"There, herr, you see," said the guide, after they had waded with the water just over their boots to the clear stone ledge along which the mule went on steadily now, "there is nothing to mind here."

"I am glad you think so," said Dale, shouting loudly, to make his voice heard beyond Saxe, who was between, and they were getting now within reach of the reverberating roar of the torrent.

Saxe glanced down as they passed the angles and gradually entered the semi-darkness, and saw that the surface of the water was smoother, and that, as they passed the waves formed by the water being hurled against the opposing faces of the rock, there was less foam and turmoil; but these places looked, if anything, more terrible than before, and the water, as it surged up so much nearer his feet, looked to his excited vision as if stealthily writhing towards him to lap round his legs like some huge serpent, and snatch him down into the depths.

Conversation was impossible, but the guide shouted a few words of encouragement to the mule, and from time to time waited for Saxe to come close up, when he shouted an inquiry or two in his ear.

"Yes, all right," cried Saxe, who gained encouragement from the calm matter-of-fact way in which the guide went on; while, just dimly-seen as the gorge curved and wound, the mule trudged on, twitching its ears and evidently caring nothing for the turmoil and rush just below.

"I half wish he had proposed the rope, though," thought Saxe, as they went on, with the various familiar parts seeming terrible enough, but very different to when he came through with the horrible feeling that Melchior was lost, and that at any moment they might see his body whirling round in one of the pools.

These were not so striking now, for in most of the places, as he peered down through the gloom and mist, the water was above the overhanging, cavernous holes, and the peculiar eye-like aspect of the one particular spot which had fascinated him so deeply was entirely hidden.

"It wasn't such a very great thing, after all, for Melchior to do," he thought, as they went on. "He has had plenty of practice, and had been before. I believe I could go through by myself."

"But I shouldn't like to," he added, after a few moments' thought; for he had to go along more carefully, in obedience to a sign from Melchior, the rock being slippery as they descended lower in the part they had now reached, and it suddenly dawned upon him that the water must have been over where he stood not perhaps many hours before.

It had the effect of coming up higher, and he was startled for the moment, fancying that the flood was rising; but he grew confident as he saw the mule clearly now, where the gorge wound off to the left and then turned again to the right, so that as the mule passed the corner and disappeared the water was only a few inches below its hoofs.

Then Melchior passed round and out of sight, and Saxe's own turn came, and he followed into one of the gloomiest

parts of the rift. And here the ledge still descended slowly till the water began to wash over the path; then, as he looked anxiously forward, he could dimly see that at every step the water splashed beneath the animal's hoofs, and the next minute it was standing still, with the guide close up behind.

Saxe stopped short, after feeling his way for a step or two with the handle of his ice-axe, while he leaned a little against the steep wall; and Dale came up and touched his shoulder, bending down to shout in his ear.

"I can't see from here. Is the path more covered where they are?"

"I don't know,—I think so," Saxe shouted back, his voice seeming to be swept away by the rushing noise that appeared to accompany the water as it hurried along.

The guide's figure was indistinct in the mist of spray, and the mule's seemed lost in the rock, so similar were they in tone; but the spectators could just make out that Melchior was doing all he could short of blows to urge the mule on, and that it was stubbornly refusing to stir.

"You must go on, or let me pass you, Saxe," shouted Dale: "I want to speak to the guide."

"It gets deeper here," cried Saxe: "it's over my ankles, and the water feels like ice."

"Never mind,—go on; keep as close to the wall as you can. Shall I get by you?"

"No," said Saxe stoutly; "I'll try."

He waded along the shelf, with the water getting deeper still; and now he could feel the curious sensation of the rushing stream bearing against his legs, which were immersed half-way to his knees; and at every step he cautiously sounded, to make sure where he should plant his feet.

Before he had gone many paces, Melchior had returned to meet him; and as Dale closed up the guide shouted:

"I can't get him along, sir, and I dare not make him restive by a blow."

"No, no—of course not. But the water?"

"It is deeper farther on, herr—I think about a foot—and he will not move."

"It is impossible to back him, of course?"

"Oh yes, herr; and he cannot turn."

"Then we must get by him and go on and leave him to follow."

"Impossible, herr," yelled Melchior. "If we tried he might kick."

"Go and coax him."

"It is no use, herr. The poor beast is right. He says in his way that it is not safe to go on, and that we must wait."

"Wait in a place like this!" cried Dale. "The water is icy, and the noise deafening. Can you recollect how much the path goes down beyond the mule?"

"I don't think it goes down at all, herr."

"Then the water must be rising," cried Dale excitedly; and the guide nodded.

"We must not be caught in this terrible trap. I thought the water was sinking."

"It was, herr; but there must have been a fresh fall of rain at the other end of the lake, and it is rising now fast."

Chapter Sixteen.

A grave Peril.

"Then we must get back at once. But the mule?"

"We cannot move him, herr. It is impossible to do anything, and he must stay. The water may not rise high enough to take him off his legs. If it does he must go down with the stream and get out himself below yonder. I would say stay, but if the water rises to our waists, we should not be able to stand against the stream."

"Try the mule once more," said Dale. "We may get through."

The guide waded carefully back along the ledge-like path, and they could dimly see him patting and coaxing the beast, but with no effect whatever; and they stood there impatiently waiting till he returned to them, but not before both Dale and Saxe were painfully aware that the water was slowly creeping up toward their knees and the position growing perilous.

"It is useless, herr," cried Melchior, as he rejoined them. "You will lead back, sir; but wait a minute,—we will have the rope."

He took it from his shoulder and rapidly passed one end to Dale, who knotted it about his waist, while the middle was once more tied round Saxe, and finally the other end to the guide, who then made a sign, and Dale began to retrace his steps toward the lower mouth of the gorge.

Even in that little time the difference in the level of the water was very evident; and as Saxe waded along, with the stream rushing by him and seeming to give him quite a series of pushes, he could not help an excited feeling of dread filling his breast, and he wondered whether he should get out of the place alive if some sudden rush of water came down in a wave and swept them off the ledge.

It was slow work for a few minutes, till the path rose once more, and then they progressed pretty quickly till the shelf ran down again; and as Saxe went on through the gloom, feeling that the rope was kept fairly taut, another sharp bend was turned, and they came in view of the facing wall of rock, against which the stream rushed and rose up now in such a body that Melchior raised his voice loudly:

"Stop, herr!" he cried: "don't try to pass."

"No," said Dale, as Saxe and the guide closed up, "the water has increased there terribly. We should be swept away."

"Then we're shut in!" cried Saxe.

"Yes, herr; but only for a time. The waters rise quickly and fall as quickly in the schluchts. Let's get back to the highest part, where we can be dry. If we could only have reached farther on!"

He said no more, for it was hard work to make the voice heard in the midst of this terrific reverberating war of the fierce waters, but he turned and led the way back round the corner they had so lately passed, to where the ledge was fully four feet above the stream.

Here he calmly seated himself on the damp stone, with his legs hanging down toward the dark rushing water, took out and filled his great pipe, and then looked up at his companions, as if inviting them to be seated too.

There was but little temptation to follow his example, and sit down on the humid rock; but it offered rest, poor as it was, and Saxe and Dale both followed the example set them, while Melchior calmly lit his pipe and began to smoke and wait patiently for the water to go down.

But Saxe's nature was too impatient for this, and before he had been seated there many minutes he began to strain his neck in looking up to right and left.

Melchior leaned over to him and shouted in his ear, he having divined the boy's thoughts from his actions.

"No, herr, no—not here. There is one place where, with a hammer and plenty of iron spikes to drive in the cracks of the rock, we might perhaps get to the top; but it would be impossible without. We should want ten times as much rope too."

"Is the water going down now?" shouted back Saxe, after a pause.

Melchior looked down and shook his head.

"Will it come with a sudden rush, like a river?"

"Oh no. It may rise very quickly, but not all at once. Of course it all comes from the lake, and the waters of the lake swell from hundreds of streams and falls. No, herr, it will not come down with a rush."

"But it is rising very fast," said Dale, who had caught part of their conversation. "Are we on the highest part that we can reach!"

"Yes, herr; and I am sorry I have brought you in. I try to be a perfect guide, but there is no such thing. I ought to have been prepared for another rise after the storm we had. Forgive me."

"You think, then, that the water will come up above where we are sitting."

The guide nodded, and pointed to a dimly-seen mark upon the wall, quite level with their heads.

"Then we must find some other ledge upon which we can stand," cried Dale, rising to his feet.

Melchior shook his head. "There is none," he said.

"You have not looked."

"Herr, I searched the wall with my eyes as we went and returned. A guide studies the places he passes, and learns them by heart, so that they may be useful at some time, should he want them. Look above you: the wall hangs over all the way. Nothing but a fly could stand anywhere along here."

It was undeniable, as Dale could see; and he leaned back against the rock and folded his arms, gazing down sternly at the rising water, till the guide spoke again, as he finished his pipe, knocked out the ashes, and replaced it in his breast.

"It would be wise to take off the rope," he said quietly.

"Why?" cried Saxe excitedly.

"Because, if we are swept down with the stream, it would be in our way—perhaps catch in some rock below, or tangle round our legs and arms."

"You feel, then," cried Dale, "that there is no hope of the waters going down, and that we shall soon have a chance to get through?"

Saxe, whose brain had been full of horrors suggested by the guide's last words—words which had called up visions of unfortunate people vainly struggling to reach the surface beyond the reach of the strangling water, but held down by that terrible rope—now sat listening eagerly for Melchior's next utterance, as the man began deliberately unfastening the rope.

"I can say nothing for certain, herr," he replied. "We are in the hands of the great God, whose children we are, and we must be patient and wait. I hope we shall get out safely,—perhaps I think we shall—but it is our duty to be ready. The young herr swims, I know, and so do you, herr; but if we have to make for the lower end of the schlucht, try and remember this: Don't struggle to get to the surface, for it is waste of strength. You cannot swim properly in this water, for all torrents are full of bubbles of air, and these do not bear one up like still water. What you must do is, to get a fresh breath now and then, and let the stream carry you along."

Saxe looked horrified, and the guide interpreted his thoughts.

"You will easily do it. The stream is swifter now than when I went through, and I had all the distance to journey. You will only have half. It looks very horrible, but after the first plunge you do not mind. Now, herr, let me untie you."

He turned to Saxe, who submitted to the operation without a word, and then watched the guide as he carefully laid up the rope in rings upon his left arm. Meanwhile, Dale had unfastened his end, and stood waiting to hand it to the guide, who secured it round the coil before hanging it across his breast.

He then carefully examined the level of the water by bending downward and noting where it now ran against a crack in the rock.

"Sinking?" cried Saxe eagerly.

"Rising," replied the guide laconically.

Then there was a long silence, during which Saxe, as if doubting that the guide was right, carefully examined the walls of the chasm, but always with the same result: he could see rifts and places in plenty where he could have climbed high enough to be beyond reach of the water even if it rose thirty or forty feet; but they were all on the other side, which was slightly convex, while their side, as the guide had pointed out, was concave, and would have matched exactly if the sides had been driven together.

"No, herr," said Melchior quietly, "I should not have stopped so still if there had been a chance to get away. I should like to say one thing more about the water rising: if we are swept down, try both of you not to cling to each other or me for help. One is quite useless at such a time, and we should only exhaust each other."

Dale nodded, and Saxe felt as if one prop which held him to existence had been suddenly struck away.

There was another dreary pause, during which they listened to the waters' roar; and Melchior bent down again, and rose to his feet once more, with his brow rugged.

"Rising," he said hoarsely; and then he leaned back against the rock with his arms crossed and his eyes half-closed, silent as his companions, for talking was painfully laborious at such a time.

An hour must have passed, and every time Melchior bent down he rose with the same stern look upon his countenance, the darkness making it heavier-looking and more weird. Both Saxe and Dale could see the difference plainly now, for it must have been a foot higher at least, and they knew it was only a matter of time before it would reach their feet.

And as Saxe stood there, miserably dejected, he began thinking and picturing to himself the snow melting and trickling down thousands of tiny cracks which netted the tops of the mountains, and then joined together in greater veins, and these again in greater, till they formed rushing streams, and lastly rivers, which thundered into the lake.

Then he began thinking of his school-days, and then of his life at home, and the intense delight he had felt at the prospect of coming out to the Alps with Dale, the pleasures he had anticipated, and how lightly he had treated all allusions to danger.

"I'll be careful," he had said: "I can take care of myself." And as he recalled all this, he dolefully asked himself how he could be careful at a time like this.

He was in the midst of these musings when Melchior bent down again, and rose once more so quickly, that Dale shouted to him.

"Rising? Shall we jump in and swim for it at once?"

"No, herr; we must wait."

"Ah! look—look!" cried Saxe, pointing downward.

"Yes, yes: what?" cried the others in a breath.

"The poor mule—the poor mule!"

"What?"

"I saw it roll over. Its leg came out, and then I saw its back for a moment, and it was gone."

"Poor old Gros!" cried Melchior; and he hurried along the shelf as far as he could go, and knelt down.

He soon returned, looking very sad.

"I just caught a glint of its back in the water, and it was gone. Poor beast!" he said; "he did not seem to be struggling. I'm afraid he is gone."

This was a bad omen, and Dale looked very hard, and then Melchior once more went down on his knees and peered into the stream, to measure it with his eyes.

"Hah!" he exclaimed, as he got up and began to fumble for his pipe and matches.

"Risen much?" Dale's eyes said, as he turned them upon the guide.

"No, herr. Heaven be praised! The water is down a hand's breadth since I looked last. It is falling fast."

Dale turned sharply round and caught Saxe's hand, wringing it so hard that he gave him pain. Then, extending his hand to Melchior, the guide took it and held it for a few moments in silence.

"Yes, herr," he said cheerily; then, "I dare say we shall be through in an hour. The waters flow swiftly, and once the flood is passed the lake soon gets down again. But I'm sorry poor old Gros is gone."

"I will pay Andregg handsomely for his loss," said Dale quickly; but the guide shook his head.

"No money will pay for the loss of old friends, herr. Gros has been looked upon as a companion by Andregg for these many years. It will be a bitter thing to go and say he is dead."

He was silent for a few minutes. Then, raising his voice, he said loudly:

"It seems strange to you English gentlemen; but you come from great cities where people are many, and you can hardly count your friends. Out here in the deep thals, where men are shut up by the snow for weeks together, with only their cows and mules and goats, they grow to look upon the animals about them as friends, just as the poor animals themselves look to their masters for their care, and run to them for help and shelter when the great storms come down. Why, herr, you have seen they live in part of the house. The chalet is built up with a warm shelter beneath for the little flock or herd. Poor Gros! Andregg will nearly break his heart; and," added the guide simply, "he will not even have the consolation of saving the skin."

This last notion, in the reaction he felt, sounded so droll to Saxe that he turned away his head for fear the guide should see him smile.

But Melchior saw nothing; and stooping down again, he rose.

"Going down very fast, herr. In another hour I think we may venture to start again."

The torrent tore along so furiously that in the time specified the little party made a start, and then paused again as they reached the place where the ledge descended into the water. For the stream rushed along heavily as Melchior began to wade; and he once more uncoiled and passed the rope.

"It is heavy going," he shouted; "but every minute it will be better, for after a little while the path rises quite high."

They started again, and Saxe felt his heart beat heavily as the water rose to his knees and he could feel its soft strong push against him; but he forgot all this the next moment, on hearing Melchior give vent to his feelings in a long, loud jodel, which sounded strange enough in the awful rift, with an accompaniment of the noise of rushing waters, but not half so strange as the curious whinnying half-squeal, half-neigh, that came back from a little way ahead.

For there, dimly-seen, was the mule, standing just as they had left him; and as they approached he signified his joy by a very near approach to a bray.

"And you said you saw him swept by!" cried Dale.

"I saw a leg and a bit of back," said Melchior; "but it might have belonged to any poor drowned beast swept out of the lake. Why, Gros! old Gros!" he cried, wading up to the mule, "this is the grandest sight I've had these many days!" while the mule literally squealed and stamped, sending the water flying in its delight at hearing human voices again.

But a good hour passed before the cautious animal—as if assured by its own instinct that the way was safe—began to advance, and in a short time was upon the clear ledge, trudging steadily along, Melchior following with his load, till the bright daylight was seen ahead, and they came to a halt on the platform whence Gros had fallen and dragged in his leader.

The rest of the journey was easily performed, Gros bearing his lightened load on along the edge of the lake, and past the place where Dale had searched for gold, till the vale at the foot of the great glacier was neared, when the mule

set up a loud squealing, which was answered by the donkey's bray and a lowing from the cows.

Then Melchior jodelled, and it was responded to from the chalet, where Andregg, his wife, and Pierre were standing watching, and ready to prepare a comfortable meal and usher Gros into the shelter in the lower part of the place.

In another hour Saxe was lying upon his bed of sweet-scented hay half asleep, thinking of all he had gone through since he last lay there, and ready to ask himself whether it was not all a dream. Then suddenly consciousness failed, and he was really in the land of dreams.

Chapter Seventeen.

Saxe takes a Shower-Bath.

The musical tinkling of bells roused Saxe at daybreak; and, as he listened to the pleasant sound produced by quite a large herd of goats, their leader's horn was heard from time to time collecting stragglers who were disposed to stop at intervals to begin breakfasting on the way.

"We haven't done much in finding crystals yet," thought Saxe, as he lay. "I wonder what he means to do this morning. I feel as if I should like a day or two's rest; but I don't know—I'm not so very tired."

He lay very still for a few minutes, listening to the tinkling chime of the goat-bells, gradually growing more distant as their wearers made their way up the side of the valley; and as he listened he could tell as well as if he were watching when one of the goats broke away from the herd and leaped and bounded among the rocks to some tempting patch of young green grass,—for there was a sudden splash, so to speak, in the stream of sound; and again when two or three young kids rose on their hind legs and butted and danced at each other.

The picture Saxe painted in his mind made him restless, and the morning love of another half-hour being chased away, he determined to rise and get out in the clear, fresh air.

"Time they woke up," thought Saxe at last, as the pale dawn stole in through the chinks. "Tired, I suppose."

He lay listening now to the low murmuring sound of the cowbells, whose chime was silvery and pleasant, and trembled and vibrated in the air; and again he pictured the soft-eyed, meek, lowing creatures, slowly picking their way among the great mossy stones which had been tumbled down from the mountain.

"Oh, I sha'n't lie here any longer," said Saxe to himself. "I say!" he cried: "Mr Dale! Ahoy! It's to-morrow morning. Oh, what a noddle I am!" he muttered. "It's broad daylight, Mr Dale. Are you coming for a dip?"

No answer.

"I say, Mr Dale! Time to get up."

All was silent, and Saxe raised himself on his elbow and peered through the darkness at the heap of hay beside him.

"He must have been tired last night," he muttered, "and old Melk too. I say, Mr Dale! do you know what you say to me sometimes?"

"No: that he doesn't," thought Saxe. "He is sleeping fast, and if I wake him he'll turn rusty. I don't care. Here—hi! Mr Dale. Breakfast!"

Still no reply.

"Oh, I must rouse him," cried Saxe, and, springing up, he went to where his companion slept, and then gave the hay an angry kick.

"What a shame!" he cried. "I do call that shabby. They've been up ever so long, and gone somewhere without me. It's too bad!"

He hurried out of the great loft-like place, and encountered the sour-looking man Pierre.

"Here!" he cried, in atrociously bad German, bolstered up and patched with English: "where's the herr, and where's Melchior?"

Pierre, whose hair was full of scraps of hay, took off his cap and scratched his head.

"Where is the herr and where is the guide?" said Saxe, a little louder and with a worse pronunciation.

Pierre opened his mouth, let his head hang forward, and stared at the lad in a heavy, stupid way.

"I say, William Tell," cried Saxe—in plain English now—"can't you understand your own language?"

The man stared more heavily than before.

"Regardez donc: parlez-vous Français?"

The stare continued.

"Well, you are a lively one," muttered Saxe. "Here, I'll have another try at you. 'Wollen Sie mir.' Let's see: 'wollen Sie mir'—what's 'have the goodness to tell me which way the guide and Mr Dale went?'—You don't understand? No more do I how you can stand there like an ugly bit of rustic carving. I say, stupid! Can you understand that? Oh, I'm as stupid as he is. Get out of the way, old wooden wisdom, and let's find your master."

Just at that moment voices fell upon the lad's ear, evidently coming from a rough building formed of pine logs built up log-hut fashion.

He hurried towards it, and found old Andregg standing at the door looking in, but ready to turn and salute him with a pleasant smile and the friendly "good morning" of the Swiss people.

"Ah, Saxe! that you?" said Dale, who was busy with Melchior repacking some of the things which had been brought up the valley by Pierre during their absence. "Had a good night's rest?"

"Yes. But why didn't you call me when you got up?"

"I did, and so did Melchior; but you were so sound that I thought I'd let you sleep. Well, all the traps are right, and I've been packing up what we want to take."

"Where?"

"Into the heart of the mountains."

"And when do you start?"

"As soon as ever we have done breakfast and put together a good supply of food. Had your bath?"

"No. I meant to go with you."

"Go and have it, and by that time we shall be ready for breakfast."

Saxe went off rather dissatisfied, towel in hand, to pass their landlord's wife and receive a nod and smile. Then he went on towards the place which he had visited before; and now, one by one, the cold-looking peaks began to turn rosy and brighten, the scene changing so rapidly to orange and gold that Saxe forgot his dissatisfied feelings, and at last stopped to look round in admiration, then in dismay, and at last in something approaching rage; for not a dozen yards behind him was the heavy, stolid face of Pierre, his mouth looking as if it had not been shut since he spoke to him.

The man had stopped when Saxe stopped, and he continued his heavy stare.

"Oh! I do wish I had paid more attention to my jolly old French and German at school," muttered Saxe, as the man's stare quite worried him. "I wonder what 'be off' is? Allez-vous en he would not understand. 'Gehen!' That's 'to go.' But you can't say 'to go' to a fellow, when you want him to be off. And you can't say 'go to,' because gehen's only one word. I know: 'Gehen sie Jericho!' I'll let that off at him if he follows me any farther."

Saxe nodded at the man, said "Morgen," and went on.

"'Morgen!' Well, that's 'good morning.' He must understand that; but I don't believe he understands it as we do when one says 'good morning' to a fellow and means he's to go. Oh! I say, what are you following me for? I know. He is a dirty-looking beggar. He's coming for a wash. But after me, please, mein herr. I'll have first go. Ugh! I'd rather have a bath after a pig."

Saxe went on rapidly; but the man still followed, walking when he did, and timing his pace to keep up; stopping when he did, and provoking such a feeling of irritation in the English lad, that he suddenly faced round and fired the speech he had prepared, but with lingual additions which ornamented and certainly obscured the meaning.

"Here, I say! you, sir!" he cried: "old what's-your-name—Pierre? 'gehen Jericho!'"

The man still stared.

"I say, 'gehen Jericho!' and if you will, 'danke schön,' and good luck to you. Oh, I say, do shut that ugly mouth of yours. What's the good of keeping it open if you're not going to speak! There's no breakfast here."

Pierre still stared, and Saxe swung round again and went on.

"It's too bad to be bothered by a foreigner like him," he muttered. "I meant to have a regular natural shower-bath,"—he glanced up at the beautiful spray fall beyond him as he said this to himself—"but now I can't have it, with this fellow watching me, and it'll only mean a scrub and rub."

He stopped and turned round again, to find Pierre in his old position just the same distance behind.

"I tell you what it is, old chap: if you don't shut up that mouth, I shall be tempted to pitch a round stone into it; and if it wasn't for fear of getting up war between England and Switzerland, I'd come and punch your head. Here, I say! Do you hear? Be off!"

Pierre stared.

"Oh! I know what you are," grumbled Saxe: "you're a cretin—an idiot. I suppose there are lots of you in the valleys. Here—hi! Catch!"

Saxe took a twenty-cent nickel coin from his pocket, and took aim.

"I'll pitch it right into his mouth," he said to himself. "There you are, old chap! Don't swallow it!"

He threw the coin so truly, that if Pierre had stood still it would, in all probability, have gone where it was aimed. But the man's action was as quick as that of a monkey. With one sharp dash of the hand he caught the piece, scowled as he found that it was not half a florin, and then thrust it into his pocket and stared.

"Oh my!" muttered Saxe as he went on; "he's worse than that lost dog, who came and said to me that I was his master, and that he'd never leave me as long as I lived. I hope this chap isn't going to follow me all the time we're here."

He stopped once more.

"I say, old chap, do you want anything?"

No answer but the stolid stare.

"Don't you know that it's very rude? Bah! I might as well discuss Euclid with old Gros. Just you wait till I've had my tub and got back to breakfast, and if I don't set old Melchior at you I'm a Dutchman."

Fully determined to take no more notice of the man, Saxe went on to the pool, had a comfortable wash in the sparkling water, which was invigorating to a degree, scrubbed himself dry, and all the time battled hard with an intense desire to throw stones at Pierre, who stood watching every act some ten yards away.

"Thank you," said Saxe at last, as he opened a pocket-comb, and began to use it to his wet hair: "I've quite done, thank you; but if I might give you a bit of advice, I wouldn't wash much this morning. Do it by degrees. If you made yourself quite clean, you might catch cold; and besides, the cows and goats wouldn't know you. 'Morgen' once more."

Saxe started to return, leaving his stolid companion behind and fully expecting to hear him splashing in the pool; but two minutes later he exclaimed:

"No fear of his catching cold or frightening the cows. I don't believe he has had a wash for a month. Why, if he isn't following me again! Well, he shall run."

It was not a very satisfactory place for running, encumbered as it was with stones; but Saxe was as active as most lads of his age, and he started off dodging in and out among huge blocks of granite, leaping from smooth glacier ground rock to rock, making good speed over the patches of level grass and whin, and sending the blood coursing through his veins in the bright morning air; but to his intense annoyance he found that his activity was nothing to that of the heavy, dirty-looking being who kept up easily close to his heels, for every now and then the man leaped from rock to rock as surely as a goat. But growing a little out of breath, and thinking at last that it was of no use to tire himself so soon in the morning, the boy slowly settled down into a walk just as a loud jodel came echoing from the sheltered hollow where the chalet stood.

"Hallo!" said Saxe, whose good humour came back at the thoughts connected with that cry. "There's old Melk ringing the breakfast bell;" and once more he stopped, placed his hand to the side of his mouth, and jodelled.

"There, old chap, what do you think of that?" he said, looking back at Pierre, who stood rooted there with quite a different expression upon his countenance. The heavy, vacant look had given way to one of utter astonishment, wonder flashed from his eyes, and as Saxe grasped the reason he swung himself round in dudgeon.

"Oh, you ignorant donkey!" he muttered: "it was as good a jodel as old Melk's. I said you were an idiot, and this proves it: never heard an Englishman jodel before?"

Five minutes after he was enjoying the steaming hot coffee and delicious milk, butter, eggs and bread, discussing—often with his mouth too full—the plans of the coming day's work.

Chapter Eighteen.

Saxe has Suspicions.

"Do we go the same way?" said Saxe, as they started up the track out of the valley, Gros far more heavily laden this time—having, beside food enough for some days, a handy tent just large enough to shelter three; waterproof sheet, rugs, ice-axes, and a coil of new English rope which made the guide's eyes glisten.

"No, herr," Melchior answered—"only for a short distance. Then we shall strike up to the east and go over the Carvas Pass into the Urs Thal."

"Urseren?" said Dale quickly.

"Oh no, herr! not a bleak green hollow like that, but a wild ravine in the heart of the mountain. It lies next but one to the valley beyond the peak you climbed."

"Ah! that sounds better. Is it much visited?"

"Never, herr, except by the chamois hunters, and very seldom by them."

"And you think we shall find what I want there?"

"I cannot say, herr. Such crystals as you seek are not often discovered. They are very rare. But we shall see. Steady, Gros, steady! Don't hurry, boy. Slow and sure: these stones are slippery."

"Slippery! Yes," cried Dale, stepping forward quickly, and then giving a glance up to right and left at the walls of rock rising on either side. "Look at this, Saxe: we must not pass things like these without notice. Wait a minute, Melchior."

"Yes, herr; but there are bigger and smoother pieces farther up the valley."

"Do they extend far?"

"Right up to the top of the pass, herr, and down the other side."

Saxe looked over at the huge mass of smoothly polished stone across which the mule had been picking its way, taking longer steps to get its hoofs on the narrow cracks and places where veins of a softer kind of rock had in the course of ages corroded away.

"Why, I thought you said that very few people came along here?" said Saxe suddenly, as Dale bent down here and there to examine the stone.

"I did, herr. Nobody uses this pass. There is no need. It is very difficult, and leads away up to the everlasting snow."

"Then, Melchior, how is it that the stones are worn so much?"

The guide shook his head.

"It is as if a river had run along here," he said. "I suppose it is the rain that has slowly worn it so."

"No," said Dale, with the voice of authority, "it is the ice."

"No, herr; there is no ice here. A great deal of snow comes down from the great stock up yonder, and from the valley between Piz Accio and Piz Nero, here on the right—avalanches of snow. We could not walk along here in March; it would be madness. But it soon wastes, and is washed away."

"No, Melchior, it is not snow or water that has smoothed all this, but ice. There must have been a huge glacier all along here."

The guide shook his head.

"Look, man," cried Dale, "it is written on the stones;" and he pointed to those beneath them, and then to others high up, which presented the same appearance.

"The stones and rocks are worn smooth, herr; but I never heard my father or grandfather speak of ice in this valley."

"No," said Dale quietly, "and your grandfather never heard his ancestors speak of it, nor they in turn, right back to the most remote times of history; but, all the same, a huge glacier must have filled the whole of this valley, sixty or seventy feet above where we stand."

"A very long time ago, then, herr."

"Who can say how many ages? Glaciers shrink and melt away in time. The one in the other valley has retired a good deal."

"Ah, yes, herr—hundreds of yards. Old people say it once came nearly to Andregg's chalet."

"To be sure; and how do the rocks look where it has retired?"

"Rubbed smooth, like this, herr."

"Of course; and there is no denying this fact. It must have been a mighty glacier indeed."

They went after the mule up the valley, content to follow the animal's guidance; and invariably, as Melchior pointed out, Gros picked out the best path. As they went right on the valley contracted, and the sides, which towered up more and more perpendicularly, displayed the peculiar, smooth, polished look, just as if masses of stone had constantly ground against their sides.

"Now, Saxe, look here," cried Dale, suddenly pausing by a great mass of grey stone. "Here is a proof that I am right."

"Is it? I don't see."

"Do you, Melchior?"

"No, herr. The stone is very big."

"Yes. How did it come here?"

"Oh, it must have rolled down from the rock up yonder."

"If it had rolled down from the rock up yonder, it would have been a piece of that rock!"

"Of course, herr. Here are plenty of pieces," and he touched them with the handle of his ice-axe.

"Yes, you are right," said Dale, picking up a great fragment; "and you can see this is the same kind of stone as that which towers up here over our heads."

"Yes, herr."

"But this great block is a different kind of stone, is it not!"

Melchior looked at the vast mass, and said at once:

"Yes, herr, of course. It is the grey hard stone that they use for building bridges."

"Well, where did it come from! There is none up here to right or left."

"No, herr—none."

"It could not have been brought here by man."

Melchior laughed.

"No; a hundred horses could not have dragged it along a hard road."

"But it has been brought here, you see, all the same. Now, where is the nearest place where we could find stone like that!"

"Oh, on the Domberg, herr, at the head of the pass. We shall go beneath it six hours from here."

"Exactly, Melchior," cried Dale. "That proves what I say. This huge mass of granite must have fallen from the Domberg on to the glacier which once filled this limestone valley, and have been gradually carried down and left here. Such a glacier as the one which polished all these rocks could easily have brought down that block; and when in bygone ages the ice melted, this block was left here. I dare say we shall find more like it."

"Oh yes, herr, there are many," said Melchior, thoughtfully examining the stone and then picking up other pieces to compare with it. "The herr's words seem like truth, but I should never have thought of that."

"It took, too, long thought and study of some of our greatest men to find it out," said Dale, "and I am glad to have come to a valley which shows all we have read so plainly."

"Stop! take care!" shouted Melchior, as a strange rushing sound was heard high up on their right; and directly after a large stone came bounding down the slope, fell on the smooth rocks before them, and smashed to atoms.

Melchior stood looking up, shading his eyes.

"That is curious," he said thoughtfully. "I do not know why that stone should have fallen."

"Loosened by the frost, man."

"No, herr. It could not have come from high enough. There is no ice up there. You have to pass another valley first. The high mountain is beyond it, and the stones would fall into the next valley."

"It must have been loosened, then, by the rain."

"Perhaps, herr; but it is more likely that a goat— No, there are no goats pastured so far up as this, and no man could be travelling up there. Herr, would you like to shoot a chamois?"

"Indeed I should; but we have no gun."

"No, herr, I forgot: we have no gun. But that must have been a chamois. We are getting into the wild region where they live, though this is low down for them."

"But surely," said Dale, "they would get no pasture higher up?"

"Only in patches, herr. They have been so persecuted by the hunters that they live constantly amongst the ice and snow and in the most solitary spots. But I cannot understand about that stone falling."

"Well, it doesn't matter," said Saxe. "It did not hit either of us, and you said they often fell in the mountains."

"Yes herr, but not like that."

They went on for the next two hours in silence, while the pass they were following grew more and more wild, but it opened out a little during the next hour, but only to contract again. And here, in a secluded place beneath one of the vast walls of rock which shut them in, and beside a tiny rivulet which came bubbling and foaming down, the guide suggested a short halt and refreshment.

Dale agreed, and Saxe doubly agreed, helping to lift the pannier from the mule's back, when the patient animal indulged in a roll, drank a little water, and then began to browse on such tender shoots and herbage as it could find.

The bread and cheese were produced, and all were seated enjoying their alfresco meal, when once more from up to

their right a stone as big as a man's head came crashing down, to fall not far away. So near was it that it startled the mule, who trotted a little on out of danger before beginning again to graze.

Melchior had sprung to his feet at once, leaped away for a short distance, and stood shading his eyes again, and scanning the rocky face of the precipice on their right—that is, just above their heads.

"Well, what do you make of it?" cried Dale,—“a landslip?”

"No, herr; there is no landslip."

"Is it the advance-guard of an avalanche?"

"Without snow, herr? No."

"Come and eat your bread and cheese, Melk," cried Saxe; "it is only a loose stone tumbled down, and no one was hit."

"But I cannot eat, herr, with the knowledge that some one is hurling down stones upon our heads. Do you know that either of those falling stones would have killed us?"

"Yes, but they did not hit us," said Saxe.

"But surely there is no one up there to hurl down stones?" said Dale.

"I don't know, herr," said the guide, shaking his head.

"But you said you thought it was a chamois," cried Saxe.

"I did, herr, but I'm afraid I was wrong. I am not a believer in such things; but some of our people would say that the spirits of the mountains are displeased with us for coming here, and are throwing stones to drive us back."

"They're pretty strong, then, to throw such stones as that," said Saxe, with his mouth full of Swiss cheese.

"Yes," said Dale, looking at the stone which had fallen; "and they take very bad aim—eh, Saxe?"

"Awfully: I could do better than that. Why, if I were up there I believe I could hit either of you."

"But it might be only to frighten us," said Melchior seriously.

"Why, Melchior, my man, surely you do not believe in such childish nonsense as that?"

"No, herr, not when I have English gentlemen with me; but there are times on the mountains, when I am quite alone and I hear noises that I cannot understand, that I do get fancying strange things, and all the old stories I have heard as a boy come back to me."

"And then you say to yourself, 'I am a man who puts his trust in reason, and shall not let myself be scared by silly tales.'"

"Well, yes, herr, something of the kind," replied the guide, smiling.

"There goes another stone!" cried Saxe, as a smaller one fell about fifty yards farther on.

"Yes," said the guide; "and it is as if somebody were climbing along there, near the edge of the rocks, and sent them down."

"Ah! that's more like an explanation," cried Dale, laughing. "Somebody. Yes, you must be right. Somebody with feet and hands, like ourselves. Can you see who it is?"

"No, herr," said Melchior, after a long examination; "and it puzzles me, for who could be climbing along up there?"

Dale shrugged his shoulders. "Impossible to say."

"Yes, herr, it is impossible to say," said Melchior, who was still watching the precipice; and he was now joined by Saxe. "You see, anybody who wished to get along the pass would come down here."

"But there may be a path up yonder."

"No, herr, there is none, or I should have known of it years ago. I have been up there, and it is so perilous that no one but a bold climber could get along. Well, it is one of the many things I have seen and heard in the mountains that I could not understand. Shall we go on, herr?"

"Yes, and we'll keep a sharp look-out," said Saxe.

"You may," cried Dale; "but you will find it is something perfectly simple—a stray foot, if the stone is not loosened by the weather."

Ten minutes later they were trudging on over the rough ground, with the valley growing wilder and more strange; presenting, too, plenty of clefts and openings to ravines which Dale felt disposed to stop and explore; but Melchior was always ready with the same form of speech.

"Wait, herr," he said. "It would only be labour in vain. We'll go on till I get you into the parts where none but the most venturesome guides have been. If crystals are to be found, it will be there."

"What's that?" said Saxe suddenly, pointing upwards.

His companions looked at once in the direction indicated, and saw nothing particular.

"Does the young herr mean that strangely shaped thing!"

"No, no. Something ran across there hundreds of feet up, where that bit of a ledge is in front of the pale brown patch of stones."

"A marmot, perhaps," said Melchior; "there are many of the little things about here."

"But this was not a little thing," cried Saxe impatiently. "It was something big as a goat. I thought it was a man."

"Up yonder, herr?" said Melchior. "No man could run along up there. It would be slow, careful climbing, and a slip would send the climber headlong down into the valley here. From where you say, is quite a thousand feet."

"It must have been a goat, then, or a chamois," said Saxe.

"I cannot say, herr," replied the guide rather solemnly, and as if he had faith in the possibility of something "no canny" being at the bottom of the mystery.

But the rest of their day's journey, as mapped out for them by Melchior, was achieved without further adventure, and some ten hours after their start in the morning he halted them high up among the mountains, in a little rock amphitheatre, surrounded by peaks, which looked gigantic in the solemn evening light.

But the need of the ordinary animal comforts of life took all romantic thought out of Saxe's brain, and he busily set to work helping to light a fire with the wood the guide had brought. Then, while the kettle was getting hot, all three busied themselves in setting up the tiny tent, anchoring it by means of its lines to stones, as soft a spot as could be found having been selected, for they were far above the pines, and the prospect of getting anything suitable for a bed was very small—even moss proving scarce. However, a rug spread beneath them saved them from some of the asperities of the rocky ground, and after they had partaken of their evening meal and taken a short peep round the huge hollow, which promised admirably for exploration next day, "good nights" were said, and Saxe lay down for his first test of what it would be like to sleep under the shelter of a thin tent eight thousand feet above the level of the sea.

"Is there any need to keep watch up here?" asked Dale.

"Oh no, herr; not the slightest."

"Then welcome sleep to my weary bones," said Dale, as he stretched himself out; and soon after, as the stars came out, they were all sleeping peacefully, but only to be aroused just after midnight by a most unearthly scream—a cry loud enough to make every one spring at once to his feet and nearly upset the tiny tent.

Chapter Nineteen.

A Strange Incident.

It was very dark and cold, the stars gleamed frostily overhead, and the nearest mountain peak stood out weird-looking and strange against the purple sky, as the little party stood together listening, and then questioning each other in an awe-stricken whisper.

"You heard it, Saxe?" said Dale.

"Heard it? Yes, it was horrible. What was it, Melchior?"

The guide shook his head, and then took up his ice-axe for a protection against whatever the object might be that had alarmed them, as he began to peer cautiously in all directions.

"It woke me up with a start," whispered Saxe.

"Yes; the most unearthly cry I ever heard. It must have been some kind of owl, and its shriek sounded the more terrible from being up in this land of echoes."

"Then if it was a bird there is nothing to be afraid of," said Saxe. "It gave me the shivers."

"It was startling. Found anything, Melchior?"

"No, herr; and I'm puzzled."

"We think it was a bird."

"No, herr; that was no bird."

"Could it have been an animal?"

"There are no animals up at this height, but chamois and marmots. They could not have made such a cry."

"No," said Dale thoughtfully.

"Stop!" said the guide, as if he had caught at an idea; "could it have been a bear?"

"No-o-o!" cried Saxe. "It was a shriek, not a growl."

"You are right, herr," said the guide. "Bears are very scarce now, and I do not think one of them could make such a noise unless he were being killed. This is another mystery of the mountains that I cannot explain. Some guides would say it was the mountain spirit."

"But you do not, Melchior?"

"No, herr; I believe now that all these old stories are fables. Shall we lie down again to rest?"

"I want to rest," said Dale; "but it seems impossible to lie down expecting to be roused up by such an unearthly cry."

"Then the English herr thinks it was unearthly?"

"Oh, I don't mean that," said Dale hastily. "The mountains are full of awful things, but not of that kind. Well, Saxe, shall we lie down?"

"What's the good?" replied the boy: "we couldn't go to sleep if we did. I say, isn't it cold?"

"Get one of the rugs to put round you."

"Shall we have a good look round, first, herr?"

"No, don't," said Saxe. "It is so dark, and there are so many stones about. Yes, let's go," he added suddenly, as the thought flashed across his brain that if he declined his companions would think him cowardly.

Just at that moment, from out of the darkness, about fifty yards away, the cry rose again, but short and sudden, like a bit of the fag end of the shriek which had roused them from their sleep.

"There!" cried Saxe.

"Yes, herr—there!" said the guide, and he began to laugh silently. "Why, it quite startled me. I ought to have known."

"What was it?" cried Dale, as the curious wild cry seemed still to be ringing in his ears.

"What was it, herr? Don't you know?"

"Of course not."

"It was Gros."

"The old mule?" cried Saxe. "Oh, I wish I was close by him with a stick."

"I suppose he feels the cold. No, stop: it can't be that," added the guide, as if suddenly struck by an idea. "There must be a reason for his crying out."

He walked away hurriedly into the darkness, and they followed, to hear him talking directly after to the mule, which responded with a low whinnying sound.

"Perhaps the poor brute has slipped into a hole or a crack in the rock," suggested Dale; but as they drew nigh they could see the mule standing out dimly in the darkness, and the guide close by his neck.

"Have we overdriven him?" said Saxe. "Is he ill?"

"You couldn't overdrive Gros, herr," said Melchior quietly.

"Why not?"

"You heard what old Andregg said to us, Gros would not be overdriven, herr; he would lie down when he had done as much work as he felt was enough."

"What's the matter, then? Is he ill?"

"No, herr; his coat is smooth and dry."

"I know," cried Saxe.

"You know, herr?"

"Yes; of course, he has been trying to find enough to eat amongst these stones, and there is scarcely anything. He is hungry, and crying out for supper."

"Oh no, herr. I showed him where he could find plenty of green shoots, and I gave him half a loaf of black bread as well before we had our meal."

"Then he wants kicking for waking us up like this."

"No, herr," said the guide drily; "and it is bad work to kick Gros. He is a very clever animal, and can kick much harder than a man. I remember Pierre kicking him once, and he kicked back and nearly broke the man's leg."

"Then don't kick him. But what is the matter with him?"

"I cannot tell you, herr, unless some one has been here since we lay down to sleep."

"But, surely, Melchior, if any one came he would have seen the tent and spoken."

"Yes, herr, one would think so, for out in the mountains here we are all friends. We should have given him to eat and drink just as we should have expected it if we came upon a camp."

"Well," said Dale, "it was a false alarm, and I'm going to lie down again. Come, Saxe."

"But suppose—"

"No, no; we have so much hard work to do to-morrow that we want all the rest we can get. There is nothing to suppose, is there, Melchior?"

"Oh no, herr; and besides, if the herr likes, I will sit up and watch."

"There is no need. Come: sleep."

"I can't sleep," thought Saxe, as he lay down once more in the shelter of the tent. "I shall be listening, and expecting to hear that cry again."

But his head had hardly touched the rug before he was breathing heavily; and he slept without moving till a hand was laid upon his shoulder; and as he opened his eyes he saw that it was daybreak and that the dark figure bending over him was the guide.

"Time to get up?"

"Yes, herr—quick!" was the reply. "Will you wake up the herr?"

"Eh? Yes: all right, Melchior," cried Dale. "Hah! what a splendid sleep! It does not seem five minutes since I lay down."

"Will you come out, sir?" said the guide, in rather a peculiar manner.

"Yes, of course. Eh? Is anything the matter?"

"I don't quite know, herr," replied the guide, as they stood together; "but it is clear some one has been here in the night."

"Then that is what frightened the mule?"

"Yes, herr; that is what made him cry out. Look!"

"What at?" said Dale quietly, as they now stood beside the ashes of the last night's fire.

"Cannot the herr see?"

Dale looked sharply round, and Saxe followed his example.

"I see nothing," said the former.

"Nor I," said Saxe; "only that the bits of burnt wood seem to have been kicked about."

"That's it, herr," cried Melchior; "and look there!"

He bent down, and pointed.

"Ah! look, Saxe!" cried Dale: "some one's footmark in the pine ash!"

"'Tisn't mine," said Saxe: "it's too big."

"Nor mine," said Dale. "An English boot does not leave a print like that. It's yours, Melchior. A false alarm."

"No, herr—no false alarm," said the guide; and he raised one foot so as to expose the sole. "Look at the open way in which I nail my boots—with big nails, so that they shall not slip on the rock or ice. That footprint is not mine."

"No: you are right. Then whose could it be?"

Melchior shook his head.

"Some one must have been prowling round the tent in the night."

"It must have been one of Melk's spirits—the one who threw stones at us yesterday. I say, Melk, they wear very big

boots.”

The guide smiled.

“Yes, herr, it was some one with big boots; and I do not understand it.”

Dale’s first idea—a natural one under the circumstances—was that plunder was the object; and he said so.

“No, herr; I do not think there is anybody about here who would steal.”

“I’m very glad to hear it,” said Dale: “but let’s see if anything has gone.”

The guide said nothing—only looked on while an examination was made.

“No,” said Dale; “I do not miss anything. Yes: my little binocular is missing!”

“No, herr; you put it inside the big basket last night.”

“Yes, here it is,” cried Saxe.

“Then you are right, Melchior: it could not have been robbery.”

“No, herr, it is strange; but I will light the fire and get breakfast.”

As he spoke he began kindling some dry stuff he had collected, and shortly after the coffee-pot was promising to boil. Then some bacon was sliced and frizzled, and the appetising odour soon made the memories of the night alarm pass away in the thoughts of the excellent breakfast, which was finished while the pass in which they were seated was still grey, though the mountain peaks looked red-hot in the coming sunshine.

“Well, I’m not going to let an incident like that interfere with our progress, Melchior. Where do you propose going next?”

“Up whichever that the herr chooses, and then up the mountain.”

“And not quite over the pass?”

“No, herr. We are in the highest part here, and we may come upon crystals in any of these solitary peaks.”

“Very well; then we’ll make a start at any time you like. Do we come back here?”

“No, herr. I propose that we take the mule on to the foot of the Great Oberweiss glacier, an hour from here. There is good camping ground, and then we will go up the mountain by the side of the ice meer.”

“And to shake off our stone-throwing friend,” said Dale. “Good. We will, and will keep a better look-out for the crevasses this time—eh, Saxe?”

“Yes, and we can try the new rope.”

A few minutes sufficed for saddling up the mule with his load, and then they started once more farther into the wilds, in all the glorious beauty of the early summer morning, Melchior leading them in and out through such a labyrinth of cracks and rifts that after some hours’ walking, Saxe glanced at his leader.

“Yes?”

“I was wondering how we could find our way back.”

Melchior laughed.

“Oh, easily enough, herr.”

“But I couldn’t,” cried Saxe.

“No, herr. That shows the use of a guide. But I could have come an easier way, only I am taking a short cut. We are a thousand feet higher than when we started. Look, herr: go on by that shelf of rock: it is perfectly safe. Then come back and tell me what you see.”

Saxe started forward, from the ragged slope they were ascending; and a minute or two after passing quite a mossy niche, which ran some forty or fifty yards right into the mountain, to where a silvery-veil-like cascade fell, he stopped short, threw up his hands, and then turned and signalled to Dale.

“What is it?” cried the latter, as he hurried to the boy’s side. “Hah!”

He wanted no explanation, for they were standing at the edge of a precipice, gazing down at another huge glacier, which glittered in the rays of the morning sun—a vast chaos of ice whose cracks and shadows were of a vivid blue; and as they gazed up towards the point where it suddenly curved round an immense buttress, there beyond, peak after peak, as far as eye could reach, stood out in the clear air, and all seeming to rise out of the fields and beds of snow which clung around them and filled every ravine and chasm running up from their feet.

“Oh!” cried Saxe—“did you ever see anything so beautiful? Why, the place is all crystals!”

"Grand!" said Dale slowly, as he stood rapt in a reverie of wonder and admiration at the scene before him. "Why, Saxe, we couldn't have had a better guide! We must make a halt here, and begin to explore."

"But you'll go up another mountain?"

"Didn't you have enough of the last?"

"No!" cried the boy excitedly. "I know I was very stupid and clumsy, and wasn't half so brave as I should have liked to be; but I long to begin again."

"Then you shall."

"When? Now?"

"Too late in the day. We'll explore about here first, and if the weather is right we'll make a start to-morrow."

"Oh!" said Saxe in a disappointed tone.

"There—you'll have plenty of work to-day, for we must go down on this wonderful glacier and examine the sides. Look! there's what they call a mill there."

"A mill? I don't see it."

"Moulin. No, no—not a building. That fall, where the water rushes into the crevasse you can see. There—up yonder, a quarter of a mile away."

At that moment there was a tremendous crash on their left; and, as they turned sharply, it was to see from far below them what appeared to be a cloud of smoke rising and wreathing round, full of tiny specks of silver, and over which an iris glimmered for a few moments, and faded away with the ice dust caused by the toppling over of a huge serac, which had crushed half a dozen others in its fall.

"Come along. Let's arrange about our camp; and then we'll take hammers and a chisel, and begin to examine the side of this glacier at once."

They turned back. Saxe quitting the glorious view of the crystal silver land, as he mentally dubbed it, very unwillingly.

To his surprise, as they descended they found Gros on his back, in a gully full of sand and stones, snorting, flapping his ears and throwing up his legs, as he fell over first on one side, then on the other, in the full enjoyment of a good roll; while as they advanced it was to find Melchior in the sheltered nook setting up the tent, after rolling some huge pieces of rock to the four corners ready to secure the ropes; for there was no spot in that stony ravine where a peg of iron, let alone one of wood, could be driven in.

"Hah! a capital spot, Melchior."

"Yes, herr, well sheltered from three winds, and there is plenty of good water; but we shall have to be sparing with the wood. To-morrow I'll take Gros, and go down to the nearest pine forest and bring up a load."

"Then you mean to stay here?"

"For a few days, herr. You have peaks all round which you can climb. There is the glacier, and there are bare mountain precipices and crevices where you may find that of which you are in search."

"Yes," said Dale, as he looked back out of the narrow opening of the gash in the mountain which the guide had chosen for their shelter; "I think this place will do."

"Then the herr is satisfied?"

"Well, yes, for the present. Now, then, leave what you are doing, and we'll descend to the glacier at once."

"Yes, herr. One moment. I'll hang up the lanthorn and the new English rope here. The glass may be kicked against and broken."

He suspended the English-made stout glass lanthorn to the little ridge-pole; and then, resuming his jacket, he threw the coil of rope over his shoulder, took his ice-axe, Dale and Saxe taking theirs, all new and bright, almost as they had left the manufacturer's, and started at once for the shelf from which the grand view of the snow-clad mountains had met their gaze. After proceeding along this a short distance, Melchior stopped, climbed out upon a projecting point, and examined the side of the precipice.

"We can get down here, herr," he said; and, setting the example, he descended nimbly from ledge to ledge, pausing at any difficult place to lend a hand or point out foothold, till they were half-way down, when the ledges and crevices by which they had descended suddenly ceased, and they stood upon a shelf from which there seemed to be no further progression, till, as if guided by the formation, Melchior crept to the very end, peered round an angle of the rock, and then came back.

"No," he said—"not that way: the other end."

He passed his two companions, and, going to the farther part, climbed up a few feet, and then passed out of their sight.

"This way, gentlemen!" he shouted; and upon joining him they found that he had hit upon quite an easy descent to the ice.

This proved to be very different to the glacier they had first examined. It was far more precipitous in its descent, with the consequence that it was greatly broken up into blocks, needles and overhanging seracs. These were so eaten away beneath that it seemed as if a breath would send them thundering down.

"Not very safe—eh, Melchior?" said Dale.

"No, herr; we must not venture far from the edge."

This vast glacier had also shrunk, leaving from ten to twenty feet of smoothly polished rock at the side—that is, at the foot of the precipitous gorge down which it ran—and thus forming a comparatively easy path for the travellers, who climbed upwards over the rounded masses, stopping from time to time where the ice curved over, leaving spaces between it and its rocky bed, down which Saxe gazed into a deep blue dimness, and listened to the murmuring roar of many waters coursing along beneath.

Suddenly Dale uttered an ejaculation, and, taking a hammer from his belt, began to climb up the rocky side of the valley.

Melchior saw the place for which he was making, and uttered a grunt indicative of satisfaction.

The spot beneath which Dale stopped was only a dark-looking crack; but as Saxe went nearer he could see that it was edged with dark-coloured crystals set closely together, and resembling in size and shape the teeth of a small saw.

Dale began to probe the crack directly with the handle of his ice-axe, to find that the crevice gradually widened; and on applying his mouth there and shouting, he could feel that it was a great opening.

"There ought to be big crystals in there, Melchior," cried Dale excitedly.

"Yes, herr; but without you brought powder and blasting tools you could not get at them, and if you did blast you would break them up."

Dale said nothing, but laying down his ice-axe he took hammer and chisel and began to chip energetically at the hard rock, while the others looked on till he ceased hammering, with a gesture full of impatience.

"You are right, Melchior," he said; "I shall never widen it like this."

"Why try, herr? I can show you holes already large enough for us to get in."

"You know for certain of such places?"

"I cannot tell you exactly where they are now, but I have seen them in the mountains!"

"In the mountains?"

"Well, then, right in these mountains, I feel sure. Let us go on and try. If we do not find a better place we know where this is, and can try it another time."

"Go on, then," said Dale, rather reluctantly; and they continued climbing, with the rock towering up on one side, the ice curving over on the other, and rising in the middle of the glacier to a series of crags and waves and smooth patches full of cracks, in which lay blocks of granite or limestone that had been tumbled down from the sides or far up toward the head of the valley ages before.

They had not progressed far before the guide pointed out another crack in the rock fringed with gem-like crystals, and then another and another, but all out of reach without chipping steps in the stone—of course a most arduous task.

"All signs that we are in the right formation, Saxe," said Dale more hopefully, after they had toiled on up the side of the glacier for about a couple of hours; and they stood watching Melchior, who had mounted on to the ice to see if he could find better travelling for them.

"Yes," he shouted—"better here;" and the others climbed up and joined him, to find that the surface was much smoother, and that the broken-up masses of ice were far less frequent.

"Plenty of crevasses, herr," said Melchior; "but they are all to be seen. There is no snow to bridge them over."

He stood looking down one of the blue cracks zigzagged across the glacier, and Saxe could not help a shudder as he gazed down into its blue depths and listened to the roar of water which came up from below.

But it was not more than a yard in width, and in turn they leaped across and continued their way.

Then they had to pass another, half the width, and others that were mere fissures, which Dale said were slowly splitting; but soon after stepping across the last of these, further progress over the ice was barred by a great chasm four or five yards from edge to edge, along which they had to skirt till its end could be turned and their journey continued.

"Can we take to the rocks again?" said Dale, looking anxiously toward the almost perpendicular sides of the valley up

which they slowly made their way.

“Not yet, herr: I have been watching, and we are still only passing mere crevices in the rock. Hah! now we are coming to the enow, and shall have to take care.”

He pointed with his ice-axe to where, a hundred yards or so farther on, the surface of the ice suddenly changed; but they did not pass at once on to the snow, for as they neared it they found that they were parted from it by another crevasse of about four feet wide.

“We need not go round this, I suppose,” said Dale, as he stood peering down into its depths—Saxe following his example, and listening to a peculiar hissing rush of water far below.

“No, herr, the leap is so short. Shall I go first?”

“Oh no,” said Dale, stepping back and then jumping lightly across, to alight on the snow; “beautiful landing, Saxe. Take a bit of a run.”

“Yes,” said the boy; and he stepped back also for a few yards, sprang and cleared the gap with a yard or so to spare. “What a place it would be to fall down, though!” said Saxe, as he began to tramp on over the snow by Dale’s side. “I couldn’t help thinking so as I flew over it.”

“And very stupid of you too! There’s no danger in leaping over a dry ditch four feet wide, so why should you make a fuss about the same distance because it is deep?”

Boom!

“Hallo!” said Dale. “That sounded like snow somewhere up in the mountains; and by the way, we’re on snow now: Melchior ought to rope us. How do we know there are not crevasses close at hand?” He turned to speak to the guide, and found Saxe standing there staring back. “Hallo!” he cried, “where’s Melchior?”

“I don’t know,” faltered Saxe.

“Didn’t you see him jump over the crack?”

“No. Didn’t you?”

“It was such a trifle, I did not think of it. Good heavens! he has not met with an accident? Ah, that noise!”

They turned back together for about a hundred yards over the smooth snow, following their own steps clearly marked in the white surface; and then stopped short aghast, for the deeply indented place in the snow where they had landed in their jump was gone, and in its stead they saw a great triangular-shaped opening widening the crevasse to more than double its original dimensions, while just at its edge close to their feet there was a peculiar mark, such as would have been made by an ice-axe suddenly struck down through the snow to plough its way till it disappeared over the edge.

Chapter Twenty.

A fearful Watch.

It was all plain enough now. The weight of the two who had first leaped must have cracked a portion of the edge of the crevasse—a part rotten from long exposure to the sun, rain and frost. Then Melchior must have sprung over, the great triangular piece had given way, he had made a desperate attempt to save himself with his axe, but that had not struck home, and he had gone down with the mass of ice and snow, the echoing crash and boom having drowned any cry he might have uttered, even if he had time to call for help.

Saxe gave one horrified look at his companion, and then, stepping aside to the unbroken part of the crevasse, he went down on his hands and knees in the snow, then upon his breast, and drew himself close to the edge till his head and chest were over and he could peer down.

“Take care! take care!” cried Dale hoarsely, though he was doing precisely the same. “Can you see anything?”

Saxe’s negative sounded like a groan, for he could see nothing but the pale blue sides of the ice going down perpendicularly to where, growing from pale to dark blue, they became black as the darkness out of which came the deep, loud, hissing, rushing sound of waters which he had heard before.

“He must be lying down there stunned by his fall!” cried Dale; and then to himself, in a whisper full of despair—“if he is not killed.”

“Melk! Melk!” yelled Saxe just then. But there was nothing but the strange echo of his own voice, mingled with the curious hissing rush of water, which sounded to the listeners like the hurried whisperings and talk of beings far down below.

“Ahoy, Melchior!” cried Dale, now shouting with all his might.

No answer; and he shouted again.

“Do—do you feel sure he did fall down here?” said Saxe with difficulty, for his voice seemed to come from a throat

that was all dry, and over a tongue that was parched.

"There can be no doubt about it," said Dale sadly. "Oh, poor fellow! poor fellow! I feel as if I am to blame for his death."

"Melk—Mel-chi-or!" shouted Saxe, with his hands to his mouth, as he lay there upon his chest, and he tried to send his voice down into the dark depths below.

There was a curious echo, that was all; and he lay listening to the rushing water and trying to pierce the darkness which looked like a mist.

At another time he would have thought of the solemn beauty of the place, with its wonderful gradations of blue growing deeper as they descended. Now there was nothing but chilly horror, for the chasm was to him the tomb of the faithful companion and friend of many days.

Dale shouted again with all his might, but there were only the awe-inspiring, whispering echoes, as his voice reverberated from the smoothly fractured ice, and he rose to his feet, but stood gazing down into the crevasse.

"Yes, he is lying there, stunned and helpless—perhaps dead," he added to himself. "Saxe, one of us must go down and help him."

"Of course," cried Saxe, speaking out firmly, though a curious sensation of shrinking came over him as he spoke. "I'll go."

"I would go myself, boy," said Dale huskily; "but it is impossible. You could not draw me out, and I'm afraid that I could not climb back; whereas I could lower you down and pull you up again."

"Yes, I'll go!" cried Saxe excitedly.

"One moment, my lad. You must recollect what the task means."

"To go down and help Melchior."

"Yes; and taking the rope from round your waist to tie it round his for me to draw him up first. Have you the courage to do that!"

Saxe was silent.

"You see, it means staying down there alone in that place till I can send you back the rope. There must be no shrinking, no losing your head from scare. Do you think you have the courage to do this coolly!"

Saxe did not speak for a few moments, and Dale could see that his face looked sallow and drawn till he had taken a long, deep breath, and then he said quickly.

"No, I haven't enough courage to do it properly; but I'm going down to do it as well as I can."

"God bless you, my boy!" cried Dale earnestly, as he grasped Saxe's hand. "There, lay down your axe while I fasten on the rope, and then I'll drive mine down into this crack and let the rope pass round it. I can lower you down more easily then. Ah!"

He ejaculated this last in a tone full of disappointment, for as he suddenly raised his hands to his breast, he realised the absence of that which he had before taken for granted—the new rope hanging in a ring over his shoulder.

"The ropes!" cried Saxe excitedly. "Melk has one; the other is hanging in the tent. Here, I'll run back."

"No," said Dale; "I am stronger and more used to the work: I'll go. You shout every now and then. Even if he does not answer you he may hear, and it will encourage him to know that we are near."

"But hadn't we better go back for help?"

"Before we could get it the poor fellow might perish from cold and exhaustion. Keep up your courage; I will not be a minute longer than I can help."

He was hurrying along the upper side of the crevasse almost as he spoke, and then Saxe felt his blood turn cold as he saw his companion step back and leap over from the snow on to the ice at the other side, and begin to descend the glacier as rapidly as the rugged nature of the place would allow.

Saxe stood watching Dale for some time, and saw him turn twice to wave his hand, while he became more than ever impressed by the tiny size of the descending figure, showing as it did how vast were the precipices and blocks of ice, and how enormous the ice river on which he stood, must be.

Then, as he gazed, it seemed that another accident must have happened, for Dale suddenly disappeared as if swallowed up in another crevasse. But, as Saxe strained his eyes downward into the distance, he caught a further glimpse of his companion as he passed out from among some pyramids of ice, but only to disappear again. Then Saxe saw his head and shoulders lower down, and after an interval the top of his cap, and he was gone.

To keep from dwelling upon the horror of his position, alone there in that icy solitude, Saxe lay down again, with his face over the chasm, and hailed and shouted with all his might. But still there was no reply, and he rose up from the deep snow once more, and tried to catch sight of Dale; but he had gone. And now, in spite of his efforts to be strong

and keep his head cool, the horror began to close him in like a mist. Melchior had fallen down that crevasse, and was killed. Dale had gone down to their camp to fetch the rope, but he was alone. He had no guide, and he might lose his way, or meet with an accident too, and fall as Melchior had fallen. Even if he only had a slip, it would be terrible, for he might lie somewhere helpless, and never be found.

In imagination, as he stood here, Saxe saw himself waiting for hours, perhaps for days, and no help coming. And as to returning, it seemed impossible to find his way farther than their camp; for below the glacier Melchior had led them through a perfect labyrinth of narrow chasms, which he had felt at the time it would be impossible to thread alone.

It required a powerful mental drag to tear his thoughts away from these wild wanderings to the present; and, determining to forget self, he tried hard to concentrate his mind, not upon his own position, but upon that of the poor fellow who lay somewhere below.

He lay down once more in the snow, shrinkingly, for in spite of his efforts, the thought would come, "Suppose a great piece of the side should give way beneath me, and carry me down to a similar fate to Melchior's." These fancies made him move carefully in his efforts to peer down farther than before, so as to force his eyes to pierce the gloom and make out where Melchior lay.

But it was all in vain. He could see a long way, and sometimes it almost seemed as if he saw farther than at others; but lower down there was always that purply transparent blackness into which his eyesight plunged, but could not quite plumb.

"I wonder how deep it is?" said Saxe aloud, after shouting till he grew hoarse, and speaking out now for the sake of hearing a voice in that awful silence. "I wonder how deep it is?" he said again, feeling startled at the peculiar whisper which had followed his words. "It must go right down to the rocks which form the bottom of the valley, and of course this ice fills it up. It may be fifty, a hundred, or five hundred feet. Who can say?"

The thought was very terrible as he gazed down there, and once more imagination was busy, and he mentally saw poor Melchior falling with lightning speed down, down through that purply-blackness, to lie at last at a tremendous depth, jammed in a cleft where the crevasse grew narrower, ending wedge-shape in a mere crack.

He rose from the snow, beginning to feel chilled now; and he shook off the glittering crystals and tramped heavily up and down in the warm sunshine, glad of the reflection from the white surface as well, though it was painful to his eyes.

But after forming a narrow beat a short distance away from the crevasse, he ceased as suddenly as he had begun, feeling that he might even there be doing something which would cause the ice to crack; and he had hardly come to the conclusion that he would go gently in future, when a peculiar rending, splitting sound fell upon his ears, and he knew that it was the ice giving way and beginning to form a new crevasse.

For the first few moments he fancied that it was beneath his feet; but, as it grew louder and developed into a heavy sudden report, he knew that it must be some distance away.

He crept back to the crevasse, and listened and shouted again, to begin wondering once more how deep the chasm would be; and at last, with the horror of being alone there in that awful solitude creeping over him, he felt that he must do something, and, catching up his ice-axe from where it lay, he tramped away fifty yards to where a cluster of ragged pinnacles of ice hung together, and with a few blows from the pick-end of the axe he broke off a couple of fragments as big as his head, and then bounded back.

None too soon, for the towering piece which he had hacked at suddenly turned over towards him, and fell forward with a crash that raised the echoes around, as it broke up into fragments of worn and honeycombed ice.

As soon as he had satisfied himself that no other crag would fall, he stepped back, and, as he picked up two more pieces about the same size as he had selected before, he saw why the serac had fallen.

Heaped around as it had been with snow, it had seemed to have quite a pyramidal base, but the solid ice of its lower parts had in the course of time been eaten away till it was as fragile as the waxen comb it in some places resembled, and had crumbled down as soon as it received a shock.

Carrying his two pieces back, Saxe set them down at the edge of the crevasse, about a dozen yards from where Melchior had fallen; and, then going back along the side to that spot, he shouted again—a dismal, depressing cry, which made his spirits lower than before; and at last, after waiting some time for a reply, knowing all the while that it would not come, he crept back to where he had laid the two pieces of ice, and stood looking down at them, hesitating as to whether he should carry out his plan.

"I must be doing something," he cried piteously. "If I stand still in the snow, thinking, I shall go mad. It will be hours before Mr Dale gets back, and it is so dreadful to do nothing but think—think—think."

He gazed about him, to see a peak here and a peak there, standing up dazzling in its beauty, as it seemed to peer over the edge of the valley; but the glory had departed, and the wondrous river of ice, with its frozen waves and tumbling waters and solid foam, all looked cold and terrible and forbidding.

"I must do something," said Saxe at last, as if answering some one who had told him it would be dangerous to throw pieces of ice into the crevasse. "It is so far away from where he fell that it cannot hurt him. It will not go near him, and I want to know how far down he has fallen."

He laid down his ice-axe, picked up one of the lumps, balanced it for a moment or two, and then pitched it into the

narrow chasm, to go down on his hands and knees the next instant and peer forward and listen.

He was so quick that he saw the white block falling, and as it went lower it turned first of a delicate pale blue, then deeper in colour, and deeper still, and then grew suddenly dark purple and disappeared, while, as Saxe strained eyes and ears, there came directly after a heavy crash, which echoed with a curious metallic rumble far below.

“Not so very deep,” cried Saxe, as he prepared to throw down the other piece; and, moving a few yards farther along towards the centre of the glacier, he had poised the lump of ice in his hands, when there came a peculiar hissing, whishing sound from far below and he shrank back wondering, till it came to him by degrees that the piece he had thrown down must have struck upon some ledge, shattered to fragments, and that these pieces had gone on falling, till the hissing noise he had heard was caused by their disappearing into water at some awful depth below.

Saxe stood there with the shrinking sensation increasing, and it was some time before he could rouse himself sufficiently to carry out his first intention and throw the second piece of ice into the gulf. As it fell his heart beat heavily, and he once more dropped upon his hands and knees to follow its downward course and watch the comparatively slow and beautiful changes through which it passed before it disappeared in the purple-black darkness, while he listened for the crash as it broke upon the ledge preparatory to waiting in silence for the fall of the fragments lower down.

But there was no crash—no hissing, spattering of small fragments dropping into water—nothing but the terrible silence, which seemed as if it would never end; and at last a heavy dull splash, the hissing of water, and a curious lapping sound repeated by the smooth water, till all died away, and there was silence once again. “Awful!” muttered Saxe, as he wiped his damp brow. “Poor Melchior!—no wonder he didn’t answer to my cries.”

A feeling of weary despondency came over the boy now, and he shrank away from the edge and threw himself down on the snow.

For it was hopeless, he knew. And when Mr Dale returned he should have to tell him of his terrible discovery; when he, too, would own that no human being could fall down that terrible gulf and live.

The snow was cold beneath him, and the sun poured down upon his back with blistering power, but the boy felt nothing save the despairing agony of mind; and as he lay there one desire, one wish came to his mind, and that was full of longing for forgetfulness—the power to put all this terrible trouble behind him—a miserable feeling of cowardice: in short, of desire to evade his share of the cares of life, which come to all: for he had yet to learn what is the whole duty of a man.

Chapter Twenty One.

“You think he is dead?”

Saxe never knew how long it was before he was roused from his miserable lethargic state by a faint hail, which acted upon him like magic, making him spring to his feet and answer before going back to the edge of the crevasse, and uttering a cry that was doleful in the extreme.

Then he shaded his eyes and gazed downward beneath the labyrinth of ice blocks among which the smoother ice which had formed their path wound its way; but for a long time he could see nothing of Dale, and he was beginning to ask himself whether it was fancy, when there was another hail, and soon after he caught sight of Dale’s head and shoulders as he climbed up the icy slope, and saw that the new rope was across his breast.

But this sent no thrill of joy through Saxe, for he seemed instinctively to know that it would be useless, and he shook his head.

In another ten minutes Dale came panting up, and, without hesitation, leaped the chasm.

“Well,” he said, “you have heard him?”

“No.”

“Has he not answered once?”

“No.”

Dale stood frowning and in silence for some seconds, before saying sternly, “well, we have our duty to do, Saxe. We must get him out.”

“Yes, I’m ready,” replied the boy; and he stood watching as Dale took the coil of rope from his shoulder, a ball of thin string from his coat pocket, and the lanthorn from his ice-axe, to whose head he had slung it as he came.

“Ah!” cried Saxe, “you have brought the lamp and string. You are going to let down a light for us to see where he lies?”

“I was going to, my boy; but I think better of it now. You shall go down without. It looks dark there, but it will not be so very black. The long light across will strike down.”

Saxe told him about the pieces of ice he had thrown down, and Dale looked terribly serious.

"So deep as that?" he muttered. Then quickly: "But one piece struck on some ledge. He must have fallen there. Now, lay down your axe, but you must take it with you."

Saxe obeyed, and set his teeth hard, as Dale scraped away the snow and found almost directly a narrow crack which ran parallel with the crevasse, but so slight that there was just room to force down the stout ashen staff which formed the handle of the ice-axe, the top of it and about a foot of the staff standing above the ice.

"That's firm as rock," said Dale, after trying it. "I could trust myself to it, and the rope will run round it easily."

"You think the rope is strong enough?" said Saxe.

"I had it thoroughly tested before we left England. I could venture to hang a bull from it, or two or three men. But, ones for all, I have no right to send you down there. Tell me you dare not go, and I will give up, and we must go in search of help, for this is a terrible task. You would rather not go?"

Saxe was silent.

"Speak!"

"I won't," cried Saxe passionately; and then to himself, "I'd die first."

He held up his arms for Dale to knot the rope about him, watching the process with knitted brow.

"There: that is safe," said Dale. "Now pick up your ice-axe and hold by the rope with your left hand, so as to ease the strain upon your chest. Use the ice-axe cautiously, to keep yourself from turning round and from striking against the side. When you get down to the ledge, which must be, from what you say, only just out of sight, you will chip a secure place for your feet if the ice slopes, and, proceeding quite slowly and calmly, make yourself first quite safe. When this is done, unfasten the rope from about you, and make it fast about poor Melchior. Be very particular about the knot, mind. Don't forget what I have taught you. That knot must not slip in any way, either in tightening round his chest or coming undone."

"I'll remember," panted Saxe.

"That's right. Now then, I think that is all, except a final word. There is no danger for you to dread. The rope is new and strong, and I am at one end."

"You will not let it slip through your hands?"

Dale smiled at him sadly, and shook his head.

"Ready?" he said.

"Yes."

"Take off your hat."

Saxe obeyed, and Dale removed his and knelt down in the snow, Saxe slowly sinking upon his knees.

There was a minute's silence as a brief, heartfelt prayer was offered up for help: and then Dale sprang to his feet with an eager, bright, cheerful look upon his face, and, clapping a hand on either side of Saxe's waist, he lifted him by his belt and set him down again.

"Why, I could draw up half a dozen of you," he said. "Now, steady! Down with you, and slide over. Saxe, you are going to the rescue of a fellow-man."

The boy set his teeth, his brow furrowed, and there were marks about his eyes, as he saw Dale throw the rope round the handle of the ice-axe, and then over the coil, so that the rings of rope should come off freely. Then he grasped the hemp firmly with one hand, his ice-axe with the other, and threw back his legs over the edge of the crevasse close to where the great piece had broken away. As he did this a piece of snow slipped from under his chest, and went down before him and he was over the side, swinging gently to and fro, as he heard a spattering noise come from below.

"Don't be afraid to talk, Saxe," said Dale loudly; and every word came distinctly to the boy's ears as the sides of the crevasse slowly rose above him, and, in spite of himself, he turned his eyes up with a wild longing toward the deep blue sky.

"I—I can't talk," he gasped forth.

"All right—steady! Take it coolly, lad."

"Yes; only don't ask me to talk till I've something to say."

"No!" shouted Dale, as the sides of the crevasses grew more distant and represented two jagged lines against the sky. "Splendid rope, Saxe!" came down to him; "runs as easily as if it were made of silk. Cut your chest?"

"Not much," shouted the boy, who for an instant felt a sensation of danger as the rope turned him round; but, remembering his instructions, he touched the wall of clear ice with the point at the end of the axe handle, checked himself, and tried to look downward into the blue transparent light which rose up to meet him, as it seemed.

"Half the rope out, Saxe!" came from above. "See anything!"

"No."

"Bit lower down, I suppose. Don't let it turn."

The two edges of the crevasse now began to approach, each other, as it seemed to Saxe; and he could see that, except where the piece was broken away, they exactly matched, every angle on the one side having its depression on the other, the curves following each other with marvellous exactness, just as if the fracture were one of only a few weeks old.

"See the ledge, Saxe?" came down.

"No;" and the lad felt an intense longing now to be able to see Dale's face watching him, for it would have seemed like companionship, instead of his having nothing to gaze at but the strip of blue sky, and the glistening blue-ice walls on either side going off to right and left till they seemed to come together in the blue gloom.

And still the rope glided over the ice above, and the slip of sky grew narrow; but though Saxe peered down into the depths, there was no sign of any ledge, and the boy who now felt less nervous, was wondering how much longer the rope was, when Dale's voice was heard.

"No more rope!" he cried. "Now, can you see the ledge?"

Saxe gazed down in silence for a few moments, and Dale's voice came again—short, sharp and impatient:

"I say, can you see the ledge?"

"No."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Yes."

There was a pause, and then Dale's voice was heard again:

"Does the rope hurt you much?"

"No."

"Can you bear it five minutes longer!"

"Yes—a quarter of an hour."

"Bravo! Wait."

There was a strange silence then, during which Saxe gazed down below him; but he could see no more than when he had been at the top, only that everything looked blacker and more profound, and that the noise of waters was more plain as it reverberated from the slippery walls.

"What is he doing?" thought Saxe. "I hope he will soon draw me up;" and a momentary feeling of panic came over him, and the rope felt painfully cutting. But just then he caught sight of a dark object against the sky. The dark object seemed to be descending, and the next moment he saw that it was light, and he knew that the lanthorn was being sent down at the end of the string.

"Call to me if the rope hurts you too much," cried Dale; and to his horror and astonishment Saxe, as he looked up, saw that his companion's head and shoulders were over the side, and it was as if a black face were looking down at his.

"The rope doesn't hurt; but—but—is it safe!"

"Perfectly; and I am letting down the light so that you may see where the ledge is."

"I understand."

The lanthorn glided down very rapidly, and in a few moments was level with Saxe's face. Then it descended still, and Dale called to him to say when it should be stopped; but it was some time before the boy sharply uttered the word, "Now!"

"See the ledge?"

"Yes—with some broken ice upon it."

"Does he seem much hurt?"

Saxe was silent for a few moments, and then said huskily—

"He is not there!"

"He must be. Look again."

"Swing the lanthorn backwards and forwards."

Dale responded by gradually making the lanthorn describe a considerable arc.

"No—no! No—no!" cried Saxe, as he swept the ledge with his eyes from end to end.

Dale was silent for a time. Then he said huskily—

"Can you hold out while I lower the lanthorn as far as the string will go?"

"Yes."

The light descended like a star going down into another firmament of as deep and dark a blue as that above; and as Saxe watched he saw it reflected from the dark walls. Then lower, lower, and down and down, till suddenly it stopped.

"That is all the string—a hundred yards. Can you see him now!"

"No!" said Saxe hoarsely.

"You can see nothing!"

"Only the lamp swinging and the ice shining."

"Hold fast!" cried Dale, and the rope began to quiver in a peculiar way, as if it were receiving a series of jerks; but Saxe guessed that this must mean that it was being hauled up handover-hand. There was no one gazing down at him now, and he had a full view of the blue strip of sky, which now grew broader and broader, till, after what seemed to have been a very long ascent, the top of the crevasse was reached.

"Now," said Dale, "reach over as far as you can, and drive in the pick of your axe."

Saxe obeyed.

"Now try and draw yourself up. That's right. I've got hold of the rope. Now—together! That's right."

There was a heavy tug, and as some more snow rattled down into the gulf Saxe was drawn over the edge on to the surface, where the first thing he noticed was the fact that the other end of the rope had been fastened round Dale's waist and passed round the ashen handle, so that when Dale had lain down he had been able to support Saxe, and yet leave his hands free.

"Untie yourself," said Dale gravely. "I am going to draw up the lanthorn."

"And what are you going to do then?" asked Saxe, who lay on the snow panting, as if he had just gone through some very great exertion.

"Go back and give notice. Get together two or three guides, and consult with them as to what is best to be done."

"Then you give him up?" said Saxe mournfully.

Dale looked at him in silence, for there seemed to be no answer needed to such a question, as he slowly wound in the string which held the lanthorn.

"Now, back to the valley as fast as we can," said Dale, as he dragged his ice-axe out of the crack and threw the rope over his shoulder, and glanced round at the sky. "Got the lanthorn and string?"

"Yes," replied Saxe; "but we cannot get there before night."

"We cannot get any farther than the camp before dark, my boy," said Dale sadly. "It is impossible to go on then. We must wait there till daybreak, and then go for help."

"One minute, sir," said Saxe; but it was three or four before he could go on.

"Yes," said Dale.

"I only wanted to ask whether you think he is dead!"

"I'd give five years of my life, boy, to be able to say no; but I cannot!"

Chapter Twenty Two.

From out of the Depths.

They began to descend the great ice-torrent in solemn silence; but before they had gone fifty yards Saxe stopped short, darted a wild, apologetic look at Dale, and began to run back toward the crevasse.

Dale followed him more slowly, and reached the boy as he was lying down with his head and shoulders over the brink.

"Mel—chi—or!" shouted Saxe, with his hands on either side of his mouth—a long-drawn, piteous cry, in which he

formed the name into three syllables; and as Dale leaned over and listened to the strange hollow reverberations down below, it was as if a voice repeated the last syllable in a faint, appealing whisper.

"There!" cried Saxe excitedly; "I couldn't go without trying once more. I knew it: he isn't dead! You heard that?"

"Yes," said Dale, with a pitying look at his companion, "I heard that."

"Well? He's not dead. I'll stay here, and keep shouting to him now and then, while you go for help. Run at once. Stop a minute. Give me your flask; I'll lower it down to him with the string."

"Saxe, my lad," said Dale sadly, "you are buoying yourself up with false hopes."

"No, no! I heard him answer distinctly," cried Saxe wildly. "Hark! I'll call again. Melchior, Mel—chi—or!"

He gave forth the last cry with all his might, emphasising the "chi—or!" and, probably from his being on the opposite side of the crevasse, and more favourably placed for the acoustic phenomenon, the syllables were repeated, after a pause, faintly but distinctly—an effect that had not been produced by any of the lad's cries on the other side of the crevasse.

"There!" cried Saxe.

Dale laid his hand upon the boy's shoulder, and shook his head sadly. Then, bending down, he too shouted—

"A-hoy-oy-oy!"

And, after a pause, there came up distinctly the latter part of the word.

"Ahoy!" shouted Dale again, sharply.

"Hoy!" came up.

"You hear," said Dale. "It is only an echo. A man down there in peril would not repeat words. In nine cases out of ten he would cry 'help!'"

Saxe turned away from the crevasse with a groan that told how forcibly his companion's words had gone home; but he turned back again.

"It seems so cruel to come away even if he is dead," he whispered. "Shall I stop while you go?"

"No, Saxe. If we could hear him answer, I should at any cost say Stay, or I would myself stop, for I believe that a word or two from time to time would have encouraged him to struggle on for his life. But to stay there by that crevasse through the night, without proper protection, might mean your death. The cold up here must be terrible. Come."

Saxe followed him slowly, with his head bent to hide the tears standing in his eyes, and then Dale took his arm.

"We have done our duty so far," he said; "and we are doing it now in going for help to try and rescue the poor fellow's remains from yon icy tomb. Believe me, my lad, I would not come away if there was anything more that we could do."

Saxe was silent for a few minutes, as they tramped on over the ice, which was now beginning to take a warm tint in the afternoon's sunlight. Then, making an effort, he spoke: "You will of course get men and ropes?"

"Yes; and bring back a crowbar or tamping iron, and a heavy hammer to drive it into the ice."

Saxe sighed, and, forgetting his weariness, stepped out quickly over the rugged way, as they kept as nearly as they could to the invisible track they had followed during the ascent.

The sun was now getting so low down that the great ragged pyramids and crags of ice cast fantastic shadows eastward. There was a deep orange glow in the sky, and at another time they would have stopped enchanted by the dazzling beauty of the effects before them; but now Saxe could see nothing but the pale face of their guide, as he lay far below with his staring eyes fixed upon the narrow rift beyond which was the evening sky; and at such times as the boy conjured up this ghastly picture in his brain, his eyes grew misty, and he stumbled and slipped upon the rugged ice which formed their way.

"We must press on," said Dale; "we have not come down above a mile, and it is a long way yet. We must not be amongst these seracs and crevasses after dark."

"I can walk faster," said Saxe heavily, and he increased his pace.

But it was in many places a task requiring careful descent, and every time they came upon a crevasse Saxe felt a curious shrinking, which called for a strong effort of will to enable him to make the necessary spring to leap across, while several of the wider ones which had been leaped in coming up were now avoided by a détour to the left.

All these incidents made their descent slower; and as Dale thought of the long distance yet to go, he grew more and more anxious.

"Saxe," he said at last, as they were now slowly passing along the rocks by the side of the glacier, which they had now left to avoid some patches of rugged ice, "I'm afraid we shall have to rest here in some niche as soon as darkness comes on. I can't trust to my memory to find the way farther when the light has gone."

"What's that?" said Saxe, catching his arm.

Dale stopped and listened; but the place was utterly still for a few minutes, and then there was a sharp crack and a rattling noise.

"Piece of ice broken off and fallen."

"No, no; I did not mean that," cried Saxe, as his eyes wandered upward among the broken ice now beginning to look cold and grey. "There!—there!"

A faint chipping sound was heard as the lad spoke; but as they stood in quite a trough between the steep rock of the valley side and the jagged masses of ice, it was impossible to say exactly from whence it came.

"Yes, I heard it," said Dale, as the sound ceased. "There must be some one on the ice: it sounded just like cutting steps. Listen again."

They stood motionless, but all was perfectly still.

"Come along," cried Dale; "we cannot waste time. It must have been the ice giving way somewhere. Perhaps it was the splitting sound of a crevasse opening."

"There it is again!" cried Saxe.

"Yes; it must be some one cutting steps: but it is evidently a long way off. We can't see from here, but some one must be on the mountain above us, and the sound comes through the clear air, and strikes against the valley wall over yonder. Yes: hark! It seems to come from there; but, depend upon it, the cause is high up overhead."

They started again, for everything was growing greyer, and in spite of the hard work they both began to feel cold. But they had not gone a dozen steps before the sound began again, and Saxe cried excitedly—

"It's from out on the glacier somewhere. There are people there, and we shall get help."

There was so much decision in the boy's utterance that Dale was impressed, and he stopped short close up to the ice, listening to the chipping sound, which was distinctly heard now, though very faint.

All at once Saxe went forward a step or two, and then dropped upon his knees on the stone where the ice stood a few inches away from the rock, melted and worn by the water that evidently tore down at times.

"Well?" said Dale, as Saxe listened.

"Yes, you can hear it more plainly here," said the boy.

"No!"

"Come and listen."

Dale laid his head against the ice, and for a few moments nothing was heard.

"No," said Dale; "it is what I told you—an echo from above. People don't cut steps on glaciers, the slope is not enough. Ah! yes. It does certainly seem to come from the ice."

Saxe looked at him wildly. His head was in a whirl, full of thoughts, which seemed to jostle each other, while Dale stood listening to the steady chip, chip, chip.

"I cannot quite make it out."

"There's some one cutting down there," cried Saxe.

"No. The sound is carried a long way; but some one must be cutting steps in the ice not far from here."

"Then it is not an echo?"

"No, I think not; but I am not sure."

"Let's see!" cried Saxe excitedly.

"It is like wasting time, my boy; but it may mean the help we want. Yes, we will see."

Dale began to climb on the ice once more, but Saxe hung back.

"The sound comes from down here," he said.

"Possibly. But come up here, and we may hear it more plainly. Give me your hand."

"I can manage," cried Saxe, and he seemed to have forgotten his exhaustion as he sprang up the rugged blocks, and wound in and out till they came to a smooth part, where Dale halted.

"Yes," he said, as the chipping went on; "the ice conducts the sound. It comes more from the centre of the glacier."

"It doesn't," said Saxe to himself. "I'm sure it comes from below."

But he said nothing aloud, only followed his companion as he led him on, and in and out, with the sound playing with their ears as the will-o'-the-wisp is said to play with the eyes.

For sometimes it was heard plainly. Then, as they wandered on amidst quite a labyrinth of piled-up ice that at another time they would have shunned in dread of danger, and through which they were now impelled by a strange feeling of excitement, the noise died quite away.

At such times they were in despair; but as they pressed on they could hear the chipping again.

Finally Dale stopped short, beneath a tall spire of ice, and held up his hand.

"I'm afraid we have wasted a valuable half-hour, Saxe," he said. "There can be nothing here."

They shouted as they had shouted a dozen times before, but there was no response, and Dale turned wearily in the direction from which they had come, the perpendicular rocks of the valley indicating the course they had to take, when suddenly the sound began again, apparently from close beneath their feet.

"It must be out here," cried Saxe; and he went off to his right, and at the end of a minute reached a comparatively level space that they had not seen before.

"Take care!" cried Dale. "A crevasse over yonder."

Chip, chip, chip. There was the sound again, and as Saxe laid his ear against the ice he heard it more distinctly.

"We're getting nearer," he cried. "It sounds underneath, but is farther away. I know! I'm sure! I've felt it ever so long now. There's some one down below."

Dale said nothing, but he thought the same, and stepping forward side by side with the boy, they strode on together, with the chipping growing plainer; and as their further progress was stopped by a wide crevasse all doubt was at an end.

The sounds came up from the vast rift, which seemed in the failing light to run in a peculiar waving zigzag right across the glacier for nearly half a mile.

Saxe uttered a curious hoarse sound, as he dropped upon his knees close to the edge of the crevasse.

"Take care, boy; the ice is slippery."

Saxe made no reply, but peered shuddering down into the black darkness, and tried to shout; but his throat was dry, and not a sound would come.

It was Dale who shouted, as he now bent over the crevasse.

"Ahoy! Any one there?"

His voice went reverberating down through the caverns of the ice, and as the sound died away there came an answer—

"Au secours! Help!"

"Melchior!" yelled Saxe wildly; and the voice came again from out of the black darkness—

"Help!"

Chapter Twenty Three.

A Rescue.

For a few moments Dale and Saxe knelt together there, with their hearts throbbing wildly at their discovery. There was a bewildering train of thoughts, too, running through their minds, as to how the poor fellow could have got there; and Saxe could only find bottom in one idea—that they had been confusedly wandering about, returning another way, till they had accidentally hit upon a further development of the great crevasse into which the guide had fallen.

All this was momentary, and then Dale was speaking.

"He must be a long way off to the right here, cutting his way up, and the ice conducted the sound. Come,—carefully. It would be terrible if you slipped."

"I sha'n't slip!" cried Saxe firmly, and he followed on.

"Ahoy!" shouted Dale. "Where are you?"

"Here!" came from the right still, but apparently from the other side, the voice sounding hollow and strange.

Dale caught Saxe's arm.

"Are we on the wrong side of the crevasse!" he muttered. But he went on for another twenty yards and called.

The answer still came from the right, but not from the opposite side, the former effect being simply reverberation. Another thirty yards or so brought them to where the hollow-sounding voice seemed to come up from straight below them; and they lay down to speak.

"Don't ask questions about how he came there. Let me speak only," whispered Dale. "Where are you?" he shouted.

"Nearly below you, herr," came up feebly. "So cold and faint."

"Hold on," shouted Dale. "Now, Saxe, the ball of string and the lanthorn. Light it quickly."

The boy's hands trembled so that he could hardly obey, and two matches were spoiled by the touch of his wet fingers before the lamp burned bright and clear.

Meanwhile Dale had been securing the lanthorn to the end of the string.

"Melchior," he shouted, "I'm sending you down the light."

His words were short and sharp, and now he lay down and began to lower the lanthorn rapidly, its clear flame reflected from the ice wall, and revealing bit by bit the horrors of the terrible gulf, with its perpendicular walls.

Down, down, down went the lamp, till Saxe's heart sank with it, and with a look of despair he watched it and that which it revealed,—for he could see that it would be impossible for anyone to climb the ice wall, and the lamp had gone down so far that it was beyond the reach of their rope.

"Terribly deep down," said Dale, half aloud, as he watched the descending lanthorn.

"Ah! I see him!" cried Saxe. "He is just below the light, on that ledge. Yes, and the ice slopes down from there."

"Can you get it?" cried Dale loudly. "Not yet, herr," came up feebly. "Lower."

"There is not much more string, Saxe," whispered Dale: "get the rope ready."

But before this could be done the feeble voice from below cried, "Hold!" and they could see, at a terrible depth, the lanthorn swinging, and then there was the clink of metal against metal, and a horrible cry and a jarring blow.

"He has fallen!" cried Saxe. "No: he has got hold, and is climbing back."

Faintly as it was seen, it was plain enough to those who watched with throbbing pulses. The lanthorn had been beyond Melchior's reach, and as he lay there on a kind of shelf or fault in the ice, he had tried to hook the string toward him with his ice-axe, slipped, and would have gone headlong down lower, but for the mountaineer's instinctive effort to save himself by striking his axe-pick into the ice.

No one spoke, but every pulse was throbbing painfully as the man's actions were watched, down far beneath them, he seeming to be in the centre of a little halo of light, while everything around was pitchy black.

"He has got it," muttered Saxe, after a painful pause; and then they heard the clink of the ice against the lanthorn, and saw the latter move, while directly after, from out of the silence below, there came the sound of a deeply drawn breath. "Can you hold on there?" said Dale then, sharply. "A little while, herr. I am cold, but hope will put life in me." Dale waited a few minutes, and Saxe touched him imploringly. "What shall we do?" he whispered. "Shall I go for help?"

"No. Get your axe, and begin cutting some foothold for us: three or four good deep, long notches, about a yard apart. Begin six or eight feet away from the edge. We want purchase to pull him out."

"But the rope—the rope!" cried Saxe. "Do as I tell you."

Saxe obeyed without a word, driving the pick-end into the ice, and making the chips fly in the grey light of evening, for the shadows were now falling fast; and as the lad worked and cut the deep groove, Dale bent over the crevasse and spoke.

"Better!" he said.

"Yes, herr: more life in me now."

"Have you your rope?"

Saxe stopped to listen for the answer, and, though it was only a matter of moments, he suffered agonies of expectation before he heard the answer.

"Yes."

"Take off the lanthorn and stand it by you, or fasten it to your belt."

"Yes, herr."

"Make fast your rope to the string, and let me draw it up."

"It will not reach, herr."

"I know. I have mine."

There was a pause only broken by the chipping of the ice-axe, and then the voice came up again in a hollow whisper

"Ready!"

"If it will only bear it," muttered Dale, as he steadily drew upon the string, hand over hand, expecting moment by moment that it would part. But it bore the weight of the rope well, and in a few minutes he was able to lift the coil over the edge on to the glacier.

Saxe heard him give a sigh of relief as he bent down and drew it away; but he turned back to the crack directly, and shouted down in slow, solemn words—

"Keep a good heart man, and if it is to be done we'll save you."

"With God's help, herr," came up; and the voice sounded to Saxe, as he toiled away, less despairing.

"Now!" cried Dale, speaking quickly and excitedly: "pray with me, lad, that these two ropes together may be long enough. Quick! Out with your knife."

Saxe obeyed, and stood ready while Dale rapidly joined the two ropes together; but, not content with his knot, he cut off a couple of pieces of string, and rapidly bound down the loose ends so that they should by no possibility slip through the loops.

This done, and Saxe once more cutting the grooves he was making more deeply, Dale rapidly ran Melchior's rope through his hands, and made a knot and slip-noose.

"Keep on cutting," he said to Saxe. "No: a better idea. Pick a hole—there!" He stamped his foot in the place he meant. "Small and deep, so as to turn your axe into an anchor if we want its help. Work—hard!"

Saxe drove his axe down on to the ice with vigour, blow after blow sending the tiny crystals flying, while he had to fight down the intense desire to leave off and watch the rescue, as Dale began to lower the noose he had made.

"Is it long enough?—is it long enough?" he muttered, as he rapidly passed the rope through his hands, Saxe giving a side glance from time to time as he picked away.

Down went the whole length of the guide's line, and the knot passed Dale's hands, after which the weight was sufficient to draw down the new rope, whose rings uncoiled rapidly, and, as their number grew fewer, Saxe breathed hard, and he echoed Dale's words, "Will it be long enough?"

The last coil but three—the last coil but two—the last coil but one—the last coil; and Dale's nervous right hand closed upon the very end, and he went close to the brink and looked down at the light.

"Can you reach it?" he shouted.

There was a pause, and then the voice came up—

"No! Lower a little more."

Dale groaned. Then, lying down, he held his hands close to the edge, giving quite another three feet to the length.

"Can you reach it now?"

"No."

"How far off is it above you?"

There was a pause, and then—

"I can just touch it with the end of my finger. I am lying down, and holding on with one hand and my ice-axe. If I could use my axe, I could pull it down."

"No, no!" shouted Dale. "The rope is all out. Stop: if I give you another two feet, can you get your arm well through the noose I have made, and hang on?"

"I will try."

"Come here, Saxe. I am going to lean over the edge and hold the rope down as far as I can reach. Drive the head of your axe into the hole you have made, and hold on with one hand; take hold of my ankle with the other. There will be no strain upon you, but it will give me strength by holding me in my place."

The axe was driven in to hold like an anchor, and Saxe shuddered as he held by the handle and took a good grip of Dale by thrusting his fingers in at the top of his heavy mountaineering boot.

Then Dale shuffled himself as far over the brink as he dared, and stretched his arms down to their full extent.

"Now: can you do it?"

Another terrible pause.

"No, herr."

Dale groaned, and was wondering whether he could achieve his aim by drawing up the rope, re-knotting it, and making the noose smaller, but just then Melchior spoke.

"If I could free my ice-axe, I could hook on to it, herr. I can see the loop quite plainly, but I dare not stir—I can only move one hand."

"Wait!" cried Dale. "Ice-axe!"

He drew back, hauled up some of the rope, knelt upon it to keep it fast, and picked up his ice-axe, while Saxe watched him with dilated eyes, as he made a knot and passed the axe handle through to where the steel head stopped it like a cross. Then, cutting off more string, he bound the end of the rope to the handle of his axe, doubly and triply, so that slipping was impossible.

This took up nearly a foot for the knot; but the handle was nearly four feet long, so that by this scheme he gained another yard as an addition to the rope.

"I am at the end of my wits now, Saxe," he said softly; and then, with grim irony, "There is no need to wet my hands, boy."

"Now, Melchior!" he shouted; "try again!"

He was on his chest as he spoke, with his arms outstretched, holding tightly by the axe handle.

"Can you reach it?"

Saxe panted, and felt the insides of his hands grow wet and cold as he held on to his companion and listened for the answer that was terribly long in coming. The sensation was almost suffocating; he held his breath, and every nerve and muscle was on the strain for the words which seemed as if they would never reach his ears.

"Well?" shouted Dale, in a harsh, angry voice, his word sounding like a snarl.

"Can't quite—can't. Hah! I have it!"

"Hurrah!" burst out Saxe, giving vent in his homely, boyish way to his excitement.

Then, feeling ashamed of himself, he was silent and listened for every word.

"Get your arm right through, above the elbow."

"Yes, herr. Right."

"Pull, to tighten it."

"Yes, herr," came back.

"Ready? Sure it cannot slip?"

"It cuts right into my arm: never slip."

"Now, Saxe, I have him, boy; but Heaven knows whether I can get him up, lying like this. No: it is impossible; I have no strength, and the wood handle is not like rope."

"Oh!" groaned Saxe.

"If I could get to the rope, you might help me. It is impossible: I cannot lift him so."

"Can you hold on as you are?" said Saxe huskily.

"Yes; but I could not lift—I have no power."

"I must come too, and get hold of the handle. Will the head come off?"

"Hush! No. It is too new and strong. But you could not get hold to do any good. There—come and try."

Saxe unhooked his axe from the ice, for an idea had struck him; and, lying down close to Dale, who uttered a sigh of satisfaction as he grasped the boy's idea, he lowered down his axe, and hooked the rope with it just beneath Dale's.

"Good," whispered the latter,— "good. Ready?"

"Yes."

"Draw steadily hand over hand, till we can get the rope over the edge. Then throw your axe back, and take hold of the rope."

"Yes, I understand."

"Now, Melchior, we are going to haul."

There was no reply beyond what sounded like a groan; and the pair at the edge of the crevasse began to tighten the rope gently as they drew up their axes, with the weight gradually increasing; they saw by the light of the lanthorn that they first dragged the poor fellow up into a sitting position; and not having the full burden to deal with yet, Dale got a shorter hold of the axe handle, Saxe doing the same.

"Steady, steady: don't hurry, boy. It is these first moments that possess the danger. Once we have the rope I don't mind."

They hauled again hand over hand literally: for in their cribbed position they could do no more than just pass one hand over the other; but they were gaining ground, and even yet they had not the full weight, for fortunately as they hauled they could see the body swing round against the ice wall, and that Melchior's feet were on the dimly visible ledge.

"Now, Saxe, we have his whole weight coming; so as the strain falls, quick with him, one, two, three, and we shall have the rope. Once I can get that between us on to the edge, we shall have a lot of the drag off our arms. Now—one, two, three!"

How it was done they could neither of them afterwards have fully explained; but Saxe had some recollection of tugging at his ice handle in answer to those words of command till he touched the head with one hand, passed his other under it, and had hold of the rope.

"Now your axe!" shouted Dale; and Saxe unhooked it, and flung it behind him with a clang, as at the same time it felt to him as if his chest were being drawn slowly over the slippery ice, and that he was moving surely on into the gulf.

The perspiration stood out in great drops upon his face, his grasp of the rope grew more feeble, and the feeling of self-preservation was thrilling him, when suddenly there was a tremendous reaction; he drew a long breath, and was hauling with renewed strength.

It was all nearly momentary, and the reaction came as the boy felt his toes glide into one of the great notches he had cut in the ice.

"Steady, steady," panted Dale. "Oh, if I only had some purchase! Pull, and never mind the skin; get the rope over the edge. Hurrah!"

The rope was over the edge, and just between them, and but for the fact that Dale was able to get the head of his axe beneath his chest, and press it down on the ice, it would have glided back once more.

"Now, Saxe," he cried, "I can hold him like this for a few moments: the edge helps. Step back and take a grip of the axe handle."

Saxe obeyed, drawing the handle tight, and getting his boot toes in another of the notches.

"Now," cried Dale, "hold on with all your might while I shuffle back."

"Are you going to leave go?" growled Saxe.

"No."

That negative came like the roar of a wild beast.

"Got him tight," cried Saxe; and he set his teeth and shut his eyes, while, holding on with one hand, Dale shuffled himself back as far as he could—that is, to the full extent of his arms and the foot of rope he had dragged over the edge of the ice.

Then he paused for a moment or two.

"Now I want to get rope enough in for you to take hold."

"Will the ice edge cut?"

"No: the rope will cut down a smooth channel in the ice. Ready?—Together."

There was a brief interval of hauling, and several feet were drawn over, so that Saxe was able to get hold of the rope too; and they rested again, for in that position everything depended on their arms.

"Now I have him," cried Dale. "Hold on with one hand while you reach your axe, and anchor it in the hole you made."

"Done," cried Saxe.

"Haul again."

They hauled, and another foot or so was gained.

"Now hitch the rope well round the axe handle," cried Dale, "and get it tight."

This was done; the rope being twisted above the band of leather placed to keep the hand from slipping; and with this to take off the stress, Dale was able, while well holding on, to get to his knees, and then to his feet, when, planting

his heels in one of the grooves cut in the ice, he took a fresh grip of the rope.

"Now, Saxe," he cried; "up with you! Behind me!"

The lad grasped the position, and leaped up and seized the rope behind Dale.

"Now, then!—a steady haul together!"

The battle seemed to be nearly won, for the rope glided on steadily over the ice, cutting pretty deeply the while, but after the first few seconds apparently without friction.

Foot by foot, a steady pull, till there was a sudden check.

"Hah!" ejaculated Dale. "I see. We are at the end of the new rope, and the knot has caught in the groove we've made. I can hold him, Saxe. Take your axe, and pick the ice away on one side. Mind! you must not touch the rope."

Saxe took his axe, and a few strokes with the pointed end broke off a good-sized piece. The knot glided over, and the next minute, with the same idea inspiring both, they began to haul up Melchior's rope.

Will this last out, and not be broken by the friction?

Foot by foot—foot by foot—till at any moment they felt they would see the man's hand appear; and all seemed to depend now upon the state in which the poor fellow would be in when he reached the surface. If he were perfectly helpless, the worst part, perhaps, of their task would come. If he could aid, it would be comparatively easy.

At last there was a faint glow of light behind the edge, which grew plainer in the gloom in which they had been working, and directly after Melchior's hand reached the edge.

Dale was a man of resource, and he was about to call upon Saxe to hitch the rope round the axe handle once more—that which acted as an anchor—when he saw in the faint glow that the fingers clutched at the edge.

"Haul! haul!" he cried; and as they pulled the whole arm appeared above the edge, and was stretched flat on the ice. And the next moment, with a dash, the guide's axe was swung over the edge, and the sharp point dug down into the glistening surface, giving the poor fellow a slight hold, which, little as it was, proved some help.

It has been said that Dale was a man of resource, and he proved it more than ever now.

"I can hold him," he cried. "Take the rope, and lower down a big loop right over his head. That's right: lower away." Then, as Saxe responded quickly, he cried to the guide, "Try if you can get one or both your legs through the loop."

There was a little scraping and movement before the poor fellow said, hoarsely—

"Through."

"Now, Saxe, twist the rope as quickly as you can, so as to get hold."

Saxe twisted the double rope till the loop closed upon the guide's leg; and then there was a momentary pause.

"Now, ready! When I say haul, try to help us all you can. Haul!"

Saxe had his heel in a groove, and he struggled with all his might, Melchior aiding him so effectually that, as Dale drew the poor fellow's arm farther, Saxe was able to raise the leg he held to the level; and the next moment the guide lay prone on the ice with the lanthorn still burning, and attached to the waist.



"The next moment the guide lay prone on the ice with the lantern still burning, and attached to the waist."

"Both together again!" cried Dale hoarsely; and they dragged him a few yards along the ice perfectly helpless, for he had exhausted himself in that last effort to reach the surface.

"Take—off—that—that light!" said Dale, in a strange tone of voice; and then, before Saxe could run to his assistance, he staggered toward the crevasse and fell heavily.

The boy's heart was in his mouth. For the moment it had seemed as if Dale were going headlong down, but he lay a good two feet from the edge, a distance which Saxe increased by drawing him over the ice; and then, himself utterly exhausted, he sank upon his knees helpless as a child, the ice glimmering in a peculiarly weird and ghastly way, the dark sky overhead—far from all aid—faint and famished from long fasting—and with two insensible men dumbly appealing to him for his assistance.

It was not at all a matter of wonder that Saxe should say piteously—

"What can I do? Was ever poor fellow so miserable before?"

Chapter Twenty Four.

A Great Call on a Boy.

Saxe's depression was only very temporary. As his breath, short from exertion, began to come more regularly, his thoughts dropped back from the tangle of weak helplessness into their proper common-sense groove.

Going to Dale, he turned him over on to his back, and then went to Melchior, who lay motionless; but he was quite sensible, and spoke.

Saxe drew out the flask, and poured a few drops between Dale's lips. Then, returning to the guide, he treated him in the same manner before clasping the poor fellow's hand between both his own, and crying in a choking voice—

"Oh, Melchior! Thank God—thank God!"

"Ja, herr," said the poor fellow in a whisper, as he reverted to his native tongue: "Gott sei dank!"

Just then Dale began to recover, and uttered a low groan; but consciousness came with one stride, and he sat up, looked sharply round, and said sharply—

"Surely I did not swoon? Ah! I was utterly exhausted. Well, Melchior, lad," he continued, with a forced laugh, "you are no light weight; but we tested the two ropes well. However did you get down to this place?"

"Don't ask me now, herr," said the guide. "I am weak, and want rest. Will you let me grasp your hand?"

"My dear fellow!" cried Dale eagerly, and he seized and held the poor fellow's hand in both of his. "Now, how are you? Can you get up and walk?"

"Oh, yes, herr; and the sooner the better, for I am wet, and it is so cold: I am nearly benumbed."

"Here, let's help you," cried Dale, and he and Saxe passed their arms under the poor fellow's shoulders and raised him up.

"Thank you—thank you!" he said. "It is the cold that makes me so helpless. Let me sit on that block for a few minutes while you coil up the ropes."

This was done; and then the question arose—whereabouts on the glacier were they?

"I think I know," said the guide, rather feebly.

"Yes: but you are not fit to move," said Saxe.

"I must move, young herr," replied the man sadly. "To stay as I am means a terrible illness, perhaps death. But I shall fight it down. The movement will send life into me. Now, have you the axes? Please to give me mine, and I shall creep along. We must get to the tent and a fire somehow."

"But you cannot lead, Melchior."

"I will lead, herr," he replied, as he rested on Saxe's shoulder. "Here in the mountains man must exert himself if he wishes to live. This way."

To the astonishment of both he used his ice-axe as a walking-stick, holding it by the steel head, striking the spike at the end of the handle into the slippery floor, and walking slowly but steadily on along the edge of the crevasse.

Saxe felt a strong inclination to go back and peer down into the black depths again, but he had to resist it, and, carrying the lanthorn, he followed close behind Melchior, with one hand raised, ready to snatch at him if he seemed disposed to fall.

It was very dark now, and the light from the lanthorn was reflected in a faint, sickly way from the ghostly-looking masses of ice as they threaded their way onward, the guide whispering to them to be silent and careful, as many of the huge pinnacles were unsteady.

But, in spite of their cautious procedure, one mass tottered over and came down with an awful crash just as Dale had passed; and the falling of this meant the destruction of a couple of others, the noise of their splintering raising an echo in the narrow gorge which ran upward reverberating like thunder.

Melchior did not speak, but hurried on, and, turning the end of the crevasse, led them diagonally off the ice and down into the narrow stony way between it and the walls of the valley.

Here he let himself sink down on a smooth slope of rock, to remain seated for a moment or two and then lie right down upon his back.

"It is nothing, herr," he said quietly,—“only weariness. May I beg for something?”

"Yes: what can we do!" cried Dale.

"Fill your pipe for me, herr, and light it. My tobacco is so wet it will not burn."

"Of course," cried Dale.

"Hadn't we better give him some more water?" whispered Saxe.

"No, herr," said the guide; "no more. That which you gave me brought life back to me: it would do no more good now. Let me rest and smoke awhile—not many minutes. Then I can go on."

The pipe was filled and handed to the poor fellow, who held it with trembling fingers to the opened lanthorn; and as soon as he had lit it and begun to smoke, he said feebly—

"Have you matches, herr!"

"Yes, plenty."

He blew out the light.

"We do not want that now," he said, handing it back to Saxe, and lying back again, to go on smoking rapidly. "The warmth is coming back to my limbs," he continued. "I shall be able to walk better, herrs, and it will be best for me."

"Then you think you can reach the tent to-night?" said Dale.

"Oh yes: we will reach it, herr. It is not so very far now. There will be a fire, and hot coffee, and rugs to cover us from the cold. Oh yes: we are all faint and hungry."

"But look here, Melk," said Saxe, "suppose I go down and fetch up some wood and the coffee?"

"No, herr: it is life to me to get down to camp. There!" he cried, making an effort and rising, "I am getting stronger now. It is hard work to walk, but it is best for me after what I have gone through."

Saxe looked at the dark figure before him with a feeling almost of awe, and his desire was intense to begin questioning; but he restrained himself, waiting till Melchior himself should begin, and following down over the rugged

and slippery stones for what seemed to be a weary interminable time. A dozen times over the boy felt as if, regardless of the cold, and the knowledge that it was freezing sharply, he must throw himself down and sleep. But there was the dark figure of the patient guide before him, struggling slowly along, and fighting against the pain and exhaustion that nearly overcame him, and he took heart and stumbled on till he felt as if all the trouble through which he had passed that evening were a dream, of which this was the nightmare-like following, and at last he followed the guide nearly asleep.

How long they had been walking Saxe could not tell, but he roused up suddenly as a peculiar cry rang out somewhere close at hand.

"What's that?" he cried excitedly.

"The mule trumpeting a welcome back," cried Dale. "We are close there now;" and, in effect, five minutes after they were in the sheltered nook, where Melchior stumbled to the tent and dropped down under its shelter.

"Quick, Saxe! The fire and hot coffee for the poor fellow!"

Saxe was wakeful enough now, and in a very short time the coffee kettle was steaming, while the fire threw strange shadows on the rocky wall.

Dale had not been idle. His first proceeding had been to throw a couple of rugs over their companion, who in due time sat up to drink the hot coffee with avidity. He could only eat a few morsels of bread, but he partook of the coffee again, and then sank back to drop into a heavy sleep, and Saxe and Dale sat watching him for some time, forgetting their own mental and bodily weariness in their anxiety respecting the poor fellow's state. But after bending over him several times, and always with the same satisfactory discovery that the sufferer was sleeping easily and well, both Dale and Saxe yielded to their own desire to lie down, carrying on a conversation one minute and the next to be sleeping as heavily as the guide.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Melchior's Adventure.

Saxe woke the next morning with a start, and, as full recollection came, he looked round at where Melchior lay; but he was not there. Dale was, however, sleeping soundly; and creeping silently out, so as not to awaken him, Saxe found, to his surprise, that the guide was seated by the fire, feeding it carefully and sparingly with sticks, so as to get all the flame to bear upon the coffee kettle; and, to Saxe's great delight, he seemed to be much as usual.

"Why, Melk," he said, "I was afraid you would be very bad."

"I? Oh no, herr. I was very bad last night, and it was hard work to get back here; but the sleep did me good. You see, we mountain people get used to being knocked about, and I am not much hurt."

"But—"

"Yes, I'll tell you presently, when the master is awake: it is not pleasant to talk about twice. Here he is."

"Why, Melchior, man, you surprise me!" cried Dale, shaking hands warmly. "Here have I been dreaming all night about a long journey to fetch a *chaise à porteurs* to carry you down, and here you are just as usual."

"Yes, herr; and the coffee will be ready by the time you have had your bath."

"But I want to know—"

"Yes, herr, I'll tell you soon;" and a very, very short time after, as they sat round their meal, Melchior went on sipping his coffee and eating his bacon, as if he had never been in peril in his life; while the others, in spite of the hunger produced by the keen mountain air, could hardly partake of a morsel from the excitement they felt as the guide told of his mishap.

"I always feel, herrs, when I have had to do with an accident, that I have been in fault, and that I have to examine myself as to what I had left undone; but here I cannot see that I neglected anything. The crevasse was not wide. I had seen you both leap in safety, and I followed. It was one of the misfortunes that happen to people, whether they are mountaineers or quiet dwellers in the valley."

"Yes; a terrible accident, Melchior."

"Yes, herr. Sometimes we go to mishaps, sometimes they come to us. Well, Heaven be thanked, my life was spared. Ah! herr, I am very proud of you two, for I seem to have taught you a little. Very few of our men would have worked more bravely, or done so well."

"Oh, nonsense! We acted as any one else would under the circumstances," said Dale hastily. "Tell us about your accident."

"My fall, herr? There is very little to tell."

"Little!" echoed Saxe. "Oh, go on: tell us!"

"Very well, herr," said Melchior simply; but he remained silent.

"We thought you were killed," said Dale, to bring the guide's thoughts back.

"Yes, herr; you would. It was a bad fall; very deep, but not like going down from a mountain. I am not broken anywhere; hardly scratched, except my hands and arms in climbing."

"But you jumped across the crevasse, Melk!" cried Saxe, "and then a great piece broke out."

"Yes, herr: so suddenly that I had not time to use my axe, and before I could utter a cry I was falling fast down into the dark depths. I believe I did cry out for help, but the noise of ice and snow falling and breaking on a ledge some way down drowned my voice; and as I turned over in the air, I felt that I had made my last climb, and that the end had come, as I had known it come to better guides."

"There are no better guides," said Saxe warmly.

"No!" echoed Dale, and they saw the man's face flush a little through his swarthy skin, and his eyes brighten.

"Oh yes, herrs," he said; "but we all try to do our best. What was I saying? I remember: that I was falling down and down, and set my teeth and held my axe with both hands to try and strike if I should reach a slope, so as to stop myself; but there was nothing but the black walls of ice on either side and the roar of waters below. I thought of this as I prepared myself for being broken on the cruel rocks beneath: a great deal to think, herrs, in so short a time, but thoughts come quickly when one is falling. Then I was plunged suddenly into deep, roaring water, and felt myself swept round and then onward as if I had been once more in the schlucht; for I had fallen into one of the great water holes in the river below the gletscher, and then was carried along."

"How horrible!" ejaculated Saxe. "Was it very dark?"

"So black that a man might do without eyes, herr," said Melchior, smiling sadly.

"You could not swim in water like that!"

"No, herr; and it was so cold that it deadened a man's strength. But I knew I must fight for my life, for I said to myself I had my two English herrs above there on the gletscher, and how could they find their way back from the wilderness of ice? Then I thought of how the little river must run, and I could tell—for I knew it must be very much like the places where I have looked up from the end of gletschers (glaciers you call them)—that there would be deep holes worn in the rock where great stones are always whirling round and grinding the hollows deeper. These would be hard to pass; but I hoped by clinging to the side to get by them without being drowned. They were not what I feared."

"Then what did you fear!" cried Saxe excitedly; for the guide had paused.

"The narrow pieces, where the water touched the roof, herr. I knew it was far down to the foot of the glacier, and that there must be many long hollows where the water rushed through as in a great pipe; and if they were too long, I felt that I could never get my breath again, but that I should be thrown out at the bottom dead."

Dale drew a long, deep breath, and asked himself whether he was justified in exposing a man to such risks for the sake of making his own discoveries.

"Well, herrs, I knew that if I stopped I should get benumbed and unable to struggle on, so I began feeling my way along the narrow shore of the little river, now touching stone, now ice, till the shore seemed to end. As I felt about I found the ice arch lower, and that I must begin to wade."

"But why didn't you try and wade back to the bottom of the crevasse where you fell?" cried Saxe.

"I did, herr; but it was impossible to face the water. It rushed down so fiercely that, as it grew deeper and from wading knee deep I was going along with the water at my waist, I had to cling sometimes to the ice above my head to keep from being swept away."

Saxe drew a long breath.

"I went on, herr, cheered by the knowledge that every step I took was one nearer to liberty; and now, though the water was all melted ice, I did not feel so cold, till suddenly my feet slipped away from under me, and I felt as if something had given me a heavy push in the back. Then I was under the water, and found that I was gliding round and round. I don't know how many times, for it was like being in a dream, till I was once more where the water swept me down under the ice arch.

"There, I can tell you little more, except that it was all wild confusion, that the roar of the water seemed to crash against my ears till I was once more in a shallow place; and as I struggled to get my breath, I came to what seemed to be a bar, panting heavily till I could turn a little, and I found that the bar to which I clung was the handle of my ice-axe lying across two masses of stone, between which the waters roared.

"I felt that I could go no farther, and that if I attempted to pass through that narrow gateway of stone it would be to my death, so I forced myself sidewise till I found myself free from so much pressure, and, stretching out my ice-axe, I felt about till I could hook it on to ice or stone; and as I drew myself along by the handle the water grew less deep, then shallower still; and as I made my way it was over stones among which water ran, and I felt about with my axe, puzzled, for it was so strange. There was the water running over my feet, but gently, and the rushing river a little way behind. What did it mean? why was it so? Those were the questions I asked myself till the light came."

"Ah! it began to get light?" cried Saxe.

"In my brain, herr," said Melchior, smiling; "and I knew that this was a little side stream coming down some crack beneath the ice, one of the many that help to make the other big.

"As soon as I understood this I stopped, for I knew that the opening to these rivers would grow smaller and smaller, and that it would be of no use to go up there if I wanted to escape. So, wading along, I tried to reach the wall, to lean against it and rest before going back to the torrent, knowing as I did that this must be the only way.

"I must have taken a dozen steps before my ice-axe checked against the ice, and I threw myself against it, trying to calm my burning head by resting it against what I took to be the arch of the large ice-cave into which I had found my way; but, instead of the wall leaning over toward me, as it would in a rugged arch, it sloped away. I did not notice this much as I leaned forward, for the ice felt delightfully cool against my burning head; and as the coldness went in farther and farther, I seemed to be able to think better and clearer, and this set me trying about with the axe, till I found that I was at the bottom of a great ice slope, as it seemed to me; and as I raised my head and gazed upward my heart gave a great throb, for there, high up, far away, was a gleam of light, and at the sight of that strength came to me, and I grasped my axe tightly, for that meant escape from that terrible place, and life.

"I was quite cool then, and I knew that I must be at the bottom of some crevasse. I knew, too, that the ice sloped away from me, therefore it would most likely do so all the way up; so I had only to climb to the surface of the gletscher and walk away."

"I'm beginning to understand now," said Saxe. "An ice slope is not a very serious thing to a guide who has worked upon the mountains ever since he was a boy, herrs. Feeling satisfied now that I had but to cut my way up step by step, I grew more easy in my mind, glanced up, and then, after a little feeling about in the darkness, I chipped my first step, just enough for my toe to hold in, rose up and cut another."

"In the dark? How did you know where to hit?" cried Saxe. "I could cut steps in the ice blindfold, herr," said Melchior sharply. "When the hands and arms have grown used to doing a thing, they can do it even if the eyes are not watching them. Of course I do not say I always struck exactly in the right place, but I could get sufficiently near to make a notch in the smooth ice; and I kept on, with my heart growing lighter as I chipped away, listening to the echoing of the blows and the hissing sound of the bits of ice as they slipped down the smooth face—for it was perfectly smooth, and as if polished.

"Step by step I cut my way. It was slow, tiring work; but every notch made was a step nearer to liberty, and I worked on. As I climbed higher I had to cut my notches deeper, for the slope was not quite so easy, and the slightest slip would have sent me to the bottom; and from the height to which I had at last climbed this might have meant a broken arm or leg, for there was no water to fall into but a few inches trickling among the stones.

"And so I cut on and on, herrs, till, as I looked up far above me, I could see the gleam of the sun, and hope grew stronger and sent strength into my arms as I swung my axe.

"Higher and higher, always getting up by making a notch for each foot, till my arms began to grow heavy as lead. But still I worked on, every step cut bringing me nearer to the surface, though at the end of each hour's hard labour I seemed very little advanced; and at last, as I grew more weary, my spirits began to sink again, for the slope grew more and more steep, though I would not own to it myself. Still it was steeper and steeper, and I cut desperately, and made deep notches into which I forced my feet, while I cut again till the last part was nearly perpendicular; and after cutting my last step I felt that my task was done, for I had reached a ledge over which I was able to climb, till I could lie half upon it, knowing that I had come to where the wall went straight up, and that it would be impossible to hold on to that slippery ice and cut my way higher.

"Still, I would not give up, herrs; but reached up and cut till I felt that I was gliding off the narrow ledge, and then I had to rest, and use my axe to cut notches for my feet to hold and others for my hands, for the least slip would have sent me down like a stone in a couloir, and I wanted rest before I had to get down again. I asked myself if I could; and a cold feeling came over me, as I thought that all this work had been for nothing, and that the end had now really come.

"And then I took my axe again as it lay beside me, and began cutting in a madly foolish kind of way. There was no use in it. I could not help myself by cutting; but I could hear the lumps of ice hissing down, and it made me think, so that the work did me good. More, it did other good, for, as I have thought over it since, it has made me try to pray as a man should pray who has been delivered from a terrible fall. For those last blows of my axe must have been the ones which you heard, Herr Saxe—the blows which brought you to my help just when my arms were ready to sink to my side, and I had fully determined in my own mind that I could never get down from the ledge to the little river alive."

"How deep was it, Melk?" cried Saxe excitedly.

The guide shook his head.

"You know the rest, gentlemen. You came and saved my life just when I had not sufficient strength left to have tied the rope safely about my waist. It was the noose which saved me, and I could not believe in that safety till you dragged me over the side of the crevasse. Herr Dale—Herr Saxe, how am I to say words to show you how thankful I am?"

"Do not try," said Dale quietly. "Come, Saxe boy, you have let your coffee grow cold."

"Yes," said Saxe; "but it has made my head hot. I don't feel as if I want any breakfast now."

"Nonsense: you must eat, for we have a long journey back to the chalet."

"To the chalet, herr? You do not want to go round by the chalet?"

"Indeed, but I do. You will want a fortnight's rest after this adventure."

The guide stared at him in astonishment.

"A fortnight's rest!" he echoed; "and with weather like this! Oh, herr, it would be madness: I want no rest."

"Why, you do not mean to say that you feel equal to going on?"

"Oh yes, herr. I am a little stiff and tired this morning, but that will be all gone by to-morrow; and I meant to take you up to a crystal cave to-day."

Saxe looked at Dale's wondering face, and then burst into a hearty laugh.

"It is of no use to dwell upon troubles gone by, herr," said Melchior. "I shall get well quicker here than down at the chalet. How soon will you be ready to start?"

Chapter Twenty Six.

An Expedition.

There was no doubt about Melchior's willingness to make a fresh start that day; but none was made, Dale being of the opinion that a quiet rest in the neighbourhood of the camp would be of advantage to all concerned.

"Rest our bodies and our nerves too, Saxe," he said. "I am pretty strong in mind and muscle, but yesterday's business shook me in both. I can see it all constantly; and as for my arms, the strain upon them was terrific."

"The herr is stopping about the tent to-day," said Melchior to Saxe the first time he could get him alone, "because he thinks I am too weak to go forward, and because he does not trust me as he did before. It is cruel of him, and he is mistaken. I had an accident, of course; but so do the best guides upon the mountains have accidents."

"You are quite wrong," replied Saxe, and he repeated all that Dale had said; but the guide did not seem to be satisfied, for he shook his head solemnly, and went about smoking his big pipe, looking despondent in the extreme; while the others spent the morning chipping the stones in search of minerals that might prove interesting, and of the various Alpine plants that luxuriated in the sheltered corners and ravines facing the south.

They had been collecting for some little time, when Saxe suddenly exclaimed—

"Well, I am disappointed!"

"What, at not going on some wild expedition to-day?"

"No: with these stones and flowers."

"Why?" said Dale.

"Because there's nothing fresh. I've seen plants like that in Cornwall, and limestone like that in Yorkshire."

"Not exactly like it, boy; say similar."

"Well, granite and limestone, then."

"So you would, my lad, all over the world—Asia, Africa or America."

"But I expected something so different; and I thought we were going to get magnificent great crystals, and I haven't seen any yet."

"Did you expect to see them tumbling about anywhere on the mountain side, sir?"

"I thought they would be plentiful."

"I did not. I fully expected that we should have a good deal of difficulty in finding them. If they were easily found, they would be common and of no value. Wait a bit, and I dare say we shall discover a crystal cavern yet."

"Well, then, the flowers and moss: I expected to find all kinds of fresh things."

"Did you?"

"Yes, of course—all foreign. Why, look at those! I've seen lots of them at home in gardens."

"Gentians? Oh yes."

"And that patch of old monkshood," Saxe continued, pointing to a slope dotted with the dark blue flowers of the aconite. "Why, you can see that in nearly every cottage garden at home. Here's another plant, too—I don't know its name."

"Centaurea."

"You can see that everywhere; and these bluebell-harebell-campanula things, and the dandelion blossoms, and the whortleberry and hogweed and wild parsley stuff: you see them all at home."

"Anything else?"

"Oh yes: the fir trees down below, and the ash and birch and oak and willow, and all the rest of it. I thought all the trees and flowers would be foreign; and there's nothing strange about them anywhere, only that they grow close to the ice."

"Humph!" ejaculated Dale, as he pressed an orange hawkweed between two pieces of paper; "has it never occurred to your wise young head that these things are common at home because they have been brought from places like this?"

"Eh?"

"Have you not heard about Alpine plants?"

"Oh yes. Aunt Ellen has lots in her garden, I know, because they are so like my name—Saxe something."

"Saxifrages. There are any number of them about here, from some so tiny you can hardly see them to others with great bell flowers and broad leaves. I'm afraid if you went to the tropics Saxe, you would find fault with the plants there, because you had seen so many of them at home in England. Now, let's sit down and rest here, and look at the mountains! I never tire of watching their snow peaks, ridges and hollows, with their dazzling snow."

"Yes, it's very beautiful; but I want to climb up some more of them."

"In spite of the risks?"

"Oh, we must be more careful, and pick fine days."

Dale smiled.

"You must have a chat with Melchior about that. Do you know that is almost impossible to pick what you call a fine day?"

"No," said Saxe. "I should not have thought it was. Why can't you choose one?"

"Because the higher you are up the more risk there is of change. Now, look here: what sort of a day would you call this?"

"Surely just the day for ascending a peak."

"Yes, I knew you would say that; but look up yonder," and he pointed toward the summit of the highest mountain near.

"Yes, I can see. What a lovely slope of snow, with a few clouds floating by!"

"To us, Saxe; but if we were up there, we should be in a mist, with the weather intensely cold and a wind blowing so hard that it would be unsafe to climb."

"What, up there?—now?" cried Saxe wonderingly.

"Yes, up there now. I have often known men ascend mountains on what seemed to be glorious days, and there was only a fine filmy veil to be seen floating round the higher parts—just enough to hide them perhaps for an hour together; but when they came down to the little hotel in the valley, they had a long tale to tell us of having been frostbitten while clinging to the snow slopes and ice-covered rocks, not daring to venture up or down on account of the tremendous, tempestuous wind blowing."

"I say, look here!" cried Saxe, pointing to another peak from which lovely, silvery streamers of cloud spread out: "you don't mean to say that there's bad weather up there now?"

"Indeed, but I do; and if you asked Melchior he would—"

"Hi! Melk!" cried Saxe, as the man came slowly up after them, "what sort of weather is it up there now?"

"Terrible, herr," replied the man, shading his eyes. "The snow must be falling heavily, and a wind raging fierce enough to tear any man from his hold."

"Well!" ejaculated Saxe, "I am puzzled. Why, the weather looks glorious—like summer!"

"But you forget that if you only go high enough up it is eternal winter. The tops of those mountains are in the midst of never-failing snow, which is gradually compressed into ice and—"

"Would the herr like to go to the foot of the glacier and examine the ice grotto?"

"We did do that in the other valley."

"But this is a larger cave, herr; and besides, it is the entrance to the one where I journeyed down."

"Can't you settle yourself for a quiet day, Melchior?" said Dale, smiling.

"No, herr; I do not seem to be earning my money. It will be a very easy walk, and we can take the lanthorn and another candle; besides, it is quite fresh. I do not think any one has ever been in it but me."

"What do you say, Saxe?"

"That I should like to go," cried the lad eagerly; for half a day of comparative inaction had been sufficient to weary him, surrounded as he was by such a region of enchantment, where, turn which way he would, there was some temptation to explore.

"I am in the minority," said Dale, smiling; "but I mean to have my own way. No: I shall keep to my previous arrangements. To-day we will rest. To-morrow, if the weather is good, I'm going up to the bare face of that mountain on the other side of the glacier."

"The Bergstock," said Melchior. "Yes, it is one of the places I mean to take you to, herr; for the gletscher winds round behind it, and I hope you will find what you want there."

"I'm not half so eager to find crystals now, Melk," said Saxe that evening, as he sat beside the guide, glad that the day of inaction was at an end.

"Why so?" asked Melchior.

"Because we don't find any, I suppose."

"But when we do the young herr will be as eager as ever."

"Oh!"

"Is the young herr in pain?"

"No: only when I move. My arms are so stiff. I say, don't you feel a bit sore from your work yesterday?"

"Oh yes, herr," said the guide, smiling; "but the best way to ease pains like those is not to think about them."

"I dare say it is," grumbled Saxe; "but it seems to me that it would be easier to bear the pain. I couldn't forget a thing that's always reminding you that you are sore. But there, I am glad it's to-night. I shall go to roost in good time, so as to get a fine long sleep."

Saxe kept his word, and he slept soundly, only waking once when the mule uttered one of its peculiar squeals. But no one was sufficiently alarmed to get up, and the incident was forgotten next morning, when one of many days of an uneventful nature commenced, during which the party made excursions in different directions: into the ice grotto; across the glacier to the Bergstock; up to first one and then another snowfield, and among magnificent views in all directions, and under endless atmospheric changes such as gave constant variety to the surroundings. And every night Saxe confided to Melchior that he was tired of it all, and every morning was refreshed and ready for fresh action.

The perils of the crevasse adventure were almost forgotten; but it seemed to the boy that Dale shrank from going into any fresh danger, and this troubled him.

"I suppose Mr Dale thinks I behaved badly, and was too young," he said. "But only let me have a chance, and I'll show him I am not such a coward as he thinks."

Then came the evening when Melchior announced that the food supply must be renewed by a long journey to Andregg's chalet, for bread and coffee and butter could not be easily obtained, like wood.

"Will the herr come back with me, or shall I go alone?"

"Go alone, Melchior, and be as quick back as you can."

The next morning when they woke the guide and the mule were gone, probably having started at the first faint dawn.

"Are you going to wait about the tent till he comes back, sir?" said Saxe, as they sat over the breakfast they had prepared.

"No: we will have two or three little excursions of our own, just up to and along the edge of the snow-line; but to-day I should like to visit the glacier again, and see those two crevasses coolly."

An hour after they were well on their way, knowledge having made the task comparatively easy. But it was rather a risky journey, before they had arrived at the spot which was pretty deeply impressed upon their minds: for every now and then some mass of worn ice fell crashing down, and raised the echoes of the narrow valley, while a cool wind seemed to have been set free by the fall, and went sighing down the gorge.

They were prepared to find the lower crevasse, from which they had recovered Melchior, much less terrible by daylight. To their surprise, it was far more vast and grand, and as they advanced cautiously to the edge and peered down into the blue depths, they both drew breath and gazed at each other with a peculiarly inquiring look.

There were the notches Saxe had cut, but partly melted down by the action of the sun; there, too, were the holes chipped out and used to anchor the ice-axe; and then, as if fascinated by the place, Saxe advanced again to the

edge.

"Take care!" said Dale warningly.

"Yes. I only want to see if I can make out the slope up which he climbed."

The boy lay down upon his chest and peered over, but gave quite a start directly, as he felt himself touched.

"I was only hooking you by the belt, my lad," said Dale, who had pushed the head of his axe through the boy's belt. "You can do the same for me another time."

Saxe flushed a little, and looked down again, feeling that Dale was treating him as if he were a child.

"Well," said his companion, "can you see the slope?"

"No: nothing but the blue darkness—nothing."

He drew himself away.

"It's a horrible place," he said.

"What are you going to do?"

"Only send a big lump of ice down."

"I suppose that comes natural to all of us," said Dale, smiling, and helping the lad turn over a huge block broken from one of the shattered seracs. "I never knew any one yet who did not want to send something down every hole he saw, even if it was a well."

The block they turned over was roughly cylindrical, and turned over pretty readily upon their using their axe handles as levers, and at last they had it close to the brink of the awful chasm, and paused for a few moments.

"No fear of its hurting any one—eh, Saxe?" said Dale; but he spoke seriously, for the terrible nature of the place impressed him, and before going farther the two again peered down into the awful gulf.

The effect was the same on each—a peculiar shrinking, as the thought came—"Suppose I were to fall?"

"Well, Saxe," said Dale, "shall we push the piece down?"

Saxe nodded, and placed the handle of his axe under the block. Dale did the same. They raised their hands together, and the great block went over and dropped out of sight, while they stood listening and waiting for the heavy bellowing crash, which seemed as if it would never come, and then far exceeded in violence anything they had imagined.

"It isn't stupid is it, to feel a bit frightened of such a place?" said Saxe, with his face all in wrinkles.

"I should say the person must be very dense and stupid who is not frightened of such an awful place. Here, let's get on: it seems rather waste of time to spend it going to these crevasses again; but it is interesting all the same."

They started upward now, and went nearly exactly over the same ground as before, till the upper crevasse was reached; and after going through the same performance of sending down a block of ice, Dale suggested that as it would be unwise to go farther up the glacier, here covered with snow, without the help of the guide, they should make for the side of the gorge, and at the first opening climb up and make their way over the lower slopes of the mountain, and so back to camp.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

The Black Ravine.

Perfectly simple to arrange, but very difficult to practise. For instance, they had to toil on quite a mile before the narrow crack, which formed the bed of a streamlet, offered itself as a way out of the glacier valley.

"I'm afraid this will be an awkward climb, Saxe," said Dale. "What do you say? Will you face the hard work?"

"Oh yes!" he cried. "It's better than going the same way back."

"Up you go, then."

Saxe went on, now on one side of the tiny stream, now on the other, the sides rising right and left almost perpendicularly at times. But there was plenty of good foot and hand-hold, so that Saxe made his way onward and upward at a fair rate for mountaineering, and in a very short time they had taken a last look of the glacier; the narrow rift, turned almost at right angles, growing blacker and more forbidding in aspect at every step.

"I don't believe there is any way out here!" cried Saxe at last. "It gets deeper and darker, as if it were a cut right into the mountain."

He had paused to rest as he spoke, and the gurgling of the little stream down a crack far below mingled with his

words.

"Well, let's go a little farther first," said Dale. "I am beginning to think it is going to be a cul de sac."

He looked up to right and left at the walls of black rock growing higher the farther they went, and now quite made up his mind that there would be no exit from the gorge; but all the same, it had a peculiar fascination for both, from its seeming to be a place where the foot of man had never before trod, and the possibility of their making some discovery deep in among the black rocks of the weird chasm.

"Tired? Shall we turn back?" said Dale from time to time.

"Oh no! let's go a little farther. This ought to be the sort of place to find crystals, oughtn't it?"

"I can't give you any information, my lad, about that; only that I have seen no sign of any. Say when you want to turn back."

"All right. Oh! look here!"

The chasm had made another turn, and as Saxe spoke he climbed on a little farther, so as to make room for his companion to join him among the fragments of broken rock upon which he stood. And there, right before them, the walls seemed to run together in the side of a black mass of rock, which formed the base of a snowy peak, one which they recognised as having often seen, and now looking the more brilliant in contrast with the black rock from which it rose.

"We could get there in another quarter of an hour," said Saxe.

"Yes; but what good shall we do when we get there?" replied Dale. "You see that the rocks to right and left are not to be scaled, or that this place ends in a mere gash or split."

"But you never know till you get close up," said Saxe. "The rocks fold over one another; so that we may after all find a way out and over the mountain."

"Well, if you are not too tired we'll try. This stream must come from somewhere. Hear it?"

"Yes, I can hear," said Saxe, as he listened to the strange musical gurgle of running waters somewhere far down below the blocks which had fallen from the sides of the chasm.

He started on climbing from stone to stone—some planted solidly, others so nearly poised that they rocked beneath his feet.

"One good thing," he cried breathlessly: "you can't fall any lower. How narrow the place is!"

It grew narrower still before they reached the spot where the place ended in the cleft in the face of the black rock; but, just as the boy had said, there was a fold of the chasm, quite a knife-edge of stone round, and beyond which the stream came gurgling down, and apparently going directly upward to the right.

"There!" cried Saxe. "What did I tell you? This is the way up. Shall I go on?"

"Yes, a little way; but I did not reckon on these difficulties. We will only explore a little to-day. To-morrow we can come straight here earlier, and take our time."

The place was narrower than ever now, and the rocks rose perpendicularly, so high that the place was almost in twilight. It was nearly a repetition of the chasm up which they had come, save that one side was the mountain itself, the other a portion split off.

The mountain side proving the easier, as the stones in the bottom grew more massive and difficult to climb, the boy took to the slope, and made such rapid progress that Dale was left behind; and he was about to shout to Saxe not to hurry, when he saw that the boy was waiting some eighty or ninety yards in advance, and high up above the bottom of the gorge along which Dale had proceeded in a slower and surer way.

Dale went on till he was right below the boy, and then stopped to wipe his forehead.

"Let's get back, Saxe," he said: "there may be traces of this narrow crack going right round the mountain. Ready?"

There was no answer.

"Saxe!"

"Yes," rather hoarsely.

"Come down now, and let's go back."

There was again no answer.

"Why don't you come down?" said Dale.

"I—I'll come down directly."

"Curious place—very curious place!" said Dale, looking about him at the solid walls of rock. "I shouldn't wonder if we

came upon crevices similar to those which we found lower down in the sides of the glacier: perhaps we may hit upon a cavern that we can explore. I must bring Melchior up here: he has a nose like a dog for holes of that kind."

He stood peering here and there with his back to Saxe, and did not turn for a few minutes. When at last he did, he saw that the boy was in precisely the same position.

"Why, Saxe, my lad," he said, "what are you doing? Why don't you come down?"

The lad turned his head very slowly till he could look down, and fixed his eyes upon his companion in a peculiar, wild way.

"What's the matter?—Giddy?"

"No."

"Come down, then."

"I—can't," said the boy slowly.

"Then climb on a little farther, and come down there."

"No: I can't move."

"Nonsense. This isn't a loadstone mountain, and you're not iron. Come down."

"I—I did try," said Saxe; "but I had to make a jump to get here, and I can't jump back: there's nothing to take hold of."

Dale scanned the position anxiously, seeing now for the first time that the rough angles and ridge-like pieces of rock along which the boy had made his way ceased about five feet from where he stood, and that he must have jumped on to a narrow piece of stone not a foot long and somewhere about a third of that width; and though, in the vast chasm in which they both were, the height above him, where Saxe was spread-eagled, as it were, against the perpendicular rock, looked perfectly insignificant, he was close upon a hundred feet up, and a fall would have been very serious, if not fatal.

"You foolish fellow!" Dale said cheerfully, so as not to alarm him at a time when he seemed to have quite lost his nerve: "pretty mess to get yourself in! Fortunately I have the rope."

As Dale spoke he looked about wildly for some means of utilising that rope; but he could see none.

"Why did you go up there instead of keeping down here?"

"I thought I saw an opening here," said Saxe; "and there is one big enough to creep in. I am holding by the side of it now, or I should go down."

"Then go on holding by the side," said Dale cheerily, though his face was working; and then, to take the boy's attention from his perilous position, "Not a crystal cave, is it?"

"Yes. I felt big crystals inside: I am holding on by one."

"Bravo! Well done, boy; but you are making yourself a front door."

"Don't—don't laugh at me, Mr Dale," said Saxe piteously. "It is very hard work to hold on."

"I'm not laughing at you, Saxe, my boy: only saying a word to cheer you up. You haven't got a crevasse under you, and if the worst came I should have to catch you. Now, let's see: here's a ledge away to your right; but it's too far for you to leap, and there is nothing to catch hold of. If I got the rope up to you, you could fasten it somewhere and slide down."

"Fasten it? To what?"

"Ay?—to what?" said Dale to himself. Then aloud: "You haven't a very good hold there, have you?"

"No—dreadful," came faintly.

"I say, boy; don't take that tone. Mountaineers are people full of resources. You say you have an opening behind you?"

"Yes."

"Then can you hold on with one hand?"

"I—I think so."

"Think! Say yes!" shouted Dale angrily. "Now, hold on with one hand."

"Yes."

"Where's your ice-axe?"

"I—I had forgotten that."

"I can see that, sir. Now put your hand behind you and pull it carefully out of your belt. Steady! there is no hurry. Don't drop it."

Saxe passed his hand behind him, and gradually hitched the axe out from where he had been carrying it like a sword while he climbed to the hole.

"That's better. Mind! Now push it into the hole and turn it across. Can you?"

Saxe obeyed his instructor, and Dale saw that the opening was about the level of the lad's waist, and evidently roomy—at least, amply large inside for the axe to be crossed.

"Now you've got something better to hold on by, and can hook your arm over it to rest your hand."

"Yes," cried Saxe, who was already doing this. "My hand was so horribly cramped, and it seemed as if you would never come."

"Time always seems long when we are in trouble. Now then, do you feel safer?"

"Oh yes," cried Saxe; and there was a complete change in his tone. "I can hold on now."

"Of course you can. Pretty sort of an Alpine hand you are, to give up without thinking of your tools!"

"Yes, I had forgotten my axe."

"You'll forget your head next, sir. Now, tell me: how am I to get the rope up to you?"

"Can you throw it?"

"No, I can't; nor you neither. Now, if you had been carrying it instead of me, how easy it would be! Of course you have not got that ball of string with you?"

"No," said Saxe sadly.

"No one should travel without a knife and a bit of string in his pocket; and yet, if you had a bit of string, it would not be long enough. Now, what's to be done?"

"I don't know," cried Saxe.

"That shows you are only an apprentice at mountaineering yet. I do know."

"You can see a way to get me down, sir?" said Saxe joyously.

"Yes: two ways. One is quick, short and dangerous."

"More dangerous than being as I am?"

"Yes, much; but for me, not you. The other will take longer, but it is safe."

"Then try that way," said Saxe eagerly; for he had quite recovered his nerve now, and would have been ready to jump to right or left had he been told.

"No, my lad; you are tired, and in an awkward place. My second way might fail too. It was to tear up my handkerchief and make it into a string to throw up to you, so that you could afterwards draw up the rope. No: my string might break. But I am as foolish as you are, and as wanting in resource. There," he continued, after a few moments' pause, "what a boaster I am! I did not even think of cutting a piece off the rope, unravelling it, and making it into a string."

"Yes, you could easily make that into a string," said Saxe anxiously.

"No, that would be a pity," said Dale; "and a practised climber ought not to think of such a thing. I ought," he said, scanning the rock carefully, "to be able to get up there above you, fasten the rope to some block, and then let it down to you."

"No, don't do that!" cried Saxe excitedly: "it is so easy to get up, and so hard to get down."

"Not with a rope," said Dale cheerily. "Let's see. Suppose I join you the way you came, and jump to you? Is there room for both?"

"No, no!" cried Saxe excitedly.

"Well, if I climb out to where you jumped, I can hand you the rope, you can pass it round the ice-axe, and slip down with it double and then draw it off. No: it is not long enough, and we should have to leave the axe behind. I must climb above you, boy; so here goes."

Chapter Twenty Eight.

The Crystal Grotto.

Dale threw down the rope from his shoulder, took off hat and jacket, replaced the rope like a scarf, and then stood looking upwards.

"Oh, pray be careful!" cried Saxe, rather faintly.

"Yes, miss," said Dale mockingly. "Why don't you come and take hold of my hand! There, boy, I have climbed before now, and I'll be as careful as I can. Hah! that's the better way. 'Take it coolly,' Saxe, as Jacob Faithful used to say. I'll soon have you down."

He went along the chasm a few yards, and then began to climb up the nearly perpendicular face of the rock, taking advantage of every niche and projection, and gradually getting higher and higher, but always farther away from where Saxe hung watching him with lips apart, and in constant dread lest there should be a sudden slip and a fall.

"And that would make it horrible," thought the lad. "What should I do then?"

Dale climbed on talking the while when he did not give vent to a good-humoured grunt over some extra difficult bit.

Saxe said nothing, for he felt hurt. It seemed to him that his companion was treating him like a child, and saying all kinds of moral things in a light way, so as to keep up his spirits; and, as Dale saw the effect his words produced, he said less.

"Rather a tough bit of climbing," he cried, after a few minutes' silence; "but I've had worse to do: for I've gone over pieces like this when there has been a fall of a thousand feet or so beneath me, and that makes one mind one's p's and q's, Saxe—precipices and queer spots—eh? But I shall soon do this. All it wants is a little, coolness and determination."

"Why are you going so far along that way!" cried Saxe, who liked this tone better.

"Because the line of the stratum runs this way, and higher up there is another goes off at an angle right above where you are; and there is a projection, if I can reach it, which will do for the rope: I could see it all from down below."

Saxe watched him breathlessly till he was on a level with the opening by which he clung, but fully forty yards away. There he turned and began to climb back, and always rising higher till he was some thirty feet higher than the opening, but still considerably to Saxe's right.

"Now," he said quietly, as he stood with his face close to the rock: "here is the spot, if I can get the rope over that projection."

"But then I could not reach it," said Saxe.

"I'll see about that," said Dale, carefully holding on with one hand while he drew the coil of rope over his head,—no easy task, with his feet resting upon a very narrow projection, and the rock against which he pressed himself nearly straight up and down.

"That's right," he said, as he let the coil rest upon one arm, and set the end free. "Now, Saxe, what's to be done next? There's a block up there if I could get a loop thrown over it; but lassoing rocks was not included in my education, and I'm afraid it will be rather difficult with the left hand."

To Saxe it seemed to be impossible, and he watched intently as he saw his companion double a portion of the rope so as to make a large loop, and to tie this he had to hold the twisted hemp right above his head, pressing his chest against the rock the while so as to preserve his balance, and more than once Saxe gave a gasp as it seemed to him that the venturesome man was about to fall backward.

But he succeeded, and then let the loop and his arms drop down.

"Hard work," he said. "Five minutes' rest. Curious how wearying it is to hold your limbs in a fresh position. Now then," he continued, "I've got to throw that loop over the block up there left-handed. How many tries will it take?"

Saxe remained silent, for he was by no means hopeful; and he watched intently as Dale loosened the rings upon his arm and gathered two or three in his left hand, which he dropped again, while with his right he tried to get a good grip of the rock where there was scarcely any hold at all.

"Now," he said, as calmly as if he were about to perform some feat with a quoit on level ground, instead of being balanced up in a perilous position, where the slightest loss of equilibrium meant a fall on to rugged stones of over a hundred feet.

As he spoke he threw up the braced loop so truly that it went exactly over the projection, and several rings ran off from his arm and hung down.

"Not a bad throw," he said quietly. "I didn't know I was so clever, Saxe. The question is, will it hold?"

The test was soon applied, for he drew the rope in slowly, till the slack was all gathered in, tightened it more and more, and the loop glided off the projection and fell.

"If at first you don't succeed—eh, Saxe? You know the rest?" cried Dale, as he drew up the loop and coiled the rope on his arm again. "I must get it farther on."

He threw again, and once more lassoed the projection; but the loop dropped off this time with the weight of the rope,

and he had to begin again making all his preparations as carefully as a man does in some perilous position.

Another throw, which proved a complete miss. Then another and another, each proving to be less accurate than the one which had gone before.

"Five minutes' rest," said Dale quietly. "My arm is getting tired."

A dead silence reigned then for a few minutes, during which time a dark shadow glided across the deep gully, and they heard the faint whizzing sound of the wings of an eagle, whose keen, cruel eyes looked down at them as if seeing prey.

"Now," cried Dale, "I must do this, Saxe. Don't be impatient with me, boy; and if it's any comfort to you, I may tell you that I am in a far worse position than you."

"Yes; I know," said Saxe hoarsely. "I wish I could help."

"Do so another time by not getting yourself into such a scrape. Hush! don't speak: I'm going to throw."

The loop went flying up; but at the same moment Saxe saw Dale slip a little, and it was only by a violent effort that he saved himself from falling, while, as a consequence, the loop missed again, and fell to the full length of the rings off the thrower's arm.

Saxe drew a deep breath, and watched now with a growing sensation of hopelessness as he saw each effort made, and every one after deliberate and careful gathering up of the rope and hanging it in rings upon the left arm. But no matter how he tried Dale's casts grew more and more erring, till, quite in despair, he stood fast, resting his weary arm, and said with an apologetic air—

"I wish I were not so clumsy, Saxe. I'm afraid I must try some fresh plan."

There was a long pause now, and Dale seemed to be thinking.

"Are you quite safe?" he said at last.

"I—that is, I can hold on," said Saxe sadly.

"That's right. I'm going to have one more try, lad, and if I fail I must climb again and see if I can get higher, so as to drop the loop over the rock; but I don't want to do that if I can help it, for, as you say, the getting down is bad."

He made a very long and careful preparation this time, and threw with so much vigour and want of accuracy that the loop missed; but a coil of the rope went right over the projection where the loop should have been, and the latter hung down nearly level with the thrower, and swinging to and fro some eight or ten feet away.

This was an unexpected complication, but Dale saw success in it; and after pausing for a few minutes to think, he began to climb sidewise toward it inch by inch over a part that was perilous in the extreme, till he was within four feet of the swinging loop. Then, glancing upward to make sure that the rope was well over the projection, he tightened the part he held, and, rising a little, let himself fall sidewise toward the loop, catching it easily, and swinging to and fro by the two ends of the rope as he vainly sought to find a hold for his feet.

"All right, Saxe," he said, as he rested one foot on a tiny boss; "I shall do it now." Then, helping himself by the double rope for hold, he climbed up the few feet between him and the projection, making use of every little crevice or angle for his feet, till he was able to get one arm right over the little block and hold on while he drew up the loop, cast off the piece of rope, and carefully arranged the loop in its place.

"Hurrah! That will not slip," he said.

"Pray—pray be careful," cried Saxe.

"Trust me: I will," said Dale, seizing the rope now with strong grip and lowering himself till he was hanging from it with both hands; then gliding down lower and lower, while Saxe felt puzzled, but dared not speak for fear of upsetting his companion at some special moment.

Dale lowered himself till he was level with the place he had quitted, and then began to swing himself to and fro across the face of the rock, evidently meaning to land upon the projection he had occupied so long. But after several trials he found that he had not sufficient length of rope for this, and he had to lower himself a little more, showing the while the most implicit confidence in the rope as he began to swing again, describing a larger and a larger arc, till he checked himself when farthest distant from Saxe, upon a projection which just gave him room enough to stand on a level with Saxe.

It was ticklish work, but by the help of the rope he maintained his balance till he could find hand-hold and stand perfectly upright.

"There, Saxe," he said, rather breathlessly, "the game is won."

"I don't see it," said Saxe mournfully.

"Well, I do. I shall throw the rope across to you. Catch it, and take your ice-axe and descend."

"But you must not be left in that dangerous position."

"Not long, I hope," said Dale quietly. "You can swing the rope to me as soon as you are down, and by its help I can swing myself to your ledge and examine your discovery. Now then: look out! Ready!"

"Yes."

"Then off!"

The rope was thrown and caught dexterously by Saxe, who swung loose in the act and slipped a little way down.

"Never mind the ice-axe," cried Dale, as he saw the lad begin to climb up again. "I'll bring that down with me."

Saxe ceased his efforts to regain his former level, and let himself glide down to the bottom of the gully, where he could climb forward till he was beyond where Dale was clinging and draw the rope right into his reach.

"Let go!" cried Dale, seizing the welcome rope; and as Saxe obeyed he swung himself to and fro again, till this time he was able to land himself on the ledge the boy had just quitted, and maintained his position by thrusting his arm into the opening and grasping the handle of the axe.

"Well," cried Saxe, "is it a crystal cave?" For once more on terra firma, the peril of his late position was pretty well forgotten.

"Without a doubt," was the reply, after a pause. "I was beginning to bully you horribly, but after this I suppose I must hold my tongue."

Saxe's spirits, which had been down to zero, rose now to the highest point.

"Can you break a piece off with the axe?" he said, as he saw that Dale had twisted the rope round his arm for safety, and was reaching into the hole as far as his hand would go.

"That is what I have just done," replied Dale; "and now I have lost it. No: I have it. I can hook it out now. Here it comes." And as Saxe stood on one side and watched, he saw his companion's arm drawn out, then by degrees the handle of the axe, and in imagination he saw a tiny piece of crystal drawn along by the steel head.

"I have it now," cried Dale. "Ah!"

He uttered a loud ejaculation, for his feet had slipped from the narrow ledge, and he was hanging by one arm, turning slowly round and round.

A sharp struggle enabled him to regain his position, and once back there he drew out the axe completely, thrust it behind him, through his belt, and then pushed his hand into the orifice again.

"Throw me a bit of crystal down, and I'll catch it," said Saxe.

Dale laughed, and held out a bluntly pointed, angular piece of dark stone that looked almost black as he thrust it into his breast. Then, grasping the rope with hands and feet, he slid slowly down and stood by his companion's side.

"A nice adventure this," he said, "when I had come out for a quiet day!"

He drew the crystal from his breast, and held it up for Saxe to see.

"But it's so black-looking," cried the latter, as he took hold of the great dark crystal, pure-looking and clear as its name suggested, while every angle was sharp and perfect as if it were the production of that very day.

"Black?" said Dale. "So much the better. It is a very valuable kind, and there are plenty more. As far as I could make out, some are very large. Saxe, my lad, we must not think of the trouble and danger, for we both have been in great peril, and I talked lightly just to keep up your spirits,—I say we must not think of the troubles, for you have made a marvellous find, and I congratulate you."

"Then you are satisfied?" said Saxe eagerly.

"More than satisfied. You could not have done better. Now to secure our find. We must not leave the rope there, because that would betray the place."

"But nobody ever comes here."

"We hope nobody has been here, my boy; but, according to my experience, somebody will be sure to come now and find it."

"But how are we to get the rope up again if we take it down?"

"We shall have to scheme it somehow, my lad. What man has done I have no doubt he can do again."

"But we must leave it," said Saxe, with a laugh, for he was in the highest spirits now. "We can't get it down."

"Indeed!" said Dale. "I think I provided for that;" and taking hold of the bottom, he gave the rope a sharp shake, sending a wave along it which snatched the loop from the projection, and the strong hempen line dropped at their feet.

"I hardly expected that," cried Saxe, proceeding to coil it up; "but it will be a terrible job to get it there again."

"We shall see," said Dale, as the loop was unfastened, the end twisted about the coil, and he once more threw it over his shoulder, after resuming his coat. "Now for camp. I little expected to make such a discovery when we started. Saxe, we shall have to pitch our tent up here when Melchior comes back."

"In this gloomy crack? Why, there will be no food for Gros!"

"Nor for us unless we bring it. I dare say we shall manage; but Melchior will be disappointed when he finds that we have made the discovery without his help."

As he spoke Dale looked up the gorge toward the sky, scanning the jagged edges of the summit.

"I hope no one has been watching us," he said. "It would not be very pleasant to find that any one has been spying all our actions, ready to take advantage of our find. There, come along! We cannot stop to watch the place, even if we felt this had been the case, for we've a long journey back out of this place, and then down the glacier home."

They began their arduous descent of the rugged place, Saxe walking behind, till Dale stopped by where the water, which had been gurgling along out of sight, rose now to the surface, so that they could obtain a refreshing draught.

As Saxe rose from his knees and wiped the drops from his mouth, he looked at Dale curiously.

"Well, what is it, boy?"

"What made you say about it being awkward if some one were watching us?"

"Oh, I don't know. The idea occurred to me. Why do you ask?"

"Because—perhaps it's fancy—it always seems to me that some one is watching us."

"What?"

"Those stones tumbling about our ears, and that glimpse I got of something going along the mountain; and then that night when some one came and made Gros cry out!"

"Oh, fancy, my lad—fancy," cried Dale; but there was a quick nervous tone in his utterance, and he walked on now toward the mouth of the ravine in a hurried manner, which suggested that he was thinking deeply about Saxe's words; and he was very silent all the way back to camp.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

An Unseen Danger.

"I shall be glad when Melchior comes back," said Dale, as they sat resting that night, with the dark shadows gathering in the valley, and the various peaks burning still in the sinking sunlight like glowing fire.

"I suppose he may be here any time now?" replied Saxe.

"Yes—no: he will be sure to have a heavy load, and he will not try to hurry the poor beast."

They had had the crystal out to examine again, and the more it was judged the higher Dale's opinion of it grew.

"No," he said suddenly: "that would not do at all."

Saxe stared at him, for this remark had no bearing upon what had passed before.

"I said that would not do at all, Saxe, to have some one watching our movements, and taking advantage of our being away to profit by them. Still, I feel pretty safe so far, and to-morrow we will climb to the mouth of that gully and stop about it, even if we do not go up."

"But suppose anybody came and took them after we had discovered them: wouldn't that be stealing!"

Dale shook his head.

"Oh no. These people who make discoveries of curiosities in the mountains consider they have a perfect right to them, as sons of their fatherland; and, as foreigners, I'm afraid we should get a great deal of law and no profit if we raised the question. The best way is to keep our discoveries as secret as we can. Now, then! what do you say to drawing the curtains and going to sleep?"

"I'm ready," said Saxe; "but my! what a lot of adventures we are having in so short a time!"

"All lessons for you in mountaineering, my lad. Good night."

"Good night," said Saxe drowsily, as he lay down inside the tent, and at an hour when he would have thought it absurd to think of going to sleep at home. But nature was quite ready, and as he watched Dale fastening down the door of the tent with a peg, he dropped right off to sleep, but only to start awake again, to sit up, and stare wonderingly.

"I said we have our crystal to take care of now, boy," said Dale, laughing at the comical figure Saxe cut; "and we

must not invite a visit from burglars by leaving the front door open. There, good night once more, and don't have a nightmare, and get dreaming about being fixed on a mountain shelf, like an English ornament, for strangers to see!"

"That's too bad," said Saxe drowsily. "I did find the crystal cave."

"So you did, Saxe, and it is too bad. Never mind, my lad. You've done well. Once more—good night."

Was it the next minute after saying that?

Saxe was not sure, but it seemed to be directly, though it could not have been, for instead of being twilight it was now quite dark.

"What is he doing?" thought Saxe, as he heard the faint sound of moving about. The canvas door of the little tent was open, for he could feel the cool night air blowing in upon his face, with the crisp, bracing sensation of wind off the snow-capped mountains.

Saxe lay still listening. He was very sleepy, and now, as he came to the conclusion that it must be close upon daybreak, and Dale had risen to light the fire and make coffee so that they might start for the ravine as early as possible, he determined to lie perfectly still and feign sleep till the last minute, and a sharp summons bade him rise.

It is that last bit of snooze which is so enjoyable. One goes to bed because it is time, and after a good deal of waiting sometimes one goes to sleep; but it is not the delicious, easy-going sleep of the last half-hour in the morning—a sleep so enticing to most people: at all events, boys feel as if they would barter all the rest of the night for that half-hour—the last before rising.

The rustling went on, and Dale went out, only to come in again.

"How stupid it is getting up so soon!" said Saxe to himself. "It's all very well when you've to cross a pass before the snow melts; but to be always getting up when it is cold and dark, and sitting down shivering to your breakfast, when you might be quite warm in the sunshine if you started at decent time, is so absurd."

He lay thinking.

"He doesn't seem to have lit the fire yet, for I can't hear it crackling," he said to himself after a time. "Perhaps he'll rouse me up directly to light it. Bother the old fire! I hate lighting fires. Oh, it does make me feel so cross to be roused up when one hasn't had enough. I haven't half done. I could go on sleeping for hours, and enjoy it, and get up all the better for it, and be stronger and more ready to climb afterwards. No wonder I feel a bit tired sometimes!"

Saxe had no difficulty about lying still, for every limb seemed to be fast asleep. It was only his head that felt as if he was awake, and that only half.

The moving went on; but no fire crackled, and he was not roused up.

"What can he be doing?" thought Saxe sleepily. "I don't know. It must be packing up for our start. Let's see, when will Melchior be back? This morning, I suppose. Wish he was here now to light the fire. He's so used to it—he does it so well; and then, he always makes such delicious coffee, that I enjoy my breakfast far better than when we make it ourselves, or Mr Dale makes it, and— Yes, all right!"

"Wake, Saxe? Sure?"

"Yes, quite awake."

"I'll get you to light the fire this morning, my lad: one of my arms feels a little strained."

Dale drew the canvas door aside and stepped out, while Saxe lay wondering how it was that it was quite dark one moment, when Dale was moving about, and broad daylight the next.

"I must have been asleep," he exclaimed. "But what was he doing that he hasn't lit the fire? How strange!"

Saxe sat up and rubbed his eyes and yawned; then leisurely slipped on the jacket and handkerchief he had taken off before lying down; and the more wakeful he grew the more puzzled he became, till a happy thought occurred to him.

"I know," he said: "It wasn't getting-up time. His arm hurt him in the night, and he was walking about on account of the pain. I wish I had spoken to him. Too late now. Never mind; I'll make haste, and get him a cup of coffee."

Saxe bustled about, and soon had the fire crackling and the coffee kettle full of fresh cold water over the bright flame.

It was daylight, but some time yet to sunrise, and the air was very cool, but Saxe hardly felt it in his busy preparations; and he was eagerly watching the kettle when Dale came back.

"Ah! that's right, my boy," he cried. "I shall be glad of a cup of coffee."

"Is your arm better, sir?" said Saxe.

"My arm is better, comrade," replied Dale, smiling. "I thought we had decided that there was to be no 'sir' out here, but only a brotherly salute, as befits mountaineers."

"I had forgotten," said Saxe; "and the other seems so natural. I am glad it is better."

"Thanks, lad. I've been to the little cascade, and held it under the icy cold water as it fell. The numb chill seems to have done it no end of good."

"You should have spoken to me when it was so bad in the night."

"I could not," said Dale, looking at him wonderingly.

"Was it so very bad, then?"

"No; it was not bad at all. I did not feel it till I got up."

"That's when I mean—while it was dark."

"You've been dreaming, Saxe. I did not get up when it was dark; and, by the way, when did you get up and open the tent door?"

"I didn't," cried Saxe: "it was open. I felt the cold when you woke me with getting up and going in and out."

"Why, Saxe," cried Dale, seizing the boy by the shoulder, "do you mean to say you heard me moving about in the night?"

"Some time when it was dark; and I thought you were dressing."

"This is very strange," cried Dale, who looked puzzled.

"Hah!" cried Saxe excitedly; "where did you put the crystal?"

"In the leather bag that I used for a pillow."

"Then it couldn't have been that," said Saxe, in a disappointed way. "I thought—"



"Dale ran into the tent and dropped upon his knees by the leather bag."

"I don't know so much about that," cried Dale excitedly; and he ran into the tent, dropped upon his knees by the leather bag, and tore it open.

"Gone!" he said.

"That's what I thought," cried Saxe excitedly. "Then there is some one keeps on watching us, and he stole that crystal in the night."

Dale closed the bag with a snap, and stood gazing up at his companion for some minutes in silence.

"This is very ugly, Saxe," he said; "and I don't like it."

"But that's it, isn't it?" cried the boy.

"I am afraid so. I can only think you must be right, unless one of us took it."

"Took it!" cried Saxe. "Oh, Mr Dale, you don't think I would take it?"

"No, my lad, of course not," cried Dale, bringing his hand down on the boy's shoulder with a hearty slap; "but I think it's quite likely that after the excitement of yesterday, and the remarks you made just before lying down, that you may have dreamed that the crystal was not safe, and taken it and hid it somewhere."

"Oh, impossible!" cried the boy.

"No, quite possible; and if you have not done this, I think it is quite likely that I may. Why, Saxe, our brains were regularly crystallised last night."

"Oh! I don't think it's anything to laugh at," said the boy seriously. "It could not have been, for I was awakened by hearing some one moving about."

"Yes; and you thought it was I."

"Yes."

"Then it must have been, and sooner or later we shall find where I have hidden it. Come: you are sure it was I? You saw me?"

"No; it was too dark for that. I only thought it was you."

"Then it must have been, for you would have felt the difference in some way if it had been any one strange. Well, I'm glad of it, Saxe; for it would have been ugly and unpleasant coming to rob us wherever we rested. Why, of course, I remember!"

"What—taking it?" cried Saxe.

"No. What did I say about fastening the door, so as not to tempt burglars?"

"I remember you said something of the kind, but I was terribly sleepy."

"You were. Well, I said that; and of course I went and dreamed about burglars, and got up, I suppose, in my sleep to take care of the crystal. There, don't worry about it any more, and let's have breakfast."

"But the stones, the figure I saw, and the night alarm?"

"Oh, fancy, I dare say, boy," cried Dale, pouring out his mug of coffee, while the boy followed suit, but with his brow wrinkled up with trouble. "Pity we have no milk. That's the worst of being too high up in the mountains. Come, eat away! the bacon's cooked better than Melchior's, and he's almost the prince of bacon chefs."

"I—I don't feel as if I can eat any breakfast this morning," said Saxe drearily.

"Nonsense, boy! Why, even if it were as you have imagined, what would it matter? We should only have to take extra precautions: set a watch, perhaps, as the sailors do. We shall have Melchior back soon, and we shall hear what he has to say. There, go on—eat. You can't work without. We've found one crystal cave, and that encourages us to find more. You can't help me if you starve yourself; and I want to get you up to the top of one of the highest mountains about here yet."

The result was that Saxe made a very hearty breakfast; for after the first mouthful or two, he forgot his mental troubles, and obeyed his companion with all his might.

The meal ended, the wallet was stored with all they would require for the day; and as Saxe arranged the contents, he looked up at his companion.

"What is it?—something else gone?"

"No," replied Saxe: "I mean yes—gone. There will be scarcely anything left to eat for tea when we come back, unless Melchior is here."

"Ah, yes, Melchior," said Dale, taking out his pocketbook and writing down in German—

"Gone up the right side of the glacier. Look out for cross chipped in the ice opposite a black ravine."

"There," he said, tearing out the leaf, "I'll put this on the big stone by the tent door, and another stone upon it to keep it down."

He suited the action to the word; and soon after, fully equipped for their little journey, the pair started, descended in due time to the glacier, where the tiny streams were trickling fast in the hot sun, and then toiled on and on through the never-wearying scenery, past the ends of the two great, now very familiar, crevasses, and sat down at last to a light lunch off the entrance to the black ravine.

Here, as soon as they had finished their meal, Dale lightly chipped a cross in a piece of smooth ice, just off the entrance; while Saxe climbed up the steep valley side a little way, threw himself down upon a flat ledge of rock, and began to look cautiously round, scanning the opposite side of the valley, and then up and down and up again.

"Hist!" he whispered suddenly; "don't look up. Some one watching us."

"Whereabouts?"

"Across the valley, high up to the right of some tall, rugged seracs."

Dale slowly sank down on the ice behind a great block of granite, which must have fallen from the mountain side and been borne down upon the glacier. The next minute he was peering carefully round from one side.

"Yes, I can see him, lad," he said; "but I don't believe that fellow would touch a crystal if there were thousands."

"You always think these people are so honest!" cried Saxe. "Well, what could he do with it? I never knew one of them yet who cared for crystals. Ah! there he goes, right up over the snow. Look! look! Saxe. Isn't it wonderful how an animal can dash at such a speed over those dangerous places!"

"Why, it must be a chamois!" cried Saxe, in disgust at his mistake.

"Yes; and I dare say there is a little herd of them somewhere up yonder in the mountain. Now are you ready to own that you are a little accustomed to give rein to your imagination?"

"I suppose so," said Saxe, rather dolefully. "It seems so easy to make mistakes."

"Yes, we all find that," said Dale merrily. "Now take another look round, and see if you can see squalls."

"Now you are laughing at me," said Saxe resentfully. "No: I am in earnest. Take a look round, boy, and then we'll go up the ravine and satisfy ourselves that it is all safe, and come back after a quiet investigation, so as to see whether there are other ways of fixing our rope. I should like to go up higher, too, and try whether we cannot get out on to the mountain, as I at first proposed."

Saxe swept their surroundings as well as he could, and paused to gaze at an ice-fall on the opposite mountain, a dull, heavy peal like thunder having announced that there had been a slip.

It was very beautiful in the bright sunshine, and looked wonderfully like water as it plunged down into a dark-looking crack, which Dale declared must be a huge bergschrund, between the snow and rock.

But there was no human being in sight, as far as Saxe could see; and as soon as he had descended, they began to climb the little lateral valley as on the previous day.

Hardly, however, had they passed out of sight, before high up on the mountain slope, what at first sight seemed to be a bear came into sight, creeping cautiously in and out among the stones, till it reached one of the many ledges of a precipice, and trotted along toward the edge of the lateral valley, over which it peered cautiously, and then drew back and went higher, repeating the action several times, and in the distance looking more and more bearlike in its movements, only that there was this difference, that instead of the travellers stalking the bear, the animal seemed to be bent on stalking them.

Chapter Thirty.

Within a Hair's Breadth.

A long and tiresome climb over and amongst the shattered blocks which filled the lower part of the chasm; but with the help of previous knowledge they got along pretty quickly, till they reached the rocks beneath the narrow opening—a place which looked so insignificant that the wonder was that it had not escaped Saxe's eyes.

"Now," said Dale, gazing up, "what we have to do is to puzzle out some easy way of getting up and down. What do you say, Saxe?"

"I think we ought to have a strong iron bolt or bar driven into a crack just above the cave; then tie a rope to it, and it will be easy enough to go up and down."

"First catch your hare," cried Dale merrily. "How is the bar or bolt to be driven in, my lad?"

"Oh, something after the fashion of our getting up there yesterday."

"Oh yes; something after the fashion of yesterday's attempt. Do you know, Saxe, I think we both had enough of that job yesterday; and but for the discovery of the crystals we should have been sadly out of heart."

"Let's leave it till Melchior comes back," said Saxe, as a way out of the difficulty.

Dale nodded, and after another long look at the crack in the solid rock and its surroundings, they turned their attention to a farther climb up the ravine to try whether it would be possible to get out there and make their way across.

Another long and tedious climb ensued, during which, without declaring the way to be impassable, they both averred that it was so extremely difficult that they thought it would be of no utility, and after some four hours' hard work assisting each other up by means of ice-axe and rope, they were glad to begin the descent.

But the toil was not altogether barren, for two niches were found where there seemed to be every likelihood of crystals existing within the caves, whose mouths they seemed to be, and after a certain time devoted to refreshing they turned to go back.

"I doubt very much whether any one could get along this way, Saxe," said Dale, as he held the rope for his young

companion to slide down, afterwards doubling it for his own use, so as to have a great loop round a block to enable him to loosen one end and draw upon the other.

"I hope they'd enjoy the hard work if they could," said Saxe breathlessly. "Oh, what a lot of bits of skin one does knock off up here!"

"Good for the sticking-plaster makers, Saxe," said Dale. "Come along, my lad: the sun beats down very hot here."

"But what are we going to do to-day?" asked Saxe.

"Nothing. This has only been a reconnoitring trip. To-morrow we shall have Melchior back, and we can get to work in earnest."

"But are we going to do nothing else but get crystals? Aren't we going to climb any more mountains?"

"Oh yes: we must do another or two, and perhaps combine pleasure with profit. Let's see: we must be getting near the cave."

"Round that next corner," said Saxe decisively.

"How do you know?"

"Because I can see the piece of black overhanging rock which I felt compelled to stare at all the time I was stuck fast on that shelf. But, I say, Mr Dale, do you feel pretty sure that Melchior will be back at the tent when we get there?"

"I cannot be certain; but—no—yes—I can be certain," said Dale quickly. "I am sure he will not be waiting for us at the tent."

His manner puzzled the lad, who looked at him curiously.

"Well?"

"What made you change so suddenly, sir? One minute you thought one way, the next minute you thought differently."

"Because I had good reasons," replied Dale. "Look!"

Saxe looked here and there, and in every direction but the one indicated by Dale's nod.

"I don't see anything, sir."

"Try again, boy. There, on that stone, with his back to us."

"A chamois!" cried Saxe eagerly.

"Chamois don't smoke pipes, my lad," said Dale laughingly.

"I see now," cried Saxe, and he burst out into his imitation of a Swiss jodel, which was answered back as Dale thrust his fingers into his ears.

The boy looked at him as he ceased his cry, and a curious smile puckered up his face.

"Don't you like Melchior's jodel, sir?" he said drily.

Dale understood him, and responded with a laugh; but no more was said, for Melchior sprang down from the rock which he had made his observatory as lightly as a goat, and came to meet them.

"Back again, then," said Dale.

"Yes, herr; and I found your note with the stick through it by the tent door."

"You mean with the stone lying upon it?"

"No, herr: a piece of sharpened pine-wood, driven through it to hold it down."

"Ah, well, you found it," said Dale, with an uneasy glance at Saxe, whose forehead had grown wrinkled.

"Yes, herr, I found it, and followed you till I saw your mark on the ice, and came up here."

"You felt, then, that we came up this ravine!"

"Oh yes, herr; and I was not surprised. It is one of the places I thought likely for crystals, and I see you have found some."

"Pound some? How do you know?" cried Saxe.

"Because I see you have been to one cave and left some of your treasure behind. I found this just inside the way leading to it."

"Then you climbed up?" said Saxe, taking a little crystal of the size of his finger from the guide's hand.

"No, herr; I climbed down," replied Melchior.

"From where? Did you come over the top?"

"No, herr; from the mouth, by the glacier, I came right along the bottom, and turned down into the chasm below."

"What chasm below?" said Dale eagerly.

"Is it possible the herr does not know?"

"We have seen no chasm but this one."

"Then you have not found a cave for crystals?"

"Oh yes!" said Saxe: "there it is;" and he pointed up at the face of the narrow valley to where the dark opening looked like a black mark on the rock.

"I see," said Melchior, looking up. "Yes, that looks a likely place too. I had not seen that."

"It has quite large crystals in it," said Dale.

"Then the herr has been up to see?"

"Yes, Saxe found it; but it is very difficult to get to. How are we to climb up and fasten a rope!"

"It is quite easy," said the guide; and, going back, he made for the ledge, along which he made his way coolly enough till he came to the gap, across which he leaped, thrust his hand into the orifice, and then, to Saxe's horror, leaped back again with wonderful activity, came down and joined them.

"These things have been so little asked for that they have not half been hunted out. I could have got hundredweights if I had known that they were of value to make it worth while."

"But that is a good cavern up there," cried Saxe, who now breathed more freely, as he saw the guide safely down without breaking his neck.

"Oh yes, herr, I dare say; but the one I have found is, I think, better."

"Show us it," said Dale. And after going back about a hundred yards, Melchior suddenly disappeared as if by magic.

"Hi! Melchior! where are you!"

"Here, herr," he replied, showing himself again from behind one of the great jagged masses of stone which strewed the ravine. "There is a great crack here."

They climbed over some awkward rocks and joined him, to find that a dismal chasm of great depth went off here at a sharp angle; and some little distance down one of its rugged walls he pointed out a dark opening which seemed unapproachable at first, though a little further examination showed that it was quite possible for a cool-headed man to get down—one who would not think of the dark depths below.

"How came you to find this place?" said Saxe. "We have come by here three times now without seeing it."

"I told you, herr. I found that crystal just there at the entrance to the narrow split—by the stone where you saw me standing."

"And that made you think there must be a crystal cavern near?"

"Yes, herr; and there it is. I wonder it has never been found before. And yet I do not, for no one but an Englishman would think of coming in a place like this."

"Have you been down to it?"

"Oh yes, herr. It is easy enough to get to; but we will have the rope, to make it easier. Will you come down?"

"Yes; let's see it," said Dale eagerly, while Saxe felt a curious sensation of shrinking as he saw the guide secure one end of his rope to the nearest block of stone that stood up clear.

"Is that strong enough?" said Dale.

"Oh yes, herr; it is not a loose stone, but a solid piece of the rock, and would bear a dozen of us. I will go down first."

He took hold of the rope, slipped over the edge of the shelf upon which they stood, and lowered himself down from buttress to ledge and projecting block, and stood the next minute inside the narrow crack.

"Will you go next, Saxe?"

The boy did not reply, but, imitating Melchior's actions as nearly as he could, he lowered himself down, only hesitating once, when he was hanging over the dark hollow up from which came the noise of falling water.

"Come along, herr," said Melchior encouragingly, as he leaned out of the hole and looked up. "Down another foot, and you can find a place to rest upon. The remainder is as easy as can be."

Saxe found it so, for it only wanted confidence, and the next minute he was standing beside the guide and looking up from the opening as Dale now began to descend.

Saxe had to back into the black rift to make room for Dale to come, and he held on tightly by a projection from the rocky side of the cavern to stand listening to the trickling of water, evidently a great way below; and as the weird whispering sound came up, he could not repress a shudder.

But there was no time left him for reflections about the danger, for the next minute Dale was blocking out the light of the entrance.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "this looks a likely place. Here, let's have a match before we move. There may be all kinds of horrible pitfalls close at hand." He let go of the rope, which swung to and fro in front of the opening, and took out a box of wax matches.

"I quite thought you had been down here, herr," said Melchior. Then, as a match was struck and held up, he continued: "Yes, we must have the lanthorn here, herr, for it is dangerous. See how the floor is split up into great holes."

Feeble as the light of the match proved, it was bright enough to show that; and, when nearly burned out, Dale threw it from him, and it fell, still burning, down and down till it was a tiny spark and it was impossible to say at last whether it went out or disappeared still burning in the great depth below.

"Why, Saxe, we have hit at last upon a veritable crystal mine," said Dale, as he held up a fresh match above his head, whose light was reflected from the facets of hundreds upon hundreds of crystals depending from the roof and sides, and, as far as they could see for the tiny glow, encircling the whole place; while Saxe now found that the projection by which he held was a hexagonal piece as clear as glass.

"Yes, herr," said the guide triumphantly: "this is what you wished for."

"No," said Dale, throwing away the end of the match again. "Very interesting, Melchior; but not what I meant."

"Then I have not understood the herr," said the guide, in a disappointed tone.

"Oh yes; and brought us to the part of the mountains where these wonders of Nature are to be found. These are beautiful, but, as far as I can see, all very small."

"But there may be big ones, herr," cried Melchior.

"May be; but it is doubtful here. There, it does not matter, for in the other cave—that to which you climbed—there are splendid specimens."

"Is the herr quite sure?"

"Yes, for we brought one away, and Saxe hid it somewhere, and has forgotten the place."

"Mr Dale!" cried Saxe indignantly.

"Well, then, I did," said Dale, laughing. "There, both of you, I am quite content. I should not have murmured about these, but we have at our command some that are incomparably better; and to-morrow we will come properly prepared with lights, chisels and hammer, and see what we can do."

"I am very glad, herr; and I have one peak I can take you up—the Blitzenhorn—where I am nearly sure we can find the finest yet."

"Good: we will try it. Now let's get back and dine."

"Yes, that will be wise," said the guide, as Saxe pricked up his ears at the suggestion. "I journeyed nearly all last night, herr, so as to get back soon; and I hurried on as soon as I found your letter with the pine skewer through it."

"Under the stone, Melchior."

"No, herr: stuck down into the crack between two pieces of rock."

Dale said no more; and Saxe thought it strange, for he remembered the incident of securing the message perfectly.

"But Melk was tired and sleepy: he fancied it was secured like that," Saxe said to himself.

He had no time to think more, for Dale spoke to him. "Now, my lad," he said, "up with you; or shall one of us go first?"

"Oh, I'll go," said Saxe, turning to the gloomy opening, and reaching out his hand for the dull grey rope, which showed clearly against the black face of rock on the opposite side, not twenty feet away.

"Get a good hold, herr; next turn face inward, and swing yourself a little sidewise; then you will be on good climbing rock, and can easily get up."

Saxe nodded, took hold of the rope, turned round, reached up as high as he could, and then was about to throw his whole weight upon it, when it gave way, and came down upon him. This, with the surprise, threw him off his balance, and he would have gone down backward, headlong to the bottom of the narrow cleft, but for the action of the guide,

who darted out one hand and caught him.

Chapter Thirty One.

Misunderstandings.

Saxe dropped, but no farther than the sill of the entrance, where Melchior was able to hold him, while Dale reached over and gripped the boy by the belt and hauled him in.

"Oh, Melchior!" cried Dale indignantly; "I thought I could have trusted you to secure a rope."

"But I did—I did, herr!" cried the man passionately. "I could have staked my life upon that rope being secure."

"I spoke to you at the time about it not seeming safe."

"The herr said the rock did not look secure, not the rope. The rock has not come down."

"It is enough for me that the rope came down. Another instant, and that poor lad would have lost his life."

"Yes, herr; but we saved him. I cannot understand it."

"Has the rope broken?" said Dale, as it was hauled in.

"No, herr," said Melchior, as he examined the rope in the darkness; "and, see, the loop is here and the knots still fast!"

"It is very strange," said Dale.

"Yes, herr. Ever since I have grown up I have laughed at all the old stories about the dragons in the mountains, and the strange elves, gnomes, and kobolds said to live down in the deep mines; but what can one say to this? Is there an evil spirit to this crystal mine who is angry because we have come, and who seeks to punish us for intruding?"

"No, there is not!" cried Dale, with genuine English unbelief in such legends: "nothing of the kind. The loop slipped off the stone; so now climb up and fasten it safely, if you can."

There was such a sneer in this that Melchior looked at him reproachfully before reaching round the side of the grotto and then stepping out of sight.

"Rather an upset for you, my lad," said Dale kindly, as he took Saxe's hand, while they could hear the rustling and scratching made by Melchior as he climbed up, dragging the rope after him; for he had not stopped to coil it up, but merely threw the loop over his head and put one arm through it.

"Yes, I thought I was gone," replied the boy.

"It has made your hand feel wet, and set it trembling."

"Has it?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry; for I want you to get plenty of nerve out here."

"I'm sorry too, for I hate to feel afraid."

"That was enough to make any man feel afraid. I'm trembling too, my lad; and my heart felt quite in my throat for a few moments."

Just then the rope was shaken vigorously, and became still once more.

"It is quite safe now, herr!" cried the guide; "and I am holding it down too."

"Right!" shouted back Dale. "I'll go first this time, Saxe."

"No, sir! please let me go: I would rather."

"Do you feel cool enough?"

"That will make me cooler."

"Then go on. Stop! you had better have the rope midway fastened to your waist, and I can hold the other end; then you cannot fall."

"No, no!" cried Saxe, rather hoarsely. "Let me climb without."

Dale gave way rather unwillingly, and the boy seized the rope, gave it a tremendous tug, and then swung himself out sidewise and began to climb; while Dale leaned out and watched him, uttering a low sigh of satisfaction as he saw him reach the top, and then following without making use of the rope.

"Now," he said, as he reached the others, "how was it that rope slipped?"

"I cannot say, herr," cried Melchior. "Look, here: the loop is big enough for it to come off easily if some one took hold of it with both hands and drew it up quite two feet, but it could not slip off by itself."

"But it did."

Melchior shook his head.

"Oh, man, man, how can you be so absurd!" cried Dale impatiently. "You don't mean to say you believe any mischievous imp could have thrown it off?"

"What am I to believe, when the rope falls on us like that? There is no one here in this desolate, awful place—not even a wild beast."

"Stop!" cried Saxe: "are you sure? Would a bear do that?"

"Surely not, herr."

"I'll believe in the bear before I believe in the gnome or kobold!" cried Dale. "Oh, Melchior! now I have so far had so much respect for you as a frank, manly Switzer, don't spoil it by trying to cloak an error with a paltry excuse. You did not properly secure the rope; it came off; and it was an accident. You know it was an accident, so let it rest."

"I have tried hard to win the herr's confidence, and to deserve it," said the man coldly. "I secured that rope as I believe any guide upon the mountains would have fastened it. The rope gave way not by breaking or coming untied, and I cannot tell how. I told the herr the beliefs of my people, and that I had ceased to think that they were true; but we are seeking to penetrate the mysteries of the mines, and this accident has befallen us. I can say no more."

"Better not to say more," said Dale coldly. "Will you lead on?"

Saxe glanced in the guide's face, and gave him a look of sympathy as he saw how it was wrinkled and drawn with trouble; but nothing more was said, and he went on coiling up the rope as they passed along the dark chasm, only stopping to untie the knot as they reached the main rift and began the descent toward the glacier.

It was no place for conversation, even if Saxe had been so disposed; for every one's energies were taken up by the task of mastering the way between or over the rugged blocks which filled the bottom of the place. But at last, at a sudden turn, a gleam of the white ice was seen, and soon after Dale was busily obliterating the mark he had made that morning for Melchior's guidance.

Then began the slow descent, sometimes beside, sometimes over the glacier—wherever Melchior could indicate a short cut; the crevasses were passed, each bringing up its recollections of their adventures, and at last a more even part of their journey fell to their lot along the polished rock.

But Dale went on in silence, answering Saxe so shortly several times that he dropped back from walking abreast, and went on down for some distance half-way between his companions.

"I can't help it," he said to himself at last: "he must be offended if he likes. I don't believe poor old Melk could help the accident. I shall walk with him."

He waited for the guide to come up, and he was soon abreast, looking inquiringly at him, as if asking what he meant to say. The man's face was dark and heavy of aspect, and he was evidently deeply hurt by Dale's anger; and, in consequence, he looked up with a bright smile as Saxe asked him if he was tired.

"Oh no, herr," he said; "my legs are a little heavy, but not so heavy as my heart."

"Don't take any notice of that," said Saxe, in a low voice; "he did not mean anything much. He was angry because I was so nearly killed."

"Yes; and it was just," said the guide: "for I am answerable for your lives. It would have been most horrible if you had gone down there."

"Yes, of course it would," said Saxe lightly.

"And I have been thinking it over and over, herr, till I can think no more; for the thoughts always come to the same point. I cannot understand it."

"Why, the rope got worked up, Melk; that's all."

"No, herr—impossible: that loop could not have worked up unless hands touched it."

"Gnomes or kobolds?" said Saxe, smiling as he had not been able to smile in the gloomy ravine.

"Ah, herr! you laugh at the old fancy; but there the matter lies; and I am beginning to think that a great deal of our misfortune is due to the same cause."

"What! the stone-throwing from the mountain?"

"Yes, herr."

"Well, don't let us talk any more about it, or you'll be making me fancy all sorts of things after it is dark. How much farther have we to go?"

"A good piece yet, herr; but we know the way. There is no doubt about it. In a little while I shall hurry on before, and get the fire lit, so as to have the tea ready for Herr Dale. I am sorry I have angered him so."

"Don't say any more about it, and he will soon forget it all."

"Yes, herr—I hope so," replied Melchior; "but I cannot."

Half an hour after he stepped out, and went silently by Dale, touching his hat as he passed, and went on so quickly that he was soon out of sight; and then Dale slackened his pace a little, to allow Saxe to come up.

"Tired and hungry, my lad?" he said.

"Yes, both," replied the boy. "I hope Melchior has brought a chicken to broil for tea."

Dale laughed.

"Well, now you speak of it, I hope so too, for I suppose I am hungry; but all that business put eating out of my head. By the way, Saxe, I am sorry I spoke so sharply to Melchior. The man is very sensitive, and of course he cannot help having a lingering belief in the old superstitions of the people among whom he was raised."

"I suppose not," said Saxe thoughtfully.

"Why, in one of their old books the author has given copperplate engravings of the terrible fiery and other dragons which dwelt in the mountains. Superstitions die hard. But there—I dare say he will forget it by to-morrow."

"But don't you think that some one must have lifted off the rope?"

"No: I believe it was his careless tying."

"But I don't think he could be careless," said Saxe quickly. "Then, about that crystal being found. Somebody must have been down to that grotto, and dropped it as he came away. I think we are being tracked by people who wish us to fail."

"Then whoever it is must wish, for we are not going to fail, my boy. We must and will succeed, in spite of everybody. By the way, did you break off that crystal by which you held when you were in the grotto?"

"No, I tried," said Saxe; "but it was too firm, and I had not room to use my ice-axe, we were so close together."

"Never mind; to-morrow will do. We must get a grand collection of choice specimens, Saxe; and I hope that, as the Swiss Government will be the gainers by my discoveries, they will not raise any objections to my taking a goodly assortment away."

They relapsed into silence again, and it was growing so dusk when they began to climb up out of the glacier valley, that the reflection of a fire could be seen upon the side of the rocky niche in which they had formed their camp; and later on, as they came in sight of the little fall at the end of the rift in the mountain, the foaming waters were lit up so brilliantly that they looked like gold.

But the beauties of the place were forgotten by Saxe in the sight of a kettle on the fire, and something which looked wonderfully like cut-up chicken waiting to be frizzled over the glowing embers, beside which Melchior's sturdy figure stood up plainly, with his dark shadow cast upon the side of the white tent.

"Tea nearly ready?" cried Saxe, as they approached.

"Very nearly, herr," was the reply. Then to Dale, as a piece of sharpened pine was held out: "This is the wood used to pin down your letter, herr."

"That?"

"Yes, herr; and it was stuck in that crevice between those pieces of rock."

Dale took the piece with a curiously intent look in his countenance. Then, half aloud: "I could have taken an oath that I laid the paper on that—"

He looked hastily round, for nothing was visible.

"I was going to say on that stone, Saxe," he said, in a low voice.

"I know," replied the boy; "but the stone isn't there, nor the one you laid upon it."

"There!" cried Dale; "I was sure of it, and you are too. It is very strange."

"Yes," said Saxe: "somebody's having a game with us, unless Melchior's right, and there are—"

"Boys who ought to be kicked for being so ridiculously superstitious. There, let's have a wash in the spring, and then get to our meal. Back directly, Melchior," he said aloud, quite in his usual voice, as he passed close by the guide, who was now busy cooking.

Melchior bowed slowly, and went on with his work, patiently preparing the tea-dinner, and drawing back after the return of the others as if to leave them to partake of their meal alone.

It was a picturesque sight, and wonderfully attractive to a hungry boy,—the steaming kettle, the glowing fire lighting up the whole niche; and, to make the sight more enjoyable, there was the savoury smell, one which seemed to have had a peculiar effect upon Gros, the mule, for he had left the patch where he was picking up a good succulent meal, to draw near and stand blinking his eyes, flapping his long ears, and staring, till Saxe drove him off as he came to take his place.

“I say,” he whispered, “poor old Melk is so upset by what you said that he is not going to have tea with us.”

“Yes, he is,” said Dale quietly; and then aloud: “Melchior, I am afraid I said hastily some words which have wounded your feelings: I beg you will let me apologise?”

“I accept your apology, herr,” said the guide quietly.

“Then we will say no more about it; so come and sit down and join us.”

“The herr wishes it?”

“Yes, of course.”

Melchior sat down quietly and gravely, and the meal went on without further reference to the unpleasant incident; but Dale grew eager about their work on the next day, chatting about the size of the crystals he had felt, and the difficulties of enlarging the hole so that they could creep in.

“That can soon be done, herr, if we have fine weather, but there is lightning over the Blitzenhorn, and that may mean a storm.”

“Let’s hope not, for though this place is lovely now, it would be very dreary and cold if it were wet. Now then, let’s clear away and get to sleep, for we have a long day’s work before us to-morrow.”

The clearance was made, and the fire raked together and made up so that it might possibly last till morning, and then came the preparation for sleep.

“We shall divide the night into three watches to-night, Melchior,” said Dale suddenly.

“The herr will keep watch?”

“Yes; for whoever it is that is watching and trifling with us—”

“Then the herr thinks—”

“That we have an enemy hanging about our camp and following us.”

“Ah!”

“And that it was he who threw off the rope.”

“Then the herr thinks that?”

“Yes, I feel sure now, for I have been thinking it over, and I know that Melchior Staffeln, the tried old guide, could not possibly have fastened that rope so that an accident would result.”

“The herr gives me hope and life again,” said the guide warmly.

“Yes, Melchior, I was all wrong. There—shake hands, man, like we English do.”

“Yes: it is good,” said the guide, eagerly doing as he was told.

“Now lie down both of you, and sleep. In three hours I shall call you, Melchior, and in three more you will come up, Saxe. We may see nothing, but henceforth we will be on guard.”

Ten minutes later the fire was subsiding into a glow. Saxe and the guide slept, and Dale was keenly awake watching for the kobold who disturbed their peace.

Chapter Thirty Two.

The Treasure.

No kobold, gnome, or any other goblin of the mine disturbed the watchers through that night. Dale roused Melchior at the end of his spell, and somewhere about daybreak the guide roused Saxe, in obedience to his orders, and asked him whether he felt fit to take his turn.

“Eh?—Fit?” said Saxe, sitting up: “of course. Why shouldn’t I be?”

“I thought you seemed a little upset by the shock yesterday.”

“Nonsense: I’m only sleepy. I’m getting used to that sort of thing. There; lie down, and finish your rest. I’m as fresh as a daisy! I say, though: have you seen anything in the night?”

"The stars slowly going down behind the mountains, and the peaks beginning to glow."

"Didn't Mr Dale see anything?"

"No."

"Well, I'm disappointed. I hoped one of you would catch the gentleman who comes after us. I'm sure there is something."

"So am I, herr. The fire is burning. Keep it up, and call me when it is breakfast time."

He lay down directly, and Saxe ran to the spring for a good sluice, to come back glowing and scrubbing his scarlet face with a towel.

"I say, Melk!"

There was no answer.

"Melky!"

Still silent.

Saxe bent over the Swiss, and then turned away.

"Well, he can sleep," he muttered: "seems only to have to shut his eyes, and he is off."

It did not occur to him that he was as great an adept at sleeping as the guide, and he turned away, half ill-humouredly, to finish his rough toilet, and then he busied himself in making preparations for breakfast, which entailed a severe fight with self, for a sensation of hunger soon developed itself. But he won by a vigorous effort, and, after all was ready, forced himself away from the fire and the kettle, walking right out of the niche, to stand watching the glorious changes on the mountain peaks, and the lines of light slowly creeping, downward and driving out the shadows where it was still night while high up amongst the glittering ice fields it was glorious day.

"Oh, how different it all looks in the sunshine!" thought Saxe. "Which did he say was the Blitzenhorn? I forget."

Then he began to think about the day's work before them—the tramp up beside the glacier, the climb along the black ravine, right in among the mountains, and the exploration of the caves.

"Well, we shall have found some crystals to take back," he thought. "Wish it was breakfast time, though. What am I to do to amuse myself till Mr Dale wakes?"

At that moment a peculiar whinnying noise fell upon his ears, and he started off down the mountain side in the direction from which the sound had come.

"Better company than none," he said, laughing. "Here: where are you, old chap?"

There was of course no answer, and he was some little time before he could make out the mule, whose colour assimilated wonderfully with the brown-grey rocks. But at last he saw it, end on, standing gazing up a narrow valley, and climbed down to find that it was in the midst of a fair spread of short whortleberry growth, whose shoots had evidently been his fare.

As Saxe drew nearer he could see that, in spite of the animal's warmth, the longer hairs about the mule were covered with hoar-frost, and at every breath a couple of jets of white vapour were sent forth from the mule's nostrils.

The mule took no heed of his approach, but gave vent to another long, loud, complaining whinny, and kept its head stretched out and its ears pointed in the direction of the top of the valley high above them.

"Hullo, Gros!" cried Saxe, as he approached; and the mule turned a little more away as the boy approached.

"Do you hear?" cried Saxe, stepping aside so as to get up to the mule's head; but that head was averted a little in the other direction, and the animal's hind quarters were presented.

"Now, stupid—I mean Dumkoff—I was going to pat your head. I can't shake hands with your tail!"

He darted sharply a few paces to the other side, but the mule carefully turned, to balance the movement, and still presented his tail.

"Ah, you obstinate old ruffian!" cried Saxe: "how can you expect people to be friendly with you! Well, I'm not going to be beaten by an old mule, anyhow!"

It was a rash declaration, for as Saxe made a rush right by the animal it spun round, and the positions were once more the same.

This evolution was repeated again and again, till Saxe stopped short, panting.

"Here!" he exclaimed. "I thought it was cold this morning, and I'm getting hot. For two pins I'd throw a chump of rock at you, you obstinate old four-legged hit of ill-temper."

He stooped and picked up a stone as big as his fists, and suddenly became aware of the fact that, though the mule's

head was turned away from him, the cunning animal turned its eyes back and was watching him carefully. For as he raised the stone Gros shook his head so that his long ears rattled, squealed, and a peculiar quivering motion, like the beginning of a dance, was visible in his hind quarters.

"Ah! would you kick!" cried Saxe. "You ruffian, you'd better not. There are plenty of stones, and I'll give you one for every hoist of those nice little heels."

He made an "offer," as boys call it, with the stone, and there was a loud squeal. Gros's head went down between his fore legs till he had nearly touched the ground, and he was turning himself into a tripod so as to set his hind legs at liberty.

Certainly they seemed at liberty, for he threw them out so vigorously that, as Saxe gazed at the hoofs playing about in the air, they seemed to be sparring and fencing at him, while the tail between whipped and whisked about, and ended by tucking itself in tightly, till Saxe sat down on a rock roaring with laughter, when the mule suddenly ceased its efforts, stood still, and turned its head round to watch him.

"Now it's coming!" cried Saxe, leaping up and raising the stone again.

The mule squealed defiance, and out flew its heels once more, and this was repeated till, half choked with laughing, Saxe threw down the stone.

"There!" he said: "I wouldn't throw at you. Poor old chap, then!"

He approached the animal now on the side to which its head was thrust to watch him, and, to his great surprise, Gros did not stir, but moved his head a little, and let him approach, pat his neck, and pull his ears.

"Only your fun, was it, old chap—eh! There! It was only my fun too. It's all right. Go on, old fellow. But, I say, how long have we been carrying on this game? Suppose my fire's out!"

He gave the mule a final pat, and then hurried back to the tent, where the fire was burning steadily, but wanted replenishing. This done, he looked at the sleepers, who were both like the Irishman in the old story, paying attention to it; then Saxe told himself that he would continue his watch.

This idea seemed so droll that he could not refrain from smiling.

"Rather a queer way of keeping watch," he said, "going off like that. Never mind: there's nothing much to steal, and no one to steal it. But I suppose I ought to stop; only the worst of it is, if I stop here I begin feeling hungry."

The temptation came over him to examine the stores which Melchior had brought on the previous day, but he resisted it; and by dint of walking about using Dale's glass to examine the different peaks and snowfields in the distance, the time passed till Dale woke with a start and sprang up.

"Ah, Saxe, my lad, have I overslept myself?—No? Well, it's time I was up. All right? That's well. Now, this ought to be an important day for us," he continued, as he rapidly prepared himself for the journey. "We must creep into that grotto somehow, and with plenty of light. I expect we shall find it quite a treasure-house. But," he said at last, "I think you may wake up Melchior now."

"I am awake, herr," said the guide, rising. "It is just the time I had settled to sleep."

In a few minutes they were ready for breakfast, and as they began Melchior drew from the pannier a portion of the provision he had brought, smiling as he placed it upon the slab of rock which served them as a table.

"What are you laughing at?" said Saxe.

"Oh, only about being a boy like you once, herr, and thinking that when I was your age I too could eat one breakfast and feel ready for another in an hour."

"I felt ready for one an hour ago, but I didn't have one," said Saxe. "No, it was two hours ago."

"But the herr did have a breakfast one or two hours ago."

"I?" said Saxe sharply. "No, I didn't have anything."

The guide looked at him wonderingly, then at the provisions he was setting down, and ended by shrugging his shoulders.

"I beg the young herr's pardon. I thought he did," said Melchior quietly; and for the time the incident was forgotten.

Half an hour later Gros was brought up, provisions packed, the geological hammer and a cold chisel put inside with the food, and they started after leaving wood and water ready for a fire when they returned.

The ravine was duly reached, Gros having proved himself an admirable climber on the ice, and he made no objection to ascending the black ravine for some distance; but at last it grew too bad for him, and he was tethered to a block of stone and left to meditate and lick the moisture which trickled down, for there was no pasture—not so much as a patch of moss.

Then the climb went on, Dale asking the guide if he thought the mule could get back with a load of crystals in the pannier.

"That depends on the weight, herr. If it is too much for him, we must help, or we must all go twice."

In due time they reached the rock beyond which was the way down to the lower grotto; but though it would have been tempting to have explored this with lights, it was decided to leave it for the present, and to go on and break into the cave discovered by Saxe.

"Well," said Dale, as they stood beneath it and gazed upon the black crevice, "do you think you can get at it so as to use a hammer and the chisel?"

"Oh yes, herr," said Melchior quietly; and thrusting the hammer handle and the chisel through his belt, he went up and along the ledge with wonderful agility, sprang across on to the projecting block, and then Saxe watched him eagerly as he saw him drive in the point of the geological hammer as high up as he could reach, and use it to hold by while he climbed higher and got his feet on the lower edge of the opening, where he stood with his hand inside to steady himself while he wriggled out the hammer. Then, holding this in his breast, they saw him take a steel spike from his pocket, and after a little examination thrust the point in a crevice which looked like an upward continuation of the opening into the grotto. This done, a sharp stroke or two from the hammer enabled him to fix the spike sufficiently firmly to enable him to hold on by it with his left hand while he drove it in firmly with the hammer before passing the double rope over it, and making a sling in which he could sit opposite the opening and work.

"There, Saxe, neither you nor I could have done that," said Dale, as the guide settled himself in the loop swinging before the mouth of the grotto.

"It makes my hands feel wet," whispered Saxe. "Look!"

For Melchior was already hard at work with hammer and chisel, cutting off great angles that obstructed the way in and sending the fragments showering down.

They watched him intently, seeing that he used the hammer as he used his ice-axe, so as not to deliver an unnecessary blow.

"Think you will make a way in?" cried Dale, as the guide paused for a few moments to wipe his brow.

"Oh yes, herr; I should have done by now, only my blows fall weakly sitting swinging here."

"Is the spike safe? Take care."

"I shall not fall, herr," he replied. "If the spike gave way I should have time to save myself."

He began hammering again, this time without the chisel, and using the hammer with so much effect that they could hear the pieces of rock he chipped off rattling down inside, till at the end of about half an hour he ceased striking, and began raking out the bits he had broken off.

"I can get through here now, herr," he said. "I'll come down, and you shall go first."

"No: that is your right, Saxe, as the discoverer; only be careful not to penetrate far. There may be danger."

As they were speaking Melchior stood once more upon the edge of the entrance, sending a shovelful or two of the broken stone clattering down as he untied the knots in the loop, and, taking one end of the rope, threw it over the spike, made a slip-knot, drew it tight, and then glided down to where Dale and Saxe were standing.

"There, herr," he said; "you can hold the rope, creep along the ledge, swing yourself across, and mount easily now."

"Shall I go first?" said the boy, looking at Dale.

"Yes, of course; but we shall be close behind you."

Saxe seized the rope, and, profiting by old experience, went up, swung himself over on to the projection, and then easily climbed in at the opening; saw that there was ample room for him to pass, and then he crept forward cautiously on hands and knees, finding that the floor sloped downward rapidly toward where all was black darkness.

He stopped short, not caring to go farther, and waited till the agitation of the rope, which he had let go, told him that Dale was nearly up. The next minute the figure of the latter darkened the opening, and he too crept in.

"Well, Saxe: what has Aladdin's cave to show us?"

"Darkness," replied the boy.

"Ah, well; we shall soon dissipate that," said Dale, as he loosed his hold of the rope and began to prepare the lantern he had brought up. "Seen any gnomes?"

"Can't see anything," replied Saxe shortly; for it seemed to him that Dale was smiling at him.

"No kobolds or goblins? Well, let's strike a match and light up: then perhaps we may. That's one good thing about these hollows,—there is no explosive gas, like there is in a coal mine. There, take this and hold it out before you," he continued, as he closed and passed the lantern. "Lift it up! Now what can you see?"

"Something glittering—yes, crystals!—beauties!—what a size!"

"Hah! Yes. These are worth all the trouble we have taken!" cried Dale, as he dimly saw pendant from the roof,

projecting from the rock at all angles, and even lying upon the floor of the grotto, dozens upon dozens of magnificent crystals, which seemed to be clear as glass, of a dull brown, like smoky quartz, and some even of a hue that was almost a purply-black.

At that moment Melchior's head appeared.

"Is there room for me to come in, herr?" he said; and before an answer could be given, "Ah! those are large."

"Large, my good fellow! they are the finest I have ever seen. Come in. Well, Saxe, how far does the grotto go in? Can you stand up? Mind your head!"

"Just stand up here," he replied; "but it is higher farther in."

"Let me go on first, herr," said Melchior: "it may be dangerous. There is no telling where these cracks in the rocks extend."

He took the lanthorn and crept forward cautiously, while Dale and Saxe watched the play of the light on the wonderful prisms and hexagons which hung in all directions. But there was no penetrating above thirty feet; for the grotto, after rising six or seven feet in height, dropped down again, and closed together till there was a mere slit.

"There may be more of it beyond here, sir," said the guide, "if we could break through."

"There is more than enough here, Melchior," cried Dale. "I am satisfied if we can get these away."

"Yes, herr," said the guide, holding up the lanthorn, and making its light play in all directions, its rays flashing off the various facets in a way that displayed in some the beauty of their forms, and in others the limpid transparency of the stone,— "yes, herr: there are many mules' burdens here. What will you do first?"

"Try to get off that one," cried Saxe, pointing. "It is the best here."

"They all seem best, Saxe," said Dale. "Yes, we will have that one, if it can be broken off without injury."

"There is a fine one here, herr," said the guide. "It must have fallen from the roof."

As he spoke he turned over a huge piece, after setting down the lanthorn, the light from which shot beneath it, and showed a rich purply-black stain, as the guide set the great hexagon up on end.

"Why, that is the finest I have seen," said Dale, growing quite excited over his discovery. "This and two or three more will be a load for the mule."

"Yes, herr, as many as we can get over the rocks with; but we can make many journeys backwards and forwards now we have found the place. But the herr will not take all away without sending word to Lucerne or Geneva?"

"You may trust me," said Dale. "I shall behave quite honourably to the Government, who will, I have no doubt, consent to my keeping some of them. Now, then: we shall have a long, slow journey back, with such a load. Try and strike off that small white piece."

The "small white piece" proved to be ten inches long and very heavy, when it had been dexterously struck off, without damaging any of its clearly-cut angles.

Two more very beautifully clear pieces were then selected, and then Dale looked questioningly at Melchior.

"If the mule carries the two largest pieces, herr," he said, smiling, "and we take one each, I think it will be all we can do. When we get lower down, on to the better way, the mule can carry all."

"Yes, we must not be too grasping," said Dale, with a sigh. "I wish, Saxe, I had all these over in England safe."

"I should like to have the whole grotto over there safe," replied Saxe.

"Better say the mountain while you are about it," cried Dale, with a laugh. "There, Melchior, try if you can get down that heavy piece."

"Yes, herr, easily done," said the guide; and, drawing up the rope, he made it fast to the largest crystal and carefully lowered it down.

"You must go down now and unfasten," said Dale. "I can lower the rest. But what about the rope when we have done?"

For answer Melchior climbed up and loosened the rope, leaving only a loop over the spike. Then sliding down, he soon set the crystal free, and the others were lowered down. Dale and Saxe followed, and the rope was jerked off the spike and coiled up.

"The only way of locking up the door," said Saxe, laughing. "But, I say, these will be very heavy to carry back. What's the matter?" he continued, as he saw Dale looking at the fragments of broken rock sent down by Melchior.

"I was thinking that those pieces will tell tales," he said. "If any one comes up here, they will see we have been at work."

"Yes, herr, if any one comes by; but nobody is likely to come here."

"I suppose not," said Dale thoughtfully, after a look round.

"The herr forgets that we are now in the wildest part of this the most desolate of our cantons."

"Yes, I had forgotten," said Dale lightly. "No one is likely to come, unless it be one of your kobolds, Melchior."

"They will not come, herr, or they would have been here to protect their treasures," replied the guide, laughing, as he stooped and lifted the big crystal on to his shoulder; then took it off, and asked Saxe to place the coil of rope under it. "The stone is heavy," he said cheerfully. "Yes, that's it: now it will ride easily. I think, herr, if you take my ice-axe and give me another under this arm to balance it, I can get on well."

"But you are too heavily laden now, Melchior."

"Oh no, herr: I am a strong man. Give me the other."

It was handed to him.

"Now, can you carry the other three?"

"Oh yes—easily," cried Saxe, who took one of the largest. "'Tis heavy, though," he added to himself, as he felt the weight of the solid stone.

"Then these two are my load," said Dale, placing one under each arm as soon as he had thrust the ice-axe handles through his belt. "Ready?"

"Yes."

"Then off!"

They started, and but for the knowledge of the value of the load Saxe would gladly have freed himself of the burden by letting it fall on the stones. But these were the crystals of which Dale was in search, and as he saw that his companion was patiently plodding on and making his way over the sharp, rough masses of stone with which the ravine was floored, he bent to his task patiently, though it seemed as though they would never reach the spot where the mule was tethered.

There he was though, at last, ready to whinny in welcome of their coming; but this glad greeting closed when Melchior's load was carefully balanced across his back, and the journey downward was very slowly and solemnly performed.

With the heaviest crystals safe on the mule's back, a redistribution took place, Melchior relieving Dale of his heaviest piece, and Dale exchanging his lighter one for Saxe's; and in this order the side of the glacier was descended, and they reached the camp hot, tired and hungry.

"Why, Saxe, we shall not want many loads like this," said Dale.

"No, herr," said Melchior, as the boy stood shaking his head. "You cannot take many away, unless we have a train of mules. Where will you have these placed?"

"Oh, just inside the tent for to-night. In the morning we must contrive some hiding-place for them, to which we can bring the rest; and when I have all I want we must bring mules here and remove them."

A good long look was taken at the various magnificent specimens before they were laid together. Then Melchior busied himself helping to prepare the meal; and very shortly after this was ended, watching being deemed unnecessary, the whole party were sleeping soundly, not one of them, after the heavy toil of the day, being startled by the loud squealing whinny given by the mule toward the middle of the night.

Saxe's sleep was almost dreamless till toward morning, when he became a little restless consequent upon imagining that he was engaged in a desperate encounter with a small round goblin, who was about the size of a baby, but seemed to have the strength of an elephant. He walked in at the tent door, and informed Saxe that he had come to fetch the crystals stolen from his storehouse that day; and upon Saxe refusing to give them up, a desperate encounter took place—a fight which had no beginning and no end, finishing off, as it were, in a mist, out of which he started to hear the sound of wood crackling, and to find that it was day.

Chapter Thirty Three.

In Desperation.

The faint grey dawn lit up the canvas of the tent and faintly showed the figure of Dale fast asleep, with his head close to the place where the crystals had been laid and covered over with a rug.

Melchior had crept out of the tent without making sound loud enough to awaken them; and it was apparent now that he was busy preparing the morning meal.

Saxe did not want to get up for a few minutes, and he lay thinking about the beautiful crystals, and of how he would break off a few of the smaller ones to bring away in his pockets to keep as curiosities for home. Then he recalled the weight of the one he had carried overnight, and thought how strong Melchior must be, or else how patient and enduring. Finally, he determined to get up and go and talk to the guide about their work for the coming day—a task

which had lost its zest now that some of the crystals had been found.

But his moving roused Dale, who started up.

"Throw open the tent door, my boy, and let's have some fresh air. I want to have a look, too," he cried, "at our treasures."

Saxe obeyed; and he was in the act of looping back the canvas, when Dale uttered an angry cry.

"Gone!—stolen!" he cried. "That man must have gone off with them on the mule."

"Did the herr call?" said Melchior, hurrying up.

"You here, Melchior?" stammered Dale in his surprise. "But yes. Look! The crystals! We laid them there. Do you know where they are gone?"

"No, herr. But are you sure?"

"Sure, man! Yes, and—ah! Look at that!" he continued, pointing at the tent wall. "A slit has been cut in it with a knife."

Melchior rushed outside and examined the slit.

"Yes," he said, shaking his head; "cut with a sharp knife. It must have been whilst we slept."

"And by some one who must have been watching our movements."

"There!" cried Saxe excitedly. "I knew it. I felt sure that we were being watched."

"Whoever it is cannot have gone far," said Dale sternly. "It is the same party that stole the crystal before. Now, Melchior, which way are they likely to have gone?—of course back toward the valley!"

Melchior shook his head.

"But they must. There is no other road, you say."

"Oh yes, herr: there are ways for good climbers."

"But a good climber cannot get up and down dangerous places with half a hundredweight of stones on his back, man."

"No, herr. They would not carry the stones very far: they would hide them."

"And go back without them!"

"No, herr. If the object of watching us is to get the crystals, they will still be hiding to see if we find more."

"Yes, you may be right," said Dale, after a few moments' thought. "Here, let's have a good look round in different directions."

Melchior looked at him half pityingly.

"Which!" he said at last. "Has the herr thought how impossible it would be to hunt good climbers down in these wilds! Look!" he continued, waving his hand round; "the great wilderness is everywhere, and there are thousands of places where men could hide."

"Yes, I know all that," cried Dale impatiently; "but I am not going to sit down quietly and be robbed like this of the specimens I have worked so hard to get. What do you say, Saxe!"

"Get 'em back at any cost. I think they are Italian brigands from the other side who have done it."

"No, herr," said Melchior. "It is the work of some of our people, who are greedy and jealous. There are some who would sooner work hard for a month to find an opportunity to steal a few francs than work honestly for a week to earn double. Fortunately they are very few."

"Then you would give up and not search for them!" said Dale angrily.

"I would search for them, herr; but it would end in failure. This must be done by men who know these high mountains as well as I do. Why, if I wished to hide here, there are places I could get to where I should never be found."

"But the hiding people want food!"

"Yes, herr," said the guide drily; "and they have got it. A great deal of what I brought up with Gros has gone. I thought the young herr here had taken some of it; but I see now."

"Then, what would you do?"

"I would not waste time in hunting for what we shall never discover, herr. It may be hidden in the mountains, or down some crevasse in the great glacier. Those crystals were very fine, but we left others behind in the grotto as beautiful. Why not go and get these, and take what we find at once to a place of safety?"

"At once? You forget how long a journey it is back."

"No, herr. It is far; but once we have them we must watch, and not be robbed again like this."

Dale stood thinking for a minute or two, Saxe watching him eagerly.

"Very good advice," he said; "and I will follow it, but not to-day. Saxe, you must be guardian over the camp. No: we shall want your help, my lad. Put some food in your wallet, Melchior; and we will try and trace these people, for there must be more than one."

"Yes, herr; there must be more than one," said Melchior; and hastily making the provision required, he said that he was ready.

"Now, then," cried Dale; "which way first?"

"One way is as good as another, herr," replied the guide. "It is all chance. We may go upon their track; we may go right away. Shall I lead?"

"Yes," said Dale, frowning; and the search began and lasted till darkness forced them to give up and seek their couches, tired out. For, taking the camp as a centre, they went off from it and returned, from every possible direction: not that there were many, for the vast precipices and hollows around compelled them to be select in their routes.

But it was all in vain, and from starting there was nothing that guided them in the slightest degree: for they were in a wilderness where footprints only showed upon the snow; and wherever they approached an ice field it was to find the pure white mantle unstained, and not even showing the track of a bird.

"Will the herr continue the search to-morrow, or go to the grotto?" said Melchior, as they lay down to sleep.

"Continue the search," said Dale sternly; and the next day and the next they toiled on, going farther and farther into the mountains, but there was no other result than weariness.

"It's enough to make one believe in Melchior's goblins," said Dale petulantly, "all those beautiful crystals to have been spirited away like that. But never mind: we shall find them to-morrow, I feel sure."

But when to-morrow came Dale did not feel so sure; and, altering his mind, to Saxe's great delight, they took the mule and started for the grotto once again.

Dale went first, and the mule followed, Saxe walking behind with Melchior, until they reached the black ravine.

"I am glad," the boy said, as they trudged along over the rock and ice. "It was all waste of time trying to catch those fellows."

"Yes, herr—quite."

"Have you no idea as to whom it could be, Melk?"

"No, herr, not the least. Mr Dale must have talked about his journey to some one as you came, and clever people have been let to watch you."

"Well, it's no use crying over spilt milk, even if it is Swiss milk," said Saxe, laughing.

The guide looked at him wonderingly. He was very proficient in English, but proverbs puzzled him, and he shook his head.

"Well, then," said Saxe, laughing, "it's of no use to throw away time when we can use it to advantage. Do you understand that!"

"Quite," said Melchior. "We must get a very great load of the crystals to-day, and make sure of them. It will be a splendid find, if we pick the best—grander than has ever been made here before."

"And I discovered them," said Saxe proudly. "Yes, herr; you discovered them," said the guide, smiling. Saxe coloured.

"He's laughing at me," he said to himself, as he hurried on to overtake Dale. "I do wish I was not so conceited."

They had a brief halt at the mouth of the black ravine, toiled up it till they reached Gros's tethering place, and then went on.

"I have been thinking," said Dale, as Saxe climbed on beside him, "that we ought to have swept away all those chips of stone after we opened the place."

"You both thought no one likely to climb up here," replied Saxe.

"Yes: we thought so, Saxe," said Dale rather shortly; and then the toil of the climbing among and over the sharp crags put an end to their conversation, and they kept on till they were beneath the narrow crevice with the fragments of stone chipped out by Melchior lying just as they had been left.

"Now, Melchior," cried Dale; "I will not be avaricious. We'll have one good select load of the crystals, and then make them safe. Up with you!"

Melchior climbed up, fastened the rope to the spike, and then crept inside the grotto with the lantern attached to his waist.

"Looks just like a bear going into his den," said Saxe, laughing, as the hind quarters of the guide disappeared.

"Yes. Up with you, and play bear too, or monkey," said Dale, laughing; and with the help of the rope the boy soon reached the opening and crawled in.

Dale followed, and blocked out the light just as Melchior had crept farther in, and was busy opening the lantern and striking a match.

"One moment, Melchior," said Dale: "here's a piece of blue light,—let's burn that."

But just as he spoke the match flashed into light, and Melchior dropped it; they heard him scratching at his box, and directly after he struck about half a dozen together, and separated them, so that they burned brightly, holding them high up above his head before taking one to light the wick of the lantern.

At the first flash out of the matches Saxe sprang back in horror, and Dale uttered a groan of disappointment. Then there was a dead silence, during which the matches blazed down close to the guide's fingers, and were allowed to fall, while the lantern burned more brightly, showing the guide's wrinkled countenance, full of disappointment and despair.

"It's horrible!" cried Saxe wildly. "Oh, if I only knew!"

"Yes, boy: if you only knew," said Dale.

"We must find them."

"No, young herr: it would be waste of time to try. Trust to me; perhaps I can take you to a better grotto yet, and if we do find one, we will live in it till bit by bit the crystals are removed and placed in safety."

"We shall not find such another spot," said Dale sadly.

"The mountains are wonderful and vast, herr. There is the Blitzenhorn yet to try."

"Yes, to try," said Dale sadly. "Oh, but it is maddening just as success had attended us!" and he relapsed into gloomy silence, as Melchior went about the grotto holding the lantern to its glittering ceiling, the light flashing from hundreds of crystals; but every one worth taking as a specimen had been removed, and a great rusty hammer with which they had been broken off lay before them, forgotten in their hurry by those who had been there.

Chapter Thirty Four.

Growing Resigned.

A month had glided by, during which Dale and Saxe had explored valleys, traced glaciers to their sources, and made plenty of mountain ascents; but though they penetrated into the wildest regions of the higher alps, and encountered storm and wind sufficient to tear them from the giddy crags to which they climbed, no more crystals rewarded their efforts, no curiously half-hidden rift fringed with sparkling points invited them to break a way in.

"Why not try the Blitzenhorn, herr?" Melchior would say: "the young herr is getting to be a clever, sure-footed mountaineer now, and I have hopes of our being successful there."

Dale would gaze up at the mighty peak whose icy crown stood up before them, beyond the mountains which surrounded Andregg's hut, and shake his head.

"No," he said: "the climb is too difficult for Saxe."

"Oh no!" cried the boy; "I feel sure I could do it."

"And I feel sure you could not," replied Dale. "Look at it. The snow slopes you could manage; but those black, forbidding, almost perpendicular crags would be too much for you, and that is the part we should have to explore."

"Yes," said Melchior; "certainly that is the part we should have to explore."

"Well, why not let me try!" cried Saxe.

"Wait, my lad—wait."

So their days passed on, amidst fine weather and foul; partly-passed at Andregg's chalet, partly in the mountains with their tent. They had been again and again to the black ravine, and examined other grottoes, bringing away a good assortment of crystals, but, as Dale said, there was nothing particular among them; and though they divided their time between trying to make fresh discoveries and tracing the old treasures, the crystals had disappeared as completely as if the legendary spirits of the grotts and mines had snatched them back, and hidden them where they would be safe from mortal eyes.

But it was a glorious time, in spite of the disappointment, and Saxe revelled in the wondrous scenery, growing more sure-footed and firm of nerve day by day when in the mountains, and happy and full of fun when back in Andregg's

valley, leaving the donkey or his companion Gros, and accompanying heavy, surly, stupid, strong Pierre up the green alps to fetch home the goats and cows, becoming a perfect adept with a great wooden Alpine horn, whose notes evoked wonderful echoes among the mountains which shut them in.

The natural history collection increased—butterflies, pressed plants and minerals were stored up; the falls were used for shower-baths; trout caught in the streams and lakes; and time was passing, when one evening, as the glorious sky foretold a bright day on the morrow, Dale, who was seated outside Andregg's chalet with Melchior, returned that day from far below with a fresh load of provisions, called Saxe to bring him his field-glass.

This was brought, and the lad watched him, and saw that he was scanning the Blitzenhorn carefully.

"He means to try it, after all," thought the boy, whose heart began to beat heavily.

"Fine day to-morrow, Melchior," said Dale at last, as he closed the glass.

"Yes, herr, I think so; though one never knows what changes may come."

"But it is pretty sure to be a good day!"

"Yes, herr."

"Then we'll start at three to ascend the Blitzenhorn, and I hope your prophecies will prove right."

"I hope so, herr. Everything shall be ready. We'll take the mule and tent?"

"No: we'll go in light marching order, and chance it. Let's get to bed at once, and start at two."

"Good, herr. Coffee shall be ready at half-past one."

"One moment. What about the moon!"

"We shall have it with us at starting, herr."

"And which way do you propose?"

The guide raised the ice-axe, which never seemed to leave his side, and pointed out the route he meant to take, with the difficulties likely to be encountered among the great snowfields which clothed the giant's sides.

An hour later the preparations had been made, and they were all sleeping, when, just as he had apparently closed his eyes, Melchior stood over Saxe and roused him up once more.

"One o'clock, herr; and the coffee is nearly ready."

It had now become such a matter of course to rise at these nocturnal hours for long expeditions, that Saxe turned out at once, with nothing more than a growl or two and a vicious snatch at his clothes. The cold water and the coffee, however, soon set him right, and at two punctually the trio were on their way along the valley, with the last quarter of the moon to light them as they struck up close by the end of the lower glacier, and then went on and on at a steady rate toward the great giant whose pyramidal peak could be faintly discerned in the distance, looking to Saxe terribly far off, and as if it would be impossible to reach the top that day. But their guide had cunning ways for shortening the distance, leading them round this outer buttress, up that ravine, and in and out and along shelves, so that, by the time the sun rose, they had well mastered the outworks, and were ready to attack the peak itself.

For the next two hours it was now steady climb over rock and snow. Then the difficulties began, but were surmounted one by one,—a great snowfield or two were skirted, an arête mounted, which led them to the foot of a slope of hard ice, where they halted for a rest.

"Must we take that, Melchior?"

"Yes, herr: there is no other way, and with the rope it is not so difficult."

"But you will have to cut steps all the way!"

"Yes, herr."

"And the precipice?"

"You will not mind that, herr; and I am sure he will not shrink from it now."

Saxe declared that he was ready, and for the next hour they were crossing the ice, where a slip might have sent all flying down two or three thousand feet. But it was passed at last, and the great black crags were now within easy reach.

"Do you mean to go right to the top, herr?" said the guide; "because, if so, it would be better to do it now, before the snow grows softer, and descend to the black crags afterwards. Then, if we do not find crystals, I can take you round by the cornice, and over or round one of the snowfields home."

"What do you say, Saxe? Shall we venture?"

"Yes, we must be able to say we have climbed the Blitzenhorn."

"Go on, then, Melchior, and we'll do it. Is there anything very bad?"

"No, herr, I think not. A few crevasses, perhaps, that one can get over, are the worst. Nothing more difficult than we have often done."

They climbed on, but the difficulties increased, and there proved to be an awkward ice ledge to pass along, with a terrific gulf beneath; and a gap or two, with snow bridges, which were apparently waiting a touch to go down at once. These were all safely overcome. And at last a long slope of loose snow was all that remained to toil up before they reached the top, where Saxe threw himself down to enjoy the wondrous prospect of glittering ice peaks, and, a few minutes after, the food Melchior brought from his wallet.

"It doesn't seem so difficult as you thought," said Saxe, with his mouth full.

"Don't holloa till you are out of the wood," replied Dale. "Shall we go back the same way?" he said to the guide.

"No, herr; I shall take you back right to the black rock, where it is too steep for the snow to lie."

"And for us to get down?"

"I shall skirt the edge of those steep bits, herr. You will see."

In half an hour they were once more afoot, with the sun beginning to blaze down upon them and the snow dazzling their eyes; but the descent to the first bare rocks was steadily made, and the exploration began, with the result during the next two hours of four crevices being discovered, each lined with crystals that, at the first sight, looked like ice, but a close investigation satisfied Dale that they were not worthy of his notice, and that the minor grotto in the black ravine was far superior.

"No good, herr," said the guide sadly. "Sehr schlecht. I hoped we should have done better."

"Never mind. We have done the best we could, and this has been a magnificent ascent."

"The herr is satisfied with that?"

"Yes."

"Splendid!" added Saxe.

Then a difficult descent began, among the jagged masses of rock, whose hollows were full of snow. After some stiff work a great couloir was reached, one which led well down in the direction the guide was now taking, and along this gully they managed to glide in safety, though twice over great stones came bounding down from the black crags overhead.

Then a ledge of ice had to be cautiously approached and passed, one angle where there was barely foothold calling for all Saxe's fortitude; but he passed it bravely and fought very hard not to show that he had felt a slight attack of nerves. There had been a curious catching sensation in his throat, and his breath had come as he glanced once down into the blue haze in an ice gulf; but he breathed more freely as firm snow and then solid rock was reached; and the descent continued, no allusion being made to the perilous bit, though on glancing at the guide once he received a nod which evidently meant:

"Bravo! well done! You could not have faced that when you first came among the Alps."

Chapter Thirty Five.

A Catastrophe.

"When are you going to give us a glissade, Melk?" cried Saxe, as they reached a piece of smooth snow descending at a moderate angle.

"The first time there is a suitable place, herr," replied the guide quietly.

"Why not here?"

"I will show you when we get to the bottom."

Saxe looked disappointed, and grew more so as the descent was made slowly and toilsomely, with every precaution taken and warning words uttered from time to time respecting keeping the rope taut.

"But there were no crevasses here?" said Saxe, as they reached to where the slope seemed to curve over suddenly and then descend more sharply, for the continuation was out of sight.

"No, there are no crevasses," replied Melchior; "but a slip here would have been bad."

"This is a cornice, then, Melchior?" said Dale.

"Yes, herr, and if you two will hold me, I will step out a little way and break a hole for you to see."

In obedience to his instructions, Saxe and Dale stepped back to the full extent of the cord, and then eased it out as

the guide stepped forward, till he suddenly held up his hand.

"Now," he said, "let me bear out against the rope;" and, raising the ice-axe in both hands, he began to use it vigorously, cutting hard at the frozen snow, till there was a sharp crack, and he threw himself back while a huge piece of the cornice broke away and dropped down out of sight. Then all waited breathlessly till a faint hissing sound told that it had touched rock or ground somewhere below, but how far down Saxe did not realise, till Melchior made way for him to creep to the extreme edge and look.

"We have the rope tightly," said Dale, "so you need not hesitate."

But the boy did hesitate, and, after peering over, he shrank back appalled.

Melchior smiled.

"Well, herr," he said, "what do you think of the glissade, if you had taken one?"

"It's horrible," said Saxe, in a subdued tone; and he turned and looked down again where the guide had broken away the cornice, which curved out over a tremendous precipice, and saw that had he followed his inclination and slid down the snow slope, he would have gone over the cornice, and then plunged headlong, to fall nearly sheer down what seemed to be three or four thousand feet, to where a glacier wound along past the foot of the precipice.

Just then Dale joined him.

"Ah!" he said; "this is grand. Look at the course of that river till it disappears in the haze. You can count several villages, too, on the mountain slope and plain."

But Saxe had no eye for river or villages. The object that took his attention was the river of ice below, upon which whoever dropped from where he stood must fall; and as Dale spoke to him again, he turned away with quite a start and a shudder.

"Hallo!" cried Dale; "that will not do. Too imaginative, Saxe. There's plenty all round to encounter, without your calling up the imaginary. Well, Melchior, which way next?"

"Up above that snow slope, herr, and round the shoulder of the mountain that you can see yonder."

"Yes; but that's going up again."

"Yes, herr; I do not like to be so near this place without letting you see the Silber Grat and the wonderful view. Very few people come to see this place, but it is very grand."

"Yes, grand in the extreme," said Dale. "Here, Saxe," he continued, giving the rope a jerk, "come away now."

The boy started again, and then frowned, as he felt as if he were being treated like a mule or a donkey, held by a halter.

"Ready, herrs?" said the guide. "We must get on, please."

"Which way?" said Dale.

"Straight up, herr, along by these rocks, till we are above that snow slope; then along the top across the shoulder, where we shall find an easy slope on the other side, and perhaps be able to have a glissade without going down a precipice at the bottom."

"Oh, come!" cried Saxe; "that's meant for me. How was I to know that the mountain ended suddenly like a wall?"

"Never mind that," said Dale impatiently; "it's growing late, and we want to get back to camp. Why, Melchior, we are going to have a storm!"

"Yes, herr; I'm afraid so."

"Then why go up there and along the top? Surely we can go diagonally up the snowfield from here to the corner below the shoulder, and we shall save half a mile, at least!"

"Yes, herr; nearer a mile," said the guide, gazing up thoughtfully at the smooth snowfield; "but there is a great slope there."

"Yes, but away from this horrible precipice. I suppose that goes down into an inner valley?"

"Yes, herr; and extends right to the bottom—all snow."

"Then a slip and a roll would not matter?"

"No, herr."

"Then why do you hesitate, man?" cried Dale peevishly, as the guide stood with his brow shaded, gazing up at the dazzling slope which rose from them at a little distance and then curved over and disappeared.

"I was looking, herr, because I mistrusted that snow. It does not look healthy."

"What, likely to give way? Absurd! There are no crevasses there."

"Oh no, herr. It is all rock below."

"Of course: it must be. Well, we will take the cut right across that snow to the opposite corner."

"The herr desires it?" said Melchior gravely.

"Yes, certainly. It is folly to go so far round."

"The snow is not always good, herr; and the longest way round is sometimes the nearest."

"Yes, but with a storm coming on, perhaps!" said Dale sharply.

"It may be hours yet, herr."

"The better for us. Let's get back down into shelter."

Melchior said no more, but unfastened the rope, and after coiling it up, led them along for some distance, till the great cornice was left behind, and they descended into a little valley over snow, ice and rock, till they reached the stream hurrying down the hollow, crossed it, made a similar ascent, and just as Saxe had it in his mind to say, "I thought we were going over that snowfield," they climbed up through a little wilderness of blocks, and they were upon the edge of the unsullied slope, which ran up to left and down to their right apparently for a mile.

"Ah!" cried Dale, springing upon the snow, which allowed his feet to sink in a little; "capital condition! Now, Melchior, forward!"

"Yes, herr," said the guide, testing the snow with his foot; "there will be no steps to cut here."

He then started off to cross the great snowfield diagonally, so as to reach the rocks at the far top corner, his feet sinking more deeply into the soft crystals than was conducive to good progress, and Saxe first, and then Dale, keeping pretty well to his footprints.

"Disappointing, this," said Dale, when they were about a third of the way across. "I thought we were to have nothing but downward progress now."

"It is puffing work, too!" cried Saxe.

"Herr! herr!" said the guide, stopping short in his tracks, and speaking in a reproachful whisper.

"What's the matter?" said Saxe.

"There is a great deal of loose snow high up on our left, and if you set any of it in motion it would be bad."

"I forgot," said Saxe apologetically. "I will be more careful."

"That's right," said Dale. "Not much danger, though, here. No fear of being bombarded by stones—eh, Melchior?"

"No, herr," said the guide, looking about him anxiously. "Shall we get on?"

Dale nodded, and they tramped on through the soft snow for some distance farther; when, just as Saxe was asking himself whether he was growing tired or the snow much more soft, Melchior paused once more and looked upward.

"Yes—what is it?" said Dale quickly.

"A minute's rest for the young herr, sir. As soon as he has his breath well go on. The snow is loose, but better than I expected. I was a little afraid at starting."

"Afraid? Of what?"

"The snow is often a little treacherous in a place like this, herr; and as it is so loose we shall have to be careful about glissading when we get beyond the rocks yonder."

"But surely there is nothing treacherous here?" said Dale: "a little soft, perhaps, but that is all. Go on: we ought to be up there in another quarter of an hour."

"Yes, herr," said the guide, after another glance up at the wreaths and folds of pure white snow which draped the mountain high above their heads; and then, after giving Saxe an encouraging smile, he went on again, with his boots crunching down the snow, forming a series of impressions which were deepened by those who followed.

Half the distance—two-thirds—was passed; and as he struggled on, feeling hot now and as if the exertion were telling upon him, Saxe glanced back, wondering at the length of the track they had made, and how the snowfield had seemed to extend as they trudged along.

"Yes," said Dale, from close behind him, as he divined the boy's thoughts, "it is a long way; but we shall soon reach the rocks now, and then the worst part of our journey is done."

Crack!

A long dull report, as of something breaking; and Melchior stopped short and uttered a groan.

"What is it?" cried Dale excitedly.

"The snow, herr—the snow!" cried Melchior. "See!"

He spoke calmly and solemnly, but made no effort to dash on; though, as he realised their danger, Dale's first impulse was to call upon Saxe to try and reach the rocks.

Melchior knew that it would be impossible, and he stood firm, ready to meet his fate.

For far above them a dark jagged line had opened across the snowfield, with the dull report they had heard. That crack had begun to widen rapidly, with a curious hissing noise, and the next moment Saxe saw that the vast snow slope was in motion, and that they were being carried by it downward toward the valley, a couple of thousand yards below.



"They had started an avalanche, and were being hurried downward to destruction."

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Everything happened so quickly that the boy had no time to feel alarm. One quick thought darted through his brain,— that they would be carried so far down that they would have to make a long détour. Then his arm was seized by Melchior, and a sound above him made him gaze upward, to see that the snow was forming in long folds, like waves, upon the slope, and threatening to curve over and bury them. Then their speed increased, the rolling sound rose into a terrific roar, and the boy fully grasped the fact that they had started an avalanche, and were being hurried downward to destruction.

"Can't we—we—"

Saxe said no more, for at that moment a rush of snow swept by them as if borne upon the wings of some terrible tempest, and in the midst of the suffocating sensation he felt himself sinking lower and lower. The snow was at his waist; then, as he was borne swiftly down, at his breast; and the next instant at his lips; and all the while he was gliding downward at railway speed.

"Melk! Help!" he cried hoarsely, as he was twisted violently round and borne down backward; and then the snow seemed to leap right over him, and all was dark.

What followed was blind confusion, in which Saxe struggled to fight back the snow, so that he could breathe, for the sense of suffocation was terrible. Then all at once the rapid gliding motion ceased, and in the darkness he felt as if he were being held tightly in some terrible embrace, which closed round him slowly and surely, till only his arms were at liberty, and with these he fought.

And now he found that he still held the ice-axe that had been his companion all day. It was stretched right out above him as far as he could reach, and, as he moved it, to his intense joy he could see a pale ray of light, one which increased as he moved the axe again, telling him that, though he was buried, the head of the axe was above the level of the snow.

His first efforts were to enlarge the hole that ran right up, very little larger than the handle of the axe, though the beating with his hand had formed quite a little hollow about his head.

"The snow has stopped, and I am only buried so deep," he thought to himself, as the horrible feeling of panic began

to subside. "If I can make that hole bigger, so as to be able to breathe, I ought soon to be able to creep out."

He worked away, enlarging the hole a little; but he had to observe the greatest caution, for fear of filling the little perpendicular tunnel with the loose snow. It was but little, still it enabled him to breathe more freely; and as soon as he reached this pitch he began to strive to raise himself, first one leg and then the other, to force himself out to the surface.

And now the feeling of horror, which had passed away for the moment, returned, as he grasped the fact that the loose snow, in which he had been swept down, had been pressed together by the weight above it, till to his waist he felt as if he were enclosed in solid ice.

In spite of his position the perspiration broke out upon his forehead, and the wild horror which seized him nearly robbed him of his senses till the reaction came.

"Melchior and Mr Dale will seek for me and dig me out," he thought. "I must listen till I hear them, and then shout."

He grew calmer now, and listened; but all was perfectly still, and a chill struck through him as he asked himself a terrible question—

"Where were his companions!"

He had been plodding on, he remembered, with Mr Dale behind him; but he had not seen a sign of his companion since, though he had seen Melchior, who had caught him by the wrist, and then—

"Yes: what then?"

He could remember no more, only that horrible confusion as they were carried down, till he was fighting for breath, buried at the bottom of the drift.

Saxe listened again, straining his ears for the faintest sound, but hearing nothing.

"They must have been carried farther," he tried to think; "and as soon as they can climb up they will begin to seek for me;" and he repeated this cheering thought to fight back another, which was vague, strange and terrible—a thought which suggested the impossibility of two people discovering the tiny hole made by the head of an ice-axe in the midst of the snow of that tremendous avalanche.

"I don't care; I will not give up hoping," he said to himself, as he moved the ice-axe gently, and saw a ray or two more light. Then he began to wonder whether the heat of his body would melt enough of the snow-ice about him to enable him to work his way out; and in this hope he waited and rested for a few minutes, for the exertion even of moving the axe seemed to set his heart beating fast.

Then once more the feeling of horror grew more terrible than he could bear; and he was fast succumbing to it and losing his senses, when he fancied that he heard a cry.

It ceased directly; and then, as he listened with every nerve on the strain, there it was again—faint, apparently very distant, but plainly enough—the jodel of some Swiss, if it were not that of the guide.

Throwing his head back as far as he could, and keeping the axe handle tight against the side of the narrow hole, Saxe sent up a despairing cry for help.

As he ceased he made a desperate struggle to free himself, but it was useless; and he listened again and to his great joy the jodel came again, and he answered it.

Then there was a terrible period of suspense; and, as no sound was heard, he yelled with all his might, and this time there was undoubtedly an answering call.

Once more he shouted, and a hail came from nearer; and then, to his despair, it was repeated from farther away, making the unfortunate prisoner utter a despairing cry of rage, which had the effect of bringing the sound once more nearer and nearer still, and at last so close that he knew it was Melchior's voice which cried—

"Now, once more shout. Where are you?"

Saxe's lips parted, and he drew in his breath in the excitement and relief of feeling that help was so close at hand; but no sound would come save a low, hoarse gasp, and then a giddy sensation came over him, and once more all was darkness.

Chapter Thirty Six.

From the Snow Grave.

Saxe seemed to have awakened from sleep with a terrible throbbing headache, to listen to a curious digging sound which was going on over his head. He could hear a loud rumbling too, and, as he was still wandering and confused at being suddenly awakened, as it appeared to him, the truth came with a leap, just as the axe handle, which he still held, was sharply agitated to keep the hole open, and Melchior's voice came down to him.

"Try—try and speak, young herr!" But for a few moments no word would come from his lips. He wanted to speak; he strove hard, wondering the while at his silence; but not a sound came, till there was a deep groan from above him,

and then with a sudden rush the words came from his pent up breast—

“Melk! Help—help!”

“Hah! That’s right. Yes, boy!” was shouted down to him loudly. “That’s right. Keep a good heart, and I’ll soon have you out. Can you breathe well?”

The axe handle was agitated while these words were spoken; and as Saxe replied, the efforts of the guide were renewed, and he cut and chopped away at the compressed snow, sending the sparkling crystals flying, and toiling hard; while a word or two were exchanged from time to time, the guide’s being so full of encouragement and promise that the boy grew more and more hopeful.

At last the fragments of snow began to crumble down more rapidly; and, in spite of Melchior’s efforts to keep the way clear, the snow rose about Saxe’s face, so that very little more of it would have meant suffocation. The boy fought hard with his left hand to keep the snow clear, but there was no space sufficient for him to sweep it right away; and the moments grew more and more anxious as Melchior’s axe cut and chipped, and he tore out great pieces from the hole he was making and hurled them down the slope.

And all the while the prisoner gazed up through his pinched-together eyes, for the fragments and ice dust fell fast, till at last the point of Melchior’s axe appeared suddenly, and was as quickly withdrawn.

“How far was that from your face, boy?” whispered Melchior.

“Nearly a foot.”

“Hah! that’s well,” cried the man; and the blows of the axe fell merrily now, till a great piece of the impending snow was suddenly lifted out, and the prisoner breathed freely as he gazed wildly up past the guide’s body at the glowing evening sky.

This piece removed, the guide’s next effort was to clear the loose snow crystals and chips of ice away from the prisoner’s face, and to chip off other pieces of the snow which had roofed him in. Then, getting himself into a better position, he bent down and grasped the boy’s hands.

“I just saw the head of your axe,” he said. “There, keep heart of gold in you, lad: you will soon be out now. I think if I place your axe across for you to drag at, and I try too, we shall be able to draw you right out. A minute’s rest first, though. Now you can breathe. I am breathless too.”

“Where is Mr Dale?” panted Saxe; but there was no reply, and Saxe read the worst in the barely seen face bent over him in the rough well-like hole that had been cut so energetically.

A few minutes only were allowed to elapse, and then the guide took the ice-axe to which Saxe still clung from the boy’s hand to lay it aside.

“Now,” he said, “close your eyes while I cut a couple of holes.”

The boy obeyed, and tried hard not to wince as the hard chips flew and struck him again and again in the face; while making the implement flash as he struck with it energetically, Melchior cut deeply into the sides of the hole, and just at a suitable distance for the object he had in view.

This of course was to place Saxe’s ice-axe across, with head and butt resting in the two holes, and he had judged so accurately that the head went in with not half an inch to spare after he had thrust in the butt spike at the opposite side.

“Now,” cried the guide, “take well hold of that, while I stoop down and get my hands under your arms and locked across your breast. Then, as I give the word, we must heave together.”

He got himself into position as he spoke, but had to use the spike at the end of his axe handle to form a place for his feet on either side. Then, throwing down the axe, he planted his feet firmly, bent down nearly double, clasped his hands round the boy, and after seeing that he had a good grip of the ashen handle above his head, called upon him to heave.

Then began a slow, patient struggle, with Saxe tugging at the cross-bar formed by his ice-axe, till it bent more and more into a bow, while Melchior brought his powerful muscles to bear in a steady strain, till Saxe gasped forth—

“No, no! Stop!”

“Did I hurt you?” said Melchior.

“Only seemed as if you were pulling me right in two,” groaned the boy. “It’s of no use; you can’t get me out.”

“I can, and I will,” said the guide firmly.

“I would go on cutting you out, only it would take so many hours, and I am afraid—”

“Of what?” said Saxe faintly, and speaking more for the sake of gaining time than anything else, so terrible had the strain been for him.

“I am afraid of loosening the snow and starting it again by my blows,” replied Melchior. “It takes so little sometimes to begin an avalanche, and we know how the snow hangs lightly on this side of the mountain.”

"Yes," said Saxe, with his eyes half-closed.

"And he would be dead long before I could get him out," said Melchior to himself. "Poor boy! He could not last for hours frozen in like that."

Saxe opened his eyes again, and looked up at the guide wildly.

"Never mind me now," he said: "go and find Mr Dale."

Melchior shook his head.

"No: my duty is here, herr, and I must get you out. As soon as you can bear it I must try again."

"But I can't bear it. You can never get me out."

"We shall see," cried the guide cheerily. "Come: you are upset. Where is your what you English call pluck?"

This was said in a tone in which there seemed to be so much contempt, that Saxe gazed at the man resentfully, and seizing the cross-bar again he cried—

"Try again!"

The guide smiled as soon as he was not noticed, and then bending down once more the strain began again, and was carried on till Melchior himself gave in.

"We must rest once more, herr," he said, as he removed his arms; and then, as Saxe made no sign, he looked down excitedly in the boy's face, to see that his eyes were closed and that he was quite inanimate.

"Poor boy!" he said tenderly: "that sneer at his courage made him fight till he could do no more."

The guide stood upright now, breathing hard as if to inhale fresh strength; and then gathering himself together, he bent down again.

"Better now, while he is insensible," he muttered.

This time he got himself down lower, and his arms so far round Saxe that he was able to hook his hands about his elbows. Then, slowly bringing his great strength to bear, he began to heave, the veins standing out like network about his temples, and his face turning purple as he strove to draw the prisoner out of the icy fetters in which he was fast. But for some moments every effort seemed to be vain, and a horrible feeling of despair came over the guide as he relaxed his efforts once more.

But only while one might have counted twenty before he tightened his clasp once more, and heaved with so good an effect that he drew Saxe right out of the icy mould, which had pretty well shaped itself to the lower part of his figure, and then carried him out of the excavation and laid him down barefooted upon the snow.

Chapter Thirty Seven.

A Great Surprise.

"Hah!" ejaculated Melchior, as he wiped the great drops off his brow and stood panting and waiting for the boy to recover his senses.

At last Saxe uttered a catching sigh and moved his head uneasily. Then, with his eyes tightly closed, he said feebly—

"Don't—don't, Melk: you hurt me. It's of no use. Go and try to help Mr Dale. Eh?"

He started as he opened his eyes widely and looked about. "Why, Melk—you don't mean—"

"Yes, herr," said the guide quietly. "I dragged you out."

"Why!—oh, how it hurts! You've left my legs in the hole! No," he added, as he struggled into a sitting position and looked down,— "only my boots."

"I'll bind some cloth round them directly, herr. We can get other boots."

"But—I feel—just as if I had no legs at all," said Saxe excitedly. "Not broken, are they?"

"No, herr: only a little numbed with the cold and pressure. There, I am better now. I'll chafe them before I bind up your feet."

"You couldn't get out my boots?"

"No, herr—not for many hours: we must not wait for that;" and he knelt down now, and after rapidly chafing the half-dead limbs to bring back the circulation, he took string from his pocket, cut off both sleeves of his jacket, and then cleverly tied the wrists, and drew them on to the boy's legs, where he bound them with the string, forming a pair of boots and stockings in one.

"Why, Melk, you've made me look like an Italian brigand," cried Saxe pitifully, as he stood up and looked down at his cross-gartered legs. "Oh! I can hardly stand. But now we are wasting time: let's find Mr Dale."

"Yes," said Melchior, drawing a long deep breath: "let's try and find Mr Dale."

"Which way shall we go?" said Saxe, painfully picking up his axe and looking hopelessly around over the white waste where the snow lay, now compressed into waves of ice, and looking like portions of a glacier.

There was no answer to his question, and he looked at the guide, who stood leaning upon his ice-axe.

"Well!" cried Saxe; and Melchior started and faced him. "I was trying to think, herr," he said. "We were all separated at the first slip of the snow. I held on to you for a few moments, but you were snatched from me, and I saw no more, till I found myself far below yonder. I had been buried twice; but the snow as it rolled over thrust me forth again, and I was able to struggle out."

"Then you have no idea where Mr Dale can be?" Melchior shook his head sadly.

"It was a mistake, sir," he said. "I ought to have known better than to cross such a treacherous slope. I did know better, but I suffered myself to be overruled, and now in the face of all this terrible misfortune I feel helpless. What can one man do when great Nature fights against him as she does here?"

Saxe looked wildly round again, to see that before long it would be dusk, for the snow was fast turning grey, and the peaks alone were ruddy with the sinking sun.

The boy shivered from cold and nervous shock, as he gazed at the weird-looking rocks and the folded snow, and then, grasping at Melchior's arm, he said pitifully: "Don't tell me you think he is buried."

"No, herr," cried the guide, rousing himself: "I will not say that, for there is still hope. He may have been carried right away below us by the loose upper snow, which went on, while the lower part soon stopped by getting pressed together into ice. But it is impossible to say. We must do something; it will soon be dark, and you have no strength left now."

"I have!" cried the boy excitedly; "and I can help you now. Shout: perhaps he may be within hearing."

The guide shrugged his shoulders and shook his head; but he gave forth a long, loud mountaineer's call, which was repeated plainly from far away above him.

Then again, and again, and again; but there were only the echoes to respond.

"Let's look about," cried Saxe, in a voice which told of his despair; but even as he spoke the guide had started off after a few minutes' consideration, and the boy followed up and up, painfully, slowly, slipping, climbing and drawing himself forward from time to time by driving the pick of his axe into the ice.

For there was very little snow to traverse here: by the slip it had been almost entirely turned into ice, and the difficulties of the climb so increased that from time to time Saxe had to stop utterly exhausted.

"Why are we going up here?" he said on one of these occasions.

"To get as near as I can guess to where we were when the snow-slide began, herr. Shall I go on alone?"

"No—no! don't leave me!" cried Saxe excitedly.

"The herr might depend upon my return," said Melchior.

"Yes: I was not thinking of that, but of my being able to help. How much farther is it?"

"About five minutes, herr—not more. You can see for yourself that we must be quite close to the position now. Rested?"

Saxe nodded, and wishing fervently for the guide's strength, he toiled on again behind him, till at last they stood upon the bare rock swept clear of the snow, and any doubt of its being where the mishap befel them was quite removed by their coming suddenly upon quite a wall of snow standing many feet above their heads, and running far enough to right and left in a jagged line, as if a flash of lightning had darted across and made the division.

Saxe's lips parted to speak, but the guide held up his hand.

"Not a word, herr," he whispered. "We might have another fall."

Saxe looked up and shuddered, for the snow far above them seemed as if it might come down at any moment; and after looking sharply from left to right, he gladly followed Melchior as he went cautiously toward the upper rocks for a couple of dozen yards.

"Here is where we must have been," he said; "and from this spot we ought to start back if we are to find the herr."

Saxe nodded, for he could not trust himself to speak. It was all too terrible; and the thought of Dale being imprisoned somewhere near, held fast as he had been, seemed far worse than anything he had himself gone through.

Melchior started back directly, as if from instinct; and, unable to do more, Saxe followed him till he halted.

"It is blind work, herr," he whispered. "There is no clue to guide one. He was suddenly swept away from us; and who can say whether we may not be going from him all this time, instead of following him up?"

"Oh, Melchior!" cried Saxe piteously.

"Not so loud, herr—not so loud. It sounds cruel to say so—hard to you; but I am obliged to be honest with you, and say that I see no hope of our finding him alive."

A sob escaped from Saxe's breast, but his face looked cold and hard.

"You might have said the same about me," he whispered back; "but I am here."

"Yes, herr; but then you were able to make some sign of being alive. We have shouted and looked about for a long time now, but have heard nothing of poor Mr Dale, and my heart is growing cold about him."

"Oh, don't say that!" cried Saxe. "It is too horrible. We must—we will find him. Perhaps he is quite buried under the snow."

Saxe's last words made the guide turn and look at him curiously; but he said no word, only kept on walking down slowly toward the foot of the slope, sweeping his eyes over the way they traversed from side to side, his keen glance taking in the slightest thing, and making him hurry away to carefully examine places where the snow and ice lay high or more ragged; but they kept on with their difficult descent, and saw nothing that afforded them a clue to Dale's whereabouts.

"Oh, we must have help to search the place well!" cried Saxe in agony. "It will soon be too dark to see anything, and we are so useless alone."

"Yes, herr," said the guide sadly; "but it will take six hours to get people here at the very least, and I don't like to go away while there is the least chance of our finding him."

"You are right," sighed Saxe; "while we were gone for help he might be perishing, and we could have saved him. We must stop and search till we drop."

That seemed as if it would not be long first, as far as the boy was concerned. He had apparently forgotten the numbness of his limbs and the peril through which he had passed, and in spite of the roughness of the ice and snow he continued to get over it in his extemporised sandals, which had the advantage of not slipping. But the day's toil had been excessive before the accident; and though his spirits had kept him up so far, the time was fast approaching when exhaustion would conquer.

Melchior knew it, and after glancing at Saxe as he tottered once and nearly fell, he went on for a few minutes before speaking and hurting the boy's feelings by telling him that it was because of his weariness, then suddenly drew up, took off and threw down his rope.

"One can't go on for ever without getting strength, herr," he said. "I'm nearly wearied out. Let's sit down on the rope for a few minutes."

"No, no: let's keep on. He may be anxiously waiting for our help."

"If we go on as we are, herr, we shall be too weak to help him if we find him," said Melchior, seating himself; and Saxe sank beside him, and involuntarily leaned up against the sturdy fellow, who began to search his wallet, and brought out the remains of some bread and cheese, the greater part of which he offered to his companion.

"No, no, Melk: I can't eat," he said.

"You must, herr—for his sake. Try."

"A fair half, then," said Saxe; and the guide smiled, and made a fresh division, which was slowly discussed every mouthful seeming to the boy as if it would choke him.

And as they ate the last faint light died away, and bright points of light began to twinkle overhead.

"It will be a bright night, thank Heaven!" said Melchior: "the storm threats have passed away. Hah! it begins to grow cold."

"And I have made you worse," said Saxe faintly, as he glanced at the sleeves of his companion's shirt.

"Oh, that's nothing, herr," said the guide, stretching out his hands to feel Saxe's feet; and after bidding him sit fast, lifting the boy's feet across his own. "Keep them there," he said: "they will be warmer while we rest; they were getting wet, and we must not have your feet frozen."

"Does it freeze?" said Saxe drowsily.

"Yes, herr, sharply up here, as soon as the sun goes down. Now, you must not think me heartless if I light my pipe. Then we will start on again."

"Oh no: light it, Melk, and let us start again," said Saxe in a whisper.

The guide rapidly filled and lit his pipe, for his long experience told him that Saxe must not sit long in the condition he was; and rising and resuming his hold of his trusty axe, he said sharply—

"Now, herr, forward!"

Saxe looked up at him in a dazed way, but did not stir.

"I was afraid so," muttered the guide, as he picked up the boy's ice-axe and stuck it through his belt. Then drawing the rope from beneath him, he threw it over his shoulder and went down on his knees just in front of his companion.

"Now, herr," he said imperatively: "put your arms round my neck."

"What for? what are you going to do?" faltered Saxe helplessly.

"Only give you a lift, my boy, till you are a bit rested."

"But—" began Saxe, protesting feebly.

"Your hands! Quick!" cried Melchior; and seizing one he drew Saxe forward, the other hand followed, and the guide staggered to his feet, shifted and shuffled his load into an easier position, and then getting his hands beneath his legs, as Saxe involuntarily clasped his arms about the man's stout neck, he began his perilous descent—perilous, for now he had to trust entirely to his feet and balance himself cautiously as he started off in the gathering darkness downward toward the nearest vale.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked; but Saxe did not reply.

"It was quite time, poor lad," muttered Melchior. "The warmth from my body will keep him alive, and, Heaven helping me, I may get safely down below the snow. If I can do that, I must find a place where I can make a fire. Now, lad, you call yourself a guide: make for the nearest bit of forest, and save this poor boy's life. But it's a hard task—a hard task, and you need all your strength and knowledge now."

It was indeed a hard task, and again and again he nearly fell headlong; but by the exercise of his wonderful activity and strength, he always recovered himself, took a fresh breath, and descended steadily over the frozen snow, which grew more rugged and difficult at every turn.

"But I must do it—must do it," the man kept on muttering; and he toiled on down till the bottom of the slope was reached, and here the piled-up new ice proved more difficult than ever; and it was not till an hour had passed from his reaching the bottom of the slip, that he thoroughly left behind the last trace of the avalanche.

What had been simple mountaineering work in the bright sunshine, when free and able to pick the way, became terrible now in the mountain, where the path was always rugged, but often such that a moment's hesitation or a slip might mean death for both. But Melchior's feet seemed by long habit to have grown accustomed to danger, and to have been educated into joining in the protection of him they bore, so that, in spite of the darkness and danger, Melchior got down lower and lower, and by degrees worked himself into the track he had followed in the morning in guiding his companions up the peak.

Here he was more at home, and able to think out how he could best pass round that ledge and creep by this angle before he reached it. Saxe did not speak, but hung upon his back perfectly inert—a terrible load at such a time; but the guide made no mental complaint,—simply toiled on slowly enough for a couple of hours; then, thinking of a certain nook in the mountain just below the snow-line where there was a good-sized clump of dwarfed and distorted pines, he decided to stop there for the night, sheltered from the icy wind with a good elastic heap of pine boughs for their bed and coverlet, and a roaring fire to add to their warmth.

"The task will be easy enough to-morrow," he said; and then, thinking sorrowfully of Dale, he kept on with his slow, careful tramp down the mountain side.

It was as if that clump of pines would never be reached, and there were moments when he was ready to think that he must have missed them; but a glance to left or right at the rocks towering up into the sky sufficed to convince him that he was still on the right track, for he knew them by heart, and, giving his load a fresh shift, he toiled on again, hot, exhausted, but full of determination.

Now and then he spoke to Saxe, but there was no reply; and more than once he felt disposed to let his burden glide down on to the rock and have a short rest, but he always shook his head and went on downward, thanking Providence that he was below all the parts which necessitated clinging; and at last, when so utterly wearied out that his pace was a mere crawl, he reached the pines, threaded his way in, and lowered Saxe down. Then, setting rapidly to work, he soon brought together a quantity of dead wood, and started a fire with a few handfuls of pine needles piled on the small boughs to shed its warmth upon the boy's half-frozen feet.

This done, he cut and broke down bough after bough, making of them a soft, elastic bed near the fire, and dragging Saxe into a better position before cutting other pieces with his axe and laying them together like the ridge of a roof over his companion's head.

"He'll soon be warm there," muttered Melchior: "no fear of freezing now."

The wood was rapidly piled on the fire, for there was abundance beneath the pines; and at last, after bending down and satisfying himself as to Saxe's condition, Melchior prepared to creep in and lie down by his side, but, on second thoughts, seated himself by the fire to enjoy its warm glow. But he was too uneasy to stay there long; and, creeping back to Saxe, he laid his hand upon the boy's breast.

"Asleep, herr?" he said gently.

"Asleep?" said the boy confusedly: "I—I suppose I have been; but I'm giddy, and my head— Melchior—Melchior! why are we here? Have you found Mr Dale?"

The guide was silent for a few moments. Then, in a low, hoarse voice, he said sadly—

"No, herr; and it seems impossible to search farther."

"Oh, Melchior!"

"It is true, herr. Your life was in danger, and it was all I could do to bring you down in safety."

"Bring me down?" faltered Saxe. "I do not understand."

"No, herr; we do not understand when we are insensible. You do not remember my carrying you down the mountain on my back?"

"I? No: of course not! You could not have done so."

The guide laughed softly, and drew the tough pine boughs more over Saxe.

"Are you warm?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so; but we must get up and go in search of Mr Dale."

"We cannot go to-night, without lanthorns and help. Do you think I should stay here without trying, if it were possible to save Mr Dale's life?"

"What's that!" moaned Saxe just at that moment; for a shrill cry came from a distance, followed by a jodel, which Melchior answered as he stood aside from the fire so as to try and pierce the darkness of the slope below them.

The jodel was given again, and answered.

"There is help coming, young herr," cried the guide excitedly, as he shaded his eyes from the fire: "men with lanthorns. Who can they be?" he muttered to himself. "Smugglers? No, for the jodel was Pierre's, and the cry was like that of Andregg. Why are they coming here?"

He was not long kept in doubt, for the party, whoever they were, came on rapidly now, at the sight of the fire, the dim lanthorns dancing and swinging about in the darkness below, and coming nearer and nearer, as their bearers ascended the mountain side towards the patch of wood, till all at once one of them came forward at a run into the light shed by the fire.

"Melchior!" he panted: "you here! Where is young Saxe?"

"Mr Dale!" cried the guide wonderingly; and at his cry Saxe came creeping out from the shelter of boughs, and struggled to his feet to utter a cry of astonishment as he saw the figure of his mountaineering friend standing full in the fire's light.

Chapter Thirty Eight.

Saxe has an Antipathy.

Dale's first act, as soon as he caught sight of Saxe, was to clasp him to his breast in a brotherly hug, while, unable to control his feelings, Saxe responded.

"Oh, my dear boy—my dear lad!" cried Dale; "I was heartbroken about you."

Saxe tried to reply, but no words would come.

"Thank Heaven you are safe!" cried Dale. "Eh? Ah, Melchior, my man, I had forgotten you!"

He held out both his hands to the guide, who took a step forward and folded Dale to his breast.

"I wish to goodness they would not do that," said the Englishman to himself: "it seems so unmanly." But he smiled the next moment, as he recalled that he had set the example by hugging Saxe; and then he drew back, for fear that the old peasant Andregg and his man Pierre should follow suit.

"Why, Saxe, my lad, I thought you and Melchior were buried beneath the snow."

"That's what we thought about you, herr," cried Melchior. "We have been searching for you."

"I searched for you both for over an hour," said Dale, "and then in despair I went off for help."

"But how was it we did not see you?" cried Saxe, who now, in his great joy, began to recover voice and strength.

"The snowfield is great," said Melchior gravely. "Several people might be on it at once, hidden from each other by the rough piles of ice and snow; and the young herr forgets that he was buried long beneath, and that it was, I dare say, nearly an hour before I struggled out and found him. How did you, sir, get on?"

"Ah! that I can hardly tell you," said Dale. "It was all one roar and rush and confusion; but I was kept at the top all the way, and never quite covered by the snow."

"All the way, herr?"

"Yes. I cannot tell how far it was; but I seemed to glissade right down into the valley, where I was fixed for a few minutes right up to my armpits. Then I got free, and began to struggle back up the snow in search of you, till, quite in despair at not finding you, I went for help."

"It was no wonder that the herr did not find us," said Melchior. "He was borne to the bottom, and we were shut in not so very far from the top. But, there, our lives are all preserved; and we thank you, neighbours, for coming to our help."

"Glad to help thee, Melchior, my brave man," said old Andregg, in his rough patois; "and I shall be glad to see thee give up this wild mountain life and become a quiet peasant like myself."

"Well," cried Dale, "what is to be done? Can you walk back to Andregg's?"

This after the boy had briefly given him an account of his adventures.

"Yes, I think so," said Saxe. "I seem to be rested now."

"No!" cried Melchior emphatically. "The young herr cannot walk another step to-night. We must stay here."

"You are right," said Dale. "We have brought up food and blankets. Now you talk like this, I begin to feel how exhausted I am."

"Then we will make camp here, herr," said Melchior. And the fire being replenished by Pierre, the little party were soon seated around, partaking of the simple fare provided; and Saxe, in his utter freedom from care, ate with an appetite which astounded himself, as he thought of the despair and misery of a short time before.

Then as they talked, Melchior smiled as he listened to the boy's remarks; for they were confused, and he was quite in ignorance of how far he was from the site of the snow slip. To him the perils of that day had occurred close by, and he did not realise the fact that the guide had carried him for hours upon his back.

"It does not matter," Melchior said to himself. "Why should I tell him? Some day he may find out. If I tell him now, he will think I am seeking for a reward."

The meal, though, was not altogether pleasant to Saxe, who found that every time he raised his eyes Pierre was staring at him in the peculiar apathetic way which had irritated him so before. No matter how he changed his position, no matter what he did, the feeling was strong upon him that old Andregg's servant was watching him; and the stronger this idea grew upon him the more he felt compelled to turn and look back, just as if the eyes of the sour-looking fellow had some peculiar fascination which he could not resist.

But even this came to an end; for, refreshed by the food, and after submitting to an examination by Melchior, who wished to make sure that his feet were not frozen in the least, a peculiar sensation of drowsy warmth came over the boy so strongly, that one minute he was trying to paint his sufferings on the snow when he felt that he had lost Dale, the next he was lying back wrapped in a blanket, breathing hard and sleeping as soundly in that dwarf pine-wood on the ledge of the huge mountain as if he had been back in London, with policemen regularly parading the street outside.

It was a heavy, dreamless sleep, that lasted till long after sunrise, when he opened his eyes to find that he was the last to wake up, that the fire was burning merrily, the sun shining, and nature looking more beautiful than ever. They were evidently waiting for him to wake and join them, for the rough meal was spread and the party talking quietly—all but Pierre, who lay on the ground upon his chest, resting his chin in his hands, and staring hard in one direction with his heavy, glowering eyes.

That direction was at Saxe, who turned away angrily as once more he found himself the object of the man's unpleasant stare.

"I can't make a fuss about it and complain," he said to himself: "it would seem to be so stupid." For what could he say, save that the man stared at him in a dull, heavy way? Dale would reply that there was no harm in that, and he would look weak. But all the same the man's stare worried him and spoiled his breakfast, making him feel irritable and morose all the way back, till they reached Andregg's home in the valley, where Dale announced that they would have a few days' rest.

Chapter Thirty Nine.

Saxe sees a Kobold.

"I don't approve of our hunt for crystals to turn out such a failure," said Saxe one day, after they had had their rest and spent another fortnight in the valley, making short excursions in various directions.

"It is disappointing," replied Dale; "but we did succeed, though we have lost the fruit of our success."

"Well, that's the part of it that I don't like," said Saxe. "It seems so precious hard. But you will not give up yet!"

"No: I propose staying another month, or till the weather breaks up. If we begin to have rain and snow, we shall soon want to get down to the lower grounds."

"That is what always puzzles me," said Saxe; "for with the mountains rising up all round us, we seemed to be on the low grounds here—down in this valley."

"You forget that we are between five and six thousand feet above sea-level here."

"Between five and six thousand!" said Saxe thoughtfully. "Six thousand; and the cross of Saint Paul's is only four hundred and four. Why, this valley here is nearly fifteen times as high, and it does not seem high a bit!"

"But it is my lad, all the same."

There was a few minutes' silence, and then Saxe began again:

"You win not give up the crystal hunting?" he said.

"Yes, I think I shall—at all events, for this year. You see it is such a matter of accident. You found that partly—well, by accident."

"No," said Saxe sharply, "not by accident: I was looking for it."

"Yes; but it was by mere accident that we were in the right spot. There—never mind the crystals. We have had a delightful trip, made an excellent collection of Alpine plants, and you have had a good early apprenticeship to mountaineering. Better still, we have escaped unhurt, in spite of the one or two rather serious accidents."

"Yes," said Saxe thoughtfully, "that's true. How soon are we going up another mountain?"

"What! have you not had enough climbing?"

"No: I should like to go up a dozen more."

"Then you will be disappointed for this season, Saxe. Melchior will tell you that it will soon be risky to attempt the high Alps. But as you want an expedition, what do you say to one up the great glacier again—this time as far as we can get?"

"This glacier?"

"No, no: the one in the high valley. We might camp again in the narrow niche."

"And go up the Black Ravine, and examine that lower grotto?"

"Well—yes, if you like. I do not feel very anxious, for the memory of that place is too much associated with my disappointment."

"When shall we go?"

"Make your hay while the sun shines, my boy. The weather is so settled that we cannot do better than go to-morrow."

"I was going with Melk to the Silbern See to-morrow, for trout; but I'd rather visit the great glacier."

"Then go and tell Melchior that we will be off in the morning. I want to make some notes about the movement of the glacier, and perhaps we may descend one or two of the crevasses where the ice is not so thick."

Saxe started off to where Melchior was busy fitting an iron spike to a stout ashen alpenstock.

"Now, Melk!" he cried: "off to-morrow again!"

"Where to, herr? over into Italy?"

"No: into the cold country again. Mr Dale wants to visit the great glacier once more."

"To search for the crystals?"

"Oh no. Don't talk about them to him. It only makes him angry. But we are going to stay up there two or three days; so take a good load of provisions and blankets, so as to make it warmer in the tent."

Melchior looked pleased, and rose to speak to Pierre about the mule, and ordered him to chop up some pine-wood small, to act as kindling to start a fire when that collected might be wet. Then Andregg and his wife were summoned, and received their orders about bread, butter, poultry and cheese; after which Saxe had a happy thought.

"Look here, Melchior!" he said; "I like milk in my coffee."

"Yes, herr, it is pleasant. I will take a bottleful."

"Oh, but I want it every day!"

"We could not take a cow up there."

"No; but we might take a goat."

The guide laughed.

"Yes, we might take a goat," he said; "but it would be rather troublesome."

"Oh no, I'll look after her. I've watched Pierre milk time's enough, and I'm sure I can do it."

"Very well, herr: if you don't mind goat's milk, I'll get one that will run beside the mule."

This fresh idea was received with a good deal of laughter by the old peasant and his wife; but a goat was selected as suitable for the purpose, and the preparations were completed by Pierre, of the heavy, stolid face, bringing in the mule, and haltering it in the stable beneath the chalet.

Saxe was the first to wake next morning at dawn and rouse Dale and the guide, the little party starting off soon afterward, before the sun was up, with the mule heavily laden, and the goat trotting, along by its side contentedly enough. Once or twice it made a bound or two up the steep rocks by the track, and Saxe was about to start in pursuit.

"There goes my breakfast milk!" he shouted; but the guide restrained him.

"She has only gone to crop a few mouthfuls," he said; and so it proved, for the active little animal returned to the track again farther on.

The way to the great glacier—or gros gletscher, as Melchior called it—was now familiar, so that the various points of view had ceased to extort ejaculations of wonderment from Saxe, who trudged on, with geological hammer in hand, "tasting," as he called it, the different stones they passed.

"For who knows?" he said: "I might hit upon gold or silver!"

"You would have to hit that kind of stone much harder to make it produce gold," said Dale, laughing.

Saxe went on in silence for a time, and then broke out with—

"Never mind: I did find the crystals, and perhaps I shall hit upon another grotto yet."

"Pray do," said Dale merrily. "But at any rate we will have a few of the best from the lower grotto in the Black Ravine."

"Yes; and I would have a good search down there," said Saxe: "we may find a fresh place."

"Well, we shall see, my lad; we shall see."

The journey to the niche was made leisurely enough, with no further excitement than a false alarm or two raised by Saxe, who felt sure that they were being followed; but, as he was only laughed at for his pains, he turned sulky, and went on without looking back. He played with the goat, which took to him in the most affectionate way, showing its appreciation by butting at him when he did not expect the kindly attention; and he became the best of friends with Gros, who climbed on, uttering low sighs of satisfaction as soon as Saxe had hit upon the idea of scratching here and there with the point of the geological hammer, and whinnying impatiently for a continuance of the titillation as soon as the boy ceased.

Then the niche was reached, looking quite familiar with the traces of their old fireplace; the tent was set up and secured with blocks of granite instead of tethering pegs, and Saxe gave a grunt of pleasure as he saw the preparations for the evening meal.

"How about the goat, Melk?" he said: "will she want tethering?"

"Oh no, herr: she will not leave us and Gros. Those animals are too fond of company to go far. They get tiresome now and then from being too familiar."

The night passed quietly enough. It was cold; and, at the height they had reached, the stars shone out frostily; but the sleep was deliriously refreshing, and Saxe rose the next morning ready for a journey to the Black Ravine. The mule was taken to carry back any specimens that they might decide to bring away, and the goat insisted upon following, having apparently no intention of being left alone, and setting Gros an excellent example in climbing.

In the Black Ravine the two grottoes were well searched, and the lower one found to be fairly extensive; but no specimens were found worthy of notice, and they returned to camp.

The next day was spent in another expedition higher up the glacier valley, which was followed till the snow became so deep as to be laborious to pass over, and, after exploring two similar ravines to the last, they returned once more to camp, where Melchior drew Saxe aside to ask him if he noticed anything.

"Eh? No," said the boy.

"Perhaps I am wrong, then," said the guide. "I thought the tent had been interfered with, as if some one had touched it."

No more was said; but these words set Saxe thinking till it was bedtime, when Melchior startled him by saying quietly —

"Don't laugh at me, herr. I do try to be firm, and to set aside all the old stories of demons, dragons and goblins in the

mountains. I wish the herr would have a watch kept again, for I am afraid that this gletscher valley is bewitched.”

Saxe looked at him for a moment wonderingly, and then laughed.

“Don’t let Mr Dale hear you talk like that,” he said. “It will make him cross. He says there is no need to keep watch; and that it is so tiring.”

Saxe had forgotten the incident in the conversation which ensued; and after the discussion of the plans for the ensuing day, he went to his sleeping-place to think about the blue-ice grotto at the bottom of the glacier where the milky stream issued, and lie wondering how far up they would be able to explore it, and whether it would be possible to get up as far as the crevasse out of which they had rescued the guide.

“Wouldn’t be worth the trouble,” he said to himself, in the middle of a yawn. “Plenty of crystals, but the wrong sort—ice crystals—won’t keep.”

It only seemed to be the next minute that he was sitting up in the darkness listening and realising that he had been asleep. He had been dreaming, he was sure, but had not the least idea what about; and all he knew now was that he was hot and thirsty.

He rose and quietly unfastened the little canvas fold which served as a door, and went out to find the kettle and have a good draught of water; but it was so mawkishly warm, that he turned from it in disgust, and began to ascend higher to where the little fall came, down, with its pure, icily cold stream.

The night was glorious, and as he looked up he felt that he had never seen so many or such large stars before. So grandly was the arch of heaven bespangled, that he stopped to gaze upward for a few minutes, till, the sensation of thirst growing more acute, he went on, with the towering wall of rock to right and left, and the moist odour of the falling water saluting his nostrils, as he went close up to where one tiny thread of water fell bubbling into a rocky basin, edged with moss—the spot where water was obtained for regular use, its crystal purity tempting the thirsty to drink.

Saxe placed a hand on the rock on either side, bent down till his lips touched the surface, and then drank with avidity, every draught being delicious.

“Make any fellow sleep,” he said to himself, as he raised his head; and he was in the act of passing his hand across his wet lips, when he became suddenly petrified, and stood there motionless, gazing straight before him at a hideous object, apparently not a yard away. It looked misty and dim in the semi-darkness, but plain enough for the boy to see apparently a huge head resting in a pair of hands, which held the chin and pressed up the long loose cheeks on either side, curving up the monstrous mouth into a ghastly grin. The forehead was low, and the eyebrows were shaggy, while from beneath them glared into his a great pair of glowing eyes, that flashed at times and sparkled in the starlight, which rained down on and through a bush of dark, tangled hair, a portion of which hung below the head on either side, and stood out wildly around.

There was no movement but in the eyes, and these literally held the boy, so that for a time he could do nothing but stare at the horrible-looking object, which seemed to come nearer to him—so near that it almost touched him; then receded, till it was almost invisible, and once more stood quite still.

But it was not moving, and Saxe still had sufficient command over self to know that this effect was produced by the mist from the fall being wafted between them by the soft night wind.

How long he stood bent forward there gazing at that horrible head Saxe did not know, but by degrees he began to shrink back slowly, getting farther and farther away, till he dared to turn and run with all his might to the tent door, and creep in, fully expecting that the monster was about to spring upon him till he was inside, when he fastened the canvas door with trembling fingers, and crept to his bed again, where he lay down quickly, with his breath sobbing and the perspiration standing in great drops upon his face. The sensation was upon him that the terrible being he had seen would begin breaking in through the canvas directly, and he lay there with one arm stretched out ready to wake up Dale for help at the first sound outside the tent.

As he now lay trembling there, he recalled Melchior’s words about the valley being bewitched, the falling stones, the disappearance of the crystals; and he was fast growing into a belief that the old legends must be true, and that there really existed a race of horrible little beings beneath the earth, whose duty it was to protect the treasures of the subterranean lands, and that this was one of them on the watch to take the crystals from their hands. But in the midst of the intense silence of the night better sense began to prevail.

“It’s all nonsense—all impossible,” he muttered. “There are no such things, and it was all fancy. I must have seen a block of stone through the falling water, and I was half asleep and nearly dreaming at the time. Why, if I were to wake Mr Dale and tell him, he would laugh at me. It was all a dream.”

But, all the same, he lay shivering there, the aspect of the face having startled him in a way that at times enforced belief; and it was getting rapidly on toward morning when he once more fell asleep, to dream of that hideous head and see the terrible eyes gazing right into his own.

Chapter Forty.

In the Ice-Cave.

The sun was shining brightly on as lovely a morning as had fallen to their lot since they had been in the Alps; and

upon Saxe springing up, his first act was to go up to the spring for his morning wash, and also to look at the stone which had so strongly resembled a head.

There was the clear basin from which he had drunk, and there were the places where he had rested his hands; but there was no stone that could by any possibility have looked like a head even in the darkness, and he returned at last to the tent feeling strangely uncomfortable, and in no good condition for his breakfast.

"Come, Saxe," cried Dale, as he sat eating his bread and fried bacon. "Didn't you sleep well? Not unwell, are you?"

"I? No—oh no! Why?"

"Because you are making a very poor meal, and it will be many hours before we eat again."

Saxe went on with his breakfast; but somehow he did not enjoy it, and his thoughts were either occupied with the terrible face which stood out clear before him as he had seen it the previous night, or he was asking himself whether he should not take Melchior into his confidence, and ask him his opinion about what he had seen.

"I shall not want to stop here to-night," he said to himself. "It is too horrible to feel that a hideous creature like that is always close at hand."

"Now, then," cried Dale, breaking in upon his meditations; "pack up, and let's start for the bottom of the glacier. How long will it take us?"

"Nearly two hours, herr."

"We'll have some provisions for lunch, and take the big hammer and chisel: I shall want the rock marked, so that I can examine it when I come next year, or the year after."

The orders were obeyed, the tent closed up, water and fuel placed ready for their return, and Melchior led off with the mule to cut across a corner before descending to the edge of the ice.

Before they had gone a dozen yards there was a loud b-a-ah! from overhead, and the goat came bounding down from rock to rock in the most breakneck fashion; but it ended by leaping into their track, and ran up and butted its head against Saxe.

"How friendly that animal has become!" said Saxe, as they walked on, with the goat munching away and trotting beside them; till Dale said suddenly, "Here—we do not want it with us: send it back."

Saxe drove the goat away, but it took his movements as meaning play, and danced and skipped, and dodged him and then dashed by, and on ahead, the same gambols taking place at every attempt to send the animal back.

"There—let it be," cried Dale at last: "you'll tire yourself out before we fairly start. Why, it follows us like a dog! Perhaps it will get tired soon, and go back."

But the goat seemed to have no such intention, and it would have been a difficult task to tire out the active creature, which was now tickling the mule's ribs with one of its horns, now scrambling up some steep piece of rock, now making tremendous leaps, and trotting on again as calmly as if it were thoroughly one of the party.

In due time the foot of the great glacier was reached, after a difficult scramble down the steep, smoothly polished rocks which shut it in on either side.

Here the mule was unloaded by a shabby amount of pasture, ice-axes and hammers seized, and the trio started over the level bed of the glacier streams, the main rivulet dividing into several tiny veins, which spread over the soft clayey earth brought down by the water. But this soon gave place to rock as they neared the piled-up ice, which looked to Saxe like huge masses of dull white chalk, veined in every direction with blue.

As they advanced the rock became more and more smooth, looking as if the ice had only lately shrunk from its surface, but, on Melchior being referred to, he shook his head.

"Not in my time, herr. The ice is creeping farther down the valley every year."

"Well," said Dale; "we'll try and find out the rate of its progress by scoring the rock."

This was done in several places as they advanced toward the low arch of ice from which the stream poured forth; and Saxe rather shrank from this task, as it seemed to promise a long wade in chilling water.

But as they came close up, it was to find ample room beneath the glacier to pick their way in over the rock, with the stream on their right, where it had worn itself a channel in the course of ages.

Dale became immediately deeply interested in the structure of the ice and the state of the rock beneath the arch, at whose entrance he paused, while the guide under his instruction chipped marks at the edge of the stream by which he could test the rate of progress of the glacier.

This was very interesting from a scientific point of view; but it soon grew tedious to Saxe, who began to penetrate a little farther into the lovely blue grotto, whose roof was a succession of the most delicate azure tints.

"Don't go in too far alone," said Dale, looking up.

"No: I shall not go too far," replied Saxe; "and, besides, I am not alone."

He nodded laughingly toward the goat, which had followed him in without hesitation, sniffing at the running water, and then throwing up its horned head to gaze onward into the blue haze from which came the gurglings and strange whisperings of the water.

"Well, I may as well go on a little bit," thought Saxe; and cautiously advancing, so as not to step down some horrible rock split, he went forward rapt in wonder at the beauty of the scene, as at the end of a few yards the passage curved round so that the opening became invisible, and he was gazing at the glorious rays of light which shot right by him, all tinted with celestial blue.

"It is glorious," he thought; and then he gave quite a start, for the goat beside him suddenly set up a loud bleat and began to advance farther beneath the glacier, its pattering hoofs on the stone sounding loudly above the water.

"Here, you: stop! Come back," cried Saxe: "you'll be tumbling down some hole. Do you hear?"

If the goat did hear, it paid no heed, but went on; and as the way seemed to be safe in the dim blue light, Saxe followed, till from twilight it began to grow purple-black before he had nearly overtaken the goat, which uttered a mournful baa, and stopped short, as a good-sized lump of ice flew by its head, and smashed upon the rock; and as the goat still advanced, another and another came flying.

Saxe retreated horrified and startled, to reach the spot where the others were, breathless and pale.

"Hullo! What's the matter?"

"The ice is falling in. Come out."

"Nonsense!" cried Dale.

"It is; or else lumps are flying out from inside; and the goat and I were nearly hit."

Dale looked at the guide, who shook his head.

"Some ice might fall farther in," he said; "but pieces could not come flying out."

"Of course not," said Dale, returning to his observations. "Go in and see."

It was on Saxe's lips to say, "Never again!" for his thoughts flew back to his last night's experience; but just then the goat bleated, looked inquiringly along the blue winding cavern, with its amethystine roof, and began to advance.

"There you are, Saxe," cried Dale: "go after that goat and turn her back, or she'll lose herself, and there'll be no milk for tea."

Saxe felt obliged to go now; and, calling himself a coward to be afraid to enter that long cellar-like place, he walked boldly in after the goat, turned the corner where the arch of light was left behind, with the two fingers busy chipping and measuring, and went on.

The goat looked very indistinct now, then it disappeared in the purple gloom; and it was only by listening to the pat-pat of its hoofs on the stone that Saxe could satisfy himself that it was going forward, and that there was no dangerous fall awaiting him.

Then the goat bleated again, and *crick, crack, crash*, came the sound of pieces of ice striking the walls and floor. The goat came bounding back, followed by another piece of ice, which broke close to Saxe's feet, as he turned and took flight once more.

"Hullo!—back! Why, you look scared, boy!"

"There is ice falling or flying out."

Dale laughed; and this put the boy upon his mettle, as he now argued with himself that help was very near.

"I want the lanthorn," he said aloud.

"What for?"

"To go and see what it is."

"That's right. Give him the lanthorn, Melchior. We'll follow him directly."

The guide swung the lanthorn round from where it hung at his belt, detached it, lit it; and, with the confidence afforded by the light, Saxe grasped his ice-axe firmly, and walked right in, preceded once more by the goat.

The mingling of the light with the amethystine gloom had a very beautiful effect, as the former flashed from the surface of the walls and made the ice glitter; but Saxe had no eyes then for natural beauties. He could think of nothing but the flying lumps of ice, and, oddly enough, the remembrance of the horrible head which he had seen in the night now came strongly back.

But he went on, and, if not boldly, at any rate with a fixed determination to see the adventure to the end.

Saxe was able to penetrate farther this time, with the goat pattering on before him; and to show that there was no fancy in the matter, the light flashed from some broken fragments of ice lying close beside the rushing stream. But

though he held the lantern high above his head, he could see nothing, only the dim arch, the line of shining water, and the pale stony floor.

Just ahead, though, the stream took a sudden bend round to the left, and the dry portion of the stone taking the same direction, Saxe went on, involuntarily raising his axe as if there might be danger round beyond that bend where the ice projected like a buttress.

He was close upon it now, and, holding the light well up with his left hand, he was in the act of turning the corner, when something moved out of the darkness on the other side, and Saxe stood once more petrified with horror as the light fell upon the huge face he had seen in the night, but hideously distorted, and with the glowing bloodshot eyes within six inches of his own.

Chapter Forty One.

Melchior wakes up.

The boy's lips parted, but no words came; his arm was raised with its weapon, but he could not strike—only stand shivering; until, by a tremendous effort, he flung himself round and dashed back.

"Why, hallo, lad! what is it? Have you seen a ghost?"

Saxe tried to speak, but no words would come for a few moments.

"Yes—no," he panted at last. "Something dreadful—in there."

Dale caught up the ice-axe which he had laid down while he was measuring, and turned to the guide.

"What is it likely to be, Melchior—a bear?"

"I cannot say, herr," said the guide, whose countenance changed a little as he, too, caught up his ice-axe. "But I should think not—in there."

"No—not a bear," panted Saxe. "I saw it—last night. Horrible—horrible."

"Don't rave like a hysterical girl, my lad," cried Dale, grasping Saxe's arm. "Now, then: speak out—like a man. Is it the body of some poor creature dead?"

"No—no," said Saxe, struggling to master himself, and now speaking calmly: "I went to the fall to drink in the middle of the night, and I saw it there. It cast lumps of ice at me, and I saw it close to the lantern."

"A wild beast?"

"No," said Saxe, with a shudder.

"Come; you must not be scared like that, my lad. What was it?"

"I don't know; unless it is true that there are gnomes and kobolds, and this is one."

"Well, then, boy—it is not true, and this is not one."

"No—no: of course not," said Saxe, who was now strung up. "It must be a man."

"Of course. What do you say, Melchior?"

"That it must be a man trying to frighten him, herr. We will go and see."

"Yes," said Dale calmly, taking the lantern: "we must go and see. We shall be back directly, Saxe."

"I am coming with you," said the boy firmly. "I am ashamed to have been so frightened, but it was very horrible."

Dale gripped his arm firmly.

"Well done, brother mountaineer," he whispered. "Come along."

He strode into the ice-cave, closely followed by Saxe, and Melchior went in after him.

"These English: they are very brave," he muttered. "I must go, too."

Dale went on, holding the lantern on high, and his ice-axe so that it could be used as a cudgel in case of attack; and as soon as the first bend was passed there were clear evidences of pieces of ice having been thrown, while a minute later a good-sized piece grazed the lantern, and another struck Saxe on the arm.

"Hurt?" said Dale.

"Not much."

"Come on, then, and turn your axe. Don't be afraid to strike with the handle. It is a trick being played upon us."

"Take care, herr—take care!" said Melchior, in an excited whisper, as a couple more pieces were thrown, to shiver against the stones.

"Yes, I'll take care," said Dale angrily, as he pressed on. "Hold your axe handle in front of your face, Saxe."

At that moment there was a rushing sound, and the goat darted by them, startling all for the moment; but Dale went on, and now reached the second angle.

He was in the act of passing round, when the same great hideous face came into view, with the eyes rolling and the great mouth opened, showing crooked blackened teeth. It was so hideous that Dale stopped short, with his blood seeming to curdle; and when he recovered himself and looked again, the face was gone.

"You saw!" whispered Saxe.

"Yes, I saw. What is it?—a gorilla?"

At that moment a hideous, bellowing roar came echoing down the ice grotto, sounding so low and inhuman that it needed all Saxe's determination to stand fast.

"What are you going to do?" whispered the boy.

"Act like a man, sir," said Dale firmly. "Here, Melchior, can you explain this—a hideous face, like that of some deformity—a dwarf?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Melchior: "you saw that? I thought so, from that cry."

"Well, what is it? Do you know?"

"Yes, I know!" cried the guide angrily: "who could be so weak? Come on, herr. Give Herr Saxe the light, and be ready to help me. He is as strong as a lion if he attacks us, but he will not dare. Throw at travellers, will he? Come on."

Melchior was already striding forward, with his axe handle ready; and, angry at getting no farther explanation, Dale followed, with Saxe close up, now taking and holding the lanthorn on high so that it nearly touched the icy roof.

They were not kept long in suspense, for there was another hideous cry, which seemed to send all the blood back to the boy's heart, and then there was a rush made from the dark part of the grotto; a loud, excited ejaculation or two; the sound of a heavy blow delivered with a staff; and in the dim light cast by the lanthorn Saxe saw that both Dale and Melchior were engaged in a desperate struggle.



"Dale and Melchior were engaged in a desperate struggle."

The boy's position was exciting in the extreme, and thought after thought flashed through his brain as to what he should do, the result being that he did nothing, only held the lanthorn, so that those who struggled and wrestled, before him could see.

In spite of the hoarse, inhuman howling he could hear close to him, all superstitious notions were now gone. Dale and Melchior were too evidently engaged with human beings like themselves; and the next instant there was a heavy blow, a cry and a fall.

"Rightly served," cried Melchior, "whoever you are. Now, herr, you hold him, and I'll use my rope."

"Quick, then!" panted Dale hoarsely: "he's too strong for me. Hah!"

Dale was heavily thrown, and Saxe could dimly see a short, squat figure upon his breast. Then he saw Melchior appear out of the gloom, and quick as lightning twist a loop of the rope tightly round the arms of the figure, binding them to its side.

"Now, herr, up with you," cried Melchior, "and help me. Show the light, Herr Saxe. Ah! that's right: down on his face. Good. Your foot on the back of his neck. Now I have him. Good English rope: he will not break that."

As the guide spoke he wound his rope round the figure's hands, which he had dragged behind its back, and tied them fast, serving the legs in the same way, in spite of the fierce howlings and horrible yellings made.

"That will do," cried the guide at last, and he stooped down over his prisoner. "Not hurt, are you, herr?"

"Well—yes, I am. It was like wrestling with a bull, and he has bitten my arm."

"Not through your clothes, herr?" cried the guide excitedly.

"No: I suppose it is only like a pinch; but it was as if it were nipped in a vice."

"Show the light here, young herr," continued Melchior, as he turned the captive over. "He is beautiful, is he not?"

"Horrible!" ejaculated Dale, with a shudder. "Good heavens! who and what is he?"

"The most hideous cretin in Switzerland, herr. Poor wretch! he had no brains, but his strength is terrible. He is from the valley next to Andregg's. I don't know what he can be doing here."

"I know," cried Saxe excitedly: "watching us."

"No," said Melchior: "he has not the sense, unless— Here, I must have hit some one else in the dark. There were two. Give me the light!"

He snatched the lantern and stepped farther in, to bend down over another prostrate figure.

"It is!" he cried. "Pierre! I don't quite understand as yet. It must be—yes, I see. The wretch!—it is his doing. He must have been watching us, and set this creature—this animal—to do his work—do what he wanted. But no: Herr Dale, Herr Saxe, I am puzzled."

"Hooray!" shouted Saxe. "I have it!"

"What!" cried Dale, who was stanching the blood which flowed from his nose.

"The crystals!" cried Saxe. "They must have hidden them here."

Melchior took a dozen steps farther into the ice-cave, having to stoop now, and then he uttered a triumphant jodel.

"Come here, herrs!" he cried, holding down the lantern. "Look! All are here."

Saxe darted forward, to be followed more cautiously by Dale, and the party stood gazing down at the glittering heap of magnificent crystals hidden there as the least likely place to be searched.

For, as Pierre afterwards confessed, he had heard the plans made as he stood, on their first coming, in the stable, and then and there determined to possess himself of the valuable specimens the English party and their guide might find. In spite of his vacant look, he was possessed of plenty of low cunning, and he at once secured the dog-like services of the cretin, who had been his companion in the mountains for years, and obeyed him with the dumb fidelity of a slave.

The task was comparatively easy, for their knowledge of the mountains in that wild neighbourhood was far greater than Melchior's. The cretin's strength and activity were prodigious, and he readily learned his lesson from his master, with the result that has been seen.

Chapter Forty Two.

Clear as Crystal.

Pierre had received so severe a blow from Melchior's axe handle that he was stunned, and when he came to he was so cowed and beaten that he went down on his knees, owned to everything, and begged for mercy, with the result that the miserable inhuman deformity grasped the position, and, uttering piteous whines and howls, seemed to be imploring mercy, too.

"Look here, Pierre," said Melchior: "I have but to send down to the village to get a messenger to take a letter to the town, and the police will fetch you to prison."

"No, no," pleaded the culprit, and he implored for mercy again in the most abject terms.

"A year in prison would do him good, herr," said Melchior. "He is no Switzer, but a disgrace to his country. We Swiss are honest, honourable men, and he is a thief."

Pierre fell on his knees, and began to ask for pity again. "Get up, dog!" cried Melchior; and turning from him he began to untie the hideous deformity whose wild eyes were watching them in a frightened way.

"What are you going to do?" cried Dale. "You forget how strong he is."

"No, herr, I remember; and I am going to make use of it; he is tamed now. Look here, Pierre, you and Mad Fritz will carry those crystals all down to Andregg's."

"Yes, Herr Melchior—yes," cried Pierre abjectly.

"Stop! You can have the mule to help you, and for the next journey you can bring the donkey too."

"Yes, Herr Melchior; but you will not let the English nobleman send me to prison," he cried.

"We shall see. Get to work, both of you, and bring out the best. The herr will choose which."

"Yes," cried the man eagerly; and Melchior turned to Dale. "You will have a fair mule-load taken down to the chalet at once, herr, will you not?"

"Yes, of course."

"Good; and we can leave the others here, and send these two to fetch them."

"But you can't trust them," whispered Saxe. "Oh yes, I can, herr, now," said Melchior proudly. "The law is very strong here in this canton; and being so strong, it is seldom put in force. People are honest here, in spite of what this man has done. My life on it now, herr, Pierre will bring every crystal down to the chalet."

"But the cretin?"

"Will do exactly as he is told. Here, Pierre, take Gros and go to our camp. Bring the tent and everything back here while we get out the crystals. Take Fritz with you."

"Yes, Herr Melchior," said the man humbly; and then, turning to the cretin, he said something in a curious harsh guttural way, and the poor creature sprang after him and out into the day.

"Then you feel that you can trust them?" said Dale.

"Yes, herr, you may be sure of that. Everything will be taken down to Andregg's—never fear. Ah! how plain everything seems now! The stones thrown at us—eh?"

"Never mind about them," cried Saxe excitedly. "You've sent those two off with the mule, and they'll take away our lunch, and I'm getting hungry now."

"Sure, I had forgotten," cried the guide, and he ran out. They heard him jodel and check Pierre and his hideous companion, so that the food was left behind.

This seen to, Melchior resumed what he was about to say in the ice-cave.

"You will communicate with the authorities, herr, about your great find?"

"Of course," said Dale.

"That will frighten Pierre, when they come to take charge of the crystals. You cannot punish that poor Heaven-smitten creature Fritz."

"No, certainly not."

"Then I would ask you, herr, if the man Pierre is patient and obedient, not to punish him more. He is a poor half-witted creature, and the temptation was too much for him."

"I shall not punish him."

"Thank you, herr."

"But," said Saxe, "you said that the authorities would take possession of the crystals!"

"Yes, herr, in the name of the canton. But they will not be ungenerous. They will like good specimens for our museums; but they will let Herr Dale choose and take what he wishes to his own country. It is for science, and we Swiss are as proud to welcome all scientific men to explore our country as we are to serve those who merely come to admire and return again and again, to see the mountains, glaciers and lakes of our dear fatherland."

All fell out as Melchior had foretold. Pierre and his follower soon returned with the tent, and humbly accepted some food before loading the mule, and then themselves, with some of the choicest crystals, which were deposited safely in Andregg's chalet. The next day they made a journey with the two animals alone, and brought back more; and again on the following day they set off and brought the rest, Andregg gazing with astonishment at the magnificent collection.

In due time people from the principal city of the canton arrived, and the whole of the crystals were taken on mules to the Rathhaus, where soon after Dale was invited to attend with his companion and their guide.

They went, and were warmly complimented by the chief magistrate and the fathers of the city upon their great discovery, following which they were invited to choose what specimens they liked.

They chose so very modestly that the selection was more than doubled, and in due time reached Old England's shores, to add lustre to several collections and museums.

Dale kept his word about Pierre, and quietly incited Saxe to make him a present when they went away.

"Because he doesn't deserve it," said Saxe, who also made a point of giving the unfortunate cretin an object which set his eyes rolling with delight every time it was taken out. This was a large knife with a collection of odds and ends stored in the handle: toothpick, lancet blade, tweezers, screwdriver, horse-hoof picker, and corkscrew, the latter being, as Saxe said, so likely to prove useful.

A month later, after a warm parting from old Andregg and his wife, who made her apron quite wet with tears, and insisted upon presenting Saxe with a very nasty-smelling cheese of her own make, the little party journeyed back through the various valleys, and on to the lovely lake of deep waters, where the mountains rose up like walls on either side, and then on and on to Waldberg, whence they were to start next day for home.

And then came the parting from the guide—the brave, faithful companion of many months.

"And now, Melchior!" said Dale, "I want you to accept this, not as payment, but as a gift from one friend to another—a present to the man whose hand was always ready to save us in perilous times."

"That, herr!" said Melchior. "No, no: you have paid me nobly, and it has not been work, but a pleasure journey with two friends."

"Nonsense, man: take it."

"But, herr!" cried Melchior. "That watch for a poor Swiss guide!—it is gold!"

"Well, man, yours is a golden heart! Take it, and some day you may tell your son that it came from an English boy and man who looked upon you as friends. The watch was mine; the chain is from Saxe here: they are yours."

The tears stood in Melchior's eyes as the watch was handed to Saxe, who thrust it into the guide's pocket. Then he grasped their hands.

"Good-bye," he said, in perfect English—"Leben Sie wohl. Ah!" he cried excitedly: "I know French but badly; but there is a farewell they have, herrs, which fits so well. The mountains are here, and everlasting. It is nearly winter now, but the summer will come again, when the snows are melting, and the valleys will be green and beautiful once more; and when those bright days are here I shall see that the peaks are waiting to be climbed and that there are perils to be bravely met by those who love our land; and then I shall pray. Herr Dale, that you will come again, and that you, Herr Saxe, will come, and, taking me by the hand, say, as you have so often said, 'where to to-day?' Make me happy, gentlemen—me, the man you called more than guide, your friend—tell me you will come again."

"We will, please God—we will!" cried Saxe.

"The words I would have said," said Dale.

"Then, now for those words of French, dear herr: Au revoir!"

The End.

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