

C O N S T A N C E    B R I D G E S

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# *Thin Air*

A HIMALAYAN  
INTERLUDE

DECORATIONS BY  
RONALD BALFOUR

*“A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!”*

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B R E W E R    A N D    W A R R E N    I N C.

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*Copyright, 1930,  
Constance Bridges*

To  
*Owen*



## FOREWORD

**T**HE world has been made safe for travellers. It is hard on the readers of books. The amateur globe-trotter has ruined the field for the professional; it is with an unhappy feeling of scepticism that one opens to an account of hardship and high exploit. The adventurer has to go to some trouble to get himself into danger.

When I returned a few years ago from some out-of-the-way places of the East, I was interested to find out how many savage tribes had attacked me, what horrible risks I had run. I had not noticed those perils before. The menace of the New York traffic seems greater.

The romance of strange countries does not have to be courted. It comes subtly to the passive recipient. This book is a record of fact. For evident reasons, I have not used the real names of the persons concerned.

I gratefully acknowledge indebtedness to "Evan," among other things, for his informa-

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tion on altitudes and things like that; to "Ian" for his characteristic decorations (done, I trust, with both hands); and to Professor Nicholas Roerich, who knows Central Asia far better than I ever shall, for a helpful conversation.

The map, used as a frontispiece, was drawn by Albert de C. Cabanné.

C. B.

*New York*  
*March, 1930.*

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*Leh*

# I

## *The Road to Kashmir*



# I

## *The Road to Kashmir*

I WAS crying quietly over the tea things; not too quietly for I hoped to be noticed.

“Dras—Kargil—then slightly south of east to Leh,” murmured Michael without looking up from his map.

We were sitting on the deck, which was also the roof of our houseboat. It was the month of May and we were in the Vale of Kashmir. The houseboat, rather handsomer than its neighbours because its carving was simpler, floated at moorings on the Jhelum River, just above the city of Srinagar.

Evan was putting a ray-filter on the moving picture camera. Ian, a pencil in each hand, was racing a Hindu on the bank. The Hindu, squatted in a neat triangle, was languidly dipping his turban in the river. Ian’s right and left hands, equally adept, were trying to put

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him down on paper before he finished and could spoil the composition. I divided my thoughts between making tea and considering my grievances.

Two bulbuls alighted on the railing and began to make love. They stopped at intervals to edge nearer to the tea table, waggling their pert little crests and preening the yellow feathers of their breasts to encourage the gift of crumbs. Things were altogether pleasant as they were. I felt sorrier for myself and succeeded in not suppressing a faint sob. Fifteen minutes before, a Chinese pedlar, persistent from a shikhara alongside, had sold me a handkerchief, price one rupee. This was useful for dabbing the eyes.

“And now what’s the matter?” sighed Evan. The ray-filter was adjusted to his satisfaction.

“The same thing. I *still* don’t want to go. Also Michael said I was a tiresome woman.”

“So you were.” Michael never retracted a comment.

“You were keen about it a week ago.”

“But I didn’t know then about the rope

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bridges. I had never heard of a rope bridge. I can't cross one, Evan. You mustn't ask me to."

"Don't be stupid. People have and people do."

"I haven't and I don't. I've had nightmares about it three nights running."

"I never suspected you were such a little coward!"

This marital taunt from Evan left me unmoved.

"Well, now you know. You'd prefer me alive, wouldn't you? Consider the nuisance to you: your wife dead from fright on the brink of an abyss. Or worse—much worse for me—glad to reel three hundred feet through the best Himalaya air rather than take one other step forward on a piece of wiggly rope."

"It really isn't so bad," said Michael; "there are two ropes joined with little ones—"

"Six inches apart!"

"Your feet aren't six inches wide, are they?"

"And holes between."

"Ropes to hold on to."

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“But struts to climb over. I can’t climb over anything even on solid ground.”

“All right. We’ll have you carried across. Like the down-country servants. Blindfold you and put you on the back of a Tibetan coolie. You wouldn’t know what was happening.”

“That’s true enough. I’d be dead from fright!”

“Oh, send her back to Europe on my ticket,” Ian suggested. His Hindu had wrapped his head in the wet turban and departed. “I’d give anything to go with you.”

“I wish you would. Evan, do let me go back to Europe until autumn. You and Michael go. Take Ian with you. I’ll sail on his passage. Then we’ll all be happy.”

“Unfortunately you can’t have my passage. I’ve a job to get back to.”

“Why did you say I could have it?”

“For God’s sake,” burst out Evan, “stop squabbling like infants. You can’t go through India in the hot weather, and that’s that.”

“Apparently Ian can.”

“He has to; besides he’s a man.”

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“If I’m man enough to cross a rope bridge, I’m man enough to stand the heat of the plains!”

“Now, listen: there’s no rope bridge so far as I know between here and Leh. We haven’t settled anything yet about Astor and the Baltoro Glacier. Now if we promise you that somehow we’ll arrange it so that *you* don’t have to cross a rope bridge, will you keep quiet and like it?”

“Yes!”

Evan looked about him severely. He was the head of the party, the oldest by two years, being nearly twenty-nine; and he took his paternal cares seriously.

“What’s the matter with all of you, anyway? We’ve had this sort of thing for days. If it isn’t Connie developing feminine hysterics and being a misunderstood woman, it’s Michael sulking because he can’t have his own way and making military noises at the wretched servants. Even Ian has had acute Weltschmerz and looks ‘Who am I? Where have I been?’ if you speak to him suddenly.”

“Whereas you are Griselda herself, I sup-



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pose,” contributed Michael. “You’ve grown so damned autocratic there’s no living with you.”

Ian helped himself to three sandwiches. “More tea, please, Connie— I dare say it’s the altitude!”

“That’s no joke,” I put in, earnestly. “It *is* the altitude. Every one here says it ruins your nerves. And why you want to go twice as high to a place where we’ll certainly cut each other’s throats—”

“Sh! I thought we’d declared a truce. Ian, put on the ‘Hymn to the Sun’ and throw me a cigarette while you’re up.”

To the melody of Rimsky-Korsakov we watched the rapid twilight swallow up the mountains, the city, and the small craft of the river.

We had been in Kashmir six weeks. My husband and I were Americans, and becoming more aware of it every day. For our good friends Michael and Ian were English. With quick natural intelligence, however, they were learning to understand American, and even,

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under pressure, to speak it. As well they might. Michael had been exposed to our quaint transatlantic dialect for eight intensive months, ever since the three of us sailed from San Francisco Bay to see how the Eastern half of the world lived. How it came about that three people each of strong individualistic temperament were still speaking to one another after the more serious hardships of months of travel—such as three meals a day, climate, boats, trains, elephants, letters of introduction, and friends of friends—is an intimate record of endurance and tact that should be written.

Sufficient comment is that when Ian joined us (by request) at Agra in March, we welcomed him with the same hysterical joy that greeted Wilson in Europe.

The first of April we left trains behind at Rawal Pindi. There we took the Kashmir road in motor-cars. Our ridiculously vast luggage lumbered behind in a van, fishpoles and films spraying over the top. That two of us were British accounts for much of it; one of us a woman, accounts for more; and the fourth,

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which explains everything, a camera fiend. By necessity one travels *en duc* in India. Mohammed Jan made it *en prince*.

Mohammed Jan was Evan's bearer. He adored the sixty pieces of luggage, his burden and his pride. Only with tears would he have relinquished a single one of them. The more the luggage the greater the sahib; therefore the more important the servant. He liked to worry; we let him. On the station platform he regimented a little army of coolies, snapped out commands in Michael's best manner (he adored Michael), and rushed from spot to spot with the energy of a fox-terrier. Four feet ten of him in white linen, European save in outflaring shirt tails, successfully harassed a dozen lethargic natives into double time. He pushed a black Astrakhan cap back to a rakish angle from a perspiring brown brow, rolled his blacker eyes with the ferocity of command, and was perfectly happy. He was nearly twenty-three years old.

Hussein, Jan's friend and mentor, and the servant of Michael and Ian, suffered too much

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from dignity to join in such activity. Suggestive criticism was his province. He was known to us, very privately, as "Rudyard" owing to a startling resemblance to a certain well-known author. He did his work adequately, but without unbecoming haste. In his spare moments, of which he found a good many, he read ponderous-looking books in English. Being a good Moslem, he kept his eyes fixed on the ground whenever I spoke to him. This moral habit made me nervous. I am certain that after two months with us he had no clear idea what I looked like. May the houris in Paradise be fat and beautiful for him!

In addition to Jan and Hussein, we had with us my mistake—an ayah from Bengal. She was an unmitigated detriment, devoid of any merit except good looks. These three and the bedding-rolls went into a Ford. We were grand in something that might have been a Cadillac of the vintage of 1906, chauffeured by a turbaned driver who was more dashing than confidence-inspiring.

We turned our backs on the hot plains of

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India and were soon in the outer hills. We climbed from garden-roses and jungle foliage to hill-scrub; then a steep ascent to the long-needed pines of Murree, and snow. To the east rose the snow-covered peaks of the Pir Panjal. We had reached the door of the Himalayas.

The next day we dropped down again to the Jhelum River, the town of Kohala, and banana trees. The road followed the course of the river, wound around spurs, and clung to the side of cliffs. We spent our nights in dak bungalows. These shelters are primarily for the accommodation of Government officials. For the traveller it is first come, first served. He brings his own bedding and his own servants; and he can order from the simple store of provisions enough to make an adequate meal. He must reach his stopping place by sunset. After that, the ox-carts have the right of way. Not so many years ago there was no motor road and the journey had to be made by tonga, a matter of two weeks. Now the energetic can do it in three days.

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We took longer about it. The third day we started late, probably owing to me. We delayed further, certainly owing to Ian. He showed himself suddenly the victim of a terrible obsession. All English males apparently belong to one of two classes: those who must go out and kill something and those who must get out and dig something up. Michael shared tepidly the characteristics of both. Ian definitely belonged to the latter.

“Oo-er! Wait a bit. Stop the car!” Ian’s topi flew off as he dug like a beaver into the heap of small luggage on the floor.

“What’s the matter? Did we hit that dog?”

Ian reappeared, red in the face, with a trowel, a pair of clippers, and a tin box. He waved the trowel.

“Over in that field near the ilex trees. Do you see them?”

“Oh, the lovely red lilies,” I said. “Do you want to pick some?”

“Lilies indeed! Do you realize that they are Crown Imperials? No, I am not going to ‘pick’ them. I’m going to dig up some bulbs.”

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He also added that they were *galliaest omnisdivisa*—or at any rate some such name. Michael scrambled out after him. In half an hour they were back, pleased with themselves and dirty from head to foot. The tin box was filled with mud and bulbs; and they carried a dozen or so of the royal blossoms. The huge orange and vermilion cups of flame were the proudest things I have ever seen. This was our introduction to the prodigality of flowers that is Kashmir spring.

Sunset caught us on the road and the ox-carts descended upon us. We had no business on the narrow thoroughfare. Their drivers knew it. They exchanged compliments in the vernacular with our chauffeur in the manner of the best Paris taxi-drivers. Progress limped. A few miles from the dak bungalow we overtook an unhappy family party. We managed to salvage a bedraggled Englishwoman, a baby, a bassinet, some blankets, and a nursing bottle from their broken-down car and arrived as dusk turned to night to find the bungalow was full.

Half-a-dozen aviation officers on leave had

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pre-empted the place. They were a type new to us. The "temporary gentleman" of the war has given place to the intermittent one of India in peace-time. The day of the "pukka sahib" is waning. These were good chaps, adventurers of the mechanic class; they showed themselves conversational and affable. They were rough, strongly Cockney, and noisy; unnecessarily brutal to the natives; but two of them doubled up that the woman and baby might have a room. The four of us slept on the floor of the verandah. It did very well.

The next night at Domel was a bad one. I had a touch of fever; and matters were not improved by the discovery that the legs of the charpoy had permanent residents, both restless and hungry. I relinquished my claims, gathered up my bedding and took to the floor. To my irritation, Evan slept peacefully.

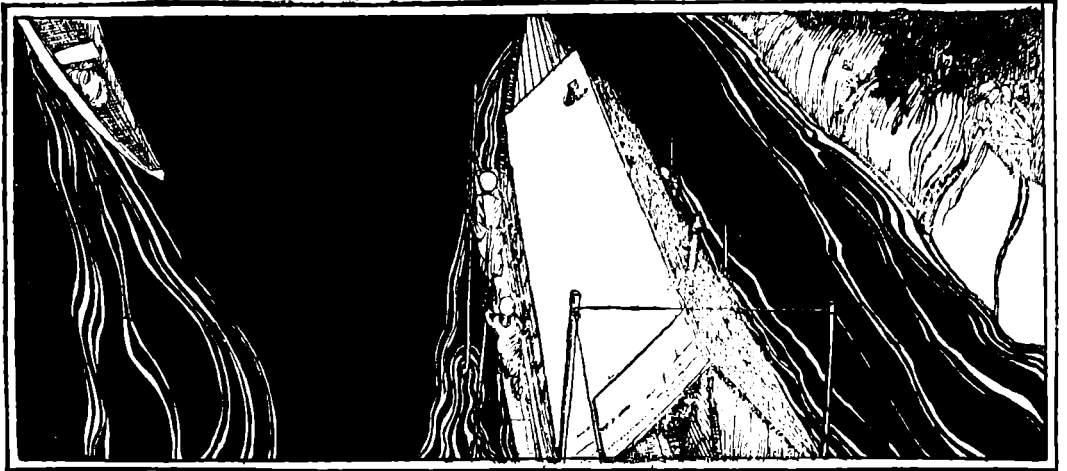
In the morning we discovered that Ian had had a worse night. Michael, awakened by strangled moans, had just in time extracted an enormous moth with many sticky legs on its way down Ian's throat. Ian was not as soothed



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as he should have been by being told it was a fallacy to breathe through the mouth.

From Domel the country grew wilder. The gorge of the river narrowed between steep red cliffs. The side nullahs, covered with forests of pines and ilex, bared vistas of immense snowy peaks. Ruined forts along the Jhelum valley crowned the bleak rocks, reminders of the days when Sikh fought hillman. To-day the only excitement is the imminent possibility of avalanche and landslip. Now we climbed rapidly and the season rolled back as we went on. The tropical vegetation gave place to the flowers of earliest spring. The Jhelum, which had been roaring past us through a deep constricted chasm, suddenly broadened, flattened, quieted. Before us the country unrolled like a wide cloth. We had reached Baramulla; we were in the Vale of Kashmir.



*The Houseboat and a Shikara*

## II

### *The Houseboat*



## II

### *The Houseboat*

FROM my childhood the words "The Vale of Kashmir" have sung in my imagination. I liked the roll of them on the tongue. Since they connoted nothing concrete, the images they evoked were untainted by the slightest reality. The name embodied all that was romantic, because I had no idea where on the face of the earth Kashmir might be nor what it might look like. It was as remote and as fantastically desirable as Xanadu or the Garden of Eden. Its vagueness was its chief charm. When journeys to odd corners of the world became possibilities instead of speculations, and Kashmir an attainable objective, I dreaded seeing it for fear I should be disappointed.

I knew very little about it. It has always been protected from the rest of the world by its natural barrier of mountains, and so has been

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singularly independent, singularly free from the outside invasions that have made India run with blood. Its wretched history has been at least its own. Its early Hindu rulers oppressed the people diabolically. The worst of the lot was Harsha, the "Nero of Kashmir" who fleeced the peasantry efficaciously in the eleventh century. Again at the present day it is a Hindu state. Its ruler is the Maharajah of Kashmir and Jammu, who, like the other independent sovereigns of India, has the benefit of the advice of a British Resident.

In the fourteenth century, Islam was imposed upon the people, according to the best traditions of the Prophet, with the sword. An adventurer from Swat became the first Mussulman ruler under the name of Sultan Shamsu-d din. The unlucky Kashmiris found themselves no better off under the Mohammedans than under the Hindus. Sikander, the "Idol Breaker," was as great a tyrant as Harsha. The fierce old bigot attempted to stamp out all traces of the Hindu religion, but not successfully. The Brahmans, the highest caste, were stiff-necked and refused

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to apostatize. Those he did not put to death he exiled; and he took out his spleen in destroying many of the finest temples. A few years after his death, there is a bright patch on the ugly record. The Sultan Zainu-l'Ābidīn ruled beneficently for the first half of the fifteenth century. He recalled the Brahmans, encouraged them to build new temples, and, most important of all, permitted no cows to be killed. For this novel tolerance, he is regarded as a saint.

Akbar, in 1587, added Kashmir to his Empire. It must have been easy. The Kashmiris are not noted for their courage, but at least they have the merit of self-knowledge. Only a few years ago they headed a petition to the Viceroy of India:

“We, being a weak and cowardly people, do—!”

In fairly modern times the Afghans and Sikhs successively have made Kashmir their debating ground; not until the end of the last century has Kashmir had anything like a decent and just government.

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It was not, however, the political difficulties, not its picturesque history that primarily interested us. It was the peculiar beauty of its physical setting that had brought us half way round the world. Kashmir was not as I had imagined it. Nothing ever is. But I was not disappointed.

At our feet a pattern of yellow and mauve primulas, narcissi and tulips, threaded among the acres of purple iris, wove a brocade of gay colour against the green of early spring. As we drove along poplar-bordered roads we saw the valley through a veil of nacreous almond blossoms.

By afternoon we arrived in Srinagar and unloaded our luggage at Nedou's Hotel. Nedou's Hotel is an institution. British officers on leave and polyglot travellers—French, German, Russian, American—drift through it; the Old Stand-bys—retired civil servants, the widows of army officers, and the unclassified fringes of Anglo-Indian society—make it a headquarters and a home. It is essentially like any Indian hotel. The traveller is well used by the time he

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has crossed India to the indispensable mosquito net, the portable tin bathtub, and the kerosene tins that are used laboriously to fill it. He is familiar with the isolated dining-room, the separate structures for the reception rooms, and the deep verandahs that shadow his sleeping apartment.

Nevertheless Nedou's has individuality. It resembles a club whose members are drawn from the four corners of the earth.

The mynah-bird was our first acquaintance. We met him at luncheon. We had seen many of his kind in the plains of India, but had never known one intimately before. This fellow strutted through the door with an air of "Here I am." One bold black eye appraised the room. For his own reasons our table seemed good to him. A short flight, difficult for him because he was fat, landed him on its edge.

He folded his head against his neck and stared at us critically. We spoke politely to him but waited for him to state his business. He addressed me immediately.

"What are you drinking?" he inquired, and



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dipped his black acquisitive beak into my glass of ale. He tipped his head back and swallowed it meditatively.

I pushed my glass towards him. He hopped backwards suspiciously and blew out his feathers with disgust.

“Not so good! Anything better next door?”

Michael offered his whiskey and soda. This was more to his taste. He drank deeply and often. In five minutes he established himself on Evan's shoulder, swayed tipsily from one foot to the other and, bracing himself against Evan's ear, apparently watched the room revolve in circles before him.

I hastened to explain that we were not his corrupters. He was sunk in vice when we met him; and if we encouraged him in his degeneration it was because he was too far gone to reform. Our friendship with him continued until the day of our departure to be on this bibulous basis. Like so many drinking companions he paid his way in conviviality and amusement.

The bulbuls that haunted our verandah ap-

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peared to be better Mohammedans. They avoided strong drink, but they indulged in greed. There was no limit to the number of crumbs they ate and at tea-time our lives were scarcely worth living because of their attacks upon the cakes.

After lunch we decided to present a letter of introduction to one Captain Ross. Months ago in Japan we had told a friend that we planned to come to Kashmir. He had said immediately: "You must be sure to look up a very good friend of mine, Captain Norman Ross. I'll give you a letter to him. He is a good chap. He will be delighted to see you and he'll show you the ropes."

That was all we knew about Captain Ross. But for no good reason we had a clear picture of one of those "outpost-of-Empire" men living in a stark bungalow somewhere on the edge of civilization. It would be an act of humanity to look up such a solitary man.

We ordered a tonga and set out to present ourselves and our letter. A tonga is the chief means of local transportation. It is uncom-

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fortable, mentally and physically. Your Western zoöphilomaniac objects to the undersize of the Kashmir pony and the perfervid enthusiasm with which he is lashed by the native driver. His body rebels against the acute angle at which he must sit, back to the horse, on a too narrow, too fragile seat.

We clattered through the bazaars of Srinagar and exchanged stares with the population with more curiosity on our side than theirs. Foreigners are no novelty to the Kashmiri.

The streets of the bazaar swarmed with a crowd colourless for the East. The common costume is a drab, shapeless garment hanging below the knees. Even the white turbans are not very white. The lower castes and the boatmen wear close-fitting skull caps of brown cloth. The predominating texture and hue are those of the potato sack.

Under a generous layer of dirt they are not bad-looking. The Kashmiri Brahman is truly handsome. He is of fairly pure Indo-Aryan stock, tall, fair-skinned with a long nose and

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regular features. The women might be beautiful if they were scrubbed.

They are not a joyous people. In the business transactions and conferences, which take place with endless leisurely parlance in the Oriental manner on corners, in front of shops, and in the street, there is little of ceremony and less of gaiety. Children and mangy pariah dogs dodge unheeded between and around adult legs. Without reproof, undersized but sacred cows snatch mouthfuls of fly-ravaged vegetables from sidewalk stalls. The narrow congested streets reek with the smell of humanity and frying food.

This was our first impression of the capital of Kashmir.

We were outside the town again, passing fields under cultivation, blue flashes of iris, stiff lines of poplars, dark chenars; above us Haramouk's dominating crest shone pure and sharp against the bluest of blue skies.

We turned in a long driveway between a pair of stone columns and found ourselves in a formal English garden.

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“I think the driver has made a mistake, Evan,” I said, “this must be the Residency at least.”

“It said ‘Ross’ on the gate posts,” Michael said.

“The Army houses its officers well,” Evan muttered.

We were stopping in front of an imposing house. We had not seen an imposing house since Viceregal Lodge in Delhi.

A *sais* came running and took the tonga-pony’s head. Two servants resplendent in white flung open the door at the head of the steps.

“Captain Ross?” Evan gave up his letter uncertainly. Surely we had been “had” somehow.

The butler disappeared, reappeared, noiselessly.

“Will you come into the drawing-room? Mrs. Ross will be happy to see you. Captain Ross will be down directly.”

“Mrs. Ross?” Our lonely bachelor dealing with papers in a hill-side shack was vanishing

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in smoke. Precisely what were we doing here?

“How do you do?” A fair, very self-possessed young Englishwoman held out a cordial hand. “I am Norman Ross’s sister. Do come in and meet Mother.”

We went in and met Mother.

Captain Ross appeared—on crutches. He had, it seemed, hurt his knee at Rugby. Certainly, they play Rugby in Srinagar.

“Yes, we live here.” . . . “We’re practically the oldest residents.” . . . “Come to dinner.” . . . “—tennis party to-morrow . . . that’s all right. We’ll lend you rackets—”

Then:

“Your houseboat is arranged for you. It took some time, but I think I have the best one for you—Bittulph wrote me—you’ll find everything in shape, I think. . . . I’ve got a good cook for you. The other servants will be available in a day or two. . . . When do you want to take over? To-morrow I’ll put you on to a man who’ll make every sort of ar-

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rangement for you . . . Oh, no trouble at all. Glad to help—”

We left a bit dazed. Did someone say once that the English were a cold and inhospitable people?

Of all this kind family, into which we were warmly adopted, the kindest was the shy young man on crutches. Allah alone knows the mistakes from which he withheld us, the complications from which he preserved us and the unmerited way in which our path of ignorance was smoothed.

The next day we saw our houseboat and we met Ahmdhu Siraj. Ahmdhu was a Kashmiri whose business it was among other things to undertake bandobasts of any sort, a bandobast being arrangements plus. Ahmdhu had one eye and a small beard. He was a Moslem and a gentleman. His efficiency and dependability were equalled by his tact. May his shadow never grow less!

The houseboat was a child's dream of house-keeping. Outside an attenuated Swiss chalet afloat. Inside an amusing doll's house. The

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drawing-room was complete with fireplace. In the dining-room you could seat six and still mix a drink at the sideboard. One of the three bedrooms had two beds with several inches left over. And in either of the two baths, you could, and did, put in and out a tub large enough to bathe all of a moderate-sized dog or a good quarter of yourself at a time. Topside was a roof garden, sun porch or deck, whichever you preferred.

Ahmdhu met us at our boat. She was tied at a landing on the Jhelum River, and we saw for the first time that chief highway of the City of the Sun. For Srinagar, called the "Venice of the East"—though surely Bangkok has as sound a claim to the title—is a network of canals and waterways. The stream of life flows through the city with the river. Barges laden with rice or wood ply up and down and make their sales to the boats coming alongside. Many a *dunga* is a Kashmiri's only home. The reed mat hut erected on a long flat-bottomed scow can shelter an enormous family with all their possessions. The ghat serves as



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landing place, bathing place, market and laundry.

Near our future home were a dozen other houseboats of various sizes. The occupants were chiefly English families escaping the hot weather of the plains. Each had beside it a shikhara, a necessity for daily journeys. For the shikhara is to the river what the tonga is to the road. It serves the purpose of the Venetian gondola. It is a thinner, more delicate dunga in shape. But how much grander!

Forward on the shikhara attached to our houseboat to be was a canopy from which hung tasselled curtains of red and white Kashmiri embroidery. The space beneath was piled with multi-coloured cushions. The deck aft held six paddlers. The small deck in front of the canopy would do nicely for Mohammed Jan.

“When can we move in?” I wanted to know. We had lived in hotels for months. This was a lazy woman’s idea of Paradise.

“The lady is pleased? In a very few days certainly. Then there will be the servants.”

“That’s a thought. Where do we put the

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servants?" said Evan. The houseboat would hold us four comfortably, and that was all.

Ahmdhu smiled politely and waved at a large, ugly dunga near by.

"The servants sleep on the cook-boat which is also the kitchen."

We hadn't thought of a kitchen.

"How about Connie's ayah?" bright thought from Ian.

Mohammed Jan, who had been standing at respectful attention with downcast eyes, now made indistinguishable murmurs.

"What did you say, Jan?"

"I wish respectfully to offer that mem-sahib send the ayah home. Ayah is great trouble for all. If mem-sahib permits I can make packings and care most neatly for dresses."

Evan brightened. It was he who fell over the inefficient ayah, he who had suffered from her complaints of homesickness; it was his shaving-soap that disappeared to wash my stockings.

He half-heartedly demurred. "But, Jan, that will make extra work for you."

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“Not so much extra work,” said Jan obstinately and bitterly, “as ayah is trouble.”

“I think the lady will be more satisfied,” said Ahmdhu softly. “It is always found that ayahs are a difficulty in Kashmir.”

So it was settled that the ayah was to be sent back to Calcutta to everybody’s satisfaction including her own. Mohammed Jan became official lady’s maid. It was his vocation. A few days later we were installed. We had a magnificent retinue. In Kashmir there is no servant problem. Numbers compensate for individual inadequacies. If one is cheated, as one undoubtedly is, what does it matter? One is cheated with smoothness, style, and discretion; and the sums are small.

It is no wonder that the petty government official, the small town middle-class Englishman, stationed in India, loses the sense of proportion that is imposed on him at home and gains an amazing misapprehension of his own importance. However minuscular a frog he may be in any other puddle, here he is a *sahib*; if he is moderately rich, he is a great lord with

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an impressive retinue—a servant to dress him, another to look after his luggage, a khitmatgar to wait on him at table, a cook and kitchen assistants, a bhisti to fill his tub, a sais or two for his horses, a sweeper, a laundry boy. That is the nucleus of a modest menage.

With the addition of a half-dozen boatmen such is the minimum of servants on a houseboat. They all live, heaven knows how, with wives, children, and unclassified relations on the cook-boat. That discreet appendage is little in evidence. It comes alongside at meal times and quietly disappears again. When the houseboat travels it wags along behind, the tail of the dog.

The first day we were on the boat I succumbed to temptation. Lalla, our “parlour maid,” spoke excellent English and intervened between us and the rest of the world. He came to me in the drawing-room where I was meditating on the possibilities of dyeing the faded curtains a cheerful yellow.

“A pedlar insists on seeing the mem-sahib,” he said. “I have sent him away. I have said

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the mem-sahib cannot be disturbed, but he says he will wait. He is waiting. What shall I say to him?"

"What is he trying to sell, Lalla?"

Lalla laughed scornfully, "Dogs."

Evan groaned. "We are ruined. Tell him the mem-sahib cannot see him, Lalla."

"What kind of dogs, Lalla?" I asked. "After all, Evan, if the poor man has been waiting for hours, it is only decent to see him myself."

"Very young dogs, Huzzur, one white, one yellow."

"I think I will just have a look at them," I said cautiously.

"It is dangerous, oh, it is very dangerous!" said Michael.

The dog seller's dunga was permitted to come alongside. We went out on the forward deck. In the bow of the dunga stood a villainous-looking, low-caste Hindu, smiling and bowing ingratiatingly. He held towards me two minute balls of fur, all paws and bulge.

"Ask him what kind of dogs they are, Lalla."

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“He says they are very valuable Chinese dogs, chow-chows. I would not believe him, Sahib,” Lalla shrugged.

Evan opened the yielding mouth of the white puppy. “They are certainly like no chows I have ever seen. They haven’t got black tongues.”

Lalla interpreted this to the Hindu. His reply was voluble. “He says they are very special rare breed, different from other chows.”

“Um-m, they aren’t chows at all, but they are amusing. Ask him how much he wants for them.”

“For heaven’s sake, don’t encourage him,” put in Michael.

Lalla translated indignantly. “Twenty-five rupees for each, Sahib; the man is without reason!”

“Send him away, Lalla, I wouldn’t give him more than two rupees for the pair of them.” We walked back inside. “That was a narrow escape. When Connie sees a dog of any sort, she loses her head.”

“They were pretty sweet,” I said, and re-

## THIN AIR

luctantly went back to the curtains. Three packages of Twink would do for the lot of them.

The episode was not closed. In half an hour Lalla reappeared. "The man will take your offer, Sahib."

"What man? What offer?" said Evan.

"The dog-walla. Two rupees for the pair, Huzzur."

Evan groaned. "Did I offer him two rupees?"

"Oh, yes," we all agreed unscrupulously. The puppies had had a certain success.

"You will regret it. They will be a terrible nuisance. Well, you will take care of them; you will be responsible for them."

"They won't be any trouble. Where's Jan?"

Jan was summoned.

"Jan, do you like dogs?"

Jan took one look at the puppies and grinned.

"Oh, yes, Sahib."

"The mem-sahib wants these on the boat. Will you look after them?"

"Oh, yes, Sahib, give them to me." Jan held

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out his minute brown hands. "I will wash them."

"They are too young to be washed," objected Ian.

"They are too dirty to be touched otherwise," said Jan firmly, and disappeared with the dogs.

We duly christened them Mumtaz and Akbar in spite of the fact that they were both females. Akbar, the white one, was healthy and stolid, but the yellow Mumtaz had a checkered existence from the moment of her arrival. First she developed some infantile complaint, crawled groaning into my lap, and behaved as if she were about to die. I laid her on the sofa with her head on a cushion. She moaned and stiffened and rolled her eyes dangerously. We were alarmed.

"Quick, let's give her some brandy." Michael rushed for a bottle and a teaspoon. We forced a few drops down her throat. It had an instantaneous and astonishing effect. Mumtaz struggled to her feet, shook herself, and jumped to the floor. She then began to stalk in-



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visible objects and make little rushes at nothing at all. After a time she was overcome by a sudden great drowsiness. She curled herself into a tight little ball in front of the fire and slept the sleep of youth and innocence. The next morning she was completely recovered and so far as I know has never had a moment of ill health since. I am not quite certain what the moral of all that is, but it is no argument for prohibition.

Mumtaz had the pioneering instinct strongly developed. When the weather grew milder we used to sit on the roof after dinner. One evening when we were drinking our coffee and the puppies peacefully gambolled round our feet, we heard Mumtaz give a slight yelp because Akbar had nipped her too hard. We looked down in time to see Mumtaz leave the game indignantly, march straight to the edge of the deck, and plunge into the Jhelum. Michael leapt into the shikhara and succeeded in distinguishing in the dim starlight a pale miserable object bobbing around in the water. Mumtaz retrieved was only temporarily chastened. She

## THE HOUSEBOAT

was fed more brandy; but I am not cynical enough to believe it was in that hope she took her midnight plunge.

The very next night when Michael was in his room dressing, he heard a plop and a faint plaintive squeak. There was Mumtaz sitting in his fireplace. She had come down from the roof by way of the chimney. She was a bit shaken, but undeterred; for, two weeks later when she had grown perceptibly, Ian discovered a yellow tail and a pair of hind legs waving from the top of the same chimney. He crawled out on the roof and rescued Mumtaz, who had stuck at her widest point, her middle.

It was evident that Akbar and Mumtaz were pariah dogs of the vulgarest birth, but at first we were optimists enough to believe that care and environment would offset heredity. We were to be disillusioned—later; but now at the age of four months, with their puppy fluff washed and combed, and equipped with bright red collars and leads, they were not unprepossessing.

The end of the Feast of Ramadan was at

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hand, which was a relief to us as well as to our Moslem servants. They had, not unnaturally, become temperamental after a month of fasting. In the month of Ramadan your good Moslem may not touch food from sunrise to sunset. Since as a result he sits up most of the night and is sleepy and cross during the day, masters and servants watch with almost equal eagerness for the first sign of the new moon. The day before, we had a message from the cook: "Will the sahibs mind not having bacon for breakfast this morning?" The devout follower of Islam is supposed never to touch the unclean flesh of pig in any form, but servants of sahibs must be philosophical to a degree. However, on the Feast of Ramadan it would be a greater sin than ever. Accordingly in the morning we went without bacon and gave and received small presents. Lalla had made the boat gay with bunches of iris, mustard flower, and poppies. It was very like an Easter morning.

Ramadan over, we decided to travel. The sinister Kashmiri who owned the houseboat pro-

## THE HOUSEBOAT

duced for us a band of boatmen. They lined up on the bank; our permanent crew got out their paddles; the servants rushed fore and aft screaming invaluable suggestions. We were off to the Dhal Lake.

Beneath the wooden bridges, past the crowded dilapidation of the bazaars, under the carved balconies of the papier-mâché manufacturies we crept slowly. We passed the gaudy Sher Garhi palace, the flashing spires of Hindu temples, and the beautiful mosque, Shah Hamadan. Before the mosque a thousand Moslem foreheads were pressed to prayer rugs.

On the roof Evan endlessly turned the crank of the cinema. Out of the city the river flowed between flat mud banks, yellow with mustard and red with poppies. The high white circle of the Pir Panjal range floated with us like a halo.

The boatmen, trudging along the shore with the tow ropes looped over their shoulders, kept up a rhythmic singsong as they pulled. Ian had an inspiration to brighten their lives. He brought the gramophone to the deck and put on

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Chaliapin's record of the "Volga Boat Song."  
Regrettably it had no visible success.

The Dhal Lake makes a flawed mirror for an amphitheatre of mountains. The surface of the shallow water is broken into three by bars of sand. Near the land the water is dense with reeds and velvety lotus-pads and further out spotted by mats of water-growth and curious floating gardens. The lake gardeners make long strips from soil-filled cones interwoven with water weed and plant thereon melons and vegetables, which flourish on their rich nourishment.

On the shores of the lake, serene and beautiful against a stern backdrop of basalt crags soaring thousands of feet into the sky, are three of the most famous gardens in the world, the gardens of the Great Moguls.

These inveterate builders made Kashmir their summer pleasure ground. Nishat Bagh, Nasim Bagh, and the Garden of Shalimar are a graceful monument to the memory of the Emperor Jehanjir.

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Our houseboat travelled at our whim from one anchorage to another. We would leave it tied to the bank beside a grove of green turf and dark plane trees and go off in the shikhara. We would take the cook, Jan, and Lalla, cameras, rugs, and books, and lose ourselves in one of the gardens.

While lunch was being prepared and spread on the shady grass among the irises and lilacs, we prowled about the black marble pillars of the summer house and up and down the worn stone steps of terraces where a stream of water cascades from level to level, leaving its pool of many fountains to find the lake. Well-fed, we would lie under the trees; and read, or sleep, or dream. Towards sunset grave families of Mohammedans, airing their docile young, prostrated themselves to the east in answer to the call to prayer. About us a circle of half-starved pariah dogs, who had with distrust snatched crusts from our hands, drew nearer, squatted on their bony haunches and wistfully hoped that we would stay for dinner.

At dusk the respectful pacing of the watch-

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man warned us that the gates must lock behind us; we would leave regretfully and recapture at the water's edge that most beautiful sight of all: the rosy mountain tops and the purple rocks and their fairy-like replica in the violet water.

The boatmen sang softly, unmelodiously, to the dip of their paddles. We were silent and thought our thoughts.

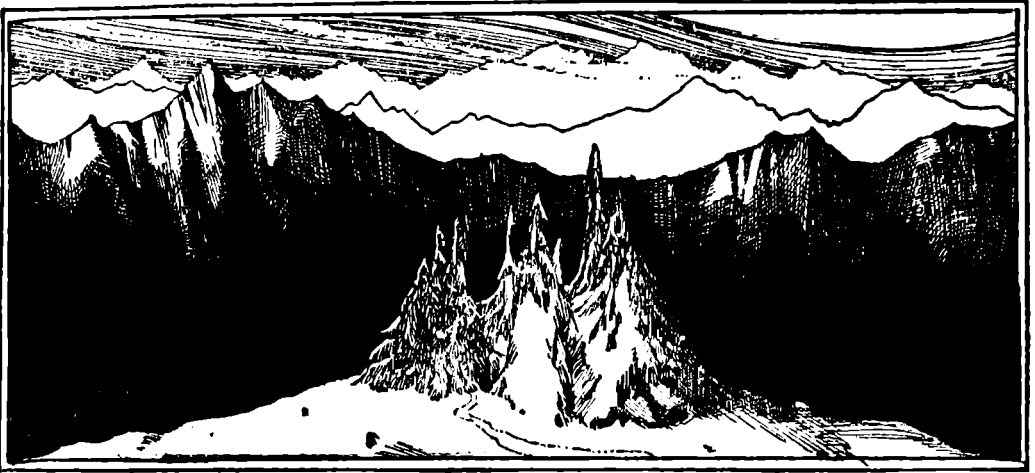
The lights and bustle of the houseboat brought a change of mood.

“Let's play ‘Analogies’ until dinner. Connie, you think of a person.”

“All right. I have one.”

“Oh, God!” said Michael.

“I agree,” said Evan.



*The Gilgit Road. Traghah*

### III

## *The Meeting at the Residency*





### III

#### *The Meeting at the Residency*

WE wallowed in idleness. Throughout long days we sat under our striped awning, each doing what pleased him best. Michael hated to be interrupted in his elaborate map-making even for meals. Ian sketched steadily—a series of imaginative fantasies. His specialty was naked women. When we expressed solicitude over this symptom of a dangerous suppression, he would grin guiltily with his cigarette drooping from his upper lip and go on placidly creating his paper harem. His left hand sufficed if he was half-hearted about it; but when he was absorbed by the intricacies of a Beardsleyesque pattern, he used both hands on opposite corners of the design to the respectful wonder of the rest of us.

Evan found interminable occupation in the collection of cameras. The big cinema, the

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middle-sized cinema, and the pocket cinema, the Graflex, and the tiny folding camera each had to have the care of a newborn baby. There were films to be fed and films to be disgorged, lenses to be changed, ray-filters to be put on or taken off. All this industry served as pretext for stirring from the boat as little as possible.

My rôle was to read aloud and, since no one paid any attention to me, I read what I pleased. At the moment this was history. My listeners were amused at what they pleased to consider my pedantry. Turned against me of course, the mimicking phrase, "What did Bismarck say in 1874?" passed into our language. I am certain that not one of them, then or later, could repeat what Bismarck did say, if anything, in 1874.

My New England conscience, which functioned for other people more than for myself, finally insisted that we should take exercise. The form of exercise requiring the least personal effort is riding. Accordingly we hired four local tats. The chief memory I have of our excursions on horseback into the beautiful side nullahs is a picture of Ian. Ian was six

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feet tall and as slim as a needle. He did not know how to ride. His pony was something bigger than a Shetland and, if he got his stirrups well shortened, his feet managed to clear the ground. Since he and his pony never agreed on a rhythm, it was hard to persuade him to sit down for his dinner after a long day theoretically in the saddle. He always took along his trowel and his tin box, allegedly to collect the roots of rare plants. Anyway it gave him opportunities to get off the pony.

We returned from riding one evening to find an invitation for all of us to tea at the Residency. This amounting in the small society of Srinagar to a Royal Command, we set off the next day by shikhara through the network of canals that form the short cut between the Dhal Lake and the city. Lady Thornton hated to entertain and cut occasions for it to the official minimum. To-day in an orgy of desperate social housecleaning she threw open the Residency to the local élite, colonels (with wives) on leave, and those of the visitors who had been inducted into the group.

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After we had spoken our piece, we sought out the Rosses. Like experienced sheepdogs they rounded us up, assigned us and separated us. Michael fell to Daphne, the fair-haired daughter; Captain Ross, who had discarded his crutches, took charge of Evan and Ian; and Mrs. Ross bore me off to be inspected. Throughout India every one had asked me: "Have you seen the Taj? Have you met Mrs. Dufferton?"

Better not go to India than miss either of those notable institutions! Mrs. Dufferton was sitting at a point of vantage in the first reception room where she missed not one of the incoming or outgoing guests. I liked her at sight. She looked like a fat, elderly sparrow with an eagle eye. I was not in the least put off by the warnings against her sharp tongue and passion for personalities. In ten minutes of Socratic conversation, Mrs. Duff (she was universally known as Mrs. Duff) found out more about me than I knew about myself. The moment was inadequate for a complete investigation; so she asked me to bring my party to tea. I explained

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that we were going to the Wular Lake, and accepted for our return.

If Mrs. Duff had only known it, I was fully as interested in her as she was in me; a classification party would be reciprocal. She was old, she was witty, she was worldly-wise; and the most entertaining person I had met in months. What did I care if she intended to dine out for the next six weeks on my personal idiosyncrasies, real or synthetic? When Mrs. Ross in pity tried to sweep me away, Mrs. Duff plucked at her sleeve.

“She must meet the other American. I want to know what she thinks of him. I can’t place him at all.”

She beckoned to a tall young man who had just come in from the garden. He had been looking about him vaguely, but Mrs. Duff had a talent for catching the wandering eye. He joined the group.

“I cannot remember your name,” she said, “but you two are compatriots and must meet.”

“David Wendell,” said the young man, bowing. He had candid blue eyes, tanned skin and singular good looks.

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“I remember you very well,” he said to me. I was puzzled. I was sure I had never seen him before, but I was impressed by the feeling of significance and familiarity in this meeting.

This he promptly dispelled.

“Six weeks ago you and your friends were standing on the railway platform when the private car of the Maharajah of Kapurthala came by. I was in that car. A week later there was a dance at Maiden’s Hotel. I saw you come down the main staircase. I stood up to let you go into the ballroom.”

“You were staying at Maiden’s Hotel?” I made polite conversation.

“Oh, no. I was at Viceregal Lodge.”

Mrs. Duff promptly asked him to tea with us.

“Here’s a man you must meet,” said Mrs. Ross. “If you are thinking of making any expeditions into the country around here, you ought to be on his good side.”

“We are not thinking of making any expeditions,” said I in my ignorance, “but I should like to meet him in any case.”

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Major Sterne was waylaid and presented. He was impressively tall and broad, but his fine physique was only a few years this side of pomposity. He acknowledged his introduction to me with a nicely balanced mixture of affability, potential interest, and consciousness of his own fascinations.

“Major Sterne, Mr. Wendell.”

The two men bowed stiffly. There was a faint flash of hostility.

“We have met before, I believe.”

“Ah—um-m, I believe so, yes.” Major Sterne turned his back and asked me how I liked Englishmen. In return I learned that Major Sterne found American women delightful, oh, perfectly charming, but that he did not care for American men. Nor for any other men was my swift impression!

The Resident came up with Ian in tow and asked me if I would care to see the garden. Sir William and Ian had already discovered a common interest in what will grow, how, in what soil, if any. I went along to hear the illustrated lecture. We threaded our way through



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the group around the tea table. I had a glimpse of Evan listening with grave attention to a thin, dark man who was drawing something in the air with his hands. From Evan's rapt expression I concluded the man must be a scientist. Michael was surrounded by three or four young women all of whom looked vaguely like horses. I caught snatches . . . "How perfectly devastating" . . . "It must have been too, too lovely!" . . . "I think it is a ripping place, don't you?" That last one is pre-war, I thought. Michael will say she dates.

It was twilight when we got ourselves together and we were paddled back to our home by the faint light of the new moon.

"I have accepted an invitation to tea for us as soon as we get back from the Wular Lake."

"Thank heaven for the Wular Lake," said Michael. "I have used it to turn down four invitations to the Club dance."

Evan was preoccupied. "We are fools to waste our time dawdling around Kashmir. If we don't look out we shall be doing nothing but drinking tea with old women and dancing with

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avid spinsters. We ought to get off in the hills and see the real country. I met a chap to-day—an interesting man—who has been stationed up in Chilas.”

I was wrong, not a scientist, I thought.

“The streams up in the hills are full of brook trout, I hear,” Michael said wistfully.

The tourist instinct was reasserting itself—we must push on, see things, do things.

“We are going up to Tragbal from the Wular, aren't we?” said Ian. “Sir William tells me that above seven thousand feet you find some very rare orchises—”

The lights of the houseboat shone orange in the thick blue dusk. The shikhara pushed its way heavily over a mass of lily pads. Mohammed Jan appeared on the forward deck. His hands and face were blotted out in the darkness and he seemed to be a small empty suit of white linen. Behind him Akbar and Mumtaz fell over their feet and yelped welcomingly. It was pleasant to come home. The bhisti came running with kerosene tins of hot water. Evan and I flipped a coin for first bath in spite

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of my theory that since I took longer to dress I should always have first bath.

Gaffara was lighting the candles, Lalla, as a special treat, was putting ice in the gin and vermouth, and Ian wound the gramophone. To the music of Boris Godounov, the current favourite, we drank our cocktails, pushed the excited puppies about with our feet, and thawed out the evening chill with a snapping fire. Why ever exert ourselves again?

The next day we were off for the Wular Lake and climbed six thousand feet of steep mountain trail to Tragbal. We were soft. We panted and rested. The plainsman, Jan, was exhausted but game; but the three hillmen servants that went with us took the sharp grades in a steady effortless stride. In the valley that we left below us the fruit trees had burst into thick blossom. The trail climbed through a forest of enormous pines. The flower-filled glades glittered with blue and gold; and below us the lake, sparkling in the bright sun, grew smaller. Suddenly we were in snow. The sweeping branches of the deodars bent under

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their white weight. The little shelter was almost invisible. Its blanketed roof nearly met the drifts blown up against it. Lalla, arrived ahead of us, and the chaukidar were piling logs on an already roaring fire. Our teeth were chattering from the icy mountain wind and even at dinner time we were glad to bring our plates within the radius of intense heat and to eat sitting cross-legged on the floor. After dinner a wild gaiety seized us. At twelve thousand feet the sharp air was more intoxicating than Lalla's cocktails. I flung open the door of the hut. The moon made the smooth pure mountain-side glisten with millions of tiny candles. The deodars were lighted Christmas trees. The distant peaks floated in the silent air like a mirage. All but one of us yielded to the enchantment.

"I must go out into it," I said. Michael and Ian agreed.

"I, for one, am going to bed," said Evan. We taunted him with being old.

"You can always go to bed," said Ian. "You will never see another night like this."

"I shall never see anything again if I don't

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get some sleep," Evan retorted. "I am conscious of having climbed a few feet to-day!" And forthwith he did go to bed.

Michael, Ian, and I put on our wolf-lined coats and went out into the brilliant night. We were too exhilarated to feel cold. The wind had died down and not even the shadow of a branch moved on the snow. It was so hushed and so unreal that we lowered our voices to a whisper. The surface of the snow had hardened and we no longer sank into it. We walked for about a mile through the black deodar shadows, wondering a little about wolves and wild cats. We came suddenly round the flat shoulder of the mountain to a blank treeless slope. Above us and below us a quarter-mile stretch of soft white snow ending in a gentle upward curve! We did not try to resist the immediate temptation. We climbed to the top of it and began an unusual descent. Had one of our servants chosen to follow us, he would have been struck to wonder at the mad sight of three sahibs rolling like barrels, faster and faster till they reached a dizzying speed.

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Three black, shapeless objects in amazing convolutions against the silver serenity of Tragbal mountain! We arrived at the bottom breathless and drunk. There were now six moons dancing in the sky and the stately deodars had burst into activity and were gyrating meaninglessly in the background.

In the morning we climbed to Tragbal Pass. From the bleak waste of great snow fields, we saw an ocean of new peaks.

“What is the country in behind the pass?” Evan asked Lalla.

“Beneath the snow is the trail that leads across the Deosai Plains.”

“And what is beyond the Deosai Plains?”

“Baltistan, Ladakh, Tibet.”

“I should like to see those places. Is it possible to get into that country?”

“Sahibs have gone; but nothing is possible until the snow melts.”

“Oh,” said Evan, and looked meditatively at the breaking billows of mountains.

We sat in the snow for luncheon, blinded with the glare and tortured by our cold wet feet

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and the sharp wind, but light-headed with the joy of being at the top of the world.

The next day we went back to the houseboat. We took the descent chiefly on the run. It was pleasant to catch up again with the warmth of spring. It proved to be our last day on the Wular Lake. Faces of consternation met us at the boat. Hussein, looking very portentous, asked permission to speak in private to the Bara Sahib. He and Evan disappeared into the dining-room for conference. Evan's face was grave when he came out.

"We had better move on back to Srinagar at once," he said.

"What is the matter?"

"Cholera. It has suddenly broken out in this village. Five people died last night. It's endemic here, of course, but it has never broken out so early in the year. The headman of the village came to-day to warn the servants that it promises to be a terrible epidemic."

"Perhaps we have all got it now," suggested Ian.

"We should probably know it by this time if

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we did! There is not much chance. The servants swear that they have got no supplies from the village. Have you been inoculated, Ian?"

"No," confessed Ian.

"Well, you were a fool. We wired you to be sure and have it done before you sailed."

"Didn't have time. Besides, I hate having needles stuck into me."

"You are going to have a needle stuck into you damn quick and so are the rest of us and so are the servants."

"But *we've* been inoculated," objected Michael.

"That was a year ago. The immunity lasts only three months, they say. Back we are going for a pleasant little party."

And back we went twice as fast as we came.

To our surprise the servants were only too ready to submit to the serum. The medical mission on the hill was crowded with applicants for treatment. Cholera and the news of it had spread like fire throughout the valley. It spoke well for the intelligence of our Kashmiris that they were willing to submit to the inoculation.



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The majority of the natives prefer the disease to the prevention. But they were a pathetic looking queue. They were shaking as if they were being marched to their execution and the poor little sweeper who looked like a mistreated mouse nearly shook himself out of the clothes that were too big for him, and fainted before the needle touched him. They looked proud and relieved when they shuffled down the hill. This was almost as good as an amulet or a sacred relic worn around the neck.

We took double precautions. Our vegetables and ourselves were submitted to baths in a potassium permanganate solution. The permanganate had no distressing effect upon the vegetables, but we came out of the tubs dyed a striking brownish red. In spite of these precautions Evan was uneasy. The death toll multiplied every day. Several Europeans in Srinagar died.

“I think we should get out of this place,” said Evan. “If there is a germ lying about loose, Connie is sure to pick it up. People who live here are not very worried. They say it is

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worse than usual, but they are used to out-breaks.”

We went about to dinner much as usual.

“I notice they are getting off to Gulmarg as fast as possible,” said Evan. Gulmarg was the hill-station at eleven thousand feet that served as the local summer resort.

“Let’s take a hut at Gulmarg,” I offered.

“I have a better idea,” said Evan. “Let’s go to Leh.”

We all said that was a splendid idea except Ian.

“I think you are cads to go without me,” he moaned. “I have to go home in two weeks.”

This was the haphazard way we liked best to travel. It was like closing your eyes, dropping your finger on the map, peeping to see what you had hit, and—going there. Evan’s enthusiasm was not so blind. He had, we discovered, been turning such a trip over in his mind ever since he met the officer from Chilas. He had a plan and route already formulated.

Leh, we found, was in Western Tibet and the capital of Ladakh. It lies northeast of Kash-

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mir in the heart of the western Himalayas. Ladakh was severed politically from Tibet when the British Government ceded it to Kashmir by treaty about fifty years ago. The inhabitants are ethnologically Tibetan and speak a Tibetan dialect. They practise Lamaism, a form of Buddhism debased by an admixture of devil-worship and the lowest Hindu polytheism.

Leh, lying close to the Tibetan frontier, is the nearest city to Tibet reachable by Europeans. That mysterious closed country has, for many centuries, been protected from outside influence by its natural barrier of mountains and the fierce reserve of its people. Leh itself has contact with Tibet through the caravans of yaks and mules that come into it from Lhasa. Hundreds of miles from a motor road and more than five hundred miles from a railway, it can only be reached by weeks of travel over caravan track on foot or on pony.

“Doesn’t that seem a good sort of place to see?” demanded Evan.

We agreed that it did.

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“The first thing to do is to get government permission.”

“How do we do that?” asked Michael.

“We go to see the British Joint Commissioner. And immediately.”

“And who is the British Joint Commissioner, since you seem to have made such thorough investigation of this brand-new idea, Evan?”

“One Major Sterne,” Evan informed us, complacently.

“Major Sterne,” I reflected. “In that case I had better go with you.”

We came out of the Commissioner’s office flourishing our permits.

“I am glad that’s over,” said Evan. “It didn’t seem to me that the Joint Commissioner cares much for travellers in his territory. One can hardly blame him after the trials he’s had with some of our dear compatriots recently.”

“He seemed relieved to find you weren’t the son of a famous President, anyway,” said Ian.

I murmured, “I have heard somewhere that he doesn’t care much for American men. By the way, I have much to say to you, Evan.

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What was all that chi-chi about special permission for a woman to go to Gilgit and Chilas? What have we to do with Gilgit and Chilas?"

"Oh, shucks," said Evan airily, "just in case we decided to go there. It's useful to be prepared."

"*And,*" I went on, "what did he mean by asking if you were prepared to have me cross a rope bridge? It sounded awful. What's a rope bridge?"

"Why—er, nothing at all. Just a method of getting across the rivers."

"That I gathered! *What sort of method?*"

Michael with a malicious grin was delighted to tell me.

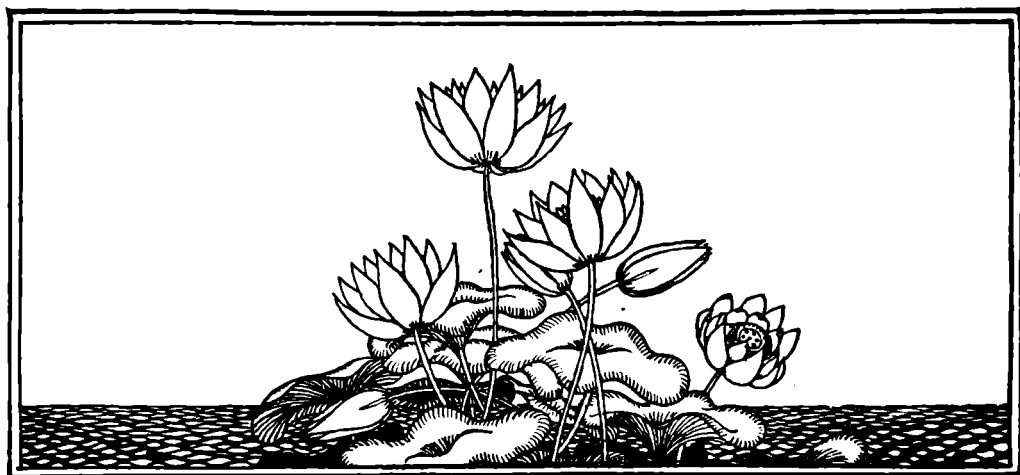
At that moment my enthusiasm caught a chill. My disposition soured; I had cold spasms of fright; I brooded and grew sulky. I demanded constantly to be sent home. When this did me no good and I succeeded only in being unpleasant, I tried tears.

April had slipped pleasantly by us. It was now early May. This brings us back to the beginning of the story—that afternoon on the

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houseboat when I cried so unsuccessfully into the tea. It was definitely decided we should go to Leh. I acknowledged defeat and determined, since there was no way out of it, to be a great big sportswoman!





*Lotus Blossom on the Dahl Lake*

## IV

### *The Value of Crystal-gazing*





## IV

### *The Value of Crystal-gazing*

**W**E began immediately to prepare for the trip. That was dull for Ian, who had nothing to prepare for but his journey home to England. The first difficulty was rearranging the menage.

We found we had not finished with tears. We got torrents of them from Hussein and Mohammed Jan. Evan decided that Hussein was too aged and short of breath to endure the hardships of the hills. He should, therefore, accompany Ian back to Bombay. When we broke the news to him he dissolved with grief; and, what was even more trying, so did his devoted friend Jan, who, of course, must accompany us, come what might. Tears and hurt pride from Hussein, tears and intercessions from Mohammed Jan—poor Evan was nearly flooded out.

It was hard to explain to Hussein that we did

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not think he could stand the journey and it was harder still to bear the reproach of his every gesture. Naturally the tender-hearted Evan suffered most from it.

“But, Hussein, why are you so eager to go? You have a much pleasanter and easier job offered you in Bombay.”

Hussein folded his hands over his ponderous stomach and pride struggled through his obsequiousness.

“I have an intellectual interest in that country, Huzzur.”

“Intellectual interest?”

“I am, you see, a student of comparative religions.”

He belonged to an obscure Mohammedan sect that concerns itself with the teachings and personality of Christ, a sect that has, it surprised us to learn, a strong foothold in Chicago, U.S.A.

“Do you not know, Huzzur, that the body of Christ is buried here in Srinagar?”

Huzzur did not know.

“Yes, Sahib; it is well-known in India. Issa did not die on the cross; he fainted and his dis-

## *THE VALUE OF CRYSTAL-GAZING*

ciples bore him away. They hid him until he recovered and, after, he came to Srinagar, where he died. I can show you his tomb with the inscription 'Son of Joseph'; it is in the basement of a private house here in the city."

This interested me greatly. I wondered if George Moore had based his story on this Moslem legend.

"Have you ever read a book called 'The Brook Kerith,' Hussein?" I asked.

He kept his eyes cast on the ground as usual.

"No, Mem-sahib."

Perhaps one didn't discuss religious matters with women!

In spite of all this, we were still firm about not taking Hussein.

Other changes had to be made. The meticulous Hussein, heaping coals of fire on our dismissing heads, reported the loss of some oddments of jewelry. The jack-daw thief had pecked at random. Among the missing things were a scarfpin of Ian's, a small brooch of mine, and one of a pair of Evan's cuff links. Their disappearances synchronized and it ap-

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peared more than a matter of our carelessness. It was impossible to guess which one of the dozen servants might be responsible, so we consulted the omniscient Ahmdhu Siraj. His advice seemed amazingly pointless to us.

“You should consult a crystal-gazer,” said Ahmdhu with a faint smile.

We wondered if he were laughing at us and in answer to Evan’s suspicious look he added: “Really, Sir, it is very successful for recovering lost articles.”

Such was Evan’s faith in Ahmdhu that he agreed. The first step in the plan was to give it complete publicity. Inside of an hour every servant and every coolie, and doubtless half of Srinagar in consequence, knew that the Bara Sahib was consulting a crystal-gazer to recover the lost property and had arranged the séance for the afternoon of the next day. The procedure was as follows: a young lad must be produced, theoretically of perfect purity (a nephew of Ahmdhu’s was drafted for the job) who would gaze into a glass ball in a state of trance induced by the crystal-gazer. While in

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the trance he would see within the ball the scene of the theft re-enacted and would then be called upon to identify the persons that he saw. All this was solemnly arranged—and advertised.

The next morning a few hours before the séance, a curious series of coincidences occurred. The sweeper came to me with my brooch, which he had found in the grass on the bank where the bath water was emptied out. Clearly it had fallen into the tub and had been thrown away. Ian's scarfpin, according to Gaffara, the khitmatgar, had rolled under the sideboard in the dining-room, and a thorough house-cleaning had brought it to light; and, finally, Evan himself discovered his cuff link back in his jewel box where it certainly had not been the day before.

The crystal-gazing experiment never took place. Instead, that day we went to tea with Mrs. Duff.

What with this and that, it was decided not to take Gaffara with us. He, of course, asked for a chit. Evan chewed the end of his fountain pen until he composed one to his satisfac-

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tion. Many things had led up to his dismissal of Gaffara. He wanted to protect future employers with the benefit of our experience but he had no definite charge he could make. Gaffara's English was rudimentary and his education non-existent, so Evan was satisfied at last with the following masterpiece:

“I have employed Gaffara A—— for six weeks, and have found him an efficient and experienced khitmatgar. His personality is entirely uncongenial to me.”

This stroke of subtlety missed fire. In less than half an hour after receiving his chit, Gaffara was pursuing me with lament:

“Would the mem-sahib give better chit? Chit of Bara Sahib not good chit. Cannot show.”

The Kashmiris resented our down-country servants and we discovered that they constantly chivied Mohammed Jan. They did their best to discourage him from going on the trip. Tales of hardships and terror were fed to him with his meals. Even supernatural horrors were suggested as waiting for him at every

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point of the road. Jan was dogged. The Bengali is much maligned and Jan is an example of the falsity of generalities. He was four feet ten of compact fighting spirit, stubbornness, and fidelity.

Mrs. Duff lived at Nedou's Hotel. So long had she been there and so firmly entrenched was she that the hotel had the air of having grown up around her and her collection of Kashmiri brasses, papier-mâché boxes, and embroideries.

"These are nothing," said Mrs. Duff when we admired the old tea-pots on the chimney-piece. "Just bits that I have picked up in the bazaars in the last few years. My old collection was entirely destroyed in the fire."

We heard a good deal about the famous fire that had razed Nedou's. Mrs. Duff's annoyance at being obliged to appear unpremeditatedly in the compound in the middle of the night in her nightgown and curl papers was mitigated by the sight of the old Colonel next door, a pompous man whom she peculiarly detested. She sympathized with him at the top of her



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voice for having forgotten his false teeth. He was not cheered by the discovery of his loss and had to be restrained by force from dashing back into the flames to try to recover his treasures. The wretched residents of Nedou's had to be clothed from the kindness of their friends. Not a pair of shoes was snatched from the burning.

This was not the only time that Mrs. Duff had been stripped of her effects and escaped with her body unadorned. In her long life she had been in floods, earthquakes, and shipwrecks. When the P. and O. liner sank with all her household goods on board, she had sat, philosophically unwrapped, in the lifeboat.

"It was so entertaining," said she, "to see how your acquaintances behaved, divested of their accessories and their dignity."

She was the daughter and the widow of "builders of Empire." She had something of the hardiness and adventurousness of a pioneer woman and all the interest in petty gossip and the minutiae of social sanctions of Titherington-on-Thames. But she could not live in England.

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It was savourless to her after forty years in India. There she was just another aging widow of a retired Colonel, hidden in a poky flat in Kensington. So she packed up her rugs, her shawls, and her trophies, for perhaps the thirtieth time in her peripatetic life, and went back inevitably to India, where she was the fearsome Mrs. Duff, the fountainhead of political and social scandals, the not-too-safe-deposit of many reputations, and the owner of a powerful tongue that was never ignored. She could watch the doings and mis-doings of the great at home through a long telescope; and the curious mixture of types from all over the world that travel to far places for varied reasons flowed past her door. At sixty-five, and burdened with two hundred pounds, she would ride her tat pony thirty miles for a spicy dinner party. She was uncharitable, she was a mischief-maker; but her malicious sense of humour never spared herself and her courage for life was unshakable. We enjoyed ourselves, drinking her Chinese tea.

All of these adventures of hers we learned

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over the first two cups and it was mystifying that in so short a time she had, in return, satisfied herself that Ian was related to the So-and-so's, that it really was Michael's aunt who had created such a storm of scandal in the Lord Chose affair, but that, after all, the This-and-that's were quite another branch of the family. Evan and I disgorged a good deal of our duller transatlantic histories. When we passed our cups to be refilled we were reasonably certain that she had card-indexed us under suitable headings in her mental files and had evolved interesting theories of our probable relationships to one another. With so much ground cleared, it was as well in the interests of research that David Wendell took this moment to appear. It seemed as well, but the conversation strangely flattened. Whether Wendell disliked Mrs. Duff or whether evasion was native to him, the unfortunate lady made no progress and she was reduced to a frontal attack.

"You enjoyed your stay at Viceregal Lodge, I suppose."

"Very much."

## THE VALUE OF CRYSTAL-GAZING

“Of course you have been in India before?”

“No, never.”

“But doubtless your family have?”

“Not so far as I know.”

“You are connected, I imagine, with the Leicestershire Wendells, are you not?”

“I shouldn’t think so. I have never heard of them.”

Mrs. Duff resigned, and we began to talk of Kashmir as it had been in the Eighties, of British administration, of life in the hill-stations, and of Rudyard Kipling. On these Wendell spoke freely.

“I am astonished by the narrowness and stupidity of the average British official,” he said. “It is incredible that they can live for such long periods in a country and protect themselves so completely from any knowledge of the life around them. They intentionally insulate themselves with insularity. You Anglo-Indians” (oh, fatal choice of words! We trembled at the gaffe) “disliked Kipling because he knew you so thoroughly; and yet he subscribed magnificently to the old ‘serve the

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Empire' fetish. Most of the Englishmen who come out here to govern the country prefer to know as little about it as possible. The natives exist only in relationship to themselves, a relationship of inferiority."

Mrs. Duff coughed a little, opened and shut her mouth.

Wendell went on: "You English have no desire to adapt yourselves to the country you are trying to govern. It is really rather touching. You behave like exiles who have brought as much of England with you as possible. You surround yourselves with an imitation of English middle class life. Your clubs, your bridge playing, your cricket, your golf, serve as a barricade against your surroundings. How many of you know or care about the life, the emotions, the traditions, the religion, or even the art"—Mrs. Duff glanced involuntarily at her Kashmir embroideries—"of the exotic land in which you prefer to be strangers?"

After the silence of a pause, Mrs. Duff's cough became distressing. I glanced at my watch. We had stayed too long, so I rose and murmured something about the time. Wendell

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followed us outside. Into the dusk of the compound, a yellow light came from the open door of the reception pavilion and the sound of a 'cello.

"Bach, and damn well played too," said Evan, as we approached the light. We looked in through the door. A white-haired woman was seated at the piano. A man was bending over her to turn the leaves of her music. The 'cellist had his back to the doorway.

"I have never seen them before," said Michael.

"Bach in the Himalayas is like meeting an elephant in Piccadilly," from Ian. "I wonder who they are?"

"They are very interesting people," said Wendell. "That is a Mrs. Telfer and her son. The man standing at the piano is called Luke."

"Luke what?"

"Just Mr. Luke."

"There is no such name," said Evan.

Wendell smiled. "They have just arrived to-day. I have met them. I brought a letter to them."





*Buddha*

V

*A Search for Spiritual Truth*





*A Search for Spiritual Truth*

**W**E asked twenty people for tea; they overflowed our drawing-room, which could hold six comfortably, in the best New York tradition. We had eight tea-cups. Lalla practised legerdemain.

Two veritable explorers were our guests of honour. Philip Visser, a diplomatist by profession and a mountain-climber by hobby, was leaving the next day, accompanied as always on his expeditions by his charming young wife, for a six months' plunge into the uncharted Pamirs. They took it as much for granted as a week-end in the country. We had met them some years before in Stockholm, where Visser was Minister to Sweden from the Netherlands; and Evan thought it virtually an act of God that I should see Mrs. Visser again at a moment when I needed a reproach to my timidity and flagging enthusiasm.

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She was a remarkable woman; pretty, gentle, and suave in manner, she seemed much more in place in a continental drawing-room than on a mountain-top; yet she was full partner with her husband on the most dangerous climbs and exhausting expeditions. They were perfect foils for each other; he was bubbling over with vitality, nervous energy and a vivacious excitement; she was poised and calm, with a mild, ironic sense of humour. And imperturbable! During their last trip into the blank spaces of the map, Visser had conceived the theory that by taking an unknown course as the crow flies across the mountains, he should in geographical probability find a pass which would enable him to rejoin his wife, if she continued to follow the winding of the valley. Accordingly he left her to go on with the coolies and supplies, and struck off into the wilderness. He happened to be right; in two weeks they met again. Mrs. Visser saw nothing unusual in this. It was all in the day's work.

We had two immediate object lessons to guide us: at one extreme, the matter-of-fact and

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experienced Vissers, who were simplicity itself; at the other, a party of prominent Americans, who had just set off for Kashgar after turning the Government of India, the State Department of America, and the city of Srinagar upside down by their feverish, if well-advertised, preparations. I was ashamed to think again about rope bridges. I answered all the questions about our plans with a casualness no longer affected. To judge the size of anything, one must see it in relation to something else. The trip to Leh appeared through the wrong end of a telescope.

Any sense of uniqueness about the adventure faded rapidly. While our British friends gave sound advice about everything from tents to water-filters, David Wendell listened attentively.

“This is useful for me, as well,” he let fall quietly. “I too am going to Leh next week.”

I thought bitterly that perhaps some one had better run a half-rate excursion into the Himalayas to take care of the crowds.

He lingered after the last visitors, while the cups were being washed for the fourth time.

## THIN AIR

“There is a lot on my mind I want to talk to you about,” he said to Evan. “When may I come again?”

He had been in a charming mood that afternoon. It had not before occurred to me that he had a playful side. He had chaffed Mrs. Duff to her delight; and I was grateful to him every time I heard her chuckle. I hoped for her sake he had admitted that his ancestors were socially secure.

“Won’t you come to dinner here on the boat to-morrow night? We are going to Gulmarg for the day. Perhaps you would go with us.”

“I can’t do that. I have—studying that I must do; but I shall be delighted to come to dinner.”

“Heavens, how do you manage to study in Kashmir?” I asked.

“Oh, I read a good deal,” he said lightly. “I don’t allow anything to interfere with that.”

The trip to Gulmarg was not an unqualified success. After a long ride through the valley, we left the tonga and climbed the mountain road on ponies. It took longer than we had

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foreseen. Before we reached the top, I was hungry and aggrieved. At nearly three o'clock no one had suggested lunch! I was so bad-tempered from an accumulation of trivial causes that I refused to admit to myself what was really the matter with me. I felt fragile and mistreated. I was too stubborn to ask for food, too injured to recognize I needed it. I consoled myself with reflections on the innate brutality of men and answered all remarks in faint monosyllables.

“What in the devil ails Connie this morning?” asked Michael.

Michael was my chief source of irritation. He had as usual taken the best pony.

“Morning!” I snapped, breaking my monastic silence. “It’s mid-afternoon.”

“So it is; it’s three o’clock,” said Evan. “That’s what’s the matter with her. We’d better feed her at once.”

I was indignant. “Certainly I’m not hungry. I couldn’t possibly eat.”

Evan, with an instinct of self-preservation, was firm.

## THIN AIR

“Right here and now. Lalla, unpack the lunch.”

“Oh, not here,” I protested. “This is a horrible place. It’s hot; no place to sit down; no view—”

Lunch was, nevertheless, unpacked. I sat sulkily remote on a stump.

“No, thanks. I don’t want a sandwich. I couldn’t eat anything.”

“Eat that sandwich or you don’t move from here!”

Even under forcible feeding, the sandwich was good. It was surprisingly good. I finished it in silence. With a guilty smile, I asked for another. I managed to join faintly in the roar of laughter at me. The sun grew noticeably brighter. I discovered that the flowers about us were lovely. I even could comment favourably on the anemones and primulas which blanketed the ground, pink, mauve and blue.

“I suppose I have been foul-tempered. I’m sorry.”

“You know,” Evan said in seriousness, “one should never go anywhere with Connie without

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a ham sandwich or a lump of sugar in the pocket. It has taken me years of sad experience to learn that she has to be re-fueled like an engine before she can run. The worst of it is, she'll never admit it."

This accusation of grossness was annoying because it was true, but I was now so charmed with the world that I did not protest it.

"That may be true enough, Evan," I said, "but this time it wasn't entirely hunger. I think it's going up in the air—no, that's not intended as a joke. What are we now—eight thousand feet? I think everything you feel gets exaggerated with the altitude. Some people notice it physically. I don't. But I'm afraid I do mentally. You ought to forgive me on the grounds I'm not normal."

"There is something in it," said Ian. "I've noticed it too. Perhaps it explains why Michael made such an abominable scene with the coolies."

Michael made a face.

"Oh, all right," said Evan. "All is forgiven, it's the altitude. You'll have to think



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up a new one when we get back to the plains. If the armistice is on, let's go and see what we came for, and decide whether we want a hut here in September."

Gulmarg, Meadow of Roses, lies high above Srinagar in the shadow of the great mountain Apharwat. It is from its natural advantages the perfect hill-station and in full summer is crowded with refugees from the heat of India and the dampness of Srinagar. Its shallow grassy basin, in which two golf courses are lost, is fringed by rich forests on whose outskirts stand the huts of the European visitors. The snow which stays until late spring uncovers as it melts a host of flowers. White-tipped ranges girdle it; and above even their tremendous heights, Nanga Parbat, the Naked Mountain, towers like a giant.

"Certainly we'll take a hut here," Evan decided. "We may as well arrange that now."

The so-called huts were roughly finished wooden houses of four to ten rooms, suggesting Swiss chalets in spite of their heavy adornment of Kashmiri carving.

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About us the white peaks were turning violet and pink.

“We have to start back. I wish it were clear enough to see K<sub>2</sub>,” said Evan.

“They will probably save K<sub>2</sub> for you until September,” Michael consoled him.

“I couldn’t stand the strain of looking at anything bigger and better,” added Ian.

When David Wendell arrived for dinner, we had washed off our fatigue in permanganate and appeared stained, but chemically pure. Evan and I were looking forward unduly to seeing another American; and Wendell was the only other American in Kashmir. We should not have suspected ourselves of so much “God’s Own Country” bias. The English were charming companions, but we had been speaking their foreign language for a long time. It would be agreeable to talk to some one who would say “freight car” instead of “goods train,” had there been any freight cars to talk about.

Evan said something of the sort to Wendell, who laughed.

“I’ve felt much the same way about you, but

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perhaps not for the same reasons. I shall have to confess that I should probably say 'goods train' after all. After I finished college I went for two years to Oxford and since then I have lived more in England than in America."

"Where do you live now?"

"Oh, America theoretically. Actually I have no home. I am a sort of wanderer. I go wherever I can find information on the subject that interests me most."

"To Leh, for instance?"

"To Leh, especially."

We were gay during dinner. Wendell had an amusing gift for anecdote and a forthright manner of stating his impressions of people, places, and institutions. He had been the guest of maharajahs, Hindu sages, and, most recently, the Viceroy at Delhi. He had had in his own words "a very good time," but had reserved a dry, critical detachment which was paradoxical in so young, so enthusiastic a man. He was essentially unimpressed by prestige and power, whether Indian or British.

"The whole elaborate show is such complete

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nonsense. What does it matter? Both sides are shrieking about things which are completely unimportant. It is a bad thing to stay in that atmosphere. I was glad to get away from it; to get up here where I am closer to what I am looking for."

"Well, what *are* you looking for?" I asked. "You have never explained."

"I mean to explain. That's one of the reasons I have come here. I will tell you about it after dinner."

It was a cool evening and we sat inside around the drawing-room fire.

"I want to talk to you about it," Wendell finally began. "I don't know whether or not I can make it clear. Most people won't understand, which is natural enough. They assume I am a little queer." He laughed. "I don't mind. I merely don't refer to it often. It is a personal matter, after all, and nobody's concern but my own.

"But I should like to talk about it to you. You are the only friends I have in this part of the world and I am going off on a long trip.

## THIN AIR

I shall be gone a long time. I suppose there are moments when all of us cannot bear the feeling of being alone. I have come out East with a definite object. My family didn't like it and didn't want me to come. But I am able to do as I please and this was the most important thing in the world to me."

In answer to our looks which were interrogation points, he went on:

"I am supposed to be here as a student of Eastern mysticism, but it isn't just that. It is something more than that. Do you know anything about theosophy?"

"Not much," we admitted.

"You are a theosophist?" Evan asked.

"No, not even that exactly. The most precise statement would be that I am a seeker after truth, spiritual truth." He looked up with a charming smile. "I expected you to laugh and I shouldn't in the least mind. Sounds a bit pretentious, doesn't it? Not very much in character with this century. I am not surprised when people find it absurd—a young, healthy man who has spent all his life at sports and the usual

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things, and who has had on the whole an easy and amusing time of it, to go chasing from one end of the world to another on the heels of an ideal. But there it is. It is the only thing that now means anything at all. I care about nothing else. That's why I am here. I believe I am about to find what I want. You know something about Buddhism, don't you?"

"A little," I answered, "the traveller's superficial knowledge. We have been in Buddhist countries, Siam and Burma—"

"Ah, yes," he said. "That is Hinayana, the Little Vehicle, a narrow and primitive form; it is a scheme of individual salvation only. The Buddhism of the north is Mahayana, the Great Vehicle which is a comprehensive scheme of salvation. It is a higher contemplative philosophy. In Western Tibet, where I am going presently, and where you too are going, there is a group of supreme exponents of this belief whose existence and whose whereabouts, I imagine, you don't even suspect."

"You don't mean the Lamas then?"

"Not the Lamas that you will see."

## THIN AIR

“Are you a Buddhist?”

“No, I would not use a term so definite as that. You see, there is a point, one which I hope that I have reached, where labels of that sort are not applicable. But I can best explain what I believe in terms of Buddhist symbolism. You understand about the Wheel of Life, Karma, and the attainment of Nirvana? So far northern Buddhists have that much in common with the southern Buddhists, but Hinayana is selfish in its conception. The soul seeks only to free itself of its individual Karma and reach salvation. Mahayana admits a higher ideal. There is something greater than becoming an arhat, that is, a saint who has saved himself alone. One can voluntarily go beyond that and become a bodhisattva—one who dedicates himself to the saving of all living beings. That is Buddhist terminology. Do you know what an Adept is?”

No, we had to admit, we didn't even know what an Adept was.

“Well, you know what the faculties of a medium are.”

## *A SEARCH FOR SPIRITUAL TRUTH*

Here at least we were on familiar ground.

“Adeptship is the opposite of mediumship. A medium is controlled by outside forces; an Adept actively controls himself. He conserves and directs his highest energies. You understand about the practice of Yoga?”

“Vaguely.”

“An Adept has the powers of a yogi. By a simple exertion of will-power, he can suspend the action of his brain and utilize his spirit for superior knowledge. He has reached a point of perfection that entitles him to what Buddhists call Nirvana, but he chooses to remain in this existence to do good to others.”

A good deal of this conversation was in answer to my naïve questions.

“Where does the Adept fit into the theory of incarnations?” I wanted to know.

“It is his final existence on the Wheel of Life. He has freed himself from his Karma.”

“Then why are there not Adepts round about and among people?”

“There are,” he laughed. “But you would not know it.”



## THIN AIR

“You mean, you might be one, or I might be one and we should not know it ourselves?”

“Not at all. The Adept is, of course, aware of his Adeptship.” There was a twinkle in his eyes as he added, “I hope that you will not be offended when I tell you that you could not possibly be one.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

“You have not reached the final stage of your incarnations.”

“How could you know that?”

“Because you are a woman. It may be upsetting to you to learn that the state of being a woman is a punishment for an accumulation of Karma in a previous existence. Not until the Karma that caused it has been worked off can you reach the superior state of being incarnated as a male.”

I decided immediately that the flaws in the theory were obvious. Evan and Michael were delighted at the turn in the discussion. Their interest increased perceptibly.

“You have said, in effect, that your trip into the Himalayas is the high point for you,” said

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Evan. "What do you expect to gain from it?"

"Unfortunately I cannot tell you that. All I can say is that there are those in the mountains who know far more of these matters than I do. Have you ever heard of the Valley of Shambhala?"

Evan shook his head.

"I thought probably not. Look here, I've been doing all the talking. I am afraid I must have bored you horribly."

"Anything but. I'm tremendously interested. It isn't at all my stuff, of course. Most of it is entirely over my head; but all good luck to you, and I hope you get what you want."

The conversation drifted to other things, but returned from time to time to Wendell's quest. I was driven by curiosity to know more of his mysterious objective, but I refrained from asking other than abstract questions. He would tell all that he was impelled to tell.

No one took heed of the time. At intervals we poked the dying fire and put on fresh wood. It was after three in the morning when Wendell got up to go.

## *THIN AIR*

“I hope I have made you understand me a little. I don’t think you are the sort of people who would assume that I was utterly mad.”

We murmured protestations.

“This isn’t a sudden decision,” he added. “It is the result of years of the most careful thought.”

It was late. We were sleepy. We did not inquire what decision.

“I shall, if I may, think of you as my friends,” he said and left us.



*Dahl Lake and Houseboat*

## VI

### *Farewell to a Pilgrim*



## VI

### *Farewell to a Pilgrim*

I AN was leaving. The atmosphere was heavy with depression. We fell over his boxes in the corridor and Hussein stalked about making arrangements, his portly back stiff with resentment. Even those insensitive creatures, Mumtaz and Akbar, had enough canine instinct to know that something routine-upsetting was on foot. Mumtaz threw her head back and howled like a young coyote and Akbar lurked dismally under the sofa. Ian did not want to go. Crossing the plains of India in the heat, being steamed in the Red Sea, were bad enough without the knowledge that his friends would be wandering into unknown and desirable places while he was tied to a London desk.

“I have a feeling I will chuck it and come back and join you in Java,” he said. This was a prophecy.

## THIN AIR

Ian was my natural ally in the equilibrium of forces. I knew all too well that the Masculine Defensive Alliance for the Suppression of Women, which Evan and Michael had established in long months of travel, would resume its full force the moment that Ian's suave and mediating personality had withdrawn. It was a pity that an unfortunate coincidence—and I say coincidence—on the last day nearly sent him over to the "enemy." It concerned bulbuls.

For some time there had been a slight tension between Ian and me over bulbuls. When the notion had occurred to him to take a pair of them back to England, Lalla had suggested and abetted what I considered a nefarious plan. The roof of our houseboat was practically a club for a dozen of them. We thought we could recognize individual habitués.

Lalla appeared one day from the bazaar bearing a wooden cage with a sliding door.

"Oh, yes, that should do very well. Thanks very much, Lalla."

"What on earth is that for, Ian?"

"Bulbuls."

## FAREWELL TO A PILGRIM

“What do you mean? Where are the bulbuls?”

“You wait and see!”

The bulbuls had a weakness for Crosse and Blackwell's raspberry jam. Ian put a spoonful on a small saucer and set it on the floor of the cage.

“Ian, you would not be so low!”

Ian stuck out his chin.

In ten minutes our old acquaintance, the fattest, brazenest bulbul, was gorging himself in prison. Ian had snapped the trap. It took the bulbul, whose name, whatever it might have been before, became Omar from the moment of his captivity, a little time to realize what had happened to him. It was no good pointing out to him a moral lesson about the terrible results of greed. He was not consoled. Wild-eyed and desperate he battered himself against the cage till his beautiful little feathers filled the air with coloured snowflakes.

“It is terrible! Evan, make Ian let him go.”

“It is his bulbul,” said Evan, who had an acute property sense.



## THIN AIR

The worst was to come. Ian wanted two bulbuls. I must admit that my admiration for the character and intelligence of the species was considerably weakened by what happened. After a couple of days the wretched captive huddled moping in a corner of the cage and refused to eat. Through bars he could see his old acquaintances preening themselves in full liberty. They could not leave him alone. They fluttered about the cage, lighted on it taunting and chivying him, and tried to peck him with their savage little beaks. This behaviour made me less sorry for the second victim. The door opened again a bulbul's height; Omar, being too beaten by fate to notice it, squatted miserably in the far corner. Again the lure of raspberry jam. Again the falling door. Bulbul number two, or Fatima (we were optimistic but unintelligent about the sex of bulbuls) was not a helpful companion. The depression following the wing-beating was broken only by a series of fierce domestic quarrels.

Mohammed Jan was morbidly attracted to the cage.

## FAREWELL TO A PILGRIM

“They are very unhappy?” he said inquiringly.

“Oh, very, I think, Jan. But the sahib says they will get used to it.”

“They can see the trees and they suffer much. Perhaps the sahib will put them inside the house.”

“No, I suppose fresh air is better for them.”

Another day: “They will not live to cross the sea, Mem-sahib.”

“Probably not; and, Jan, it would be just as well for them.”

The day before Ian's departure he went up to feed his bulbuls. The cage was empty! He came down the stairs four at a time.

“Connie,” he shouted, “Connie, did you let my bulbuls out?”

“Certainly not,” I said coldly, “I haven't touched them. They are your bulbuls, aren't they?”

Mohammed Jan also denied all knowledge of it.

All day Ian looked at me with angry suspicion. At tea time Omar—I am certain it was

## THIN AIR

Omar—sat on the railing and winked at me.

In the evening we were gay with the hysteria that refuses to admit depression. The sadness of parting with Ian was only the final straw in the accumulation of disquiet. Ian had troubles of his own, happily put aside for months, which he must return to England to face. The trip to Leh shadowed my mind with a heavy uneasiness which I preferred not to try to analyze. Even the realists, Michael and Evan, were oppressed and restless. It was to Ian that I spoke of it. We were on the roof and Ian was staring at the mountains with that disconcerting air of a person registering impressions for the last time.

“I am unreasonably unhappy, Ian. I don’t know what is the matter and I don’t know how to shake it off. It would be agreeable of me to say it is because you are going away. I hate terribly, as you know, to have you go, but it isn’t that, it is something more than that. There is a strong feeling that because all this which has been so serene and perfect is coming to an end, something sinister and terribly vague

## FAREWELL TO A PILGRIM

is ahead for us. It is frightfully silly. I wouldn't dare to say anything about it to the others. You know what derision I'd get for more of my nonsense. I am truly frightened about this trip. I suppose it is the old inferiority complex; I feel inadequate."

Ian patted my hand. "I shan't laugh at you. I feel like that too often myself, but it doesn't mean anything. I am too depressed now to be any help, but I know exactly why. It *is* the end of something. We have been a happy family for all our rows. I have got to leave it and even if I can come back and join you again it won't be quite the same."

"We have been like children, free from real responsibilities and emotions and ambitions for a time anyway—a sort of false Nirvana. I don't suppose any of us has worn off our Karma; so it cannot last."

"Karma, indeed!" said Ian.

"Oh, I have a lot of nice new words now! All the jargon that we dismissed as mystical cant back home seems so much more meaningful out here."

## THIN AIR

“Now, don’t go playing at that sort of thing,” advised Ian earnestly. “You are bad enough already with your premonitions and psychic apprehensions.”

“Don’t be silly, Ian, I am as much of a realist as you are, and I think anyway that I have the rudiments of a scientific mind. At least one half of it is scientific; the other half likes to toy with ‘as if’ things—things it doesn’t believe in at all but which are an escape from the dullness of common sense. You like to read fairy tales yourself, Ian.”

“I don’t mix them up with life,” Ian retorted.

“Well, I like to think them and I don’t mix them up with life either. Anyway I feel better now. I have been talking utter rot, haven’t I? I love not to make sense.”

“Let’s go on not making sense. We will put on fancy dress for dinner and drink a great deal too much.”

“You won’t get Evan to put on a fancy dress. He and Michael insist on being grown up.”

## *FAREWELL TO A PILGRIM*

“It’s my last night,” said Ian. “I can bully Evan with that.”

The servants took it calmly, since obviously we were a little mad, when there appeared at dinner a bejewelled maharajah with a strangely Western salience of jaw, an African explorer, a Chinese mandarin, and a very painted geisha. This cosmopolitan group admired themselves and one another enormously, laughed loudly at the feeblest jokes, and caused the dogs to growl and retire suspiciously to the darkest corner of the boat. By two o’clock they were shedding maudlin tears of sentimentality while a nasal voice from the gramophone asked: “What’ll I do-o-o-o, When You-u-u-u Are far away-e-e?”

Four hours later the light was grey, the air cold; and the mandarin, the maharajah and the geisha, strangely metamorphosed in pyjamas and dressing gowns, and haggard from insufficient sleep, were taking leave, between yawns, of the African explorer, who, in turn, was concerned only with getting his luggage into the motor car and slapping his pockets to make sure he had not forgotten his tickets.

## THIN AIR

The emotions of farewell were blunted by the desire to go back to bed.

Breakfast was a silent affair. Michael had a headache and thought he would take a long walk.

“Better see about buying those horses this morning,” said Evan. “Now that Ian’s gone, there is no reason why we should not push along with things and get off the first of the week.”

Whereupon to my own surprise I burst into tears and left the table.

“Good God,” said Michael, “I thought we had finished with that sort of thing.”

In point of fact we had. Half an hour later I asked if I might go along to choose my own horse. The prospect of leaving had become exhilarating to me.

In the Madan all the horses of Kashmir and their owners seemed to have collected. Apparently each animal had peculiar merits. The owner was willing to part with him as a favour and at a price. We singled out a dozen of the least terrible and watched them go through their paces. The less abject of these we tried

## FAREWELL TO A PILGRIM

ourselves. Evan conceived a singular attachment for a sort of Clydesdale with the flowery name of Gulshah. Whether it was the name "Lord of Roses" or Gulshah's amiable expression that attracted him, I could not find out. I tried him out myself. It was a struggle to put him into a canter and I was sorry when I succeeded. He had no springs, but Evan would have him. That was one horse settled. Then came a battle of low cunning between Michael and me over a charming little roan named Sunnybank. Sunnybank was not for sale but could be had for the trip with the owner thrown in as sais. He was delicately built, sensitive, and fast. I wanted him; Michael wanted him. His owner ruined my chances.

"I don't think he could carry your weight, Michael," I said.

The sais, eager to make his bargain, said quickly, "Oh, yes, he is very strong."

"He seems to have more spirit than the rest of these poor things," Michael said, approvingly patting his nose. "Um—yes, it is dangerous on the mountain trails. I can manage



## THIN AIR

him but it would not be safe for the mem-sahib. The mem-sahib doesn't ride very well." I shot him a furious look. Sunnybank fell to Michael. The best of what was left was an aged mare named Bessie, tired of life, but willing and sure-footed.

"Done," said Evan, "Gulshah, Sunnybank, and Bessie. They will look better with decent saddles. That part I leave to Ahmdhu."

In the late afternoon we were busily making lists: things to be left in storage in Srinagar; things to be shipped home; supplies to be bought—when David Wendell appeared.

"I have come to say good-bye to you," he said. "I am leaving in the morning."

"Leaving for Ladakh? How sly you've been about it! We had no idea you were going so soon."

"Nor had I," said Wendell. "I speeded up my arrangements."

"Oh, shucks," said Evan, "we are starting Tuesday ourselves. Why not wait a few days and go with us? It can't be much fun going alone."

## FAREWELL TO A PILGRIM

“I wish I could come with you,” he said earnestly, “but it is too late. I have made arrangements to go with the Telfer party. They are going very slowly in half stages. Mrs. Telfer, you see, is old and has to be carried in a dandy. It would have been simpler for me to go with you, but I am committed now.”

“How did you decide to join them?” I asked curiously. “You have never seen them before and how amazing that they should want to go to Leh.”

“No, I have never seen them before, but as I told you, I brought a letter to them. We have the same interests, you see.”

“Oh, they are Buddhists, too?”

“They are interested in Buddhism,” he corrected. “A friend of mine in New York had arranged for me to meet them here.” His manner changed and he looked serious. “I want to tell you about that. I shall meet you at Leh. It is very important for me to see you there. I am going to Leh to meet someone, someone who is coming a long way for that

## THIN AIR

purpose. After that, things will be different for me and I can tell you more. You see, I consider you as friends. I think, my only friends in this part of the world. There is something else I want you to know. It sounds absurd but I will say it all the same. I have a code arranged with the man in America who gave me the letter. He is the only person in the world who knows why I am going to Leh. If he should get a message purporting to be from me that did not have a certain word in it, he would not believe it, he would know that it was not from me; and if, for instance, to suggest something fantastic, I should disappear, if it was said of me that I was dead, unless he had positive proof, he would not believe that either. You are my friends. I wanted to tell you that.” He looked at his watch. “I mustn’t stay any longer. However, it is going to be for only a few days. You will certainly pass us on the road; and we have our rendezvous in Leh. Don’t forget that.”

We followed him out to the little forward deck.

## FAREWELL TO A PILGRIM

“You are being very mysterious, aren’t you?”  
Michael said.

“Oh, just call it romantic, harmlessly romantic,” he laughed. He clung to our hands when he said good-bye. “Do you know, I am very reluctant to leave. Well, all good luck to you. We meet again soon.” He scorned the narrow gang-plank and leapt surely from boat to shore. He turned once and waved his hand. We watched him until he had disappeared among the chenar trees.





*The Last Tree*

## VII

### *Caravan*



## VII

### *Caravan*

SIXTY ponies, each burdened with two yakkans, met us at Ganderbal Lake. He who would go into Ladakh and Baltistan must take his food and his shelter with him. The unproductive country yields barely enough to support the limited population. When we were granted our permits, we had promised not to draw on the countryside for anything but the most trivial supplies. An occasional chicken or a few eggs, if we could get them, would not be held against us.

Our orgy of shopping resulted in some strange equipment. If you must have forty ponies, you might as well have sixty and be luxurious. Some of the additions to our equipment looked very odd on the back of a pony. We did not intend to suffer. The tin bath, the boiler for hot water, the folding tables and



## THIN AIR

chairs gave no greater difficulty than the three sleeping tents, the dining tent, and the medicine chest complete for any emergency.

We had more than a hundred leather-covered boxes of wood, called yakdans, I suppose, because they were designed for the backs of yaks. Yakdans for clothes, yakdans for tins of food, yes, and yakdans for bottles. Camera yakdans, book yakdans, money yakdans. We had to take our currency in rupees and annas. Little yellow leather bags of annas were distributed at the bottom among boxes of the duller supplies. The coolies and pony men had to be paid off at the end of each march. All this more than Oriental splendour averaged about two annas a day (four cents) per coolie. There was special coolie-food, chiefly rice. Fortunately the natives have no taste for Fortnum and Mason's best tinned peaches.

Among all the soups and potted meats for three months of dinners, there was, alas, not a scrap of beef, even in its most disguised form. Not a tin of Bovril, nor the mockest of mock

## CARAVAN

turtle can be smuggled into the jurisdiction of Kashmir, where the cow is sacrosanct.

We weakened at the last moment, largely because our excellent cook was fat and had short legs, and provided ponies for our domestic servants. Mohammed Jan had never been on a horse, but he was willing to try. One of the problems facing us was what to do with Mumtaz and Akbar. In a city where hordes of homeless pariah dogs, ignorant of birth control, confounded the municipal authorities, we could not give them away. We took them with us in despair. They were too young to walk; they travelled in a basket on the back of a special dog-coolie!

The first stage we did by water to a camping-ground at Ganderbal. The caravan went round by land and when our shikharas arrived, dinner was cooking, Lalla and Jan were screwing table legs into tables, the bhisti was boiling the bath water, and coolies were pitching the tents. The gramophone coolie set the machine on a pile of yakdans. Evan hunted through the record-yakdan, labelled such in clear printing,

## THIN AIR

for "L'Après-midi d'un Faune." But Michael discovered there was no ice for the cocktail. There would be no ice. We were brave under the hardships of adventure.

Early in the morning we got on our horses and took the Ladakh road. It led at once into the green valley of the Sind, where rich crops and groves of walnut trees spread to the foot of softly rounded hills. The horses plodded half dozing in the sunlight along the edge of the river rippling by us as placidly as a New England brook. Bright orioles and wagtails darted back and forth across the water and blackbirds sang from the tops of trees.

At noonday we passed a caravan of Ladakhi traders. Their merchandise was laden on the back of grotesque animals that looked like shaggy cows. Which indeed they were. They were "zhos," a hybrid formed by crossing yaks with domestic cattle. The Ladakhis stared at us with friendly curiosity and grinned amiably as they drew their beasts to the side of the stony trail to let us pass. The zhos took a neighbourly interest in our long train of yak-

## CARAVAN

dan-burdened ponies and seemed possessed to stand sidewise to the road. Their owners pushed, prodded, and admonished them in Tibetan; and exchanged the time of day in Kashmiri with our servants. They were sturdy little men with cheerful Mongolian faces.

Up the valley we had very few encounters. The snow-ridden mountain trail had been passable only a short time. As we climbed higher, the country became wilder; sheer white peaks closed in upon us, precipices rose like walls, and the Sind tore its way past us, breaking over boulders and torn pine trunks in a foaming steep descent. Towards sunset of the third day we climbed through the grandeur of a spectacular ravine, a howling torrent below us, forest-crowned cliffs above us, to the peaceful beauty of the plain of Sonamarg. Here in the last outpost of the fertile grace of Kashmir, we decided to make a halt.

The broad grassy meadow lies at the foot of a valley of glaciers. The sloping sides are black with forest and, in the open sweeps, acres of Alpine wildflowers make brilliant streaks in a

## THIN AIR

turf nipped close by sheep, thousands of sheep, a great grey woolly sea. We chose a camping ground at the edge of the forest where the pine boughs met over a cheerful little brook. In our front yard we had sixteen thousand feet of mountain.

Sharfa was the shikhari, or huntsman, and, so far, he had had very little to do except look handsome, which came easily to him, and give a few orders to the coolies of whom he was in charge, about pitching or striking camp. Engaging pony men, lining them up for payment, and dismissing them at the end of the agreed stage was hardly a full-time job. His vocation and his delight was to find game for sahibs. We were not yet in the country of the sharpu and the markhor; so he would wistfully remark to Evan that above the forests near the snow line the mountains abounded in ram chikor, the partridge of the Himalayas; or that Monal, the pheasant, could be flushed in the high forests.

Evan took a gun to please Sharfa, and a camera to please himself—and returned with

## CARAVAN

some very fine pictures. We dined as usual on sausages. I was lucky to have sausages; I was nearly sent to bed without my dinner! Evan had been gone a long day with Sharfa. In the late afternoon I got bored with camp and announced to Michael, who was doubtless working on his map, that I was going for a walk with the puppies. The slanting sun turned the crags of the mountains purple and the broad névés a rosy pink. Akbar and Mumtaz bounded along through fields of anemones and buttercups, stopping to yap at a quiet sheep-herder crouched beside his flock. The great glaciers, spread in front of me, receded as I went on.

At my left I saw the smoke of a camp and a circle of men sitting about a fire. Great bales were piled in a wall as a defence against the wind. Between me and the camp a number of dark clumsy objects were moving slowly about.

Akbar gave a delighted bark and headed straight for them. Mumtaz and I followed more sedately. Suddenly, much too suddenly, one of the objects appeared from nowhere and looked me in the eye. It was a yak. Undoubt-

## THIN AIR

edly a domesticated yak, a useful, harmless yak; but it was very close and it made an alarming noise.

I decided that it was probably late and I ought really to think of going home. Out of pure curiosity, I kept one eye over my shoulder while I cautiously retreated. A yak's curved horns are very long; and the ponderous shaggy shoulders are as impressive as a bison's. As soon as this yak turned and trotted away on his short legs to join his mates, he was absurd rather than formidable. Then I discovered it was unexpectedly dusk and I was a long way from camp.

What was more formidable than the yak was the greeting I got from Evan and Michael.

"Don't be angry. I didn't know it was late. And I've seen my first yak."

I can't think of a suitable way to paraphrase their replies.

The next day was my birthday. The cook made me something rather like a cake, and there were presents for me in the yakdans. Evan gave me a string of lapis lazuli, which he had hidden for the occasion since Delhi. I was

## CARAVAN

standing in the door of the dining tent when I slipped it on. The string broke and the bright blue beads flew in all directions.

“Oh, what a misfortune, Mem-sahib,” exclaimed Lalla.

“It doesn’t matter. I know the number. We can find them all,” said Evan.

Lalla still shook his head.

“The mem-sahib will hear strange news.”

We broke camp in the morning and started off at a canter along the level trail of our last Kashmir stage. The benign morning sun warmed our faces and the fields of flowers nodded lightly in a ruffling breeze. The pygmy cows lifted their dripping muzzles from the stream to look at us with mild inquiry. A turgid flood of sheep parted reluctantly to let us pass. About us was the rich loveliness of vegetation; trees, grazing cattle, meadows of flowers, and the song of birds. Somewhere before us in the forbidding ring of soaring peaks that engirdled us was the narrow cleft through the mountains that would admit us into a different country, into the wildness of Ladakh.



## THIN AIR

The stage was a short one. Twenty miles over flat country on horses took so little time that we could idle for hours after our stop for breakfast, while the caravan went on ahead. When we were nearly in sight of the camping ground of Baltal, we saw a dusty man coming towards us at a rapid dog-trot. He halted when we came up to him and made a deep salaam. We acknowledged the greeting and drew in our horses. He addressed Evan in rapid Kashmiri.

Evan looked back helplessly, shrugged his shoulders and waved a hand.

“Samajhna kuchh nahin,” he essayed in the hope it meant “Don’t understand.”

It evidently did, for the man began again very slowly, very emphatically.

“He’s in earnest about something. ‘Dras?’ That’s a place on the road. ‘Sahib?’ And he keeps repeating ‘kuchh kharab!’—‘something bad.’ Apparently something bad for sahibs at Dras. Perhaps he’s telling us a bridge is washed out. Achha!”

The man saluted again and resumed his trot.

## CARAVAN

We found our servants standing together in front of the camp in an agitated knot.

Lalla and the sais rushed forward to take the horses.

“The mail-runner has passed here, Huzzur. He carries a letter to the Resident at Srinagar. A strange thing has happened. That friend of the sahibs, the tall sahib from America who came often to the houseboat—”

“Wendell Sahib?” prompted Evan.

“Wendell Sahib has disappeared.”





*Towards the Zoji-La*

## VIII

### *The Crossing of a Great Wall*



## VIII

### *The Crossing of a Great Wall*

**B**EFORE dawn we crossed the Zoji-La. We had sat late into the night discussing Wendell. Lalla could tell us very little. All that the bearer of the letter knew was this: The party of sahibs had made camp at Dras for the night. The news spread through the village that the young sahib was a yogi, a very holy man. Every coolie would testify to that. His tent was at a little distance from the others, on the edge of the river. The sahib dined with his friends and remained talking with them; he then went to his own tent, presumably to bed, for his servants said they saw his lantern go out about eleven o'clock.

At six in the morning his bearer went to call him according to his instructions. His master, who was dressed in a sweater and a pair of shorts, ordered chota hazri brought to him in

## THIN AIR

half an hour. When the bearer came back with the breakfast, the sahib was not there to eat it. He never returned.

“But, Lalla, what could have happened to him? What else did the chaprassi say?”

“He knows nothing more, Huzzur. The Lambadar of Dras sent him to the friends of the sahib in all haste to take their message. So much the servants told him.”

“He couldn’t disappear into thin air.”

“One can think what one thinks. Wendell Sahib was rich man and all men are not good men, Huzzur.”

“Why do you think he was rich, Lalla?”

“Those things are known, Mem-sahib,” Lalla said simply.

“Then you think he might have been—some one has—?”

“Who can say? In three days we shall be at Dras.”

Heavy with depression and disquietude we went to our beds and were wakened in the cold blackness to the same fearful unease. We gulped black coffee and wrapped our puttees

## THE CROSSING OF A GREAT WALL

round our legs in shivering silence by the light of a lantern, while the tents were struck from above our heads.

The stars were setting when we mounted our sleepy horses. The string of pack-ponies curled behind us in the gloom like a long dark snake. In the first grey light we climbed sharply up a thread of trail etched in sheer cliff. Here and there was snow under the ponies' feet. Remnants of avalanches blocked the path; and we were obliged to dismount and lead the horses across strips of polished ice. Above us a vast dark wall of slate; below us, immeasurably down, to the remote angry roar of the river, a black vertical gorge. Between us and the gorge, an inadequate foot of trail.

Suppose, I thought to myself to keep my mind from the fear of dizziness and my eyes from the fascination of the depths below me, suppose this tiny gap in the wall of mountains leads exactly nowhere. When we get to the top of this pass, if we ever do, we may step lightly into—nothing at all.

The light climbed with us and, when we



## THIN AIR

reached the summit of the pass, eleven thousand and five hundred feet, a shaft of sun yellowed the rough pinnacles above. A vast basin of snow and ice curved in front of us. The sun was our enemy. Before its rays grew vertical and warm enough to melt the crust, we must get across the white desert. Not a tree broke the desolate expanse. Even through our black glasses, the glare was dazzling. By mid-morning the ponies sank into the softening drifts up to their bellies. We moved forward slowly. Once we crossed a caravan of yaks and envied their comparative speed, their powerful shoulders and short, slender legs fitting them admirably to cope with snow. We were so tired and hungry that we stopped for breakfast at the first sign of shelter from the icy wind,—the lee of a deserted hut. We got on our horses to ford the glacial streams that intersected the trail. They were the only note of colour. Ledges of jade-green ice overhung their sides, and giant blocks strewed the bottom of the stream beds. We scrambled up the far side of the basin and of a sudden reached the edge of the saddle.

## *THE CROSSING OF A GREAT WALL*

Below us the trail dropped away into a deep valley. We had pierced the Himalayan wall.

Before us was new country, a harsh unfinished country where man was not meant to be. Mountains reared themselves on both sides like polished walls. There was no vegetation. The sides of the valley were forested only with spires of intensely coloured rock. We led our horses down the steep trail. Except in the lee of a curve where the snow-grilled stone threw back a blast of heat in our faces, the wind was cruel; and the glare was constantly intolerable. We were in the face of a cosmic hostility. Nowhere in the world could it be possible to have a greater sense of nature's disregard of man, a disregard too impersonal to be enmity.

This impression was flung at us when our minds were obsessed with Wendell. We said little about it to one another, but our thoughts raced wildly over theories. In this setting only the fantastic was the probable.

At such a height and in such conditions nerves play strange tricks. The well-known effect of altitude upon the mind is as imperative

## THIN AIR

as it is illusory. It is like champagne: the effect differs with the individual. Tests have been made at great heights to measure the speed and accuracy of reactions. The subject feels confident of a greater intellectual vigour and clarity, but the confused results demonstrate the opposite. The physical corollary is an everyday experience.

No less disturbing than the altitude in its effect upon the mind was the character of this country. In crossing the Zoji-La, we might have stepped into a different planet. There was something much more than the abrupt transition from fertility to barrenness. We came into a setting which, though comparable to nothing in our sensual experience, was uneasily familiar to an atavistic consciousness, stirring in its sleep beneath our imagination.

Time has slipped. We are an anachronism. Have we been thrust back in an age when the earth was raw and man unforeseen, have we intruded upon something not yet ready for us; or have we wandered into the future to find a preparation for something beyond ourselves for

## *THE CROSSING OF A GREAT WALL*

which we are an outworn degenerated form, unwanted by the tremendous forces busy with things to come?

In this country our friend had disappeared.

As the trail slipped down the limestone cliffs, a circle of glaciers, forming great amphitheatres to the north, moved into sight. At the bottom of the descent, we could see in the sandy plain of Minimarg the silver ribbon of a river and the desolate huddle of low mud huts that was Matayan, our resting place. There really was life, then, in this harsh valley.





*The Disappearance*

## IX

### *Disappearance of a Sahib*



## IX

### *Disappearance of a Sahib*

THE ponies were scarcely unsaddled and the tents pitched when Lalla announced that we had callers. We had camped in a desolate plain, unprotected from the wind, at the outskirts of the village. Not far from our tents a little group of men was standing. Two of them carried large brass trays; another was holding the head of a handsome little horse, saddled with an embroidered cloth; and a tall old man with a grey beard quietly folded his hands in his long sleeves. Sharfa, the shikhari, hurried up to us to whisper that this was the local rajah, who had come to pay us a visit of ceremony.

“Does he speak English?” Evan demanded.

“No, Sahib, but it does not matter.”

“All right, Sharfa, you come along and say all the correct things.”



## THIN AIR

Evan and Sharfa went forward to meet the guests; and long sonorous speeches were exchanged, accompanied with many salaams and gestures. The two men with the trays stepped forward and offered them. Evan turned round and beckoned to Michael and me, who were watching with interest from the door of the tent.

“This is a sort of surprise party,” he said; “we are urged to have tea.”

On one tray was a tall silver tea-pot, gracefully and curiously shaped, and a number of little stone cups; on the other some dingy little cakes and a pile of golden apricots, arranged symmetrically on fresh-washed mulberry leaves. There was nothing for us to do but to drink the tepid tea. At the first taste I nearly dropped the cup. Sharfa admonished me hastily.

“It is the butter and the soda that makes the strange taste, Mem-sahib. It cannot do harm.”

I finished it with a strained smile, which I hoped indicated delighted satisfaction, and

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attempted one of the sticky squares. It was doughy and extremely sweet, but had no other recognizable taste. We gathered that the rajah was deeply honoured at our arrival and offered his services and hospitality in his realm. We could only hope that Sharfa in return was expressing our appreciation in suitable terms.

“And I know what to do next,” said Evan proudly. “Forewarned is forearmed, literally. I now give him a present. That is the real point of the visit.”

He disappeared into his tent and returned with a package of cartridges.

“Ross told me before we left that nothing would be more welcome. They cannot get ammunition up here. Ask him, Sharfa, if these are right for his rifle, and wish him good shikar.”

The rajah examined the cartridges with childlike satisfaction, nodded happily, and with many salaams tucked them into the bosom of his ample robe. Another speech, which sounded interminable to us, was translated by Sharfa: “He says he is pleased.”

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And the party was over.

“If we meet too many rajahs, we shall get no markhor,” said Michael.

Evan reassured him. “We have a special supply of rajah-cartridges. When they give out, it is just too bad.”

This diversion took our minds from thoughts of Wendell only until dinner. We tried not to talk about him. As a result there was silence. We were all eager to press on to Dras as fast as possible and went to bed immediately after dinner in order to make an early start.

Going to bed did not mean going to sleep. At this height sleep became increasingly elusive. In normal circumstances nothing is greater agony for me than the daily necessity of getting up, but now the routine of rising at five to break the back of the march before the heat of the day was an easy matter of course.

The early sun strengthened the colours of the masses of limestone towering above our route. Rudely sculptured pinnacles crowned the bold cliffs with peaks, spires, and domes; and haphazard bands of yellow, red, and green-

## *DISAPPEARANCE OF A SAHIB*

ish rock made erratic patterns on the surface of the smooth walls. Sudden veins of porphyry and granite interrupted the sweep of limestone. Below us an inky river turned the polished boulders of black basalt to gleaming onyx. Towards noon a hot dry wind sweeping down the plain made more unbearable the heat and glare from the sand. Still no grass, no trees to give relief from the fiery colours. Even the blue of the sky was a hot cobalt.

It was a long stage and the sun was low in the west before the valley widened and the greenness of Dras spread before us. Extensive crops of barley and buckwheat announced a large settlement. We passed brown, wrinkled women working in the fields and a number of the more leisurely men on the road. The people of Dras are a mixed race, and undoubtedly a tough one to endure the long Arctic winter and the swift summer of intense heat. We were at an elevation of about ten thousand feet. The air was cruelly dry. We ignored the uninviting rest house and rode beyond the cluster of rubble buildings to make camp on

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a flat arm of turf thrust out into the sluggish grey water of the river. A grove of stiffly planted poplar trees and a stone wall cut off the camping ground from the road. This was the spot where David Wendell and the Telfers had pitched their tents.

We were impatient for news and through Sharfa immediately questioned the chaukidar, a patient man grown old in caring for the camping ground of sahibs. He was willing to be helpful, but we found out little.

Sharfa interpreted. "Here close to the river where the sahib is standing was the tent of Wendell Sahib. Over there near the ponies the other sahibs pitched their three tents, and behind, near the gap in the stone wall, was the camp of the servants."

The chaukidar interrupted him. Sharfa explained that the chaukidar wished to say how distressed he was at the misfortune. All the village was distressed because they feared calamity would overtake them if something terrible had happened to that holy man.

"That is the second time we have heard about

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his being a holy man. Ask him why he says that.”

“He says that all the countryside knows. The coolies have told how every morning the sahib sat in meditation. The people here are very impressed by Yoga.”

“But they are Mohammedans in this part of the country, aren't they? We are not in Buddhist country yet.”

Sharfa shrugged. “Oh, yes, but I think not very good Mohammedans, not like Kashmiris. They are much mixed.” He said something to the chaukidar who shook his head obstinately.

“A holy man is a holy man, Sahib.”

The chaukidar pointed out that no one but Wendell's bearer admitted having seen him that morning, yet it would have been practically impossible for him to leave his tent without being seen by the other servants who were busying themselves about the fire between his tent and the road. These all insisted that Wendell had not passed by them. According to the bearer's story, which we got at third hand, he had in the course of time become distressed at

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his master's absence and reported to the Telfers that he was not to be found.

They were not greatly concerned. It was often Wendell Sahib's custom, they said, to go off by himself to spend the early morning in meditation. By afternoon, however, they began to feel uneasy and started a search. No Wendell. Nothing was missing from his tent except the clothes he was wearing and a climbing stick. They were not really alarmed until the evening. The next day they sent in a report to the Resident by the runner whom we had met on the other side of the pass. After that, added the chaukidar, they had immediately gone on to Kargil; probably they were still there.

“Didn't they make any investigations?”

“Many people searched in all directions.”

This vague story satisfied us not at all.

“The chaukidar thinks the sahib may have drowned,” said Sharfa. “The sahib liked to bathe in the river.”

“How? Where?” Evan said scornfully. The river flowing gently around the curve broke

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in ripples over the flat stones. At no point was it two feet deep. "I remember Wendell telling us that he was a champion swimmer."

There was nothing for it but to hasten on to Kargil and overtake the Telfers if possible. This was a long stage. In amazing contrast to the great black rocks and the sinister gorge of the river, we came upon a burst of roses. For miles, spreading bushes, so thickly weighted with their pink blossoms that they bent to the road, were banked at the foot of cliffs of basalt. In places they were half buried under the ravages of avalanche and land-slip. Then their heavy perfume gave place to an intense aromatic odour on a dreary plateau. Wormwood and unfamiliar low-growing herbs that smelled pungent as our horses' feet crushed them struggled through the waste of stone.

The town of Kargil on the Suru River was a return to comparative civilization. We rode through the bazaar to an accompaniment of shrieks from children and yelps from dogs, and the curious glances of Mohammedan merchants in the doorways of their shops. Kargil has a



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post office, a telegraph office, and a Government Revenue Officer called a tehsildar. That was the man we wanted to see.

We left a message for him at the post office and went directly to the dak bungalow to spend the first, last, and only night of the three months under a roof.

The Telfer party had gone. That was a disappointment we had half expected. In spite of Mrs. Telfer's fragile health, they were pushing on for Leh at doubled speed. The only compensation was that we had the bungalow to ourselves. The tents lay folded on the verandah in the middle of a wall of yakdans, piled like bricks. Jan flung the bedding on the charpoys, those frames of wood with four carved legs and a network of string as a spring that are called beds, and with practised haste unpacked my toilet things. As always, he arranged the combs, brushes and bottles in a neat geometric pattern, which varied from day to day in design but never in perfection of symmetry. While I was washing off the dust of the march, and exchanging my riding breeches for a cotton

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dress, the tehsildar arrived. I heard him greet Evan ceremoniously in excellent English. I finished dressing at the speed of a fireman and hurried out. I did not intend to miss a word.

There was no doubt that the tehsildar was pleased to see us. He was nearly bursting with the story he had to tell. In fluent, if sometimes unusual, English, he poured out his grievances to interested ears.

“Oh, yess, Sirs—and Madam, I took official charge at once, from the moment I was summoned and informed of the interesting case. I brought my note book with me and I carefully wrote down all the facts, in the interest of His Majesty’s Government. But the difficulties were great, very great.”

He quivered at some memory and sighed.

“These people did not understand my position at all. They—brushed me aside as if I were an ignorant native of this place. I assure you, Sir, I am graduate of the University of Bengal. I am an educated man. For twenty years, I have been authorized servant of His Majesty’s—”

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“But they did give you all the facts for your report?”

“Well, yess. Mr. Luke told me all he knew, he said. But he is very abrupt man. The story of the bearer was as you have heard it. I should like to have questioned him further. I could have been most helpful, but, as I shall tell you, that too was taken out of my hands.

“Mr. Luke was a most meticulous man. He had, he said, examined the country surrounding the camp at Dras with care and found traces of footprints leading to a place in the bank of the river. Here they stopped and there were signs of the earth disturbed and broken as if some one had slipped and fallen. He even showed me a neat diagram with a cross marking: ‘Here the footprints end.’ ‘I feel sure,’ he said to me, ‘that Wendell Sahib was at this spot yesterday morning, possibly to bathe.’”

Apparently the antagonism in their interview grew strong from this point.

“Do you believe,” the tehsildar had asked Luke, “that he met death by drowning?”

“It is possible.” Luke was cautious. “I be-

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lieve it is unlikely. He was a strong swimmer.”

“What is your theory? What do you believe has happened to him?”

“That is what I should like to find out.”

“Then, please, will you turn over the gentleman’s effects to me, in the name of the Government?”

“Certainly not,” said Luke.

“But, Sir, it is my duty as His Majesty’s servant to take possession of them herewith in the name of the British Government, which I have here the honour to represent.”

“They will be sealed and delivered into the hands of the British Resident, no one else.”

“I am authorized— It is correct procedure. You must do so.”

Luke was dogged. “No native touches a thing!”

“But I am officcial! It is the law.”

“Don’t tell me about the law. I happen to be a barrister and I will be the judge of that.”

“It is really expedient that I know as much as possible. Without it I cannot take action. There may be papers—”

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“I will attend to that. There are papers. I have them here.” Luke touched his breast pocket.

“Ah,” said the tehsildar and held out his hand.

“No, you don’t. I give these to the British Resident myself.”

“But, Sir, I ought to examine them. They may give light to this most difficult situation.”

“That’s all right. I have examined them. They concern private matters and in Mr. Wendell’s interest I cannot let his diary fall into strange hands.”

“There is a diary? Ah, you know, really, you must give me that.”

Luke strode into his room and closed the door.

The tehsildar wrung his hands in exasperation, mounted his horse, and galloped to the telegraph office. In half an hour he returned triumphant.

“Meester Luke, I have here the telegram. See for yourself. Confirmation from the Residency. Give me the diary.”

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“Too late,” said Luke placidly, “I have burned it.”

At this point in his story the tehsildar paused for his dramatic effect and looked from one to another of us.

“That was pretty high-handed,” said Evan. “I have heard that Luke was a lawyer of sorts. He ought to have known better. Isn’t that known as destroying state’s evidence?”

“King’s evidence, Sir. Oh, yess, it was very wrong, very wicked. I hope you can appreciate my position. It was trying for me in my offee-cial capacity, you understand.”

“What did you do then?” I asked.

“In line of duty I wrote at once a full account—”

“No, no, I mean about looking for Wendell Sahib.”

“Of course, I did all and more than my position requires of me. It is a serious matter, you see. The disappearance of a sahib in any case— Such a rich man and such a holy man—”

“Such a rich man? What do you mean? What makes you think Wendell was rich, I

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mean, richer than any of the British sahibs that come here to shoot?"

"Oh, Madam, that was well known throughout the country. Ladakhi coolies were hastening from all over the hills to try to get into his service. Wendell Sahib gave rupees freely—like sand; where you, for instance, or the officers on shikar gave annas to your coolies, he gave rupees, with golden promises of much more."

This shocked us. How inconsiderate of Wendell to override the established standards—and how indiscreet!

"That may have been the whim of a moment or for some special service," suggested Michael.

"Oh, no, Sir, he travelled with more than thirty thousands of rupees."

"How do you know that?"

"It is common knowledge in these hills."

"Where are those rupees now?"

The tehsildar shrugged. "How should I know? I was not permitted to see the luggage. It is said, Sir, that his bearer has taken his sealed yakdans back to Srinagar."

## DISAPPEARANCE OF A SAHIB

“Alone, through the mountains?”

“It is very unwise, yess. If my offeecial position had been recognized, naturally I should not have permitted it.”

“Quite. We understand that. And you called him a holy man. That is a universal impression, is it not?”

“Oh, yess, he is known to be a yogi. That is why the Ladakhis are disturbed. They believe they will be cursed because a calamity has befallen the holy sahib. The sins of others will fall—”

“Do you believe he has been murdered?”

The tehsildar shrugged again and looked out at the mountains. “Thirty thousand rupees. Alas, there are many evil people in the world. Who can tell? Does a young, healthy man, rich and powerful, disappear for no reason?”

“By whom, then? Who would have done it? Who could have done it?”

“In my offeecial capacity, I know nothing. The people here in Kargil are very ignorant. They are angry and frightened. They talk much but they know nothing.” Then he sud-



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denly added: "Myself, I do not believe he is dead."

We waited in silence.

"Those people left abruptly the next morning. Meester Luke did not even notify me of his departure. He was not polite man. Then I mounted my horse and myself rode to Dras. I examined everything and I went to the spot marked in the photograph. By this time there were many footprints. So many other people had been there one could tell nothing. But this I think. Wendell Sahib could not have drowned there, either by accident or by his own intention. The river at that point is shallow and nowhere about could it cover the knee of a man. If the sahib had wished to die, it would not have been there, Sirs, oh, no."

"Supposing he lost consciousness and fell in? It is possible, of course, to drown in very shallow water."

"Then the body would still be there. The water could not carry it beyond the barrier of rounded rocks and the little sand bars."

"Well then, what?"

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“How do I know? There is one thing, however; I will tell it to you and you may think as you please.

“I have examined the camping ground most accurately. As you know, there is a main road. One goes forward or one goes back. Besides that road there are only the rough trails that the hill people use over the shoulders of the mountains. As you can see, I am not young man, but one must not spare oneself in the performance of duty. Myself I searched these trails for many miles around. On one of these a strange thing happened. I am not superstitious man, you understand. I have been to the University of Bengal, but one does not understand everything, Sirs.”

We agreed that was true.

“There were two men with me, honest fellows, I believe, although they were Mussulmans and Kashmiri. High in the hills we were surprised to see a tall figure against the sunset. We hoped for a time that it was our man. As we approached, we saw that it was a yogi, thin and gaunt in ragged yellow robes. He was

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muttering prayers as he strode along. When he came abreast of us he stopped and gave us a greeting in a Tibetan dialect. I, who speak little Tibetan, responded in Urdu. He turned his eyes on me—he was remarkable-looking man, I assure you, Sirs,—and pointed to the hills. In Urdu he said to me, ‘You are seeking the stranger who has vanished. You believe him dead. Look for him no further. He is not dead and you will not find him. This morning at the rising of the sun I have met him in the mountains. We understood one another. Go back to your homes. It is useless to search.’ ”

“So you went back?” from me, suspicious.

“No, Madam, we went on until dark, but we saw nothing. We met no one. That is wild country.”

“Where is your fakir now?”

“Who knows? He did not come into Kargil.”

“And we certainly did not meet him on the road. Where was there for him to go?”

“They have business of their own, those holy men. Their road is their own.”

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“Did you believe him? It was an odd coincidence.”

“I am not superstitious man, but he was holy and one knows these people are different from us.”

“Are you the only person who saw him?”

“There are Mohammed Ali and Rasul. They saw him, they heard him. They will tell you the same story.”

“Do you really believe Wendell Sahib is in the mountains?”

“Who knows, Madam? Things that are not possible are possible in these hills.”

“But a man could not live three days without supplies in this country,” objected Michael. “Wendell does not even speak the language.”

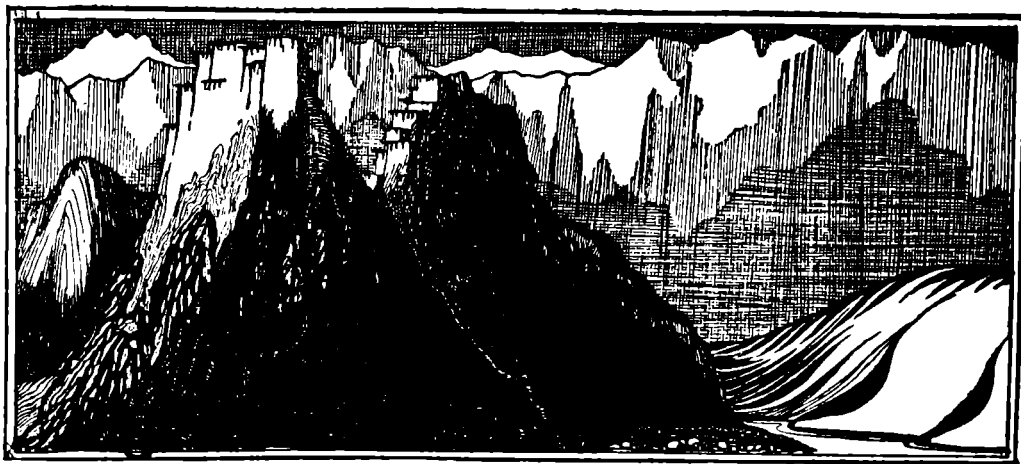
“You are sure, Sir?”

“Well, we had no reason to suppose he did. He was never in the East before. It is not probable.”

The tehsildar lifted one shoulder the shadow of a hair's breadth.

“You are undoubtedly right, Sir. Then Wendell Sahib has been murdered.”





*Llamaseries*

X

*Om Mani Padme Hum*



## X

### *Om Mani Padme Hum*

**W**HAT had happened to Wendell? We could think of nothing else. Our chief object was to press on as fast as possible in the hope of overtaking the Telfer party. Failing that, we were certain of finding them at Leh. Our servants' camp was a hornet's nest of gossip, and the more incredible the suppositions that filtered to our ears, the further we felt we were from anything like the truth. We assumed that, if the Telfers had nothing to conceal, we could get the truth from them. Picturesque and imaginative lying is as natural as breathing to the native servants. The Telfers, unknown quantities though they might be, were, at least, of our own race and spoke our own language.

We had a number of theories from which to choose to account for Wendell's disappearance. Each had something to be said for it. The sim-



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plest was that he had met accidental death while taking an early morning bath. Against this were several facts. He was a powerful swimmer. At the point of his supposed disappearance the water was not more than eighteen inches deep. The movement of the current was sluggish. The conformation of the riverbed was such that it was difficult to see how a body could float even out of sight.

The second possibility was that Wendell had committed suicide. Our own feelings were strongly against this. It was contrary to the impression he gave of a cheerful disposition and an enjoyment of life. We were well aware that his unconventional religious views and theosophical convictions were enough in themselves to convince the average British official that he was eccentric; but, knowing how important these very beliefs were to him, we could not believe that he had contemplated an act so overwhelmingly in opposition to them. For our own part we were convinced of his sanity and intelligence.

It was not in Wendell's mind to kill himself

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when he left Srinagar. There was some purpose in his travels whose fulfilment was far beyond the present. On the other hand, we could have no idea of what might have occurred on the journey to turn feverish a mind already over-mystical. There were two natural causes that would strongly affect the nerves of an impressionable person—the altitude and the chaotic setting. We were far readier to credit the importance of these than we should have been a week ago. If these things could colour the meditations of the casual traveller, who is chiefly concerned with when and how he has his lunch, how much more could they affect a mind already given to brooding on the meaning of the universe and his relation to it. Possibly, overwrought by pondering an enigma forever beyond his limitations, Wendell had tried to bridge the gap between the part and the whole by a simple act of self-annihilation. This, however, would be an act in direct contradiction to his philosophy and could be accounted for only by some subversive influence as yet unknown. Whether the burnt diary could

furnish a clue to this, only the man Luke could say.

A third theory, the one favoured by the natives, was that he had been murdered. If so, by whom, when, and how?

The fourth possibility persisted in returning to our minds. He was not dead. He had, for reasons of his own, chosen to disappear.

Two days beyond Kargil we were in Buddhist country. Mani-walls stretched beside us for miles. Each one of the flat prayer stones has been engraved by pious hands and it is not surprising to find inscriptions in every language from Sanskrit to Mongolian. Chiefly one finds the Buddhist invocation: *Om mani padme hum*—Ah, the jewel is in the lotus. We got the habit, like good Buddhists, of passing prayer walls on the right; thereby we deferred to the customs of the people and conceivably “acquired merit” as well. It was easy to be on the safe side.

The country was dotted with chortens, sepulchral monuments which held relics of deceased Lamas and resembled in shape the dagobas of

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Ceylon. Prayer flags waved from poles in every village. Roughly modelled images squatted by the side of the road and occasionally on the roofs of houses. Outside Mulbek we came upon a gigantic stone figure, infinitely old. This is the image of Maitreya, mentioned in the tales of Fa-hsein, the Chinese traveller. The inscription on the back of the rock is said to be in old Chinese. One is now surprised at nothing. Above us loomed the monastery of Mulbek, perched, unbelievably out of reach, on a grey limestone cliff. Across the Namika-La and through the Kharbu valley the soaring rocks were sheerer than ever.

The colours, always extravagant throughout Ladakh, transgressed all restraint. The upward sweep of rock is stratified in layers of shale, slate, and limestone. Green, purple, orange—the whole spectrum—spread at random. Column succeeds pilaster in a sort of architect's nightmare. The top of the Fotu-La, more than thirteen thousand feet in the air, is crowned with a heap of rocks and stones, horns of animals, their skulls engraved with in-

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scriptions, and even an occasional tail of a yak. This heap of rubbish is a religious monument called a Lha-To, built from the votive offerings of grateful pilgrims.

When we descended the defile beyond the pass, the whole country seemed to have burst into fire. The multitudinous peaks, sharp as flames, the intricate drawing of the ridges, and the fine fantasy of Gothic buttress and cupola glowed with the hot colour of a bed of coals.

The hand of man is impotent in this setting. Against a wall of yellow rock, cut by the stream at its feet into castellations, turrets, and domes, the great monastery of Lamayuru is scarcely distinguishable. Clinging to the side of the cliff, high above the bed of the river, it overhangs the village; and its balconies with finials of chortens, its flat roof with its prayer flags and waving yaks' tails, are merely an extra flourish on the architectural elaboration of nature. We rubbed our eyes, agreed that we were having hallucinations, and dropped down to the river bank to camp.

In the sunset light, even the life of the vil-

## OM MANI PADME HUM

lage was unreal. The two broad mani-walls through which we rode ended in a series of archways crowned with the inevitable chorten. Over the doors of the houses were alcoves frescoed with crude demons and containing three tiny chortens, red, white and blue. Ladakhi women were driving home their herds of little black goats. The sun glinted from the masses of turquoises on their heads. This universal headdress, called a perag, has a foundation of a strip of red cloth sewn on leather. The front is shaped like a cobra's head. Rows of turquoise matrix, varying from two to twelve, according to the wealth and importance of the owner, constitute the woman's portable dowry. Broad earflaps of lambskin project at the sides, and her black hair, interbraided with wool, is scarcely distinguishable from it. Every woman wears the same simple full red dress over long clumsy trousers—black trousers for married women, white for girls. She jingles as she walks with the weight of ornaments—hoop earrings of seed pearls, cowry shells, heavy silver bracelet cuffs, and amulet boxes.

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The swarthy, slant-eyed men wear their hair in a pigtail, sodden with grease and elongated with black wool. Through the skerag, a long woollen sash wound many times around the waist, are thrust every sort of useful implement; complete "manicure sets," sewing implements, a drinking cup, and a dangling pencase. Old men and old women wandered through the streets with small wooden spindles in their hands, spinning black wool, and the white wool of goats. Donkeys, sheep, cattle, and ponies ambled home to spend the night with the family in the house. Everyone we passed greeted us with amiable smiles and the young girls with bursts of excited giggling. The Ladhakis apparently were a friendly and cheerful lot.

When we reached our flat grove of poplars, Evan prepared to pay off the pony men. This was a tedious process to be gone through whenever we changed packhorses, as we had to do from district to district. The yellow moneybags came out of the yakdans. Evan sat at his portable table with pencil, lists, and dozens of

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piles of coins in front of him. The pony men squatted at a respectful distance in a patient row. As each number was called a pony man would answer, come forward, salaam, receive his pay, salaam again, and take his place at the end of the row. When the business was ended they would all rise, give a sort of guttural cheer, and take themselves off.

This night there was a difficulty. After Evan had wound up the payroll and gone into his tent, he was summoned by Jan. A terrific commotion was taking place outside. Under a tree two coolies were holding by the arms a miserable pony man. In front of him Sharfa was fiercely brandishing and snapping a whip, while Lalla poured a pitcher of cold water down his neck. This was the most excruciating torture they could invent for a Ladakhi. He had, it seems, committed the grievous offence of being found out. The coolies were no mathematical geniuses and this man's clever invention held a flaw. One coolie to our eyes looked very much like another. When this chap had presented himself three times and collected the pay of



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three men, his colleagues had observed it with interest, but Evan had not. It had not occurred to the coolies to draw attention to the malefactor until they discovered that fifty coolie men meant fifty payments and no more. When the payroll was completed, two men were left over. Then a howl went up. The villain was seized and pushed forward for punishment. After the cold douche he was only too glad to disgorge the extra payments and flee yelping from the camp, pursued by Sharfa, who was roaring convincingly and cracking the whip around his ankles.

We halted a day at Lamayuru to visit the monastery. The road zigzagged up to it from the village to a group of bare houses at its base. Here the nuns lived. Every family in Ladakh wishes to dedicate at least one child to religion. If there is no boy to become a Lama, a girl must do. She shaves her head, adopts the red or yellow Lama cap, and theoretically resigns herself to celibacy. This latter is useful in restricting the population. These nuns are called Jomos. Ordinarily they continue to live in their homes

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performing menial tasks and sharing only slightly in religious ritual, but in some cases and some districts they live together in a nunnery as here.

The terraced roof of the Lamasery was swarming with activity. Dozens of Lamas in red caps and black robes rushed out to greet us with hospitality and friendly curiosity. Lamayuru is a stronghold of Bon-po, the old religion of Tibet, which has here been only slightly affected by pure Buddhism. There are two main sects of Lamaism. The old form is the Red Sect. These are far the commonest in Ladakh. Their red caps and sashes are faded to every shade from vermilion to garnet.

In 1378 a reformer appeared among them, the great Tsong-Kaba. Those genial abbés, the two French monks Huc and Gabet, who journeyed from Mongolia to Lhasa in 1844, tell of the purification that Tsong-Kaba effected in Lamaism, which had already become degenerated. Huc suggests that the founder of the Yellow Cap Lamas had come under the influence of a French Jesuit who had died be-

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fore he could effect a complete conversion to Catholicism and he supports this theory with some ingenious confirmation. In any case Tsong-Kaba's partisans increased so fast that the chief of the Lamaist hierarchy, the Buddha Chakdja, was disturbed and determined to have the matter of supremacy settled. The Abbé says:

“As he entered the modest cell of Tsong-Kaba, his high red cap struck against the beam of the door, and fell to the ground, an accident which everybody regarded as a presage of triumph for the Yellow Cap. The reformer was seated on a cushion, his legs crossed, and apparently took no heed to the entrance of the Chakdja. He did not rise to receive him, but continued gravely to tell his beads. The Chakdja, without permitting himself to be disconcerted either by the fall of his cap, or by the cold reception that was given him, entered abruptly upon the discussion, by a pompous eulogium of the old rites, and an enumeration of the privileges which he claimed under them. Tsong-Kaba, without raising his eyes, interrupted him in these terms: ‘Let go, cruel man that thou art, let go the louse thou art crushing between thy fingers. I hear its cries from where I sit, and my heart is torn with commiserating grief.’ The Chakdja, in point of fact, while vaunting of his

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own virtues, had seized a louse under his vest, and in contempt of the doctrine of transmigration, which forbids men to kill anything that has life in it, he was endeavouring to crack it between his nails. Unprovided with a reply to the severe words of Tsong-Kaba, he prostrated himself at his feet, and acknowledged his supremacy.”

Since the days of Tsong-Kaba, Lamaism has relapsed into polytheistic devil-worship far removed from the teachings of Gautama Buddha. We knew very well that the Lamasery we were entering was far below the standard of meditation, piety, and erudition that we could find elsewhere, but nevertheless we were impressed. Perhaps it was the dimness of the light, the bare spaces and architectural simplicity; perhaps the smell of incense and joss sticks from China, the flickering and gleaming of hundreds of tiny lamps. Perhaps it was the hushed, monotonous murmurs of the Lamas seated like Buddhas on low cushions in front of their little tea tables which held their cups and their sacred books. The air was heavy with mystery.

Great tankas of silk painted with effigies of bodhisats hung from the ceiling. From the dim

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snadowed walls violently-coloured devils leered with grinning ferocity while they inflicted the most imaginative tortures of hell on the mass of humanity depicted writhing under their feet. Further on the childish scenes of horror gave way to a fresco of benign bodhisats peacefully meditating in the conventional cross-legged position. Before the high altar, where the terrible many-armed Kali of the Hindus, in her fiercest manifestation as Durga, disputes place with the mystical serenity of the Buddha, hundreds of little brass lamps flickered among the offerings of holy water, flowers, and coloured butter.

We followed our Lama guide into the library, a high, narrow room lined from floor to ceiling with pigeonholes for the sacred books. These are loose-leaf, illuminated manuscripts, unbound, preserved between boards and wrapped in silk. Through our local interpreter we asked our guide if he read them. He shook his head. Almost all the monks of Lamayuru were entirely illiterate. Ignorance of the contents of the supposed treasures of learning only

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served to increase the veneration in which they were held. Apparently sanctity could seep through their unlifted covers.

We came out of the gloom of the interior into the dazzling sunshine and the bustle of life on the roof. Word had spread that the strangers had brought cameras, and the monks, far from sharing the hostility of the Mohammedans to being photographed, had eagerly gathered in the hope of being in a picture. They were so good-natured and so childlike as they jostled each other about to get in front of the lens that, long after our films were exhausted, we went on snapping the empty camera in order to disappoint no one. We left amid earnest pressure to stay or, failing that, to return speedily.

We knew that the Lamayuru monks practise what is considered to be the most brutalized and degraded form of the local religion; that they winked at the vows of abstinence and celibacy which distinguish the purer Yellow Order. We saw for ourselves that they were stupid, indolent, and dirty. But that they were amiable,

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happy, and naïvely contented, it was impossible to doubt.

The sinister aspects of the religion have not perverted the tranquil nature of the Ladakhi. There are no crimes of violence, murder is unknown, and a sense of property scarcely exists. We were in a land of polyandry, a condition fundamentally shocking to the polygynous Mohammedans as well as to the Christian missionary. It must, however, be admitted that for local conditions it seems to work very well. A barren country, inevitably deficient in the food supply, cannot support an increasing population. The celibacy of a large number of the people and the custom of polyandry combine to restrict birth. There is no problem of infanticide as in India. Children are loved and valued. No fuss is made about the exactitude of paternity. When a woman marries, she marries all the brothers of a family, and, by a gracious convention, the offspring are all attributed to the eldest.

Women naturally have a freedom and a power which is unknown in other Eastern

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countries. However reprehensible this may be, they at least look happy and the men seem satisfied. Sexual jealousy has no place in the Ladakhi temperament.







*The Gorge*

# XI

*Along a High Road*



## XI

### *Along a High Road*

**W**E were covering the long marches far more quickly than we had intended. Concern for Wendell drove us on. Sharfa's disappointment at his sahibs' lack of interest in shikar became so acute that Evan was persuaded to halt a march beyond Lama-yuru to track down sharpu on the mountain-sides.

During the hours before dinner we wandered about the village taking pictures in the slanting light of late afternoon of whatever caught our eye—young Ladakhi girls, whose white teeth and merry eyes made charming their broad healthy faces, watering the small black goats at the central well; pious old men whirling the eternal prayer wheel; young men with flowers thrust behind their ears under their jaunty fur caps, arguing over the barter of a

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horse; and, best of all, the procession of a caravan of yaks and ponies through the low walls of the street.

We followed the caravan into the village serai to watch their owners make preparations for the night halt. From off the animals' backs they unloaded bales of rugs from Yarkand and silks from Khotan destined for the markets of India. The group of tall Yarkandi merchants saluted us affably and began conversation with our servants. Two of them were sitting in a corner on a pile of saddles holding a lamb. How charmingly fond they are of animals, I thought! While I was watching the pretty scene—the lamb was white, woolly, and young—one of the men stretched it firmly across his knees. The lamb gave a surprised bleat and the other drew a long sharp knife from his girdle. I realized suddenly that I was observing preparations for dinner and was surprised to hear myself utter a shrill squeak of horror. Mohammed Jan, who had been nervously conscious of the situation, rushed protestingly towards the men with rapid Hindustani explanations. The

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traders looked up in surprise, laughed good-naturedly, and released the lamb. I was terribly embarrassed.

“I have explained,” Mohammed Jan said proudly, “that the mem-sahib does not like the sight of blood.”

“Oh, Jan, tell them that I am very sorry. I would not interfere with their dinner for anything, and I am going out of the serai immediately.”

The men protested and came up to us. Jan translated that they were in no hurry and they would not dream of slaughtering the lamb until much later. They were as full of curiosity about us as we were about them, and the conversation lasted a long time. After we had answered their frank questions of who we were, whence we came, and whither we went, they were ready and glad to talk about themselves, of their long, difficult trip through the snows of Central Asia over many dangerous passes. Were we going to Kashgar, they wanted to know? No, we regretted, we were not. Oh, that was a pity; we must change our plans!

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Kashmir was beautiful, it was true, but not so beautiful as Kashgar. In Kashgar flowers were lovelier, larger, and rarer; and every other aspect of life more charming. It apparently was a land overflowing with hospitality. Should we change our plans and await at Leh their return from India, they would escort us into this superior country where we should be entertained in royal style.

There then arose some slight dissension among them over the comparative merits of Yarkand and Kashgar. As I listened attentively to the elaborate speeches painstakingly translated by Jan, I felt that if I closed my eyes I could imagine myself back in our United States, eavesdropping on a conversation between a gentleman from Buffalo and a gentleman from Cleveland, good Rotarians both, telling a third gentleman from New England, who had never been west of the Hudson River, what he really ought to know. We assured them that, though it was impossible for us at the moment to accept their kind invitation, if ever our wanderings took us to their Home Towns, we should

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certainly renew the acquaintance. They accepted this with grave satisfaction and insisted that we write down their long and impressive names.

They were fine-looking chaps all, towering above the squat Ladakhi. Their weather-browned faces, ruddy as an English sportsman's, were frank and jovial, their manners hearty and ceremonious as became men who were wealthy, courageous and important, Solid Citizens of Central Asia. With unfeigned regret, we declined their invitation to dine on the unsuspecting lamb.

Before dawn Evan and Sharfa departed to track down a bigger and better sheep, the wild and elusive sharpu; and in the evening Michael and I had a bitter, idiotic quarrel. Whether it was brought about by the recurrent tension over the cinema camera, or by the disagreement about whether a coolie should be sent with a message and some forgotten supplies to Evan, is of no importance. Our taut nerves encouraged us to magnify ridiculous trifles into causes of war. In any case we exchanged home



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truths; and, after dinner, I retreated to my tent in haughty resentment.

My exit gratified my outraged feelings all too briefly. I had occasion to repent. The tent had become suddenly infested with a plague of spiders. Doubtless they were harmless spiders; but that insect is able to arouse in me a terror and a revulsion which I firmly believe a plague of tigers would be unable to do. There were, quite literally, thousands of them. The floor was an undulating mat. I could not put my feet on the ground without crushing dozens. They swarmed up the sides of the tent and over the cot. In order to get into bed I had to brush them in handfuls from the pillow and quickly insert myself into the uninhabited space. This was not all. They had competition. The bedside lantern attracted a flock of enormous hard-shelled beetles, fantastically striped and spotted with green and yellow. These blundering creatures rushed in with the whirr of a small motor, ricocheted off the glass of the lamp, often into my face, and crashed to the ground with an important plop. There they lay until

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they had wriggled into position to begin the attack again. I was caught on the horns of a dilemma. If I put out the light, no more beetles! But then I could not see to ward off the spiders whose line of march was, by choice, across my face. After hours of indecision, and trying both effects alternately, I wrapped the sheets over my head, resigned the field to the spiders, and fell asleep from misery. In the morning spiders and beetles had gone, and I was, remarkably, still there.

Evan returned a day late with no sharpu and no Sharfa. High up in the snows when they were thoroughly exhausted from climbing and scrambling, they had spied some magnificent animals. Sharfa had been kept too long from shikar. In a crisis of buck fever he entreated: "Shoot, Sahib, shoot!"

"We are not close enough," Evan objected.

"Yes, yes, Sahib, you will lose him."

Evan fired; miraculously the great sharpu dropped. He was on a hillside across the nullah and Evan and Sharfa in leisurely pride slithered down and toiled up to claim the prize.

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The sharpu, however, picked himself up, shook himself, and trotted off. When they reached the spot, there was nothing but a slight stain of blood in the snow. Evan, whose interest in killing things was entirely synthetic, was determined to be the thorough sportsman. Ethics required that having botched the kill he must put the wounded beast out of misery. For a whole dreary day he followed the tracks of the sharpu. In a short distance the blood spots stopped. The sharpu was never seen again. It had recovered from its surprise and the slight graze in the flank and happily joined its friends. Evan, in disgust, left Sharfa to finish his sportsman's duty for him and came back to camp.

Sharfa came in the next day shamefaced and empty-handed. To create a diversion by arousing our sympathy he asked for medical aid. The altitude was giving him headaches. We produced aspirin from the medicine chest. Then a curious epidemic set in. One after another our servants came to us with tales of aches, pains, and disabilities. All looked wist-

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fully at the medicine chest. We duly prescribed for each with unfailing success.

From then on along our march, new interruptions presented themselves. Early one morning I walked out of my tent to find a deputation of women and babies waiting patiently outside. There was an air of expectancy.

“What is all this about, Lalla? What do they want?”

“They have brought their children to be cured, Mem-sahib. It is known that the mem-sahib has a magic box that heals the sick. They are stupid people, but perhaps the mem-sahib would look at the babies. They came at dawn and they have been here for hours. They will be very disappointed to be sent away.”

I was greatly taken aback. “What am I going to do, Evan? I cannot do anything for those babies. Most of them are suffering terribly from rickets. Look at them. Look at their distended stomachs and puny arms and legs. What they need is a case of cod liver oil apiece, which seems to be about the only thing we haven't brought with us.”

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“When in doubt,” advised Evan, “give them bicarbonate of soda. You can only do your best!”

One after another the children were given to me for inspection. We had a supply of simple remedies and I could deal with fever, colic, and the usual disturbances of childhood. Eno’s Fruit Salts was a happy solution. Its quick effervescence gave it a magical air that made it a popular success. Before the dozen babies had been dealt with, a pathetic lot of new arrivals was haunting the fringes of the group. Infirm old men, cripples, and ragged bundles of disease were staring wistfully at the proceedings. It was heart-rending.

“This cannot go on,” said Evan firmly. “Lalla, tell these people that the mem-sahib can help the babies’ stomach-aches, but beyond that, much as we should like to, we can do nothing.”

In spite of this ultimatum, at our next halt there were more babies. The improvement in our first cases regrettably added to our prestige. One frightful mistake occurred which nearly

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lost us our reputation. Whenever we halted for lunch we used to let those miserable puppies, Akbar and Mumtaz, run about and exercise themselves as they saw fit. At the end of lunch, Gaffara, the dog-coolie, would throw them back in their wicker basket, sling the basket over his shoulder, and march off with the others, looking only a little more absurd than the gramophone-coolie.

The day after the first outcropping of babies, Gaffara came into camp with Mumtaz, and Mumtaz only, on his back. He explained that he had stopped at the side of the road to rest and let the puppies out of the basket for a run. Akbar had promptly disappeared. He looked for her for an hour, found that it was getting late, and decided further search was hopeless. After all, she was only a pi-dog; he came on without her.

Evan was suspicious. The puppies were getting heavier every day! Pi-dog or not, we could not leave a half-grown puppy to starve in the hills. Gaffara must go back and retrieve her. But Gaffara, it seemed, was ill, oh, very

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ill! Mysterious but acute pains disturbed his interior. Another coolie, eager for the extra annas, went off in his place. Gaffara stood on one foot and whined! "Could the sahib give assistance from the wonderful box?"

The sahib was absent-minded. Eno's Fruit Salts, obviously.

"Jan, get the bottle of Eno's Fruit Salts from the mem-sahib's dressing table and give Gaffara a large dose."

A little later Jan came into my tent with a bottle in his hand.

"What have you there, Jan?" I asked.

"I have been giving medicine to the dog-coolie."

I took the bottle from his hand and flew to find Evan.

"Evan, are we going to have a dead coolie by morning? Jan has just given Gaffara a large dose of boracic acid!"

Evan showed consternation. "Then he had better follow it up with a large emetic!"

Jan, horrified at his mistake, tore down to the coolie camp with a glass of mustard and

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water. He returned with a broad smile and the glass of mustard and water.

“It was not necessary, Sahib. The medicine immediately had the effect you wished. Gaf-fara feels much better. He is very well now, quiet and happy.”

At this point the flap of the tent wavered and a brown hand thrust in a miserable object. It was the prodigal Akbar plastered with filth. She wriggled in, crab-fashion, thumping the canvas floor with a dirty tail. Mumtaz had been lying comparatively quiet under my chair, gnawing a leg of it meditatively; and, for once, she was not particularly objectionable. We had assumed she would greet Akbar with affectionate relief. Not at all. She flew out with her puppy fangs bared in a hyena snarl and bit the home-comer in the leg. Akbar promptly responded in kind. They rolled over and over on the floor, yapping and tearing at each other in an orgy of hate.

This was a final disillusionment. The older they grew, the more they skulked, snarled, and snapped at the hands that fed them. They de-



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veloped a marked preference for filth and refuse rather than good food. We sadly acknowledged that environment cannot overcome heredity. Born a pi-dog, always a pi-dog.

On the heels of this the sais came to us with a long face. The horse, Bessie, was about to die. Bessie had, a few days before, lost a shoe and the slight lameness resulting unfitted her for being ridden until we reached a settlement where she could be reshod. Michael generously gave me Sunnybank and took the thirty miles a day on foot. A coolie led Bessie slowly behind and apparently she enjoyed her holiday. Now a change had come over her. Her end was near, the sais insisted. Evan and I went to the horse camp to see her. She was evidently a very unhappy horse. She tottered on her feet, refused grain, and let her head drop almost to the ground. She was shivering convulsively and felt hot to the touch.

“The sahib will give medicine?” the sais inquired hopefully.

Evan and I looked at each other and retired to the tent for consultation.

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“What the devil do you give a sick horse?” asked Evan.

“I haven’t the faintest idea. There is a better chance of killing her than curing her if we try any experiments.”

“The sais says she won’t live through the night; that she has been ill for days and this is the worst. He counts so earnestly on our doing something about it.”

We rummaged through the medicine chest and decided on quinine and calomel.

“What is the average dose? All right. Eight times that, I should think.”

This gigantic and desperate remedy was thrust down the throat of the moribund Bessie. We covered her with every heavy cloth we could find and left her to let nature take its course. In two hours the sais reported delightedly that Bessie was sweating violently, had opened her eyes and raised her head to look about her with interest. We came out of our tents in the morning to see the fifteen-year-old Bessie galloping playfully about the camping-ground, frisking her tail like a foal. From then on she was a rejuvenated horse.

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At one of the villages we succeeded in hiring a lively Tibetan pony for Michael from a local trader. I continued on Sunnybank. At Kalatsi, where a great suspension bridge swings across the Indus, we paid a call. Europeans live here in a simple garden that is an oasis in a desert, a family of English missionaries, who for twelve years have shut themselves off from civilization to spread the doctrine of Christ among the benighted heathen of Ladakh. We drew up beside their garden at noonday, and immediately a pale, earnest Englishman came out of the little house to greet us.

“Do come in. Come inside the house and have your lunch with us,” he urged us.

“That’s extremely kind of you. We have already started preparations for lunch, but if you will permit it we shall be delighted to have it inside the shade of your garden. Won’t *you* take lunch with us?”

“We have already had lunch, but I hope you will not go away without meeting my wife. It means so much to her to see people. Will you promise to come in before you leave again?”

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Are there any supplies we could give you? Perhaps you would like some salad from the garden. It's perfectly safe."

"Salad" was lettuce and we gratefully accepted it. The missionary returned to the house to prepare his wife for the great event of visitors. After lunch we presented ourselves. On the porch there was waiting, with an air of expectancy, a fair, haggard young woman with a young baby in her arms. A little girl of seven was hiding behind her skirts.

"Please come in. Come in and stay for a long time. I can't tell you how excited I am to see you. You are the first white people I have seen since my baby was born."

She took me into the bare little house while Evan and Michael followed her husband out to see the garden.

"People are generally so kind," she said. "They almost always stop. I think they know how much it means to me. I am so terribly, terribly lonely."

"Do you see many people here?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, in the summers. Sometimes as

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many as twelve or fifteen parties come by. If they do not stop, it is a great disappointment. In the winters, of course, there is no one. It is much better here on the highway than where we were before. When we were in the hills, we never saw any one. That was terrible."

"Have you lived here a long time?"

"Not very long. Only six years. That makes twelve years in all. It has been much worse for me since I had to send the children away."

I glanced at the baby and the little girl.

"I mean the other children. I have two little boys with the Moravian Mission in England. Being separated from the children is the hardest thing to bear. They are company for me, but they cannot stand the altitude too long, you know. I shall have to part with Monica soon and that will break my heart. You can see she is a bundle of nerves. White children cannot stand it. They have to go back and the Mission takes care of them, but it is sad for us."

"Were—were you alone when the baby was born?" I asked interestedly.

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“Oh, no,” she said, “for the first time I wasn’t. There is so much kindness in the world. Just before the baby came, an English-woman who was returning from Leh stopped in to see me. She had been a nurse; and, when she saw the situation, she insisted on staying with me until the baby was born. It was wonderfully good of her. My husband was very busy and very tired with so many patients. The other three times there was no one but him to help. This kind woman made things easy for both of us. We are so grateful to her.”

“Your husband is a doctor?”

“Oh, how he wishes he were! No, he is a servant of God, but he is so interested and knows so much about medicine that I regret to say the people here depend on him more for that than for his teachings of Christ. You saw the old men in the garden when you came in? They are his patients, itinerant Lamas whose feet have been frozen in the snows. He is still treating them. There are many problems. They must be cleaned and disinfected if they are to be cured. But they are shocked and dis-

## THIN AIR

approving if he wishes to kill the lice, because it is against their heathen beliefs. But they know he is a good man. They trust him. They have been with us for weeks now and are much better.

“The most pathetic people are the lepers. They come to us from all over the country. My husband has an oil that helps them a great deal. If only he could afford to get more of it! We are, of course, very poor and everything we have goes into medical supplies. In spite of all we do for them, it is difficult to make converts among these people. If one of them becomes a Christian, he is despised by his relations and friends and he has no place among them; it is too hard for him to bear.”

“Have you made many converts to Christianity?”

“Not many. But we hope for more if we continue to labour and to pray. In twelve years we are certain of ten and there is another in prospect. Our cook is a Ladakhi girl and there is a young man in the neighbourhood who is in love with her and wishes to marry her. She is,

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of course, a Christian and will marry him only if he adopts the truth faith, so we have great hopes of saving another soul.”

She told me that we were the first Europeans that she had seen that spring. I was surprised and interested.

“Didn’t a party of English people pass through Kalatsi a few days ago?” I asked.

“Oh, yes,” she said, “but I didn’t see them. That hurt me very much. I don’t understand it.”

“They were some people named Telfer, I believe,” I murmured.

“Yes, indeed,” she said. “I know Mrs. Telfer very well. I knew she was coming and I counted tremendously on seeing her. All day I watched for them to come and then I heard that they had passed through the village without stopping. I could not understand it. She had promised to come back. I thought I was very nice to her. I was terribly hurt. She knows how lonely it is for me here and how much it means to see again people that I have met.”



## THIN AIR

“Perhaps she has a good deal on her mind,” I suggested quietly. “You have heard, of course, about the disappearance of the young American?”

“Yes, I have heard of it from the natives, but they say such strange things. They are so superstitious.”

I told her what little we knew.

“It looks as if the poor young man had been murdered by his servants, doesn’t it? I am afraid some of the Kashmiris are very wicked men.”

“Do you think he has been murdered, really?” I asked.

“It doesn’t seem as if it could have been an accident,” she said, “and I should not want to believe that one of God’s creatures would have flouted His law by taking his own life. Still, you know, if he were not in his right mind he would be forgiven, would he not? This altitude does such strange things to people that I am sure that God could not hold them accountable for their acts.” She looked at me earnestly. “I pray to be forgiven for my own

## ALONG A HIGH ROAD

wickednesses. I think they are from the strain of living at such unnatural heights.”

I laughed. “You do not impress me as a very wicked person.”

“Oh, I am, I am at times!” she said. “Fortunately, my husband is really a saint and his patience and forbearance have no limit. Sometimes, for no reason at all, I say the most terrible things to him to try to provoke him to a quarrel. There is no reason for it. I feel that I must have some excitement or die; and I invent the most terrible reproaches to goad him into a scene. I demand to go back to England and give up this life consecrated to God. I say wicked things: that it isn’t fair, that I won’t stand it any longer, that I want to live a life like other people. He is wonderful. He is always gentle and sympathetic and always forgives me.”

“As you have said, he is a very busy man and has a great deal of hard work to do. That makes it easier for him. Shall you ever go back to England?”

“What would we do if we went back to Eng-

## THIN AIR

land? We are too old for any other work. We don't know any other work. We would starve and our children would starve."

"Why, I don't believe you are much older than I am."

"Twelve years out here are much more of a life than twelve years anywhere else. I feel old and spent. I don't feel that I can live here much longer. However, it is God's will. It is in His hands. I have many compensations. I am happy that I have been given another baby. It gives me something to think about. Only I know that in a few years he will be taken from me."

Then she said wistfully: "Have you a book with you that you have read and could leave behind?" She pointed to a meagre book shelf. "I have read each of those, dozens and dozens of times. I think I know 'Jane Eyre' by heart."

"I have dozens of books in one of the yaks-dans. I should be only too happy to leave them. I'll get them now."

"That would be wonderful," she said. "They will last me for years because I shall

## ALONG A HIGH ROAD

read them many times. It isn't so bad in the summer when I can work in the garden, but in the winter there is nothing to do but think."

While we rummaged through the books, she went back to the subject that was on her mind.

"Do you think Mrs. Telfer will stop to see me when she comes back? Do you think anything can be the matter, that perhaps she doesn't like me? I feel that she doesn't sympathize with our work."

"Oh, I am certain that that has nothing to do with it. She is evidently hurrying on to Leh as fast as she can."

"She has peculiar views, you know," confided the missionary's wife. "I don't understand her. I don't know why she comes again and again to this country."

We rejoined the men and the missionary showed us his little schoolroom chapel and his meagre laboratory. He had a shelf of standard medical treatises, some surgical implements, and rows and rows of bottles and drugs. With pride he showed us his little supply of chaulmugra oil for the treatment of leprosy.

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“If I had my life to live over again,” he said, “I should leave no stone unturned to get a doctor’s degree. It would be an enormous help to me in my work. Even now, from my reading and practical experience, I think I could pass an examination.”

We went back to the simple chapel.

“I am interested,” I said, “to know what the basic beliefs of these people are. You must be an authority on the local religion.”

This was a terrible gaffe on my part.

“I know no more than I can help,” he said stiffly, “about their pagan superstitions. I try to show them the beauty of the teachings of Christ, and I don’t wish to mix up in any way with their heathen beliefs.”

“But surely,” I said, “in order to convert them to the Christian religion, you must know their religion so you can draw parallels and point out differences. How else can you show them that Christianity is better for them, or as good?”

“Not at all,” he said; “I see no connection. I cannot debase Christianity by comparing it

## ALONG A HIGH ROAD

with their crude superstitions about which I prefer to know as little as possible. I can only show them the light. Truth must triumph."

I said no more. I rather envied him the simplicity and confidence that could remain unshaken by statistics: ten converts in twelve years of sacrifice.

When we were leaving, his wife made me promise that we would stop on the way back.

"Besides sending you the snapshots of the baby, is there anything we can do for you?"

"Yes, if you would," she said shyly. "Some chocolates for Monica. She never has any sweets."





*On the Plain*

## XII

*In the Air*





## XII

### *In the Air*

FROM Khalatsi we followed the valley of the Indus. In many places along the sides of the cliffs the trail had been broken away by landslides and rebuilt with slender wooden scaffolding. In a straight drop under us the river roared. These palis terrified me. Sharfa gave instructions that we were to dismount and lead our horses across them—instructions which I disregarded if I were behind and unnoticed. My motive was not courage, but extreme cowardice. I trusted Sunnybank's legs more than my own. I could sit nonchalantly in my saddle and murmur, "Sunnybank, you take it." Unfortunately Sharfa detected this practice at a moment when Sunnybank, rounding the sharp spur of a cliff, chose to shy at an invisible menace. Nothing but a few inches of boards between Sunnybank's hoofs and a great deal of

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fresh air in front, behind and below! Sharfa complained of my foolhardiness to Evan and thereafter I was ignominiously watched, made to dismount, and crawl along on my own shaky and inadequate feet.

Here the Indus was a mysterious and sullen river flowing through its dark narrow channel to a secret destination. The natives do not know where it rises or whither it flows. It tears a serpentine course through the country, incalculably changing its mood and its direction. Surely it is the Alph of Xanadu that "ran through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea."

At Saspul we left the river and ascended a series of steps called rongs. A narrow defile opened above a sandy plain forming a sort of pass that goes up but never comes down again. We left the lovely village of Basgu with its apricots and walnut trees and its quaint, crumbling architecture, for a slow, steady ascent. This was the last stretch of the journey. Before us stretched suddenly a great plain. In the distance a mirage of a city floated against a

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background of soaring mountains. Range after range of white peaks lifted behind it to a turquoise sky.

This was the city of Leh. It seemed to lie at the world's end. From many miles away we watched it over a desert of sand and stone. We put our horses to a gallop over the level ground; and, late in the day, the cultivated fields which surrounded the city made a clear line of green against the yellow and grey which had for so many miles given back the hard glare of the sun. It was hard to believe that this apparition appearing in the heart of nowhere was a crossroads of importance in Central Asia. But into Leh, from the north, from the east, came caravans laden with merchandise, which traders from Yarkand and Kashgar, from Lhasa and China, were bringing from the heart of the Himalayas into the markets of India.

We entered the old carved gate in a kind of solemn procession. Half the population seemed gathered to greet us. To escape the staring children, yapping dogs, and the gaping crowd that surged like waves before and behind us,

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we put our horses to a trot down the main street of shops and through the bazaar. Ladakhi women of the poorest class were collecting yakdung for fuel in wicker baskets slung behind their sheepskin capes. Turbaned Hindus of the Pandit class who fill the government posts here—one can nowhere escape the Babu—watched the crowd with scornful detachment. Lamas of the Yellow Sect strode through the throng in oblivious meditation. Groups of two or three of their Red Capped brethren looked up with mild curiosity. Portly Mohammedan merchants from every corner of Asia leaned from their shop windows. Muleteers from Lhasa, a sprinkling of the ubiquitous Chinese, who compete with the other traders as successfully here as everywhere in the East, Ladakhi gentlemen in plum-coloured robes with fur-trimmed caps, astride their ponies as integrally as cowboys, were exchanging gossip.

We passed the dak bungalow, a comfortable house with a wide verandah, set back from the street. This was already occupied. In any case, we preferred our tents. Lalla spoke to the

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chaukidar of the bungalow, who was leaning on the gate. The people in possession were the Telfers. At last we had caught up with them.

We rode on up terraced levels to the outskirts, crossed the streams that flowed through the streets, and climbed to a shelf of shaded grass. We had reached a permanent home. Since this camping ground would be our base for at least two weeks, we made ourselves comfortable.

Before us and below us, spread the city of Leh; behind us, the gigantic peaks of the Karakorams. The tents went up in a neat row—two layers of canvas to protect us from the sun of the day and the cold of the night, with bathroom compartments at the rear. Books came out of their boxes, the gramophone was set up in the dining-tent, a writing-table made from a pile of empty yakdans, semi-civilized clothes shaken out of their folds, and a dhobi sent for to take away our washing. The laundryman of Leh is, of course, a Chinaman. Why, I wonder, do the Chinese inevitably wash the dirty linen of the world? Everybody, including the

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dogs, took a hot bath as a ceremony of arrival.

We were impatient to see the Telfers. After luncheon I was elected a committee of one to write a note to Mrs. Telfer. I worded this as best I could, saying simply we should like to have what information we could about our friend David Wendell and asking what hour would suit her to see us. Our messenger came back with her reply that we might come at six o'clock. She added that she did not feel she would be able to give us any information other than what we already undoubtedly had. I could read into it no particular eagerness to meet us, but we were not deterred.

At precisely six Evan and I found a self-possessed, calm-voiced, mild-mannered old woman sitting in a rocking chair alone on the dak verandah. She was about sixty-five years old. Her white hair was parted in the middle, drawn down close over her ears with Madonna-like simplicity. From an immobile, unlined face, her eyes directed an intense blue gaze, extraordinarily unchanging in expression. I decided at once that Mrs. Telfer's emotions and

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thoughts would never be at the mercy of an observer.

She greeted us evenly and with a cold courtesy guided the conversation along trivial lines. We were content she should. We were aware that this was a person accustomed to dominating any situation. For fifteen minutes she regarded us steadily while she spoke casually of the city of Leh, the mountains, the stages of the journey, and Kashmir. I found myself wondering whether the disappearance of Wendell were not a figment of my own mind. Then I was conscious that she was appraising us according to some standard of her own.

“You have come, of course, to hear about our poor young friend. I must tell you all I know, which is very little. But first I want you to meet my son. I will send for him.”

A tall, nervous young man appeared. His manner had a slight timidity. Whenever he spoke he glanced involuntarily at her for approval. His relationship to his mother was that of a young child, though he must have been thirty-five years old. She ruled him with quiet



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authority in every word, in every gesture. Since he existed only as a faint reflection of this strangely dominating old woman, we ceased to feel his presence. Young Telfer counted for nothing one way or the other in the situation, but we were acutely interested in the third member of the party, that high-handed man who had taken the destruction of government evidence into his own hands. We inquired for Mr. Luke. Mr. Luke was out.

“What precisely have you already heard about this distressing event?” inquired Mrs. Telfer.

“Very little that is convincing. These facts, I suppose, are official.” And Evan outlined briefly the bearer’s story as we had heard it from the chaukidar.

“Yes, those are the facts,” said Mrs. Telfer, and added with a keen glance: “No doubt you have heard many theories and rumours from your servants as well.”

“Naturally,” said Evan, “but I am interested in facts, not suppositions. Wendell, I believe, considered us his good friends. We are the only

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Americans in this part of the country and I feel strongly that we owe it to him to do everything we can. I have not yet been able to find out what action the Government is taking or what the situation really is.”

“I quite understand your interest,” she said. “You are right to disregard the gossip of the servants. They are an untrustworthy lot, dangerous, very dangerous.”

“Oh, if you only knew what we have put up with from them. It’s terrible—” began young Telfer. His voice trailed into silence as his mother went calmly on.

“What you have heard as the bearer’s story is quite correct. The night before, David had dinner with us in our tent. I assure you he seemed happy and his mind at peace. We were discussing matters—abstract matters—of importance to all of us. Perhaps you knew that we have certain views in common.”

“I do. Wendell discussed his interests and beliefs fairly freely with us before he left on the trip.”

“Ah, I did not know that.” Mrs. Telfer

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leaned forward in her chair. Her manner changed. "That makes it easier to explain to you. I suppose you think him a very eccentric young man?"

"Not at all. I found him interesting and independent in his ideas, but not eccentric. Why?"

Mrs. Telfer smiled. "It is dangerous to differ from the majority in anything. One is misunderstood. Well, then, we were discussing theosophy. I won't concern you with the details of the conversation. I am afraid you have not the interest."

"The interest, but not the knowledge," I murmured.

"At the end we made some plans for our departure the next day and David left us with a cheerful good-night. That is the last we saw of him. Towards noon his bearer came to us, apparently in great alarm and told what you know. We were surprised but not frightened. It was David's habit to go off by himself for long meditations. Perhaps you know that."

"We have heard that."

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“By afternoon we were concerned and the next morning started a search for him.”

“May I ask what your reasons were for waiting so long before looking for him?” asked Evan.

“It was not our custom to interfere with him unnecessarily,” Mrs. Telfer answered coldly.

“Do you imagine Wendell had any intention of committing suicide?” Evan asked.

Mrs. Telfer shook her head.

“And you have no reason to think that he was not in his right mind?”

“Certainly not,” she said sharply. “He was as sane as you or I.”

This comparison did not particularly reassure us.

“Do you believe then that he was accidentally drowned?”

There was a long silence. Mrs. Telfer’s brilliant blue eyes looked out over the city. “No,” she said finally, “I do not believe that he is dead at all. I am convinced we shall see David Wendell again. Possibly not for years, but we shall see him again.”

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We waited attentively.

“I can give you nothing concrete on which I base this, but I myself am convinced. I know from things which he told me from time to time that the idea of disappearing from his former life attracted him. He often considered entering upon a life of meditation. You have heard of Yoga?”

We nodded.

“Do you remember the case of the Englishman who disappeared thirty years ago and was given up as dead and years later was found in a monastery in Tibet? That is one which is well known, but there are many others. David talked often of this. It made a great impression upon him.”

“You think,” I asked, “that he chose to disappear at that moment and allow it to be believed that he was dead?”

“That is what I think,” she said.

“But surely that is hardly possible. There is only one road. There are only two directions, forward or back, that he might take. He could not keep alive three days in this country

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without provisions and we know that he had no supplies and no method of obtaining any. Moreover, we know that he had an important meeting with some one at Leh. He was insistent that he should see us here. Surely if it had been his intention to disappear, he would have first carried out his plans of going to Leh. After that it would have been simpler."

"That is what I believe," repeated Mrs. Telfer. "David Wendell is not dead. He will be heard of again one day. Probably not in my life time."

"There is a possibility," persisted Evan, "that Wendell has been murdered."

"Yes, of course, there is the possibility," she agreed, "just as the other solutions are possible."

We got up to go, puzzled and unsatisfied.

Mrs. Telfer was affable. "It is very sad, very distressing about our friend, but I am afraid there is nothing we can do. I hope you will come to see us again. I should like to hear all about your travels."

We said that we should be delighted and ex-

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pressed our desire to meet Mr. Luke. At this moment a spare erect man of uncertain age, with a snuff-coloured face, came up the steps of the bungalow. He was carrying a paper in his hand.

“I am sorry you weren’t here,” said Mrs. Telfer as she presented Mr. Luke. “These are friends of David Wendell’s.”

Luke’s round black eyes appraised us intelligently. “Don’t go,” he said. “Please sit down again. I have news for you. Wendell’s body has been recovered.”

We all looked at each other in stupefaction. Mrs. Telfer had more than half persuaded us that Wendell was not dead.

“I have just had a wire from the Residency in Srinagar. A body has been found in the Indus River at Tolti, fifteen miles below Dras. It has been taken to Skardu and identified as Wendell. That seems to settle the matter. It is a sad affair.”

“Who is making the identification?” Evan asked.

“The Indian doctor at Skardu who is the

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Resident Surgeon there has undertaken it. It is all quite official.”

“How could he know the body is Wendell’s?”

“Why not?” said Luke.

“It has been three weeks since the disappearance. It would be difficult.”

“The surgeon has been sent official data. The Government has accepted his report.”

After a pause Evan asked: “What caused his death?”

“It seems fairly clear now, doesn’t it, that it was accidental drowning?”

Our hope that he was alive was getting very faint.

“I suppose you knew better than any one else what was in his mind up to the time of his death,” I suggested.

“You mean the diary? You have heard that I destroyed it. That is true; I had very good reasons.

“In the circumstances, I could not act otherwise. I had three reasons. Each was good enough in itself. As perhaps you know, Wen-



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dell held unconventional religious views. Most of the entries in the diary concerned his speculations and convictions. I happened to know from conversations with him, and subsequently from some correspondence that I found among his effects, that this interest of his was painfully offensive to his mother, a narrowly orthodox woman. To spare her I destroyed the diary.”

Evan and I made no comment.

“In the second place, the diary contained criticism of the British Government’s policies in Kashmir. It seemed to me unfortunate that this should come under official eyes.” He paused and looked reflectively into space. “And the third reason: Wendell and I were both Masons. There were a number of Masonic references which clearly could not be made public. Conceivably it was injudicious, but I felt obliged to act as I did. I burned the diary.”

“It must have occurred to you that the Residency would be annoyed.”

Luke’s black eyes burned in his parchment face and the thin line of his lips became thinner than ever. I thought irrelevantly of the Pil-

grim fathers as he said with a snap of his jaws:

“The annoyance of the Government is a matter of supreme indifference to me. I did what I believed to be right.”

“It is perhaps a pity that the only record of Wendell’s last few days of life and the only indications of his state of mind have vanished as completely as he has,” Evan said quietly.

“Not at all,” Luke answered quickly. “On the contrary before burning it, I carefully copied from it everything which could be considered pertinent. I have it here in my pocket. I should be delighted to have you look at it if you care to.”

“And the correspondence you spoke of,” I asked, “have you destroyed that too?”

“Naturally I refused to permit that abominably officious native, the tehsildar, to touch Wendell’s effects. Everything of his, including his letters and papers, I packed into yakdans, sealed them myself, and sent them off to Srinagar by the bearer. With the exception of the diary, nothing has been destroyed.”

I asked myself if the too-much-advertised

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thirty thousand rupees, sent in the sole care of a native servant for a hundred miles through a desolate country, would reach their destination, but I said nothing.

Luke drew from his pocket some photographs and a sheaf of papers covered with small, cramped writing. "I have here some pictures I took myself of the spot where the footprints ended. You can see the prints of the stick. In this one, I have marked with a cross the point where they end and where the rim of the little embankment has been disturbed."

We tried to look at the pictures with intelligent eyes. Aside from the diagram drawn in with ink they showed us nothing but a blur of rocks and sand. The copy of the diary which covered a period of only two weeks consisted largely of asterisks and brackets containing the information that here for such and such a reason Mr. Luke had deleted what he saw fit to consider irrelevant material. What was left of the original matter was neither coherent nor enlightening. There was no reference to his travelling companions. The last entry was in-

complete: "When I reach Leh I shall know—" Here the diary broke off.

We handed it back without comment, thanked our new acquaintances for their trouble and again rose to leave. They were all geniality.

"May we call upon you to-morrow to see your camp?"

"Come at tea time," we suggested.

Outside of earshot we burst into discussion. I had felt the strain of leashing my tongue.

"What do you make of them, Evan?"

"I don't know what to think. They are certainly queer birds."

"I rather liked them."

"I liked them well enough, but I can't make them out. That woman has the most disconcerting eyes I have ever seen. She seems to be looking through you at some interesting object directly behind you; and at the same time looking back inside her head at her own thoughts, which, you will agree, cannot be done. Luke's expression isn't so complicated. He just bores into you with a pair of black gimlets."

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“I have an idea they are keeping something back.”

“No! Bright girl! But I cannot imagine what it is. I have the feeling that Mrs. Telfer was perfectly sincere when she said she thought Wendell was not dead. Then Luke’s arrival with the telegram upset that pretty definitely, and she certainly took the line that that settled the matter. Whatever it is they act in agreement.”

“I’d like to know what young Telfer thinks about it,” I said.

“Why? It would be just about as interesting as a gramophone record. He thinks whatever his mother wants him to think.”

“Do you think poor Wendell was drowned by accident? I cannot believe that he committed suicide.”

“There is one other explanation. I’d like to know more about that bearer chap. Did you see Mrs. Telfer’s expression when she spoke of him?”

“Yes. She hates him, doesn’t she?”

“Then why did they send him back with the luggage?”

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And so we reached our camp to find, as was becoming a habit, a commotion among our servants.

“Sahib,” said Sharfa, “the bhisti is ill and unable to do his work. There has come to the camp a man well known to me who would like to enter your service and return with you to Srinagar. Will you give him a place?”

“Who is the man? Let me see him.”

“He is a relation of my wife and has been brought to Leh by another party. He did not wish to stay with them. He has left their service. His name is Amīra.”

Amīra was produced. He was young and unprepossessing, but his appearance in itself could not be held against him. We did need a bhisti certainly. Evan said that Amīra might stay.

Down by the camp fire the cook was having a vivacious discussion with a solemnly interested Chinaman. We recognized our dhobi. Mumtaz and Akbar snored quietly beside the fire. First the cook would point to the dogs and gesticulate energetically, then the tall Chinaman

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would bend over them and inspect them with serious interest. I had an alarming thought.

“I’ll bet that dhobi is trying to tell the khansama that the puppies will make a good roast for dinner. The cook seems all too interested.”

Lalla shook his head. “Would the mem-sahib care to sell the dogs?”

“For stew? Certainly not!”

“Oh, no! The laundryman admires those dogs immensely. Cook and I have told him they are very fine animals brought specially a long way from England. Very valuable dogs. Dhobi wishes to buy.”

“Lalla, how outrageous! You know they are common pariah dogs.”

Lalla was not impressed. He shrugged. “Dhobi thinks very fine dogs from England. He will pay good price, Mem-sahib. He wants watchdogs to guard his house and keep away thieves. Will the mem-sahib sell?”

“Of course not. Tell him the truth, Lalla.” Then temptation came to me. “Wait a minute, Lalla. I won’t sell the dogs, but if he wants

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them and will treat them well, I will give them to him. Go down and tell him that.”

Lalla joined the argument by the fire. Whatever he said, the cook shrugged and looked disappointed. The dhobi showed a stolid delight. Lalla came back.

“The cook is disappointed. He was making very fine bargain with dhobi man. Dhobi is very pleased and will treat the dogs as his own children.”

“Did you tell him they were Indian pariah dogs?”

“Mem-sahib, he would not have believed me. Why should sahibs bring such dogs this long journey? He is very happy to think they are rare English dogs. He will take good care of them.”

“He must be told,” I insisted, but without conviction.

We could not say one word to the dhobi. Lalla was able to give whatever impression he liked. The dhobi left the camp with many smiles and bows, proudly leading a shinningly clean brace of puppies. Brushed and cared for



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as no pariah dogs have ever been, they did not betray their low origin. The ungrateful little brutes left, without a backward glance or the slightest trace of regret.

Disconcertingly early the next morning a sahib called to see Evan, who, grumbling a little at being disturbed in the painful process of shaving, came out of his tent to find the young Telfer, tremulous with agitation.

“I have come to protest,” he said in an unsteady voice. “You cannot take that man into your employ. It is outrageous—it would be insulting—you must turn him off at once—!”

“Sit down, sit down, have some coffee, won’t you? I haven’t had breakfast yet.”

“No, thanks. It is true, isn’t it, that you have taken on a man named Amīra? It won’t do at all—why, the brazenness of the fellow—it’s unspeakable—!”

“It is very good of you to be so concerned about my servants, but there is no need to get upset about it. What is the matter with the man?”

“He is a liar and a knave, that’s what’s the

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matter with him! I simply cannot allow you to have any dealings with him after the way he has behaved.”

“Yes? How has he behaved?”

“He started from Srinagar, you see, in our employ. Oh, we have had bad luck—the whole beastly lot of them have done nothing but make trouble for us and now this one—one of the worst of them—!”

“You discharged him and refused to give him a chit?”

Telfer wrung his hands. “No, no! We haven’t discharged him. He has refused to come back. We sent him to Srinagar with a message. Instead of joining us again he stopped at our camp merely to say that our khansama’s wife was dying and that he must return to Srinagar at once. The cook came to us and told us. We were suspicious and telegraphed to Srinagar for confirmation of the story. There was not a word of truth in it. He wanted to leave us without a cook. You see, it is all done to upset us, to make trouble for us!”

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“You have caught him out in a barefaced lie, and a pretty stupid one at that. I will send for him and see what he has to say for himself.”

Telfer, trembling with anger, repeated his accusation before Amīra.

“What do you say to this, Amīra?” asked Evan. “Do you admit you told a deliberate, malicious lie?”

“Oh, no, Sahib,” said Amīra, looking as mild and guileless as a lamb, “I have not known that I told a lie. I can only say what I have already said to Telfer Sahib. When I was leaving Srinagar to return, I met Fazil at the bridge Saffa Kadal.”

“Oh,” said Telfer, “I thought Fazil was mixed up in this!”

“And who is Fazil?” asked Evan.

“Sahib, he was bearer to the unfortunate Wendell Sahib. Fazil asked me if I would do him a favour and carry a message to Ramzana, the khansama. ‘Tell him,’ he said, ‘that his wife, who is my wife’s sister, is very ill and being afraid to die is eager that he return to Srinagar at once.’ I said I would take the mes-

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sage. That is all that I know. It is not my fault, Sahib, if what Fazil spoke was not the truth.”

“That Fazil is a perfect villain. There is nothing he would stop at to make trouble for us. Oh, the lies, the lies these people tell! You cannot trust any of them.”

Evan sent Amīra back to his work. “He has a pretty smooth explanation for himself. My bhisti is ill and I need him. Thanks for the warning, but I am afraid I shall have to make out with him as best I can.”

Telfer stood irresolutely on one leg like a stork. “Do get rid of him. He will tell lies among your servants.”

“I have not many illusions left about the Kashmiri. I expect nothing and I usually get it. He seems to carry water efficiently.”

Telfer hated to take his leave without gaining his point. “I feel somehow I haven’t made myself clear. Mother will be annoyed with me. Oh, I told her she should really have come herself.”

“I am very sorry to disoblige Mrs. Telfer,

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and it is good of you to warn me, but it isn't important. Don't worry about it. We are seeing you at tea, I believe?"

Within the hour we had another visitor, a grave and kindly Englishman. This was the Resident Surgeon, a missionary who lived by Government appointment half the year at Leh. It was a call of courtesy to welcome us to the city, but after a few minutes of amiable greeting, he got down to the subject on his mind.

"I have been very much puzzled about this identification," he said. "If Wendell was drowned at Dras, I am curious to know how his body could have been found three weeks later at Tolti in a recognizable condition. There are, I understand, specific and conclusive tests which could be applied, but, so far as I know, the Government has made no effort to send out a white surgeon to identify the body. From some experiences of my own I mistrust the native doctor at Skardu. I wish I could have a look at it myself."

"What specific tests do you mean?"

"Of course they have measurements and so

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on, but the important things are the gold fillings in his teeth. The dentist at Gulmarg did some work recently for Wendell and he has a record of his teeth. Most definite of all, there should be evidence in the skull of a mastoid operation behind the left ear.

“It is hard for me to see how the body could have been swept out of the ordinary course of the river and could have taken the turning into the Indus near Kargil. It is mysterious that it should have reached Tolti in spite of the rocks and rapids of the Indus between those points. It isn't reasonably possible that it could have reached Tolti in a condition for the doctor to be positive of the identification. There's been a reward offered for finding the body. I know that type of native mind so well that I cannot help being sceptical of something which would be so convenient and so much to his advantage to believe.

“Well, there is nothing to be done about it until we get more information. I suppose you are going to Hemis for the dances. Hope I shall see you there if I can get away. I am most

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fearfully busy these days winding things up here. I am going back home on leave for the first time in years.”

“We shall see you again in any case when we get back from the festival. Things may be cleared up a little by that time.”

We resigned ourselves with bad grace to await developments.

“There’s something damned queer about this whole business. I’m not satisfied,” said Evan.



*The Vision*

## XIII

### *High Places*





## XIII

### *High Places*

“**W**OULD the sahibs care to see a polo game?” said Sharfa.

“Polo? At Leh? Where? When?”

“Oh, yes. Several times a week there is polo here. They used to play in the streets of the bazaar, but now they have a field on the edge of the town. There is a platform at the side. I will take the chairs with me and it will be very comfortable under umbrellas above the crowd. At three o'clock this afternoon.”

“Do you think in the meantime you can find an interpreter for us who speaks Tibetan and English? This morning we want to visit the Gon-pa of Tsankar.”

“I can find such a man, Sahib.”

By the time we were ready to leave camp, a stolid young Ladakhi was waiting to act as guide.

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“He is Christian convert,” Sharfa explained, “and speaks very good English.”

We followed our guide up a hill outside the city to a small monastery of the Yellow Sect. It was strikingly well cared for, clean, small, simple, and rather beautiful. At the top of the steps was a frescoed porch. The wall on the left was covered by an enormous Wheel of Life. The gentle old Lama who met us at the door with friendly courtesy was gracious enough to explain this.

It was Gautama Buddha himself who made the first drawing of the Wheel of Life with grains of rice. It is an allegorical representation of the system of the universe. A horrible fanged demon holds the Wheel in the clutches of his long-nailed fingers and toes. He represents Tanha, the craving for sensate life, the illusory phenomenon of self which keeps the Wheel in motion. The eternal round of the Wheel, the sequence of cause and effect, produces a series of universes that come into existence from the elements of previous universes. The world is built of layers in space. The blue

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air supports the waters; upon them, a gold foundation; and then the earth itself, from which towers a central mountain. Each universe in its turn perishes, a new one is created, and Samasar, the "wandering," goes on.

Round the Wheel, a twelve-linked closed chain binds the rim. The links are the twelve stages of birth, maturity, death and re-birth. The body of the Wheel is divided into six manifestations of the forms of life. The hub, which lies at the core of life, is Maya—illusion. The Daughters of Maya are the three vices, lust, anger, and stupidity, which are represented by a dove, a serpent, and a pig.

In the centre at the top is the highest region of re-birth, Heaven, the home of the gods. There, in an abode of bliss, those entitled to godly birth spring fully developed from the lotus-flower. During this happy existence they have at their disposal a wish-granting tree, a wish-granting cow, and the jewelled horse-of-fore-knowledge. But no state on the Wheel of Life is eternal. Their period of happiness over, even the godly must die and re-enter the Cycle.

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Next to Heaven, clockwise on the Wheel, is the realm of the Titans. These ungodly spirits live in a perpetual warfare with the gods. Theirs is a life of passion and they too must meet eventual death.

The third "good" state of life is the human world, less than the gods and the Titans, but still in the upper half of the Wheel. The view of man's existence is a pessimistic one. The eight categories of human life are full of miseries.

In the lower half of the Wheel, below the Titans, is the animal world. The beasts are worse off than man. They constantly prey on one another and are in turn preyed upon. Below the human world is a sort of purgatory where the Pretas live. In an uncertain twilight a host of unsatisfied ghosts wander, tantalized by desires which can never be assuaged. At the nadir of the Wheel is Hell. At the apex of this section is the Great Judgment, wherein the victim of the inexorable law of Karma must appear to have the sum total of his actions, words, and deeds weighed in the scales.

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The judge holds up a mirror which reveals the naked soul, while white pebbles, which are the good deeds, are placed in the balances against the black counters of sins. Below are the numerous compartments of Hell with separate tortures for each. There are eight hot and eight cold hells. The cold hells seem to be a special invention of the Tibetan imagination, for the horrors of cold lie outside the conception of the Buddhists of the South. To make matters more discouraging, there are eighty-four thousand external special hells in addition to the major ones.

But there is an escape from the terrible Wheel. Outside the Wheel and detached from it stands the figure of the Buddha, pointing the way. By following his Eightfold Path, man may escape from the Cycle; by enlightenment the chain that binds him can be broken. If he will follow the Eightfold Path, he can pass beyond the sphere of Karmic Law and attain Nirvana. He may even in this life reach Nirvana, which is a state of moral perfection and desire-

lessness, and pass thereafter into Parinirvana, the supreme state.

All the pictorial details of the Wheel are drawn from the sermons and allegories of Buddha. It is the elaborated symbol of the metaphysical core of his teachings.

It was evident to us that it was a far cry from the crude demonolatry of the devil-ridden monks of Lamayuru, where the savagery of the old Black Faith has been only slightly modified by pure Buddhism, to the mystical speculations of the highest type of Yellow Lama. Many of these hold the degree of ge-she, which is equivalent to Doctor of Divinity.

Somewhere in Tibet there is supposed to be a form of esoteric Buddhism known only to a closed group of Initiates. The Lamas who are the custodians of the doctrine hold the keys which can unlock hidden meanings. Their teachings are passed from guru to chela by "ear-whisperings." Nothing is written down and the secrets are inaccessible to those who are not prepared to receive them. The Buddhists of the South, however, indignantly declare that

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the existence of such an esoteric doctrine is contrary to the very teachings of Gautama Buddha.

Buddhistic or not, there exists in Tibet a secret philosophy separate from and above and beyond the popular religion. Of this, we, who were "outsiders,"—the only word the Tibetans have for those who are not of their faith—could learn nothing. The Lamas are essentially benign. Their religion is a religion of gentleness and tolerance; but the portals of their mysteries are firmly guarded.

Our Lama guide told us many astonishing local legends. The one that interested us the most was the widely spread story of Christ's visit to Leh. This seemed to be a development of the story we had heard that Christ had lived and died in Srinagar. Throughout Tibet there is a belief that He lived in retirement from time to time in certain of the monasteries.

The unknown years of Christ's life are accounted for by these legends of an Asiatic sojourn. There is supposed to be a pond near



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by, where Christ preached to the people from under an old tree.

The Yellow Lamas were a far stricter sect than the Red Caps we had seen. Their faces were ascetic, peaceful, and intelligent. Their vows of celibacy and poverty were more strictly kept. One of their most charming customs was their practice in time of storm: from good will to the human race the Lamas would climb the hills with little images of horses which they distributed to the four winds for the aid of pilgrims in difficulties.

After we left the monastery, we wandered into the bazaars of the town. A caravan had just arrived from Lhasa with a load of salt, borax, and bricks of tea. A number of mules were standing docilely in the centre of the square, thankful for having their burdens taken off their tired backs. Many of them had brilliant striped saddle cloths and their bridles were decorated with red and yellow tassels. A small donkey was being led down a side street and I was amazed to see, under his clumsy pack-saddle, a cloth of Chinese imperial yellow silk

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embroidered with a delicate floral pattern in red and blue. The heavy fringed border was the conventional Chinese wave design.

“Wait a minute, I must catch up with that donkey! It is sacrilege to use as a donkey cloth a piece of silk that ought to hang in a palace. I am sure that man will sell it.”

Mohammed Jan interposed to restrain me. It would be a mistake for me to show too great an eagerness to buy it. The price of the object would automatically go up. Jan would track down the donkey and his owner and barter with him. The hesitation was fatal. The donkey and his guide had disappeared.

In the afternoon we joined the rest of the population of Leh to watch the polo game. The ground was a narrow, dusty strip behind a garden wall. At either end were high walls and on the fourth side we sat in state with the chief officials on the grand stand. Like all Oriental events it was late in starting.

Leh is almost the home of polo. The game is supposed to have originated in Persia and, when it had virtually died out there, to have

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been preserved and perpetuated in Tibet. The word "polo" is Tibetan in origin. It is the chief sport of the town. The local officials, the leading merchants, and interested visitors take part in it.

At last a sufficient number of players arrived. There are no regulations that the players must be dressed for the sport in which they are engaged. The native band of drums and trumpets, which had attempted to solace us with music during the long wait, burst into full noise. It was impossible to tell which player was on which side. Several wore the fur Ladakhi caps, and plum-coloured robes with long sleeves and high collars. One or two had little tight-fitting caps, and three of the players were so magnificently robed and turbaned that they must have been rajahs at least.

When the play began there were no more than three on each side. Other players rode up and were mysteriously added from time to time, without affecting the game.

Both sides started with a rush from the same end. The leader, in full gallop, threw the

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ball into the air and struck it with a tremendous swing. There seemed to be no rules and no fouls. The game was fast and spirited. Whenever the ball was driven through the white stones that marked the goals, the crowd cheered with equal enthusiasm for both sides and there was an eruption of noise from the band. Since I was quite unable to follow the play, I gathered that the game was over when both sides and the ponies were completely exhausted. I was assured that we had witnessed some fine playing; that these men were the most skilled at the game. That must have been high commendation, for it is the universal sport. Infants of two play in the streets with polo sticks, taking competent swings at any object that happens to be at hand. They are put on ponies almost as soon as they know how to walk.

We went back to our camp in time for tea. We had told Lalla that we should have three guests. Lalla had pricked up his ears when he overheard their names at lunch. Now he met us with a worried frown. He tried, with many

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circumlocutions and evasions, to tell us that the servants were restless and disturbed.

“What the devil are you trying to say, Lalla?” said Michael. “Are you trying to imply that the servants have objections to our inviting what guests we choose?”

“Only that it is unwise, Sahib,” said Lalla stubbornly, his eyes on the ground. “The sahibs should not ask these people whom they do not know. Strange things have happened. Wendell Sahib was the friend of the sahibs and it is said . . .”

“What damned cheek! That will do, Lalla. You can serve tea at five.”

Lalla's back managed to imply, as he marched out of the tent, that, if the sahibs wished to be fools, he washed his hands of all responsibility. When he had gone Evan said:

“Young Telfer seems to have been right. The new bhisti has been spreading tales. There certainly is hostility among the Kashmiris towards the unfortunate Telfer party. I think I will have a talk with Mohammed Jan.”

Jan stood in a position of advantage. He

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was resented as a plainsman and an alien by the other servants and enjoyed a certain splendid isolation, but his diplomacy and amazing ability to keep his mouth shut saved him from being embroiled in the eternal camp warfares. He heard everything, but said nothing. Evan sent for Jan to find him something in one of the yakdans. When Jan had taken it out, he said:

“By the way what is all this excitement among the servants about, Jan?”

Jan professed ignorance.

“They have many silly stories, Sahib. I pay no attention. I stay by myself.”

“You are neither blind nor deaf.”

“I know nothing, Sahib. How should I? I can only think.”

“Well, what do you think? Has the bhisti been making trouble?”

“He says foolish things, Sahib, and the Kashmiris believe what they wish to believe. They pretend they think the English sahibs have done harm to the sahib who has vanished. They are afraid of a trouble coming to all of us.”

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“Do you believe that nonsense, Jan?”

Jan shook his head. “I ask myself who is this bearer of Wendell Sahib. The sahib was good to him. He gave him many rupees and many presents. He promised him much more. Now, I believe bearer is very bad man.”

“Why do you think so? Did the bhisti say that?”

“Oh, no, the bhisti is friend of the bearer. He would not say that.”

Lalla appeared at the tent in the disconcertingly silent way of the bare-footed Indian and told us that our guests were here.

Tea went off pleasantly in spite of the strained atmosphere of the service, which I hoped was unnoticed. I had a fleeting absurd fear that perhaps all would not be well with the food and I tasted the tea and the sandwiches with suspicion.

The Telfers and Luke were all knowledgeable musicians. They had lived a long time in the East and had travelled to the far places of the world. They seemed to know America as

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well as we did. For a long time Wendell was not mentioned, then Evan turned to Luke.

“I had a talk with Dr. Mann, the surgeon here. Do you know him?”

“Oh, very well,” said Luke. “I have been here before, you know.”

“He seems rather puzzled over the identification of Wendell’s body. You have given the matter a good deal of thought; do you think the thing is definite enough?”

And he repeated the surgeon’s objections.

“I only know that the Government has accepted the identification. I suppose they know what they are doing.”

“One other thing has come up. I heard that his family in America have cabled to ask that the body be shipped home. They wish to confirm the identification themselves. This the Government has refused to do since it would be impossible to get it out of the country in a condition fit for shipment. It has been buried at Skardu.”

“I think Dr. Mann’s feeling that the identification of the native doctor is insufficient is



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quite justified," put in Mrs. Telfer. "You said you were going, in any case, to Askole and the Baltoro Glacier. Your road, of course, lies through Skardu. Why don't you take a European surgeon with you and satisfy yourself about it?"

"What surgeon?" asked Evan.

"Why not Dr. Mann?"

"To-morrow we are going to the Khardong Pass and after that to Hemis. I shall see Dr. Mann when we get back. Meanwhile, I will think about it."

"Then we shall see you at Hemis?" said Mrs. Telfer as they were leaving.

The Khardong Pass lies north of Leh on the road to Central Asia. It is itself nearly eighteen thousand feet in the air, but behind it rise the highest mountains in the world. The giants of the mysterious Karakoram range lift their heads above twenty-nine thousand feet. Even so late as July, the trail to the north is hazardous and deep under snow.

We camped for the night on a bleak plain, itself more than fifteen thousand feet, at the

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foot of the pass; and in the morning we made the ascent. Near the bottom, blue patches of borage and gentians struggled courageously out from between drifts of snow. It was a difficult climb, but, in spite of our inexperience, we felt no other effects from the rarified air and terrific height than a light-headedness and an unusual excitement. The hillman Sharfa, however, mountain shikhari for fifteen years though he had been, grew sick and dizzy. He had to stop and rest and struggle with nausea. His dark face under its weathered brown turned greenish and his head ached violently, but he insisted on accompanying us on the last stretch to the top.

Unlike the Zoji-La, the snow-covered summit was narrow. We could see immediately where the descent on the other side began. It was not our intention to go further. We rested here at the highest point I had ever reached, or am ever likely to reach, and looked with awe at the very top of the world spread out in front of us.

Snow lay on the pass in rough, broken masses

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like a white rock pile. The wind drove the soft, thin clouds that hovered close to us over our heads like a flock of geese, and whistled past our ears charged with an electrical excitement. The pure blue of the sky seemed not only above us but wrapped about us as well. The life of the earth was infinitely far below us and behind us.

I left Evan and Michael and picked my way through the snow blocks to the far side of the pass. It was incredible that the trail through these mountains could lead to habitations of men. On both sides the unexplored, unscalable Karakorams reared themselves up like forbidding, mysterious guardians that protected a secret from the eyes of men. Travellers and caravans had followed the straight thread of track, over the mountain passes that lay ahead, to the high plains of northern Asia. What lay to the right and to the left of that narrow track in the snow-and-rock-guarded fastnesses, no one knew.

There was a legend. I thought of Wendell and I thought of the valley of Shambhala—

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Shambhala, the White Island. With the strange physical detachment and mental exhilaration that the pure light air and the remoteness of the earth gave me, I felt, not that it was possible for such a land to lie somewhere between those floating ranges, but that it was impossible there should not be such a land. The ground between the physical and the spiritual diminished to a hair's breadth. A fantastic legend could be nearer truth than the reality of common sense.

The conception of Asiatic mystics of the valley of Shambhala is two-fold. There is a geographical Shambhala, whose whereabouts is unknown, where men live; which seekers have reached. There is also a mystic Shambhala which is a spiritual state. This Shambhala is the source of the religion of the future, the era to come. It is identified with the Kalapa of the Hindus. Rigden Jyepo is the ruler of it. From it will come the great Avatar, who is one and the same with Maitreya, the Lord of the Future. This conception is the core of the metaphysical life of Tibet.

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Recently the Tashi Lama, Panchen Rinpoche, who is the real spiritual ruler of Tibet as the Dalai Lama is its temporal head, fled from his seat at Tashi Lhun-po to China. This is, according to prophecy, a sign that the era of Shambhala is at hand. The Tashi Lamas are sacrosanct among Central Asian mystics. They are the great exponents of Kalachakra, the Yoga of utilizing the high energies. The belief exists that the Tashi Lama in his mysterious flight visited the land of Shambhala to which he has access. The uninitiated cannot know its exact situation, but the writings of mystics in many countries indicate its whereabouts through symbolism. North of the great Himalayan wall that shuts off India, south of the bleak plains of Tartary, east of Mongolia, west of the steppes of Russia, the lines seem to converge somewhere in that uncharted land where the high Karakoram lift their heads. It is a land of yogis, men who are freed from their Karma and who, by the concentration of their energies and the direction of their spiritual force, have attained an ineffable intelligence

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which they exercise for the benefit of the world. They have reached the final stage in human development. That which is hidden from more earthly men is not hidden from them.

Whether the geographical existence of Shambhala is considered by the mystics as a fact or as a symbol, only the mystics themselves can say. I remembered the quest that Wendell had so earnestly and so seriously described to us on our houseboat in Kashmir. Then, I had listened to him with the incredulous detachment that one accords a visionary, remote from one's own experience, but with the respect due to every manifestation of the human soul in its search for a solution to the patternlessness of life. The quest, throughout the history of the spirit of man, has persisted. Its symbolism changes; its purpose is eternal.

Allegory and reality merged for a moment into a higher reality. Had Wendell found his way into the Valley of Shambhala? The limitations of material reasonableness did not obtain at eighteen thousand feet.

The descent from the summit was easy and

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swift. At the bottom a heavy fatigue replaced the ecstatic nervous tension. The next day we returned to Leh. Its altitude of twelve thousand feet seemed a drop to sea level.



*Devil Dancers at Hemis Festival*

## XIV

### *Gods and Devils*





## XIV

### *Gods and Devils*

THE road to Hemis lay along the valley of the Indus in the direction of the frontier of Tibet. Four miles below Leh we crossed the river at the cantilever bridge and joined a gay stream of travellers. More than a religious interest drew pilgrims to the Lama dances. It was a festival time. In holiday attire whole families of Ladakhis were journeying from every village of the hills to this annual social event. Every one who could deserted Leh. Mohammedan merchants, Hindu officials, and deputations of Gurkha soldiers, smart in glengarries, kukris thrust through their sashes, made a procession as lively and varied as the Canterbury pilgrims. Ladakhi women of high rank, with embroidered shawls in place of the usual sheepskin slung over their shoulders, sat sidewise on mules led by their servants.

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It was a long march. Mani-walls and chortens followed us out into a bare plain. A long stretch of sandy desert, over which we were persuaded to race some high-spirited young Moslems, came suddenly to an oasis and as suddenly left it again. Late in the day the road turned sharply to the right, rounded a spur of mountains, and climbed a steep hill between two prayer walls. The chortens were a thick forest, their thirteen rings blood red in the evening sun.

Hemis lies in a gorge. The famous Lama-sery dominates it, very bare against the bare pinnacles of the ridges behind. For the distinguished visitors, and all Europeans are distinguished visitors, the garden of roses belonging to the Head Abbot was thrown open as camping ground. The village at the foot of the Gon-pa had the aspect of a county fair. The new arrivals were busily seeking places for the night. Many of them were riotous from too much chang, the potent local beer, and booths and stalls were springing up with the swiftness of architecture in the Arabian Nights.

We had neighbours within the rose garden.

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Somewhere the Telfers had pitched their tents. A party of officers on leave had interrupted their shooting to get to Hemis. In the camp next us, two young Englishwomen, travelling alone, strode about in shorts and khaki shirts and shouted orders to their shikhari in loud hearty voices.

The events were to last two days. While we were at breakfast Sharfa brought us a message to hurry to the Gon-pa. They were waiting for our arrival. The performance was scheduled for nine o'clock. At ten nothing had happened. We brought our own chairs and joined the Europeans in a balcony facing the main wing of the Lamasery. The crowd, which had long before found places on the four sides of the court, covered the roofs, the galleries, and the ground in a tightly packed mass.

To the right of us, another balcony was filled with the Gurkha soldiers. They were clearly out for a good time. They had pushed their caps rakishly to the sides of their heads, and each broad Mongolian face wore a delighted grin. Their taste in cravats fascinated me.

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The favoured patterns were checks and diamonds in violent colours.

An incongruous figure was sitting in their midst, a saturnine man in rich Lama costume decked out with all sorts of elaborate accessories. This, we were told, was the Hermit of the Rocks, a holy man much respected for his piety. He lived in retirement somewhere in the mountains back of Leh, and the people made devout pilgrimages to him. Whenever hermiting was dull or he felt like a bit of social life, he would come out of his retreat and could be seen from time to time in the streets of Leh. To judge from his clothes, the vow of poverty did not trouble him. Apparently he was successfully entertaining the Gurkhas. They were giggling like school-boys. Behind them, a group of Moslem merchants in sober robes of rich wool, came and went preserving an air of amused superciliousness.

Opposite us, a double row of Lamas lined the great steps of the Gon-pa. Their robes made a mottled splash of red shaded from henna to magenta. Above their heads, an enor-

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mous tanka, displaying the portrait of the Incarnation in the attitude of a Buddha seated on a lotus, hung from under a yellow fringed canopy. This effigy of the Skushog, as the Head Abbot is called, is displayed only once a year, on this special occasion.

The façade of the Lamasery was divided into tiers of balconies very like the boxes in an opera house. The centre ones were protected from plebeian stares by heavy curtains. Next to the hanging tanka, in what was literally the royal box, sat a pathetic figure with a shaven head. If one can tell about the age of a Tibetan, he was a very old man and he sat clutching the railing with a sad immobility. This was the ex-king of Ladakh, a monarch completely devoid of political importance, but still a personage to the Ladakhis because of the fame of his great piety.

In the next box an old Lama was holding in his arms a small nursling in Lama robes. The child was the newly "incarnated" Abbot of a near-by Lamasery. The laws of apostolic succession are peculiar in Tibet. A Skushog must

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be a man freed from Karma, who has enough holiness to reach Nirvana, but who voluntarily remains on the Wheel of Life to do good to his people. When an old Skushog dies, somewhere a child is born whose identity and whereabouts are revealed through a complicated prophecy. Lama emissaries set out in search for such a child, in accordance with the symbolic predictions. When he is found, whether in the humblest hut or in the home of a great personage, he is brought to the monastery to be trained for his sacred position. While we were in Ladakh, we saw two of these baby Abbots. One of them, the little Abbot of Spitok, was the son of a rajah. They were charming children, a little awed and frightened by the solemnities that surrounded them, but happy enough in the really tender care of their Lama nurses.

We had a glimpse of a thick-set man with black spectacles in the back of the box where the ex-king sat. This was the Skushog himself. We hoped he would leave to put on his magnificent robes and appear on his throne in the courtyard.

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For more than an hour we were content to watch the crowds and the celebrities, but by eleven o'clock we grew impatient for something to happen. The Telfers and Luke came in quietly and found places not far from us. They were experienced in allowing for Oriental delays.

At last an orchestra of Lamas came down the steps and took their places directly under our balcony opposite the Skushog's throne. To the clash of cymbals and the roll of drums the Skushog entered with Lamas holding a canopy above his head and took his place on the throne. After the solemnity of his entrance, there tumbled down the steps two chaprassis in yellow hats flat as pies, short yellow robes, and grinning orange masks. Their long black pig-tails flapped from under magenta handkerchiefs. They carried little whips in their hands with which they threatened the half-amused, half-terrified crowds of women squatted on the ground. These served as policemen to keep the crowds in order, and as buffoons to fill up the intervals with comic relief. By the time



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we felt we could bear their practical jokes not an instant longer, though the crowd continued to scream with hilarity, there was a hush, the rows of Lamas on the steps pushed back, and with a dazzle of colour the dancers appeared.

Their robes were magnificently embroidered. Elaborate and delicate capes of brocade fell over their Chinese pleated skirts. Each dancer wore at his waist a large white skull. Their enormous lampshade hats were topped with metallic coloured crests from which, down their backs, hung narrow streamers of brocade. They danced solemnly and stiffly in a circle until two Lamas came up to them and presented each one with a little bundle of straw. Another Lama then placed a brazier of coals in the centre of the courtyard and stood over it fanning it with peacock feathers.

When that was over, I asked Mrs. Telfer if she could tell me what it was all about. She told me that this ceremonial was to prepare the atmosphere for the mystery play. The burning brazier was to purify the air. There were thirteen dancers, as there were thirteen red

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rings on a chorten, to represent the thirteen eons of existence. The incantation of the thirteen Lamas was to call on the unseen to make ready the way.

Sixteen Lamas in conical blue hats and gold masks took part in the second dance. In their left hands they carried Tibetan bells, and in their right hands rattles. To the accompaniment of a low monotonous chant they rang the bells and rattled the tiny green boxes, as they faced first to the right and then to the left in a series of rhythmic postures. In some way, not clear to me, their movements symbolized the seven principles of human nature. The noises were to purify the air by sound as before it had been purified by fire.

Now the band came out from below us carrying their enormous drums and their cymbals. They wore hats oddly like the mitre of a Roman bishop. Down the steps there was a rush of masked figures followed by a stately procession of seven gurus. The benign deities in amiable smiling masks were flanked by fierce devils. These protective demons, neither hos-

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tile nor beneficent, must partake sufficiently of the nature of the evil spirits about them to ward them off from the deities whom they protect. This seemed to me a sophisticated symbolism.

They are each provided with a third eye which enables them to see hidden things. The seven bodhisats sat themselves in a row on thrones. A smiling Buddha under a canopy in the centre held in his right hand a dorje, the thunderbolt, symbol of supreme power, and in his left hand a little bowl of grain, the first food. Beside him sat the conventional Mongolian Buddha. His face was blue and he wore the pointed head-dress of Siam. Opposite the enthroned deities sixteen Lamas as chelas, or disciples, identically dressed in skirts of yellow edged with blue and capes of red and silver brocade, squatted cross-legged on a narrow strip of rug. On their heads they wore a sort of Byzantine crown, richly brocaded in dark blue and red and surmounted by a brass knob.

The seven gods one by one rose to do a stiff solo dance and returned to their places. The blue Buddha was the star performer. While he

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executed his solemnly grotesque steps, the cha-prassis ran round and round him with the brazier of coals.

After an intermission, the sinister devils took centre-stage. An inspired imagination had equipped them with a variety of terrifying physiognomies—skulls, bestial snouts, and contorted scowling faces with fanged and snarling mouths. Four imps, lightly dressed for active leaping, bounded forward and engaged in a sort of quadrille: backward and forward, change corners, twirl, and back to places. They gave way to four devils with faces like Japanese lion-dogs, who carried symbols in their hands: one, an iron hook; another, a chain; the third, a rope; and the fourth, a bell. Their huge head-masks incongruously overbalanced their graceful figures, slim in tight trousers that ended in feet of the same red silk. After them five devils in red and black masks, with skulls on their heads and skulls on their breasts, and tremendous ear-rings pendent from ogre ears did a solemn round march with swords. In their left hands they carried tiny bowls with

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streamers. They were champing with exasperation. A Lama appeared, and from a great basin of food gave each a share in his bowl. This immediately reduced them to quiescence. They stood immobile for a minute and then departed in a peaceful, lethargic march.

Their exit was followed by a bacchanale. Ten demons in little blue shorts and yellow leather jerkins rushed in. Belts of harness-bells jingled about their waists and strips of leopard skin hung below their bare knees. Their blue, red, and yellow masks were hideously cheerful. Above the skull decoration on their heads were white silk flags with three great eyes. Each demon carried a Tibetan drum upon which he steadily beat with an odd rhythm, increasing in speed, like the chug of a train leaving a station. They moved faster and faster, their twirling became spinning, and finally they burst into a disordered frenzy which reached collapse.

Then, swiftly, the courtyard was cleared. A Lama entered with a human effigy of dough which he placed on the ground. Over it he

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spread a purple cloth. Another Lama brought him a silver tea-pot and a bowl. While he poured out a libation of beer and an offering of barley, a company of ghouls and ogres revolved in a threatening circle about him and the effigy. To a crash of cymbals, a ferocious demon-king strode in. He seized the bowl of barley, placatingly offered by the Lama, and scattered it to the four corners of the earth. Drawing a great sword, he attacked the dough figure and hacked it to pieces. Then he stood back in triumph, while the Lama resignedly gathered up the bits and distributed them to him and his accompanying demons. The demons burst into an orgiastic dance and the show ended for the day.

I was for a moment close enough to Mrs. Telfer in the crowd that pressed out to ask her what this pessimistic drama meant. It appeared to derive from the cannibalistic rites of the old religion Bon-Po. Now it is only a faint shadow of the human sacrifice and is supposed to represent the bad end of an enemy of religion. The figure might represent the wicked Langdarma who opposed Buddhism,

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and symbolizes the fate of the man who neglects the good offices of Lamaism. With the best efforts in the world, the Lamas can not save such a man from the demons. They are regretfully obliged to sacrifice him—a terrifying object-lesson.

At the foot of the steps, one of our servants was waiting with a message. The Skushog had summoned us to an interview. He had heard that the three strangers had brought with them a cinema camera. He wished to meet them—and the camera.

This unexpected invitation delighted us. Followed by two servants carrying the camera and tripod, accompanied by an interpreter and a dignified old Lama, we climbed the long flight of steps, and under the tanka of the Incarnation and the heavy, looped-up curtains of the doorway, entered the dark dukang. Groups of Lamas were silently drinking tea at little tables as we slipped along between the square columns, past fluttering strips of embroidered silks and hanging tankas. Before the myriad lamps of the altar was the throne of the Skushog.

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Through a little door into a narrow passage, up steps and steps, down a long corridor, through a series of rooms—and we were in the presence of the Incarnation himself. I had a quick impression of richly coloured rugs, a gleaming silver tea-pot surrounded by jade-green cups, an image of Buddha, some strange books, and in the midst of them a fattish man seated, a dark-skinned man with a serious owlish face. The Incarnation had taken off his black spectacles.

And then I saw playing at his feet two little dogs; I could scarcely wait through the requirements of civility to ask about them and make their acquaintance.

The Skushog was willing, even determined, that we should take his picture. This suited us equally, but he was grieved to hear that he could not see the results immediately. He was curious about America and through his interpreter asked many questions. He himself was a travelled man within Central Asia and hoped to travel more. He was born, incarnated rather, in Lhasa. Thither emissaries from



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Hemis had come when the last Skushog died to find him in the house indicated by the prophecy. He journeyed with them to Hemis to be received as Abbot and returned again to Lhasa to study the doctrine of the Red Sect. After he had passed his examinations, he lived for ten years in meditation as a hermit. Then he came back to Hemis to take up his duties as Abbot.

At last a moment came when I could ask about his dogs. They were a Lhasa breed, a favourite pet of Head Lamas, and accustomed to monastic life. The Skushog was affable and apparently pleased at my interest and I was permitted to pick them up. They were friendly and playful little animals, not at all conscious that they were semi-sacred dogs. They looked liked the Chinese Dog of Fo with their pug faces, round protruding eyes, curly tails, and long rough coats. I then and there resolved that if a Tibetan pug was to be found outside of a Lamasery in Tibet, I should have that pug.

We left the monastery in the twilight. From the "Trees of the Law" in the courtyard

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the mystic words fluttered: *Om mani padme hum*. Shadowy Lamas passed us twirling their eternal prayer wheels. From a distance the monotonous quarter-tones of the musicians reached us. Out in the street, we were among the chatter and bustle of a holiday crowd. Little fires brewed the tea and cooked the rice and chapattis of the pilgrims. Women were bartering for finery at the hawkers' stalls; and a sing-song of revelry arose from groups of chang drinkers.

Within our garden the air was heavy with the evening scent of roses, and a welcome overtone of dinners cooking. Despite devils and devil-fear, peace and meditation were abroad and they were good.

The second day was largely a repetition of the first. The same Lama with the brazier and the peacock feathers purified the air. This time eleven dancers in even more magnificent costumes followed him. They wore pleated skirts of imperial Chinese yellow, blue aprons embroidered with golden dragons, wide pointed sleeves bordered with vermilion and yellow capes heavily embroidered with silver.

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Throughout the ceremonies a Ladakhi layman slowly turned the massive prayer wheel that stood in the wall at our left. The music swelled and diminished in volume throughout the dances. Finally in the late afternoon, after the dough figure had again been sacrificed and the evil fate of a doer of harm to religion thus exemplified, they reached the culminating ceremony.

A group of Lamas drove into the courtyard three horses and three black dogs. One of the horses and one of the dogs had fine embroidered coverings on their backs, but the other two were covered with shabby cloths. While Lamas swarmed up the prayer poles to tie fresh red cloth prayers on their tops, and the band disappeared to reappear on the roof, other Lamas rushed about with burning embers in a pan which they pushed in the faces of the animals to excite them, poured beer on their backs, and smeared them with blood-stained clay. Two grey goats were brought in. Then the beasts were driven three times around the Gon-pa and allowed to disappear.

## GODS AND DEVILS

This is the Hemis form of the ritual of the scapegoat. The animals have taken unto themselves the sins of the people for the year. For their trials on this occasion they are well-fed and allowed to live in ease for the rest of their lives.

Again the courtyard was cleared. On a low platform of mud a Lama drew with coloured chalks a device of triangles within triangles—purple, yellow, blue, and black. Over them he spread the ritual cloth; and, at the head of a wild procession, four black-faced demons danced in bringing another effigy of dough. Six times the Lama filled the dancers' cups with beer; and six times they emptied it on the ground. The leader, whose forehead was adorned with a pair of horrible horns, carried a cup made from a human skull. Again the Lama failed to placate the devils. Again the effigy was cut up and its pieces distributed to each demon. On this dismal note the second day's performance dwindled to its close.

The crowd seemed not at all depressed by the final allegory. They drifted out of the

## THIN AIR

enclosure into the gaiety of the streets, laughing and chatting with the satisfaction of those who have seen a good show. I saw Mrs. Telfer for a moment.

“Do you believe these people get any religious significance out of all this?” I asked her.

“Very little, I should think. There is a traditional symbolism behind every dance and every movement which I doubt whether the Lamas themselves appreciate. There is, of course, a far higher type of Lama, the genuine mystic, but you won’t find him here.” She turned to Evan. “By the way, are you still thinking of going to Skardu? I wonder if you will find out any more than you know now.”

“I shall go to Skardu in any case,” Evan told her. “As soon as I get back to Leh I shall have another talk with Dr. Mann and find out how he feels about going with me.”

“I know he is very much tied up with work at Leh. I doubt if you will be able to persuade him to get away.”

Mr. Luke came up, rolling the film of his camera.

## *GODS AND DEVILS*

“I think I have got some very good shots,” he said. “I have been all over the court taking them from every angle. I should like to see yours some time.”

The crowd separated them from us.

“That’s very odd,” Evan commented. “Now she doesn’t want me to go to Skardu. The other day she seemed particularly keen about it. I believe they have had a conference since and changed their minds.”





*The Glacier*

XV

*Pursuit of a Mystery*





## XV

### *Pursuit of a Mystery*

**T**WO days later Evan returned at lunch time to the camp at Leh.

“Well, I saw Mann this morning and I am more puzzled than ever. So is he. I put it up to him about going to Skardu with me to confirm the identification. He said he would be glad to do it if the Government would authorize it. He feels strongly that it should be done. It is a very inconvenient time for him, but he says he will manage it anyway. We shall make forced marches and get there in a few days. But, as he says, he is a Government servant and must have official sanction to go. That is natural enough. I shouldn’t think there would be any question about it. I have sent off a wire to Sterne to the effect that since we are friends of Wendell and the only Americans here, we feel we should like to be what help we can; and I am

## THIN AIR

requesting permission to take the Resident Surgeon to Skardu at my own expense. I ought to get a reply this afternoon. Then I can leave in a few days.

“Connie is worn out now and can’t possibly make the trip at the rate we shall have to go. You two will have to come on at the regular stages. I shall meet you at Skardu.

“There is one very queer thing about this business. Mann has already seen Mrs. Telfer. She told him that I had in mind asking him to go to Skardu and insisted most urgently that he should not do it. She thought of every possible objection. When I told him that it was her suggestion in the first place, he was as much astounded as I. Neither of us can make anything of it. Mann is more and more convinced that there is something very wrong about the identification.”

No telegram came through that afternoon. We were restless and could keep our minds on nothing else. All our plans hung in mid-air until Evan could come to a decision about his departure for Skardu. He was prepared to kill

## PURSUIT OF A MYSTERY

two birds with the same stone. Throughout the trip, his desire had grown to see the wild country of glaciers near Askole. The problem was what to do with me. Obviously I could not go along. I had grown thinner and thinner, and, unable to sleep at night because of the altitude, was exhausted to the point of illness. The climb to the Khardong Pass had reduced me to a positive handicap. Evan was worried and decided I should be sent back to Gulmarg. But how; with whom? He suggested tentatively that Michael should see me and the caravan safely back to Srinagar and join him again at Skardu. Michael and I, for once with unanimity, jumped upon this idea with all four feet. Conventions might not obtain in the Himalayas, but they did with full force in a hill station.

I hated being a white elephant. We did not have unlimited time ahead of us. Michael was eager to go himself to Askole to shoot ibex and markhor. It was evident that, in no circumstances, could I do forced double marches of sixty miles a day. I was in the position of being an unmitigated nuisance. But there I was, and

## THIN AIR

something had to be done about me. Some one had to sacrifice something of his plans to get me safely back to Srinagar.

Evan wanted to act quickly and waste no more time. Major Sterne's silence was maddening. Dr. Mann sent to inquire if we had had any word. In order to get away at all, he must go at once.

To relieve the suspense of waiting, we visited the sights of the town—the windy and deserted palace of the Gyalpo on the ridge, the old monastery above it with an enormous image of Buddha, and the old fort.

We went to tea with a Yarkandi merchant in a charming Tibetan house adorned with innumerable overhanging balconies, where a stream of sunlight illuminated the colours of rich rugs and old embroideries. We bought lumps of turquoise matrix measured weight for weight against rupees, and cups of jadeite with wrought silver covers studded with carbuncles. We admired the brilliant silks from Yarkand, which he drew out of ornate Chinese chests, and the pelts of snow-leopards, foxes, wolves, and

## PURSUIT OF A MYSTERY

stone martens from Khotan—and uneasily wondered whether the telegram from Srinagar had yet come.

The next day we haunted the telegraph office. It was in the main street near the old entrance gate. From some distance we could see the Babu operator sitting in front of his office, playing with a tiny puppy. I saw with delight that the little dog was a Lama pug. The Babu operator was perhaps the best informed man in Leh. He was the first to know of each new development and made no attempt to conceal his curiosity and interest.

“No, Sir, there is still no reply for you, but I have traced your message and I know that it must have been received. This morning there came a telegram from the Joint Commissioner saying that he is arriving in Leh to take up his summer residence in two weeks’ time.”

Evan was annoyed.

“I can’t wait any longer,” he turned to us, “I am going over Sterne’s head. I’ll send a telegram direct to Sir William Thornton.”

He wrote out a long dispatch stating that he

## THIN AIR

had received no reply to his message to the Joint Commissioner, outlining the situation as he understood it, and repeating his suggestion that he should take the European surgeon with him to confirm the identification.

“Do you know, Sir,” said the Babu, “that the family of the young man have asked to have the body sent home that they may identify it themselves? Otherwise they will not be convinced. Owing to the condition of the body, the Government has refused their request.”

“In that case,” said Evan, “it seems all the more certain that the Government will leave no stone unturned to have competent corroboration. When the answer to this comes, send it up to the camp.”

As we went out, I asked the Babu, “Do you know where I could get a dog like this? Are there many in Leh?”

“Oh, no, Madam, it is difficult to find one. A caravan from Lhasa brought this one with them. I think it would be impossible to find another.”

“That’s fortunate,” said Evan.

## PURSUIT OF A MYSTERY

Within the hour two telegrams arrived. One, signed Sterne, was curt: "Identification perfectly satisfactory. Take no further steps."

The other was from the Resident. It was long and courteously worded. It thanked Evan for his offer and his interest. It apologized for the Joint Commissioner's delay in replying, which it trusted would be rectified. It restated that the identification had been checked by the gold fillings and the mastoid operation and had been officially accepted. That being so, there was no necessity to take further steps, but the Government had no objection to any private investigation Evan might care to make.

Except for the difference in temper, both telegrams came to the same thing.

Evan went immediately to see Dr. Mann. He was gone a long time. When he came back, his jaw was set.

"I'm going alone and I'm starting to-morrow."

"Isn't Mann going with you?" I asked.

"No, he has decided against it. In view of the Government's attitude, he doesn't feel that



## THIN AIR

he is justified in leaving Leh at this time. We discussed the whole thing from beginning to end. He weighed the pros and cons. But, anyway, that's the final decision. Mann is mystified. He can't understand why they haven't sent out a white doctor from Srinagar. He isn't satisfied about it; evidently the family isn't satisfied; and certainly I'm not. However—apparently the Government is, and that's that, so far as he is concerned. He doesn't believe the doctor at Skardu would know the evidences of a mastoid if he saw them. Moreover, if the body was as badly smashed as has been reported it is incredible that the doctor would have been able to check it in any case.

“Residency or no Residency, Mann or no Mann, I'm going there and find out what I can for my own satisfaction.”

“Well, in that case, we go along with you, I hope?”

“Not at all. I am going to take it on the run. I shall make Skardu in less than half the time it would take you. I want to go up to Askole. You stay here for a few days until Connie feels

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better. To-day is the tenth. I'll meet you in Skardu on the twenty-fifth. Connie and I will go straight back to Srinagar and Michael can go up to Askole for a month's shikar. We'll divide the caravan here. I'll take Sharfa, a couple of servants, and a few coolies; and travel light. Lalla can manage the others fully as well as Sharfa. At Skardu, Michael can take Sharfa up to Askole and we'll take the horses and the caravan down to Kashmir."

Evan had made up his mind. He knew exactly what he wanted to do. The next day we rode half a stage with him and watched him out of sight. Gulshah thought his nose was headed for home and galloped heavily across the desert of sand with the willingness of a fire-horse.

I was depressed as we rode slowly back through the gate of Leh. I was tired and half ill, and terrified of this unaccountable country where men disappeared, and where their bodies appeared in places where they had no physical right to be. I did not like the idea of Evan going alone to Askole.

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Michael, too, was depressed. He was far from pleased at being left out of the adventure. It was an anti-climax to go back by slow stages over the same road to Kargil.

In front of the telegraph office the Babu was lying in wait for us. He held the puppy. Bowing and smiling ingratiatingly, he asked:

“Is the lady still interested in the little dog?”

“Very,” I said, pulling in my horse. “Do you want to sell him?”

“I hate to part with him, of course; but, as a favour only, I might do so.”

This was the beginning of an Oriental conversation, I saw, so we dismounted. At the end of half an hour, after long evasions, protestations and compliments on both sides, I had the puppy and the Babu had one hundred rupees.

My conscience troubled me briefly. I had a feeling, not unjustifiably, that if Evan had not been well out of sight, the dog would not now be in my possession!

The same afternoon a Chinese merchant appeared at the camp with a basket. The basket

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contained another pug, an even smaller softer pug, infantile and female. This was, the merchant assured us, unquestionably the only other pug in Leh. We allowed ourselves the privilege of doubting it. The supply seemed to spring up to meet an unaccustomed demand. Michael, who also had looked covetously at the Babu's puppy, bought this one immediately.

We made elaborate plans for introducing a new, rare breed into the West, and of course making our fortunes thereby. We wanted to name them at once. They looked astonishingly like the lion-dogs guarding the Japanese temple of Nikko. The male puppy had a fierce frown and was energetic; the female was gentle and confiding and sat motionless wherever one put her down. We considered the names of the lion-dogs: Ama-Inu, the Open-mouthed One; Koma-Inu, the Closed-mouthed—the active and passive principles. Then we wondered if we should not give them Tibetan names in deference to their Lhasa origin. Perhaps, Tashi and Dalai, after the two great Lamas.

## THIN AIR

We asked the Hindu if his puppy had a name.

“Yes,” he said, “I have called him Tashi, the Blessed One.”

That settled it. Tashi he remained. But the other one stayed Koma-Inu, which was promptly corrupted by her great admirer, Mohammed Jan, to Kumu—and Kumu she is to this day. Gaffara, the dog-coolie, had again a reason for his existence.

The day before we left we went shopping. In a narrow alley I spied a donkey which had a familiar face, and, on closer sight, an even more familiar saddle-cloth. I walked casually on, pretending complete detachment. Mohammed Jan closed a deal with the donkey owner who appeared astonished that any one would want a donkey-blanket.

We were glad to leave Leh. In a few weeks the country had changed. It was full summer. When we dropped down to Khalatsi we found that the apricots had ripened and the roses were in full bloom in the missionaries' garden. We stopped to have tea with them and get the latest

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news of Evan, who had been there some days before. Our khansama had ready some fudge for the child Monica. It was his latest parlour trick which I had taught him at Leh.

A march or two beyond Khalatsi I had the worst half hour of the trip. The servants and the caravan were well ahead of us. Michael and I, riding slowly along, weary from the long day and the heat which was now terrific, came suddenly upon a fresh land-slip. Since our caravan had passed, a rush of boulders from above had torn away the narrow trail. We got off our horses. What was left of the path was a strip of broken earth a few inches wide, enough to cross if one put one foot carefully before the other. I mistrusted my footing and looked at it appalled.

“We can make it easily,” said Michael, “by leading the horses. I will go over first and take Sunnybank. Then you bring my horse, and I will give you a hand from the other side.”

Above the rock rose in a straight wall. Below was a steep slippery incline of shale, one hundred feet or so, to the river bed. The trail

## THIN AIR

curved sharply around a spur. One could see neither ahead nor behind. Michael crossed the break in a series of deft leaps and reached the other side, but Sunnybank, following on a loose rein, took fright midway, slipped, scrambled, lost his footing completely, and started to slide down the bank. Michael let go the rein and Sunnybank, gaining momentum, descended rapidly to the river bed. At the bottom where the slope began to level off, he righted himself, broke into a terrified canter, and disappeared around the bend.

“Damn!” said Michael. “I will have to go down after him. You hold the other horse and I will be back in a minute.”

“You can’t go down that.”

“It’s easy,” he said; and slithered down after Sunnybank. He picked himself up at the bottom, and he too disappeared. I waited ten minutes, twenty minutes; no Michael. At the end of half an hour I called out. There was no answer and the sound of my own voice frightened me in the complete silence. Michael’s horse, restless, began to neigh and paw the ground.

## PURSUIT OF A MYSTERY

The sun was low. For ten miles in both directions there could be no sign of life.

I wondered how long before the servants would miss me. Not until after dark surely. Would they then be able to come back for me? What could have happened to Michael? Almost anything might have been waiting around the bend. Nothing would induce me to cross that gap in the trail, leading a horse. Should I desert the horse and try it? I doubted if I could make it alone, in any case. I remembered only too clearly the skeletons of cattle, sheep, and ponies we had seen below us at so many palis. Undoubtedly some one would come along the trail, or the servants would come back the next day, but I felt it would be pleasanter to die at once than to spend the night alone in that desolate place.

At the end of an hour Michael appeared around the bend ahead leading a trembling Sunnybank. He had been obliged to scramble for miles down the river bed before he could find a slope up which he could possibly lead a horse. Even then, it was the sheerest good luck



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that he had been able to get the terrified and reluctant Sunnybank back on the trail. Michael came towards me as far as he could get a foothold. I stepped gingerly on the breaking ledge of earth, took a blind leap, clutched his hand, and somehow was over. The mountain pony followed surefootedly enough, slipped once, but scrambled quickly to safety.

We reached our camp just after dark. I had a strong emotion that I was tired of mountains and would be very glad to be at home. I was grateful to Mohammed Jan, who now had taken the habit of sleeping at the door of my tent, curled up like a watch dog.

Near Kargil the villages had taken on a festive aspect, since we had last seen them. Flags and buntings draped the doors of shops. Arches, festooned with ropes of green leaves and bearing an inscription, met us at the gate-ways. We rode under them and turned round to read them: WELCOME. We were slightly hurt that the greeting faced the wrong way.

We inquired the cause of all the decorations, since obviously they were not for us, and learned

## PURSUIT OF A MYSTERY

that Major Sterne, the Joint Commissioner, was on his triumphal way to the capital of Ladakh.

At Kargil we profited by our experience with the dak bungalow to pitch our camp in a field outside the city. At the post-office I found a long letter from Evan. In spots it was cryptic. "I am hot on the trail, and I think I shall have a great deal to tell you when I see you in Skardu. Such is the anxiety among the natives to produce the body and claim the Government rupees that I am only surprised there have not been more 'positive identifications.' Yesterday I covered three marches. Sharfa and I are pretty much all in. I shall wire before I leave Skardu."

There was no telegram. Perhaps it would come in time for us to leave the next day.

I was walking slowly back to camp, reading an illustrated letter from Ian: "I suppose Evan and Michael have grown beards and you have retorted with a super-shingle." The accompanying caricature of Evan, Michael and me, bearded and hairless respectively, were so disconcertingly realistic that I laughed aloud.

"May I share the joke?"

## THIN AIR

In front of me stood six foot four of Major Sterne.

I jumped guiltily. My thoughts of Major Sterne had been harsh.

“I was just coming to pay a call,” he said, “and ask you to dine with me. I hear your husband has gone on ahead to Skardu. He is very much excited about Wendell’s disappearance, isn’t he?”

“Yes. We all are.”

“And how is the secretary—he is the secretary, isn’t he? Has he too gone on to Skardu?”

“No, not the secretary,” I said, slightly acid. “Michael is here. I imagine you will find him at camp.”

“Oh. I see. Yes. Of course. In that case, perhaps you will bring him to dinner.”

“Thank you very much.”

“I am at the bungalow. I cannot give you much of a dinner, but it is very jolly to meet friends here. Lonely sort of trip, isn’t it?”

“I suppose you find it so. Will you come in? I think Lalla can give us some tea; or would you prefer a whiskey and soda?”

## PURSUIT OF A MYSTERY

At eight o'clock we dined at the dak bungalow. Major Sterne was a good host. The inevitable curried mutton had the advantage of differing slightly from the curried mutton of our khansama.

After dinner the Joint Commissioner was in a mellow mood. In fact, what with the soft starlight, the whiskey and soda, and a long cigar, he mellowed so rapidly that I felt that if I heard one other touch about the loneliness of the life of a Joint Commissioner, I ought in decency to burst into compassionate tears.

I could no longer resist the temptation to speak of the subject I had carefully avoided throughout dinner.

"How very bad of you not to answer our telegram!" I said.

"What do you mean by 'our' telegram?"

I went on: "I can't tell you what a state of suspense you put me through. I couldn't make any plans."

"Why, were you so tremendously interested in this Wendell chap?"

"Oh, very," I said. "Aren't you?"

## THIN AIR

“Not terribly. It’s a frightful nuisance, you know, these foreigners coming up here, making no end of trouble for us and getting themselves lost. I had no idea you were so concerned about him.”

“Naturally. He was a friend of ours, and a compatriot. Somebody has to be concerned about him.”

“And make no end of a mess. As if the Government didn’t have troubles enough without that sort of thing. He was mad, of course, perfectly mad! So are they all, the whole lot of them.”

“Whole lot of whom?”

“Oh, those people he started off with, the Telfer crowd. Good Lord, what they have put me through! You know, don’t you, they all have some outlandish belief—they’re theosophists of some kind.

“I don’t know what is at the bottom of all this, and I don’t want to know. The sooner it’s a closed subject, the better.”

“Are you really satisfied with the Skardu identification?”

*PURSUIT OF A MYSTERY*

“Of course. The unfortunate chap undoubtedly drowned himself and the body was carried down the river.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

He smiled with paternal benevolence. “Well, what do you think?”

“I think it is more than possible that he isn’t dead at all.”

“My dear young lady, you don’t know this country as I do.”

“Granted,” I said stubbornly, “but if he is dead, it is neither accident nor suicide. If he is dead, he has been murdered.”

Major Sterne frowned. “If he has been, I would rather not know it. What a nice tamasha that would make!”

“Why?”

“You don’t understand the conditions out here. Have you ever heard of the necessity of maintaining the prestige of the white man? We are dealing with a lot of prejudiced natives. Do you think we want to start an investigation that will turn up God knows what?”

“I am afraid I don’t follow you. I presume

*THIN AIR*

the Government wants to get at the real truth.”

“Well, I believe we have. Wendell was drowned and the body has been found at Tolti. It is very sad, very regrettable; but that seems to be the end of the matter.”

“Is it, I wonder?”

“I trust it is. You will forgive me for saying so, but I told you I didn’t like American men. They seem to have a perfect passion for interfering in matters which are none of their business.”

“Perhaps so do American women.”

“Ah, that’s very different,” he laughed, “one expects that from the ladies. One doesn’t have to treat it seriously. It’s part of their charm.”

I swallowed my irritation.

“Wendell is an American. We’re the only other Americans here. Would you expect us not to be interested?”

“Not at all. I think your interest shows a nice nature and a kind heart—so long as it doesn’t interfere with Government policy.”

I sighed.

## PURSUIT OF A MYSTERY

“Do you play polo at Leh?” Michael asked the Joint Commissioner.

No telegram came from Evan the next day. I started to send him a long message to Skardu. I thought better of it, tore it up and wrote another. I was looking forward to seeing him on the twenty-fifth. Details could wait.

Major Sterne dined with us at camp. We did not speak of Wendell. We were making an early start the next day, and we were leaving for Skardu. When he said good-bye, he added:

“I hope you will send me news of your trip. Just ‘Joint Commissioner, Leh,’ you know.”

I replied with cordiality. “Oh, I shall undoubtedly send you a telegram from Skardu.”







*The Rope Bridge*

XVI

*An Embarrassment of Bodies*



## XVI

### *An Embarrassment of Bodies*

SUNNYBANK, who had been trotting along enthusiastically in the direction of Srinagar, was so furious, when, a little below Kargil, I turned his head to the right and tried to induce him to cross the suspension bridge over the Dras River at Kharal, that he laid his ears back and reared and snorted with irritation. It took savage cuts across his flanks to prevail upon him to take the road down the Suru Valley to Baltistan. From that moment until we reached Skardu he was sulky and resentful and took his revenge by shying dangerously at invisible menaces whenever the inadequate trail threatened to become no trail at all.

We had left mani-walls and chortens behind and were again in Mohammedan country. The district was wild and not so colourful as Ladakh. It was high summer and desperately hot.

## THIN AIR

Flies swarmed into our tents at every halting place and the only activity to which we could bring ourselves after the exhausting march was attacking them with our patent insect spray for the pleasure of seeing them drop stupefied to the ground in hundreds. Sand-flies attacked us viciously and invisibly. They may have been the cause of a low fever which made each day's march a burden to me. The well-known quinine sulphate, without which no traveller moves in the East, reduced me to deafness but enabled me to keep going.

We had no pack-ponies here. The Balti coolies each carried a yakdan on his back. They were a sad and dour lot, drab and dirty, who seemed to find life a far less bearable matter than the cheerful Ladakhi. Their dialect resembled Tibetan. The lower-class villagers were Mongolian in type, with beardless faces, bullet heads, and narrow slanting eyes.

The Suru River flows through a deep, narrow gorge. At the infrequent villages, every available foot of land has been cultivated and terraces of green rise in narrow steps.

## *AN EMBARRASSMENT OF BODIES*

One night we camped at a settlement high above the river bed, which delighted us by its name of Olthing-Thang. A few miles beyond we rejoined the great valley of the erratic Indus. It turned sharply to the north between two ranges of mountains. A narrow trail was blasted along the face of sheer rock many hundreds of feet above the river. On each side is a great range of mountains. Far below us the river swirled turbulently by, sullen and inky. Wherever there was a settlement, there was a garden. The trees hung heavy with ripe apricots and mulberries. Beside the tiny canals that irrigated these oases were lines of pale willows and the deep crimson of roses.

A march beyond Olthing-Thang the river gorge narrowed to a mere slit in the dark rocks, then plunged suddenly downward in a boiling torrent over huge broken boulders. We came to the gentle waterfalls of the village of Tolti. This was where the supposed body of Wendell had been recovered.

Tolti had a sinister aspect. It was wedged beneath huge cliffs so overhanging and so for-

## THIN AIR

bidding that it seemed lying in the threatening shadow of a permanent thunder cloud. It may have been fever and exhaustion, or merely the gloom of the place, but I fancied that the few villagers were suspicious and evil. Nothing could have induced me to delay there. We pushed on to Skardu.

Michael and I had been doubly injudicious. The apricots and mulberries that brushed our heads at every village as we rode under them had been a recurring temptation, impossible to resist. At every breakfast time our servants put before us piles of the fruit on glistening leaves. Crystal clear streams of glacial water cut the trail along our hot and dusty road. There were no habitations above us. Disregarding the advice given us on the importance of water-filters, we drank freely and often.

From whichever cause, when we rode into the camping ground at Skardu at four o'clock on the twenty-fifth, to keep our rendezvous with Evan, Michael and I were both very ill. An hour later, from the opposite direction Evan walked into camp. He was conspicuously

## *AN EMBARRASSMENT OF BODIES*

leaner and browner than when we parted from him. He, in turn, was shocked at our appearance.

“You look more dead than alive. A nice trio of skeletons we shall be to struggle into Srinagar. What’s the matter with you?”

“Sand-flies and mulberries,” I moaned. I would confess to the mica-laden water at a more suitable time.

“Let’s get out some brandy.”

We propped ourselves feebly against a pile of yakdans. Evan made his report.

There was absolutely no reason to believe the body found at Tolti was Wendell’s.

He had come down the Indus Valley by triple marches. A stop at Tolti had yielded nothing.

“I found out in ten minutes that I should get nowhere. I’ve never seen people so successfully stupid. To all my inquiries through Sharfa the universal reply was ‘No speak English,’ or any other language for that matter.”

As soon as he arrived he went to see the Wazir Wazarat. “He’s the big gun of the place, the Governor of Baltistan. It’s a dole-



## THIN AIR

ful sounding title, isn't it? And he was a doleful chap. We didn't like each other much."

His pretext for the call was to get some information he really had to have. He asked the Wazir which of the two routes to the Biafo Glacier was the better, and was told that both were out of the question. It could not be done. Skoro-La was too dangerous. The Braldoh was impassable. The Wazir was wrong in both instances; Evan went the one and had just come back by the other. In the same conversation the Wazir assured Evan that he had buried David Wendell's body with his own hands, and had, himself, positively identified it. Evan's pointed questions about gold teeth and mastoid operations made him uneasy. His manner became definitely cold. What a mastoid operation was he had not the slightest idea. Why should he? From that point on he decided to have ideas about nothing. His indefiniteness was masterful.

"How tall was the body?"

"Oh, that would be impossible to say. Bodies shrink in the water."

## AN EMBARRASSMENT OF BODIES

“Colouration?”

“That could not be determined; the body had been in the water too long.”

“And the teeth?”

He knew nothing about the teeth. The mastoid he had never heard of. After all, that was the doctor's province.

“Then on what do you base your conviction that the body was Wendell's?”

Apparently on a stubborn belief that since a sahib had been drowned and the Government wanted a body badly enough to offer a reward for it, a body which had been found must be the sahib's body. And that was all that Evan could get out of the Wazir.

“Where can I find the doctor?”

The Wazir Wazarat was enjoying Evan's society less and less.

Evan, notwithstanding, did find it worth his while to search out the doctor. There were a number of other people in Skardu who were only too eager to give him information. All the petty officials with personal dissatisfactions had opinions to offer. The most enlightening

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bit was the fact that a postmaster's son, a native of a near-by village, had been drowned recently while swimming in the Indus not far from Tolti. So far that body was still at large.

Evan finally tracked down the doctor at his house. He was an affable little Bengali, more communicative than the Wazir Wazarat, but equally vague, and very harassed. Evan persisted in his inquiries about the gold fillings.

"There were no gold fillings," answered the doctor. "You see, some of the teeth were missing."

"How was that possible?"

"The body had been in the water a long time."

"Was the skull smashed?"

"Oh, no. The skull was not smashed."

"Didn't it occur to you as curious that the teeth with the gold fillings were the only ones missing? You say the others were intact?"

The doctor brightened. That could undoubtedly be explained on the ground of human weakness. Gold was gold. Very likely the vil-

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lager who had discovered the body on the sands of Tolti had removed the fillings to eke out his small share of the reward.

“And the mastoid operation? Would you be good enough to describe to me precisely what traces of that you observed?”

The doctor shifted about uneasily. He retained his amiability, but his worried frown deepened.

“Ah, well, really, that would be difficult to do. In point of fact, mastoid cases do not come within the range of my experience here. I could, of course, tell you anything you would like to know about goitre; and there are many other unusual diseases, which I have treated successfully, most successfully, considering the limitations of the equipment they provide me with. But mastoid, no. I do not believe I have ever seen a case of mastoid in Baltistan.”

“But surely you would have noticed the marks of the operation.”

“The body was in very bad condition.”

“The skull, man; the skull!”

“The skull . . . ,” the doctor repeated,

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vaguely. "Oh, it would be quite impossible to say about that."

"It's going to go hard with some one if those gold-filled teeth are not produced," Evan said. "The body will have to be exhumed."

"Oh, believe me; that is quite impossible. The authorities here have sent in their report. The reward has been paid. The Government would never permit it."

"We'll see about that," Evan told him. "Hasn't it struck you as a bit odd," he added, "that a body drowned at Dras could appear at Tolti intact except for the loss of a few significant teeth after having passed some of the most savage rapids in the world?"

The Bengali agreed perfectly. "Yes, that is quite true. Everything you say is quite logical. But the authorities here are satisfied; the Government at Srinagar is satisfied; there is nothing more to be done."

"I think there is," said Evan. That was the end of the interview.

"That doctor's a man after Major Sterne's heart," I commented.

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“The whole proceedings were so crude I don’t think even Sterne will stand for it when he hears of it,” Evan replied.

“Don’t be too sure,” I said; “Sterne wants to see the end of the Wendell episode. I’ve just seen him.” I told him the conversation with Sterne on the road.

“Now that he’s up here in the country he’s the logical person to report this to; but he’s been so damned rude, I’ve decided to send on my information to Thornton,” Evan said.

“I don’t think you’ll get any more action out of Thornton. Sterne had his British back up because you interfered. Write out what you want to say and let me sign it. We’ll get an answer this time. Major Sterne will not ignore a telegram from a woman.”

By this time the tents were up and Mohammed Jan had unpacked. I changed into a skirt and we started for the telegraph office, which was at the other side of the town. Michael was more interested in Askole than the Wendell affair. On the way to the telegraph office, Evan

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gave us an account of his last few days among the glaciers.

The morning after his interviews with the Wazir Wazarat and the doctor he loaded his twelve coolies, the three servants, and the four ponies on a small wooden ferry. The Indus at Skardu, although some thousand miles from its mouth, is already tremendously broad; but is still turbulent and angry from its confinement in the narrow gorges above. On the other side he crossed ten miles of hot sandy valley to the town of Shigar, beyond which the trail follows the Shigar River through the shade of poplars, apricots and willows. At the end of the twenty-three mile march he camped for the night at the mouth of Skoro Lumba. The only drinking water there was grey "snow water"—half liquid, half pulverized rock, scraped down by the glaciers. Eighty per cent of the natives of the district were hideous from goitre.

The next day he started a long grind up the western slope of Skoro-La. For the first six hours the only difficulties were the rock avalanches and the frequent torrents that had to

## *AN EMBARRASSMENT OF BODIES*

be forded; but in the afternoon the precipitous sides of the valley closed in and the faint trail grew rough and breathlessly steep. It ascended like a ladder for two thousand feet to drop eighteen hundred equally sheerly. Only eight hundred feet were gained, as the crow flies.

Down the trail came a coolie swathed in white surgical bandage. Bandages meant there was another white man in the valley. Evan learned that the coolie had fallen down the side of a gorge with an eighty-pound pack lashed to his back. This discouraged Evan. If a native of the country could not stay on the trail, how could he? The thought of the Wazir kept him going.

He advanced a total of thirteen miles in twelve hours, and camped at the foot of the last ascent. Here he found the donor of the surgical bandage, a British Army officer on shooting leave. They exchanged tins of beans and fresh ibex steak.

The third day was harder and more disastrous. For three hours he zigzagged up three thousand feet of grassy slopes, then up a steep,



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pathless ascent of twelve hundred feet to the top of Skoro-La. The coolies took this final climb on all fours. To relieve their bare feet from the sharp, jagged rocks, they bore part of the weight of their eighty-pound loads on their hands.

Skoro-La is sixteen thousand seven hundred feet above sea level. It is a knife-like ledge, descending on either side with dizzying abruptness. Some of the coolies were suffering from mountain-sickness; and Evan, from exhaustion, was glad to give them a rest. He gazed alternately westward into the bare rocky gorge he had just ascended and eastward to the vast snowfields and glaciers down which he had yet to go.

He descended the first thousand feet by sitting on the snow and letting nature take its course. At the bottom of the long slide, he met the bare ice of the underlying glacier. He found himself in a great horse-shoe of solid snow and ice below a jagged three-quarter circle of peaks. Down the sharp valley to the east, the perilous trail descended a glacier.

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The crevasses and weak snow bridges were a frequent danger.

Evan was ahead of his coolies. When he had reached camp and darkness came, he discovered four of them were missing. In the morning they appeared at camp. One of them was a mass of blood-stains. Somewhere in the five miles of glacier, the wretched man had slipped, and dropped, pack and all, down an ice-crevasse. The crevasse wedged him tight fifteen feet below the surface. His three companions untied their packs and with the ropes managed at last to lift him to the surface. His head was cut severely and he was badly bruised.

It was then dark, and further progress on the glacier was out of the question. The injured man sat quietly down on the ice; and they spent the night in the bitter wind with no fire and no food. As soon as it was light, he shouldered his eighty pounds and trekked on into camp. To judge by his clothing, he must have lost a quart of blood.

The natives assumed as a matter of course that Evan was a combination of surgeon and

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magician. They brought the victim trustingly to him for treatment. The instruction-book in his first aid box dealt exhaustively with every ailment in the world but scalp hemorrhages. There was little that Evan could do for him but bind him up and send him back with two companions to the doctor in Skardu. His constitution was as remarkable as his stoical fortitude. We found later that he had arrived in good order and was getting on very well under treatment. No white man could have survived.

After the rough going across Skoro-La, the descent of the next day seemed easy. But when Evan reached the Braldoh River three miles below Askole, there was nothing to do but cross it. There was only one means to cross it—a rope bridge.

“I now forgive Connie all her tremors. A rope bridge is just as bad as she thought it was. Worse. She couldn’t possibly have done it.”

He described a rope bridge in detail. Cables about eight inches thick are woven from long willow wands. Two are used as handrails and the third to walk upon. Every ten feet, a light

## *AN EMBARRASSMENT OF BODIES*

strand runs from each hand cable to the foot cable to prevent it from sagging too much under one's weight. The novice, who must look down to place his feet carefully on the round, slippery cable, cannot avoid seeing the rushing, boiling water beneath him. Its roar and dizzy turbulence is almost as disconcerting as the constant swaying and teetering of the bridge itself. Braces, leg high, are placed at intervals to keep the foot cable from pulling the hand cables together and pinching one fast between them.

Evan found by experience that he could not get his second leg over until he had hopped a foot or two on the first to allow his trailing knee to pass!

It would be all too easy to slip off the cable in any one of the ten-foot gaps. The victim of such a slip would never be seen again all in one piece. The natives can run lightly over without even looking down. In spite of his command to the contrary, Evan's heavily burdened coolies started to trot across the Askole bridge before he had even reached the middle. This

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added to it a new and exhilarating shimmy which he could gladly have done without.

His time was short. He had only one day for exploration beyond Askole. He spent this day on the Biafo Glacier. This monster, thirty miles in length, is, next to its neighbour, the Baltoro, the largest glacier outside the Polar regions.

He took his return route down the Braldoh—the route which the Wazir Wazarat had told him was “impassable.” To get back to the left bank, he had to cross another rope bridge, a very old and dilapidated one nearing the breaking point, which means the end of traveller as well as bridge. Then a series of break-neck ascents and descents over smooth slippery rock which dropped off sheerly a thousand feet to the river below brought him, foot-sore and exhausted, to the confluence of the Braldoh and the Shigar. To his relief, he found there was a means of quick and easy return to Skardu.

“From here the sahib can cover a two-day march in one.”

## *AN EMBARRASSMENT OF BODIES*

“How?”

“By goats!”

And by goats it was, by the skins of goats. Zakwallas appeared bearing twenty-four goat skins, tied with cord at the legs and throat. With their own lungs they blew them up tight, and lashed them to the bottom of a light frame raft.

Evan, Sharfa and some of the most necessary luggage were loaded on to this. An efficient Balti guided the strange craft with a steering pole, used as a paddle, with which he kept the skins from being punctured on the sharp rock heads. They travelled forty miles down the tumultuous Shigar. It took five hours. In places, the raft spun round and round in the shoals and had to be fended off the treacherous rocks. In others, the rapids swept it along at a great speed and the zakwallas were constantly alert to keep it from being speared on the rocks as it rushed dizzily around corners. Evan had no hope that it could possibly get to Skardu right side up. Waves broke over him and the luggage. The corners of the raft dipped dan-

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gerously into the water. By early afternoon, however, they were vomited out of the Shigar River into the broad and more sluggish Indus. Their speed was sufficient to carry them across to the further bank. They were back at Skardu.

“And glad to be back. Being alone is no fun for me. I wouldn’t have missed it for anything, but I had enough of it,” Evan finished.

“I’m afraid I don’t sympathize,” said Michael. “I’m keen to get off by myself. It sounds perfect.”

“I had this Wendell business on my mind all the time. We seem to have got precisely nowhere. I’m satisfied that this body at Skardu isn’t Wendell. All right. Where are we? Just where we were when we first found out he disappeared. Now we’re leaving the country and there’s nothing more we can do. What the devil has happened to him?”

“I’m afraid whether he likes it or not, Major Sterne will have to worry about that,” I said.

“What are you going to say to him?”

“Briefly, just what you told me. The identi-

## AN EMBARRASSMENT OF BODIES

fication was no identification at all. It's his move next. Evan, don't you think it possible that Mrs. Telfer was right, that Wendell has chosen to disappear? Do you suppose there is such a place as the Valley of Shambhala?"

"You've been reading too much occult nonsense. It is possible of course that he is in hiding in one of these Lamaseries. I wonder if there was anything in the Kargil tehsildar's story of the fakir in the hills near Dras. It sounded pretty good tosh at the time; but up here in the mountains you get used to the idea of queer things happening. At any rate, he certainly has not been proved dead."

We had reached the telegraph office, where Evan was well known to the operator. I bit at my pencil and tried: "According to promise, am wiring you developments of interest. . . ." Then I turned to Evan.

"You add the résumé of what you found out, finish it: 'Wire me here,' and sign my name. That ought to shake him up a bit."

It was we who were shaken up. Within two hours I had a reply.



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“Thank you very much for your kind telegram with informative details. Another body has just been found near Dras. Positively Wendell’s. It is being shipped to Leh and will be buried here. Will write you to Srinagar. Best wishes.

“STERNE.”

We looked at one another, staggered.

“There’s no use. The Government says Wendell is dead. He’s got to stay dead.”



*Snow and Trees at Traghal*

## XVII

*Down to Earth*



## XVII

### *Down to Earth*

WE could not leave Skardu quickly enough. We had to delay one day on account of Michael, who collapsed suddenly with a fever and a violent colic. Whether it was our suggestion that he give up his month's shikar at Askole and return to Srinagar with us, or the ministrations of the devoted and worried Jan, at the end of twenty-four hours he ceased to look green, pronounced himself cured, and decided to leave with Sharfa the next day.

We had a surfeit of visits from local dignitaries, but we were unable to resist the pressure of the Bengali telegraph operator to come to tea with him. The pièce de résistance was an enormous bowl of mulberries! Evan had not eaten fresh fruit for months. I warned him earnestly, but it did no good. I made the social error of admiring the green stone tea-

## THIN AIR

cups. Two hours after we went back to camp, a package arrived for me by messenger. It contained the tea-cups.

We had left Srinagar with equipment for virtually every imaginable contingency. The tehsildar, who was a fellow guest at the tea party, asked us if we had mosquito nets. We had not.

“Then how do you expect to get across the Deosai Plains?” he asked. “You have heard of the Deosai mosquitoes.”

It was true we had heard of them vaguely, but we had forgotten them until that moment. There were no mosquito nets to be had in Skardu. There was, however, always one solution. We wired the infallible Ahmdhu Siraj. He sent a prompt reply. We were not to give it another thought: coolies from Srinagar would be waiting for us with mosquito nets two marches on the other side of the Burji-La.

At dawn our caravan divided once more. Michael took Sharfa, one or two servants, Evan's hill coolies, the guns and some supplies. The rest of the luggage we loaded on Balti

## DOWN TO EARTH

ponies and we turned our faces towards Kashmir.

The ascent of the Burji-La was the last great climb of our journey. We struggled up eight thousand feet above the dark orchards of the Indus Valley to a summit of nearly sixteen thousand feet. There we halted to look back at the country we were leaving. To the north, far across the valley in front of us, loomed K2 above the crests of a sea of glaciers. I looked a long time. Undoubtedly I should never see such country again. Then, without regret, I turned my back. I had had enough.

We dropped down from the top of the pass to the vast wind-swept plains of the Deosai. The clouds close to our heads had thickened. The sky was dark grey and without the sun it was bitterly cold. The wind that howled past tortured our faces. Hail began to fall in painful missiles the size of pigeon's eggs. There was no shelter of any sort. In the midst of the bleak expanse, we pitched our tents.

It was the wretchedest night of the trip. We had no way of keeping warm, the wind bat-

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tered at our canvas roof, and Evan and I were both exceedingly ill. He openly and often lamented his mulberries. The dull light of morning brought us little relief. The hail, however, had given way to driving blasts of cold rain. Quinine sulphate had ceased to have any effect on my fever, which had become constant, and we had fought down dysentery with all the opium-laden chlorodyne that we dared to take. We lay on our cots in a stupor of misery. Srinagar, so desirable, was as unattainable as Mars.

Suddenly a horrid thought struck me. We had sent on two coolies by a short cut to pick up, a march and a half beyond, the mosquito nets from Ahmdhu Siraj. One of these coolies was the young brother of Sharfa, a boy of sixteen. They had no shelter with them and only a small supply of food. I reminded Evan of this.

“Oh, God!” he groaned. “We can’t leave them in the middle of the Deosai Plains in a storm like this. And how are we going to move?”

## DOWN TO EARTH

“Choose your poison,” I said. “From the way I feel we shall probably die anyway. We certainly aren’t going to be better until we get back to Srinagar. We have sent those coolies off. We shall have to go on and pick them up.”

At the moment I was the less miserable. I tottered to the door of the tent and called for Lalla.

“Lalla, we must go on and pick up the coolies. The sahib says to strike camp. We are moving on.”

Lalla, rain-drenched in the few steps from the servants’ shelter, looked dubious.

“Achha, Mem-sahib,” he said, and disappeared. He returned in a few minutes. “It can not be done, Mem-sahib. The pony men refuse to move. They have let their ponies out to range. In this weather they will not go after them.”

“But do they know about the coolies, Lalla?”

“They are Kashmiri coolies, Mem-sahib.” Lalla shrugged. “It is no concern of the pony men. They will not go.”

I was so angry that I felt for the moment ex-



## THIN AIR

traordinarily well and strong. I struggled into my wolf-lined pashmina coat.

“The mem-sahib is going out into the rain?”

“We are all going out into the rain. At once. Where is the horse whip?”

Lalla looked mystified. “I think the sais has it.”

“Good.” The sais was a tall fierce-looking Kashmiri with whom I agreed perfectly. He would make a splendid reserve.

“Send the sais with the horse whip to me immediately.”

I took the whip from the puzzled sais and said: “Follow!”

Exalted with anger, I strode down to the canvas shelter where the pony men were squatted in a sullen crowd.

“Now, tell them exactly what I say to you. Unless we leave this camp in an hour, not one of them gets one anna of pay. I shall report them to the Government in Srinagar and this is the last time they will ever serve a sahib. They will be reported to their own rajah and they know very well what punishment they

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will get for disobedience. In addition to that, I shall beat with my own hands every one of them that I can lay this whip across. Ask them if they want to be beaten by a woman!”

I hope my aspect was as terrifying as I thought it was. In any case, the pony men listened in dumb astonishment to the sais' version of these remarks; and when I took three threatening steps towards them, they scrambled to their feet like alarmed rabbits and scattered over the range. The Baltis seemed to have the same high standard of courage that distinguishes the Kashmiris.

The sais also looked a little surprised.

“They say they will go, Mem-sahib,” he said mildly.

In an hour's time we were on our way. This high plateau seemed older than the country we had left. We stayed at an average elevation of thirteen thousand feet. But so broad was the sweep of the undulating country and so rounded the low, far-away hills, which are seventeen-thousand-foot mountains, that it was impossible to realize that we were at such a great height.

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The gravel and rock of the plains and slopes gave way to a sweep of grass and then to a profusion of wildflowers. The whole plateau became a high extravagant garden—mallows and wild geraniums in mauve and pinks, the bright blues of borage and myosotis, and a host of primroses. The only life we saw during the long march was colonies of whistling marmots. Like their American brothers of the Rockies their curiosity repeatedly overcame their caution. When we came upon a marmot village we would see a score of them sitting on their haunches outside their holes. At a shrill signal from their leaders they would scurry underground only to reappear again immediately in order to miss nothing.

The rain had become a mild drizzle when, in the late afternoon, we wound down a long slope to the bank of a stream. There we found waiting for us, in a wretched huddle, our half-frozen coolies. Mohammedans though they were, they made no resistance to drinking brandy and hot water. They had sat there doggedly for hours, guarding the mosquito nets

## DOWN TO EARTH

they had come to get. Ahmdhu had not failed us.

The nets arrived just in time. The next day the wind died down and the sun shone again. Scarcely were we back on the trail when an onslaught of the man-eating tigers of the Deosai attacked us. These bloodthirsty insects were to the ordinary mosquito what the dinosaur is to the elephant. They had the courage of size and numbers. Their half-inch bodies were striped, and they carried prodigious stings which they used with devilish ingenuity. Nets draped our topis, we wore gloves, and we reeked with oil supposed to be antipathetic to mosquitoes, but which seemed to attract them strangely. Their cleverness in finding accessible portions of our anatomy showed a high order of intelligence. It was cold comfort to hear they were non-malarial. A man in the jaws of a lion is uninterested in whether those jaws are prophylactic. For two days we fought them. Beyond Chanda Kut they unexpectedly deserted us, as we dropped to the grass of the Chota Deosai.

## THIN AIR

Whole fields of columbines, whose creamy white blossoms were three times the size of any I had ever seen, and acres of giant delphinium nodded waist high. We passed the little lakes of Kruhin-āb, the black water, and Wozul-āb, the red water, until on the summit of the last pass we reached a lake of an intense sapphire, bluer even than the larkspur that surrounded it. Across its tranquil surface, far beyond the summit of the pass, we saw an old friend—the sharp white peak of the beautiful Nanga Parbat. We had reached the rim of the barrenness in which we had wandered for so long. Below us a rough goat track dropped steeply down to the rich vegetation of Kashmir.

We were again among trees. Under the tender young birches was an incredible profusion of anemones, columbines, and geraniums. The trees thickened and the accustomed glare of harsh sun was replaced by broken shade. By noonday we reached the Gilgit road and the rest house at Gurais. Just before we came to the rest house, Sunnybank for the last time pretended he saw a menacing object and jumped

## DOWN TO EARTH

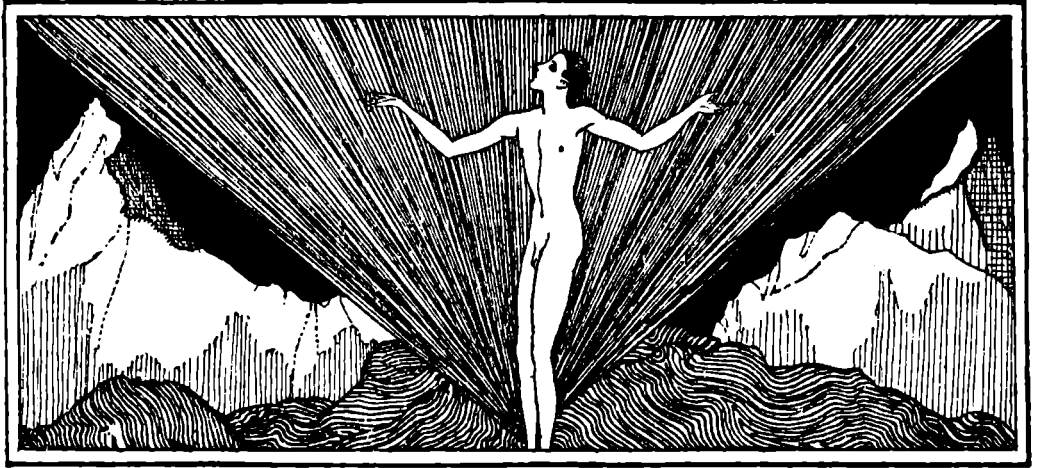
sharply to the side. I was sitting loosely in the saddle, weak and exhausted, and he tossed me with ease several yards over his head. All about me were jagged rocks, but I landed with precision flat on a strip of soft green turf. I picked myself up unhurt, breathless, and angry. To have ridden seven hundred miles successfully over every sort of dangerous trail and then to be dumped ignominiously in the front yard, as it were, was a blow to my vanity.

The next two marches were swift over good dirt road, through forests and flowers, and beside a sparkling river. The country was exquisitely lovely, but I had not the eyes to see it. I was concerned only with sitting my horse doggedly and getting somehow to the end. We were riding down, always down. For the second time we saw Tragbal Pass. The snow was gone from it now, and full summer radiance shone on the deodars. At the foot of the mountain in the village from which we had been driven by cholera many months before, we were met by shikharas. We had completed the circle.

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I lay inert under the canopy of the shikhara while six boatmen, hand-picked by Ahmdhu, paddled us rapidly across the Wular Lake and down the Jhelum to Srinagar. The caravan made its slow way back by land. I hoped never to see a horse again.

Nedou's Hotel, where we stayed the night, was almost deserted in the sultry heat of late summer. One last effort was necessary. In the morning we retrieved our luggage from storage and climbed to Gulmarg. I was at the end of my strength. Once inside our hut there was no more demand upon me. I promptly collapsed. The hill-station doctor informed me that I should have the pleasure of spending the next six weeks in bed.



*"Into Thin Air"*

## XVIII

### *The Closing of the Record*





## XVIII

### *The Closing of the Record*

ONE long slow day passed much like another. I had ample time to think. It was pleasant to lie in bed, languid and placid, and watch from my window the tops of the trees and the far crests of mountains. I could hear go by my door the sound of horses' hoofs, bursts of laughter, and snatches of talk—English talk. Even the click of golf-balls carried in the still air from the near-by links.

When I was able to sit up, I could see the players driving off from the third tee, parties of young girls on tat ponies, trotting coolies carrying old ladies in dandies. The cheerful life of a British hill-station in late August was in full swing. Daphne Ross came in to see me every day, bringing one and another of her officer admirers to divert the invalid. She had found the time in her gay athletic life to put the

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hut in readiness for me; and she kept an eye upon the menage to see that it ran smoothly. Her mother kept sending flowers and fruit from her garden, and delicious foods from the hands of her cook—which Evan, who was his healthy self again, was delighted to eat, since I could not. I had no cares. Mohammed Jan continued to be the perfect maid. The puppies, Tashi and Kumu, were content to sleep the day away on the foot of my bed.

My first look in a full-length mirror shocked me. I had left half my weight somewhere in the Himalayas. I did not care for the thin, haggard face, burned brown except where the dark spectacles had left protected circles of white owl-eyes. I had been away from the current of normal life less than three months. It had seemed years; but now that it was behind me it began to fade into a hazy disturbing dream. I took up life again where I had left it when I crossed the Zoji-La.

Many people came in to see me when I was permitted to sit up. They were kind; they put themselves out to be entertaining. Books to

## THE CLOSING OF THE RECORD

read: "Here's a thumping good mystery story," said one of Daphne's subalterns. "Did you get many ibex? You're not interested in shooting? If *I* could get up into that country—"

"You'll miss the dance at the club Saturday night; and the golf tournament. But you'll be up and about when the Dramatic Club gives its play."

"Do you care for cricket? There's a good match next week."

There was chatter about Wendell; casually. "Poor chap; gone gaga and killed himself."

Mrs. Duff came. She was in good form. I was delighted to see her. She was truly interested in Wendell, in the Telfers, in the Government; they had all behaved discredibly!

"But, my dear, of course he was mad. I realized that from the beginning. The talk I have heard from him! So are the others, those friends of his—all perfectly mad. It's very sad, of course, but people shouldn't get mixed up with ideas like that."

My letter from Sterne arrived: the body was found buried in sand, naked, a few miles from

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Dras. This time there was no question whatever about it. He had buried it with suitable ceremonies in the European graveyard at Leh.

A man accidentally drowned or a suicide cannot remove his clothes and bury himself. How many more bodies, I wondered, would appear that were positively Wendell's?

What had happened to the thirty thousand rupees? Wendell had withdrawn that sum from the bank at Srinagar. The yakdans supposedly containing them had been sent back, seals unbroken, to America. What about the bearer, that native who had crossed our path only as a malign shadow? The Government was not interested. Wendell had met an accidental death by drowning. He was officially dead, officially buried. There was an end of the matter.

Evan made a colourless report of the incident to the American Consul. He received a colourless reply. He was thanked for his information. The matter was in the hands of the British Government. The American Government did not feel itself called upon to take action.

## THE CLOSING OF THE RECORD

I began to wonder if I had ever really met a person called David Wendell. Life had closed up behind him as if he had never been. On the other side of the Himalayan wall, he had had greater actuality for me than here in the sort of surroundings in which I had seen him. The tide of common sense was engulfing me. Each day I was becoming more dully normal. I felt I was losing some intensity of apperception which the heights had given me. Or was it only that a state of fevered imagination had passed? In the rarefied atmosphere of high Tibet, Wendell had seemed bent upon an important quest of the spirit, the fundamental adventure of every man. In the amiable banality of an English station, he was merely a person, pathetically deranged, who had made the mistake of not running true to type.

I silently accepted the verdict of the good practical people who run the affairs of this world. Let there be no more speculative nonsense. The episode was closed so far as we were concerned. We had stayed too long in the thin air into which Wendell had vanished.

## *THIN AIR*

Perhaps he had been the victim of an avaricious evil native. Perhaps it was his body that was lying in a grave at Leh. Even so, was his quest ended?

There may be more than one route to a valley of Shambhala.

