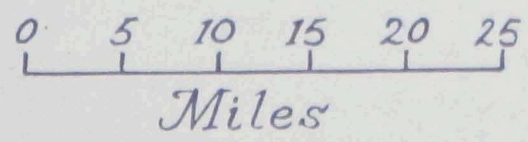
Sketch Map of the
Country Described
0 5 10 15 20 25
Miles
MT. EVEREST (29,002 ft.)
LHOTSE (South Peak)
TIBET
Bivouac
Avalanche
Professor Wilberforce's camp
Pass crossed by Hunzerger
Bivouac
KONGRA DZONG Monastry
Bivouac
Four porters killed
Bivouac
Bivouac
High Pass
Fight with Pendlebury
Snow Pass
Pass crossed by Hunzerger
Bivouac
Rope bridge
Rope Bridge
Shepherd's hut
Rope bridge
Pass crossed by Trevanion
CHODING
KANGCHENJUNGA
SIKKIM
Bivouac
Bivouac
Cave
Bivouac
Bungalow
Bungalow
TEESTA R.
GANGTOK
KALIMPONG
SINGALILA RIDGE
DARJEELING
NEPAL
ARUN RIVER
BENGAL
SILIGURI
Drawn by Bip Pares

Books by

Frank S. Smythe

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THE SPIRIT OF THE HILLS
CAMP SIX
OVER TYROLESE HILLS
MOUNTAINEERING HOLIDAY
THE VALLEY OF FLOWERS
KAMET CONQUERED
ALPINE JOURNEY
EDWARD WHYMPER
THE MOUNTAIN VISION

Secret Mission

By Frank S. Smythe

London
Hodder & Stoughton

The characters in this story are imaginary. It is also necessary to state that Northern Nepal is still unexplored by Europeans. Therefore many of the topographical details described in the text, and set out in the map, are imaginary also.

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Chapter One

I WELL REMEMBER THE AFTERNOON THAT BEGAN MY ADVENTURES in connection with Professor Wilberforce and his aerial torpedo. I was on leave from India at the time. For some years past I had spent my leaves shooting and mountaineering in the Himalayas, but the time came, as it always does to an Englishman, when I longed for a sight of England. So I came to London and took a service flat in St. James's, with the idea of seeing life and having a good time. A good time? My hat! I hadn't been back a fortnight before I was wishing that I had never left India. It was my own fault, I suppose. I was never a great hand at casual friendships, and most of my pals were out East. I had been in some desolate places up on the edge of Tibet, but I had never felt so lonely as I did in London.

On the afternoon in question, having nothing better to do, I dropped into a cinema. A film was being shown there about some people who had tired of civilisation and had established a colony somewhere in Tibet where they had managed, among other things, to discover the secret of eternal life. The main idea was good, but much of the rest, the palace they built, the clothes they wore, and so forth, was pretty average nonsense. However, there was some splendid photography, real mountains and glaciers, and views of stupendous barren uplands where nothing moved except cloud shadows. Those pictures of the Himalayas gave me nostalgia, so much so that I made up my mind then and there to clear out of England and spend the remainder of my leave mountaineering. It was the obvious solution to my boredom, and I came out of that stuffy, disinfectant-reeking cinema a happy man.

Now that my decision was made, I realised more than ever that London was no place for me. As I marched down Charing Cross Road the noise of it seemed to hammer against my brain. A newsvendor tore past bawling out something about Bombs on Barcelona and a New International Crisis. Another crisis—western civilisation seemed to feed on crises. Why the blazes couldn't people live peaceably together like the hard-faced little Sherpas who climbed with me in the Himalayas? *They* didn't blow women and children to bits with explosives. *Their* fight was against Nature, against blizzard, avalanche and flood. They would have thought anyone raving mad who told them that western people threw food into the sea in order to keep up its price. Yet, there were more smiles to be seen in one of their primitive hamlets than in the length and breadth of Charing Cross Road.

As I turned into Trafalgar Square I glanced up at Nelson. Very lonely he looked above the heedless crowds, the Neon lights, the vulgarity at his feet, perched on his pedestal against the misty primrose of the evening sky. He was symbolical of something, something simple and fine, something Britain badly needed, but might have to go through Hell fire to get.

I was so engrossed with my thoughts that I didn't look where I was going, and bumped into a tall fellow who seemed to be in a hurry. I mumbled an apology and was moving on when a hand gripped me by the arm.

"Tom Trevanion!"

I swung round. The tall man was regarding me with a surprised grin.

I recognised him at once; there was no mistaking that great hooked nose and bushy eyebrows.

"Beaky Morrison!" I had not seen him for years, not since we shared rooms at Trinity and played rugger for the 'Varsity.

"And where have you blown from?" he asked.

"India," I said. "And you?"

"I'm a policeman of sorts over there." He waved a large hand in the direction of Whitehall. "What are you up to?"

"Indian Political. I'm on leave and wish I wasn't, at least not in this God-forsaken city."

Beaky grinned.

"Too civilised for you, Tom? You always were a barbarian. I can still remember your tackles. When you couldn't bring 'em down by orthodox methods you collared 'em by the neck."

"On the contrary," I retorted, "it's you who are the barbarian living in this barbaric city. I've just decided to return to India and finish my leave in the quiet and peace of the Himalayas."

Beaky raised his eyebrows.

"The Himalayas, you say. Do you know them well?"

"The Himalayas are a trifle larger than the South Downs," I explained. "Nobody knows them well, but I've spent the best part of the last fifteen years among them."

"The devil you have." Beaky was eyeing me intently. "I suppose you've never been to Nepal?"

"Curiously enough I have. Five years ago the Government of India was called in by the Maharajah to settle a boundary dispute between his country and Tibet. I was chosen for the job; it took me into country never before seen by Europeans."

"The deuce it did!" There was a note of suppressed excitement in Beaky's voice. "Why on earth didn't those wretched underlings of mine ferret you out, Tom? If only I'd known. Why, you're the very man, probably the only man who——"

"What on earth are you driving at?" I interrupted him.

"Sorry, Tom," said Beaky, earnestly, "but it's a queer

thing meeting you accidentally like this when I've been scouring the country for someone like you. It's the hand of Fate, nothing less. Look here, are you free for dinner? You are? Good! Then come along to my place where we can talk."

Beaky had a comfortable bachelor establishment in Westminster. During dinner we discussed old times, and it was not until coffee had been served and our cigars were well alight over some brandy that he opened fire.

"Ever heard of Professor Julian Wilberforce?"

"The scientist? Yes, I have. I don't know much about his scientific work, but in his spare time he's an explorer and naturalist. So far as I know he's the only Englishman, bar myself, who's been to the Himalayas of Northern Nepal. It's a mystery how he managed it. As you know, Nepal is politically barred to Europeans; the Nepalese won't have them at any price; they say they bring nothing but unhappiness and strife wherever they go; but in the Professor's case I believe he did a good turn once to the Maharajah and received a special invitation."

"Exactly. Do you know whether he published anything about his travels?"

"I don't think he did. I've never met him, but from all accounts he's a shy, retiring bird."

"So no one knows exactly where he went?"

"Not exactly, but I've a pretty good idea as to the district. It was a long way to the east of where I was. One of my Sherpa porters went part of the way with him. I gathered it was towards the valleys south of Makalu and Mount Everest, a terrific country, I should think the grandest in the world."

"That's most interesting and important," said Beaky. "And now let me tell you one or two things about the learned Professor. Firstly, he's a pacifist of the first water and has interested himself in various pacifist movements.

Secondly, he's invented the most devilish war weapon yet devised."

"The two sound incompatible."

"They do, my son, but wait until you've heard the story, then judge for yourself.

"Three months ago the Professor notified the War Office that he had developed a weapon of quite extraordinary power, on which he had been working for some time past, and was willing to demonstrate it. As he put it in his letter, 'I venture the claim that the destructive nature of my apparatus will make war between civilised peoples impossible, and it is solely on this account that I am prepared to demonstrate it on behalf of what I fervently believe is a peace-loving nation.' As you know, Tom, the War Office is pestered by thousands of would-be inventors, but Professor Wilberforce was different—a scientist with a big reputation—and although he refused to disclose the plans of his apparatus an elaborate demonstration was arranged.

"The experts evidently had wind of something pretty important, for Scotland Yard was called in to see that secrecy was maintained. As Assistant Commissioner, I took charge of this myself, and went with the party to the scene of the demonstration, a remote spot on Salisbury Plain.

"It was obvious that the demonstration promised to be unusually interesting because all three of the Services were represented. General Sir James Blackton was the senior officer present, a peppery fire-eating old fellow with a face like a lobster, a hobnailed liver, and all the catalogue. I remember thinking at the time that anyone less suited to deal with a pacifist professor could hardly have been chosen.

"The Professor is a tall lean man, sixty years old, with a ruddy complexion, a mop of snow-white hair, and kindly

blue eyes. I took to him at once; he was so completely unassuming. He had his daughter, Mabel, with him."

"The airwoman?"

"Yes, but a different brand from most of the flying furies—a nice girl, and a real good-looker. She had been helping her father with his invention and seemed to know as much about it as he did.

"We motored out to the rendezvous in the middle of the plain, the Professor in a small, closely guarded van which contained his gear. When we arrived, while his daughter supervised the unpacking of the gear, he addressed the experts.

"'I am about to demonstrate to you,' he said, 'a device which will, I confidently believe, render warfare impracticable to an aggressor nation, provided that it is at the disposal of the attacked. I believe that this country is embued with some at least of the Christian principles. Therefore I am prepared to put my device at the disposal of the British Government in the hope that Britain will remain inviolate from attack by any other power.'

"It sounded suspiciously like a sermon and I saw some of the assembled company stir uneasily, while old Blackton gave a snort, which said as plainly as anything could, 'Dammit, sir, we're not here to hear *you*, we're here to see what your blankety blank invention can do.'

"Well, to cut a long story short, the invention was rigged a few minutes later. It wasn't much to look at, simply a steel tripod with a complicated head which could be turned, elevated or depressed in any direction. Another tripod was placed a few yards away, the two being linked by a cable. Mounted on the second tripod was a piece of mechanism, and what looked like a pair of binoculars, which I took to be some sort of range-finder. Next, the Professor opened another box and took from it an object a couple of feet long, like a miniature torpedo, with narrow longitudinal

fins. This he placed on the first tripod, then turned and surveyed the company with a benevolent smile.

" ' I understand,' he said, ' that two Queen Bee wireless-controlled aeroplanes have been provided for the occasion, one to fly high and the other low. I hope there is no objection to their being destroyed? '

" ' None whatever,' replied Air Commodore Manston, the R.A.F. representative, heartily. ' You're welcome to bring 'em down if you can, Professor; no one has succeeded in doing it yet except by gunfire. Which will you start on? '

" ' I will begin with the high-flying machine,' said the Professor.

" It was devilish interesting, and I can tell you, Tom, we were thrilled to the core as we waited for the Queen Bee to gain its altitude. Even old Blackton was impressed, though he indulged in some disbelieving grunts. As for the Professor, he sat down on a camp chair, got a book out of his pocket, and started to read. I took a peep over his shoulder; it was *Plutarch's Lives*!

" About twenty minutes later the man working the Queen Bee wireless-control apparatus reported that the machine had reached its ceiling.

" ' That means something over twenty thousand feet,' said Manston with a smile. ' Go ahead and do your worst, Professor.'

" It looked a hopeless proposition. The Queen Bee was almost invisible to the naked eye. But it cut no ice with the Professor; indeed, he seemed to have lost all interest in the proceeding, for he merely glanced up from his book.

" ' My daughter will do all that is necessary,' he said. ' Mabel, would you be so kind as to oblige these gentlemen? '

" ' Right-ho, Dad,' replied the girl enthusiastically, ' you bet I will.' She, at any rate, was getting a kick out of it,

"She seated herself on a camp stool by the second of the two tripods, and gazed through the binoculars. I remember that as she moved the binoculars, the head of the first tripod moved in sympathy until the torpedo, or whatever it was, was pointed almost vertically at the Queen Bee. This took only a few seconds; then she moved a small switch. There was a whining, humming sound, followed by a swish like a rocket. The torpedo disappeared from its tripod. It happened in the fraction of a second; one moment it was there, the next it had vanished. I caught a glimpse of it as it disappeared into space; then it was gone.

"We all jumped when it shot off, then settled down to see what would happen. The silence was almost uncanny. I remember hearing the Professor turning over a leaf of his book—he was still reading—and someone a yard or two away breathing short, excited breaths. Overhead the Queen Bee cruised round in wide circles, a silvery speck four miles above our heads, and we could just hear the steady drone of its engine.

"Five, ten, fifteen seconds. Suddenly the aeroplane slipped off sideways and downwards from its course. Manston, who was gazing through field glasses, shouted out:

"'She's spinning!'

"Then came the voice of the man at the wireless-control board, who was operating the Queen Bee.

"'She's no longer under control.'

"The aeroplane's humming ceased and the machine spun more and more quickly earthwards. It was fascinating to watch. At one time it seemed to be coming straight for us, and it looked as though we might have to do some smart dodging, but it veered off and fell with a grinding thud of crushed metal about four hundred yards away. It didn't catch fire and everyone hurried to the wreck.

" It was possible, of course, that the controls had gone wrong, and that the Professor's torpedo had nothing to do with it, but when we got to the crash almost the first thing we saw was the tail of the torpedo sticking out of the engine cowling. Such was the force with which it had hit that it had smashed right into the engine and damaged the control panel at the same time.

" We brought the battered remains of the torpedo back to the Professor. Old Blackton was visibly shaken. He stuttered out:

" 'By gad, sir, it's—it's amazing! Anyone who has this is master of the air. You—you have revolutionised warfare, sir! '

" 'I should prefer to think,' said the Professor coldly, 'that I have made warfare impossible.'

" After that there was a second demonstration, with a low-flying Queen Bee. The result was even more spectacular. This time the Professor worked the apparatus. The machine came roaring across, and as it passed overhead, not more than a hundred feet from the ground, he loosed off another torpedo. It didn't travel as fast as the first one and we were able to see its flight. It missed the Queen Bee by several feet, then—and this was the marvellous thing—it curved round and down and plunged into the machine from above, bringing it to the ground less than a hundred yards away.

" Once again the Professor seemed completely unmoved, but when we had gathered round him, everyone talking at once, he proceeded to explain.

" 'The demonstrations you have witnessed,' he said, 'have been rendered possible by an apparatus of my own design which incorporates two main features, sensitivity to light and sensitivity to sound. They may act independently or both together. Thus, in the case of an aeroplane concealed from the ground by clouds, sound detection alone

is sufficient to ensure that the projectile reaches its objective. It is, therefore, necessary merely to launch the projectile in the approximate direction of the objective, at a speed proportional to the distance of the objective, and it will find its own way; it may be said to have both eyes and ears which can be tuned to special degrees of sensitivity. It could, for example, be used with equal effectiveness against vehicles on the ground, and could easily be adapted for employment at sea against submarines or surface craft. It is, of course, obvious to you that it could be charged with high explosive.

" ' Furthermore, by means of an accurate map it can be adjusted to descend on any particular spot with far greater accuracy than a shell.'

" ' What would its maximum range be? ' inquired Blackton.

" ' As for that,' replied the Professor, ' its range may be said to be almost unlimited, seeing that it derives its power through a controlled short-wave radio beam. I am most interested in its possibilities for inter-planetary survey and communication, if, indeed, any intelligent beings dwell on other of the planets.'

" ' So it might be possible to bombard say Berlin from London? ' said old Blackton.

" ' I have not considered that,' replied the Professor. ' I have already pointed out, General Blackton, that my sole object in demonstrating my invention has been to prove its effectiveness for *defensive* purposes.'

" If old Blackton hadn't been quite such a blithering idiot he would have seen the danger signal. As it was he continued testily:

" ' Quite, quite, Professor, but you must leave such considerations to the Services concerned. The best defence is attack, you know. Any nation that possessed your invention could dominate the world.'

" Professor Wilberforce rose to his feet at this. He was white-faced with anger.

" ' I can only say, General Blackton,' he replied icily, ' that I do not share your belligerent views. As I have already endeavoured to explain, apparently without success, my invention is not intended to destroy humanity, but to preserve it. Had I thought that any consideration whatever would have been paid to its offensive possibilities I should certainly have declined to demonstrate it. I must request that my apparatus be packed immediately and returned to my house.'

" It was an unfortunate end to the show. Too late old Blackton saw what an ass he had made of himself, but his explanations and apologies fell on deaf ears. In any other country the invention would have been collared there and then, but we don't do things like that in England, and Professor Wilberforce, his daughter, and his gear went off back to their home, Barnton Court, at Forestford in Sussex, closely guarded by some of my men. Having seen what I had, I was taking no chances.

" The Government, of course, was ready to pay anything for the rights of the invention. They thought it was merely a question of steering a large sum through the estimates, and that after that everything would be beautiful in the garden. Meanwhile, they tried to persuade the Professor to hand over the invention for safe keeping, but this he refused to do; he stalled them off by saying that sundry minor alterations and adjustments had to be made to it. And so there was nothing to do but wait. Meanwhile at Scotland Yard we received orders to keep the strictest watch on Barnton Court. It wasn't an easy job, and had to be done as secretly as possible for obvious reasons, and also because the Professor resented intensely any intrusion on his privacy.

" Barnton Court is a rambling old house about three

miles from Forestford, and the only unusual thing about it was that it had its own aerodrome where Mabel disported herself. During the first week after the demonstration, she made several flights, returning in each case an hour or two later. The Professor did not accompany her, but even so we didn't much like it. Being in charge of the job of keeping an eye on the Professor and his invention was a heavy responsibility. I had no illusions as to the value of either; they were of Empire, you might say of world, significance, and I had few sound sleeps at the 'Blackbird,' the local pub which I had made my headquarters.

"Everything went on all right for a week, then in the early hours of the eighth day I was roused by one of my men.

"'An aeroplane's just taken off,' he told me.

"That was queer. Mabel had not been away on a night jaunt before. I dressed quickly and went over to the outskirts of the grounds where my men were stationed. They had all seen or heard the machine. It had happened very quickly, they said. The hangar doors had opened, and the 'plane had taxied out and taken off a minute later after a run so long that it had only just cleared the trees at the end of the aerodrome. No flares had been used and the whole proceeding had a secrecy and swiftness about it I did not at all fancy. So disturbed was I that I determined to knock up the Professor and make sure that everything was well with him.

"With the inspector in charge I marched up the drive, and rang the front-door bell. It was answered almost immediately by the butler, who I was surprised to see fully dressed.

"'Is Professor Wilberforce in?' I inquired.

"'Professor Wilberforce has gone, sir,' he replied. 'He and Miss Mabel left in the aeroplane about an hour ago.'

"Here was a pretty kettle of fish. I suppose I must have looked my anxiety, for the butler said:

"'I fancy, sir, that you are the gentleman from Scotland Yard. If so, I am to give you this.' He fished a letter out of his pocket. It was in a plain unaddressed envelope. This is what I read—I have a copy here.

> "SIR,—This is addressed to you and other Government officials who have seen fit to interest themselves in my affairs. After working for the past two years I perfected an invention which I hoped would, in view of its destructive qualities, make war impossible between civilised peoples. At the worst I trusted that it would be used as a purely defensive weapon against unprovoked aggression, but the manner in which the recent demonstration I gave of its capabilities was greeted, convinced me that its offensive powers were alone considered. Since then I have been under constant surveillance of a most disagreeable character. For these reasons, and because I am horrified to think of myself as a potential destroyer of my fellow men, I have accompanied my daughter to a place where I may reasonably expect some peace and quietness of spirit. As my invention has possibilities other than those of human destruction I have taken the plans with me, having first destroyed the experimental apparatus which I used for demonstration purposes.
>
> Faithfully yours,
> (*Signed*) JULIAN WILBERFORCE.

"You can imagine the horror with which I read this letter. The Professor had taken his plans with him. His aeroplane might come down anywhere, perhaps in the territory of a foreign power. And he had slipped through the fingers of Scotland Yard, through my fingers, like an eel. It was awful, Tom. I had to act quickly, and the first thing I did was to ring up the Yard. They would get into touch with the Air Ministry, and the Professor's 'plane

would be detained if it came down at a British airport. Then I told the butler to get together the staff; possibly one or other of them could shed some light on the Professor's destination. There were six of them—the butler, the cook, a housemaid, the chauffeur and two gardeners. It took an hour to collect five. The chauffeur was missing, and a prolonged search failed to find him. Was it possible that he had gone off with the Professor and his daughter? It was not. The butler testified to the fact that he had helped him open the doors of the hangar, and that after the aeroplane had left he had discussed with him the meaning of this nocturnal flight, and the stores of food and equipment he had helped to load into the machine shortly after sundown.

" Somehow or other he had penetrated the police cordon, probably during the upset caused by the Professor's flight. But why? There was something here I did not at all like. I should add that long before this the antecedents of the Professor's staff had been closely scrutinised as a necessary precaution. The chauffeur had been employed for five years. His only weakness had been a fondness for betting, and he was known to be heavily in debt with various bookmakers. It was on the cards, therefore, that he was trying to recoup himself with a newspaper story, or, what was much worse—indeed it hardly bore thinking about—was in touch with foreign agents. All I could do was to get on to his trail as soon as possible, and trust that he would be roped in in due course.

" The remainder of the staff knew little or nothing, with the exception of the housemaid, and she had a piece of information of vital importance. She said—I'll try to put it in her own words:

" 'I went into Master's study unexpected-like to get a duster I'd left there. When I opened the door I saw Master and Miss Mabel looking at a big sheet of coloured paper

they 'ad spread out before them on the table. So taken up was they that they never 'eard me open the door, and as I stood there I 'eard Miss Mabel say:

" ' " It's a good thing, Daddy, that I was going to try for the longest non-stop woman's flight. The machine is teed up now down to the last gallon of petrol. Given the right weather and winds we ought to do it comfortably. The only thing that worries me is the landing."

" ' " I think I can guarantee that, my dear," says the Master, " it's the only valley I know where a landing's possible in that part of the——"

" ' I didn't rightly catch the last word,' concluded the housemaid, ' but it sounded something about " 'im as laid there," though that don't make sense, do it?

" ' As I'd been standing there some time I thought as 'ow I'd better advertise myself like, so I gives a cough. My! 'ow quick Master and Miss Mabel looks up.'

" ' " What are you doing here, Annie? " says Miss Mabel ever so sharp.

" ' " Beg pardon, miss," I says, " I'm looking for a duster as I left 'ere, but seeing as 'ow you and Master are busy I'll come another time." And with that I shuts the door, not too soft, and not too 'ard, but determined-like, because of the way Miss Mabel spoke.'

" Well, Tom," continued Beaky with a smile, " it's obvious to you that the Professor said ' Himalayas,' and in view of his previous visits to that part of the world it seems certain that that is where he planned to go. The question is, which part of the Himalayas? I discovered that he had been in several different districts including Northern Nepal. The last was by far the likeliest as, besides being remote, it is barred to Europeans, whereas the other districts were all British territory and have been thoroughly explored and mapped. I think you'll agree then that the odds are that, failing a crash or forced land-

ing *en route*, the Professor and his daughter are at this moment safely ensconced in some charming valley of the Nepal Himalayas leading the simple life far from this wicked world.

" As for the aeroplane being prepared for an attempt on the female long-distance record, that was easily ascertained. I had a conversation with the manager of the firm that had been adapting it for the job. The preparations had been completed some time before the Professor demonstrated his aerial torpedo, and Mabel's flights were simply preliminary canters to test the behaviour of the machine, and work out its petrol consumption for various loads.

" After that we got busy and, armed with a warrant, I went through Barnton Court with a fine comb. I found nothing of importance, not even a record of the Professor's trips to the Himalayas. As he said in his letter, he had destroyed the experimental apparatus used for the demonstration, and all we found was a mass of battered and twisted metal.

" All this took place only a week ago, and there has been the most unholy row. My one consolation is that old Blackton got what was coming to him: I believe he's resigned already. I've been expecting the sack hourly, and heaven knows I deserve it for being such a blithering fool in allowing the Professor to make his get-away. I ought to have realised that, when he returned home after demonstrating his invention, he was completely fed up with old Blackton and the rest of the brass hats. You see, I was thinking like any narrow dam' fool policeman, and it never occurred to me that a man of Professor Wilberforce's standing and reputation would do anything but hand over his invention to the Government, and settle down afterwards as a peer of the realm with a million or so in cash to spend on himself and local good works. That's the worst of these peace cranks and idealists, you never know

how they'll react to circumstances; they don't know the meaning of patriotism as we know it.

"As you can imagine, it was vital to preserve secrecy over the whole business. The Cabinet is in a flat spin, and it would mean the end of the Government if it leaked out, which makes things even more difficult and complicated. So far not a word has come through about the 'plane. Its engine had been specially super-charged and its cabin fitted with oxygen apparatus for stratosphere flying, so it's probable that Mabel flew it so high that it was neither seen nor heard. If anything went wrong and the Professor and his plans were landed in foreign territory we shall hear all about it, and in a way we shan't fancy, so look out for squalls, and don't laugh the next time you read of some secret weapon one of the dictators has up his sleeve.

"But that isn't all, Tom, not by a long chalk. Matters went from bad to worse. Yesterday, a dead man was fished out of the river below Tower Bridge. He had been murdered: shot through the head from behind at close range and his face smashed in as well, probably after he had been shot. He had been stripped of all his clothing so that there wasn't even a laundry mark to identify him by, but we got him by two moles on the back of his neck. That is the one thing I take a pride in over this wretched business. I had taken pains to get a complete description of all the servants at Barnton Court. It was Edwards, the missing chauffeur.

"As you can imagine this discovery made us think fast and furiously, but so far no evidence has come to hand as to where, and by whose hand, he met his death.

"What inferences suggest themselves? Firstly, Edwards knew something about the Professor's invention. He was a skilled mechanic, and is known to have lent a hand in its manufacture. Exactly how much he knew about its capabilities we don't know, possibly quite a lot. Secondly,

he was a gambler and was heavily in debt. Probably his racing activities brought him into contact with some shady characters, including foreign agents, and a market for any information he might possess. Thirdly, why was he murdered? *He knew too much!* Assuming that he had sold his information to someone, what was there to prevent him from selling it to someone else? He was in desperate need of money and was probably not above double-crossing his pals. So he had to be silenced—permanently.

"But the most important point of all—and this is absolutely vital—is whether he knew where the Professor and his daughter were going? If he did, and sold his information, then there is no time to be lost—by hook or by crook we have got to get there first. Yet the difficulties are immense. It is only surmise that he has gone to the Himalayas. The whole thing may have been a carefully planned blind: the housemaid, for instance, may have heard something it was intended she should hear. However, I don't think so. And the murder of Edwards has to be explained. I think that end is genuine enough. He has gone to the Himalayas, and if so the odds are to the Himalayas of Northern Nepal.

"Then there is the question of secrecy. The Cabinet are like cats on hot bricks; the show simply mustn't be allowed to develop into a *cause célèbre*. Somehow or other the Professor and his plans have got to be coaxed back into this country quietly and without fuss. As Nepal is an independent State closed to Europeans, there would be the devil of a row, probably a minor war, if we insisted on sending an expedition in search of the Professor, and of course the object would be bound to leak out. Then there is the difficulty of the country; to penetrate it is a job for a mountaineer and explorer who can speak the lingo. The best way of doing it is for someone to creep in without permission, with the minimum of fuss and delay, and go hell

for leather for the Professor's lair as soon as he finds out where it is. We have been combing the country, and India too, for such a man, but until to-day we've drawn absolutely blank. But now we've found him. Tom, will you go? "

Chapter Two

NEXT MORNING WHEN I WOKE IN MY FLAT THE FIRST THING I did was to ask myself whether the events of the previous evening were a fantastic dream, and when I had come to the conclusion that they were not, whether I was making an unqualified ass of myself. For so enthralled had I been with Beaky Morrison's story that I had accepted almost without thought a job which, to put it mildly, was extremely likely to prove nothing better than a wild-goose chase. Then my official training rebelled at the idea of entering without permission a country in which I had been treated as an honoured guest. I had Beaky's word for it that if the powers that be endorsed his recommendation I should have the backing of the Government whatever happened, but fifteen years' political experience had made me a cynic in the matter of the treatment meted out by the Government to its underlings when anything went wrong.

You could be a Government's darling one moment and a Government's scapegoat the next, out of your job and lucky to have a pension between you and the workhouse.

They were stupid, trivial thoughts, and only went to show that I had not yet grasped the enormous significance of all that Beaky had told me. Indeed, in the clammy grey of a March morning it all seemed unbelievably fantastic. However, after breakfast, when my pipe was alight, I felt better and fully able to cope with Beaky, who turned up a little later.

His face showed that he had nothing to add to what he had already told me.

"Not a word about the Professor's 'plane," he said gloomily. "And not a shred of evidence yet to show who murdered Edwards."

"Have you rounded up possible foreign suspects?" I asked him.

"We can't do that without evidence," he replied, "but we've got an eye on every known agent."

"In that case there's no point in my hanging on here. The sooner I'm off the better. There's a P. & O. sailing to-morrow—the *Garhwali.*"

"You're right there, Tom, but as time is the essence of this business we were assuming that you'd travel by air."

"I've thought of that and there are several reasons against it. First and foremost, there's no chance of getting through to the high valleys of Northern Nepal until the snows melt, and that won't be until April. At the same time if there's any news of the Professor's whereabouts it's to be had in the Darjeeling native bazaar. Don't ask me how it will get there, via Tibet maybe or through Lower Nepal and the Terai, but get there in due course it will. Someone, or the sister-in-law of someone's second cousin's uncle will have seen or heard an aeroplane if there has been an aeroplane over Nepal. Even if you had me dropped in Nepal itself I would be less likely to get some useful information than if I explored the Darjeeling bazaar, and that news will take time to filter through. Therefore, it's a mistake to hurry, and, incidentally, I loathe flying."

Beaky grinned.

"I see your points, Tom, they seem sound enough, especially the last, but I don't quite follow how news manages to get over snow-covered passes which you say are inaccessible at this time of the year."

"The answer is simple," I told him. "The Sherpas of Northern Nepal are the toughest men in the world; they

can cover country and sleep out in conditions that would kill a European, even a skilled mountaineer and explorer. And remember, I shall be travelling very light; there won't be a train of porters carrying tents, camp beds, and arm-chairs. If I'm to get into Nepal without being seen and turned back, I've got to go cannily."

"You seem to have thought it out already, Tom. Thank the lord I bumped into you yesterday. Can you come along now? There are some people who would like to see you. I've been busy already this morning, and it's pretty well fixed up now. They only want to vet you; don't be scared," he concluded wickedly.

If I had had any doubts as to the importance of the story I had heard from Beaky Morrison's lips, they were certainly dispelled that morning. I was taken first of all to Scotland Yard, where I was introduced to the Chief Commissioner, who greeted me in the friendliest possible manner. He had evidently looked up my record, for he asked me some searching questions about the jobs I had done in India. However, he seemed well satisfied, for at length he leant back in his chair and regarded me quizzically.

"There are one or two members of the Cabinet who are anxious to meet you, Mr. Trevanion. They want to assure themselves personally that this matter is in capable hands, as I am already sure myself that it is," he concluded with a smile.

Twenty-four hours ago I should have regarded anyone as a lunatic who told me that I was to interview some of the leading statesmen of England. It was a pretty formidable galaxy for a minor star to barge into, and when the Commissioner told me who I was to meet I felt like dropping through the floor. However, it turned out very differently from what I had expected, and a few minutes later, in a house the number of which is known throughout the civilised world, I began to understand how these

leaders of State got their jobs—it was not through bluff and bounce as so many like to believe, but tact, sympathy, intelligence, the power of seizing on a vital point in a mess of irrelevancy, and reasoned, balanced decisions. Within five minutes they put me so completely at my ease that I got out my pipe and was yarning away with them as though they were any group of fellows you would meet at a club bar. When I came to think of it afterwards I realised that they were testing me; they wanted to see for themselves what sort of a fellow I was and whether I was fit for the job. One of them—it was the Foreign Secretary—who had been to Khatmandu, the capital of Nepal, on a State visit, told me a yarn about tiger shooting which had such a glaring misstatement of fact in it that I felt bound to correct him. When I did so he nodded as though well satisfied, and apologised for the slip. Then they asked me questions about the Nepal Himalayas, some of them very shrewd and some the sort of questions complete ignoramuses ask. I did my best to answer them, and give a picture of the country and its people. When at last they came to the point it was the Prime Minister who set the ball rolling.

"You know, Mr. Trevanion," he began, looking at me keenly, "you have been put into a position of trust and tremendous responsibility."

"I realise that, sir," I replied, "but to be quite honest, it has taken some time to sink in. The story I've heard might have come out of a penny dreadful."

"Exactly, and yet it's true, every word of it. It is not too much to say that Professor Wilberforce has in his possession the plans of an invention that is capable of making or breaking civilisation as we know it to-day. If those plans, or for that matter Professor Wilberforce himself, were to fall into the wrong hands, the results would be disastrous beyond all human conception."

" Horrible! " exclaimed the Secretary of State for War.

The rest said nothing, but it was obvious from the tense expressions confronting me that, as Beaky Morrison had said, the Cabinet was going through a trying time.

" You will appreciate, Mr. Trevanion," the Prime Minister continued, " that secrecy in this matter is as vital as the recovery of the plans? That is why you alone have been asked to undertake the mission."

" I understand that," I replied. " And I understand, too, that I shall be acting on my own initiative, and that I have *carte blanche* in the matter of any decisions I may have to make? "

" You have," agreed the Prime Minister. " I can see," he added, " that you are not one to expect favours, yet I can tell you this, that if you succeed in returning Professor Wilberforce and his plans to this country, or failing that are instrumental in destroying the plans, so that they cannot fall into the hands of another power, then you will have performed a great service to the nation and you will not find the nation ungrateful."

After this a number of questions were asked and answered. Finally, I was dismissed and went off to lunch with Beaky Morrison at his club.

My head was in a whirl. Twenty-four hours ago I had been a disgruntled Indian Civil Servant mooching about London on an unappreciated leave; now I was the confidant of the Cabinet. It was unbelievable and I had to ask Beaky to kick me on the shin. He did so, most effectively, then proceeded to put me in possession of various facts.

" We've notified the Chief of Police at Bombay to expect you. He doesn't know what you are up to of course, not a soul in India will, but he will give you any help you need. The same applies to the Commissioner of Bengal and the

Deputy Commissioner at Darjeeling; you'll be starting from there, I take it?"

I nodded.

"Well, he will be tipped the wink to do nothing to stop you even if he suspects you are off to Nepal. As you know, his job is to prevent inquisitive people from crossing the frontier, but in this case he'll turn a blind and benevolent eye on your illegal activities. He will see you through too as regards money. I should take a useful dollop with you; it might be useful as bribes."

I shook my head.

"I doubt it. In that part of the world, half the population are Buddhist monks shut up in monasteries and the other half carry on trade mainly by barter. Besides, money is heavy stuff."

"But you can take notes."

"Notes!" I laughed. "Do you really suppose that bits of paper cut any ice in Northern Nepal? I should have to take cash. Do you know what £250 in rupees weighs? It comes out at about fifty pounds, and I'm travelling light."

Beaky grinned.

"You're a practical devil, Tom. I never thought of money as an encumbrance. It's jolly to know that there's one part of the world where the accursed stuff doesn't matter."

After settling a few other minor details, I returned to my flat and packed. That evening I dined once more with Beaky. It was a convivial affair in which all mention of the job was taboo. Afterwards we went to a music hall show. Beaky, as ever, was splendid company, and now that my former disgruntlement was no more I felt genuinely sorry to be leaving London. Somehow or other the place had grown on me during the past twenty-four hours. I seemed to take a fatherly interest in it, and I remember

thinking as I passed Nelson again that he and everything else might be lying in ruins one day if I failed in my mission. It gave me a pretty solemn feeling, and I remember lifting my eyes to the stars and praying that success might be granted to me.

Chapter Three

I BOARDED THE S.S. "GARHWALI" ON A BLUSTERY MARCH morning. The voyage to Gibraltar was a beast. Being a wretched sailor I remained supine in my cabin. Then we caught another packet in the Gulf of Lions, and it was not until we passed Corsica that I took any interest in the proceedings.

There were about two hundred passengers, and it seemed to me that those at the Purser's table, where I had been placed in the dining saloon, were fairly representative of the whole. There was a middle-aged tea planter going back to his plantation in Assam, whose principal interest in life after tea was a study of the malarial mosquito; he would talk for hours to anyone who cared to listen on the habits and idiosyncrasies of the pest. Less interesting was a Hungarian count, a black-bearded saturnine fellow. He was off to Leh to shoot ibex. He had been there before, and showed me a photograph of himself seated on a broad flight of steps surrounded by dozens of "heads." Next was a pimply-faced youth who was going out to a commercial job in Malaya. Already he considered himself the complete man of the world, and usually went to bed drunk. In Malaya one of three things was certain to happen to him. He would be kicked out, die of fever, or be knocked into shape.

Then there was an American globe trotter and his son, a huge man with a laugh which could be heard all over the saloon. His name was Harrison B. George. He was both vulgar and amusing. He had "done Yurrop" and was about to start on Asia. The former had taken a month, but he "opined" that the latter might take a little longer,

"say six weeks." At the same time he was "blamed" if he was going where there were no ice boxes. "Yurrop" had been bad enough in that respect.

Finally, there was a parson, a chubby-faced little fellow who was very much to the fore in the organisation of deck sports. Because I like to be lazy during a voyage, and hate being organised, I steered clear of him, but one evening as I was watching snow-clad Etna glowing in the setting sun he planted himself next to me at the rail.

"A wonderful sight," he said, blinking and beaming at me with pale watery-blue eyes.

"It is," I agreed, shortly.

"You know," he continued, "I can never look at the marvellous beauties of Nature, and in particular mountains, without thinking that if everyone appreciated them there would be a deeper understanding of spiritual values, and less strife and suffering in the world."

Here was a sentimentalist who wore his sentiments on his sleeve, the sort of fellow who always gives me a hot uncomfortable feeling under the collar. I tried to think of something appropriate to say, but could only manage a non-committal growl. It didn't seem to upset him for he prattled on.

"I wish the ship stopped a day or two at Messina. I've always wanted to climb Etna."

"You like climbing?" I asked him.

"I love it," he replied enthusiastically. "Not that I'm an experienced mountaineer, not by any means, but I've managed to spend two of my vacations in the Alps. I—I suppose that kind of thing does not attract you, Mr.—er——"

"Trevanion," I told him.

"Trevanion, of course, the Purser did tell me. Pendelbury is my name, Theophilus Pendelbury. I was asking you, Mr. Trevanion, whether climbing appealed to you,"

"It does, a little," I replied, guardedly.

"Really," he beamed, "but that is perfectly splendid; I had no idea there was a fellow mountaineer aboard."

I saw that I had blundered badly, and that from now on I could expect no peace, so I hastened to add, untruthfully, that the sum total of my experience was some rough scrambling in the Himalayas. But if I had thought to choke him off, I was mistaken; the word Himalayas acted on him like magic.

"The Himalayas!" he exclaimed ecstatically. "You have climbed *there*. That is where I am going, and not only to see them but possibly climb a little too; I am also a keen lepidopterist and want to add to my collection."

I tried to picture the Reverend Theophilus Pendelbury wandering about the Himalayas with a bunch of hard-bitten Sherpa porters chasing butterflies. Only with the greatest difficulty did I keep a straight face.

"I should advise you to go to Darjeeling," I told him, "and visit Sikkim; the valleys there are teeming with butterflies."

"Exactly what I have planned to do!" he exclaimed gleefully, clapping two chubby hands together. "I do hope you won't mind an ignoramus like myself asking you a few questions, Mr. Trevanion?"

An hour later I managed to escape to my cabin. I had had more than enough of the Reverend Pendelbury. At the same time I told myself that the naïve enthusiasm, which had inspired innumerable questions regarding Himalayan travel, was of the type that would carry its owner anywhere. I could imagine this cherubic little parson standing up in a cooking pot and addressing a horde of ravening cannibals with a child-like smile, utterly unconscious of his unhappy position.

After this I saw him at intervals; indeed I grew to admire the determination with which he carried through every-

thing to which he put his hand. He might *seem* an idiot, but he was one of those idiots who usually gets what he wants. He would probably make a fist of his trip to the Sikkim Himalayas and come back with a fine collection of butterflies and photographs to show to his parishioners.

The voyage passed uneventfully. The Red Sea was hot, but no hotter than usual. Aden, however, was blistering. I could see no particular object in going ashore, but the Reverend Pendelbury thought otherwise. He came up to me just as I was digging myself into a new novel from the ship's library.

"I wonder whether you would care to come ashore, Mr. Trevanion?"

"There's nothing to see except the water tanks," I assured him, "and when you've done those you've done Aden."

He grinned at me self-consciously.

"I've been told that already, but there's a fine hill behind the town, quite a mountain in fact. I thought that perhaps it might be worth climbing. I wonder whether you would care to accompany me, Mr. Trevanion, if only for the sake of the exercise?"

Never in my life had I heard of anyone who wanted to climb one of the sun-scorched volcanic peaks at the back of Aden. The idea and the little parson's enthusiasm amused me.

"Right," I said, "we will make the ascent."

Climbing that peak was a sweaty, sweltering business. Aden's rocky mountains may look striking from the sea, even beautiful at sunrise and sunset, but if the peak we climbed is a fair sample of the whole, they are abominable from a mountaineering standpoint. The volcanic rocks were so hot to the touch and so loose and treacherous to climb that the ascent was a purgatory. For my part, I larded the

mountainside with the accumulated fat of the past lazy days, and would gladly have renounced the ascent had I been on my own. But Pendelbury was made of sterner stuff. He puffed and blew but refused to entertain the thought of defeat for a moment.

"We've got to do it!" said he, and laboured on ahead in the broiling sun with astonishing agility.

His enthusiasm amused me. Here I told myself was a mountaineer in the making. He was also much more sure-footed than I would have given him credit for.

The last few hundred feet was steep climbing. There was an easy way round, but my companion insisted on going straight up some rocks that cannot have been less than sixty degrees in angle. Obviously, he had been badly bitten by the mountaineering bug.

I followed a few yards behind. We were near the top when an incident occurred which nearly put "paid" to the day's excursion; it might, indeed, have been attended by disastrous consequences. His Reverence elected to climb a crumbling buttress; all the rock hereabouts was loose, but this was worse than any. I warned him to be careful but he paid little attention. I decided not to follow behind him, until he was up, as I did not much fancy the place. I am glad I did so because he accidentally dislodged a mass of rock from beneath him weighing the best part of a ton which crashed down on to the very spot I should have been had I not waited. Even so it came unpleasantly near, and I had to dodge the minor fragments.

The little man was horrified at what he had done and when I joined him at the top was profusely apologetic for his clumsiness.

"I shall never forgive myself," he kept saying over and over again. "Supposing I had hurt you; it would have been terrible, terrible."

He was so upset that I had quite a job to calm him.

" Accidents can always happen in mountaineering," I told him. " We ought not to have climbed this foul stuff."

By the time we got back to the ship I had had enough of Aden and was glad, late that evening, to see its serrated skyline sinking beneath the sea. It had also occurred to me that in view of my job I had no business to take unnecessary risks of any sort. It was a good resolution in the circumstances, but two days later something occurred to make me break it.

The ship was nearing Bombay and an uneventful voyage was drawing to an end. In a few days' time my mission would have properly begun. It was long after dinner and, as was my custom, I had gone on to the poop for a final pipe before turning in.

It was a beautiful night, soft and warm, with a full moon glimmering on a flat oily sea. There was not a sound except for the gentle soughing of the wind in the rigging, the almost imperceptible throbbing of the engines and the churning of the propellers as they thrust the great ship along at a steady eighteen knots.

The poop was deserted, but presently I heard a step and a voice I had come to know only too well.

" Why, it's Mr. Trevanion, isn't it? "

I assented without enthusiasm.

" What a glorious night," continued Pendelbury. " It is positively romantic. It makes me feel almost as though I was . . . "

But I never learnt what effect the Indian Ocean had on my sentimental little companion, for he was interrupted by a sudden splash.

" What's that? " he said.

" Only some rubbish being dumped overboard," I told him.

But he was gazing intently over the rail. Suddenly he clutched my arm in a vice-like grip.

"Great heavens!" he gasped. "It's a child!"

I leant over the rail and gazed in the direction indicated by his other outstretched arm. The sea was brilliantly lit by the moon, and in another instant I saw what he was pointing at. A little face was bobbing past in the eddies. Its mouth was wide open with terror and it seemed to be staring up at me with mute, pitiful intensity.

I am not a brave man. Had I stopped to think, I might not have done what I did; as it was, I acted automatically. In a moment I was on the rail, then pausing an instant to steady myself, I jumped.

I am only a fair swimmer and no diver from any height. From the poop of a big liner to the water cannot be less than forty feet, and to land flat from that height means catastrophe. I did not dare to make a header of it so went feet first in the "wooden soldier" position. I hit the water a tremendous crack and seemed to go down for miles. When I came to the surface it was only to be dragged under again by the whirlpools formed by the threshing propellers. By the time I had fought my way to the surface for the second time, I had swallowed pints of sea water, and was feeling pretty blown. The child had passed astern before I hit the water, and as soon as I had collected my wits I set off swimming backwards along the bubbling wake of the ship.

As I did so something flopped into the water behind me, spluttered and lit up with a bright light.

Pendelbury had kept his wits about him, and done what I ought to have done in the first place, thrown a calcium buoy overboard.

Once in the water there seemed precious little chance of finding the child. The odds were that it was already drowned. I must have been swimming for two minutes before I saw its white face in the moonlight. I shouted "All right, sonny, I'm coming!" and made for it as hard

as I could. It took me another minute to reach it, and I remember wondering why it neither sank nor struggled. Then I grasped it. It was curiously stiff and immobile, and its head was unreal and hard, like wood. It was not a child but a life-size doll!

I suppose that if I had had a super sense of humour, I would have laughed; to have jumped off the poop of a liner after a doll was distinctly laughable to say the least of it. But this absurd anti-climax only served to bring home to me the great emptiness of the ocean beneath the galaxies of stars.

When I looked at the ship I was horrified to see it fully a mile and a half away, apparently still proceeding on its course. Then as I trod water and gazed with a feeling not far removed from utter despair, I saw its dark hull grow broader, and long lines of brightly lit port-holes appeared. Thank God, she was turning to succour me. The alarm had taken some time to get through to the bridge, and as I remembered, it takes time to pull an ocean greyhound out of her stride.

The best thing I could do was to make for the calcium buoy, about two hundred yards away. A swim of two hundred yards doesn't sound much when the sea is calm and as warm as milk; but for a poor swimmer it is a long way, and my sodden evening clothes seemed to grow heavier with every stroke. Altogether it was as much as I could manage. I was thankful to reach the buoy, get it round me and rest my tired arms on it.

There was nothing to do now but wait until I was rescued. It would have been pleasanter had I not suddenly thought of sharks: I had seen none, but the possibility that there might be some gave me a distinctly uncomfortable feeling, particularly about the legs.

It was with immense relief that I presently heard the chug, chug of an engine. A minute later I was lifted into

a motor launch where I was glad to lie down and vomit up some of the water I had swallowed.

Back on board in my cabin I soon recovered. I felt worse than a fool. For the remainder of the voyage I should be known to all and sundry as the fellow who jumped overboard after a doll. Not that I minded that very much, but the thought that I might have been drowned doing it was disagreeable in the extreme; what a story to have gone home, and what an ending to my mission! I apostrophised myself as an idiot, but in my heart I knew that I had done the only possible thing. If I had not gone overboard after what I took to be a drowning child, I should ever afterwards have reproached myself as a coward.

After the ship's doctor had satisfied himself that I was none the worse, in came Pendelbury. His head was bandaged and he was terribly flustered and agitated. I cut short his incoherences.

"Don't worry," I told him. "You weren't to know that a doll dropped overboard wasn't a child, and anyway you got the lifebuoy overboard pretty quickly. I don't think I could have lasted without it."

He goggled at me.

"But I didn't, Mr. Trevanion, I didn't."

I stared at him.

"What on earth do you mean?"

He became even more agitated.

"It was terrible, simply terrible. When you so bravely jumped overboard I rushed to get a lifebuoy but I tripped over something on the deck and stunned myself. Happily there was a couple of other people on the poop, a young man and a girl. They were on the other side but they heard you splash in the water and threw the lifebuoy after you."

That made me sit up.

"So if it hadn't been for them, no one else might have seen me go?"

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Trevanion. They told me afterwards that it took a quarter of an hour to bring me round. I am so sorry, so very sorry. I should never have forgiven myself if anything had happened to you, Mr. Trevanion."

The little man's distress was so evident that I could only try to cheer him up.

"Don't worry," I said consolingly, "accidents will happen, and all's well that ends well."

"It is very generous of you to take that view, Mr. Trevanion," he replied earnestly. "I had thought that perhaps you might be angry, and I couldn't have borne it. Let no man call another a fool, but I call myself a fool, I do indeed."

"By the way," I said grinning as he was turning to go. "There was one casualty, that doll. How did it come to be dropped overboard?"

"I have wondered too, Mr. Trevanion. I will find out. It was most careless. I will speak very sternly to the mother of the child, and the child too for that matter. To think that it might have cost you your life. It is too terrible to contemplate, too terrible."

He went out of the cabin blinking with righteous anger and shaking his chubby face to and fro in such a ridiculous manner that the moment he was gone I relieved my feelings with the best laugh I had yet had on board the S.S. *Garhwali*. I was coming to the conclusion that the Reverend Theophilus Pendelbury was really good value. He would have been worth a fortune at the Palladium.

Next morning a message came that the Captain wanted to see me in his cabin. He was a bluff, grizzled veteran of the old school and, after I had taken a seat, he gazed at me long and steadily.

"We thought you were a suicide at first, Mr. Trevanion."

"I'm not so tired of life as all that," I replied smiling.

"We were reasonably quick in picking you up, at least I hope you think so."

"You were wonderfully quick," I assured him. "I am very sorry for causing you so much inconvenience."

"Not nearly so much inconvenience as that doll caused *you*, Mr. Trevanion. It was a plucky thing you did going overboard like that after a child, or, I should say, what you took to be a child."

"If I had stopped to think I mightn't have done it."

He shook his grizzled head.

"There are too many who stop to think when it comes to a job of that kind, Mr. Trevanion. If it hadn't been for that couple who happened to be there on the other side of the poop, after a quiet squeeze or two, I'll be bound, we would be one short this morning. Then I should have a mystery on my hands when we tie up at Bombay, and I don't like mysteries, not aboard my ship, Mr. Trevanion."

"I'm sure you don't."

"That doll, or whatever it was," he continued. "How came that to go overboard close on one bell?"

"Haven't you discovered the child it belonged to?"

"I have not," he replied, shortly. "And I don't like my passengers going overboard without knowing all the whys and wherefores. I have made inquiries, Mr. Trevanion, and there's no child on this ship, or grown-up either for that matter, who will admit to having lost a doll overboard."

This was news—news that made me think.

"I expect the kid, and the kid's people, who dropped it overboard are too scared to say so."

The skipper shook his head.

"There's no need for that. It was an accident, a dirty sort of an accident as far as you were concerned, Mr. Trevanion."

"It was indeed," I laughed, as I got up to go. "I hope

that if I ever have to jump off your poop again, Captain, it will be after genuine flesh and blood."

There were points about my conversation with the Captain that made me think, even more than I had before, about the strange business that was taking me to India, and I sat in my deck chair staring unseeing at the print of the novel on my knee. The fact was that I had had a particularly narrow squeak from death.

Providence alone had sent the spooning couple on to the poop. I had seen them and thanked them for what they had done. But for them my corpse would be floating about in the Indian Ocean or else digesting in the tummy of a shark. Yet I could not bring myself to believe that an attempt had been made on my life. The whole affair was too fantastic and improbable. Only someone with a brilliant and devilish imagination could have thought out such a scheme. In my capacity as Political Officer I had dealt with some clever and unscrupulous rogues, but experience had taught me that crime was normally a vulgar, unimaginative affair.

What were the facts concerning me since I had become involved with Professor Wilberforce and his aerial torpedo? I had had two narrow squeaks. Firstly, there was the mass of rock dislodged by Pendelbury during our climb at Aden. Surely that was a pure accident? The same kind of thing had happened before on mountains and I had been nearly killed several times. Pendelbury was an enthusiastic but clumsy and inexperienced climber, and novices on loose rock are always a menace to their companions.

And, lastly, there was this jumping overboard business. Who was responsible? First of all the child or adult who had dropped the doll overboard. I had seen it and jumped after it. Whoever dropped it could hardly have known that I was on the poop, and even if he or she did, it was possible that I might have taken no notice of the splash.

Wait a moment, though. Pendelbury again; he had called my attention to the splash and the doll. I had jumped overboard, then, instead of giving the alarm, he had tripped up and stunned himself. Two remarks of the Captain's had stuck in my memory. "I don't like mysteries, not aboard my ship." And then he had said "A dirty sort of an accident as far as you were concerned, Mr. Trevanion."

A dirty sort of an accident! It certainly was; but the Reverend Theophilus Pendelbury! The man was such an obvious ass. Try as I would I simply could not associate him with any worse crime than appropriating the last sugar cake at the Vicar's tea party. Still, in the novels I had been reading, the villain was always, *ipso facto*, the last person to be suspected.

Supposing Pendelbury was very different from what he appeared, a wolf in sheep's clothing, it all fitted in very neatly except for two points; there must have been an accomplice to inveigle me overboard, and Pendelbury had damaged his head.

I determined to find out more about this last, and went off in search of the ship's surgeon.

"I feel responsible for the Reverend Pendelbury giving himself a crack on the head," I told him.

"It was nothing serious," he replied. "At first he seemed to be under the impression that someone had hit him, but when he came to his senses he said that he had tripped over something and fallen on to his head."

"Was it a nasty cut?"

"Oh no, not a cut at all, the skin was scarcely broken. He seems to have fallen on to the back of his head. There was a bruise the size of a pigeon's egg."

"I should have thought that if he was hurrying to get a lifebuoy and tripped over something, he would have fallen forwards," I said casually.

The ship's surgeon looked at me curiously.

"Now you mention it I should have thought so too. He certainly knocked himself out. It was lucky for you that there was someone else on the poop to give the alarm."

This did not bring me much forwarder. Was it a put-up job? I remembered "Raffles." He had managed to damage his head and feign unconsciousness sufficiently to deceive the redoubtable Inspector Mackenzie of Scotland Yard.

Bombay was now visible, its white buildings shimmering unsubstantially in the heat across the sluggish green sea, and I went down to my cabin to do my packing.

I was late for lunch. When I arrived at my table I was greeted exuberantly by Mr. Harrison B. George who had obviously well primed himself preparatory to going ashore.

"I reckon," he said, "that this is something of an occasion for my son Jefferson and me, and I guess we should like to drink your health before parting at the Gateway of India across the water there. I have taken the liberty of ordering the right stuff to do it with, yes, sir, and I have ventured to fill your glass."

"Thanks," I said. "Well, here's your very good luck, Mr. George, and may you find India all that you have hoped for."

"I certainly shall," replied the American solemnly, "if it's anything like the pictures on the posters."

"And how long do you expect to be in India?" inquired Pendelbury.

"Jefferson and I opine it will take a fortnight."

"I think you're over-estimating it," said the elderly tea planter wickedly. "I once met someone from your country who did the whole thing in ten days."

This information visibly shook the American.

"You don't say!" he exclaimed. "Waal, I guess we'll

forget the hustle and take it easy for once. Mr. Pendelbury, I sure wish you would allow me to fill your glass!"

"Thank you, thank you," said Pendelbury, "but champagne always has the most unfortunate effect on me. Not that I am a teetotaller; not at all, moderation in all things is my ideal, but I have resolved never to drink in the Tropics before the sun goes down."

The American shrugged his shoulders.

"Waal, if you won't you won't. As for that last resolution of yours, I've seen a sight of folks as has made it, but not one as has kept it. If you keep it, Mr. Pendelbury, I guess you'll be due a stained-glass window way back home in that chapel of yours."

By the time lunch was finished the ship had berthed, and after bidding good-bye to my table companions, I returned to my cabin to supervise the disembarkation of my baggage. Now that the ship was in port the atmosphere in the cabin was stifling, and I began to feel uncommonly sleepy, so much so that it needed a conscious mental effort to do up the straps of my valise. I summoned my steward and tipped him. He thanked me, then looked at me curiously.

"If I may say so, sir, you look unwell."

"I'm all right," I replied, "but I feel very sleepy. I can hardly keep my eyes open."

"There's no need to hurry, sir," he said. "The Calcutta Mail doesn't leave for several hours. If you care to rest I'll look after your luggage and see it to the customs."

It was an excellent suggestion, indeed I had no option but to follow it, for my eyelids felt leaden and I could scarcely think straight. I staggered rather than walked to my berth and flopped down on it. I remember that the steward continued to stand there looking at me in a puzzled, anxious manner. Then complete unconsciousness descended upon me and I remember no more.

Chapter Four

OUT OF NOTHINGNESS A VOICE SAID:

"He's coming round now."

I opened my eyes. I was in bed and a man in a white coat was bending over me; his fingers grasped my wrist. Behind him stood a uniformed nurse.

"Where am I? What's happened?" I inquired feebly.

"You're in hospital, but you're perfectly all right," said the House Surgeon, for such it was, cheerily. "The best thing for him," he continued, turning to the nurse, "is some natural sleep."

I was only too glad to obey, for I had a bursting head which made coherent thought impossible. I awoke some hours later feeling much better and with my brain in working order again. Then I had the story from the House Surgeon.

I was in Bombay hospital, having been brought thither from the ship completely unconscious. I had remained unconscious for no less than five days and the doctors had had to work hard to keep me alive. I had been poisoned by some obscure narcotic, the exact nature of which had not been determined.

So much I learned and it gave me plenty of food for thought. Undoubtedly there had been an attempt on my life, and I knew who was responsible—Pendelbury. Who else could it be? He had been next to me at lunch. My champagne had been poured out before I sat down. It had been easy for him to slip some poison into it. What a blind fool I had been! I had voyaged to India with my eyes shut to facts that fairly screamed at me.

I remembered that Beaky Morrison had told me that if

I got into trouble I should get into touch with the police, and I asked whether I could see the Chief.

" As a matter of fact he's been wanting to see you as soon as you recovered," said the House Surgeon. " He's waiting now; I'll have him sent up."

The Chief of Police was a bright, bustling little man.

" I'm very glad to see you alive and kicking, Mr. Trevanion," he smiled. " From what I hear I gather it's been touch and go with your life." His smile faded, and he became suddenly serious. " I was advised of your coming by Scotland Yard and asked to keep an eye on you. I don't know what it's about, but I've a feeling it's important."

" There's been an attempt on my life," I told him.

" Ah," he breathed, " I suspected that might be the case. But let me tell you first what I've done. As soon as we knew who it was we got into touch with Scotland Yard. They were very perturbed at the news of your illness and begged that everything possible should be done for you; indeed that no expense was to be spared in the matter of medical attention. They asked me to make inquiries, and to give you all possible help if and when you recovered. As soon as I heard that you had been poisoned I made investigations on board the *Garhwali*. Unfortunately all the utensils you had used during your last meal had been washed. There were no other cases of poisoning so it is safe to assume that the caterers are not to blame. Your cabin steward was questioned and I obtained the names of your table companions; they had scattered to various parts of India. It was impossible to do anything without evidence, and there was nothing to suggest foul play other than the nature of the poisoning. I may say that to begin with we suspected an attempt at suicide."

I smiled ruefully.

" You have certainly worked hard; no one could have done more."

"I did my best," said the Chief of Police. "Now tell me, do you suspect anyone of having poisoned you?"

"I do," I replied, "but they are only suspicions. It might help to verify them if I could send a cable to Scotland Yard."

"I'll see that it goes through at once in code," he promised.

My message addressed to Beaky Morrison ran:

"Can you give me any information regarding Reverend Theophilus Pendelbury travelling aboard steamship *Garhwali*?"

The answer reached me an hour or two later.

"Pendlebury has been curate of Forestford past year stop said to have left for long vacation in India collecting butterflies stop am investigating history and will communicate stop am very interested stop have you suspicions stop glad you have recovered stop good hunting stop."

So Pendelbury was curate of Forestford, and Forestford was also the home of Professor Wilberforce. The coincidence was too striking to be neglected. It had obviously struck Beaky, too. It would have gone home with even greater force had he heard of my other experiences. In one respect Pendelbury's story had been confirmed; he was in truth a parson, if only for the past year. As to what he was before that I should hear from Beaky in due course. Meanwhile the best thing I could do was to get on to Darjeeling without further delay.

The train journey across India to Calcutta was hot and dusty, but uneventful. At Calcutta I kicked my heels in the Great Eastern Hotel for some hours, then caught the mail to Siliguri. It was a steamy night, but the dawn was refreshingly cool. I knew that the Himalayas were near and peered out of the window as the train rattled across the Plain of Bengal. It was hard to believe that the monotonous expanse of flat paddy fields lay at the threshold of

the greatest mountain range of the world. Suddenly, I saw the dim blue outlines of the foothills swimming in a diaphanous mist suffused with the opal tints of sunrise. Then, as I gazed, I saw something else, something suspended in pearly space above and beyond the foothills, something too high, too steady, too remote for clouds, shining in the rising sun. It was the Himalayan snows seventy miles away. I caught my breath then as I had caught it before, but this time with a different feeling. What adventures, what experiences awaited me there in that high and silent world of ice and snow?

At Siliguri I had breakfast and changed on to the narrow-gauge train that climbs seven thousand feet to Darjeeling. It was a perfect morning and as the little engine snorted its way through the foothill jungles, London seemed very far away. The sight and smell of those forests, and the glimmer of the distant snows made me feel wonderfully peaceful, so much so that the events of the voyage, my illness, and even my mission seemed curiously unreal.

It was good to step out of the train at Darjeeling into the sparkling air and see all about me the broad Mongolian faces of the hill people with their cheerful smiles. I hired a rickshaw and a few minutes later, after a climb up the steep streets, was being welcomed by Harry Travers, the Deputy Commissioner, an old acquaintance of mine.

"Well, Tom," he said, "I had word that you were coming. I don't know what brings you here or what the deuce you are up to, but I suspect it's some nefarious business."

"You're not far wrong," I smiled. "I'm off on a little show of my own into the Himalayas and I don't want any publicity. All I want people to know is that I'm spending part of my leave climbing mountains in Sikkim."

"Which means, I suppose," he said, looking at me keenly,

"that you'll be going in some other direction, Nepal for example?"

"What makes you say that?" I said quickly.

"Oh, rumours, just rumours."

"What sort of rumours? Come on, Harry, out with it. I'm not allowed to tell *you* anything, it's hush, hush, but it's up to you to tell *me* all you know."

"Is it? Well, you know what the native bazaar's like, a focal point for trade from Nepal, Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan?"

"Yes."

"Well, there's a vague rumour floating around about some Europeans having got into Nepal without permission. I'm a bit worried. Europeans do get into that country sometimes and soon get turned out again. Then the Nepal Government lodges a protest with the Government of India, and poor Political Officers like myself get kicked for not having prevented the miscreants from crossing the frontier."

"Have you heard what kind of Europeans?"

"From all accounts two men."

"*Men?*"

"Yes, men; what do you suppose, the beauty chorus of the London Casino?"

"Tell me," I said, ignoring this last sally, "have many parties left Darjeeling recently for Himalayan trips?"

"Yes, quite a number. I must have issued a couple of dozen passes for permission to enter Sikkim and do the bungalow round. Among them were some French botanists who are collecting in the Teesta Valley, an expedition of climbers who have gone off to have a crack at Kangchenjunga, a couple of Yankee geologists and the usual trippers."

"Was there a parson named Pendelbury among them?"

Travers grinned.

"There was, a gem, a perfect gem. He left three days ago to chase butterflies. I told him he couldn't do better than follow up the Teesta Valley, but he seemed set on having a look at Kangchenjunga and has gone off to the Singalila ridge. Do you know him?"

"I do," I said. "He was on my ship."

"It's people like him who make my life a misery," said Travers irritably. "They need dry nursing from beginning to end, otherwise they manage to strike trouble of some kind, get lost, or hurt themselves, or go down with fever, and then I have to send out and bring 'em in. When are you off, Tom?"

"To-night if possible. Meanwhile I'll go to the bazaar and try to pick up one of my former porters."

I was thinking hard as I walked down the hillside towards the native quarter. So Pendelbury had left three days before for the Singalila ridge. It was a favourite trip with tourists, but it was also in the direction of Nepal. It might be coincidence or it might not. On the other hand, Travers had formed the same opinion of the fellow as I had in the first place. Nothing more had come through from Scotland Yard about him, but I couldn't wait; I had lost too much time as it was.

As I reached the Chowringhee, as the principal European thoroughfare is called, a native approached, a stocky little man clad in a weird and wonderful assortment of clothes, a tattered wind jacket, patched corduroy breeches, gaudily topped football stockings, and an ancient pair of climbing boots. As he neared me he awkwardly removed one of those battered Homburg hats beloved by the Nepalese and Tibetans, revealing an untidy mop of jet-black hair, set like a flue brush on a broad pock-marked face with almond-shaped eyes and pugnacious nose. At the same time he grinned sheepishly and his mouth filled with gleaming gold-crowned teeth. There was only one set of

teeth like that in all the Himalayas; it was Nima Dorje, the Sherpa porter who had accompanied me during my trip to Northern Nepal, and had been on half a dozen other expeditions with me besides; one of the toughest little fellows that ever trod a mountainside. Here was the very man I wanted. As he came up to me I placed my hand on his shoulder and gave him an affectionate shake.

"What brings you here, Nima?" I asked him in Nepali. "Why are you not at your home in Sola Khombu?"

His grin broadened if that were possible.

"I came to Darjeeling because I heard that some sahibs were going to Kangchenjunga, but there was much snow on the passes and I was late. Now they have gone."

His grin faded; he looked suddenly lugubrious.

"You rascal," I said. "You know very well that you came to Darjeeling to enjoy yourself in the bazaar, to drink much chang and look at the girls."

The grin returned.

"Is it possible that your Honour makes another banderbast?"

"It is," I replied. "I leave Darjeeling to-night. You will come?"

The little man's eyes glowed.

"Yes, Sahib."

"Listen," I continued. "It is a very small banderbast, so small that you alone will accompany me, and I do not want anything said about it in the bazaar. You understand, Nima?"

"Yes, Sahib," he said automatically; it is not the way of the Sherpa to express surprise at the idiosyncrasies of his European employers.

"Then come to the Deputy Commissioner's bungalow at midnight," I told him.

"Very good, Sahib."

"There is one thing more," I said. "There is a story in the bazaar that two Europeans have been seen in Nepal. The Deputy Commissioner and I are very interested in this. See then whether you can find out any more about it."

"I have heard the story myself," he replied. "My cousin Tashi Dorje, who arrived in Darjeeling only yesterday, says there is talk of two sahibs being seen."

"Where is your cousin? I should like to speak with him."

"He is gone. Only this morning he left with some people who were going for a tour in Sikkim."

"That is a pity," I said thoughtfully. "Did he say where the sahibs had been seen?"

"No, he did not."

"Was not one a memsahib?"

"That I cannot say. He said only two sahibs."

I reflected for a few moments. As I had anticipated, news of the arrival of Professor Wilberforce and his daughter had been quick to filter out of Nepal. It was curious that every mention was of two men, but it occurred to me that Mabel was more likely to pass as a man than a woman as she would undoubtedly be in man's attire.

"Tell me," I went on, "has there come to your ears any story of a flying machine having been seen or heard in Nepal?"

Nima Dorje puckered his brows in thought for some moments.

"Well, Sahib, when the great bird machines flew over Chamalung we heard them from Sola Khombu."

"Have you heard any since?"

Again the little man screwed up his brows.

"I am not sure, Sahib," he said doubtfully. "But before I left Sola Khombu for Darjeeling I was out in the evening cutting wood when I heard a humming noise that came from the sky, like a mosquito singing. It was the same noise that we heard before."

"Did you see anything?" I queried eagerly.

"No, Sahib, the noise sounded a long way off."

This was great news. I had little doubt that the Sherpa had heard an aeroplane, and the similarity of the noise with that of the machines of the Houston Flight that had flown over Mount Everest (Chamalung was the native name for that mountain) was very significant. Undoubtedly an aeroplane had flown over Northern Nepal, and if so what other machine could it have been than that of Professor Wilberforce? I tried to get Nima Dorje to think back to the exact date, but on this point he was characteristically vague; it was two moons ago and the moon was nearly full. That was all I could get out of him but it tallied approximately with the date of the Professor's departure from England.

Having again enjoined secrecy, I returned to Travers' bungalow to pack my kit.

This last was simplicity itself. I am used to travelling light and the prospect of having no tent or creature comforts, of sleeping as best I could, and eating native food did not appal me. I had two rucksacks, a large one for Nima and a smaller one for myself. These I packed with essential kit, including an eiderdown sleeping bag, a light groundsheet, an aluminium cooking pot, snow goggles, spare socks, and clothing. Then there were two ice axes, one for Nima and one for myself, and a length of Alpine climbing rope. I was sorely tempted to take a sporting rifle, but decided against it as it made me too conspicuous. Instead, I slipped a Colt automatic pistol and twenty-five rounds into the pocket of my climbing jacket. I am no marksman with a pistol but it was better than nothing, and I had a feeling it might be useful.

That evening I dined with Travers. It was a good dinner and the last civilised meal I should eat for some time to come. Afterwards we sat yarning—he had the tact and the

good sense not to try to pump me about my journey—until shortly before midnight when a servant announced that Nima Dorje had arrived.

I went out on to the veranda and the first thing I heard was a hiccough. There was unfortunately no doubt about it, Nima was drunk. He was swaying from side to side and his breath reeked of arrack. It was no use being angry; I could only pray that he had not spread the news of his departure through the bazaar. I gave him both rucksacks in the pious hope that some hard work would sweat out the alcohol. Then I said good-bye to my host.

"I don't know whether I ought to let you go," he said smiling. "It all seems very furtive and illegal. Let me know how you get on if you can, and remember that I'm here to help you if need be. So long, and the best of luck."

Chapter Five

IT WAS A CLEAR MOONLIGHT NIGHT AS NIMA DORJE AND I tramped through the deserted streets of Darjeeling. The air was frosty, and in the northern sky the Himalayan snows hung glowing like an auroral curtain above the ranks of foothills. Everything was silent except in the bazaar, whence came a monotonous dirge-like chanting, punctuated by drunken yells and the staccato beating of a drum: Nima's friends were still holding high revel.

I had decided that it was too risky to enter Nepal from the south as I should almost certainly be detained by the police, and that it was best to make towards Kangchenjunga, then turn west over the mountains into the north-east corner of that country, a district where I was unlikely to be seen except by herdsmen and villagers.

Our departure from Darjeeling would have seemed comical had I not been preoccupied with thoughts of my mission. To begin with I heard Nima Dorje hiccoughing behind me, but presently, as the first effects of the arrack wore off, a severe headache supervened and the hiccoughs were replaced by groans. I relieved him of my rucksack, and gave him half an hour's rest. After this he went better, and with the toughness of his kind, presently recovered. He had probably drunk enough alcohol to put a European to bed for a week.

Our way lay first of all down into a deeply-cut valley, filled with luxuriant sub-tropical jungle. The sun had risen in a cloudless sky and it was blazingly hot, yet I was enjoying myself hugely and wondered why I had been fool enough to spend my leave in London when I might have been in the Himalayas. These foothill ranges we

were traversing had a charm of their own. For mile after mile we passed through forests alive with insect and animal life. The still warm air pulsed and throbbed with the whirring of tree crickets and the clatter of bull frogs, whilst from the shadowy jungle on either hand came furtive rustlings, the chattering of monkeys and once the unmistakeable cough of a leopard. Then, after hours of uphill plodding, we crossed a ridge and between the fern-draped trees was a vision of mighty Kangchenjunga, silvery and remote between immense pillars of slow-moving cloud.

Small wonder, I thought, that Professor Wilberforce had renounced civilisation and all its works, for there is something eternally restful about the Himalayas. In their presence, the cares of life vanish like snow-flakes in the sun. Once they cast their spell upon a man, he is bewitched for the rest of his days.

I had intended, if possible, to double-march that day, but my illness at Bombay had so weakened me that it was out of the question. Furthermore Nima Dorje was making heavy weather of it after the dissipations of the night before. On all counts, therefore, it was best to do the ordinary march and put up for the night at a dak bungalow on the route. The bungalow was situated in the forest and an afternoon thunderstorm was rumbling among the ranges as we reached it. I was tired and was glad to stretch myself out in a chair on the verandah. I asked the Chowkidar (caretaker) whether Pendelbury had stopped there and heard that he had. "The round-faced sahib who was always smiling," was how he described him. Then he went on to tell how his visitor had run about the bungalow compound with a net scotching butterflies.

This last made me think hard. I had assumed that Pendelbury's butterfly collecting was merely a blind, and here he was rushing about in the heat chasing insects when he

might have been taking it easy in an arm-chair. It was not a pursuit that one would expect a crook or a foreign agent to indulge in. Then I remembered that the best actors lived their parts. Pendelbury was a clever devil, and he meant to keep up his disguise as a harmless curate as long as he could. It was possible also that he had heard that his attempt at poisoning me had failed, and had assumed that I would be hard on his heels.

I had a restful night at the bungalow and was away at dawn next morning. This time I was determined to make a double march and told Nima Dorje of my intention. He was feeling better and this unpleasant information produced nothing worse than a philosophical grunt.

Our way lay across forest-clad hills. Already the high snows were appreciably nearer. From one ridge we gazed down into a valley no more than two thousand feet above the sea, then up the gleaming summit of Kangchenjunga twenty-six thousand feet higher.

I think Nima Dorje felt something of the same awe as I did at this stupendous spectacle. For him the great mountain was no mere mass of ice, snow and rock, but the throne of a deity whose anger is destruction by avalanche, blizzard and flood, whose smile is the golden grain and rice on the terraced fields wrested from stony mountainsides and begrudging jungles.

Late that afternoon we reached the last bungalow on the route. A Buddhist monastery was not far away and that evening I heard the lamas chanting their prayers and the deep booming of their great horns vibrating solemnly amongst the hills.

From the caretaker I learned that Pendelbury had passed two days before. By double marching I had already caught up on him by one day. Nevertheless, he had travelled fast, and more and more it looked as though he was making for the pass I intended to cross into Nepal. I

should know in a day or two whether or not he was in truth a butterfly-collecting parson, or something infinitely more dangerous.

The weather was unsettled; there was another thunder-storm that evening, and I lay on the verandah in my sleeping bag watching the lightning zig-zagging like fiery serpents among the clouds that concealed Kangchen-junga.

The bungalow was the last outpost of civilisation; thence-forward Nima Dorje and I would have to rough it in the open.

The forests were dripping when we continued on our way next morning. For some miles we were tormented by innumerable leeches. The Himalayan leech is normally about the size of a match, but when it is gorged with blood it swells out to the diameter of a slug. The brutes seem capable of penetrating anywhere. They crawl through folds in puttees, insinuate themselves in the eyelet holes of boots, and lie in wait on the vegetation to fasten on the passer-by. I have often pictured the fate of a man injured and unable to move in one of these damp forests fringing the Hima-layan snows: he would be literally eaten alive.

We passed a primitive little village, then followed a gradually narrowing valley through a forest denser than any we had yet seen. The foothill country lay behind, and in front loomed the outpost peaks of the Himalayas.

The forest was very still. Not a leaf moved, and a heavy silence was broken only by the low rumbling of a glacier torrent. I noticed that Nima Dorje, who on the more populous paths between villages had often lagged behind, now kept close to me; frequently he glanced apprehensively into the jungle on either hand.

"You seem afraid of something?" I said.

"Yes, Sahib, people say that the Mi-Go are here."

He meant the Snow Men, the legendary ape-like creatures

whom the superstitious natives of the Eastern Himalayas believe dwell in the jungles close to the snows.

"Rubbish," I said. "There are no such beings as the Mi-Go."

"You are wrong, Sahib," he replied earnestly. "My brother was once chased by one; it was twice the height of a man, with a white skin and black hair."

"Your brother is probably the same as you, Nima," I laughed. "He drinks too much arrack and imagines things."

But the little man was not to be shaken from his belief, and continued to dart swift sidelong glances into the jungle.

Late in the afternoon we came to the end of the valley and, after crossing a torrent by a fragile bamboo bridge, halted for the night in a small cave formed by an immense overhanging rock.

It was a wild spot. On all sides, save the narrow valley up which we had come, rose a wild tangle of forest. Higher still, bare mountain faces streaked with winter snow stood up towards high peaks, yet these peaks were but outposts of greater mountains that culminated in the enormous massif of Kangchenjunga. Darkness fell swiftly. The high snows flamed and went out and the towering mountain-sides crowded darkly in upon us. Nima Dorje collected an abundance of fuel and soon a fire crackled merrily in the entrance to the cave. Over it he cooked a pilau of rice, mutton and vegetables.

Supper eaten, I leaned contentedly back for a final pipe before turning into my sleeping bag. The night was very still. Not a sound was to be heard except for the steady rumble of the glacier torrent. Fresh as I was from a noisy world there seemed something ominous about the intense quietude, and I found my thoughts straying back to Nima Dorje's superstitions. Anything might exist in this

country of primeval forest and untrodden mountainsides. It was easy to laugh at snowmen from the latitude of London, but not so easy from the threshold of the eternal snows.

I was about to knock out my pipe and slip into my sleeping bag when I heard a sharp, hissing intake of breath from my companion, who was seated a yard or two away.

"Sahib!" he whispered. "Look!"

The fire flamed up at that instant and as I peered into the darkness I saw something, a great dark shape, not more than ten paces distant. Nima Dorje saw it too.

"The Mi-Go, the Mi-Go!" he moaned; never have I heard such horror in a man's voice.

My pistol was in my pocket, and in a matter of seconds I had it ready cocked in my hand, but the shape had vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared.

"It was a bear," I said, trying to instil unconcern into my voice.

But the Sherpa was too far gone in terror even to dispute this; he was huddled shuddering at the back of the cave.

It was, I felt certain, only a prowling bear, but terror is an infectious quality, however much we may steel ourselves to resist it, and I doubt whether I slept any more than my companion that night.

At the first glimmer of dawn I stirred the still trembling Sherpa into activity and bade him make some tea. He did so and in the rapidly increasing light I went to have a look at the place where I had seen our nocturnal visitor. Undoubtedly some large beast had been prowling about near the cave, for the vegetation was crushed down, and in a patch of mud were the imprint of two feet. Nima Dorje presently mustered the courage to join me.

"Look, Sahib," he said, pointing at the indentations. "See, it is the track of the Mi-Go. He walks on two legs with his toes behind him."

That was too much, and I burst out laughing.

" Nonsense," I told him. " It is the track of a bear, and on all fours too. See how he puts his rear feet into the rear of the impressions left by the front feet which makes a single impression like that of a man."

But superstition is blind to reason.

" It was a Mi-Go," repeated Nima Dorje sullenly, " a Mi-Go."

There was nothing more to be said, and a few minutes later we were on the march.

The way now lay entirely uphill, through a forest of tree rhododendrons and bamboos which presently gave place to pines and low scrub. After the steamy heat of the valleys it was good to feel the dry cold tang of the mountain air. At length we emerged from the forest on to a grassy shoulder, a bleak windswept spot where stood a tumble-down stone hut probably used by shepherds later in the season. As it was the only shelter we should get, I decided to spend the night there.

It was time I took Nima Dorje into my confidence.

" To-morrow," I told him, " we cross into Nepal. As you know, it is forbidden for Europeans to go into your country, but I go for a very special reason, to find a sahib who has gone there in one of the bird machines. It is necessary that I should not be seen, or perhaps the police may turn me back before I find this flying sahib. Therefore, we will not sleep at villages, and only you will go to them to get food. At each village you will inquire for news of the flying sahib and if you can guide me to him you will be well rewarded. Do you understand? "

Nima Dorje grinned; he had been in trouble himself with the authorities on more than one occasion both in India and Nepal and a little lawlessness did not appal him.

" Yes, Sahib, I will do as you say."

" There is one last thing, Nima. Remember this. There

is a devil in chang or arrack that makes men's tongues wag and say foolish things. If this devil comes into you then you may do me an injury."

He looked at me long and earnestly.

"You are right, Sahib, there is a devil, ugh! I will not taste a drop."

We were now at a height of nearly ten thousand feet, and the night was cold. I slept little and lay awake watching the march of the stars through a chink in the crazy roof. The moon was shining brightly when shortly after 2 a.m. I roused Nima Dorje. He was loath to leave his blanket and grumbled that to cross into Nepal in one day was impossible. However, an hour later, after a drink of tea and a porridge of sattoo (ground, parched barley) we were off.

We had not climbed far before we came to snow; it was hard frozen, and we made rapid progress. I kept my eyes skinned for traces of Pendelbury, but some additional snow which had fallen recently effectively concealed any tracks he might have made. Higher up, however, a strong wind had blown the new snow away from the old in places, and when dawn came I saw distinct traces of footmarks. My last doubts that he had preceded me into Nepal disappeared when the sun rose, for almost the first thing I saw was a piece of silver chocolate paper. Nima Dorje saw it too.

"Another sahib has passed here," he said with a puzzled expression.

"Yes," I replied grimly, "and he's going to get a thick ear presently or my name isn't Tom Trevanion."

I spoke in English but my companion seemed to divine my meaning and a broad grin revealed his array of gold-crowned teeth.

So well did we progress that by ten o'clock we had covered a normal day's march and reached some scattered

rocks where Nima Dorje said it was usual to halt before crossing the range. There were signs that someone, probably Pendelbury, had recently halted here. If so, he could not be more than one march ahead, and this knowledge made me more than ever determined to push on over the range that day. But my companion was not so enthusiastic. He cocked a weatherwise eye at the sky.

" Snow comes, Sahib. It is best that we stop here and camp."

There was truth in what he said. The fine morning had gone out; the high peaks had disappeared, blotted out by formless mists, and the sun shone weakly through a densening slate-grey pall. A blizzard was brewing.

Could we cross the range before the blizzard broke? If we remained where we were we should have a bad time of it without a tent; the place was shelterless and windswept except for a few scattered rocks; we might suffer frostbite or worse. Furthermore, if snow fell deeply we might be unable to cross into Nepal for some days. To retreat to the hut we had left that morning was the only other alternative. In ordinary circumstances I should have chosen this last safe bolthole. But the circumstances were anything but ordinary. A delay of several days might prove fatal. There was a larger issue at stake than that of personal safety.

Nima Dorje had been that way before on several occasions.

" How far is it to the pass? " I asked him.

" Five miles," he told me.

" Could you find your way over in a snowstorm? "

" I do not know," he replied doubtfully. " It is possible, but——"

" Then come on," I said. " Let us cross quickly before the snow comes."

At his worst the Sherpa porter is a compound of obstinacy and stupidity; even so he seldom lacks courage,

an unimaginative kind of courage perhaps, but courage all the same. At his best he is bravery and loyalty personified. He has also an almost uncanny sense of direction and can be trusted to nose out a route through country that would baffle experienced European mountaineers. Yet his qualities are only in the ascendant when he trusts his employer; without trust he is like a ship without a rudder and may go completely to pieces in an emergency. I am glad to say that Nima Dorje trusted me, for he swung his rucksack on to his back without a further word of protest or warning.

The sun disappeared as we trudged uphill towards the pass, and light and shadow in the monotonous snow-covered landscape were merged into an unvarying blankness.

The air was ominously still; in that frozen wilderness there was not a sound to be heard and the mist-oppressed mountainsides menaced us on either hand with their threat of impending storm.

We halted again for a while. I got out my compass and took a bearing on the pass. I had scarcely done so when snow began to fall. First came a single flake floating down silently out of the void, then came another flake, and another and another, and finally countless millions falling with a dry, rustling, crepitating sound, like the tread of innumerable little feet. Landmarks vanished; hillsides disappeared; the distant rim of the pass was lost, blotted out by endless curtains of snow.

Then came the wind, at first in a light gust that sent the snow-flakes scurrying before it like a swarm of affrighted butterflies; then, as though satisfied with its first experiment, in a stronger gust, followed by a still stronger gust, and so stage by stage and power by power to an ungoverned fury.

Soon there was nothing to be seen but a yard or two of whirling, wind-tortured atmosphere. Our clothing was

encased in snow; we peered through our goggles, straining to see something, yet saw nothing but dizzy snow.

We toiled on. I did not need to turn to see whether Nima Dorje was following me; he was always there, a yard behind, a snow-masked figure that moved resolutely forward. One hour, two hours, three hours, still we climbed, and with ever increasing steepness. So far we had steered by compass, but even that instrument has its limitations in complicated and difficult country. Was it possible that we had deviated from the precise direction? I knew full well that even a slight deviation can lead a party into trouble on a mountain. So far Nima Dorje had followed without demur, but now I heard him shout. Turning, I saw him pointing to the right.

"It is this way, Sahib."

"Right," I said. "Go ahead."

He grinned. I knew Nima Dorje of old. There was nothing he liked better than to show an employer the way; he was a born leader among porters.

I trudged along behind him. In spite of his heavy load he seemed to go uncomfortably fast. It was all I could do to keep up with him. No, it was not he who was going quickly but I who was going slowly. There was no doubt about it, I was beginning to tire. Up to then excitement had sustained me, but this monotonous uphill trudging had killed that. Then there was the altitude. The pass was eighteen thousand feet high, and I had come up from sea level to a height higher than Mont Blanc in a matter of a few days. My head ached abominably, and my legs were leaden.

On, on, on. It could not be kept up. Was there any place where we might shelter? No, not a rock was in sight, nothing but snow. And it was cold. The wind was numbing, paralysing; its icy blast was hellish, the cold hell of the Tibetans. God, how tired I was. Could I go on? One,

two, three, four, I was counting my steps, but my legs no more belonged to me; they were two weights that had to be lifted one after another with enormous labour and placed in front of me, and when I had lifted one there was always the other——

Nine, ten, eleven. . . . What was that? Nima Dorje had stopped and I had bumped into him. Had he lost the way? He must have done; we had been going for hours, interminable hours. If so we were done, at least I was. He had turned. He was saying something. What was he saying? We had reached the pass? He was right. The snow before us no longer sloped up but down. We had made it! And now we had merely to walk down into Nepal. Nima Dorje had done it; a grand bit of work. With my gloved hand I grasped his and saw him smile happily, like a child.

Going down was easier. I no longer had to lift my legs, I merely had to drop them, and with every minute that passed I felt stronger. My fatigue had been three-quarters due to the high altitude.

All the same I was very tired when at length we escaped from the blizzard. Ahead the sky was packed with sullen clouds into which scowling mountains thrust icy fangs, and beneath a valley showed with crawling lines of blue-green pine forest.

There was no time to descend to the tree line, but we were off the snow by nightfall, and down at the level at which dwarf rhododendrons grow, so we were able to make a fire.

It had been a rough passage into Nepal and only my companion's knowledge of the country and instinctive sense of direction had got us through. But for him I might have left my bones on the pass. I felt more than grateful to him as I snuggled into my sleeping bag, but so weary was I that I had little energy left even for thinking and in a matter of seconds was asleep.

I awoke to find the sun shining brightly and Nima Dorje busily engaged in coaxing a smouldering mass of rhododendron wood into flame. We breakfasted and set off down into the valley beneath. An hour or so later we were among the pines. Very friendly they seemed after the desolate slopes of the pass, and had circumstances been different I should have camped among them and rested a day. But it was essential to get on, for I was determined to catch Pendelbury before he did any mischief.

The question was which way had he gone? There were two possible routes; one followed the valley in a south-westerly direction, the other went westwards over a ridge. Both led in the general direction of the Arun Valley, my next objective. I was considering this problem when we came out of the forest on to a small pasture. A score of yaks were grazing there under the charge of a herdsman. I had no wish to advertise my presence in Nepal, but it was unlikely that herdsmen would worry about me; they were simple folk concerned only with grazing their yaks, and I decided to inquire.

The herdsman was an old fellow dressed in dingy sack-cloth. Yes, he had seen a strange man yesterday. He had gone over the ridge towards the next valley.

"How far is that?" I asked him.

"It depends," said the old man doubtfully. "If you have yaks it will take you three days. I have only once been that way, and then I had many yaks and there was much snow. It took me three days, but perhaps if you have no yaks it will take only two days."

His mental horizon was bounded by yaks, but he was none the less happy for that; there was a great peace in his eyes.

So Pendelbury had passed only yesterday. He was evidently taking it easy, doubtless under the impression that he had the country to himself. He was going to get a shock.

After the exertions of yesterday, I was a trifle tired but I enjoyed the march all the same. Spring had come to the slopes, and here and there, between oozing snowdrifts, were colonies of purple-headed primulas. Yet winter still reigned on the heights, and as we breasted the first of a series of ridges, there was a glorious view of Kangchenjunga smoking with wind-driven snow.

After this we dropped down a short distance, then climbed over another ridge. There was some snow about and in places the going was hard work. Pendelbury had passed here but recently for the tracks of a pair of hobnailed boots were plain to see. With luck I should overtake him on the morrow.

Evening was drawing on as we crossed yet another ridge and descended into a forest-clad valley. Here we decided to bivouac, and while Nima Dorje collected fuel for a fire, I strolled along the valley with the intention of reconnoitring the country and seeing whether there were any signs of Pendelbury. I had gone about half a mile when I heard a stream ahead. As I approached it, I suddenly smelt smoke. I continued to advance, moving very quietly and cautiously. A minute later I came to the edge of a turfy glade hard by the stream I had heard. In it a fire was burning, and by the fire, seated on a log, with his back to me, was the Reverend Theophilus Pendelbury.

I grasped the pistol in my pocket, and having made sure that the safety catch was down, strolled into the clearing towards him. He did not hear me approach across the turf, but when I was a few yards away I halted.

I tried to think of something to say but for some time no words would come. Associated with that sylvan scene, the whole thing seemed somehow fantastic and absurd.

"Well, Pendelbury," I said at last, "I want to know what the deuce you think you are doing trespassing in Nepal?"

Chapter Six

NEVER IN MY LIFE HAVE I SEEN ANYONE SO SURPRISED. HE whipped round with a convulsive jerk. At the same moment I drew the pistol from my pocket.

"What—what——" he stammered.

"It's no use, Pendelbury, or whatever your name is. The game's up."

His round red face had gone suddenly white.

"What do you mean, Mr. Trevanion? What are you doing here, and why do you point that pistol at me?"

"Because I'm taking no chances," I told him grimly.

"I don't understand."

"Oh yes, you do. Professor Wilberforce will never see you if I can prevent it. He——"

Suddenly he sprang at me. I suppose I could have shot him. I ought to have shot him, believing what I did. But something, some instinct, prevented me. He was unarmed and I had never before shot at a human being, armed or unarmed. And I was more than a match for him in strength and size.

It was rank foolishness in one sense, for I had never had to deal with a desperate man who believed himself to be fighting for his life. He collared me low, a rugger tackle, and we went over backwards, my head only just missing a boulder embedded in the turf. The pistol flew out of my hand with the shock, and thudded to the ground several yards away.

He was a much smaller man than me but he fought with amazing strength. To and fro we writhed. Twice he struck me in the face, but I was fully roused now and my superior strength and weight presently told. I got him by

the throat with both hands and nearly choked the life out of him; it was no time or place for Queensberry rules. At length it was over, and having recovered my pistol and assured myself that he had no weapon on him, I stood up. He lay there gasping but there was no fear in his eyes.

"You traitor!" The words jerked out of him between his laboured breaths.

This was the last thing I expected to hear.

"What do you mean?"

"Kill me, if you like, kill me," he gasped. "I pray God you will not succeed in your wicked designs."

There was no mistaking the earnestness of his words. I put the pistol in my pocket, and bending down, helped him to his feet.

"There's been a mistake," I told him. "Supposing you tell me exactly who you are and why you are here. But remember," I tapped my pocket, "no tricks. Next time I shall shoot."

Amazement and relief chased themselves over his rubicund countenance.

"I—I had no idea," he stuttered. "I owe you an apology, Mr. Trevanion. I thought when I saw you standing there with your pistol pointed at me that—that——"

"That I was a wolf in sheep's clothing?"

"Yes, and I thought too that you meant to kill me."

The man was transparently genuine, but there was still much to be explained. I said curtly:

"I am acting for the British Government. Now perhaps you will let me have your explanation."

"Certainly I will," he cried. "Let me see now, I had better start at the beginning, had I not? Well then, for the past year I have been curate of Forestford. I have always been interested in natural history and am, as you already know, a keen lepidopterist. I had not been there long before I discovered that Professor Wilberforce had similar

interests. I ventured to call upon him, and although he was a shy man and at times difficult to get on with, we presently became excellent friends. It was then that he confided to me that he was working on a new invention of enormous destructive capabilities. I may say that I shared his pacifist views, but not entirely. I could not endorse his view that his invention would make war impossible, but I did agree with him most emphatically that were such a weapon placed at the disposal of the British Government, it might protect England from the present wave of paganism and aggression that is sweeping Europe. As you know, the invention was completed and demonstrated to the authorities. I was unable to see the demonstration myself, but on the evening of his return from Salisbury Plain, he asked me to go round to his house and see him. I did so, and found him in great distress of mind. From what he told me, I gathered that so far from appreciating the defensive merits of his invention, the military authorities were concerned only with its offensive capabilities; neither were they in the least interested in its possible application for the surveying of interplanetary space, which was his most cherished ambition. Finally, he said that he could not possibly hand over the invention to anyone under such circumstances, that mankind in its present state was totally unfitted to have control of such a deadly instrument, and that he was going to renounce civilisation and all its works, and seek refuge in a remote valley of the Nepal Himalayas. I tried to soothe him, and pointed out that the reception of his invention by some belligerently-minded army officers did not represent the feeling of the vast majority of British people who desired only peace and were becoming increasingly concerned at the Nazi gospel of force and aggression in Europe; but he had made up his mind, and being naturally an obstinate man, nothing would move him."

"Why didn't you notify the authorities?" I asked him.

"I considered that," he replied slowly. "Indeed I went through much agony of spirit when I realised the great issues at stake, but he only imparted his intentions to me under a vow of secrecy, and as his friend and spiritual adviser, my lips were sealed. I could do nothing but beg, indeed implore, him to reconsider his decision. I talked also with his daughter. Although she was loyal and only desirous of helping her father, I believe that she was not wholly in agreement with him, though I know that such a tremendous flight appealed to her immensely; as you are doubtless aware, she is a most capable and enthusiastic pilot."

"Did you know Edwards, the chauffeur?"

"I did, slightly, and I cannot say that I was impressed with him. He was a highly skilled mechanic and assisted Professor Wilberforce considerably in the construction of his invention, but he was a shiftless, dissolute fellow with a passion for gambling, and had a bad reputation in the district. As a matter of fact I mentioned this last to the Professor but he refused to listen to a word against him. 'He has been with me several years,' he told me, 'and I trust him absolutely; as a mechanic he is invaluable.'"

"You know that he was found drowned, and that murder was suspected?"

"I do, indeed. It came as a terrible shock to me. I felt sure that Edwards must have been talking, possibly even trading information. I suspected also that he may have known something as to Professor Wilberforce's destination. I can tell you, Mr. Trevanion, that I was in greater agony of mind than ever. More than once I nearly went to the authorities, but I had no direct evidence that anyone knew where the Professor had gone, and every time I was tempted to divulge what I knew I remembered my vow of secrecy. I can tell you, I spent some disturbed nights thinking of

the problem and my responsibilities. Then I had an idea. I am a keen mountaineer as well as a lepidopterist and, as I think I told you, have spent two vacations climbing in the Alps. But my greatest ambition has always been to visit the Himalayas. I decided to do so if my means would permit, and I could obtain the necessary leave of absence, and devote my time to searching for Professor Wilberforce. If I found him I would do my best to persuade him to return to England with his plans because I was more convinced than ever that he had made a grievous mistake. At the same time I should tell him of the murder of Edwards, and warn him that in all probability unscrupulous foreign agents were after him in an endeavour to obtain possession of his plans. I fear that I took you for one of those agents, or what was even worse a traitor prepared to co-operate with the enemies of his country.

"I realised that there were difficulties in penetrating Nepal and that I might have to embark on illegal acts. Furthermore, my inexperience in Himalayan travelling and ignorance of the language and the people might well prove insuperable obstacles. But such was the importance of my object, I freely confess the former difficulty scarcely appalled me. As for the latter, you will, I am sure, realise, Mr. Trevanion, that it was by far the greater difficulty in my case. You may remember that during the voyage I continually pestered you for what must have seemed to you the most elementary information on the technique of Himalayan travelling. Well, I managed to raise the necessary funds, but the question of leave was difficult, very difficult. The rector was adamant. He said he could ill afford to spare me. I do not blame him for this, but his reception of my statement that I wished to visit the Himalayas in order to climb mountains and collect butterflies was scarcely polite."

I smiled.

"What did he say?"

"He said, Mr. Trevanion—I cannot remember his exact words, but it was something to the effect that he didn't see why he should have the whole work of the parish thrust upon him while I was shinning up mountains, and chasing butterflies. His view was that if I wanted exercise I could climb the church belfry half a dozen times before breakfast every day; as for butterflies, I fear he was even less sympathetic, I might almost say rude."

Pendelbury paused. He looked intensely serious. It was all I could do not to laugh.

"What did you do then?"

The little man looked even more serious, if that were possible, and took a deep breath.

"I did what even now I can hardly believe possible; indeed, looked at in retrospect, it seems positively fantastic, an act for which I have repeatedly prayed for forgiveness. The fact is I left Forestford without leave of absence!"

"You took French leave? Splendid!" I said cheerfully. My opinion of the Reverend Theophilus Pendelbury was mounting every minute. He had defied the rector; he had come out to India and made an illegal entry into Nepal, a country which many Europeans had unsuccessfully tried to penetrate; he had crossed a high pass entirely on his own, and had charged and fought what he had assumed to be a desperate villain armed with a pistol.

"It was a serious act on my part," he continued. "What the Bishop will think when it is reported to him I scarcely dare to contemplate. However, perhaps when he knows the facts he may be lenient. Well, as I was saying, I booked a passage to India on the first available ship. It was a strange coincidence that you were also travelling on the *Garhwali*, Mr. Trevanion, though I had, of course, no idea that you were on the same mission as I. I may say," he continued shyly, "that I took to you at once because you also liked

the mountains; that made it an even greater shock for me when I found you here threatening me with a pistol.

"And now I come to something that will surprise you. I need hardly remind you of the unfortunate incident as a result of which you so bravely jumped overboard. I only hope that I would do the same were I able to swim, but the fact is I cannot manage a stroke. Directly you disappeared I at once turned to find a lifebuoy and give the alarm, but before I had time to do either I received a terrible blow on the back of the head which felled me to the deck. I remember nothing more until I found some people gathered round me. Then, when I had recovered my wits, I told them that you had gone overboard. They at once assured me that the alarm had been given and that a boat had already been sent to succour you. I need scarcely tell you how happy I was to hear that you had been rescued."

This was news with a vengeance.

"Who hit you?"

"I wish I knew. I believe that when I first regained consciousness I said something about being struck down, but when I had fully recovered my wits I decided to say nothing about it, at least not immediately."

"Why?"

"Well, you see, Mr. Trevanion, my position was a delicate one. If there was a fuss and a scandal I might be forced into saying something indiscreet, and then the whole object of my coming to India would stand revealed with the most unfortunate results. But I thought a great deal, and the more I thought, the more puzzling the whole matter appeared. Why should anyone want to injure me? There could be only one reason, to prevent me from reaching my destination. In that case someone else knew about Professor Wilberforce, and that someone was an evil-disposed person. Terrible though it was to contemplate, I could not help feeling that murder, not merely injury, had

been the intention of my assailant and that I had had a narrow escape from joining you in the sea. The only thing that had prevented him from bundling me overboard was the appearance on the scene of the couple of young people who, as you know, threw a lifebuoy overboard and raised the alarm. I questioned them and they told me that they were climbing the steps to the poop when they heard the first splash which was followed by the heavier splash made by you. They hurried on to the poop and the young man saw you bobbing in the wake of the ship. He immediately threw a lifebuoy after you and raced to the bridge to inform the officer of the watch. Meanwhile the young lady tripped over me as I lay unconscious on the deck and hurried off for help. I asked both of them, quite casually so as to allay any suspicion of foul play, whether they had seen anyone else on the poop, and the young man replied that he thought that he had seen someone hurrying away in the darkness. It ought, of course, to have occurred to me that my being struck down prevented me from giving the alarm of man overboard, but I never dreamed that you had anything to do with it or that anyone should wish for your death. It was very stupid of me. I was so wrapped up in myself and what I was doing that I thought of nothing else, but knowing what I do now it is of course evident that it was you, Mr. Trevanion, not me that was the intended victim, and that I was struck down merely to prevent an alarm being given."

"You are right there," I said, "and it was not the only attempt, either, on my life."

"Great heavens," he exclaimed. "You horrify me!"

"I was poisoned," I told him, and gave a brief account of the circumstances that had led to my being carried unconscious from the ship, and incarcerated in hospital.

Pendelbury's eyes opened wider and wider as I proceeded.

"Did you suspect anyone?" he said at last.

"I did—you. I even took steps to find out who you were, and when Scotland Yard cabled that you had been a curate at Forestford for a short time I suspected you more than ever. It even occurred to me that you had tried to murder me by dislodging that rock on top of me at Aden."

"I understand everything now!" he exclaimed. "But do you really think, Mr. Trevanion, that someone had designs on your life?"

"What other explanation is there to fit the facts? I am inveigled overboard and someone knocks you on the head to prevent you spreading the glad news. It was an ingenious dodge, but it failed, so an attempt is made to poison me."

"But who could have done this thing?"

"That is what I should like to know."

"Have you any suspicions?"

"None whatever now," I said a trifle bitterly. "I have been as blind as a bat."

"But when you were poisoned," Pendelbury persisted, "it must have been by someone who had access to your food."

"That's so. But who?"

"What about the man who was seated next to you, the Hungarian count?"

"It is possible, of course, but he was such an obvious foreigner, and I've a feeling that if anyone is up against us over this business, he will be far from obvious."

"But who else could have done it?"

"I suppose anyone: the tea planter, the pimply-faced youth, or the American and his son. Incidentally it was the American who ordered the champagne; it may have been tampered with, but on the other hand it may have been something in the food that made me ill."

"That is true," said Pendelbury thoughtfully, "and

really I cannot see that American doing anything. He was so, so . . ."

"Typical," I smiled. "I agree with you. Mr. Harrison B. George was typical; that's the difficulty; everyone I can think of was typical."

"The steward may have had something to do with it."

"Of course he may. He is the most likely of all in many ways. He could have poisoned my food with the utmost ease. I had a Madras curry, too, with that meal, strong enough to have disguised any poison."

"Do you remember him?"

"Very well. He was a Goanese, typical of his kind again; they were all Goanese stewards in the dining-saloon."

Pendelbury thought for a few moments.

"Do you think that some foreigner is trying to reach Professor Wilberforce on information gained from Edwards?"

"That is what we have got to find out. There is no doubt that the Professor arrived. The 'plane was heard, and rumour has it that two Europeans are in Nepal. Have you heard whether any other Europeans have been seen?"

Pendelbury shook his head.

"I have not heard of anyone. Even if I had I should not have understood as I don't speak the language. That is why I decided to go on my own. I should never have been able to make native porters understand what I wanted, and they might have given me away to the Nepalese authorities."

"You have done extraordinarily well to get as far as this on your own."

He flushed happily.

"I'm bound to say, Mr. Trevanion, that it is a great relief to have someone so experienced as you with whom to co-operate."

"I'm glad you think so. Well, it's obvious that we've got to join forces. Meanwhile, you had better come back with me to my camp. I can promise you a reasonably decent meal. I've a Sherpa with me, an Everest veteran and a first-rate cook into the bargain."

"I should be only too delighted," he replied simply.

It was not Nima Dorje's way to express surprise and when I returned with Pendelbury to the camp he scarcely looked up from the cooking pot in which he was preparing a stew.

"This is Pendelbury Sahib," I told him. "He accompanies us. In England he is a great lama so you must look well after him."

"Achha Sahib," was the reply, accompanied by the usual grin and a glance which took in the new acquisition to the party from the top of his head to his clumsy, heavily-nailed boots.

The stew fully justified my description of Nima Dorje's culinary powers. It was evident that the little parson had been on short commons, for he ate ravenously.

Darkness had fallen by the time we had finished our meal. There were various details to be discussed, and I asked him whether he knew exactly where the Professor's valley was. He did not. The Professor, however, had stated that Mount Everest was visible from it. This was helpful. At the same time Mount Everest must be visible from a good many valleys in Northern Nepal. We should have to rely on local information for the exact locality. In this I had perfect faith, for long experience of Himalayan travel had taught me that whatever the difficulties of a countryside and its communications, news of a stranger usually soon spreads.

It was frosty and cold when at length we turned into our sleeping bags.

Chapter Seven

NIMA DORJE WOKE US AT DAWN. THE GROUND WAS WHITE with frost, but hot tea put life into us. The peaks were paling as we set off on our march and soon the sun rose flooding the high snows with gold.

I had expected Pendelbury to be a slow walker, but for all his smallness, he swung along with the easy gait of a mountaineer, a pace that matched my own perfectly. I have known many people who gloried in the beauties of Nature, but none more enthusiastic than he. Every turn, every view provoked new exclamations of wonder and delight. He was like a child turned loose in fairyland. And indeed the scenes were as magnificent as any I had seen in the Himalayas. We were passing beneath the flanks of the Kangchenjunga range. Above was a tangle of peaks and ridges, an icy labyrinth of gigantic mountains gleaming like polished shields in a sky of profound blue. Thousands of feet beneath, a glacier torrent shone in the forest-matted depths of a valley, and the dull thunder of it was heavy on the still morning air.

Our route took us over a ridge sixteen thousand feet high. Nima Dorje was ahead, and as he reached the crest we saw him halt and remove his battered hat with a gesture partly of obeisance and partly in the manner of one who greets an old friend. He was smiling as we came up to him.

"Chamalung, Sahib," he said, pointing to the north-west.

We saw Mount Everest at once. It was fully sixty miles away, but there was no mistaking it, for it stood out above everything.

Pendelbury was thrilled beyond words.

"So that is Everest," he said at last. "I had expected something fine but nothing like this. And you can see every detail. I suppose we are looking at the north-east ridge?"

"Yes," I replied, "and if you look hard you can see two rises in it, the first and second steps. It was somewhere about there that Mallory and Irvine were seen going strong for the top."

"And they never came back?"

"No, they never came back."

I got out my map and unfolded it. It was a sketchy affair and bits in it were blanks, but it gave a fair general idea of the country and the main river valleys.

"We are there," I said. "On that long spur running south-west from Kangchenjunga. We've got to descend now into the valley ahead of us, cross the stream, then make for the Arun Valley over the intervening ranges. After that it's *terra incognita.* We shall have to cross the river as near the Tibetan border as possible, then keep to the south of those big peaks, Makalu and Chomolönzo. The map hasn't much to say about that country; it will be pretty tricky going. The Professor's valley may be anywhere in that area," I concluded, jabbing my finger down on some meaningless shading and herringboning south of Everest, with which the painstaking cartographers had sought to conceal an obvious ignorance of the country.

It was almost dark by the time we reached the floor of the valley. There we bivouacked close to the stream I had noted on the map.

It proved to be a raging glacier torrent impossible to ford; however, Nima Dorje said that there was a bridge half a mile downstream used by shepherds.

Our first job next morning was to cross the torrent. What Nima Dorje had described as a bridge turned out to be nothing but a single rope suspended between two posts, one on either side of the torrent. I had crossed many

such " bridges " before, but it was the first Pendelbury had seen.

" It looks very unsafe," he said doubtfully. " What is the rope made of? "

" Yak hide," I said. " The strongest stuff in creation."

" But I should never have the strength to go hand over hand along it."

" You don't need to. You see this leather belt? You fasten it round you and the rope; then you put up your feet and pull yourself along the rope. If you get tired you can rest in the belt, and go on when you feel like it. I'll cross first and show you."

So saying, I slipped on the broad leather belt, and a few moments later was going hand over hand along the rope. I remember thinking as I glanced over my shoulder into the torrent beneath me that anyone who fell into it could not last long; he would be smashed to a pulp almost before he was drowned.

I was three-quarters of the way across when above the din of the water I heard a sudden startled shout. At the same moment the rope in my hands went suddenly limp. I had no time to realise what had happened before I was in the water. Instantly I was swept downstream clinging desperately to the rope. Then the rope tightened. For an agonising second or two I clung to the yak hide, but the rushing water piled up against me with an irresistible force and I was wrenched away. After that I have a confused memory of foaming, bubbling water, of shock after shock, of seeing pine trees and mountains revolving madly. Then came a shock greater than any, followed instantly by a terrible pressure, a pressure that grew and grew, that became intolerable. There was a roaring in my ears, then peace and oblivion . . .

When I came to myself Pendelbury was on his knees beside me. He was holding a flask, and in my mouth was

the after-taste of brandy. My head was pillowed on a rucksack and Nima Dorje was standing close by; there was a look in his eyes that I had never seen before.

"Make tea," said Pendelbury. There was a crisp authority in his voice that was new to me.

"Achha, Sahib!" replied Nima Dorje, joyfully, and hurried off to collect fuel and light a fire.

Half an hour later I was warmly tucked into my sleeping bag, bruised and aching in every limb, but thankful to be alive. Pendelbury was in his bag, too, while Nima Dorje busied himself drying our clothing before a fire. Then I had the story from my companion.

"You were proceeding so well across the bridge," he said, "that I was already convinced that the contraption was safer than it looked, when of a sudden the rope parted close to the post to which it was attached on the further bank. It was a terrible moment. I thought that nothing could save you. For a second or two you clung to the rope, then you were swept away. There seemed to be nothing I could do, but as quickly as possible I unpacked the climbing rope from the rucksack. Then Nima Dorje and I ran along the bank. You had completely disappeared and I thought you were gone. Then I saw you wedged up against a large boulder. You were almost invisible because the torrent was piling up against you. Your head was just above the water but you made no movement and I thought you were dead already. Fortunately, at that point the stream was wider and shallower, and there were numerous boulders, so I tied one end of the rope to my waist and held by Nima Dorje managed to wade across to you. You were unconscious when I reached you, so I tied you on to the rope also. It was not easy bringing you to the bank but Nima Dorje was magnificent: he seemed to possess the strength of ten men, and it was his work with the rope that helped us across the worst of the rapids. At

the same time, had I once slipped, I do not think he could have done very much as it would have been impossible to have regained a foothold. There is no doubt that Providence came to our aid," he concluded simply.

I was silent for a while.

"It's a queer thing," I said at last. "A few days ago I nearly shot you, and now I owe my life to you. How you did it I don't know, it was superhuman."

He flushed happily.

"To be honest, Tom—do you mind if I call you by your Christian name, it is somehow less formal?—I don't know how I did it either. I am thankful that . . ."

"Sahib! Sahib!" Nima Dorje's excited voice broke in on the conversation. "The rope, Sahib, the rope, it was cut!"

He had retrieved the rope end attached to the post on our side of the stream, and now held it out for our inspection. It was even as he said. A rope that breaks leaves a frayed ragged end, but this one had parted cleanly; it had been cut with a knife, all save a single strand. The remaining strand had held as long as most of my weight had come on the post of the near bank because of the sag in the rope, but when I passed the middle of the bridge and the strain was transferred to the post on the far bank, it had snapped.

Pendelbury's face was set and grim; his normally mild eyes flashed dangerously.

"But this was done deliberately!"

"Um, it certainly looks as though someone intended one or both of us to fall into that torrent," I replied. "I wonder whether . . ."

"It means that there *is* someone else in Nepal after Professor Wilberforce!" he broke in excitedly.

"I believe you are right. In any case it's safest to assume so. We shall have to watch our step in future." I

turned to Nima Dorje. "How far is it to the nearest bridge?"

"There is one at Chodlung fifteen miles down the river."

"But Chodlung is a village, and we want to avoid villages."

"Yes, Sahib, but the headman there is my uncle. If you tell him he will say nothing."

"We shall have to risk being spotted by the Nepalese authorities," I told Pendelbury. "In any event we are bound to be seen crossing the bridge at the village. It means at least a day's march lost, but I don't think I'm good for more than fifteen miles to-day; I'm feeling a bit battered."

An hour later our clothes were dry, and we dressed and set off for Chodlung. I was stiff and sore and, as I hobbled along over the rough boulder-strewn ground, or clambered painfully over fallen trees, I vowed that one day in the very near future I would settle accounts with whoever had tampered with the rope bridge.

So rough was the going and so slow was I that not until late in the afternoon did we reach the village. It was a largish place as Nepalese villages go, with wide-eaved houses in the chalet style. Various emblems to ward off devils or propitiate gods adorned the roofs, and scores of prayer flags shivered in the breeze. The people turned out as we approached. Few of them could have seen a European before but they greeted us in friendly fashion, except for the children who fled screaming to the protection of their mother's skirts.

Guided by Nima Dorje we climbed a short rickety ladder and were ushered into the headman's house, a commodious dwelling that stood a little apart from the rest. The ground level was given over to cows and fowls and we squatted on sheepskin rugs on the floor above, sucking up a potent drink through pieces of bamboo

inserted into large wooden pots, filled with fermented millet and hot water. Pendelbury at first refused to drink, but when I pointed out to him that it was essential he should do so if good relations were to be established, he consented to take a few sips with a wry face. Later, eggs, rice and goat's meat were provided; after the limited and monotonous fare of the past few days we did the meal justice.

Meanwhile the headman, a wrinkled leathery-faced old man, eyed us with bright twinkling eyes, and his women-folk with many surreptitious giggles hastened to fulfil our needs. The meal over, I offered our host some tobacco which he accepted eagerly. It is not etiquette in the East to talk business or to make inquiries until the formalities of hospitality have been gone through, and for some time the talk was of trivial matters. It was the headman who set the ball rolling.

"Your Honours have come far?" he inquired.

"From England beyond the Great Water," I replied. "A great distance, fifty times as far as from Chodlung to Khatmandu."

The headman opened his eyes.

"It is indeed a long way. Then it must be something very important that brings your Honours here?"

I had had plenty of time to think out a story likely to meet with a sympathetic reception.

"Listen," I said impressively. "In his own country, that is England, my friend here is a great and renowned lama. One night he had a dream. In that dream it was revealed to him that in a former incarnation he was a lama in a great monastery of Nepal. Therefore, he was bidden to return to gather anew knowledge with which he may assist our brothers in the West along the path towards enlightenment. It was ordained also that I, being used to travelling among the high mountains, should accompany

him and offer him all the assistance in my power. We do not know exactly where the monastery is, but"—here I ventured to draw still further on my imagination—"my friend remembers it as a great building standing high on a hill within sight of Chamalung, which in our country is known as Mount Everest."

I flatter myself that it was a plausible, even ingenious, story. Experience of the Buddhist peoples of the Himalayas had taught me that there was no better way of appealing to their interest and sympathy than through their religious susceptibilities. It went home better than I had dared to hope. The headman's eyes glistened with excitement. He placed his hands together and bowed low to Pendelbury.

"That is indeed wonderful!" he exclaimed. "Your Honour can only mean the monastery of Kongra Dzong which some call the Abode of Clouds. That stands on a great rock and is within sight of Chamalung."

Here was a bit of luck. I was swift to press home my advantage.

"You will understand," I continued, "that the Rimpoche"—I thought it safe now to refer to Pendelbury as "holy"—"although a reincarnation of a lama of Kongra Dzong is in this life in the fleshly guise of the West. As you know, the Nepal Raj frowns, and I think rightly so, on Europeans who come into their country, and so it is possible that if the Rimpoche were seen by officials perhaps from Lower Nepal, who are not so far-seeing and spiritually minded as you who dwell among the Holy Himalaya, there would be difficulties put in his path. Therefore, it is better if nothing is said as to his presence in your country and at your village."

"It shall be even as your Honour asks," said the old man solemnly. "To-morrow the tax gatherer reaches here from Khatmandu with his escort of police, but I shall say

nothing. As for my people, there are those in this village, as in all villages, whose tongues wag, but I shall tell them that if they talk, then I will place the seven curses of Jannu upon them, and one of these is that the tongue shall shrivel at the roots and die."

"There is one other matter," I continued lightly, "on which you may be able to throw some light. Rumour has it that there is another sahib in the country."

"That is so," said the headman. "Three days ago there passed through here a shepherd with his flock, and he was very angry. He said that he had been stopped by two sahibs who wanted to buy one of his sheep to eat. He replied that they were not his to sell, and that they would have to come with him and see his master. The sahibs were angry at this and took a sheep and, when he made to stop them, seized and kicked him. He has gone down the valley to give information to the police."

"Did he say what these men were like?"

"He said that one was very big and the other not so big. They had with them four coolies, who laughed when he was kicked, bad men, no better than dacoits, from the Darjeeling bazaar."

"Do you know in what direction these men have gone?"

"It must have been either in the direction of Tibet or across the mountains to the Arun Valley," replied the headman. "Otherwise they would have passed through this village."

It was apparent that I had exhausted the headman's scanty stock of information.

"The Rimpoche and I are tired," I told him, "and will now rest. As we have no tent we would ask you for the shelter of your roof."

"I shall be honoured if the Rimpoche and your Honour will shelter in my house," said the old man simply. "My women will prepare a couch."

A few minutes later as we lay side by side in our sleeping bags I repeated what I had heard. If we had entertained any doubts as to the nature of the rope-bridge affair, the headman had effectually dispelled them. There were two other Europeans in Nepal. They either knew of, or suspected, our presence, and had attempted a cold-blooded murder. So much was certain. It was a pity that the shepherd was not available for examination. He had gone down the valley to inform the Nepalese police. If anyone was likely to suffer from the crimes of these evildoers it was us; indeed it was possible that their ill-treatment of him was part of a carefully laid plot to embroil us with the inhabitants. One of his assailants was a large man; the other was not so large. There was little to be gained from this vague description. One thing was self-evident. We must push on as quickly as possible. Every day, every hour was vital now. Men who could cut rope bridges were capable of anything. Supposing they discovered Professor Wilberforce before we did? What chance would an elderly professor and his daughter stand against such desperadoes? Our mission, hitherto merely interesting, had suddenly become something dark and sinister. One thing stood out as clear as crystal; we had got to be the first to find Professor Wilberforce. Pendelbury was in full agreement, but later when I told him, not without pride, of the yarn I had concocted to explain our presence in forbidden Nepal, he showed signs of uneasiness.

"No doubt it was an admirable subterfuge, Tom, but I feel that I am a party to a deception, and I do not think we should impose on these simple people."

"Well, at any rate you are a lama in your own country," I told him cheerfully.

"That is true, in a sense," he replied stiffly, "but you must understand that I wish to be dissociated entirely from Buddhist doctrines and principles."

I had put my foot in it with a vengeance and could only apologise.

The little parson melted in an instant.

" My dear fellow, of course I understand. It may even be that I am unnecessarily pedantic. You and I have a hard and dangerous road before us. We will tread it with a good heart."

Chapter Eight

WE WERE OFF IN THE FIRST GLIMMER OF DAWN NEXT morning and, crossing the river that had caused so much trouble, by a wooden bridge, began climbing a rough, steep hillside through dense pine forest.

There was a certain self-righteous air about Nima Dorje which was explained when I asked him how he had got on with his uncle. He told me that he had been given a great feast but, remembering my former injunction, had resolutely declined to drink chang.

" My uncle," he explained, " was very surprised. He said that it was the first time anyone of our family had refused to drink, but I told him that because of my many sins I had made a vow to drink no more until at least half had been forgiven me."

I was still stiff and sore from my battering in the torrent and the climb seemed interminable. Towards midday we came to a small glacier which we left in favour of a snow gully leading to a notch in a rocky ridge about sixteen thousand feet high.

It was well after noon when we reached the notch. Before us was the immense rift of the Arun Valley, one of the great valleys of the Himalayas, which cuts through the range from the plains of India to the windswept plateau of Tibet. Thirteen thousand feet beneath, the river wound snakily through a series of huge gorges, channels carved through the slowly upheaving mountains over illimitable vistas of time. Where we stood the wind from the snows blew keen and cold, but from the steamy depths in the south, immense clouds were slowly building up, and from their cavernous folds came a dull cannonade of thunder.

But it was to the north-west, to the country into which we must go, that our eyes most frequently turned. Our gaze swept over ridge after ridge to the far summits of Makalu and Chomolönzo, then further still to where the solitary pile of Everest stood steaming with wind-driven mist and snow.

I got out the map and tried to reconcile it with what we could see. As regards the position of the main summits it was accurate enough, but it was obvious that the Arun was the Rubicon so far as exact geographical knowledge went; westwards of it we should have to rely on local information, and our own topographical sense. There was one consoling thought; those ahead of us would be up against the same difficulties. Indeed it was doubtful whether their small initial advantage of time and distance would be of much value. The search for Professor Wilberforce might well be like that for the proverbial needle; much would depend on luck.

I repeated these thoughts to Pendelbury.

"I am beginning to think I was something of an optimist to imagine that I could find my own way," was his smiling rejoinder. "I pictured the Himalayas as being like the Alps on a greater scale, but this," he stretched out an arm, "this is stupendous!"

The descent into the Arun Valley was steep and complicated. We had to cut across a long slope of snow, then pick our way through a wilderness of rocks. Lower were belts of formidable cliffs. Nima Dorje had not been this way before, but he took charge of the route finding, and with great skill and the agility of a chamois led us rapidly downwards. It was steamy and close in the lower jungles. Presently clouds gathered and thunder boomed from the heights. Then rain began to fall in large drops. We were resigned to a damp time when we came to a clearing in the forest, with a little hut, and some sheep grazing nearby.

In the doorway of the hut stood the shepherd. He saw us at once and advanced to meet us. It was unlikely that he had ever before seen a European, but the sight of a fellow countryman in Nima Dorje reassured him. He had scarcely greeted us when, with a roar, the rain deluged down.

We hurried into the hut where Nima Dorje soon put our host at his ease. It was a primitive little place. A fire burned in the middle of an earthen floor, the smoke, or some of it, escaping through a hole in the roof. In one corner was a rude wooden couch a few inches high covered in greasy sheepskins. In another corner reposed some hide bags containing food, and near the fire stood a rude iron cooking pot. Such were the simple requirements of our host who, as soon as he had got over his surprise and shyness, was all smiles and friendliness.

Supper was a jolly affair. We made the shepherd share our meal. Afterwards I offered him a piece of chocolate. He eyed it doubtfully, took a tentative chew, then spat it out with a gesture of disgust. Tobacco, however, he received with gratitude, and squatted by the fire in his sackcloth kilt contentedly puffing at a clumsy pipe. He told us that he spent the summer grazing his sheep, returning in the autumn to his village fifteen miles down the valley.

"Are you not lonely?" I asked him.

The question seemed to puzzle him. He wrinkled up his brow before replying.

"There are always the sheep," said he at last.

"But sheep cannot talk to you."

"That is so," he agreed. "Here it is only the heart that talks; the tongue sleeps."

I was careful to ask him whether he had seen any other travellers of late, but he had come across none.

By the time we were ready to turn in the storm had passed. We stood at the door of the hut and gazed into a night full of stars. Lightning still flickered in the south

but the silence of the mountains was unbroken, save for the pattering of water drops in the forest, and the dull booming of the Arun River in the gorge beneath.

As usual, we were away at dawn next morning. I asked the shepherd where was the nearest bridge and he told us of one some three miles down the valley. Descending the hillside we struck a good path, evidently the main trade route linking eastern Nepal with Tibet, and reached the bridge without difficulty. It proved to be another rope affair. The Arun was narrow at this point and its waters raged through a wall-sided gorge with fearful force; the rope spanning the gorge was fully two hundred feet above it. I had seen many bridges of this type but none more sensational.

The two miscreants who had tampered with the last bridge must have crossed the range well to the north of our route, which meant that they should have crossed the Arun some miles upstream of us. I ought to have asked the shepherd whether a bridge existed, and I now apostrophised myself as a blithering idiot for failing to do so. I examined Nima Dorje on the point. Yes, he believed there was another bridge, but he was not sure. When travelling between Sola Khombu and Darjeeling he usually crossed the river much lower down. He knew little or nothing about villages or bridges higher up the valley.

"It seems practically certain," I told Pendelbury, "that they must have crossed the river higher up. In any case I doubt whether they will attempt any more tampering with bridges unless they know us to be close behind them; they will become extremely unpopular with the locals if they do." I said this as cheerfully as possible, but I knew there was a doubt and that the rope before us might well have been cut in the same way as the other.

Pendelbury screwed up his round face; it was a trifle white.

"Well, Tom, I am a good stone and a half lighter than you; I will go first."

It was bravely said, for, apart from any possible tampering with the rope, I could see that the thought of wriggling his way along a rope two hundred feet above the river appalled him.

"Nonsense," I replied brusquely. "It's my job. I'm used to these bridges. Why, you haven't even seen yet how they should be crossed."

"That may be," he returned doggedly, "but you must remember, Tom, that we are now partners, and as such share equally every responsibility."

I thought for a moment.

"I don't think there's any danger about this contraption. Anyway the first man over can be tied to the climbing rope as a safeguard; it would be better than nothing if there has been any hankey pankey with the bridge, and ... Well, I'm damned!"

I had turned as I spoke to look at the bridge. In the middle hung a small figure. It was moving along the swinging rope with the agility of a spider. As we watched it reached the far side and jumped lightly to earth. Nima Dorje had settled the argument in his own characteristic fashion!

"You little devil," I said a few minutes later when Pendelbury and I had joined him. "What do you mean by going over like that? I don't believe that you even wore the safety belt."

He grinned sheepishly.

"I saw you and Lama Sahib"—he always referred to Pendelbury as "Lama Sahib"—"talking, so I thought it would save time if I went over first."

"Lama Sahib and I were discussing whether the bad men who cut the bridge near Chodlung had also cut this bridge."

"If they had, Sahib, then I should be there." He pointed down at the boiling torrent. "And you would be there," sweeping up his hand to indicate the opposite bank. He concluded this simple statement of fact with a giggle.

Another hurdle had been safely passed. Up to that point Nima Dorje's knowledge of the country had been useful, but henceforward we must find our own way as best we could. We agreed that the first thing to be done was to get on the tracks of the mysterious pair ahead of us.

Much depended on how much they had learned about Professor Wilberforce's whereabouts. It was extremely unlikely that the Professor had divulged his precise destination to anyone, much less his chauffeur, and it was probable that our enemies, for such we assumed them to be, were working on the same supposition as we, that he was encamped in some valley of northern Nepal to the south of Mount Everest. Yet, we must never neglect the possibility that they had more exact knowledge than we. All things considered, therefore, it was best to trail them until such time as we were able to gain more definite information. Then we could deal with them. I had seen enough already of my companion to know that he was as brave as a lion. At the same time, with only one pistol between us, it was not going to be easy tackling two probably well-armed desperadoes, to say nothing of their four porters, who might or might not fight for their employers. However, Nima Dorje was the equal of at least two dacoits if it came to a scrap, and I knew that he would not let *his* employer down.

I pointed out these things to Pendelbury.

"I wish you could trust me, Tom," was his somewhat sad reply, "but the fact is that, if we have to fight these men, I shall be of little use; I have never handled anything more lethal than a butterfly net in my life."

There was a rough goat track along the west bank of

the river and we followed it upstream. Some hours later we turned a bend and saw, two or three hundred yards away, a group of Nepalese on our side of the river. They were gesticulating and we could hear angry voices above the roar of the torrent. There was some sort of trouble in progress, and I had a shrewd idea as to the cause of it.

"I've a feeling we may become unpopular if we are seen," I told Pendelbury. "We had better wait here in the cover of these trees while Nima Dorje goes forward and discovers what the fuss is about."

"Nima," I said, "leave your rucksack here, and find out what is happening. And see, too, whether you can get any news of the two who cut the rope. You can pretend to be anyone you like, but say nothing about us."

Well concealed behind the trees, we watched the Sherpa trudge along the path and join the group of his compatriots who promptly gathered about him, all talking at once. Half an hour later he returned.

He reported that the bridge had been cut like the other one. A man started to cross it from the west bank. Luckily for him the rope had been cut on the same side; thus it broke at once so that he fell down on the bank and not into the river. It was said that two days ago two white men and four porters had crossed the stream and a shepherd who was near swore that he saw them do something to the rope afterwards.

"The people," he concluded, "are very angry because they have no more yak rope and must go a long way to get one. They say that word has already gone forth about the white men, and that they will be held by the police if they are found. The shepherd told me that after crossing the river they did not follow the path, but climbed straight up the mountainside and disappeared."

We certainly seemed to be preceded by some thorough-paced blackguards. What was most surprising was the fact

that they had crossed the Arun only two days ago, when in view of our own delays I had expected them to be at least four days ahead of us. Possibly, unlike us, they had experienced difficulty in crossing the mountains between the two bridges.

I translated what I had heard to Pendelbury. The news of yet another attempt on our lives moved him strongly.

"Devils, Tom, devils. We are fighting against devils. They must be brought to book for their wickedness. To think that, but for the mercy of Providence, some poor fellow might have fallen from the bridge and been killed."

"There's no doubt we are up against some tough customers."

"Retribution will overtake them!" he declared emphatically.

Again I got out the map and we studied it. Although destitute of dependable detail, certain main features could be relied upon. The Arun was also fairly accurately delineated. We were a long way south of the Tibetan frontier, and it looked as though our enemies were making for the country well to the south of Makalu where there was a valley that connected with the Arun Valley a few miles to the north of our present position. The map showed this valley as populated, at least in its lower reaches. It seemed probable, therefore, that by climbing out of the Arun Valley they intended to push as far as possible along the uninhabited ridges bordering the valley and descend into it above the populated zone. Such tactics would take time and we debated whether to follow them or continue on up the Arun into the valley we had noted. By so doing we should probably steal a march on them; on the other hand we should almost certainly run into trouble with the populace, for news of the two cut bridges would spread quickly. In that event we might be collared by the police, whom I knew from past experience to be thoroughly

efficient at their job, and escorted ignominiously to Khatmandu for inquiries, a fatal ending to the mission. In the end we decided to stick to the original scheme, and for the time being follow our enemies wherever they went until we were clear of populated areas.

It was a hard climb out of the Arun Valley. For some five thousand feet we forced our way through some of the steepest and densest forest I have ever seen. The point at which we left the river cannot have been more than three thousand feet high and the atmosphere at that level was hot and damp.

The forest was wonderfully impressive. The huge trees were draped with epythytic ferns, long graceful tendrils hanging in festoons from every branch. In that green riot, everything struggled for one thing only, light, and we clambered up beneath a canopy of interlacing branches in a solemn gloom unbroken by a single shaft of sunlight. The steamy heat was terrible, and this, combined with the dripping vegetation, saturated us to the skin. Even worse were the leeches. They abounded, and at every halt we picked scores of them from our persons. There was one place I shall never forget, a marshy hollow in the hillside, that seemed a breeding place for the pests. The undergrowth was black with them, and as we appeared it stirred horribly as untold millions of the ravenous little bloodsuckers became aware of our presence and hastened to close in upon us from every direction. I had seen leeches many a time in the forests of Sikkim, but never so many as this. We fairly took to our heels, and dripping with sweat scrambled out of the loathsome place as quickly as we could.

We had almost cleared the forest when darkness fell. Thank heavens there were no leeches at that level and we were able to bivouac in reasonable comfort. We had already decided that we must be careful not to reveal our-

selves through our camp fires, but there was no danger of our being seen in the forest, and Nima Dorje with uncanny skill soon coaxed a mass of dripping timber into a blaze.

The night was chilly and several times we rose to replenish the fire. Dawn broke cheerless and cold, but once on the move we soon warmed up. The forest thinned out as we climbed, and the going became easier. Presently we were among pines and had no longer to force our way through dripping undergrowth. At a height of some eleven thousand feet we emerged on to open slopes and were able to take stock of our surroundings, and the route we must follow.

We were on the first shoulder of a ridge. Northwards lay the valley we had noted on the map. We could not see into it, but it was evidently of considerable size, and ran in the direction of Makalu and Mount Everest. In the north-west rose a cluster of high peaks with splintered crests and razor-like ice ridges, evidently subsidiary summits of the Makalu range. Whether it was possible to make a way through them into the country to the south of Mount Everest remained to be seen. There were some pretty topographical puzzles to be solved, and what little we could already see confirmed my belief that hereabouts was some of the most complicated and terrific mountain country in the world.

Now that we were on open slopes we had to watch our step, and we spent the next quarter of an hour carefully examining the ground ahead of us. Pendelbury and I could see no sign of life, but Nima Dorje, who had eyes like a hawk, presently spotted some barhal, the wild sheep of the Himalayas, a full two miles away. Apart from these there was no movement to be seen, and soon we were on our way again.

It was rough and, in places, steep going. In many hours

we seemed to cover but little ground. The buttresses we so laboriously traversed were but minor folds of a mountainside, which in itself was but a part of a subsidiary eminence abutting against a secondary ridge of the great ranges beyond. To Pendelbury, used as he was to the Alps, it was a revelation in mountain majesty and scale.

" Really, Tom," he exclaimed, " this is like Looking-Glass Land; it is all one can do to keep in the same place. We have been going for five hours, yet I doubt if we are more than two miles from our starting point, as the crow flies."

Late that day we turned a final shoulder and saw the valley outspread before us. There were several villages in it, but our route had brought us into it above them and above the tree line, into a region of scanty pastures leading towards a glacier flowing from the flanks of some high and complicated ice peaks. Perched on the hillside we examined the valley floor minutely but could see no one. It was certain that Professor Wilberforce had not made this valley his retreat, as, apart from its barrenness, it was too easily accessible from the villages lower down, and from the Arun Valley. We must continue westwards towards Everest. But how? To do so meant crossing the range bounding the head of the valley. This range was a mere offshoot of the mightier mass of Makalu, yet it was nowhere less than twenty thousand feet high. Unless our enemies had retreated, they must have traversed it, or be engaged in the attempt. What they could do so could we. All the same, everything pointed to the fact that we were in for some mountaineering of a very different order from any we had yet done.

We descended into the valley shortly before nightfall. Before bivouacking I sent Nima Dorje reconnoitring ahead. He returned to report that he had seen no one. We felt justified, therefore, in lighting a small fire of dwarf rhododendron twigs in a hollow.

Pendelbury and I had already decided that in future we must keep watch. I took the first spell on guard, and spent it partly in replenishing the fire, and partly in tramping about to keep warm. It was a still night and innumerable stars glinted frostily. Tired as I was after a long day's march, time dragged interminably, and I was selfishly glad to stir Pendelbury into activity shortly before midnight and turn into my sleeping bag.

Chapter Nine

NEXT MORNING WE MARCHED UP THE VALLEY, CAREFULLY examining the range on our left for a possible pass. We had progressed several miles before we saw what we hoped to see, a branch valley running up into the range. At the head of a steep and broken glacier filling the uppermost portion of the valley was a well-defined gap between two formidable rock peaks, an obvious pass if ever there was one provided, of course, that the far side was practicable. The last point also occurred to Pendelbury.

"That certainly seems to be the only way over the range," he said, "but if they fail to descend the other side they will return this way."

"In that case there will be a pleasant little social gathering," I told him. "We've got to keep our eyes skinned, Theo."

He sighed; his round face was set and grim.

"I am a man of peace, Tom, but when I think of what those men have done and are trying to do, I must confess that were I to meet them I might lose my temper. I remember my father—he was a minor canon—telling me that every time I felt like losing it I must count ten."

"If I were you," I urged him, "and we come up against those gentry, I should lose it first and count ten afterwards."

He smiled.

"You are a practical fellow, Tom, and your advice is sound. I shall most certainly follow it."

The next mile consisted of stony ground. Then came patches of snow. Here we came across unmistakable footmarks.

Nima Dorje was the first to spot them.

"Men have been here."

"How many men and how long ago?" I asked him.

"I think five or six men, two, perhaps three, days ago," he said after a prolonged scrutiny of the tracks.

I agreed with him. The tracks were certainly not new, and had been melted out by more than one day of sun. It meant that those we were following were in all probability already over the pass. They were evidently first-rate mountaineers, for we had lost no time, yet were still a good two days behind them.

If they had been lucky with the weather, so were we, and the sun shone from an unclouded sky. All the same, a bivouac on the pass was to be avoided if possible; without a tent a night in the open at twenty thousand feet would be a chilly, uncomfortable business, and might well become dangerous in the event of bad weather.

Two hours later we were treading the glacier. It was one of the steepest and most broken I have ever encountered, and formed an almost continuous ice-fall split up into tottering masses of ice and rifted from side to side with immense crevasses.

We had nothing to do but follow the tracks we had seen. It was plain from the first that those who had made them had experienced considerable difficulty in finding a route, for the glacier was enclosed between sheer precipices, and there seemed no possibility of circumventing the crevasses; indeed, only the presence of winter snows spanning the rifts made the ascent practicable.

Fortunately the night had been cold and the snow was well frozen. Even so, I was thankful that there were three of us on the rope, two to hold the leader should a snow bridge give way beneath him. Our progress was slow, as the hot sun of the past two days had rendered the snow bridges perilously thin and unstable, and we crawled

across several fragile arches with our hearts in our mouths, momentarily expecting a collapse.

The worst section of all was about half-way up the glacier where the ice was divided into tiers, separated by abysmal clefts. Here we came to what we had expected and feared to find, an enormous and apparently impassable crevasse. That those ahead of us had crossed it was evident; we could see their tracks on the far side, but the snow bridge they had utilised had disappeared. Whether it had subsequently collapsed, or whether it had been deliberately destroyed, we could not tell.

Was there an alternative route? Standing on the edge of the rift we examined the glacier to right and left. We were engaged in this when Pendelbury suddenly held up a warning finger.

"What's that?"

"What's what?" I asked him.

"Didn't you hear it? A curious noise. It seemed to come from the crevasse. Hark! There it is again!"

We all listened. There was no mistaking it; from the depths at our feet came a long-drawn groan.

"Great heavens!" I exclaimed. "It sounds human. There must be a man down there."

As though in answer there came another groan, a terrible sound expressive of the utmost agony. There was no doubt about it; a man was entombed in the crevasse.

With one accord we went down on our knees and peered into the cleft. Accustomed as we were to the dazzling brilliance of sunlit snow, it took some time for our eyes to pierce the bottle-green gloom. Nima Dorje was the first to speak.

"Look, Sahib, look, there on the snow. Ho!" he shouted. "Ho!"

The response was another groan. At the same moment I saw the fallen man, silhouetted against some snow that

had fallen in partially choking the crevasse. He was a long way down, and the same thought occurred simultaneously to us all: had we enough rope?

Pendelbury's face was white beneath its sunburn.

"This is terrible, Tom. Do you think we can get him out?"

"I don't know," I replied, "it depends whether he has the strength to tie the rope, if it will reach him."

We untied the rope from our waists and lowered it into the crevasse. Would it reach? For a dreadful moment we thought it was too short, then to our enormous relief we saw it touch the snow a yard or two from the fallen man. A minute later by dint of some careful manipulation we managed to bring it directly on to him so that it was actually touching him. Then I shouted down, first in English, then in Nepali:

"Tie it on to you!"

The man seemed to understand for he feebly raised one arm, and we could feel from a slight pull on the rope that he had momentarily grasped it. Then his arm fell back on the snow.

He had no strength left, and despite our repeated shouts made no further attempt to help himself.

We withdrew the rope. There was only one thing to be done; one of us would have to be lowered into the crevasse. He would then detach himself from the rope and remain below while the injured man was hauled out.

In theory it sounds an easy matter for two men to haul a single man out of a crevasse, but in practice it is not so easy. The rope tends to cut into the lip of the crevasse, and the friction is such that it may take three or four strong men to overcome it. It was essential, therefore, that the lightest man should be lowered, and that was Nima Dorje. I asked him whether he was prepared to descend and his instant reply, made with the broadest of broad grins, was:

"Of course I will, Sahib."

We arranged stirrup loops for his feet as well as securing him by the waist to the rope, then lowered him. He arrived on the snow and after carefully testing it to see whether it would bear his weight, detached himself from the rope and, tying it to the injured man, bade us haul away. We did so. It was hard work. Foot by foot we raised him out of his erstwhile tomb. The thin, hard climbing rope cut cruelly into our hands and we had to stop every half minute to belay it round an ice axe, driven into the snow, while we puffed and blew in the thin air. The worst part of all was getting him over the snowy lip of the crevasse, for he was a dead weight twisting and turning on the rope and unable to help himself, but it was done at last. As he appeared we saw that we had rescued a native, a Nepali by the look of him. He was no longer groaning, and appeared to be unconscious. We laid him on the snow, then sent down the rope to Nima Dorje. I don't know what he must have felt like down in the cold jaws of the crevasse, with nothing but a thin bridge of snow between him and eternity, but we heard him relieve his feelings, as the Sherpa is wont to do, by a thin mirthless whistling. Except that our arms were very tired, it was easier getting him out, as he was able to help himself to some extent, but the rope was bloody from our seared palms by the time it was done.

When we were reunited, Pendelbury and I examined the injured man. He was in a very bad way. Both his legs appeared to be broken, and he had a terrible gash on one side of the head, due to striking some projecting bit of ice in his fall. Fortunately Pendlebury still had a little brandy left in his flask. The spirit revived him, and presently he groaned and opened his eyes.

"Do you know this man?" I asked Nima Dorje.

"Yes, Sahib," was the reply. "I have seen him in the

bazaar at Darjeeling. He is not a good man, and has been many times in prison."

"Try and find out what has happened," I said, "while Lama Sahib and I discuss what is best to be done."

Now that the rescue had been effected it had dawned on both Pendelbury and me what a terribly awkward situation had arisen. Here we were far from all help, with no medical supplies, in the midst of appallingly difficult country, with a badly injured man on our hands. Then there was our mission, the dangers threatening Professor Wilberforce, his daughter, and his all-important invention. Even supposing we were able to carry him down the glacier it might take a week to get help from the nearest village. Then what sort of a reception should we get, especially in view of the damaged bridges which would be attributed to us, and what arrangements would there be for dealing with an injured man? The answer to the first query was probably trouble of one kind or another with the strong possibility of running up against Nepalese officials who would insist on escorting us to Khatmandu, or returning us to India accompanied by a posse of police or soldiers; the answer to the second was that there were none, and that unless the injured man could be got down to some hospital in Lower Nepal, there was no hope for him.

Looked at coldly and dispassionately, our obvious course was to leave him to die on the glacier, but there is a certain code attached to such matters, a code that knows no logic, and is unaffected by motives of expediency. It is called humanity. It is not done in mountaineering to leave a sick or injured man to die on a mountainside.

Pendelbury must have read my thoughts for he said:

"I do not know what else we can do, Tom, but our first duty is to tend this poor fellow. We must trust to Providence to find a way. We cannot possibly leave him and

must endeavour to put him in a place of safety where his wounds can be attended to."

"I agree," I said, "but how are we going to get him down the glacier? We have no stretcher and no splints. Then there is . . ."

I was interrupted by a cry from the injured man. He had recovered consciousness, and had opened his eyes. He began to mumble something and Nima Dorje squatted down by him.

"What does he say?" I queried.

Nima Dorje listened for a minute, then:

"He says he reached the pass with the sahibs. The other side was very steep, and when the sahibs wished to descend all the porters were frightened and refused to go. The sahibs kicked them and pointed a gun at them, but still they were very frightened, so the sahibs sent them back after taking all the food and equipment. The sahibs also took the rope. They came back the same way by which they had ascended, but when they tried to cross the snow bridge the snow gave way under them, and they all fell into the ice."

"Ask him how long ago was this."

Nima Dorje bent low over the injured man. The latter seemed to be on the point of lapsing again into unconsciousness and could only whisper.

"He says he does not know," he said at length. "He thinks it was a long time ago, perhaps two days, perhaps three."

"Does he know where the sahibs are going?"

Nima Dorje again questioned his compatriot but there was no reply. The unfortunate man was breathing quickly and jerkily and seemed no longer to understand what was being said to him. I knelt down beside him and felt his pulse; it was faint and irregular. I unstoppered the brandy flask but before I could administer the liquid he made a noise that was something between a gasp and a groan. His

head lolled back and his eyes stared glassy and unseeing. He was dead.

There was horror in Pendelbury's eyes. It was the first time he had seen anyone die a violent death.

"Poor fellow! " he said, and again, "Poor fellow! To think we have got him out of that horrible chasm and he dies like this."

As I gazed at the pitiful heap in the snow I felt a cold rage mounting within me.

"He and his companions were murdered," I said. "Without a rope they hadn't a chance. When they were sent back the snow bridges were soft in the afternoon sun. There was not a hope of their getting down safely. Their swines of employers knew that. They didn't want them to get down, Theo, and it's my belief that they hoped something like this would happen to delay us, that is if they suspected we were still on their trail."

"I fear you are right, Tom," said Pendelbury sadly. "We seem to be against the very incarnation of evil."

I glanced at my watch.

"We've lost three hours. If we are going to reach the pass to-day, we've got to get a move on."

I turned to Nima Dorje. The dead man was a fellow-countryman. It was politic as well as courteous, having regard to religious prejudices, to ask him as to the disposal of the body.

The Sherpa had evidently been considering the same problem for he replied promptly:

"He would like to join his brothers. It is best if we put him back with them."

"Do you think," said Pendelbury, "that it would offend Nima Dorje's religious susceptibilities if I were to say part of the burial service? "

"I'm sure it wouldn't," I assured him. I turned to Nima Dorje:

"The Lama Sahib wishes to say a prayer to speed your brother on his way to Paradise."

"He will be honoured," was the simple reply.

It was a singular occasion, a burial service amidst those aching expanses of snow with huge icy peaks frowning down from the profound blue of the Himalayan sky. When it was ended the unfortunate porter had gone to join his comrades in the depths of the crevasse.

Our unpleasant task accomplished, we turned to the problems confronting us. The first and greatest, it might well prove insuperable, was to find an alternative means of crossing or outflanking the crevasse into which the porters had fallen.

Where we stood the glacier was at its narrowest, less than a third of a mile wide, and the crevasse split it from side to side. There was no other snow bridge and our only hope lay in turning the moat. At first sight this appeared impossible for the glacier was enclosed by huge precipices, but careful examination revealed that the cliffs on the left were a little less sheer and a little more broken than those on the right. We made our way across to them until they loomed above us, as formidable a wall as may well be imagined. It was an awkward business getting on to the rocks, as they were separated from the ice by another crevasse, but eventually we found a place it was possible to jump.

So much for the initial difficulties. The danger was another matter. The glacier at the base of the cliff was pock-marked with fallen stones. It was a place no prudent mountaineer would have assailed, but our one and only hope of reaching the pass, indeed, the success or failure of our mission, depended on crossing it. I do not think that Pendelbury realised the danger at first because he was new to Himalayan work, but it was soon to be brought home to him in no uncertain fashion.

It was after mid-day and an almost vertical sun blazed with sub-tropic intensity. A stone fall could be expected at any moment, and it was not long before we heard the clatter, then the hum and whine of stones as they shot past us. They had fallen at least fifteen hundred feet and were going so fast as to be almost invisible. Worse was to follow. As we made our way diagonally across the rocks, keeping as close to the glacier as possible, there was a shattering roar from far overhead. There was no time to do anything except cower in as close to the rocks as possible. Then, as we gazed, we saw dozens of dark specks suddenly appear against the sky. The specks rapidly increased in size. It was the steepness of the cliff and the momentum of the falling rocks that saved us. As I yelled, " Keep your heads in! " scores of huge boulders flying through space with insane force seemed to be coming straight for us, but by great good fortune there was a projecting bit in the cliff above; they struck this and were deflected outwards. Even so it was a near thing and we felt the wind of them as they hurled past, with a deep whirring sound like swooping eagles, to strike the base of the cliff with splintering crashes or plunge with sullen thuds into the ice of the glacier.

The *détour* cannot have taken more than an hour, but it seemed interminable and it was with profound relief that we regained the glacier above the impassable crevasse, and hurried away from the base of the cliff out of harm's way.

There were more crevasses above the one that had caused so much tragedy and trouble, but happily the snow bridges were still secure and an hour later we crossed the last of them.

An unbroken but steep slope of snow and ice now separated us from the pass. Steps had been cut in it by those ahead, but the hot sun of the past two days had melted

them out and it was apparent that they would have to be remade. It was now late in the afternoon and it was questionable whether we should be able to cross the pass by nightfall. Should we bivouac at the foot of the slope and traverse it on the morrow, or should we continue and get as far as we could? In any other circumstances neither Pendelbury nor I would have hesitated; we should have stayed where we were and made ourselves as comfortable as possible rather than bivouac high up on or near the windswept crest of the pass exposed to the risk of frost-bite and bad weather; but on one thing we were unanimous: everything—prudence, caution, comfort—must be sacrificed if we were to succeed in our quest, and every moment was of vital consequence. We decided, therefore, to carry on and take our chance on the pass. I thought it only fair to acquaint Nima Dorje of this decision. His reply was characteristic:

"Where you go, Sahib, I go also."

The slope took even longer than we had anticipated. At any other time I should have enjoyed the task of step-cutting but, overshadowed as we were by tragedy and our own critical position, I grudged every stroke of the ice axe and what should have been thrilling mountaineering became a weariness of the flesh. As we climbed heavy clouds formed. The sun disappeared and the air, despite the altitude, grew heavy and oppressive. I told myself that they were merely clouds that bank up along the Himalayas on a fine afternoon, harmless mists rising from the steamy depths of the valleys, but in my heart I knew that the fine weather of the past few days was breaking.

Pendelbury was the first to voice his thoughts.

"I think there is a storm coming."

I agreed.

"We must find some sheltered place to doss down for the night."

"No doubt we shall," he replied cheerfully, "but I wish I could take my share of the step-cutting. I feel that inexperienced as I am with this kind of work, I'm nothing but a drag."

"Don't worry," I said. "Nima Dorje can cut steps too. We'll give him a turn in the lead."

"Nima!" I called down the slope to where the little man had stood impassively during this brief conversation. "Would you like to go first and cut steps?"

The reply was instant and enthusiastic.

"Achha, Sahib, achha!" A few moments later the little man was attacking the slope at a pace so fast and furious that it suggested some personal grudge against the ice.

Up and up we toiled. The pass seemed as far away as ever and the thud, thud of the ice-axe pick spelled nothing but fatigue and monotony, but at long last ice was replaced by snow which became progressively softer and deeper as we advanced. It was here that Pendelbury made up for his comparatively easy time on the ice.

"If I cannot do the skilled work, I can at least relieve you of the donkey work," he said, and went ahead, stamping a track with astonishing energy considering his short legs and small body.

Three hours had passed since we first began to cut steps. It was certain now that we should have to bivouac high up. And the weather was worsening every minute; the sky was choked with slow boiling clouds and the snowy dip of the pass was outlined against a lurid copper-tinted glare.

In mountain exploration there is no greater thrill than to cross a pass over an unexplored range. It is the supreme fulfilment of man's inherited instinct of wanting to see round the corner. But there was no room for any thrill of interest or excitement. We were too weary, too much beset by anxiety. Our legs were weighted with fatigue, and our

lungs laboured desperately to extract sufficient oxygen from the attenuated atmosphere.

Then, quite suddenly, with gasps of relief, we were there, grouped together on a wind-moulded edge of snow in a fast-gathering gloom. Immediately our eyes turned to the far side of the pass. From the little we had heard from the dying porter, we expected something difficult; what we saw was worse than anything we had anticipated. It was horribly steep, a cruel precipice of slabby rocks seamed with icy gullies that seemed at first sight to offer no lodgment for a fly. I heard a shrill whistle from Nima Dorje and a groan of disappointment from Pendelbury. Mists lay beneath, concealing the base of the precipice so that it was impossible to estimate its height. It was a bad place; it would take time; there was no question of descending it until the morrow; we must do what we had hoped to avoid, bivouac on the pass.

As we stood gazing, the last baleful glare of the sun was extinguished and the whole tremendous prospect of peak, range and valley was plunged in an inky twilight, not the peaceful oncoming of dusk but a sudden menacing scowl pregnant with the threat of storm. Above and below sulphurous clouds writhed and twisted in the grip of invisible air currents. Yet where we stood not a zephyr stirred. The world seemed cowed, overawed and oppressed. Suddenly Pendelbury broke an almost intolerable silence.

"What a curious sensation! My face feels as though it were covered in cobwebs."

"It's electrical tension," I told him. "The sooner we are off the crest the better. Look, there's a shelf of sorts a few yards down between the snow and the rocks. We could enlarge it." I raised my ice axe to point as I spoke and its steel head immediately emitted a sibilant hissing sound. At the same moment Nima Dorje's axe did likewise.

The little man stood gazing at it with a stupid, puzzled

expression, then I heard him give a quick gulp of fear. The Sherpa is brave enough when dealing with dangers he can understand, but anything unusual terrifies him beyond measure.

Without further ado we descended from the crest of the pass and set about levelling a rude platform, large enough to sit upon. This done, we drove our ice axes into the snow and tied ourselves to them by the rope as an additional safeguard. Having made ourselves reasonably comfortable in our sleeping bags, we settled down to eat supper. We were more thirsty than hungry after our grilling in the sun and it was fortunate, therefore, that we had each of us added some sticks and twigs of rhododendron wood to our loads when setting forth from the valley that morning. It was not much but Nima Dorje soon had a little fire going, and over this we melted some snow, and brewed a few mouthfuls of soup.

Meanwhile the last of the daylight ebbed rapidly away. The electrical tension was increasing and the atmosphere seemed to be stretched taut almost to breaking point. Then above, on some rock pinnacles on either side of the pass, little tufts of blue fire appeared and there came to our ears an indescribable singing, whining sound. It was the electrical manifestation known to sailors as St. Elmo's fires. To Pendelbury and me it was strange and uncanny even though we recognised it for what it was, but to Nima Dorje it was terrifying. He drew his sleeping bag up over his head and we heard the muffled gabbling of prayer after prayer. I did my best to comfort him but it was useless. The gods of the pass were angry and must be propitiated at all costs. Centuries of superstitious fears are not to be eliminated in a night.

Then the storm broke. A curtain of blinding mauve fire descended on the ridge above and an explosion of thunder rocked the mountainside, a tearing, rending bang like a

bursting bomb. Almost before we had time to take breath the first discharge was followed by another, which sent tongues of mauve fire licking all round us, accompanied by a simultaneous and fearful concussion. Then came the wind and the hail, a sudden blast of hurricane force and a solid wall of enormous hailstones.

The next two hours was an inferno. Hail and lightning combined to detach great rock avalanches, which crashed down into the abyss at our feet, whilst the sound of the wind as it fell upon us was at times almost indistinguishable from the shattering explosions of thunder. Then what I had both feared and anticipated came to pass; the hail was replaced by snow as the temperature fell and a furious blizzard whirled upon us.

The situation was growing serious. If the storm continued, descent from the pass might become difficult if not impossible, and without adequate protection we could not survive long. It was towards midnight that a miracle happened. In a matter of seconds the wind fell to a dead calm, the snow ceased to fall and the lightning to strike the ridge above. A star showed feebly then grew bright. The clouds rolled back. The storm had passed away to the north and Makalu and Mount Everest received its fury. We lay in our sleeping bags and watched the lightning darting from one cloudy chasm to another, twisting like fiery serpents among the ridges, or bursting upwards in fountains of blue fire, while the Himalayan giants reverberated to the mighty concussions of thunder. Later still the moon rose and flooded the scene with glory, lighting swathes of mist in the valleys, illuminating a hundred peaks and fields of untrodden snow.

For Pendelbury and me sleep was impossible in the bitter cold, but Nima Dorje, impervious as he was to the cruellest conditions, snored loudly in his sleeping bag. It was a wretched night and as we waggled our numbed toes

and fingers we longed for daylight. It seemed an interminable age before the moon paled and the high snows shone coldly in the dawn. Then came the sun, and a sudden rush of golden light set crest after crest aglow in the great array of mountains before us.

From our vantage point we gazed over a host of peaks and a labyrinth of valleys. The summit of Mount Everest was concealed behind a nearer spur, but we could see some of its subsidiary ridges and precipices falling into the blue depths of the valleys beneath. One of those valleys must be Professor Wilberforce's retreat, but it was impossible to say which; it might be any one of the rifts separating the ranges abutting against Everest and its neighbours. At our feet a narrow valley ran sinuously northwards. This was all to the good for we had no option but to descend into it. We tried to make out where it led but were mystified by the complicated jumble of peaks into which it disappeared.

So much for the view. Not until the sun warmed us did we struggle out of our frozen sleeping bags and survey the immediate problems. If the cliffs beneath had looked formidable in the gloom of gathering storm, they scarcely looked less so now that they were plastered with freshly fallen snow. However, it is a mountaineering maxim that difficulties can only be assessed by practical trial, and after a frugal breakfast we began the descent.

Certainly it was bad going. Snow-covered rocks were outside Pendelbury's limited experience, but his natural surefootedness and common sense went far to compensate for this. For much of the way we had to move one at a time, and on occasion swing ourselves down the cliffs after doubling the rope round a projecting rock. It became more and more evident that we were up against no ordinary blackguards but hardy, skilful men well versed in the art of mountaineering.

Four hours later the worst was behind and we had vanquished the snow-covered precipice. We found ourselves on a small glacier. Little new snow had fallen at this level and we made rapid progress. After the glacier came a wilderness of moraines. Flowers were growing here, cushion-like plants with brilliant blooms that reflected the purity of their environment. After our battering in the dead world above it was wonderful to see them; and Pendelbury, with all the ardour of a naturalist, would have halted many a time to examine them had I not urged the necessity for haste. Lower still was an alp, an emerald-green sward ablaze with flowers, and beneath that a pine forest descending to the floor of the valley.

Below the snow-line we lost all trace of our enemies. At the same time we kept a careful look-out. It was extremely unlikely that they still believed themselves to be followed, and in any case they must be even farther ahead than before owing to our delay in crossing the pass; still, we could not exclude the possibility of an ambush, and from what we had already experienced at the hands of these gentry, we knew that if it suited their book they would not hesitate to murder us out of hand. We saw no sign of human life until we had forced our way down through the forest into the valley. There we came to a rough track which pointed to habitations of some kind, possibly a shepherds' encampment, for it was unlikely that in such wild and difficult country there were any permanent inhabitants, especially since the winter snowfall must cut all communications for months on end. Whether our enemies had turned up or down the valley it was impossible to say, for heavy rain at this level had washed everything clean, but we agreed that the odds were a hundred to one that they had turned northwards in the direction of Mount Everest.

Except that the valley presently narrowed into a series of gorges, to avoid which the track made long and annoying

détours, the way was devoid of difficulty and by nightfall we had covered several miles. Before halting, I sent Nima Dorje ahead on a scouting expedition—a job the little fellow loved and regarded as enormous fun. He returned to report that there were no signs of anyone.

We bivouacked in a glade close to a stream. Of food there was none too much, but we estimated that with care we had enough for a further two or three days. Before then we must somehow or other replenish our stock. However, as we told ourselves, sooner or later we were bound to come across a hamlet or a shepherds' encampment.

That night we again did sentry-go but the dark hours passed peaceably, with no sound in our ears but the rush of the torrent, a soothing lullaby that was difficult to resist particularly after the fatigues and stresses of the past two days.

Chapter Ten

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THE WEATHER WAS PERFECT WHEN WE SET OFF AGAIN NEXT morning; and as we marched, treading a soft carpet of pine needles, I for one found it difficult to concentrate my thoughts on my mission; amid these fragrant forests and mighty peaks with their gleaming steeps and towering summits, cut-throat foreigners and aerial torpedoes seemed remote and absurd. Pendelbury must have felt the same and I saw him eye wistfully many a gorgeous butterfly as it fluttered past.

Our awakening from these day-dreams was as dramatic as it was rude. We turned a corner and there before us was one of the most extraordinary sights I have ever witnessed. Perhaps two miles higher up the valley forked, one arm bending north-eastwards and the other north-westwards. In this fork, and standing well out from the ridge separating the two arms, rose an isolated rock fully fifteen hundred feet high on which were perched tier upon tier of white buildings, shining in the brilliant sunlight. It was the fairy palace of childhood dreams come to life.

We paused spellbound at the spectacle and I heard Pendelbury catch his breath ecstatically.

"This must be the monastery of Kongra Dzong, the 'Abode of Clouds,'" he said.

"Yes," I agreed. "It's a Buddhist monastery. I've seen the same sort of thing in Tibet, but nothing as fine as this."

I had hardly finished speaking when Nima Dorje exclaimed:

"Look, Sahib, look!"

Less than a quarter of a mile away a score of men were

advancing towards us. It was evident that they had seen us and concealment was out of the question. I had hoped above all things to avoid contact with the monks of Nepal but now that it was inevitable we could only do our best to ingratiate ourselves with them and overcome their almost fanatical dislike of foreigners in their country.

"We shall have to put a bold face on this," I told Pendelbury. "Come along, we will go forward and meet them."

As we approached the lamas, for such I soon recognised them to be, we saw that they were "yellow hats," the holiest order in Lamaism. The "red hats" are frequently unruly, war-like monks and the intellectual inferiors of the "yellow hats" who are sworn to religious observance and meditation. It was with surprise, therefore, not unmixed with apprehension, that we noticed that they were armed, some with sticks, some with swords, and one or two with ancient muzzle-loading guns. A tall monk clad in a beautifully embroidered silken robe of yellow and blue was in advance, and when we were some thirty yards distant he halted his followers and advanced alone to meet us. He was unarmed, but there was no welcoming smile on his aquiline face; indeed, an atmosphere of hostility was now painfully apparent.

"It is the desire of his Holiness the Rimpoche Lama that you should accompany me at once," he said abruptly.

"The abbot desires our presence immediately," I translated to Pendelbury. "I don't like the way the invitation is couched; it's an order."

I turned to the lama. "My friend here is also a lama and a man of holiness and learning in his own country. May I inquire what is the name of your most mighty and noble lamasery?"

There was no softening in the face of the lama as he replied shortly:

"It is Kongra Dzong or, as some say, the Abode of Clouds. And now you will come with me?"

It was so curtly put that for a moment I contemplated refusal, but to have done so would have been to invite force and a fracas must be avoided at all costs. The monks closed round and one of them dived his hands into my pockets and abstracted my pistol.

There was no attempt other than the seizure of the weapon to molest us as we were marched along, but I could see that Nima Dorje was thoroughly scared: like all lay people of Nepal and Tibet he had a healthy dread of the Lamastic persuasion and the autocratic power wielded by the Buddhist monasteries of his country.

"Don't worry," I said. "All will come right. Above all you must say nothing as to why we are in Nepal or there will be great trouble."

Half an hour later we were at the foot of the rock on which stood the monastery. It was a wonderful place, and it was staggering to think of the labour involved in the making of its scores of majestic buildings. In arrangement and symmetry it was a work of art. We in the West who pride ourselves on our civilisation have little to boast of in the shoddy buildings with which we deface our cities and countryside, but here was something typifying the very soul of beauty, something serene and grand, the work of generations of inspired and gifted craftsmen.

A narrow path hewn in the rock wound sinuously up the face of the precipice. Along this we passed in single file. Every foot of the cliff was engraven with the Buddhist prayer, "Om Mani Padme Hum" ("Hail, to the Jewel in the Lotus"), and at intervals were little shrines presided over by effigies of Buddha.

Some five hundred feet up we came to the lowermost walls of the monastery and turned in through a wooden gate which creaked open to receive us. On either side of the gateway were twin rows of revolving barrels packed with parchment on which were inscribed innumerable prayers.

and each lama as he entered gave these prayer wheels a turn. I followed suit and bade Pendelbury do likewise. He did so with an ill grace and I heard him mutter something about heathen practices and idolatry; at the same time it was evident that he realised the importance of conforming to ceremonial, and was determined not to embarrass our present awkward position. In another moment the gate creaked to and we were within the monastery of Kongra Dzong.

If the monastery was a triumph of engineering and architectural design, the same could hardly be said of the sanitary arrangements to judge from the many and varied smells that assailed us as we mounted a flight of rough-hewn steps between the tall white buildings. Presently, after a steep climb, the lama who accompanied us conducted us through a narrow arch into a paved courtyard. A door led out of the courtyard into a passage so dark that we had almost to grope our way. Nima Dorje I noticed was no longer with us; he had been detained in the courtyard. At the end of the passage was another door, giving access to a small stone-walled room lit by a single slit-like window. We had no sooner entered when abruptly the lama turned, the door closed and we heard the grating of a key in the lock. We were prisoners.

I had not liked the proceedings from the first, and now my resentment and anger got the better of me.

"Here! " I shouted. "Here! What is the meaning of this? Is this the way strangers are treated? " To lend force to my words I seized the latch of the door and shook the latter vigorously. There was no reply, and I heard the sound of footsteps retreating down the passage. Then, and very unexpectedly, I heard a giggle from my companion. I looked at him angrily.

"Well, Tom," said he. "When I was a boy I used to read penny dreadfuls. In one of them the hero was captured

by some cut-throat Tibetans and locked up in a monastery. If I remember rightly he was threatened with torture because it was believed that he had stolen some sacred talisman. I must confess that when I accepted the curacy of Forestford I did not anticipate that anything of the kind would happen to me."

My anger evaporated, and I turned away from the locked door.

"I don't think we need worry about ourselves. These 'yellow hats' are normally a peaceable people, scholars and philosophers. They will do us no harm, but they may keep us prisoners until the civil authorities are informed, in which case it's going to be devilish awkward. We may get taken to Khatmandu under armed escort and that means the end of everything. It looks as though we are going to suffer for the crimes of that infernal pair we've been following. Somehow or other we have got to persuade the abbot that we are not stealers of sheep and cutters of rope bridges, and that our job is in the interests of humanity. The same story I told the headman of Chodlung may go down here. Perhaps it would have been a good thing if I had told Nima Dorje to spread it abroad; I hope he keeps his mouth shut about other things."

"It certainly is an awkward position, Tom, and as you say, we must try to persuade the abbot as to our good intentions. But I have a feeling that truth will help us better than deception. There is something about this place that . . ."

He was interrupted by the opening of the door. Three lamas entered. One carried two bowls filled with stewed meat and macaroni which he placed together with chopsticks on a low wooden bench which was the only furniture of the apartment, the second bore a copper teapot and two wide china cups perched on brass pedestals, whilst the third carried some cushions which he placed on the ground by

the bench, then with a gesture invited us to seat ourselves and eat.

"Tell me," I asked one of them, "what is the meaning of this? Why are my friend and I locked in here?"

"It is his Holiness, the Rimpoche's, orders," he replied impassively.

"Well, inform his Holiness that my friend and I wish to see him, for we have something very important to tell him."

"His Holiness will see you when he pleases," was the enigmatical reply. "Should you require more to eat and drink you have only to ask and it shall be brought." With that he and his companions withdrew.

"They evidently do not mean to starve us," said Pendelbury. "This stew is really excellent and the macaroni is reasonably well cooked. I must confess, though, that I find these chopsticks a trifle awkward."

"You had better defer judgment until you have tried the tea," I answered, smiling. "In this part of the world they make it of Chinese brick tea, salt, spices and rancid butter, principally the last."

He made a wry face.

"It certainly sounds an acquired taste."

"Oh, it's not so bad when you are used to it."

Considering the circumstances, the meal passed off pleasantly enough, even the buttered tea being pronounced as "nourishing" by my cheerful little companion. By the time we had finished darkness was falling. Our cell faced north and, as we gazed through its narrow, glassless window, we saw the afternoon clouds dissolving from the high peaks. Slowly they vanished to reveal the scimitar-like edges of an enormous mountain whose glowing summit shone out like a beacon in the deepening blue of the evening sky. For a moment we gazed wondering, then, as one man, exclaimed "Everest!"

As we watched, the sunset glow faded and Everest shrank

cold and pallid into the gathering stars. Then, suddenly, a profound silence was broken by a great chorus of voices punctuated by the throbbing boom of horns and the measured clashing of cymbals. The chanting rose and fell, filling the valley with waves of solemn sound. The lamas were at their evening orisons.

"But this is wonderful," breathed Pendelbury. "They may be primitive according to our notions, but they have retained something that we have lost—simplicity and serenity."

The chanting and the music ceased and silence settled down on Kongra Dzong. Our kit had been given to us intact, and with our sleeping bags we made ourselves comfortable on the cushions.

We were awakened soon after sunrise the next morning by a lama who entered with our breakfast. Instead of leaving the room he remained, eyeing us impassively, though I thought I detected a smile as he observed Pendelbury's efforts with his chopsticks.

"His Holiness will now see you," he said when we had finished, and motioned us to accompany him.

Unshaven and unwashed as we were we must have looked pretty disreputable objects as we trudged along behind our guide, I cudgelling my brains to think of some plausible story to explain our presence in forbidden Nepal, for I had a strong presentiment that the story I had pitched to the headman of Chodlung was unlikely to go down with the abbot of a "yellow hat" monastery.

Through a maze of ill-lit passages we passed. Then came a climb up several flights of stone stairs. Finally we came to a large courtyard into which the newly risen sun streamed brightly. It took a few moments to accustom our eyes to the glare. Then we saw that the courtyard was enclosed on three sides by cloisters decorated with mural paintings and hung about with prayer banners. The eastern end was open

and afforded a splendid prospect of snowy mountains. At the western end was a dais overhung with an embroidered silken canopy. On the dais was seated the Abbot of Kongra Dzong. He was clad in a simple robe of yellow and blue with one arm bare, the Buddhist symbol of poverty, and on his head was a tall, sugarloaf, yellow, silk-embroidered hat.

We advanced until we were within a yard of the dais when our guide motioned us to halt and, making a deep obeisance, retired a step or two. We were left confronting the abbot.

He was very old and very fat, and his heavy face was seamed and puckered with innumerable wrinkles, the lines, it seemed, not of years but of centuries. But if age was evident in his withered skin it was a very different matter with his eyes. Deeply set and heavy-lidded they yet shone with the sparkle and lustre of an eternal youthfulness. Wonderful eyes they were, expressive of character, scholarship, penetration and mental acuity. And withal they were kindly. Little lines led off from their corners into the broad cheeks, lines of laughter and good humour. Here we felt instinctively was a great personality, a worthy master of the monastery over which he held absolute sway.

But there was no laughter in his eyes now or any smile of the wide, mobile mouth. He looked at us sternly and his first words were almost brutally direct.

"You are Europeans. Why are you in Nepal which is forbidden to you?"

I had long anticipated the question, but now that it was put I felt my cheeks reddening. If I had planned to hedge and prevaricate, any such plans now crumbled about me. This old man missed nothing; truth alone would satisfy him. Almost without thinking I found myself replying:

"We come in search of a fellow-countryman."

"That I know."

"You know!"

"It has come to my ears," he continued, ignoring my surprise, "that two Europeans have been causing much trouble to my people, stealing their sheep and cutting their bridges. Are you those two men?"

"We are not, but we know of them. They are bad men, worse than dacoits. It is our desire to foil them in their evil designs for we come only in peace to bring a message to our brother."

"What is that message?"

"It is a message from the British Raj asking him to return to England."

"Then why was I not informed from Khatmandu? Why do you come into Nepal in this way unknown to our authorities?"

"Because there are special reasons."

"Then I must know them."

I considered for a few moments. Concealment was useless. The abbot seemed to know everything. Was it possible that he could read my very thoughts?

"Listen, your Holiness. Somewhere in your country in a valley near Chamalung is one of our countrymen. He is a scholar and a man of great learning. Because he is also a man of peace, he was distressed at the state of our civilisation in the West where many men think only of war, but he believed, as do I and my friend here, that the British people desire only peace. And so, because he is a very clever man, he made a new and terrible engine of war which he believed was so destructive that none of Britain's enemies would dare attack her. But when he had made this engine, and saw how terrible it was, he became afraid that perhaps after all anyone who possessed it might be tempted to employ it against his fellow men for greed or the lust of conquest. Then he remembered that he had once visited Nepal at the invitation of his Highness the Maharajah. So he decided to return there, together with his daughter and the

plans of his engine. He thought that there he might rest and that he and his engine would be forgotten. And so he and his daughter travelled in an aeroplane hoping that they would find peace. But unhappily it became known to wicked men, the enemies of England, where he had gone, and my friend here and I set out to warn him of his danger and protect him and the plans of his engine. It was necessary, your Holiness, as you will understand, that such a matter as this is best kept secret, otherwise there would be much political difficulty and perhaps even trouble between Nepal and the British Raj. Therefore, my friend and I entered your country secretly, but we found that two of our enemies were before us, and twice they tried to do us injury by cutting rope bridges we had to cross. We heard also that they misused the people of the country, stealing their sheep, and we saw with our own eyes porters that they had left to die on a high pass. I beg your Holiness, therefore, to allow us to proceed on our way so that we may prevent our brother from falling victim to these men who are also the enemies of Britain."

There was silence. The abbot's eyes probed mine; there was something almost hypnotic about them, they were luminous with knowledge. But I had told him the truth and could meet them unflinchingly.

Then, quite suddenly, he smiled. It was as though a mask had fallen, revealing an illimitable kindliness and good humour.

" You speak the truth," he said simply, " and because of this, and because we of Nepal trust the British Raj, I will help you. I know where your countryman and his daughter are. Three years ago he visited Kongra Dzong with the permission of his Highness the Maharajah. I made him welcome and did my best to help him in his work which interested me also. He is, as you say, a great

scholar and we had many discussions in which he told me much about the West. Indeed, I grew to love him as a brother. Then a little while ago he suddenly arrived here, and told me that he had come to seek refuge and peace in my country. He also said that he had come without the permission of the Nepal Raj and begged me to allow him to stay in the valley where he had descended from the sky in his bird machine. I told him that he might, and that I would give him anything that he needed, providing only that he would visit me sometimes so that we might talk.

"Then, three days ago, two men arrived having travelled up the valley from the south. They said that they were friends of our brother and bore him important tidings from England. They also said that there had been following them two men who sought to do them and our brother an injury. These men, they said, had already damaged bridges and stolen sheep but had taken the wrong road and were behind them. They told me to detain them when they arrived and send word to the police."

I could not repress a whistle.

The abbot smiled, noting my surprise, and continued slowly.

"These men carried with them a box from which came strange sounds, a buzzing like hornets and a wailing and whistling as though from the spirits of the damned."

"Wireless!" I ejaculated.

"They desired to know the way to the valley where our brother dwells which is called the Country of Singing Birds. At first, believing them to be, as they declared, friends of our brother, I was disposed to believe them and direct them on their way, but when I looked into their eyes I knew that they did not speak the truth, for I am an old man and the little wisdom granted me has enabled me to discern falsehood as well as truth. I debated within myself whether or not to detain them until I had found out more about them,

but they were strangers and this seemed to me discourteous and inhospitable, so I let them go."

"You let them go!"

"I let them go," repeated the abbot calmly, "but first I took from them their guns, telling them that no bird or animal may be killed in my country where all is at peace. They were very angry at this and departed from Kongra Dzong with many black looks."

I could restrain myself no longer.

"Your Holiness!" I exclaimed. "Guns or no guns, these are evil and desperate men who will do an injury to our brother. God knows they may have done it already."

"I do not think so," said the abbot imperturbably. "As you will have seen, the valley divides here into two. One leads upwards into the Country of Singing Birds, the other goes over the high snows westwards of Chamalung into Tibet. I thought it advisable to direct them into this last valley so that I might send a message to our brother informing him of their presence. If they are indeed his friends I shall know before they return and I shall then direct them into the right valley. If they are not then I shall detain them and communicate with Khatmandu."

I breathed a sigh of relief. This old man was wisdom and tact personified.

"But are they bound to return this way?" I asked him.

"There is no other way," he replied simply.

"But they might cross the mountains between the two valleys."

"No one has ever done so for the mountains are very high and steep and covered in snow."

"Um," I pondered. "I wish I could be as sure as your Holiness upon this last point. These men are great climbers and have already crossed many high and difficult mountains and passes."

A shade of anxiety crossed the abbot's face. He was about

to reply when a lama advanced to the dais and whispered something into his ear. Then he retired and another lama, a young man, came forward and engaged in animated conversation with his master. Their talk lasted for several minutes in which time I acquainted Pendelbury with what had been going forward, then the lama retired and the abbot turned again to us.

"My messenger has returned. He tells me that our brother is horrified beyond measure at the news that others of his race are seeking him in his retreat and begs me to do everything I can to prevent them from reaching him." He paused and contemplated us for a few moments. "Were I to honour his instructions," he continued slowly, "I would not allow you to proceed, but in view of what you have told me, and because I know you to be honest men, I think it best that you should warn our brother about those who seek to do him an injury, especially since, as you say, they may seek to cross the mountains into the Country of Singing Birds."

"Then my friend and I may leave at once?"

The old man smiled.

"Do not hasten," he said gently. "Evil may benefit from haste, but seldom good. It has long seemed to me from what I have read and heard that you in the West must ever be hastening. I have heard of your machines which travel quickly from one place to another across the ground and through the air. Tell me, does it make a man any the happier to proceed faster than we do on the back of a pony?"

I was nonplussed at first to find an answer to this question.

"I don't think it does," I said at length.

"Those who built this lamasery many generations ago," he continued, "left a record of their work in a book. They wrote that beauty alone was worth striving for and, as you see, they strove hard. And they prophesied that men would

look down from the clouds upon great wars and sufferings, and upon wheels that turned ever faster, sending out not prayers to God but an evil that concealed beauty and blackened the hearts of men. Then out of the turning and the noise and the speed of it, out of the darkness of men's hearts and the greed and pride of counsellors, there would arise an evil greater than any, a beast that would seek to ensnare men's souls. And it was written also that this evil would be a scourge on the face of all men, so that their lips were twisted with hatred and sorrow. Then, because naught else availed, they would pray, and beyond the seas men would arise to grapple with the beast and overthrow him utterly. And the wheels would cease to spin, and men turn from them to seek the quietness of their own souls and hearken once more to the wisdom of little children. Then shall East join hands with West and the shadow of a great ignorance pass from the hearts of men so that all shall be as one, and one as all, in the enjoyment of the earth and in the love of Him who created it."

There was silence when the abbot had finished speaking. Suddenly I felt supremely peaceful. My gaze lifted from the old man's face, above the fluttering prayer banners and the white walls of the monastery, to where, bastion upon bastion, and edge upon edge, in awful majesty the Himalayan snows rose into the unclouded blue of the morning sky.

When my eyes fell again the abbot was smiling.

"I see you understand," he said. "And now you must go. You will take the path to the north-east which leads towards Chamalung. You will pass through a narrow place; then in two days you will come to the valley where our brother stays, the Country of Singing Birds."

"There is one thing," I said. "As we may meet with these men who would do us and our brother an injury, may I have the pistol that has been taken from me?"

The abbot shook his head.

"You will not want it back when I tell you that there is a curse placed on all who take weapons of destruction into the presence of Chamalung and the Country of Singing Birds. I will keep it until you return. You will also send my blessing and greetings to our brother, and tell him that I shall assuredly detain those who would do him evil when they return here."

There was nothing I could do but acquiesce to this, though I must confess that the possibility, even if remote, of having to deal unarmed with two desperadoes was not an altogether happy one, and there was always the chance that they might have other weapons which the lamas had failed to find and confiscate. However, we were scarcely in a position to press the point, and in any event, our principal difficulties and dangers had been minimised, if not removed, by the wisdom and astuteness of the abbot. I could only thank him for his courtesy and consideration, but my words fell on deaf ears. During the past minute an astonishing change had come over the old man. He still sat and smiled, but his gaze was on things far away as one who sees a vision. A lama touched me on the arm.

"His Holiness meditates. Come, your servant is here and your luggage ready for the road."

The lama accompanied us out of the monastery and down the same narrow winding path by which we had entered. When we reached the foot of the rock he pointed to the right hand of the two valleys.

"That is your road. For a little distance there is a track, for we go there to pray and meditate and some of the brothers have cells on the mountainside. Then you must pick your own way. It is rough steep ground in some places."

With that he bade us adieu and we set off on the last stage of our journey.

One look we took at that marvellous pile of buildings, sunlit and serene against the deep blue sky, then we turned the first bend of the valley, and the monastery was lost to view. Once again we were in the solitudes of the mountains.

Chapter Eleven

NIMA DORJE WAS IN HIGH SPIRITS; HE HAD BEEN TREATED WELL by the monks and proudly displayed a bag of ground barley, together with a quantity of dried meat, sufficient to keep us going for several days, though, as we told ourselves, Professor Wilberforce must be supplied with a considerable stock of provisions.

As we marched, Pendelbury asked me many questions as to my conversation with the abbot and, as well as I could, I translated all I had heard.

"What a remarkable personality," was his verdict when I had finished. "It seems as though, thanks to him, our difficulties are at an end."

"I should like to think so," I replied, "but remember we have still to persuade the Professor to return to England. It's not going to be easy. He's an idealist and may resent intensely any disturbance of his solitude. And I don't like the thought of those blackguards still at large. I've a feeling that we haven't seen the last of them. There's the girl also. A woman in these circumstances is a big responsibility. By the way, you never told me whether you know her?"

It seemed to me that my companion reddened beneath his tan. There was a pause before he replied.

"Yes, Tom, I do. She is a charming girl." He spoke warmly and it seemed to me a trifle defensively.

I looked at him quizzically. It was on the point of my tongue to ask for further details of Mabel, but I refrained. There was a far-away look on the little man's face. I began to suspect that his journey to the Himalayas was not quite so altruistic in its motives as I had supposed.

We continued our march in silence, Pendelbury with that

same far-away look whilst I began to turn over in my mind the problems ahead of us.

Some five miles from the monastery the track zig-zagged sharply up the mountainside towards the foot of a vertical cliff at the base of which was a line of dark openings, evidently the cells where the brothers of Kongra Dzong spent their time in prayer and meditation. It was a wild spot. The roar of the stream, the wind in the crags, and the thunder of avalanches alone disturbed their quietude. They looked out on stern sublimity, rocks and snow and slow-weaving clouds. Why should they cut themselves off thus? If they did no good to others what good could they do to themselves? Or did they believe that through their prayers and meditations they could enrich the lot of humanity?

For us it meant the end of the track and easy travelling. Thenceforward we had to traverse ever steepening hillsides, scrambling up and down over slopes of shale, or cautiously edging across cliffs which in places fell sheer away into the glacier torrent. Save for a few stunted pines and patches of juniper, the valley was bare of vegetation. It narrowed gradually as we advanced, and its sides grew in height. By nightfall we had covered some eight miles, not a great distance but fair going considering the difficulty of the terrain. We bivouacked on a stony shelf and supped by a fire of juniper. It was comforting to reflect that our enemies were now on the other side of the great wall of mountains bounding the valley to the west, but we were taking no chances and that night resumed our watch.

The following morning was gloriously sunny. It was queer to reflect that before the day was out we might be at the end of our journey.

For the first four miles of our march the valley continued as before, stony and desolate with steep rugged sides and a tumultuous glacier torrent raging down it. Then we rounded a shoulder and halted in bewildered surprise. The

valley seemed to end against a great curtain of rock apparently linking the ranges on either hand. It looked an impasse but we knew that this was impossible; the torrent must find its way through somewhere. Then we saw a dark slit in the wall and at the foot of it the white of tumbling water. There was a gorge and no ordinary gorge even in a country of gorges. Could it be followed or circumvented? The cliffs were thousands of feet high and above them were other cliffs ending in a gigantic confusion of rock, ice and snow. It might take weeks to force a route, even supposing a route could be found, and the abbot's messenger had delivered a message to Professor Wilberforce and returned to Kongra Dzong in four days. There must be a way through the gorge.

Half an hour later we arrived at the entrance to the ravine. Never had any of us seen anything like it. Its sides were vertical for many hundreds of feet; in places they overhung. Beneath, the glacier torrent struggled to escape, and the noise and tumult of its seething waters sounded a thunderous litany in the depths of the chasm. At first sight, it seemed impossible that a goat could pass along either wall and our first feeling of consternation was renewed. It was Nima Dorje's quick eye that spotted the way. We had been looking too low but now, following upon his exclamation and outstretched arm, we gazed upwards. At a casual glance the cliff seemed hopeless. Then we saw the ledge, a mere wrinkle in the smooth cheek of the precipice, a geological fault that led deep into the jaws of the gorge. And it could be reached. The rocks were broken at the corner where the gorge ended and, although steep, appeared climbable.

I asked Pendelbury whether he would like the rope. His reply was that if the abbot's messenger had passed that way without assistance then he could do so too. So without further ado we began to climb the corner. Certainly the

rocks were steep but they proved easier than anticipated. Once we went wrong and had to retrace our steps a short distance, but Nima Dorje, with his natural aptitude for route finding, went to the fore and a little later we found ourselves on the ledge.

It was a sensational passage. In places our path was a yard or two broad and it was possible to walk, but in others it narrowed to a foot or less and we had to shuffle along sideways like crabs. The worst bit of all was a corner where it shrank to a mantelshelf, a few inches wide. We tied on the rope for this, but it was of little practical value as there was nothing to hitch it round, and a slip by one would have precipitated all three of us into the abyss. It was not a specially difficult place from a mountaineer's standpoint, but as we edged along with outstretched arms like men crucified, it needed steady nerves to gaze down several hundred feet to where the torrent roared in insensate fury sending up cold breaths of spray into our faces.

On and on we went, treading with the delicacy of cats on a roof coping. The gorge twisted like a serpent but still that amazing ledge, the one break in the precipice, led us steadily forward. There seemed something unnatural and dreamlike about the whole proceeding. Never in all my climbing experience had I experienced anything like it. It was a path that Pilgrim might have trodden.

The gorge seemed endless, but in reality it cannot have been more than a mile long. Then we turned a corner and a bright light suddenly smote our eyes. Framed in the dark rift was a strip of brilliant green. We pressed forward expectantly. The strip widened, revealing a vista of gently undulating grassland dotted with trees, and there came to us a warm fragrance of turf and flowers.

The ledge was roughly horizontal and as the bed of the gorge was steep we came out of the latter only a few feet above the torrent and straightaway stepped on to turf.

For miles we had mounted a stony valley typical of its kind in the Himalayas, now we came to a verdant country of grass and woodlands, of tumbling streams and spacious meadows. And not only this; the valley broadened out and the peaks on either hand stood well back. Alice in Wonderland when she peered through the small door into the flower garden cannot have experienced a greater thrill than we as we gazed into that Eden among mountains. Pendelbury was the first to speak.

"So this is the Country of Singing Birds," he said slowly. "Listen."

For a day and a half the strident note of the glacier torrent had been our theme song. Behind us its waters struggled furiously in the gorge but in the almost level valley before us they flowed placidly and soundlessly, and I became aware of a different sound, a thrilling chorus, the song of thousands of birds. From copse and meadow, shrub and tree, it came to us, filling the air with joyful sound. This then was Professor Wilberforce's retreat. This was the place we were rudely invading with unwanted news from an outside world.

Expectantly we gazed across the meadows and woodlands. Suddenly Nima Dorje clutched me by the arm.

"Barhal, Sahib, barhal! " he whispered.

He was right. Half concealed by a rhododendron thicket was a herd of the beasts. I had often stalked these wild sheep of the Himalayas and knew them to be shy and elusive creatures, but here they were less than fifty yards away grazing peacefully. Their leader, a fine old ram with a splendid head, paused to gaze at us, but apparently satisfied as to our good intentions, presently resumed his grazing. He and his companions had never learned to fear human beings. I remembered the abbot's words, "No bird or animal may be killed in my country where all is at peace."

But where was Mount Everest? Before us was ranged a

mighty wall of peaks, but the supreme summit was not visible. If Professor Wilberforce was within sight of it then he must have camped farther up the valley.

A short rest and we resumed our march. We passed within a few yards of the barhal, but they merely looked at us inquisitively even when Nima Dorje, unable to restrain himself, brandished his ice axe. Thenceforward, the way lay over lush meadows gay with flowers. There were innumerable butterflies, and almost every step brought some exclamation of surprise or delight from the enthusiastic Pendelbury.

The valley ran north-westwards for about five miles, then it bent sharply round a rocky buttress to the north. As we turned the buttress we saw what we had expected to see. The valley continued for some miles. It was parklike in appearance with scattered clumps of birches and firs, but beyond this peaceful scene the earth stood up in an enormous mountain that flaunted from its crest an immense banner of cloud.

" Chamalung," said Nima Dorje, and once again doffed his disreputable hat.

" Everest! " exclaimed Pendelbury and I in the same breath.

We continued to gaze without a further word. Our eyes passed from a vast muddle of lower buttresses, labyrinthine ridges and shattered glaciers, to steeps of snow and ice and soaring crests gleaming like blades of polished steel, up and up in a giddy surge to the final eminence of earth with its knightly plume of mist and snow.

We gazed along the valley but as yet could discern no signs of the Professor's camp. So we continued with our march. Half an hour later we emerged from a birch wood and knew that we had come to the end of our journey.

For the best part of a mile the valley floor was level and unbroken except for a few scattered trees. In the middle of

this expanse was an angular object that reflected the sunlight in a silvery gleam. It was an aeroplane tilted awkwardly over on to one side.

We approached. It was at once evident what had happened. The machine had been skilfully landed and the scattered trees avoided, but concealed amidst the long grass were occasional boulders. A wheel had struck one of these, crumpling the undercarriage and tipping the machine sideways on to one wing. The propeller had driven into the ground and its blades had broken off short at the boss. There was no damage to the fuselage that we could see, but short of replacements the machine would never fly again.

The occupants could not have camped far away because of the labour of moving stores from the machine, and we made for the woodlands nearest the scene of the landing.

The flat ground ended, and from a fringe of trees we found ourselves looking down into a little dell bright with flowers watered by a clear running stream. Two tents were pitched there. Near them a man and a girl were seated in camp chairs. The man had a flower press on his knees and was evidently mounting a specimen; the girl was reading. Neither heard us as we descended the grass-covered slopes towards them.

Chapter Twelve

IT WAS PENDELBURY WHO FIRST REVEALED OUR PRESENCE. WE were some ten yards away when he suddenly sneezed.

Never have I seen a sneeze produce a more instant consternation. Professor Wilberforce and his daughter leaped convulsively to their feet, and stood staring in amazement.

Professor Wilberforce was the first to speak.

"Who—who are you?" he stuttered.

Pendelbury half managed to smother another sneeze.

"It's all right, Professor Wilberforce. Don't be alarmed; it's only me, Pendelbury."

"Pendelbury?" reiterated the Professor dazedly. "Pendelbury?"

His daughter's face which had first gone white suddenly flushed a rosy pink. She broke into a high-pitched peal of laughter.

"Well I'm jiggered!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "If it isn't Mr. Pendelbury. And how on earth did you get here?"

We advanced, my companion blinking nervously and Nima Dorje grinning with interest and excitement. I for one felt a tattered ragamuffin before the cool appraising glance of the Professor's daughter and, indeed, torn and travel-stained as we were, we must have looked a pair of unmitigated toughs.

Mabel had completely recovered her composure.

"Please introduce your companion," she demanded imperiously.

"Certainly, certainly," hastened Pendelbury. "This is —er—Mr.—er—Trevanion; Miss Wilberforce."

"How do you do, Mr. Trevanion." She held out a slim brown hand. I took it and found myself facing a pair of

mocking dark eyes which seemed to play over me like a rapier. Now that the first shock had passed it was a very self-possessed young lady that stood before me, even though her slim body and ebony curls had nothing better to display them than a pair of shorts and an open-necked bush shirt.

"Daddy," she continued, "meet Mr. Trevanion."

But Professor Wilberforce made no move to comply with the invitation. He was staring from Pendelbury to me and back again. He was sparely built, the ideal figure of a traveller and explorer. As with his daughter his face was sunburned and brown, and this brownness contrasted with and accentuated a mop of silver hair and a pair of intensely blue eyes. Mild eyes they were with kindly wrinkles radiating from the corners, but there was no kindliness in them now; they looked at us sternly and resentfully.

"I think, gentlemen," he said at length, "that some explanation is due to me for this unwarrantable intrusion on my privacy. If I remember aright, Pendelbury, you gave me your word to respect it."

Before that cold glance my companion shuffled uncomfortably like a delinquent schoolboy. He was about to reply when Mabel broke in.

"Oh, shucks, Daddy, explanations can wait. Here they are anyway. I'm going to make them some tea. That man—who is he? Can he make a fire?"

"My servant," I explained. "Nima, get some wood and make a fire."

"Achha, Sahib," replied the Sherpa, and went off to do the needful. He, at any rate, was enjoying the situation.

"Come along, Mr. Trevanion," she continued. "You can help me wash up. I've a dreadful confession to make. I never washed up the things after lunch, but I'm really a very efficient housewife as Daddy will tell you."

"I'm sure you are," I told her, as we walked down to the

stream, "if your housewifery is anything like your piloting and navigation . . . "

She laughed.

"Well, we got here all right, Mr. Trevanion, but I was never so annoyed in my life as when we hit that boulder just when I thought we were nicely down. However, it doesn't matter much because there isn't enough petrol left to fly fifty miles and Daddy swears he's going to stay here until things have calmed down at home. You and Mr. Pendelbury turning up like this has upset him tremendously. You see we love being hoboes, and this is the most wonderful place in the world. And I had to help Daddy; he was at his wits' end to know what to do. It came as a terrible shock to him when he found that those stupid old men at the War Office only looked on his invention as a new and better means of warfare, not as something capable of preventing war." She paused and looked me straight in the eyes. "I don't know yet why you and Mr. Pendelbury are here, Mr. Trevanion, but if it's anything that Daddy doesn't like then I shan't like it either."

"I understand that," I said awkwardly, "but whatever happens, please acquit me of any personal motives. I'm not my own master in the matter. To be quite honest, Pendelbury and I hate intruding on your privacy like this, but, as it happens, there are other and urgent reasons why it's necessary."

We had been washing plates and cups as we talked. Now she set to work to dry them with a dishcloth. Suddenly she looked up and smiled.

"You know, Mr. Trevanion, I'm glad you and Theo have come. When I first saw you standing there I was horribly frightened. You see the old abbot at Kongra Dzong sent a message to Daddy saying that he had seen two Europeans and had sent them off on the wrong trail because he didn't like the look of them. We were wondering who they were

and Daddy was very worried. So was I. How you got here I simply don't know."

I did not answer immediately.

"We have a lot to tell you and your father," I said at length, "not all of it good news I'm afraid, but it's a long story and had better keep until after tea."

She looked at me quickly and intuitively.

"So there *are* two men? I mean besides yourselves."

I nodded. "How did you guess?"

She coloured.

"Because the abbot is a wonderful old man. He wouldn't have taken a dislike to you and Theo. Now please tell me about these men. Who are they and what are they up to?"

Her dark eyes were serious now and troubled.

"We don't know who they are, but I suspect that they are foreigners of some sort and after your father's invention. They've twice tried to murder us."

She caught her breath.

"Murder you!"

"Yes, they are evidently gentlemen who will stick at nothing. For the moment they've gone off on the wrong scent and the abbot may rope them in when they return. All the same, now it's known where you and your father are, you've got to get out of here."

"Daddy will never go."

"You will have to persuade him."

"I tell you he will never go. He swore that come what may he would remain here. He believes that Europe is going up in flames soon and refuses to have anything to do with it. He says everyone is to blame and that no invention of his is going to add to the carnage."

"I believe he's right about a war coming, but it won't be our war, and he has the power to stop it."

"You'll never convince him of that now."

"I'm going to try. Will you help?"

She gazed at me in silence for a few moments.

"I'll do my best," she said at last, "that is if Daddy's in any danger, but he's so terribly obstinate. If only I hadn't crashed on landing I could fly off and bring back help whether he liked it or not."

"There's no hope of repairing the 'plane?"

"None whatever without spares."

"Well, we shall have to do what we can to make him realise the position. It's wonderful to know that you will back me up; it will make all the difference."

She smiled.

"You wouldn't say that if you knew Daddy."

Washing up completed, we returned to the camp where a folding table was produced and the tea things set out on a flimsy lace cloth. This, I told myself, was camping *de luxe*, something quite different from the grubbing along of the mere male when he takes himself off into the blue. Except for the fact that Pendelbury and I sat on packing cases, and the tremendous background of mountain and cloud, we might have been enjoying tea in an English garden.

The Professor was silent during the meal and it was uncomfortably evident that his resentment at our intrusion had in no way diminished. Mabel was as well aware of this as us and chatted brightly away, as any good hostess would have done in similar circumstances.

The meal over, the Professor cleared his throat ominously.

"Now that you are refreshed," he began ponderously, "you will doubtless wish to provide me with some explanation of your presence in this valley, where I had hoped and expected to find some measure of that peace which was denied me in England."

Pendelbury looked nervously across at me.

"You had better explain, Tom."

"Right," I said. "You probably don't know, Professor

Wilberforce, that shortly after you left home, your chauffeur, Edwards, was found in the Thames. He had been murdered."

As I had anticipated, this information both startled and appalled the Professor.

"Edwards murdered!" he ejaculated, leaning forward in his camp chair with a horror-stricken face.

"Yes, murdered."

"But why?"

"That is where you may be able to throw some light. Scotland Yard's theory is that he knew where you were going and sold his information to foreign agents, and that when he had done so they decided to silence him permanently."

"Nonsense! I cannot believe that he would have done such a thing, and anyway he could not have gained any information as to our destination."

"Are you certain about this?"

"Absolutely certain."

"There was no possible means by which he could have found out?"

"One moment, Daddy," broke in Mabel, "what about the map?"

"The map?"

"You remember we marked out the course on a map."

"That is true," agreed the Professor, "but we took care to let no one see it."

"We did, Daddy, but once or twice it was left lying on your desk, you are a bit absent-minded sometimes, and Edwards may have slipped in and seen it. He was a well-educated man and would be able to read it and understand what it meant."

"True, true, my dear; but Edwards! I cannot believe that he was deceitful and dishonest. I trusted him absolutely."

" H'm," I said. " I'm afraid that there were deeper depths to Edwards than you suspected. He was known to gamble and was heavily in debt at the time. That may have accounted for a great deal."

The Professor shrugged his shoulders.

" Well, suppose I accept your statement, Mr. Trevanion, may I inquire how it was that the authorities came to know my whereabouts? "

I smiled.

" That is easy, Professor. One of your maidservants overheard you and Miss Wilberforce discussing the proposed flight. She didn't understand what it was about, but she remembered enough to put Scotland Yard on the track. It was known that you had already visited Northern Nepal and putting two and two together they had a shrewd idea as to where you had gone."

Professor Wilberforce groaned.

" I see it all now. We were careless, Mabel, criminally careless." Suddenly anger blazed up in his blue eyes. " And now that it is known where I am, now that the authorities refuse to respect my desire for privacy, now that you are here, Mr. Trevanion, what proposals have you to make? "

" I think," said I, " that I had better tell you all I know, then you can judge for yourself what is best to be done."

With that I told him the story of my adventures and of the plots against my life.

Both the Professor and Mabel listened attentively, but when I came to my fight with Pendelbury, Mabel burst into a peal of laughter, and even the Professor's stern face relaxed a little.

" Poor Theo! " giggled the former.

Pendelbury smiled a trifle bleakly.

" I can assure you that it was not in the least funny at the time. I thought I was fighting for my very life."

Then I went on to describe the nefarious activities of the

two we had followed, and they became solemn again, especially so when I told them about the rope bridges and how I had narrowly escaped being drowned. Pendelbury wriggled uncomfortably when I described his brave action and made deprecatory noises. The Professor and Mabel were visibly moved.

"That was a brave act," said the former. "I have misjudged you, Pendelbury. I thought at first that you had divulged my secret."

A little later, when I told how the porters had been sent back with no rope to perish miserably in a crevasse, the Professor drew a deep breath.

"I can scarcely believe it," he said. "Surely there must be a mistake. Perhaps they were merely careless and did not consider the consequences?"

Never had I met anyone so loath to believe evil of his fellow men.

Finally, I described our experiences at Kongra Dzong, touching upon the abbot's esteem for the Professor.

"And so you see," I concluded, "there are now two reasons why you should return to England, for apart from the value of your discovery your whereabouts are known to others. Pendelbury and I know them to be unscrupulous ruffians who will stick at nothing."

I paused. The story had taken a long time in the telling and the shadows were lengthening in the valley. The Professor was silent, his eyes ruminating and far away. I felt that I had put my case well, even that I had won it. Had we come merely to beg him to return in the interests of his country we might well have failed, but the fact that others knew of his hiding-place altered the whole complexion of the problem. I must have forgotten Mabel's warning that come what might her father would refuse to leave, for I felt almost complacent.

The Professor's first words shattered my illusions.

"I shall remain here, Mr. Trevanion." He spoke gently, but there was the ring of an unalterable decision in his voice.

His flat and unemotional words sent a chill of apprehension down my spine.

"You mean . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Trevanion. I mean that I have renounced civilisation and that I will have nothing further to do with its destructive processes. I have laboured under a grievous misapprehension. I believed that through my discoveries in applied science I was contributing to the peace of the world; I know now that I was mistaken, that I was asking the impossible of humanity. The abbot of Kongra Dzong in his wisdom has shown me that the peace and happiness of man cannot be achieved through fear but only through love."

"I agree with much of what you say, Professor Wilberforce," said Pendelbury earnestly. "Man's spiritual destiny is linked with love and not hate and fear. But before I decided to come out here in search of you, I spent many anxious hours thinking out what was best to do. I prayed for guidance. It came to me then, I sincerely believe in answer to my prayers, that you were wrong in supposing that were England armed with some new and formidable weapon she would use it to cow and dominate other nations. I came to the conclusion that you had been unfortunate in your experiences with the military authorities. They are trained merely to fight and kill, and their outlook is not necessarily representative of the nation's outlook. My conviction is that you should place your discovery at the disposal of the Government and that a great European catastrophe would be avoided if you did so."

Professor Wilberforce smiled.

"Ah, Pendelbury, you are a good fellow, a practical churchman if ever there was one, but I wonder whether

you will ever see deeply enough into the scheme of things to separate the pure gold from what so often passes as gold, the dross with a golden glitter, the dross that is called patriotism, yes, and sometimes even Christianity. If I thought that my discoveries could avert war, I should not hesitate, I should hand them over to the Government; but I do not believe that anything physical or material can militate against the catastrophe that is coming to the West. Did the abbot of Kongra Dzong repeat to you the ancient prophecy which is among the archives of the monastery? He did. Then you will remember how an evil arose out of wheels that turned faster and ever faster. There is a scourge coming to the West of its own making, Pendelbury, and the knots in it are called dictators, hard knots tied out of revenge, greed, hatred and the lust for economic and social power. You, Trevanion, love the mountains as I do and the simple life amidst Nature. You know that all a man needs for spiritual happiness and bodily comfort is companionship, food and warmth and that everything else, the vast material gain and inventiveness of man, is illusory unless it can be directed into the channels of knowledge and through knowledge to a greater understanding of the universe and the abounding love of Him who created it. That to my mind should be the justification of science and invention and the sole arbiter of creative genius. Look there, at Everest. See how the declining sun lights the snow on high. That is beauty; the man who can interpret and reveal one fraction in picture, poetry or prose to his fellow men has accomplished something beyond price."

There was silence. Somewhere, distantly, I could hear Nima Dorje's cheerful little ditty as he went about collecting wood, then there was the near music of the stream and a great chorus of bird song sounding through the still woodlands. I found myself looking at Mabel. Her piquant face, so smooth and brown, with its firm little chin and

tip-tilted nose, was in profile. She was gazing at her father, but suddenly, and it seemed almost unconsciously, she turned towards me and smiled. For a second or so our eyes were locked and I forgot everything else. My heart gave a queer little jump and I felt my face to be flushing hotly. As though from a great distance I heard Pendelbury's voice.

"I honour you for what you say, Professor, I do indeed. You are an idealist, yet idealism is not only a matter of cutting yourself off from your fellow men and brooding over the sins of the world. When one of my parishioners is sick I go to his bedside and try my best to cheer him. The West, as you say, is sick; it needs men of vision like yourself to minister to it. I still maintain that you have it in your power to protect millions of innocent people from aggression and prevent a great war."

The Professor smiled again, sadly.

"You and I, Theo, have much in common. You must believe me when I say that I have often asked myself whether I was acting purely from selfish motives, but my conscience is clear on that point. I believe that were any government to be in possession of my discovery, then the effects on humanity as a whole would be disastrous."

"Suppose your plans are stolen?" I asked him.

He regarded me quizzically.

"My dear sir, do you really suppose that I have not considered that possibility? During the flight I had ready to hand means of instantly destroying them in the event of a forced landing, and when we arrived here my first care was to render them inaccessible."

"You have destroyed them?"

"It is immaterial to you, Mr. Trevanion, what I have done with them; I can only repeat that they are inaccessible to anyone but myself."

"Then you have hidden them?"

The Professor stiffly inclined his head.

"You are very inquisitive, Mr. Trevanion."

"It is not for my own sake," I told him frankly. "I'm thinking of the fate of some millions of innocent men, women, and children, should your discovery fall into the hands of one of the dictator countries. What one man has hidden another may find, even perhaps accidentally."

"If it would relieve your mind, Mr. Trevanion, I can tell you that their discovery, accidental or otherwise, is out of the question."

"There is another point," I went on. "Pendelbury will bear me out when I say that somewhere not far away, two utterly unscrupulous blackguards are at large. Suppose they find their way here?"

"Then I am afraid that they will meet with no more success than yourself."

"You mean that you have merely to inform them politely that the plans are inaccessible and they will depart leaving you in peaceful seclusion?"

"You put it perfectly, Mr. Trevanion. What else could they do?"

"What else could they do! Have I not told you that these men will stick at nothing to gain their ends?"

"You have, and I am getting a trifle weary of the continual atmosphere of melodrama which you insist on imparting into this matter."

I decided that it was time to play my trump card.

"Melodrama or no melodrama," I said grimly, "there is abundant evidence that two of the worst crooks in Christendom are after you and your plans. You appear to forget, Professor Wilberforce, that you have a daughter whom your obstinacy may expose to danger."

It was abruptly, even brutally said. He was on the brink of an angry reply but with an effort he mastered his rising wrath; his voice was quiet and level as he replied:

"I have been considering that side of the problem and

I have decided if necessary to confide you, my dear," he turned to Mabel, " to the care of you, Pendelbury. You will be safely escorted from Nepal to India."

The momentary but electric silence following upon this announcement was broken by Mabel's silvery laugh.

" My dear old Daddykins, do you really think that I've flown you several thousand miles to leave you alone here? Not on your life. Besides, I love this valley and the birds. If you stay, I stay too."

For the first time a look of anxiety clouded the Professor's brow.

" No, my dear, you must go. It was no part of our arrangement that you should stay with me indefinitely. You are young; your life is before you; you have many and varied interests. I am old and want only peace and tranquillity. I had intended to broach the subject before the appearance of Pendelbury and Mr. Trevanion. It was worrying me. Since the machine was damaged I have been wondering how I should get you to India. Now there is an opportunity; I must insist that you take it."

But Mabel merely smiled.

" Really, Daddy, it's no good your trying on the heavy Victorian stuff. It simply won't work."

I could not repress a grin, but out of the corner of my eye I seemed to discern a look of shocked disapproval on Pendelbury's round face. Among clerics the modern young miss with her racy slang and disrespectful attitude to her elders is still highly indigestible. Hesitatingly he cleared his throat and spoke.

" Really, Mabel," he said stiffly, " it seems to me that your father is acting for the best and that you should obey him."

" Dear old Theo, there's nothing more I should like than to tramp through Nepal with you and Mr. Trevanion, but it can't be done. So long as Daddy stays here, I stay too, and if the thugs turn up, well, we shall have to bat them on

the head, shan't we, Daddy? I've just been reading Captain Kettle. His friend, Mr. McTodd, always hit people on the head with spanners. I've a fine collection in the machine."

Professor Wilberforce sank his head in his hands and groaned.

"Worse than her mother used to be!" I heard him mutter. When at length he raised his head it was with a look of resignation.

"Tell me, Mr. Trevanion, do you think that these men might attempt any mischief in the immediate future?"

"I don't know," I replied. "The danger is that now your retreat is known it is only a matter of time before others turn up, and the abbot of Kongra Dzong couldn't do much against an armed band of desperadoes."

"I see your point. I feel that perhaps I have refused to face the facts as you have stated them. You see," he continued wistfully, "I have grown to love this spot. When I first discovered it three years ago, I swore that one day I would return and spend a year or two studying the bird and plant life. The abbot of Kongra Dzong is a valued friend and colleague. Not only has he assisted me in my studies but I have gained through him much wisdom. As a result, the thought of returning to Europe is well-nigh intolerable. All I ask for now is that I should be allowed to spend the remaining years of my life at peace. There is one thing that you must clearly understand. Should I decide to leave this valley, the work I have done will remain here until such time as I am able peacefully to develop it for the astronomical purposes for which it was originally intended."

"You mean you will leave the plans of your discovery behind you?"

"Yes, Mr. Trevanion. You have already heard my views; further amplification would seem unnecessary."

"I am sorry," I said simply. "I still believe you are wrong

and that your discovery in the hands of the British Government would prevent, not encourage, war."

"On that point then we must agree to differ. No, Pendelbury; it is useless your saying anything further. I respect you for coming here and I regret the perils and hardships you have endured, but on the question of my discovery and its possible application, my mind is made up." He rose to his feet. "It is my custom to take a stroll while Mabel cooks the dinner." Gathering up his flower press he made for his tent, and a few moments later we saw his lean, spare frame disappear into the fast gathering dusk.

Mabel, Pendelbury and I were left eyeing one another over the tea cups.

"Poor Daddy," said Mabel. "I wonder if you realise how much this means to him? He was very very tired when we arrived here. He thought he had discovered peace and rest, but it was not to be," she concluded sadly.

There was silence after this. I found my eyes straying up the valley to the mighty pile of Everest. In the depths, the brief twilight was growing deeper every minute. Every other peak was white and dead, but still that highest of all summits hung glowing in the half-light, enormous, mysterious, sublime. Here was something symbolic of the peace men sought but could not find, dreams and fantasies woven on high amidst the stars, a serenity infinitely divorced from the play and interplay of life on the plains beneath. It was very silent now. Only the stream continued its melody and even that seemed hushed and subdued, awed by the spirit breath of sundown. And as we continued to sit the last of the bird chorus thinned gradually away and died in the woodlands around.

It was dark when Professor Wilberforce returned. Meanwhile Mabel had cooked the supper. With housewifely acumen she had brought out from England many excellent foodstuffs. In addition, sweet wild rhubarb and onions grew

near the camp. As a result, Pendelbury and I enjoyed our best meal since leaving Darjeeling. Mabel chatted brightly throughout. She had taken a great fancy to Nima Dorje, and I acted as interpreter while she asked him many questions as to his home life and his adventures on the expeditions in which he had taken part. The little Sherpa was at first very shy and faced his inquisitor with a sheepish grin, twisting his hat in his horny hands, but he got over this presently, and related many battles with the giants of the Himalayas, including two attempts to climb Mount Everest, on both of which he had greatly distinguished himself.

The Professor was silent throughout the meal and for some time afterwards sat by the fire smoking without a word. Suddenly, however, he seemed to come to some decision for he knocked out his pipe and began to talk. In the firelight his face looked lined and worn and what he had to say evidently cost him a considerable effort.

"Since our conversation," he began, "I have been considering the problems as outlined by you, Mr. Trevanion, and you, my dear Theo, and I have come to the conclusion that now my retreat is known to others there is little object in my continuing to reside here, since it is evident that I shall be continually pestered by those interested in my discoveries. Furthermore, there are, as you point out, certain dangers. I have considered the possibility of accepting a standing invitation by the abbot of Kongra Dzong, who told me that I could seek the sanctuary of his monastery at any time. This would have been necessary in any case during the winter months when snow lies here many feet deep, but I had hoped to have arranged for Mabel to leave for India before then.

"I have, therefore, decided to accompany you back to India where I shall acquaint the Government of the decision already arrived at that my discovery is not available. The plans and formulae connected with it I shall leave behind

me. On this last point I can set your mind at rest, Mr. Trevanion; they are concealed where no one save myself can find them. Not even you, my dear," he said, turning to his daughter, "know where they are, not because I do not trust you, but simply because I want to spare you any difficulty or embarrassment in the future. I know your views, Theo, and yours also, Mr. Trevanion, and I respect them. I appreciate your motives and the sense of self-sacrificing patriotism that brought you here, but they are not my views and I beg of you to respect them even as I respect yours. In view of the fact that the abbot will detain the two renegades who have already caused so much trouble, there seems no need to hasten away from here. I am particularly anxious to complete the botanical and ornithological work on which I am engaged. I take it that neither of you are in a hurry to return and that you would not resent a few days in this valley?"

"There is nothing more I should like," I told him. "It has long been an ambition of mine to examine Mount Everest from the south, but there is one thing that still worries me. Supposing those two manage to get here unobserved by the monks, perhaps by some route other than past Kongra Dzong? You know the country better than I, Professor, do you think they could cross the mountains?"

"I have considered that possibility," he replied. "In a country like this it is not to be entirely ruled out, but the range separating the valley they have followed from this is very formidable and exceeds twenty-three thousand feet in places. But even if they did get here what can they do? They are unarmed and the plans are inaccessible to them."

"That is so," I agreed. "All the same I've a feeling that we haven't seen the last of them. How long would it take you to complete your work?"

"A week should be sufficient."

A week in the Country of Singing Birds. It would be an interesting time. Assuredly there was no country richer in beauty and grandeur than this fertile valley beneath the precipices of Mount Everest.

I found my eyes straying to the girl who sat opposite. Her face showed brown and elfin in the firelight. Without thinking I knocked out my pipe, got out my tobacco pouch and rammed in a new charge of tobacco. As I did so she turned and looked at me.

"Do you always smoke like that, Mr. Trevanion? You only filled it up just now and you've wasted three-quarters of the tobacco."

I must have reddened as I mumbled awkwardly:

"So I have. Stupid of me. Can't afford to waste tobacco here."

She laughed, and her laughter matched the liquid sound of the stream as it slipped over the stones.

"Men are such wasteful creatures. I suppose when you run out of tobacco you'll be like a bear with a sore head?"

"Really, Mabel!" said the Professor reprovingly.

"Well, you see I know what *you're* like, Daddy. But perhaps Mr. Trevanion is strong like you, Theo."

The little parson grinned self-consciously.

"Well, the—ah—fact is I don't smoke on principle. I came to the conclusion when I was up at the 'Varsity that it impaired the wind."

"I see, that explains your sermons."

"Really, Mabel!" said her father again, while Pendelbury blinked at this allusion to his professional activities, uncertain whether to regard it as a joke or not.

"You think my sermons are too long?" he said at last, defensively.

"Not when you make them up yourself," said Mabel kindly. "It's when you read other people's that they seem interminable."

Pendelbury glowed at the compliment.

"I fear that is not always the rector's view. He says my own compositions are distinguished by a certain shallowness, and that my similes and metaphors are often singularly inappropriate to the subject-matter and the occasion."

"I expect that's why I liked them," said Mabel. "Anyway, I think the rector's a stupid man. He's always humming and hawing, and he's got a face like a codfish," she concluded irreverently.

"Really, Mabel!" said her father for the third time that evening. "I suggest that your own similes are scarcely appropriate."

As for Pendelbury he was momentarily at a loss for words.

"The rector is an estimable man," he said at last, "but I fear that he is scarcely likely to approve of my travels or absence from the parish."

"You don't mean to say you took French leave to come out here?" cried the girl.

He nodded.

"I fear that is how it may be described."

"Well I'm jiggered! I didn't think you had it in you, Theo."

Pendelbury looked a trifle pained.

"I considered it necessary," he replied stiffly. "My decision was only arrived at after much heart-searching."

Professor Wilberforce leaned across and placed a sun-tanned hand on the little man's shoulder.

"My dear fellow, you must believe me when I say again how much I appreciate your action. I fear it may react on you adversely."

"I would not mind that if I were successful in convincing you, Professor, that it is in the best interests of humanity that you place your discovery at the disposal of the Government," said Pendelbury sturdily.

The Professor withdrew his hand.

"I fear that is impossible," he replied quietly. "You would not have me go against my conscience, I am sure."

"I understand," said Pendelbury earnestly. "It may even be that you are right and I am wrong, that you have been permitted to see more into the heart of things than I. Who are we anyway to make decisions that may affect the lives and happiness of millions of our fellow men?"

"That is what I feel, Theo. It were better that I had never applied myself to science." He clenched his fists until the veins stood out. "God knows the agony of mind that I have been through since I realised what I had done. It seemed to me that I had raised the very devil himself. I am an Englishman like you, Theo, and you, Trevanion. I love my country, its traditions, its associations, its peace, the simplicity of its country folk. Many a time I have been tempted to reconsider my decision. If only I could be sure that this fearful weapon of mine would be used merely to preserve those people and those things that are so precious to me, but I am convinced that the West is not ready for such discoveries. I know that the inventive power and genius of man's brain has outrun his spiritual progress. There is a great flame due to sweep this earth. Man will writhe and twist in a torture-chamber of his own devising. Heaven forbid that I should add to his torture."

"You believe that another World War is imminent?" I asked him.

"I do. And not one war but many until we all realise that one thing and one thing alone can direct our footsteps."

"You mean . . . ?"

"Love, Trevanion, a principle capable of solving every difficulty, international, national, and personal; a feeling permeating every hour and day of life; kindness if you like, just kindness."

I knew then that I had failed in my mission. I had done my best, and so had Pendelbury, but we were opposed to an

idealist who had come under the influence of a still greater idealist—the abbot of Kongra Dzong. Steeped and grounded though I might be in conventional ideas I found it difficult to keep a grasp on reality before the blaze of two such personalities. I seemed to see a world consisting no longer of suspicious and warring peoples but a vast brotherhood united under the same banner. And yet, and yet, someone had to lead and initiate. Someone had to educate and direct perverse human nature, to overcome the inherited fears and selfishness of untold centuries. Was England fit to do it? Had my country qualities worth preserving, the first of many stepping-stones across a wide and turbulent river of many conflicting currents? And if so, was the Professor right in denying to his country the fruits of his genius? Was he too far in advance of his time? Great principles were easy to advocate but infinitely hard to realise. Struggle and suffering had been the lot of humanity through æons of time. It was only thus that man progressed spiritually. And England was faced with a new and terrible danger, a moral retrogression that threatened the whole world. Like any ostrich she had buried her head in the sand while the armoured chariots were clanking into position. Was she too late, too weak to stop the rot? Surely the issues were simple? How easy it was to talk, how easy to be an idealist, how easy to shut yourself away in the depths of the Himalayas and avoid vital issues. Faults there were in plenty in England but also virtues, great and enduring virtues. Somehow or other Professor Wilberforce must be made to appreciate the real issues, the live core of this matter before it was too late.

Chapter Thirteen

BEFORE TURNING IN I POINTED OUT THE ADVISABILITY OF keeping watch. I expected the Professor to scorn the precaution, but to my surprise he acquiesced without demur. He asked for the first spell, and we left him seated by the fire meditatively sucking his pipe.

Pendelbury roused me for the last watch. I do not suppose any sentry has witnessed a more wonderful sight than I as, three hours later, Mount Everest lit up in the floods of dawn. Then came the sun to change the high snows from alabaster to gold, to reveal the enormous details, the crowding forests still dim with night, the huddle of lower buttresses, the sweep of glaciers, the fluted ice slopes and razor-edged crests, all ending in that uppermost secret place, that inviolate summit which man for all his ingenuity has failed to tread.

The sunlight grew. It was a beacon and a signal. From a near-by copse came the twitter of a bird. It was answered by another and another until a great chorus filled the still frosty air.

At breakfast the Professor invited Pendelbury to accompany him on a flower-hunting and bird-watching expedition. The latter was nothing loath, especially as the valley was rich in many species of butterflies. For my part I had decided that it was advisable to check the Professor's statement as to the difficulty of the range separating this valley from the valley up which our enemies had gone, and see whether there was any possibility of their attempting to reach us other than by Kongra Dzong. The best way of doing this was to clamber some thousands of feet up the eastern side of the valley until a good viewpoint was

reached. It was Mabel herself who suggested that she should accompany me.

"It will be a pretty strenuous scramble," I warned her.

"I know it is," she replied, smiling.

"You've been there before?"

"I went with Daddy."

"I didn't know you were a mountaineer."

"There's a lot you don't know about me. As a matter of fact I love climbing now even more than flying. In flying you are taken there, but in climbing you have to get there by your own unaided efforts; there's a big difference."

A few minutes later we were off. The Professor and Pendelbury had not yet started and I thought I saw the latter's eyes follow us a trifle wistfully.

It was a perfect morning as we crossed the dew-soaked meadows, then mounted tree-clad slopes where the birds sang with an even greater vigour, if that were possible.

An hour later we were above the forest on grassy slopes that rose at an ever steepening angle. I watched my companion as she climbed; she moved with the grace, agility, and rhythm of a born mountaineer, and more than this, she possessed in full measure that poise and balance in which a woman so often excels the male.

Some strenuous going brought us to slopes of rubble, then to snow, and finally to a rocky ridge leading up between two steep little glaciers. For safety's sake we tied on a rope though I already felt certain that Mabel was equally sure-footed and confident on difficult ground.

A further three hours of exhilarating scrambling and we found ourselves on the summit we had been aiming for. In the Alps it would have been reckoned a fair-sized mountain but here it ranked as a minor eminence, a mere outcrop of a rocky wall that rose sheer for thousands of feet. All the same, it was a splendid viewpoint, and we seated ourselves

on some sun-warmed rocks to enjoy the prospect and our lunch.

As the Professor had said, the range bounding the valley to the west was a formidable proposition even to an expert mountaineering party fully equipped for the job. At no point was it less than twenty-one thousand feet high and it consisted of wall-sided peaks of terrific steepness. In one place only was there any indication of a pass. This was a notch in the chain between two needle-like peaks separated from the valley by ice slopes of formidable length and steepness.

On the whole there seemed little doubt that anyone who approached the Country of Singing Birds must first of all pass Kongra Dzong, in which case he would be seen and detained by the lamas.

Satisfied with this inspection we gazed down at the camp, a mere speck over five thousand feet beneath, then up the valley with its woodlands and flowerful meadows until our vision was brought up short by the gigantic mass of Mount Everest. If the mountain looked magnificent from the valley it showed to even finer advantage now, for our height practically eliminated foreshortening. Precipice on precipice it lifted to the crest of Lhotse the South Peak, then in a sublime sweep of ice and snow to the highest summit whence flowed a plume of mist and wind-blown snow covering miles of peaks and ranges with its pall.

" Once," said Mabel slowly, " I used to think people who climbed mountains stupid when it was so easy to fly even higher than Everest, but now I understand why. There is something that seems to drive you there. When I first saw the Himalayas I felt as Kim did when he said, ' Surely the gods live there.' *Per ardua ad astra*—I think that fits climbing even better than flying."

We were silent for a while as we gazed at the glorious panorama of peak and cloud.

"Do you mind if I call you by your Christian name?" I asked her, a trifle awkwardly.

"Not a bit," she returned, smiling. "It's less of a mouthful for one thing. Yours is Tom, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Tom Trevanion. It trips nicely off the tongue."

"It does when you say it."

"Really, Mr.—er—Tom," she laughed. "When I first saw you I thought you were one of those strong silent men but now I'm not so sure."

"Strong silent men of the Ethel M. Dell type simply don't exist," I told her. "The real ones are only silent because they've nothing to say, and when they go into the wide open spaces they don't wash or shave and live like pigs."

She grimaced.

"How horrible! I couldn't live like that, not even in the wilds. I've brought all the feminine vanities I could think of, even lipstick which Daddy hates; he says it's atavistic to adorn oneself. I expect Mr. Pendelbury has similar views. Dear Theo! I could never resist pulling his leg at Forestford. How he must have hated me for it."

"On the contrary, he probably enjoyed the process."

She smiled.

"And yet I've always felt so sorry for him; that awful dried-up creature of a rector disapproving of everything he did, and the bunch of unattached spinsters always on his trail. It made me feel positively maternal towards him, poor dear."

"Well, I couldn't have wished for a better companion. He's the toughest and bravest little fellow I've ever met."

"Is he really? I always thought there was something that only needed bringing out."

"There's one thing I've been wanting to ask you. Don't you find it lonely here?"

She considered for a few moments before replying.

"Perhaps, in a way. I would do anything for Daddy, but he lives a bit in the clouds sometimes, and when he said that we might have to spend the winter at Kongra Dzong because of the snow I didn't like the idea. A week or two after we got here we went down the valley and called on the abbot. He's a dear, but some of the monks were so dirty and the monastery is a cold, draughty, smelly place."

"It certainly isn't a Ritz."

"I don't ask for a Ritz in the mountains, but I do like well-cooked food and all the comfort and cleanliness I can get. On those Everest expeditions I've read about they always seem to wallow in dirt and discomfort and eat badly cooked food."

"That's the explorer's prerogative."

"Well, they ought to take a woman to look after them," she said decidedly. "She would make them wash and shave and eat decently."

"I'm sure she would," I returned, smiling. "At least *you* would."

"I should do my best. Men are such helpless creatures on their own."

"That's what I'm beginning to think," I said.

She swung lightly off the boulder on which she was perched and stood for a moment gazing down into the valley.

"I love all this," she said simply. "It's so grand and simple. The day after we arrived I lay out in the sun for hours listening to the birds and watching the clouds wandering about the mountain tops. It's my idea of heaven."

"And mine too."

She turned and regarded me steadily.

"Is it really? Then you're the first man I've met who liked simple things."

"And you are the first woman I've met."

She turned and gazed towards Everest. I found myself

studying her face, her sun-browned skin the colour of honey, her provocative, tip-tilted nose, the curve of her chin, her dark hair stirring gently in the hill breeze, her lithe figure perfectly outlined against the distant shine of a high snowfield. And quite suddenly there ran through me an indescribable feeling. It was as though my whole body had been charged with electricity. My heart missed a beat, then began to hammer in my throat. And that was how love first came to me. It sounds banal as I put it. It is something I cannot describe. All I know is that with every fibre of my being I wanted to take her in my arms.

"Mabel," I began, and my voice sounded hoarse and strange in my own ears. "Mabel, I . . . " Heaven knows what I was going to say but the words seemed to crowd together and jam in a hopeless muddle.

She looked at me and for a moment her eyes were soft, or so I imagined. Then:

"We'd better be getting back," she said, "or Daddy will be wondering what's happened to us. Besides, I'm simply dying for some tea."

And so we clambered down. I couldn't say another word. The moment had passed, that supreme moment when, standing on a mountain top under the rich blue of the Himalayan sky, I first realised that I loved Mabel Wilberforce. I know now that such a love, call it love at first sight if you like, recks nothing of time or place; it is fundamental, the hand of Fate. Yet, as we descended the sun-warmed rocks, I experienced all the agonies of a self-conscious reaction. For a moment I had trodden space with the gods, now I crept along like a worm in the dust telling myself miserably that I had only known her for a day and had precious nearly made a blithering idiot of myself.

Then, with a sudden bump, I remembered Pendelbury. Had he fallen under the same spell? I remembered his first awkwardness, his far-awayness, at mention of her name, and

more than once I had seen his eyes following her with a look of dog-like devotion. Quite apart from our friendship and the fact that he had saved my life, who was I, a very ordinary person in the I.C.S., a bachelor who loved a rough life knocking about in the wilds, to ask any woman to link her life with mine? And yet, and yet. For the first time I was going through the delicious, delightful, torturing experience of falling in love. Sentiment, a thing outside my experience, had come knocking at the door and had been admitted first knock.

It was late afternoon when we regained the valley. Professor Wilberforce and Pendelbury had had a good day and the latter was brimming over with enthusiasm because of all the rare butterflies he had seen.

That evening we again sat by a fire of birch wood and juniper to eat an appetising supper cooked by Mabel with the help of Nima Dorje, who had become her close and attentive slave. The stars shone down through the motionless lacery of birches with a wonderful brilliance, and all about, more felt than seen, were the encompassing mountains. The real object of my presence there seemed strangely remote. Yet the hard fact was that I had failed in my mission. Nothing I could say or do would avail against Professor Wilberforce's inflexible determination not to allow his discovery to be used for the destruction of his fellow men. Yet I had learned to respect his decision. He had talked of love as the prime mover in human affairs. I had thought him an impractical idealist and sentimentalist, but I knew now that he was right. For I had also discovered love that day. Again and again I found my eyes turning to the girl who sat near me. She had been beautiful on the hillside in the sun, and she was beautiful in the warm glow of the fire as it lit her bronzed face and arms. And once, suddenly, and for no particular reason, she glanced at me and smiled. Was it an ordinary friendly smile or

was it something else? Time stood still, and again I found my heart bumping against my ribs. The others must have found me unusually silent as I sat there on a packing case puffing at my pipe, quite unable to enter into their conversation. We were very peaceful that evening in the Country of Singing Birds and feared no evil.

Chapter Fourteen

IT WAS IN THE SMALL HOURS THAT IT HAPPENED.

As usual we kept watch. Nima Dorje was on guard when Pendelbury and I, who shared a tent loaned to us by Professor Wilberforce, were awakened by a shout followed by a shrill cry of pain, then a shot.

We hastened to extricate ourselves from our sleeping bags. We had scarcely done so when the tent flaps were torn apart and we were dazzled by the glare from an electric torch.

"If you move," said a voice in clipped English, "you will be shot."

Resistance was useless for we could see the menacing gleam of a pistol barrel.

Pendelbury was the first to speak.

"What! What!" he stuttered. "What is the meaning of this?"

"You shall know soon enough," said a voice from outside, a harsh voice that I seemed to recognise. "You have the Professor and the girl?"

"Ja, Herr Kapitan."

"And that *verdammt* native—you shot him?"

"He is gone, Herr Kapitan," said another voice.

"You clumsy fool! You were always a bad shot, even in the *Putsch*. Has he hurt you?"

"He has cut me in the arm. It is bleeding badly."

"It serves you right. Fritz! Bind up Oskar's wound. And light a lamp. I will inspect the captives."

A few moments later a young man carrying a hurricane lamp entered the tent. There was something vaguely familiar about him. A huge, powerfully built fellow

followed. He took the lamp from his companion and, holding it before him, surveyed us.

"So," said he, "the journey ends, Mr. Trevanion, and . . . But what is this? *Bei Gott*, if it is not the little parson! What is your name now? Pendelbury, yes, I remember, the Reverend Pendelbury. But this is indeed an unexpected pleasure. The butterfly-hunting parson, well, well, this is something new; I had no idea."

It was then that we recognised him, for he raised the lamp as he spoke and now it shone full on his face. It was the American globe-trotter, Harrison B. George. It was the American and yet it was not. The spectacles had gone and so had the air of vulgarity and benevolence. The face before us seemed to have changed; it was no longer white and fleshy, but sunburned and hard. And, more than this, it was brutal. The cold, light grey eyes, the heavy jowl and massive chin all spoke of ruthlessness and brutality.

Pendelbury was again the first to find his voice.

"Mr. George!" he exclaimed in amazement, then: "What is the meaning of this—this outrage?"

The American grinned insolently.

"Not an outrage, my dear sir, not an outrage. Merely a call, a pleasant social call even if made at a somewhat unusual hour in a somewhat unusual place. But I see that you still labour under a delusion. You must really allow me to introduce myself. I am not an American, *Gott sei dank* for that, I am a German. Hunzerger is my name, Captain Friedrich von Hunzerger, and this is my son, Otto, a rising young member of the party and already well thought of by Herr Himmler."

Hunzerger, the name seemed familiar. Then I remembered, for I had seen it often enough in the newspapers. The man who stood before us was none other than the head of Hitler's special secret police, and the right-hand man of that sinister figure Himmler. It was he who had been as

responsible as any of the Nazi gang for the cold-blooded shootings at Munich when the Führer turned on his former friends and associates.

"I see that you have heard of me, Mr. Trevanion," he said, looking at me keenly.

"I have," I replied grimly, "but I repeat my friend's question. What is the meaning of this outrage?"

Hunzerger shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Need we go into tedious explanations? Surely that is obvious?"

"What have you done to Miss Wilberforce and her father?"

He grinned.

"I observe," said he smoothly, "that you very gallantly place the lady first. Let me assure you that we Germans are chivalrous. No harm will come to her, or to you, if you behave yourselves, and very soon when Professor Wilberforce has handed to me the plans of his most interesting invention, you will be left in peace to enjoy this most charming and romantic valley."

There was a sneer in every word he spoke and I felt my rage mounting every instant.

"Robbery and murder may go down in Germany, Captain Hunzerger, but it won't here. We are British subjects in a friendly State."

He sighed ponderously.

"Really you English are a strange people. You appear to think that your nationality and a Foreign Office passport confer upon you complete immunity from the trials and tribulations of this wicked world. But you mention murder. I am not aware that I have committed that particular crime here, at least not yet."

"What about your porters?"

"Porters?"

"The four men you sent back without any rope. It may

interest you to know that they fell into a crevasse and were killed."

There was not a trace of surprise or emotion in the sinister face before us.

"Ah, those. Yes, I remember now. So they fell into a crevasse and were killed. Well, well, that was very foolish of them, was it not?"

"It was murder and you know it. You planned to murder those men just as you attempted to murder me. It is a speciality of yours from all accounts, Captain Hunzerger."

Again he grinned.

"You must admit, Mr. Trevanion, that my first attempt was positively artistic; as for the second, I fear I must apologise: poison is a vulgar method. I congratulate you upon the strength of your stomach. It is the first time I have known that particular poison to fail. I was indeed astonished when my agent wirelessed that you had recovered and had gone to Darjeeling."

"So you admit it?"

"Of course I admit it. Why not? You and I were on the same mission and it must be evident to you that we could not both of us succeed."

I gazed at him speechlessly. In the course of my career in the I.C.S. I had come across a good many criminals but not one who regarded murder as of no more account than a puff of smoke from a cigarette.

"You will, I am sure, also forgive me for the rope bridges," he continued, "that again was a banal method, but I could think of nothing better, save perhaps an ambush, and ambushes are tedious and not always successful. You have been lucky. It is curious how often fortune favours the fool."

He spoke with a heavy condescension. If it was intended to anger us it failed, for we were beginning to realise that we were up against something deadlier than a rattlesnake and must keep a firm grip of ourselves.

"Surely," he went on, "you are interested to know how I and my men got here? It was really very simple. I must admit that the miserable old abbot of the monastery deceived me. If there is time I shall deal with him before returning to Germany. But having gone some distance up the wrong valley, it occurred to me that it should be possible to cross the intervening range into this valley. This we did, in spite of great difficulties and burdened as we were with much luggage. However, Otto takes after his father, for he is almost as good a mountaineer as he is a National Socialist, and three days ago we descended into this charming valley. We had with us a small wireless transmitting set. The rest was easy, and the day before yesterday an aeroplane left Germany with some of my men. I had contemplated a surprise landing here, but it occurred to me that the Herr Professor might have time to destroy that which we in Germany want, so, as there is a flat place some miles down the valley, I arranged through the wireless for the machine to land there, which it did yesterday evening, having planed many kilometres from a great height so as to avoid any noise reaching you. The rest you know, Mr. Trevanion. It was simple, was it not? Very simple."

It was, as he said, simple. And like so many simple things it was also ingenious. Yet the key to the whole plan had been in our hands. The wireless set! We had heard about it from the abbot but had scarcely given it a second thought. What blind fools we had been! And now it was too late. We must have looked our thoughts for Hunzerger continued with a horrible geniality.

"I see you are, as it were, kicking yourselves. I may tell you that since we discovered from your traitor—what was his name, Edwards?—that Professor Wilberforce had left for Nepal, some of the best brains in Germany have been considering the problem and we Germans are thorough in everything we do, as you in England will have reason to

know in the near future. And now you will, no doubt, wish to resume your interrupted slumbers." His small grey eyes flickered from Pendelbury to me and back again. "You will do as you are told. Should you try to escape you will be instantly shot. Come, Otto, we will rest until daylight."

We were silent for some moments after the pair had withdrawn from the tent.

"What a brute!" exclaimed Pendelbury.

"He's all that and worse," I said grimly.

"But he can't get the Professor's plans."

"Thank heavens for that. But I hope the Professor tells them that he has destroyed them."

"Why destroyed them?"

"Because if he thinks they are merely hidden, he will try to make him reveal their hiding-place."

"You mean . . ."

"That he will not scruple to use force. Haven't you heard about him? He is the chief of Hitler's special secret police, the kind of man who will stick at nothing."

Pendelbury clutched my arm.

"But this is awful, Tom! What can we do?"

"Do? Heaven knows. Nothing at present except keep our eyes skinned."

"I wonder what happened to Nima Dorje," said my companion after a while.

"He evidently got away after welting one of them on the arm with his kukri. If he's sensible he'll make for Kongra Dzong."

"But what can the abbot do?"

"Nothing against these desperadoes; there must be a dozen of them and they are all well armed; but he will send messengers to Lower Nepal for the police and they in turn will notify the British Resident at Khatmandu. Then there will be an almighty row."

"But all this will take weeks."

" I'm afraid it will. Our only chance is to bluff them. If we can make them believe that the Professor destroyed his plans they may clear out. But, candidly, Theo, I don't like the situation. This fellow Hunzerger is the biggest blackguard I've ever struck, and he's probably working under the direct orders of Hitler. He simply daren't fail."

There was nothing more to say or do and we lay in the tent waiting miserably for daylight. What idiots we had been, I reflected bitterly. We had lived in a fool's paradise. I found my thoughts turning again and again to Mabel. Poor girl, what a damnable thing to happen, and she would be worrying terribly about her father. Surely, I reflected, they would realise the vital importance of bluffing Hunzerger into believing that the plans had been destroyed, not hidden. But even if he did believe this, what then? Supposing he kidnapped the Professor and took him in the plane to Germany? If he did this it would have to be done secretly. And he wouldn't leave the rest of us to let the British Government know what had happened. A man of his reputation, a man who could send his employees to their deaths as though they were nothing better than cattle, was capable of anything, absolutely anything. Whichever way I looked at it the prospect was dark and my mind was full of forebodings.

Daylight came at last. We heard the harsh voice of Hunzerger issuing orders. Presently a young Nazi entered the tent and began to rummage around. Apart from ourselves there was nothing in it beyond a pile of plant presses filled with specimens. These were opened and the contents examined paper by paper. We knew, of course, that a search was being made for the Professor's plans, but we said nothing.

" There is nothing, Herr Kapitan," we heard him say.

" Teufel! " rasped Hunzerger. " They are not to be found anywhere. Bring the prisoners to me and I will examine them."

A minute later we were roughly bidden to leave our tent. Standing in the dew-soaked glade were Professor Wilberforce and Mabel. Both looked worn out, and there were dark rings under Mabel's eyes, but they carried themselves gallantly and looked the scorn they felt for the crowd of young louts gathered there, ten of them in addition to Hunzerger and his son, Otto.

"You will take a seat, Fräulein?" invited Hunzerger, pointing to one of the camp chairs.

"I prefer to stand," flashed back Mabel.

Hunzerger shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"As you will."

He seated himself in a chair and surveyed us in silence for a few moments.

"I regret exceedingly," he began, "that I and my men have had to intrude upon you in this manner. You have chosen a charming retreat and speaking as one who sincerely loves the mountains, it would have given me much pleasure and interest, at any other time, to have explored the southern approaches to Mount Everest which, since you English have failed to climb, will, I have no doubt, be conquered one day by our Nazi youth."

Never have I listened to a more pompous or insolent mode of address. Professor Wilberforce snorted his indignation.

"This is intolerable, sir!" he exploded. "The British Government shall hear of it."

Hunzerger smiled gently.

"No doubt they will, Herr Professor. I am thinking also that they will have other things to complain of soon. But I am surprised that you should mention the British Government, for I understood that you had come here to escape their unwelcome attentions, and that perhaps you might welcome the representatives of a Government so sincerely concerned for the welfare of humanity as the Third Reich."

" Do I understand you to mean, sir, that you and these young ruffians are representatives of the German Government? "

" I should hardly refer to them as young ruffians. Like myself, they are members of the National Socialist Party, and they have come here at the express wish of the Führer. But we need not bandy personalities, Herr Professor. As I have said, it is a matter of regret that you, your daughter, and these other gentlemen should have been inconvenienced, but the night was dark, and I feared that perhaps my motives might have been misinterpreted, and that one or other of you might have removed or even damaged something of value."

" You may as well come to the point and finish this speechifying," said the Professor wearily.

" It became known in Germany, Herr Professor," continued Hunzerger smoothly, " that you had demonstrated to your military experts a device which would revolutionise warfare. However, for reasons best known to yourself, you refused to sell your invention to the British Government. Is it possible that you were not offered enough for it? "

Professor Wilberforce choked. He was speechless with indignation.

" If that is so," went on Hunzerger, " then it is a simple matter, for the Führer has most generously commissioned me to offer you any price you like to name."

This time Professor Wilberforce found his voice.

" You can return to Hitler and tell him that I refuse his offer."

Hunzerger raised his eyebrows.

" So," he said softly. " So. Then am I right in supposing that it was not because of a financial disagreement with your Government that you left England, Herr Professor? "

" You are," replied Professor Wilberforce emphatically. " My discovery is not for sale to anyone."

"Really," said Hunzerger slowly. "May I then inquire why you are not prepared to sell? A man does not refuse as a rule to become a millionaire, for that is what the Führer's offer means."

Professor Wilberforce's blue eyes flashed.

"There are still some men who refuse to sell their souls."

"Is that so? I think I begin to understand. You are a pacifist, that I know. But I am puzzled to understand why a pacifist should invent a destructive war machine. Perhaps you can enlighten me, Herr Professor?"

"I am not prepared to discuss this matter any further," said the Professor disdainfully. "I must request that you and your companions leave this camp immediately. Your presence, sir, is repugnant to my daughter and to myself."

Hunzerger's eyes flickered. No one had ventured to speak to him thus in the Fatherland where he held powers of life and death over millions of his bemused fellow countrymen. For a moment I thought he was going to lose his temper, but he managed to control himself. When he replied it was with a forced geniality that could have deceived no one, least of all Professor Wilberforce.

"But surely you mistake me, Herr Professor. We in Germany have a mission. It is to unite Europe in a new order of peace and friendship. Let no one attack Germany and she will attack no one. On the contrary she will extend her help and sympathy to other nations. Her culture shall bring contentment and prosperity to all. Why, you yourself have realised that in the hands of Britain your invention would be used for purposes of aggression and domination. You are an idealist; so also is the Führer, but he will be the saviour, not the destroyer, of mankind."

With those sullen-eyed youths standing around it sounded utterly unconvincing, yet I am convinced that the man who spoke believed in what he was saying, if only for the moment.

There was silence for a while. Then the Professor replied, his voice icily distinct.

"I have followed the course of your Führer and of National Socialism in Germany. Herr Hitler had an opportunity, a great opportunity, of creating a new Germany. What in fact has he done? He has merely ministered to the Prussian lust for power and conquest. It may be that in the beginning he was sincere, but he, and you also, Captain Hunzerger, have mistaken means for ends. Instead of trust you have created mistrust; instead of love you have stimulated hatred; instead of peace you will make war, but you will make war with no help from me."

It was then that Hunzerger realised that he had failed, failed at least by the power of moral persuasion. His face went an ugly, blotchy red and his small eyes bulged forward. He banged a great fist on his knee.

"So!" he roared. "You would defy me. I have given you a chance. I have made you an offer. You will not accept it, *hein*? Then you shall be made. You have the plans, yes? That I know. They are with you. I know that too. You will give them to me or——"

"Or what?" It was Mabel's voice and it cut across the bully's roarings like an icy draught in a superheated room.

Hunzerger turned his narrow, pig-like eyes on her. With an effort he mastered his rage.

"I was about to remark, Fräulein Wilberforce, that in the Gestapo we have ways and means of making those talk who are reluctant to talk."

"You mean—torture?"

Hunzerger grinned.

"We do not call it torture, Fräulein. It is just ways and means."

"And you would torture my father, you loathsome beast!"

The bully shifted uneasily in his chair. He was unable to face squarely the blazing eyes of the girl.

"No doubt you would want to spare your father this inconvenience?"

"If you mean that I should betray my father, you are merely wasting your time, Captain Hunzerger. My father came here to find rest and peace. He has destroyed his plans."

It was well said; her voice was level; her words matter-of-fact and direct. For an instant Hunzerger was taken aback. His jaw dropped. Then his thick-lipped mouth widened in an evil smile. When he spoke it was with the purring accents of a cat.

"I see, Fräulein, I see. It is of course natural that you should endeavour to protect your father. Supposing I was to tell you that someone, I will not say who, had told me that the Herr Professor had concealed, not destroyed, his plans? What then would you say to that, eh?"

It was Mabel's turn to be taken aback. After an almost imperceptible pause she replied steadily:

"I should say, Captain Hunzerger, that you were a liar."

Her hesitation, slight though it was, had not escaped the astute German, long expert as he was in the craft of examination.

"It is scarcely natural," he continued smoothly, "that when a man has spent years of his life perfecting an instrument that he should destroy it. That instrument becomes his child, the product of his brain, of his genius. Does an artist destroy his life's masterpiece? And I understand too that your father's invention was also intended for astronomical survey and research. No, Fräulein, I am not a fool. And yet I cannot see the difficulty. You, Herr Professor, have come here to seek peace. It matters nothing to you what happens elsewhere. You are only concerned with the use of your instrument for scientific purposes. There is

no reason why you should not see your ambitions in this direction fulfilled. I offer you enough money for your work for you to go down to posterity as the greatest of all scientists. What more can you wish for then, Herr Professor?"

"I have already told you that your infamous proposition does not interest me," returned Professor Wilberforce.

"I see. Then perhaps your daughter might be prepared to tell me where the plans are, shall we say with a little persuasion?"

Professor Wilberforce whitened beneath his tan.

"You scoundrel!" he cried. "How dare you threaten my daughter? She has no knowledge as to where the plans are. You will kindly leave her out of this discussion."

Too late he saw the blunder he had made. Hunzerger lifted his eyebrows in simulated surprise.

"So," he said gently, "so, Herr Professor. Then you *did* conceal the plans. That is extremely interesting. I was almost beginning to wonder whether perhaps after all you had destroyed them; there is no accounting for the behaviour of the democratic peace cranks we hear so much about in Germany. And your daughter does not know. That again is extremely interesting, for it means that no one else does. My friends tell me that I have a suspicious nature, but for once I believe what I hear."

"Well, now you do know, sir, perhaps you will kindly take yourself off. I can only repeat that my invention is not for sale and that you are merely wasting your time here."

Hunzerger sighed.

"And so we come back to the beginning again. But really you English are very obtuse. You do not appear to understand the position. The Führer has ordered me to obtain the plans."

"I have already told you that my invention is not for sale to your Führer or anyone else."

Hunzerger sighed again.

"Is it possible that you still do not understand, Herr Professor?"

"Understand what?"

"That any order the Führer makes must be obeyed?"

"In the present instance you and your Führer are going to suffer disappointment." There was a sneer in Professor Wilberforce's usually quiet voice; it went home to the hulking brute opposite. I saw Hunzerger's fists clench.

"In Germany no men, not even I, disobey the order of the Führer. If you will not sell me your plans then you shall give them to me."

"You are welcome to them if you can find them."

"I do not intend to find them. I repeat, you shall give them to me, you shall be *made* to give them to me."

"You have threatened me already," said the Professor steadily. "I can only repeat my refusal. I have nothing but contempt for you and that megalomaniac you call your Führer!"

The words roused Hunzerger to fury. His face went suddenly crimson.

"I tell you that you shall give me your plans," he roared. "Have I not already told you that there are ways and means of making you tell me where they are?"

"You have," retorted Professor Wilberforce with withering contempt. "You are typical of your species, a Prussian bully and a braggart."

Once again the German mastered his rage. If truth be told I believe that, apart from his anxiety to obtain the plans, he was enjoying himself; like others of his kidney he was first and foremost a sadist, a member of the most brutal gang of men civilisation has ever known. And yet he was also puzzled. He was, as the Professor had said, a bully and a braggart. He had been used to getting his own way. Never before had he encountered the disconcerting element

of spiritual force, the force that rises superior to physical pain, that stands aloof from the issues of life and death. He licked his lips and his eyes glared beneath lowering brows.

"You shall tell me!" he hissed. "You shall tell me. I am in no great hurry, and this is a charming spot; the view is *wonderschön*, is it not? And should you not tell me, then it is possible that the *gnädige Fräulein* will oblige, or, shall I say, assist, me in my investigations."

"I have already told you that my daughter knows nothing," replied Professor Wilberforce.

"That is so, Herr Professor, and I believed you. I still believe you. You misunderstand me." His small eyes gleamed evilly as they turned towards Mabel. "The Fräulein is beautiful; I am only just beginning to realise it, so beautiful. How pleasant it would be if she accompanied me back to Germany. How very pleasant, Herr Professor."

I could contain myself no longer.

"You swine!" I shouted. "You swine! You dare touch her and I will kill you. I——"

"One moment." It was Mabel's voice, as clear and cold as the sunlit snows high overhead. "No, Daddy, not a word, please. Am I to understand, Herr Hunzerger, that it is your intention to force your attentions upon me in order to make my father reveal the whereabouts of his plans?"

"I did not say force, Fräulein. Perhaps I may hope that——"

"Never mind what you hope. You talk like something out of a twopenny novel," she went on scornfully. "Why, you haven't the guts of a louse. You are not even the bully and braggart my father said you were; you are just a toad, a crawling, greasy toad that no decent person would dream of touching, something to be stamped on. And you've the ugliest, nastiest face I've ever seen," she concluded.

Every man has his weak points and Hunzerger was no

exception. Doubtless he had been something of a king-pin in a country where wives are no more than chattels. Women had been afraid of him, doted on his physical strength, on his power over his fellows; they had fawned on him. And here was a woman, an Englishwoman, who not only stood up to him, but told him exactly where he got off and, what was even worse, in front of his fellow countrymen. His fat face turned a vivid purple.

"What? What?" he stuttered.

"A hulking ugly great brute," went on Mabel dispassionately, "that no decent woman would look at. You poor boob. Do you really suppose that sort of nonsense cuts any ice with Daddy and me?"

Hunzerger choked. He was inarticulate. His pig-like eyes started from their sockets. The veins in his bull-neck stood out like knotted cords. I really thought the man was about to have a fit.

"There's one other thing," she continued imperturbably. "In England we don't think much of your Adolf Hitler and his gang. We've come to the conclusion that they're nasty bits of work and that the time is coming when they will have to be wiped off the face of the earth."

In the presence of the bully and his followers with their brown shirts and swastika armbands, the clear-cut English idiom sounded like a carillon in the midst of bedlam. It brought sanity into proceedings that seemed more than a trifle insane. Whether or not Hunzerger realised he was beaten I don't know. At all events he suddenly found his voice.

"Remove the prisoners!" he shouted passionately. "As for you, Fräulein Wilberforce, we shall see. Perhaps you English swine dogs will not feel so sure of yourselves when you no drink or food have had."

We were hustled away to our respective tents. I managed to give Mabel a reassuring look. Amid those brutes she

looked suddenly pitiful and forlorn but she smiled bravely in return.

I swore savagely to myself that come what might no harm should befall her so long as breath and life remained in me.

Chapter Fifteen

BACK IN OUR TENT PENDELBURY AND I REVIEWED THE SITUATION. Throughout the affair outside Pendelbury had remained, for him, unusually silent.

" I have been praying, Tom," he said simply, " for some means of deliverance, particularly for Mabel. I am confident that my prayers will be answered."

" We've got to do something, and pretty quickly," I said. " This fellow Hunzerger is more than half mad. We are up against something devilish."

" I fear so too, Tom. If this man and the youths under him are samples of Nazi Germany then the sooner the Professor and his invention are back in England the better."

" Do you realise, Theo," I went on, " that even if Hunzerger did get hold of the plans it would make no difference? What the Professor has done he could do again."

" You mean? "

" That he would not be allowed to return to England."

" You think they would kidnap him? "

" I think they would murder him, and us too, to avoid awkward questions being asked."

There was a long pause.

" I believe you are right, Tom," said my companion at last. " Hunzerger is the incarnation of evil. I did not know that such men existed."

" It's pretty evident that they do in Germany; he's not the only one. It's not a war that's coming but a crusade. Something unclean has come up in the garden of Europe and it's got to be weeded out before anything else can flourish."

" I'm sure now you are right, Tom. This Nazi regime is

unclean, but the soil must have been sour and poor to have produced it."

"It's a tight corner," I said. "These fellows are all armed. We haven't the ghost of a chance against them in daylight. We shall have to wait till night, then scupper our guard and get his pistol. Then we can shoot up things generally and in the darkness and confusion get Mabel and the Professor away."

Pendelbury leaned across and grasped my arm.

"I'll do whatever you think best, Tom. It would be better to die than do nothing. We cannot leave them at the mercy of these fiends."

Nothing further happened during the morning. At midday we were given some lunch by one of the young Nazis. Pendelbury asked him whether he was not ashamed of the part he was playing but he got no reply beyond a threatening scowl.

It was evident that Hunzerger completely dominated and overawed his followers.

Late in the afternoon we heard his harsh voice.

"I will again see the Professor."

There was a minute's silence, then:

"So, Herr Professor, is it possible that you are now prepared to tell me where your plans are?"

"Despite my requests," replied Professor Wilberforce coldly, "I have been given no food and drink to-day. May I inquire whether you have treated my daughter in the same barbarous manner?"

Hunzerger laughed, and his laugh was not pleasant to hear.

"Certainly you may inquire, Herr Professor, but whether or not I shall answer your inquiry is another matter."

"Assuredly Almighty God will punish you should any harm befall her," said the old man in terrible accents.

Hunzerger laughed again, jeeringly.

"That is how you English always talk when anything goes wrong—of God, the English God. In Germany we have learned to do without this God of priests and old women. We are strong in Germany as the whole world will soon discover."

"If you have brought me out here merely to listen to your blasphemy . . ."

"I have not, Herr Professor. I have brought you here for one thing and one alone. Will you now tell me where your plans are?"

"I will not."

"Your plans, you will tell me where they are!" shouted Hunzerger.

There was no answer.

"Your plans; where are they?"

Again there was no answer.

"Think," continued the brutal interrogator, "how easy it would be for you *and* your daughter if you would tell me where you have hidden your plans. Just a word, only a word, and you are free, free to stay here in peace."

It was then that Professor Wilberforce spoke, and his voice, for all his years and the brutal treatment meted out to him, was unwavering and strong.

"I am an Englishman, Captain Hunzerger," he retorted proudly, "and it is as an Englishman that I speak. Under no circumstances will I tell you where my plans are concealed. You may torture me, you may torture my daughter, but she knows, as I know, that life is a small thing compared with the issues at stake in this matter."

It was magnificently said. As I listened every muscle in my body seemed to thrill and stiffen. Then I felt Pendelbury's fingers biting deep into my arm.

"Let us rush them now," he breathed.

For a moment I was within an ace of agreeing with him, then:

" No, no," I whispered. " We must wait; the chance will come, it *must* come."

" But this is terrible! " he groaned.

" So," sneered the German, " the pacifist has become the patriot." Suddenly he seemed to goad himself into a fresh access of fury.

" You will not tell me! But I tell you that you *will* tell me! You fool, you little know what awaits you. Did I not say that in the Gestapo we have ways and means of making prisoners talk? Already you are hungry and thirsty. By to-morrow you will be hungrier and thirstier still, and you will not have slept. You will not be allowed to sleep, for always there will be someone to keep you awake and say to you over and over again—Where are the plans? Where are the plans? Where are the plans? And at last you will tell, for no man that I have examined has failed to tell in the end. But by then, Herr Professor, you will be broken, finished, *caput*, as we say, and it is too late. How much easier it would be for you if you were to say now where the plans are. Come," he continued softly, " tell me now where they are and save yourself and your daughter while you may."

" I have given you my answer," said Professor Wilberforce slowly.

" For the moment, just for the moment," said his tormentor. " But later, ah later, you will talk, for I will wear you down; I will crush you as I crush this insect beneath my foot. You see it? And now it is dead. You are like that insect, Herr Professor."

" But it told you nothing, Captain Hunzerger."

" That is so; it told me nothing. But you will, you will tell me everything, everything I say, everything. We shall meet again, perhaps to-night, perhaps to-morrow morning. Remove the prisoner! " he bawled suddenly.

" So that is the Gestapo at work," I said when Professor Wilberforce had been escorted back to his tent.

" We have been listening to the Devil himself," declared Pendelbury solemnly.

" I believe you are right, Theo. We've got to do something to-night. The Professor's an old man. They will kill him. I've an idea. We will cut our way out of the tent through the back."

" It's stout canvas," objected Pendelbury, " and the groundsheet is sewn in. What can we cut it with? We haven't a knife."

" I've been thinking of that. Do you see that packing case, the one with the botanical specimens? "

" Yes."

" Well, it's got a loose nail in it. We could slit the canvas with that."

My companion's round face glowed with sudden hope.

" You're right, Tom, we could. And then? "

" The sentry is stationed at the entrance. After we've got out we'll go for him from different directions, you from one side of the tent and I from the other. At worst he can only wing one of us and the other will get him. Whoever does get him has got to collar his pistol and shoot him."

Pendelbury shuddered.

" Do you really think, Tom, that it's necessary to shoot him? Wouldn't it be possible to hit him on the head and stun him? "

" Have you ever tried to knock anyone on the head in the dark? You haven't? No more have I, but I should imagine that it's a pretty tricky operation. Besides, there's bound to be a row when we tackle him and the other sentry or sentries will be roused. Remember, this is a life-and-death show, not only for ourselves but for Mabel and the Professor. Everything depends on speed and surprise. We've got to put him out of action quickly or not at all."

" That is true, Tom; forgive me for being so stupid."

" Well then," I continued, " assuming we're lucky and

both of us get away with it, the man with the pistol goes bald-headed for the other sentries, you had better leave that to me, whilst you, Theo, take advantage of the general confusion to get Mabel and the Professor away. There's no moon, which is all to the good."

"But didn't that fiend Hunzerger say something about someone keeping the Professor awake all night?"

"He did, but the odds are that when he hears the row he will come out of the tent to see what it's about. That's your opportunity to release the Professor. You know that tree-covered knoll about two hundred yards west of the camp? Well, make for it with the Professor. It will be our rendezvous. If I don't turn up within a minute or two you'll have to assume I've been scuppered and make your get-away. Above all, don't stay. Remember that whatever happens to the rest of us the Professor has got to escape."

Looking back on it now it seems a forlorn-hope plan for two unarmed men to have made against a gang of desperadoes armed with rifles and automatic pistols, but desperation never counts the cost—and we were absolutely desperate. It was the only thing left to do, and having agreed on our plan, we felt curiously calm and confident for the remainder of the afternoon. In particular, Pendelbury's serenity had much to do with my own feelings, for there was something about the little parson that inspired faith. Physically puny he might be but he had what none of those Huns possessed, a spiritual fire that burned within him radiating an indomitable bravery. Since I had known him and Professor Wilberforce I had come to realise that there was a quality greater and finer than mere physical courage, a quality possessed by the martyrs of old, who died smiling and apparently without physical pain in the midst of smoke and flames.

So far so good, but dusk brought a dreadful disappointment.

Hunzerger and a couple of his men appeared in the entrance of the tent.

"I fear, gentlemen," said the Nazi with his vile grin, "that you will have to suffer some inconvenience until Professor Wilberforce is kind enough to reveal the whereabouts of his plans. Unfortunately this camp lacks the amenities of a concentration camp and you are both of you active young men. It is necessary, therefore, to ensure that you do not cause me any needless trouble in the night. Hans, tie them up!"

One of the young Nazis produced some cord. At sight of it and at the thought of how our plans had been thwarted, I instinctively braced myself for a sudden and desperate assault. At that moment anything seemed better than tame submission. But Hunzerger was quick to interpret the look in my eyes. In an instant he had produced an automatic from his pocket and covered me.

"It is no use, Herr Trevanion," he said gently. "I should shoot you in an instant were you to attempt any violence. Indeed I am not at all sure whether it would not be the simplest solution to shoot you both. You have what we call in war merely a nuisance value."

"So you are a self-confessed murderer as well as a robber," blazed out Pendelbury.

Hunzerger turned his malignant eyes on my companion.

"Really," he sneered, "I did not know that priests talked in this fashion. I thought that they talked only of what they call love and brotherhood. In Germany we do not murder those who would injure the State, we merely liquidate them. Murder, *mein Herren*, is a term applied to those who are foolish enough to kill for personal and petty motives. Therefore, if I kill you, I do it because your presence is injurious to the Führer and the Reich."

He paused. I watched the muzzle of the automatic waver from Pendelbury to me and back again. Was it my imagina-

tion or did I see the trigger finger of the hand that held it twitching? The eyes behind the weapon were horrible. They glared with a red, unholy light; they were the eyes of a fanatic, of a sadist who was three-quarters insane. How long this lasted I cannot say; it seemed an eternity. Then suddenly the red light seemed to flicker and die. The pistol was lowered, and the German laughed harshly.

" I think, however," he went on, " that to liquidate you now would be a reflection on the powers of Hans, who is a sailor and quite expert with knots."

There was certainly truth in this last assertion, and a few minutes later we lay bound hand and foot. Hunzerger personally inspected the knots and growled approval at their effectiveness. Then, mockingly, he bade us " Good night and pleasant dreams."

So filled was I with bitter thoughts as I lay on my sleeping bag that I was unable to say a word. It was Pendelbury who broke the silence.

" We are still alive, Tom." His voice was as steady as ever.

" I thought he was going to murder us," I said.

" He would have done so had he been able," said Pendelbury with simple conviction, " but he had not the moral courage, it was we who had that."

I could not help being impressed, but the bitterness I felt at seeing our plans go awry persisted.

" I don't know about moral courage," I grumbled. " What I do know is that you and I are trussed like chickens." I writhed and twisted as I spoke in an endeavour to loosen the knots, but as Hunzerger said they had been tied by an expert; Houdini himself would have been defeated by them. Then suddenly through the fast gathering gloom I perceived that my companion was smiling. It annoyed me, that smile.

" I can't see anything to grin about," I said between my teeth.

"I'm sorry, Tom," he said apologetically. "I was only wondering what the Bishop would say were he to see me like this."

My anger evaporated. What could I do but smile too?

"You're a braver chap than I am, Theo."

His face reddened.

"Nonsense, Tom, it's—it's only because of late I've tried to form a new philosophy of life. You see," he went on hurriedly and half apologetically, "I've been blind. I seem to have worked to a formula. It was good as far as it went but it was not good enough. I was intolerant, Tom. I used to divide people into Christians and non-Christians, believers and non-believers, church-goers and non-church-goers. Heaven forgive me, but I used to talk about heathens as though they were moral lepers. But since I came out here I have realised that I was wrong. Among these great mountains and in the presence of the simple people who dwell among them I know now that the world and every form of life upon it is part of a great evolutionary scheme, created, guided and perpetuated by one thing, and one alone, the love of Him who created it. You see, Tom, I feel that it is my mission to go back to Forestford and tell my parishioners of these things and because I feel this it gives me confidence."

It was an extraordinary speech to hear from a man bound hand and foot on the floor of a tent. So astonished was I that at first I could find no words with which to reply. At length I said:

"How are you going to put it to them when you do get back?"

"I shall not talk to them any more about sin and the fear of God. I shall tell them about the simple and beautiful things, about hills and flowers, the smiles of little children, the beauties of clouds and stars, the minute but wonderful forms of the humblest insects. I shall teach them the virtues

of rest and meditation and how through rush and speed we miss so much of beauty. I shall tell them that every atom of the earth that they dig in their fields radiates the glory of its Creator. Then perhaps they will understand the meaning of that phrase I have used so often and with so little meaning, 'God so loved the world.'"

We were silent after that. Darkness fell and the fresh wind in the trees around the camp died away. So also did the bird song. All day it had mocked us with its message of freedom and we were almost relieved when the last twitterings ceased. But now in the silence that followed we heard another sound, one that we had come to loathe and detest. It was Hunzerger's harsh voice speaking to Professor Wilberforce in his tent on the other side of the glade.

"Good evening, Herr Professor, we meet again, and I hope in happier circumstances than last time. You will tell me where are your plans, will you not?"

"You have already had my answer." The Professor's voice was hoarse but there was no mistaking an unflinching determination.

"So," snarled Hunzerger, "you are still obstinate, *hein*? Are you not hungry and thirsty then?"

"I am very thirsty."

"You are thirsty, Herr Professor," mocked the brute. "And you will not sleep. All night you will be asked one question and it will be always the same. Where are the plans? And when the small hours of the morning come, then you will tell. So often have I seen this. Why not spare yourself so much unpleasantness?"

There was no reply.

"Very well," said Hunzerger. "Then there is nothing to do but bid you a very good night, Herr Professor."

There was a short pause, then:

"Heinrich," we heard him say, "you will question the Professor for the first four hours. Franz will follow, then

Ulrich. You will at once report to me should he reveal the whereabouts of his plans; and remember, no food or water for him. Those are my orders. Do you understand? "

There was a chorus of " Ja, Herr Kapitan."

A minute later we heard the first of the inquisitors commence his loathsome task.

" Where are your plans? "

There was no reply.

" Where are your plans? "

Again there was no reply.

" You are not to close your eyes. I will strike you if you do. Where are your plans? "

Like many other people, I had looked on third-degree examination as something merely disagreeable. I know now that it is the subtlest form of torture in the whole repertoire of human beastliness, for it strikes at the mind and the soul of man.

And so it went on. For Pendelbury and me it was the most ghastly experience of our lives. Except for the occasional footsteps of the man on sentry-go there was no other sound in the camp beyond that monotonous voice. " Where are your plans? Where are your plans? " If it was stamped in red-hot letters on our brains, what must it have been for Professor Wilberforce, weak as he already was from hunger and suffering the growing agonies of thirst? Some men would have cursed their tormentor but he maintained the same stoical silence, except when nature gained temporary ascendancy and he dropped momentarily off to sleep only to be awakened by the brutal jogging of his inquisitor. Then we heard him exclaim and once he burst out passionately, " You unutterable young beast! I tell you that I will never reveal my plans."

At midnight the first inquisitor was relieved. No doubt it was all part of Hunzerger's devilish ingenuity born of a long experience of brutality, that the second inquisitor,

the youth Franz, was of an even more brutal and unpitying type than the first, for the Professor's exclamations as he was roused were cries of pain.

"You old *sweinhund,*" we heard the Nazi say. "You will tell me where your plans are, tell me, I say, tell me!"

"I will never tell you." Professor Wilberforce's voice was weak and quavering, but it was still imbued with an inflexible resolution and courage. But could he last? Could he endure those small hours, of which Hunzerger had spoken so confidently, when physically and mentally a man is at his lowest ebb, and the strongest men succumb?

At the start the same terrible thought had occurred to both Pendelbury and me. Mabel's tent was closer to her father's than ours. She would be hearing, even plainer than ourselves, the torture that was being inflicted upon him. She heard, but no sound came from her. Hers was the greater bravery. My heart went out to her in her agony of mind.

Pendelbury, I knew, was praying. Only once did he speak.

"So the saints of old must have suffered," he whispered. "God grant us deliverance."

Chapter Sixteen

IT MUST HAVE BEEN ABOUT TWO HOURS BEFORE DAWN THAT there came the long deep thunder of a distant avalanche. For a full half-minute it rolled and reverberated across the Country of Singing Birds. It was the signal of our deliverance. As the grumble of it died away into the night we heard close to our tent a sudden low gurgling, choking sound, followed by a dull thud. Then there was silence. The silence lasted for perhaps a minute. It was followed by a slight stirring noise and a sibilant hissing that rose and fell, the sound of someone breathing as though after violent exertion, close to the tent. Then, very slowly and cautiously, the tent flaps were undone.

Bright stars appeared as they parted.

"Who is that?" I whispered.

"It is me, Sahib," said a voice—Nima Dorje's voice.

"Quick!" I said. "We are bound. Here are my hands; cut the rope."

I felt Nima Dorje's groping hands on mine. A moment later the razor-like edge of his kukri had parted the strands. It left something wet and sticky on my wrists.

"Now my feet," I told him. An instant later I was free, though cramp half-paralysed my limbs.

In a matter of seconds Pendelbury was also free. Painfully I crawled to the entrance to the tent. Everything was silent. Then:

"Come now, *sweinhund*," said the distant voice of the man Franz. "Tell me, where are your plans?"

The reply was a heart-rending groan. Professor Wilberforce was near the end of his tether.

Nima Dorje had joined me.

" What have you done? " I whispered.

I sensed rather than saw his self-satisfied grin.

" There was a man. I hit him with my kukri and killed him. He is there." Following his outstretched hand we saw a huddled mass in the starlight. Near it reposed a smaller object the size and shape of a football. It is unnecessary to go into further details; the terrible accuracy and power with which the Gurkhas and Sherpas of Nepal wield the kukri is well-known. At my elbow I heard Pendelbury take in a deep shuddering breath.

" Was he armed? "

" Yes, Sahib. He had a pistol." From his jacket he drew out an automatic and handed it to me. My hand closed round the butt. The feel of it was familiar and I recognised it as a Mauser automatic. Better still, the magazine was fully charged. We were armed now and could give the Nazis a taste of their own medicine.

" Are there other men about? "

" There is one in the Sahib's tent, he is talking; but the others sleep."

" You are quite sure? "

" Yes, Sahib. I have been watching since it became dark."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Our chances were improving every instant.

" Listen," I said to Pendelbury. " We needn't stick to the original plan now. We will keep together but if we get separated make for the knoll just the same. We will get Mabel out of her tent, then the Professor. We must try to silence the Hun there so as not to alarm the rest."

" There's one thing," whispered Pendelbury. " What about food? "

He was right. I had forgotten that it might be a day or two, perhaps several days, before we reached Kongra Dzong. I had not as yet thought of anything beyond escape.

" Have you any food, Nima? "

"No, Sahib," he replied ruefully. "I have eaten nothing since the day before yesterday."

"You know where the stores are. While we are releasing the Memsahib and the Professor Sahib you will take all you can easily carry. There are some small bags of sattoo [barley] there. Take one of them."

So it was arranged. Then, one by one, we crawled cautiously out of the tent into the open. There we separated, Nima Dorje making for the provision dump, while Pendelbury and I stealthily set out for Mabel's tent at the other end of the glade. It was fortunate that we had the geography of the place accurately in our minds because the Germans had pitched several of their own tents in a line to one side of the glade.

The night was very quiet and the only sound to break the silence was Professor Wilberforce's tormentor.

"You will tell me where the plans are? The plans, where are they? Ah, you would sleep, would you, you old English fool. Wake up, do you hear, wake up!"

There was the sound of a blow followed by a groan. Then we heard Professor Wilberforce's voice—it was thin, high, and quavering.

"No! No! No!" he faltered. "I will not tell you, not tell you, not tell you, never, never, never. Ah, for God's sake leave me alone."

Our blood boiled as we listened. Fiercely, exultantly, I gripped the butt of my pistol.

I meant to kill that Hun.

And Mabel? It was a wonderful moment as we neared her tent, treading as softly as cats. Then, as we came close, we heard a muffled choking and sobbing. Poor girl, had any woman ever endured worse than she? A wave of indescribable emotion swept over me. Above all things I wanted to comfort her.

Very gently we undid the tent flaps and peered inside.

Dimly we perceived a huddled figure lying on a camp bed. From it came those terrible, muffled sobs.

"Mabel," I whispered. "Mabel. Don't be frightened; it's me, Tom."

But the poor girl was past all hearing. The only reply was a fresh paroxysm of sobbing.

I crawled inside the tent.

"Mabel," I whispered again. "It's me, Tom."

This time she heard.

"What—what——?" she faltered. "Tom—it's Tom! No, no, it isn't, it can't be. Oh, Daddy, Daddy!"

"You must pull yourself together," I told her. "Theo and I have come to get you and your father out of this."

She had been lying face downwards on the bed; now with a sudden effort she twisted herself round.

With a thrill of anger I realised that she also had been bound.

Without Nima Dorje's kukri it took time to undo the knots, but it was done at last.

"Is it really you, Tom?" she whispered. "I can hardly believe it. When I heard your voice I thought it was my imagination. I thought I was going mad."

"No, no, I will not tell you. Let me sleep now. For pity's sake let me sleep." It was Professor Wilberforce's agonised voice.

"Quick!" I said. "We've no time to lose. Are you all right now?"

"Yes," she whispered bravely. "I'll try and not let you down."

"Of course you won't," I reassured her. "Listen. We are going to get your father. Keep close behind Theo and me. There may be some shooting. If we get separated make for the knoll over there—you know where I mean, don't you?"

"Yes, I know."

"Right then. As carefully as you can; not a sound or that young beast in there will hear us."

First myself, then Theo, and lastly Mabel, we emerged from the tent and tiptoed across the grass towards Professor Wilberforce's tent. As we approached we heard the voice of the brutal young German.

"For the last time, will you tell me where your plans are? Tell me, I say, tell me, tell me."

With each demand came the sound of blows. They were followed by the shuddering gasps of the assaulted man, then:

"No, you foul brute, no, I will not tell you. Never, never, never. Oh, God, what have I done to endure this?"

Behind me I heard Mabel catch her breath. As she told me later, she was on the brink of a fit of uncontrollable screaming, but by a supreme effort managed to master herself.

"So," said the man Franz, "you will not tell me, *hein*? You are still obstinate? Never have I seen such obstinacy. Well then, we must see what Ulrich can do. For me, there is sleep, but for you, you English swine, there is only wakefulness and pain."

It was the last thing I had bargained for. Franz's time was up, and he was about to call the next inquisitor, Ulrich.

The Professor's tent was visible some yards away. There was a light burning within and, as we crouched down and watched, the flaps parted and the man Franz emerged. After a few seconds' hesitation to accustom his eyes to the darkness he walked across to the tents of his compatriots. He halted before one of them, then dived inside to rouse his companion.

This was our opportunity. Swiftly we sped across the turf to the Professor's tent. Franz had left the flaps undone. We parted them and peered inside. What we saw I shall not easily forget. A single candle stood guttering on a

packing case. Its light revealed Professor Wilberforce. He was propped up in a sitting position at the end of the tent and his hands had been tied behind him to one of the poles. His head had sunk forward on to his chest and he slept the sleep of utter exhaustion. It was a very weak, very old, and —it might well be—broken man that we saw. I heard Mabel stifle a gasp and a sob.

"You release him, Theo," I said. "Get him going somehow or other. As quick as you can; that Hun may be here at any moment."

While Pendelbury and Mabel slipped into the tent I stationed myself outside, crouching down to one side of it.

Evidently Ulrich was in no hurry to take on his job, for I heard him conversing with Franz in sleepy tones. Yet my heart sank as I listened to the attempts of Mabel and Pendelbury to rouse the Professor.

"Daddy, Daddy," reiterated the former. "Wake up, wake up, it's me, Daddy, wake up."

"Leave me; sleep, I want sleep," was the muttered response.

Had the brutal treatment meted out to the Professor completely exhausted him physically even if it had failed to break his spirit? I began to think that it had. If so there was no hope of getting away. At all events, I told myself fiercely, we had two weapons, Nima Dorje's kukri and the pistol, and could make some sort of a fight for it. For we were desperate, absolutely desperate. As for Mabel, it was no use one or other of us trying to get her away; she would never leave her father.

"That's done it," I heard Pendelbury say. Evidently he had managed to free the Professor's arms.

"Who? What?" It was the sleepy, apathetic voice of the Professor. Then: "Mabel!" I heard him croak. "Mabel! What are you doing here? What——?"

"Sh! Daddy," was the reply. "Not a sound. We have come to get you out of this. Can you walk?"

"Yes, I think so, a little." The Professor spoke in a whisper, but his voice was stronger. "But I am very tired; those brutes have . . ."

"Yes, yes, Daddy, I know. But there's not a moment to lose. They may be back at any moment. We've got to go now. Can you manage it? Lean on Theo and me."

"It's all right, my dear; I can manage it; I've got to manage it."

A few seconds later they emerged from the tent and I had joined them. At that moment I heard the voice of the dilatory Ulrich.

"*Jawohl*," he said in grumbling tones, "I suppose I must see what I can do with the old idiot. What business has he to keep us out of bed at this time? I was dreaming too of a girl I met last week in Charlottenburg, such a nice little bit."

"Well, make him tell you where his plans are," answered his amiable companion, "and then you can go back to bed and dream some more about her. Go now, I am very tired. By the way, I wonder what Hans is doing? It is time Fritz here relieved him. Here, Fritz, wake up! Wake up, I say. It is time you relieved Hans."

It was a matter of seconds now before the fat would be in the fire.

The Professor could only just manage to keep on his feet, so Pendelbury and I took him by the arms and hustled him along between us.

It was very dark amid the trees, and we slipped and stumbled over roots and stones.

We had been going for perhaps a minute when from behind we heard a shout, followed by another and louder shout. Evidently the escape of the Professor and Hans' body had been discovered at one and the same time.

A few seconds later the dark outline of the little conical shaped knoll loomed ahead. As we approached a figure materialised from the darkness.

"Is that you, Nima?"

"Yes, Sahib."

"You have the food?"

"Plenty," was the reply.

The camp was now in an uproar. Then, above the clamour of voices we heard a string of furious Prussian oaths. Hunzerger had wakened to the fact that his prisoners had escaped.

We had escaped, but was it to be only for the time being? Professor Wilberforce was nearing the end of his tether. He could only walk with difficulty and was supporting himself by sheer will-power. In an hour it would be dawn and already the hunt was up.

"We shall have to hide," said Pendelbury.

"I know of a place, the ideal place," said the Professor. "It is not more than a mile away."

"You can find it in the dark?"

"I think so."

"Then the sooner we're there the better."

Before setting off the Professor drank copiously from the nearby stream, for he was terribly thirsty. It says much for his courage and determination that he was able to carry on. He had aged visibly during the past twenty-four hours and his gait was that of a tottery old man. More and more Pendelbury and I had to support him, yet not once did he complain and he was able to guide us without hesitation through the darkness. As for Mabel, although she had suffered as badly as her father, if in another way, she resolutely declined any offers of assistance even over the roughest ground.

Our way took us first across the valley to the west, then straight up the mountainside. The ascent was steep. I doubt

if we could have done it had it not been for Nima Dorje who, after handing his load to Pendelbury, assisted me in practically carrying the Professor.

The first glimmer of dawn found us still scrambling upwards. In another half-hour it would be full daylight. Then we were certain to be seen, for the bare hillside offered scarce cover for a cat.

"How much farther?" I asked the Professor.

"Only a little way now," he gasped. "Another few minutes at most."

The light was increasing fast, and on high the crest of Mount Everest was waxen white, when at length we reached the foot of a cliff extending to right and left as far as we could see. There was no possibility of scaling it, and I must confess that my heart sank.

"Where next?" I asked. "We can't possibly climb that."

"There," he pointed. "Up that gully. There's a ledge leading out of it about a hundred feet higher."

It was fortunate that the light had increased sufficiently to see by, if only a little, for the Professor was practically a dead weight, as somehow or other we pushed and pulled him up the rocky bed of the gully. Then we found further progress barred by vertical rocks.

"Now to the left," he croaked, "along that ledge."

Still supporting him we edged along the ledge. It had been invisible from below and led out across the cliff. We had not gone more than twenty paces when we came to a dark slit a yard wide in the face of the cliff.

"In here," said the Professor, and without further ado gropingly insinuated himself through the opening. We others followed, and a few moments later were congregated in what appeared to be a fair-sized cave.

It is impossible to describe the relief we all felt. For the moment at least we were safe.

"I found it quite by accident," the Professor explained

a little later. "I was out flower hunting when I saw a plant growing on the cliff. I climbed up the gully to get it and came unexpectedly on the ledge. Out of curiosity I followed it, and so reached the cave. It is quite invisible from below. And now we must eat and afterwards sleep. There is a small pool of water at the back there. Here is a candle and some matches. I left them here."

With the aid of the candle we were able to take stock of the cave. It extended several yards into the mountainside. At the back it was littered with large fragments of rock fallen from the roof, and among these a small spring welled up, forming a pool of clear, ice-cold water.

Nima Dorje had thoughtfully provided himself with an aluminium saucepan, and in this Mabel, who had taken charge of the commissariat, made a porridge of sattoo and water.

"I don't know what you would call it," said she cheerfully. "Something or other—*maître d'hôtel,* I suppose, only this isn't exactly the Savoy Grill."

The Professor ate ravenously, for alone among us he had eaten nothing for some thirty-six hours, but before he had finished his head fell forward on to his breast and he slept. The rest of us made him as comfortable as the rough floor of the cave would permit, then settled down to rest ourselves, for we were dog-tired after the strain and exertions of the past twenty-four hours.

It was well past mid-day when we awoke and our awakening was disagreeable. On the mountainside below men were moving about and we could hear their voices.

They approached until they were directly beneath the cave at the foot of the rocks.

"Well, there is nothing here at any rate," said one in surly tones.

"That is so," assented another. "A fly could not hide in those rocks."

"We had better be getting back to the camp," said a third, "and report to the Herr Kapitan that they are not on this side of the valley. I have had enough of this searching of mountainsides. If they are hidden, they must come out when their food is eaten; then we shall have them."

"I wonder what the Herr Kapitan will do to them when we get them?" said the first voice.

There was a guttural laugh.

"I think I know what he will do to that native who killed poor Hans."

"And the Professor?"

"*Bei Gott!* He will tell where his plans are next time."

"What about the girl?"

"As for that we shall see. It will be amusing, *hein*?"

"Well, let us be going then. To-morrow we shall get them, perhaps the day after. They cannot escape now there is a guard on the path through the gorge."

"That is so; it is only a matter of time. It will be good to leave this accursed country; I have never liked mountains."

"It is lucky, is it not," said the first man who had spoken, "that the damage to the aeroplane was not worse when we hit the stone? Schneider says he can have it repaired now in a few days."

There were sounds of retreating footsteps, and peeping cautiously out of the narrow entrance of the cave we watched the three Nazis descending the slopes. They were all armed with rifles.

"What beasts they are," said Mabel calmly.

Professor Wilberforce had watched impassively; now he suddenly turned to me.

"You have doubtless divined, Trevanion, that this cave is also the hiding-place of my plans."

Truth to tell I had not given the matter a thought; there had been too much else to think of.

" Here! " I ejaculated.

" Yes, here. You will, I am sure, agree that it is a perfect hiding-place."

" It certainly is," I said.

He struck a match and lit the candle.

" Come with me then. You see those boulders at the back. Kindly remove the centre one."

I did so, rolling it aside with an effort.

" And now the smaller two behind."

I lifted them out and deposited them on the floor of the cave.

Professor Wilberforce thrust forward the candle. In the gap thus revealed something gleamed. He reached forward and withdrew a small metal cylinder.

" Even should anyone find this," he said, balancing the cylinder in one hand, " he would be unable to secure the plans."

" What do you mean? "

He chuckled.

" I have no doubt that the British authorities were rendered additionally anxious by the possibility, as they thought, of the plans falling into the hands of some foreign power."

" They were," I said emphatically.

" They need not have worried. It was the first possibility that I considered and before leaving England I enclosed the plans in this cylinder. The air was then evacuated by a suction pump and the cylinder sealed."

" Well? "

" Inside is a chemical compound which ignites when exposed to the oxygen in the air. Any unauthorised person who obtained possession of the cylinder would naturally seek to open it with some instrument. The instant he punctured it the plans would be destroyed."

" By jove, what a splendid idea! " I exclaimed enthusi-

astically. Then, as a sudden idea occurred to me: "But suppose you want to open it yourself?"

Professor Wilberforce smiled.

"The answer to that, my dear Trevanion, is simplicity itself; I should puncture the cylinder under water. This would immobilise the chemical compound, but would not harm the plans as they are enclosed in a waterproof oiled-silk container."

Mabel and Pendelbury had joined us during the conversation.

"Why," asked the latter, "did you refuse to tell the Germans the whereabouts of the plans, seeing that they must have been destroyed when the cylinder was opened?"

"It was on the tip of my tongue to do so, but I remembered that Edwards assisted me in the construction of the cylinder. It was very unlikely that he understood its exact purpose, but he was a clever fellow and it is just possible that he did. In that case he may have revealed the secret. In any event, had Hunzerger obtained possession of it and then seen the plans destroyed before his eyes, I have little doubt that he would have vented his disappointment and spite on us all. He is, I am convinced, a megalomaniac who will stick at nothing to gain his ends."

"Like his master," I interjected.

"Exactly. It is this knowledge that has caused me to change my mind."

"You mean——?"

"I mean, Trevanion, to return to England and place my invention in the hands of the Government."

An indescribable thrill surged through me at these words. In the candlelight I saw Pendelbury's face beaming with joy.

"I have been blind," continued the Professor bitterly. "In the ordeal we have all undergone it was brought home to me how profound is the gulf between the English and

German ways of life. It is one thing to be an idealist and quite another to attempt to realise ideals. It is also a matter of environment. The abbot of Kongra Dzong is, like me, an idealist, but he lives in a different world, in a different and simpler set of circumstances. In the West, life is infinitely more complex; our problem lies in turning material means into spiritual ends. In England we have made and are making mistakes, but we are pressing forward, even if slowly, but Germany has unhappily taken the wrong turning. Her road leads down into the pit where man is the slave to the Moloch of Force. In that direction lies damnation. We have seen its effects. Thousands of unhappy people have already been murdered or enslaved; it may well be that millions will suffer in the future. Do not misunderstand me. I am not actuated by personal motives or any spirit of revenge; I am trying to look objectively at the problem; but I am now convinced that in supporting England I am supporting my conscience."

"I am sure you are right, Professor," said Pendelbury simply. "As you say, we have seen the effects of this Nazi creed before our eyes. These young men under Hunzerger are his chattels; they think as he thinks, they do as he does. They have lost all power of self-determination. To them there is no right or wrong, only obedience to a system, and that system as we know is a cancer on the face of the earth."

Later that evening we discussed plans. Whichever way we looked at it our situation was precarious in the extreme. Hunzerger's first action must have been to send a party down the valley to guard the entrance to the gorge. There was no hope of reaching Kongra Dzong, for one man could effectively hold up a large party and the Germans were armed with rifles; what chance had we with a single pistol and a few rounds of ammunition?

At first sight it seemed that we had escaped from a trap merely to fall back into it again. Nima Dorje had secured

some twenty-five pounds of food of which we had already eaten several pounds. Still, sattoo is a concentrated and nourishing food and if strictly rationed would last us a further four or five days. The question was, could we escape over the mountains and reach a populated valley in that time?

" What about the pass Hunzerger crossed? " asked Pendelbury.

" I have already thought about that," I said. " Hunzerger said it was very difficult. We've no reason to doubt that; he is a first-rate mountaineer; and, remember, we've no mountaineering equipment. If we are to get out of this valley across the mountains it will have to be by some much easier route. Besides, it's certain that Hunzerger will keep an eye on his route. Much of it is visible from the valley. In any event they would be much faster than us, and would soon overhaul us, especially since they would be properly equipped. Without ropes and ice axes we wouldn't stand an earthly chance. Mabel and I had a good view of the pass and the slopes on this side are very steep. We shall have to try some other way. You have seen more of the valley than we have, Professor, have you any suggestion to make? "

" I cannot say I ever examined it with any idea of escaping from it other than by the gorge. As you put it, Trevanion, it certainly seems as though . . . "

" One moment, Daddy! " interposed Mabel excitedly. " You remember the day we trekked up the valley until we were close beneath Everest? "

" Yes, my dear."

" Well, there was a small branch valley running up to a glacier close beneath Everest. I remember your saying that perhaps it might be possible to cross from it into the next valley to the east."

" You are quite right, Mabel. There may be a pass there."

" Do you remember what it looked like? " I asked him.

" As far as I can recollect there is a fair-sized glacier in the valley. If there is indeed a pass at the head of it, it will be a very high one, well over twenty thousand feet, and of course there's nothing to show what may lie on the far side."

" But we should still need mountaineering equipment," objected Pendelbury.

There was an uncomfortable silence. All our excitement and optimism over the Professor's decision regarding his plans had vanished. The truth was that our situation was little better than it had been before. On the face of it, it looked as though we should be forced either to surrender or make a desperate attempt to escape, an attempt foredoomed to failure, and in all probability total disaster, lacking the proper equipment for high-altitude mountaineering. The plans of course would be destroyed, but we had seen enough of Hunzerger to realise that he would certainly revenge himself on us for his disappointment and the death of one of his followers. And was it likely that he would allow Professor Wilberforce to return to England to hand over his ideas to the British Government? No, anything was better than capture or surrender, anything. It might be lunacy to attempt to cross a high Himalayan pass without adequate mountaineering equipment, but better die up in the snow than at the hands of Hunzerger. Then suddenly something flashed into my mind. A friend of mine, who had been through the last war, once told me that the best policy when dealing with the Hun was always the boldest and most unexpected.

" We'll cross that pass," I said, " and we're going to have the equipment to do it with. Nima Dorje and I will raid the camp and get it."

" Tom, you mustn't, it's too dangerous! " Was there something more than concern in Mabel's voice?

"It's madness, man!" exclaimed the Professor.

"Not a bit of it," I said with such cheerfulness as I could muster. "It's the only thing to be done, and it's the thing the Huns will least expect; it would never enter their heads that we should have the audacity."

"But they're bound to have someone on guard," objected Mabel.

"They did before," I reminded her.

"I think you are right, Tom," said Pendelbury slowly. "I should like to go with you myself."

I grasped him by the hand.

"My dear chap. There's nothing I should like better, but Nima Dorje and I are armed and you are not. It's a case of the less the merrier."

"I suppose you are right," he said sadly. "I would be a lame duck if it came to a fight."

"Your job is to go with Mabel and the Professor as hard as you can for the pass. Nima Dorje and I will catch you up. If by any chance we don't turn up you will know what to do, carry on and do your damnedest."

"But, Tom, you must turn up!" cried Mabel.

"Of course we shall," I assured her. "But we've got to consider every possibility. Nima," I continued, turning to the Sherpa, "would you like to come with me to-night and get what we need from the camp to cross the mountains?"

The little man looked at me with his almond eyes; his hard, pock-marked face was entirely without expression.

"Yes, Sahib."

"Good. Do you know where the climbing kit and the rope and ice axes are?"

"It is in the two rucksacks at the end of the stores under the cover, and the rope and ice axes are nearby."

"That's right. Everything is in the rucksacks, snow goggles, socks, gloves and woollen pullovers. We've got to get those rucksacks, Nima, and the rope and ice axes too."

"Yes, Sahib."

"And we mustn't be seen," I continued, "but if we are, and there is trouble, you know what to do, Nima?"

The array of gold-crowned teeth suddenly appeared in a broad grin.

"Yes, Sahib. I hit like the last time with my kukri."

So it was arranged. We had only an hour or so to wait for darkness but time dragged interminably as it always does when one is keyed up for a difficult and dangerous job of work. At length, through the mouth of the cave, we saw the high snows glow crimson, then with sub-tropic swiftness night fell.

The sky was alive with stars when we emerged from the cave. In the valley beneath was a red smudge of light; the Germans had lit a fire. It was unlikely that they had any pickets out except down the valley by their aeroplane and at the entrance to the gorge; nevertheless we proceeded with the utmost caution. The moment for parting soon came, for it had been agreed that the Professor, Mabel and Pendelbury should contour the hillside and descend into the valley well above the camp; whilst Nima Dorje and I should make straight for the latter, conceal ourselves near and wait for a suitable opportunity to raid it.

"Well, so long," I said. "We shall be seeing you later." I tried to make my voice sound unconcerned, but it rasped queerly in my ears and my heart bumped uncomfortably; when all was said and done it was a pretty desperate business and I might not see Mabel again.

"Good luck, Trevanion," said the Professor earnestly. Never before had I discerned such feeling in his normally unemotional voice.

"Godspeed, Tom," said Pendelbury. "You will do it, I know; I can feel it."

Mabel said nothing, but she came close to me and I felt her hand in mine. Then, and I don't quite know how it

happened, my arms were around her and I had kissed her.

"My prayers go with you, Tom," she whispered.

That was all. What her father and Pendelbury thought I do not know; perhaps in the darkness they did not see. And I did not care if they did. All I know is that I went off down the hillside with my head in the stars, for I had discovered the most wonderful thing in the world.

Chapter Seventeen

SLOWLY, YARD BY YARD, WE MADE OUR WAY THROUGH THE trees towards the camp, treading with the utmost caution so as to avoid snapping twigs which, on that still night, would have sounded a hundred yards or more. We need not have bothered, for long before we approached the edge of the glade in which stood the camp we could hear the crackling and hissing of the fire. It was evident that the Germans feared nothing from us despite the pistol we had taken. Evidently Hunzerger had assumed, and with some justification, that no one with a single pistol would be suicidal enough to attack a camp of eight or ten men armed with rifles.

In making this assumption he had acted true to Teutonic form; it is on just such assumptions that the German is most likely to come a cropper in war against a bold and unorthodox opponent who refuses to concede the superiority of numbers.

Well concealed behind a thicket on the edge of the glade we watched the Germans golloping—that is the most descriptive word—their supper of soup and stew. Hunzerger sat well apart from his underlings as befitted his position of leader. Had there been any certainty of hitting and killing him then and there, I should have been tempted to fire, for I am certain that without him the youths under him could have accomplished little, but I am no shot with a pistol and to have fired would have been to bring the whole pack about our ears.

It was a long wait. Now and again fragments of conversation came to our ears and once I heard Hunzerger's harsh voice say confidently:

"To-morrow or the next day we shall have them. Without food or equipment they cannot escape me."

At length he gave an order and his cohort obediently trooped off to bed. Two of their number stayed behind to act as sentries. This was a complication. I had hoped that there would be but one sentry, but it was only to be expected that after the killing of the former sentry the guard would be increased; in any event the German is not happy on his own when there is danger about.

Another hour passed. The sentries remained together, now and then leaving the fire to patrol the camp.

I had planned to remove the equipment without alarming the camp but I soon saw that this was impossible. The night was chilly and in between their patrols the sentries paused to add fuel to the fire. The dump of stores and equipment was only a few yards away from it, and we should have to pass right across the brightly lit centre of the glade where we were certain to be spotted and fired at.

There was nothing for it but to attack the sentries and knock them out, if possible without alarming the camp. I whispered this to Nima Dorje.

"We will wait until they pass near us, then, when I give the signal, we will attack them. You will take the nearest. Kill him, as you killed the last man, without noise."

I heard my companion suck in his breath in a hiss of pleasurable anticipation; he was thirsting for a scrap.

We had to wait a long time before any possibility of an attack presented itself, but at length the two sentries, after warming themselves by the fire, turned and walked in our direction.

They approached until they were less than five yards away. Then they paused and after a few words of conversation turned and set off back towards the fire.

This was our opportunity. I grasped Nima Dorje by the arm.

"Now!" I whispered.

Crouching, we emerged from the thicket into the glade, and moving swiftly on tip-toe made for the two sentries. It was not a job I fancied, this attack on unsuspecting men from behind, but it had to be done, it was nothing less than war.

They were sharply outlined against the fire and we were within a few yards of them when my foot came up against something on the ground. It must have been an empty tin for it made an infernal clatter. Instantly they jerked round. After that things happened quickly. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Nima Dorje bound forward like a panther, the polished blade of his kukri flashing wickedly in the firelight. There was a startled shout, ending in a scream. At the same moment I raised my pistol and fired. As I did so I realised that I was firing at Hunzerger's son, Otto. There was an answering shot and something ripped through the cloth of my jacket at the shoulder. Then I saw the Nazi suddenly crumple up and fall. I rushed forward to help Nima Dorje but he needed no help from me. He was on top of his man and in another moment rose brandishing his bloody kukri. He was blood-mad and ready to take on any number of Germans.

"Quick!" I yelled, and made for the tarpaulin-covered dump of food and equipment.

He followed and in another moment we had torn away one end of the tarpaulin and were rummaging for the equipment. Thank heavens it had not been disturbed, and in quicker time than it takes to write this, we had seized the two rucksacks together with three ice axes and a coil of rope.

By now the camp was aroused. There were shouts, and the roaring of Hunzerger. Figures appeared out of the darkness and as we bolted for the edge of the glade pistol shots rang out and bullets whizzed past. Rifle shots followed, but by then we were in safety among the trees.

Without pause we hastened through the forest, tripping over roots and fallen branches. For a quarter of an hour we ran and stumbled along at top speed, then we paused to pant and listen.

Shouts and cries sounded in the distance, but we were safe now from any pursuit until daylight.

" That was good work," I said to the Sherpa. " You got your man all right."

" Yes, Sahib, but not so well as last time. Then I killed with one hit, but this time it was two or three." He spoke in the manner of an artist dissatisfied with his work.

So far, so good. We had now to tramp on up the valley at our best speed and overtake the others. It was rough going in the darkness but it was impossible to lose the way; we had only to follow the stream. Soon we had put two or three miles between us and the camp, and although we stopped now and then to listen for sounds of pursuit there were none. I surmised that Hunzerger, in spite of his grief and rage at loss of his son, was unlikely to waste his energies in a fruitless hunt in the dark, but would organise his men before setting off in pursuit.

One thing was self-evident, we could not afford to be recaptured; certain death awaited us if we were. And now as to immediate possibilities. Would Hunzerger assume that we had gone up the valley and not down it? In any event the gorge was guarded and the route he had made across the mountains was under observation. Therefore he would almost certainly send a party up the valley, in which case we must look forward to a determined and well-organised pursuit on the morrow. Thank heavens for one thing; the aeroplane was out of action and could take no part in the proceedings. The first move had gone to us, but the remaining possibilities were still heavily in Hunzerger's favour; for he had at his disposal some eight or nine active young men plentifully provided with food and equipment

to say nothing of arms, whilst our party included an elderly professor and a girl, and had but little food and nothing in the way of cooking apparatus or sleeping bags. True, we now had the necessary climbing equipment for the passage of a glacier pass, but I knew full well that should that pass prove difficult, we would never manage to cross it.

Yet there was one thing on our side—the weather. The sky was filled with stars, and the Milky Way hung like a spectral banner in an unclouded firmament. At any other time I would have enjoyed the scene as the dawn broke, for Mount Everest was so close now that the eye reeled in its giddy climb towards the immense ridges and gleaming scimitar-like edges that slowly revealed themselves as the light grew.

Soon it was light enough to see. We were now above the tree-line in a stony waste. The valley was narrower here, and huge precipices stood up on either hand towards a wild chaos of peaks and ridges. Selecting the largest boulder we could find, we scrambled to the top and, lying flat, gazed backwards along the way we had come. About two miles of the valley floor was visible, but no sign of movement could we see. The view in the other direction was even more limited, for above us the valley bent slightly. The others were not in sight and the horrid thought occurred to me that perhaps we had overshot and passed them in the dark. Then I reflected that, although we had gone hard, they had at least four hours' start of us and must be some distance ahead. As yet there was no indication of any break in the wall of mountains bounding the valley to the east and it was evident that we had still some distance to go before turning up the side valley towards the pass.

The sun was gorgeous on the mountain tops as we continued. We had provided ourselves with some sattoo before leaving the cave and this we ate dry as we trudged along.

Twenty minutes later we passed the bend. Beyond it the

valley broadened out. Less than two miles ahead was the tongue of a glacier falling precipitously from the flanks of Mount Everest. No advance was possible in that direction and, as though to emphasise the fact, there came to our ears the sullen thunder of an ice avalanche. At first sight it looked an impasse, a trap from which there was no escape. Then I saw what Professor Wilberforce had seen. A mile or so away the valley forked. One branch ended against Everest, the other disappeared round a buttress to the east. There was no other break in the wall of mountains and it was apparent that here and here alone was there any possibility of finding a pass. Yet I must confess that my heart sank as I gazed. Even if there was a pass it must be very high. The Professor had said at least twenty thousand feet, but the lowest point in the range must be considerably higher than that, at least twenty-two or twenty-three thousand feet.

"Look, Sahib, look! I can see them!" Nima Dorje's excited voice broke in on my thoughts.

I followed the direction of his outstretched arm. At first I could see nothing; then, yes, there was no doubt about it, a tiny figure was moving amidst the waste of tumbled rocks at the entrance to the side valley. It was followed by a second and a third. My gloom vanished. There they were, and they had made splendid progress.

"Come along," I said to my elated little companion. "As hard as you can. We'll soon overtake them."

It was all easy going to the entrance of the side valley. Then came a scramble through a wilderness of boulders. An hour passed. The valley was narrow and tortuous. We turned a corner. A hundred yards ahead were our three companions trudging slowly but resolutely along. I let out a joyful cry. They halted and turned, and one—it was Mabel—came hurrying back to greet us.

Her eyes were wet.

"Tom, is it really you? We've been looking out for you, but you never came. We heard shots and we thought——" Suddenly she burst into tears.

For the second time my arms were around her, and this time it was in broad daylight.

Chapter Eighteen

"YOU WILL OBSERVE, TOM," SAID THE PROFESSOR A FEW minutes later, "that where the glacier disappears round that corner there are indications of a pass."

"That's so," I agreed, "but it will be a high one and we don't know what lies on the other side."

"As regards that," he said gravely, "we can only trust to Providence, but the immediate question is whether we should push on and spend a night in the snow, or bivouac on the rocks below the glacier in the hope that we can cross the range to-morrow."

"It depends on whether we are being followed," I replied. "I think we should assume that we are. If so, we shall have to keep going all day and bivouac in the snow. It will be an uncomfortable business, I know, without a tent or sleeping bags, and we shall stand a risk of being frostbitten."

"And we have little food to keep us warm, and no means of cooking anything. All the same I think you are right, Tom; I bow to your judgment in these matters. We are bound to assume that we are being followed and that every moment is important; what do you think, Theo?"

"The same as you, Professor," said Pendelbury stoutly.

"We'll push on then," I said, "and only bivouac when we have to."

It was easy, if laborious, going for the next few hours. The glacier looked close at hand from our halting place, but in that enormous country of deceptive scales it proved to be several miles away, and to reach it we had to make our way over interminable acres of loose stones. I watched Mabel anxiously, for I knew from past experience that women will seldom own to being tired, and will drive them-

selves to breaking-point unless checked. But it was Professor Wilberforce who first showed signs of fatigue. He had endured much at the hands of Hunzerger, and that and his age began to tell even against his magnificent physique. As a result our pace slowed up appreciably, and it was not until well after mid-day that we reached the terminal moraine of the glacier, a vast muddle of stones arranged in heaps hundreds of feet high. Here we halted for a meal and afterwards, while the others rested, Nima Dorje and I scrambled up to the highest point of the moraine which commanded a view down the valley. The best part of three miles was visible, but though we gazed until our eyes ached we saw no movement of any living thing. Was it possible that Hunzerger had gone off on a wild-goose chase in some other direction? We could only pray that he had.

Mabel and Pendelbury received this good news enthusiastically, but the Professor was oddly apathetic.

" How high do you think we are now? " he asked me.

I told him about sixteen thousand feet.

" That accounts for it then," he said.

" You are feeling tired? "

" A little," he replied. " It is merely the effect of the altitude. I shall feel better presently. Let us continue."

Half an hour later we were treading the ice of the glacier. After the slopes of stones the going was easier and we progressed well for a time, but the bare ice did not extend far, and presently we came to snow.

Fortunately among the raided equipment were enough snow goggles for us all, but unhappily there was no glacier cream to counteract the intense power of the sun which, reflected from the snow at high altitudes, strips the skin from the face as though it were paper. Here, however, Mabel came to the rescue. From her pocket she produced a tube of face cream with which we anointed our countenances.

" You've been down on me more than once, Daddy, for

what you called feminine vanities," she said, smiling, "I hope you'll take it back now."

"I do," replied her father humbly. "Trust a woman to look after her complexion anywhere."

At length we approached the point from which it was possible to see past the bend in the glacier. Everything depended on that view. If the head of the glacier was enclosed by unscaleable mountainsides there would be no escape, and failure was not pleasant to contemplate. And so, as we approached the fateful place, I know that my heart was thumping uncomfortably fast and that neither exertion nor altitude could explain a sick feeling at the back of my throat.

Slowly, as we rounded the bend, the view ahead was revealed. At first we saw only an unbroken and brutal skyline of knife-like ice edges underhung with impassable precipices. If it was all like that it was hopeless, utterly hopeless. A few yards more; it was the same, an impasse; the strongest and most skilful of climbing parties could never force a route. Practically all was visible now and we began to experience a feeling of chill despair. Then, just as all hope was dead, we saw the pass. It was as though some giant had taken a clean bite out of the palisade of precipices. Close under the flanks of Everest itself, and between it and a savage peak of fearful steepness, was a gap, a snowy notch linked with the glacier on which we stood by a narrow corridor of ice and snow. True, the corridor was steep, but it could be climbed, of that I was certain. And the portion of the glacier separating us from the foot of the corridor was by no means easy; crevasses rifted it across, and here and there ugly walls of gleaming ice interposed awkward barriers. Undoubtedly it would take time to ascend, and the way would not be easy to find, yet never for one moment did we doubt that a route could be found.

So much for the difficulties, but in mountaineering diffi-

culty is one matter and danger another. A route may be either easy or difficult, but it may be dangerous into the bargain. Sweeping up from the head of the glacier was the great face of Mount Everest. For thousands of feet it was broken up into ribs, ridges, buttresses, and spurs, and in the hollow between these the snows of centuries had collected to form glaciers. These glaciers were in downward movement owing to the accumulations of fresh snow, combined with the constant tug of gravity, but their slow motion was circumscribed by the nature of the ground. When the ice came to the edge of a precipice it was pushed over until, unable to support itself any longer, it broke away and plunged in enormous slices weighing tens of thousands of tons, down the mountainside on to the glacier. Imagine the cliffs of Beachy Head to be changed into ice. Then picture them being constantly thrust forward until they tottered and fell into the sea and you will have a fair idea of the place. To reach the corridor leading to the pass we had to cross an area of glacier liable to be enfiladed at any moment by a barrage as deadly as any a soldier must face. No skill would avail us now; we had to trust to Providence to see us safely through.

I did not know then whether the others realised the danger and I determined to say nothing about it. Nature, however, had no such delicate feelings. There was a sudden low muttering from high up on the slopes of Everest, rising quickly to a thunderous roar. A mile or more above our heads a small puff of white smoke appeared. As we watched it shot downwards, gathering volume every instant. For a full half-minute we watched it shooting over cliff after cliff until at length in a final bound of fully a thousand feet it reached the glacier. There the avalanche was deflected forwards and outwards, and a torrent of ice and snow swept forward like the blast of some monstrous explosion. Dense clouds of wind-blown snow billowed far

into the air, concealing the corridor and the pass, and it was some minutes before the thunder of the fall died away.

It was Mabel who spoke first.

"Old Man Everest seems in a fractious mood," she said with a tight little smile. "Let's hope he behaves himself better when we are there."

"The best thing we can do," I said, "is to cross the dangerous bit to-morrow morning before the sun rises; there will be less risk of an avalanche then."

"That depends on whether we can find a good route up the ice-fall and bivouac high to-day," said Pendelbury.

"It does," I agreed. "We must push on as long as the light lasts."

I glanced at Professor Wilberforce as I said this. Of late it had become increasingly obvious that it was by will power alone that he was keeping himself going. Now, with bowed shoulders and lack-lustre eyes, he presented the spectacle of a well-nigh exhausted man.

We were about to move on when Mabel plucked me by the arm and drew me aside.

"Daddy is dreadfully tired," she whispered, looking at me with troubled eyes.

"I know he is."

"Do you think we shall be able to get him over the pass?"

"Of course we shall." I tried to impart a cheerfulness I was very far from experiencing myself.

"Perhaps it would be better if we didn't go too far to-day," she said. "The night's rest may do him good. If only we could be sure that those Germans were not following us it might be best to stop now and risk the avalanches to-morrow, but we can't be sure; I've a horrid feeling they're after us."

"What about you?" I asked her. "Aren't you tired too?"

"I suppose I am a bit, but it's wonderful what one can do when one has to. I don't want to be a burden to you, Tom."

"You'll never be that," I assured her.

Truth to tell we were all tired. Even Pendelbury was not his usual buoyant self, and alone among the party Nima Dorje seemed unaffected by the stresses and anxieties of the past three days. No doubt unusual and inadequate food had something to do with this in the rest of us; in Nima's case, hard work and short commons are the lot of the average Sherpa. Up to then I had not dared to face the possibility that one or other of the party might prove unequal to the strain of crossing a high Himalayan pass, but it was now sadly evident that Professor Wilberforce might prove unequal to the task. And if so what then? It did not bear thinking about.

Mabel must have read the anxiety in my face, for she said gently:

"Cheer up, Tom; it's tough on you, I know; you have to saddle all the responsibility, but we'll pull through all right."

She smiled bravely as she spoke. My heart went out to her. She was desperately anxious because of her father.

"Of course we will," I assured her, and strove again to put a confident note into my voice.

The difficulties of the ascent began soon after we had started again. The glacier, as already indicated, was broken and steep; we had to thread our way between deep crevasses and, when dodging them was impossible, climb over steep escarpments of ice. In the Alps it would not have been particularly difficult, but we were now at a height of twenty thousand feet, and anything in the least strenuous made us gasp for breath in the thin atmosphere. To add to our troubles the snow became progressively softer and deeper as we climbed. At first it was only boot-deep, but presently

we were sinking in half-way to the knees. Pendelbury, Nima Dorje and I took turns at stamping out the track. The Professor came last in the line and so had the advantage of well-trodden snow, but even so it was painfully evident that he was very tired, and halts to rest him became more and more frequent. Without a rope and ice axes we could not possibly have done it. Several times the leader plunged through the insecure snow bridges spanning the crevasses, and had to be dragged out on the rope by his companions, whilst now and then the ice axe was called into play to hew a staircase up a steep bit where the powdery snow had slipped away exposing blue-black ice.

We were about half-way up the ice-fall when the sun disappeared. In another hour it would be dark and it was necessary to find a sheltered place and make ourselves as comfortable as possible. We were all very weary and Professor Wilberforce was near the end of his tether. For some time past he had been walking like one in a daze sustained only by his indomitable will power, but now when the time came to halt finally he sank down into the snow with a groan.

An ice wall some thirty feet high was the best protection we could find and we decided to bivouac at the base of it. As every moment of daylight was precious I set Nima Dorje to fashion the best shelter he could, knowing him to be expert in the matter of sleeping out in all manner of exacting conditions, then asked Pendelbury to accompany me so that we could prospect the route for the morrow, and not waste further time and energy finding it in the dark.

Like me he was very tired, but he agreed instantly to the suggestion, and taking turns at the arduous task of track-making we slowly made our way up the ice-fall. Above us the glow of sundown illumined the peaks, and the enormous mass of Everest rose into a sky of clear, cold green. It was a quiet, serene evening and at any other time we would have

enjoyed the splendid scene, but tired and anxious as we were the huge mountain seemed savagely hostile.

For some forty minutes we toiled upwards. Then, to our relief, we discovered easier going in a scoop that avoided the worst of the crevasses and ice walls. Up this we climbed for another quarter of an hour. It was almost dark now but there was sufficient light left to see that the way lay clear to the uppermost plateau of the glacier and the corridor leading to the pass.

We arrived back to find that Nima Dorje had accomplished marvels in our absence. With seemingly inexhaustible energy he had attacked the base of the ice wall with his axe and had fashioned a shallow cave. We assisted him to widen the cavity until it was large enough to accommodate the whole party. This done we scooped up the snow to form a rude wall at the mouth of the cave, as an additional protection. Then we fitted ourselves inside. The exhausted Professor we made sit in the middle with Mabel on one side and Pendelbury and Nima Dorje on the other, while I sat next to Mabel.

In retrospect it is not easy to describe the rigours of that bivouac in the high Himalayas, for memory does not easily conjure up pictures of intense physical discomfort. It was cold; the coldness of space descended on the earth that night, a cold that must have frozen us had it not been for the fire made by Nima Dorje. With native acumen and foresight he had gathered some pieces of wood as he and I hastened up the valley through the darkness after our raid on the camp. These he had secreted about his person and he now produced them in the most matter-of-fact way. It was not much, a few handfuls, but the fire sufficed to melt some snow and make a warm porridge of sattoo. The Professor had the major portion, we insisted upon that despite his expostulations, but there was a mouthful or two for each of us.

Unequipped as we were with sleeping bags it was essential to remain awake, or at least to doze only in snatches; to have slept for any length of time might have been fatal. The Professor was our greatest anxiety. To begin with he was speechless with fatigue, but the hot sattoo revived him a little. As for the rest of us, Nima Dorje obviously regarded a bivouac in the open at over twenty thousand feet as all in the day's work, whilst if Pendelbury and Mabel were tired they gave no outward sign of it. Mabel, especially, exhibited a cheerfulness which I should not have believed possible had I not seen it.

"I've often read about cave men," she laughed, "but I didn't realise that I should ever have to live with any."

As for myself I only know that, used as I was to high climbing, I have never spent such a horrible night. Hour after hour we sat with our shuddering backs against the hard, cold ice, kicking our feet and beating our gloved hands together, in attempts to keep the circulation going, as well as our cramped position would permit. Now and again one or other of us dropped into a doze only to be forcibly awakened by his companions. Nima Dorje alone was allowed to rest undisturbed, for I knew from experience that his hard little body could resist a temperature that would kill a European. He rewarded us with some resounding snores, but presently awoke with a piercing yell under the impression, as he told us later, that an abominable snowman had looked in at the mouth of the cave.

Meanwhile the stars glittered in upon us through the mouth of the cave with that amazing brilliance which is seen only at the highest altitudes. How remote they seemed and how oblivious of the miserable little beings who shivered and kicked on the icy roof of the world.

Occasionally the glacier creaked and groaned as the ice bore slowly downwards and now and then came the thunder of ice avalanches from Everest; one, it must have been a

monster fall, descended not far from us, and the glacier shuddered beneath the impact.

The night seemed interminable and the planets marched with inexorable slowness. The cold grew and grew, until by midnight the temperature must have been many degrees below zero.

To the reader it may sound romantic that I was seated next to the woman of my choice under the stars, but romance blossoms only in those who are warm, well fed and comfortable, and I doubt whether Romeo and Juliet would have done anything but curse their fate had they been made to spend a night in the snow at an altitude of twenty thousand feet above the sea.

And so, very slowly and very uncomfortably, the night passed. Once Mabel told me half-apologetically that for some time she had lost all sensation in her fingers. I asked her why on earth she had not mentioned it before, and massaged her hands between mine, afterwards making her place them underneath my clothing against my chest. Happily this saved her from frostbite, but the returning circulation was agonising for her, as I knew full well, although courageously she sought to stifle the groans which a strong man would not have been ashamed to make in similar circumstances.

No, it was not romantic, but I remember something bigger and finer than romance—a feeling of wanting to protect and help her, coupled with a mighty determination to see this business through to the end, and to get her and her father over the pass together with the plans. I remember, too, swearing that whatever else happened, Hunzerger and his gang should pay dearly for the misery they had caused; those Huns would be made to rue the day they interfered with the personal liberties of British subjects.

About an hour before dawn we ate a small quantity of sattoo. There was no fuel left with which to melt snow and

we consumed it dry. Never have I eaten a more wretched meal; we had to force the powdered barley down throats already sore and congested through breathing the intensely cold, dry air; but it was better than nothing as all the strength we could muster would be needed for crossing the pass.

Chapter Nineteen

THE STARS WERE BEGINNING TO PALE AS WE EMERGED FROM the ice grotto. So stiff and cramped were we that it was some time before we could straighten ourselves out, and I do not suppose any more miserable collection of climbers ever set out for a day's mountaineering.

Professor Wilberforce was still our greatest anxiety and I watched him carefully as we tied on the frozen rope. If the rest had restored him in the first place, the cold had subsequently done much to reduce his vitality and he moved like one in a dream.

Some vigorous stamping and arm-slapping in an attempt to restore sluggish circulation to our numbed extremities and we were ready to start.

In the growing light it was possible to pick out the track Pendelbury and I had made the night before, and this relieved us for a time from the tiresome necessity of route-finding. Nevertheless our progress from the first was slow, and over an hour passed before we reached the end of the track. It was now full daylight and, as we paused to rest, the summit of Mount Everest, nine thousand feet higher, glowed white-hot like an enormous forging newly withdrawn from a furnace. Quickly the glow spread downwards. If we had hoped to cross the avalanche-swept zone before the sun shone on the mountain we had sadly miscalculated; it would take us another hour at least to reach the dangerous area, and by that time the sun would be hard at work disintegrating the ice cliffs.

Then as I gazed back down the way we had come my heart gave a sudden convulsive leap, for I saw what above all things I had dreaded to see. Two miles away, and over

two thousand feet beneath, where the glacier swept round the corner we had passed the previous day, a dark dot showed against the snow. It was moving. Then another dot appeared and another, six in all. My companions saw them almost at the same moment and I heard Mabel take in a sharp little breath that was half a sob, whilst Nima Dorje emitted a thin, doleful whistle. Professor Wilberforce alone did not see, for he was seated in the snow some yards away with bowed head; already he was desperately tired. I hated having to tell him what we had seen.

"How are you?" I asked him.

He looked up; his face showed drawn and haggard in the growing light.

"Pretty done, I'm afraid. I doubt whether I shall be able to make the pass. It's—it's worrying me, Tom. I am delaying you all."

"Not a bit," I said in as casual a voice as I could muster, "but we've got to get a move on. Hunzerger's on our tracks."

He jerked upright as though he had been struck.

"Eh, what's that you say? Hunzerger on our tracks? How do you know? How . . . ?"

He broke off; he was gazing down the glacier.

Suddenly with an effort he scrambled to his feet and stood facing me. His hand went to the inside pocket of his jacket and withdrew holding the cylinder containing the plans. He held it out to me.

"You are the strongest and fittest man, Tom. It's your duty to get over the pass with this. You can easily do it with your servant."

"That's impossible," I told him.

"Impossible, why?"

"We are all together in this show, and there is Mabel."

His blue eyes were no longer dull and filmed with fatigue. They bored into mine.

"You love her, Tom, I know that—I have seen it. And

she loves you, that I know also. But there are greater issues at stake; you must go."

"And leave you and Mabel to that brute Hunzerger? I'm damned if I will."

He was silent for a few moments. Then:

"Listen, Tom," he said earnestly, "there is one thing you can do for me. I am an old man; it matters nothing what happens to me. The rest of you must go on and leave me. What can Hunzerger do? I have no longer got the plans."

"It won't do," I told him. "We're all in this together. You've got to come on, Professor; it isn't far to the pass now and once we're over it, it will be easy enough for you going downhill."

I tried to put some optimism into my words, but in my heart I knew there was no hope of getting this worn old man to the pass.

"And suppose I refuse to accompany you?"

"Then we shall stay with you."

"And if I *cannot* go on?"

"We shall still stay with you."

Again he was silent; when at last he spoke it was with a conscious effort.

"Very well, then I will go on; God grant me the strength."

"That's better!" I said cheerfully. "We will help you as much as we can. Nima Dorje!"

"Sahib?"

"You are not tired?"

"Not at all."

"Then walk next to the Professor Sahib and help him as much as you can."

A minute later we were on our way again. Already the Germans were appreciably nearer. Theirs was an easy job—they had merely to follow our tracks. As I ploughed through the soft snow I wondered whether Mabel and Pen-

delbury had heard anything of what had passed between the Professor and me. Of one thing I was certain; they would have refused, as I had, to abandon him. Yet the decision, instantly made though it had been, was not easy. Again and again I asked myself whether I had done right. Strong and fit as Nima Dorje and I still were there was a chance that we might get to the pass before the Germans, even taking into account the labour of track-making in the soft snow. And if we did, it meant that the Professor's plans might still be saved. Mabel, I knew, would refuse to leave her father, and how could I leave her and Pendelbury to the mercy of that fiend, Hunzerger? I had acted in the main on impulse, on the immemorial instinct of man that decrees it wrong to leave his companions in the lurch. And yet, as the Professor had said, the stakes were large, too large to comprehend properly. For one of the Germans at our heels the issue would have been simple. He would have gone on, thinking only of Führer and Fatherland. But an Englishman thinks differently. His first thought is always for those about him. Above all things he is humane. And yet, and yet, it was my duty to deliver those plans at any and every cost to those who could use them best, regardless of humanity, regardless of the woman I loved, regardless of everything. My duty, yes; and I failed —failed in my duty and my mission.

I found myself scrambling over a mass of ice blocks and realised with a sudden shock that we had come to the avalanche-swept area. For a full half-mile it stretched, a waste of piled-up fragments covering the whole upper bay of the glacier, masses of snow and angular blocks of ice, some the size of houses. Judged by every standard of mountaineering prudence and safety, it was a horrible place, a veritable death trap, a skittle alley of titans. Directly above was the immense face of Everest. We were still in chill shadow but there on the icy steeps the sun shone with

an ever-increasing power. We could see threatening escarpments and masses of ice hundreds of feet thick, poised on the very brink of precipices, in enormous blocks, towers and pinnacles, silhouetted in weird beauty against the sky like the crumbling walls of some medieval fortress city. It was appalling, that view, but we paid little heed to it; there was too much else to burden us with anxiety. Professor Wilberforce was going gallantly; he was putting everything he possessed into one last effort; but he was beginning to stagger and it was all Nima Dorje could do to support him. He must be helped still further, and after unroping myself and bidding Pendelbury go ahead towards the foot of the corridor, which was plainly visible, I dropped behind to assist the Sherpa. With two of us, one on either arm, he was able to progress a little better, but his legs were scarcely able to support him and it was only by our united strength that we were able to get him along. Gruelling work it was at that height and we had to halt to regain our breath every few paces.

How long we were in the dangerous area I do not know; for Professor Wilberforce it must have seemed an interminable, never-ending desert of effort crossed with the clogging pace of a nightmare. He was staring fixedly in front of him like a sleep-walker, and his breath was jerking out of his lungs in short, rushing gasps.

I did my best to encourage him.

"You're doing splendidly; another hour and we'll be there."

"Another hour," he gasped. "Another hour. I'll do it, yes, I'll do it. I'll do it."

Of such quality was his courage.

Mabel was tired too, but her father's courage inspired her to fresh efforts as it inspired us all.

The fallen ice had choked and obliterated the crevasses in the glacier, and we came across none until we were

within fifty yards of the foot of the corridor, which we knew was out of the reach of avalanches. Then we were confronted by a monster. At first we were undecided as to the best way of avoiding it, but presently decided that we must cross it by way of a steep tongue of frozen snow. We were about to start when I heard an exclamation from Pendelbury.

"Heaven help us!" he said. "They are very close."

For some time past we had not seen the Germans. They had been out of sight on the steeper part of the glacier, but now we saw them again. They had advanced quickly, far more quickly than we had anticipated, and were no more than a third of a mile distant. Even had the Professor been going well there was now no chance of reaching the pass, for they were carrying rifles and against the snow of the corridor we should be picked off like flies. There was only one thing left to do, to halt and fight for it with the five shots left in my pistol—five pistol shots against six riflemen. But halt where? There was not cover for a fly. Pendelbury must have divined my thoughts for he suddenly cried:

"Above the steep bit, Tom! There's a dip there. We can shoot them as they cross the crevasse."

The way in which he said "shoot them" was hardly consistent with a cleric and a man of peace, but his round little face, sunburned now to the colour of mahogany, was more pugnacious than I had ever seen it, even when we had fought on that first memorable encounter.

Between us we supported the Professor to the snow tongue. It was the steepest place we had had to climb since leaving our bivouac and the snow was unexpectedly hard, windswept and icy. It was necessary to cut steps. I did so with desperate speed while Nima Dorje held me on the rope. Then, having scaled the obstacle, I drove my ice axe into the snow, took the rope round it and shouted to the

Sherpa to come on with the Professor. It was a risk, as the snow tongue might have collapsed and precipitated them both into the cavernous depths of the crevasse, in which case I could not possibly have held the two of them on the rope. But, luckily, the bridge held. Slowly, the Professor struggled up the steps. As well as I could I assisted him by pulling hard on the rope, whilst Nima Dorje supported him from behind, taking much of his weight on his head and shoulders. I could hear his sobbing gasps, they were terrible to listen to. It was a supreme effort, his courage and fortitude were something I can never forget, but it was his last. As I seized him by the hand and dragged him on to the shelf he collapsed face downwards into the snow. I pulled him round and slipping off my rucksack placed it beneath his head. His face was grey-blue in colour and he puffed his breath out from between swollen lips in thin, wheezy gasps. There was no doubt about it; he had reached the end of his endurance. For long he had climbed on will power alone, but Nature had asserted herself finally over the poor, tired old body.

One by one the others came up. When Mabel arrived she went down on her knees beside her father with a pitiful cry.

So that was to be the end. The Germans were now only a few hundred yards distant. They were trudging methodically along and I could see the great frame of Hunzerger in the van.

"Tom." It was the Professor's voice, quavering and feeble. "I am finished. Something has broken inside me, my heart. Tom, you are there? You seem very far away."

"I am here," I said, kneeling down in the snow.

"Tom, you will take care of Mabel, you will not let any harm come to her?" He was speaking more slowly and with greater difficulty every instant; I had to put my ear close to his mouth to catch the words.

"Yes, sir," I answered, "you can rely on me."

"You must trust Tom, my dear."

"Yes, Daddy, of course I will," said Mabel in a choking voice.

"Everything seems so dark and cold," he muttered, then:

"The plans, Tom—they are in my pocket—take them—destroy them."

I did as he bid me, and from the inside pocket of his jacket drew forth the metal cylinder.

"Destroy them now," he entreated me.

"Very well," I replied. "Nima! Your kukri."

The knife was handed to me. I placed the cylinder in the snow then, raising the kukri, brought it smartly down. The razor-like edge sheared through the metal as though it were paper. For a second, several seconds, I waited, expecting a sudden gush of flame and smoke, but none came. Something had gone wrong with the chemicals inside. Perhaps, as the Professor suspected, Edwards had tampered with them, perhaps the oxygen in the air was insufficient at that height to produce the requisite reaction.

For a moment I was nonplussed to know what to do. Then:

"The crevasse, Tom! The crevasse!" It was Pendelbury's voice.

"The crevasse, of course. What a fool I was!"

In another moment I had hurled those accursed plans far down into the chasm at our feet. I heard the cylinder strike one wall with a thud, then the other. Down it went, and down. There was a tinkle and swish of dislodged ice fragments, a faint noise in the depths of the glacier, and that was all, that was the end of Professor Wilberforce's invention, an invention capable of changing the map of the world.

"The plans, Tom?" Professor Wilberforce's voice was almost inaudible.

"They are destroyed," I told him.

"Good, good," he whispered. Suddenly his voice grew strong. "I am glad. I should have destroyed them anyway. I have been blind. Who am I to bring misery and suffering to men. Who am I? The world is not ready for me. God forgive me for it all."

"Daddy, Daddy!" Mabel's arms were around him. Her tears were falling fast.

But Professor Wilberforce seemed no longer conscious of where he was. His eyes were closed and his breath came slower and slower. Then suddenly with an effort he jerked up into a sitting position. He raised one arm, pointing upwards to the summit of Mount Everest; his blue eyes were wide open; his voice was strong and clear.

"The light," he exclaimed in ringing tones, "the light, see it, there on the mountain!"

Then abruptly his arm fell and he sank back. He was dead.

I put my arm about Mabel and gently drew her away. She was sobbing as though her heart would break.

For a few moments, in the stress of this dreadful affair, I had forgotten the Germans, but now I was recalled to the peril of our position by a shout of triumph. They had halted some fifty yards away. Hunzerger knew very well that we were armed with one of his automatics.

"You will surrender!" he yelled.

"If we do, will you promise us a safe conduct?" I replied.

"You *sweinhund*!" he shouted. "You do not know what you say. You have murdered my son, I will have blood for blood."

"Whatever you do," I retorted, "you will at least promise safety to the lady?"

"To the lady, yes, that I will do, but first I must have the plans."

"Professor Wilberforce is dead and his plans are destroyed," I returned.

For a moment Hunzerger seemed thunderstruck by this news, then:

"Destroyed!" he yelled. "What is that you say? Destroyed?"

"Yes, destroyed," I repeated. "So you see, Captain Hunzerger, there is no use in prolonging this farce."

But the Prussian was no longer capable of reasoned thought. He was beside himself with disappointment and rage; indeed, I verily believe that the frustration of his plans had turned him insane. He seized a rifle from one of his followers.

"You English swine!" he screamed. "You laugh at me, but now you will die—die!"

Even as the rifle cracked I threw myself on Mabel and bore her downwards into the soft snow. The bullet whizzed harmlessly past. For a second after the crack there was silence—then Everest woke to a clamour of echoes, a cannonade that flung from precipice to precipice.

It was then that Providence intervened. No doubt it was the reverberation of the shot on those immense masses of ice delicately poised on the great mountainside, but before the echoes had time to die away they were overwhelmed by another sound, a sudden crash followed by a thunderous roar. Thousands of feet above our heads a huge ice wall was crumbling. Enormous masses the size of cathedrals were lurching to destruction with the slow deliberate stateliness of felled factory chimneys. Forgetting Hunzerger, forgetting everything, we leapt to our feet and began to run with desperate energy, running as though in a nightmare through the soft clogging snow with hearts and lungs at bursting-point in the thin air of twenty-two thousand feet. Instinctively I had clutched Mabel, but we did not manage more than twenty yards before we sank down utterly exhausted; the prospect of death itself could not force another pace. I have a dim recollection of seeing out of the corner of my

eye the Germans also running, small black figures with one larger than the others, Hunzerger, and above them and us the avalanche bearing irresistibly down the face of Everest in a grinding, pulverising cataract. Then it was upon us. A blast of hurricane force hurled past, and a furious cloud of snow swept over us. We were blinded, smothered, choking. We must be dead, but, no, we were still alive. After the first initial thunder of the fall I was not conscious of hearing anything, yet I remember the din ceasing, a crunching, creaking sound as thousands of tons of ice came to rest on the glacier. Only boiling clouds of wind-blown snow remained, filling the air like steam from a witches' cauldron. The avalanche had missed us.

And now, as we gazed half expectantly, half fearfully, the snow clouds began to settle. Three yards away loomed a wall of ice blocks some fifteen feet high, the edge of the avalanche. It covered the place where we had been. The crevasse and Professor Wilberforce's body had disappeared. And the Germans? Where they had stood, where they had been running, there was nothing—nothing but a waste of tumbled ice blocks and sun-lit snow, blindingly white in the morning sun. They had vanished—vanished utterly from the earth. And on high Mount Everest slept again, serene and terrible in the blue of heaven.

Chapter Twenty

HOURS LATER WE STOOD ON THE PASS. WE HAD DECIDED TO push on for two reasons; firstly, to have retreated would have meant running the gauntlet of more ice avalanches, and, secondly, two or three of our enemies still remained in the valley, though with Hunzerger dead there was probably little to fear from his underlings.

We were desperately tired. Mabel was wonderful, but the toil up the corridor had been as much as she could manage, whilst Pendelbury and I, who shared in the arduous task of track-making through the soft snow, were little more than automatons with legs of lead. Only Nima Dorje seemed unaffected. The avalanche had terrified him; it had been so obviously some manifestation of the gods; but he had subsequently recovered and had helped to stamp out the track with tireless energy.

Oddly enough, I had never anticipated any great difficulty in descending from the pass, and it was scarcely a surprise when, on reaching the crest, we saw long, gentle snow slopes before us and far beneath the blue-green of a forest-clad valley leading, as we had hoped, towards the distant Arun River.

The weather was still perfect and for a while we rested in the sun. Our height cannot have been less than twenty-three thousand feet, yet Everest still towered seven thousand feet higher, trailing its vast plume of mist and snow and now and then sending its avalanches thundering into the depths from which we had so painfully climbed. The scene was sublime but we were scarcely in a position to appreciate it. Mabel's face was drawn and anguished and Pendelbury's chubby countenance was unusually set and grim. Only

Nima Dorje grinned happily as he gazed down the long sweeps of snow into the green valley at our feet. To him death counted for little, it was fate; life alone mattered.

There was food, warmth, and human companionship in the valley, escape from these deadly heights of ice and snow.

As for my mission, Britain would never profit from Professor Wilberforce's invention—nor, for that matter, would any other country. And there was a great war coming, we all knew that, for we had seen the Beast and knew it for what it was.

Wearily we tramped down from the pass, at first over snow slopes, then along an easy glacier with few crevasses to delay us. Darkness was falling as we reached the tree-line. Although dog-tired, we felt better now that those numbing altitudes were behind. Nima Dorje prepared a great fire and when we had eaten a frugal supper of sattoo mixed with water from a nearby stream, we slept without a break until dawn unfurled its banners on the mountain tops. Then we made our way down through a pine forest warm and fragrant in the morning sun, until suddenly and unexpectedly we came upon a shepherd's encampment. The shepherd was amazed to see us, for no one had ever come that way before, but when he got over his surprise he gave us sheep's milk and told us that there was a village a few miles down the valley which we should come to before nightfall.

Some time later Pendelbury and Nima Dorje went on ahead, ostensibly, so the former said, to look for the village, and Mabel and I found ourselves together as we strolled down the valley. Summer had come to the slopes and presently we came to a glade all blue and white with gentians and anemones, a lovely place girt around with tall pines etched darkly against the shine of the high snows. We were both of us strangely silent and now that all difficulty and

danger was past I found myself fumbling for something I wanted to say and being quite unable to say it.

It was Mabel who helped me out, for she suddenly stopped and gazed back to where on high the snows of Everest looked down through a portal of towering clouds.

" Daddy always wanted to die among the mountains," she said simply. " He has had his wish."

I took her hand.

" Yes," I said. " And there was something else he wished. Do you remember? "

" Yes, Tom? "

" That I should look after you. Would—would you let me—for always? "

Suddenly my arms were around her. Her lips were parted. There was a wonderful light in her dark eyes.

" Yes, Tom," she whispered between our kisses. " For always."

. . . . .

" There's one thing," I said, ages later. " Theo."

" Theo? "

" At one time I had an idea that he loved you too."

She smiled.

" Dear Theo. I've always liked him, he's the best friend we shall ever have, Tom, but I never thought of him like that. When we were walking up the valley, while you and Nima Dorje were away, he told me some of his ambitions, all the things he's going to do when he gets back to England, but I don't remember that a wife entered into his schemes."

I laughed.

" Well, I'm glad to hear that, I thought——"

" Hullo, you two! " It was Pendelbury's cheerful voice from the other end of the glade. " There's a village less than a mile away, but when you failed to arrive I came back. Has anything happened? "

"Lots," said Mabel. "Tom and I have decided to get married."

The little parson hurried forward, both hands outstretched to grasp one of ours in each.

"I'm delighted, simply delighted!" he beamed. "Of course I knew."

"You knew?" we both echoed.

"It was obvious from the first that you were made for one another. I've only one thing to ask you—that you let me marry you?"

"Of course we will, Theo," said Mabel; "that's obvious too."

Suddenly a great idea came to me.

"Listen," I interposed, "let's make it the shortest engagement on record. Marry us now, Theo."

"And Nima Dorje can witness it," exclaimed Mabel, "there he is over there. It's legal, isn't it?"

"Perfectly legal but . . ."

"No 'buts' about it, Theo."

"I was merely about to observe," said Pendelbury with a seraphic smile, "that you will have the unusual experience of having to tolerate a third party on your honeymoon."

And so then and there in that gentian-carpeted Himalayan glade, Mabel and I were married, the sole spectator and witness of the ceremony being a little tousle-haired Sherpa who stood by grinning, while bashfully twisting an old felt hat in dirty, toil-worn hands.

A glacier torrent was our organ, the birds our choristers, and all around were the walls of God's own cathedral, the shining ramparts of the everlasting hills.