On the World’s Roof

BY

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Roger Sturdee felt very low as he sat on the edge of his narrow bed, his elbow jammed on his knee and his chin cupped in his hand.

Ever since he was demobilized from the Fleet Air Arm, where he had been a Midshipman Pilot, R.N.V.R., Roger had slaved at the Imperial College of Mining to win his diploma, and now that he had graduated, life suddenly seemed empty and pointless, with the goal towards which he had worked, safely won.

He glanced down at his packed trunk and the two battered suitcases which held all his worldly goods; they stood rather pathetically on the floor waiting to be carried downstairs to the taxi. He felt a surge of what was really homesickness for this little room which had been his home for those three long and busy years. In fact it really was his home, for Roger, so far as he knew, had not a single living relative, while apart from some £90 which he had saved while he was at the college, he did not own a cent in the world.
Consequently Roger was feeling a prey to the deepest gloom, especially as there appeared to be no openings in the profession for which he had just qualified. So far as he could see, newly qualified mining engineers were a complete drug on the market. The Principal of the college had done his best to get him a post, and Roger had personally answered two promising advertisements in *The Times*, but nothing definite had come from all their efforts. Grimly he summed up his assets as he sat on his bed: Item—the ability to fly a naval aircraft. Item—a degree in mining. Item—his £90 in the post office. Items—an athletic body, a desire for work, a sturdy physique, and an almost encyclopædic knowledge of how to look after himself at fencing, boxing, ju-jutsu and wrestling. He had won the school mile as well as the annual swimming chase to Barchester, a gruelling race along a six-mile stretch of river, but, shrugging his shoulders rather bitterly, he told himself that chaps like him were probably ten a penny.

Roger’s gloom deepened as he heard shuffling footsteps climbing the narrow stairs. Old Sam Evans, the porter, was coming to take down Roger’s trunk—his last link with Barrowminster was about to be snapped!

Roger murmured “Come in” as a knock fell on his door, and, rising from his bed edge, was on his feet by the time that the gnarled form of the old servant appeared in the frame of the open doorway. “I’ll take down the suitcases myself, Sam,” Roger said as cheerily as he could. “If you’ll see
to the trunk I'll manage the rest. I'm afraid it's a bit heavy, though, as I've packed a lot of books in it."

"There's no hurry about shifting your gear, Mr. Sturdee," the porter grunted, a grin spreading over his crabbed features. "The Principal's compliments, sir, and he asks if you would go to his study at your earliest convenience."

Roger wondered what the "Archboffin" could possibly want from him. The Archboffin, by which disrespectful title Doctor Edward Carshal, the Principal of the Imperial College of Mining, was known to the whole student-body of Barrowminster, very seldom sent for any of his subordinates, and when he did so it usually meant that news of a student's sins had reached his august ears. For the few seconds before he told himself there was nothing that the Archboffin could do to him now that his student days were over, Roger felt all his old dread of being summoned to the Principal's study.

"There's a queer-looking cove in with the Principal," the porter mumbled, dropping the formal tones he had used to convey his message. "Don't know who he is, but he looked rather like a Chinaman to me, though somehow I don't think he is one. He wasn't with the Arch—I beg pardon, sir, the Principal, for more than five minutes before I was rung for and told to ask you to be good enough to go along to see 'em. Can't think what he'd want you for," the old man ended offensively, for as Roger had never been able to afford to tip him as lavishly as some of the other students, Old
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Sam had never wasted any more courtesy on him than was necessary.

As he walked along the broad, tiled passage, Roger was thoroughly mystified, wondering what the extraordinary summons might mean. He was even more surprised when he saw the strange, wizened old gentleman who, wrapped in a black shawl drawn tightly around his overcoat’s shoulders, was sitting at one side of the Principal’s desk. This aged man looked up out of weirdly youthful and merrily twinkling brown eyes, which were sunk at the bottom of deep pits and more than half-hidden by a thicket of shaggy grey eyebrows. Then, to complete Roger’s first surprise, this old man suddenly spoke, sharply and incisively, in P’al-skad, the dialect of the peasants of Tibet.

For a moment or so Roger was far too astonished by the unexpectedness of hearing that strange tongue to say anything, but he recovered very quickly and replied in the Ruje-sa speech of educated Tibetan, saying he was quite well, and that he hoped his questioner was the same.

“You have answered me in the cultured tongue,” the old man said, still speaking in Tibetan. “Can you speak the language of the peasants and the ordinary citizens?”

When Roger had replied in the P’al-skad that he could, the old gentleman sighed with satisfaction, and abruptly sat back in his chair. He was silent for a moment before he turned again to the Principal, who, in the meanwhile, had waved Roger to a seat. In English, the living mummy continued:
“Perhaps the time and labour which I have expended in coming here have not entirely been wasted,” he said. “This young man certainly speaks the tongues of Tibet with great accuracy and fluency. His dark complexion and black hair, too, will make it simpler for him to pass as a native.”

Roger's curiosity rose to a white heat and, for a second or so, he began to wonder whether he was not dreaming all this fantastic nonsense of being addressed in the language which had been so familiar to him as a boy.

“You were born in Tibet, were you not?” the old man asked, his face thrust forward with an expression very like that of a questing bird.

“I was, sir,” Roger admitted. “But I don’t quite see what that has to do with——”

“Quite, quite! Naturally you are puzzled,” the shrivelled ancient interrupted, raising a small, yellowed, long-nailed hand to check the threatened spate of Roger’s questions. “Pray, introduce us formally, Doctor Carshal.”

“Sturdee,” the Archboffin said, “I want to present you to the Marquis of Tremough. You probably know him better under the name of Lord Walter Percuil.”

Roger stared at the famous old adventurer and explorer with something very close to awe. In Central Asian affairs Walter Percuil’s name is a legendary one, and his exploits are world-famous. He spent thirty-one years in Tibet, the last nine of them as the Abbot of a famous monastery, where, like some great feudal prelate of the Middle Ages
in Europe, he ruled the lives of a thousand lamas as well as the broad domains of his abbey, a countryside as big as Wales.

"You are Francis Sturdee's son, I believe?" the old man snapped, acknowledging the introduction with a nod of his head. "I remember that he had a boy living with him at Selipuk Gomba after his wife, poor dear, went to her just reward."

Roger agreed that that was his father's name, and also that he had been brought up at that lakeside town in Western Tibet, whereupon Lord Tremough continued:

"I knew your father very well, Roger. He was perhaps my closest friend, collaborator and colleague. If any man has ever truly known and loved the Tibetans and Tibet, then Francis Sturdee was that man. Now, my boy, how would you like to return to Tibet?"

Roger gasped. Return to Tibet? He had spent the first twelve years of his life in that land of vast mountain ranges and broad valleys, of wide lakes and snow-covered screes, the World's Roof as it is called, and his memories of it often came to him in his dreams. Roger had been educated by his father who, during the whole thirty-five years of his work, had never left Tibet again after first entering it. His skill as a doctor and surgeon quickly won him, among the strange mountain clansmen, a place which he had never lost until the day when, a couple of months after Roger's twelfth birthday, he was killed by an avalanche when trying to rescue four young people trapped in a crevasse.
“Well?” snapped the fierce old gentleman, after Roger’s silence had lasted for close on thirty seconds, during which he was doing his best to weigh this surprising question. “Make up your mind one way or the other, my boy. Answer me—do you wish to return to Tibet?”

“I’d like to hear a little more about your intentions first,” Roger managed to reply. “If the pay and the prospects of such a post are worth my having, sir, I’ll be glad to consider it. I can’t afford to go gallivanting about accepting jobs that won’t pay.”

“Good!” Lord Tremough rose lithely to his feet, with an ease that seemed incredible in one who looked so old and frail as he. “You shall hear all about it and I am gratified to find you so cautious. That augurs well for the success of the great project I have in mind.” Turning towards the Principal he went on: “I think that that will be all, Doctor Carshal. Thank you for allowing me to meet your Sturdee. Good morning!” and without a further word, or even a glance, the little wizened man walked out of the study, leaving a very puzzled and astonished young man staring after him.

In the bright moonlight the old-fashioned civilian Dakota transport droned on across the beetling white peaks of the Himalayas, slipping past, in never-ending succession, beneath its retracted undercarriage. Roger, a huddled figure sitting wrapped in his lama’s robes, shivered with the intense cold, his face hidden behind the oxygen mask that
their altitude of 35,000 feet forced him to wear.

Away in front of him, through the open door in the forward bulkhead, he could see the second pilot helping his captain to find the exact spot where they were to drop their passenger. Tibet is almost an unknown land, and such maps as exist are very sketchy and inaccurate, so that they all knew it was going to be an extremely difficult business to set down their passenger at the spot where Lord Tremough had arranged for him to be met by secret agents of his own.

Roger's task was to penetrate into Tibet and there do his best to discover what truth, if any, there might be in the many rumours which had reached London saying that several top-ranking German war criminals, men who were officially believed to be dead, had found refuge in remote parts of the Roof of the World where they were supposed to be actively preparing a war of revenge, and to have gone a long way towards preparing a new secret weapon.

When the lad was first told these tales he had laughed at them, but Lord Tremough had been only too grave and serious in pointing out during the interview Roger had at his home that, from the remote mountain fastnesses of the Roof of the World, it would be a comparatively simple matter for unscrupulous and desperate men, armed with the necessary weapons, to dominate the world.

"Of course, it may very well be nothing but exaggerated nonsense," the old marquis admitted, "yet we dare not dismiss it all lightheartedly without
making a careful investigation. There are several top-ranking Nazi scientists and leaders whose fates have never been satisfactorily explained, who may quite easily be hidden in Tibet, in which land they could find an ideal setting for their dreams of world-conquest.

"The dangers of atomic bombardment from Tibet are tremendous, not only because of its almost impregnable inaccessibility, but because of its position in the middle of the great land masses of Asia. It is perfectly possible nowadays to build and launch a guided rocket missile capable of reaching any part of the world. If such a gang does exist and they very well may, Roger my boy," Lord Tremough said, "Tibet gives them the best possible position, once they have hit any town in any part of the world with extremely long range nuclear-fission rockets, to dictate terms by radio, and to win victory without the least need ever to quit their unassailable fastnesses until all is over."

Roger remarked that if anyone wishes to win a war he must be able to consolidate his gains, but Lord Tremough quickly smashed that objection.

"If they crush London, or Paris, or New York, or Moscow, or all of them simultaneously, with their missiles," he said, "they will be in a position to hold the world under the fear of renewed salvoes of atomic rockets, until their confederates, who have meanwhile seized the equipment of the vanquished Allied Armies of Occupation, can be sent by air from Germany to occupy all the strategic points and so make their victory effective."
As Roger sat there in the Dakota’s cabin, huddled in the thick clothes of a Tibetan monk, preparing himself to drop into the sub-zero atmosphere outside, he realized how much depended on him! If there was any foundation for the rumours, then the lives of millions, and the peace of the whole world, hung poised on his shoulders.

Speed was the dominating factor in his task. If any more time had been available, or if international jealousies had been less strong, every country would, at the first hint of such a danger, have certainly sent observers into Tibet. But to do that would need considerable time, and time was the one thing which they did not dare to waste. There was, as Lord Tremough frankly admitted, the chance that the whole thing was a mare’s-nest, but it was far too risky to assume that such was really the case.

The pale outlines of lakes shimmered far below the aircraft, glistening strips of mirror lying among the vast black bulks of the overpowering mountains. On the shores of one of those lakes, Nagsong Tso, 18,500 feet above sea-level, and 120 miles northwest of the sacred capital city of Lhasa, Roger was hoping to meet the three agents of the Regent’s party, with whom Lord Tremough was in contact.

The intercommunication telephone in Roger’s headphones buzzed suddenly.

“Could you come up here and see if you agree that we are almost over the dropping-point,” the pilot said quietly. “Judging by this drawing of the outline of the Nagsong Lake that I’ve got before me, I reckon that that’s it immediately beneath us.”
Roger shuffled to his feet and, collecting his flowing garments around him, stumbled forward into the control cabin, and joined the navigator and co-pilot standing at the broadside scuttles looking downwards. They both glanced up for a moment as their passenger entered, before they looked back towards the ground.

"There's the hammer-headed peninsula, handle running north and south, head east and west, lying on our starboard bow," the navigator said. "It seems to be just as it's shown on our sketch map. There's that bay on the north-west shore immediately opposite the hammer-head to which it approximates in shape and size. My estimated position, 31 degrees twenty minutes North, 89 degrees twelve minutes East, is the one marked on this map as being Nagsong Lake. But the maps are so often wrong that I thought I'd better check up with you before you decide to go downstairs," and he grinned.

Roger murmured his thanks and, after studying the ground below and comparing it with his own sketch map, one that had been drawn years before by Lord Tremough, he agreed that it looked very like the rendezvous, and probably was Nagsong Tso.

"Try to drop me as close to the landward end of the hammer-handle as you can," he said. "The chaps I'm to meet are to be in a valley to the south-eastward of it. What about my gear? Does it go first, or will you send it down after I've dropped?"

"Firstly, I think," the co-pilot replied. "You'd best go down immediately after it, so that if it drifts"
you'll be able to have some idea of where it finally lands. Now, if you're ready, Mr. Sturdee, I reckon we'd better be getting started. The skipper's anxious to get away as soon as he can; there are lots of rumours about strange fighter aircraft infesting the skies over this part of the world. Quite a few planes have mysteriously disappeared while flying over Tibet."

Roger nodded and, giving a last hitch to the straps and buckles of his parachute harness, stepped aft, saying that he would wait for them to flash the red light as his signal to let himself go. The Dakota banked steeply and Roger felt her give a lurch as his heavy gear—the radio-transmitter, arms, ammunition and the presents he was to bear to certain abbots and nobles—was dropped.

He stood by the open well, bracing himself for the descent through the freezing air to the inhospitable hostile country he could see looming so far beneath. He had secured the light sack which would keep his voluminous garments in control while he was going down, and strapped its single release buckle under his armpits.

Suddenly the old Dakota seemed like home, like a part of England, and a great wave of fear surged over him at the thought of leaving its kindly shelter. Once he had stepped through that hatch he would be beyond all hopes of rescue—he would leap not only into the cold night air above the Roof of the World, but would also be jumping into a country very like what Britain had been a century after the Norman Conquest. Tibet is a land ruled
by great nobles and powerful ecclesiastics, whose ways of life are like those of our forefathers before they began to emerge from the Dark Ages.

If he failed to jump he would be back in civilization and safety in a few hours! For a few seconds Roger was very greatly tempted, and it was probably only the abrupt flickering of the bright red electric lamp on the bulkhead alongside him which saved him from disgracing himself. If he had stayed there another minute; if he had had a few more seconds in which to think, his nerve would have deserted him. As it was, he had to summon up his failing resolution to thrust all thought into the background, before, alone in that compartment of the quivering aircraft, he slid over the coaming of the dropping-hatch, and let himself go.

It was not the jump which scared him, for, during his service in the Fleet Air Arm, Roger had made many parachute descents; it was the sheer loneliness of his venture which froze his soul. Then, as the Dakota thundered away into the distance, and after Roger had dropped half-way, a stream of red balls soared towards him in a long arc from the ground. He had seen "flak" too often before to be mistaken. Anti-aircraft fire was rising towards him! His arrival had been seen! Down on this desolate and lonely landscape below him unknown people were using modern weapons to kill him before he could touch down!
CHAPTER II

Alone in Tibet

Icy fear clamped Roger’s senses. Anti-aircraft fire was the last thing he had expected. He worked at the shroud-lines of his parachute, hastening his rate of descent while taking full advantage of the strong cross-wind howling across the vast upland to get as far away from the gun as he could. Then, as he drifted swiftly away, he realized, to his infinite relief, that the gunners apparently were not shooting at any definite target, but were blindly “browning” the sky in the hope of hitting whatever might have been dropped by the aircraft which they had heard passing over them.

For another minute or so Roger saw the flickering flames of the gun-muzzle down at the root of the graceful parabola of red balls sailing into the sky. Then the gun flashes were blanked out as a mountain ridge intervened its bulk between him and the gunners. Taking fresh heart that now he might be able to land far enough away from the gun-post to make his escape in the darkness, Roger took a quick look round the sky, hoping to see his precious load of equipment against the twinkling stars, but failed to locate it.

He felt a wave of cold despair, for, without his
transmitter, he would be completely out of touch with the world. It would take a dispatch carrier many weeks to reach Lord Tremough's agents in Pakistan, beyond the vast tangle of the highest mountain barrier in the world.

The loom of the ground came up to meet him, and Roger hurriedly prepared for the final moments of his descent. He released the buckle of the sack confining the lama robes, and, as he kicked it away, his voluminous skirts and mantle came swirling around his face before his feet touched the ground. He quickly cast off his parachute harness as he landed, and fell clear. Rising, he paused only long enough to hide it beneath a rock, while the gun was still firing its stream of scarlet tracer into the sky. Roger grinned with relief at this proof that the gunners were firing wildly at random, uncertain as to whether their target was still airborne.

He walked along the barren scree of the hillside until, three hundred feet lower, he found he was on level ground. He was too wise in Tibetan ways to attempt any great hurry, for the thin air of that great altitude makes it impossible for anyone who is not acclimatized to it to undertake undue physical exertion. By the time he had covered three hundred yards, the flat reports of the anti-aircraft gun ceased, and the bleak night was still again except for the shrill keening of the great wind rushing over the desolate landscape. Fortunately the gale was behind him, giving him a fair wind, so that he made better speed than he otherwise could have done, with the result that an hour after
landing he was a good three miles from the scene of the drop.

He trudged on, beginning to feel weary, for the thin air hurt his labouring lungs, until, after he had been tramping for close on three and a half hours, during which he covered close on ten miles, the sky began to pale with the greyness of mounting dawn. As the night grew lighter Roger halted to look around for some shelter for the day; he must hide if he was to evade the search the gunners would surely make as soon as the sun rose.

He was moving over a three-mile-wide gravel-covered plain between two great mountains, when he heard voices some distance ahead of him, a few seconds before he saw the first glimmer of a little fire glowing low down on the ground. Roger fell prone and remained quite still, with his face to the ground, but listening hard. Hearing no sounds of alarm he again advanced until the voices of several men speaking the peasant’s dialect came clearly to him. He dropped again, lying flat on the rocky soil, and soon learned that the group was an outpost guarding a great annual caravan bound from the famous monastery of Kyaring Gompa to the late-summer market in the Forbidden and Holy City of Lhasa.

As the light slowly strengthened he made out the massive forms of hundreds of yaks, the pack-animals of Tibet, as well as the outlines of the horses of the caravan escort, who protected the merchants and their goods from the brigands infesting the mountains. He lay still until he suddenly had the in-
spiration that this caravan might give him just the shelter he was seeking. If he could only join it without rousing any suspicion he should be safe from any patrols seeking for the parachutist, while, if he succeeded in making his way to Lhasa, he could there contact some of the European officials of the Trade Mission and be able to radio to Lord Tremough whatever information he picked up in this way.

With his decision made, he rose to his feet, adjusted his robes, and walked boldly forward in the increasing light. To his surprise, he was allowed to approach unchallenged as the men of the caravan were far too busy saddling-up the yaks and horses in readiness for the day's journey to pay attention to anything less than a body of armed men. They took no notice whatsoever of the young monk who came so humbly towards them spinning his small praying-wheel, so that it was not until Roger was within a dozen yards of three warriors of the caravan escort busily donning their equipment, that anyone said anything to him at all.

"Whence come you, holy man?" barked one of them, a savage-looking mountaineer, who was pressing a clip of cartridges into his very efficient rifle while he spoke.

"I am a humble brother of the Abbey of the Diamond Sow," Roger replied. "I travel as a messenger of my Lady Abbess."

The mention of the great and venerated Abbey of Samden Gompa, a great building which dominates the important town of Nagartse Dzong, whose
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abbess, a girl of less than ten years old, rules a great and rich community of monks, was more than enough to command the warriors’ respect.¹

“You are very welcome, venerable brother,” the warrior grunted. “Say a prayer for our safety, if you please. Buttered tea will be served soon. Will your holiness deign to partake of our humble meal? We shall be greatly honoured if you will do so.”

Roger was delighted, though most Europeans would have been revolted by the boiling-hot mixture of tea-leaves, yak-butter, soda and salt which is the staple beverage of Tibet. He gratefully gulped down a wooden mug of the greasy concoction as the yak drivers and the escort stood around doing the same and paying him no attention; lamas are very ordinary wayfarers along the caravan trails, and the young monk drinking tea among them was apparently no different from any of the vast number of Tibet’s lamas to whom they were accustomed. Roger watched a small knot of wealthy merchants who were getting ready to mount their horses, waiting while their leader spoke to a strapping warrior who wore two well-oiled Mauser pistols in his belt, and had a Sten-gun slung by its strap over his shoulder, counterbalancing the long Mongolian sword and dagger dangling at his side.

A conch shell blew suddenly and hoarsely to command silence. There was some shouting of

¹ The Diamond Sow, the title of the Lady Abbess, is in commemoration of an ancient legend which says that when, some centuries ago, the monastery, then a nunnery, was besieged by raiding Mongols, the Abbess opened her gates, magically turning all her nuns into sows so that they might evade the savages outside the walls. The fierce invaders were so impressed by the miracle that they are said to have laid down their arms and retreated.
orders, mingled with a storm of grunts and groans from the stolid yaks, before, slowly and methodically, the caravan took the trail in a long, narrow, swaying column. Some of the warriors were riding on the flanks and a scouting party was thrown out ahead as a screen. Roger trudged along near its centre, close to the principal merchant. The youngster kept his head bent, as he fingered the beads of his heavy rosary, giving an excellent imitation of a monk too rapt in meditation to pay the least heed to any worldly matters.

Roger was very tired; the excitement of the flight over the Himalayas, the effects of the parachute jump, and of coming under fire were at last beginning to make themselves felt to increase his natural exhaustion after a night spent tramping through the thin, keen and bitter air. Somehow, he managed to keep his feet moving mechanically, helped by the slow pace of the lumbering yaks who marched at not more than two miles and a half an hour. The walk was so slow and steady that the lad was all but half asleep as he trudged along.

They had been on the road for slightly more than three hours when a conch shell was blown sharply by the vanguard’s trumpeter. Roger looked ahead and saw a knot of well-mounted horsemen galloping towards them from a side valley on the right. Instantly the flanking parties and the scouts fell back on the caravan; the merchants retired to the centre of the ring into which the yaks were hustled by their frightened drivers, while the escort checked its arms and took up defensive positions around it. Roger
quietly joined a dozen or so other lamas who, like himself, were travelling with the caravan, and, at the command of an elderly monk, knelt in prayer with them. Then, as ably as any of his venerable companions, he set his prayer-wheel whirling.

The approaching horsemen fanned out into a long line, all reining-in abruptly at the blast of a trumpet. Each man flung himself from his saddle and lay prone, thrusting forward his rifle or sub-machine gun to threaten the convoy. Four of the strangers, mounted on very fine chargers, rode forward, one of them raising a brass trumpet and blowing a signal to show that they came as heralds.

Roger stood still, intently watching events, patterning the prayers of his fellow lamas, who were also keeping their small wheels clicking. The leader of the caravan escort shouted his permission for the envoys to approach, whereupon they came galloping until, a few yards from the grim faces of the defenders, they reined their mounts almost on to their haunches, sending a shower of small gravel and dust spurting forward into the faces of the warriors of the escort, who took not the slightest notice of it.

"We mean you no harm," the leader of the newcomers said in a hoarse roar. "We come in peace, and intend no evil. My leader wishes to ask only whether you have seen any strangers on the road? He bids me warn you that foreign devils were dropped from the sky last night, and are now abroad somewhere in this land."

"We are not fools, sir," the leading merchant said haughtily. "Although it is true we believe that
there are many devils, as well as the host of noble saints, we also know that, in these days, devils do not drop from the clouds whatever they may have done in our father's time.”

“These are not spiritual devils, Master Merchant,” the rider replied curtly, “but very human ones. Foreigners who have dropped from the clouds to bring war and suffering on this holy land. Tell me, have you seen any strangers since you started this morning? Did any outlanders join you during the night?”

“No one,” the merchant replied, for the rider’s mention of foreigners had, naturally, made the worthy man think of something very much out of the usual, about people such as he had never seen on the caravan trails of Tibet. As the presence of an extra lama was something that happened every day, he never even thought of the unobtrusive young monk who had joined them at dawn.

“Maybe you haven’t,” the man grated, with a sinister smile. “All the same I shall be glad of your permission to examine your caravan.”

“Do not trust him, master,” the leader of the escort warned the merchant. “This may be a trick to plunder us without giving us a chance to fight.”

The man on the leading horse leered thinly, and then, with a wave of his hand, indicated his followers, who lay prone, staring unwinkingly over the sights of their rifles and machine-guns at the halted caravan.

“Can human bodies endure such a sleet of bullets as that I can have flung at you?” he demanded.
His tones changed abruptly to a rasp. "Come! You have no chance either to escape or to resist. If you have any foreign devils among your number you had better say so before worse befalls you."

Roger suddenly realized that this man on horseback was not a Tibetan, that he was not even Chinese or a Mongol, but a Westerner, who, from his Tartar-like appearance, was probably a Hungarian or a man from the eastern marches of what was once East Prussia. The brute spoke perfect Tibetan, while his brown skin and slightly oblique-set eyes heightened the illusion, yet Roger grew certain that he was looking at a European. Here was definite proof that he had not risked his life on a wild-goose chase; that there really were foreign influences at work in this secret, mysterious land on the Roof of the World.

The search was very quickly finished, but while it was being made the grim line of men holding their automatic weapons in readiness to quell any resistance never relaxed, showing that they were held under a stern military discipline which believed in leaving nothing to chance. A squat man walked towards the little group of monks on whose fringe Roger was standing and cast a cursory glance over them. He took little notice of the young lama in the black travelling habit, whose lips were pattering prayers while his rosary slid swiftly through his fingers. The man was accustomed to travelling monks, too rapt in their devotions to take the least notice of any worldly things which might chance to be happening around them, and consequently paid
very little attention to Roger whose head, covered with the usual great crested hood, remained bowed, his eyes modestly cast on the ground, as he stood, apparently lost in his deep spiritual meditations.

Roger suffered a few bad moments while this was happening, but forced himself to appear unconscious of the squat man’s slit-eyed gaze. Half an hour later the disguised European chieftain apologized to the caravan’s leaders for the delay he had caused them, and, turning away, waved his arm to his followers, who promptly slung their weapons over their shoulders, reformed, and trotted away in a compact and disciplined body before they disappeared over a long ridge of boulders to the northwards.

Roger walked stolidly along in the dry dust of the caravan throughout the rest of the day, but, as the afternoon advanced, he quietly dropped farther and farther to the rear until, as the sun sank and the head of the long line halted to make camp for the night, he was a couple of miles behind its last rider. No one had taken any notice of this single monk’s dilatoriness, or that he was so lost in his holy devotions that he had dropped farther and farther back, for Tibet is a land accustomed to devout lamas.

Roger squatted beside the trail, drawing his habit around him, and then as full darkness fell, rose and stalked swiftly back along the way he had come. He did not halt again until nearly midnight, when he squatted on his heels and ate a little of the food he had secreted during the midday meal, and then commenced to think over his plans.
Somewhere in this unknown land, he hoped, were Lord Tremough’s agents, but he knew how very difficult it might prove to be to make contact with them. There was nothing to be won by hurrying, however, and after all his exertions the thing he most urgently needed was sleep. There were plenty of caves in the limestone mountains, and though the thin night air was chilly, his lama’s robes protected him against suffering too severely from the chill and the exposure. He soon found a small, dry cave within a few yards of, and ten feet above, the caravan trail, where, wrapping himself in his cloak and using his crested hood as pillow, he was soon sunk in the deep sleep of utter exhaustion.

When he opened his eyes again he drowsily became aware of human voices speaking somewhere close at hand. Roger was instantly alert, and even before he made his first move, realized he was listening to the voice of the same foreigner who had searched the caravan. Then, to this infinite surprise, he recognized that the language the men were using was German!

With his heart beating like a trip-hammer he crept to the mouth of his little cave and saw, a dozen feet beneath him, a knot of men sitting around a tiny fire, with a large motor vehicle looming close behind on the caravan trail!
CHAPTER III

Roger becomes a Prisoner

Roger soon made out the details of the small group sitting in the glow of the little fire; he saw that five of the eight men were native Tibetans—unmistakable even in that dim light.

“I repeat what I’ve already said,” the man nearest Roger snapped. “Von Cressenstein is becoming a timorous old woman. Opening fire on that plane last night was a bad mistake. The Leader will have a lot to say about it. I am sure it was only a patrolling Pakistan Air Force machine, or, maybe, a Russian passenger plane strayed from its course. By now its pilot will have reported that modern anti-aircraft guns tried to shoot him down, and that means real trouble if anyone learns there are such weapons in these remote mountains. Von Cressenstein should be relieved from his command for betraying our presence here.”

“That’s true enough, Herman,” the man on his left agreed. “Von Cressenstein should have known better; he’s got enough experience in this sort of thing.”

“Still, he was very certain that the machine dropped a parachute,” the third foreigner put in. “Colonel von Cressenstein even swears that there were really two coming down.”
"Then, why haven't we found any trace of the harness?" Herman snarled. "We've searched hard enough for them all through the day, haven't we?"

Roger's hopes began to soar as he lay prone listening to and watching the sinister group so close beneath him. So they had not found his supplies! That could only mean that Lord Tremough's agents had discovered the pack and hidden it away, otherwise the methodical Germans would certainly have found it. The agents must, therefore, be awaiting their chance to make contact with him, aware that he had landed! The sense of loneliness and helplessness receded a little with this proof that he was not entirely abandoned in this terrible mountain-land.

"We'd better be getting back to Sabu Gompa as soon as we can," Herman announced. "We'll need to report all this to the Leader before von Cressenstein gets ahead of us with his own explanation of what happened, otherwise it may be all the worse for us."

"I agree," the second man, whose name appeared to be Otto Carl, grunted. "The Leader is getting very jumpy these days and the least thing makes him murderous. Thank Heavens we shan't need to stay in this benighted land much longer—I shall be glad to see the lights of a German home again after all these years."

The third man gave a gusty sigh. "Yes, it has been a weary time, but it will have been worth all the waiting and the hardships if we can restore our German land to its rightful place after the long night of humiliation she has endured."
Silence fell among the little group. The five Tibetans, who had long since ceased to take any interest in their foreign companions, were sleeping, squatting on their haunches, their heads on their knees. Herman broke the stillness at last:

"Come, comrades," he said. "Let us get what sleep we can. We march for Sabu Gompa at dawn."

Roger lay quite still while the three Germans rolled themselves into their sleeping-bags. Herman roused one of the Tibetans, and, in broken accents, ordered him to take over sentry duty, threatening him with instant death if he dared to doze off. The squat mountaineer shook himself, placed his sub-machine gun across his knees, and squatted obediently on the extreme verge of the little circle, dimly lit by the glow of the small fire. Ten minutes later the snores of the three Germans were pulsing rhythmically through the keen, thin night air.

But Roger was very much awake as he lay motionless in his lair, thinking over the implications of all that he had just heard. He carefully sorted out the mass of information the unguarded talk of the three men had given him. First, he must send word to the outside world that foreign war criminals really were in Tibet, so that swift counter-measures might be taken. He shuddered with sudden fear when he realized that the peace of the world and the lives of scores of millions of people depended on him.

But he also saw that, before his report could be of the least use, he must learn far more details. Tibet is a huge and broken country and, unless he
could give precise information of the plotters' headquarters, the United Nations would be unable to do very much. Even more important than the recovery of his radio-transmitter, was the need for him to discover the place where the mysterious Leader lived, and to learn something of what was happening there.

He lay quite still, with the cold night air striking ever more deeply into his bones, while he tried to think of some feasible plan to get quickly to Sabu Gompa. The Germans were going there in that truck of theirs—obviously, therefore, the most desirable way of reaching Sabu Gompa would be to ride in it. But how? Should he try to hide inside it, or attempt to get a lift in some other fashion?

The sentry was sitting motionless, hunkered down on his heels, staring into the fire, which was not the most efficient position for a man guarding the camp in the darkness, for his eyes must be dazzled, and he would not be able to focus his gaze into the shadows beyond. Roger decided to reconnoitre the lorry, and, if it was at all possible, to find a hiding-place inside it where he would conceal himself and then chance to luck about what happened later on.

He crept out of the cave mouth without being seen by the sentry. His dark-coloured lama's robes, though their voluminous folds were a sad hindrance to him as he snaked along the ground, proved of the greatest help in making him practically invisible in the darkness. After fifty yards of cautious crawling he stopped and, hiding the white blur of his face
by covering it, all except one eye, with his dark sleeve, took stock of the situation.

Roger resumed his creeping progress when he saw that the sentry was still crouched as though he had been carved out of stone and, at the end of a nerve-racking half-hour, he was touching the big wheels of the truck. He slid round to its farther side, and then stood upright.

It was a big, roomy, army-type vehicle, powerful and rugged enough to work in that rough countryside, covered by a tarpaulin tilt stretched over a metal framework, but it was empty, except for a few small bundles. He saw that there was no chance for him to stow away without being seen as soon as its crew started to load their camp equipment. Roger was so engrossed in his inspection that he did not even hear the sentry’s footfalls until the man was close alongside the truck; the Tibetan’s felt-covered feet made his approach practically noiseless. Roger’s trained mind responded automatically, so that he sank swiftly behind a small bundle of gear as the sentry’s head and shoulders loomed against the star-lit skies above the open tailboard.

Those few seconds, while the man stood still at the back of the truck, seemed like long years to Roger crouched behind his bundle, holding his breath, afraid that the hammering of his heart might betray him, so loud did it thunder in his own ears. Then, to his vast relief, the looming shadow walked quietly away again towards the fire. Roger caught the hiss of the man’s breath as he drew air into his lungs in the strange fashion Tibetans employ
to counteract the effects of the rarefied atmosphere of their lofty land.

Roger lay without moving for a good ten minutes until the little fire gave a spurt of yellow light when the sentry threw another cake of dried yak dung on to its embers. It was not until this had happened that Roger dared to peer over the tailboard, and when he did so he quickly made out the man as a dark blur limned against the tiny yellow flames. He paused only long enough to make sure that the rest of the gang were still wrapped in their sleeping-bags before he slid out of the truck and crept round to the side farthest away from the camp.

Once clear of its shelter he resumed his snake-like progress, continuing it until he was a good half-mile from the fire, when he rose to his feet, walked several hundreds yards, and, once again, sat down to think. The eastern sky was growing grey before he came to a conclusion—and when he did it appeared to be a completely hare-brained plan. But, crazy or not, it was the only one that gave him any chance of reaching Sabu Gompa without being picked up by one of the patrols which, judging from the conversation he had overheard, Colonel von Cressenstein was still sending out.

In the very last of the night Roger struck the rough trail along which the truck would move on its way to Sabu Gompa, and, enveloping himself even more closely in his sombre monk’s habit, he turned and began to walk slowly back towards the Germans’ camp. The sky lightened swiftly as he went along, spinning his little prayer wheel and
chanting the first part of the devotions every lama is bound to recite at sunrise. By the time he reached the shoulder of the hill, less than a mile above the camp, the men were already moving about. The roar of the truck's engines warming up for the day's run rose in the cold air, while, almost at the same instant as the exhausts started to rumble, the first golden lances of the swiftly rising sun spired into the sky above the peaks and crags of the Nyenchen-tanglha Range, enclosing all the horizon to eastward.

He plodded ahead until a shouted challenge from below gave him warning that he had been seen. He watched the men around the truck halt abruptly in their many duties and turn their faces towards him. One of the Tibetans, easily recognizable in the growing daylight, shouted and waved his arms, but Roger made no reply and neither halted nor hastened his steps. A pious lama, deep in his morning devotions, would not be distracted by any earthly matters; in the sacred hour of sunrise he would be too immersed in his prayers even to consider the presence of other human beings.

Spinning his prayer-wheel slowly and methodically he plodded steadily towards the camp, taking no apparent notice of the men who were growing nearer with every step he advanced. But, beneath his big cowl, a head-dress which is very like a caricature of the helmet of the Roman legions, Roger was keenly weighing the situation. Then, to his relief, the Tibetan who had been shouting and waving his arms, turned to his companions, evi-
dently say something which made them promptly resume their work, apparently taking no further notice of the solitary figure coming so steadily towards them.

"Good," Roger told himself with a surge of relief. "That means they think I’m just a lama on pilgrimage. If they had thought me at all suspicious they would either have fired, or else have come running to investigate. If I take it easy I’ll be able to join them without exciting any suspicions."

As he drew nearer he saw the Tibetans were packing the camp furniture into the truck, while the Germans were eating their breakfasts of coffee and some hot food from tins. It was not until he was within twenty yards that anyone spoke to him, when Herman, in a brutal, coarse voice, speaking very bad Tibetan, suddenly shouted:

"Clear off! We’ve nothing here for a snivelling monk!"

Roger pretended not to hear; his little prayer-wheel continued its small squeaking noise as its cylinder rotated. The monk’s eyes remained cast humbly to the ground while his lips droned the faint chant of the Morning Orison. To all appearance he was not even aware that there were any human beings within miles of him. His unconcern angered Herman, who bellowed, this time in German:

"Clear off, you heathen scum! Away with you—there’s no room for beggars around here. Off with you, I say."

His rasping tones seemed to exasperate the Tibetans, who stopped the work and began to look
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angrily at the German, resenting his way of talking to a holy lama. This was so obvious that Otto Carl tugged at Herman's sleeve and whispered a few words which brought that surly brute to his senses. Otto Carl, a crooked smile on his squat, pock-marked face, turned to the approaching holy man.

"Forgive us our bad manners, Reverend Brother," he said smoothly, in fairly good Tibetan. "My comrade is strange to your land and did not recognize you as a monk on pilgrimage. Will you not eat with us?"

Roger, his face deeply hidden within his cowl, stopped as though he had suddenly come to his senses, but he was careful to keep the little prayer-wheel running. No monk ever stopped the endless mechanical succession of the prayers it offered up, no matter what necessary distractions this human life might thrust upon him.

"I thank you," he said slowly. "I have not eaten for three days. It will be the last time I may take of food until I reach my monastery at Sabu Gompa, for such is the command laid on me as a penance by the Father Abbot of the Great Lamasery at Lhasa, from whom I take a message to the Abbot of Sabu Gompa."

Herman, who had been following the conversation with intense concentration, anxious to understand all that was said in this strange Tibetan tongue, rose to the bait the British lad offered. If this lama was a messenger from the Great Lamasery to Sabu Gompa, where the mysterious Leader was installed, then the letter he carried from the Great Lamasery
in the Forbidden City must concern their plans. He spoke swiftly in German to Otto Carl.

"You speak this outlandish tongue better than I," Herman muttered. "Talk gently to this daft monk. Offer him a lift in our truck to Sabu Gompa—that will mean his arriving there at least a week before he would do otherwise. Perhaps he carries a message for the Leader from Prince Chimbu."

Otto Carl snarled at his comrade for mentioning the prince's name even in German. He need not have worried, for, to all appearances, the monk was once again deep in his sacred meditation, apparently unaware of all the ordinary things of this workaday world. Roger gave no sign that he had received a priceless clue, for Prince Chimbu, the Deputy Regent of Tibet, was, he knew, one of the most powerful nobles in the whole land. If he was on the Germans' side matters might be very serious indeed.

The second German turned once more towards the young monk, and putting on his most ingratiating manner, spoke in a very respectful voice, offering him a lift in his truck, but Roger to all seeming was in no hurry to accept it.

"My abbot said nothing about riding in a fire-chariot," he demurred. "I am not sure that I shall not be guilty of the grave sin of disobedience if I do not make the whole journey on my feet," and he sounded as though his conscience was greatly troubled.

"But his lordship did not forbid you to take advantage of such a convenience, did he, reverend brother?" Otto Carl asked in his blandest voice.
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“No,” and Roger sounded uncertain. “But that was because he probably did not know that I should meet with foreigners who owned such transport.”

“Are you not being a little presumptuous, brother?” the German asked. “The wise and powerful Lord Abbot is a man to whom many things are open which, to lesser mortals, are hidden. Is it not possible that he told you to come by this route because he foresaw that you would meet us and that we should thus have the honour of carrying a holy monk with us to Sabu Gompa? In any case his lordship’s message will thus be carried all the more swiftly, and that must surely please him the more.”

Roger agreed that such indeed might have been his superior’s intentions and, without more ado, accepted the proffered ride in the truck. He took some food, and then, once again sunk deep in his devotions, sliding his rosary through his fingers, after carefully dismantling his prayer-wheel and stowing it in his leather scrip, he climbed into the lorry. He sat silent for hours while it bumped and rolled across the rough mountain tracks, and along valley bottoms where there was no road at all.

Roger evaded the gossiping tongues of the Tibetans by telling them that he was under a vow of silence. They left him alone after that and spent the time yarning between themselves, or else dozing as the truck trundled across the rough tracks. The Germans sometimes talked, but were more often silent, although they seldom dozed and always had their firearms ready to hand, fearing an attack by
the brigands with which these mountains swarm.

The truck halted twice during the day, while its crew ate and refuelled it from the five-gallon cans they carried strapped along the running-boards; otherwise there was no stop until the sun dipped behind the western ridges. Roger had not added very much to his stock of information about the Germans in Tibet, but he did gain a clearer idea of their numbers, and also heard some of the names of the war criminals who had found refuge here on the World's Roof. Herman grunted an order as it began to grow dark, whereupon Otto Carl, the driver, ground on his brakes and everyone fell to work making camp, unloading equipment and starting a small cooking fire on which to brew buttered tea, and heat the tinned rations carried by the Germans.

They were busy at their meal when, without the least warning, a score of rifles blazed from among the rocks of the mountainside above them. Herman, giving a coughing grunt, slumped across the fire, smothering it, while Otto Carl and the other German both fell headlong as, tugging at their belted pistols, they jumped to their feet. One of the Tibetans dropped without a sound; the others, flinging themselves as far from the fire as they could, escaped death and wounds.

By some miracle Roger was untouched, but he lost no time in casting himself beneath the truck, where he was a witness of the savage rush of the mountaineers when, yelling and shrieking in their fierce exultation, they surged into the camp. A con-
fusión of rushing forms dashed in from the darkness; in the glow of the scattered embers Roger saw the glint of bared steel, and heard the gasping of men exerting themselves too strenuously in the thin air.

A raucous voice screaming orders soared above the others, and the tumult ceased. Roger heard men breathing hard, their lungs overtaxed by the fury and rush of their mad charge, mingling with the groans of a badly wounded Tibetan sobbing in the night. The dominating voice snapped a command to examine the plunder, and as the brigands began their search, they lit torches at the embers and Roger knew he must show himself before he was discovered. He rose to his feet after he had backed out from beneath the truck and found he was facing a ring of about thirty squat, slit-eyed brigands, every man of them bristling with weapons.

"I have never yet heard of anyone harming a Brother of the Holy Abbey of Sabu Gompa," he said, slowly and distinctly. "Surely this is a strange thing to happen in our ancient land."

"Not so strange as it is to find a monk in such company," the leader's voice boomed. "If a good man consorts with evil ones he must expect to be judged by the company he keeps."

"A servant of the gods goes wherever he is led," Roger replied humbly. "I bear a message from the Great Lamasery at Lhasa to my Lord Abbot of Sabu Gompa, and I fell in with these men who were bound my way. I took advantage of the chance to execute my mission the more quickly. All things are ordained, my friends. If it is fated that I should
die here and now who am I to resist my destiny?"

He folded his arms inside the wide sleeves of his habit, and moved his lips in the endless mutter of a lama’s prayers. There was complete silence for a moment, broken only by the fierce hiss of the brigand’s breathing. Roger felt sick with fear but, fortunately, his deep cowl hid his face from too close a scrutiny.

The leader seemed nonplussed and spat a string of questions at the surviving members of the Tibetan crew of the truck, who promptly confirmed Roger’s tale of having been casually picked up by the Germans and offered a lift to Sabu Gompa. The chieftain snorted as though baffled, and then, disdainfully, bade Roger proceed on his way without further loss of time.

"I go," the young man replied quietly, allowing no sign of his heart-felt relief to show in his tones; "but I do so with great sorrow because I may not die as a martyr discharging my duty."

Without another word he walked quietly away into the night, his rosary gliding through his fingers, his prayer-wheel slung over his shoulders. But, once he was well away from the knot of fierce warriors, Roger hurried his steps and never halted until daylight greyed the sky above the eastern peaks and ridges. After a short search he found a small cave in which to snatch what sleep he could, for what with lack of sleep and exhaustion, he was already almost unconscious on his feet.

If an army had passed during the following day Roger would not have heard them, so deeply did
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he slumber. His thick monk’s garb protected him from the worst of the cold, but he was extremely hungry when he finally awoke as the sun was sinking towards the western crags, and realized he must quickly find food and shelter if he was to survive. With that desperate need in his mind he took the road again, heading towards the town of Sabu Gompa, forty miles to the north.

As dark settled in Roger saw a small glow at the end of a valley, and, an hour later, came to the camp of some herdsmen watching a flock of yaks in a small pasture in a cross-canyon. As soon as they saw his monk’s robes they made him welcome, the warm grease and salt of their hot buttered tea sliding down his throat like nectar, their yak-cheese and coarse bread bringing strength back to his famished body. They also invited him to stay the night with them, saying that they were on their way to market at Kerinsiring, a town only seven miles south of the abbey of Sabu Gompa.

Roger would have liked to ask these simple mountain-folk many questions, but realized that it might be extremely dangerous. A pilgrim monk much interested in worldly matters happening around him would rouse too many suspicions. As soon as he had refreshed himself, Roger withdrew a little way from the camp-fire and sat on his heels, spinning his prayer-wheel and listening to its monotonous clack-click-clack-click while the long hours passed. Even after the herdsmen had lain down for the night, and the herd of rancid-smelling yaks were quiet except for occasional rumbles, the clicking
of the monk's prayer-wheel went steadily on, while
the mutter of his orisons rose in a steady drone until
everyone except the watchman was fast asleep.

Roger continued his monotonous devotions for
another hour after all was peace in the camp, and
then, wrapped in his dark-coloured habit, stretched
himself at full length and fell asleep. He awoke
refreshed and hungry, and once again hot buttered
tea was offered him with another chunk of evil-
looking yak-cheese and a loaf of coarse barley bread.
When the herdsmen began to drive their charges on
to the trail, Roger rose and, keeping a few yards
behind the last of the horsemen, walked sedately
along, his rosary slipping through his fingers.

Nothing of unusual interest happened during that
day's march; they were disturbed only once when a
party of about forty well-armed horsemen, clad in
chain-mail and carrying lances in addition to more
modern weapons, clattered past at the heels of a
nobleman whose standard of three yaks' tails showed
him to be one of the higher aristocracy.

A grizzled warrior riding beside the nobleman
halted fairly sharply when he was opposite Roger
and asked if they had seen anything of a motor truck,
but the herdsmen replied that they did not know
quite what he meant—some even inquired what a
motor truck might be. The warrior explained at
some length, using the simplest words he could
think of, but finally dismissed them all as being
merely stupid peasants, and cantered away in despair
to catch up with his own party.

Roger stood with down-bent head during this
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examination, his face deeply concealed inside his cowl, his prayer-wheel spinning; he looked so natural a part of the Tibetan landscape that the warrior paid little attention to him. The herdsmen finally camped for the night among the ruins of an ancient temple in the bed of a valley, where the yaks were allowed to wallow in a reed-grown, shallow lake lapping the crumbling walls.

They marched again at dawn, and, six hours later, saw the walls and low houses of the town of Kerinsiring showing white against the blue waters of a long, narrow lake, filling a valley between the vast hog-backs of the Tanghla Range. Roger parted from the herdsmen at the ramshackle gate of the town, where a few soldiers in ragged uniforms were more intent upon levying blackmail on all passers-by than in examining their credentials. Roger saw one surly Manchu under-officer who used his felt boots and hide whip on several peasants when they failed to give him part of the loads of vegetables they were carrying on their backs. The brute caught the young monk’s eyes, looked at him, appraisingly, out of his one eye, but when Roger continued to advance, his lips calmly muttering prayers, the man stopped his roaring and gave a respectful salute as the lama passed.

The swarming streets inside the gate came into view as Roger stepped through the crumbling archway of the city entrance. To his left a pock-marked monk with his cowl flung back was talking to a knot of roughly dressed soldiers, who suddenly stared fully at him, as the Englishman stepped forward
briskly, anxious to lose himself in the teeming throngs passing along the streets. Roger felt an inward tremor of fear and apprehension as he saw the gleam of baleful interest suddenly leap into the slit eyes. The monk said something in a low voice to his companions, and, instantly, the gaze of the whole group turned towards the dusty, travel-stained figure of the lama shambling past them. The monk came forward rubbing his hands together as though washing them with invisible soap and water.

“Greetings, brother,” he snuffled. “Whence come you?”

“From Lhasa, brother,” Roger replied quickly, wondering why he should have been singled out for the attention of this sinister-looking brute. “I go to Sabu Gompa with a message from the Lord Abbot of my monastery.”

“Have you always been a member of a Lhasa community?” the fellow asked blandly.

“Since I entered the service of the Blessed Ones I have,” Roger answered.

“Then how comes it, holy colleague, that your habit carries the purple cord of the suppressed and heretical sect of the Tarbilones?” the monk asked, his face betraying his exultant curiosity. “Seven months ago the Lamasery of Sabu Cherchen was suppressed by order of the Dalai Lama himself because of the false doctrines taught by your brethren and for the treasonable activities of your abbot. How comes it, then, that you still openly wear the purple cord of that accursed abbey?” The narrow eyes glittered and the harsh voice became a snarl.
“It seems that you are a dangerous man, and that it might be better if further inquiries were made as to why you have come to Kerinsiring.”

Roger saw the hard, merciless faces of the guards closing round him in a ring. A sudden wheep-wheep of steel swords leaving their scabbards sang in his ears.

“You are mistaken, reverend brother,” he said, striving to keep his voice steady and to show no concern. “This garment of mine is the habit of the lay-brothers of the Holy House of Gumpta-Crun in the city of Lhasa.” It was sheer bad luck, of all the lama’s robes that could have been chosen for him by Lord Tremough, he should be wearing the habit bearing the purple cord of this particular house. In desperation Roger had mentioned the name of one of the greatest abbeys in Lhasa, but his protest only heightened the mounting suspicions of this sallow monk. He threw his head back and laughed long and scornfully.

“Now I am fully certain that you will repay investigation,” he sneered, and turned to one of the warriors who was raising his broad executioner’s sword for a death-stroke.

“Keep your blade down,” the pock-marked monk spat. “This man is too interesting to be slaughtered before we discover what really brought him here. Put down your steel!” he thundered, as the soldier hesitated and continued to swing his weapon. “Even if the man is no monk, remember that he is still dressed as one. What would be done by these pious crowds to any murdering fool of a fighting
man they saw strike down someone whom they believe to be a holy man?"

This threat to his own life was sufficient to make the soldier lose his thirst for the stranger's blood. Without further words the other warriors closed in around Roger, who, for his part, although he was sweating with fear, staunchly carried on playing his part of the monk to whom all earthly things are of no importance. He kept his prayer-wheel spinning and his lips moving in the endless muttering of the prayers.

No one among the crowd appeared to be greatly interested in the little drama being played out in front of their eyes. The presence of the pock-marked lama among the soldiers was sufficient to assure them that one of their reverend monks was not being wantonly manhandled by brutal soldiers, so that, bar a few quickly averted glances, Roger and his escort passed through the crowd without causing much comment.

He was led to a small arched doorway in the tall blank wall of a great fortified building, half castle, half monastery, such as are common in Tibetan towns, where the great abbots rule their domains very much as feudal nobles governed English counties in the Middle Ages. The pock-marked monk said a few words to an aged lama, who unlocked the gates and then, with no further pretence at gentleness, Roger was bustled along several cloistered corridors, across three courtyards, and through a couple of chambers towards a small door in the base of another wall. Once he had passed through it he
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was half thrust, half kicked, down a flight of stairs into a damp, cold-smelling passage, along which he stumbled until he and his guards came to a grated wooden door.

A monk drew its bolts and, without further ado, Roger was hustled within, his original captor turning to him with a final sneer.

“You had better think of some good reason for your coming to Kerinsiring, spy,” he sneered. “There are no torturers in all Tibet more skilled in finding the truth than those who serve my Lord Abbot here.”

The door slammed. The bolts shot home, and as soon as the footsteps of the lamas and guards died away up the stone staircase, a great silence fell in the underground dungeons. Roger squatted on his heels in one corner of the completely unfurnished cell, with despair gnawing at his heart as the full realization of his perilous position came home to him.
CHAPTER IV

In the Abbey Dungeon

Roger’s worst terrors faded a little after several hours had passed without anything disturbing the darkness and silence of his dungeon. But, as time went on and ever on, the awful quiet and the darkness of his prison began to have their effect, and new fears arose that his captors might mean to leave him to starve in utter solitude in order to break down his resistance.

To maintain his sanity and keep himself from despair Roger occupied himself with guesses as to the identity of his jailers. Were they merely ordinary lamas angered by finding one of their own class wearing the habit of a suppressed monastery? Were they something far more sinister, allies of the outlander criminals? Or—and at the thought his hopes rose once again—might they be patrols anxious to preserve their remote land from foreign interference?

The slender ray of hope had one good effect, it made Roger curl himself up in one corner of the cell, which, though cold, was fortunately dry, and, wrapped in his lama’s robes, he fell into the sleep of complete exhaustion. He was awakened by the pad-padding of many felt-soled feet descending the stairs and coming along his passage, and was on his
feet when the door swung open. He was temporarily blinded by the bright light of an electric stable lantern held by a tall and emaciated lama, behind whom were three warriors with their bared swords glinting menacingly in their hands.

“Come,” said the sardonic monk, making a beckoning gesture with his free hand. Then, without even waiting to see whether he was being obeyed, he turned his back and strode down the passage towards the winding flight of stone steps.

Roger, acting with true monastic obedience, followed without question, the warriors closing in at his heels. The little procession wound its way along a maze of corridors and halls, many of them lined, like a prison in Europe, with the narrow doors of the cells of at least a couple of hundred monks. Muttered prayers, mingled with a muffled monotonous chanting, rose from many of the cells, while, in one big chamber through which they passed, a large, water-driven prayer-wheel was automatically clacking and rotating, like a stream-side mill at home, mechanically offering the abbey’s praise and supplications to the heavens.

They halted, at last, outside an elaborately carved teakwood door on which the grim, lean monk knocked softly, and then stood waiting until a clear voice from within bade them all enter. He led the way, after motioning to the guards to close in around the prisoner, while Roger, with his heart in his mouth, submitted passively and walked on to the thick pile of a wonderful blue and cream Isfahan carpet. The room was only dimly lit with the dimin-
ished daylight shining through the beautiful colours of the tiny exquisite, lancet-shaped stained-glass windows in the sides of the dome above, but it was bright enough within to show the shaven head of a monk dressed in yellow robes, and also the gorgeous clothing of two Tibetan nobles who sat on a low divan, one at either side of him. In front of the trio stood a short-legged, carved table supporting a brass and silver lamp, and also a sheaf of documents, with several rolls of parchment, lying near them.

The guiding monk kow-towed humbly, an example which was followed by Roger and his guards, and, when the third prostration was ended, the lama straightened himself, though still keeping his eyes cast meekly down to the carpet. Roger, his lips dry with fear and his mind racing with dread, followed his jailer’s example by folding his arms inside the wide sleeves of his monk’s garb. The warriors, with a flourish of bright steel, sank the points of their bared swords to the floor near the toes of their left feet and respectfully folded their sinewy hands on top of the pommels.

“Is this the prisoner of whom I have been told, Brother Langri?” the Lord Abbot of Kerinsiring, the shrivelled monk in the yellow robes, asked, his narrow black eyes glinting in the yellow, wrinkled mask of his face.

“Yes, my lord. This is the man who was arrested for wearing the purple cord of the suppressed abbey.”

Roger remained quiet, grimly determined to play to the very end his part of a simple monk. His eyes
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were cast modestly downwards, although between his lashes he was anxiously watching every movement and gesture of the three men on the divan. As their faces turned simultaneously towards him he saw them staring at the betraying purple stripe on his dark robes. For a long minute there was complete silence until it was broken at last when the abbot, in a voice that sounded very sinister, although its tones were extremely gentle, asked Roger whence he came and what his business might be in the town of Kerinsiring.

"My lord, if it may please you, I am travelling to the Abbey of Sabu Gompa," Roger snuffled.

"It always pleases me to see a servant of the gods going about his proper business, my son," the abbot replied. "But what do you seek at Sabu Gompa?"

"A peaceful and prayer-filled life, my lord," Roger replied.

"You will find very little peace in Sabu Gompa," the dignitary on the abbot's left interrupted in a sharp voice. "Sabu Gompa is an evil place filled with foreign devils who destroy all chance of tranquility."

"Your pardon, Prince," the abbot put in, as gently as though he were quietening a fractious child. "May I be allowed to continue my examination of this worthy traveller?"

The seated man bowed his head and subsided on his cushions, muttering an apology. The abbot turned his eyes towards Roger who, at this interruption, had felt a sudden surge of new hope. If
what he had just heard was right, then these men might be enemies of the Germans in Sabu Gompal. If he played his cards well he might yet win their help and so save himself from a humiliating and agonizing death. He forced himself to maintain his pose of being nothing but a simple lama standing in the presence of great nobles and a high prelate.

"How is it that you are wearing the forbidden colours of a suppressed abbey, my son?" the abbot inquired. Though his tones were so benign and quiet, Roger knew only too well that he must reply in some way which would convince them of his good faith. If he failed to do so they would know, as soon as he was stripped naked for the torture, that he was a European. He felt he must risk everything on this guess that they were hostile to the Germans. So, with this mind made up, he looked up humbly.

"I would beg you, my Lord and Father, that you will permit me to answer that question in privacy," he said quietly. "I beseech you to send out Brother Langri and these worthy soldiers, so that I may reply truthfully and without fear of betraying a great and vital secret which is not only mine, but one on which all your lives may depend."

A refusal was flickering in the abbot's glowing eyes and trembling on his shrivelled lips, when, fortunately, Brother Langri angrily broke in.

"Order me to have this repulsive dog cut down, my Lord Abbot," he spat through his dingy teeth. "The insolence of this cur to ask to see your nobility in private passes all bearing! Why should I, I who have been a brother in this abbey for
twenty-seven years, be sent out like a cur at the request of the first vagabond who asks your nobility to grant him such an impudent request? Am I not to be trusted?"

The wrinkled yellow mask of the prelate turned towards his angry subordinate, but all sign of expression had vanished from the narrow, agate-black eyes.

"It would seem, my son," he said, staring mildly at the wrathful face of Brother Langri, "that all your twenty-seven years of religious training have been wasted if you still retain so much corporeal pride that you break in on your superiors, and resent the prospect of being sent out of my council chamber. You forget yourself, Brother Langri!" His voice became peremptory. "For your presumption you shall do penance to curb your proud self-will and to purge your soul. You shall fast for three days in your own cell, holding converse with no one other than the sub-prior, who shall be ordered to visit you once each day. Now go, and take your soldiers with you, but bid them remain within call in case we should need them to take this prisoner away."

Roger saw the hatred in the eyes of Brother Langri as he glanced malevolently in his direction, and knew that this bitter-souled monk was his relentless foe. But that was a matter which would look after itself; at the moment his own danger was far too pressing to give him any chance to worry about the hatred of Brother Langri.

The English lad stood motionless and outwardly submissive while the three warriors and the monk
made their kow-tow before backing from the presence and departing through the door. Roger maintained his meek stance after they had gone, and made no outward move until the gentle voice of the abbot, under whose silky tones lay a note of chilly menace, spoke again.

"You may now reveal whatever is so secret that it could not be mentioned in the hearing of a brother of my own house," he said. "But if you have deceived me into granting you the privilege of a private interview, my son, you will suffer greatly to pay for your presumption. Meanwhile, trusting that you have some real motive for so daring a request, I wish you to tell me who you are and what is your mission here in Kerinsiring."

Roger looked up, though still maintaining his respectful posture, his hands crossed inside the wide sleeves of his monk's habit, and began:

"My Lord Abbot," he said firmly, "I take it that you, and these noble gentlemen, are opposed to the foreign devils in the Abbey of Sabu Gompa, who are planning death and destruction for the world?" He allowed his eyes to rake their old yellow faces as he ended.

"That is as it may be," the abbot replied, very, very quietly. Roger was not deceived, however, he felt the tenseness that underlay that small voice, and he did not under-estimate his own peril. The interest of the three old men was razor-keen. They were not going to betray themselves as they waited for him to explain.

"My lords, I will not lie to you, I am no Tibetan
and also I am no lama,” Roger said slowly. “I, too, am a foreigner.”

“That much I already know.” The abbot nodded his head, and Roger had the ridiculous memory of a small mandarin doll he had once seen in a house where he spent one of his lonely boyhood’s Christmases. “If I had not known that you are a European I should never have granted you a private interview, nor would I have sent away my warriors and good Brother Langri. Proceed, and conceal nothing, for I shall know at once if you try to deceive me.”

And Roger knew that he would, that the abbot was not exaggerating—there could be no chance of cheating the age-old wisdom shining in that wrinkled yellow face. So, looking straight at the old man, and dropping his pose of being a simple monk, Roger spoke in firm tones.

“My lords, I throw myself into your hands. You have not told me whether you are friends or foes of these foreign devils at Sabu Gompa, so that I have no certainty that I shall win your help. If you are accomplices of those terrible men, then indeed I am lost, for what I have to tell you will show you that I must be killed if your cause is not mine. Yet if, on the other hand, you are honest men, then I am wise in confessing to you who and what I am and in begging for your aid to save all humanity.”

Not a nerve twitched, not a muscle stirred on those three sage old faces. They remained completely expressionless except in their mild curiosity about what he might have to tell them. For a brief
moment Roger’s heart misgave him—perhaps these men really were allies of the Nazi refugees and were merely giving him a chance to seal his own fate, playing cat-and-mouse with him. He hesitated for a moment, until, reflecting that he could be no worse off than he already was, he went on:

“ I am both Tibetan and British,” Roger said, “ for I was born here in your mountain land. My father spent many years doing good among the poorest people of all Tibet. You may have heard of him, my lords, for though he was a priest of his own church, he was still well loved and respected by all who knew him. His name was Francis Sturdee, well known as the missionary who died for the Tibetan people whom he loved.”

“ He was a great and a good man,” the abbot nodded gravely. “ I knew him and I loved him. But a worthy father does not always sire a worthy son. Proceed, my son,” and he lapsed into his former bland attitude of neutrality.

“ You will have heard of the misfortunes and the evils which have stirred the world outside your borders, my lords,” Roger continued. “ The Nazis who ruled Germany and wrecked a whole world, were defeated and their country was overrun by the Russians, Americans and British, along with their other allies.”

“ We know all this.” The right-hand noble broke his silence. “ We are not utter fools in this land, although many may believe us to be so.”

Roger gulped—there was still no definite sign to show on which side these three men were ranged.
Collecting himself he forced his voice to sound normal.

"I was sent here to gather whatever information I could so that my employer, Lord Tremough, may be able to lay concrete evidence before the United Nations, and so obtain their help in crushing these men who are a menace to all mankind."

"If you collect that evidence," the first noble asked, "is it your intention that the United Nations shall launch warfare against my country?"

Roger instantly sensed the danger of that question—if the Tibetans believed themselves to be in danger of a foreign airborne invasion it was not at all likely that they would allow anyone with such information to reach the outer world.

"No, lord," Roger replied, turning towards the speaker. "My intention was to eliminate these Germans so that no foreign intervention would be needed. I was born in Tibet and I love this land of my childhood."

They fastened on his first words, and the abbot at once asked how he, a youth, by himself, alone and without equipment, could hope to fight such a powerful organization as the Nazi fugitives. Roger replied that he was not alone, but steadfastly refused to mention the names of any of Lord Tremough's agents and the allies with whom he was to make contact. The noblemen pressed him to say who these agents might be, and when he steadfastly refused to answer they seemed to grow very angry.

"You are very foolish, my son," the abbot said slowly, looking at Roger benignly, as though he
were heartily sorry for him. "I must remind you that we have many painful ways of making stubborn people confess, especially when, as in your case, the lives of many thousands and the safety of our sacred shrines may depend upon our loosening your tongue. Now, tell me, ere worse befalls you, the names of these Tibetans who are willing to help a foreigner to enter their country without his having first obtained permission from the Dalai Lama or the vice-regent to do so."

Roger, as courteously as he could, declined to say any more, and when he was further pressed, replied that this was not his own secret. He could not, he said, in honour bound, betray these men whose only crime was their wish to save their country and the world from disaster. If the lord abbot and his noble friends happened to be friendly to the Nazis he would be sending his friends and allies to execution.

"I am sorry, my lords, but this is not my own secret," he said, with a firmness he was far from feeling, for he was beginning to lose all hope that these terribly patient and frighteningly quiet ancients could possibly be friends. "Even if I have to die for it I cannot tell you the names of my helpers, although I would like you to know that I have seen none of them as yet."

"We do not wish to be cruel to you, my poor friend," and the abbot's voice sounded as though he were brooding over Roger's strange and terrible fate. "Yet, as it is absolutely necessary that we should have those names from you, I am afraid that we must
take measures to make you disclose them. Now, be sensible. Do not drive us to extremes, for which you will be sorry. Answer, and all will be well with you.”

“If I do answer you what will happen to these men whose names you demand?” Roger asked desperately.

“Whatsoever the gods may have decided shall happen to them,” the urbane voice droned. “No man may resist his fate and theirs will doubtlessly be as it is decreed for them. Now, quickly! Will you speak, or will you meet the skilled torturers who await such stubborn people as you?”

“But don’t you understand?” Roger became utterly desperate. “I cannot betray these good people. That would be to purchase my life at the price of many innocent ones. No, I will not give you their names.”

“Choose quickly,” the abbot said, a gentle smile flickering across his face, but his eyes shining black and hard, as he picked up a small, leather-covered hammer and bent towards an ornately carved gong standing beside him. “Which is it to be for you? Life? Or agonizing death in the wire-cage, or perhaps by the Thousand Cuts? You have one last chance. Which do you choose?” and he raised the hammer, looking inquiringly and almost pityingly at Roger.

The lad’s face was chalky white, but his mouth became a thin grim line of determination, his jaw was set steel-hard. He looked straight at the still, expressionless faces, but held his peace and made no
reply. The lord abbot said no more, but struck the gong softly several times and, before its booming reverberations had ended, the three soldiers came smartly through the door, their swords in their hands.

"Take the prisoner to the torture crypt," the abbot said, "but tell the chief tormentor to do nothing to him until I arrive. He is not to be maltreated until I come, but while he is waiting he is to be shown every form of the torture which it is possible to inflict."

Too dazed and heart-sick to care very much what happened to him, Roger bowed deeply to the three men on the divan and, with the soldiers roughly grasping his elbows, was hustled through the door and along many passages, passing down several flights of stairs until he came to a grimy, smoke-blackened chamber. It held several glowing braziers and had queer-shaped, sinister engines standing ranged around, while the walls were festooned with ropes, straps, knives, saws, pincers, and other gruesome articles and tools of the torturer's awful art. Six men clad in leather aprons, but otherwise stark naked, flitted around the gruesome place like evil gnomes. The guards explained the orders they had received, and the chief torturer, a huge, broad-shouldered Tartar, grinned a wolfish, gap-toothed smile, saying that he would do his best to entertain the patient until the operation was allowed to begin.

The succeeding half-hour, while the savage brutes carefully, and in detail, explained to the ashen-faced Roger the exact purpose and effect of each devilish
article and tool, was terrible. Mercifully his senses grew numb with sheer horror after a while, so that he understood very little of what was being said to him. But deep in his mind was the determination to endure to the end, not to purchase his own life at the price of betraying the names of his friends. The tormentors, too, soon wearied of their sport when they saw that their victim had ceased to comprehend what they were showing him.

“Well, well,” grinned the Tartar at last, as a gong sounded in the distance. “You will soon be taking a closer and more personal interest in our art. That gong is the signal that my lord abbot and his noble friends are on their way here to witness the skill of us, their servants. You’ll talk, my lad, never fear, you’ll talk. Patients always do when I, and my mates, apply our little persuasions,” and he licked his thick, brutish lips in eager anticipation.

A deep voice suddenly shouted for silence, and Roger, with all hope dead in his heart, saw the lord abbot, accompanied by five other monks and the two nobles who had been at the interview, advancing down the chamber towards him. The prelate seated himself in a carved teakwood armchair, his monks disposing themselves in a semicircle around him. As soon as they were all settled he waved his hand, and in a clear, calm voice told the Tartar to begin his examination of the prisoner.

“We will start with the thumbscrews,” the abbot commanded. “I believe they are the gentlest tools we have. Let us not proceed to extremes until it is necessary. Commence, please.”
With a sick coldness in his heart Roger watched three of the professional tormentors step towards him, a small steel object glistening in the rays from the brazier in the hand of their chief.
CHAPTER V

The Enemy’s Headquarters

Roger glanced desperately round that terrible, dark, dingy vault and endured the full bitterness which a cornered animal feels. There seemed no chance of escape, no hope of evading the dreadful fate which menaced him. The grisly band of torturers came stalking towards him, brutal anticipation and savage pleasure glinting in their slit-like eyes as they purposely slowed their steps to make him feel more keenly the full fears of his impending fate. The monks and nobles sat impassively on their carved stools, looking on as stonily as though they were about to watch some rather boring scientific experiment in a laboratory, not the agony and shame of a fellow human being. No sign of pleasure or of disgust showed in their impassive, wrinkled yellow faces; nothing but an impersonal desire to get this matter decided as quickly as possible.

The thought of purchasing his freedom by betraying the names of Lord Tremough’s agents never crossed Roger’s mind. The idea of saving himself at the cost of others bearing the torments he was about to undergo was unthinkable. He believed that there was no escape, not even a chance to die fighting. Those awful, muscular brutes of tormentors would probably welcome their victim.
making a strenuous resistance to add brutal pleasure to their grisly task. Fighting would be both useless and undignified; Roger braced himself to face his end with whatever fortitude and endurance he could summon to his aid.

He made no resistance even when the fiends snatched his arms and lashed his wrists together with a looped leather thong which one of them was carrying. It was all done with a slickness bred of long practice, so that scarcely a muscle twitched on their bestial faces while they prepared their victim for the torture. The little steel circlets were thrust over both his thumbs, and then, while two of the men held him immovable between them, their chief grasped the turn-screws on the terrible instrument and looked towards the lord abbot for further orders.

Roger, almost numb with hopeless terror, held grimly to his proud determination not to give these devils the satisfaction of enjoying his fears. The abbot looked benignly at him, and in a low soft voice asked:

"Will you not spare yourself the agony which you must inevitably endure, my son? To persist is useless for, in any case, we shall continue until we wring the names from you. Reflect! Consider how hopeless is your case, and submit while you still have time. You shall be allowed to leave Tibet in peace if you will give us the names of those who wished to help you."

"Do your worst," Roger grated. "You will get nothing out of me."
Silence fell, a quietness deep and terrible and throbbing with menace. The grasp of the torturers never relaxed for a single instant as they waited, tensed and eager, to ply their cruel trade.

"For the last time, I ask you to have mercy on yourself, young man," the abbot said, calmly and clearly.

"I know that you can do whatsoever you wish to me," Roger replied, "but, with God's help, you will not get from me the names of men whose only crime was that they wished to preserve all mankind from death and destruction. At the very worst, if your torturers do force names from my lips, you may be quite certain that they will be false ones. Now, get on with your devilish fun. You will gain nothing by further delay for I am no longer afraid of you."

Then, so suddenly that he almost fainted with the unexpected relief, the abbot's face changed, and a human, kindly smile spread over it. He waved his hand peremptorily to the torturers, ordering them to release their prisoner and to remove his bonds. The monks and the two nobles smiled in a kindly fashion, as, utterly bewildered at this dramatic change, Roger stared stupidly at them, not quite realizing what had happened.

"Come this way, my beloved and worthy son," the abbot said, and led him to a stool. "Fear no more, for now we have proof that you are a man who is to be trusted to the death. If you had betrayed even one of those names we should have imprisoned you for life, for you would have been too weak and too unreliable an instrument for our
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use. Now that we know you are loyal and true we can take you fully into our confidence. We, too, are of the party who fear and distrust these foreign devils. Yet, because of the great power and influence of these countrymen of ours who have sold themselves to the foreigners, we have to work in the utmost secrecy and to test fully every person whom we entrust with our secrets.”

Roger was almost too exhausted by the sharp reaction from his terrors fully to understand what was being said. He was not completely trustful, either, suspecting some satanic stratagem of his captors. He had once read how the Spanish Inquisitors did something of this kind, and he feared that these monks might be trying to worm out his secrets in some secret fashion of their own. But, as he was soon to find out, the good abbot had spoken the truth, and in the following two days Roger was admitted to the inner circle of those who were plotting to overthrow the protectors of the Nazi fugitives.

He was well cared for and given a comfortable lodging in a monk’s cell, where he lived the life of an ordinary lama, while no one, bar the abbot and his half-dozen councillors, even knew that there was a European in the abbey. Brother Langri, of course, was privy to the secret, but as he was undergoing his penance, he had no chance to betray his knowledge, and the abbot said that he would take steps to make sure that the lean and sinister monk had no opportunity of betraying what he knew.

Roger met Brother Langri once while he was
passing through the cloisters. He saw the saturnine features under the grey cowl as the monk passed to take his place in the temple at public prayers and watched a spasm of bitter hate cross the yellow face as their eyes met. But Roger took no further notice, for he did not consider it in the least likely that the monk, no matter how deep his hatred of the young Briton might be, would do anything which might hurt his own abbey.

Many plans were discussed during those two days, and all the time Roger hammered at his companions about the dire need for haste. He stressed that the dead Germans had said their preparations were almost complete and that Z-day was very near. He finally won the abbot’s consent to his going to Sabu Gompa to gather what information he could, so that they might have something definite upon which to work. The abbot and the rest insisted they were anxious to deal with this menace themselves, and not to allow any foreign intervention in their secret and sacred land of the World’s Roof.

"Once we are sure that these Germans are truly a menace to our country’s independence," the abbot said slowly, "we will take whatever steps are needed to remove them. We do not wish to bring in other foreigners to destroy those we already have. There is an ancient fable in our tongue about the field-mice who bribed a mongoose to destroy the cobra which was troubling them, and eventually found that they had merely exchanged masters. We have no intention of acting the part of these field-mice."
Roger gave his promise that he would not transmit any information to the outside world before he had told the churchman and his companions all that he had learned. Consequently, on the third morning after his release from the torture chamber, Roger, clad in the habit of a monk of Kerinsiring Abbey, passed out through the town gates, with his face turned towards the monastery of Sabu Gompa, eight miles to the northward.

Everything had been extremely well arranged. He carried a letter from the abbot to the superior of Sabu Gompa saying that, as he had been found to be an unruly member of the community, he was being sent to be disciplined in an outside establishment, in accordance with the usual Tibetan monastic custom. The abbot of Sabu Gompa was requested to take strict measures with him and to employ him for six months on the most menial tasks, so that when Brother Laong, as Roger was called, returned to Kerinsiring, he might be a little more appreciative of the privileges which he enjoyed in his own monastery.

No one took any particular notice of the young monk as he tramped along the trail beside the lake towards Sabu Gompa. Clad in his distinctive grey habit with its brown cowl, Roger looked no different from any of the dozens of lamas who thronged the road. He reached his destination after two and a half hours of tramping, and took his place among the crowd of supplicants awaiting the noonday opening of the Almoner's Gate. Roger, his lips muttering endless prayers, leaned on his long staff,
with his rosary beads slipping swiftly through his mechanically moving fingers. But his eyes were very alert and he was extremely interested in many of the things which he saw happening on the road, as well as in the people who came and went through the gates used by those who had business with the abbey.

Sabu Gompa was a very large building, one of those strange Tibetan sky-scrappers which towered a dozen or more stories into the sky five hundred years before Manhattan Island was even discovered. It was enclosed by a strong wall, above whose battlements the rows of windows and the tops of many evergreen trees, rose into the clear air. The roots of the walls were washed by the blue waters of the lake, for the abbey completely filled a small promontory jutting out into the mountain-surrounded lake.

Roger watched seven foreigners, all obvious Germans, ride in, accompanied by a Tibetan nobleman and a dozen mounted huntsmen, bearing hooded falcons on their wrists. They were all talking and joking, apparently very pleased with the excellent sport they had enjoyed that morning. Roger’s attention was next claimed by a high-pitched persistent whine from somewhere deep inside the monastery, which he finally recognized as the note of dynamos. Next he was attracted to a small knot of foreign workmen who came out of the main gates and walked up to a small escarpment through which a stream brawled its way from the mountains in the background. He almost whistled with surprise as he recognized what these men were doing.
"Hydro-electric plant," he said to himself in astonishment, for the workmen were soon hard at work on the sluices of a long channel which, because of the cunning way it had been cut into the rock, and camouflaged against any chance of being seen from the air, he had not previously noticed. The men laboured on the sluice for over an hour, and then as they came away the sound of busy machines and of dynamos within the monastic fortress grew more intense and louder.

Roger also learned a great deal from the whisperings and murmurs of the crowd of supplicants among whom he was standing. They were mainly beggars come for their usual noonday dole, or men tramping from one town to the next, anxious for the food and shelter which the great abbeys of Tibet offer to all wayfarers. But, among them, were workmen from Lhasa and quite a few soldiers-of-fortune who had heard that there was employment for good swords at this Abbey of Sabu Gompa. It appeared to be common knowledge among them that something strange and terrible was being prepared on the shores of this peaceful lake.

"I have heard, comrade," said one weather-beaten soldier to another who stood at Roger's elbow, "that there are good prospects and excellent pay to be found in this abbey. I have also heard that those whom they take on are likely to go very far away, even to fight in the great cities of the European paleskins, where there will be much fine loot and great pickings for men such as we."

"I have no least wish to leave our own land,"
muttered the man whom he had addressed. "Tibet is good enough for me, though, if there is a chance to pick up sufficient plunder in these strange lands of the West to allow a man to return and buy himself a fine house with plenty of good farm-hands to keep him fat, I shall be glad to hire my sword to whosoever offers me such a chance. But we must make quite sure first that these foreigners really will pay all that they promise. Too many war-lords offer poor soldiers like us the moon and all its glory while they need us, but, once we have won their victories for them, they throw us out, broken and bruised, without a single copper coin to buy ourselves bread."

They talked and muttered and grumbled and argued for a couple of hours until the Almoner's Gate swung wide and brought a tense and silent expectancy to the whole shabby gathering as its great valves squealed open. The beggars tightened their belts; the unemployed soldiers-of-fortune picked up their weapons and assumed a swaggering, martial air; the wayfarers collected their bundles, and only the travelling monks stayed still, affecting to take no notice of the worldly stir around them. Roger took fresh hold on his courage, and, remaining as still as the other monks, waited while the gates rolled open, to reveal a dozen lamas and their servants standing behind tables on which were piled great steaming bowls of buttered tea, yak-stew, and loaves of coarse bread. Two lamas sat at a small table on the opposite side of the archway with rolls of parchment in front of them, and with their writing
brushes placed beside blocks of ink ready to deal with any callers whose business might not be confined to the want of food and drink.

Roger had been extremely carefully coached as to what he must do as a penitent arriving at an abbey where he was to work out his penance. He took his place at the end of the little procession of visiting monks and stood humbly and meekly in their rear until the last of them had stated his business and received an answer before returning to the road, or had passed within the portals and been lost to sight in the gloom of the abbey’s interior. Then he stepped humbly forward and, with downcast eyes, held out the Abbot of Kerinsiring’s letter to the lama at the table.

The clerk, a very fat, jovial-looking monk, glanced at the letter and then looked up at Roger’s face with a leer in his eyes.

“So you’ve been a bad boy, have you?” he grinned. “Well, I reckon we can put you to some useful and punishing work here which will make you only too glad to get back to your own house, although for my part it would take a lot of persuasion to get me into so strict an abbey as Kerinsiring. Personally I like an abbot who does not insist too much on old-fashioned discipline, and has some consideration for a few of the modern comforts with which the gods have nowadays blessed this suffering old world of ours.”

He glanced very shrewdly at Roger as he ended his little speech.

“You seem a strange man, brother,” he said
after a long pause. "There is something about you which makes me feel curious. What can it be, I wonder?" and he looked musingly into the depths of the cowl covering Roger's features.

"Naught save that I am a very sinful man, such a one as your reverence would naturally think somewhat strange," Roger replied. "I have repented of my faults committed against the code of discipline of my house, brother; I now crave only that I may start on my penance so that the time which must elapse before I may return to Kerinsiring shall be as short as possible."

"Your words are not very complimentary to Sabu Gompa," grunted the fat monk. "However, that is as should be. Perhaps after you have lived with us for a while you may change your ideas and wish to remain here. Have you any particular aptitude? Had you any work before you took the vows of a monk?"

"I am a very ignorant man, brother," Roger replied meekly. In a very humble voice he went on: "It is not my fault, reverend brother, that I should be so unruly, for I was spoiled in my youth. My father, woe is me, put me to work as a servant-boy in the house of a foreign consul in Lhasa, and there I learned to serve foreigners in the way to which they are accustomed, and so became corrupted in many of my views and ways. It is that badness of soul which I am now so anxious to correct in order that I may become as good a monk of my house as any of the brothers who were not exposed to such dangers in their earliest years."
"What's that?" the fat monk squeaked, his voice and face expressing surprise. "You say you worked in the house of a foreign-devil consul in Lhasa? How comes it that you arrive here at Sabu Gompa where there are also foreigners? Eh?" His voice sounded sharp-edged with keen suspicion. "Did you know before you came here that there are foreigners in this abbey?"

"I assure you that I knew nothing of the sort until this very morning," Roger replied, and then injecting a whine into his voice, he went on: "It was not until I stood at your gates awaiting the honour of seeing your holy face that I realized foreign devils were polluting this blessed house. I saw some at the entrance-way, but they spoke a tongue different from that used by the ones I served in Lhasa."

The lama's suspicions seemed to be allayed by the humility of Roger's tones. He grunted and apparently dismissed his visitor as a fool. Then a gleam of inspiration gleamed in his deep-sunk eyes, and he glanced up at Roger.

"Do you know how to wait at table and to care for the sleeping-rooms of these foreigners in their own strange fashion?" he demanded.

"Those were my duties when I was a boy," the young monk replied. "Yet, I beg you, great and honoured brother, not to expose me to the shame of having to attend foreign devils. I beseech you to allow me to spend the time of my penance in holy exercises for the improvement of my soul."

"You came here to do penance by obeying all the
commands you may be given,” the fat monk snapped, a heavy frown creasing his yellow forehead. “Obedience is the first duty of a good serving-brother. You have not come to pick and choose what form your punishment shall take, but to render humble obedience and to do your very utmost in carrying out the orders you are given.”

He glared truculently at Roger, who bowed deeply and meekly, anxious to hide the excitement glinting in his eyes.

He meekly begged pardon for having spoken in so worldly a fashion and said that he would obey the command to serve the foreign devils. The fat monk smiled at this display of a proper submission.

“I am the assistant guest-master,” he said approvingly. “You will work under me and you will do your best to please these foreign guests of the lord abbot. You will never refer to them again as foreign devils. Wait beside me until I finish this duty and I will take you inside and explain your duties to you.”

Roger bowed again and stood aside, his hands folded inside the sleeves of his habit, his face shielded by his cowl. The assistant guest-master was almost purring with satisfaction and pleasure at his good luck in having found a body-servant for the Germans, while Roger’s excitement mounted higher the longer he waited. Ten minutes later, after the fat monk had disposed of the last of the pilgrim lamas who entered the gates, Roger was taken into the inner fastnesses of the vast abbey, and introduced
to his new tasks in the western wing where the Germans had their quarters.

Two sentries in the black uniforms of Hitler’s S.S. stood, with automatic weapons under their arms, on guard at the low arched gateway which gave access to this fortress within a fortress, where everything was bustle and activity. Roger heard the deep hum of a turbine and the sharper note of dynamos, while from a tall iron chimney at one angle of the courtyard a stream of yellow smoke was pouring into the chilly, thin air. Europeans were coming and going, several of them wearing either dungarees or the long smocks of laboratory workers. Among them was a sprinkling of brutal-faced S.S. men, with a few others who wore the uniforms of the old Nazi Army, Navy and Luftwaffe. Everyone moved with the rigid discipline of a garrison, while the few Tibetan servants, all monks, slid quietly and unobtrusively among the foreigners, as though anxious to cause no comment among these hard-faced men.

Roger quickly discovered the reason for the monks’ anxiety not to appear conspicuous, for he was scarcely inside a long hall on the other side of the courtyard, before a tall one-eyed German, in the black S.S. garb, snapped at him in bad Tibetan, announcing that Roger would be an officers’ mess servant and waiter, with the care of some bedrooms as his special task.

The assistant guest-master, with a look of suppressed hatred in his eyes, sidled away as soon as he had introduced Roger to the German sergeant. The
sergeant watched him go, a sardonic smile lifting one corner of his thick lips, and then spat a stream of the filthiest abuse in German, directed against all things Tibetan, and Tibetan religious customs in particular.

Roger instantly grasped that the brute wished to discover whether the new servant had any knowledge of the German language. If he had not, then he might be safely allowed to hear the German officers discussing secret matters. When the sergeant saw no least sign of comprehension in the young lama’s face, he stopped his spate of abuse, and resumed in Tibetan:

“If you do your work well, brother, you will have nothing to fear. But if you do it badly, or if you are found putting your ugly nose into any business which does not concern you, you will be whipped the first time, and hanged the next. That is all. Report to the corporal mess waiter, he is in there. He will instruct you in your new duties—and, for your own sake, do them well!”

Hardly daring to believe in his good luck Roger shuffled to the door which the sergeant had indicated with a contemptuous flick of his wrist, and a few minutes later was receiving his first instructions from the German steward responsible for the messing of the foreigners. But, despite his elation, he was more careful than ever to act his part, to give no cause for suspicion. Everything seemed to be going his way; within a few days he might hope to have sufficient definite information to be able to leave the Abbey of Sabu Gompa and to tell the
world the details of the ghastly new peril which was facing it.

The German corporal told him to find a place in which to sleep and then to report back to the pantry in plenty of time for the evening, when Roger's services would be required.
CHAPTER VI

The Temple Wizards

Within a week of starting his duty as a servant in the foreigners' mess Roger had most of the essential points of the great plot fairly clear in his mind. The Germans made no attempt at being discreet when they were within their own quarters, and spoke quite freely of their part of the plan and their hopes for the future once they had restored the fortunes of their fallen Fatherland. They seemed so certain no enemy ears could be within hearing —after all, Tibet itself is remote enough, and the Abbey of Sabu Gompa is one of its most secluded lamaseries—that they were quite satisfied that no foreign spy could possibly win past their own security officer. Consequently they talked very freely and at great length, never dreaming that every word was being carefully noted by a British secret agent.

Roger's life was a very hard one, for Sabu Gompa is a monastery where the rule is kept very strictly. In addition to his long hours serving the foreigners, Roger had to attend all the public prayers in the temple with the rest of the monks of the community. By the end of the week only two things kept him from returning to Kerinsiring and proceeding with the next step of his plans: he wanted to know
the identity of the mysterious Leader and to discover the actual date of Z-day, the moment when the first atomic-bomb salvos were to be launched.

The first riddle fascinated him, for he was beginning to believe that the Leader might be no less a person than Hitler. It seemed utterly fantastic, for he had read all the evidence that the Fuehrer perished in the Chancellory in Berlin, but as he heard more and more of the talk of the German officers and scientists in the foreign mess, the surer he became that that evil genius might still be alive. None of the plotters ever mentioned his name; they were extremely careful never to refer to their chief except as the "Leader" or as "Himself". It seemed to be almost a religious scruple never to utter his name.

Roger knew too that it would not be more than three weeks before the first part of the terrible plot would be put into action. He had heard too many of the Germans discussing how short a time remained before they would be able to return in triumph to the Fatherland that they had not seen for so long, to be in any doubt about that point.

The broad outlines of the A-plan, as they called it, were simple, and called only for a salvo of atomic long-range rockets to be fired from the projectors, which had been built about fifteen miles north-west of Sabu Gompa. Allowing for the great variation in distances, these would explode at precisely the same moment on most of the important cities of the world.
There was to be a radioed demand from the Leader, calling on all nations to surrender, but, before they would have any chance to comply, another salvo would be discharged, to fall close to the first targets. All nations would then be told to surrender to secret Nazi agents already stationed near every capital, while the occupying powers in Germany would disarm and surrender air transport and arms to German military commanders. Occupation forces would be sent in then to take control of each country, covered by the threat of further salvos from the unknown base from which the first had been launched.

Roger, while he served the Germans at the mess tables, had been aghast at the satanic simplicity of the vast plan. Immediately the first phase was over and German detachments were garrisoned in every capital, the Leader and his staff would fly to Berlin, and there start direct negotiations, while the launching-sites were to remain at instant readiness until the new Peace Treaties were signed and Germany was restored to its pride of place.

Then, when he had made up his mind to get away without further delay, as Z-day was coming perilously close, the conversation around the central table in the mess suddenly riveted his attention. An S.S. general started to grumble about their ill-luck in having to defer action owing to the superstitions of these stupid monks, as he scornfully called his allies.

"I don't know, Excellency," another of the diners broke in. "I think it should be very interesting to
see these native prophets at work. I'm looking forward to it I must say."

"If you had already seen it a dozen times as I have, you wouldn't be so eager, Admiral," the general grunted. "The brutes go off into a fit, and during their seizures the rest of these snivelling lamas think their Sungmas, as they call these prophets, are possessed by some of their gods. It's a pretty foul exhibition, believe me, but unfortunately the Leader believes in this sort of thing."

"That's true enough," a civilian scientist agreed. "More's the pity. These brutes are dangerous; they go quite mad, and during their seizures the Sungmas are liable to do anything. They run amuck with swords and lances, and anyone who gets in their way is liable to get badly hurt. I heard that this King Sungma who's coming to-night actually killed the abbot of some lamasery only a few months ago during one of their little meetings."

Roger was growing increasingly interested. He understood enough about Tibetan ways of thought to know that their leaders would never commit themselves to any serious major act without first consulting the oracles of their many gods, and if a King Sungma was visiting Sabu Gompa it could only mean that some decision of the very first importance was about to be taken—possibly the date on which the murderous attack against world peace was to be launched. His ears were very keen as he meekly and deftly carried out his duties waiting on the chattering Germans, determined not to miss a
word of what was being said. The general was still grumbling.

"This is going to be just as big and sickening a business as it was when they consulted the Sungmas on our first arrival. Pretty nerve-racking that was, too, for everything depended on what these epileptic lunatics said about us. We were very weak in those days, and if they had decided against us, we should have been butchered or sold as slaves. I shan’t forget those hours while we stood there, waiting for the final word from a mad Tibetan native. I wish we hadn’t got to be in our places in the temple to-night. However, as Himself has given direct orders that we must all attend, there’s no escaping it, I suppose."

"Is the Leader to be there in person, Excellency?" a high-ranking officer in Luftwaffe uniform asked eagerly. "I’ve never seen him yet. Not since the old days, I mean. Has he altered very much?"

"You won’t recognize him," replied the general. "The plastic surgeons made a fine job. They had to, otherwise he would never have been able to escape the Allies in Germany. He was in the Fatherland, you know, for over three years after the end of the war, before we were able to get him here. Yes, you’ll find precious little that you’ll recognize in his features when you see him to-night. He’s much older too than he was in the days when the Third Reich ruled the world."

"Small wonder," the airman murmured, and Roger, who was handing him a dish of meat, heard
the adoration in the man’s voice. “No one has ever suffered so much as the Leader has done—and no one shall be so richly repaid as He once we restore the Fatherland to its rightful pride of place.”

Roger never quite knew how he managed to preserve his disguise throughout the remainder of that long-drawn-out meal, nor how he served the coffee afterwards. While he was handing round the cups a high-ranking lama came to the pantry and warned all the monks that they must finish their cleaning as quickly as possible. Every member of the community was to be in his place by the stroke of midnight, when the lord abbot and the visiting princes and prelates from Lhasa would consult the oracles of the gods.

Just before that time the great gongs of the lamasery began to boom with an all-pervading thunder, and from every nook and cranny of the great, rambling building, soft-shoed monks, faces deep in their crested cowls, hands modestly folded in their wide sleeves, came scurrying to take their places on the floor of the huge temple. Roger was among his brethren as they mustered beneath the forty-foot statue of the goddess Gyalwa Penkhang, the most mysterious of all the idols of Tibet. The exquisitely carved statue of a woman, richly dressed, and seated in the Western fashion on a throne, sat a-swim in a cloud of incense smoke, as though serenely disregarding the hundreds of lamas who lived only to worship her.

Immediately beneath her altar were set rows of
hassocks; the tallest and most ornate stood in the middle at Gyalwa Penkhang’s feet, the others diminishing in height and decoration as they stood farther away from her. A long chant began to swell, monotonous, slow, and infinitely sad, the reed-like voices of the lamas singing the ancient liturgy with rhythmical swayings of the body. Roger, sandwiched in the front row between two fat monks, played his part magnificently during the whole hour the chanting continued before the sound of gongs heralded the arrival of the lord abbot, his high officers, and his noble guests.

They came in, slowly and majestically, dressed in glowing, many-coloured silk and brocaded robes. Bowing humbly to the gilded statue of the towering goddess they then, one after another, walked to their hassocks, where they stood, hands folded, waiting until the lord abbot took his own seat. On one side was a sinister, scarred, tall and rangy man, the Prince Chimbu, whose intrigues were leading his country into this terrible witches’ brew of murder. His hassock was of the same height as the lord abbot’s, the only one to be so, and his whole demeanour showed that he was merely making a pretence of civility by accepting equality with the monkish noble.

The lord abbot raised his hand in benediction over the bowed and cowled heads of his hundreds of followers. They accepted his blessing, and then, on the stroke of a small and silvery-sounding gong, a single monk intoned a new chant, and after a few syllables, the remainder joined in. Roger carefully
On the World’s Roof

imitating the gestures and swaying of his companions, opened and closed his lips in time with the singing, while, from the depths of his cowl, he watched the arrival of the Germans, staring at the figure who led them.

He was distinct from the others in that he wore a simple brown uniform, the old shirt and breeches of the S.A., the Hitler Brownshirts, while his only decoration was the simple black-and-white of the Iron Cross pinned to his left breast. The others, however, more than made up for the drabness of their cherished Leader’s attire, by the brilliance of their full-dress uniforms, and the blaze of the jewelled orders and decorations they displayed. Roger noticed the garb of the Third Reich’s Army, Air Force, Navy, Diplomatic Corps, Civil Service, and S.S. formations, mingled with those of some regiments of the Kaiser’s army, such as Death’s Head Hussars, as well as a few white tunics and gilded helmets of the Cuirassiers of the Imperial Guard. Certainly the Nazi plotters were putting on a magnificent show, and Roger saw that the princes and nobles in the long line on each side of the lord abbot were very impressed at what they were seeing.

The Leader puzzled Roger extremely. It was Adolf Hitler whom he had expected to see, but there was no apparent resemblance between this emaciated, bearded, stoop-shouldered man before him and the pictures and cartoons which had made the one-time Fuehrer’s features the best known and most bitterly hated in the whole world. When the man spoke,
making a long speech to the lord abbot, as the remainder of his followers stood stiffly to attention, there was only a faint resemblance to the voice which had once sent races and nations mad with desire and misplaced pride.

Roger told himself that if this man was Hitler then plastic surgeons had really worked a miracle. He wondered how it would be possible, supposing the plot succeeded, to convince the ordinary German people at home that this was their Fuehrer returned from the dead, and not some Perkin Warbeck-like adventurer trying to win their allegiance. That, however, was not his business. Whoever the mysterious Leader might be, and there were certainly chances that it really was Hitler himself, all that was of far less importance than his discovering the actual date of the proposed attempt to conquer the world.

The Germans were led by obsequiously bowing chamberlains to a position to the left of the statue's feet, and when they were settled in their places a silver gong sounded once more. Instantly the precentor intoned a high, fierce note and the whole community swung into the harsher, exciting rhythm of an invocation to the Demon-god Chenchi to make his presence felt among them. For nearly ninety minutes the fierce, shrill singing carried on without a pause and then a fanfare of trumpets split the heavy, incense-laded air. As a brittle silence fell, five strange, richly dressed and magnificently equipped figures came slowly across the open space in the temple's centre and walked towards five
thrones erected facing the lord abbot's hassock, but a good fifty feet away from it.

Roger, of course, knew about Sungmas, the prophets and oracles of the Tibetan Church. During his boyhood he had seen minor Sungmas, many of whom were cheats, visiting the villages, and often shamefully imposing upon the ignorant country-folk by their faked exhibitions of pretended possession by gods or by evil spirits. He had only heard about the mighty King Sungmas who live in Lhasa and the great abbeys, but this was the first time he had ever seen any of them.

At the stroke of another gong the chanting changed abruptly again, and now it was accompanied by the blasts of many long trumpets, the clashing of huge cymbals, the booming of gongs, and the mad banging of drums. The monks were invoking the spirit of the dreadful demon Chenchi to come and fill the body and inspire the mind of his servant, the King Sungma, so that they, his humble servants, might be given an outline of what the future held, and be told what measure of success would wait upon the plans of the lord abbot and his allies the foreigners.

Roger, just one more sombrely clad figure among the lines of hundreds of chanting, frenzied monks, watched the scene before him from the depths of his cowl, while his body swayed in the rhythm of the frantic liturgy. A steady stream of young monks waving censers walked slowly round and round the five wizards on their thrones, enveloping them in a cloud of incense through which the myriad candles
and lamps in the shrines and on the altars glowed like dim stars. High above the swirling clouds the serene, majestic face of the great idol swam serenely, as though Gyalwa Penkhang was drinking the adoration of her maddened disciples.

With the lights and the hundreds of perspiring bodies wrapped in their heavy monkish clothes, the temperature swiftly grew higher. The incense swirled heavily in the still air, adding to the excitement and tension inside the great temple, while the rapid tempo of the frantic chant swelled upwards in rolling billows of sound. Cool as he tried to keep his brain, even Roger began to feel the mounting tension of the strange scene and to find it becoming increasingly more difficult to concentrate. To his companions, who had no such bridle on their thoughts, the whole scene was wildly exhilarating. Every now and again a monk fell prostrate either in utter exhaustion or in the throes of a fit, but no one took the least notice of those who collapsed; their own feelings were too intense for them to be aware of anything but the amazing scene being enacted before them.

Roger saw that even the Germans were becoming infected with the general excitement. Perspiration glistened on their faces as the stuffy temperature mounted, and several of them loosened the stiff gold-braided collars of their full-dress tunics. Only the Leader remained impassive, betraying nothing of his personal feelings on his emaciated face, which remained as impassive as that of the gilded idol swimming over the sweet-smelling fog above him.
Suddenly, the King Sungma and his four assistants joined in the wild chanting and mumbling prayers of the lamas, contorting their own bodies in time with those of the eldritch choir, and, seeing this, the frantic mob yelled and excitement grew electric. Suddenly the King Sungma's hands rose convulsively and grasped at his scrawny throat above the gold brocade of his vestment, whereupon the long trumpets blew a sonorous blast and the cymbals gave a final, terrifying clash. Instantly, so abruptly that it came like a shock, deep silence fell on that maelstrom of noise—the temple grew so deathly still that only the laboured breathing of the five wizards on their thrones could be heard. A deep, gargling sound escaped the King Sungma's writhing lips as he tore even more wildly at his throat.

Watched by hundreds of pairs of glowing eyes, his two nearest assistants rose lithely from their seats and stepping across to one side lifted a large, tall, curiously decorated and plumed iron hat, weighing close on seventy pounds, and set it firmly upon the King Sungma's head, pausing only to tie its trailing ribbons firmly under his chin. He showed no signs of being conscious of the great weight on his skull; for all the effect it had on him that mighty helmet appeared to be no heavier than a jockey's silk cap. The deep, gargling sound coming from his lips ceased and, for a moment, he grew still. Then all at once, his body began to sway back and forth, and his legs to shake; he spat and groaned, blood oozed from his mouth and nostrils,
causing a great sigh to rise from the congregation. "Chenchi has come! Great Chenchi is present in the body of his servant!" they breathed. Deep and utter silence fell once more as every lama waited for the words which might fall from the epileptic's lips.

To the Germans, and to Roger, it was only too obvious what was happening, and the Englishman felt a surge of pity for the poor stricken man whose every contortion was being so closely watched by the hundreds of gloating monks. To them, however, it was proof positive of the existence of their terrible gods, for were they not watching Chenchi, the greatest evil spirit of all, taking possession of the bodily faculties of his servant so that he might make his divine will known?

The King Sungma's face became empurpled and soon swelled to three times its normal size, looking like a caricature of a Rugby football in its grotesque yellow and blue colouring. He spat on the ground, groaned deeply and heavily, and then, abruptly throwing himself backward, would have crashed to the ground if the four lesser Sungmas had not grabbed him, and with a mighty struggle managed to balance him.

Suddenly he straightened himself and with a fierce yell extended his hands, into which one of the attendants thrust the hilt of a long, heavy-bladed sword of Mongolian steel. Roger had seen many of these weapons, and, though he was no weakling, he had never been able to do much more than give these blades a very slight bend, so strong and tough
is their steel. In the twinkling of an eye the King Sungma’s hands had twisted the long sword into several loops and knots, and at the sight a fresh torrent of concerted prayers broke from the serried mass of monks.

The King Sungma tossed the huge hat above his head, the plumed and ribboned mass of iron rising for nearly thirty feet, straight in the air, as though lifted by some invisible cable hanging from the dome of the temple far above. Down it came, straight back on to his head, and though the shock of that mass of metal falling must have been considerable, it appeared to have no effect on its crazed wearer. Perspiration running in streams down his swollen purple face mingled with the blood trickling from his mouth and nostrils. Roger felt his stomach heaving in disgust at the dreadful sight, but, knowing how much depended on him, he was able to fight down his qualms and continue to imitate the rhythmical movements of his companions.

The next senior Sungma wiped his chief’s face with a silk scarf, and then the others came forward one at a time, offering the triangular pyramids of tsamba (cakes of barley-flour dough) presented on golden platters. The senior Sungma took the first tray and, lifting the tsamba, held it to the King’s face so that his forehead touched it and as he did so a new tempo and a fresh chant rose from the rows of watching lamas. Still shaking violently in every limb, the possessed wretch took a handful of rice from a jewelled bowl which was presented to him, and threw the grains violently into the crowd, who
surged back in terror to avoid the ill-luck which was believed to follow any whom the rice touched.

The lord abbot rose majestically from his hassock and, after bowing deeply to the German Leader, waited while that man joined him, and then, hand in hand, they advanced towards the repulsive figure of the King Sungma, who, for his part, seemed hardly aware of them until they were within a few feet of him. Then, suddenly, the twitching, purple-faced, swollen-featured, sweating figure in the gorgeous robes began to shriek with a heart-rending reproach and, apparently, in the direst fear, while the chanting of the monks died away in astonishment.

"Who is this terror who comes to me?" the King Sungma howled. "Who is he? Before this Man of Blood and Lies I, Great Chenchi, I, who have worked evil and death for many thousands of years, am as innocent and as guiltless as a babe born yesterday and as free from all past sins. Who is he? This is a fiend and not a man. He frightens me, me, Chenchi, who have never yet known fear."

The lord abbot halted, frightened at these terrible words, words such as he had never expected to hear, but the Leader continued to move forward and force him to accompany him. Then a new convulsion crossed the face of the King Sungma. With one mighty bound, he snatched himself clear of the restraining hands of his attendants, and, catching hold of one of the many swords put near him, rushed at the lord abbot and began to belabour him with the flat of the weapon, screeching:

"That man I dare not touch, but you, you who
have traitorously brought the most terrible soul in all the universe into this sacred place, you I can punish," and, with a hearty good will he struck at the lord abbot while the attendants, too terror-stricken to move, gazed dumbly on. No one had ever before offered violence to the lord abbot, to the great prelate whose word meant life or death to hundreds of subject monks and thousands of humble tenants.

The unfortunate abbot's yells, however, brought swift action from the Germans, not because they cared what happened to him, but the sight of this frantic lunatic wielding his wild steel so close to their Leader was something which called for immediate action. The surge forward of the Nazis detonated the mad rage of the other Sungmas, who sprang towards their King to resist the impious foreign devils. At the same moment the lamas crowded forward, eager to prevent the Germans laying their sacrilegious hands on the embodied spirit of their god Chenchi.

Roger quickly grasped that if the Germans as much as laid a finger on the King Sungma there would be a battle to the death on the temple floor. He rejoiced at the thought; it would be a fine thing if the outraged monks put an end to this vile nest of plotters. But he underestimated the Leader and his hold on his followers. Above the mounting tumult rang a harsh, rasping voice; a voice with a peculiar madness about its ring, and Roger instantly remembered radio broadcasts from Germany that he had heard as a boy before the start of the Second World War.
"Hold!" it roared in tones of the harshest command. "Back to your places, gentlemen. I gave you no orders to leave your seats. Back, I say!"

The tumult and the shouting died at the sound of that voice. Instantly all was silence except for the groans and whimperings of the badly bruised lord abbot and the strangled gargling of the King Sungma now held very firmly in the hands of his attendants. The tense silence was ripped open by a squall of maniac laughter, and all faces again turned towards the wizard, who in a clear voice shouted, amidst his gale of terrible merriment:

"I am no longer afraid. I, Chenchi, no more fear that Man of Blood. He will not succeed in his plans! He will fail! He will fail because he is himself being duped! Here in this temple there is a spy from the outer world, one who will bring all this devilish planning of the Man of Blood to naught. I tell you that here, among you, is a foreigner who is not of the blood of those who follow that terrible man. He is a spy who knows all and who will bring this plot to naught!" The cackling laughter broke into sardonic amusement. "Yes, among you is a spy who has deceived the Man of Terror."

Roger's heart grew icily chill as he saw the Germans turning one to another, those who knew Tibetan better than the others translating what had just been said. Most of the Nazis looked scornfully amazed, until the Leader turned towards the King Sungma and in loud tones said:

"Since you have told us so much, Chenchi the
Liar, say more. Show us the spy and we will believe in you!

Again came the storm of mad laughter. “What care I what you believe, Man of Blood?” spluttered the maniac. “What care I? You have reached the end of your course! At this very moment when you believe that your feet are once more set in the paths of glory, you are being deceived. To prove to you the power of Great Chenchi I will now show you the foreign spy. I will place my right hand upon his shoulder, and when you see that I am touching a pale-skinned foreigner, who is not a man of your race, perhaps you will believe that your day is done. Now, at long last, Death opens his trap at your feet.”

Roger watched the King Sungma shake himself free of his attendants’ grasp, and then walking in the deathly hush through those hundreds of awe-struck monks, nobles, warriors and Germans, the bizarre, swollen-faced figure, crowned by its weighty iron hat, its gold and scarlet brocade swishing, stepped from its throne and came slowly, in a straight line across the marble pavement, towards him.

As fascinated as a rabbit by the gaze of a python, Roger watched the terrible figure. He was staring straight into the frenzied, blood-shot eyes of the King Sungma who, with every swift step, was stalking closer to him! The stillness grew ever deeper and more intense as all present held their breath while they awaited the ending of the tense drama.

Roger smelled the fetid breath of the lunatic, who was now so close that he could see the drops of sweat
running down that crazy face, until, with a last step, the King Sungma sprang forward. With a shrill shriek of triumph he clapped his dirty right hand, with its long filthy nails, upon Roger's right shoulder!
CHAPTER VII

Battle in the Temple

Sick with fear as well as with the fearful stench of the King Sungma, whose body had never known soap and water, Roger stood motionless for one brief second. Then a fresh scream of maniacal laughter ripped from the wizard's writhing lips as he turned towards the Leader, yelling:

"So, O Man of Blood, it seems that you are only a man after all, and because you are naught but a mere mortal, in no way to be compared with me, who am Chenchi the Evil!" The King Sungma tore back the cowl covering the lad's head and shoulders and, as Roger's European cast of features was exposed, a sighing groan rose from the still ranks facing the strange pair.

"Let this proof of your human capability to err make those princes and nobles of our race who believe you to be a demi-god, pause and think whether you may not have made many other mistakes!" the King Sungma yelled. Then, as the Germans surged forward to snatch the prisoner, Roger's senses flooded back and he sprang into instant action. His right fist crashed into the sweat and blood-streaked chin of the wizard. The man crumpled, and as his huge metal helmet fell with a clang to the tesselated floor, Roger sprang, head
down and arms weaving, into the front rank of lamas packed almost solidly a yard behind him.

So sudden and so utterly unexpected was his attack that the monks shrank back before him, opening a narrow lane through the thicket of human bodies. One of the Germans then committed a crowning error; seeing the spy apparently making good his escape, an S.S. man drew his pistol, and sent a magazineful of bullets whistling into the thick of the crowd standing closest to the disturbance, which marked the fugitive's progress through the terror-stricken ranks of lamas.

Roger's life was saved by his crouching position, for a monk on either side of him staggered mortally wounded, while four or five more dropped before that sleet of steel-jacketed Mauser bullets. Instantly all was confusion, a great roar of anger from the Tibetan warriors followed close on the screams of the wounded men. Casting aside, in their rage at this sacrilege, all reverence for the temple of the gods in which they were standing, they whipped out their swords and, yelling like fiends, rushed forward to hew down the hated foreign devils.

In the few seconds before Roger reached one of the many exits from the temple a score of Germans had been cut down. As he paused on the top of a flight of three steps leading to a small door, Roger saw a scene of the wildest confusion raging behind him. Hundreds of monks were screaming and struggling to extricate themselves from the fighting mob in the centre of the holy place, ringing the foreign devils who had rallied around their Leader,
and, well-disciplined and steady even in this sudden emergency, were actually beating back the wild swordsmen hacking at them. Automatic pistols were defeating the whirling blades, and it is possible that the Germans might have escaped without many further casualties if someone had not, at that moment, thrown a hand-grenade into the tight ring of snarling Nazis.

Roger had hardly time to throw himself flat as he saw the flash, but he heard several fragments of steel whine past him and clatter against the walls above his door. The heavy explosion brought a momentary silence, but that was quickly broken by the yells and screams of the now doubly frightened monks and the shrieks of the wounded. The drum-fire of pistols, so steady before the bomb-throwing, grew ragged, while the shouts of the swordsmen became ever shriller as they charged home through the reeling German line. Roger, as he rose to his feet, caught one hurried glimpse of the savage struggle around the feet of the great gilded image before he dived through the narrow doorway and raced up a sharply curving flight of stairs inside it.

He ran for several minutes like a man possessed, traversing many chambers, corridors, and descending four flights of stairs until he suddenly found himself in the midst of a great throng of jostling monks and country-folk in a great open courtyard, all panicking as they rushed towards the huge arch of the opened main gate. Roger instantly seized his chance, and, borne along in the middle of that torrent of terrified humanity, passed through the gates, catching only
a brief glimpse of the corpses of the guardsmen lying on the fouled cobblestones as he passed. In less time than it takes to tell he was on the causeway, which connects the mainland with Sabu Gompa, still being whirled along by the maddened horde of fugitives, all anxious to get far away from the uproar behind them.

With his cowl drawn over his head Roger looked no different from his companions in misfortune as they fled. Suddenly, a great roar of rage-filled anguish rose from the crowd as someone shouted that the abbey was blazing. Roger took advantage of the break to push his way to the side of the road, where by jumping on to a small rock he was out of the thronging press and able to look around.

The vast, many-storeyed building behind its fortress wall looked normal enough until he saw a thin column of smoke pouring out of the roof beside the temple. There was still some shooting, and, though it was muted by distance and the thick walls between, the sound of fighting could still be heard now that a deep silence had fallen on the refugees in their horror at seeing the ancient shrine burning.

A tall emaciated lama, dressed in a yellow robe, leaped on to a rock beside the road, about fifty feet from where Roger stood, and in a thunderous voice bade the crowd pray for the safety of the Holy Seated One in her shrine away in the blazing inferno of her own temple. The mob, bitterly afraid of the fighting foreigners behind them, swayed, uncertain what to do next. At that very instant, an armoured car appeared at the dark archway of the abbey gates,
and, without the least thought for the safety of the hundreds of people on the narrow causeway, drove straight through them, with her forward machine-gun cutting a lane for her easier passage.

The rattle of the gun and the sight of the steel monster were more than the frightened folk could stand; with one accord they surged forward in a blind rush for safety. Roger on his rock was fairly safe from their trampling feet, but it was far too conspicuous a place for him to retain. At any moment the German gunner inside that approaching armoured cupola might single him out as a likely target, so, jumping into the fringes of the frightened herd, Roger, crouching as low as he could, allowed himself to be swept along by its blind rush.

It was very fortunate for him that he was on the crowd’s outside edge, for, as the car came level, its turret rotated and the gun clattered satanically, cutting a broad swathe of bodies. Roger dropped over the brink of the causeway into the blue lake a dozen feet beneath him as soon as he saw the murderous muzzle swinging. The shock of the icy-cold water almost numbed him; fortunately, he was not more than waist-deep, while, a score of yards ahead of him, a small, blunt-edged sampan lay moored to the rough stones of the road’s retaining-wall. He splashed frantically towards it, boarded it, and rapidly hoisting its rough sail stood away with a fair wind on his quarter, heading for the upper end of the lake.

No one took the slightest notice of him. Not a shot was fired in his direction; not a single challenge
or appeal for his help followed the craft as she drew away from the milling mob on the causeway. The clumsy-looking sampan proved to be a remarkably fine boat, and under the thrust of her sail was quickly speeding along at close on four and a half knots. Once he was afloat and away from that pitiful procession on the causeway he saw that Sabu Gompa was becoming shrouded in an ever-growing mantle of thick black smoke, while a frightful wailing was rising from the hundreds of desperate people still inside its vast walls or streaming along the causeway.

The armoured car, its presence still advertised by an occasional burst of machine-gun fire whenever it encountered a thicker-than-usual party of fugitives, was making its way down the road which led away from the direction of Kerinsiring. Roger wondered who might be in it, and was almost certain that the Leader would be hidden behind its steel shields, snatched from the general destruction that had overtaken his followers in the blood-soaked temple. Then, as the sampan heeled to the breeze, he quickly drew out of sound of the fury in the abbey and, long before he beached the square-ended boat at the upper end of the lake, the armoured car had disappeared.

Roger, once he was ashore, had no further difficulty in reaching Kerinsiring Abbey, for the hordes of refugees streaming along the narrow road made his passage perfectly inconspicuous, and, as soon as he arrived, he was ushered into the presence of a very anxious lord abbot, who sat among his council.
They listened to Roger's tale with bated breath, and when he told them that, so far as he could tell, the foreigners were exterminated, except for the crew of the armoured car, relief dawned in their wrinkled and venerable faces.

The lord abbot spoke briskly immediately Roger's voice died away. There was only one thing to be done, he said, and it must be accomplished as quickly as possible. Now that the Germans were so badly shaken it was time to strike at the Field of Ramps, as he called the main launching-site the foreigners had prepared.

"Let us stamp out those places," the old prelate said. "If the foreign devils are prevented from launching their awful weapons then no one will strike back at Tibet. Come, let us be going while there is yet time."

It was not quite so simple as that, however. Three warrior chieftains and Sabbatai the captain of the monastery guard were called in. They said there were still foreign crews and the chief workmen at the Field of Ramps, many of whom might not have attended the recent ceremonies in the Sabu Gompa temple. These men would fight like fiends, the captain said, especially if this young monk who had brought the news was right in believing their Leader had escaped and was with them. Frankly, the worthy soldier did not like the idea of facing determined foreigners with modern machine-guns at their command.

The lord abbot quickly overruled his objections and, an hour later, Roger rode out of Kerinsiring
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at the head of four hundred Tibetan warriors and soldiers, most of whom possessed modern rifles, with a few machine-guns and one two-inch mortar to strengthen them. By late afternoon they reached a small, steep-sided valley running steeply up through a cleft that was almost a couloir between two vast mountain shoulders. They followed it, until at last the slit-eyed Captain Sabbatai announced that they had arrived at the entrance to the Field of Ramps.

Captain Sabbatai had no idea that Roger was anything else than the simple lama he appeared to be, and the fighting-man seemed to resent the fact that he had been placed under his command. Consequently, it was with none too good a grace that he accepted Roger’s order for the whole party to dismount and follow him on foot up the narrow entrance-way to this place which threatened the whole world’s security, and Roger had to snap viciously at him before his orders were obeyed. He was even forced to threaten him with the anger of the lord abbot before the scowling man stamped away to give the required instructions to his followers.

The sun was dipping towards the western ridges by the time all was ready and the column was formed up, leaving the sturdy ponies to be cared for by a small holding-party. With Sabbatai in advance and with Roger walking close behind him, the long file of fighting men started to climb in the swiftly gathering dusk. It was stiff going; in the thin air Roger found his lungs labouring long
before he was half-way up the low cliff, but speed was necessary if they were to take the Germans off their guard, so that he never paused. With a painful stitch growing to needle-sharp agony in his side, he kept his place at the head of the clambering Tibetans.

It was almost dark when they reached the top, but there was still sufficient light remaining to see some details of the strange place they were entering. It was an old volcanic crater, extinct thousands of years ago, but it was the ramps of earth and masonry which made it so peculiar. There were about twenty of these banks, each a good two hundred yards long and pointing in every direction except due north. Several huts stood in a cluster at the centre, and from one of them, whose windows glowed in the gloaming, rose the whine of big dynamos driven by the stream, which roared down a broad flume from the rim-rocks above.

Strangely enough there were no sentries to challenge them; the entrance to the huge rock-bowl was completely unguarded!

"If it had not been my lord abbot's special command," Captain Sabbatai grunted to Roger as he halted beside him to regain his breath, "we should never have agreed to come. No man of our blood, except two of the princes, has ever visited this haunted place since the foreign devils first started to work here. Death came to any who tried to pry into these mysteries, so that all men are afraid to lift their eyes in this direction."

"There is naught to fear," Roger assured him. "Believe me, these are simple weapons of war, no
more concerned with the gods or with devils than are the rifles you carry on your shoulders. Now, Captain, listen carefully to all I have to say. If you fail to obey my orders the foreigners may slay us all, and even if they don’t my lord abbot will send you to the executioners.”

Quietly and swiftly the British lad gave his orders, and when he had finished there was an exclamation of unwilling admiration from the tough fighting man at his side.

“You would have made a great general, monk,” Sabbatai said. “I could have formed no better plan myself, and I have been soldier all my years. Come, let us be going. The light of day is almost gone, but there is still sufficient to show us what we must do.”

He whispered to the men crouching behind him in the gully, and then in the thickening dusk the hardy hillmen, with smothered grunts of approval, spread out on to the open bowl of the crater, dispersing to form the small parties into which Sabbatai had divided them. Swiftly they advanced towards the cluster of hutments set in the middle of the giant ramps, Roger leading the centre section, a party of thirty-five well-armed men, while Sabbatai broke away with his gang, as soon as they reached the foot of the first great embankment.

“I will await your signal, monk,” he muttered. “Give me as long as it takes a healthy man to walk half a mile and I shall be ready.”

“Good,” Roger replied. “When I fire two shots swiftly one after the other, you will strike in and
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spare no one whom you meet. Everything hangs on our snatching a swift victory."

A dreadful five minutes followed, while Roger waited, counting the seconds slowly so as to give Sabbatai and his men plenty of time to reach their positions and to muster there before starting their charge. Once, he thought, the Germans suspected the presence of enemies; a dozen men ran out of the power-house and stood, outlined in the glow of its windows, staring towards the place where the lad and his warriors lay crouched under the cover of the big launching ramp. After a minute or so, however, they broke up into small groups, and one after another, walked back through the brightly outlined doorway of the engine-room and the hut adjoining.

The time had come—the Tibetan soldiers and warriors would be in their positions, forming a semi-circle around the opening of the great bowl. Slowly Roger raised the Mauser pistol he had been given at Kerinsiring, and slipping down the safety-catch pressed the hair-light trigger twice. Before the echoes of the shots died down he started to run towards the windows of the dynamo hut, his men padding swiftly behind him.

Shouts to right and left told him that his men were charging too, while from the front came the blast of an alarm whistle and the amazed yells of the garrison as they piled out into the night. Surprised though they were, they took only a few seconds to form a rough line, to fling themselves prone to the ground and then commence a sleet of automatic fire.
The storm of bullets sang past Roger’s head as, gathering himself like a Rugger forward racing for a touch-down, he hurled himself at the cluster of orange flashes stabbing the gloom ahead of him.
CHAPTER VIII

Man-made Volcano

The sleet of death ceased as suddenly as though some giant hand had closed a tap. The rain of bullets from the defenders' machine-guns and automatic weapons ended abruptly. There was a brief silence before the wild yells and battle-shouts of the Tibetan flanking-parties, launching themselves at the wings of the still-confused foreigners' position, again split the night. Strangely enough, even at the end, there was very little firing, the long, tough Mongolian swords were deciding the battle, the chilly darkness of the Tibetan night cancelling the advantage of the defenders' automatic firearms.

Roger's shout sent his own party charging forward to add their weight to the onslaught. The enemy fired a few rounds from their pistols, but the rest broke under the fury of the attack and ran to be picked off piecemeal by the attackers. In less than a quarter of an hour after Roger had discharged the signal shots, all sound of battle had ended; except for the shrill chattering of the hardy mountaineers, there was no sound but the keen wind whistling across the bowl.

Captain Sabbatai came to the engine-house, where Roger was sitting close to a huge electric radiator,
and after wiping his long, heavy sword saluted him respectfully.

"Your plan proved to be as good as it sounded, monk," he said gruffly. "I believe that only one small party of the foreign devils have managed to escape, and there were not more than half a dozen men in the gang. If it had not been for their accursed armoured car we should have had them too."

Roger's heart sank with fear that the armoured car might have been carrying the mysterious Leader. So long as that man was alive there would always be the danger of a fresh attempt on the peace of the world, but, at least, a reprieve for millions of men and women had been won. If he, Roger, could only get safely out of Tibet, once he had wrecked this mighty installation, there would be time for the United Nations to take action. Everything now depended on his carrying the news to some place whence it could be forwarded to Lord Tremough.

After dawn came Roger and his men worked fast and hard. The Tibetans seconded his efforts valiantly and, after six hours' hard toil, eighty-three long, torpedo-shaped missiles, which had been intended to wreck the whole world, were piled in the crater, with more propped against each of the ramps of the power-station and the collection of strange buildings where the uranium had been treated and the rocket bombs constructed.

He discovered a collection of textbooks in German, and hunting through them found a chapter of warnings about the dangers of premature explosions of the terrible weapons. It took Roger about an hour
to get the gist of this section, but, by the end of that time, he was able to fuse and to fix the bombs with a certainty that they would explode as soon as he allowed the detonators he placed near them to come into action.

By mid-afternoon, all the dead foreigners had been collected and placed in one of the smaller huts. Roger examined them but could not find the Leader among them. There were no wounded. The Tibetan casualties were sent back to Kerinsiring; the dead for honourable burial, the wounded, of which there were about fifty, to the care of the monks in that abbey’s infirmary. Roger set his demolition charges, finding a selection of time-fuses, very similar to those he had known in the Fleet Air Arm, in one of the magazines. He set them to burst in four hours, and then hurriedly led his men away.

Captain Sabbatai had prepared his followers for the vastness and fierceness of the explosion, telling them that it would be the greatest man-made detonation the world had ever known, but they were by no means prepared for the awful effects that followed. By nine that night they were fifteen miles away, and had one great ridge of mountains between them and the doomed launching-site, but when that terrible tower of vivid light leaped into the sky it all but blinded them. It would have surely have shrivelled their eyeballs if it had not been for the tall mountains, which hid the first five thousand feet of the flash from their sight.

The solid mountains shook beneath their feet
while the column of incandescent light mounted ever higher, with millions of new flames leaping from it as it rolled, flower-wise and strangely beautiful, towards the remotest zenith. The driving scud and the storm clouds of Tibet were thrown violently back so that the column could be seen climbing towards infinite space, while, as more bombs exploded, the rocks and the mountains shook and quivered again and again. After that first all-consuming brightness, the fiery pillar continued to seethe with fresh flames, while, every now and again, fresh detonations in the death pit threw new flares into the glowing sky.

The Tibetans, lying flat on their faces, called in terror on their gods as the ground heaved and quaked beneath them. The rumble of avalanches sounded everywhere around as torrents of boulders, earth and snow cascaded down the shivering mountain flanks. It was as though the whole world was dissolving in flame and fire and thunderous bellowings, while, over all, and dominating all, the bright pink light turned the dark night into brightest day, vivid with a glare of unearthly and terrible beauty.

Scraps of things he had read and heard about the atom bombs dropped in Japan, in the Bikini Islands and the other Pacific atolls rose to his mind. Perhaps the dreadful radio-active rays of the explosion might reach them, even shielded as they were in their deep valley? Meanwhile the heat from that great pillar of flame was making the cold of 20,000 feet above sea-level feel like an equatorial forest. The memory of an article he had read describing
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how atomic explosions might set up a chain-reaction, disintegrating the whole solid Earth, rose to his mind.

Fear gripped Roger more terribly as explosion followed explosion in devastating succession. Was he feeling the world breaking up? He began to feel the same wild terror as his ignorant companions-in-arms, as the ground shuddered as fresh bombs burst, giving greater quakes than usual when three or four of them chanced to detonate simultaneously. After half an hour there were no further explosions, however, and his senses began to seep back. The glowing column swiftly sank and died, its evil glories fading, leaving only a bright glow in the sky above the crater mouth to betray where the vast store of explosives had been turned harmlessly adrift.

Shaken, grey-faced and bitterly afraid, the Tibetans made their way back to Kerinsiring Abbey, where their reports of what had happened added a further fear of the foreign devils to the minds of the simple monks. During the next few days many reports came in, but it was not until when, a week later, Roger had completed his arrangements to strike south for the borders of Pakistan, that disaster suddenly came on them.

Late that afternoon two aircraft flew in over the mountain ridges to the westward, and, while one flew low over the abbey, the other circled threateningly above the buildings. A small bag with a long bunch of gaily coloured streamers fluttering behind it was dropped into the main courtyard and, when
picked up and opened, was found to contain an
ultimatum from Prince Chimbu. It said, briefly,
that the foreign spy must be surrendered, and placed
aboard one of the aircraft, which would land on the
level ground near the lake. If that order was not
obeyed the abbey would first be bombed from the
air, and then attacked by the prince’s ground forces,
who would have orders to give no quarter to the
monks.

Roger was with the abbot when this message was
read out, and he saw the monks’ faces blench in
terror. They had no defence against air attack, no
hopes of saving themselves and their precious shrine
if bombs were rained down on them. Some of them
began to mutter that the fate of one foreign spy was
not worth the destruction of the holy places which the
monks of Kerinsiring had tended for so many cen-
turies, and that Roger should be given up to the
forces of the prince ere worse befell.

While the noise of the circling aircraft came dis-
trictly to their ears, Roger rose to his feet.

“My Lord Abbot,” he began, “I agree with you
that the simplest thing is to spread out the white
cloths on the ground outside your gates as the signal
to their aircraft that you mean to comply with their
demands. But may I be allowed to ask you one
single question before you do so?”

As he paused there was a low growling from the
assembled monks, and Roger knew that he would
need to speak fast if he was to have any chance of
being heard before their fears got too great a hold of
them.
On the World’s Roof

"Let the white cloths be spread," he cried. "That, at any rate, will prevent the machines from bombing you for the moment. But think, brethren, and you also, reverend fathers, will my death help you in the long run? It may give you a short reprieve, but will it save you? The foreign leader has escaped—he knows that the destruction of his devilish machines was caused by men from this abbey. Do you imagine he will stay his vengeance on you?"

He paused again while in the stillness came the sound of the threatening aircraft engines, a note of menace which stirred his congregation so that some of them seemed about to surge forward to seize him. With his heart in his mouth Roger went on:

"I am not begging for my life, but for yours and for the safety of the sacred shrines under your care. If I am killed, and even if you are not sacrificed to the vengeance of the foreign leader, what will happen? In the course of another couple of years or so, the Leader will have rebuilt his plant and started again on his mad career to conquer the world. Then what will happen?

"You saw for yourselves, although it was so many scores of miles away, the awful results of the explosions in the crater. That is what will happen here when the other foreign nations strike at Tibet to protect themselves. I tell you"—and he lowered his voice as he saw that he had won their attention, and got them to the point where they were thinking of something besides the imminent threat from the aircraft above—"I tell you," he repeated solemnly, "that your only hope is to help me to carry word
of what has happened to the outside world in order to persuade the governments of the nations of the earth to force these princes in Lhasa to put an end to their support of the foreign-devil leader."

The sound of the aircraft coming in to land in answer to the signal which some of the monks had spread on the ground, rose sharp and clear in the thin air. Roger, knowing that his fate hung on a thread, spoke swiftly, fighting to keep his voice unconcerned and steady.

"Tell them that I was here, but say that I left six days ago, heading for the Khamba Dzong, hoping to reach Darjeeling with my news. Let me hide while you encourage them to search the abbey. That is your only chance, for I assure you that your lives depend on your saving mine. If I die without getting my news to the world then you die also. But if I live, and if these traitor princes of yours think that there is any chance of my carrying news to the lands of the West, then they will do nothing against you. They will be only too anxious to have you to speak for them when the Western races demand an explanation of how such a plot could be hatched in this beloved and sacred land of yours."

He paused a moment, and as the sound of the aircraft’s engines ceased with a final splutter as her pilot set her down, Roger ended his appeal.

"You have but a few minutes left, my lord abbot and honoured brethren. Just a few minutes now in which to choose between your own deaths or your going on living. Between safeguarding your sacred shrines or seeing them totally destroyed. You
must decide whether you will hand me over to the pilot in the next few minutes, and so win yourselves a small respite before death surely strikes you and ruin smites this blessed place, or whether you will take a risk now and so save yourselves and your abbey."

Hubbub broke out as Roger folded his arms over his chest, his hands enveloped in the folds of his lama’s habit. None of them guessed how frightened he really was—the prospect of a death by fiendish torture was grinning evilly at his elbow. All depended on how they decided.

The chattering increased and then came the thunder of the second aircraft flying low to cover its companion on the ground. Silence fell on the crowd in the dim chapter-hall of the abbey. Slit eyes turned towards the roof as though they could see the threat of death that hung poised in the air above them. Then, with one accord, all faces turned towards the abbot as he rose from his stool of state and raised his hand for their attention.

Roger, with as much composure as he could muster, his face grey and drawn, also faced about to hear his fate from the shrivelled lips of the old monk, just as, with a thunder of engines, the second machine hurtled past the abbey roof, not more than a hundred feet above its pinnacles.
CHAPTER IX

The Chase through the Mountains

Twenty-two days later Roger was cowering beneath a boulder overhanging a stream seventeen thousand feet above sea-level, with death moving a few hundred feet below him. With the aid of the guides and helpers provided by the Lord Abbot of Kerinsiring, he had reached the north-eastern corner of Tibet, but, for several days, he had been entirely alone as he approached the Tang Pass, only a dozen miles from the borders of the Chinese province of Sinkiang.

He had endured three weeks of great hardship and terrible danger, for he was only three days' journey from the abbey when he had abundant evidence that the sinister Leader and his Tibetan allies were in full pursuit. The crew of the aircraft had searched the great lamasery but finally left, satisfied that the foreign spy was gone and that the monks' story of his departure was true.

As soon as the two machines disappeared, however, the abbot lost no time in setting Roger on his way.

"Do not fear about us, my son," he said kindly, as the lad protested that he did not like the idea of abandoning his friends in the face of such terrible danger. "All will be well. The gods will protect
their chosen servants. In any case,” he ended, with a twinkle in his eyes, “I can always raise the tribesmen of these hills if the need should arise. There is an arsenal in my cellars, and with the weapons I have stored I can arm three thousand mountain warriors, who can check any forces the prince can send from Lhasa. He knows this well, so I am sure he will never try openly to attack us.

“Look well after yourself, my beloved son,” the old man ended, his face growing serious; “for though I may be able to fend off for some months the massacre of my community and the destruction of our shrine, it will be a hopeless fight if we have to continue it too long. Our only hope is that you will reach your own parts of the world and there tell the story which will bring the United Nations to demand the surrender of this foreign devil of a leader as well as the imprisonment of all those traitors of our own race who have helped him.”

Roger marched for the north-eastern angle of Tibet, the opposite direction from that towards which the aircraft pilot had been told he was heading. For the first three days he, and one hillman guide, made good progress, but on the third afternoon, while they were crossing a great height of land, the divide of the Shamsung Pass, with the blue waters of the Lake of Bumtzo just beginning to show several thousand feet beneath them, an aircraft flew low over their heads. Something about them must have roused the pilot’s suspicions for he came back several times, and, on the last run, opened fire with a machine-gun in his bows.
Fortunately the tumbled mass of huge boulders on either side of the narrow trail saved them from destruction, but the aircraft dropped a message before she finally tore away, evidently afraid that her petrol supplies might fail. It was written in German, and briefly ordered the foreign spy, who, so the pilot said, he was sure he had located, to head back for Lhasa and there surrender himself, otherwise he would be harried until he was destroyed.

After that experience there had been adventures enough. Roger and his comrade managed to evade the aircraft which came almost continuously during the next week to search for any sign of them, but that had meant he had to travel only by night and to hide all through the daylight hours. Consequently his rate of progress towards the Chinese border was greatly slowed down. He should have been on the frontier of Sinkiang Province in slightly more than a fortnight, but he was still, after twenty-two days, travelling from Kerinsiring Abbey, more than a day's march from the point where he would be clear of Tibetan territory.

It was not very long before he had plenty of evidence that land patrols, also, were hot in their chase after him. He had the first sign of this when, on the ninth day of his flight, he was hiding in a cave and saw a large Dakota flying overhead. It passed his hiding-place, and then, while over a valley some miles to the westward, began to circle. After a few minutes, the domes of parachutes showed white against the icy blue sky as a dozen airborne troopers, Tibetans trained by the Germans, came
down to investigate something which had raised the pilot's suspicions sufficiently to make him believe he had located their quarry.

"There is a seldom-used caravan trail over there where they are dropping," Roger's guide muttered. "The men of Amdo Tsonak sometimes use that road to smuggle contraband through the Tang Pass into China. It is probably some of their animals whom these skymen have seen."

Roger would have left their cave at once in his fear of the landing-party, but the guide pointed out that it would be madness to do so as long as there was any chance of their being seen by the aircraft, which they could still hear drumming away somewhere beyond the intervening mountain range.

They marched at the first fall of the dusk, pressing on through the night, and for some hours believed they had evaded the parachutists. It was not until the following evening, after they had spent a whole day hiding in a cleft of a rugged mountain shoulder, that they knew the hunters were still on their trail. The Tibetan guide had gone out to start saddling-up the mules when his right arm pointed stiffly to a valley mouth about seven miles in their rear, where, against the snow, showed a dozen small dots. Roger recognized the parachutists coming along the very path which he had followed the previous night!

They were forced to wait for full darkness for fear that they might be seen by the distant patrol, and, when they marched, the night's journey was a complete nightmare. Roger and his guide pressed ahead, striving to gain all the distance they could,
knowing that their pursuers would rest for the dark hours. When daylight greyed the east they knew they must lie-up for fear of aircraft which might be acting in support of the ground force, for if their enemies were modern enough to have parachute troops, they would certainly be in radio communication with the patrol toiling through the savage mountains and deep valleys.

"We've got only one hope," Roger said, as they found shelter in the ruins of an abandoned lamasery, "and that is that they may not be quite sure they are on our tracks. If they have any doubts that they may be pursuing some brigands or smugglers, they may not push ahead quite as strenuously as they would if they were fully certain it was us. If they even half believe that they may be following some wild-goose chase they may be content just to plod along."

The guide grunted and said nothing, but it was only too obvious that he had no great faith in Roger's hopes. They soon saw that they had been wise to hole-up during the day, for there was scarcely an hour during daylight when they could not either hear or see an aircraft busily quartering the hillsides for any sign of the quarry their parachutists were pursuing.

Worse was to come as the afternoon dragged towards evening, for, an hour before sunset, they saw, faint and far in the distance, a number of men moving against the snow and the light-coloured rocks of the mountainside three thousand feet beneath their refuge. Roger grunted in dismay
when he saw that there now were at least fifty men in the hunting party.

"They have enlisted some of the hillmen," the guide snarled. "There are very bad men in this area of my country, for this is the place to which all the outlaws flee to escape their just punishment on the execution grounds of the cities. These mountains are filled with broken and desperate rogues who will do anything for gain. Maybe they have been promised a pardon if they help to catch us, and so will work all the harder to win a chance to return to their homes."

Roger asked, if that was so, how was it that they had seen no one during the last few days? The countryside had been, to all appearances, completely devoid of human inhabitants. The guide replied that that was nothing unusual; in this savage land men hid whenever they saw other men, fearing all strangers and seeking to avoid encountering what might be patrols of the regent's forces hunting for absconded offenders.

"Then the chances are that we may have been seen by some of these outlaws?" Roger asked, feeling a fresh fear welling up inside him.

"You may be quite certain that we have," the guide agreed. "You may also be perfectly sure that the presence of two strangers has already been reported to those men who are chasing us. If their officer is clever, and I expect he is, or he would not have been chosen to lead such a party, he will have sent warnings all through the area, offering great rewards for our capture. The tracks between this
place and the border will be closed against us, and men will be lying in ambush awaiting our coming along every single track and path."

Roger pondered over this for some time as they lay watching the approaching party, who were still a good five miles away when the dark began to settle in. The thought of being hemmed in dismayed him until he began to reason with himself. After all, although the parachutists might have radio to keep in contact with their aircraft, the brigands in these mountains would not possess it, and so all messages to them would have to be sent by runner. As he and the guide were moving as fast as any enemy messenger could do, the odds were that they might still be ahead of any hue-and-cry.

The guide merely grunted when Roger put forward this theory.

"The mountain men have ways of passing news, ways such as you cannot begin to understand," was all he said in reply. Then, after keeping a grim silence while they saddled-up and started to move, he went on:

"It will be better to leave the trails and take to the mountain shoulders. I know of a way by which we may reach the Tang Pass and so hope to evade any ambushes set for us," he grunted. "We must, however, abandon the mules and proceed on foot."

The very thought of being dismounted appalled Roger. Without being carried on muleback it would be torture to undertake the terrible strain of marching and climbing through these savage moun-
tains in the rarefied air. Only the fact that they were in the saddle had kept them ahead of the hardy parachutists who, trained to a hair in hill warfare, were making far better time than the British lad could hope to do if he had to proceed on his own feet.

But there seemed to be no choice. They could either carry on as they were doing and walk into an ambush, or take to the shoulders of the mountains and hope to get safely out of Tibet. He looked back and saw, far away, just before they dipped down the farther slope of the ridge on which they stood, the tiny glow of three fires in the distance and knew that their enemies had camped for the night.

There was something fantastic in this mad pursuit—in the fact that while the hunted ran by night the hounds pursued by day. While the fugitives were pinned down by the aircraft the pursuers were making good time along their tracks. Only the simple fact that the mules carried Roger and the guide so well, had kept them ahead of the men behind—now, if they had to abandon the animals the odds would be lengthened even further against them.

At midnight the guide halted, and as Roger's mule bumped into him he said gruffly:

“Lord, I have obeyed my master the Abbot of Kerinsiring as far as I can. Here is where we part!”

Roger asked him what he could possibly mean?

“This, lord,” the man answered. “The men who follow us are trailing two mules. I will ride on with
both beasts and leave a fine track for them to follow. You will leave me here and start out across the mountains towards the Tang Pass. Perhaps it will be as much as two days before they find that I am only an innocent wayfarer; that I am not a foreign devil. Have no fear," he raced on, "for I know that you are honourable enough not to wish to save your life at the expense of mine. I will convince them that I did not know I was being pursued, and as for the fact that I travelled only at night, that will be accounted for by the fact that most men in these hills do the same."

"But surely they will know they were chasing two men," Roger protested. "They will have read these signs at each place we halted."

The guide grinned grimly. "That too can be accounted for," he said. "Men often die at other men's hands on this trail. No one will think it at all out of the way if I say that you fell into a torrent a few miles before they found me. They may suspect I murdered my companion to get his mule, but they will not be able to prove it nor that you were a foreigner, lord, and so may think that they were hunting along a useless trail. It is our only hope, so make no more difficulties, but dismount, take your weapons and what food you can carry, and leave me. There is a stream ahead—you must walk up against its flow for a mile or more and then, climbing over the hard rock you will find up there, you should be able, if you are very careful, to leave no trail for them to find.

"Go, and may the gods preserve you. One thing
only, I beg you, do not put too great a trust in the Chinese troops at their end of the Tang Pass. It is a remote place and they will gladly sell you to the prince’s men if they think that they can make a profit by so doing.”

Roger sat in his saddle, huddled in the sheepskin coat of the shepherd’s disguise which he was wearing in place of the lama’s habit which had served him so well, and thought over his guide’s plan as they trotted towards the stream the man had mentioned. The plan was good and, if the guide was quite sure that he would be able to explain his movements when he was finally overtaken by the pursuers, it would be madness not to take advantage of it. Roger’s natural feeling was to stand by his companion, but he had, almost savagely, to remind himself of the great issues which depended upon his reaching civilization and telling his story of the peril in which the whole world lay, before he decided to part company with the loyal fellow.

When they finally halted by the brawling waters of the stream, Roger buckled on his parabellum Mauser pistol, cased in the wooden holster which could be slipped on to its butt to form a weapon of precision. With a hundred rounds in clips, and a small parcel of food in his leather scrip, he was equipped for the next stage of his journey. The guide smiled tautly as he bade him farewell.

“Have no fear, lord,” he said staunchly. “I will keep ahead of those dogs for as long as I can, and so give you as much start as I can, probably as much as two whole days. Don’t forget, keep your
pistol hidden, and rely on the good sling all our shepherds use. It is good that you are fairly proficient in the use of our hill weapon.”

Roger, with the icy water swirling to his knees, stood looking at the good fellow, a lump in his throat and not quite knowing what to say, but the guide cut the painful scene short by smacking the led-mule on its flanks; the two animals leaped ahead and scaled the low farther bank. The Tibetan never looked back and Roger, without more ado, turned and started his wading upstream. It was tough going, for the water ran fast, while the rounded boulders in its bed were slippery and sometimes covered with a scum of green moss which made the going perilous.

He was soon soaked, for the stream ran through several deeper pools which had to be swum as he dared not quit the water for fear of leaving a trail which the keen-eyed trackers coming so relentlessly, like human bloodhounds, along his trail might find if they decided to search in that direction.

The greatest obstacles were two tiny cascades, the first one about eight feet high but the second plunging a good twenty feet. Roger managed to struggle up both of them, but in the thin, keen air and the sharp temperature of the lofty mountains, he was in a very distressed state by the time he had covered the first mile. It had taken him far longer than he had expected; the sun was beginning to glow above the eastern crags when, with exhaustion and sheer physical misery gripping him, he paused to see if there was any sign of his pursuers.
A large boulder overhung the brawling stream at the angle of the valley at the point where it curved upwards and climbed towards the saddle between two peaks, and Roger paused under its cover to regain his breath and to see whether there was any sign of his pursuers. To his shocked amazement he saw them, less than a couple of miles away, but a good fifteen hundred feet beneath where he was standing. Only the high sides of the stream's bed, which seldom dropped beneath ten feet until he reached the boulder, had saved him from being seen!

Crouching very close beneath the dark shadow of the rock, with the stream swirling around his ankles, Roger watched the party as they came along the trail the mules had left. In front were two men, tiny dots at that distance, walking swiftly along, for all the world as though they were hounds running on a breast-high scent. It gave the hunted lad a strange, despairing feeling to see the almost uncanny certainty with which these Tibetan trackers followed the exact path he had pursued himself only a couple of hours earlier.

The rest of the hunters were strung out over the better part of a mile of ground, and, as they came along the bare side of the hills, Roger counted seventy-three of the little black dots. It made him shudder as he thought that each and every one of those men down there were rampantly eager to kill or capture him; that so many fellow human-beings should be straining themselves to bring death to him!

As the distance narrowed and the hunters grew nearer to the place where Roger and the guide had
parted in the middle of the stream, he began to make
out some of their details. One man, at least, he was
sure was a foreigner, while probably three more
were also not Tibetans, though Roger could be
certain only of one of them. Near them came three
Tibetans who, judging from their clothing and their
fashion of carrying themselves, were either nobles
or professional soldiers. The remainder were a
hotch-potch of mercenary troops or clansmen, with
a few who looked as though they might be caravan
guards, shepherds or ordinary mountain farmers.

Roger studied them as they drew closer to the
point where the trail crossed the stream until, to
his increasing agony, he saw that a check had
occurred! When the two trackers had crossed the
water some yards in advance of the nearer members
of the main body, they suddenly halted and started
to run around in small circles, darting out every
now and again to examine the banks of the little
stream. Roger's heart gave a sickening lurch as he
realized that these highly experienced and almost
uncannily gifted man trailers had found something
suspicious about the tracks of the two mules after
they had quitted the water. Had they spotted that
one of the animals was no longer carrying a load?
Had they found some trace which Roger might have
left behind when he dismounted in the darkness?

All the tales he had heard about the skill of native
trackers in many parts of the world, Australian
aborigines to Red Indians, flooded back to his
memory as he began to fear that he was about to
fall a victim to the keen eyes of these slit-eyed
Tibetan herdsmen. The remainder of the hunters bunched together as they halted at the trackers' commands, and soon there was a little crowd of them all on the farther bank of the river, waiting for further orders and watching their two companions on the other side questing about like hounds at fault.

Roger, by this time beside himself with anxiety and the long exhaustion of the terrible days and weeks through which he had passed, had to fight hard for enough self-discipline to prevent himself rushing out into the open and crazily defying these brutes to do their very worst. Finally he did control himself as the small party of foreigners and nobles coming along from the rear broke into a trot as soon as they saw that something untoward was occurring ahead.

The leading noble, as he reached his men, waved his arm in an infuriated gesture, and at the signal one of the trackers dashed back into the stream and ran towards his master's side. Roger could see the excitement shaking the party, and in his despair looked round for some place which might give him a better shelter than the great boulder under which he was crouched. There was none; no prospect of cover anywhere within half a mile; as soon as he left the stream he must inevitably be instantly seen by the men down at the crossing.
Roger watched the noblemen gesticulating fiercely to the tracker, who, for his part, assumed a posture of servile humility. Suddenly the leader’s whip snaked out and again and again curled its stinging lash around the man’s head and shoulders until, with a great deal of shouting, whose thin echoes reached Roger even above the bawling of the turbulent watercourse, the party started to move on again along the tracks the guide had left.

Scarcely believing in his good luck, Roger had all he could do to contain himself. The relief from overpowering tension was so sudden that he felt a crazy urge to rush out into the open and there roll about in a frenzy of joy. He was probably no longer wholly normal after all his exertions and extreme fatigue, for the thin air of these terrific uplands does strange things to people who are not acclimatized to it. He managed to restrain his hysteria, however, and lay quite still until the last man of the tracking party had disappeared around the far shoulder of the long, barren hillside.

As soon as they were well out of his sight, he was up and away again, anxious only to put as much distance between his heels and his pursuers in as short a time as he could. After an hour or an hour
and a half of hard, frenzied going, he was brought back to his senses by the growing sound of aircraft engines roaring among the hills behind him. Roger staggered into a cleft between two boulders, and sank down to look for the machine.

Once he was down it was as if a hammer had struck him over the head. All his pent-back weariness and utter exhaustion hit him so hard that he was no more than a minute in his refuge before he was completely unconscious. He did not even get a sight of the aircraft before he passed out, but, what was even more important, neither did its pilot catch any glimpse of a human figure in the desolate landscape beneath him.

Roger woke towards evening wondering, for one desperate moment, how he came to be where he now found himself. Fortunately his thick shepherd’s clothing had saved him from frostbite, but his body was so chilled that, for some moments, he was unable to move any of his limbs. When he did, finally, get to his feet his wits quickly returned, so that he was very careful to scan the mountainside for any enemies before trusting himself in the open. No one was in sight, so, taking one of the few remaining mouthfuls of dried yak-meat from his scrip, Roger trudged on again, heading towards the high peaks marking the entrance to the Tang Pass.

A mile farther on he rounded a shoulder of the hillside and instantly fell flat on his face at the unexpected sight he saw. Six watch fires were spaced, two hundred yards apart, right across the narrow valley opening before him, while between the fires,
now glowing red in the growing dusk, he saw that sentries were moving alertly along their beats. Even while he lay there he noticed a small knot of men leave the middle fire and start towards the very shoulder on which he was lying, moving with military precision as they had started off to form an outpost.

If he had arrived half an hour later, Roger must have walked right into that picket! His salvation lay in the fact that the blockading party had themselves only arrived a couple of hours earlier, and had been kept so busy making camp and establishing their line of sentries that they had had no time to post their outlying pickets. Roger's heart sank into his yak-hide boots at this proof of the power of the Leader and his Tibetan allies; there were scores of valleys running towards the Tang Pass, and if they were all picketed it would need many hundreds of men to do so. After all, this valley in which he stood had been advised by his guide because it was one of the less likely and the most obscure. If the Leader had taken all the trouble to blockade it, then the better-known exits must be even more heavily guarded.

Quite evidently no pains and no exertions were to be spared to prevent his escaping into the outer world, and the Leader must know that the foreign spy he was seeking was heading to escape through the Tang Pass.

Roger had not remained still; he was in full retreat while he was thinking, for there was no time to be lost if he was to avoid being captured by the
advancing picket. His one great asset was the gathering darkness, and he realized his need to use it to the fullest advantage. He decided to take the route his enemies would consider it quite impossible for any man to use, and he had no illusion just how difficult that was going to be in face of this evidence that even the smallest and least-used caravan trail out of Tibet was being blockaded.

As he walked rapidly along, looking back into the increasing dusk for the first sign of the picket crossing the shoulder of the mountain, Roger studied the slopes above him. They were covered with boulders for a good couple of thousand feet, rising at a sharp angle until they reached the low cliffs forming the actual crest of the long ridge on whose flanks he was travelling. Upwards then was his only way; if he could reach that tableland summit he might be able to pass along the snow and ice which crowned the upper levels, until he could descend on the far side of the blockading line.

Accordingly, he struck away towards the crest, taking the fullest advantage of the cover of the huge boulders, while, with every passing minute, the night came in more darkly. He was five hundred feet up when a small flame, marking the campfire of the picket, started to glow, and he thanked his lucky stars that the Tibetans evidently thought so little of there being any chance of their quarry coming in this direction, that they allowed themselves this small luxury to make their night’s vigil more comfortable.

The going became ever more difficult the higher
he climbed, and it was close on an hour before he reached the sheer wall of rock forming the last stage of his journey towards the rim-rock. Breathless and almost spent he halted as he found the rampart of precipitous cliff barring his further progress.

He could now see the fires marking the blockading line, as well as the solitary glow of the picket’s camp. Around him the thin, piercing wind whistled and keened, blowing into his face and searching every inch of his thick garments, while his lungs panted as they strove to draw in sufficient of the rarefied air to keep him going. At twenty-two thousand feet it is a great hardship to undertake severe physical exertion, and Roger was feeling the height-exhaustion of his position very keenly.

But he realized only too well that it was no use his standing still bemoaning his fate. Below him were men who would drag him back to the torture chambers to extract all the information they could before committing him to some fiendish death. Hundreds of men were all concerned with the task of preventing him from ever carrying to the outside world his tale of the dastardly plot they were weaving. The thought strengthened him, helped to steel his will, and gathering his failing strength, Roger began to creep along the foot of the precipice, while, in the starlit darkness, he searched for some practicable path which might carry him to the level ridges above.

The cliffs were not very high, scarcely more than a hundred feet, but they proved an almost insurmountable obstacle to the tired and famished lad.
It took him most of the rest of that night to reach the crest and by the time, panting and gasping, he had crawled over the rim-rocks, the eastern sky was growing grey with the coming of dawn. Roger looked around for some shelter which might hide him from the questing aircraft which would start their search with sun-up. Any movement up there would be suspicious, for not even the hardy Tibetan shepherds take their flocks to such places as that.

Forcing himself onwards Roger staggered away from the edge, through the yard-deep snow for a few feet, in a blind search for shelter, and stopped only just in time to realize that he was leaving a trail which any airman was bound to see at once. It took him nearly half an hour to obliterate, by sweeping with his coat, the tracks which he had had already made. Then, standing still as the grey light swiftly strengthened he began to look for some hiding-place where he might safely lie until the following evening’s darkness gave him another chance to travel towards the frontiers of China.

There was nowhere at all which offered him the smallest refuge; the tableland stretched away as flat and as smooth as a billiard table under its blanket of snow. He was still less than a dozen yards from the rim-rock, standing at the end of a crevasse, which allowed him a view of the line of camp-fires, now growing paler in the dawn-light, far below. There seemed to be only one place in which he could hope to evade aircraft search—in a dug-out in the snow! His thick shepherd’s clothes might
save him from freezing to death; in any case it would be warmer once he was out of this dagger-like wind whipping the surface of the high tableland.

Roger grinned rather wryly to himself when he recalled old tags about how it was warmer in the snow; how trappers and Eskimos made themselves shelters in snow-banks when overtaken by blizzards. He wondered just how much truth there might be in the yarns. In any case he was about to find out about the heat-giving qualities of a snow dug-out from first-hand experience, for there was absolutely no other cover in which he could hope to keep out of the sight of scouting aircraft.

He was extremely careful about the digging of his refuge; it was absolutely vital that he should leave no traces on the virgin whiteness of the snow to betray him to a keen-eyed observer flying over. It proved easier than he had hoped, for the snow was not too tightly packed, having fallen only a day or so earlier. He burrowed straight into it like a rabbit, and, by pressing his body against the walls once he was seven or eight feet down the steeply sloping tunnel, he was able to spin himself round and to come back head uppermost. Then, for a good half-hour, he worked with his hands restoring the snow around the entrance to a semblance of its early smoothness.

His face was just at the mouth of the burrow, though he could slide inwards another eighteen inches if an aircraft came too close. Down below in the valley there was great activity among the men of the blockade line; Roger was certain that
they must be regular troops judging by the disciplined fashion in which they took exercise and came for their meals to the central fire in steady squads. Nothing much happened for a long time, and he was soon nodding with sheer tiredness, often blacking-out, after the night’s exertions. He was delighted to find that he felt no distressing sensation of cold; it was certainly far more comfortable out of the biting wind down in his burrow than he had hoped.

Hunger was the worst of his torments; he dared not eat much of the tiny store of food still remaining in his leather scrip, for he had no means of knowing when he would be able to get fresh supplies. Probably three hours had dragged by, during a great deal of which time he dropped into wells of unconsciousness, before he was half roused by the increasing clamour of aircraft engines. After some minutes he saw a Dakota flying in down the valley, and then to his surprise noticed that the troops below had been very busy, while he slept, clearing a small runway down the centre of the lines.

The machine circled for several minutes before, in reply to a small flare burned at the end of the runway, where a small fire was also sending out a pencil of smoke to indicate the wind direction, it came in for a landing. The first time he did so the pilot pulled out of his dive just as he was about to touch down, and then soared high again, only to return and to make a safe landing, pulling up at the very end of the emergency field. Another few yards and the Dakota would have overshot the end
of the cleared space and run into a mass of jagged boulders.

"Some pilot that chap!" Roger grunted to himself. "Must be a Jerry and an expert. I'd hate to try putting a crate down on a place like that."

The landing could only mean that something important was happening, otherwise no airman in his senses would have brought a machine down in such a dangerous place. To confirm this guess, Roger watched a party of the troops run along the valley to the side of the Dakota, when, tumbling over each other, they formed line and went through the motions of rendering a salute. They were obviously a guard of honour and, for such a compliment to be paid in these circumstances, showed that someone of the greatest importance must be paying the outpost a visit.

At that distance Roger could not, of course, make out who the visitors might be. To him the men below were merely black dots, but he watched the guard of honour going through its exercises, and then, all of a sudden, a crazy idea struck him. His food was almost gone, while another night of exertions equal to the one through which he had just passed would force him to surrender out of sheer inability to go on any farther. If he had had sufficient food it might be possible for him to keep going, but with that pitiful handful of dried meat, which was all that remained in his scrip, his bodily strength could not be maintained, so why not seize the Dakota and get away in her?

Was it sheer lunacy? Long afterwards Roger
often marvelled that he should even have thought of the idea. Perhaps it was the exhilaration of the thin atmosphere added to his complete exhaustion, but whatever might have been its cause, the plan suddenly leaped into the forefront of his brain.

Then, equally coolly he began to consider the best way in which to carry out his mad plan. Studying the valley beyond the blockade line, he saw a flock of sheep, grazing in a small depression where the green of grass showed among the stony soil, a couple of miles farther up. If he could only reach that flock he might be able to drive it slowly forward, drifting along with it until he was close enough to the Dakota to risk everything by making a run for its side door.

Roger did not even pause to remember that to get control of the sheep might alone take several hours, during which interval the aircraft might well take-off and leave him stranded in full view of his enemies. Neither did he pause to consider the risk of leaving his dug-out and of making his way across the tableland and down to the valley, let alone the possibility that the sheep might be guarded by several herdsmen. Driven on by the dazzling prospects of making his plan a success, he wriggled out of the burrow he had made with such toil, and, without bothering to conceal his tracks through the snow, started off along the plateau, keeping only sufficiently far back from the rim-rock to be invisible to anyone beneath, and headed towards the nearest point above the flock of sheep.
He tramped along through the three-feet deep snow, sweating beneath his thick garments, his heart pounding with the exertion of moving so fast at so great an altitude. An hour later, he was looking over the rim-rocks straight down on to the patch where about fifty sheep were grazing on the sparse herbage. He saw that the Dakota was still on the runway, although it had been wheeled back to the downwind end, while a great many black dots in the centre of the lines, and nearly half a mile from the aircraft, showed that some sort of ceremony was going forward. Bringing his attention back to the flock of sheep he noted that, so far as he could make out, there were only two herdsmen with them, both of them lying on the ground near a great boulder by which they had formed a camp.

Now that he was fully committed to his adventure Roger’s brain was working very coolly and his physical distress was, for the moment, forgotten. He pondered the problem of approaching the shepherds’ lair without rousing their suspicions, or being seen by the troops of the blockading line nearly two miles away. There was little cover between the foot of the rim precipice below him and the first of the boulders, and it was in this zone his first peril would lie. He might stay hidden while he was scrambling down the precipice, but across the hundred and fifty yards intervening before he reached the uppermost boulders, he would be out in the open. He was certainly bound to be seen—therefore, Roger decided, he would allow himself to be seen plainly. Any skulking movement
would be bound to draw instant suspicion if it was spotted, but, if he advanced openly, as though he had no reason to hide himself he might be dismissed as an innocent wayfarer. Audacity might pay—in any event it was his only chance.

The descent was quite simple and easy compared to the harassed climb he had made in the darkness, and when he reached the foot of the rock wall he was feeling fit enough to carry on as he stepped out into the open and then walked slowly forward, taking the utmost care to avoid any show of haste. A few minutes later he was among the tumbled boulders of the hillside, and, as soon as he was safely hidden, he moved as fast as his returning exhaustion and the thin air stifling his lungs allowed him.

He doubled back, running among the twenty-foot rocks until he was immediately above the shepherds, then, dropping swiftly towards them, he quickly found himself less than fifty yards above the reclining men. A swift glance showed him that all was quiet back in the military lines, and that the Dakota still stood at the end of the runway. A column of smoke was pouring up from the centre of the camp—evidently a ceremonial lunch was being prepared for the honoured guests, whoever they might be. Roger's starved stomach crawled at the thought of the hot, baked meats and the buttered tea which would be lying in such profusion up at the fire; the very thought of the succulent food made his determination even more grim. Consequently he was as grim as any famished wolf in sight of its
prey as he stole towards the two shepherds beneath their rock.

Neither saw him until he was within twenty yards and was forced to emerge into the open space they were using as a sheepfold, from behind the shelter of the last big boulders. Uttering a sharp shout of alarm, one of the shepherds bounded to his feet, snatching up a rifle as he did so. At first, his companion did not quite seem to grasp what was happening, but he was fumbling for his rifle as he rose to his feet.

The peril was acute! Even if Roger was not hit, the report of a shot, echoing and re-echoing along the valley, must sound the alarm and bring the troops hurrying along to investigate what the shooting might mean. The shepherd’s brown finger whitened as it took the pressure of the trigger. The man meant to shoot first and to leave any questioning until later! Roger, his senses reeling, staggered for a moment and then clear, sharp decision returned in the face of what seemed certain death.
CHAPTER XI

Shot Down in Flames

Roger had sloughed off the heavy *chupa*, the sheepskin coat with hair turned inwards to the body, which is the only garment of Tibetan shepherds, before he started his run towards the watchmen. He had been careful not to unholster his Mauser pistol because the report of a shot would have ruined his plan. He was relying entirely on the long sling made of horse-hair and wool, which is the usual weapon of the hillmen in this part of the world.

It was a weapon he knew well, for he had been an expert slingsman in his younger days, and had learned the trick of the weapon among the shepherds around his father’s mission station. In his Royal Naval days too, Roger had often displayed his skill to the amazement of the other young pilots of the Fleet Air Arm. There was no time for the full violence and shock of the sling’s discharge to be worked up. As the man levelled his rifle and contracted his hand to squeeze the trigger, Roger had to discharge his smooth, rounded pebble with an underarm motion. Despite the loss of force, however, it still flew swiftly enough to stun the shepherd as it crashed on his forehead.

The man’s rifle slipped from his nerveless grasp,
and by great good luck did not discharge as it struck the ground. Disregarding the falling man Roger seized his chance and dashed at the second shepherd while he remained off-balance, shocked by the unexpectedness of his comrade's fall. Roger seized him around the knees in a flying Rugger tackle which brought him crashing on to his back, and then began a terrific struggle, for the shepherd was every whit as strong as the English lad, whose main advantage lay only in having got his blow in first, and by having one of his arms clear of the heavy flowing garments.

This second man, winded by his fall, recovered very swiftly, his hand streaking for the long skinning-knife in his belt. That move was countered by Roger bringing his head up hard under the man's chin, and thereby sending him down once more. Before the shepherd could recover again, the lad was on his feet, and was able, as the Tibetan staggered upright, to send in a pile-driving upper-cut to the angle of the jaw, which proved the sweetest of all knock-outs.

The shepherd's arms relaxed as his body went limp under the force of that shrewd blow and, before he had any chance to recover, Roger had turned him on his face, and using the fellow's own sling, slipped a good seaman-like hitch over his forced-back wrists. Gasping, he rose to his own feet and faced the man he had brought down with the sling-stone. That worthy was still completely unconscious, but Roger was taking no risks, and in less than a minute had him as firmly trussed as his companion,
finishing them both off with leg-lashings. A gag, formed of each man's skin cap, completed the job and left Roger free to collect the sheep.

Just before he moved off he arranged the pinioned men's bonds in such a fashion that they could finally extricate themselves, for to have left them bound and helpless would have been to condemn them to an agonizing and long-drawn-out death. Slinging the first man's antiquated rifle over his own shoulders, Roger pulled his chupa coat closely around him, arranged his heavy sheepskin cap well down over his face, and, driving the flock in front of him, started his trek towards the camp.

Managing the sheep was more difficult than he had anticipated, but he soon got them into some sort of formation with the bell-wether leading, and, helped by the narrowness of that part of the valley floor, grazing as they went, he drove towards the blockade line a mile away.

His main anxiety now was that the aircraft might take-off before he could reach it, and so conscious was he of this that he was sorely tempted to hurry his animals, a course which must have proved fatal. He had to fight hard with himself to keep down to a normal shepherd's crawl, as with an agonizing uncertainty he drifted closer to the military lines, watching every movement in them as he drew closer. The smoke was still rising from the central fire, showing that the meal was still being served, a fact which did a great deal to cheer him.

When he was still a quarter of a mile away, three men, walking swiftly from the camp, came towards
him, and Roger braced himself for the meeting. He was feeling much better, for he had helped himself to the food in the shepherds' scrips before he started, and with the good meat inside him his strength and his clearness of mind began to flood back: nevertheless, he became more than a little frightened, as a full realization of the whole desperate situation began to dawn on him with the return of his common sense. If he could have done so he might have withdrawn, appalled by the hopelessness of what he was attempting. But, as it was, there was no way out—he was forced now to proceed with what he had started, it was too late to try any alternatives.

The three soldiers shouted at him as they approached and Roger obediently halted as they waved, his sheep also stopping as they saw their guardian hesitating. Their frightened baaing and puzzled bleating rose on the keen wind as they lifted their shaggy heads to stare at the approaching strangers.

"Hi, shepherd," the centre man called, when he was still a couple of hundred yards away. "Have you any beasts to sell? We need meat for our men now that the visiting princes and their foreign-devil friends are eating all our store; may they be accursed!"

"I am only a servant, good sirs," Roger replied surlily. "I have no right to dispose of my lord abbot's flock. I shall be executed or at least scourged, if I return to the abbey without the full tally."

He did not know to whom the flock might belong, nor what great landlords happened to own this particular valley, but it is always a fairly safe bet
in monk-ridden Tibet to assume some great abbot being the owner of anything valuable. In any case the three soldiers made no question about that, but the first speaker snarled as they came within a few feet.

"You need have no fear," he said sarcastically. "We will give you a receipt for the sheep, which your master can cash at the treasury at Lhasa. We are not giving you any money, you see, naught but a small piece of paper which will show your lord abbot that you have not been dishonest and cheated him."

Roger protested that he did not believe in pieces of paper, and that as he could not read he might easily be given something which would only make his punishment the more certain. He made a very fine job of acting the illiterate, surly, distrustful peasant lad, but the speaker quickly cut his arguments short by aiming a cuff at his head, which Roger to the manner born avoided, by a quick dodge of his body, to stand glowering at the soldier.

"Do not play the fool, boy," the man snorted. "If you hope to go on living, I advise you to say no more, but to drive your sheep into the camp where we can select those we need. We are likely to be here for some days if this foreign spy whom we seek does not happen to come this way. That will give you plenty of time to return to your abbey and report what has happened. Your abbot will be able to send some of his monks out here to check on your story if he thinks it worth his while, so do not be a madman and cause yourself unnecessary
hurt, for, whatever you say, we mean to have your sheep for our cooking-pots."

"It seems that I have no choice," Roger grumbled. "Good, if there is a chance that the lord abbot is not to be cheated out of his payment I will take your paper and return to the lamasery in order to tell him what has happened."

"Then drive your sheep forward," the soldier replied. "Quick, the princes and their guests will be leaving as soon as they have finished their meal in the big yurt," and his head indicated the large felt tent which housed the officers of the blockading party. "We took advantage of them all being at the feast to sally out and seize your walking lumps of meat before you got clear away."

Roger resignedly shrugged his shoulders as he started to drive the sheep forward, an evolution which turned out to be a very clumsy one. So clumsy indeed that one of the soldiers who had not yet spoken, suddenly remarked:

"Your animals do not seem to know you, shepherd. That is a strange thing, for flocks in these valleys spend all their lives with their shepherds and obey them like children."

Roger saw the danger at once. His quick wits saved him.

"These sheep too would know me if they were my own flock," he grunted; "but they are not. I only came here two days ago to relieve the two regular shepherds who are wanted at the abbey because they are witnesses in a man-slaying case which is to be tried by my lord abbot. Curse these sheep!
They know nothing," and he turned away, making himself very busy in marshalling his flock.

The excuse was reasonable enough. At any rate it satisfied the men, who said no more but trudged along in a knot while Roger continued to plod about shouting to his baaing charges. They soon drew close to the lines and Roger saw that a great crowd of soldiers were busy around the yurt in which the banquet was being held. He listened to the scraps of conversation which reached his ears, although he was very careful not to let the soldiers gather the least inkling that he was deeply interested in what they were saying.

Interested indeed he was, for they were discussing the visitors who had arrived in the Dakota. It seemed that the two princes who were travelling in it were accompanied by the German leader and two of his staff. The princes had addressed the mustered troops and exhorted them about the importance of keeping the strictest watch for the foreign spy who was believed to be trying to leave Tibet by way of the Tang Pass.

"I would dearly like to win those thousand English gold sovereigns which they are offering for this man's head," gloated one of the soldiers, and then went on with a rapt description of what he would do with so vast a sum if he was able to spend it in Lhasa. That started a wordy warfare, for the senior man scoffed at such profligate waste and then launched out into a list of how many sheep, horses and yaks he would buy if he was lucky enough to win the reward, as well as the small farm it would
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bring him in Tzong Bo, his native district near the Bhopal border.

As they drew very near to the lines, Roger was told to drive his flock over towards the end of the runway, where the men already had a small sheepfold erected. The Dakota stood less than a hundred yards away as Roger passed it; while he was doing so, a trumpet suddenly rang out and the three men with him hurriedly bade him carry on to the fold without them.

"That is the 'General Assembly'," one of them muttered. "It orders us to muster near the big yurt to give a royal salute with our weapons. The princes and the foreign devils must be about to leave in that flying machine," and his glance indicated the Dakota.

"They are visiting all the outpost lines which we have established through these mountains," one of the others growled. "Thanks be to the gods we shan't have them here with us all night. As soon as they are well away, we shall be able to get our own meal. It's a pity that the great ones of the earth do not have more concern for us simple folk. They eat their fill and never think that humbler bellies can also be as hungry as their own."

Roger saw that something was stirring. The doorflaps of the big yurt were folded back and several people were issuing from it. In front were a couple of men in European flying-suits, evidently the crew of the Dakota, while behind them were several notables in richly embroidered and quilted clothing, and in the rear of them again were three men in
heavy overcoats, all wearing Germany Army head-
dress. It must be now or never! If he was to take
the Dakota he must act at once!

Roger looked carefully over at the yurt and saw
the troops mustering into long lines near it, while
their officers shouted orders to parade them in
readiness to pay the final compliments to the great
persons about to make their departure. The lines
were practically unmanned—no sentries stood near
the aircraft. It is probable that the senior officer of
the blockading party was anxious to make as good
a showing with as many men as possible, and as
there was not the least likelihood, in his opinion,
of anyone attempting to steal the machine in that
open space, he had drawn off any men he might
have left to guard it.

The lad judged the distance to the open door in
the side of the Dakota to be a good hundred yards,
or slightly more. The three men, driven by the
brawling of a distant officer, were running hard to
join the muster; there was no one between him and
the aircraft! All the same, if he made any openly
suspicious move, he might easily be picked-off by
a rifle shot long before he could reach it. Forcing
himself to be patient Roger drove his flock at an
angle, and with the sheep kicking up the fine dust
in front of him drew closer to the grounded machine.

Over his shoulder he saw that the two pilots had
left the leave-taking ceremony and, drawing hard
on their cigarettes, were strolling towards the
Dakota. They were about two hundred and fifty
yards away, while he, Roger, was now within thirty
feet of the side door. Patience, he told himself, as the flock passed near the grey machine, and then, seizing the moment, he suddenly ducked and, with one lithe movement, was in the doorway and racing forward inside the length of its cabin towards the controls up in its nose.

A swift glance as he bent towards the self-starters showed him that the pilots were about one hundred and fifty yards away, and still unconscious that anything untoward was happening. Further back still the princes were haranguing the mustered troops, while astern of the Dakota the flock of sheep were trotting briskly towards the fold, unconscious that their shepherd had left them. Everyone in the valley was so concerned with the departure of the notabilities that nobody was paying the least attention to the humble shepherd boy, whose passage was, in any case, half screened by the thin haze of dust raised by the feet of his charges.

Roger pressed the buttons and at the first whine of the starters, saw the two pilots halt abruptly as though filled with sudden amazement. The starters ground hard, and, as the two Germans, tugging their pistols from their holsters, broke into a run towards him, Roger knew the most deadly fear. If he could not get the machine taxi-ing before they reached him, the thin fuselage of the aircraft would not keep out their pistol bullets. Would the engines never catch?

The starboard one suddenly coughed and then broke into a full-throated roar, though the port still refused to budge, but one would give him a chance
to taxi out of range, although he knew he must quickly reach flying-speed, if he was to lift the heavy machine off that primitive runway. There was little space for manœuvre. At the farther end the big jagged boulders were only too plainly in sight; if he could not be airborne before he reached the tip of the narrow runway, he must crash in red flames on top of them!

Roger caught one glimpse of red flickers of fire spurting from the hand of the leading pilot as he ran towards the machine. The man was using his pistol, determined to stop the theft of his aikraft at all costs. But Roger could not afford to worry about that if he was to get the Dakota off the ground, so ignoring the shooting, he bent to his task.

Suddenly to his delight the port engine also fired, and, losing no more time, he gave both full throttle and, spinning the aircraft on its wheels, turned it towards the end of the runway, gathering speed while he did so. He caught one glimpse of the furious faces of the pilots as they came within a dozen yards, both men with their pistols blazing. In the fury of engine noise Roger did not hear the whip and crack of the bullets as they tore through the fabric, and would have taken no notice of them if he had!

The pilots' faces disappeared abruptly as the Dakota gathered speed, and with another swift turn which almost capsized her, Roger brought her to the beginning of the runway. The whole scene below faded from his view as he committed her to her run, and suddenly knew just how poor had been
the work of the Tibetan soldiery in making the landing-ground, and also how expert the German pilot must have been to set her down. Bouncing and lurching the Dakota raced towards those grim, twenty-foot boulders while Roger's heart sank with every shrinking yard as he saw how swiftly he was using up his intervening space.

The aircraft bounced twice, rose, touched down again, only to bounce once more and then, straight in front of his nose, were the boulders, their jagged ends upreared as though they were malignantly alive and lusting to rip him to pieces. Nothing, it seemed, could make the hurtling mass of fabric and metal rise in time—death on the rocks looked certain.

Roger held on, doing his utmost to lift her. The grim thought racing through his mind that even death in the thunder and flame of a crash on the rocks would be good luck when compared with what might happen to him on the rack and torture-bed of some Tibetan fortress if he was taken prisoner. Another bounce, one which almost shook him from his seat; then, even as the tips of the boulders hungrily reached up for him, he was up and over! Clear, with not more than six inches between his undercarriage and the death beneath!

Banking steeply on one wing he almost crashed her again as she all but stalled, but he was forced to turn sharply to avoid hitting the opposite side of the valley. The whole desolate panorama stood up on one end like an inverted plate, and he was able to see the scene of mad confusion raging below
as well as the sparkle of the scores of rifles the troops were firing in a last effort to stop him.

He had no time to bother about them, however, and thanking his stars that he had served in the Fleet Air Arm, Roger feverishly scanned the controls of the Dakota. Fortunately, he had flown this type during his service, so that the aircraft was familiar to him, and then looking out of the side-port, he saw a long stream of black smoke streaking from his starboard engine, a ribbon that quickly grew to a cascade and which began to sparkle suddenly with red flames. A lucky shot must have hit him, but, even so, with the flaming aircraft beneath him, Roger knew a fierce gladness, and realized that if he could remain in her for even a few minutes, he would cover as much ground as he could in a week's march.

Up and up he took her until his altimeter showed twenty-seven thousand feet, and at that height he reached out for an oxygen mask hanging on its clip within his grasp. Slipping it on and opening the tap, he lost a great deal of the dizziness caused by his climb, and he could study the vast panorama of peaks lying beneath. He sighted on the distinctive crests of the Tang Pass and headed towards them, glad to see that the engine fire was not spreading to his wing fabric. It must be a punctured petrol pipe which was alight, he calculated, and so long as he kept her flying he might hope to save it from spreading. The danger would come when he started to come down and the flaming spirit had a chance to lick inboard.
Half an hour later he saw that he was over the last of the great ridges of Tibet. Lakes and the shining beds of streams lay beneath him; the headwaters of the great Mekong River, which flows south-east through China, down the eastern extremities of Burma, through Siam, and out into the Pacific through French Indo-China.

On and on, nearly an hour had passed before he saw that he must have been hit in other places, for the petrol gauge showed that he was at the end of his fuel! In another ten minutes there would be none left. Down below lay a tangled maze of mountains, no longer quite so high as those of Tibet, but nineteen-thousand-foot giants none the less, with great gorges between them and rugged peaks above.

The fire on the starboard wing was still raging, and as he looked down, wondering where he might find somewhere to set the aircraft down, he saw the flames spreading along the fabric of the wing, which was turning black before his eyes. There did not seem to be any place where a machine could be landed; death seemed certain to anyone trying to drop on that wild terrain! In any case, as soon as he turned her, the chances were that the fire would consume the wing and start inboard.

And at that moment the Messerschmidt fighter took a hand in the game! Roger was not even aware that there was another aircraft within hundreds of miles until he saw the instrument panel in front of his eyes splinter and shiver as the burst of machine-gun bullets tore into it. The perspex dome over his
head suddenly showed a line of holes. The cockpit became an inferno of flame and smoke with the smell of the petrol and oil which were leaping in jets from the shattered gauges. As he watched, the fighter swung past, banking steeply to put in a new attack!
CHAPTER XII

Crash-landing in a Lake

Roger was not nearly as frightened as he had been while he was being hunted afoot through Tibet. He was a trained pilot who had qualified in war, so that danger in an aircraft was almost second nature to him. All his earlier experience came to help him; rather to his surprise he found that he was actually taking a fierce joy in this new turn of events. He found that the Dakota still carried two guns in her nose although the rest of her armament had been stripped to lighten her for duty as a passenger-machine, and suddenly he felt almost at home.

Through smoke and vapour, Roger’s hand streaked out for the controls of the bow-guns, although he had no assurance that they would be loaded. To his joy he felt them leap under his fingers and, with a whoop of joy, watched a stream of red tracer tearing towards the momentarily-seen fuselage of the Messerschmidt. Not that it did her much harm; probably only half a dozen bullets hit the fighter, but resistance was something the German pilot had not expected. He sheered off in a wide arc, leaving Roger free to consider his more pressing problems—the burning wing and the exhaustion of his fuel.

The ground, frightening in its rugged savagery,
was swiftly coming up to meet him as the Dakota lost height. So far as he could see there was only one place where there was any room between the frowning mountain peaks and the jagged ridges, and that single opening was a narrow lake, three miles long but less than three hundred yards wide, through which a river flowed, broadening out as it filled the valley before resuming its course at the outfall.

He glanced quickly round the cockpit, seeking a parachute which might offer some chance of life, but there was nothing of that sort in the compartment. If there were any in the main cabin behind him they were of no use, for he dared not leave the steering position for as long as an instant. Any momentary loss of control would send the staggering, flaming, smoking aircraft down in an uncontrollable spin, to smash itself in blazing flinders on the pinnacles beneath.

Roger decided that his only chance was to make a belly-landing on the lake, and his face grew grim as he calculated the odds against doing it. Down among the peaks there would be incalculable air currents, fierce updraughts and savage down-pulls which no one could judge before he was gripped by them. He was so engrossed in calculating his best means of reaching that shining lake surface, that he completely forgot the attacking Messerschmidt. It was not until the gunman dived straight on to the Dakota’s back, its bow-guns blazing, that he remembered his immediate peril. By some miracle he was not hit, although the control cabin for the
second time was filled with the crackling and spitting of tracer and incendiary bullets, whining off metal or tearing through fabric.

Half blinded by the smoke and the stink of fire and spurting oil, Roger, despite the tottering, smoking, burning wing, instinctively put the Dakota's nose down, in the manœuvre he had learned in flying-boats, where, if a fighter came in, the pilot took his aircraft down to wave-top level, where he could no longer be attacked in the under-belly.

The big Dakota's nose tumbled downwards as he hurtled her towards the mountain crests, with the Messerschmidt sticking tightly to his tail, firing hard as she tenaciously followed her prey down. A steel-like purpose filled Roger's mind—if there was no other way out of it, if he had to die, he would do his best, when all hope was gone, to make sure that the black fighter behind him died as well. With icy determination he pushed forward the stick and set the aircraft into an even steeper dive. The fighter pilot probably mistook this as proof of his quarry being out of control and starting what looked like the beginning of a vertical nose-dive. The cloud of smoke trailing astern must have been positive proof to the pursuing plane that the Dakota's pilot was dead and his machine falling helplessly in its last dive.

As the angle of descent grew ever steeper the Messerschmidt pilot pulled out his own craft, scarcely more than in time to save himself from going into a spin, and hauled back to watch the end of the smoking wreck beneath him. Hardly
believing that his bluff had succeeded, Roger caught a glimpse of the fighter pulling out of his pursuit, and then, looking downwards and outwards, calculated his own chance of survival, and he knew he would need all his luck to clear that last ridge of the mountains between him and the long, narrow lake. Even if he cleared it there was still no certainty that he could pull the Dakota out of her dive in time to set her down in a fashion which might give him any chance of extricating himself from the wreck.

The wall of rock ahead, the spread shoulder of a great mountain spur, came straight at his cabin window. Roger studied it intensely, fighting for height as he struggled with his floundering aircraft, and, as he hurtled closer, feared that he would fail to clear it by at least a dozen feet. The crest, ragged and jagged against the blue sky, blotted out all sight of the ridges and peaks beyond, and obscuring the lake, seemed to fill the sky. Roger saw that he was slowly dropping ever lower as the Dakota staggered onwards. With sinking heart he believed he was already under it; two hundred yards away the rim-rocks looked higher than the nose of his plane.

He involuntarily shut his eyes to blot out the scene, and his body tensed itself for the all-shattering crash which would come when he hit just beneath the jagged skyline. Then, miraculously, or so it seemed, there was a sharp bounce as the Dakota struck an updraught of air curling over the crest, and with scarce a foot to spare was hurled over and
Crash-landing in a Lake

was dropping down beyond. Roger, scarcely daring to credit his good luck, opened his eyes and realized another piece of fortune—the fire on the wing was no longer burning so fiercely—the trailing flame of black petrol smoke was gone! Only a segment of glowing red showed where the fire was gnawing a way into the fabric. With the last drops running from his tanks the main fire had died for lack of fuel.

The rocky ground, sloping steeply, was rushing past beneath him while Roger fought the hurtling machine until he got her again under some sort of control, and pointing towards the distant lake several hundred feet below. Then, very abruptly, there was only emptiness beneath him, the upper slopes of the range ended in an abyssmal drop, a vast precipice which fell straight to the water. Roger again thanked his good fates, for the aircraft had been diving so swiftly that she must inevitably have hit the boulders of the original slope within another minute or so if the precipice had not appeared.

With nothing beneath him for hundreds of feet, he was able to push the nose down for a few seconds so as to gather greater speed, and then as he felt her quicken, he brought her bows round in a great sweeping curve, to head up the length of the long, narrow lake into the keen wind that was blowing. Again he had completely forgotten the Messerschmidt in his struggle with the failing machine, but suddenly he saw her again, flying several thousand feet above, as she crossed his bows, evidently
enjoying what her pilot believed to be the death agonies of the foreign spy inside her.

“ I’ll bet the brute’s already licking his chops over the reward money,” Roger grunted to himself. “But this particular fox ain’t dead yet!”

He hit the lake in a blinding sheet of spray, and as his head snapped forward, Roger passed out, his last conscious thought being that this was death! Everything was cracking up around him as the Dakota shattered and began to fall to pieces. The sting of the icy water brought him round within a few seconds of touching down, and, struggling out of his safety-belt, he found himself up to the waist with the lake pouring in through all the holes and rents in the fabric, while the whole machine felt heavy and sodden as she rolled and gurgled, sinking fast into the depths.

After Roger had rushed to the broadside door and found it firmly shut, he began to tear at the escape-hatch above his head. As his fingers touched the fabric, he heard the roar of the fighter’s engines with the stunning rattle of her bow-guns as she fired a burst of tracer and incendiaries into the shattered hulk of her enemy. Once again Roger’s luck stood fair, for the bullets almost all crashed into the after-part of the fuselage while the rest kicked up harmless water spouts.

With the hull sinking fast his first instinct was to wriggle clear of her as quickly as he could, but that reminder of the enemy still being present, forced him to stay hidden until, at least, the Messerschmidt was out of sight. If the German pilot
saw him still alive, he would come down again and again and fire until he was sure there was no life in the floundering wreck beneath him.

The heavy Dakota squatted and gurgled as the water poured into her, but as Roger could still hear the distant whining of the fighter’s engines, he dared not climb out of her.

Then, scarcely believing his eyes, he suddenly saw that the aircraft was sinking no deeper—the water-level inside the cabin remained constant at his shoulder level. For a minute he did not dare to let himself hope, he was afraid he might be mistaken, that his imagination was playing him tricks until, forcing himself to stand quiet and to watch, he realized that it was no illusion, that the machine was going no deeper. By some great piece of luck she must have grounded on a shoal right in the centre of the lake.

Roger drew himself out of the freezing water on to a shelf beneath the broadside-ports and watched the fighter for some time until, with a final wheel, it turned and disappeared over the rocks crowning the vast cliffs walling-in the sheet of water. He waited for nearly half an hour after it had gone, before he crawled through the escape hatch and got out on to the top of the Dakota. He was sure there would be no chance of the Messerschmidt returning until it had refuelled, as she must be nearly at the end of her endurance and be faced with a good hour’s flying time to get back to her landing-ground in Tibet.

The outlook was even more unpromising when he
had retrieved a pair of powerful Zeiss binoculars from a locker in the control cabin and had had a look around. The view was a very grim one, for, so far as he could see, there was not a single break in the cliff walls, except one gap at each end of the lake where the river flowed in and passed out. Otherwise the sheer precipices were unbroken and seemingly as smooth as glass.

There was a sluggish current running past the stranded aircraft, steady but purposeful; he could see, down by the outflow, that it grew swifter as the waters piled up to pour themselves through the narrow gorge. Feeling hopeless and with a chill of dismay, Roger sat down to think matters out as calmly and clearly as he could. First, he decided he must find out where he was. That was easy, for the crumpled chart, now sporting a couple of bullet holes, was easily taken from where it lay, sodden, on the navigating desk. A few seconds sufficed to show him that he was probably in one of the many lakes among the headwaters of the River Mekong, which is the seventh longest in the world, running for two thousand, eight hundred miles through southern Asia, in which continent it is fourth in size.

Roger learned from the German navigator’s books he brought up from their steel chest, that some hundreds of miles to the south of where he sat the River Mekong flows through the city of Chiamdo, a great market on the caravan trails between Lhasa and China. He found nothing very definite about the upper stretches of the river except the mention
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of several rapids caused by the great height from which the stream descends in its passage towards the sea in far-off Indo-China. There was a brief description of its course through almost unknown mountain wastes, and precious little else.

He sat on the top of the cabin pondering this when the thought struck him that the Leader was not in the least likely to be satisfied with the fighter pilot's report. He would not dare to leave anything to chance and would send an amphibious aircraft to alight on the lake to make sure that the foreign spy's corpse really lay among the wreckage of the Dakota. At all costs, Roger realized, he must get away as quickly as possible. The only question was —how?

And, supposing he did manage to crawl out of the freezing waters of the lake, what was he to do next? The cliffs looked quite unscaleable, but if, by some miracle, he did succeed in climbing to their crests, how much better off would he be? By the time he reached rim-rock, he would be in such a state of exhaustion that he could not possibly proceed any further in that savage mountain land with its rarefied air.

Down the river, then, lay his only hope! Could he drift with the current until he reached some place where he might land and find an easier route? To do so, he would require a boat, or, at least, a raft, and, after a thorough search of the aircraft, he was not able to find anything which would make one or the other. The Dakota was not fitted with rubber dinghies, for it was extremely unlikely that
such equipment would be needed in Tibet. Yet he must be away from the icy chill of the water, for he was not likely to last many minutes after he entered it; swimming therefore was out of the question.

The problem seemed insoluble—death lay in both directions. If he stayed aboard he was doomed, if not from a return of the Germans then from hunger and exposure. If he dropped into the water his end appeared equally certain.
CHAPTER XIII

Through the Mekong’s Rapids

Roger’s next find was a sealed tin box of iron rations, an American Army pack of emergency stores. The hard chocolate, and other good food like pressed beef, gave him new heart, and, feeling better after a sustaining meal, the first he had had for a very long time, he started to hunt for other things that might still be in the long cabin. The cold water inside it, through which he had to half swim, half wade, chilled him to the marrow, but, by the time he was forced to return to get some warmth into his chilled limbs, he had an interesting assortment of articles laid out on the top of the plane.

Perhaps the most important was something which the German pilot must have kept from his own war days—a crash-landing flotation-suit used by the men who flew the Fokker-Wolfs over the Atlantic in the days when they were attacking the convoys hastening to make ready for D-day. It was a long garment, rather like a suit of grey dungarees, designed to keep men who had to force-land in the ocean alive and dry, safe from the killing touch of the sea, for several days.

Naturally the life-saving suit was wet inside, for it had been hanging on a hook in the cabin, but its
kapok-lining dried very quickly once Roger had spread it out and turned its open side down. While it was draining he busied himself, collecting another pack of the iron rations, a small compass, the chart, and a long sheath-knife hanging on a belt which he discovered in a broadside locker. The weak sun was now almost overhead, which meant that he had already been nearly two hours making his preparations—in another hour or so he might expect the return of one of the Leader's aircraft. Roger hoped for considerably more time than that, but there was no certainty that he would be granted any longer. He had sufficient respect for the Germans' efficiency and their anxiety to make quite sure that the menace to their plans had been removed, not to have too much optimism about how long he would be left alone.

The thought of the Germans brought his mind back to the problem of leaving no traces, for, if the Dakota was thoroughly searched, it was more than likely that they would miss the life-saving suit and draw the obvious conclusions, when they failed to find his corpse, that he had got safely away. That would turn them on to his trail at once, as there was no other way out of the lake than by going downstream. He decided to burn the machine, or as much of it as remained above water, before starting off on his perilous voyage.

It was not too difficult, for there were a few gallons of petrol trapped in the after-tank, kept there by the steep angle of his descent. It needed the better part of half an hour to syphon the high-octaine
gasoline into containers, and then to splash it over the exposed part of the aircraft, before, crawling into his still damp flotation-suit, Roger adjusted its zip-fasteners, flaps and straps, made a bundle of his small stores, which he attached to an empty jerry-can, and then stood ready to enter the water, after making the jerry-can fast by a lanyard of thin rope. He strapped his Mauser pistol and the sheath-knife outside the suit, and, lowering himself on the downstream side of the aircraft, slid into the water.

He waited a couple of minutes in order to make quite sure that all the joints of his armour were water-tight, and then, satisfied that everything was holding, he drew his pistol. Pressing its muzzle into a pool of petrol lying nearby, he pulled the trigger and frenziedly pushed off into the lake, his arms and legs flailing as he fought to get as far away from her as possible. The flames spread with terrific ferocity and swiftness, so that, by the time Roger was fifty yards downstream, the whole of the exposed hull of the Dakota was ablaze from end to end. A mantling column of black smoke rolled upwards from it like a giant mushroom with an oversize and ever-growing head on a slender, swaying stalk.

The current was much stronger than he had expected, for after paddling a few yards towards the northern shore, he found himself in its full pull. A river running within a river down the lake’s centre began to whirl him with ever-increasing speed towards the black cleft in the vast walls marking the outfall. Roger quickly arranged his
Jerry-can float so that he could have full control of it, and, rejoicing in the buoyancy and water-tightness of his suit, was content to let himself go.

Gradually the gate came nearer, and, the closer he approached it, the swifter grew his progress as the waters bunched together, piling themselves back from the narrow outlet to gather their main force in the centre. A fresh peril showed itself as he came within a couple of hundred yards of the gorge's opening, for huge snags of timber and mats of herbage came swirling at him, thrust in the reverse direction by the backwash caused by the edges of the main current hitting the sides of the chasm, and rotating back in sinister swirls before making another try to escape from the lake.

At first, until he found that he was nearly as mobile in his flotation suit as if he had been swimming in a pair of trunks, Roger was afraid of these deadly looking black spears of splintered wood. Once he had established his ease of manoeuvre, however, the rest was fairly simple, and he evaded the worst of his dangers, although he was very much alive to the danger of having the suit ripped by some protruding branch. Not that a puncture would have sunk the kapok-stuffed garment, but it would have admitted the icy water, with results equally fatal. The middle of the roaring current, however, was clear of floating obstructions, and as the lake gathered for its final charge, the water grew into a central hump as it forced its way towards the black gates.

The entrance was certainly frightening enough,
with its walls towering sheer and black for well over fifteen hundred feet towards the sky, while, in the very middle of the stream, a hundred yards in front of him, white spray was flying as the full force of the water met the rocks jutting from the bed as far as he could see in the gathering gloom ahead, spray and white hummocks of riven ragged foam making a great rapid as the lake poured over the shallows in its fury to join the rush to the ocean.

Roger carefully studied the raging chute of water and foam ahead. If he kept his head, he thought he might be able to evade the rocks and to slide past in the glissade of deeper water deflected from their shoulders by the obstructions. Then, amidst the roaring of the rapid, as he entered the very gate itself, he saw something which shook him to the backbone—a row of spurts of water flying up beside him!

He had not heard the aircraft. The roaring of the waters had completely drowned its engine noise, but the keen-eyed pilots had spotted his head bobbing in the current. Taking almost crazy risks they flew in using their bow-guns, coming so close under that they ran a very real risk of crashing head-on into the beetling cliffs. The Leader’s orders were very positive and exact—at all costs the foreign spy must be prevented from making his escape. The crew knew he would count as nothing the deaths of all of them and the loss of their plane into the bargain so long as they succeeded in killing this menace to their plans.

Roger took the only evasive action he could.
As soon as he knew the splashes to be caused by machine-gun bullets, and his back-flung eyes showed him the aircraft, he acted almost automatically. He flung his arms high in the air, threshed his legs, and gave a fine imitation of a man struck by a whole burst, and the next instant was seized by the rush of water and hurled into the comparative darkness within the gorge.

He was safe from the machine-guns. His danger now lay in being dashed into one of the spouting, ragged boulders or the great snags, trees with their butts driven into the river's bottom, which protruded like lanceheads through the boiling surf, offering the risk of impalement on their streaming points.

Rolling over and over, fighting hard to control his course, Roger struggled for a long time. He had to abandon the jerry-cans float almost at once because the thin lanyard holding it to his body afforded a hazard he could not accept. There was always the danger that it might pass to one side of some obstruction while he was whirled down the other, and if he was held in the teeth of the raging flood for even an instant, its tremendous force must smash him. Only by travelling with and being careful not to resist it, could he hope to win clear of the swirling rapids.

But he soon found that it was too much for him—human strength could not fight the frenzied smooth strength of the elements. Buffeted, half drowned, whirled all ways at once, now head foremost, now feet floating helplessly on the surface,
he was whisked past many shining, sleek rocks over which the surf creamed in a rushing slide. His hands were torn on protruding snags as he frenziedly warded himself off, until, at last, with only a dim consciousness remaining, he was unable to do any more for himself, and resigned himself to whatever fate held in store for him.

That was probably what saved him, for he floated so high in his suit that he fell into the greatest rush of the stream and was whirled along by it, shaving past rocks and grisly snags, as though he had been thistledown afloat, the scend of the water keeping him clear. He suffered one or two savage bumps, the breath being driven out of him as he crashed on to one submerged rock, which fortunately was so water-worn and smooth that it resembled a whale’s back, with no roughness or obstructions upon it. He rolled helplessly along its entire length before he again felt the easement of being once more in deep water.

Abruptly, when he believed he was at the very last gasp, all the hurry and turmoil ceased, and, quiet, unbuffeted, and almost unbelievably still, he was drifting between two smooth walls of rock with deep untroubled water around him. The Mekong had forced its way through the rapids and was now running along a quiet stretch. Roger quickly recovered, and was overjoyed to see, less than fifty yards ahead of him, the jerry-can bobbing on the smooth surface. A few strokes took him to the precious float and he quickly made everything fast.
It was surprisingly comfortable inside his flotation-suit. He was warm and dry and, if he could have seen any break in the cliffs, might have felt almost content. As it was hour succeeded hour without incident, always without the least sign of any possible landing. On several occasions the rock walls grew lower as some side valley branched down towards it, but none of their sills ever came lower than from fifty to one hundred feet above the level of the stream.

At first Roger did not worry very much for, strangely enough, he was enjoying the absolute rest and the strange feeling of safety as he drifted smoothly downstream. He amused himself for a while estimating his speed by calculating some small mark a couple of hundred yards ahead, and then counting the seconds it needed to take him past it. Nearly five knots he made it. A big speed for running water, but not strange, or out of the way, in a river dropping from the Roof of the World down to the ocean. For the first time in many weeks he was quite alone, remote from hostile human beings and the experience was a relief in itself.

But, when time passed and the dim light in the bottom of the water-filled gorge grew even less as the sun, far overhead above the rim-rocks, waned towards its setting, he began to grow anxious. If he struck more rapids in the darkness he would stand no chance at all, and, judging by the way the Mekong ran, it was more than possible he would meet dangerous waters at any moment. Any bend
ahead of him might conceal shallows over which
the stream raced in fury.

He began to see the stars shining dimly in the
thin ribbon of sky a thousand feet above his head,
for black darkness reigned below, although the sun
had not yet actually gone down. His fears increased
as the strip of sky grew darker and then, just when
he had begun to resign himself to a perilous night
afloat, the river ran into another lake, very similar
to the one in which he had crashed the Dakota,
except that here there was a strip of shore at one
point, dimly seen as he passed it in the deep gloam-
ing which was less here in the open that it was in
the narrow gorge.

A side valley debouched on to the lake, bringing
a tributary with it, and it was the swirl and thrust
of this feeder which drew his attention to the break
in the cliff wall. The current too was much slacker
in this lake so that it did not cost him too much
effort to swim towards the mouth of the little river
and to crawl ashore on to its gravelly bank, dragging
the jerry-can behind him. He opened the ration
pack, made himself a meal, and kicking himself for
not having looked for a box of matches before
leaving the aircraft, so that he might brew some of
the coffee in the pack, he settled himself down for a
night’s sleep.

Roger lay awake for only a few minutes, but,
now that he was ashore again, a sudden horror of
the water seized him; a terror of ever entering it
again. He wondered whether any man had ever
been in such a plight before, and then kicked him-
self, remembering some of the yarns of the Japanese War he had heard, and a few of the almost fabulous exploits of the Irregular Warfare fellows of the Royal Navy operating on enemy-held coasts during the recent struggle. Of course men had faced perils as great as, or even greater than, his own and survived, and with that comforting assurance, he fell fast asleep, warmly wrapped in his flotation-suit.

He awoke to find the grey light of full day filling the narrow space in which he lay. The wider expanse of sky over the lake shone in the rising sunlight, but it was not that which had awakened him, but the sound of a multi-engined aircraft immediately overhead!

Roger rolled himself closer to the steeply rising bank of the tributary and gazed upwards, and then could have kicked himself for being such a fool! His sudden movement had betrayed him to the keen eyes of the men aloft, whereas if he had only lain still in his grey suit he might have escaped unnoticed. With a steep bank the big machine began to come down towards him. It flew over less than five hundred feet above his head, its wing-tips almost touching the wall of cliffs as it turned, before racing back with its bow-guns flickering.

A storm of steel splashed on the rocks and screamed off the gravel in a hundred ricochets. But his position was a good one, and, after three more runs, the pilot evidently became satisfied that it could not winkle him out, for Roger always ran to the bank nearest to the line of attack as the aircraft came first from one side and then from the
other. Under its height he was safe, for the machine
did not seem to mount any rear-guns.

The fifth time it flew across without firing, but
less than two hundred feet up. Nothing happened,
until it turned again and came back with the bomb-
doors in its bottom dropping open. He actually
saw the black missile leave the plane, and was only
just in time to fling himself headlong before it burst
in a blinding flash of flame on the bank, less than a
dozen yards from the stream's verge. The solid
rock shook, but when the dust had settled, Roger
was still unhurt.

Four bombs in all were dropped without doing
him any damage. Then, rising a little, the plane
cruised down the lake, which was a good two miles
in length, before turning once more, still with its
bomb-doors open, and coming back towards him.
Roger crouched still, hugging the ground and
expecting another bomb; with his arms around his
head he lay still awaiting the shock and flash of the
explosion.

Instead, the machine passed over, and when there
was no detonation, Roger looked up wondering
what had happened and blenched at what he saw—a
couple of inflatable rubber dinghies were dropping
towards the water. Back came the plane, climbing
hard until, when it was several hundred feet above
the rim-rocks, white mushrooms blossomed beneath
it as four parachutists dropped from its fuselage to
man the dinghies and dig him out of his hiding-
place.

There was a mile and a half at least of water
between his refuge and the outfall of the lake; if he entered the lake and tried to reach the gorge, the machine-guns could get him long before he reached his haven. If he did not move, the parachutists would have plenty of time to reach their dinghies and, using their paddles, overtake him before he could hope to win to safety in the far gorge.
CHAPTER XIV

Out of the Mekong

There seemed to be nothing he could do to save himself; all escape was cut off. He tried hard to think of some way in which he might win clear, but the more he thought the more certain it seemed that he was completely and finally trapped. Suddenly, something strange about the four parachutes caught his eye; they were no longer dropping as complete and perfect domes, but spilling wind on one side, as their wearers fought with their shroud-lines in frantic efforts to steer them.

They were still too far away for Roger to see clearly what was happening, and, at first, so sunk was he in despair, that he did not bother very much. Then, with a fresh surge of hope he realized what had happened; the parachutists had been dropped far too high above the lake and some freakish side-draught, rising from the lake and spilling over the rim-rocks above, had gripped them and was drifting them rapidly inland. Roger saw with rekindled hope that they would not be able to clear the cliff and so alight on the water.

A couple of minutes later they were out of his sight beyond the crest, and Roger’s new hopes had a further rise as he looked at the two yellow dinghy packs, slowly drifting towards the distant gorge.
entrance in the grip of the current. What would the aircraft do next? Had she any more men to drop?

He must get those dinghies before they drifted too far and disappeared downstream, but, if he ventured out of his refuge, he still had the machine-guns and bombs in the aircraft to face. He would make an easy target swimming in his flotation-suit.

He slid into the water after a few seconds of hesitation, and, gritting his teeth, struck out for the two yellow packages. He did not take the jerry-can with him, as he trusted that the dinghies would carry any equipment he needed, and, if he wasted time in towing, the boats might be carried into the mouth of the gorge before he could reach them.

For a few minutes nothing happened, and then the swiftly increasing roar of air engine told him that the machine was coming again into the attack. Roger gritted his teeth, but refused to look up, and continued to swim hard towards the gliding yellow bales as though nothing was happening. Then, as the whine of the machine came right over him, filling his ears with a fury of sound, he braced himself for the shock of machine-gun bullets tearing into his body. Those couple of seconds while he remained exposed to the aircraft lasted, seemingly, for years, but then, without a single bullet splash in the water beside him, she was away and gone. Almost unbelievably he was looking at her upper-works while her pilot climbed steeply to pull her out of her dive, to avoid striking the rocky walls ahead of him. She had not fired a single shot nor dropped a bomb!
The reason for it came to him as he swam, and he could have kicked himself for having been such a fool as to fear her. The aircraft had exhausted all her ammunition—she must have done so before taking the extreme course of dropping the four parachutists and the inflatable dinghies. The Leader would not have risked throwing away four of the best men left in his sadly diminished party if there had been any other way of making sure of Roger's death.

The aircraft dived twice again before Roger reached the first dinghy, and, ripping it open, pulled the valve and let it inflate. As it blew up with a hiss of compressed air, the plane made a last attack, and, as it passed over, several heavy splashes within a few feet of him showed how anxious the enemy must be to finish him, for she dropped a shower of spanners, tools, and any other heavy objects that her crew could scrape together. Roger paid little attention to them, for by the time they had passed over he was paddling towards the other dinghy, which he secured and then headed for the outfall.

Faint and far away he heard the reports of musketry and grinned again as he realized that the parachutists had struggled back to the rim-rock, from whence they were doing their best to hit him. The splashes were a good four hundred yards short, for the marksmen were carrying only short-range automatic weapons, and with those they could scarcely hope to reach him. A glance along the ridges assured him that they could not reach the
cliffs above the gorge for several hours. Consequently, with a fairly light heart, Roger, sitting in his dinghy, plunged into the black gate a few minutes later.

His last immediate fears were wiped away when he saw how deeply and smoothly the river piled itself through the entrance. There were no rapids at this place, although the roar and hiss of the great volume of water charging solidly through the narrow channel were terrible enough to hear. In contrast with what he had just gone through, however, Roger felt serenely safe and almost at peace.

As the day passed the dinghy careered along in mid-stream, and it settled down to a steady five knots as soon as it was away from the lake. Roger grew increasingly anxious as he tried to guess what the Leader’s next move might be. The brute would be certain to have agents down the river, who would be able to take steps to have Roger waylaid as soon as the Mekong emerged from its sheer gorges and ran through villages and towns. Radio would put the Leader in communication with his own men in China; probably the ether was already crackling with orders to cut him off.

The worst of it all was Roger’s ignorance of the Mekong’s geography. At any of the river’s bends he might float out of the gorges into gentler territory. At any one of them an ambush might be awaiting him. His only hope was to leave the stream before then and strike away through the hills in a last effort to reach civilization. Beyond a dim idea that Burma lay to the west, and Thailand somewhere
to the south, with China all around him, Roger had not the least guide as to where to run, nor any certainty of his present position. The map he carried, the only thing he had brought from the jerry-can, was not nearly detailed enough to mark any of the many small lakes through which he had passed, nor to give him any clear idea of what might lie ahead. His one chance lay in getting downstream as quickly as he could and then guessing the right place at which to quit his boat.

He was anxious to remain in the boat for as long as possible; he was making a good five knots, a speed which he could never reach if he was afoot among these terrific mountains. Above all, he was moving swiftly without having to exert himself, and in that rarefied atmosphere, where breathing is always difficult, this was of vital importance. As the day passed and he continued to glide between the great walls of glistening rock, Roger began to feel really rested.

A few hours after quitting the lake he heard an aircraft overhead, but in the thin ribbon of sky over his head he failed to see it. It was not until dusk that he saw the first scouting plane. He was drifting along a small widening of the river, not broad enough to be called a lake, but a good hundred yards across, when he saw a Messerschmidt outlined against the summer sky far overhead. The pilot saw him too, for he came as low as he dared and then released three bombs, two of which burst harmlessly against the rock hundreds of feet up, the third plumeted into the river two hundred
On the World’s Roof

yards astern of the dinghy. Roger scarcely felt its spray, and though a tremor ran through the boat at the underwater shock, its resilient rubber sides saved it from any injury. By the time the Messerschmidt returned to the attack, Roger was safe inside the narrow gorge again.

For a long time he considered mooring to some outcrop of rock for the night; he was afraid that he might encounter rapids in the dark, but finally decided to keep moving. The enemy, he thought, would probably estimate that he would not dare to travel once the light was gone, so that the ten hours of night might put him at dawn fifty miles ahead of their calculations.

Roger’s luck stood good, the stream’s smooth rush never wavered nor broke all through the long hours before the ribbon of sky overhead turned grey with the dawn, but, when the sun’s rays finally managed to pierce through, he saw that it would soon be time for him to leave his boat. The banks were becoming much lower, and less precipitous. If he kept on running downstream it could not be long before an aircraft picked him up, but he decided to risk travelling for another hour, hoping that the Leader had been deceived into starting his patrols fifty miles farther upstream in the belief that the fugitive had moored for the night.

Then, as suddenly as though he had been thrown out of a gate, he was whisked between two shoulders of cliff and found a broad valley, almost a plain, so far back were the distant mountain ridges on either hand, opening in front of him. Roger lost no time
in sheering into the side and making his boat fast to a tree-stump growing close to the water’s edge. A quick glance at his map told him that he was in the Valley of Lamdo, and so within fifty miles of Chaimdo.

Some distance ahead the roofs of a village rose around the red-tiled and scalloped roof of a small pagoda dominating the humbler houses from its position on a knoll, while across the plain farther off were the roofs of many farms and the smoke of several villages. There were plenty of people working in the fields, or walking along the lanes and the bank of the river lower down, but, fortunately, none was close enough to see the fugitive as he emerged from the water. After his long rest from physical toil in the dinghy, Roger’s brain was cool and alert, so that he was very much alive to the fact that this was the very place where he must expect an ambush. The Leader would certainly have his arrangements perfected at this, the first point, where it was possible for the Germans to make easy contact with the fugitive.

Scarcely understanding why he had not been seen as he was whisked out into the open through the gorge, Roger saw that the first thing he must do was to sink the dinghies. That took him only a few minutes, but, after he had done it, he was faced with the greater problem of how he was to travel dressed in his bulky flotation-suit, and completely without money or equipment. He had been forced to leave his sheepskin chupa behind when he got into the flotation-suit, for, large as that garment
was, it could not accommodate the bulky shepherd's clothes. He might be seen at any moment, and, if he was once spotted, there could be no escape, for anyone dressed as conspicuously as he was in so thickly populated an area must cause a great deal of interest.

He was forced to dive into a brake of bushes beside the bank, as two sampans came round the corner, working their slow way upstream, and, to his alarm, anchored just opposite where he was lurking. After some chattering the men on board started fishing with trained cormorants. At any other time Roger might have been both interested and amused by what he saw, but, in his position, he was anxious only about his escape. He watched the sharp-eyed birds launch themselves from the sampans' gunwales, where they had been sitting like statues, and pursue their quarry for as much as fifty feet under water, generally emerging with the flapping fish in their beaks. The birds tried hard to gulp the fish down, but Roger saw that each one had a brass ring made fast around the base of its neck, so that when the bird swallowed the fish stuck fast at this point. With the scaly body choking it the cormorant was quickly in distress and waddled over to its master, who promptly turned it upside down and shook it over a basket until the still-live fish was disgorged.

Roger privately thought it rather hard on the poor bird to be deprived of its catch in this fashion, and he began to consider them very stupid creatures always to return with so much zest to the fishing
after being cheated like this. Then he saw that each seventh fish became the bird's property, its master loosening the brass neck-ring every time one of his cormorants had brought him six fish, and allowed him to enjoy the seventh.

Time passed maddeningly slowly, while Roger remained in that thicket watching the four Chinese fishermen, but at least the delay did give him time to think over what his next step should be. Finally, after a very long hour, during which the fishermen made a fine catch, they decided to move on and, toiling against the current, disappeared upstream. As soon as they were out of his sight Roger rose to his feet and took a cautious look round.

He saw at once that any movement would be madness. He could not have emerged from the thicket without being seen at once. The fields near the Mekong's banks had become thronged with people working their land during that hour, while pack-mules and squealing-axled carts were passing along most of the many tracks between the fields. The nearest group of toilers were scarcely more than one hundred yards away, working with their hoes in a large field of some root vegetables which he could not identify. There was nothing he could do, except to wait for dark as patiently as he could, and then, by making a wide detour, hope to get past the villages and find some other river transport below them.

About midday he had concrete proof of how sensible he had been not to show himself in public, for a long sampan, powered with an outboard
motor, came chugging slowly past him, breasting the strong current. In her stern was an unmistakable European who was apparently in command of the ten villainous-looking Chinese riflemen sitting on the boat’s thwarts. A few seconds later the engine was stopped and the boat swung to an anchor. The European spoke in German, bidding his interpreter tell the crew that though they intended to remain at anchor for a few hours, they must keep their eyes open.

"Tell them," he growled, "that my radio signals say we may expect this foreign spy to come out of the gorge some time to-day. It has been calculated by the Leader’s staff that he should be swept out of the mountains by this afternoon or evening. They say that, counting all the stops he may have made for fear of running into rapids in the dark, and also by our aircraft’s spotting of him, he cannot possibly arrive before noon at the earliest. There are one thousand American dollars for the first man of them to see him. It should be easy for he is in a yellow dinghy, a rubber boat which will show up very clearly on the waters of the river. That is all, but do not forget—one thousand dollars for the first to see him!"

Roger sat back grinning to himself despite the deadly danger of his position. So the Leader really had underestimated his enemy! Thanks to Roger’s having faced the odds and run by night, he was clear of the Mekong gorges ahead of schedule, but that was an advantage he would soon forfeit if he did not make immediate use of it, for, if his dinghy
did not emerge from the gorge, the German would start searching for him lower down.

Roger lay still, looking at the men who were hunting him and trying to find some way in which he might get away to gain every precious second of a start that he could. But, if his bulky flotation-suit was seen by the labouring peasants, they would cause so much fuss that the attention of the ruffians in the long sampan must be drawn to him at once. The problem seemed insoluble as he sat there, glowering at those men in the long sampan, who were chattering and squabbling less than fifty yards away.
CHAPTER XV

Flight by Road

The morning crawled past with a slowness which made every minute seem an hour to the young man hidden in his thicket within fifty feet of death. But if it was infinitely wearisome to Roger it was even more boring to the men in the sampan. For the first hour or so they kept an eager watch on the distant gorge, whose black cliffs stood up like a gate, with the waters spilling through into the wider reaches of the valley, but, as time went on and nothing happened, even the glittering prize of one thousand dollars, unbelievable riches to them, could not keep their attention unflaggingly on the quest.

Roger heard them grumbling about sitting still for so long, and after a while their protests became so loud that the German in the stern-sheets, who was himself feeling the strain of waiting, grunted permission to weigh anchor and chug a little farther upstream.

"Tell them that it may be just as well if we do move," he ordered his interpreter. "When this accursed spy does come tumbling out of the gate we may as well be nearer at hand to grab him before he can land and lead us a long chase. By what I've heard over my radio he is a slippery customer."

Roger watched the sampan get under way and
breathed a sigh of relief when he saw it go half a mile upstream before the stuttering of its exhaust died away and it settled down to ride to its anchor. As soon as he was sure it was moored, he crawled to the inland side of the brake and, staring out, saw that a Chinese farmer, busily plying his mattock, was within forty yards of him. The man’s back was towards the thicket as he laboured, coming steadily nearer, while Roger tried to think of some plan by which he might obtain possession of the fellow’s clothing. He did not wish to injure the innocent man, but he knew that there could be no way of persuading him to part peaceably from his garments without causing sufficient stir to attract the attention of other peasants, and so bring those men in the sampan storming along. He steeled himself with the recollection of how vital it was to the lives of millions of human beings that he should win through to civilization with word of what was happening back in Tibet, and so gained the necessary resolution to do whatever was necessary to ensure his own escape.

For the next quarter of an hour the man came steadily nearer, while Roger was delighted to find that there was no one else within three hundred yards of the thicket. The nearest man to the mattock-wielder was digging in a small field across a little dyke, quite close enough to see or hear anything out of the ordinary, but unlikely to be disturbed otherwise. For a time things went well; the man came closer with each minute but, when he was still forty yards away, he reached the end of the row on which he was working, and Roger saw that
he would soon turn round, and start going away from him. At all costs, therefore, he must attract him within the thicket, and there overpower him without causing the least disturbance.

The answer to the problem of inveigling the man into the bushes beat him for a long minute until, suddenly, he had an inspiration. Lying quite prone, he thresher the dry twigs with his arms, and ceased only when he saw that the labourer’s attention was drawn towards him. After a few seconds the Chinaman, plainly believing he had been mistaken, again bent to his work, whereupon Roger thresher the branches again, his eyes keenly watching the man out in the field.

The farmer straightened his bent back at this fresh disturbance, and stared once more at the thicket. When Roger gave a couple of feeble flaps, he dropped his mattock and started slowly to advance. Roger’s glance in the reverse direction showed him that the sampan’s crew were still completely wrapped up in themselves and taking no heed of anything downstream. He tensed himself as the labourer neared him, but relaxed again as the man halted, a dozen yards from the outer bushes, his keen eyes peering into the tangled thicket. Roger ventured one more feeble flapping, which seemed to make up the man’s mind for him. He probably thought that some animal, probably a neighbour’s pig, might be entrapped in the branches.

Roger smiled grimly to himself as he saw the mean-looking black eyes. The farmer was a middle-aged man with greed and self-seeking stamped on
every wrinkle and line of his weather-beaten yellow face. He was only too plainly weighing-up the chances of keeping the pig for himself, of slaying it and leaving the carcass until after dark, so that he might come and collect the pork for himself and his own family. Roger gave one more enticing flap, and then, practically invisible in his grey flotation suit in the depths of the thicket, lay quite still awaiting whatever might happen.

The farmer came swiftly closer, and, parting the outer branches, peered in as though puzzled. Roger, with his face hidden, only a dimly-seen greyish mound in the deep shadow, gave a convulsive wriggle. That made up the farmer's mind, and, after another glance to make sure that none of his neighbours was close enough to see what he was doing, he dropped on to his hands and knees, and crawling beneath the lowermost branches, came towards the heap on the ground.

The rest was easy—Roger had him by the throat before the Chinaman could utter a single cry. The frightened man, his deep-set, slit eyes shining with fear, lay quite still, expecting death, too terrified to offer the least resistance. By gestures Roger let him know what was wanted, and ten minutes later the exchange of garments was effected; the farmer, dressed in the bulky flotation suit, was lying bound and gagged within the depths of the thicket. Roger hated himself for what he was forced to do as he saw the man's frightened black eyes shining above the bandage of the gag, but, telling himself that he had no choice, carried on.
He came out of the thicket, and, fighting hard to keep his patience and not to spoil everything by undue haste, picked up the mattock and carried on working for a good half-hour as though he were the farmer himself. Then, strolling back to the thicket, he made quite sure of the knots and lashings, before, shouldering his mattock, he walked away towards the village, carrying a large bundle of long-leafed "celery-cabbage" he had cut from the plot. He shouldered this bundle, making it large enough to half conceal his face as he bent beneath the load, and, not in the least noticeable in his cotton shirt and trousers, his feet in flat-soled shoes, he plodded along the path towards the red-tiled pagoda.

Behind and around him, everything seemed normal—the sampan lay quietly at its moorings, the peasants, bar a few who, like himself, were carrying head-loads to the village, were working in their fields. No one spoke to him; no one seemed to think him in the least suspicious, not even when he turned left along a path which branched from the trail and passed out and beyond the village. Roger shed his load a mile farther along, and then, bearing his mattock on his shoulder, strode briskly towards the point where the Mekong, after describing a big loop, ran straight once more as it headed for the mountain gateway at the southern end of the valley.

Mile after mile he marched, keeping his eyes averted, his face bent towards the ground, whenever he encountered anyone on the way. No one seemed to think this at all strange, for, in civil-war-
torn China, men and women mind their own business, so that he passed without rousing the least question in the minds of those he met on his way.

The sun dipped towards the western mountain ridges, and he began to meet large parties of farmers and workmen returning to their villages from the fields. As the dusk deepened he saw that some of them were looking suspiciously at him, as though wondering what a man with a mattock on his shoulder could be doing out in the open, when the time for the evening meal, for rest and sleep, were coming to a work-weary world.

Roger was very tired, for he had been walking for a very long time, and knew that he must get into hiding until, at last, the night fell and people would no longer notice him. When the inevitable pursuit started it would be fatal if anyone told the Leader's agents about a strange farmer who had passed them heading south at such a late hour. He stepped into a copse of tall trees beside the road as the shadows lengthened, and, sitting down in the deeper gloom, really began to feel his tiredness, and, even worse, his hunger.

With no money, and not a single word of Chinese, there seemed to be no way of ever satisfying his need for food, and, helped by his growing exhaustion, he began to feel the full hopelessness of his position. The German in the sampan, Roger reflected, must by this time be getting anxious that something had gone wrong with his Leader's plans. The pinioned farmer in the flotation-suit, too, might have been discovered. If he had, the hue-and-cry
would already be roused. The exits from the broad valley might already be closed against him—men, inflamed by the promise of a huge reward, be seeking him in all directions. Roger's spirits sank to a new low level as he thought about the long odds against his ever reaching civilization. Then all his fighting spirit came flooding back—he had gone through so much already that he was in no mood to surrender tamely.

It was at that very moment he heard the wheezing engine of a motor truck, and, almost disbelieving his ears, at such a sound in such a place, moved down to the side of the track. After a while, spouting flame and smoke like the legendary dragon, he saw the vehicle, and grinned as he remembered having read in some magazine or another about the weird, native-built vehicles that the Chinese run on coke-gas in the remoter parts of their country. On it came snorting, banging, rattling, and as it drew nearer, Roger heard the chattering and squealing of the passengers packed into its body at the back. If the truck was headed out of the valley it would give him his best way of making his escape, especially as the Leader would be concentrating on the Mekong River route.

He crouched behind a tree so as not to be seen in the light of its feeble headlamps, and, as the truck passed, he ran out reaching for its high tail-board. It was not making much more than fifteen miles an hour, so that he found he could hang on for the few seconds he needed before he was able to drag himself clear of the road. The lurching and
bumping almost threw him off, but by sheer deter-
mination, he at last threw his leg over the tail-
board, and fell amid the cursing people already
aboard.

The little close-packed party swayed along the
track for an hour or more before the truck drew to
a halt. Then, to his horror, Roger saw that a party
of soldiers in Chinese Army uniform were blocking
the way. He could not understand, of course, what
the officer shouted, but as all his fellow-passengers
were in a tearing hurry to alight, Roger quickly
followed suit, and stood among them while the
soldiers searched the truck. The worst moment
came when the officer stalked among the frightened
wayfarers and started asking questions; Roger took
the only course he could, and moped and mowed
like a village idiot when his own turn came, making
gurgling sounds to show that he was dumb.

The officer held a hurricane lamp to Roger's face
for a moment, but evidently satisfied by the packed
dirt and the crazy, contorted expression on the lad’s
dark face, made no further examination. Roger
could scarcely believe his luck, not realizing that
his filthy and toil-stained features had saved him
from being recognized as a foreigner.

After that halt things were easier for a little while.
By listening carefully and gleaning a word here and
there, Roger learned that the truck was bound for
the big town Chungtien, a couple of hundred
miles down the Mekong Valley. There were several
stops, while the two drivers got down to make
repairs. The coke fumes made them all sick, and
the lurching completed the effect of the gas. The aged radiator boiled on three mountain paths, and, on one occasion, they spent a whole hour pushing the truck up a steep gradient after it refused to go any farther with a load. Roger worked as hard as the rest, putting his shoulder and body to the sides of the truck as he heaved and shoved in an effort to get it going again.

Sometimes his fellow-passengers tried to speak to him, but on each occasion quickly desisted when they recalled how he had behaved when speaking to the officer at the road-block. The passengers huddled more closely together as, bowed aboard by the obsequious driver, two lamas climbed in among them. Roger found himself close to them and, as the night passed, grew extremely interested in what they said to each other. Speaking their own language they evidently thought that none of these Chinese peasants, whom they only too plained despised, could understand a word of what they said.

Roger, startled at what he heard, bent towards them trying hard, amid that inferno of noise, to hear every word the monks were saying. Then, excited by what he heard, he was about to join in their conversation, when the lorry squealed to an abrupt stop, as a stentorian voice shouted orders from the dark. Roger glanced over the side, found facing him, a little way back from the side of the track, his face revealed in the dim glow from the headlamps—the Leader himself! Four of his own staff stood near him, and a whole platoon of Chinese army troops were in close attendance!
CHAPTER XVI

The Ending of a Menace

Roger remained transfixed with astonishment, until, several seconds later, the terrified jostling of his fellow-passengers throwing themselves over the side of the truck in deathly fear of the prodding bayonets, brought him back to a realization of where and what he was. The hated face of this terrible man, the driving power of the savage and relentless hunt for himself, made him seethe with a rage which drove out his terror, so that he suddenly felt as fresh as though the game had just started.

While he was alighting Roger noticed that the staff-officers surrounding the Leader were personally seeing the truck’s passengers, taking no chances of the hunted spy slipping through their net. They must have received news that Roger had not only got safely away from his dinghy, but that he was heading in this direction, otherwise the Leader would not have been present at this remote place. The pinioned farmer must have been found and told his story of being stripped of his clothes, and some of the country-folk too in all probability had spoken of having met a strange peasant carrying his mattock long after the time when he should have been turning homewards.

Roger felt a momentary chill as the realization of
the sinister power and tremendous authority of this man reached him, but, even so, he was no longer afraid. Determination to settle the whole matter then and there filled his soul. If he could kill the Leader, the whole dastardly plot would fall to the ground, for there was no other person still alive whom the surviving fugitive war criminals would follow with the blind and fanatical faith they had in him. Once he was dead the whole grisly brotherhood would drop apart through the mutual jealousy of its members as they intrigued to be his heir. Men like them could never trust each other, as they did this Leader whom they worshipped.

Roger stood shivering among the rest of the peasants, pretending to be as frightened as any of them, while the Chinese troops yelled and threatened them with their bayonets or menaced them with their pistols. The two lamas, meanwhile, remained quietly at one side, their hands folded inside the wide sleeves of their mantles. Their faces were clearly visible in the light of half a dozen powerful battery lanterns which the soldiers had hung on branches to aid them in their investigations; Roger clearly saw their lips moving in the endless prayers of their profession.

The Leader seemed to be beside himself as he struggled to keep control over his cold rage and his bitter anxiety. He swayed gently back and forth on stiffly braced legs, his lips set tight, and his dark eyes glittering like those of a man in a desperate stage of fever. He spat continual questions at the Chinese interpreter, and also orders at his staff, until
most of them were as brittle and tense as he was himself. The soldiers too seemed to catch some of the prevailing excitement and suspense and became even more brutal and noisy in their handling of the truck drivers and native passengers than they had been previously, so that the screams and shrieks of the victims rose to swell the general uproar.

"Silence!" the Leader screamed suddenly, and Roger clearly saw flecks of white foam at the corners of his writhing lips. "Let there be instant silence!"

The interpreter shouted, as soon as they understood what this foreign devil wanted, the officers of the Chinese platoon joined in, and the German staff added their own commands to the din, until, at last, comparative silence, broken only by the terrified whimperings of the truck's company, reigned in the night air.

"Kill them all," raved the Leader. "They are all liars, and one of them may be the man whom we seek. Let them die! They are only vermin—human-kind will be better with the dispatch of such inferior specimens. Therefore kill them. Kill them, I say!" he screamed as he saw the Chinese interpreters hesitate to translate his words to the soldiers, who were looking with amazement and an almost superstitious fear at this foaming foreigner. "Kill them! Here, give me a pistol, and I will make a start."

He snatched a revolver from the belt-holster of a Chinese officer, and, brandishing the weapon, turned and stood facing Roger. That young man had never been quite so much afraid as he was at that moment, knowing that he was looking into the face
of death in these glaring, crazed eyes of a man who had caused so much of human death and human misery. The Leader was a lunatic. A dangerous, man-killing lunatic.

The pistol jerked up into line pointing straight at his eyes. Roger actually saw the fingers whitening as they took the pressure of the trigger, and then, without the least warning, a burst of shots rang out from just behind Roger's shoulder.

The crazed eyes suddenly leaped into a brilliant flame; the terrifying face of the slavering madman seemed to change as sanity swept across it, as though, in his last moments, the Leader was jerked back to a normal state of mind, and at last knew himself for what he really was, a feeble and very mortal man. It was all over in a second. One moment the Leader had stood there, raving in the full consciousness of his evil power over the lives of the poor peasants facing him, the next he lay dead on the dusty track, his head only a few inches from the off-rear-tyres of the decrepit motor truck.

Before the German officers had time to draw their own guns, the heavy pistols spat fire once again, and, one after another, the foreigners dropped as dead as their Leader. Roger spun round in amazement and saw what he had almost expected—the two lamas with the guns they had drawn from the depths of their wide sleeves still smoking in their hands, looking down on the prostrate bodies. One of them turned, his habit skirts whirling, to face the Chinese officers and troops.

"If any man moves he will die," the monk said
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sternly. "What you have seen is no murder, but a just execution ordered by the high lamas and the great abbots of Tibet. These men were so evil that only by their removal from this earth could human kind be saved. If you interfere with us, soldiers, you will draw the curse of a hundred thousand monks on your heads. If you molest us or try to stop us, rest assured that you, and your families, will wither and die under the great power of the curse, which will be loosed against you by all the great wizards and mighty sorcerers of Tibet, those great beings who have the power and the will to protect us. We are merely their humble servants and executioners, who have carried out their commands."

Roger was a fascinated witness of all this, but the sudden change from almost certain death at the hands of the Leader to the destruction of the whole gang was so quick and unexpected that he was too shaken to speak. It was just as well that he could not make himself known, for if the lamas and soldiers had suspected that another foreigner was present they would have been careful to remove such an important witness. Even as it was, the officers spent a lot of time discussing whether or not to kill all the people from the motor truck, for fear that they would spread the news of what they had witnessed. The two lamas saved the passengers' lives, as they were opposed to any unnecessary shedding of blood. What they had done themselves they looked on as a just execution, but to massacre the wayfarers would be inexcusable murder, and to this they would not agree.
After some argument the soldiers bade the peasants go, warning them all to keep their mouths shut about what they had seen. Roger climbed into the truck with his companions, and, a few minutes later, with its exhaust flaming, the decrepit vehicle was roaring and banging along its way once more. But he lost no time in leaving the truck when a few minutes later all hands had to drop off to help push it up a steep rise, and when it resumed its journey, Roger was no longer among the passengers standing in the back.

The fact of the Leader having come to this remote place at all suggested that somewhere in the neighbourhood must be an aircraft, or, at least, a car which would take him to one. If he, Roger, could only move ahead of the news of the shooting, he might be able to seize the machine, whatever it might be, for himself, and so get out to civilization all the more easily. There was no longer any burning urgency for his escape; with the death of the Leader the rest of the gang were not likely to make much trouble. Neither were the people outside Tibet at all likely to support any lesser man in the attempt to reverse the verdict of World War II.

Roger back-tracked at a steady lope and soon found himself within sight of the fires lit by the Chinese troops. But as he understood not a dozen words of their language, he hoped to creep close enough to overhear the conversation of the two lamas, from whom he might gather some idea of where to look for the dead Leader’s transport. In the darkness of this unknown district it would be
quite hopeless for him to start looking for it without some sort of a guide.

He found the approach unexpectedly easy, for the soldiers were too excited about what had happened to be keeping proper watch and guard. So far as Roger could see there were no sentries present at all. In the centre of a camp a party of men, stripped of their green tunics, were digging a shallow grave with their entrenching tools, and as they laboured no one seemed to be paying the least attention to anything outside the circle of light cast by their two fires and the battery lanterns hanging on the branches of the trees.

Roger worked his way around through the bushes, careful to make no noise and not to break so much as a twig, until he was just behind the two lamas, who, grim and silent, sat cross-legged, swathed in their long dark habits, as though surveying what they had done. Time passed quickly and neither monk spoke to the other while they watched the deepening of the grave in which all the Nazi gang were to be buried. Not until the last spadeful was thrown out and the Chinese officer came across and spoke to them, did either monk have a word to say. Then, after replying in voluble Chinese for a few minutes, the shorter lama broke in on his companions exhortation, to say in Tibetan that it would be as well to destroy the aircraft in which the foreign devils had come.

"Thus no one will know what had happened to them," he urged. "The details of the death of the Man of Blood will remain unknown; people will
On the World’s Roof

believe that Satan has snatched back his evil spawn. These soldiers do not know who he was, and so cannot speak of him, except to say they buried some foreign devils whom a couple of Tibetan lamas slew. So will the end of the Man of Blood become a legend and a mystery of which no one except us, brother, and our lawful superiors will ever know the answer. The aircraft is near, less than one hour’s match due north; she lies in the little valley beyond that ridge of ground. Your Chinese of this dialect is better than mine, so tell the officer where it lies and demand its destruction.”

“He will not want to do that,” the other protested, and Roger saw that the officer, not understanding a word of what was going on, was commencing to look puzzled and angry. “But I will give him the jewels we carry, for paying portage, and promise him a like amount from our abbey as soon as we can return if he makes sure of the destruction of the flying machine.”

The other monk agreed, and then both started a long and involved argument with the Chinese officer. Their nearness forced Roger to lie quite still in a real agony of mind for fear that they might send a party away to destroy the aircraft. However, he need not have worried; the officer needed all his men to help with the labour of burial of the corpses. At last they lifted the mortal remains of these men who had once made the world tremble, and carried them to the unhallowed and dishonoured hole in the ground, and, as they did so, the lamas moved forward to witness the last act in the tragedy.
Roger took instant advantage and lost no time in getting away, heading north towards the ridge they had mentioned.

He arrived near a dimly seen Dakota without accident, only to find it guarded by two Chinese soldiers, but so far as he could tell in the greying darkness, growing light with the coming of dawn, there were no Germans anywhere about. The pair of soldiers were sitting, yawning sleepily, near a small fire, and judging by the careless fashion they had lain aside their arms, evidently considered themselves to be in a friendly countryside where they need not anticipate trouble.

Roger studied the situation for some minutes, and then decided that he could approach the Dakota from the farther side without rousing the suspicions of the guards, where there was a fire a good hundred yards from the machine. The dawn darkness was still sufficient to give him all the cover he needed to reach the plane and get aboard. If he could only start the engines he believed that the soldiers would not be able to force an entrance into the cabin before he was safely airborne. There was a chance too that they would not dare to open fire for fear that someone who had the right to be driving the craft was actually aboard.

His plan worked smoothly. The soldiers, who were dozing and keeping no real lookout, did not suspect anyone had boarded the Dakota until its starters whined and the big engines crashed into life. Roger, looking out through the broadside ports, had a glimpse of the men running towards him, and he
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watched their waving arms with some amusement. For a while he was a little afraid that they might fire their rifles, but, as he had hoped, his judgment was right, neither man dared to take such a step without the order of an officer to cover him.

Roger switched on the powerful headlights as soon as he believed the engines were warm enough, and then, taxi-ing along this beam of light over the clearing, he soared over the trees at the far end. Rising sharply, he rose to meet the light of a new day as it came washing over the distant mountain crests, leaving the Valley of Death still in deep darkness behind him.
CHAPTER XVII

And Last

The remainder of Roger's journey was exciting enough, and though he had not to face danger from the enemy, the perils of wind, weather, and great heights, flying over some of the worst country in the whole world, were enough to deserve a book in themselves. After checking the fuel of the machine and finding that her tanks were almost full, he turned almost due west and headed towards the Bay of Bengal and Calcutta, a thousand miles away.

His way lay over the terrific mountains of Western Yunnan, across the border of the North Shan States by way of the fearsome "Hump". He sped over Burma with its mountains, swamps and forests, while his engines turned with a sweet note of power. All went well until he altered course north-westerly just beyond Akyab, steering for the mouth of the Ganges and the city of Calcutta. The coast of India was actually in sight when his starboard engine suddenly spluttered and died, to be followed, almost at once, by the cutting out of the port one, leaving him no choice but to make a crash-landing in the sea, and Roger brought the machine down as well as he could.

The Dakota sank almost at once, leaving him afloat on a kapok-filled cushion. A bad couple of
hours followed, during which he had to fight a shoal of too inquisitive sharks. He was picked up, finally, by a small fishing-craft, whose Indian crew were extremely surprised to find what, by his dress, appeared to be a Chinese coolie as the sole survivor of the big aircraft which they had seen, from the distance, diving into the blue waters of the Bay of Bengal.

That was the last of Roger's adventures, however, for three days later he was in London, and, accompanied by Lord Tremough, was telling his astonishing tale to a number of high-ranking Royal Naval officers in Admiralty. They listened at first with open disbelief, and it was not until the youngster got deeply into his story that they began to show interest. The turning-point was reached when they checked his account of the destruction of the atomic-bomb arsenal in the crater with some earth tremors recorded on the seismograph on the day he said he had destroyed the launching-ramps.

"We had been puzzled by that recording," an admiral muttered, "for they all pointed to an earthquake having occurred in Tibet, an area where these things seldom occur. Now we know what happened. Carry on, please."

As the realization of what Roger had saved them from grew, their admiration increased until, at last, they were congratulating him on all he had accomplished.

"About this mysterious leader," a vice-admiral asked, "have you any idea of his identity?"

Roger looked uncertain, but before he could
reply, a colonel of Royal Marines put the question which was on all their tongues.

"Do you think it was Hitler?"

"Well, sir," Roger replied uncertainly, "his voice sometimes certainly sounded very like what I remember of the ranting we used to hear on the radio in the old days before the war, but I was only a kid then and I might be mistaken. Also this chap was a blond and he certainly didn't look very much like the pictures I've seen of the Fuehrer. All the same I had a queer feeling that it really was Hitler himself."

"It might have been Martin Bormann or one of the other leaders whose fate is uncertain, you know," an officer broke in. "Though it might conceivably have been Adolph himself. In any case we shall never know now."

The rest breathed a little nervously.

"No," said the First Sea Lord, "we shall never know now, thanks to this young man. I think you'll agree, gentlemen, that we can't make an open and adequate acknowledgment of his great services, for that's something we daren't do. It would frighten half the world into fits if they knew just how close they had been to death and destruction. However, there is quite a lot we can do for you, Roger, my lad, if you want us to."

Lord Tremough looked up, his unbelievably wrinkled face like that of an old eagle as he blinked his eyes, staring at that gathering of flag-officers.

"That is a matter for which I will hold myself responsible, gentlemen," he announced.