

Now Ilar was gathered at the barren's edge with her eyes on a handful of youths. They were travelling light—those tall, strong sons of peril. Each had meat in his pack, and cordial, and a hunting knife at his belt. He was clad in close-tunic and breeches and cap of bear-skin, and long slender drift-oak skis were strapped to his high tough boots.

Ilroff, heir to the Kingdom of Ref, was there, his heart keen with love for the Princess, lips warm with the touch of her hand. There also was Conrad, heir to a whale-bone hut and a frozen-in smack, his heart aflame with his love for the Princess, his lips burning from the press of her lips and the taste of her tears.

Nichulas rose with a long horn of mead in his hand, thanked and blessed them and gave them "Goodspeed," and quaffed off the mead.

There was a long creak as the skis broke the fingers of frost; then sounded the last farewells, then crunch of the snow, and swooped those few dark forms like low-flying birds.

Three hours later Conrad, swinging from crusted knoll to knoll, body swaying, yet poised, limbs straining yet rythmical, reached the foot of the Black Mts., where the snow clad rocks hung steep and ice-edged and chasmed and bearded with sparse black pines.

Twenty miles of barren were won. Conrad was warm in body, the breath of his great breast rose in unwavering clouds, though bitter frost kissed his cheeks the hot blood still surged in his veins; but pausing a moment and eyeing the great sinister rocks he drew from his pack a leather bottle, drank deep of the cordial, and slipped the flask in his vest.

Then plunging his flexible poles in the mountain snow he placed his skis edgewise along the steep surface, strained every muscle and mounted from rock to rock.

Suddenly down from a great crag, leaping and shrieking and wriggling black imps struck his head and neck. They clung to his wild fair hair, they spit in his face and tore at his tunic and pack. He tottered and swayed for a moment, distracted and blind, then grasping each swift loathsome form in his iron hands he flung it out and over the edge to the gully below. He straightened and poised for a run, then realized his pack and his bear meat were gone.

On and on he sped his lean muscles tense now, now subtle. He leapt black clefts in the rocks, bent double beneath hanging crags, swooped bird-like from height to height, followed Cimmerian passes, and ledges as wide as your hand. Still came cruel cackling laughter as he hung above gully and gulch, and dark creatures struck him and stung him and clawed at his keen blue eyes.

Running a long ice slope with the wind in his teeth he felt the hill's sudden edge, swept into space. For one wild second the dropt, strange chill at his heart, then struck as on splintered ice. He twisted his body and stopped. And then came a blast of cold so cruel and keen that his hot blood paused and he shuddered. By the thin white light of the stars and the white of the snow he saw a huge dragon of ice.