In the highest mountains of the Alps there lies a tiny village, isolated and remote from the rest of the continent. Many legends weave themselves about the snow-covered peaks and crags, a few stretching into the villages and tangling themselves in the minds of the people. But the village of which I speak is too self-contained even for legends. There, the people, protected by their environment, are secured against false imaginings and petty schemes. They go about their daily work oblivious to both the perils and the beauty which may lie on the other side of their mountains. Their stories are the true stories of their people, and their truth is absolute and imperishable.

Anton Herzig, the club-footed shoemaker, is as much a part of the remote village of Schlezic as is the antiquity of its church spires or the color of its landscape, although to the casual tourist he would be no more nor less than a modest, white-haired shoemaker, the epitome of all others of his trade, and an object for compassion. But to the villagers he is much more than a stereotype, more even than a good, honest laborer. There is, in spite of his deformity, something in the noble carriage of his stocky frame, in the purity of his looks and the directness of his eyes, that is a symbol to them. For he bears the grace of a man who has lived abundantly and who has aged with the serene complacency of one who walks with truth.

Anton lives alone in a bare little cottage just outside the village proper at the foot of the mountains and not far from the lake, working quietly, seldom looking out the one little window, and going abroad only twice a day. Every morning he rises early, and, after eating a simple breakfast, walks to the village and back again. As he walks through the village streets, passing the shepherd on the way to the pasture or the farmer on the way to the field, he is greeted with the respect of a long-standing honor:

"Good morning, Anton. And how does it go today?"

To which Anton's answer is always, "Very well, friend, very well." And then he passes on, gravely nodding his head.

To the children of the village, Anton's figure is one of awe-inspiring mystery, and they whisper strange tales of childish imaginings of the hermit who makes their shoes, but who has never lived among them. It is only the oldest villagers who know the true story of Anton and the reason for his hermitage.

Long ago, Anton, too, had been a little boy, they said, laughing and running as do the village children even now. But his was not the contented mirth of childhood. Often, in games, when others would not play his way, he would draw quickly aside, and muttering to himself, curl his lip and laugh wickedly. "You will not let me lead, and I know the right way. I would lead you up the mountain, where the path is steep and exciting, where the flood waters tumble down over the sharp rocks in the rainy season. Higher than you have ever been,
but you will not let me lead you. So I go alone." And off he would run to scramble painfully up the mountain side, sending down tiny avalanches of rocks, until he reached a small green plateau high above them, where he would stand, hands on hips, and laugh down at them. “You, down there, look at you, how little you are. And me, look how big I am. If I jump, I can touch the sky. You cannot see anything, but I, I can see everything — almost the whole village. You cannot even see the grass on my little plateau. And there is a flower blooming here. I've never seen one like it before. It's big and red. I dare you to come up here and see for yourselves.”

Anton's taunts struck their mark. The others, too, wanted to see the plateau grass and the red flower. But they looked at the sharp rocks and the steep climb and were afraid. So they soon ran home to tell their parents of the daring deeds and the taunts of Anton.

The parents of the village were afraid, too, lest their offspring should accept the challenge, follow Anton up the mountain side, and, while climbing, slip and fall to be dashed to death at the foot of the mountain. So, warning their children, they told them how Anton was different from the other boys. Anton, they said, was almost as wild as the sheep or the goats — more wild, for even the sheep had someone to take them to pasture and bring them back to the village at night. He had never been a really bad boy, but only a little over-active, and his father was too old and deaf to do anything about it. No one knew much about his mother except that she had been young and pretty. Some of the oldest villagers said that she had been found, when a child, wandering about in the Alps, nearly frozen and starved to death. But no one really knew the truth, so they seldom talked about it. She had died when Anton was born, and he was left to live a free and wild existence of his own making. Even from birth he was a strange, moody boy, and as he grew older, his queer antics and sudden changes characterized him more and more as something supernatural.

How strange, they said, that this boy of the lame foot should be so daring. How strange that he should want to climb the mountain without so much as thinking of his physical handicap. None of the other villagers had ever dreamed of climbing their mountains. God had put them there, they said, for protection, and it did not become men to be curious about God's work. And so, believing these things, they looked with wonder and fear at Anton. He would lead himself to destruction, they said, for such action is not natural. But day after day went by, and still Anton could be seen scrambling up the mountain or lying quietly on the little plateau. The people, as they walked through the village or worked in the fields, could look up and see him, sometimes gazing down upon them, sometimes standing, head uplifted, a defiant silhouette against the blue of the sky. What was he doing? What could he be thinking? And then they went on with their work, turning their eyes back to the soil.

Anton, on his private plateau, wondered too. Why do they watch me? They care nothing about the mountains and less about my plateau, my flower. Let them burrow always into the dirt. To me, they are no bigger than the worms turned up by the probing of their plows. And, turning his back upon them, he would lift his eyes again to the mountain peaks, to the sky beyond.
But there was one, a pale, blue-eyed girl, who watched Anton more closely than the others. At the foot of the mountain, where she could see him climb step by step from rock to rock, she sat quietly watching. In the blue of her eyes was the same wonder which the other villagers felt, mingled with admiration and longing. The higher he went, the rounder and bluer were her eyes, and with each step she felt the sharpness of the rocks on her own feet. And sometimes, when he had reached the safety of the plateau, he turned once to wave at her. Always, she waved back, and then, intimidated by her own boldness, she, too, ran home.

But came the day when Anton, as he climbed, stopped to look back at the intent figure below. He said nothing, but it seemed to her that he had called her name. Then, quickly, he went on again, and she knew she was mistaken. That day he stood looking down at her from the plateau for a long time, and when he came down, she was waiting.

“You waited?”
“Yes.”
“For what?”
“For you.”
“You like the mountain too?”
“Yes. Does the red flower still bloom?”

Never before had Anton been asked about the red flower. His eyes shone with pride and eagerness to tell someone about the flower, the plateau, and all the things he thought and did. Yet, he hesitated. She was only a girl. She could not understand. He looked at her eyes and saw that she was sincere. She did want to hear about his mountain. So he told her all he knew — how the people in the village got smaller and smaller as he climbed, how the rocks sometimes turned under his weight and caused him to slip, how their sharpness went through the soles of his shoes, how the pain was good to feel, how the plateau grass was soft and damp, how the red of the flower danced against the green of the grass, how the air felt clean and cool, how it pressed against his ears, and how, some day, he would climb on, past the plateau, to the very top of the mountain. There, he stopped. I will do it, he thought. Before, he had only dreamed of the mountain peaks with wistful yearning. But now, he would get to the top somehow, sometime, soon. This, he dared not discuss, even with Frieda. He had said enough already.

From that day, Frieda became his constant observer and only confidante. Every day, when he came down from the plateau, he told her what he had seen and heard and thought, and she listened but said nothing. He hated the people, he said, in their ignorance, their plodding contentment. Did they never think of anything but their own physical needs, putting clothing on their backs and food into their mouths? Did they never do anything but work, and eat, and sleep? Did they never get tired of doing the same thing day after day, of seeing the same things? Frieda only looked at him and shook her head silently in sympathy, and he would go back to talking of the climb, the plateau, the flower. Even when he talked of these things she said nothing. But there was something in her eyes which spoke of hunger. And one day Anton saw it there.

“You, Frieda, you want to go with me? You are only a girl, but I can help you. The way is not too difficult. I know every rock, every foothold on the way.”

Frieda looked up from where they
sat at the foot of the mountain. The plateau looked friendly. She could almost see the green of the grass and the red of the flower, and she knew that the sun would be shining there. It would be like stepping into another world. But she saw, too, that there was great distance between the plateau and the ground. She felt the ground beneath her, and it was smooth and hard, and she remembered the sharpness of the rocks and the steepness of the climb. And she was afraid.

Anton saw the fear in her eyes, and he was angry. "You are just like the others, rooted to the earth. Stay here until you wither away. I can go alone."

He turned and began the climb, faster and more recklessly than ever before. "This time I will go to the top."

"No. Wait. I'm coming with you. Wait for me."

But Anton was past waiting, and that was why he didn't see her fall. When he reached the plateau, she lay very still at the foot of the mountain. And when they found her, he was nowhere to be seen.

The climb from the plateau to the top was much steeper than Anton had dreamed. Again and again he slipped and fell back almost as far as he had climbed. The rocks were sharper than he had thought, and his hands were torn and bleeding. He could feel the strain on his lame foot. And the peak was no nearer. At last, exhausted, he gave up and slid, face down, back to the cool grass of the plateau. Below, was the village, just as it had always been. The mountain peak, now clothed in black clouds, loomed above. And Anton, lying half-way between, knew that he would never reach the peak.

He had lain there for some time when the storm broke. Thunder crashed and rolled about him, and he lay shivering with cold and fear. The lightning cracked through the clouds like a huge whip, and the plateau shook with the fury of the storm. Then it died away with one last murmur, leaving the gentle fall of rain in its place. Slowly and painfully, Anton rose and began his last descent.

The people, seeing his still face with the fear lying in his eyes, asked him no questions. Frieda, they told him, was dead. Their words came to him across great space, hung heavily in the air, and throbbed against his ears. Their faces, white against the dusk, floated before him, faded, and came back again, merged into one accusing stare. And they were gone.

It was weeks before Anton would leave his cottage. When the villagers saw him limping slowly near the cottage, always looking down at the ground, they looked at each other with faces of pity. He was only a boy, they said. He had not meant to hurt Frieda. Perhaps, if he had had someone to care for him, someone to tame his wild spirits . . . They watched him, feeling the pain in him, but they did nothing. He was very young, they said, and he would outgrow it. And in the years that have passed they have wondered, too, about what happened on that stormy day. Anton, the maker of shoes, has never told them. But they say that he has looked upon the face of God.