

Banner in the Sky

By James Ramsay Ullman

CHAPTER ONE: A BOY AND A MOUNTAIN

In the heart of the Swiss Alps, on the high frontier between earth and sky, stands one of the great mountains of the world. To men generally it is known as the Citadel, but the people of the valley beneath it seldom call it by that name. They call it the Rudisberg--Rudi's Mountain. And that is because, in the long gone year of 1865, there lived in that valley a boy called Rudi Matt

Most of the boys of the village were tall, broad and strongly built. Rudi was small and slim. But to make up for it, he was quick. In all his sixteen years he had probably never been quicker than on a certain summer morning when he slipped out the kitchen door of the Beau Site Hotel and into the alley beyond. When Teo Zurbriggen, the cook, turned from his stove to get a jar from the spice shelf, Rudi had been at his usual place, washing the breakfast dishes. But when, five seconds later, Old Teo turned back, his young helper was gone.

The cook muttered under his breath. But, almost at the same time, he smiled. He smiled because he knew what the boy was up to, and in his old heart he was glad.

Outside, Rudi did not follow the alley to the main street. He went in the other direction, came to a second alley, and ran quickly through the back part of the town. He made a wide detour around his mother's house; another around the house of his uncle, Franz Lerner. Fortunately he met no one who knew him--or at least who knew he was supposed to be working in the kitchen of the Beau Site.

Soon he came to the edge of the town and a roaring brook. Across the brook lay a footbridge; but, instead of using it, he worked his way upstream around a bend and then crossed over, leaping agilely from boulder to boulder. From the far side he looked back. Apparently no one had seen him. Scrambling up the bank, he plunged through a clump of bushes, skirted a barnyard and picked up a path through the meadows. Here, for the first time, he stopped running. There was no living thing to be seen except a herd of grazing cows. The only sound was the tinkling of their bells.

The meadows rolled gently, tilting upward, and their green slope was sprayed with wildflowers. The path crossed a fence, over a rickety stile, then bent and rejoined the brook; and now the cowbells faded and there was again the sound of rushing water. Rudi walked on. Three or four times he passed people going in the opposite direction, but they were only Ausländer--tourists--and nothing to worry about. Whatever guides were climbing that day were already high in the mountains. And any others who might have known and questioned him were back in the town or on their farms.

Rudi smiled at the passersby. "Grüss Gott," he said--"God's Greetings"--in the ancient salutation of the Alps. "Grüss Gott," they said in reply.

He was no longer hurrying. He walked with the slow, rhythmic pace of the mountain people, and, though the path was now steepening sharply, he felt no strain. His legs, his lungs, all of his slight wiry body, were doing what they did best; what they had been born to do. His feet, through the soles of his shoes, moulded themselves to each hump and crevice of the path. Arms and shoulders swung in easy balance. His breathing was steady, his heartbeat strong and even.

"A typical mountain boy," one would have said, seeing him at a distance. But then, coming closer, one would have seen that he was not typical at all. Partly, this was because of his slimness, his lightness of muscle and bone; but even more it was in his small, almost delicate features and his fair, pink-and-white complexion. Rudi Matt hated his complexion. In summer he exposed his face for hours to the burning sun, in winter he scrubbed it violently with snow, trying to make it brown and tough and weatherstained, as a mountain man's should be. But no stain appeared. No whisker sprouted. "Angel-face," the other boys called him. Or, rather, had called him, until they learned that his fists, though small, were useful. Most of the men of Kurtal had black hair. Rudi's was blond. Most of them had dark eyes. Rudi's were light--though exactly what color no one was quite sure. His mother called them hazel, but she saw them only when he was at home or around the village. When he left the village, when he climbed above it, they seemed to change, as the light changed. Looking up at the great peaks above the valley, they seemed to hold within themselves the gray of mountain rock, the blue of mountain sky.

Rudi Matt climbed on. Now that he was no longer afraid of being stopped, his heart was filled with peace and joy. Just why he had run off on this particular day he could not have said. He had had to--that was all. He had looked from the window of the hotel kitchen and seen the peaks that rimmed the valley rising vast and shining in the morning sun; and he could no more have stopped himself than he could have stopped breathing. A few minutes before, he had been a prisoner. Now he was free. He no longer looked backward--only up--as slowly the great mountain world unfolded before him.

The path bore away from the brook, zigzagged up the highest of the meadows and entered a forest. And here Rudi stopped. Beside the path, at the forest's edge, was a shrine.