

THE ICE-AXE

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DARKNESS. A bleak, cold wind blowing from endless leagues of ice; widespread canopy of stars, jarred and split by savage rock; everywhere, penetrating everything, the far-off sound of faintest music.

Unreality and reality meeting; inextricably mingling.

The glacier-lantern gave enough light for safe movement down steep rock, over crevassed ice and tiny glacier-streams. Beyond the level ice was again more ice—a vast upward surge of it, buried in snow—carrying onward and upward the indeterminate majesty of the mighty glacier. Riven rock; rent and tortured ice; split and tattered sky in which the stars sat fidgeting, wakeful, in aloof, celestial agitation.

On the huge bulge of snow-carpeted ice the lanterns twinkled faintly. The leader's feet sank deep into the snow, which was firm and held strongly. The course was a steep zigzag, traced on a monstrous highway between the embattled walls of a fortress of giants; a fortress in appearance everlasting, yet in reality eternally crumbling, as the great scars on its seamed and shattered walls gave proof.

The highway, too, was neither whole nor still. Its calm, unhurried downward march was too slow for human detection, but now and again with a voice of thunder it would signal its advance casting down some huge, unstable tower of its own building; as though this particular piece of architecture had served its purpose, and was now ready for demolition. Its surface, too, was scarred and split without plan or purpose by bottomless horrors of darkness—gaping crevasses in whose depths also could be heard that same strange music, far off, faint as though drifting on its own sound-breathings, stirring (or was it everywhere?) in an unfathomable abyss of emptiness.

The restless stars grew faint, their light quenched by a stronger flame. Colour and form began to clothe the vastness of silence frozen into gigantic material shapes. The terrible gashes could be analysed;

the tottering battlements traced in their uncertainty. The grandeur of their terrific austerity absorbed the mind, so that it became disembodied, aloof, on a plane unknown in human habitations.

Presently the highway ceased its steep ascent, changed to a vast pool of whiteness; a ghost-lake. Beyond the lake swept up in tremendous majesty the central keep of this castle of the Valkyries, towering into and through a floating cloud-wraith, pointing skywards the glorious summit of its gigantic peak from which streamed the very banners of Heaven. Down from this peak there stretched a monstrous curtain of savagely splintered towers and battlements, rent and twisted into most weird and fantastic forms. Up this curtain lay our path.

The music was louder here—or rather it now swelled and faded in cadences which reached the mind not so much through the ears as through the whole being. The sun's light glowed and streamed down upon this world in which we were as ants upon a housetop. The glory of infinite blue space above met, but did not blend with the glorious savagery of rock and ice around. "Ever upward" seemed to echo from every tower and bastion; "ever upward" was the wordless refrain of the continuous, soundless music.

With infinite care the leader traced his way amongst the mighty fragments which crested the great rock-curtain, like the teeth on a broken comb. We were in a new world now; a world of monsters, whose shape and size suggested no similarity to other monsters known to history, or pre-history. Furiously they towered over us, angrily enquiring by what right we violated their sanctuary of silence; but they could not harm us, for in the ages of chaos before men were born they had been stricken into fearful immobility by irresistible power.

We came at length out upon the head of a monster which was of sufficient width and flatness to allow us to rest on it. We took off the rope, took food from our packs, and ate. Then we lay down upon the stone—the music of Eternity rising and falling around us, a glorious anthem now. It told us of a time before the world was; of a time when space was filled with the beginning of worlds yet to come; of a time when Time itself was unthought of; of other things which cannot be expressed. Then it soothed us into slumber.

Hours later I awoke and looked around me. The music had ceased; the air was wintry cold; the monsters were sheathed in murky grey writhings of cloud; snow was falling. A shattering sword of lightning split the darkness, followed by the stunning explosion of thunder close at hand. I rose to my feet and put on

the rope; we must leave the Ridge of Monsters immediately, for our safety's sake.

But no one rose to take the rope's other end, which still lay loose upon the rock. No one was there to take it; no one save myself was on the rock, nor within sight or sound of it. Only upon its rough and hoary surface, fast becoming covered with new-fallen snow, there lay the ice-axe of my companion. . . .

It kept its counsel; the monster held its secret. I must descend alone.

