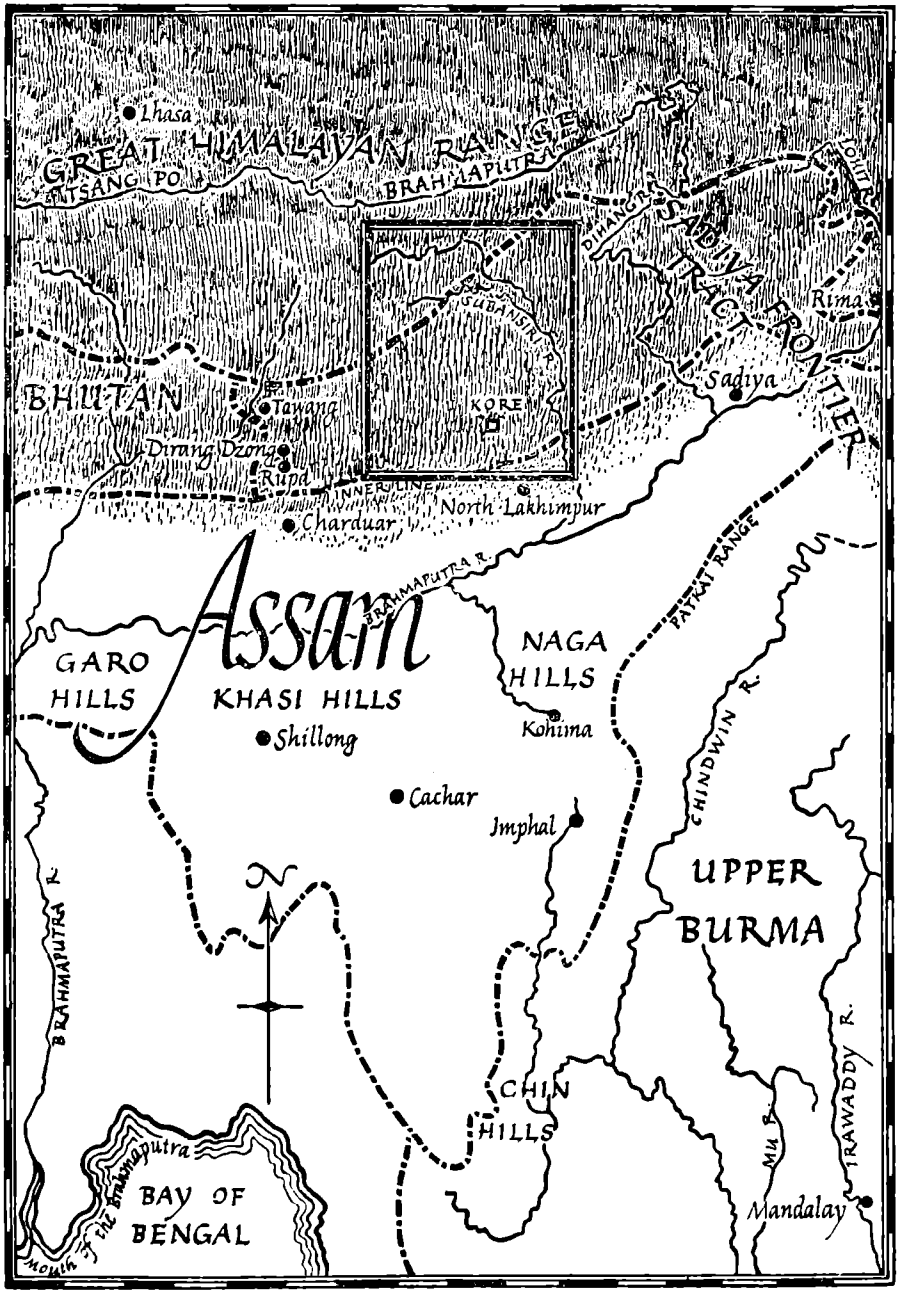
Lhasa
GREAT HIMALAYAN RANGE
TSANG PO
BRAHMAPUTRA
DIHANG R.
LOHIT R.
SUBANSIRI R.
KORE
Rima
Sadiya
BHUTAN
Tawang
Dirang Dzong
Rupa
NEFA LINE
Charduar
North Lakhimpur
Assam
BRAHMAPUTRA R.
GARO HILLS
KHASI HILLS
Shillong
NAGA HILLS
Kohima
PATKAI RANGE
CHINDWIN R.
Cachar
Imphal
UPPER BURMA
BRAHMAPUTRA R.
CHIN HILLS
MU R.
IRAWADDY R.
Mandalay
BAY OF BENGAL
mouth of the Brahmaputra

URSULA GRAHAM BOWER

THE HIDDEN LAND

Mission to a Far Corner of India

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Preface

THE Assam Valley is a long, low, fertile salient born of and watered by the great stream of the Brahmaputra. On three sides it is walled in by mountains and primitive tribes from whom the ruling power, whether Ahom, Kachari or British, has always had to protect it. The tribes south of the river are strong and aggressive and during the nineteenth century, when the British held Assam, almost all the hills on the south bank were annexed and administered as the only way to control their peoples. To the north of the river, however, the tribes were milder, and as a system of forts and payments kept them reasonably well contained it was pointless and expensive to do more.

The isolation of the northern mountains ended abruptly in 1910. China, which had long claimed suzerainty over Tibet in spite of Tibet's assertion of her independence, invaded that country, deposed the Dalai Lama and occupied Lhasa, and a garrison of Chinese troops appeared at Rima on the Assam-Tibet border and ordered the local Mishmi tribesmen to cut them a road to India. Since there was no knowing where China would stop (she had already hinted at claims to the buffer states of Nepal and Bhutan) information on the frontier territories was urgently needed, and in the next few years considerable stretches of the Northern Assam hills were more or less thoroughly explored and surveyed. The main routes from Tibet were located and a military bridle-road was built

up the most important, that running from Rima, but in the deepest part of the hills, the Subansiri region, no through route could be found; the heavily escorted Miri Mission moved a long way up the Kamla River without meeting Tibetans, and the rest of the Subansiri country was then left to itself. Finally, in 1914, Sir Henry MacMahon negotiated a tripartite Convention between India, China and Tibet and fixed the hitherto undefined Indo-Tibetan frontier along the Great Himalayan Range. Tibet accepted the Convention, but the Chinese Government repudiated its representative's actions and refused to sign.

The significance of this was swamped and forgotten, as the Convention itself was forgotten, in the confusion of the first World War and the troubled thirty years which followed. Then in 1943 China, grasping again at the hold on Tibet which she had in the meantime lost, issued maps which showed Tibet as a Chinese province and drew the Tibetan frontier a hundred miles south of the MacMahon Line, thus claiming not only the border hills but a part of the Indian plains as well. The situation was delicate, for China was at the time England's ally against the Japanese, but India's right to the Convention boundary had to be made very clear indeed and a second period of exploration and development began in the Assam hills.

The prime task was to make good the MacMahon Line and Mr. J. P. Mills, a senior Indian Civil Servant with an unrivalled knowledge of the tribes, was put in charge of the frontier. The difficulties were enormous, for the country was nearly trackless, animal transport was impracticable and the soil was so loose and the rainfall so heavy that it was all but impossible to build roads. The sole means of moving goods was on human backs, but permanent porters had to carry their own rations, which reduced their range to five days from base and their payload to a minimum, while tribal porters,

who at least rationed themselves, were few and hard to come by. Nevertheless he established outposts on the three known routes through the hills, the Lohit Valley, the Siang Valley and the Dirang Dzong track, and at all accessible points he either vindicated the MacMahon Line or made India's claim to the belt between it and the plains abundantly clear. But when all this was done there still remained the Subansiri region, where Tibetan ornaments found among the tribes made it likely that either Tibetans or people in touch with Tibet lived in the unexplored hinterland. It was desirable to find out more here and Dr. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, a distinguished anthropologist, was instructed to enter the region on a journey of exploration.

Since Dr. Haimendorf and his wife are telling their story, admirably for themselves there is only need for a short summary here. The only information available was from the reports of the Miri Mission and the brief accounts of the few punitive expeditions which had entered the hills, and these indicated that some five or six marches from the plains there was a densely populated valley inhabited by a people of higher culture than the barbaric Daflas who surrounded them. The temper of the tribe, the Apa Tanis, being uncertain, no expedition had entered their villages or made contact with the tribal leaders, and towards this landmark Dr. Haimendorf and his wife set out in the spring of 1944.

Travelling under appalling conditions and with every disadvantage and hazard, for at that date even the most necessary stores and facilities were unobtainable, they made two successful expeditions of reconnaissance and returned with a wealth of topographical and ethnological material. On their first journey they penetrated through the hills to the almost legendary Apa Tani Valley and made effective and friendly contact with the tribe. On the second they returned at the Apa Tanis' request with an administrative officer and a force

of military police. These carried out punitive measures against Licha, an aggressive group of Dafla villages north-west of the Apa Tani Valley, and rescued a number of Apa Tanis who were held prisoner there. Lastly the Haimendorfs struck out unescorted to the north in an attempt to reach the snows. Lack of time prevented their achieving this but they covered a considerable distance and demonstrated a new travelling technique of such importance that it is necessary to discuss it.

The previous method had been to move with a large escort (which in turn entailed an unwieldy baggage train) and, on the assumption that the tribes were hostile, to avoid the villages and move along the unfrequented river valleys. For this the Haimendorfs substituted a cheaper and more effective system, but one involving a much greater risk. With a small and almost unarmed party they travelled from village to village, persuading the tribesmen to carry their loads for payment in cloth and salt and halting at each stage to establish further friendly relations. The system depended on tact and an understanding of tribal psychology; it was purely for exploration and could only succeed if entirely divorced from administration. It was essential to avoid any entanglement in tribal feuds or any infringement of custom, great care was necessary that neither the members of the party nor the tribesmen themselves had an opportunity to use the party's presence for their own ends, and it was of paramount importance to travel without an escort and with the smallest possible train.

The Haimendorfs finally returned to the plains in 1945 and embodied their discoveries in reports [1] submitted to the Assam Government. The Government now had to consider the

[1] Readers interested are strongly recommended to consult Dr. C. von Fürer-Haimendorf's *Ethnographic Notes on the Tribes of the Subansiri Region* (Assam Government Press, Shillong, 1948). There are copies in the libraries of the Royal Anthropological Institute and the Royal Geographical Society. It is a mine of valuable information and contains the only authoritative material so far published on the Subansiri tribes.

region's future; the phase of exploration was over and consolidation must follow, but the form it should take depended upon what conditions among the tribes were disclosed by the reconnaissance expeditions.

There were rumoured to be other tribes somewhere in the remote interior, but for all practical purposes the Government had only to deal with two, the Dafla-Miri group and the Apa Tanis. The bulk of the known country was occupied by the former, who were in fact two branches of the same tribe. The Daflas lived to the west of the Apa Tani Valley, between it and the Aka country, and the Miris were to the east of it, between the valley and the Subansiri River. Both Daflas and Miris lived in villages which were loose aggregations of long-houses, the joint family in the long-house being the primary social unit; so much was this so that in time of war individual long-houses were regularly attacked and burned while the rest of the settlement not only remained unmolested but made no attempt to intervene. These villages were unstable entities from which households could easily detach themselves and move off elsewhere and the settlements readily split up and changed their sites. The houses were deliberately of flimsy construction so that the inmates could escape easily in case of a surprise attack, and in many places they were occupied only during the day, the people sleeping in the woods at night for fear of raiders. Both sections of the group used a primitive system of slash-and-burn cultivation, the fields being tilled largely by the non-combatant sections of the community, the women and slaves. Their material culture was on the whole poor. Blacksmithing and *cire-perdu* casting were carried on and pottery was made here and there, but they depended for textiles wholly on outside sources such as the plains, the Apa Tanis and Tibet. Both sections were riddled with blood feuds and in a state of constant strife; captives were held to ransom

or enslaved and, especially among the Daflas, murders, kidnappings and the theft of cattle were daily occurrences.

To this state of affairs the Apa Tanis presented a complete contrast. They were peaceful, settled and organized and formed a compact enclave in the middle of the Dafla country; they lived in a flat-bottomed valley, the drained bed of a swamp, lying 5,000 feet above sea level and girdled by forested mountains up to 9,000 feet high and, though the area of the valley floor measured barely twenty square miles, its total population was estimated at 20,000. The tribe, whose culture Dr. Haimendorf had described as virtually Late Neolithic, lived in seven great villages ranging in size from Bela, with 5,000 inhabitants, to Michi Bamin with 750. This population density of 1,000 to the square mile had its nearest parallel in the rich silt lands of Bengal with their two rice harvests a year and was unique among primitive peoples dependent on a single harvest. It was attained by a complex and intensive agricultural system. Rice was grown on irrigated fields of skilled construction, millet was cultivated on higher lands dependent on rainfall only, and the miles of clay banks which enclosed the irrigated fields were planted with yet more millet whose yield added many thousand baskets to the valley's total; groves, gardens and grazing-grounds occupied all the land not under crops. All agricultural land was private property; the best of it was very valuable and the skill, care and labour lavished on it were extraordinary. The material culture was higher than among the Daflas, and Apa Tani dyeing and weaving were of a very high order indeed. The villages were compact permanent settlements whose houses were inhabited by a single family, with at most one or two servants living at a secondary hearth; the tremendous size and concentration of the settlements were sufficient protection against attack. The tribe was divided into two exogamous classes, the *mite*, or patricians, and the *mura*, or plebeians; each class was again divided vertically

into exogamous clans and every *mura* clan was dependent on some *mite* clan. The villages themselves were laid out on a clan basis, each clan or group of clans occupying its own quarter with its own ritual centres. There was no such anarchic state of war as prevailed among the Daflas, for a strong feeling of tribal solidarity and the necessity to live at peace, if they were to live at all, in their densely crowded valley had led them to evolve an efficient machinery for the settlement of disputes within the tribe and for the good government of the villages.

The invasion of Burma and the Naga Hills by the Japanese had taught the Indian Government that undeveloped territory, however difficult the terrain, could no longer be reckoned on as a defence, and the Chinese threat made it desirable that a firm claim to the Subansiri region be established. A prerequisite for this was the pacification of the tribes. The Apa Tanis presented no great problem; their peaceable and highly developed social organization could be left to itself during the initial stages and though certain of their customs, notably domestic slavery, must inevitably be changed, these were an integral part of an economy so specialized and delicately poised that too rash interference might have disastrous results. The Daflas were far more difficult to deal with. No progress of any kind could be made till their internecine warfare was ended and free movement in their country became possible. It was necessary with them to develop control and eventually administration among a warlike and savage people who had no conception of unified and organized government and whose home was in mountainous and almost entirely unexplored country; to accomplish this forcibly would entail a major military operation, which, owing to the scattered population and the incredible difficulty of the country, would have been both prohibitively costly and largely ineffective. The

alternative was to proceed by slow pressure and gradual infiltration, and this was the course chosen.

The Government decided to begin by establishing a permanent post as far out as conveniently possible in tribal territory. As it was essential that there should be no withdrawal during the rainy season and a consequent relapse into anarchy in the hills, it would be served by a line of communication to supply and maintain it throughout the year. To feed the line of communication, a base for the collection and despatch of stores and the housing of a permanent porter-corps of Nepalese was to be set up in the plains near North Lakhimpur. The tracing and construction of an all-weather porter-track was bound to be a long business and to save time it was arranged that when a Political Officer was appointed he should move straight into the hills with a platoon of military police and a small staff of interpreters, select a site for the post and receive a year's stores by air; thus, cushioned against major transport problems for at least a season, he could open the line of communication, make the acquaintance of the tribes and learn his way about the country before any serious attempt at administration began.

At this point my husband became Political Officer of the newly formed Subansiri Area and was called to Shillong to receive instructions. The directive he was given was this. He was to proceed with the greatest deliberation and caution in all his dealings with the tribesmen and, since their only previous contacts with the outside world had been with punitive expeditions exacting retribution for tribal raids on the plains, he must explain to the people that the Government's aim in entering their country was a benevolent one. He must guide, advise and control, but he must not resort to force. The task of the platoon of Assam Rifles attached to the Area would be to see that the King's writ, as symbolized by the Union Jack which flew at the Political Officer's headquarters, ran in the

immediate neighbourhood of the post and the track. This alone would occupy all their time and stretch their limited strength to the utmost, for in that zone not only must Government property be sacrosanct, but the Pax Britannica must reign, and the outpost and the track, the little speck of peace and the long stalk which attached it to the plains below, must be an object-lesson to the tribes, a demonstration plot of law and order. But for the present intervention beyond these narrow limits would be not only vain but disastrous; however one's pity might be aroused or one's sense of justice outraged no commitment must ever be undertaken which could not be carried out in full, for this alternative policy to large-scale military pacification rested on a gigantic bluff and any rash action which exposed it might well mean the end of the Political Officer and his whole party.

And so we entered upon the Subansiri Area.

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THE HIDDEN LAND

Mission to a Far Corner of India

1

The Assam Valley

THE snow-ranges behind the unknown land ran from end to end of the northern horizon, tinted, ethereal and immeasurably distant. A coppery haze rose up from the broad, hot trough lying between them and our viewpoint in North Cachar and hid their bases so that they seemed to float and were more like dream-mountains than ever.

"Another few months," said Tim, "and we ought to be well up under the lee of those."

"It looks like a long walk to me," I said, staring at the snow-fangs.

It was a longer walk than we imagined.

We had first heard of the Subansiri Area in 1945 and after that first mention it recurred persistently. It was weird and unexplored, a strange and uncharted world. Its tribes came from no one knew where, its hinterland held no one knew what, and in it was a fantastic enclave, the Apa Tani Valley; this was a marvellously cultivated bowl populated by a bizarre people, planted with an alien flora brought from an unknown home and visited every year by mysterious white cranes which appeared each winter and vanished mysteriously in the spring. The Area lay in the foothills belt which runs between the plains of Assam and the Great Himalayan Range on the

southern borders of Tibet. The map showed it as a blank, a vast, virginal space, broken only by the conjectural courses of the three major rivers, the Subansiri, Kamla and Khru. The Subansiri had its source in Tibet and pierced the snow-ranges by a tremendous gorge; its tributaries, the Khru and Kamla, rose in the Himalayas, merged far down to the south and joined the Subansiri not far from the edge of the plains. The rest of the enormous tract was a mountain labyrinth of unbelievable difficulty, a terrain which had kept the area largely inviolate. The hills were folded and knotted, peaked and rent; ridge was crammed against ridge, soaring and sheer, the valleys between were gigantic gashes four, five and six thousand feet deep, and the whole country was up on end. Except in the Apa Tani Valley the villages were small and scattered and the cultivation primitive; over most of what was known the tribes were unsettled and warlike and nobody knew what lay further in at the foot of the snow-ranges. Paths were steep and few, the wide, strong rivers were unfordable, bridges were frail and rare, and from one end of the Area to the other there was nothing but cliff and torrent, harshness and savagery. It was wild, sinister and unbelievably beautiful.

In the days before Tim and I had met and when neither of us had ever heard of the Area, I had lived alone among the hill tribes of the Assam-Burma border, doing anthropological work of considerable interest. For the best part of seven years I had been the only white inhabitant of a Zemi Naga community; I had been mistaken for a reincarnation of a former goddess and had had an embarrassing reign as a divinity; I had been accepted by the tribe and eventually adopted into it and I felt a very deep and real affection for these people. When the war came up through Burma I and a number of the Zemi joined a guerrilla organization known as V Force, a unit of the 14th Army. In the same organization there was a Lieutenant-Colonel Betts who had a similar love of the jungle; to cut a

long story short, he visited my camp at the end of the war on the pretext of collecting butterflies and within a month we were married and honeymooning in Tibet. He then went off to join the Civil Affairs Service in Burma and when he reappeared demobilized six months later he was given a post in the Political Service on the North-East Frontier of India.

There followed six weeks of uncertainty as to where he would be posted. There were many senior officers to be accommodated before him; it had just been decided that he should go to Mokokchung in the Naga Hills as Subdivisional Officer when there was a complete reversal and the totally unexpected happened; a senior man took the Naga Hills post and Tim found himself the first Political Officer of the newly gazetted Subansiri Area. We were nearly delirious with excitement. The Area was an enchanted mirage, the very stuff of dreams, an anomalous survival into the twentieth century. We did not discover until later that only the most incurable romantics would have taken on the Subansiri Area with the enthusiasm that we did, but even had we known we should still have taken it on.

When the rains ended and it was time for Tim to take up his post we went to Shillong, the provincial capital. There was a momentary hitch when the Government of India objected to my going into the Area with him, but they consented in the end on condition that I kept out of danger. They were, I think, bothered less about my life than about the expense of a punitive expedition if we were all scuppered. Political Officers were presumably expendable when on duty, but dead wives implied domesticity destroyed and indignant letters to the papers.

While Tim sat in an office on Secretariat Hill and studied the files I searched the straggling bazaars for warm clothing and stores; there was little of either to be had—some moth-eaten Army serge which would make coats and trousers, some

poorish knitting-wool for socks, and a few tinned foods. Then one morning we piled into a lorry with our household goods and pathetically small amount of equipment and bowled off down the long hill-road from Shillong. Bumping and lurching, we dived and wound from grassland and pines to the light woods and from the light woods to the jungle and fields of the Assam Valley, and so north across the river towards the Subansiri Area.

We reached it by a sidewheel steamer up the Brahmaputra and another long day in a truck, and as dusk fell on the third day out from Shillong the glaring white road we had been following since morning changed abruptly to black tarmac. We came to the outskirts of a town, a small, untidy place; we threaded a street of tawdry shops, and somewhere on the far side we turned in at a gate and unpacked ourselves by the light of hurricane lamps into one whitewashed room and half the verandah of the North Lakhimpur Circuit House. Before the building were ragged trees, and towering dark behind them, immense and looming, like a vast velvet silhouette pasted on the starry night sky, were the outer ranges of the Area.

Daylight revealed our quarters as stuffy and bug-infested. There was a noisome servants' latrine thirty paces on the left flank and a dead cow in a ditch in front; North Lakhimpur usually contrived to greet us with such emblems of mortality and on a later visit Tim found that a police inspector had hanged himself on a near-by tree. We spread newspapers in the chairs, which temporarily frustrated the bugs, directed the sweeper's attention to the latrine and hoped that the Town Council would deal with the cow, which mercifully it did before the sun grew hot.

Soon after breakfast the Area staff began to arrive. Since there was as yet no base the office was temporarily housed in the police lines, and they came drifting thence over the sunlit grass. They were a mixed lot, representing most of the main

political and racial groups of the Province of Assam. First came the Assistant Political Officer, Rajuni Gogoi, a middle-aged Ahom who had spent his life in Government service and knew more about Daflas than any non-Dafla living. Then came the Assistant Surgeon, Dr. Bhattacharjee, a small, gentle Bengali who had been with the Haimendorfs; we in our turn were to find him shy, kind, gallant and selfless. Thirdly came the Transport Supervisor, a lean and wiry Mohammedan called Siraj-ud-Din. He was possessed of demoniac energy and was completely fearless; he had a long black forelock which dangled over his forehead; he was single-mindedly loyal to the Government which employed him and had he been called upon to die for it he would have done so without a qualm. Lastly came the tribal interpreters; those based on Lakhimpur were Daflas and only two of these were notable: Kop Temi, the Head Interpreter, and Bat Heli, his lieutenant. Temi—his clan name came first and his personal name second, as was the Dafla and Apa Tani custom—was a solid, immensely competent man in his middle fifties; he had a wide influence among the tribes and was universally trusted. He wore European dress with the Dafla cane helmet and hair-knot and kept a neat record of his cases in a pocket notebook. Bat Heli was a much younger man and came from a village just inside the Area. He was far more of an unregenerate Dafla than Temi and from time to time the old tribalisms would flare through the law-abiding crust; in dress he was wholly Dafla, with tunic, helmet, necklaces, body-armour, archer's wristguard and sword, and though only in his early twenties he had the gnomelike Dafla look which Temi lacked, a strange compound of youth and extreme old age, as though he were a mere stripling of two hundred and fifty. Had he one day turned out to be the wood spirit he so much resembled and melted into a tree trunk nobody would have been surprised.

The R.A.F. Dakota squadron which New Delhi had lent to the frontier was due to drop supplies in the second week in November and the sooner we could enter the hills and find a dropping-ground the better. When Tim mentioned the matter a look of gloom at once settled on Rajuni's face. We had come up against a major difficulty, a difficulty with which we were soon to be horribly, painfully familiar, a problem which was to haunt us for the next eighteen months, the problem of finding porters.

"I will send to the hillmen," he said, and raised his hands hopelessly. "But I do not know if they will come."

They did not. They had been drawn on heavily in the last two years for the exploring expeditions and they were not going to turn out again if they could help it. The permanent porter-corps of Nepalese was still forming and was nowhere near ready yet, and the days passed in frustration on frustration. The high hopes with which we had begun wilted, and tempers frayed and ravelled. The bungalow was small and cramped and was stifling in the afternoons, and the high, pale wall of the Subansiri hills looked down aloofly on us and on the simmering plains where we planned its violation.

The worst of it was that there was nothing we could tackle directly. The deadlocks which hemmed us in were none of our own making and impossible for us to solve. The boots, clothing and blankets with which to equip the porter-corps were almost unobtainable in war-disorganized India, and when secured they went astray on the railways and involved us in endless correspondence with remote stations. When the Nepalese began to come in they were of poor quality, drafts raked together anyhow by the recruiting agency; many went sick at once, others ran away with their kit, and Tim and Rajuni wasted long hours in the Subdivisional Officer's Court in prosecuting the absconders. There were no tribal porters at

all and the interpreters sent out like the ravens from the Ark returned, like the ravens, unsuccessful. As to our own equipment, from a professional point of view it did not exist. We had to make and improvise almost everything. Much of the winter clothing—caps, socks, sweaters and mittens—I knitted myself, and the rest, including the sleeping-bags, was made by the tailors of North Lakhimpur bazaar. Our cameras were ten years old and needed repairs, but there was nothing to be done about that. Film was virtually off the market; the learned societies from which I begged help wrote politely back regretting their inability to do anything and in the end I collected about a quarter of what we needed by writing persistently for months to every dealer I could hear of in India. Our blankets were Army relics, our shoes were Pathan sandals and our tent was a Government issue, thin, tropical and chilly, and when wet about as portable as the Albert Hall. Necessity after necessity failed to arrive. Rajuni was almost in despair; Siraj rushed round resolving crises and assuring us that everything must come all right in the end. The transport broke down regularly. The nights were sweltering hot, the jackals howled on the lawn, and the second week of November drew ominously near.

Then suddenly we were off. Thirty-five Nepalese porters had been mustered from heaven knew where and were awaiting us at the hill-foot. It was half-past eight on a late October morning in 1946; the early light slanted long and golden across the grass and the stuffy little Circuit House, now stripped of our possessions, looked cool and white and peaceful. The heap of baggage on the lawn grew gradually less as the kit was stowed in the truck—the camp-beds, the bedding rolled up in valises, the wooden boxes of stores and the tall cane carrying-baskets with their pointed tops. The dogs were caught and heaved protesting aboard, the three Naga servants climbed in,

Tim took the driver's seat and I sat beside him and the truck churned off at last through the crowded streets of the town.

The hills ran alongside us as we trundled westward, a lavender-grey dado in the morning light, and the Panior River, which in the plains is called the Ranganadi, broke through them in a savage gorge visible from far out on the level. Beyond the town the road crossed the river by a long bridge and on the other side ran on for a while through broad green flats rich from the rains just ended. Then we turned abruptly up a rough track and headed straight for the hills.

With the turn the sun seemed to go. A ceiling of cloud hung over us, damp, grey and sad as wet cotton-wool. It gathered on the ranges, whose colour deepened to a dull blue. As we bounced and swayed down the uneven road the mountains began to appear in relief, here a buttress showing itself, there a spur standing out, till the frieze of hills had become concrete and three-dimensional. One sharp-edged ridge towered high above all the others; it was Tasser Puttu, where ran our road to the north. In the grey light and under the heavy sky there was depression and foreboding. These hills did not call. They threatened and repelled, they resented intrusion, and yet there was an awful fascination about them, an aura of things strange, of places not in the creation we know.

The truck decanted us at the entrance to a jungle path and into the middle of the Nepalese porters. They fell on the baggage. Loads were picked up, carried off, abandoned for those lighter and left forlornly sitting under a tree. Siraj and the porter-headmen ran about like madmen and exhorted, pushed and pulled and somehow the vital baggage was hoisted on to backs and the train formed. There were inevitably fewer porters than expected and most of our European food had to be left behind, but a month on porter-rations was as nothing to the risk of delay. At last the line moved off, strag-

gling uncontrollably, an undisciplined, unpractised mile-length of porters, servants, excited dogs and Assam Rifles sepoys who shepherded the whole. The jungle path swallowed us, an undulating track which we shared and sometimes disputed with the wild elephants, and we trudged off through the cane-brakes and dense wet forest towards the hills.

Long after dark had fallen and a huge yellow moon had come up Tim and I sat on a bare spur outside Heli's village of Selsemchi and waited while the Assam Rifles found and brought in the last, tired, fallen-by-the-wayside porters. Normally we reached camp well after the baggage, but tonight arrangements had broken down completely. The newly recruited porters were out of condition, and as each man had wearied on the seven-mile march he had plumped down where he was and made no attempt to reach camp. Our sweat-soaked clothes had chilled on us; we were hungry and without shelter; but the plains lay moonlit two thousand years away and two thousand feet below us while we were in tribal territory and beyond the world.

The small Dafla village of Selsemchi perched at the foot of the climb over Tasser Puttu. Above the village the foot track climbed through fields and passed into the forest. Up it went, by a long narrow buttress so worn away that one looked down on either side into treetops below; we climbed interminably, stride after stride, knees and thighs aching, up slopes of brown soil, over small ledges, over brief levels which gave us no relief, up and up the great hill closing the gateway to the Area, until the undergrowth thinned and the air grew cool. Then at last the path could climb directly no more and it wriggled and twisted up the final wall till the chilly mist of the summit gathered us in. We stopped—the porters shaking with the cold, the lean, drill-clad Siraj, Heli with his Robin Hood hawk's feather jutting boldly from his cane helmet—in a small,

mossy col too dank to sit in. On the far side the track fell away like a chute.

We slid down it one after the other on a long bank of stiff clay, lurching, sprawling and clutching at the trees for support.

"How on earth," said Tim bitterly, "do I keep a track open through the rains over this grease-patch?"

Below this the ground firmed and the forest stretched away down into space, tree boles one after the other, grey-green tops, wet mould underfoot, and small plants growing at the feet of the big trees; here and there were little yellow begonias, as bright and unexpected as buttercups. Next the lower woods began, and the old clearings, where the path was slimy and the weeds thick and the roof of branches hung a few feet over our heads. Then, four thousand feet down, when the path was plunging steeper and steeper away and the footholds were full of shale and mica grit and rocks poked up through the soil, the vegetation altered again. Up shot the trees once more, but wilder and ranker, and the undergrowth was a dull-leaved mass which thrust forward, prickling and stinging, to close the path—the harsh, wet jungle of the valleys.

We camped that night at Lichi, on a bare hill looking back to Tasser Puttu. The jerseyed porters, shivering, doubled about pitching tents and finding wood. The loads were stacked in a derelict heap on a knoll and I sheltered in their lee while the tent was going up. Curiously enough, I felt no elation at our having got so far. As so often happened in the Subansiri, all emotion seemed drained away and obliterated by physical weariness. The body overcame the mind and there was nothing left but a tired animal reacting to sensory impressions; one became a recording machine, registering sights and sounds but no more able to comment on them than a camera. Beyond our spur we looked across encircling abysses at battlements of ranges, one behind the other in rampart and bastion and barrier. They rose straight out of the twilight val-

leys in a single sweep and away they went, ridge beyond ridge, grim spire and spike peering one above the other; below us the Panior cut through them all in a gigantic slash. The day went out in a streak of wintry yellow between grey cloud banks. Deeper grey swamped the hills. The stars appeared, sparks rushed up from the newly lit campfires; the tents flapped, the dogs huddled up to the men for warmth in black and white hummocks of breathing fur, and a wind swept down from Tasser Puttu and flayed impartially ourselves, the dead trees and the dry grass.

Next morning at the foot of the spur Heli pointed out a skeleton at the side of the path. The man had been an Apa Tani; he had gone on a trading trip to the plains and had died there in the Bach Bat ravine on his way home. The ground was rocky and it was impossible to dig a grave, so his companions had covered him with leaves and left him. Desert, hot winds and blowing sand are surely the right accompaniments for a wayside skeleton. Here in the cool dampness of the forest ferns curled over the shoulders and tendrils wound delicately through the ribs and about the spine; the pattern of bones, still recognizably human, enclosed growing stems which were a fierce assertion of life. It was a macabre *memento mori* in the style of Dürer.

The track climbed out of the ravine. We were weaving up and down now along the toes of the ridges, diving into clefts and gullies and scrambling out again. Then the valley opened a little and there was a shelf between the hills and the river.

It was covered with the unfenced fields of Dafla slash-and-burn cultivation. The rice was ripe and women were reaping. They cut the ears off short in small handfuls and threshed them straight into the baskets they carried, knocking the grains out against a flat piece of wood hung inside the basket; the empty bunches of ears they threw away and the knee-high stubble was left standing. The fields were full of enormous

felled trees, some of them five or six feet through. All had been cut down with the primitive Dafla axes and *daos* of soft iron. The women reapers were dressed in dingy white calico or in straw-coloured Assamese silk, tied over one shoulder and belted round the waist with a red cotton sash over which a few, the rich, wore a heavy girdle of bell-metal discs. They had plump, yellow-brown faces; their coarse, black hair was knotted loosely on the neck and they were sturdy, dumpy and heavy-featured. All wore beads, mostly scarlet and yellow, with a few valuable old cornelian strings and others like pale clouded amber. Their legs were measled white with myriads of bites from the vicious little dimdam flies; their ankles were constricted above the bone by bands of woven cane so tight that the flesh bulged over them.

Somewhere on the slopes above us there were four villages, Chod, Sekhe, Yoijat and Potin, but except for the women in the fields there was no sign of their people. Beyond the fields the valley closed in again. The Panior was close beside us, broad, white and cascading, foaming and pouring down shallow steps. The path fell away suddenly from the bright fields, the reaping women and the sun and ran down through brown and green jungle, between bamboo and thorny rattan, over sliddery earth slopes, and into a dark cove full of the noise of the river. The rock steps down which we clambered ended in a fan of shale and then we stepped out on to pale sand at the edge of the foam, rocks and eddies of the Panior River itself. The line deployed a little uncertainly, the porters downing loads and scrambling up boulders here and there to look at the river. The dogs barked unceasingly at the water, paddled in it, tasted it here and there, and scrambled out shaking themselves.

From here the path, barely traceable, followed the river-bed. When the water rose in the monsoon there was no way through at all and we should have to cut a new track higher

up on the side of the gorge. Now the stream, though still seventy yards wide, was shrunken to its winter volume and wide strips of sand and shingle or sandy flood-courses edged with reeds separated it from the summer tide-marks. The line re-formed and we moved on up the stream-bed, Tim and I hanging back to let the porters go on. The gorge was green and sunlit, cooled by the mass of water passing through it. In the open the river was green, the same colour as the forest; in the eddies below the cliffs it was black, sheeny-black patterned with foam, and colder than death. Big grey kingfishers flew over it. There were sunny rocks out in the dancing green water and on them butterflies lit, and fluttered and lit again, butterflies brown, yellow, orange, almond-green, black and white. While Tim fished I sat on the hot sand and watched them.

By paths through thickets of black-stemmed wild banana, by goat tracks over the top of cliffs, by shallow backwaters and by woods full of sun-dapple we came at last to a side stream struggling through tumbled boulders. On the far side was a cleared space and the cane cables of a bridge. We had reached Pite Camp and the Panior crossing.

2

Airdrop

THE place was empty and there was no sign of the Dafla porters who should have been there to meet us. The Panior ran smoothly past in a long, slow reach, like a canal through forest, and the cane suspension-bridge hung over cool water full of silence and shadows. We pitched our tents and took counsel; the Nepalese had finished their rations and must return at once, and if no Dafla replacements had arrived by morning then we must halt a day while Siraj went out to fetch some. That being safely settled, the Nepalese went to sleep and Tim cast a line in the big pool under the bridge and caught five six-pound fish.

Next morning early Tim poked his nose out of the tent into the cold air.

"Any porters?" I asked.

"Not a soul," said Tim, and went shivering back to bed.

After breakfast the Nepalese left. Siraj, swearing that all would be well and that we should get our men, went off up the valley towards the Dafla villages, and the remaining dozen or so of us were left to our own devices. The day passed in hot, fly-haunted inactivity, and on the second morning we again peered out hopefully into a dark dawn chilly with river-mist and found nobody and nothing.

Since there was nothing much to get up for the camp re-

mained deserted long after it was day. Smoke streamed up from the leaf-and-tarpaulin shelters and the sun broke through the trees in slanting rays and made wonderful silhouettes in the hanging reek, so that tree trunks, boulders, bushes and the tops of the crazy huts were edged and haloed with light. Only Tim was about. The Panior was some of the best fishing in the world and the halt was a godsend to him; caught up like everything else in the web of light-patterns, he had wound his line round a pair of trees and was busy greasing it. As the shadows shortened and the sun found the water, the dimdams —the biting flies—awoke and Tim swatted one on his leg and started for the tent and the insect-repellent bottle.

At that moment there was a faint murmur, an all-but inaudible drone behind the top of the forest. He stopped short and listened.

"Here!" he called. "D'you hear that?"

I left the tent and joined him. It was unmistakably the sound of aircraft. The noise grew. Tim ran to the tent and came back with the field-glasses; people tumbled out of the shelters and stood staring, the Gurkha sepoys, the Assamese clerk, the Naga servants, all craning up at the narrow channel of sky. Then two Dakotas passed over, flying steadily north. We heard them circling behind the hills for some time, searching for our recognition signals, but after half an hour they gave it up and turned back, sailing over us without a look as we stood there hopelessly concealed by the enshrouding trees. They droned off down the gorge and the sound of their engines died out.

"The first recce," said Tim.

It was an appalling crisis. We had not expected the first reconnaissance flights for another five days at least, when we had hoped to be settled by a suitable dropping-ground in the Panior Basin country another two marches further on. If we were not in position there next morning with all the signals

out when the final flight came over, then our airdrop would be cancelled, the whole year's work would be scrapped and we might as well never have started. All the struggles of the last few weeks, all that we had achieved so far—were they to be thrown away in the next few hours? We were about twenty miles from the rendezvous; no one had the slightest idea where, or even if, we should find a dropping-ground when we got there; we were completely stranded in the woods and there was nothing whatever we could do to collect porters, since Siraj, Heli and all their aides were out already. There was only one thing left and that was, if no one had arrived by the afternoon, for Tim and the Gurkhas to abandon the rest of us and try to reach the rendezvous by a forced march.

The day crawled. The river slid smoothly between its banks, Tim went fishing from the rocks below the bridge, the kingfishers flashed and darted and the dimdams swarmed and kept us all slapping. When lunch at last arrived, it was a landmark in a desert of time. Then at last the light fell long and slanted down the reach; the shadow of the hills stepped over us, gathering us in, a chill rose up from the water, and though it was early yet and the hills above us were in full sun, it was dusk with us down in the valley.

Eight Daflas appeared from the woods on the far bank and started to cross the bridge. Tim and I ran from the tent, the clerk left his shelter, the Gurkhas turned out; the camp erupted people and the astonished Daflas came down from the bridge into the middle of us.

They were brown, woodland men, cane-helmeted and armoured in cane rings. Their broad-bladed, murderous *daos* were slung high under the arm and they carried bows and arrows. They were amazed at so many strangers and bunched defensively at the bridge-foot while the Assamese clerk questioned them. Were they porters? Where were they from, and had they news?

They were not porters. They were, as their spokesman explained, kinsmen of Nabum Takum, a notable of the Upper Panior region, and they were on their way to Selsemchi and a feast in Bat Heli's house. They asked what all the fuss was and whether anything was wrong.

The clerk explained and the Daflas looked at one another. They had not, said their spokesman, come as porters, but if they could be of help to their friend Bat Heli's Sahib . . .

We bundled together blankets and rations and threw in the marking-strips and inside ten minutes the party was off. The Daflas led, bent under their loads, Tim stalked behind, and after him trotted two Gurkhas. They crossed the swaying cane bridge and swarmed down the far ladder, and then dusk and the forest took them and they were gone.

As night fell and the stars came out in the tree-enclosed strip of sky, Siraj unexpectedly returned. He was damp with sweat and hoarse with talking; his wavy black forelock was more unruly than ever and goodness knows when he had last eaten. Out of the green tunnel of path behind him came fifteen Dafla porters and twenty more were promised for the morning. I did not believe in the latter—we had had Dafla promises before—but in the morning the miracle happened. At first light the camp was surging with porters, last night's fifteen and the new twenty, barging about among the loads before anyone was awake, grumbling, arguing, hefting the baggage and tying everything up in tangles of cane, and the camp dissolved round us in the dawn before half the inmates were out of bed. Along the edge of the bank we went, stumbling among the smooth boulders; up the ladder to the bridge, over its shaking, springy length, with the water sliding dark and cold under; down the far side, up a muddy slope, and into a winding green alley whose walls were saplings and trees and clumps of bamboo. The leaf-mould was soft to the tread and the air smelled cool and fresh; the indefatigable Siraj was at

my heels and behind us both again at last, grander at that moment than a full orchestra, were the sounds of a column of march, the grunts and breathing, the padding of bare feet and the creak of cane baskets.

We had gone some miles when we heard the aircraft coming. Conversation in the column died, the voices ceasing one by one like lights put out, and we halted. The Dakotas swept over us, visible for a second or two through the gaps in the leaves, and the noise faded out to the north.

We waited. Nobody spoke. A bend in the valley had shut off the sound of the engines and in the quiet I could hear the man next to me breathing. The creak and rustle of the wind in the bamboos sounded unnaturally loud; the sun streamed down on the bright rapids of the Panior and the small waves lapped on the sandy shore in front of us. Then, very faintly, we heard the returning hum.

You could feel the tension relax throughout the column. The aircraft were coming straight back and there had been no long search. They had found Tim's party. We marched on again.

A little farther on we met three men coming the other way, winding down the path between the tree boles. They moved at a curious jogging pace. They had plaited cane haversacks on their backs and wore cane helmets, but helmets subtly different from the Dafla ones. Their hair-knots differed too, being more finely and intricately plaited, and they wore scarlet cane belts which ended in a long lobster-tail behind. They were Apa Tanis, grubby and scruffy Apa Tanis, but Apa Tanis all the same. The first man and I came face to face on the path, neither prepared to step off, and stopped, almost touching. Bat Heli shouted to the man to give way. He moved over and we trudged past, but I had not gone more than a pace or two when he grasped what our party was and asked for the Sahib.

"Gone ahead," said Heli.

"Where's the Memsahib, then?" said the man. "They told us there was one coming."

There was a general guffaw. The man looked amazed, and two or three people pointed me out within a yard of him. He looked me up and down, heavy sandals, ankle puttees, drill trousers and old Army shirt, much as I might study a circus elephant, and then said, "Huh! She looks just like a man. She's much bigger than the one who was here last year."

The outraged porters chivied him off down the path and cut short this interesting comparison with Betty Haimendorf. Siraj, much upset, said, "These Apa Tanis have no manners. They are an impudent people."

Heli concurred, I laughed and left it at that, and we tramped on up the track, past the open space at Yazali and on to the small, cleared camp-site at Dodoseram. There Tim, the Gurkhas and a guide rejoined us, triumphant, at dusk.

They had reached Dodoseram at nightfall and had pushed on again at dawn with Pei Topu, a young local headman, to show them the way. They had climbed till they overlooked the Panior basin, an enormous hollow fifty miles long and thirty wide; it was bounded by high hills almost lost in blue haze, and its floor was heavily eroded grassland, a formless mass of ridges and knolls with deepcut ravines between, a landscape which looked as if it had solidified at a rolling boil. For two hours they marched through it without seeing a patch of flat ground, and they were almost in despair when they came out abruptly on a stream and a small valley; beyond the stream was a stretch of old rice fields, a possible dropping-ground, while the valley gave a run-in for aircraft. The sun was well up already and though the site was not ideal there might not be another within twenty miles, so they laid out the marking strips and scrambled up the nearest hill to look for

something better. Arrived there, they saw nothing except more hills, each shouldering up in a steep camel's hump with only height and a bush or two to distinguish it from its neighbours, an endless monotony of close-packed hillocks of every size from thirty to a hundred feet high, so they sat down to wait where they were.

"Sahib," said Pei Topu, puzzled, when they had got their breath, "what is all this for?"

"Aeroplanes will come," said Tim. "Like great birds—"

"Ah, yes, I know all about them," said Pei Topu, who three years before had been flown over by most of the U.S.A.A.F. "But what will they do?"

"They'll throw out sacks of food, many, many, and then we shan't have to carry it all from the plains."

"But how? Are they not small, like birds?"

"No, big like a house. They hold forty men."

"And they always looked so tiny up there, like swallows!" Topu sat speechless for several seconds, meditating on the effects of perspective.

"Listen!" said Tim.

Above the sound of the wind in the miles of grass they heard a hum. At first it was so low and small it might have been an insect or a trick of the ear; they could hardly swear they heard it. Then it grew. Two minute specks appeared against the grape-blue wall of the outer ranges. They winked silvery when the sun struck them. Nearer they came, and nearer. They turned and twisted, searching over the sea of humps. There was no camp, no white tent to show up, and the cloth strips were very small in the vast yellow wilderness; Tim flashed the signal-mirror with something like despair.

One Dakota dived towards the valley and the pilot waved as he passed. The second aircraft followed, they both circled the dropping-ground, and then they swung back to the south. In

a matter of seconds they were midgelike specks again and the mountains had swallowed their hum.

A week later we were camped by the Kale River, the small stream on which Tim and his party had come. The high, bare, grassy hills, like a landscape in a Chinese painting, looked down on a cleared strip where the airdrop had begun and on the tent pitched out of harm's way in a clearing in the scrub. The flag, barely stirring in the negligible breeze, now and then showed a brief glimpse of red and blue and white; its rough pole stood before the tent and the campfire. It was a gesture of defiance in the face of that immense and indifferent wilderness, but at least we had brought it so far; seven days before it had been most unlikely that we should.

There had been no move yet from the tribes. The walls of the Panior Basin were sprinkled with villages and immediately to the east of us were three big Dafla settlements, Jorum Kamin's, Jorum Tacho's and Jorum Kopi's. If you went up to the top of the knoll you could see them plainly, their longhouses ruled along the dun slope, paths meandering up and down between, white dots of goats moving and small squares of cornplot patchworked about, but we had seen nothing of their people, except for the pick-up gang Siraj had recruited; as for the Apa Tani Valley—now just over the hill behind Kopi's village—it might never have existed. To the hillmen the British Raj was a mighty but foreign devil, and when it left home and wandered into the hills it was better to let it alone until it declared itself.

The day was greyer than usual. A high, thin mist obscured the sun in typical Subansiri weather. There was a strange light, dull and unearthly, and the world was neither bright nor stormy, heaven nor hell, but a vague, chilly limbo. The three dogs, fresh from the plains, felt the cold acutely and lay about in flaccid heaps. We breakfasted outside in the raw air

and waited until ten o'clock, when Tim, looking up at the clouds, said he thought no aircraft would come and he had better go over to the dropping-ground and check the stores. He vanished down the path to the stream and I turned back into camp.

I had just reached the tent when I heard someone running behind me and turned round to find Tim returning at the double.

"The headmen!" he shouted. "It's an official call. The path beyond the fields is solid with them. Get the political presents, quick!"

Curiosity had overcome discretion and the hillmen had suddenly moved. We had presents for such occasions, beads, knives, Assam silks and the like, and the box in which they were stowed with the rest of the baggage under the eaves of the tent; we both ran for it and, as usual, it jammed. Tim squirmed under the fly-sheet and pulled it loose and we dragged it into the open, but we were still scrabbling undignifiedly among the contents when the first arrival stalked up the path from the stream.

When I looked up I thought for a moment that we had got into one of Edgar Rice Burroughs' interplanetary romances. We both knelt there by the box, speechless and staring. I don't know which stunned us most, his weird, fantastic, Martian appearance or the fact that he stood there alive and solid among our commonplace possessions. We slowly stood up.

He was an Apa Tani and nearly six feet tall. His lids were heavy and drooped over full eyes, giving him a reptilian look. There was a blue tattoo-mark under his lower lip; his skin was fair and the mark showed up clearly. His hair was black and long and plaited in a horn on his forehead, not in the heavy Dafla knob, but in the lighter, more complicated Apa Tani knot, and a foot-long brass skewer was thrust through it.

He wore a scarlet Government cloth draped in a short tunic, below which was a perineal band and a perspective of bare, pinkish leg which reminded one of a cock ostrich. He was formidably armed; a dagger hung round his neck on a string, he carried a Tibetan sword on a baldric ornamented with a tiger's jawbone and he wore a hairy black palm-fibre raincape; a saucy little white feather fluttered from his cane hat, contradicting the implied ferocity below. He stared at us sulkily—he must have been expecting the Haimendorfs—and his half-dozen ragged servants halted in a semi-circle behind him. Then a second red-cloth man, a little, elderly headman with another long Tibetan sword, pushed his way through them and stood by the big man's side.

Siraj appeared and identified them. The big man was Kago Bida, executive head of the Kago clan in Haja, and the little old man with the clown's face was Chigin Nime of Duta, priest, warrior, councillor and one of the most notable men in the Apa Tani Valley. When Siraj introduced us, Bida forgot his sulks and beamed. Chigin Nime's welcome burst all bounds; he flung out his arms, rushed at us and hugged us; he caught our bewildered heads between his hands and patted them with cries of joy. Then he threw his arms wide again and spun round to hug Siraj, but the scandalized Siraj fled and we were left in a tableau, Nime hugging us tight, as the main body of headmen came on the scene. First a tide of red blankets and feathers came surging up from the stream, and then it split and spread through the camp, and the clearing was full of helmets and hornbills' feathers, hide armour, swords and daggers.

Siraj and Heli rounded up the visitors and sat them down in a half-circle facing the tent. All the chief men of the eastern Panior Basin were there; in the middle was Toko Bat of Talo, a big and repulsive man, and by him his too-glib cousin Toko Höli, and beside them sat the morose Mai Heli and the

amiable Pochu Tangam; on the other flank were the two Apa Tanis, Bida and Nime, and the three headmen of Jorum, Jorum Kamin, elderly and aristocratic, Jorum Tacho, heavy and coarse, and Jorum Kopi, the youngest, a fine-looking cateran with black eyebrows which met. Each had feuds with most of the rest and their armed retainers sat behind them in clumps and glowered.

While liquor was handed round they stared at us and we at them and a conversation was begun through Bat Heli.

"Are the crops reaped?" said Tim. "Ask Jorum Kamin."

The question was put.

"The crops are reaped," said Kamin. "But they are not good."

"Why are they not good?"

"There were many rats."

"Were the crops good at Mai?"

Mai Heli only grunted, and his embarrassed neighbour Pochu Tangam broke in to cover up.

"The crops were good at Pochu," he said, "except, of course, for the rats. The bamboos are seeding and dying; therefore there are many rats. It is always so."

This natural phenomenon might have kept them occupied for some time, but the hoarse voice of Toko Bat cut abruptly in.

"Let the foreigner say something sensible. Will the Government hear our cases, or will it not? And if not, what is the use of his coming here?"

There was a short silence, just the fraction of a second. Then there was a murmur of agreement and a shifting rustle in the group as everyone leaned forward to hear the reply.

It was an extremely awkward moment. The entire Dafla country was a hotbed of feuds, a welter of raids, cattle thefts, kidnappings and horrid butchery. Tim's eventual object was to make the outpost neutral ground, a protected sanctuary,

where litigants could meet and settle their disputes by compromise and compensation instead of raid and counter-raid. Every crime had its compensatory payment in tribal law and, given a meeting place free of the fear of treachery, there was reason to hope that they would use it. Until the outpost was built and we ourselves firmly established Tim could not possibly give time to their endlessly tangled feud cases, but if he refused to hear them now the Daflas would deny us help and we should lose our much-needed labour. The interpreters looked embarrassed and everybody stared at Tim. And Tim took no notice at all, but leaned back in his chair and smiled quietly to himself.

Then we heard what he had heard. Out of the south, as appositely as though he had called for it, came a faint hum. When it swelled Tim nodded to me, we both jumped to our feet, and as we ran for the lookout hill the meeting rose as one man and followed us.

By the time we reached the top the aircraft were already circling. They were higher than usual and when the first machine came past on a dummy run we could see the crew, little pin-figures, stacking what looked like boxes in the open doorway. This was to be something new, for the several hundred pounds of stores which had arrived so far had been free-dropped in double sacks. The aircraft went round in a sweeping curve up the next valley and came in to drop.

Away went the first lot of bales, seen as small black specks cascading down against a cloudy sky. With a suddenness which fetched a cry from all of us the packages burst into long, fluttering streamers and then into billowing white umbrellas which rocked down gently into the scrubby level like a slow-motion snowstorm, and a moment later the old rice fields were full of parachutes collapsing gracefully into round splotches of cordage and cotton. The same thing happened at the second drop and again at the third and fourth—it was a

whole parachute series instead of unspectacular free-dropping. For the first five minutes the audience was almost too startled to react and then it went into transports of delight. Bat Heli was craning up; Jorum Kamin was pointing, thrilled as a child; Chigin Nime's gestures followed the Dakotas' every move and we dodged his sweeping arms every time the aircraft rushed over. "He'll take off himself in a minute," said Tim, ducking. "Oohs!" and "Aahs!" rose up in gusty choruses. The grass on the hilltop was trampled flat by excited feet. Down sailed case after case of sugar, butter, tea, condensed milk, matches, kerosine and cooking fat, and thicker and thicker on the grassy slopes, in trees, on bushes, in the rice stubble and on the river banks grew the dapple of white parachutes.

It was over at last. The aircraft circled to show that they were empty and soared away as diminishing specks against the blue mountains, and down poured the crowd from the hill, Tim and I caught like flotsam in it. Nobody stopped to think of a feud, to ask for presents or even to say good-bye; the one idea was to race home with the story, and in five minutes the headmen's red blankets were so many scarlet dots receding at speed over different hills. On the dropping-ground Siraj and his men dashed about like ants, some fussing round heaped parachutes and freeing the loads while others staggered in to the central dump with packed containers slung on poles. Tim hurried off to supervise and I was left alone. Only Chigin Nime and Kago Bida, both too far from home to reach it that night, were left with me in the temporarily deserted camp.

Both were overcome with emotion but, in the absence of a common language, almost unable to express it. Nime rushed at me and hugged me repeatedly and then ran away to look for Tim; when he failed to find him, he came back and hugged me again. Bida was more inhibited and stood there smiling shyly, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Excite-

ment seethed in him; he must express it or burst. He turned and barked a word or two to his men.

There was a short scuffle and some confusion. Nime still clasping me tight, I found myself face to face with a fat, naked, grimy savage who was protesting at a peremptory order from Bida, and when at last Bat Heli was found I discovered that I had been presented with one of Bida's serfs as a souvenir.

3

The Apa Tani Valley

TEN days later the airdrop ended and we moved on to the north.

The track wound on and on through the bubble-humps, each rise we crawled over throwing us a little higher, and presently we neared the basin's northern rim. Two tributaries of the Panior, the Kiyi and the Pein, ran out from the face; the Kiyi was away to the west of us, but the Pein, a smaller stream, rose in the woods of the rim and lay directly ahead.

Our line of march was like a long, dark snake and it stretched out slowly in each spell of marching and contracted again every time the leaders halted. I was at the head, not for glory, but because if the long-legged Tim set the pace I had no hope of keeping up. Next came Tim; then came the three Naga servants with the chupatti-and-cheese lunch, the water-bottles and a flask of coffee; then came fat Buda, Kago Bida's man; then came Bat Heli; and then came the irregular string of porters, Siraj striding up and down beside them, now giving instructions to the leaders and now chivying the rear, his long legs working like pistons. On every march he covered at least three times as much ground as anyone else.

Our three Nagas deserve special mention, for to them we owed what leisure we had and all amenities. They were para-

gons; we had never seen their like before and we never shall again.

Khuikhe the cook was the senior, a young, stocky Christian Sema. He had come to us from the Haimendorfs, and he knew the Area well and spoke Apa Tani. His Mission training sat on him lightly, his humour was Rabelaisian and his matrimonial alliances were numerous and ephemeral. The other two were Zemi Naga lads who had followed us from North Cachar; Namde had served as a guerrilla against the Japanese and was a fiery, slim, good-looking and rather a handful; Lungchiwong was about the same age, perhaps eighteen or nineteen, but was a stronger and maturer character. He was just over five feet high, golden-skinned, athletic and wiry. His father had been coverted to Christianity in middle-age, but Lungchiwong, who had been brought up in the *morung*, the young men's house, and educated in the old tradition, was unwilling to make the change. His father insisted. Home became impossible; Lungchiwong went to pagan relations, moving from house to house so as not to be a burden, a hurt, unhappy and frustrated boy. When Tim and I came to the village just before we left for the Subansiri, Lunchiwong realized that to leave with us might be his salvation and after consulting the headmen we agreed to take him on as a camp servant. In an effort to keep him his father suppressed the message, but when Lungchiwong heard of this it was the last straw and he quarrelled violently with his father and hurried after us by forced marches. His father caught him up at our camp and yielded to circumstances; he renounced his rights in the boy, made us his legal guardians and begged us to bring him up strictly. Then he turned round in the doorway to say good-bye to his son.

"My child," he said very tenderly, "good fortune be with you. May you always be well."

Lungchiwong turned his back. The old man looked in a

long and painful silence at the rigid shoulders, the small, bitterly unforgiving figure, and then went slowly away. One could only hope that two years' separation would ease the irreparable wound and hide it a little with scar tissue. So Lungchiwong took us for his family and came to the Subansiri, where he proved quick, intelligent, strong-minded and hardy. The perfect camp servant, he could cook, clean guns, make beds, shoot the dinner, darn socks and pitch tents and he darted after his dilatory local subordinates like a slight but deadly hornet.

From the highest point on the track we saw the northern rim of the basin rising ahead and, perched on the knolls of its foot and lower slopes, the long-houses of the considerable Dafla village of Talo. A short, steep ascent took us into it and we wound between the knolls, the inhabitants crowding their balconies to stare at us, until we came to the Pein. Siraj and the porters camped on the bank, and we in the tent and the servants in the cookhouse all crowded together into the only other space, a small dell near the village. The wind was bitter, the tent was old and thin, and when night fell Buda the Apa Tani built us a roaring bonfire whose sparks went whirling to the stars.

Early next morning we crossed the Pein, a small stream running over gravel and boulders. We were bound for the Apa Tani Valley to see the hidden wonderland for ourselves. It was to be a brief visit, a mere passing through; there was no time at present for Tim to do more than show the Apa Tanis he had arrived and meet a few headmen, for there were many urgent affairs to be attended to at the dropping-ground and on the track.

On the far side of the stream the path turned up the slope and climbed in earnest. The grass gave place to wintry brown bracken and alder trees appeared in the gullies and, as we mounted, the Panior Basin fell away below, the ranges lying

blue and dim on the far side. The long-houses of Talo now looked like toys on its edge; their cultivation was dotted round them in little squares of green and yellow, and the rest of the basin was a waste of heaving knolls, bare, dun, treeless and covered in yard-high grass, an uninhabited desolation.

We passed into the woods on the ridge. Here was high mountain forest, airy and tall; the ground was crisp with dry leaves, and ferns and orchids grew in the forks of the trees. Occasionally the sun broke through, but where the trees stood thick we walked in a cold dusk. Other trails, green tributaries appearing mysteriously from nowhere, joined ours from time to time and at the junctions the wooden tripods called *pogran* had been set up to record inter-village peace treaties. Then we found that we had changed direction and that the path was heading due east. The track was much more worn now, and felled trees and the debris of woodcutting lay beside it. Steeper and steeper it grew, and now we were scrambling down stairs of roots and the gullies and wash-outs of storm-water. The trees were thinning and it was clear beyond.

"The Apa Tani Valley," said Bat Heli.

It was one of those moments when reality so transcends expectation that the shock is physically stunning. Though we had known of it for eighteen months and had thought and talked of it constantly, the valley itself was so amazing and the contrast with the Dafla wilderness so utter and complete that we both stopped short. I exclaimed involuntarily, my legs buckled under me and I sat down abruptly where I was on the edge of the muddy track. Tim at least remained upright; he leaned on his long bamboo staff, his woollen cap perched piratically on the back of his head, and we both stared out between the trees at the sunlit wonder beyond.

There was the flat-bottomed valley, exactly as it had been described, lying in a deep hollow of the hills and enclosed by forested ranges. A little below the crests the forest stopped

and beneath that again was a countryside as rich, cultivated and serene as an Italian garden. The valley floor was a marvellous complex of irrigated rice fields; they filled every inlet and tributary valley and in places climbed like steps up the lower slopes. On the surrounding hillsides were fenced gardens at the lowest level, then bamboo groves, and lastly plantations of pines, the magnificent *Pinus excelsa* which the Apa Tanis had brought to the valley with them. All the groves and plantations were carefully fenced; alleys ran between them and neatly fastened doors or stiles gave access to the enclosures. Islands of higher ground stood out of the valley floor and on these too were gardens and groves, but most of the drier land was given up to grazing. Dots which were cattle moved about, and dykes and fencing separated the open moor from the cultivation. At various points round the edge of the rice fields there were denser growths of trees and among them we could just see the roofs of houses. The pines growing near the villages had been lopped almost to the tip; they stood up tall and artificial, like town-grown bay trees in tubs, their long, bare trunks ending in a bushy tuft. They struck the keynote of the valley, for everything in it was tidy, was trimmed, ordered, cared for and turned to the use of man. After the wildness of the Dafla country, where the human race squatted untidily in half-finished temporary settlements, the contrast was extraordinary; there was war and barbarism, here was peace and civilization.

We walked on, and from the edge of the forest the path leaped out into sunlight and bracken and ran down an autumn hillside. There were red leaves beside us and a plant like staghorn moss; delicate pinkish-mauve climbing gentians poured over the bushes in torrents of colour. The valley floor below was bleached and straw-tinted, the tone of dry stubble and clay, and the pinewoods ringing the bowl, and the for-

ested mountains beyond, were a deep and luminous blue-green.

At the foot of the hill we came to the fields. The path continued along a broad mud retaining wall which followed the curves of the field-banks and irrigation channels; the valley was larger than we thought and our moving file looked tiny and insignificant in its wide spaces. It was early winter and the fields were dry, but even so the irrigation system was a thing to marvel at. Every stream entering the valley was rigidly engineered and controlled; some were directed down flights of terraced fields, running from level to level by small, bright falls or through conduits of hollowed logs; others were sent along graded runnels to cultivation half a mile away. The system was perfectly drained. Rivulets from the furthest fields ran into rills; the rills, each laden with the drainage of a combe, delivered their burden to a channel serving a side valley; the channel, broad, banked and bridged, ran into the Kale River in the main valley, and the Kale took the concentrated load and poured it all out to the Panior through a wild chasm at Mai.

The mouth of the subsidiary valley down which we walked was blocked by a thickly wooded island, and the cultivation made its way round it into two creeks. It rose out of the fields, now dry, as a long, low mound, perhaps half a mile long, bristling with bamboos and trees which pressed out of a circumvallation of fences; in the summer when the fields were flooded, the island, like its many fellows, was cut off from the surrounding hills by a sheet of water intermittently traversed by low banks of clay on which narrow paths ran, a precarious spider's web linking the different parts of the valley. We crossed the nearer strait of lower ground and saw the main valley for a moment on our left, a vista of stubble and banks which in the distance merged into a delicate grey haze. Then we reached the island. The path circled it on the very lip of

the bank, and we were almost squeezed off on to the cracked mud below by the leaning fences of the groves; we tightrope-walked along the edge of slimy ponds which in the spring would be nice nurseries, and then the path disappeared up a dank alley through the groves. Close, twiggy fences shut it in and bamboos made a Gothic vault over it. Presently there was light ahead. Dogs ran off barking, hens and chickens scattered, the path widened suddenly and we glanced up from the mire through which we were splashing and found ourselves at the entrance to Haja village.

It was just as fantastic as the Apa Tani landscape. The street before us was twenty feet wide and looked, as it wound away, like a drained canal. It was solidly walled on either side by bamboo houses on piles; each house had an entrance-balcony reached by a notched log ladder, the steep-pitched roofs were thatched, and the eaves came nearly to the ground. Behind the houses on the street there were others, all packed in tightly, eaves to eaves and front door to back—hundreds and hundreds of houses. Alley on alley, lane on lane, roof behind roof, the amazing town spread away as far as we could see.

As we moved into the street the balconies began to fill and in a minute or two we were marching between banks of spectators. There were Apa Tani men in their normal near-nakedness; some wore cloaks, a fine bordered cope for the rich and quilted rags for the poor, and every grown male had the tribal belt, the girdle of scarlet cane strands with the long lobster-tail behind. Small boys had miniature cloaks and a single strand of red cane and little girls wore a cloak and a bell. Then there were the women. Filthily grimy, like all Apa Tanis, their greasy black hair was screwed on top of their heads in a pointed knob; they wore bunchy handwoven skirts and quilted jackets, both sooted dark grey; their necks were hung and their ample bosoms loaded with string upon string

of blue beads, their faces were tattooed, and their noses were turned into hippopotamus snouts by large black resin discs thrust into the pierced wings.

"I wonder," said Tim, staring fascinated, "what happens when they get a cold?"

Before long we had so wound about in the warren that I had lost my bearings. The streets ran as they liked, now wide, now narrow, now joined by alleys the width of a man, and courts and crooked lanes led off them; sometimes the street shrank and sometimes it widened into an open space where stood assembly platforms, the *lapang*, massive, chest-high structures built of huge adzed planks. Each village was subdivided into clan quarters, or *lemba*, and the ritual centre of each was a platform and its associated shrine, a small, thatched hut known as a *nago*. By them stood sixty-foot masts with long cross-pieces at the top; these masts were the *bobo* and were used only at the spring feast of Mloko. Then we turned left up a lane, ducked under a straggling peach tree, scrambled down a foul alley and emerged at the edge of the fields; wide and clear the main valley ran to the foot of the far hills and about two hundred yards out from us was a low island with a clump of tall pines. The island was Duta Pape (which rhymes, oddly enough, with harp) and the huts were what was left of our predecessors' camp. We wound along the clay field-banks towards it.

When we poked our noses out of the blankets next morning we met a bitter chill, a stinging air. There was dense mist and it was freezing. The hut-walls were of bamboo from which the mud plaster had long since crumbled; the icy damp flowed through them as though they were not there. Outside, a grey, numb vapour blanketed island and fields, a line of old crab-pear trees loomed through it a darker grey, and beyond that the eight great pines in their ring-clump were only a shadow. Behind us the bamboos were frozen and eerie; not a leaf

moved and the groves were motionless, a study in grisaille. The valley collected the cold air and life there in winter was never bearable until half-past ten. No Apa Tani stirred while the mist hung; the streets were empty, the fields deserted, the houses closed tight. We were shuddering round bonfires in the open when, soon after ten o'clock, the sun struck the fog at last. The white blanket above us turned opalescent. It swirled, it fumed, it fled, there was pale blue sky; the groves emerged green, the pear trees were black-etched and clear, the pines unveiled, the sun gleamed on the water and the valley lay open.

And then came the Apa Tanis.

They streamed across the fields and down the lanes through the groves. They crowded round our fires and elbowed us out; the place seethed with tousled and verminous heads, sooty faces and grubby grey cloaks; men were shouldering, crushing and peering. The camp was swamped. There were rude comments and they laughed in our faces. We were Wild Men of Borneo, apes in a cage to be teased, jeered at and prodded. Most primitive people are formal in their manners—after all, an insult is more than likely to get one killed—but the lower-class Apa Tani, secure in his hidden valley and God-given conviction that his tribe is the hub of the universe and the only true human race, is the worst-mannered creature in Asia. Almost as bad as their manners were their thefts and their filth. They forced their way into the huts, crowding out Tim and the Apa Tani headmen with whom he was trying to talk, and hundreds of dirty feet trampled mud and turds across the floors; every man chewed tobacco and spat, and brown gobs smeared the walls and trickled stringily down them. No small possessions—clothes, cups, knives or forks—were safe from their jackdaw snatching, and by nightfall I loathed the Apa Tanis, loathed them singly and collectively from unpolished

brass hair-skewer to calloused and grimy bare heel, and I didn't care if I never saw another.

Kop Temi, who had now joined us, had managed to settle a case and Tim had met at least some of the notables, so as soon as the mist cleared next morning we set out for the south. The Apa Tanis had sent no porters and the baggage had to be left while men were found, but we pinned our hopes on Siraj and went off without it. In front of Pape a long peninsula blocked the view and at the root of it the houses and granaries of Duta village spilled out at the edge of the fields; behind were the roofs and *bobo* of Mudang Tage and Michi Bamin. We went round the nose of the point, turning and weaving among a maze of fields, and came to the Kale River running straight and channelled between spiled banks.

In front of us now lay the length of the main valley. The wide, featureless expanse of fields, devoid of any scale, dwarfed to minute dots the people who moved in it. Our party straggled along in a line of pathetic little specks, ourselves in the lead, next the Naga boys and Buda, and then, by ones and twos, the few porters who had appeared. For perhaps an hour we marched like this till all traces of Haja and Duta had vanished. Then suddenly we saw lopped pines again on the left. *Bobo* came in sight, and granaries with their roofs of bamboo shingles, and we plodded up a wet gully into Hong.

It was the second biggest settlement in the valley and its population was estimated at 4,000. The site seemed more hilly and, paradoxically, damper than that of Haja, and we threaded our way through steep alleys running with liquid sewage. Crowds stared at us from the balconies while a tidal bore of small boys followed us, and at last we came to an assembly platform and were directed onto it. This was the traditional ceremonial meeting-place; evidently we were to be received. We scrambled up a notched ladder designed for prehensile toes and not for hobnailed soles; the crowd, undeterred

by the fact that there was no room, surged after us, and we sat down in a small space palisaded by bare legs.

We had waited perhaps five minutes when the crowd bulged and gave way and into our space came a splendid patriarch. He must have been over seventy, his hair was snow-white and glistened, he had once been tall and he had the innate dignity of the Apa Tani aristocrat. He was Ponyo Tamar, one of the leading men of Hong. He brought the proper offerings of respect—rice-flour in a bowl and a gourd of millet-beer—and wore his priestly robes in our honour; large circular earrings of silvery metal hung almost to his shoulders and his cloaks were wonderful copes stiff with patterned tapestry. The soft colours seemed to melt into one another, red and blue blending to an indescribably rich background tint and the yellow borders deepening to a greenish-gold. He was pleased when we admired the workmanship and told us that he had made them himself before his eyesight failed. We found later that this was a common practice, the women weaving the body of the robes on the usual loom while men made the tapestry insets on a smaller loom on which the woof was passed by hand instead of by a shuttle.

We sat for perhaps half an hour and then said good-bye to Ponyo Tamar and took the path for Mai. Now, as the valley closed in and drew to its end, the great sheets of fields gave place to isolated patches. Brackeny knolls spiked with scanty bushes took up more and more of the narrowing space, and at last we came to the valley's very close, where the fields ran out in a ragged tail among bogs and the Kale became a winding, tree-shaded stream instead of a ruled canal. We pitched camp at the site called Soro, on a rough grass slope beyond the river. On either side of us were stands of pines, green, immense and shimmering. They were good for the soul, those Soro pines. You went in among them harried and exacerbated, frayed and worn out by struggles with fractious, unruly

humanity; inside the woods the air was warm and still and smelled of resin and the sunlight fell on the thick drifts of needles. High overhead clouds ran across the sky and a remote wind sang in the tops of the pines, but that was in another existence. Here, a hundred and fifty feet below, nothing had changed for centuries except the girth of the trunks and the slow deepening of the needle-carpet. The world and human worries were a long way away, and they no longer mattered.

The next morning as we marched we looked back once at the valley, at the spurs of rough moor shutting out the patterned fields, the pines dark and shining and the hills beyond a deep madonna blue. Then the cold, wet, grey-green forest drew us in again, and eight hours later we were camped a march further on, among the desolate knolls of the Panior Basin. The valley, the hidden valley, might never have been.

4

The Outpost

A BITTERLY cold gust eddied down from the hill and Buda came out of the cookhouse and threw more wood on the fire. The winter dusk was falling on the hollow at Talo; the wind-tossed flames shone on the table before the tent, on the baskets and boxes stacked under the flies, and on Tim, gulping tea laced with rum in the small, chilly lee by the door. We had been camped at the village for a week while he and the Gurkhas searched the rim for a position for the outpost and tonight they were back with the news that they had found a site.

When we climbed up to it next morning it proved to lie right above Talo. Half a mile to the north ran the track from Talo to Duta and the site itself straddled the path between Talo and Mudang Tage. Since Talo, a meeting-place of routes, was suspected of being behind many raids and could bear surveillance, the situation was strategically admirable. The Adviser, Mr. Mills, had already decided against the Apa Tani Valley, where firewood was scarce and dear, land was ever scarcer and the water-supplies were tainted. This place near Talo was the best site on the Panior Basin side, and we decided on it.

It was a stretch of irregular hillside at spring-level and our aneroid gave the height as 5,000 feet. Higher up there was no water, and lower down the gullies were deeply cut and the

streams difficult to reach. We were rather more than a thousand feet above Talo and above us the hillside rose a thousand feet higher still, the bracken and bushes which covered it ending at last in the dark brow of forest. There were three springs, and our household, being the smallest unit, was allotted the smallest of the three; the clerks and interpreters would have the next largest and the Assam Rifles the third and best. For our own house we chose a spur beside our spring, at the very top of the site. The hill fell away from the spot in one long sweep to the roofs of Talo and from where the door would be to the mountains fifty miles away there was nothing—nothing but hazy blue air and the wind blowing cold and the huge, dun Panior Basin curving away below.

Two days later we moved from Talo to the site, which the Daflas called Kore. Inevitably, there were too few porters, and we ferried ourselves up by stages; Tim and I and Siraj nearly went grey ensuring that each load went with its proper convoy, that tents were with their prospective occupants, cooking pots with the rations and baggage with its rightful owners.

At last we had all pushed our way up the hill through the thick scrub and were encamped at the middle spring. Tim and I were in the tent by it, the three Nagas and Buda were close by in a shelter of branches, the interpreters squatted in leafy bowers on the next spur, and the Assam Rifles were camped snugly under tarpaulins on the hill above. It was good to be out of dank and unfriendly Talo and better still to be no longer nomads. Somehow or other we had struggled on from crisis to crisis, and our great design was taking shape; there was immense satisfaction in becoming settlers at last and we went to bed with a pleasantly pioneering feeling.

The very next morning, with the help of the few Daflas who were working for us, we began to clear the places picked out for houses, and brambles, bracken and madder went down in

swathes before the combined assault of *dao* and *kukri*. Next, paths were made and the springs were dug out—we all drank muddy water for a week afterwards—streams were dammed and channelled, and timber was felled and brought in, and then, as Siraj recruited men and the labour-gangs grew, we turned to the work of building in late November.

There was no question of town-planning. The houses were where we could perch them on the irregular and folded slope, on spurs, on knolls and on ledges. We and the interpreters lodged in one straggling group, the Assam Rifles in another more compact, the doctor and compounder in a third and the clerks and storehouses in the fourth and lowest. On even the best sites there was a great deal of earth to move and, as the first few were levelled and fans of raw, red soil began to stream down the green slope, it was painfully clear that we needed tribal labour on a very large scale. And we had no means of paying for it.

The difficulty lay in the means of payment. Here beyond the frontier coin was so much metal and the hillmen traded by barter. Haimendorf had solved the problem by paying his men in coin and letting them exchange it at leisure at a trade-goods shop maintained for the purpose in camp, but the coin we had brought was exhausted, and of cotton cloth and salt, the hillmen's chief needs, cloth was impossible to get because of the acute cloth famine in India, and on this airdrop salt had not been included with the rations and could not be carried for lack of porters. Siraj, as usual, saved us. He recruited us men and kept them working on credit when cash was short; though the work-gangs grew and dwindled as the cash-boxes came or failed to come from North Lakhimpur and, as the infrequent loads were generally in small change, the box was regularly emptied before the arrears were paid off, we battled on from shift to shift and slowly and erratically, but visibly, Kore Outpost went up.

It as early December and the weather was icy and we worked sweatered and coated in the thin sunlight. We had at first thought of a log cabin outpost, warm, durable and romantic, but the heavy timber was too far off and we had to fall back on more accessible materials. The stock piles were round our tent at the middle spring. There were giant bamboos from Dodoseram, a long day's march off, to make pipes and water conduits, and for walling we had collected thousands of wild bamboos from the forests on the heights; Apa Tanis brought these in, long files of them trotting down the steep, winding path at their running pace, each man with a bundle of twenty stems balanced on his shoulder. Since we were building native-fashion, with lashings instead of nails, there were great coils of green cane brought from the Talo Daflas, canes fifty or sixty feet long and as stout as ropes, while round the tent, the store-dumps and Siraj's shelter there were heaps and stacks and ricks of sharp-edged thatching-grass.

All over the slope skeleton houses of beams and rafters were now sprouting from the bracken. About each embryo structure Daflas and Apa Tanis bustled like termites, the Apa Tanis swaddled in their grey quilted cloaks and the Daflas, less well off for textiles, in thin cloths and cane-ring armour; with every mob was the overseer in charge, an unperturbed Gurkha, or the darting figure of an interpreter, or the incredible Siraj, doing four jobs at once and all efficiently. Here a terrace was being made; since we had no levels, the overseer, or more likely Tim, had to lie down and squint and peer while the workmen shaved off earth or added to it. There house-posts were being stepped and sixty or more Apa Tanis were pushing and yelling round a long, stripped tree trunk which, held more or less upright by ropes and shear-legs, swayed and veered and threatened to crash on them. Further on men were hauling a roof-tree into position; at a fourth house thatching had begun, Apa Tanis were crowded on the rafters,

the ground was littered with grass as though a bomb had exploded in a haystack, and workers below were handing grass up to the thatchers on the end of bamboo poles. Hundreds of men were coming and going, shouting, lifting and carrying; they swarmed along the paths as they took material to the sites, they crowded in with fresh supplies for the dumps, they jammed the ground round the huts as they clamoured to the clerk for payment. The mud was trampled and wet, the soil was strewn with fresh white chips, the cold air smelled of greenery and new-cut wood, and the fifteen acres of hillside were noisy with voices and the thud of woodchopping. The houses were single-storeyed, with a timber framework; their walls were of split and interlaced bamboo; the windows were unglazed openings covered at night by woven cane shutters and the steeply pitched roofs were of shaggy grass thatch. Day by day Kore grew, and as we watched it rising mint-new we were quite unreasonably proud of it.

Then there were the nights. They were bright and full of stars, and we built a windbreak screen by the campfire and spent the evenings sitting there in the open, drinking rum toddy with Kop Temi or Rajuni or rice-beer with visiting tribesmen. The circle round the fire was friendly and intimate. We talked about everything under the sun; we roasted corncobs or popped corn (both were Dafla delicacies), and the red light glared in the ring of brown faces, and the flames went swirling up to the branches overhead and to friendly Orion beyond them. Then we slept in our inadequate tent, wearing all our clothes and buried under blankets, and the dogs curled up with us for warmth. Along the side walls and under the flies, pinning the thin canvas down against gusts, were the boxes which held our china, linen and lamps, carefully brought to furnish the new house. The fire died down to a glow; Orion marched on to the west; the furry bodies of the dogs burrowed still more tightly against us as the raw cold

of morning came; and we woke to a shivering, grey dawn, the smell of smoke from the cookhouse fire and the welcome clink of teacups at the tent door.

At the very top of the outpost, at its culminating point, was our own house. There was among the staff a curious tradition which was almost certainly a relic of the Ahom kingdom of the eighteenth century, and that was that the senior officer must always be on a higher point than his subordinates. No one must look down on the king or his representative, and when we travelled our tent was pitched on the highest pinnacle available and teetered in the arctic wind like a paper hat perched on an iceberg. After three days at Talo in the teeth of a wind from the snows, Tim cancelled the rule for ever where his touring was concerned, but at Kore the protocol was rigidly observed. The house which so conspicuously dominated the settlement was not quite what we had intended, but it was nevertheless imposing. It was long and high and wide and rather like a railway shed. With its long, straight lines and its pediment it had also a classical air, as though it had strayed to Kore from the frontiers of the Roman Empire, from a fort in the Scottish forests or on the Rhine. It measured fifty feet one way and thirty-five the other and it stood with its tail to the hill on an earth platform like a quay, which was partly levelled from the slope and partly built up of rammed and revetted earth. Behind it were the cookhouse and the servants' lines; adjoining it on either side were the tribal interpreters' quarters; alongside it was the water-point, to which water was brought from the spring in a long, open bamboo pipeline, and in front the ground fell away in a broad, undulating stretch earmarked for a garden. Below the garden the hill rushed down to Talo, the new houses of Kore cropping out on the knolls like yellow mushrooms and the paths winding from one to the other in patterns as curving and fantastic as Celtic ornament, and away beyond all this was the stupendous view

which ended only with a line of dim peaks on the far horizon, a pale and unsubstantial range half-hidden in violet haze.

The inside of our house was even less what we had planned than was the outside. We had meant to use kingpost construction and do away with central pillars, but unfortunately we happened to be away on a labour-recruiting drive when the work was done and kingpost construction proved too much for the Assam Rifles. They had used central pillars after all and revised the plan accordingly, and as a result the house was not even Roman inside; it was plain Bronze Age. It was cut in half down its whole length by a fourteen-foot-high matting screen attached to the central posts. On one side of this, the left, there were three bare rooms, bedroom, bathroom and office. The bedroom contained two camp-beds, an assortment of tin boxes, the cane carrying-baskets and some nails hammered into the house-posts and used for hanging clothes. The bathroom was small and dark and had a low platform at the end. The bath was a canvas tub and you emptied it by tilting it up on the platform, when the water ran out through a channel underneath. The only other fitting was a bamboo shelf for the soap. The office had rows of bamboo shelves where I kept our tinned stores, some more boxes full of stationery and Tim's natural history specimens, the typewriter, and a desk made of a box-lid laid on two empty tea-chests. In the other half of the house, on the right as you looked in through the front door, there was a high, raftered hall which ran through the building from front to back; the draughts wailed along it, down the outer wall was a row of unglazed windows through which came cross-draughts and grey winter light, and at the front end, near the door, there was an eight-foot-square open hearth enclosed by four big logs.

We stood there when we moved in and studied it with very mixed feelings.

"After all," said Tim at last, "it isn't everybody who can have a Great Hall."

"Bearskins on the floor," I suggested.

"It would have to be tiger."

"Trophies on the walls."

"Yule-logs and wassail."

"We could stop the draughts with curtains, I think." So the Great Hall stayed as it was.

All through December work on the outpost went on. When the houses were finished we stepped and revetted the paths, we bridged the Pein at Talo, we improved and realigned the track to the dropping-ground at Yatchuli, as the Daflas called the small level patch in the bend of the Kale stream, and we built storehouses there and huts for the Assam Rifles guard. Then we set our labour to carrying supplies up from there to Kore, where we filled the new godowns with stacks of grain and meal and wooden chests of tea.

At last it was all done. On Christmas Day, 1946, the Union Jack went up over Kore. It flew out bright and strong against a clear blue sky and we all stood round below and drank its health. It was a symbol and more than a symbol. For three months we had fought and struggled to bring it there, and to bring with it that for which it stood. In its shadow the tribal warfare, murders and kidnappings of the Dafla country would not be tolerated and law-abiding men of whatever race or tribe would be free to travel the King's highway in safety; tribesmen could come in to where it flew and settle their disputes peaceably without fear of assassination. It stood for law and order amid anarchy and peace amid bloodshed, and all of us—Tim, myself, Rajuni, Temi, Siraj, Heli, Europeans, plainsmen and tribesmen alike—cared very much indeed for all that it represented.

5

In the Dafla Villages

ONE day in early December when for once there was little to do at Kore I borrowed Siraj, Bat Heli, two of the three Nagas and half a dozen porters and set off on my own through the nearest Dafla villages.

We first made for Jorum Kamin's, south of Kore. The direct route was too steep, so we went by the new road to Talo. At the crossing of the Pein beyond Talo the ford was spanned by a fragile, curious structure of grass, twigs and bamboo chains—the bamboo was cut in fine slips and linked so that it resembled a paper Christmas decoration—like a suspension-bridge. This was precisely what it was, a bridge for the rice spirit, so that that desirable entity could reach the fields freely and not be held up by the stream. On the far side of the water we turned off towards the hills once more through Talo's wet rice cultivation. There were several acres of it in the low ground beyond the village, but though it was copied from the Apa Tani system it was neither so well finished nor so well cared for. Even in the slack season the Apa Tani fields were spotless; here the land and banks were neglected and overgrown. Then we came to knolls and tall, dry grass again, the familiar landscape of the basin; we tramped down a chokingly hot path where the air was thick was dust and pollen and at

last came out at the foot of the basin wall and below the long-houses of Kamin's village.

These were scattered about haphazard, perching wherever there was a ridge or spur on whose crest they could stand, and sometimes they ran across the slope itself, the inner edge of their platforms almost touching the ground and the outer ten or fifteen feet above it. Their long-legged stilts pointed all ways at once, as though the house had been propped and underpinned many times and no worn-out timbers ever removed; the earth underneath was inches deep in refuse in which fowls scratched, pigs rooted and on occasional mithan stood hoof-deep, tethered where risk of theft was least. Compared with Apa Tani houses they were tattered and ramshackle, but the Apa Tani, living in complete security in a large permanent village, could afford to build stoutly. The Dafla tended to migrate, he lived in constant insecurity and he liked a house he could break out of easily and not be trapped in. Again, in contrast to the compact Apa Tani towns, each long-house here was twenty to a hundred yards from the next and the comparatively small settlement straggled over ten acres of hillside. Dispersal was its defence and it was impossible for a raiding force to surround the whole village.

The path to Kamin's house went straight up the hill, a rugged track deep in rubbish and loose stones, and we plodded up it towards the dark skyline of the spur and the bright noon sky beyond. We were just below the top when a large root like a turnip bundled unexpectedly over the crest and came rolling down among us. Heli picked it up and a line of small, anxious heads peered down at us from above. When we reached the top they had fled, but a word from Heli recalled them, a dozen Dafla boys between seven and ten. They were armed with bows and arrows, their adult clothes were too big for them, their heads were shaven except for a long forelock, and even at that age they had the gnomelike look.

"This," Heli explained proudly, "is how the Daflas learn to shoot."

The boys formed two lines along the path and Heli bowled the root down between them. As it tumbled erratically past they loosed arrow after arrow at it with amazing speed; someone retrieved it and they bowled it again and again. They forgot us. They were wholly absorbed in their task, intent on transfixing the root with their vicious little bamboo arrows, and when Kamin appeared and took us off to his house they did not even look up.

Kamin's house ran along a short spur and under its piles were more big, black, hairy pigs than I had ever seen together. The far verandah jutted out over space, but the landward one was low, a foot or so off the ground, and was floored with logs laid loosely. We picked our way over the gaps and past the heavy wooden mortar for husking rice; Kamin pushed back a sliding bamboo door and we ducked after him through the opening.

At first sight the inside of the long-house was like a railway tunnel. It was pitch-black. There were no windows and the only light came from the chinks in the walls and from the doors at either end. Small fires, one to each family, burned at intervals along the floor in an eerie perspective and the air was thick with smoke. Far down the cavelike gallery dim figures moved, eclipsing the fires as they passed; the place was full of people we could not see, people eating, cooking, talking, a termite-burrow creeping with communal life.

We sat down cross-legged at the first hearth and Kamin and his head wife sat down facing us on the inner or family side. Kamin was tall and lean; he had good, aquiline features and a pleasant, rather quizzical look; his Assamese silk wrap had long since sooted grey and his helmet was cheerfully awry. He wore strings of pale yellow beads, and instead of the full armour of hundreds of flexible cane rings he had only a few

round his waist. The rest of the house's population came swarming up to stare at us, but Kamin drove the children away and their elders presently decided we were of no interest and drifted off.

This was the head wife's hearth. The hearths of the lesser wives lay beyond it, where each lived with her children, and down at the far end were the hearths of dependants and servants. The house was small as Dafla long-houses go, and Kamin explained that until lately he had shared a house with his brother but that the joint establishment had grown unwieldy and they had split. The brother now had a ten-hearth house close by while Kamin, with nine hearths, remained on the old site.

While Kamin and Heli talked, I looked round. Kamin's oblong hide shield, his spear and his leather corselet hung on the wall behind him. With them were a bamboo bow and quiver and the feather fan which Dafla men of rank carry, a bird's wing fitted with a cane grip, and against the same wall was a crude cupboard, the *ürrü*, where valuables such as beads were kept. At the second hearth two of the lesser wives were infusing beer for us. They had set up a notched log ladder to the storage space in the roof and had brought down gourds of fermented millet. They had then packed the grain into a pointed strainer of woven cane and were now pouring boiling water through it; a cloudy, pinkish liquor dropped through into a jar below. It was presently served to us in bamboo mugs which were sections of giant bamboo bound round with plaited cane; they were smoked brown, they must have held half a gallon, and the rims were worn by many lips. The beer was faintly sour, with a smoky tang to it. It was not so palatable as Naga beer, but was refreshing. The two lesser wives waited on us, hovering to refill our mugs when we had hardly more than sipped, and the head wife supervised.

Dafla head wives form a distinct class and Kamin's, who

was large and plain, was typical. The head wife is the first wife married; she is generally the daughter of some powerful man with whom her husband wished to cement an alliance; the need to rule an enormous mixed household of anything up to a hundred souls soon turns her into a savage virago, a bully to all connected with her, even her husband. Head wives have charge of their husbands' valuables and especially of his *maje*, which are Tibetan bells; they are much prized in the Subansiri Area, where they are used in trade and have a wide range of worth whose criteria are not always apparent to the outsider. The most precious of them are named and may be "married," the appropriate ceremony and the "bride-price" paid creating just such a bond between the men concerned as actual marriage to a daughter of the house would do; the head wife buries her husband's most valuable *maje* for safety in the jungle near the village and goes off alone to exhume them if at any time they are required. Head wives are fair game in war while lesser wives are not, a rather doubtful privilege; lesser wives are sold as slaves or held to ransom if captured, but a head wife is killed and her hands nailed up as a trophy exactly as a man's are.

We left Kamin late in the afternoon and camped on the far side of the village, and the next day we moved on towards Mai. A steep and awkward path round the curve of the hill brought us first to the village of Kamin's kinsman Jorum Tacho. We called at Tacho's house, as courtesy required, and the first thing we saw as we climbed the ladder to the platform was a fettered prisoner.

He stood by the door and glowered at us. He was a thick-set young man; his knot had been lopped off as a humiliation and his hair fell in black elf-locks round his broad and sullen face. One ankle was thrust through a stout horizontal log rather better than a yard long and was kept in place through the slot by an iron bar driven through the wood. A loop of

cane was tied to the ends of the log, and by taking the weight of it on this he could shuffle slowly about. It was an ingenious portable stocks and one in common use in the Area.

Jorum Tacho appeared at that moment and we asked why the youth was held. Tacho explained that the man had stolen a girl from the village and was in custody as a punishment; since there was no jail, Tacho's house was the obvious place for him. His imprisonment, though no doubt inconvenient, did not seem particularly rigorous; as we moved indoors Tacho's head wife stood up to prepare our beer and finding the prisoner handy, thrust her baby at him. With the child balanced on his hip he steered his log through the crowd, sat down with us by the fire and joined in the conversation.

We talked to Tacho for a while and then moved on. Dafla partings were unceremonious. Where the Zemi Nagas called formal blessings and exhortations at each other as far as their voices could carry, Daflas simply turned their backs on one another and walked off, two indifferent, egotistic entities. There were no farewells or God-be-wi'-yes; we simply got up and went, scrambling down the log ladder before an audience of small brats, and that was that.

As we emerged from a deep gully beyond the village we suddenly saw a swift-moving scarlet figure, plumed and mediaeval, coming down the slope towards us. It checked as it saw us and then came on, and we met at the next bend.

The man was an Apa Tani. He was tall, young and well-built; he wore a red Government cloth, and a curled feather flew from his cane helmet. He was a handsome Mephistopheles, his chin a little too pointed and his brilliant black eyes too close together; he was very angry and at the moment very drunk. He was Koj Karu, the leading Apa Tani interpreter.

Ever since we entered the Area the Apa Tani interpreters had been a problem. They were not entirely to be blamed. They had worked for former Government parties and had in-

evitably taken part in settling disputes and in punitive operations, and then when the expeditions withdrew they had been left defenceless and exposed to retaliation. Not a single one had returned to regular duty this year. Siraj had dragged out one or two of them, protesting and reluctant, but at the first chance they had fled and refused to reappear and unless we could persuade them that the Government had come to stay it was unlikely that they ever would. And we needed them badly; we were most desperately short of interpreters.

Heli spoke first, and Karu, who was in a vile temper, answered him sulkily. He said that he hated the Government and was finished with it and was on his way to resign his job. Both Heli and I knew that Karu was suspected of complicity in a recent kidnapping case, but such was the need at Kore that we should be hard put to do without him. I caught Heli's eye and we both began to talk to him. He refused to listen at first and made as if to go, but I was well in his path and too big to brush aside, and after a while he consented to go on to Mai with us and then take back a note from me to Tim. He fell in at the tail of the line, a bright, Satanic figure walking disdainfully some way behind us, and we proceeded.

As we reached the third of the Jorum settlements, Jorum Kopi's, a man came out to meet us and explained that Kopi's son was ill and that Kopi wanted me to see if I could help. We turned down the hill to the house.

It was bigger and wider than either Kamin's or Tacho's and it was nearly empty. A clear fire burned at the second hearth and Kopi sat behind it. Today the spirit had all gone out of him and I had seldom seen such distress in a man's face. On the floor in front of us a lad of seventeen or so was stretched out unconscious on his back, his eyes open and rolled up until only the whites showed. I guessed at cerebral malaria, but whatever it was I had no means of giving drugs to an unconscious patient and there was nothing whatever I could do. All

I could suggest was that we should send a note back to Kore in case the doctor had arrived, which in view of the transport position was most unlikely. This was poor comfort to Kopi, whose disappointment was evident, but he sighed, dismissed the matter and asked us to sit down and have a drink. I felt wretched at having failed him and said through Heli that I was ashamed to stay when I had done nothing.

"That makes no difference," said Kopi, when Heli had translated. "It will be with the boy as the spirits please. Sit down and rest."

But it was more than I could bear, and we went out and down the ladder and into the dust and sun. I sent back a note to the doctor, and the boy did in the end recover.

Below Kopi's village another part of the same settlement straggled down the hill for a couple of hundred yards. The one big house in it belonged to Kopi's cousin, Jorum Takr. They had fallen out over the distribution of some inherited property, and although their houses were only a bowshot apart they raided one another's cattle freely. No one had yet been killed on either side, but it was only a matter of time before it happened. Jorum Takr was a wild young man and Koj Karu's intimate friend; he was believed to be at the bottom of the kidnapping case with which gossip connected Karu, and when Karu fell out of line and disappeared into Takr's house, Heli glanced significantly at me. Karu did not rejoin us until some time later.

It was very nearly dusk when we reached Mai. We found Siraj pitching camp in a steep, damp hollow with a millet patch in the middle. The tent was at an even wilder angle than usual and the only water available trickled through the village refuse before it reached us; Mai Heli, appealed to, was as morose as ever and said that that was the best place he had and that if we didn't like it we had better find somewhere else for ourselves, which, as it was dark by now, was imprac-

ticable. Karu said loudly that that was just like a Dafla and helped, very ostentatiously, to make camp, Heli having succumbed to temptation and slipped off to the village. Karu then disappeared too, I think to gossip with Siraj, and we all went to bed tired out and slept through the cocks' crowing and the barking dogs and other night nuisances of a Dafla village. Early next morning Karu took my note and set out for Tim and Kore, promising to think it over before he resigned. He stayed on for several months; his brilliance as an interpreter was offset, as will be seen, by his complete unpredictability, but he was undeniably useful.

As soon as his scarlet back had disappeared along the path we marched for the south and Pochu. A little way up the path we were overtaken by a small, panting Apa Tani whose very helmet-feathers jiggled with breathlessness. He also was an interpreter and wore the red cloth; he was Tenyo Bida of Hong. He had been to report at the outpost and Tim had sent him scurrying after us to relieve Heli, who was due to go home on leave. Tenyo Bida was a happy little robin of a man, bouncing, chirping and giggling, and Nada Rika, the other Apa Tani with us, was delighted to see him. Rika was a Haja man who had once been the camp caretaker at Duta Pape, but he had nearly died of malaria after a duty-trip to the plains and was only now slowly recovering. He was a tall, thin man of good family, but was extremely poor. With his long, slender hands and feet, high-bridged nose, angular figure and air of breeding he was wonderfully like an aristocratic maiden aunt.

Tenyo Bida now took the lead, bounding along in front of us in enormous spirits. It was the local custom for a subordinate to march in front, to get speared first, I suppose, and whenever we travelled with the tribesmen they adopted the order out of habit. There were, however, no ambushes today, and Tenyo Bida bounced unscathed before me round a great

many folds in the hill and in and out of as many ravines and we walked up into Pochu in the late afternoon.

The village lay fairly high, and the wind blew straight across Talo and the three Jorums and rushed at it over the top of a spur. It was the wind from the snows. We had seen them earlier in the day, a cold rampart against the blue sky, and far down to the west the shoulder of Gori Chen, the great peak behind Balipara Frontier Tract, had shown itself in a dazzling curve of white behind a dark, forested hill. This was a black wind, born of night and ice; when dusk fell it roared through the camp, it flapped the thin cotton tent, it found the gaps in my coat and probed the seams, it numbed my fingers and slightly damp nose and made fools of my blankets and sleeping-bag. Seeing me shiver, Rika was all concern.

"You'll freeze in the tent," he said. "Why don't you sleep in a Dafla house where it's warm?"

The idea was attractive. I sent for Siraj. Siraj belonged to the old school and Government officers and their wives were all but divine to him; he observed every ritual surrounding them with religious devotion, and when he heard that I wanted to sleep in a Dafla house he threw up his hands and said, "Memsahib! Impossible!"

I wanted to know why. The noise, said Siraj, and the smells; there would be crying children and people coming and going—why, the house would be full of men, there would be no privacy; it was quite unthinkable. But I had no *purdah* traditions and the war had taught me to do without privacy. Sleep in a Dafla house I would, and I told him so firmly. He went off in enormous agitation to find Pochu Tangam.

Between the two of them they arranged it. Round about ten o'clock I moved to Pochu Tangam's house and found my camp-bed set up. When I protested that I would rather sleep on the floor—the bed looked most unsteady on the bamboo

slats–Siraj was adamant and said there were fleas, so I capitulated and sat down meekly on the side of the bed.

The long-house was firelit from end to end. Each little hearth blazed, there was a ring of people round each and the light beat up on flat, Mongol faces, on necklaces, on helmets and shining brass hair-skewers. The hearths were on the right of the house; along the left side there was an open passage and down this there was constant coming and going, women busy on chores and men moving up and down on visits.

I slid into my sleeping-bag and lay watching. Gradually the movement slowed down. Here and there at the different fires one person after another stretched out, pulled his clothes over him and went to sleep; the men, I noticed, kept their cane helmets on. In half an hour there were more people asleep than awake and movement along the passage had almost ceased. In the long, smoky perspective there were only faint sounds, a woman coughing, a man muttering in his sleep, a child crying till hushed. At the head wife's hearth, nearest me, everyone was asleep except the head wife herself and Bat Heli. Heli had a touch of flu and was helping out quinine and aspirin by a recital of incantations; he had once trained for the Dafla priesthood and had a fund of spells and a profound faith in their efficacy. He began in a steady monotone and Pochu Tangam's head wife, after listening to him politely for a few minutes, lay down with her baby beside her and pulled an old cloth over herself. Her arm crooked protectively over the sleeping child; it relaxed and she was asleep.

Now all the house was quiet and the fires were dying down. Right away at the far end where the servants lived two men were still talking, but I could hardly hear them. I discovered my camp-bed to be an error. All Subansiri houses are built for life on the floor and the traveller who rises higher does so at his peril, for a bed brings him neatly to smoke-level; I thought of putting my bedding on the floor after all but,

being tired and sleepy, decided against it. The smoke made me cough. I pulled the blankets over my head and lay there listening to Heli, who had changed tune.

When I roused it was midnight. Heli was still at it. I turned over and went to sleep and when I woke again it was morning and the house was stirring to the day.

6

Hapulia

A LONG tongue of land split the bogs of the valley floor and on this, a speck in a sea of bracken, stood the white tent. A line of low hummocky hills cut off the view to the north; behind them lay the ordered rice terraces and the clustered, grove-sheltered villages of the main Apa Tani Valley, but we had had enough of Apa Tanis in the mass and were camped at Hapulia, a lonely stretch long deserted for fear of Dafla raids. It was mid-December; I had come back from my Dafla trip a week previously and found Tim momentarily at leisure. We needed more men to work at Kore and must recruit them from the Apa Tanis. We had packed and taken Kop Temi, Nada Rika and the servants and had marched off up the hill behind Kore and climbed on and up through the clear, pale, northern air till we disappeared at last into the evergreen forests which ringed the valley, and here we were in camp on the fourth morning of our stay.

It was daybreak and bitterly cold. Behind us the sedge was frozen in the bog; mist hung over the land in eerie curtains and swirls, as though the very wind had frozen. The woods were black and motionless; the bamboos on the hills to the north were coated with rime and as fixed as though they were painted. Far off, muffled by the fog, came a strange, harsh

cry, achingly lonely, the voice of desolation itself—the cry of the mysterious cranes.

The flock had not been long in the valley and this year there were not many of them, only forty or so. They usually came in December and migrated again in March; we had seen them through the field-glasses, tall, greyish-white birds some four feet tall, stalking about on their long legs and feeding in the bare expanse of the main valley. The Apa Tanis claimed that since the birds had been fired at by the sepoys in 1945 they were far wilder than before, and they were certainly almost impossible to approach. Tim, who wanted a specimen for identification, had crawled through mud and frozen ditches for hours without success, and Temi and the Naga boys had had no better luck. An Apa Tani could walk within a biscuit-toss of the flock, but a man with a gun could not get within half a mile. Then suddenly on the third day the cranes were a mystery no longer; Temi walked in that morning with a dead bird on his back and it proved to be *Grus nigricollis*, the Black-necked Crane, from Tibet, never so far as we knew reported from India before.

Today the flighting cranes were the forerunners of the sun. As it came over the far rim of the valley the mist, which seemed thinner here than at Duta Pape, lit up from above, boiled, swirled and was gone in a few dwindling shreds of vapour. The world below was whiter still. The bracken was hard with dazzling frost on which the shadow of the tent was spread long and blue; the bog behind the camp was full of white rime and sharp ice; the tent ropes were furred with crystals and the ground rang hard underfoot. Dusu Rüdo, our new Apa Tani water carrier, was squatting blanketed to the eyebrows in a small patch of sun and chipping an inch of ice from the cookhouse water buckets. When he finished, he filled them at the stream and brought them back to the kitchen; as he came out again his eye fell on the ice from the

buckets. He picked a piece up and before our astonished eyes ate it with evident enjoyment. We stood in what sun there was, felt-booted and in sheepskin coats, and watched the rest of the servants thaw out in the wake of Rüdo; first came Nada Rika, then the three Nagas and lastly Buda, gross, ash-smeared and sluggish.

Dusu Rüdo was a new acquisition. He might perhaps have been thirty, he had slightly bandy legs, a face like a stage Irishman and a timid and excitable nature, and he was an incorrigible clown. Buda, of course, had been with us for some time. When Kago Bida deposited him with us and threatened to take mortal umbrage if we did not appreciate his loan, poor Buda lost all hope and saw himself abandoned for ever in the hands of strangers. He moped in the kitchen ashes, a miserable savage; he was a big, fattish man, moon-faced and coarse; his age might have been twenty-six or seven. As he crept about the camp in the first few days he looked like an unhappy slug. The weather was turning cold, and as we had no porter-blankets I had to fit him out with an old, cellular one out of my own bedding, which gave the final touch to an already unfortunate appearance. He slept in the warm ashes and emerged thence smeared, grimy, scruffy and quite unlike anything human. But his ample pay and rations had a rapidly comforting effect; he became almost jaunty and by now was established as a family pet.

A column of thin smoke went up from the fire in front of the tent, the sun climbed, the rime steamed and life at last became bearable. We breakfasted by the fire—porridge, bacon and eggs and coffee—and then Tim took the .410 and went to collect birds along the fringe of the woods. As the frost melted the landscape changed from a shining and magical white to a frost-burned brown, and along a distant footpath among the hummocks came trotting the first long line of Apa Tani ladies who were going to try to sell me something.

The Apa Tani is like the Flemish peasant, frugal and parsimonious, as indeed he must be to survive in the valley's economic conditions, but it is not his most lovable attribute. We depended on the Apa Tanis for our fresh supplies. It was one thing to get the women to come out and haggle, but it was quite another to buy anything at a fair price, and to make things worse there was no money economy and trade was all by barter.

The women jogged across the moor towards us like a file of dolls. Each carried a small creel and each was exactly like all the others; for a moment they disappeared into a hollow and then they were up on our tongue of land and into the camp, where they came to a giggling standstill among the tent ropes. Like the women we had seen in Haja, their dirty faces were tattooed, they wore huge black noseplugs, their quilted skirts were shapelessly bunched and they clutched their sack jackets round them. They were lamentably plain.

The first and boldest approached with her basket, and taking the cloth off it as though she were displaying jewels, she revealed a small, sagging bunch of greens. I shouted for Rika and the day's marketing had begun.

Rika trotted up, his grey porter-blanket wrapped tightly round him. He asked her the price; she demanded a pound of salt, twenty times the proper value; Rika snorted like a war horse, and she promptly retired.

A second woman advanced, cautiously pulling the covering off her treasures. Rika, disregarding her protests, ferreted ruthlessly in the basket and brought out some greens, some chillies and a rag full of popcorn. I shook my head and she was dismissed.

The third woman had three or four smoke-dried rats, an Apa Tani delicacy. She was hurt when I would not buy.

Rika now plunged among the bevy of women to a chorus of squeaks and squeals and in as many seconds had uncovered

six pumpkins and ranged them in front of me, their owners making vain snatches at them from behind him. He held them all down and haggled. One angry lady secured hers and marched off with it, but he stuck to the others, arrived at a price and referred to me. I did frantic mental sums, equating tobacco leaves, matches and salt against more normal currency, and decided the total was fair. Five pumpkins were mine for three leaves of tobacco, two annas in cash and a handful of kitchen salt, and Rüdo carried the purchases to the cookhouse.

Hardly had the first batch gone when in came a second with the robin-like Tenyo Bida in charge, and as they reached the tent the lady at the head of the file pushed past him with conscious dignity, uncovering her basket. She had something she knew I wanted. Tenyo Bida, his hands tucked inside his tunic for warmth, was still gabbling an explanation when she drew out a jacket of Apa Tani tapestry.

I had seen such jackets before and they were beautiful things. They were part of a priest's robes. The ground was of white cotton on which was superimposed an intricate bird's-eye pattern in black wool, sometimes with fine lines of madder-dyed thread running through it. As she gently unfolded the piece I saw it was good. I fingered one corner as disparagingly as possible, but there was no fooling her; she folded it up and laid it on top of her basket until I had made my offer.

Textiles meant big money and all other business was suspended. I sent Rika down to fetch Kop Temi, whose tarpaulin shelter was shedding blue smoke from every corner to show the inhabitants were awake and cooking. Temi arrived, his overcoat buttoned up and his cane Dafla helmet on the back of his head, glanced round the group, surveyed the jacket, spoke to the owner, snorted at her answer, and turned away to look at the pumpkins. Seeing that the matter was out of my hands I went off to the cookhouse to order lunch.

When I returned I found Temi sitting on the ground surrounded by women and vegetables. The jacket was hanging on the tent ropes, so I gathered it was mine. The price was four pounds of raw wool and a handful of salt. A market was now in full swing, Temi in complete command. Rika hovered at his elbow, now bearing off a pumpkin, now collecting chillies, and Temi, centrally situated, weighed, measured, judged, valued and bought in the face of shrill female expostulations. The two Zemi lads leaned on the tent ropes and watched until the inevitable Apa Tani small boys appeared from nowhere, when they both retired on the cookhouse to defend our property. They had not forgotten the pilfering at Duta Pape.

It was now noon and the day as hot as it ever would be. Where an hour ago the men were crawling round as peripatetic mounds of blankets, they were now shedding covers like skins off an onion. Tenyo Bida and Rika, who was now also an interpreter, had their red official cloths, but Dusu Rüdo, who was poor, changed abruptly from a long grey chrysalis to a stark naked savage. Wearing nothing but his red cane tail and a small strip of cloth, he doubled cheerfully to and fro between tent and market, carrying purchases one way and salt the other, his bamboo cutty clamped in a corner of his grin and his hair-skewer winking in the sun. Not so Buda, who crawled reluctantly into the open, sniffed the fresh air once and lumbered back again into the warm cookhouse. There were sounds of altercation. He was driven out to the woods and the collection of firewood by the infuriated Lungchiwong and his complaints died out gradually across the bog in the direction of the forest. Meantime the bazaar had ended; Rüdo had collected the purchases, Temi had gone back to his hut and the women had jogged off home. Peace fell again on the camp and the long, undulating slopes of withered bracken.

Not for long. By the time Tim had come back and we had finished lunch there was an ominous gathering of hawk's

feathers and Dafla cane helmets outside Temi's shelter. Sure enough, they were litigants. Jorum Kamin, his helmet still awry, had come over the hill with a bunch of friends and supporters to ask help in bringing a Haja man to the conference table. Koj Karu, who should have summoned the Apa Tani, had gone off home on leave without bothering to do so, so Tim wrote the order again and looked round for a messenger. Tenyo Bida had gone, Rika was not too well, Rüdo had a splinter in his foot and the Daflas were unsuitable, so there remained only Buda. We called him.

Buda would not go to Haja. It was too far, it was too late, it was getting dark and cold, he had work enough as it was and it wasn't his job anyway. He turned his back on the lot of us and rolled back to the cookhouse in indignant defiance; Temi and Rika went after him, scolding furiously, and the argument went on for half an hour and ended where it began. Not for the whole British Empire was Buda going to Haja and that was that.

Just about three o'clock, when a hint of the evening chill was creeping back into the air, we saw a solitary figure coming from the woods along the Kore path. Nearer it came, picking its way through the broken ground and the deep inlets of peaty black mud which wound between the hillocks. It breasted the slope of our tongue of land; it was Kago Bida, big, bare-thighed, dressed in his scarlet cloth and his great, black, bristling war cape and beaming with his own particular blend of shyness and delight. We had come to be very fond of Bida, large, simple, kindly and good-hearted creature that he was, and we greeted him with shouts of joy. He was on his way home from Talo and had come the long way round to see how we were. We had exchanged gossip and he was just leaving again when his eye fell on a ground sheet on the grass and he pounced on it; he wanted it and haggled joyously with Tim until they arrived at a fair swap, a nearly new ex-Army

ground sheet for Bida's palm-fibre war cape, and then Bida, with a grin of pleasure, folded up his new toy. Then the grin faded a little. Bida was an aristocrat and it was *infra dig.* for him to carry burdens. He turned to the cookhouse and said, "Buda!"

Buda's head came reluctantly out.

"Carry," said Bida tersely.

Buda picked up the bundle without a word, and five minutes later a meekly bent figure, Bida stalking behind, was jogging out of sight along the path to Haja.

By four the shadows were long and at five the winter dusk was gathering in the woods. As dark shut down and the frost bit, Rüdo lit the campfire and a column of flames went up to a sky brilliant with stars. The logs came from the forest and were gnarled and mossy; the fire was full of arches and chasms, and now and then within them tufts of lichen burned with sudden spurts of flame. It was too cold for the men to sit by our fire and they preferred the comfortable fug of the shelters and huts, but usually one man, either Rika, Buda or Rüdo, sat by our fire and tended it when necessary. Tonight it was Rüdo.

I forget how the conversation started, but I think I must have asked him about the Dusu clan. He came out with an odd story and, odder still, while he was telling it his whole personality changed. From a comic, bandy-legged peasant he became a gentle, well-bred man discussing a personal tragedy, and so completely did the intervening generations seem to melt away that he himself might have been one of the men of whom he spoke.

There had once, he said, been eight Apa Tani villages instead of the present seven. The eighth stood at Soro, and the tremendous pines which had so impressed us there were in fact the old village plantations, left untended for centuries. Now one year when the harvest failed in the rest of the valley

and many were starving, the prosperous Dusu village, which had ample rice, sold it at exorbitant prices and exploited their fellows' distress in a way which even the commercially minded Apa Tanis found excessive, and public feeling in consequence ran very high. At about this time a man in another village died and a wealthy kinsman of his sent a slave to the jungle to bring in a mithan for the funeral ceremony, for the Apa Tani cattle, then as now, lived a semi-feral existence in the surrounding woods. But the man could not catch the beast, and when at dusk he was still empty-handed he dared not go back and tell the truth; instead he hit on an expedient. Returning scratched and mired as he was, he claimed that the Dusu had attacked him. This was the last straw; the seven hungry villages flew to arms, raided the Dusu settlement, burned it to the ground and slaughtered most of the inhabitants, and from the few Dusu men who were spared and kept as slaves Dusu Rüdo and his handful of kinsmen descended. There were not more than half a dozen households of them extant in Haja, scarcely as many in Hari and none anywhere else.

"So the Dusu," said Rüdo wistfully, looking back on lost grandeur, "are really *mite*."

Rika shouted from the cookhouse. The spell was broken; Rüdo screamed like a sea gull and shambled off to join him, and we were left alone by the fire. The night wind moved in the black spaces of the valley and stirred in the long re-entrant where the pines of Soro stood, and our campfire seemed very small in the dark expanse of the moor.

7

To the North

BACK in November, while Kore was still building, Siraj, going down to buy cane in Talo, found the men from Hidjat Lupukher. Hidjat lay in the unexplored country. For a march or two north of Kore the country was roughly mapped; beyond that was a twilight fringe half-known from rumour, and beyond that again was darkness. Hidjat lay on the fringe. It was somewhere near the Palin Valley, a notorious nest of raiders. The Palin was on the road to the snow-ranges and beyond it was the Panyi Valley, and beyond the Panyi Valley was the valley of the upper Khru. In that stood a village called Paba Tayi and another called Lebla, whose people were reputed to have Tibetan contacts. Up beyond them both was a stone building, perhaps a Tibetan fort, and away beyond that again was the Khru's own source in the Himalayan snows. It was the land of mystery and magic, the unknown place behind the hill, the Island of the Golden Apples; and if Hidjat itself was not on the Upper Khru, then at least it was on the way there, and Siraj pounced on the Hidjat men, whom the Talo people were hiding, and brought them up to Kore to see us. The upshot of it all was that Khoda Talom, their leader, agreed to come back in a month's time and take us up to his village.

There was only one chance for us to penetrate any distance

and that was to travel unescorted. The method was simple; you took yourself and your baggage to a village and waited there until the people in the next settlement had got over their fear of you and then you persuaded them to carry you on another stage and repeated the process again. Other complications apart, the chief risk was that someone on your route might have a grudge against the Government, or that a death in the village after your visit might lead them to blame you for disease-carrying and so involve you in a feud with them. What was not so simple was to rid yourself of the peril of political entanglements. Not all Daflas were prepared to settle their difficulties at the conference table. They had no conception of abstract justice or impartiality, and to the vast majority the Government was a powerful force to be bent, by whatever means, to the furthering of their own feuds. Litigants, therefore, clung to Government parties on the move as leeches cling to travellers; they were dangerous and unpleasant; they used your presence without the least scruple to press their claims, which were generally false, and involved you without a qualm in disastrous situations; the very sight of them with you shut every door and sent the inhabitants flying to their spears. The elimination of litigants was, as we were to discover, a major problem, and breaking through the litigious limit was like passing the sound barrier—once you had done it successfully everything was comparatively plain sailing.

In our case the sound barrier was represented by the Talo Daflas. Like all their tribe, they had only one use for the Government and that was as a means to settle disputes in their favour. They determined to turn the Hidjat expedition to their own advantage, and when on Christmas Day the fair-skinned, pock-mocked, hide-corseleted Khoda Talom returned to Kore, Toko Höli was inseparably with him and whispering in his ear like an evil genius. Talom sat by the Great Hall hearth with the nervous air of a Dafla from the raiding areas,

where life is apt to be brief, and arranged to meet us in a week's time at Kirom in the Kiyi Valley and to go on to Hidjat from there; but Toko Höli had done his work and the former cheerful atmosphere had vanished. Khoda Talom waggled his hands at us and made curious noises which he conceived to be the Assamese form of salutation and left us like one who has asked the devil to dinner and is now not sure of the spoon.

It was vital to Talo that we should take troops, for otherwise it would be impossible for them to enforce their thousand-and-one claims on the villages further to the north. When they realized that we were going unescorted there was consternation and Toko Höli hurried up to Kore. He plumped himself down by the hearth, his pale face very earnest, and explained to Tim that he had just heard from Khoda Talom that his neighbours objected to our coming and would raid the village when we arrived, so we must be sure to take a section of troops. We were new and green and it sounded alarmingly convincing; we went in perturbation to Kop Temi, who exploded Toko Höli's ruse in a few unemotional words. Feeling rather small and chastened, we went back again to Toko Höli and told him we would just take the risk, and he returned to Talo in a bad temper.

A day or two later he reappeared. This time he had definite news from Kirom that the warriors of Tasser in the Palin Valley were waiting for us with drawn bows in the Yapup pass. Tim took his pipe out of his mouth and said that that was most unfortunate, but we would go unescorted all the same. Toko Höli retired again, indignant at our refusal to accept such convincing fictions.

Three days later, when we had almost forgotten him in the stress of packing, he burst into the Great Hall in gabbling excitement. Behind him he hauled a wounded Talo man. The whole household stopped work and gathered round; we

sent for Temi, and the visitors sat down by the fire, Toko Höli fluffed out like a fowl with his own importance. When Temi arrived, Höli burst into a long tirade. Nyelom Sera of Nyelom had attacked them both because Talo was friendly to us; his man had been injured, his own red cloth had been slashed, and the Nyelom were going to ambush us on the way to Kirom.

Now the red cloth was a remarkable institution. It was issued only to Government interpreters and officially recognized headmen and it conferred a special status; its wearer was sacrosanct, he was vested with authority and behind him stood the British Government. An attack on the red cloth was an attack on the Government itself and could not be allowed to pass. Temi listened in silence. Then he said that as he had heard the story (Temi's intelligence service was remarkable) the wounded man had insulted Nyelom Sera and got no more than he deserved. Toko Höli went white with fury; he saw this third attempt failing. He seized the folds of his scarlet Government blanket and shook them at Temi, reiterating that it had been slashed and its privileged immunity violated.

"Where is the cut?" said Temi.

Toko Höli ferreted among the folds. He pawed them this way; he pawed them that. The damage seemed elusive. The pause grew longer. He peered and searched as though hunting a flea and at last triumphantly pounced. He held out the cloth to us with a tip of a finger showing through a very small circular hole, and Temi looked at it and said coldly, "Moth."

Toko Höli glared at him speechlessly for a second. Then he leapt up and rushed out of the house, and that evening word came up from Talo that our porters, who were prospective litigants to a man, had disbanded. The next morning the whole of our Apa Tani labour bolted for fear we should take them on what the Talo men had told them was a suicidal venture, and there we were high and dry in the middle of a

half-built Kore with a hundred loads and not a soul to carry them.

We were almost in despair when help arrived from an entirely unexpected source. About two o'clock next afternoon a long file of strange Daflas came scrambling up the hill. Their leaders, a tall, thin man with a horribly scarred face, and a short, stocky fellow in a red official blanket, walked into Tim's office and introduced themselves. They were Licha Sera and Licha Tasser of Kirom. This was the Kiyi Valley village which had been the object of the punitive measures two years before and here they were, justifying their peace with the Government and their headman's new red blanket, with thirty-five porters to take us north. We called up every available Nepalese and pruned our baggage ruthlessly, and with not a porter to spare we left only a day late, on January 2, with all our party and a forthnight's rations. We were surprised to be starting at all.

With us were Dr. Bhattacharjee, Siraj, Bat Heli and three Apa Tanis. The latter were Chigin Nime, who had friends in the Palin Valley, Koj Karu, who spoke the best Assamese, and another interpreter, Kago Bida's young kinsman Kago Tajo. Unfortunately for our chances, which would have been much greater with him, Kop Temi could not come; he had been called home on urgent affairs, as happened all too often to him and to Bat Heli. Their wives resented their prolonged absences on duty and were apt to call them home about once a month by reporting unimaginable disasters, and though these were usually false alarms they damaged the victims' peace of mind and complicated administration considerably.

With Tim and me in the lead we dropped down the long hill to Talo, whose inhabitants ignored us pointedly, and wound on by narrow trails through high grass and scrub jungle till we reached the climb to the peak of Pad Puttu, in whose forests we camped for the night. The next morning we scram-

bled down three thousand feet into the steep Kiyi Valley. We were out of our own familiar Panior Basin landscape and into new and potentially hostile country; if it was not very different to look at, an untidy, hilly stretch of forest and old fields, it promised fresh people, fresh experiences, fresh adventures.

The slope eased and we came to Nyelom, a fair-sized village among broken hillocks and grass. In spite of Temi's reassurance we still felt a little uneasy; the high grass was perfect for ambush and our column of march was straggling along cheerfully as though entering the most friendly place in the world; but, far from attacking us, the villagers fled the moment the first Gurkha porters came out into the open, and only emerged from the woods when we were safely camped on a spur well away from the houses. The few who ventured in to sell us eggs explained that they thought we had troops and were hostile, and we traced the machinations of Toko Höli.

Hardly were the tents up than trouble began. The first at the door was the doctor, with the news that Kago Tajo had malaria.

"I would like to give a quinine injection," he explained in his pleasant, gentle voice. "But he is a difficult patient. Perhaps if you could come . . ."

Tim had just returned from sitting on the reluctant Kago Tajo when Siraj arrived, apologetic. His drill clothing flapped on his lean frame in the cold wind which ran before the sunset.

"I have been to Nyelom for porters," he said, "but, Sahib, they are building two new long-houses and there are no men to spare. We shall have to wait in Kirom while the Nepalese go back to fetch the other loads from Kore."

Then at dusk came the final straw. In by the path from Kore marched Toko Höli with a baggage-laden wife or two and a couple of Hidjat men. Tim and I conferred urgently in the tent. We dared not turn him out lest he go ahead and queer

our pitch; there was nothing for it but to speak him fair and deal with him as best we could. The cold, gusty night shut down, we ate a large meal of curried corned beef, and then we rolled into our sleeping-bags and slept till morning.

Kago Tajo was better and we pushed on as planned. While the porters packed up the camp we walked back to the village to try to see Nyelom Sera, a notoriously shy bird, and to our great surprise he was at home. He was a tall, rangy man, scar-faced and shifty-eyed; he was plainly afraid of us and yet, or perhaps because of it, inclined to be boastful. There was nearly a scene when he saw Licha Tasser with us, for he had a feud with Kirom and held one of Licha Tasser's sons prisoner and thought we had come to intervene. We left Nyelom without regret and followed the Kiyi River, a golden, gravelly stream running through rich land, and presently turned up a side stream and reached Kirom's fields.

Here our Dafla porters took a path to the left while Licha Tasser steered us up one to the right. Koj Karu stopped in his tracks. He spoke angrily to Licha Tasser and broke off to tell Tim that we were being sent round by a detour instead of by the proper route. Licha Tasser denied it. The other track, he said, was a field path and was overgrown and rough. The porters took it as a short cut, but we should find it troublesome and little quicker. We all stood for a moment in the road, Koj Karu muttering to himself, and then Tim shrugged and went on. Everyone else followed, Karu still hotly contending that the other was the main track and inveighing against the perfidy of all Daflas; it soon became clear that he was right, for we swung far out to the east by the new site of Bagi, a village burned by the punitive expedition, and then joined the main path from the Apa Tani Valley and turned back to Kirom along that. For all their protestations of amity the Kirom men were not letting us see the direct road to their village from Kore, a road of prime military value.

We came on Kirom suddenly, crossing a steep ridge and finding it hidden on the reverse slope. The houses stood, widely scattered, on two or three narrow spurs which jutted out abruptly. Far below was a tributary of the Kiyi; westwards against the wintry grey sky were black, forested hills where the Panyi and Panior rose, and a mile or two to the north was a brief notch in a col—the low, wooded pass called the Yapup-bog, which gave on the Palin Valley. We camped on a spur between the scattered houses, the ground falling away in front and behind into deep ravines. The Apa Tanis went off in a body to perform ceremonies at the water-supply; they were still officially at war with Kirom and could not drink until it had been rendered ritually innocuous. The night was cold and windy and the tents flapped, and we went to sleep with difficulty through the steady howls of some unfortunate slave-woman whom Licha Sera's wife was beating.

In the morning we woke to rain and a succession of disasters. Firstly, Bat Heli had malaria and was seriously ill. His emotional temperament and passionate belief in Dafla rites made him hard to treat. He would take a dose or two and refuse more in case it prejudiced the Dafla magic, and then, when the little failed to cure, he would be more convinced than ever that medicine was no use. We were in for trouble with Heli; we read it in the doctor's look, and Heli, as the only Dafla interpreter, was vital to the expedition. Kago Tajo was far from well and Tim had to supervise another injection, and last in the catalogue of troubles, there was no sign of the Talo porters Rajuni had promised to send after us with the loads we had been forced to leave behind. We sent back our Nepalese to fetch the remaining baggage from Kore and sat down to wait for five days.

Since the Daflas were suspicious and the time was not ripe for asking questions, anthropological or any other, we passed the time as best we could. Tim went out hunting with the

Kirom men, I shot pigeon for the pot, and we both went over to Bagi with Koj Karu and Licha Sera and looked at some rock outcrops which were thought to be coal; if they were, it was coal of very poor quality. Every evening we built a massive campfire and sat round it, the flames pouring up to the overcast sky in an orange tower against the chasms of darkness. Since Nime spoke no Assamese and Kago Tajo very little, the gatherings were dominated by the brilliant, witty, satanic and unpredictable Koj Karu. Even the clumsy *lingua franca* could not quench his verbal fireworks; they flickered like lightning round our slower minds and he scored off us continually, to his great delight, for he was intensely vain, and every night he retired on some outrageous exit line. And then, when we were convinced of his brains and of his value to us, there came the crash. Perhaps he underrated us, perhaps we overrated him, or perhaps he just had bad luck.

On the morning of the fifth day there was a sudden confusion round the tent door as we were getting up. There were Daflas voluble and argumentative, Licha Tasser apologetic but determined and Siraj distressed and uneasy. A pig had been killed in a near-by ravine and Koj Karu was accused. We all went down to the spot in the morning sunlight, the world a clear green and gold and blue all about us; as always in the Subansiri region, where we had such a narrow margin of safety and anything which went wrong had vast possibilities for disaster, there was a faintly nightmarish feeling, a sense of vivid but intensely unpleasant reality, shot by a wild hope that one might wake up in bed in London and find one had dreamed the whole thing. The pig lay where found, at the bottom of a narrow gully; those most concerned gathered round it on the trampled grass and the path behind was so steep that the rest were in a curving line, as though they watched from a spiral staircase. The Daflas stated their case. A small girl was the witness. Karu denied it all vehemently,

his handsome devil's face contorting with excitement, but his denials fell on a growing silence, the Daflas melted away and we all went back to the camp. Though no one would say so, there was no doubt that Karu had tried to kill and steal the pig and, unescorted as we were, had risked all our lives in pursuit of a trivial private grudge; had the Daflas taken a different line, we should none of us have lived five minutes. There followed a stormy interview between Tim and Karu, and Karu, finding himself disbelieved, fell into a black passion; there were scenes all day and the tension spread to the cookhouse, where the Zemi boys had a wholly unnecessary row with Dusu Rüdo. Then in the evening the Nepalese porters returned, some men from Hidjat arrived, and Heli was much better. We could move on next morning.

We marched in bright weather to strike the Kiyi River below Bagi. There were not enough porters to go round and we had to leave the doctor and Siraj in Kirom until the Nepalese could come back for them. It was not a pleasant march. Koj Karu's flaming shame and rage overshadowed the entire column; he was speaking to neither of us and turned his back in an icy silence whenever we appeared. He stalked with the porters, the anxious Nime keeping near him to dissuade him from further mischief. The convalescent Heli came slowly in the rear, his harelipped wife Putu, who appeared to be the travelling model, carrying his modest baggage. Kago Tajo, a cheerful young sprig of the Apa Tani nobility, walked with us and the Zemi boys and tried to lighten the thunderous atmosphere with a running fire of small talk, but without any great success, and at last even he gave it up and we trailed along without a word.

From the Bagi crossing we followed the stream north-eastwards towards the head of the valley, the path sometimes running through the dense forest on the banks but more often up the stream-bed itself; the Hidjat men had told us that

Hidjat was four marches off and that the Kiyi was waist-deep, but the latter at least was a lie, for the clear, cold water hardly reached our knees. Daflas, it seemed, habitually lied about routes, partly to discourage strangers and partly lest one complain afterwards that the going was worse than expected. For four miles or more we waded thus up the Kiyi, and then at the foot of the range which divided the Panior system from the Khru, the Kiyi split up into a number of small, deep rivulets. We followed one almost to the top of the range and there camped in fine mountain forest at a height of 5800 feet, on a cramped and narrow spur where *pogran* tripods took up most of the room. Dusu Rüdo went to gather wood, found a hand nailed to a tree and fled back to camp in hysterics; Bat Heli went to see and returned looking smug and superior—he had no good opinion of the unwarlike Apa Tanis—to say it was a monkey's paw, a hunting and not a war trophy, but the uncomforted Apa Tanis were in a flutter all night.

In the grey morning we climbed on up the pass. The trunks of the trees were dim columns on either hand; the undergrowth was low and damp; a cloud hung on the hill, prolonging the night. As we neared the top of the hill the path ran into a steep-sided gully like a miniature railway cutting, and we plodded ankle-deep through the mud and water in this, the high banks and the trees on them still covering us with a cold shade. Fallen branches impeded us; we picked our way over and through them. Then we suddenly saw that the water through which we walked was running the other way. We had crossed the divide; both the Kiyi and a north-bound stream of the Khru system took their rise in the same gully, the one flowing to the Panior and the other to the Subansiri.

The path dropped steeply away through thick forest, and now and then through gaps we could see snow-streaked hills in the distance, not the main range, but the lower hills before them. Shortly before noon we came abruptly out into an open

field full of sunlight and stubble. On a pile of chaff in the middle of it Putu was fanning Heli, who was lying back, clay-coloured, with a relapse of his malaria. Beyond them crimson celosia, planted to scare off birds, shone among tall, yellow straw; behind were hills, each paler and paler blue in the haze and glare of midday, and at the head of the field was a Dafla house which our guides said, to our surprise, was an outlier of Dadum, Khodo Talom's village. The supposed four marches, then, were a bare march and a half. Another short stretch through woods brought us out in a second clearing where Khoda Talom's own long-house stood and where our porters were already gathering, and we pitched camp on the open spur beyond it. Heli was again ill, God knew when we should see the doctor, Koj Karu was still not speaking to us and Kago Tajo knew little Assamese, but we had reached Hidjat at last. From the edge of the camp the fields fell towards a hidden river. Beyond that was the Khru Valley, and to the north of it the unknown country rolled on and on, ridge behind sullen ridge, towards the snows a month's journey away.

We woke at dawn. Framed in the open tent door was a sight to make us gasp, a rose-pink range of twenty-thousand-foot snow-mountains glowing in the early sun above a world of grey-blue dusk; fanged, peaked, magnificent, they marched across the horizon behind the unknown sources of the Khru. As we watched, the clouds gathered in the valleys below them and mounted, a wall of cumulus swelling upwards. For a moment the highest peaks stood out sharp and white over it and then they too were swallowed and there was nothing but an ivory-tinted cloud bank and a wilderness of dark hills before it.

In front of our eyes the blank spaces on the map had taken shape. They swelled up in ranges ten thousand feet high or more, a ribbed and crowded country cut through by steep and immense gorges; it was as though someone had tried to fit a gigantic tract of land into far too small a space and had bent

and squeezed and crumpled it to fit, packing an enormous acreage into a corner never meant to hold it, a corner now indecently full of dizzily precipitous square miles. To our right we could see the gorgelike rift where ran the lower Khru, the river itself marked only by a band of low-lying mist, a twist of smooth cotton-wool between the green slopes. To the left was the Palin Valley, running northward to the gulf of the Khru; beyond that we could see the upper Khru Valley, the home of mystery and wonders, the place of Lebla and Paba Tayi. After a northward bend near the mouth of the Palin it appeared to run back north-westwards as a long, low basin to the very foot of the snows. It was startlingly near; between it and the Palin next door to us we could see only three ridges and those might well be but spurs of a single great ridge.

We ate our breakfast in a haze of rosy hopes, our difficulties forgotten and dissolved at the sight of that promised land, visible but still mysterious behind its folding and concealing hills. They reasserted themselves with a run, however, when Tim sent to Khoda Talom to ask for porters to take us to the Palin. Khoda Talom waggled his hands and made placatory noises, but was vague on the subject of porters. By noon the situation was taking shape through the fog of hints and intrigue; we had reached the litigation barrier. Khoda Talom and Toko Höli were in league together and would prevent our moving a yard farther unless the Government settled their claims for them against the men of the Palin. This being morally and physically impossible, the day passed in ceaseless argument and ended in complete deadlock. This was crowned when in the evening Beuri Hasse of Beuri, Chigin Nime's ceremonial friend, arrived to greet the old man and told us point-blank that the Palin men would never let us in if we came with a tail of litigants. The only bright moment in the day was the doctor's sudden arrival at dusk, and we went to bed thoroughly depressed and cursing Toko Höli and Khoda Talom, whose

intrigues were wrecking our hopes of exploration and were not unlikely to land us in serious trouble with the Daflas of the Palin. The wonders of the upper Khru had receded like a mirage.

Our spirits revived a little in the morning, and after breakfast we called the party together and held a council of war about the fire. The Apa Tanis no more liked being blackmailed than we did, and after a discussion it was decided that Chigin Nime, our most skilled negotiator, should go off round the other six scattered houses of Dadum and see what help he could find. In a loosely integrated Dafla community there was quite a chance that someone would be glad to queer Khoda Talom's pitch and cut him out with the Government.

He returned triumphant at noon. None of Khoda Talom's kin were ready to go against him, but he had found a "broken man" named Tasser Ekim who came from the Palin and knew the neighbourhood well, and in return for payment he would go round the villages as our ambassador and recruit us porters from there. But on the edge of dusk the man, a stout, thickset Dafla, turned up at the camp looking scared and asked to be released from his bargain. Khoda Talom and Toko Höli had been at him and had told that as our emissary he was certain to be murdered.

For a few seconds Chigin Nime was speechless. He sat by the fire staring up at Tasser Ekin, his wrinkled, rather pale face working and no sound coming from him but inarticulate sputters. Then he leapt to his feet and rushed to the interpreters' shelter; he came back clutching his knapsack and sword, and struggled into them as he stuttered good-bye.

"I will d-do it myself," he said to Tim. "It is n-n-not right that these shameless Daflas should make fools of us."

He straightened his worn red cloth with a sharp jerk and set off down the steep fields through the twilight and drizzle to do the job himself, the humiliated Tasser Ekin trailing de-

jectedly after him. We watched the indomitable old man till he vanished in the dark of the valley, and none of us were quite sure that we should ever see him again.

The next day was wet. The flag hung limply from the staff before the tent, the landscape was hidden in dank grey clouds from which nameless shoulders of hill peered out as the mist swirled, the eaves of the tent dripped and the campfire was reduced to charred branches steaming in a patch of sodden ash. Anything was better than the dank misery of the tent and we splashed off up the hill to visit the nearest houses.

They were not large, the biggest having nine hearths, and they differed little, if at all, from Dafla houses further south, but the granaries did differ markedly. Like all Dafla granaries they were small, stilted, thatched buildings a short way from the house, but these Dadum ones were peculiar in that they had two pointed depressions which dropped well below the level of the floor at the far corners. We saw the type later in other places and the distribution suggested that they spread from some cultural focus further north, perhaps on the upper Khru.

We found the first house full of people, marched boldly in and sat ourselves down by the fire at the chief hearth. If Dadum would not give us porters, it could at least warm us. The Daflas round the hearth made room for us, squeezing up and shuffling round. Our involuntary host accepted the invasion calmly and called to his wife to bring us beer, and we sat there cross-legged on the matting, staring across the flames at the Daflas, who stared uneasily back.

The Dadum people were the fairest-skinned Daflas we had seen. The women wore curious bell-metal earrings shaped like large collar-studs and the men—in contrast to those of Talo and Jorum where, under Government influence, raiding had almost ceased—never seemed to stir abroad without full hide and cane armour. They told us in the course of conversa-

tion that they were sleeping indoors at night instead of in the woods, as was usual, for they knew that while we were there they would not be raided. (So much for Toko Höli.) Evidently in crossing the Panior-Khru watershed we had passed from a zone trading predominantly with Assam to one drawing supplies from both north and south, for here, though salt came from Assam through the middlemen of Talo and Licha, Assam-forged weapons were uncommon, many men carried Tibetan swords, and there were more Tibetan ornaments. Textiles, we noticed, were scarce. Instead of Indian calico or Apa Tani homespun the villagers wore Apa Tani-style cloths made by the one or two local weavers, or nettle-fibre stuff like sacking, or handwoven cotton cloths with borders of red and black wool. These again came from the north and possibly from the upper Khru. Nor were we far from the "clothless zone," the tract encountered by the Haimendorfs, which was too far from both Assam and Tibet to receive textiles from either, for hanging on the wall of the house was a grass skirt. This I presently bought for the equivalent of about sixpence, and Koj Karu, whom the rice-beer had warmed into speaking to us after three days' freezing silence, whipped it on and danced back to camp, the scanty grass fringe and his bare, brown buttocks flaunting and bouncing in gross obscenity before us down the village path. The Daflas laughed till they cried, but Kago Tajo was shocked.

By the campfire that night we suddenly thought of a way to deal with Toko Höli. It fell on us out of the blue, heaven-sent, perfect and inspired, and we went to sleep feeling happier than we had done for days.

Next morning the weather had cleared. We ate a leisurely breakfast and sent for Toko Höli. He came believing, I think, that we meant to come to terms at last, and settled down by our fire with a pleased and expectant look. Tajo and Karu in their scarlet blankets joined the group; I knitted placidly and

Tim enjoyed his morning pipe. Great wisps of cloud came peeling off the distant hills and the landscape beyond our spur was all subtle blues and grey-greens washed with golden light, a scene in which earth and sky had overlapped their boundaries and mingled, hills poking up suddenly where clouds ought to be and detached fragments of cloud wandering idly below them as though they had lost their way.

Then Tim finished his pipe, knocked it out on his heel and slipped it into his pocket. He addressed Toko Höli. Koj Karu interpreted with relish. A runner had slipped off at dawn with a note for Rajuni at Kore, and unless Toko Höli reported to him there at once and then stayed quietly at home, Rajuni would go down to Talo and arrest Toko Höli's son.

The smug look slipped from Toko Höli's face like butter from a hot plate. His jaw dropped, his mouth sagged black and open and his face went a whitish-yellow. I found time in the lull to wonder why he had never realized that we should in time be provoked to retaliation. For perhaps five seconds he sat there staring at Tim, that ridiculous mask of stupefaction turning blankly on us, and then he leapt up and ran for his bivouac without a word; there was a wild clatter and scuffle as his wives threw the things together, and before any of us had moved from the fire he was fleeing at a steady trot up the path which led to Kore, and his women were struggling after him with the baggage.

Chigin Nime returned at midday. He came hustling up the hill through the fields, his old face crinkled in an enormous smile of delight, and rushed into camp crying, "*Dapo! Dapo!*" and trying to kiss us both. He was safe and sound, as was his follower Tasser Ekin; he brought friendly messages from everyone who mattered in the Palin Valley and our safe entry was assured. He had even seen Tasser Tad, that terror for miles around. He had reached the notorious Tasser settlement in the middle of the night and Tasser Tad had rushed out to give

battle. Nime had sat down plump in the middle of the path, shouting, *"Dapo! Nime dapo!"*—"a treaty, the treaty of Nime!"—which so astonished Tasser Tad that he brought the eccentric visitor indoors, plied him with food and drink, and by dawn had agreed to a provisional treaty with the Government. There was nothing now to delay us and we tackled Khoda Talom again, Karu and the triumph-flushed Nime going to interview him and demand porters. Without Toko Höli's support his resistance instantly collapsed; he made a treaty of peace with us in quite indecent haste and sent out for his men. There were not enough of them to move the whole lot of us at once, but they agreed to make the journey twice, so on a warm, bright morning Tim and I and the three Apa Tanis marched off again to the west.

We passed Takum village on an intervening ridge and came at length to Gami in the Palin Valley proper. We pitched camp in a dry-stalked patch of old maize on the village outskirts and looked about us. We were now on a hill above the east bank of the Palin River. It ran in a fine, wide vale; behind us the valley curved round into high, forested hills, the Palin rising further to the west than the Miri Mission had guessed (we had a copy of their conjectural map) and just at the curve was the Yapup pass leading to Kirom, with Tasser lying at its foot. From Tasser downwards to the Khru the valley was densely populated. On the east bank were Takum, Gami and the scattered Liasso, and on the west bank Lembla, Blabü, Beuri and Dolong ran along like beads on a string; both sides of the valley were thick with cultivation, with little yellow fields patchworked about the easy slopes and nibbling up into the dark forest. Dolong, in plain view and only a mile or two off, stood on the first of the three ridges between us and the upper Khru.

The people of Gami came out rather cautiously to watch us setting up the tent. The gesticulating assembly of lunatics

round the heap of cordage and canvas alarmed them considerably. One or two of the Dadum men, who had seen it done before, came forward self-importantly and held on to ropes as told, and then the nightly miracle was performed and the tangle rose up and became a neat, four-square white house with Karu and a Zemi boy hurrying round to hammer in the last pegs. The Gami folk were grubby and ragged, and there was less sign of Tibetan trade than there had been at Dadum, which was discouraging.. We had hoped to walk into a new trade-flow here, but instead we seemed to have struck a backwater intermittently fed by the known main stream through the Miri country to the east. The Apa Tanis, knowing our plans, asked casually about Dolong, but the spectators gave them the routine replies: there was no path, the Palin was too deep to ford and the Dolong people were hostile. We let it be.

The next morning the Gami crowd was larger. Among them I noticed a number of very poor men who were undoubtedly slaves. This was the first time we had seen such a thing in the Area, for gradually Government pressure had caused their disappearance from the country south of Kirom. The black hair of these wretches was cut short and fell round their faces in ragged black locks; they were practically naked, having only shreds and strings, like tattered brown netting, which might once have been cloth. One young man who hung about near the tent like a large and pathetic dog had his rags round his shoulders and covered himself with his hand when I went by, in a half-forgotten memory of a decency he could no longer afford. Had one of them claimed sanctuary in the camp we should have had to ransom him out, but nobody did, and in our tightrope-walking state, our touch-and-go existence, we could not lift a finger unasked.

In the afternoon we went to visit Gam Tasser, the leading man of the place, a mild, pleasant person. He had promised

to show us "a stone which looked like a star" and this turned out to be a large piece of rock-crystal, which he said was found in some quantity in the upper Khru valley. When we returned to the camp we found the doctor and Siraj there with the still-sick Heli, and knowing Daflas now, nobody was surprised when the chief man of Dolong, Dolong Eo, arrived in the evening to see us and we learned that there had been Dolong men in Gami all the time. Dolong Eo, a tall, thin, middle-aged man with smoke-reddened eyes, was friendly and promised to send some men to fetch us to his village. Beuri Hasse, truculent and rather drunk, arrived with fifteen porters and Gam Tasser agreed to supply the rest. There was then a hitch because most of the proposed porters wanted to carry to Beuri, where we did not want to go, instead of to Dolong, where we did, and in the end the party had to split again, Siraj, Heli and the bulk of the baggage going to Beuri to wait for news of us while we, the Apa Tanis and the doctor tried to break through to the north.

At daybreak the camp was swamped by a mob of Daflas who fell on the carefully sorted loads and in five minutes undid all of two hours' work. After half a morning's pandemonium we straightened matters out and departed on our respective courses; the Palin, when our party reached it, was, to nobody's surprise, a small, clear stream barely over our knees. We scrambled steeply up the far bank and presently reached Dolong, a poor, four-house village standing just below the crest of the ridge. We pitched camp in a field just above it.

As soon as the camp was made we hurried to the hilltop with Dolong Eo. We overlooked the Khru at last, but the gulf was so deep that we could not see the water. To the eastward villages were strung out along the gorge at the 4000-foot contour, where the slope eased a little and gave them a perch; in the other direction, to the north-west, a tangle of crests and

chasms made it hard to tell tributaries from main streams. Encouragingly close on our left were the second and third ridges, both fanning down from the same high range with the Panyi Valley beyond it and the Upper Khru beyond that.

Dusk fell and we turned back to camp to confer, scurrying elatedly down the path through the stubbled fields. In the lamplit lean-to—we had left the tent with Siraj and brought a tarpaulin—we sat on our blankets and argued. The road to the north was before us, the Khru was behind the hill and the mythical Lebla was within reach. But there was one limiting factor, for a mail-runner from Kore had brought news that the spring airdrop was to be a month early. Time was cruelly short, but we could just make a dash for the north if—*if*—we could start for Dado next day. We sent Nime and Karu to the village at once to negotiate for porters.

Until they came back we wobbled between hope and morbidity, between disbelief that our luck could be as bad as all that and the certainty that it would. It was. The door which had opened at Dadum slammed shut. We had been lucky at Gami, and now we were going to be unlucky at Dolong. Nime and Karu met with a flat refusal, Dolong Eo insisting that he was on bad terms with the people on the middle ridge and could not take us through to Dado without their prior consent, which might or might not have been true. At any rate, he would take us back to Beuri, but not one step north would he go, and as there was no time now to send out ambassadors ahead there was nothing for it but to admit defeat. The tingling hopes of sundown, the thin, bright chance of success, went down into black ruin at nine o'clock and at ten we were in our beds and there was a bitter silence over the whole camp.

At noon next day we reached Beuri and as we climbed up towards its long-houses on the flattish spur we saw in the crowd a Dafla woman dressed in red Tibetan woollen. She stood out like a portent, a phenomenon in dull brick-red, in

coarse, madder-dyed cloth from beyond the great range, the red of the Red Lama; but only momentarily, for, seeing our eyes on her, she turned and burrowed into the crowd like a frightened animal and vanished. At the camp-site was Siraj, quivering with a great secret, and before the tarpaulin was up he had taken Tim aside to tell him that Beuri stood on the main route through to Lebla and Paba Tayi. A capricious fate had brought us to another door the moment it had closed the one, and we had left a dead-end at Dolong to stumble on the through route.

We sat in the lean-to shelter—the ground was too steep to pitch the tent—and again conferred. The narrow path from the north ran out between our feet; the very camp was pitched across it; it appeared, a band of worn grass, from under the ground sheet on which we sat and twisted down the slope into Beuri, whose sunbleached houses stood out against the blue hills piled up behind them. Siraj had passed himself off as a down-country Dafla called "Kop Sera" and had managed to talk with the red-dressed woman and her two male companions. They came from Lebla itself and told him that behind the hills there were other villages of the Beuri clan with which Beuri of the Palin traded, and that these in turn were in touch with tribes further north who sold them Tibetan wares.

Again we grasped at the chance, but this time without much hope. Where the friendly Dolong Eo had refused it was not likely that Beuri Hasse, who had concealed the very existence of the track, Beuri Hasse, lord of a profitable trade-block, would agree. We were right. Tim went down in person with Nime, but there was no help to be had from Hasse. The best that Nime could extract was a grudging promise to let him go north after the rest of us had turned home. Though such a reconnaissance was dangerous, Chigin Nime was willing and anxious to go, so when they had returned to the camp Siraj weighed him out rations, and we turned out the present-

box and gave him what daggers and silks and tobacco he thought he would need. The next day we marched on to the south and left him behind.

Outside Beuri village we passed the recent grave of a man killed in a raid. Over it stood a long bamboo pole from whose tip dangled a dead white cock. The Dafla porters explained to the Apa Tanis and the Apa Tanis explained to us that the dead man's kinsmen would tether a live cock to the top of a pole in this way in order to take the omens; if a hawk took the cock quickly, the dead man would soon be avenged. Again we crossed the Palin, this time below Blabü, marched up the east bank and camped in a field near Tasser. The village was exaggeratedly scattered; there were only three houses and each one was at least a mile from any other. We had hardly pitched the tents when it came on to rain. The stubbled fields streamed with wet, the raw cold bit through our clothes and the half-frozen Apa Tanis were washed out of their shelter and had to take refuge in ours, where the resulting cold fug compensated very inadequately for the congestion. When in the morning the mist lifted and we crawled out into a lull, the high hills above us were white with snow or hail, probably the latter. Presently Tasser Taje, one of Tasser's three chief men, arrived with a handful of porters and explained that the rest of the villagers were all out hunting and could not come till next day. We settled to another halt. I went to bed with a cold, and Tim and Kago Tajo went off on a social round.

They returned in the afternoon full of news and beer. Tasser Taje, though an ardent raider and a most unsocial character, was far more ready to talk than such sly twisters as Beuri Hasse and Toko Höli. There was yet another pass, he said, to the Panyi Valley from the Palin; it was above Lembla, the next village down the river, and by this route it was only a day to Pago beyond the range and another day on to Dado and our third spur. At the mention of Dado a boy by the

hearth had spoken up; he had told Tim that he came from there and that we certainly ought to visit it, and that from the village you could see Paba Tayi in the Panyi Valley. Paba Tayi was a big village, as we had been told, but the rumour that it stood on a level plain was untrue; it was built on no more than a small patch of level ground. The great flat stretch was further up on the Khru, which one had to cross to reach it, and there, one on each side of the river and both called Tayang, were two large villages where the black-bordered cloths were made and Tibetan goods could be bought.

Soon after dawn next day some sixty cheerful and battle-scarred ruffians appeared to carry our baggage. We set off over the Yapupbog by a worn and much-used trail which climbed precipitously from fields to forest; we crossed the pass at 5200 feet and reached Kirom to find tents on our camp-site there. A convoy had arrived with extra rations and stores in case we had broken through to the north. We kept twenty porters for ourselves and sent back twenty-five to the doctor and Siraj, who were sitting in the field at Tasser with the sick Heli and the usual porterless loads.

That night at Kirom, Kago Tajo looked up at the waning moon and said that if we hurried we might be just in time to see the Apa Tani feast of Morrum, which opened the agricultural year. Tim and I talked it over. We decided that I should take the cameras and make a dash for Duta while he brought on the main body, and at dawn next day I left with Kago Tajo and Karu and took the forest trail to the south.

8

The Morrum Festival

THE Apa Tani Valley looked much the same as we dropped down to it from the heights—wide, cold, and strange. The huge, stilted villages and the fantastic people with their skewered hair-knots and weird, angular, grey cloaks made it vaguely uncanny, as though one had reached some place beyond the world. Spring was on the way; in the hedges behind Duta Pape pussy willow was shooting, and the silver tufts on brown wands stood out against a pale blue sky; on the old pear trees there were infinitesimal buds which would soon be leaves. Nevertheless, it was cold.

At the camp Nada Rika met us, tall, cloak-wrapped, dignified, more like an aristocratic aunt than ever, and genuinely pleased to see us. At the camp, too, Koj Karu left, stalking off arrogantly to Duta; his mood had changed abruptly as he neared his home ground and he had withdrawn himself from the foreign orbit, becoming again a hostile, contemptuous Apa Tani. Kago Tajo was loyal to his new friendship. When the warmth went out of the afternoon air he and Rika looked round the bleak camp with its thin mud-and-wattle huts and suggested I sleep in Haja village. I accepted with alacrity, but with some surprise, for Apa Tani houses are usually closed to strangers for fear of the alien spirits they might bring with them; if you are prepared to regard evil spirits and disease-

germs as roughly equivalent, the precaution is understandable. It was decided I should sleep at Tajo's, as Rika had a large, young family and his house was likely to be noisy; so we found a man to carry my bedding over and sent the bundle across. Remembering Pochu, I left out the camp-bed.

I ate supper in the camp and after nightfall set out for the village with Tajo. The sky was overcast, but that did not ease the cold; a raw damp rose up from the rice fields as we crossed them and seeped through our clothes; the freezing air of the heights was flowing down into the valley, its chill breath running before it. We passed down the miry alleys of the village, meeting no one, till we plunged down a tiny footpath and came to a group of houses on the village outskirts, a small Kago colony set far out among the gardens and groves like a berry on the end of a stalk. Tajo ran up the wooden ladder of a house and opened the front door, and we passed in.

A bright fire burned on the hearth and the interior was well lit. It was astonishingly warm; the deep eaves stretched almost to ground-level on either side and they and the double-layered matting walls shut out the cold as efficiently as stone or brick. On the outside of the house, the stranger's side, Rika was laying out my bedding on the floor. On the inner side sat a young, pleasant-faced woman and a little girl of four. The house itself was clean; there was room for two hearths, though in fact there was only one (the second would have been a servant's); clothes and baskets hung on the walls, and between the wall and the eaves on one side of the house was a closed gallery shut off by sliding doors. This was the latrine; it had holes cut in the floor and it overhung the pigsty; in the end, of course, the Apa Tanis ate the pig. But as a system of primitive sanitation it was most effective and with all those hundreds of houses, those thousands of human beings, crowded together without a drain among them, there was scarcely an offensive smell.

We sat round the fire, Tajo on the host's side, and he introduced Morpin, his wife. I have already mentioned that the Apa Tanis were rigidly divided into two classes, *mite* and *mura*, the former free and the latter servile, and within the free class one could distinguish individuals and families who seemed to constitute a nobility, the heads of clans, for example, and the heads of senior branches and their immediate kin. This nobility married almost exclusively within itself and the network of alliances throughout the valley was almost comparable to that of European royalty in the years before 1914. Morpin was the daughter of a prominent family in Bela. She was slight and delicately built. Like many of the upper-class women, she had shed her jacket and was bare above the waist; dignified unself-consciousness of this kind seemed to be a hallmark of the virtuous, and the lower-class Apa Tani women who frequented Kore and solicited the Assam Rifles always clutched their jackets round them, intensely conscious of the body below and of the attraction of concealment. Leading Apa Tani nobles were often polygynous, their two or three wives, unlike those of the Daflas, being of equal status; and Tajo, the child of a third wife, was half-brother to the head of the Kago clan and so uncle to the clan's executive head, his much-older kinsman Kago Bida.

We discussed the Morrum ceremony. Bands of boys and young men from each village were visiting every other village, going round the valley in a sunwise direction in processions led by a priest. The priest scattered grains of rice on the fields as he passed, and in each village they visited they went to every clan quarter, danced at the *lapang* and were entertained with food and drink by the leading citizens. Koj Karu's house overlooked the Kog *lapang* and Tajo had arranged that we should all go there in the morning to see the Bela and Hari processions come round.

The sound of my alien voice brought the neighbours in at

this point. Tajo's house was in the middle of the knot of other Kago homes, some occupied by free clansmen and others by *mura* of the family, Buda and his relations among them. He was one of the first to roll in and sat down, bulkily aggressive, alongside Rika. The ample Government rations were taking effect on his figure and he bulged over his red cane belt.

"Pity he's not a pig!" said Tajo. He prodded him and giggled. "There's enough lard for a year."

Buda glared, but this was only one of his idiosyncrasies, an accepted item in his serio-comic relations with the world, and it meant nothing and nobody minded. With him was his small stepson, a tousled, poker-faced imp. The brat, Tajo told me, had spilt pork fat in the fire a year or two before and not only burned down the house but a sizable part of Haja, and Buda had nearly been lynched by the infuriated villagers. Tajo himself had lost everything and was making himself a new set of priest's robes—he was a practising priest. He brought out the small loom on which he was making the tapestry insets and showed me how it was done.

Visitors came and went and we sat and gossiped in the warmth until nearly ten o'clock. Then one by one the strangers drifted away, Rika stretched himself out by the hearth with his cloak, I crawled into my flea-bag, and Tajo, his wife and the child lay down under a common covering and the family dog curled up beside them. The flames danced on the hearth, fed by strips of resinous Apa Tani pine, but I went to sleep before the darkness had crept in from the corners of the room, and roused at dawn to find Morpin making up the fire.

Rika would not let me go to breakfast till the mist lifted, so we sat on in the house, sipping millet-beer and nibbling the crude form of potash known as "Apa Tani salt," until half-past ten. Then he and I went off through the chilly streets

and as soon as I had eaten we set out on the main path to Duta.

Tajo joined us on the way and led us to Karu's house. He was dressed in his best white cloak with the gold borders and trotted jauntily along, tossing jokes at me over his shoulder. When we came to the house Tajo ran up the ladder and we waited outside among a crowd of not-too-polite Koj clansmen. The wait grew uncomfortably long. We turned our backs on the Koj men and began to talk about the *bobo* and the feast of Mloko, cutting ourselves off as far as possible from the sneers and gibes. Then at last the front door opened, Tajo called to us to come up, and we passed into Karu's house.

There were several people in there but the fire was low and it was difficult to see anything. We sat down and there was a long silence. Karu was chewing angrily on the stem of his long metal tobacco-pipe; I said something to him and the harmless remark fell into the hush like a stone down a well. Tajo jumped up, said that he had work to do and disappeared through the door, and Rika and I went on sitting in the hostile and prickly silence. At last, to our relief, there was a sound of gongs in the distance and Karu got up and went out. Rika and I followed.

The mist had all cleared and the sun was out. The balconies all down the street were packed, chiefly with women. The clanging of gongs was coming down the narrow street on our right, and now we could hear the sound of chanting. The crowd in the street gave way, scrambling up onto the balconies and the *lapang*, and round the corner came a priest in full robes, waving his ritual feather fan and singing an incantation. Behind him came a long and sinuous line of small boys in their best white cloaks, most of them carrying large brass plates on which they beat. Behind them came a long file of youths, also in white cloaks with gold borders; they carried unsheathed swords, which they shook so that they flashed in the

sun, and they shouted rhythmically as they walked. The priest climbed up on the *lapang*, the small boys got out of the way, and the youths faced round to the *lapang* and began to dance. It was not much of a dance. They bent their knees, shook their swords, shouted "Ho!" and shuffled sideways. By the time they were halfway round the *lapang* men had arrived with refreshments and the dance stopped.

Koj Karu went down to serve beer to the visitors below and Rika whispered to me that although he and Tajo had arranged the day before that we should all come to Karu's house, Karu had refused to admit me when we arrived; Tajo had reprimanded him in public and there had been a row between the two interpreters. I whispered back that, welcome or not, I was not going until I had my pictures. Rika smiled. Then there was a commotion down the street. Women were scuttering indoors from one balcony after another, squealing like unoiled brakes. A man armed with a long bamboo phallus was darting from house to house in pursuit of them. As the man came up to the *lapang* the interval for refreshments ended; the priest came down to the ground, the chanting recommenced, the swords winked in the sun; the rich colours of the cloaks patterned the drab street and vanished at last round a corner, the phallus-bearer coming last, his progress through the village marked by receding female shrieks. We scrambled down from the balcony and returned through the deserted alleys to Pape.

The next day Tim arrived, just in time to see the tail end of Morrum. On the third day we were all back again at Kore, Tim arriving through the front door from Yatchuli, where he had been to supervise the airdrop, and I by the back door from the woods and the Apa Tani Valley. We had hardly stretched our tired feet to the fire and sat down to a cup of tea when the front door was flung open and into the Great Hall burst our beloved Chigin Nime, triumphantly garrulous.

Behind him slouched Bueri Hasse, staring round at the Great Hall and impressed in spite of himself. Chigin Nime embraced us both twice; we sat him down by the fire and supplied him with millet-beer and he launched into an account of his adventures.

He had set out from Beuri with a kinsman of Beuri Hasse's for guide and a boy to carry the baggage. They crossed the range lying west of the Palin and dropped down into the Panyi Valley, which was larger than the Palin Valley and, like it, thickly populated and full of cultivation. They had travelled down the valley on the second day, crossed the Panyi by a cane suspension-bridge—the Panyi was a big river, as big as the Panior, or some fifty yards across—and late on the third day reached Paba Tayi. He reckoned the journey at five marches for porters.

When Nime and his party approached the village it was after dark and the Paba Tayi men armed and rushed out at them, thinking they were raiders, and were by no means pacified on finding an elderly visitor from an entirely unknown tribe. Nime repeated his Tasser technique of sitting down in the road and throwing his weapons away, which so astounded the Paba Tayi people that they lowered their spears and parleyed and eventually took the three to the village. But arrived in a house and himself and his intentions explained, he still found their attitude unsatisfactory, so he took out a knife which Siraj had given him at a somewhat lively farewell party at Beuri. It had fancy scrolls down its edge and Nime told Paba Tayi that if anything happened to him his Sahib had sworn to kill as many men in revenge as there were scrolls on the knife. His hosts counted the scrolls and found sixty-three of them, after which they were markedly more cordial. The next day they showed him round the village and pointed out Lebla, a day's march further on; both Lebla and Paba Tayi stood in the angle between the Khru and the Panyi, and near

Lebla there was a long suspension-bridge across the Khru. Again the big flat plain of which we had heard so much suffered a shrinking; the Paba Tayi people knew Tayang and said that it stood only on a small patch of level. It was certainly miles from the snows; no Tibetans ever came there or to any other place of which they knew, and the population was wholly Daflas for days round. They and Chigin Nime then parted with expressions of mutual esteem; he presented the leading villagers with suitable gifts from his stores, and they presented him in return with strips of smoked pork and various large white beads which were tokens of the treaties they proposed to make with us when eventually we arrived. And then Nime had set off home.

It was clear from his report that although Tibetan tradegoods drifted far down, the areas of Tibetan settlement on the Khru, if there were any, were still a long way from us and must be close to the foot of the snows. It was equally clear that Chigin Nime's enterprise had put Beuri Hasse's nose out of joint, for he demanded enormous presents for his help and sulked when he was given less; we pointed out that if he had helped us to go north the rewards would have been greater, and hoped that our evident numbers and the size of Kore would make him think us worth cultivating. But Tibetans or no Tibetans, Nime had opened the way for us and the Upper Khru was worth a visit. We drank to our second expedition in rum toddy.

"Here's to next year," said Tim, "—perhaps."

9

Gam Tatam

IT WAS one thing to open Kore as a sanctuary for negotiation and another to achieve settlements. True, there were notable successes. Some of the saner chieftains ended their feuds gratifyingly before Kop Temi's house and came to explain the terms to Tim afterwards: so many mithan for a murdered wife as a whole and then, to itemize her, a Tibetan bell for her head, a silken cloth for her hands, strings of beads for her bowels, and so on through the rest of her anatomy. But not the lesser fry. To them in their thousands the Government—the unfathomable, unaccountable Government with its dreaded troops—was a dangerous but stupid beast to be tricked into taking their part, right or wrong. They swarmed after Tim and brought with them all the woes we had left behind at the litigation barrier in Dadum. They burst into camp at all hours of the night, waving bloodstained garments and howling for reparation. They flooded into Kore, gate-crashing the Great Hall and screaming complaints at him in the middle of breakfast. They sat in clumps wherever it was most inconvenient, orating over lines of tally-sticks, rehearsing nightmare crimes, tracing hideous webs of murder, kidnapping and theft. When he and the interpreters tried to bring the opposing parties together both threw up a smoke-screen of lies, evasions and wilful misunderstandings to prevent it,

for so long as they still hoped for some wrongfully gained advantage, peace was the last thing they wanted. While they feared the Government, they despised it. Their attitude was ambivalent; they invoked it against their foes, but they themselves treated it with contempt. Like Toko Höli, they backed their own cleverness. They squawked and hopped and quarrelled under its nose like sparrows in a lion's den, never dreaming that the paws could move or that anything could provoke reaction. They would have driven a less even-tempered man than Tim to frenzy, but they were lucky, as Chigin Nime pointed out, in having a Sahib who tore his own hair instead of theirs.

The case of Gam Tatam was one of the first handled. In its way it was typical and, like everything else in the Subansiri Area, it was a mixture of farce, tragedy, high ideals and sublime chicanery. It began on the day we spent at Duta Pape on our first visit to the Apa Tani Valley. Between two and three in the afternoon, when the chill was at its least raw, we saw the crowd which filled the camp coalescing at a point a few yards from Kop Temi's hut. Within the concentration of people was a clear space; down the middle of this a long bamboo lay on the ground, and on one side of it sat a fattish, oily Dafla from Talo and a group of his supporters and on the other a number of Apa Tanis. Kop Temi, impassively judicial, stood at the head of the bamboo in khaki shorts and sheepskin waistcoat; his arms were folded, his lips were pursed and he glanced sharply from one party to the other; he looked a little like a schoolmistress about to take an unruly class. A *mel*—the Assamese term for a meeting for negotiation—was about to begin.

Both parties produced bundles of bamboo tally-sticks. The Daflas pulled them out of the cane haversacks on their backs and the Apa Tanis from the capacious leather pouches they carried under their cloaks. An Apa Tani began to speak and

went through the case, laying a tally against the central bamboo for every item cited. Every theft or incident had one, and so had each *dao*, cloth, mithan, Tibetan bell or string of beads claimed as damages. The Apa Tani case stated, the Daflas began; their spokesman laid down his tallies and made counterclaims, the Apa Tanis replied, and the Daflas answered them again. It was all astonishingly orderly. The speakers were listened to with complete attention and there was hardly a word from the surrounding crowd.

It appeared that Danyi Simla of Haja, a rather bumptious little Apa Tani, was a rich man and owned a number of mithan. Since the Apa Tani Valley had no room for such herds they were farmed out, as the practice was, with the Daflas of the Pein Valley, the herder taking a percentage of the calves for his trouble. A beast entrusted to Gam Tatam, the fattish Dafla, unfortunately disappeared and had probably been stolen. Gam Tatam offered Danyi Simla what the latter thought inadequate compensation, so Danyi Simla kidnapped Gam Tatam's wife, took the unhappy woman back to Haja, fettered her with a heavy log and held her there as a hostage against payment by Gam Tatam. After some months without a wife, Gam Tatam had been driven by the inconvenience to open negotiations and had appealed to Kop Temi and the Government to see that he had fair play. And so here we all were on an icy winter day, seeing it.

They came to an arrangement about four o'clock. Gam Tatam was to pay one cow mithan as a ransom for his wife, and Toko Höli would stand guarantor for him. The Apa Tanis were to release the woman at once and Kago Bida, large, beaming and doing his very best to help, would be guarantor for them. The transaction was duly recorded in Temi's notebook, his pencil tracing carefully the elaborate, squiggly Assamese characters; a messenger ran off along the

field-banks to fetch the woman, and everyone sat down to wait.

When half an hour had passed and she had not arrived the Daflas began to comment, and a second messenger was despatched. He came back panting a few minutes later to explain that her jailer had taken the log off her leg already but that the rice was not yet cooked for the customary feast which they proposed to give her to show that there was no ill-feeling, and that there would be further delay. So we all went on sitting in the gathering winter chill, the smutty and tousled crowd, the headmen in their red blankets, Kop Temi with his notebook and I with my camera, till dusk had fallen and the light was gone; then in the short, harsh twilight, just as night shut down, a small file came hurrying out from Haja. First came the messenger, swaddled in his cloak. Then came a frightened Dafla woman who limped a little, a thin, wispy creature, caked with the grime of long confinement in a smoky house. Lastly came her jailer, a solid, well-fed, middle-class Apa Tani, who explained loudly to everybody that he had not wished to stint the dinner. The Daflas, to whom Apa Tani meanness was proverbial, received this information with incredulity, to put it politely. Then Tim, Temi and I were all called on to see the ransomed woman and witness the terms of the bargain, just as has been the custom with all races since time was. The crowd, bearing the principals on its rim, closed in like a tide on the verandah where Tim was sitting writing. The woman went where she was pushed; she seemed dazed and afraid, as though she had for so long done only what she was told that she had lost all volition. There was a jabber of voices. Everyone pointed and explained. There was more writing down, which was watched in the silence which such a mystery deserved. Then the Dafla contingent bunched together round Gam Tatam and his wife and moved off in the firelit warmth of Kop Temi's hut, and the Apa Tanis swept

their cloaks about them and vanished into the darkness like a flight of birds.

We had almost forgotten the case when, soon after we were back at Kore after Morrum, Kago Bida and Toko Höli arrived in the Great Hall together. Toko Höli, not at all sure of his position since the episode at Dadum, sat down by the fire and said little, but Bida looked round for one of our comfortable cane stools, settled himself on it alongside Tim and began to explain that they were in difficulties over Gam Tatam. The stipulated two months since the Duta Pape *mel* had passed and he had paid over no cow mithan. Danyi Simla had complained to the guarantors, who had borrowed two Government interpreters to back them up and gone to see Gam Tatam. But, to their rage, he had repudiated the agreement. They had offered to pay the mithan themselves and accept a beast from him later and he had refused in a passionate fury, and when they pressed the matter, he had turned truculent and drawn his *dao* on them.

"And what," said Bida, an enormous and enchanting grin spreading over his face as he unloaded his troubles on his friend the Sahib, "are *you* going to do about it?"

Since this was a test case and Government prestige was involved, it was quite clear that something would have to be done, though it was not yet certain what. Gam Tatam was sent for and the next day arrived from Talo escorted by a band of righteously indignant tribal worthies, Kago Bida and Toko Höli prominent among them. They all gathered round the hearth of the Great Hall. Tim and I were already sitting on camp chairs at the inner corner. The interpreters ranged themselves on either side of us, pulling up logs to sit on and toasting their toes at the blaze, and on the far side and facing us sat the Talo Daflas. In the middle of them, plump, glib and noisy, was Gam Tatam. Big logs a foot or so thick burned on the hearth and the smoke went up into the darkness of the

high roof; the thin, wintry sun slanted in through the windows and made pale patches on the twilled bamboo matting on the floor.

There was silence while Tim began. The Duta Pape *mel*, he said, had been convened by the Government at Gam Tatam's request; the agreement reached there had been freely entered into. The Apa Tanis had honoured it and now it must without fail be honoured by the opposite party.

Gam Tatam shifted as he sat cross-legged and hitched his *dao* forward. He would not honour it, he said. The Apa Tanis were a cheating lot. They had done him wrong in the first place and now that he had his wife back he would pay them nothing.

Tim returned to the attack, emphasizing the important point. The *mel* was an official one, held under Government auspices. The judgment had been recorded and would be enforced. Gam Tatam evaded the point and began to argue; the Apa Tanis, he repeated, were a lot of rogues, and he was under no obligation to pay them anything because they had cheated him originally. He was confident and pleased with himself. His argument was one to appeal to Dafla sentiment. Quite plainly he felt that now that he had his wife back and was at home in the middle of Talo no one could force him to do what he did not want. The interpreters and bystanders joined issue with him, the Apa Tanis in particular growing hot; as the clamour mounted Gam Tatam suddenly pulled out his *dao* and waved it, shouting that he would kill anyone who forced him to pay. There was an abrupt and uncomfortable silence and the crowd fell back.

"Enough," said Tim into the lull. "You're not to play the fool with us. We called the *mel* for you and settled the case. Now you must abide by the judgment, which is a Government judgment, and if you don't we shall deal with you. Will you pay that mithan?"

"No," said Gam Tatam curtly. He stared at Tim for a minute and then contemptuously dismissed him from his mind. Tim was neither ranting nor shouting, therefore he was not moved; he had no weapon, therefore he did not count. Gam Tatam put up his *dao* and began arguing again with the others round the fire. He ignored Tim so completely that he missed a significant action which the rest did not, for Tim had scribbled a note to the Naik of the Assam Rifles and one of our Apa Tanis had slipped out with it by the back door. When the small stir in the crowd made Gam Tatam look round I was knitting, as usual, and Tim was leaning back in his chair and pulling on his pipe.

The Assam Rifles were a long time coming. The chief fear was that Gam Tatam would get up and go, but he did not; the fire was warm, he had an audience; he sat there, comfortably at ease among his crushed opponents, talking condescendingly down to them and now and then hitching forward his immense, razor-sharp, swordlike *dao*. The extraordinary thing was that everyone else in the room knew what was going to happen and there was a strained quiet, a tingling hush, but still he noticed nothing. As the minutes ticked off and it seemed the Assam Rifles must come, I got up and moved my chair and the table back out of range, as though out of the smoke. The typewriter was on the table and I didn't want it broken in the fight. It was a good machine and typewriters were hard to come by—I bought it from a Eurasian girl who probably got it from a G.I. friend, and it lasted until it was stolen between London and Kenya two years later. As I shifted the chair the interpreters began slipping their cloaks unobtrusively and Tim himself got up and drifted round behind Gam Tatam, where he leaned on the wall and knocked out his pipe.

The Naik and two sepoys came hurrying through the back door with a scrabbling of nailed boots and Tim dropped a

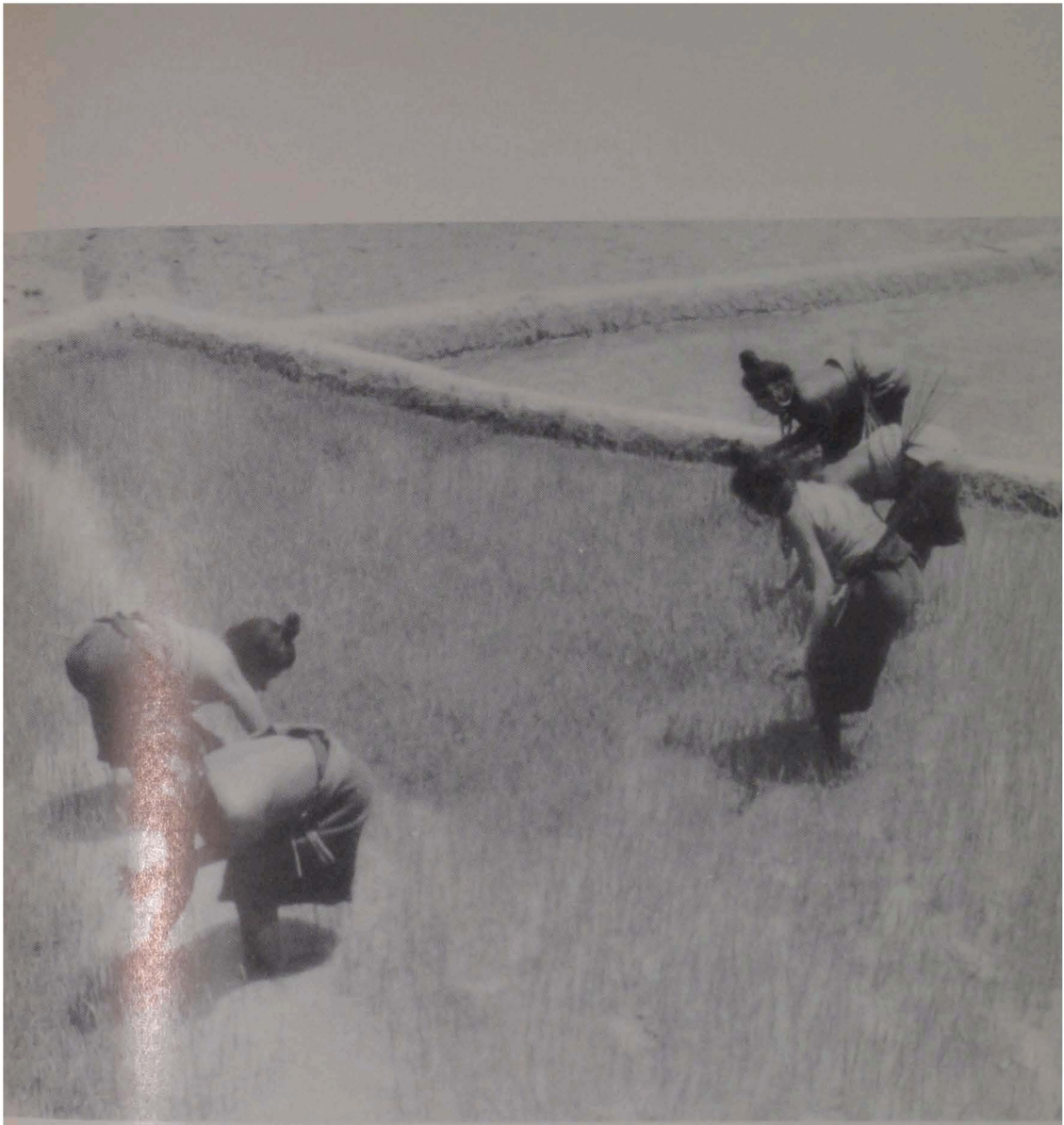
hand on Gam Tatam's shoulder. The interpreters half-rose, their eyes on Gam Tatam's *dao*. But it was a glorious anti-climax. His hand never moved to the hilt; the weapon which could have swept off heads and hands like daisy buds was pulled off ignominiously in its sheath and taken over by a Gurkha sepoy, and Gam Tatam rocked a little uncomfortably and complained that we had taken him too seriously. As the handcuffs closed on his wrists he whispered urgently to the nearest Apa Tani; he begged the man to go down to Talo and tell his wife to send a mithan—any good mithan—to Kore at once. Then the sepoys took Gam Tatam out to be the first inmate of the Kore lock-up.

On the third day a breathless party of Talo Daflas delivered a cow mithan to Kop Temi. Temi reported to Tim, Tim signed an order of release and Gam Tatam was freed. He went off down the path to Talo as fast as he could run, a scurrying, scudding man with his *dao* rattling behind him. He was gone.

At five o'clock that evening Tim, Kop Temi and Kago Bida came together into the Great Hall. Temi had a grim look; Kago Bida's dismay was patent. Tim sat down in his chair, pulled off his woollen cap and threw it on the table as though he needed to break something. Then he began to laugh.

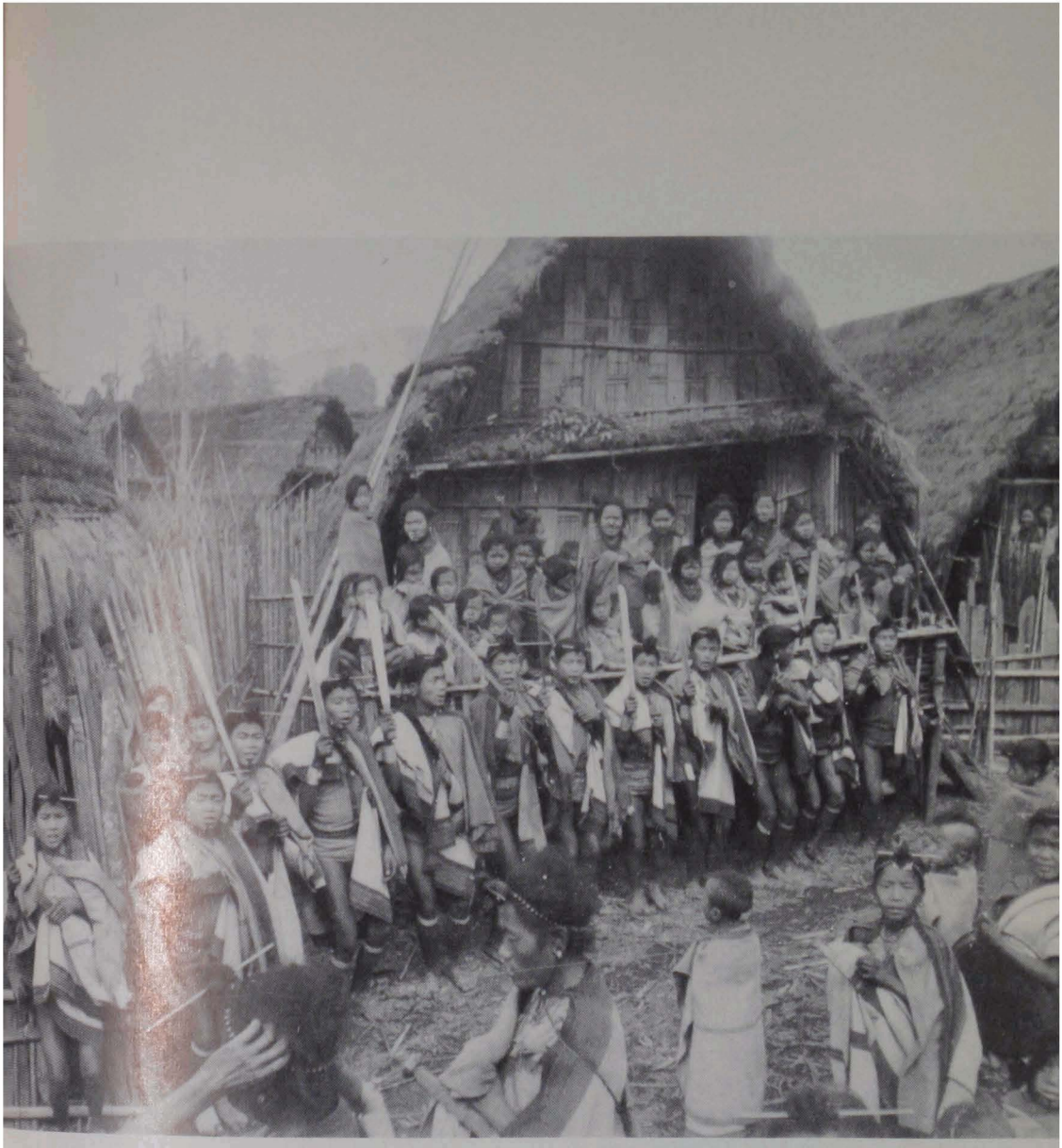
"What's the matter?" I said.

"God bless all Daflas!" said Tim. "That ransom-mithan was stolen."



Apa Tani women transplanting rice.

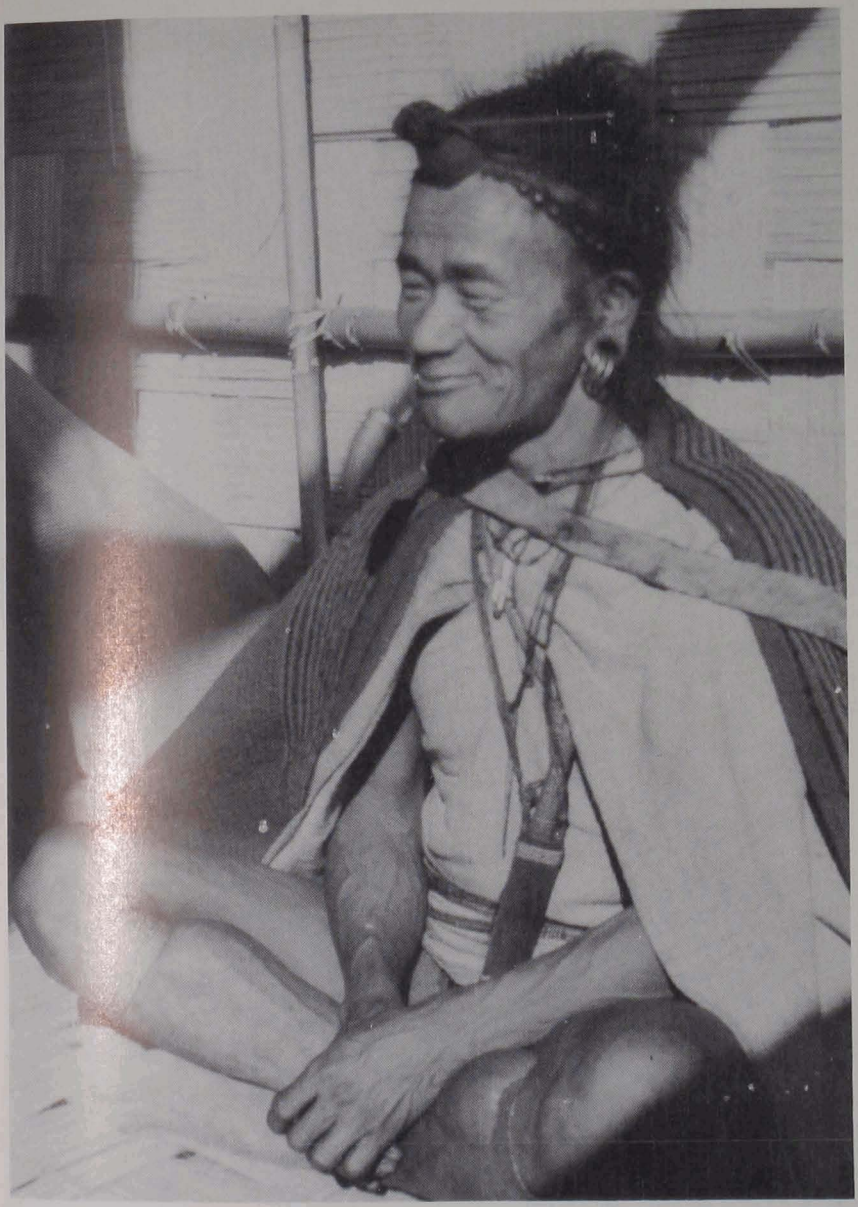
View in the Miri Country.



Morrum procession: youths from Bela dancing in Duta.

The hills of the Subansiri Area.

Dusu Rüdo and Haj Buda doing the laundry at Koro.



Chigin Nime.

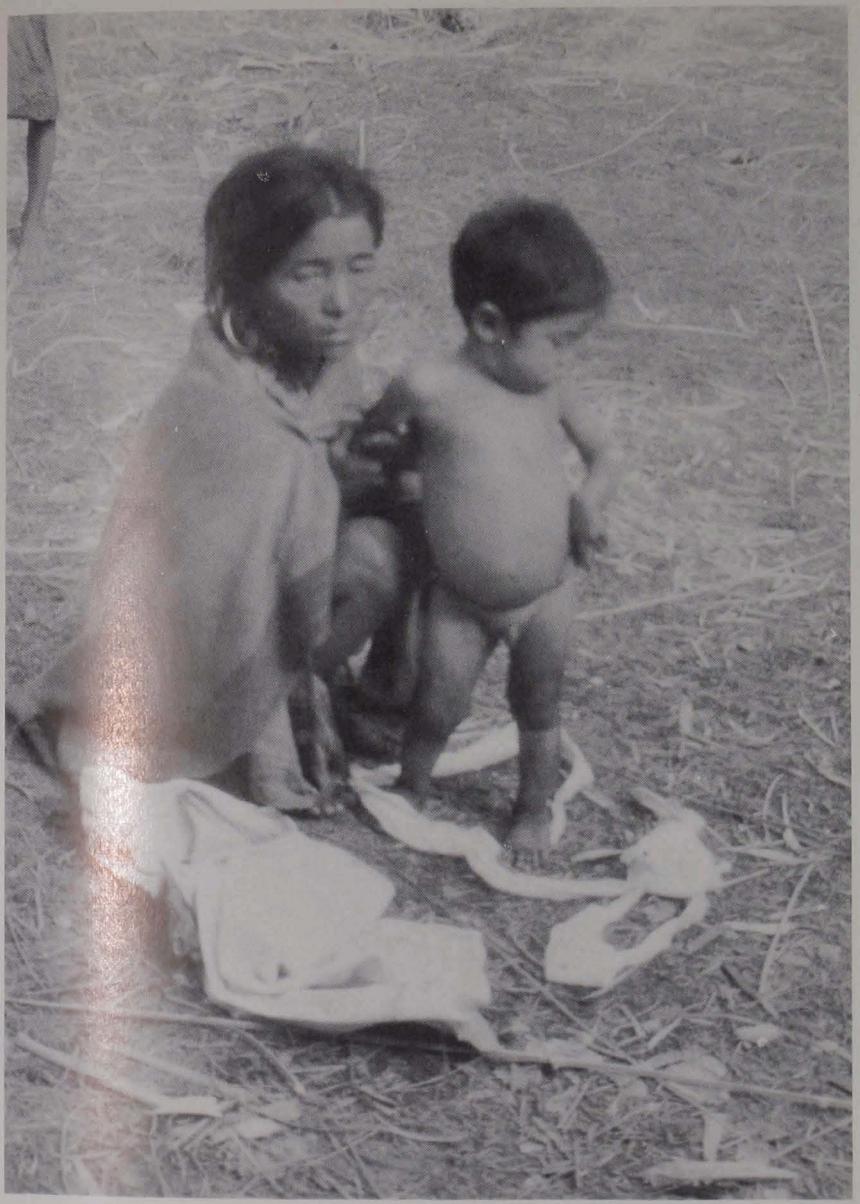
Long-house, 300 feet long and with 16 hearths, in Pegabari village.

Apa Tani field worker, showing red cane tail.

Kago Tajo.

In the Apa Tani Valley.

The Gam Tatam *mel*: Gam Tatam on the left.



Likha Teyi, survivor of the massacre at Bagi,
with his grandmother.

Koj Karu.

Apa Tani women.

The Apa Tani Valley.

View over Haja village.

Apa Tani rice terraces.

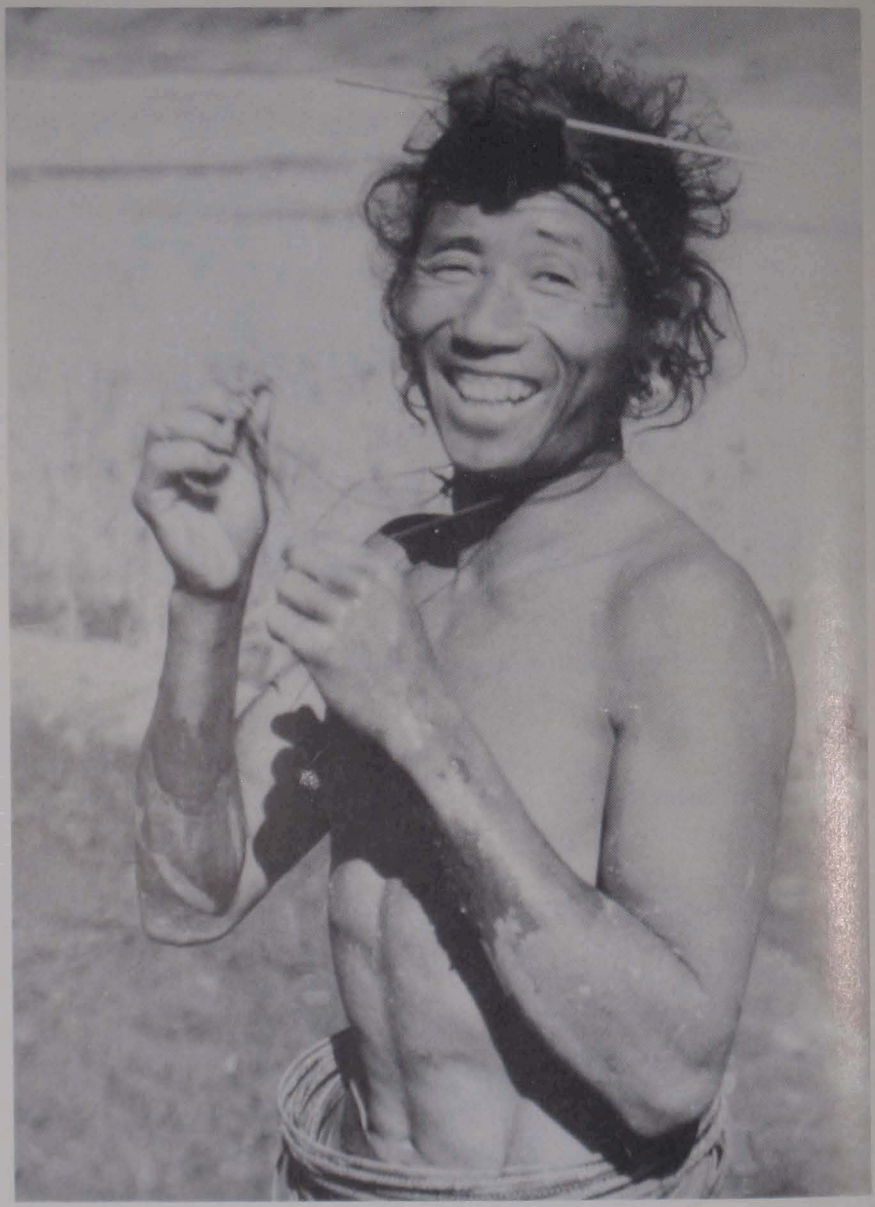
Apa Tani woman preparing rice nursery for sowing.

Crowd of tribesmen watching airdrop.

L. to R.: Kago Bida, Chigin Nime, Tim,
watching air supply drop.

Porters crossing Kiyi River.

Outskirts of Hari village, Apa Tani valley.



Dusu Rüdo.

10

Kore

MAY came, the spring was over and early summer was on us. Gone were the greys and duns and the sombre lights; there were blue skies and sun, and the slopes of Kore greened over with a film of young bracken. The terraced vegetable gardens we had carved from the hill were striped with rows of head-high peas. Before the house experimental grass-plots lay neatly fenced, a network of finger-like shoots spreading over the last bare patches. The fruit trees we had brought three hundred miles from Shillong stood in an embryo orchard round and behind the house, and the first buds were showing on their thin, dark stems. The alders in the gullies were in leaf, brambles and madder sprawled back across the cleared paths and crozier-heads of fern thrust up everywhere under the floors; the air was warm, sunlight splashed the matting of the Great Hall, and the Apa Tanis worked with their red-brown bodies bare except for a brief rag and their curving belts of red cane.

We had come far in the last six months. Kore was established, the porter-track was through, staging-camps had been built along it and another half-year's rations had been dropped from the air and were safely in the Yatchuli store. Raiding had been stopped along the track and within patrol-range of the post, and there was a *mel* daily in the Dafla interpreters'

quarters. The line of communication was still precarious and porters were still short, but at least a part of our dream had taken shape, and for the first time since we had left North Lakhimpur we could pause for a moment to breathe. Kore, our own creation, was a living, coherent entity, a valid community, a growing and expanding cell which acted and interacted with the body of the Subansiri Area.

Physically it was the same Kore. The fan of scattered settlement swept down the hill towards Talo, looking as though each knoll and rise had erupted simultaneously into a clump of thatched houses. Psychologically it was very different. The prospect of permanent occupation had altered the political climate to a very definite degree, and we had become an accepted feature and a force with which to reckon. Tribesmen flowed in and out of our timber-and-bamboo capital; from the south and west came Daflas to consult Kop Temi; from the north-east came wondering Miris, with blue beads and bear's hair frontlets, and from the east came Apa Tanis, visitors, traders and workers. We planned to have a weekly market and Kop Temi revived his long-held scheme to settle in the hills, but this was quashed when his head wife came to see Kore and preferred North Lakhimpur.

One day Dr. Bhattacharjee arrived back from a visit of inspection down the track and came along at once to see Tim. I sent along to the office to tell Tim that he was there, and when Tim came up to the house, as he did promptly, we settled down by the Great Hall fire to hear what the doctor had to say. It was clear that he was worried. He sat for some minutes without speaking, and Tim had time to fill and light a pipe before the little man could bring himself to begin his story.

"About two years ago," said the doctor at last, "I was called to a Dafla woman who had terrible head injuries. Her husband had attacked her with a *dao* when he was drunk, and her

head was cut open. She ought to have died, but, being young and strong, she survived and went back to her husband and we heard no more. Now two nights ago she appeared suddenly in my camp at Pite." The little doctor, the soul of innocence and propriety, blushed at the memory of that embarrassing moment. "She had heard that I was coming to Kore and had travelled for three days to put herself under my protection. I told her at once that she should return to her husband, but she answered that she could not do so because life with him was unbearable and that if I and the Government would not help her, then she would kill herself." He spread helpless hands. "What could I do? She would have done it, without doubt. But as she has left her husband without his consent I fear there may be serious trouble."

"Where have you put her?" said Tim.

"With the wife of Bat Heli."

Inevitably we sent for Kop Temi. When he came, majestic in his red waistcoat, he took this technical abduction of a Dafla wife with reassuring calm. Since the outraged husband had not followed and murdered the doctor, he was unlikely, Temi thought, to try violence now. To regularize the position, he explained, we must find the girl Yalu a home in the Government orbit, arrange matters with her husband and pay him compensation. Tim immediately pointed out that Kop Temi himself was the ideal protector for her, being well able to support her, above reproach and too powerful to be imperilled by a feud, and after surprised consideration Kop Temi agreed. His already extensive establishment could easily absorb one more. We sent a messenger to fetch her so that we could put the proposal to her.

She came escorted by the little harelipped Putu, Bat Heli's travelling wife. Yalu was a tall, Junoesque girl, full-breasted and shapely; her black hair was drawn back in two glossy wings on either side of her head; in her handwoven silk dra-

peries she was a living Caryatid. The doctor had warned us that she was nearly out of her mind, but neither Tim nor I was much prepared for the tragedy of her look. I had never seen such aching sadness in a human face. It was as though a light had gone out; agony without respite had killed the will to live and left only an empty shell. I went over and sat by her. She looked at me with her wide, dark eyes—it was a curious, unseeing look, as though she now saw human beings only as shadows in a dream—and then, tentatively, put her hand in mine. At the answering pressure she left it there, like a child.

She heard of the suggested arrangement without emotion. Yes, she would be glad to go to Temi. He was a good man and would be kind.

She held my hand all the way to the door as though afraid to lose even that small support. Putu drew her away and the two women disappeared together towards the Dafla interpreters' lines.

A week or two later we heard that the arrangements had gone through smoothly and that she was Temi's wife. She moved from Bat Heli's house and the chaperonage of Putu to Temi's own quarters, and from time to time thereafter she appeared in the Great Hall, a gentle, slow-moving ghost. She rarely smiled and she never spoke and she was happiest when least noticed, liking to watch the household bustling about her as though she were invisible. Then Temi went down on leave to his home in the plains and she accompanied him and stayed there. She said no good-bye, no farewell; she was simply no longer there. She vanished like a disembodied spirit, and her tragedy and her dazed look were gone. Kore went on without her.

Perhaps the greatest development which time had produced was in our relations with the Apa Tanis. On our first visit to the valley we had found them wholly detestable. They

were ill-mannered, thievish, mean, dirty, inhospitable and xenophobic. Our relations with the Apa Tani interpreters, too, had been uncertain, for they did not believe we meant to stay and would not commit themselves, and we sensed their withdrawal and would not trust them. But now there was a marked change. We had travelled with them, joked with them, been in danger together, been wet and hungry and cold, had sat on dank logs with them in Dafla fields and waited for the porters, had ploughed through knee-deep mud and crossed perilous bridges and ferries. We had been with them to the Palin, to the Miris of the Kamla River, to the upper reaches of the Panior. Since the New Year alone we had marched nearly a thousand miles with them, for we were walking a steady average of two hundred miles a month. On these cheek-by-jowl treks there was no room for sham. You came to know people as they were and you liked them or you did not. We came to like our Apa Tani interpreters and they to trust us, and they brought in friends and dependents until we had a permanent labour-force forty strong based on Kore, and an Apa Tani village, a suburb of the valley, sprouted behind the Great Hall. These workers built and kept up the elaborately terraced and revetted gardens which supplied the outpost. They carried our loads on trek, they brought up stores from the dump at Yatchuli, they cleared the paths at Kore, they constructed roads and bridges and they repaired houses. Also, which was much more important, they and their friends, families and neighbours formed a reciprocal network, a system of radiating channels of communication, from ourselves in the Great Hall to the heart of the Apa Tani Valley, to Bela, to Haja, to Hong, to women and children, to rich men, to clan-heads, to slaves, to people we had never seen and who had never seen us—in short, to the Apa Tani tribe itself.

Of the interpreters, Koj Karu had at last resigned, his credit irretrievably damaged by the pig episode at Kirom. He had

been replaced by a young Hari man, Hage Tara, a lively, cheerful, good-looking eighteen-year-old who picked up Assamese quickly and did well. Kago Tajo, the maiden-auntly Nada Rika and the brisk, robin-like Tenyo Bida were still with us. On the domestic side, our household had been augmented, and besides Buda and Rüdo, the two original Apa Tani servants, we now had Buda's younger brother Koda, a massive, black-browed man, and a small, plump, impertinent fourteen-year-old called Kago Taki, a naked imp of the pit whose job was to wash the dishes and carry Tim's butterfly-net.

As we came to know them all better their personalities asserted themselves, and they became real and living people, sharply defined. There was not much to learn about the interpreters, who were generally, as befitted their office, the soul of propriety and rectitude, but some of the revelations about the *mura* were startling. For example, Nada Rika remarked casually to me one day, "It will be a bad day for Kago Taki if you and the Sahib ever leave."

"Good heavens, Rika, why?"

"Because of the husband of Milo Yama."

"Well, what about the husband of Milo Yama?"

"He is waiting to kidnap Taki for adultery."

It turned out to be quite true. Kago Taki had been deeply in love with Milo Yama (who must have been about fifteen at the time) the year before and had seen far too much of her since her marriage. Her husband, suspecting the worst—probably with justice—but not daring to act while Taki was in our employ, was fashioning stocks and grimly waiting his chance. The story was well known in the valley, and when Taki appeared with us there the girls working in the fields used to hold up their rainshields before their skirts and flap them at the party—an invitation to dalliance—and sing a little song in pidgin Assamese:

"Kago Taki doribi, doribi!
Milo Yama kandibi, kandibi!" [1]

And Tim and Temi would pretend not to notice; the rest of the party would giggle, and Taki would scuttle along in front like a blushing rabbit.

Dusu Rüdo, too, though not one's idea of a great lover, revealed unexpected traits. Whenever he came back from leave in the valley he brought some new gift from an adoring nymph, perhaps a shiny tobacco-pipe or a nice clean cloak, and when he began to spend most of his time in the Apa Tani colony at Kore instead of going home, his lady admirers sought him out there. After a successful interview it was his custom to climb a tree and sing songs in praise of himself for half an hour or more. The interpreters and I remonstrated with him and pointed out that he was getting the place a bad name, but it was all of no use until early one afternoon in April when I, Kago Tajo, Kago Bida, Nada Rika and a large party of Apa Tani notables on their way to see Tim were all coming over from Duta Pape together and arrived in a body on the brow overlooking Kore. The first thing we heard was one of Rüdo's triumphant paeans, delivered from the top of the highest tree on the spur behind the house. The temptation was overwhelming. There was a brief moment of silence and then the entire Apa Tani contingent, led by Kago Bida, burst into an Apa Tani war-shout. Rüdo's song broke off. He almost fell from the tree, flashed through Kore like a blue streak, and for all I know kept on running till ten o'clock that night, when he crept into the kitchen by the back door and begged sanctuary from Khuikhe. I doubt if his amours ended, but they were at least less publicly advertised after that.

Of all our Apa Tanis we probably know the Haj family

[1] "Capture, capture Kago Taki!
Weep, weep, Milo Yama!"

best. Besides Buda and Koda, their father Morte, a skinny, cheerful, utterly feckless old boy, was also employed at Kore and worked in the garden. Morte had the distinction of being a fallen *mite*. Though the patrician *mite* and the plebeian *mura* classes were distinct and never intermarried, the division was not quite unalterable, and it was possible for a poor *mite* to slip down into the servile grade. Heaven help the unfortunate man who, from poverty or other reasons, found himself embarked on that slippery slope; no fall down an elevator-shaft could be more final than the descent which ended it. Once in the servile grade there could be no return. He was lost forever to his clan and cut off from all his kinsmen, and he and his descendants were to the end of time the servants of others.

We never discovered exactly how or why this had happened to Morte, and there was something of a mystery about it, for Tajo, Rika and all the others who clearly knew evaded my questions and would not tell the truth. The official version was that Morte, who had been born a member of the *mite* clan of Haj in Haja village, had found himself bankrupt through youthful improvidence and had become the *mura* of Kago Bida's father in order to keep himself fed and clothed. But the Apa Tanis always insisted that a bankrupt's kinsmen would pay his debts without fail to save him from such a disgrace. Why had no one done this for Morte? Perhaps financial trouble was not the whole cause of his fall. In 1947 a Bela *mite* who ran away with another man's wife was recaptured and reduced to *mura* status without intervention by his kin, and it might be that something similar had happened to Morte. But whatever the cause, a *mura* Haj Morte became; he accepted a wife from his master, and so bound himself and his children by her still more closely. Later on, this wife having died, Morte married a second whose bride-price he paid himself, and at the time we knew him he had long been a

"separated" *mura*, a man owing certain duties to his master, but having a home and possessions of his own. His humiliating status did not worry him in the least. The absence of responsibility he found delightful, for it left him free to be as happily childish as he liked. Morte argued with Bida and Tajo when they gave him orders; his few hairs bristled, his faded eyes started and his skinny arms waved in simulated indignation, but I noticed that he always yielded when their tone grew sharp; Apa Tani *mura*, presumably for good reasons, were seldom rebels for long.

The *mite* class was strictly endogamous, marrying only within itself, and many of its members conformed to a characteristic tall, lean, physical type to which Morte himself belonged. Buda and Koda, however, were such hulking Calibans that it was highly probable that Morte's first wife had been a Dafla or of Dafla stock. There was a considerable Dafla strain among the *mura*, for the Daflas had been selling prisoners-of-war to the Apa Tanis for generations. Buda was moon-faced and fat; Koda was slightly leaner—at least, when he first came—and he had a kind of coarse good looks.

As children the two boys worked in the various Kago households which had claims on their services. They carried water from the village spring; they rose at dawn and went off through the freezing mist to the woodcutting grounds in the forests of the rim, returning with towering loads of firewood balanced in a minute back-basket; they washed, they fetched, they scrubbed, they dug and they obeyed. An ingrained habit of obedience and a servile mentality easier to recognize than to describe were the legacies which both retained from these early days. When they attained manhood it was open to them either to accept wives from their masters and so place themselves more tightly in their grip, or to find wives of their own and take the first steps to a little independence. This last they did, Buda marrying a scrawny but capable widow who looked

old enough to be his mother and Koda a stout and personable girl called Impu, and they set up house side by side near Morte's home in the small Kago colony round the house of Kago Tajo, right out on the edge of Haja village.

From now on their ways, which had so far run parallel, grew apart. Buda was pushful and able where his own affairs were concerned and he went to the plains to trade, where he bought cattle and Assamese silks and worn metal hoes and salt and carried them back to the hills to sell at a profit. After a few years of this he had collected quite a good sum, and when Kago Tajo's wife fell ill and he had to sell his best land to pay for curative sacrifices, Buda had cash in hand and bought the lot up cheaply. Since land was the only real wealth in the valley he was soon a well-to-do man, better off, it was said, than his master the high-born Tajo, and when he came to work for us his wages so increased his riches that he presently bought fields worth eight mithan, or £120 ($483). Tajo, whose status as one of Buda's overlords entitled him to act as go-between, rubbed his hands for days and gleefully calculated his commission. Some moneyed *mura* spent much on dress and even tried to pass themselves off on strangers as important *mite*, but Buda lived in modest comfort and wasted not a penny. His house was small, a congested, dirty, friendly pigsty of a place, full of children and step-children and cluttered with old gourds and baskets and grubby clothes from which the last ounce of use was being wrung.

Koda was less fortunate. He lacked Buda's gift for trading and also the drive, the rhinoceros hide and the resilience which had helped Buda loosen the Kagos' feudal hold. Being landless and poor, he depended too much on his masters ever to escape their grip. Buda's greater financial stability sometimes allowed him to resist—not always successfully—the demands they made, and his habit of protest had, so to speak, cleared a patch of freedom round him, a spiritual elbow-room; Koda

had no such advantage and was given to small and hopeless rebellions which generally ended in a merciless tongue-lashing from Tajo. Occasionally these upheavals took place in our kitchen and set the household in an uproar, and when all else failed I was forced to call in Tajo to deal with his unruly vassal. Sometimes Koda met the wrath poured on him with resignation, sometimes with a wooden face which covered a deep hurt, and sometimes he was like a beaten dog, utterly wretched until forgiven and taken back into the family circle again. I hated it more each time and felt desperately sorry for Koda, for a whipping could hardly have hurt more than Tajo's flaying phrases.

Koda's life then, was dual, a blend of sporadic revolt and the automatic obedience into which he had been drilled from childhood, but he had one psychological escape, one means of self-assertion. In the early stages of an Apa Tani dispute kidnapping one of the opposite party was a common gambit, and people with a case on hand used to hire Koda for the job. His powerful physique was admirably suited to the work and he soon grew expert at it. He would assess the victim at a glance as a two-, three- or four-man case. He would note his habits, enlist the necessary aides, stalk him and lay an ambush, and deliver him bound and protesting into his smiling enemies' hands, all in a short time and for a very moderate fee, so his services were often in demand. Two or three times while he was with us he disappeared unaccountably from the kitchen and reappeared some hours later with another kidnapping to his credit, and as we found this embarrassing politically we did our best to dissuade him, but we never managed to stop it. He enjoyed it far too much.

At the beginning of May there was enough business to take us eastwards again to the Apa Tani Valley. We climbed the

hill up the vast steps of the slope, a hundred feet to each bank, till Kore looked like a child's toy and the enormous hollow of the Panior Basin lay knobbed and wrinkled below, and then at last we turned into the forest and took the familiar track.

At Duta Pape it was suddenly an English June. The trees were in full leaf, the wind rustled the pines, the air was warm and sweet, the young rice in the acres of rice fields was brilliant with colour, and fat white clouds were sitting about on the mountains beyond. When Tim's other work was finished we wandered about the valley through the long, hot days, exploring the nooks and side creeks and searching for a better place for a Government camp than cramped and insanitary Pape, perched in a still-used graveyard and drawing its water from human-manured fields. We passed down brush-fenced lanes which might have been in Cornwall; we rested in bamboo-shaded alleys at whose mouths the flooded fields glared in the sun like white-hot metal. On the patches of moor beyond the cultivation Apa Tanis were burning fern and sedge to make the ash they used instead of salt. Their bare bodies darted in and out of the writhing grey smoke as they stoked the reeking heaps, and the scene, uncouth as it was, had suddenly an oddly familiar look. Perhaps it was the low, rough, undulating waste, a quasi-English landscape. I wondered if on prehistoric Dartmoor or Bodmin Moor the tribesmen eked out a scanty salt-supply with soda-ash, boiling it down as the Apa Tanis did to make hard, earthy, faintly saline cakes.

After one long morning spent about Hong we halted to eat a picnic lunch in a small pinewood. The Apa Tani guides who were with us cut pine branches for us to sit on; the needles were young and silky and the cut ends smelled sweetly resinous. Between the half-grown trees of the wood we could see green pastures and grazing cattle. Overhead was the shimmer of pines; round us as we lay the men sprawled in perspec-

tives of cane hats, red belts and tails, and bare, copper-brown buttocks, and away at the head of the valley, framed between distant wooded hills, the snow-peaks showed cool and unattainable.

11

Mass Duel

ABOUT the middle of May Tim went off to Shillong. Independence for India was near and change was in the air. The committee which was to decide the future of the hill tribes was touring Assam, and he had to appear before it; he had further business after that, and he did not expect to return before July. Rajuni, Kop Temi and Bat Heli went with him and, to conserve rations, as many of the clerks and down-country staff as could be spared. After some discussion we decided that I should stay in the hills with Dr. Bhattacharjee, Siraj and the Assam Rifles and not go to Shillong too; in the past all Government parties had had to withdraw during the rains and leave their supporters open to retaliation, and it was vitally important that we should not seem about to do so as well. If I and the household remained at Kore it would be clear that Tim's absence was only temporary.

In Assam the monsoon is an event. The steady south-west wind streams up from the Bay of Bengal and drops its waters on the province in a cataclysmic lump. Torrents pour down from the sky for days on end; railways breach, rivers flood, bridges disappear, towns and villages are cut off, and in the hills astronomical rainfalls cataract down day and night and make life miserable. Laisong in North Cachar, where I lived for seven years, gets well over 200 inches in the summer

months, the Naga Hills some 300 and the celebrated Cherrapunji over 450. Nobody had ever sat out the monsoon in the Subansiri Area and no one knew what fantastic tonnages of water might descend. We at Kore awaited the rains, therefore, with something of the feelings of a garrison expecting siege. The very day Tim left the weather turned wet and cold and clouds began massing on the outer ranges as forerunners of the monsoon; we went round strengthening roofs and reinforcing walls and waited for the heavy rain, but it did not come, and at the end of a couple of weeks we realized that Kore, the Apa Tani Valley and the Panior Basin lay in the lee of the high ranges to the south. Day after day we saw it streaming down Tasser Puttu and the Panior Gorge thirty miles away, but we had only hot, steamy weather and showers.

Early in June there were rumours of a *gambu* in the valley. A *gambu* is a mass duel, a peculiar Apa Tani institution, a mode of settling quarrels between different villages. The Apa Tanis, closely packed as they are in their small, highly cultivated enclave, cannot afford the long, bloody feuds of their Dafla neighbours; their disputes must be regulated or they would starve. All Apa Tani activity, hunting, weaving, housebuilding, travelling and the like, is closely geared to and controlled by the agricultural year, and disputes are similarly treated. For ten months, from the beginning of the rice harvest in August through the trading and travelling seasons in December and January, the bank-repairing in February, the rice-sowing in March, the rice-transplanting in April and the millet-transplanting in May, quarrels between Apa Tani and Apa Tani are left to the individual to settle by kidnapping, negotiation or by other means. By about May 21, however, heavy agricultural work is over till harvest except for periodic weedings, and instantly the whole valley bursts into fervent litigation. All outstanding disputes are brought out for settlement and from end to end the villages buzz with disputation.

Bamboo stakes appear in rice fields overnight in formal notice of a grievance against the owner; unsatisfied claimants cut swathes in their opponents' half-grown crops or break the banks of their fields; outraged defendants perform ceremonies to attest their innocence.

Lesser suits are settled between the parties, but major cases go on to the village councils, which are bodies composed of councillors, known as *buliang*,[1] of several grades. *Ajang buliang* are assistants and messengers, *yapa buliang* are executives, and *akha buliang* are old men responsible for final decisions. If the quarrel is between two men of the same village, then the *buliang* of that village settle it and that is the end of the matter. If it is with a man of some other village, then they negotiate with their opposite numbers, the *buliang* there, and reach a settlement if they can. If no settlement can be reached, then the case goes on higher still, to the tribal level, and bands of delegates hurry about the valley at all hours, enlisting supporters and advocates, offering defiance to the enemy and arguing interminably. At this stage a *mel* is usually held and a judgment arrived at in accordance with the general feeling of the tribe, but should one of the parties refuse to accept this, then resort is had to the ultimate sanction of a *gambu*. *Gambu* are of two kinds, opposed and unopposed. An unopposed *gambu* is an armed demonstration and may end in attacks on the recalcitrant's groves and house and in the humiliation of his person, but an opposed *gambu* is a mass duel which may well result in casualties. To avoid a destructive war the *buliang* are always careful not to demand a *gambu* unless they have an overwhelming majority of the tribe on their side.

I begged the interpreters to let me know if either kind of *gambu* was imminent, looked over the cameras and films, and

[1] The Apa Tani sound here represented by *ng* is pronounced as in French *sang*.

settled down to wait at Kore until something turned up. At five o'clock one evening I was working in the small, hot office at the Great Hall when in burst young Hage Tara, the new interpreter from Hari. His clothes were round his neck, he had run all the way from Duta, and in his hand was a sweat-damp note from the doctor to say that I ought to come over to Pape at once as there was to be a *gambu* in the morning. It was too late to go that night, so we left at six next day, and at nine arrived panting at Duta Pape, hurrying to it along the field-banks through a warm, steamy-white mist.

The doctor met us at the camp and gave me an outline of the affair while one of our Apa Tanis went off to Duta village to scout. It had all begun with a quarrel between a Bela man named Radhe Talan and a Koj clansman from Duta. It had followed the usual course until it reached the highest level, and then, although the Bela *buliang* had invoked an ancient treaty of friendship between Bela and Duta and claimed that the matter should be settled quietly between them, the Duta men had brought in the rest of the valley and proposed to coerce Bela by a full-scale *gambu*, and the latter was due to begin any moment now.

The doctor had hardly finished when the scout came back to report that the Duta war-parties had assembled and were ready, and that the declaration of war, a long bamboo, had been set up at the Koj assembly platform. We set off at once to see, but as we reached the edge of the island there was loud shouting in Duta village and people began to crowd onto the balconies of the houses. We stopped where we were on the low bank of the island, and out along the field-banks before us came the war-party.

They were an extraordinary sight. All wore cane helmets and had folded cloths or stout strips of tapestry round their throats as a protection against arrows; some wore hide corselets in the Dafla fashion and some made do with cloaks

wrapped round their middles like cummerbunds. All carried shields made of a hide stretched on an oblong frame, but they looked awkward things to handle and too light to stop much more than a spent bow. All had bows and long *daos*, but more amazing than anything, each carried an enormous bamboo lance fully thirty feet long. These cumbersome pikes wobbled with their own weight; their upper halves inclined gently backwards from the mere resistance of the air as they were borne on; and their bearers marched stiffly and self-importantly, each clinging with widely separated hands to the shaft of his spectacular weapon. At the rear of the file were unarmoured men shouldering what I at first thought were bamboo torches, but I later realized these were bundles of bamboo javelins.

While the doctor and I stood watching speechlessly, this monstrous file came towards us, tramping solemnly along the banks with its fantastic shark-rods waving over it, marched on to the solid ground of the island and formed up in front of the camp. It was speedily joined by a second party and then by Chigin Nime alone. After ten minutes' noisy argument both parties re-formed and moved off up the road towards Bela. Behind, a tail of small boys, stray dogs and ourselves followed the perspective of wavering pikes. At the far end of the gardens the path forked, and while the Duta army bore left and continued out over the fields towards another body with pikes, believed to be the Hari force, which was squatting and waiting for them on a low bluff, we turned to sunward and looked for a point of vantage. About fifty yards further on we found a young piebald mithan and several very agitated Bela elders, who had come out to make peace and hand over a fine; but the rest of the tribe had not put on its armour and walked all this way in the sun for nothing, and it refused to take any notice of them at all until the *gambu* had been performed as

arranged. We left the Bela *buliang* gesticulating alone and marched on ourselves towards the scene of action.

The battleground was a stretch of millet fields overlooking Bela's rice cultivation and Bela village itself. As we walked across it we saw the Duta company take station to the left of Hari, ground pikes, stand easy and look round for the rest of the *gambu* force, which had not yet appeared. Finding no good viewpoint, we turned along the back of the line of battle, which stood a little above us on a small rise, and were just passing behind the Hari men and exchanging remarks with them when somebody shouted that the fighting had begun. Instantly all the small boys began to run and on the skyline beyond us we saw a mass of figures sweep forward out of the line of battle and disappear down the slope beyond.

We hurried over the rise. In front of us was a cloud of dust in which men with levelled pikes were disentangling themselves from the bamboo fence of a small vegetable garden on the edge of the bank. Duta had just charged. But there was no enemy in sight. The rice fields were vacant and green, and Bela sheltered invisible behind its bamboo groves. The rush was purely a demonstration, a look-what-I-should-do-to-you-if-you-were-only-here gesture. As we watched, Duta's first platoon extricated itself from the fence, sloped pikes and trailed back again up the slope, and after an interval of scratching, spitting and general conversation, the second Duta contingent formed itself up and executed a similar manoeuvre. Twenty minutes later they were followed equally raggedly by the Hari men, who went hopping with levelled pikes down the same sort of gentle slope and brought up, like Duta, when they came into unwarlike contact with another small vegetable garden. At this moment, however, the Haja, Michi Bamin and Mudang Tage forces were seen advancing towards the battlefield, the war broke off and everyone stood about chatting and waiting for them to come up.

"Where are the Bela men?" said the doctor to the nearest warrior.

He looked a little blank and said, "In their houses."

"Why?" we said almost together, hoping for some recondite ceremonial reason.

He gave us an indignant stare.

"Because they are afraid. Everyone is making war on them."

The doctor and I looked at one another blankly and the Hari man walked off in a huff. It had not occurred to us that anyone, even the Apa Tanis themselves, could consider this comic-opera affair a deadly serious military demonstration, for compared to war as we unfortunately knew it—or even as the Daflas or the Nagas knew it, when it was quite bad enough—this was nursery charades. And then we both burst out laughing and were very glad that it was so.

Haja now arrived by the path at the back of the fields and stood to the left of Duta, and after an interval they were followed by Mudang Tage and Michi Bamin, who had taken the other fork of the path and had stopped on the way to argue with the Bela *buliang*. By now the line of battle was a good quarter-mile long. From where we stood on the rise we could see it stretching along the edge of the bluff in a succession of dramatic clumps of pikes and clusters of men; round it the young millet was richly green; behind it were dark and irregular hills, and its air of brilliantly coloured unreality made it look like a film re-creation of a mediaeval battle. The cinematic atmosphere was increased by the swarms of small boys and spectators on the flanks; while the numbers of Apa Tani nobility who had arrived in mufti to watch and who wandered about meeting and talking, like the County at a point-to-point, added a touch of the social occasion.

Now things began to happen. Firstly, a long-expected contingent from Hong was sighted, nearly a hundred strong, strung out along the rice fields near Mudang Tage, and sec-

ondly, the warriors on the spot started on the second half of their battle-plan. Our neighbours the Hari men raised their pikes to the vertical, scrambled down the bluff into Bela's rice and set out along the field-banks to a small stream which ran across our front about two-thirds of the way between us and Bela. As they went they flashed their drawn *daos*, shouted rhythmically and made a curious noise which was nothing more than a repeated rolled "r," a loud, vibrating, menacing *rrr-rrr-rrr*. When they reached the point nearest Bela they lowered their pikes and advanced their shields, and began to bounce along the path with a straddled step which, like the *rrr-rrr*, was an accepted expression of hostility and a formal mime of war. This lasted until the path curved back, and they ceased their demonstration, raised their pikes again and marched solemnly back to resume their station on the bluff. Duta followed Hari and then all the others in their turn, and for the next hour the fields before the unresponsive Bela were occupied by batches of little hopping and charging figures, distant, belligerent manikins in a sea of sun-vivid green.

In the meantime a tremendous file of Hong men had marched up, with their pikes bristling, by the same road as everyone else. As they reached the millet fields the Duta party completed its demonstration and formed up and started to leave. They were forcibly intercepted by Hong. After a furious argument Duta consented to wait for a while and halted a length or so to the rear while Hong took over their vacant place on the bluff. The doctor sent Kago Tajo, who had now joined us, to find out what it was all about, and he returned to explain that the Ponyo clan in Hong had a friendship with a section of Bela and that when the other clans of Hong had attempted to leave the village to join the *gambu*, the Ponyos had massed at their assembly platform and discouraged the would-be warriors with sticks and stones. There was then a pitched battle which ended only when the Ponyos were driven

into their houses, and here were the Tilings, Kagos, Hibus, Tenyos and Takhes, all bruised and thumped, howling for reprisals against the Ponyos and Bela, and complicating a simple situation by refusing the piebald mithan with which the others were ready to be content, and demanding that the united force join them in wrecking Bela's fields and groves.

Everybody—the warriors, Hong, the spectators and the strolling nobility—now formed a milling mob and argued the matter. It was more like a riot than a discussion; arms waved, heads bobbed, men screamed and yelled, the group reeled and surged, and individual warriors broke out of it and danced and screeched and brandished their weapons at Bela; and then suddenly the cluster broke up and the armed contingents reformed. The main body had had enough and was going home, and the Duta men were already a quarter of a mile along the homeward track. Hong, making the best of it, then formed line on the bluff and charged impetuously towards Bela, and as they turned back from the bluff the last man or two kicked a spurt of earth up behind with a gesture as insulting as it was crude.

The retiring companies had now converged in a huge crowd round the Bela *buliang* and the mithan, and there we also went, accompanied by several notables with whom we conversed pleasantly on the way. They were very anxious to know whether we had enjoyed the *gambu* and we assured them that we had, adding fervently that we had never seen anything like it in our lives. This had the double merit of pleasing them greatly and being absolutely true. When we reached the crowd the mithan had already been killed, and its feet and head had been sent to be set up on *pogran* tripods at the proper places in witness of the peace-treaty; the *gambu* had had its effect; Duta had coerced Bela, and Bela had paid its fine and made its peace with the tribe, and the quarrel was officially over.

At this moment, however, Hong again introduced a discordant note. Just as the crowd, all semblance of military order lost, was beginning to break up and drift home, the Hong party, which had been demonstrating in the rice fields, marched past on the main track and gave the peace-conference a pointedly wide berth. Two or three of the Bela elders, not wishing to leave an excuse for further hostilities, ran off down the road to stop them and coax them back, but the Hong men handled them roughly and threw them off with abuse. At this Kago Tajo, who had not taken part in the *gambu* because he had relatives in Bela, went running off after the Hong men to see what he could do and they all disappeared round a corner of the path together. He failed to bring them back to the conference, but he did at least persuade them to hold their projected protest-meeting among the Pape bamboo groves and not, as they had proposed, in the very middle of our camp. As far as we could make out Hong's meeting proved abortive, for none of the other villages were prepared to go on with the war, so the Hong warriors sat about for some hours and argued with each other and then got bored and went home.

There was nothing more to see now, so the doctor and I turned home in the warm afternoon sunlight, parting from Kago Bida, whom a very worried and polite old Bela gentleman was trying to prevent from dancing with excitement on the young millet, and walked back through the peaceful, sun-dappled, bamboo-arched lanes, past the disputing members of the now-dispersed Hong company, past the huge old tree like a hornbeam where Duta's major ceremonies were performed, and so back to the green, grave-studded turf and the peaked gnomes' houses of the camp.

As it turned out, the Apa Tanis were going to be very sorry for that *gambu* before we were through.

12

Jorum Kuli

AT THE end of the month a bridge on the track collapsed and we were temporarily cut off from the plains. Siraj hurried down with a gang and soon had it up again, but when the mails came through once more I wished to God he had not. In the brief interval the whole of our world had crumbled. In every letter from Tim there was a fresh blow, a new disaster. The months of struggle and sacrifice had all been for nothing; our ideals were childish dreams; our achievements were melting away like a sand castle in the tide, and we could no more control the forces responsible for it than tin soldiers could the moon. After a while when Tim's letters came I used to be afraid to open them. I would leave the envelope with his familiar, squiggly handwriting on it lying on the table till last and only then screw up my courage to tear the flap.

Indian Independence, previously announced for June of 1948, was now to come in a few weeks' time and nobody knew what would happen to the North-East Frontier. The new Government might or might not continue the old policy. Plans were disrupted and everything was at a standstill. The R.A.F. was to go and there would be no airdrop in the autumn, for no civil firm had been found to undertake it. Tim's contract had been cancelled, and as India was a second home to us he had applied to stay on there instead of transferring

to a British colony; there was, however, no guarantee that he would be employed, and we should probably be workless and homeless in a month. We were in that case likely to be penniless too before long, for there were 9,000 people trying to leave India and only 3,000 passages available in the next two years and we had spent most of our savings on the job. There was also a good chance of civil war in India, and if that happened we should have to walk out through Tibet, heaven knew where to; the choice of refuges was limited.

But none of this really mattered. What was unbearable was to know that we had failed. In our battle with our gigantic task we had worked twelve hours a day and seven days a week for three-quarters of a year, fighting our way from crisis to crisis while new obstacles and frustrations rose at every turn. We had gone hungry and cold and dirty; we had slept on the ground and under the sky. Now the flag flew over Kore and the long hours through which Tim had kept his temper were bearing fruit—not for nothing had the Apa Tanis dubbed him the "Ui Sahib," the Sahib who, like their own benevolent god of the heavens, was never angry. The tribesmen were beginning to seek the peace and impartial justice he was there to give. The track from Kore to the plains was a safe highway down which the Apa Tanis swarmed to trade, immune to attack from their old enemies the South Panior Daflas. Round Kore itself there was an expanding zone where raiding had ceased, and for the first time in history the Daflas who lived in it could sleep at home at night instead of hiding out in the woods. All this was to be torn from us at the very moment we had grasped it; we had come to care very much indeed—no, that is a miserable understatement. We had come to care passionately, vehemently, fanatically for the Subansiri Area and its people, to care as the unemotional, inarticulate Briton is supposed to be incapable of caring. They meant more to

us than anything else in the world, than home, prosperity, security, children or comfort.

Kore was too full of heartbreak, of clerks badgering me for orders I could not now give, and paths, houses, gardens and bridges, every stick and stone, were reminders of hard struggle and ruined hopes. I fled to the Apa Tani Valley, where our impact on the landscape was negligible.

As we came out of the forest we saw that the valley floor below us was a lake of growing rice, a sheet of green velvet in which little clumps of figures stood, the men red-brown and naked except for their scarlet tails and the women bunched in their queer grey petticoats and sack jackets; or perhaps they were wearing their oblong hinged rainshields, the peak in front sticking out and making them look like some unearthly form of half-human lizard. The millet was up along the field-banks and we pushed through it thigh-deep. Millions of dragon-flies, brilliant needles of every colour—green-and-gold, scarlet, pink-and-gold, turquoise and sapphire—rose from the crops in jewelled swarms as we passed. At Duta Pape camp the nights were warm and moonlit and full of lovers who whispered in the dark of the bamboo groves or flitted past to some rendez-vous among the great, black trunks of the pines.

I had little time to fret. Kago Tajo, who enjoyed social life, was delighted to have me at Pape all by myself and insisted that I go calling. He took me out every day to visit a fresh notable and I felt like a débutante in my first season, meeting all the best people under the highest auspices; I grew adept at polite conversation and expert at the exact grading of gifts. We dealt with Bela; we covered Hari in detail; we dropped in on Hong. Morning after morning we pressed through the wet millet, bearing carefully chosen presents for the day's aristo-crat. Tajo walked in front of me, his skin old-ivory under his yellow silk tunic, his scarlet tail sticking down below it and

his tiger-skin haversack and bear's-hair swordbelt slung above; the other interpreters followed me, their scarlet cloaks hung on their backs or dangling out of their palm-fibre war capes. Everything round us was brilliantly coloured; there were deep blue hills beyond and the sky was full of stout, three-dimensional clouds. Day after day we trailed home again in the afternoon, replete with rice-beer, laden with ceremonial offerings of smoked pork and pursued by thundershowers which stalked across the sunlit bowl of the valley in grey pillars of rain.

One morning it was too wet to go out and we settled down to talk round the fire, Kago Tajo, Nada Rika and I. Presently the door was pushed open and in came Nada Tamu, one of the headmen of Haja. He was a long, thin man with a gentle, vague face, and he was a leading member of Nada Rika's clan. He slipped off his rainshield and hung it on a peg on the wall and sat down beside me at the hearth. For some minutes he exchanged small talk with the other two, and then he turned and addressed a remark directly to me, a remark completely outside the few phrases which were all the Apa Tani I knew, so that I was forced to ask Tajo and Rika for translation. Rika, whose integrity was absolute, remained tightlippedly silent, which alone should have warned me that there was something in the wind, but Tajo answered with the beaming smile which accompanied his larger lapses from strict Governmental behaviour.

"Nada Tamu," he explained cheerfully, "wants to know if you would like to buy a slave."

To say that I was startled is to put it mildly, but in Subansiri circles one soon learned to show surprise at nothing, at least till the facts behind the matter emerged. I raised my eyebrows slightly and answered with the *lingua franca* equivalent of "Oh? Really?"

Nada Tamu went into details. Though I tell the story fully

here I had to piece it together then out of bits of fact and random scraps of guesswork floating in a turgid sea of untruth, for the only plain thing about the business was that it was crooked.

The slave in question was a small Dafla boy named Jorum Kuli. His parents were dead, and he lived at one time with his elder brother, a notorious cattle thief called Jorum Khru, in Jorum Tacho's village. When Kuli was only seven—he was now about nine—the village had been raided as a reprisal for his brother's sins, and Kuli had been wounded and captured and carried off to Likha. There he had been kept in stocks for a fortnight, and when the wood of the log dried out and shrank he squeezed his foot free and escaped—he was clearly an unusual child—and tramped two days' journey home alone through enemy country. Then just before Tim and I arrived in the Area his ne'er-do-well brother Khru fell foul of Koj Karu's powerful friend Jorum Takr. With Karu's help Jorum Takr had Khru kidnapped, and the young thief was carried off, brutually treated, kept in an Apa Tani house for a while and finally bound and led off like a bullock to Jorum Takr's settlement, where Takr kept him as a slave. Intervention in the case was unfortunately difficult because of Jorum Khru's known record, for it was almost impossible to prove that Jorum Takr's action was not justified under Dafla customary law, when it would be beyond the Government's self-imposed limits of jurisdiction.

Some months after this affair young Kuli set off alone to visit some Apan Tani friends in Hong. On the way he met a low-class Apa Tani with a grudge against Jorum Khru, and the man seized Kuli, tied him up and dragged him off to Mudang Tage with the idea of holding him to ransom and getting payment from Jorum Khru; but before anything had been done about it Khru, who was apparently quite reconciled to Jorum Takr's household and had settled down there comfortably as

his man, was killed in a drunken brawl and there was no one left to rescue Kuli. When his ransom-value vanished the Apa Tani sold him for what he would fetch to Nada Tamu, who bought him as a speculation and sent him to a friend in Bela for safe custody. He had probably intended to sell him to the Miris, but now, whether from a misplaced business instinct or a fear of possible consequences, he was offering him to me.

It put me in a most awkward situation. The British Government, as a signatory to the Geneva Convention, was pledged to put down slavery. The kidnapping of Kuli, his purchase by Nada Tamu and his imprisonment by Taliang Bokr were all illegal and a gross defiance of our policy, and the correct course was to demand his surrender, refuse to negotiate and deal sternly with everybody concerned. Unfortunately, there was not the least chance that Kuli would be surrendered. I had no reliable interpreter I could send to secure his release. I could never recover him from Bela with the only force available, a dozen Assam Rifles, and at the first hint of coercion every slave for miles would be sold out of reach of all rescue whatever. If I waited till Tim and the leading interpreters came back—if they ever came back, which was at the moment doubtful—Kuli would long since have been traded to the north and lost, and as the only way to save him was to buy him, either principles or the boy had to be sacrificed at once.

Geneva was a long way off, and within two miles of me was a small boy in imminent danger of being sold into life-slavery. After a sharp mental struggle, I threw the principles out of the window and my official conscience after them, and said to Nada Tamu, "How much?"

I like to stick to the truth, so I can't say that I wake with a shriek even now after dreaming that I'm bargaining for Jorum Kuli, but it would make a good nightmare all the same. The negotiations went on for about three days. I brought in one

of our Dafla porter-headmen to back me up, but all he would say was, "The Apa Tanis are lying." This was horribly obvious and of little practical help. Nada Rika wouldn't say anything. Tajo and Nada Tamu said a very great deal and most of it was untrue. Rika and the Dafla glared at me indignantly whenever I made a mistake, and as they refused to help me I did so pretty frequently. I gritted my teeth and went hot with shame all over and ploughed doggedly through the mess, and Tajo and Nada Tamu rubbed their hands and enjoyed themselves, and in the end Jorum Kuli was mine at the maximum standard price of Rs. 200/-, or £15.

The hand-over was arranged for the following day. I hadn't the amount with me, but credit was apparently good. I hoped that they would bring him along and leave him with us quietly, but no, it had to be a ceremonial affair.

They arrived at ten o'clock, a voluble and beaming tide of them. Everyone was a little too bright, a little too chatty. The uneasy hand of conscience lay upon all of us. Nada Tamu had a fixed, wax-dummy smile which did not involve his eyes, and Taliang Bokr, a tall, middle-aged man, was full of an oily pleasantness. The small room was crammed with people and crammed as well with hidden motives and unspoken thoughts. Only Tajo seemed to be in his element, exchanging presents on my behalf with the guests, laughing, joking and saying the socially right thing.

Then suddenly there was a small boy in the middle of the crowd. He was a thin brown waif. His black hair straggled over a peaked face with eyes much too big for it; he looked half-starved, and his arms and legs stuck out from his only garment, a shapeless old flour sack. He was smiling a shy, hopeful smile and handing me a strip of smoked pork, a formal gift to win his new owner's favour. As he stared into my unfamiliar European face the smile faded and he hovered on the verge of tears. Nada Tamu and Taliang Bokr were patting

him on the back and telling him to be a good boy. I knew no Dafla with which to reassure him. Crisis impended. Rika swooped in the nick of time; before Kuli's unshed tears could spill, before anyone noticed anything, he had swept him deftly out of the group and into the kitchen and the tide of conversation closed again over the incident.

We went back to Kore next day. It rained, and the big drops splashed in the flooded rice fields, turning the water to a ring-patterned mat-surface. The Kore path was slimy with mud and we tramped ankle-deep through the slush in the woods, slipping and skidding; leeches brushed off on us from the damp leaves and drops pattered down from the high trees above. Kuli walked in the middle of the column, silent and miserable, the only sound from him an occasional wet sniff. At Kore we exchanged the old sack for a proper Dafla cloth taken from my textile collection, and I tried to explain to him through Rika that he was now free. He owed the Government his price (I had borrowed it from the Trade-Goods Fund and sent it over by Tajo), but we would give him well-paid work and he could easily refund the debt. It was no good; he could not understand. He looked from one to the other of us in bewilderment, and when Rika had finished he sat by the fire for a few minutes, scratching in the ash with his toes, and then got up and went unhappily away.

As the days went on and he was always full-fed, when nobody beat him and he came and went as he pleased, his spirit as well as his body filled out. All of a sudden we had a Dafla devil in the house. He turned on the Apa Tani servants and revenged himself for the wrongs their tribe had done him. He tweaked, he filched, he annoyed. He darted out as they sat down to eat, sent their dinner flying on the ground and ran for the safety of the far woods. Feeling that reaction had better run its course if it could, I turned my back and refused to interfere, but I had little sympathy for him if one of them

caught and cuffed him and he came to me roaring with noisy grief which lasted just as long as he thought anyone was looking. And then, just as I was wondering if I had made a mistake, my restraint was fortunately justified and his devilishness worked itself off. When Heli came back with Tim, and he had another Dafla to be with and a tall Sahib at whose fatherly heels he could trot like a puppy, he was not much more mischievous than any other small boy.

One day he went off unbidden to Jorum Tacho's and was sent home in short order, Jorum Tacho, who brought him back himself, saying crisply to Heli in my hearing that he had no desire to harbour our runaway slaves and so start a quarrel with us. I was horrified and said vehemently to Heli that Kuli was free and that if I heard him called a slave again I should be angry, as it was an immutable law that in British territory there were no slaves. Heli waited until Jorum Tacho had gone and then said quietly, "Memsahib, you and I know that the Government allows no slaves, but if you want to save Kuli's life you must let the Dafla think that he is yours. The moment they know he is free his brother's enemies will kill him. He has inherited his brother's feuds, which are very many, and Jorum Takr desires to murder him before he can grow up to avenge his brother. So long as they think he belongs to you he can go anywhere and be safe."

And then Temi came back. We had already learned that Kuli was his kinsman, which made me less sorry than ever that I had thrown my principles to the winds. Kuli waited for him all day, a scrawny, squatting imp in a cloth much too big for him, crouched in a corner of the platform before the house with the Talo path winding down in clear view below. When at last the group came in sight, Temi's solid figure plodding steadily upwards with his porters trudging behind, Kuli was off like a shot. He went scudding down the slope, a racing, whirling-armed little figure. He flung himself at Temi, sob-

bing; Temi caught and held him, and the next moment Kuli was trying to pull Temi on up the hill.

"Uncle, Uncle!" he said, tugging at Temi's coat. "Come to the house and tell the Memsahib I'm not a bad lot! She doesn't speak Dafla and I can't make her understand. I didn't know she had saved me when I first came, and I was wicked, so Uncle, come and explain!"

They arrived at the hearth of the Great Hall together and Temi duly explained while Kuli held his hand and beamed at me through tears of pure happiness, and then they went out together to the Dafla interpreters' quarter, Temi stumping ahead, stout, solid and dependable, and Kuli pattering behind.

13

Balipara

HARD on the heels of the returning Tim came a letter from the Secretariat to say that his contract had been extended for another six months, which gave us at least the winter and a further chance of exploration. But there was a rider. Independence and Partition had made such a clean sweep of the British and Pakistani officers in the Assam service that there were sixty-five senior posts vacant and only fifteen qualified men to fill them, so that Tim had been given charge of the adjoining Balipara Frontier Tract in addition to the Subansiri Area. Either was a full-time job and his two headquarters, Kore and Charduar, were two hundred miles apart, a week's journey on foot and by truck. He could only spare a fortnight in the Area, therefore, before going down the hill again and away to take over Balipara.

It was a good fortnight while it lasted. There was little to do at Kore, so we went across to the valley. The rains were over, and everywhere there was opulent golden sunlight and the rich vegetation of late summer. In the hot, still alleys between the groves big butterflies flew about lazily, and up in the side inlets were muddy patches—Tim searched assiduously for them—where other butterflies gathered in scores. There he used to go daily, Kuli or Kago Taki scuttering ahead of him with the big net, and the tin box in which he kept his collec-

tion began to fill up rapidly. In the fields the rice was tall and the full ears swayed in the wind; bird-scarers—streamer-hung strings which ran across from one split bamboo to another—covered the irregular plots like networks of clothes-lines, and in little huts on stilts among the crops small boys sat, and sometimes whole families, defending their harvest from the predatory doves which sat cooing among the pines with their crops bulging with stolen grain. At a clayey pond behind Hong some boys had made a mud-chute on the bank and were sliding down it on their bare behinds into the thick, yellow water; in the channelled Kale a band of naked brown imps ducked and splashed and hallooed at us, their wet black hair falling in strings over their faces and the light flashing helio-like from the broken surface of the stream.

One warm evening we were sitting down to our evening meal when the old hut gave a sharp quiver. Then the table lurched and the building began to vibrate. It was as though a gigantic dog had the earth in its teeth like a rat and was shaking it hard. We both leapt up and ran for the door, and I shall always remember that Tim, a Wykehamist, reached it first and stood politely aside to let me leap out into safety before him.

Outside, under a clear sky full of stars, the earthquake was rocking the valley from end to end. It was the worst that either of us had been in. The camp was creaking and rattling; I had a job to keep my feet and sat down on the ground, to the general amusement. The Apa Tani servants had all dashed out at the first shudder and they stood in front of us, naked and wild, swaying as the earth heaved, their brown bodies and brass hair-skewers lit by the lamplight from the windows of the deserted house, and shouted and bawled at the top of their voices. In the lulls in the pandemonium we were aware of an extraordinary noise; two hundred yards away Haja village was being shaken like a boxful of dice, and we

could hear the concerted groaning of several hundred houses, men yelling, women screaming and frightened children howling.

Then, with a final quiver, the earthquake stopped. Haja village, restabilized, hummed like a hive. The earth under us was calm and solid again, and the night was windless and full of peace. We climbed back up the verandah steps and into the empty house where the lamps still burned, but our supper lay on the floor in a ruin of upset plates and spilled curry.

At last the time came to leave for Balipara. We agreed that Tim should travel light and go ahead to make arrangements and that I should follow behind with the main body and the heavy baggage. Khuikhe went off with Tim, as the two Zemi boys, Namde and Lungchiwong, were due back from furlough. By the evening before my start, however, there was no sign of them; night fell and they had not appeared. Koda, Taki and the Apa Tani interpreters had all gone home to the valley on twenty-four hours' holiday before leaving for foreign parts, Buda and Rüdo were not there either, and I was faced with getting the packing done single-handed.

I rose at three and lit the hurricane-lamps in the empty darkness of a Great Hall populated only by sleeping dogs. I cooked myself some breakfast in the deserted kitchen and then began the packing. Pots, pans, kettles, knives, forks, cups, plates, tin-openers (vital) and everything for cooking and eating; rice, atta-flour, tea, coffee, butter and all tinned stores; clothing for a month at several possible temperatures from the tropics to the snow-line; bedding; beds, tables and chairs; cameras and films; books to read, writing-materials and the typewriter; lamps, wicks and oil; all these I found, sorted out and packed into carrying-baskets or canvas bags. Then I hefted the loads for weight and adjusted them if necessary and ranged them along the walls to wait for the porters. Just as I was finishing, soon after sunrise, Koda, Taki and the Apa

Tani interpreters appeared, and close on their heels came the porters. Half an hour later we had all set off on the double march down to Yazali, some sixteen miles away through the heat of the shadeless Panior Basin. As I unpacked in camp that night, dripping with sweat and very weary, I suddenly saw two slim figures coming lightly down the woodland path from the south and the plains, their bright, alien cloths shining against the dark background of trees. The Zemi boys had returned. They brought presents from many old friends I had left the year before, and I was momentarily acutely homesick for the tried and trusted fellowship of North Cachar.

The next day we pressed on to the Panior bridge and down the new path which Siraj had cut along the side of the Panior gorge. It ran up and down, as it had to, dipping steeply into ravines too wide to bridge and climbing staircase-like over jutting spurs and outcrops. The air was hot and humid; it was like walking through a steam bath. I had a bird's-wing fan of the kind carried by Dafla notables, a complete pinion mounted in a plaited cane grip, and with this in one hand and my staff in the other I fanned myself solemnly up the ascents. It gave one surprising comfort. From time to time we were too exhausted to pant any further, and then we sat down by the side of the track till we got our breath back. The sweat ran in trickles down the Apa Tanis' bare backs, and I felt and looked as though I had just been fished out of a kettle.

At one such halt Koda, who was of a heavy build and felt the heat a good deal, pulled a handful of leaves to protect his bare buttocks from the ground and sank down on them with a long sigh. Then he got up again with a hurt look, like a dog which has sat on a bee, and stared at us in bewilderment. He looked so comical that we all laughed and I called out, "What's the matter, Koda? A leech?" Then we stopped laughing, for Koda was going white. He dropped to his knees on the path and toppled forward on his face. Of all the leaves

in the jungle, he had chanced to pick on the virulent jungle nettle, which does not look like a nettle at all and burns like acid.

Tajo and Rika jumped up and ran to him and so did I, and the others gathered round us in a frightened group. Koda was writhing and moaning, smothering his cries. We had no brandy, but there was some strong black coffee in the flask, and Tajo held him up while Rika and I dosed him with it. It had some effect, and after about ten minutes we were able to make him fairly comfortable on a bed of cloaks and clothes. After another hour we managed to move him on, half-carrying, half-helping, to a hut in a Dafla field, whence we brought him slowly into camp in the evening cool, but he was ill for several days and the sting was acutely painful for some time longer.

On the fourth day after leaving Kore we reached the hill-foot and found that the Area truck had broken down and that there was nothing but a jeep to carry the whole tired lot of us. I was standing there wet and weary among the baggage and porters and wondering where on earth I could find a lorry, when there was the sound of a churning vehicle in the distance and, sliding and ploughing in the black forest mud, Tim came round the corner in the Charduar truck. He had heard of the breakdown that morning and come straight over. We climbed thankfully in.

The run to Charduar was long and hot, and when we reached it the bungalow was an echoing, empty barrack of a place in which we squatted with our camp furniture like gipsies in an abandoned palace. Bats hung on the electric-lamp cords and dropped mixed blessings and half-eaten frogs on our heads throughout the night; it was oppressively hot, and the only pleasure was a large kerosene refrigerator whose creation of ice from flame delighted and amazed the Apa Tanis. Then we rose again at three in the morning, the coolest hour of the

twenty-four, and drove off through creeper-hung forests to a camp among reed grass. We were ferried over a pale stream in the dawn—water, sand-banks and sky all the same wan shade—found our porters waiting on the far side, and struck out on foot down a long track towards the hills.

Tasser Puttu, the guardian of the Subansiri Area, was a little less than 6,000 feet high, but here the outer range went straight up from the plains to 10,000 feet. It took us three days to get up it, climbing, climbing all the way, by a rough, winding path almost overgrown with leech-infested grass. Our first camp was called "Pestiferous" and lay at about 4,000 feet. On the second night we camped at 8,000 feet and it rained heavily and steadily, as it had done since we reached the hills. On the third day we went on and up through forest which grew less tall, more open and more gnarled and lichen-hung till the chill in the air was perceptible and, though the rain had stopped, a dank mountain-mist hung on the hill. At last, by a rocky gully where twisted trees loomed out of the wreaths of fog, we gained the top of the ridge and a wood of mountain bamboo, thin, whippy and brown-stemmed. On the very crest, incredible though it seemed, there was a well-marked elephant trail and day-old droppings.

From the pass—the Bompu La, at 9,600 feet—the road twisted along the ridge, but the clinging mist hid the snows and the view. Presently we came to an eerie forest of ancient hemlocks. The giant trunks swept up into the mist like Jack's beanstalk, ending no one could see where; the trees were dead or dying and there were no seedlings coming up below them. Then the road began to drop and we went down, from mountain forest to oakwoods and open meadows full of wild columbines and delphiniums. We were nearly at the foot of the slope, our knees aching and our toes sliding out of the end of our sandals, when there was a patter of heavy drops and down came a torrential storm. We hurried on down the hill, the

rain streaming down our backs and running off our wet hair, and as we reached the bottom we saw, fifty yards ahead, a roofed caravanserai, an unwalled hut for the use of pony convoys. We abandoned dignity and ran for it, slipping and sliding down the glassy track and tumbling pell-mell into shelter as yet heavier sheets of water cascaded on the hillside, poured from the eaves and ran in red waterfalls down the path. When we had wrung ourselves out, Koda and Kago Taki hunted round and found some wood, and we built a fire by which we all sat and steamed until the rain stopped.

The storm swept over and left the oakwoods dappled with sun. We were at the bottom of a deep valley and the path ran on down it over drifts of brown leaves and outcrops of grey rock, and beside us was a clear, foaming stream like a Highland river. Windflowers and a cream-coloured scabious grew alongside and all was cool and rainwashed.

We walked on down the widening valley, tremendous, pine-grown hillsides sweeping up on either side. Then we came out suddenly on a small patch of field. We had a brief glimpse of ponies and lurid trappings; a stocky young man with a felt pudding-bowl hat and a Tibetan coat came forward to meet us. He was one of the Sengjithongji interpreters from Rupa post and had brought out mounts for us so that we could make a correct ceremonial entry.

We walked over towards them. They were two grey Tibetan ponies, plump, solid and standing not more than twelve hands. Their bridles had bright yellow webbing reins; they carried high Tibetan saddles with elegant bronze stirrups elaborately worked; under the saddles were rainbow-coloured quilted saddle-cloths and on them were even more brilliant Tibetan rugs. I gingerly mounted the nearest pony and sat perched like a jockey, the saddle entirely precluding any other seat. Tim swung on to the other, and off we set down what I should have thought was an impossible path for horses.

Each pony was led by a groom in a felt hat like the interpreter's. It was apparently due to one's rank not to control the animal oneself, but simply to sit and be led along by a retainer as I used to sit on a donkey and be led along by my aunt at the age of three. We scrambled up ledges, we balanced along the edge of crags, we slid down mud-banks; sometimes we crept round on tilted shelves overhanging the stream, one leg scraping the cliff and nothing between the other and the water but thirty feet of space, and sometimes we came down staircases of boulders, the ponies moving like bored chamois in a series of staccato bounds. After the first few minutes of terror I realized that our mounts knew their business, and it seemed best after that to ignore the impending death and enjoy the scenery.

There were three fast, rock-strewn rivers to ford, each the size and shape of the Garry at Killiecrankie. At every one the grooms went over a footbridge and left the ponies to take us across unaided, which miraculously they did, picking their way girth-deep through racing water and among stones and cavernous holes. Then beyond the third stream we spied scarlet coats on a knoll. The ponies heaved themselves out of the water and thrust up the steep river-bank, nearly dropping us over their cruppers; we clutched at reins and mane, and with a final heave they clambered over the lip of the bank and into a meadow beside the river. Lined up on our left in order of seniority were the Tibetan Agent, the Jemadar of the Assam Rifles, the Sub-Assistant Surgeon and the village headmen of Rupa. We tried to draw rein and exchange greetings with decent formality, but our ponies were too used to doing without advice from their rider and their home was in plain sight. They bore us on relentlessly at a smart walk, and all we could do was to bow from the saddle, calling, "How d'you do?" and "Salaam!" and hoping that the members of the gathering would accept whichever was appropriate. And then we passed

on willy-nilly, the notables hurrying to keep up, circled a huddled settlement of rude, chalet-like buildings with a stark Tibetan keep looking down at it like a Norman castle on an English village, and came to the fortified Assam Rifles' post. Beyond the post a magnificent, ice-clear river rushed down between stony banks, and beside it was a two-roomed hut, the Rupa rest-house. We halted there among grazing goats and ponies, meadows, foaming water and pines.

14

The Se La

HERE on the Bhutanese border the high hills bent southward towards the plain, a trade-route ran through from Tibet and until recently Tibetan control had reached almost to the low ground. But the people along the trade-route had found it irksome. They were a long way from Tibet itself, the tribute was heavy, the exactions were many and the benefits were very few; so they had asked British India to rule them instead. The arrangement had worked out very well. They paid Rs. 5/- in house-tax annually, an amount they had chosen themselves; they had three outposts, at Rupa, Dirang Dzong and But, to protect them from the wild tribes and the Tibetans; they had doctors and dispensaries; a special Tibetan Agent (they were near-Tibetans, after all) attended to their affairs; exactions ceased and they were paid for any work they did. They were very pleased with it all. Their one fear was that under the new régime they might be returned to Tibet.

After a day's halt at Rupa so that Tim could inspect the outpost, we set out again on the two-stage trek to Dirang Dzong. We were escorted by the Tibetan Agent, Achung, a charming and able Sikkimese to whom we both took a great liking. Our way ran up a spur from which we looked back at Rupa below, its grazing sheep like toys on a green baize cloth and its fishing-weirs barring the grey river; the Rupa people

lived on fish and carried supplies of it about with them, and they stank of rotting carp in a way which passed all belief. Then the track climbed on, clinging to the sides of the hills, until we reached the Bomdi La at over 9,000 feet. The actual crossing was on a steep ridge in bamboo jungle, and there was none of the stone and good footholds we had found on the outer range. The path was precipitous and deep in black mud, and we struggled through mist and drizzle to the top; on the far side the going was so bad that the porters could not stand, and we all had to clamber down at the sides of the path, finding some sort of grip on the white, wormlike bamboo roots which writhed out of the soil. Then light began to shine up through the cloud from the sunlit valley below, and it seemed as though we were marching down through the eerie mists of death towards some pagan Elysium in the underworld.

We camped at Rahung, in the valley bottom, and noon next day found us trudging along by the river towards Dirang Dzong. In the Subansiri Area one crossed the outer ranges only to find the desolate grasslands of the Panior Basin, but here it was very different. This was a cultivated, settled land, an Alpine country of oaks and pines, fields, bridges, water-mills, prayer-wheels and villages of tall stone houses, and of cheerful peasants who whipped their hats off and put their tongues respectfully out at us through friendly grins. We were, too, in the sub-Himalayan vegetation zone, and the mystery of where the Apa Tanis' imported flora came from was a mystery no longer, or at least in part. They kept running into the woods and returning with some familiar handful, peach, pear or pine, and their remote ancestors had evidently brought the plants with them to the Apa Tani Valley from a similar zone in the northern part of the Subansiri Area.

Five miles short of Dirang Dzong we were again met by the traditional ponies with bronze and shagreen trappings and multicoloured rugs and pads, and the saddles were as

acutely uncomfortable to sit on as before. A bend or two further on we met the Dirang Dzong headmen, gorgeous in their scarlet coats. They presented us with scarves of honour, strips of cobwebby white silk given temporary substance by rice-water, and as these accumulated round our necks we both began to look as though we had acute laryngitis. Then we met the local lama, a young and merry man, who had brought arrack in a jug and pomegranates in a vast brass dish, and we had to dismount and sit on rugs and cushions on the ground and feast in unaccustomed Oriental splendour. At last we remounted and passed on, our colourful tail increasing with every reception committee we met, and there were several; we rode spectacularly through Dirang Dzong itself, a well-built, walled town where every house had large phallic emblems dangling from the eaves; we covered two miles more up the valley, and then there was the Assam Rifles post and a welcoming Jemadar with an escort as polished as the Guards Division.

We were now at the foot of the high hills, and in front of the rest-house door, between it and the stone-walled post, there ran a track whose destination was India on one hand and Lhasa on the other. It wound away out of sight, an innocent grassy lane, as bland and gentle as though it ran to Toller Porcorum instead of to fabulous lands for whose possessions empires quarrelled. We had unfortunately neither the time nor the money to follow it up and visit the big monastery at Tawang, which lay in the Debatable Ground south of the MacMahon Line and outside the current area of direct Indian control, for Tim, as an official, would have had to take a large escort for prestige's sake and more presents than the Political Fund would run to; but we could go as far up the Tawang track as the Se La pass and look out from there as Moses looked out on the Promised Land. After only a day's halt, therefore, we set out again for the north.

We followed the narrowing valley, passing men ploughing in small fields on the river-bank; their beasts were *dzo*, a type of yak-cattle hybrid. Then we left the river and climbed on through the folds in the hills, mounting higher and higher up their piled and tangled flanks. By the evening of the first day we could feel the altitude and breath was beginning to come short. All the second we climbed, and in the late afternoon we pitched camp at a little under 10,000 feet, on a bleak spur outside the village of Senge Dzong.

Here the mountains poured down like a cataract and cascaded into the deep valleys with prodigal abandon. They were gloriously and wildly steep, soaring and plunging magnificently. The village clung to a narrow ridge, and our borrowed tent with its Tibetan motif perched on a shelf above a bend in the road; it was so surrounded by space and immense drops that we seemed to float in the air as though on a magic carpet. Below us was a black abyss in which an unseen torrent roared; across the valley from us were fantastic crags on which jagged pines shot up their etched black shapes against a wild cloudscape, and the wind had the sharp, cold tang of the high peaks.

We started at dawn for the Se La. With Tim and me went two of the Assam Rifles who were escorting us and three or four sturdy local men in Tibetan coats of claret-coloured wool. They were mannerly people, bowing one everywhere with anxious hissings and polite protrusions of the tongue. I rode a black pony lent by the village. I perched on the usual hard Tibetan saddle, and numerous rugs, which I hoped were less verminous than they looked, mitigated its severities on the pony's back and my bottom. There was an elaborate crupper but no breastplate, and only a yak-hair rope hitched round the cantle and the pony's chest kept the saddle from slipping off backwards; after the first fifty yards of really steep ascent everyone had to gather round me, adjust the saddle, tighten the rope and adjure me to hang onto the pony's mane. This

was evidently standard practice, for a tuft of it had been turned permanently sideways by constant use. I hung on shamelessly and the pony, too used to it to mind, climbed stolidly on over torrent-beds and rock-staircases.

From the camp we went up past the village by a deep, pleasant lane which might have been anywhere in Devon, the earthern banks, thick with wildflowers on either side. Next came Alpine meadows, which were sheets of yellow rock-rose and a lacy white flower like a bedstraw. Then came a surrealist grove of tree-rhododendrons with strange, obscene trunks like raw meat, and then Christmas-tree conifers hung with strings of lichen. Still we went on and up. We were getting high now; Tim was breathing hard and every twenty yards men and pony halted to rest.

The Christmas-trees thinned out and gave place to spruces. These were weird woods, a fit setting for *The Ring*, with deep mosses smothering the ground, bare branches, and dark, haunted distances—a were-wolves' wood, a home for bears, owls and ravens. Then we came to the tree-line and even the spruces stopped, and there was nothing but acre upon acre of tangled rhododendrons flattened by the winter snows, a dull and matted wilderness which gave no hint of the glory there would be in spring. The road climbed on and up over rocks and suddenly the hillside was alive with colour; we were moving through a wild rock garden, but such a garden as civilization never saw. Fat cushions of buckwheat covered in rose-pink spikes sprawled over naked crags with nothing but air below; everlastings and stonecrop grew everywhere between; deep blue gentians blazed on tiny ledges; dwarf monkshood, delphiniums and Canterbury bells stood up among the other plants' tussocks. For three hundred feet the hillside glowed with yellow, pink, white and every shade of blue, and then the plants stopped abruptly, as though someone had ruled a line, and we came to bleak, rocky slopes. Cairns,

standing-stones and clumps of prayer-flag poles edged the road, the weather-beaten rags flying in the wind; we had reached the pass itself. Grey crags like the rocks of Skye loomed out of swirling mist, and when an eddy rent the cloud, hills which were own brothers to the Coolin showed their up-sweeping flanks for a moment and were gone.

We left the Assam Rifles to build a fire in a lee while we two walked over the pass to the far side. A barren corrie ringed with scree, rock and misty peaks fell away to a valley beyond, and the road to Tawang and Lhasa wound down past three peaty lochans and vanished over the lip of the hill. Far out beyond we could see the sunlight beating up under the clouds from the unattainable land below, but it was as invisible as it was inaccessible.

We turned back over the pass, ate our sandwiches by the fire in a hollow among the rocks and then turned home again down the hill. It was too cold to linger. I walked, having lost enough skin to the Tibetan saddle. Tim and I had gone about forty yards when there were shouts from the men we had left to pack up. Looking up, we saw everyone rushing to a spot among the boulders on the left, and when we reached it ourselves we found one of the Senge Dzonz villagers in a heap on the ground. He was a man who lived at 9,000 feet or better; he spent six months of the year in the summer pastures at 11,000 feet and up, and yet, as his companions explained, he had run a few yards to catch the pony at 15,000 feet or so and collapsed from the effects of height. Unless he had a weak heart or some similar disability it seemed a low level of tolerance. We got him up and on his way again after a short rest, but two hundred yards further on he collapsed once more and after this we put the headman with him in case he fainted over one of the many precipices. The pony walked composedly along on its own and we, the Assam Rifles and the remaining local men followed.

A little before dusk we regained our windswept camp on its grassy shelf, chasms and gulfs before and below it, and looming over it across the valley, the heaven-scraping frieze of pines. Night gathered in the depths and swelled grey up the hills. For a few minutes the peaks opposite us held out and shone warm and red, and then the shadow swallowed them too.

Eastwards from Dirang Dzong lay the Lamai country. The tribesmen, whom the Tibetan Agent always referred to as "the wicked Lamai"—if there were any virtuous ones, we never heard of them—had for years been in the habit of raiding the peaceful Monbas; Dirang Dzong was fortified against them with steep approaches, gatehouse towers and loop-holed houses on the wall. An Assam Rifles outpost had recently been placed at But to keep the Lamai in check, apparently with success, and Tim was to go and inspect it. We left Dirang Dzong for the second time, therefore, by the But road, climbing along a ledge on the hill behind the town, first Tim and I and the Tibetan Agent, then the Apa Tanis and the Nagas, and then the straggling line of khaki-jerseyed porters bent under their loads. From here the close-packed, tall houses with their small-windowed façades had a Southern European look, like a Provençal village seen from the air; their gently-sloping roofs were splashed with great scarlet patches, flaring daubs of colour, where chillies were drying in the sun; the river curved in front in a broad, bright sweep and the hillsides tumbled steeply down all round.

We reached But on the second evening, winding up to it by an absent-minded bridle-road which ambled along the north bank of the river valley and suddenly found itself, with a start of surprise, under the outpost gate. The posts at Rupa and Dirang Dzong were only nominally built for defence, and their stone breastworks defined rather than protected the

perimeter; But was a very different kettle of fish. It was a true frontier-post. It stood on a hilltop, and the slopes about it had been cleared of jungle to give a field of fire. The roofs of its bamboo barracks hardly showed above the bristling timber stockade. The spiked gates were hinged at the top in the Naga fashion and propped open by a log which could be kicked away in a second; they were closely guarded, and a stilted watch-tower and a sentry stood high over all.

We pitched camp on the edge of the woods near the post. The Apa Tanis were greatly excited to find scraps of *bije*, their characteristic bamboo, among the camp debris, and when we asked the village headman's son he told us it grew wild in the neighbourhood—another and rather unexpected identification of their flora with the sub-Himalayan zone.

Next day, when Tim had inspected the outpost, visited the village and talked crops with the headman, ration problems with the Jemadar and political troubles with Achung, the Tibetan Agent, he ate a hasty lunch and received a deputation from the Lamai. All at once the peaceful, confident Monba world vanished and we were back among the wild tribes and the atmosphere of wary-eyed mistrust so familiar from the Subansiri Area. The Lamai headmen wore oddments borrowed from the neighbouring cultures, Assamese silk cloths, Tibetan hats, silver-mounted daggers and turquoise ornaments, but their followers were half-naked archers as grimy, straggle-haired and sword-hung as anything from Licha or the Palin. The Apa Tanis' reaction to them was immediate. Tibetan goods had a high market-value in the Apa Tani Valley, and among the Monbas—whom, despite their far higher culture, the Apa Tanis despised as uncivilized maize-eaters, rice, of course, being the only food fit for gentlemen—they had found no chance to trade. Here at last were people who knew what was what, people fairly hung with desirable items and especially with Tibetan swords; so, servants and interpreters alike,

the Apa Tanis rushed at the Lamai and the meeting went forward to a running accompaniment of barter.

Tim sat outside the tent. Cross-legged on the ground before him were the local Lamai chiefs, round them were their retainers, looking with hostility at us and with astonishment at the importunate Apa Tanis, and behind them all the woods were a backcloth to the bare and half-bare bodies, to Tim's weathered green drill and to the travel-worn baggage. The principal Lamai, who wore a bell-shaped hat with a fluted brim, gave me a suspicious look (I was moving round with the camera) and addressed himself to Tim in an aggrieved voice.

"The Government," he said, "has put sepoys at But." The outpost, black on the skyline against the westering light, confirmed his statement. "Whereas formerly we used to raid the Monbas, the Government will not now let us do so. Our livelihood is gone." He turned an outraged glare on Tim and his companions murmured agreement. "We are not people who work. It is unseemly for us to work. We do not know how to work. It is therefore necessary that the Government, having stopped our raiding, pay us a pension for our support."

There was another mutter of agreement and the meeting looked expectantly at Tim in the hope that he would sympathize. For a real trouble there was. However absurd their request for Pensions for Unemployed Bandits might seem, it was a fact that each group among the tribes was oppressed by more powerful neighbours and in turn oppressed the weaker to find tribute for its own oppressors, and when the Government defended the weak those next to them were caught between the law on one side and rapacious foes on the other; the need to protect each successive group had extended many frontiers in defiance of declared policy and the anguished protests of the Treasury. But all Tim could say now was, "I will tell the

Government what you ask, but what their reply will be I do not know."

From But we turned eastwards again to rejoin the main track at Rahung. Our way ran steeply down into a river valley and suddenly we saw those in front of us gathering on the bank of the river, as though something impeded them, and coming down the hill to the place ourselves, we found that it did.

The stream, foaming, rocky and fast-flowing, rushed between high banks. The sole means of crossing it was a tubular cane footbridge, a spider's-web stocking slung between uprights on either side. We had often heard of such bridges, but had never crossed one. The most famous was that at Karko in the Abor country, which was something like 700 feet long and had a swing of fifty feet, and compared with that giant among bridges this was a very modest and stable specimen indeed. Nevertheless, it was quite daunting enough to hold up the column. As we reached the entrance Lungchiwong, contemptuous of the hesitating Apa Tanis, scrambled up the ladder and started across and reached the far side after a wobbly but determined journey, and with one accord all the rest of the party who remained stood back and gave precedence to us.

Basically the bridge consisted of four stout canes slung across the river, one above, one below and one on either side. Round them at intervals of a dozen feet or so were fixed rings of cane which gave a tubular shape to the structure; four or five small canes were laid to make a footway along the bottom of the tunnel, and the gaps between this and the side ropes were lightly filled in with bark cords, more to give a look of security than to provide it, for the bridge still consisted largely of space. We stood at the head of the ladder and looked at the bridge with increasing distaste, but there was nothing for it and we somehow had to get across.

Tim, gripping the side ropes, embarked on the trip firmly. The bridge swayed and rocked, the footrope bounced and the side ropes bellied, but he moved forward steadily, walked up the far side and jumped down on the firm earth beyond. It was my turn.

I stood between the posts, very conscious of the upturned Apa Tani faces below me. In front the bridge fell away in a sagging, swaying perspective of string, and below it was tumbling white water. I laid hold of the side ropes and started down the catwalk.

The first few steps were nothing. In a moment I was ten feet out, carried forward by my initial surge of courage. But the structure's elasticity asserted itself; the four-inch footway twisted and turned; it bounced up and down to my tread. I wobbled and leaned on a side rope, which instantly gave to my weight, and the bridge tilted over. Recovering with a lurch, I gulped and padded on. Now I was nearing the bottom of the sag. The white water was tearing past underneath and gave me the feeling that the bridge was swinging slowly upstream. The bounce and sway were at their worst and the wave-echoes of my own steps recoiled from the supports and threw the footway up to meet me. I kept doggedly but unsteadily on. Then the perspective slanted up, the exit came in sight, the bouncing checked as I neared the bank, and I had reached the end. Tim had me by the arm, and I was safely down on solid ground with him and Lungchiwong.

It now remained to get the Apa Tanis over. Since the Apa Tani Valley had no river more than a foot or two deep, they were terrified of any larger water, but Tim and I having led, the interpreters were not to be outdone. Rika was already standing on the bridge with auntly dignity when I looked back, and he was soon across. Tajo followed him, giggling at his own adventurousness, and one by one after him came the others, the mighty Koda leaping off the bridge-end as though

it were red-hot with a shudder and a loud "*Ugh!*" Then we took our way along the valley towards the west.

We camped that night on a broad, slightly-sloping stretch of parkland above the river. For some reason I can remember it more vividly than any other camp I have known. Even at the time the experience seemed curiously intense, the senses unnaturally sharpened, and yet nothing happened to mark it; it was simply another camp. Tall, isolated trees like Scots firs rose out of the dry grass; their trunks were straight and branchless almost to the top, but high overhead their limbs and stiff foliage made delicate, unreal patterns against a pale evening sky sown with faint stars. As the darkness deepened and the firelight began to tell, our tawdry tents and shelters took on a new quality; the fires glowing in the dusk were sources of magic and wonder, transfiguring rather than revealing the figures—sepoys, porters, tribesmen—which moved round them, so that they became inhabitants of another and more marvellous world, creatures of high romance. When night shut firmly down and the stars, grown big and bright, glinted through the remote roof of leaves, a wind came rushing down the valley. It whipped the fires into sudden life; the fir branches which built them roared into flame, whirling tourbillions shot skywards, the red-barked branches overhead leaped out of the dark, the half-ween foliage tossed, and far above the fiery caves and the flames, swarms of sparks like fireflies hurtled into the windy blackness.

I lay and watched the fires and listened to the wind until I fell asleep.

15

Return to Kore

WHEN we reached Rupa again, dropping down to it by the zigzags and intricate hill-windings of the track from the Bomdi La, we found our sheep already there. Tim had bought a flock of twenty at Dirang Dzong with the idea of taking them back to Kore. Wool was so valuable to the Apa Tanis and so difficult for them to obtain that we had long planned to try sheep in the Apa Tani Valley. A young ram and ewe which had come from Shillong in the spring had been farmed out with Kago Bida with great success; their shearing in May had been the event of the season, and while Tim and I clipped away with nail-scissors, the only implements available, Bida had sat on the growing pile of wool to stop the jealous spectators from filching the precious stuff. Now Tim was to turn back to Dirang Dzong to make treaty-payments and I was to escort the sheep and the Apa Tanis home to Kore and the Apa Tani Valley. We surveyed the flock as it grazed in the meadows beside the stone-walled Rupa outpost, and the leader, a magnificent ram with horns like an Ovis Poli, lifted his head and stared at us.

"I should look out for that chap," said Tim. "We ought to have had his horns blunted, but there isn't time now."

We parted in the morning, Tim striking back to the north with the Tibetan Agent and Khuikhe, and I trampling off

southwards, a travel-worn shepherdess in jungle-green, on the long climb over the Bompu La. As we crossed the pass and left the Alpine woods for the tropical forests of the south face, a thin rain began to fall. Leaden clouds shut down, and as we paddled along a wet, shaly path through rank jungle, they suddenly dropped on us such a storm as I had not seen for years. The bottom fell out of the sky. It rained vertical steel rods. It rained with a savage force, striking at us like shot, like spears. Sodden, chilled to the bone and running with blood from leech bites, I and the Apa Tanis hurried shivering into the camp at last.

The place was deserted, there was no firewood and the grass round crawled with yet more leeches, blind, horrid, persistent strips of living greed. The Apa Tanis found some wood, hacking down a dead tree and taking the dry heart from it, and we lit a fire and squatted round it in an unwalled hut, wiping our eyes as the bitter smoke eddied. The fire mitigated the icy damp a little, taking the edge off our misery, but we were still shaking with cold when the Nepalese porters came in, soaked and carrying soaking baggage, and the wet, pathetic, drifting flock of sheep. Only Ammon the ram, surveying the wretchedness round him with hard, yellow eyes, was unmoved by the discomfort.

On the way out we had had the tent, but that had now gone with Tim. No one had realized that this camp had no extra hut, so while the Zemi boys and the Apa Tanis squeezed into the porter-lines with the Nepalese, I made do with a shelter contrived from tarpaulins in a corner of an open shed. Although the rain had slackened, it was cheerless beyond belief; the floor was damp, the fire smoked, the wind blew dankly through and the hurricane-lamp on the table flickered behind a broken glass. I ate some supper and crawled into bed, and as I did so the rain came down again.

There was a sudden pattering and jostling and my bed

shook. I turned over and an overwhelming reek of wet wool met me, drowning even the smell of smoke; the shed was full of pushing and thrusting bodies. I turned up the lamp and looked straight into the baleful yellow eyes of Ammon. His nose was touching my pillow and his curling horns, sharp as daggers, shut me completely in. For a moment he and I stared at one another while I waited for the lunge. Then he lowered his nose and prodded my hand. He was a cold and neglected ram and he wanted comfort.

I sat on the edge of my bed and fed him with salt while the flock milled round us, bleating and struggling for room. The rain roared on the roof, the forest soughed, trickles from the wet world outside crawled into the hut and were carried off by the channels the Zemi boys had considerately dug, and the sheep established themselves among my furniture and boxes. When at last the flock was steaming companionably in a close-packed mass, I turned down the lamp again and crawled back between my blankets, and Ammon, as tame as an old spaniel, lay down and went to sleep by the head of the bed.

Our journey back to Kore was fitful and chequered. There was a thirteen-mile march in the heat of the day from the foot of the hill to the point where the trucks were waiting, and the Charduar head-clerk had sent out a pony for me. After the first hundred yards I dismounted and had it unsaddled and found a sore the size of my hand, so I told the Government syce what I thought of him and walked. There were three ferries to cross on the motor-road up the Assam Valley, and the monsoon-swollen rivers had fallen to a halfway level at which boats could neither reach the bank nor cars drive out to them. We waited six hours in the sun on the bank of the second river. A few yards from where we were was the unattainable ferry-boat, sundered from us by more water than the jeep and truck could go through. In the middle distance three

elderly labourers up to their waists in the river were very slowly building a wattle dam to divert the water from the creek. When at last their feeble barrier was finished, we all went down to the brink and watched the water, and very gradually indeed it sank the necessary six inches. The jeep crawled cautiously through, the truck waddled after, and as the boat's runways groaned up behind us the dam parted with a noise like a long sigh and the three old men waded out to repeat the process for the next vehicle. By the time we reached dry ground again it was already evening, and the third and last ferry closed at dusk. We tore along the white road with our backs to the sunset light, our wheeled shadows straddling grotesquely before us, but we were too late; when we reached the river the ferry-boat was moored on the far side and our hails brought no one. We bivouaced where we were among the bushes, and it rained heavily.

When we arrived in North Lakhimpur at noon next day, we found that there had been heavy floods. The motor-road to the base-camp was impassable and the first big bridge on the Kore track had been swept away. We spent all the next day getting porters, sheep, baggage and Apa Tanis to the base-camp on foot, staggering and slipping through ankle-deep black slime, and went to bed exhausted and caked with mud.

We were to march at dawn. The Zemi boys called me at three, and while they packed the baggage I stood in the hut porch in the cold dark and watched the camp rouse. The tall, thin forest trees which had been left here and there in the clearing hid the stars, and it was pitchy-black. All through the darkness people were moving. I could hear the scuffle of feet on the sandy soil and sometimes a lamp floated among the porter-lines on the other side of the clearing.

Suddenly a hand was slipped into mine. It slid in gently and confidently, sure of itself and me, and lay there relaxed and still. There was someone standing beside me in the dark,

someone I could not see, but I could feel a shoulder at the height of mine and the soft, rough-surfaced touch of an Assamese silk cloth such as Dafla women wore. There were people behind me, too, and I could hear breathing and whispers.

"Memsahib," one of them called. "It is Yalu, Kop Temi's wife. She has come to greet you."

So that was who it was. Yalu of the split head and the dazed look, Yalu whom we had taken from her drunken and savage husband and married off to Kop Temi. His village was across the river and six miles away, but Yalu had come in the dark before dawn—for this. To stand in the dark and speak to me in the only way we could talk, a way much better than by stumbling and twisted words which change their meaning in the passing; to stand there hand in hand and, if you like, mind in mind, sharing our common humanity, trust and compassion. We stood while the sky greyed and the light grew and the porters fell into line, and then we looked at one another in the dawn and smiled, and went back again to our own lives.

A few hundred yards beyond the base-camp was the Kimin river. It was still running waist-deep and the bridge over it had disappeared as though it had never existed. The clerks and base-camp staff lined the bank and watched anxiously as I and the Apa Tanis, propping ourselves against the current with long walking-sticks, edged our way across the slippery boulders and through clear, cold water which tore and swirled round us. The sheep came across on the porters' shoulders, Ammon facing the situation with his usual calm. We sweated up the climb to Selsemchi and reached it, tired, cold and sodden, to find the hut I had hoped to occupy in use as a ration store. There was nowhere for the Apa Tanis either, so we crowded in there together among the sacks, what little room there was reduced by the Dafla caretaker's overconscientious insistence that he sleep there too. On we struggled

next day, lurching and sliding over the storm-washed Tasser Puttu pass and through the leech-ridden jungle of the gorge; on the third night we reached Yazali, at the edge of the drier country and the Panior Basin hummocks. We marched on at dawn to Yatchuli and the dropping-ground, and there to my surprise and delight was a batch of Dafla relief-porters whom Siraj had sent down from Kore.

There was a gasp from them as Ammon and the flock trotted out on to the open space. Then with one accord they surged in on the sheep. In a gabble of noisy curiosity they clawed at the wool and snatched brutally at necks and legs, and when the ewes scattered, bleating in terror, there was a general laugh and they began to chase them. The Assam Rifles and I ran angrily to stop them, the Apa Tanis yelled abuse and the Nepalese downed loads and joined in, but Ammon was before us all. He lifted his great head. He snorted and glared at the crowd and took a few paces forward. In a second there was a receding ring, as from a stone in a pool, and eighty armed Daflas were fleeing to a safe distance—about two hundred yards—with their swords flailing and their heels twinkling. A grinning Nepalese rounded up the flock and started them along the path to Kore, Ammon stalking in the rear, and the Daflas, keeping well clear of him, took over the loads and followed. We marched off on the final eight-mile stage.

Kore was deserted except for the Assamese clerks and the Assam Rifles. Every Apa Tani had gone home to the valley for the harvest, and Tajo and the others with me went straight on there that night without even stopping to eat. Only Rüdo and Hage Tara's man, Landi Guro, a quiet, amiable *mura* from Hari, stayed on at Kore to help the Zemi boys and me deal with sheep, gardening, unpacking, washing, airing, sorting and all the other jobs which had to be done to make the house habitable.

As soon as everything was straightened out I packed up my cameras and started for the valley myself. The high woods had a breath of autumn about them now; the heavy green of summer was gone, the paths were drier and crisp brown leaves were beginning to gather on the ground. We passed the crest of the rim and dipped and meandered down the familiar trail with its ribbed steps of roots and detours round fallen trees, until the open sky ahead announced the end of the forest. We turned the last corner and looked down again on the valley.

I had seen it so perhaps fifty times, but it had never ceased to amaze me and leave me staring and silent, unable to comprehend but wanting to wrap up the incredible moment of experience and take it home to wonder over and treasure. For the valley was beautiful beyond belief. It was lovely with the wild, unearthly beauty which belonged to the Subansiri Area alone and to nowhere else, a frightening beauty, a beauty so grand and terrible that we had no right to see it; we had strayed into the world of the gods and were tasting forbidden pleasures. But, though I had seen the valley so often, I had never seen it as it was now. The whole floor was a sheet of old gold. Behind rolled the dark hills, blotched with swift-moving purple cloud-shadows. Round the acres and acres of ripe grain were the groves, broad smears of pine-green; the villages rose out of the lake of yellow as islands of trees and gardens, the weathered roofs barely visible, and as I watched a rainstorm swept down across the landscape in a column of grey.

In the morning Tajo and I set off early from Duta Pape. We walked for a couple of miles through fields of new stubble in the morning mist; it was like an English autumn sunrise, cool and fresh, with everything magically wrapped in illuminated vapour. All round us as we passed the harvest was in full swing. Unlike the Nagas, the Apa Tanis had no storehouses in their fields and all the grain they reaped in the day

had to be threshed and carried by nightfall, and since the main-crop rice and the millet ripened together, hundreds of tons of grain had to be moved in the three weeks of harvest. Long before daylight the boy and girl work-gangs were out, the younger children almost concealed by the crops in which they laboured; about half-past ten they jogged home to breakfast, little lines of basket-laden figures streaming swiftly along the narrow clay banks. For half an hour there was a lull while they ate their boiled rice and vegetables, with perhaps a little pork if they were lucky, and then at eleven o'clock every village spilled its population like a broken ant-hill. The young people's gangs were now augmented by the adults, whose household tasks were done, and every able-bodied soul of the twenty thousand in the valley joined a field-gang and went to work. From our vantage-point on Pape, now a wooded holm in the wind-rippled sea of grain, we watched them. Every path was black with bands of people streaming outwards. They rayed from the villages on the lines of a spider's-web, jigging away along the banks like mechanical ducks in a shooting-gallery, more and more pouring out as the leaders grew small in the distance, until even the stragglers were gone and there was nothing but the yellow sheet of rice and tiny, stooping figures visible here and there in it. Then at half-past two the entire movement was reversed and gang after gang came trotting in with their baskets packed with paddy. An hour later, at half-past three—three o'clock was *aji apin dudu*, "field-rice-eating," the second meal of the day—the villages again spewed out their workers by hundreds; again they streamed in lines down the banks and again vanished into the fields. As the light began to fail they made their final return. They came more raggedly now, the orderly field-gangs dissolving into smaller groups, and not till long after dark did the torch-lit rearguard come in, whooping, laden and well-filled with beer.

In the fields work was organized on a team basis. This was

in contrast to the Dafla practice, where each individual worker reaped, threshed and carried without reference to the others. Here the reapers, mostly women and boys, moved in front; they cut the straw about halfway down and passed the bunches back to a man standing behind them. He was the thresher. At his feet was a large basket of the kind called *yagre*. Hung inside the rim of this was a wooden board about the size and shape of a small hornbook, and as each bunch was handed to him he beat the ears against the board so that the grains fell into the basket; the straw he dropped to one side, to be used later for thatching. (Daflas, who had grass or leaves with which to thatch, let their straw go to waste.) When the grain-basket was full it was taken to a mat spread on the ground a few yards further to the rear and there emptied on a growing pile; when there was as much as the workers could carry, each filled his or her basket and the party trotted back to the village, joining the other convering lines of workers pouring down the field-banks, down the paths, down the main thoroughfares and into the villages—thousands and thousands of baskets of grain, reaped, threshed and carried, day in, day out, from cockcrow till nightfall, by teeming, tireless, little human ants.

When we returned to the valley again ten days later the golden sea of grain had gone, leaving fields of bare stubble in which cattle strayed and grazed. The Apa Tani harvest was over.

16

The Hands of Lyagi Dübo

ON THE hill above Kore there was a vewpoint from which one looked out on the world below, on the roofs of the outpost cropping out of the trees a thousand feet down, on Talo, a minute cluster of toy houses fifteen hundred feet below that, and on the Panior Basin, a knobbed and monotonous waste rolling southwards towards the Panior River and the gorge. It was a regular stopping-place on the way from Duta to Kore. One sat on the knee of hill, shedding guns, haversacks and cameras, leaned back on the short grass and lit a cigarette, and waited till the porters had caught up and one's calf-muscles were ready for the final plunge to the back door of the Great Hall. There I and Hage Tara, the young Hari interpreter, halted one afternoon in October. I had been over to Duta and had returned in a hurry on hearing that Tim was on his way home from Balipara at last; the porters had gone on while Tara and I were talking to Kago Bida in Haja, and now we were a good twenty minutes behind the main body. As we came to the edge of the hill and sat down I saw the tail of the column jogging solemnly past the gardens far below.

"Ami Sante," said Tara abruptly, out of a silence. He used my native name, the Apa Tani version of "Mother Ursula." "I am in great trouble."

"Why, Tara, what's the matter?"

"It's a feud. I may have to kill a man."

"Oh, dear," I said. Interpreters with blood feuds were a very awkward problem.

"It is doubly difficult for me," he went on, "because I am a Government servant. I am expected to set an example and the Sahib would be extremely angry if I went out and killed someone, as that is not the Government custom."

"Without doubt," I agreed, "he would be enraged."

"But my clan is involved. I have already been spoken to sharply for not going out with the other young men. Indeed, because of my position as a Government interpreter I am expected to be braver and stronger and cleverer than anyone else and to take a leading part." Tara looked exceedingly gloomy. "I think I had better see the Sahib and ask him what I should do. It may be," he added more hopefully, "that he will forbid me to join in. I could not disobey the Sahib."

When we reached the Great Hall, dropping down the spur above the Apa Tani interpreter's lines, we found pandemonium. A flock of thirty more sheep was milling about on the grass outside the front door, herded by a hard-pressed Nepalese. Inside the hall Tim was sitting at a camp-table. Before him were Siraj, the Assam Rifles Subedar and the trade-goods clerk, all posing problems and asking for orders. Round this inner circle was a ring of litigants, and outside them was a clamouring mob of Daflas demanding cloth.

Even when the others had been disposed of, the cloth-hunters unfortunately remained. Since the Panior Daflas neither spun nor wove they depended largely on the plains for their textiles, but there was a cloth-famine in India, and as they lived beyond the frontier, they were outside the rationing scheme. The Area's allotment for the year was barely enough for the clerks, but the merest rumour of cloth in our store brought the Daflas streaming in from miles around. They worked on the theory that if they only made enough fuss we

should in the end give in, and the badgered Tim spent the rest of the day repeating "No! No!" to inquirers as maddeningly persistent as horse-flies.

Towards evening there was an incident. Public audience was over for the day and the Great Hall had been cleared, but a group of Daflas remained in the doorway, still shouting at him for cloth. Tim, who had had little food and no respite at all since dawn, told them finally that he had nothing for them and hurried off by the back door to some business in the Assam Rifles' lines. As he disappeared a big, heavily armed Dafla yelled abuse after him in Assamese. Tim did not hear, but it could not be allowed to pass. There were a number of people present and we stood to lose too much "face." I jumped up, therefore, grabbed a burning stick—the best weapon available—hurdled the fire and ran at the Dafla, intending to make a demonstration. But when I reached the door he wasn't there. I glared round for him and the crowd giggled, and then I looked down the hill; two hundred yards away on the steep path to Talo my enemy was running like a scared rabbit and still gaining speed. His sword was clutched under his arm, his leather wallet flew behind him, his helmet-feather streamed on the wind. As I stood there gaping, he shot round the bend by the store and scudded out of sight, and the episode ended in laughter.

Night had fallen before Tim and I had a chance to talk.

"Ah, the treaty-payments!" he said, sitting down on the side of his camp-bed and peeling off his damp socks. "Well, the *dzongpons* came down to Dirang from Tawang in a smart cavalcade with all the usual trappings, but their hats were unique. One had a pleated sunbonnet in oiled yellow paper and the other a glazed pagoda with floral decorations."

"And how did the ceremony go off?"

"Very well. I gave them the maroon cloth and the liquor and the money. There was no counting the cash or anything

common like that. Achung and I dumped it on the table in thousand-rupee bags, and they took it up. It was very mediaeval and satisfying. They gave the Government a pony, a gold ring, a yak's tail and a couple of porcelain cups, which all had to be auctioned off when I got back to Charduar. I bought the cups as souvenirs."

"And the Seven Kings of Rupa?"

"They came to the foothills for their money and they were all pretty scruffy except one, who had curly-toed knee-boots of lovely soft leather, scarlet brocade breeches, a Tibetan coat trimmed with silver braid and a yellow pixie hat with a fur border." Tim looked down wistfully at his worn jungle-green drill, stained and tattered by many marches. "I wish I could wear scarlet brocade breeches and a fur-edged pixie hat. They ought to issue a costume like that as a uniform for Political Officers. We're not nearly striking enough. Anyway, how's the valley?"

"Oh, the harvest was terrific, all gold and purple and green and the population running round like ants. Everyone's very well and there are lots of good rows. There's a squabble between Haja and Hari—" I felt in my breast-pocket for my notebook, turned the pages and read out: " 'Danyi Pilya of Haja (now dead) stole Kago Gat's valuable dish and left it with Tasso Talu of Hari, who took it away to sell, but was detected. Kago Gat then kidnapped Danyi Pilya's son. Danyi Pilya seized Tasso Talu. Therefore Tasso Talu, presumably after ransom, has captured Tak Kimle, who is the maternal uncle of both Kago Gat and Kago Tajo.' "

"Can *anybody* make head or tail of that?" asked Tim, after a moment of blank silence.

"Presumably God and the *buliang* can, and the latter seem to think they'll settle it. I've had to sack two of our Hari porters—one of them had kidnapped his prospective mother-in-law because his fiancée had run off with the other, whom

she liked better, so there was a certain amount of tension in the lines. And, oh, yes! Hari's right in the news. They've had a scrap with Mudang Tage and a Hari man's been killed. Hage Tara says he's got a blood feud on his hands, and I expect it's that. He wants to ask your advice."

"We can see him after supper. Will you have first bath, or shall I?"

The hearth of the Great Hall was the centre of our small community and there after dark came the interpreters, servants and tribal porters, gravitating to the warmth and space of the big fireplace. While Tim and I worked by the lamp on the table they toasted themselves at the fire, mended cane haversacks, made baskets or merely gossiped, and we listened and joined in when the mood took us. A curtain of grey blankets was drawn across the Hall, turning the end where we were into a room full of warmth and light; rain dripped from the eaves into the silted runnels below and made the place seem warmer by comparison with the chill outside. Five big logs burned on the square hearth, and the bamboo matting behind it was hung with odds and ends belonging to the household, baskets, a bookshelf, a calendar, headstraps for carrying loads, long swords in sheaths with bearskin slings, cloaks, and the hide pouches which were universal repositories for Apa Tani possessions. Round the hearth sat and sprawled half a dozen Apa Tanis. The harsh white lamplight could not kill the red glow of the flames on their naked brown bodies; their grey porter-blankets, worn like copes, fell in heavy folds, there was a glint of light on their brass hair-skewers, and fang ornaments gleamed on their bare chests.

There was a quick, light step in the cold stretch of hall behind the curtain and young Tara came through. He shook back his blanket cloak, hitched up a log to sit on, sank down beside Rika and spread his hands to the fire.

"Ah!" said Tim. "What's all this about Mudang Tage?"

Tara explained that about a week before the harvest began some Hari men of his clan had gone over to Mudang Tage. Their intention was to cut a swathe in the crops of a Mudang Tage man with whom one of them had a dispute and induce him to come to a settlement before the litigation-season ended. But the man, whose name was Lyagi Dübo, refused to retire to his house in the accepted way and leave them to do their will. He summoned a band of his friends and came out to resist; there was a short and untidy scuffle and a Hari man was killed. The victim's kin held Lyagi Dübo responsible although he was not the actual slayer, for his unwarranted breach of custom had touched off the disastrous affair, and a few days after the fight a large armed band of them arrived to kill him. The Mudang Tage villagers endorsed their action by sitting passively on their balconies to watch the raiders go by. But the house was empty and Lyagi Dübo and his family had fled, so the Hari men chopped through his house-supports as an earnest of their intentions and marched off home again, and the moment they were out of sight the Mudang Tage people, taking a pessimistic view, propped the house up on piles once more so as to be ready for Lyagi Dübo's body. At present, Tara said, Dübo's wife and family had ventured home and were living in the house, but Lyagi Dübo himself, hunted by the Hari men and fed secretly by his kinsmen, was living like a wild animal in the woods.

Apart from warning Hage Tara to take no hand in the feud, Tim said nothing at the time. He was gravely disturbed, however, and the next morning he sent for Kop Temi and the two talked it over at the hearth of the Great Hall, which at that hour of the day was deserted. But talk as they would, there was nothing to be done. This was no isolated act of private vengeance, but a recognized penal procedure, sanctioned and approved by the community. The case was clear in Apa Tani customary law, and the man's own villagers, who, if anyone,

should have intervened, had acquiesced in his punishment. There was not the shadow of a right to interfere, and until the Government could introduce its own legal code it must respect the extant tribal ones. Only if Lyagi Dübo sought the protection of the flag could they help him.

And that was just what Lyagi Dübo did not do. He did not flee to the plains, where the Government would have given him shelter, nor take refuge at Kore, where Tim would have been bound to protect him. As with all Apa Tanis, the valley meant everything to him, and though it cost him his life, he would not leave it, not even though the lovely, peaceful, tinted bowl lay below him now like a lost haven. Weeks passed and, to everyone's amazement, he was still at large. We thought of him often as we walked through the woods of the rim or looked up at them from the valley, those spreading, blanketing, calm forests, like the soft and strokable coat of a great beast, which hid such a human tragedy. Then the weather grew colder and the winter frosts began, and we hoped against hope for him—hoped that he was hiding in the plains, that he had fled to a Dafla village or that he had quit the woods and was safe.

The end came with the new year. Perhaps his kinsmen had grown careless, or perhaps the Hari scouts did their work too well. One morning an armed party stalked the daughter who was smuggling him food and found him in a lonely ravine. He met his end among the rocks and mosses of a spring and in the twilight of the forest, fighting one to their dozen, and it did not last long. His hacked and mutilated body—"They cut it too much, too much," said Kop Temi, reporting. "It was not like a man at all"—came home that night at last to the shored-up house and Lyagi Dübo's long agony was over.

There remained the final act. On a bright winter morning we went over from Pape to Hari, winding down the narrow clay banks between the patchwork of dry fields. The stubble

was white with rime, there was ice on the pools, the sky was blue and there was pale golden sunlight. The people of the Subansiri Area took hands, not heads, and we were on our way at Hari's special invitation to see and photograph their triumphant *ropi* ceremony over those of Lyagi Dübo, the man we had never seen but would out of pity have saved, the criminal his village had repudiated, the murderer who had paid the price. Hari had done what their law laid down as right and to have refused their summons would have been a deliberate insult, so we went.

When we reached the village, whose roofs and *bobo* poles climbed from the rice fields' edge up a low hill, the Hage quarter was loud with the sound of chanting, and twice as we threaded our way through the town we were pressed to the side of an alley by long files of warriors dancing by. We passed the Hage *nago* shrine, where the hands had been kept for the night—the little thatched hut on stilts was decorated for the occasion—and moved on up a lane to the assembly platform. It stood at the foot of a long, rising street and had an open space in front of it. On either side the towering balconies of the houses were packed to bursting with people; the platform itself was jammed. The Hari elders, knowing how we liked to see and photograph everything, had earmarked a small knoll for us on the right, and we struggled through the crowd to it and turned to look around us.

In front of the assembly platform was a curious, decorated structure of grass and bamboo. This was a "spirit-house" of the kind always made for major ceremonies, and Rika whispered to me that it stood at the spot where Lyagi Dübo's hands had been burned that morning. As the crowd parted for a moment I saw that close before it on the ground there was a patch of grey ash. Tethered close by was a young mithan, and beside the beast were two priests in war capes, gesturing at the animal with their swords and chanting loud

incantations. On the assembly platform above a man stood and blew harsh, moaning blasts on a buffalo-horn trumpet, and the chant of the dancing warriors swelled and faded as they circled through the mazy alleys of the Hage quarter.

The chanting rose suddenly to a peak and shrill, triumphant yells and war-cries rose above it.

"They are at the house of the man who was killed," said Rika. "They are telling his parents he has been avenged."

The crowd began to pour out of the narrow alley leading to the *nago*, and black against the sun, we saw the tossing spears of the warriors as they danced towards us. They passed the assembly platform, the spectators pressing back to give them room until we were almost knocked off our feet, and then they began to circle the spirit-house and the priests. The priests' chanting quickened. The frightened mithan backed, tugging and struggling, to the far end of its rope; the numbers in the centre increased as more and more warriors gathered, and we craned out over tousled heads and bristling hair-skewers, a tight-packed jam of villagers, at a jogging, bobbing, clamouring sea of helmets, spears and brandished swords.

Now there was wild excitement and shouting in the dense mob of men round the priests and the sacrificial beast. In the middle of the group the incantations suddenly ceased; a sword flashed, the mithan's severed head fell, spouting blood; there was a surge of men over the still-kicking carcass, and two warriors caught up the head and tossed it from one to the other over the tasselled spirit-house. Up went the dust in a cloud over the swirling, stamping horde as the dancing began again with redoubled frenzy; blood from the flying head spattered the warriors and the crowd, and over the leaping, yelling, surging, exultant chaos the war-horn brayed repeatedly.

17

The Bagi Raid

WHILE Lyagi Dübo was still hiding in the woods—indeed, not long after Hage Tara first told us about him—the monsoon blew itself out in a fierce scatter of rain, and winter and the travelling-season were on us. We began to look to the north and the road over the top of Pad Puttu, to remember the dried maize-stalks in our camp at Gami in the Palin Valley, the long, smoky houses of Tasser, and the little path to the wonders of the unexplored lands, the narrow, delectable, worn path which meandered up the Beuri hill and into the unknown. The bracken grew crisp, the hilltops were sharp against the sky, the cool air invited to marching, and our beloved, familiar Kore was suddenly irksome and prisoning.

We planned to go first to Kirom. The final peace-treaty between the Licha Daflas and the Apa Tanis was still to be made and this would take several days. Then we would move on by the Yapup pass, over the slippery trail through the forest and down the steep slope to the fields of Tasser and the deep ravine of the Palin, and make a last attempt to reach Lebla and the Upper Khru; the indomitable Dr. Bhattacharjee was to go with us and so were the wizened, clown-faced old warrior-priest Chigin Nime and the safe, solid, wise Kop Temi. Siraj would be in charge of the porters and a reserve supply-train would be ready to follow us up if we managed to break through.

The loads had been packed and the porters mustered when word came from North Lakhimpur that Temi had been delayed and could not reach Kore before the middle of November. It was a waste of time to move without him, so we postponed our start for a fortnight and cast round for something else to do. Sometimes crucial moments announce themselves and you have a hunch that they are going to matter, but sometimes they creep up on you unawares and only afterwards do you realize with a shock that at that instant of time your life and the lives of others clicked over invisible points and took a new track; this was just such a hidden crisis. Looking back on it afterwards, we saw that the news from Temi and our decision to postpone the start were the first hints that we were launched on an unexpected course, the first subtle signs that things were going wrong. The ultimate origins of what happened undoubtedly lay further back still, perhaps when one of Temi's wives felt unwell, perhaps immeasurably earlier, in some obscure and ill-starred chain of circumstances; but whatever and whenever the beginning may have been, the result was—because Temi did not come, because we waited for him, because we were therefore not in Kirom on the day we planned—to change our lives and break our hearts and destroy eighteen people in a night of fire and horror. The terrible web of human life was briefly visible, the least act fraught with incalculable, infinite possibilities stretching far beyond the individual span, and the grim deities who amuse themselves with men looked at the dark pattern and laughed.

But all this was hidden then, on the day we disbanded the porters at Kore. The camp at Duta Pape was in a shocking state. The huts were crumbling and earthquake-shaken and were too small for their present purpose, so we packed up trade-goods and money and transferred ourselves to Pape to rebuild them. The crucial moment had passed and the new set of events was in train, but the eighteen people were still

alive, and we were still happy because we believed that in spite of the delay we were going to go on our exploring trip after all and reach Lebla and the Upper Khru and find name and fame. So we ran down the path from the forest into the valley and hurried cheerfully along the field-banks to Pape.

When we arrived there, Tim, Siraj and the Assam Rifles Naik who was to be building foreman studied the site. It was already in use as the Duta graveyard; on the east side the turf swelled up in a close-packed series of humps like large mole-hills, some firm and green, and some still new and earthy and stuck with valedictory bamboos—the mounds of Apa Tani graves. On the west side, nearest Haja, the ground had been smoothed and flattened by use and the grave-mounds worn away, and it was here the existing camp stood. Since there was no other site and no room to expand, they decided to do away with the porter-shelter (the Apa Tani carriers preferred to sleep in their villages) and build a new bungalow on the spot, turn the old officers' hut into clerks' quarters, the old clerks' quarters into interpreters' lines and the old interpreters' lines into the bungalow kitchen. A purchasing commission—Tim, Nada Rika and myself—collected bamboo, timber and cane, Siraj recruited a hundred Apa Tani labourers, and the game of General Post began.

It opened with the Naik and his gang gingerly digging post-holes between the grave-shafts of long-dead Apa Tanis, while Tim directed operations from a plan drawn on the back of an old envelope. To avoid the intruding villagers who made life such a nightmare, we decided to build our house ten feet off the ground, to heave it up on a shelf, to make a private sanctuary of it, like a child's house in a tree. It would stand on a forest of piles like a seaside pier. There would be a projecting porch in front, two main rooms behind and a pantry and bathroom leading off them, and access would be by a main staircase to the porch; the steeply pitched, gabled roof

would be high to draw off the smoke and the walls would be double for warmth.

In the next stage a maze of posts sprouted out of the soil, and pine-trunks two and three feet thick stood in an intricate disarray which was the Apa Tanis' translation of Tim's gridiron plan. The clamorous confusion which accompanied all Subansiri Area building supervened. The Apa Tanis had never seen a straight line in their lives and were ignorant of accurate measurement. They cut the posts off three inches, six inches, a foot too short. They dropped them and split them. Tim, Siraj and the Naik instructed, cursed and cajoled. Rika and I trudged round the pine groves finding more trees. Then at last beams and a floor were laid and the roof-tree went up, and a skeleton house stood white and raw among the swarming Apa Tani workers, the piles of split bamboos, the half-made matting and the untidy heaps of thatch on which small boys bounced and played until driven off.

At about this stage a number of Apa Tani notables on whom we had called in the summer arrived with the traditional presents to friends building a house, and we held social gatherings in the verandah of the old hut, admiring the rising structure and discussing its unusual layout. Tim, it appeared, was the Frank Lloyd Wright of the Apa Tani Valley. Then the wall-matting went on, and the rafters and the thatch, and there wasn't enough grass and Siraj had to hurry to Talo to find some more, and the hearths were put in and the hanging anti-spark trays in the Apa Tani style, and one day the final tie was tied and the house was ours. And then, after all that, it was no more exactly what we had intended than the Great Hall was. If the Hall were Bronze Age, the new building was Pseudo-Tudor. The floor sloped all ways at once, the roof was resolutely mediaeval, the front porch swooped up as though designed for launching space-rockets and the stairs were a destroyer's bridge-ladder in bamboo. But it was cool and quiet,

and from our Olympian height we stared down detachedly at antlike human activity below, on the smooth turf of Pape, the dwarfed and smoky huts adjoining and the wide channel of fields which separated the island from Haja. We called the house "Crazy Gables" and came to love it.

While the building was in progress, I set up a rice-buying agency in the back verandah of a hut; the airdrop having been cancelled, we had to buy as much of the Apa Tani rice surplus as we could. My assistants were Tara's man, Landi Guro, the pleasant *mura* from Hari, and our own Haj Koda. Our equipment was a primitive pair of scales, our capital was sacks of wool and our small change was safety-pins and matches. Our customers were Apa Tani ladies who came in basket-laden gangs, blue beads hanging in heavy swathes on their chests, their enormous and always very dirty earrings jangling and their hair screwed up into neat little shining cones on the very top of their heads.

Business had scarcely begun when it appeared that Koda and I had diametrically opposed ideas on commercial morality. Koda, like all Apa Tanis, was a born twister, and learned to manipulate the scales almost at once. I presently caught him giving outrageously short weight and called him into the inner hut and scolded him for dishonesty. To my astonishment he exploded indignantly back.

"No!" he said, facing me angrily among the bales of wool. "It is you who are dishonest! You have no idea how trading is carried on, and by forbidding me to manipulate the scales you cheat the Government of its rightful profit!"

"But Koda, the Government must be honest in all things—"

"If that is so," he retorted crushingly, "why do all the ration-clerks at Kore do it?"

The clerks' incessant peculations were such a sore problem that I changed the subject quickly. In the end he and I settled down to a guerrilla war, I pouncing out to deal with his

more visible lapses, and he weighing more or less honestly as long as he thought I was looking. My notions caused him real distress, the more so as our scales could be made to weigh almost anything and the possible profits were great, but he tried not to offend me too much. Only once did his feelings get the better of him. One day a regular surge of women came in towards evening; we were all working flat out, the dark was falling and our customers were clamouring for us to hurry and let them go. To save time I tossed a woman a ready-made-up bundle of a pound of wool, and Koda, touched to the quick, pursued me back into the store and caught me reproachfully by the arm.

"Oh, Memsahib!" he said in a fierce stage whisper. "Why do you rob the Government so? If you had let me reweigh that I could have made a pound and a half of it!"

The middle of the month arrived and our revised departure date drew near, and Tim went off down the road to clear up the one or two matters still outstanding. There was firstly the garrison's relief. There was no room for both the incomers and the outgoers at Kore, so the hand-over was to take place at the Yatchuli dropping-ground, the departing platoon marching down in the morning and the new contingent marching up in the afternoon. Secondly, there was the Panior Bridge, whose annual repair was just completed. The most vulnerable point in our line of communication, it spanned two hundred feet of fast-flowing torrent which was unfordable for six months at a stretch; its narrow bamboo footway carried all our supply traffic of several thousand loads a year, and if it broke, we should starve. Bamboos for the footway and canes for the lesser ties could be found in the near-by jungle, but the main suspension-ropes were a serious problem, for they must be at least three hundred feet long and without a join. Such canes were hard to find and grew only in the remote forest on inaccessible summits, and even for the fast-travelling

Daflas it might take a week to fetch one. The bridge was too important to be left to the sole responsibility of even Siraj, and Tim must go on from Yatchuli to inspect it himself. He set off from Kore one morning early in November, expecting to be away a week, and I went back to Duta Pape to complete the huts and send the rice we had amassed to Kore.

On the fourth day after he left I was wakened in the early morning by a scratching on the bamboo door. It was still almost dark and there was no sign of Lunchiwong, who brought the tea and hot water at seven; instead, I could see the dark loom of a figure in the verandah, a tall, cloaked, bulky Apa Tani figure. I recognized Koda.

"What's the matter?"

"I've been sent from the village to fetch you. Someone's been badly burned."

Accidents were common at the open Apa Tani fires, but only a real emergency would have made them send for help at that hour. The doctor was down the road with Tim and there was no one else to go. I tumbled out of bed—we always slept fully clothed in the bitter winter weather—crammed on a scarf and windcheater, and began to pull bandages and ointments out of the medicine-chest and pack them into the first-aid bag. Then I joined Koda in the grey, new-born daylight and the vicious chill and set off with him out of the camp, shouting at the shuttered cookhouse as we passed to tell the boys I should be late for breakfast. We dropped off the steep earth bank of the island and hurried across the fields, Koda jogging before me with his odd, bobbing Apa Tani gait.

A thin mist hung, clinging in the treetops and trailing low over the roofs. The eight tall pines of Pape towered into it, their giant trunks growing dimmer till they vanished in the grey obscurity; groves and islands darkened into existence like images on a photographic plate and paled again into nothing as the mist eddied; there was no one astir in the valley except

ourselves. Koda took me into Haja by the Tak-Taru quarter instead of by the more usual route through the Nada section, and we entered by a narrow lane ankle-deep in half-frozen filth. As I was getting my bearings he plunged down a minute passage between the packed houses and I was again lost. We hurried through the maze of back alleys and somewhere at the rear of the quarter, not far, as I judged, from a main street, we came to a house giving on a small open space. Koda ran up the log ladder and signed to me to come in, and I followed him through the low door and into the blackness inside.

We sat down by the fire to wait till our eyes grew accustomed to the dark. There were people sitting all round us; someone opposite—he sat in the host's place, and I guessed he was the master of the house—called out to someone else invisible; there was scuffling, and unknown hands threw pine-slivers on the dull red embers of the fire. They caught tentatively and then spluttered and flared up. The yellow flames leaped, I smelled the heavy, resinous smoke and the house was suddenly lit. We were in a ring of Apa Tanis, men, women and children, the light shining on the men's hair-skewers, the women's bare breasts and on the children's faces, oddly pale and unweathered compared with those of their elders, peering out elfishly from under wild locks of black hair. I looked round to my right and saw the man we had come to see.

He was a middle-aged Apa Tani, and except where his tunic had protected him the front of his body was a sheet of burns. Face, chest, arms, thighs and feet were skinned and sloughing, eyelids and ears were blistered, eyebrows and lashes were gone, and on the outside of his arms, which he must have thrown up to protect his head, the burns had destroyed the skin and bitten deeply into the flesh and muscle below.

It was so cold even in the house that every so often Koda

had to stop interpreting and thaw out the sulphanilamide ointment at the fire. The master of the house, who seemed to be the burned man's son, fed the fire with pinewood to give us light. I snipped away dead skin, cleaned and swabbed; Koda smeared sheets of lint with ointment and handed them to me; I laid them on the burned areas and bandaged, weaving the broad white strips over in the intricacies laid down by the Red Cross Manual. The Apa Tani talked and Koda translated.

Reports that the British were leaving India had reached the Daflas, and to them this meant only one thing, the end of all control and the withdrawal of the outpost at Kore. The Kirom Daflas, whom nothing but the fear of troops had kept from their savage raiding, had for some time past maintained spies in Talo to watch our movements and see if the report were true. When they saw the garrison march out and Tim follow they immediately concluded that it was, and ignoring the building at Pape, the store-convoys passing up the track and the large civilian staff left at Kore, they raced back over the range with the news that the troops had gone. Had they only waited half a day they would have seen the relief march in, but they did not stay an hour. The Kirom men's help had been enlisted by a certain man of Bagi who had a twenty-five-year-old quarrel with two households in his own village, a quarrel so ancient and forgotten that it was ideal for treachery and surprise, and as soon as they received the news they called the intended victims to a peace conference. The four delegates who arrived were seized, tied up to the house-posts and butchered horribly at leisure. A raiding-party was ready; with it were many of our self-styled friends from the Palin and Hidjat, Khoda Talom and the Dadum men, and a contingent sent by Beuri Hasse, Chigin Nime's friend. The warlike Tasser, to their credit, honoured their understanding with Tim

and abstained. In the small hours the raiders set out for the unguarded long-houses.

The Apa Tani had been to trade in Bagi and had gone to spend the night in a friend's house. In the dark before dawn there was a sudden uproar, a sharp crackle of flame and a smell of smoke. The raiders had surrounded the two houses and fired the ends where the doors were, and were cutting down any inmates who managed to break out. In the Dafla way, the other people in the village did nothing to help; it was not their war, and they simply lined their balconies and watched. The houses flamed like torches, like tinder, the fire running through the dry bamboos. Inside, there was ghastly confusion as screaming women and children fought to escape, or fell and roasted, and as the Apa Tani hacked with his sword at the blazing wall four children shrivelled and died alongside him. He broke out, clothes smouldering, and rushed through the smoke. A Dafla lunged at him with a spear, but another who saw he was an Apa Tani shouted, and the spear missed. He ran on, stumbling over bodies. He reached the jungle and staggered into it and was suddenly caught and steadied by another Haja man, an acquaintance who had been in an unmolested house. Together they struggled back the twelve or fifteen miles to Haja, the unhurt trader half-carrying his agonized friend, and they had reached safety late on the night after the raid. The Apa Tani did not know what the death-roll was, but it must undoubtedly be heavy. Most of the victims were women and children, for, raiding having ceased within reach of Kore, the Bagi people had been sleeping at home instead of in the woods.

When the dressing was finished I hurried back to Pape. Rika and Tajo were there, and I sent them off to Haja to round up the Bagi survivors, who were said to be trickling in, and I myself sat down and wrote a report to Tim.

18

Aftermath

TIM found the rebuilt bridge hanging safe and new, and set off up the river for a day's fishing. The water had cleared, conditions were at their best; the fish were taking well and life could hardly have been better. Into this sunlit content my letter dropped like a bomb, and he returned by forced marches.

When he arrived he found me compounding sulphanilamide ointment with my cold cream, the burned Apa Tani's needs having exhausted all our vaseline. I don't think either of us really understood at that time the implications of what had happened. When an unheralded cataclysm occurs, when, say, a volcanic island blows up, it takes the inhabitants a little while to adjust to their new situation; their minds are still set in the accustomed channels and they do not realize at once that they cannot go to the market for food, because the market is flat, or to the police-station for help, because the police-station is buried under a mound of ash. So it was with us. Some days passed before we grasped that the north was lost to us forever and that our hopes of exploration were dust, and I shall not easily forget the shock when we did. But when Tim first returned to Pape there seemed nothing much to worry about except the immediate horror of the raid, the rescue of any prisoners and the need to restore order.

Information and Bagi survivors were coming along in dribs and drabs; all the men of Kirom were implicated, and the scar-faced Licha Sera was said to have hacked two of the betrayed delegates to death with his own hand; the total death-roll was believed to be eighteen, of whom four were men and the rest women and children. Most of the missing had now reappeared from the jungle or from unaffected houses in Bagi, but one, a man who had worked for us once as a porter-sirdar, was known to be a prisoner in Kirom's hands. The Apa Tani villages were humming with excitement. The buzz redoubled when Tim returned, and it mounted still more when the last of the new troops reached Kore. They arrived in two or three instalments, and paradoxically enough, this made more impression than a massed entry. I suppose there looked more of them.

We knew that the Kirom men were in touch with Apa Tani friends and the news reached them almost at once. It must have come on them like a thunderclap; they had miscalculated horribly; they must have felt the gods had cheated them. They knew what happened to villages which defied the Government, for the mild punitive measures against them in 1945 had frightened them beyond all reason; ambushes they understood, raids and counter-raids they knew, but disciplined, organized, steady, rifle-armed troops were as terrifying and incomprehensible to them as a Martian horde. They set up a howl of rage and fear and—duly relayed to us through Haja—volleys of hysterical threats to burn Kore, murder Tim and sell me as a slave in the interior if the Government lifted a finger against them. When nobody answered back they found the silence ominous and the screams of hate grew louder.

We now had to face the fact that militarily our situation was far from strong. Because of the cancelled airdrop and rationing difficulties the garrison was at half-strength, twenty-five instead of fifty men; the outgoing platoon had been

seasoned troops who had seen two years' guerrilla warfare against the Japs and knew their trade from A to Z, but the newcomers were young reserves who had never been in danger in their lives. In view of the Daflas' record of cowardice it was unlikely—fortunately for us—that they would attack the outpost in strength, but a tip-and-run raid or a pounce on our long and exposed line of communication was possible. The best defence was to forestall them and regain the initiative, so Tim went back to a sentry-girdled Kore to organize a patrol and I stayed on at Pape to spend my two freezing hours a day attending to the burned Apa Tani.

Just after dark had fallen that day Rika came in from Haja. He flicked his cloak back and sat down at the hearth in the living-room of the new house, stretching out his hands to the fire. His prim and yet kindly face had a tense look. He said, "There is a report in Haja that the Kirom men intend to attack here tonight."

"This camp?"

"Yes."

I pulled a face. We had thought that Pape, of all places, would be safe, right in the middle of the crowded Apa Tani Valley.

"I can't get the Sahib back now, Rika. It'd be dawn before anyone could be here."

"That is so. It may be that the story is a lie. The Daflas tell many lies. But I felt I should let you know."

"I've got a shotgun and cartridges. Let's hope they don't come."

When Rika had gone, I looked round the house. It was damnably inflammable, and to make things worse, the space between the piles below was stuffed with dry grass for thatching. The roof had been leaking and Siraj was preparing to mend it. I walked round all the rooms and looked out of the windows, studying the routes to the ground; it was a long

jump, but with a foothold outside I could make it at a pinch. I took out the shotgun and cartridges and put them on the floor by the bed, and then crawled into my sleeping-bag and lay there, thinking. I wasn't particularly scared, but I didn't like the situation much either. The only comfort was, funnily enough, that there was nothing to do about it, for the way out was to take shelter in Haja and that would have let the Daflas get us on the run. Either they'd raid or they wouldn't, I said to myself among the blankets, and if they didn't there was nothing to worry about. If they did, I could worry about it when the time came.

I was tired and went to sleep quickly, the darkness rushing over me before I was aware. When I woke, it was an ordinary, plain day, grey and very cold, and nobody had set fire to anything or even tried to. Another episode in the war of nerves was over. I got up and went downstairs and set Koda and Buda, who had now returned from the village, to moving the thatching-grass out from under the house.

By the time the patrol was ready, after four days' unavoidable delay, our intelligence service in Haja had something interesting to report. The Kirom men were about to visit the instigator of the raid at his home in Bagi and divide up the loot. A quick swoop might round up the lot. The next problem was where the patrol should start from. The path from Kore to Bagi led right through Talo and any movement of troops would be reported instantly to Kirom, and Pape, which was otherwise better, was also watched by people in touch with the enemy. In the end we decided on Pape and evolved a protective ruse, though without much hope that it would work.

Early on the chosen morning Tim came over from Kore. There was a white frost and a magical, pearly mist was still steaming off the crisp fields when he appeared; he stalked out of the sunlit wreaths of vapour as a looming, shadowy figure,

a materialization from some wonderland beyond. He announced to our Apa Tanis that some of the Assam Rifles would arrive later on and give an entertainment next day. (The last platoon's concert-party had been very popular.) Kop Temi was already at Pape, impassively keeping the secret, and Bat Heli was in Haji, sounding the Bagi survivors to find a guide.

It was extraordinary how the simple piece of deception spread a peculiar, strained, conspiratorial feeling through the camp. The most innocent comings and goings became suddenly mysterious and the movements of actual participants were as doom-ridden as the knocking in *Macbeth*. The Apa Tanis were intensely curious, pressing, questioning and prying. Neither Tim nor I was a good liar and by noon we were perjured past redemption, but because we had always told the truth before, the Apa Tanis believed us in spite of themselves —or at least they suspended disbelief for the few hours which mattered. Only Rika was not fooled. In that taut and abnormal atmosphere we could no more have hidden our minds from him than our faces; he was always so much closer to us and more in sympathy with us than the others, and he knew as clearly as though we had told him. But he could be trusted and he asked no questions.

The Assam Rifles arrived at dusk, a dim, slouch-hatted line crunching booted down the narrow path. The platoon comedian danced along at their head for the benefit of any who saw; a few small boys trailed him into camp, gazed fascinated at him, and then drifted off home as darkness fell.

Tim and I had supper together in the big house and afterwards he went to get ready. All of a sudden Koda, who had come across from the kitchen on some errand or other, burst in bulging-eyed.

"The sepoys are gathering! They're armed! Are they going to attack Kirom?"

Outside I could hear the rattle of bolts, the snapping home of magazines, and a shuffle of feet and murmur of voices as the patrol fell in. There was still time for someone to get to Kirom ahead of them if the news reached Haja, and I caught Koda by the arm and pushed him down by the fire.

"*Talia-to!*" I said. "Be quiet!"

Kago Tajo, who had stayed late, looked at me with a fallen jaw. His mouth gaped and his slanting eyes were opened wide; the shining skin was drawn tight over his cheeks like parchment; the firelight lit him brightly, the personification of amazement. Then anger flooded over him.

"Why was I not told? Why was I not trusted? Why have I been shamed like this?" His voice began to rise. "Why was I not told?"

Tim came out of the bedroom and stood in the doorway. He had his carbine slung on his back and he was buckling on his kukri, hooking the broad webbing belt round his narrow waist.

"We told nobody," he said shortly. Tajo subsided, huffed and muttering, beside Rika. There was a feeling of fear in the room; they were afraid of Tim and what he might do. They were chilled and quelled by the unfamiliar tension, the patrol gathering outside, the impending appeal to force.

Tim walked down the steps and I followed. Outside there were yellow dots of lanterns where Tim and Heli stood, the light shining up on their bare legs and leaving their faces in shadow, and the Zemi boys stood watching, cloak-muffled ghosts, by the kitchen door. Khuikhe brought Tim's water-bottle and haversack of rations. The patrol moved off, Tim and Heli melting into it, and dropped down over the steep edge of the bank into the dark fields; for some minutes Temi and I stood listening to their receding footsteps as they moved through the black void on their way to the secret rendezvous

with the Dafla guide, and then the faint sounds died out and there was nothing but the cold and the night.

I went back to the lit bungalow. There was the lamp on the table, burning brightly, and the three Apa Tanis were still sitting by the hearth, Rika grimly amused, Tajo sulky and Koda scared. The house seemed extraordinarily empty without Tim. I realized that I was frightened for him. I wished I had borrowed a rifle and gone with him.

I said, "You can go now if you wish."

They looked at one another and went, and I heard the outer door fall behind them. I was alone with the firelight in the chill and deserted house.

The patrol returned thirty hours later. The first to appear was the Dafla guide, Dur Sera, who arrived late at night on Pape. Rika, Temi, Koda, I and the Naga boys went out as a relief-party, and just below the woods on the valley's north-western rim we found Tim and Heli, very exhausted after marching almost continuously for twenty-four hours. They had come ahead to give the news, and the Assam Rifles, who were too tired to move the last few miles without rest, camped the night in the forest beyond the hill and came on later. By eleven o'clock next morning everybody was in.

The expedition had been a success, and it had narrowly missed being a triumph. Two bits of bad luck had marred it. Firstly, the troops were fresh from the plains and so not in hard training, and they had taken longer to cover the fifteen miles than expected. They had reached their objective, a house on the outskirts of Bagi, a little after daybreak instead of a little before. Secondly, a hundred yards or so from it they had bumped without warning into a small party of Daflas; the Daflas had fled for the house, the patrol doubling after them, but their lead was enough, and as the Gurkhas dashed in at one door, the quarry—Licha Sera and the Kirom men and

their Bagi host—flashed out of the other, leaving a brightly-burning fire and a litter of spilled food and upset beer. They also left behind a small, naked Dafla baby about fifteen months old, whom Dura Sera identified as a captured survivor of the raid. There were then signs that the Kirom men and their Bagi sympathizers were rallying, so after doing as much damage as possible Tim and the patrol withdrew, taking the baby with them. They had one casualty, a too-rash sepoy slightly wounded in the neck by an arrow, but they had given the enemy the fright of their lives, burned the instigator's house, destroyed his livestock and garden, fired a granary full of looted grain and rescued the captured child. The Government had recovered the initiative.

The baby arrived with the Assam Rifles. It appeared in a rice-basket on somebody's back and was a small, yellow boy called Likha Teyi. His father had been one of the murdered delegates, and his mother with Teyi, another and still smaller baby and a slightly older boy, had broken out of the blazing house together. The mother and tiny baby had been hacked nearly in half, the elder boy had been speared, and Teyi had been knocked down in the hot embers and not discovered until the massacre was over, when the raiders picked him up and carried him off.

The man who had brought him to Pape fished him out of his nest and dumped him on the ground behind the house, and I was left alone with the pathetic mite. Teyi sat in a frozen heap and looked at me with enormous eyes. His small back was a mass of crusted burns under the first field-dressing which Tim had applied, and he was too shocked and scared to make a sound; he simply sat there and waited for the next brutality. As I stood there, hesitating to pick him up, for native children do not take kindly to an alien white face, Koda came out of the kitchen and looked in astonishment at the pair of us. Before I had finished explaining Teyi, Koda

had flung wide his cloak and swooped. His big arms gathered the lost little figure in, his tousled head bent tenderly, his husky man's voice whispered the primitive endearments I did not know. Likha Teyi stood up and turned bewildered towards him, dimly sensing friendliness in this big, strange, creature, and the next minute he was safe in Koda's grip.

"Poor little thing," said Koda gently. "I feel for him as though he were my own child."

He wrapped the little boy in the warm folds of his cloak and bore him off to the comfort and shelter of the cookhouse.

The problem of Teyi being thus temporarily solved, I went back to camp-repairing for the rest of the morning. To be perfectly honest, I forgot Teyi. There was so much else to see to, the underpinning of Crazy Gables, whose floor was beginning to sag, the purchase of rice and timber, the rethatching of huts, the wounded sepoy's throat, and of course my hardy perennial the burned Apa Tani, now almost well. I only remembered Teyi again when we sat down to lunch. We had just drawn up our chairs when there was a faint whimper from the cookhouse, and then, after a half-minute pause, a longer and louder cry; a half-minute again, and then a loud, lung-filling howl. We both jumped up and ran.

Teyi was sitting on the bamboo bed in the cookhouse with a meal lying half-finished before him. No one had beaten him or hurt him for the last twenty-four hours, his experimental whimpers had drawn not a single cuff, and now he had a lost mother and a week's misery to lament. The tears streamed down his yellow-brown cheeks and he howled and howled his heart out, pouring out his pent-up wretchedness in a perfect cataclysm. The huts vomited interpreters, servants and sepoys, and in a minute he was the centre of a crowd of anxious grown-ups who but partly divined his need and were all trying to hush him. Still Likha Teyi bellowed.

Then we heard running feet outside. Koda came bursting

in, thrusting us unceremoniously aside. He caught up the weeping child and sat down with him by the fire. The damp little paws clutched at his coarse tunic, the smeared and wet face came down on his massive chest, and on Koda's protective shoulder we left Teyi to cry his fill.

Next morning the Teyi problem recurred in an acuter form, for Koda asked if he could take him home and keep him. Teyi was the child of a well-to-do Dafla family, and Haj Koda was poor even for an Apa Tani *mura;* to hand the boy over to anyone short of Kop Temi would be a sure start for a feud should any Dafla kin appear. We told Koda regretfully that it could not be and he accepted the disappointment with his usual resignation. No Dafla kin could be heard of and Temi was unwilling to have the child, and I began to see myself arriving at the family flat off Berkeley Square with a brownish-yellow baby and what would seem a pretty thin story.

Then abruptly the problem was solved. Temi appeared one morning accompanied by a thin, elderly woman with a tragic face. She explained that she was Teyi's grandmother, that she had been in another house at the time of the raid, had escaped to some small village, and until a day or so ago had had no idea that any of her family survived. Someone had told her that the rescued Teyi was with us and she had come at once to find him. An uncle in Likha was the obvious guardian for them both and Temi had already sent for him.

Teyi was produced from the cookhouse, his usual haunt. The old woman squatted down and looked at him hungrily. We stood Teyi on the floor, a small, plump figure, naked as a Cupid except for the white bandage on his back, and he toddled unsteadily towards her. She looked at his half-healed burn and then the memory of the past overcame her; she broke into a wild keening, rocking herself to and fro.

Tim came out of his office in amazement.

"What on earth—?" he began.

"Teyi's grandmother," I said.

"Thank God for that," said Tim with feeling, and went back to his reports.

For the next week the old lady was a guest in the camp and, it must be confessed, a difficult one. She saw Tim as a universal provider, an omnipotent Almighty, and one specially detailed to attend to her. She insisted that he set her up in the world with a new set of household goods and was decidedly sharp with him when she got all we could spare, some clothes for Teyi and some of our own cooking pots. She turned up every day with a new complaint; nothing suited her, nothing was what she liked. With small, puzzled Teyi in tow she drifted from house to house and from one set of hosts to another, but after what had happened to her world it was impossible to be unkind to her. From time to time she left Teyi in some safe place and went to a point from which she could look out towards Bagi, and there she would sing laments for an hour or more, not in the plains falsetto, but in a way so eerily reminiscent of the West Highlands that I had to look out of the window to make sure that Dinko Puttu, not Sgurr nan Gillean, dominated the landscape. This vaguely Hebridean music, this sub-Himalayan coronach, was a constant and haunting accompaniment to the days following the Bagi patrol.

Then the uncle from Likha came, a short, wiry man. He thanked us for saving Teyi, crouched down to let the child climb on his back, and called to the old lady to pick up the baggage. Teyi, who had filled out like a prune in water since his rescue, scrambled up and went away out of our lives, a dark-eyed figure gazing without emotion at the receding camp. For a Dafla child, I thought, a stolid temperament was a valuable possession.

In the meantime there had been other developments. Soon after the patrol Temi had received information that three of

the wanted Kirom men were expected to visit Talo. Tim and a small force of troops slipped down to the village before dawn and surrounded the suspected houses; at one an elderly man was caught dropping unobtrusively through the floor, but the two younger men who had come there with him had slept elsewhere, and when the party reached their house they found they had fled. But Tim had at least secured a bargaining counter, and retiring to Kore with the prisoner, he popped him into the Kore lock-up and sent a message to Kirom, offering to exchange him for the captured porter-headman.

For a while there was no reply. Kirom's friends in Talo were angry at the swoop and threatened to burn the Great Hall, so for a while we returned to Kore and had sentries out again between dawn and dusk. We kept cans of water standing ready outside and slept with firearms beside our beds, but as before nothing came of it. Then Kirom renewed their threats against Tim and myself, and as the path between Kore and Pape was ideal for ambush we began to take troops with us when we moved along it. Unfortunately, the new and unseasoned sepoys had no idea of danger and made very poor escorts indeed. They dropped out to drink in the villages and fell behind on the march, and their protection was such a farce that I told Tim I would rather do without them. This he vetoed, holding that to be seen starting out with them had at least a deterrent effect. As we were never ambushed and would pretty certainly have been killed if we had, there was probably something in the theory.

One afternoon at the end of November I set out from Kore to Pape with Bat Heli, Lunchiwong (who was carrying my shotgun), the usual two escorting Gurkhas and a dozen Apa Tani porters. We climbed the Kore hill and plunged into the forest; for the first mile or two it was not too bad, for the undergrowth was thin and there was little cover, but on the valley side of the rim there were bushes right up the track

and I never knew from step to step whether I should be speared at the next or not. I was always thankful when we passed that stretch and reached the open again. By the time we had done so the porters had pushed on ahead and the escort had fallen far behind, and so there were only the three of us, Bat Heli, Lungchiwong and I, the short, wiry Dafla, the small, tough Naga and the tall, white woman, descending the long, brown slope of dead bracken. We reached the valley floor and started off for Pape at a good pace along a wide, flat-topped clay bank.

We were at the narrowest part of the side valley when I saw five Daflas approaching on the far side, following the Talo path, which ran parallel to ours. I halted to have a better look. Heli, behind me, confirmed what I thought myself, that they were Kirom men. They were now about two hundred yards off and we could see them looking at us, but we had the sunwise place and the clearer view. Then we were all halted, they and ourselves, staring at one another across the narrow strait of dry fields.

I began to wonder what would happen and whether there were any more of them about. I decided that our best chance if they made a rush for us was to use the bank on which we stood as a breastwork and try to turn them with the shotgun. Then suddenly the tallest man, whom I recognized as the scar-faced Licha Sera, sprang off the path away from us, leaped a fence, and went to ground like a rabbit in the bracken on the rough grazing beyond. His companions instantly followed suit, hurling themselves into cover, their swords flapping in panic-stricken abandon, and we three were left in command of the deserted valley.

"If only we had a rifle!" said Heli.

I agreed with a sigh. I would have given a good deal to put ten rounds rapid into the opposite bracken, through which, I had no doubt, Licha Sera and his friends were scrambling to

safety; I looked back to the rim, and saw the two tiny dots which were our armed escort just coming out of the woods, a good half-hour behind us. I shrugged and, because there seemed nothing else to do, turned with the others and walked on towards Pape.

All of a sudden fate handed us an ace. It was all due to Siraj, and though the ace was very far from what Tim would have chosen there was no denying its immediate tactical advantages.

Siraj, who was over at Kore and doing repairs there while Tim and I finished off the work at Duta Pape, went down one day to Talo to buy thatching-grass. In one of the houses he saw a youth whom he recognized as Licha Tasser's son; no one ever discovered what he was doing there, but it was probable that he had been sent there for safety in case Tim raided Kirom. Siraj made no sign, left the house as though he had noticed nothing, and hurried back to Kore. Tim was due back from Pape that afternoon, but there was no time for delay. Siraj collected three unarmed sepoys and one of the Dafla interpreters, went straight back to Talo, and returned to the same house on what purported to be a convivial visit. He and his party settled down to drink by the fire until the lad got in among them, when they pounced on him together and carried him off to Kore. The Daflas were taken by surprise, there was no attempt at rescue, and when Tim arrived the wails of the Talo women lamenting the disaster could be heard from the Great Hall.

The young fellow was an invaluable hostage and the results of his capture were immediate. Days of negotiation had previously achieved nothing, but the lock-up door had barely closed on Licha Tasser's son when the captured porter-headman was freed from Kirom; he turned up not much the worse except for a slash on the head and the scars where his bonds had cut

him. Tim released his elderly first prisoner in exchange and told Licha Tasser through him that if he wanted his son back he must surrender his red cloth and come in under safe conduct to interview the Political Officer about the Bagi Raid. But Licha Tasser, born and reared among treachery, could bring himself to trust no one. He feared that we should serve him as he had served the Bagi delegates and, torn between terror for himself and anxiety for his son, he changed with the weather. He sent to say that he would come, and then that he would not. He was reported to have reached Talo on his way to Kore, and then to have been dissuaded by the Talo men. Nevertheless, as Kop Temi pointed out with a quiet smile, the fish was hooked, and sooner or later Licha Tasser must come himself or send negotiators to Kore. In the meantime no one dared make a move against the outpost or against Government personnel; Tim could shake Dafla worries from his shoulders for the time being, leave Temi to play the fish and set out again on tour.

The Palin and the Yapupbog were closed to us. It was too late now to follow the Haimendorfs' route up the Kamla Valley and try to reach the snows there, and we could only make a short round, a farewell to the cool, bright winter days, the long, leg-aching marches and the star-roofed, firelit nights. The Miri *posa* must be paid and that was as good a circuit as any, and so in the early days of December, with snow-clouds lowering on the Miri Hills, we achieved the necessary synthesis of loads and porters and set out eastwards from Pape.

19

The Last Tour

I SHALL always remember that last trip. We had been on so many: to the Palin, to the Upper Panior, to Likha and Dorde, to Balipara and the Se La, and the year before, to the Miri country itself; yet none of them stand out now with the particular clarity of this final journey. I think it was partly because our months of struggle were at last bearing their full fruit and we had achieved that trust and comradeship with the tribesmen, that indefinable but lasting unity, which is the crowning reward of work among primitive people; and partly it was because the consciousness of imminent loss sharpened our faculties and made impressions vivid and intense. There had been plenty of time for the new Government to offer Tim permanent employment, but it had not, and with every week which passed now it was more likely that our remaining hopes would be crushed and that we should go.

Our first march took us out past Hari. We wound along the smooth, flat-topped, clay field-banks which formed winding main roads between village and village; we crossed the Kale in the shallow bottom of the valley and mounted on the far side, step by low step, till we came to Hari on its hill; our porters, most of whom were Hari men, disappeared into the village to eat their morning meal and took their loads with them, so we sent young Tara to shepherd them and ourselves

trudged on alone, past neatly fenced gardens and crowded groves whose bamboos looked like giant plumes. Behind the village a worn woodcutters' track climbed up a steep slope and vanished into the forest.

The march was a short one, for a broad belt of uninhabited and nearly waterless country separated the valley from the nearest Miri village, and Taja, half a day from Pape, was the first of the only two possible camps. We mounted through the now-familiar sequence of vegetation—groves and plantations, green meadows, the ferny lower forest and the high, airy, mountain woods—and then, with our long tail of naked porters catching up behind us once more, we crossed a ridge and dropped sharply down to our camp on the reverse slope.

Even for the Miri country, where one camped every night on precipitous and unpromising ground, it was an unlikely site. A narrow neck of land, like a bridge, sprang across between two steep ridges. On either side of it a vegetation-choked ravine, dank, cold and thick with grey-green bamboo, fell away into the gloom of the forest; hillsides covered in gnarled trees rushed down on it from above and disappeared into obscurity below, into knots and tangles of gullies and folded spurs and a blue, wintry twilight, and the only site for a camp was on the neck itself. As we reached it, the line of march dissolved. The leaders halted, looking to Tim for orders, and the long string of porters gathered round in a half-circle. When positions had been decided, the group broke up, the bare, brown bodies with their red lobster-tails re-sorting themselves like a shaken kaleidoscope, and down went the loads, out came the long *daos*, and the bustle of camp-pitching began.

Tim and I drew our kukris and joined in, and while he cut poles for the lean-to I went off to fetch firewood. When I came back hugging an armful—the firewood at Taja was always particularly angular and intractable—I found him hauling

the tarpaulin over the frame while a couple of Apa Tanis blocked up the side openings with bunches of leafy twigs. We had long since ceased using the tent, and for more than a year now we had camped under an open tarpaulin and slept in our blankets on the ground. The camp was already taking shape; smoke was rising from the windbreak of branches which was the cookhouse, Koda had brought in a log and was starting the main campfire, Lungchiwong was unstrapping the bedding and laying the ground sheets out and the kettle was on and the curry for dinner was cooking. As evening drew on, the smoke from our fires filled the wood, hanging in grey wreaths and smelling tangily. The dusk gathered and deepened and the flames shone up redly on the leaves overhead, and by nine o'clock the last voices were still and we rolled into our blankets and slept.

We woke in the chill of dawn to find Koda making up the fire and the camp stirring round us. The lean-to disintegrated over us while we ate our breakfast. We packed our belongings into the carrying-baskets, stuffing in last-minute oddments; we belted on our kukris and took up our walking-sticks; the Naga boys fell in behind with the shotguns and the lunch; the porters squatted to the loads, scrambled up and followed, and the long line of us jogged away again through the sunlit morning forest, winding down the steep slopes and crawling up the far side.

Our next halt was at Dhansok, a grassy, scrubby patch above a stream; wild lemons grew there and the untouched jungle pressed in, but the small scrap of clearing still spoke of man, for Dhansok was an old village site made uninhabitable by raiders from the next valley. Temi had concluded a peace for the Dhansok people and guaranteed them a safe return, but they hesitated, and his treaty-tripod, solid, creeper-bound, crowned with a weathered mithan-skull and certified by a notice-board lettered in red paint, presided over weedy noth-

ing, an abandoned waste. On the third day we climbed on again, but we were now clear of the protecting belt of forest which the Apa Tanis successfully maintained to the east of their valley; there were fields and increasing signs of habitation. Then we came to Bua, the first of the Miri villages, and on the fourth day to Chemir.

Dafla settlements were precipitous enough, but Miri ones clung to the impossible slopes like swallows' nests to a cliff. They were threaded by slippery paths where bare feet clung better than our hobnails, and were littered with dust, refuse, dung, old maize-cobs, broken bamboos and fragments of worn-out baskets, a flea-infested crust of debris which drifted downhill to form middens among the bushes at the bottom. The houses were ramshackle beyond belief, mere collections of holes punctuated by logs and matting; chasms gaped in the floors, there were foot-wide gaps in the thatch, and while the inner edge of the platforms touched the hill, the outer was fifteen or twenty feet from the ground.

On one side of the deep Chemir ravine was the settlement belonging to Guch Tamar, and on the other that of Hipu Taya. We had business here, so we slithered down the long, glassy path through Guch Tamar's village, crossed the stream at the bottom and camped on the far side among Hipu Taya's granaries.

Both villages were full of Miri headmen who had come to collect their *posa*. Physically they were much like the Daflas, though they were lighter in build and fairer-skinned. They wore the same type of draped clothes which were smoked the same sooty grey; they had the same hide corselets and weapons, but their hair-knots were twisted to one side instead of being plaited in a long, projecting knot. They favoured bear's-hair fringes on their helmets and instead of the Dafla wristguards of coiled human-hair cord they had curious long gauntlets of woven cane. Where Dafla men wore hundreds of cane-and-

fibre rings as abdominal armour, the Miri men had very few, but the Miri women were so encased in them under their clothing that one felt that not long ago these had been their only covering. A similar relic was the broad, stiff band of rings which they wore tightly drawn over the breasts.

In the evening we conferred to decide where we should go next. Our time was limited, for Tim had to be in Balipara in two or three weeks. We could go north to Rahke and retrace the Haimendorfs' route up the other bank of the Kamla; we could stick to the bank we were on and try to move north up that, or we could turn eastwards down the Kamla to the Subansiri. We had not enough time to add to the Haimendorfs' discoveries; the route up the bank we were on ran too close to hostile Dadum; so we chose the path to the east and the South Kamla Miris, who claimed that no one had visited them since the Miri Mission passed that way in 1912.

We marched at daybreak next morning. The country was steeper than anything we had yet seen. The southern flank of the valley was all of seven thousand feet high, and from that precipitous face spurs jutted out, forming knife-edged ridges with gashes of ravines between; the track along the valley crept over them, winding up two or three thousand feet of slope and plunging down the far side like a ski-run. On our first day out from Chemir we covered seven miles in eight hours, and it was a hard day's work.

Several South Kamla Miris were travelling with us, notably La Tara and Biku Yama. La Tara was a charming elderly gentleman, almost eclipsed by an enormous black bear's-hair frontlet. His large bell-metal earrings, of peculiar shape, winked like mirrors before us up the long hills. Biku Yama was a middle-aged woman, motherly, capable and determined. With her was her daughter, who carried her provisions and beer, for Yama worked entirely on liquid fuel, and a young man whom we at first thought was her son-in-law. He turned

out to be her husband, her third or fourth, I think, and instead of stalking regally before his baggage-laden women in the usual tribal fashion he toiled after Yama with a full load while she gave her attention to us. She did this thoroughly. On the hill between Chemir and La she was like a Royal Governess with a couple of imperially born but idiot children. When I stumbled and sat down her shrieks stopped the column. When Tim slipped and recovered, she seized him by the shirt and held him up, and then tried to carry his carbine for him. Tim blushed crimson and fled, clattering down the hill past the porters, and was into La half an hour ahead of any of us.

We camped that night in a wooded ravine between the two halves of La village and the next at a jungle camp in thick woods, and then we dropped at last to a scrub-covered shelf by the river, deep down between the towering hills, and to the village of Gocham. Gocham Tapak, the leading man, came out to meet us and took us to a level patch where the Miri Mission had camped. We pitched there, as it seemed expected of us, though our half a dozen shelters were lost in a space which had held several hundred men. Half a mile up a glen to the right was Gocham village, hidden by thick trees; a few hundred yards to the left was the Kamla itself, walled and concealed by the jungle. We lit our fires, and the litigants began to arrive.

From dawn to dark next day, and again on the day following, case-hearing was in full swing, for there were many years' arrears to work off. It was restful, for unlike the Daflas, the participants were quite happy to sit about in small clumps, smoking long, silvery pipes and arguing at leisure. There was no shouting and waving of *daos* and little oratory. When at last a decision was reached the party would move over to Tim, ask him to approve and record the terms, and then drift off to

the village, a casual, chatting group, to find a drink, leaving their vacated place to the next contingent.

We marched again on the third day. We had arranged to cross the Kamla here and return along the north bank. The river was large and there was reported to be no bridge, but Gocham Tapak said that his people could work a ferry. We broke camp about seven, in the morning cool, and went down to the stream with a guide.

We came out suddenly from the jungle a few yards above the crossing-point. The Kamla was a tremendous stream, cold, green and swirling, and all of eighty yards wide. It poured along smoothly and strongly, not breaking into foam, but boiling and eddying with a hidden force, a deadly and feline power, like a vast cat stretching its claws. On either side were high banks of shingle, and tree trunks, barked and ground by the river, lay stranded on them like a litter of monstrous dry bones. Behind the banks rose two solid walls of forest, twined and blended tapestries of every known shade of green.

A hundred yards downstream from us a number of Miris were gathered at the water's edge and we went towards them. They were clustered round a bamboo raft with a tripod-like structure on it. They had run a cane across the river and, they explained, they would haul the raft across by it hand over hand. There was far more shouting and arguing going on than this simple procedure seemed to justify, and a look round told us why. They were all drunk, cheerfully and noisily drunk. In honour of our visit and the settlement of cases they had been drinking beer steadily for three days and nights.

We sat down on the shingle and waited for something to happen. The Miris clamoured and disagreed and nothing was done, and none of them seemed quite sure how the ferry was going to work. The sun climbed and the Apa Tani porters complained, for we had a long day's march still to go, and some of the soberer Miris detached themselves from the babel

and began to walk away up the bank to the next bend. We presently saw them poised high in mid-air, trotting precariously over a long, tubular cane bridge of the kind we had braved at But.

Tim got up.

"I'll go and have a look at that," he said. "If we wait for the ferry we'll be here all night."

He crunched off along the shingle-bank and round the corner, and a dozen of our Apa Tani porters picked up themselves and their loads and trudged hopefully after him.

When I looked back to the raft, I saw to my surprise that it was pushing out from the bank. It was captained by a young Miri with another lad as crew, our bedding and the cookhouse-box were stowed amidships, and the two Zemi boys, Lungchiwong holding Tim's gun, were perched on the baggage. I saw also that the raft was badly made. There were far too few bamboos for proper buoyancy; it rode low in the water, almost awash, and it was sluggish and awkward to handle. The Miri captain did not seem very sure of what to do. Under a running fire of conflicting instructions from the bank he hauled his craft out a few feet along the cane and then stood up and began to fumble with the cable, trying to brace it in some way over the tall bamboo tripod. Then he gave up trying to get it right and put it over as best as he could and, pulling on it cautiously, took the raft a yard or two further out into the stream.

Then it happened. The Miris had confused their methods. A raft hitched to a cable in a strong current had better be fastened at the water-line or not at all, and the point of leverage here was four feet above the water and a third of the way aft. The moment the raft felt the strong central current it veered and put its nose under; the river swung it round and turned it over, the four men shot into the water, the cane rope twanged off the tripod, and the capsized raft with the men clinging to it whirled round and shot off downstream.

The Miri spectators stood perfectly still on the bank and screamed like sea gulls. The women began lamenting the death of the unfortunates in the water—prematurely, but not very much so—and no one did anything to save them. I realized that I must be the only swimmer present. I threw off my camera and kukri and dashed down the shingle bank, intending to get the Naga boys ashore, if no one else. The Miris were in the way and I burst through them. Biku Yama shrieked and tried to hold me back, and so did several of the others, but I broke free and ran on. I was kicking off my shoes by the brink when I saw that by God's mercy there was no need for heroics; the set of the current was drifting the raft inshore, slowly, very slowly, but steadily, and with any luck it would be within reach in ten minutes. I put on my shoes again and walked down the bank, keeping pace with it.

It was ashore in half that time. The moment the tallest of the four felt a toehold under him he gave a heave shorewards, and at once the crowd of Miris ceased ululating and rushed towards us at last, exclaiming and gabbling. They splashed into the shallows and hauled wreck and men to the beach, and there we were on the stones, Namde speaking his mind about Miri boatmen, Lungchiwong still clutching Tim's gun and nobody seriously the worse. Even our baggage, which I had thought at the bottom of the river, had been lashed to the craft by the Nagas before they started and was only wet.

Upon this scene and my commination of the sobered Miris, Tim and the Apa Tani porters, recalled by the ominous chorus of shrieks, burst at a run.

We were all somewhat shaken and sat down on the shingle to recover. Gocham Tapak came up unnerved and apologetic, and said that the raft could be repaired easily and that they would paddle the other loads over, as being safer. This was just as well, for the cane bridge was so airy as to be very nearly not there and none of us could have got across it. For the

rest of the day, therefore, we waited while men and loads were ferried across in small lots with immense caution and no accidents, and when at last we were all on the far bank it was far too late to march on. We found a level place in the forest and camped there, sleeping gipsy-like in the fern while our blue wood-smoke stole out over the Kamla.

The next day we began the climb up the north side of the Kamla Valley. There was no convenient shelf here, as there was at Gocham, and the hill was steep-to, rising straight from the river. The southern side had been wooded and jungle-covered, but the northern was all vast, tumbling slopes of unbroken grass. Our long column toiled up a featureless brown hillside which was almost vertical. The path was like a staircase and had hardly a zigzag to it. When we looked back from the lead, the tail behind was strung out in a dwindling perspective of bent heads, a winding thread of ants, each with its plodding gait and unwieldy load, and each smaller and smaller till one reached the final dots straggling along a thousand feet below. Yama, always at our heels, whipped out a large tin goblet every time we stopped for breath and her husband immediately filled it with a sustaining draught for us. She was very worried because we did not drink enough millet-beer to maintain good health. Crawling slowly on and up through the shadeless day, we surmounted the penultimate ridge and came to a small village lying in its lee; we halted on the slope above it in a patch of short scrub, eight hours and a good many thousand feet from the Kamla.

The next day's sweat-soaked haul brought us in the afternoon to a horseshoe hollow and the village of Kabak lying in a patch of wood, the only trees for miles. We descended to a deserted village. A few scrawny fowls pecked about in the dust, but the human population had vanished; seeing our long column, over a hundred strong, marching unheralded and

unexplained upon them, the people of Kabak had very reasonably taken to the woods.

Gocham Tapak, who had come on with us, assured us that they were merely scared and not hostile, and we passed through the village to a more or less level stretch below it and began to pitch camp. We were hard at it, ramming in posts for the lean-to, cutting branches, unfolding tarpaulins, spreading leaves for beds and collecting firewood, when one or two fair-skinned Miris in helmets and hide corselets appeared on the fringes of the camp. After a nervous minute or two they ventured a few words with the Apa Tani porters. Some small boys peered out of the bushes at us and fled when we looked round. Then a headman appeared with Gocham Tapak and was briefly introduced to Tim, on whom he looked as the devil incarnate, and that was all we saw of the villagers of Kabak. Biku Yama disapproved of them; they were uncivilized and unaccustomed to the proper usages: they had offered neither us nor her any beer. "Dirty Abor people!" said Yama. They were neither Abors nor very filthy, but it did not matter; it was her comprehensive term of abuse.

At noon next day we passed through a small village, ricketty, foul and undistinguished, and marched on towards a cavernous valley and Yukr on the far side. The climb up again from the valley bottom was all of three thousand feet and we went up it in the heat of the day, the afternoon sun on our backs. Yama, whose beer-supplies were running short, wilted like a fading flower. Her running commentary stopped, she lay down exhausted at the halts, she ceased to scream when we stumbled. We arrived perspiring, leg-weary and prepared for trouble, for Yukr had a bad reputation. We pitched camp by the village, the porters ostentatiously gathering the loads into a central dump and building their shelters round them, and when a heavy-faced, unpleasant headman came out to see what we wanted and peered closely at the loads, Rika ordered

him off. The man became abusive. The sound of the row revived Yama. She answered as a war-horse to the trumpet; she ran from her shelter to the scene and hurled such a torrent of denunciation at the man that he fled, discomfited and deflated, while the Apa Tani porters giggled.

"Dirty Abor man," said Yama to his retreating back.

We were to recross the river here and had to wait a day while arrangements were made for the ferry. From our perch on the hill above the village we looked out on a landscape of heaving hills, packed closely one behind the other. The air was brilliantly clear and the hills were all an unbelievable poster-blue, as though someone had painted them in great sweeps of colour without any regard for probability. Against this gigantic backcloth the weathered houses of the village stood out like stage scenery, perching on the edge of the steep and clinging to the narrow strip of easier slope which was the village site. We spent the free day doing chores in camp, but the Apa Tani porters flooded down to the village to trade. They had been doing this throughout the trip, not so much, it seemed, from a desire to profit as from a small boy's desire to swap. As with small boys, their activities went in crazes; if one started making plaited cane garters, then the whole lot began, and if one collected Miri waist-rings to take home to sell, then the rest of the gang followed suit.

The ferry was less troublesome than the Gocham one had been. The Rakhe men, with whom we had made a treaty the previous spring, were in charge of it. They brought their clumsy raft nosing cleverly across the milky-green water, and it slid through the flickering sun-blink and deep, brown shadows and came to rest where a spine of rock served as a quay. Miri spectators were scattered about on the cliffs and under the trees, and the reflections from the water below broke up into the shade and lit them. On the open shore were the Apa Tani porters, some sitting on the grey boulders to watch

the raft across, their naked, copper-brown bodies warm against the opaque green water beyond. Some bathed in the shallows, and their wet, bare shoulders shone in the noon sun. Seeing attention focused on the ferry, Tim and I took a cake of soap, slipped off round the nearest bend and took a bath ourselves, in an icy, secluded pool. We were hardly in when moving figures opposite and a good deal of shouting showed we had been observed.

"I'll bet," said Tim, soaping, "that Koda's hiring out my field-glasses at four annas a look."

It was late afternoon before we were all across. There was just time to reach Rakhe before dark; we set off in a hurry, scrambling up and down through woods and fields, but always more up than down. We crossed the extraordinary valley we had seen on our earlier trip, where the northward-facing slope was covered in cold, wet jungle but the opposite hill with a strange mixture of palms and orchid-smothered bauhinias; as before, none of the orchids were in bloom. This was a pity, for all were new to us and it would have been a collector's paradise. The sun declined and the heat went out of the day and dusk began to gather in the hollows; the last light was fading when we came over the final ridge and saw Rakhe before us on the far side of a ravine. There in the fields below the village were grey, bustling figures, the glow of small fires and a lanky form, a black forelock falling over its nose, rushing here and there with fiendish energy—Siraj, with a relief-party of Nepalese and loads of much-needed rations.

It was dark when we reached the camp, but our shelter was already up. The Naga boys were clattering in the cookhouse, and there was Siraj with a mail-bag, shedding letters, parcels, newspapers and bundles of magazines over our feet and those of the attendant Miris. It was only then that we remembered it was Christmas Eve.

At Bua reality closed in. It was the last Miri village, and

the fact brought it home to us suddenly that we should never in all our lives see another, never sweat up and down these interminable ridges with our tail of porters following us, never again know the freedom, the friendship, the share in adventure. Our days in Eden were numbered and the desolation beyond loomed frighteningly close, a grey desert of days at which we could hardly bear to look.

We camped, as usual, on a shelf above the village; our shelter stood at the edge of a drop to a ravine and when night fell we looked out beyond the fire at a gulf of darkness as deep as the Pit. Somewhere down in the abyss the black air moved. An eddy of it lifted the ash of the fire and set the leaves in the shelter walls to a stiff rustling. On the far side of the cleft a ridge towered immense and clear-cut against the sky. We crawled into our sleeping-bags, the fire burned low, Koda came tiptoeing round the corner of the shelter to fetch the sword he had left behind; the pain of our loss was so great that I could not even cry, and I lay and watched the stars walk along the far hill, until, in spite of myself, I went to sleep.

Three days later we came down from the forests of the rim to the Apa Tani Valley and found it wrapped in a Christmas-card frost, white from end to end and splashed with icy blue shadows. Every pond was frozen, glassy splinters glittered on the path, rime was thick on the grass, and the interpreters who came out to meet us looked ridiculously like robins, their red cloths bobbing briskly through the shining landscape.

20

Spring

THE next day, at Pape, Tim began to cough. By evening he had a fever and had gone to bed, and looking down at him, long and thin under the khaki blankets, I saw the quick and shallow breathing which means pneumonia. The doctor was in North Lakhimpur, his assistant was away down the road and there was not even a native dresser within reach.

We had a supply of the sulpha drugs and I dosed him with the appropriate one. I was not merely frightened, I was scared sick. He had had a long, hard war and come straight from it to the Area; the last sixteen months had been physically and mentally gruelling and now he was worn out. As night fell and the frost shut in I dared not go to sleep and let the fire die down, so I sent Koda for a stock of wood, spread my bedding by the fire and prepared to sit up all night.

After a while the lamp flickered out, there was no light but the fire and everything grew still and creepy. I put on firewood from time to time and sat watching Tim's muffled shape and the too-rapid rise and fall of the blankets over his back. Every time the blaze lessened the black shadows and the bitter cold came swooping in at us from the corners of the room.

In the morning his respiration rate was normal, and, though he was still very ill, he insisted on getting up when the day grew warmer. So long as he could stand, nothing ever kept

him from his job, and on the third morning, with a graveyard cough and in the face of my frenzied protests, he hurried off to Kore to attend to affairs there. When I followed a day later with the heavy baggage, I was just in time to put him to bed again with a resounding attack of bronchitis, but mercifully there was no more pneumonia.

January passed in journeys, Tim making at least three trips up and down the road, once to deal with urgent business in North Lakhimpur, once to hand over Balipara Frontier Tract to the incoming officer, and once to meet the new Governor. Licha Tasser had still not reported to Kore and his unfortunate son remained a prisoner. Tim was about to send him down to safer and more comfortable custody at military headquarters at Lokra when word of this intention reached Licha Tasser; he stirred to action at last, found a reliable intermediary, and sent in his red cloth and a rather inferior mithan. Tim and Temi accepted these with a sigh of relief and let the lad go, and so the episode closed.

Hardly had he gone than another problem arose. We had thought that Jorum Kuli was safely set up for life as the ward of his kinsman Kop Temi, but Temi presently came to us in considerable concern. The cost of living was rising, he had a large household to keep, he had several children of his own to educate, and he did not see how he could deal with Jorum Kuli too. Yet Kuli must go down to the plains, for Jorum Takr would kill him if he stayed in the hills. Could we by any chance pull strings and have him enlisted in the Assam Rifles, where he would have at once education, protection and a career? Though it seemed very hard to take the child away from his tribe, there was no doubt that this was the best possible solution and Tim promised to do what he could.

About a week after he had gone to Balipara a panting sepoy called me from the Great Hall to the Assam Rifles' lines. I

ran down all the way, down the hard, curving paths, over the little bridges, down the steep flight of steps to the signallers' hut. Tim was on the air over the radio-telephone, a new acquisition. The minute, tinny voice was clear and yet infinitely distant; it sounded impersonal and unfamiliar, with all the characteristic inflexions ironed out of it.

"Is that Ursula?"

"Yes."

"The C.O. says he can take Kuli."

"Right."

"Send him down with the signallers when they're relieved."

"They're either going or gone. I'll try to catch them now. Over."

The signallers had not yet gone, but they were on the point of going. They had no time to waste, for it was already late afternoon and they must reach Yatchuli that night, but I persuaded them to wait five minutes. I hurried up to the Dafla interpreters' lines and explained matters to Kop Temi. He disappeared into the house, there was a short pause, and then he reappeared with a bitterly-weeping Kuli.

"He does not want to go," said Temi. "But what is there to do?"

What else, indeed?

The signallers, sympathetic, patted him on the back, told him what a fine time he would have, what a lot he would have to eat and what a warrior he would become, but none of it made any difference. Feeling all the brutes ever born, I watched the wretched little grimy figure trail off down the hill with the men, uprooted, exiled, homeless and alone among strangers again.

There was one more glimpse of him. Tim, on his way back, met the party in pouring rain on the top of Tasser Puttu and stopped to say good-bye, but Kuli would neither speak to him

nor look at him. So there, in the dark, dripping jungle and the mud and wet, we parted sadly from Jorum Kuli.

There is something personal about gardens, something which makes them a part of ourselves. I can never look at the earth without wanting to plant it up, dig it, care for it—to create something from it, to increase life. And so when I stood out under the big tree at Kore and watched the garden die, it was both the death ot the outpost and a death of part of ourselves. We knew now that Tim's contract would not be renewed and that we must go, and we were moving over to spend the rest of our time at Pape.

On the trunk of the tree by which I stood were orchids we had brought the year before from the orchid valley at Rakhe. They were making new roots, spreading their white, clinging feelers over the ridged bark; we should never see them bloom. What kind of flower was it, what monstrous shape, which preceded those giant seed-pods, those capsules the size of lemons? We should never know. The ridges of earth on which I stood were dry and neglected, the weeds creeping back over them. Nobody would ever plant them again. There to the right were the dogs' graves; Nagi, my own little soft Nagi, black and gentle and kind, with a coat like silk, and Tim's beloved Tessa, the golden, foolish puppy. Heartbreak and happiness and tragedy were buried here. And now on the slope by the house Tim and the Apa Tani labourers were digging up the orchard trees to send over to the valley, where they would have at least a chance of life.

Kore was indeed dead.

At Pape the winter cold was still bitter and in the early morning the ladders leading down from the house were thick with ice. The days were damp and raw, and we bought our firewood by the tree, for there were many hearths to feed, the

house, the kitchen, the servants' quarters, the interpreters' lines and the Assam Rifles' guard. Rika and I and Koda went trekking from grove to grove with the prospective sellers, scrambling over bamboo stiles and tramping across the thick, damp needles, buying sixty-foot pines as they stood. They cost about fifteen shillings. Then we sent our Apa Tani porters to cut them down. The frost-shrivelled grass was littered with sweet-smelling chips, the *daos* flashed and bit again and again into the resin-sticky gash in the trunk, and at last the tree crashed down the hill among the bamboos. With their tiny primitive axes, narrow-bladed, toylike things, the porters would reduce the tree to a neat stack of split kindling in something like an afternoon, and just before dark the files would come trotting in at the jogging Apa Tani pace, with the tall bundles of wood towering high above their dishevelled heads. With pinewood burning day and night, the house developed the authentic resinous Apa Tani smell; the rafters were smoked a rich brown, and one woke up in the morning as sootily grimy as any tribesman.

Then the Morrum festival came. The previous year we had been alien spectators, but now the new house at Pape had given us residential status. We found ourselves swept into the full tide of the feast, and it was great fun. The Apa Tanis were used to my cameras by now, and action was obligingly carried on within their range; we were invited to private ceremonies and installed at points of vantage. Next, field-work began, and the valley was again dotted with little groups of stooping figures. Small boys repairing the dams made clay models of mithan bulls, as they did every year, and sold them to us for safety-pins and matches. Ammon the ram, who was now with Kago Bida, was a favourite subject that season and quite eclipsed the traditional forms.

Then came the Apa Tani spring. First it was the pussy willow, thrusting up long rods against grey skies. A few days

later, walking up the strait beside Pape, we saw that the wild violets were out; the high land of the millet fields was carpeted with them, some small and dark, some big and almost white, but all so low-growing that one hardly noticed them in passing; bending down, one saw that the brown earth was carpeted with them, cloaked in a blue, delicate, wind-shaken sheet. Then came the peach trees. Here and there in the hedges and in the vegetable gardens, or even among the close-packed houses of the villages, they burst suddenly into a rosy-pink foam of wonderful richness and fragility; the blossom-covered branches stood out against cloudy skies, indomitably asserting the hope and promise of spring, or, at their loveliest, waved before the first patches of clear blue. The groves began to glow with a pale multiplicity of colours, greens so light that they were hardly perceptible, dark greens, mid-greens, yellows, reddish-browns, all the tints of young leaves; the old crab-pears in the camp at Pape budded and frothed out snowily, and from the balcony of Crazy Gables we looked straight into them; the dark pines beyond threw them into brilliant relief, and whenever the wind blew, a drifting snowstorm of petals glided in over the rail and covered the bamboo matting.

Then came the flowering cherries. They shone like floating aureoles among the groves, like sunset clouds caught among the black branches of the pines. They hung in a haze of blossom against a background of powder-blue hills; they were light and colour incarnate, neither pink nor crimson, but a deep, rich, luminous carmine. Lastly, in the woods on the rim, tree-rhododendrons bloomed in great scarlet swathes, and on every grazing-ground and grassy flat in the valley the primulas appeared. A foot high, they were topped with mauve heads the size of cricket balls; the banks of the little clear brooks and of the bigger streams, the tussocks, the sides of the paths, the mossy dells, the meadows and the sedgy patches were a

mass of them; in the main valley they grew in millions. They sprinkled the drier slopes in an outburst of pointillism, and in the hollows where they grew thick they coalesced in lakes of pure colour with a sheen on them like water.

21

Tragedy in Eden

EARLY in March the first low rumbles began, and then the trouble swelled and grew and spread out till it covered the Apa Tani Valley, and the wide, green bowl lay under the shadow of war.

It was all because of a treaty. The original colonists of the valley, many centuries before, were the people of the four larger villages, Bela, Haja, Hari and Hong. They united in a friendly alliance which lasted for some time, no one knows how long, but long enough for them to feel it was a success. Then along came a band of latecomers, who founded the three smaller villages of Duta, Mudang Tage and Michi Bamin—a group known collectively as Dübo—and asked to be admitted to the alliance. But not all the members were ready to agree to this. Hari and Bela were willing, but Hong and Haja declined, and in the end the alliance split up, though in a friendly way. To oblige the newcomers Hari left its old friends and allied itself with the strangers; the conservative Hong and Haja stood by their old pact, and to keep the balance even, the giant village of Bela put half of itself into the new alliance with Dübo and left the other half with Hong and Haja. The tribe was thus divided into two roughly equal groups, Hong-Haja-Bela and Hari-Dübo-Bela. The old colonists who had broken away, however, were not entirely sure of their new

friends, and with true Apa Tani caution they insisted on an escape clause. If the newcomers broke the agreement, they said, by any unfriendly act, they reserved the right to leave them and return to the proved friends who had served them so well before. To this the Dübo people consented.

For many generations the arrangement worked well, and every year at the Mloko feast the members of each group cemented their friendships by ceremonial visits and gifts. Then a devil entered into Duta, and in the summer of 1947 they pressed a private quarrel against their Bela allies and coerced their opponents by the *gambu* which I and the doctor saw. The Bela men accepted the tribal verdict, but they very reasonably felt that a *gambu* was an unfriendly act and a breach of the treaty, which expressly laid down that disputes were to be peacefully settled. They therefore invoked the escape clause and, as Mloko drew near, informed Duta that they proposed to reunite with the Hong-Haja group and pay their ceremonial visits there that year instead of to their former allies, Dübo and Hari.

Duta's first reaction was one of professed indifference, but when they found the Bela men meant what they said there was a complete right-about-face. They began to clamour for retraction. A wild passion for violence seemed to possess them. They would have no negotiation; Bela must reaffirm the treaty. There was no threat to their livelihood, no material gain at stake, and yet they lashed themselves into a pointless frenzy, while the most berserk of them all was our old friend the elder statesman Chigin Nime. Days passed in fruitless conferences. The Bela men were willing to compromise but would not be dragooned, and Duta, dragging their remaining allies after them, were utterly intransigent. At last negotiation failed, and Duta announced that if their Bela allies paid their ceremonial visits to Hong and Haja, they, Duta, would attack the processions.

The valley was at its most idyllic. In Bela and Hari new *bobo* masts were going up in preparation for Mloko. The emerald green of the young rice was swelling over the grey mud of the nursery ponds till the village outskirts were studded with bright patches, and over all the beauty the threat of disaster hung like an imminent storm.

At half-past nine on the morning of March 13, 1948, Koda was sweeping out the living-room of Crazy Gables. I was knitting by the fire and Tim had gone off to Haja on some errand or other; we were all waiting anxiously for Kop Temi to come over to deal with the Apa Tani crisis, for the *buliang* had given up hope. Our last, peaceful weeks at Pape were not proving so calm as we had thought. To make things worse, Tim was no longer officially responsible; his term of duty had ended and he was on paid leave, but it made no difference. There was no sign of the incoming officer, and everyone turned to Tim. They had always turned to Tim and so long as he was there they would go on doing it.

Koda's grass broom chased the mud and fluff across the uneven matting-floor, over the threshold and onto the balcony, and there the soft brushing noise stopped. After several seconds' pause he called to me to come and see what the Duta men were doing, and I went out to the open and the morning sun.

The green plaque of Pape lay washed with a long, rich light which lay warmly on the turf between the shadows of the trees. Fifty yards to our left was the path from the bamboo groves to Duta village, a narrow, pale ribbon of bare earth, and along this were hurrying bands of men, some carrying new *gambu* pikes, some bundles of bamboo spears and some loads of firewood. As we watched, Koj Karu went by, followed by half a dozen men with armfuls of fresh-cut javelins; in the quiet morning air we could hear the steady *whop-whop* of

bamboo-cutting in the Duta groves behind us, a monotonous rhythmic background. This was a strange and sinister development. The Duta men, who, having been latecomers, had no firewood reserve in the valley rim and cut by permission in Haja's, were now afraid to go to the forest; sure that their groves would be destroyed in the coming strife and knowing that Haja could cut them off indefinitely from the woods, they were razing their precious plantations to manufacture weapons and build up their firewood stocks against prolonged disturbance. Even their valuable pines were being felled to burn. It was tragic and terrible. Groves, carefully tended and handed on from father to son, were being hewn down and destroyed in a useless and unnecessary quarrel. Here before our eyes an entire village was wasting the treasure of generations, sacrificing the patient, slow-growing accumulation of uncounted seasons to egotism expressed in a collective adult tantrum. The endless chain of jogging manikins passing in the golden light was pitiful, an epitome of the folly of man.

At eleven o'clock there was a rush of feet on the stairs and in came Tenyo Bida, the little Hong interpreter. He was panting; his clothes were disarranged. He dropped down at the hearth, almost speechless with anger, and told me that on his way over from Hong to Pape he had found the main road closed by a barricade guarded by armed men from Duta's ally Mudang Tage, and these, telling him that they were there to cut Hong off from the rest of the valley, had tried to assault him and turn him back by force. Then, with Duta's munition-works in the groves as accompaniment and Mudang Tage's barricade as a storm-centre, incidents began to pile up thick and fast. Since the Mudang Tage guard attacked everybody indiscriminately, Haja and Hong, who had so far held aloof from the quarrel, were rapidly drawn into it, and so, on the other side, were Hari and Michi Bamin, and Bela was rent asunder, for two-thirds of it supported Haja and Hong, while a

dissident minority, the Kalung quarter, clung obstinately to Duta. By the time Tim came back the valley seemed to have gone mad.

Directly after he returned the Hari porters arrived to say that they were afraid to go to Kore. A Haja man had been manhandled at the barricade and they thought Haja might waylay them. They gathered at the foot of the stairs, their narrow cane headropes trailing from their hands. Rika went down to interview them, his long legs twinkling down the steps; he snorted through his aristocratic nose and told them to go at once, before the situation grew any worse. They glanced at one another, took up their loads and went, a line of bowed figures jogging along the field-banks out in the cultivation and as far as possible from Haja.

They were hardly out of sight when word came that some Hong women had been molested by Mudang Tage, and matters then worsened sharply, for the infuriated Hong men went out and retaliated appropriately on the first women they met from the other side. About half an hour after this the great Ponyo Tamar's youngest wife, who had been to call on me at Pape and had started back to Hong before we knew that the situation had deteriorated, was stopped at the barricade by the Mudang Tage men. They made as if to assault her attendant women, but she stepped quietly forward and suggested that any violence should begin with her. This challenge the Mudang Tage men mercifully did not take up, or there would have been war by nightfall. In the end she and her servants passed unharmed, but the scandal caused by the affair had the fortunate effect of checking the attacks on women.

In the middle of lunch there were shouts and a commotion outside. Our servants came rushing up the back stairs and stampeded onto the balcony, Kago Chobin, our stout woodcutter, halfway through a shampoo and clutching his

long, wet plait in front of him. We followed in time to see a flood of field workers, mostly women, fleeing along the banks towards the safety of Duta. One of the few men came panting to a halt at our gate, took shelter by the sentry, and there put down his hoe and rearranged his disordered clothing under the blank stare of the surprised Gurkha. Koda hailed the man over the rail and was told that a Bela raiding-party had just rushed a Duta field gang in the farthest cultivation, and that all the other Duta people in the vicinity had joined in the flight to safety. Just after the Duta man had gone, someone else came in with a rumour that other Bela men were blockading the Duta woodcutting path and that a clash was imminent. Then a Duta ambush was reported among the Pape groves and our Haja servants panicked, and finally an armed patrol—nobody knew where from—was said to be moving near Haja. If the ceaseless stream of report and counter-report flowed in and out of the indignant villages with half as much effect as it did the camp, there was no wonder that when Temi at last arrived at three o'clock the Apa Tani Valley was a disrupted and overturned magazine, a litter of shaken explosive waiting for the first spark.

Temi's first act was to call a general meeting for next day. When the delegates arrived, which they did by devious routes for fear of Duta, it was clear that they retained a remarkable sanity in the face of the prevailing upheaval. Nobody wanted war. Everyone was for peace, reason and discussion, and they were sure that, given calm and time, they could find a solution. They feared that the young men would get out of hand in the excitement and all were anxious for a temporary truce, but as the Duta contingent were absent, either by accident or design, nothing could be decided. Temi called a second meeting for the following day.

In the morning he himself went down to the Mudang Tage barricade to see that the Hong delegates got safely past it.

Tim and I, ostensibly shooting pigeon for the pot, followed a little behind him, partly to see what there was to see and partly because Temi was unescorted and we did not trust Mudang Tage.

The place was on a long tongue of undulating land about a mile north of Hong, a stretch peppered with small, fenced fields and neat clumps of pines. As we walked down one of the green lanes which threaded it, I shot a pigeon in one of the plantations. At the sound of the shot there were shouts out on the flank, and I heard *"Halian! Halian!"*—"foreigners foreigners!" As we topped a rise, we saw four or five young men with spears racing across the young millet, swift, eager, arrogant figures, as though to cut us off. For a moment I thought there was going to be trouble, and then, as they reached the fence and saw that we were well-armed and a fair-sized party, they hid their spears in the hedgerow and scrambled through the gap innocent and empty-handed.

A hundred yards farther on we caught up with Temi, who was standing disapprovingly before the barricade. The main Hong path here ran across a grazing-ground, an open, green spread of turf, and in the middle of it a high bamboo fence had been built across the track. Its irregular top stood out against the grey clouds, an ugly excrescence in the calm and orderly scene, as jarring as Duta's violence was in the social context. It was flanked with stakes and with blocked gates and hedge-gaps, and armed patrols roamed the woods and fields all round. Kop Temi overcame his distaste for it sufficiently to take us up to it, like a lecturer with a repulsive but interesting specimen, and show us how the lower nodes of the big bamboos had been packed with stones to make them impossible to cut down. All this while more and more of the Mudang Tage men were gathering round us, and we saw that they were all young toughs, ruffianly hoodlums, who obviously enjoyed their job. I was sorry for any defenceless passers-by

they caught. Then, as the Hong delegates still delayed and it was past noon, we left some of the party to see them through and turned back to Pape with Temi.

As we crossed the valley floor we were met by a Mudang Tage patrol, which at first rushed menacingly out at us and then checked and went disinterestedly round when it saw that we were armed. A little farther on a band of Mudang Tage youths were sitting on the main bridge over the Kale, waiting to pick up stragglers past the barricade. There was a good deal of shouting and some insults as we neared them along the Kale bank, but when we came close there was a swift and inglorious dispersal. I have always disliked cowardly bullies, and I was beginning to dislike Mudang Tage and Duta very much indeed.

Pape was occupied by a huge crowd, nearly all young men from Duta. Temi plunged straight into the conference-room in the pillared space under the house, and we, going upstairs, found the Bela delegation sheltering in the living-room for fear of a Duta coup. The meeting, when it began, was stormy and for four solid hours the discussion raged under our feet, separated from us only by a thin skin of floor, and the house fairly rocked to it. A dense sea of spectators was packed round the principals and Crazy Gables rose out of the crowd like a match-box from a pool of ink; when we looked down from the balcony we saw a black sea of heads, tousled, dusty and dry shoulders hunched in quilted grey cloaks, and innumerable long hair-skewers which formed a brassy pattern on the background of hairy pates.

At five o'clock the meeting broke up and the delegates went home. The Hong and Bela men were escorted through the danger-zone by the Government interpreters, and Temi came up to Tim to report. Chigin Nime, he said, had been completely unreasonable and Koj Karu nearly as bad. He—Temi—had urged concessions so as to leave Duta no excuse for ac-

tion, but nothing had been settled and time was growing short. There was only one day to Mloko, and if no compromise was found, Duta would attack the processions and there would be war.

In the morning Temi went off to Bela to resume the discussions and we, since there was nothing we could do to help, took a picnic lunch and went down to Soro at the south end of the valley. We turned home in the late afternoon, muddy to the knees, drunk with blossom and sun and haunted by pines and bracken. We lingered on the long, worn track up the west side on the valley and looked out at the fields spread below in their uncountable range of earth-colours; terrace after terrace they fell, grey, fawn, cinnamon, dun and every intermediate shade, and the slanting sun washed them with lavender shadows. We marvelled at an old pear tree, a towering pyramid of white, an earthbound cloud, and from Mudang Tage groves we looked out across the narrow strait and saw the cherry blossom on Pape hanging like a red mist among the pines.

As we neared the camp, Temi came out to meet us.

"What's the news, Temi?"

He smiled, a wide, fatherly smile spreading out across his brown face.

"It is good, Sahib."

It was indeed good. A compromise had been reached, the elders had been most reasonable, and everyone had agreed to remove the main bone of contention by omitting the ceremonial processions from that year's ceremony. Mloko could go forward peacefully, and the Apa Tanis had a full year before them in which to negotiate a settlement.

The next day seemed strangely quiet after all the excitement. Duta was still simmering and would take some days to settle down, but no wild rumours came in and there was no

woodcutting in the groves. The Haja men put on their best clothes and went off by ones and twos to visit friends in Bela and Hari, for it was the first day of Mloko; the feast was celebrated annually by one of the three ritual groups and this was Bela and Hari's year. That villages could be linked ritually and opposed politically at one and the same time made the current Apa Tani problem even more confusing. Temi went off to Hari on some quite unimportant business—the recovery of some stolen property, I believe—and we took our lunch and called up Buda and went off to the country for the day, this time to the north end of the valley.

The day was cloudy and grey. We took the Duta woodcutting path, which ran north along Pape from the camp and was at first a broad, green lane lined with bamboo fences and walled in by groves. At the tail of the island it crossed the open fields and metamorphosed finally into a winding track, undulating picturesquely among pine-dotted hillocks and brackeny stretches. We were shocked at the havoc along it. The dense block of trees behind the camp looked as though someone had mown it erratically with a gigantic scythe; jagged stumps of bamboo hacked off roughly at waist-level stood up in the trampled grass, their cut ends starkly white and as desolate as broken rafters in a bombed roof. Beyond the fields the destruction was Bela's, for the Bela men had attacked Duta's road and flung down the many little bridges and felled or ringed the trees in the plantations. When everything was shining blue and green in one of the rare bursts of sun, we picked our way for half a mile over young pines thrown across the track, their bright, new, tasselled foliage wilting slowly in the white dust; there was devastation all the way.

At last we reached the far end of the valley. We dropped behind a steep spur into the hidden corner called Suplu. In contrast to the wide moors and primula-starred slopes of Soro, it was a tangled, intimate place, full of unsuspected nooks and

corners which were all subtly different; islands and peninsulas shut it off from the main valley and Bela's fields wandered between them in mazy channels and straits; in its determined picturesqueness, its sudden tableaux, its eye-catching rocks and trees, it was like a landscape garden composed from a series of Chinese paintings. We were very near the rim here, and the gnarled forests crept down along the side glens and encroached on the cultivated land, were submerged in the tide of neat fields and popped up again, unrepentant, on the banks of the clear stream which ran towards the Kale.

In the early afternoon we met a wide path going towards Bela and drifted slowly down it, looking for pigeon in the gardens.

I was staring at a haze of pink peach blossom when I first heard the noise. I turned round and listened. There was a muffled, confused shouting from the direction of Duta and the camp. We all three stood listening, and then set off at a quick walk along the track.

Two hundred yards farther on the path to Pape struck out into the fields, and almost running, we branched along it. As we reached the edge of the millet fields and dropped down to the lower level of the irrigation, we saw the valley spreading out before us, a landscape of flat planes in monochrome. To the right, above the groves of Pape, the horizontal lines were sharply broken by a rolling column of bronze smoke and we could hear gunlike reports from bamboos bursting in the fire. For all we knew the whole of Haja village was going up and our camp as well. In the fields we met two fleeing women racing towards Bela, and in answer to Buda's shout they called out that trouble had begun and then fled on without giving details. Here Tim pushed on ahead, being much faster than Buda or I, and we watched his long figure striding at tremendous speed down the narrow path and up the steep bank into the millet on the far side.

As we scrambled up the steep bank ourselves we almost collided with a man running for Bela, and he checked for a moment and told us that Duta, Mudang Tage and Michi Bamin were out in force against Haja. Then, as we topped the bank and had a clear view, we saw the distant, familiar figure of Nada Rika, tiny and far off but unmistakable, trotting down the path from Pape. We saw him talking to Tim, and then Tim went hurrying towards the camp and Rika came on to meet us. He told us that a large Duta-led force had appeared unexpectedly on Pape, been involved in a clash with Haja, and had killed one Haja man and wounded two.

Between us and the Pape groves the millet fields stretched interminably, the beaten footpath winding on and on. Tim was still drawing away and was now three hundred yards ahead. As he reached the entrance to the groves I saw two men armed with spears come loping towards him down another track, but to my relief they ignored him and went padding on towards Bela. We could still see women running for their lives out on the fields in the valley floor, but the distant shouting had stopped and we could hear nothing now but the pistol cracks of the bursting bamboos.

Tim had long been out of sight when we reached the groves and for the first hundred yards there was nothing. We threaded a green-walled lane as peaceful and harmless as ever. Then the smell of smoke grew stronger and we came suddenly round a bend on to utter havoc. The fences had been smashed down and were ablaze on either side, the flames showing a malignant yellow through the reek; the groves behind were gutted. Where we had gone out an hour before down a grassy alley, we returned over a horrible turf of black, papery ash which lifted, floated and dissolved into ankle-deep dust about our feet. Fifty yards farther on a bamboo grove had been wrecked and the bamboos felled across the path. The fences

were burning here, too, and we scrambled across the stems in a firelit, artificial twilight thick with smoke.

We neared Duta's ritual tree, a great forked bole like an elm, and saw an armed party there guarding a chanting priest in full war-dress. I had just time to wonder if they would attack Buda and Rika and decided to fire if they did, when I saw two Gurkhas with fixed bayonets coming down the road to meet us, an escort sent by Tim. We passed the Duta group with bare steel between us and them. The priest never turned his head, but the warriors stood and glared.

It was nowhere near evening, but the smoke hanging over Pape made the grey light dull. The first people I saw as we came out into the open camp were our Haja servants lining the balcony of Crazy Gables, evidently sent there for safety; Gurkhas with fixed bayonets stood guard below, and a little in front of the house, at the head of the slight slope which fell to the island shore, were Tim and Temi together. A number of headmen in red cloths were standing round them and all looked troubled. As we mounted to where they stood the hollow beyond came into view and there, massed under the eight great pines, were fully two hundred warriors of Duta, Michi Bamin and Mudang Tage, armed with pikes, javelins and shields. They were already filing off Pape with their immense pikes held upright, and their bristling line was extending itself and winding and coiling forward like a gigantic armoured snake along the narrow path to Pape. Two unarmed figures in red cloths were racing up and down the file, arguing and haranguing. Rika identified them as Koj Karu and Nime, either striving to lay the devils they had raised or trying for the Government's benefit to look as if they were.

We all stood and watched till the last warrior had gone and dusk had fallen in earnest, and then we went indoors to piece together the tragedy. Tim lit the lamps and the sudden, white glare showed our small company sitting grim and

sobered round the hearth. We took our places among them and the inquest began.

About the time we left Pape, Temi said, a delegation from Hong had set out for the Mudang Tage barricade and had taken with it a mithan which it slaughtered there on arrival. The delegates pointed out to the guard that a settlement had been reached, and suggested that they remove the road-block, take the beef as a peace-offering and resume friendly relations. The guard, however, abused them, there were arguments and a scene, and the Hong delegation retired.

The matter might have ended there had not rumours of it reached Hari, where the young men armed and rushed out in defiance of the village elders. This sent Temi, who had an excellent nose for trouble, home in a hurry. The rumours spread to Haja and Duta in wildly exaggerated form and the villagers flew to arms and began demonstrating noisily, though no one was quite sure against what or whom. Most of the Haja men had gone visiting in Bela and Hari and the village was nearly empty, but there happened to be a private sacrifice in progress at the Tak clan assembly platform, and about thirty of the crowd there ran off to fetch their weapons and gathered, shouting loudly, at the edge of Pape. Kop Temi, whose instinct had brought him there in the nick of time, immediately silenced them and told them to go home, which unfortunately they did not do. He was still arguing with them when an enormous Duta-led force appeared from behind the Duta peninsula, a long, wooded tongue of land which jutted out into the valley, and without a moment's warning charged towards the island and Haja.

There was no doubt that the force had collected to repel supposed Hong attacks on the Mudang Tage barricade and that it was diverted by the Haja men's ill-advised yelling. By turning out the small guard Temi managed to deflect the rush from the camp itself, but the charge swept across the Pape is-

land, knocking down Chigin Nime and Koj Karu, who tried to bar the way. Several other headmen who had been drawn to the place by the clamour also tried to stop the clash by throwing themselves in between, but they were overrun like grass, and the next minute the large mixed Duta force and the small Haja one were at push of pike in the flooded rice fields before the village.

There was nothing anyone could do. Kop Temi, the Gurkhas, the headmen and our Haja servants, whom Temi had bundled into the house in case of a Duta swoop, stood helplessly and watched the battle. Clouds of bamboo arrows flew and a good many of them landed on the Pape turf. The front ranks grappled, others were hurling spears, the pikemen leaped and bounded, jabbing with their unwieldy weapons, and all involved shouted at the tops of their voices. The combatants were knee-deep in a kind of mud-soup which severely limited their capacity for manoeuvre, and had fate only been kind they might have bounced and yelled and thrown things at one another with very little harm done till everyone was too exhausted to go on, but all in an instant there was disaster. Almost by accident, the mud being too deep for him to dodge, a Haja man took a pike in the stomach and fell. At this the headmen rushed down on to the field again and by frenzied appeals succeeded in parting the combatants. Haja retired, taking with them one dying man and two wounded, and the Duta force fell back on Pape. By Apa Tani standards the casualty-list was calamitous. Blood must pay for blood, the feud involved the whole tribe, and the social system offered no mechanism by which the dispute could be resolved. The valley was in utter confusion, the way of life was disrupted and nobody knew of a remedy.

By the following morning a good many people had thought of one. Chigin Nime's clamant aggressiveness made him an obvious scapegoat. Haja was after him, and Duta's allies, los-

ing much of their enthusiasm and anxious for a separate peace, were hinting broadly that if Haja would only murder him and square the feud, then everything could be comfortably settled. We found this inexpressibly distressing, for Nime, whatever his recent follies, had been guide, counsellor and friend to us for the last eighteen months. We all met round the fire, Tim, Temi and I, to think of a way to save him, but there seemed to be little we could do. Though the more responsible headmen realized that his loss would be irreparable, the rank and file would not take such a long-term view. Temi went across to Duta to see him and suggested that he might claim sanctuary in the plains till the row blew over. This Nime refused. He was certainly no coward, so it was not unexpected. Then Temi offered to mediate, to which Nime replied that he would pay anything Haja asked, but very much doubted if they would accept compensation now. So Temi came back, and all we could do was to preach compromise to everybody.

By the afternoon Duta was in a state of siege. The entrances were barricaded on the Pape and Haja sides, women and children had been moved in from the outlying houses, *bobo* masts were felled and cut up for firewood, and shouting, incantations and the braying of war horns went on practically continuously. Not a man put his nose outside the village, but all day long a procession of women—who were apparently immune from reprisal—streamed past Pape at a steady trot carrying everything they could salvage from the ruined groves, bamboos, fence posts, saplings, anything, in fact, which could be used for palisades or to burn. One touch of the ridiculous among all the tragedy was that the two chief contestants, Duta and Haja, were only a couple of hundred yards from one another. It was like Berkeley Street at war with Piccadilly, and they were playing their drama out in their backyards and gardens, within earshot of one another, in a

miniature and domestic campaign. Or perhaps that only made it more tragic.

And now we had reached our last few days in the valley. They were chequered and uneasy. As soon as the first alarm had worn off and they were safely palisaded, Duta resumed the offensive. They staked the approaches to Haja, laid ambushes on the Pape paths and destroyed Haja's bamboo groves. The sorely tried Haja, who were keeping a truce during Mloko, had to break off the festival and palisade themselves. I sometimes wondered whether the others wouldn't turn in the end and wipe Duta out like the Dusu village. They may have thought the same thing themselves, for the most innocent movement by Haja brought them streaming out with their weapons and shrieking defiance. They set up a look-out post like an Eiffel Tower in bamboo and kept sentries there day and night; after dark they made life hideous by bugling and yelling till dawn, partly to keep awake, and partly to impress Haja with their efficiency and general frightfulness. This cacophony was the last straw, Duta's crowning contribution to the ruin of the Apa Tani Valley, to the destruction of peace and loveliness and an innocent, primitive, Arcadian beauty which the world could ill afford to lose. It was the ultimate exacerbation.

Till the very last minute the Apa Tanis did not realize that we were going. We had deliberately said very little for fear of another disaster like that of Bagi, and when they grasped that we were really leaving there was consternation. Rika burst into sudden and disconcerting tears. Everyone was distressed and bewildered. We were begged to stay; Haja offered us a free labour-force to keep the camp going. There was still no new resident officer and no certainty that there would ever be one; since the crisis began the Apa Tanis had come to depend on the Government as never before as a neutral and pacific power, a guardian and mediator. That Temi and the Assam

Rifles were staying made no difference at all. It was Tim, dependable, impartial Tim, whom they wanted. But we could not stay. It was one of the Subansiri gods' ironic jokes that we should have succeeded in what we set out to do only in the very hour that we left.

On our last day we went to Hari to say good-bye. Outwardly there was very little wrong with the valley. Duta, crouching flattened below the steep Mudang Tage hill, was barricaded and trumpeting, but the fields stretched neat and tended with the clay-bank paths winding through them and the villages lying shaggily at the edge. Ducks and geese swam here and there in the flooded fields; they were leaving their winter home on the Brahmaputra for their summer quarters in Tibet. They were a temporary answer to our meat problem; though the open fields prevented anyone else getting near them, Lungchiwong, the Zemi, had an uncanny gift for stalking, and in his snowy-white cloth, he would trot out among the field-banks and abruptly disappear. For four or five minutes there would be nothing but the empty fields and the birds in the middle distance, and then, having apparently dematerialized over the intervening space, Lungchiwong would fire from a point some ten fields farther on and come trotting back with the spoil, his white cloth still unsullied. As the fields were deep in slime and had no more cover than would hide a rat, his performance had a flavour of witchcraft.

When we climbed the valley rim for the last time I did not look back. The forest closed in behind us, shutting the valley in, shutting us out, and we walked forward through the centuries, in a thin, unkind rain, towards the alien and bitter present and the strangers who were our own kind.

22

Vale

THE brown water of the Brahmaputra, coffee-coloured and almost iridescent in the morning light, slid slowly past the plates of the river-steamer, and the figure of the little doctor, minute, lonely and forlorn, grew rapidly smaller on the jetty.

Rika, Tajo and our Apa Tani servants had come to North Lakhimpur to see us off, and the truck which took us to the steamer dropped them by the Kore track; while we bumped on to the river, they trudged back towards the green line of the hills. Buda had been the last to part and had stood on the truck steps to say his good-bye long after the others had turned and gone; it was a curiously touching gesture, for we had never suspected the fat, reluctant Buda of much attachment to us. And now all that was over and we should never see any of them any more, and there was nothing left except the dwindling figure of the doctor, still waving his white handkerchief in infinitely pathetic farewell. It was a poor prospect for him, an Assam-domiciled Bengali, for the Province had celebrated independence with a violent burst of chauvinism and his friends were gone.

I looked at Tim. There was nothing to be read there. We were both wrapped in our separate miseries, cocooned and bundled in wretchedness. I knew that a part of me was dead,

had died of grief on that long road of parting between the valley and the plains; the woman who had been me was gone and a remnant, a ghost, remained.

Now the doctor could no longer be seen, and now the jetty had disappeared from sight. There was only the great bulk of Tasser Puttu towering stark, steep and tremendous, the gateway to a forbidden world.

Calcutta was hotter than the hobs of hell, and plague, cholera and smallpox were all raging. The travel-agents were at a standstill because of strikes. Tim went from end to end of the city in a rickshaw, getting permits for every conceivable item of baggage. Independence here meant bureaucracy run mad, officialdom incarnate. You could take out six polo-sticks and several tennis-rackets, but only one pair of spectacles, and we had to get a separate permit for my gold wedding-ring. When we came to leave, nobody looked at any of them. We took off from Dum-Dum in the early morning, the chequered table of the earth wheeling and shrinking and falling behind, and half our lives were gone, cast off and torn away and shredded into the dust of India below.

The *York* was noisy and lurched about the hot sky. It was a hundred and twenty degrees in the shade at Delhi; Karachi was cool by comparison. In the morning we roared on again, deafened by noise, shaken and stunned by vibration. The Persian Gulf slid under us, blue and rippled, and the gnarled yellow corner of Arabia—an adult geography lesson, an unreeling map.

London. When you return from the wilds to your own kind, come back after months and years among strangers, you seem to have lost a skin. It is so long since you saw a white

face, heard English spoken, were conscious of the voices and gestures and small, familiar things, that everyone is friend and kin and the least, unintended snub hurts bitterly. There were plenty of hurts going in the rationed, frustrated, taxed, houseless, war-scarred England of 1948.

The train rolled westwards, carrying me out of London to see friends. Tim was in hospital—"A very sick man," said the doctor. Everything round me seemed to be unreal; life was nightmarish. The English hills were too close. I wanted to push them back, to have space, to have forty and fifty miles of clear air between me and untrodden mountains. We had been torn up by the roots. The wound ached unceasingly. People talked kindly, could not understand, were bewildered. We had come home; what could be the matter? How could one explain that home was no longer home, that it was utterly foreign, that home was in the Assam hills and that there would never be any other, and that for the rest of our lives we should be exiles? How could we communicate the incommunicable, how explain that these wild and naked savages at the end of the earth were our own people, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh? Truly we were cast out of Eden; willing or no, we had eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, and we knew that across the barriers of caste and custom and colour human beings are one, all struggling along the same dark road. Of all that we had seen and known, nothing remained but the intangible. Each fact of being makes its own impress on the shape of time. It is and passes, and sinks into oblivion, and falls down to the bottom of time like a dead mollusc to the sea-bed, but because it was, because it existed, the shape of things is eternally and irrevocably altered to an infinitesimal degree. Nothing can ever take away that fact of being. We had gone, we had striven, we had tried, we had loved the

tribesmen in spite of ourselves and they had loved us, and though everything else might perish—our bodies, our memories—nothing could ever wipe out and destroy that.

The train slid on, gliding in and out of patches of morning mist. For a horrible moment I knew that I had died and that this was my own particular, private hell.

Postscript

From Kop Temi, North Lakhimpur, Assam,
to F. N. Betts, Kenya.

March 4, 1952

. . . I would like to inform you that Jorum Kuli whom you rescued from slavery is grown up a man and he is still serving in the Assam Rifles at Lokra. He has been promoted Lance-Naik and become a Leader of the Band. . . .

People in this Book

RAJUNI GOGOI.	A middle-aged Assamese. Assistant to the Political Officer, Subansiri Area.
SIRAJ-UD-DIN.	An Assamese Moslem. Transport Supervisor, of Subansiri Area.
DR. BHATTACHARJEE.	A Bengali living in Assam. Medical Officer of the Subansiri Area.

The reader has all my sympathy when it comes to Apa Tani and Dafla names; they are extremely confusing. It may help to remember that the clan name comes first and the personal name second, much as the telephone-book says: "Brown, John."

KOP TEMI.	An elderly, educated Dafla from a village in the plains. Head Interpreter, Subansiri Area.
BAT HELI.	A young Dafla interpreter. Second in command to Kop Temi.
NADA RIKA.	A middle-aged Apa Tani interpreter of good family. From Haja village, Apa Tani Valley.
KOJ KARU.	An Apa Tani interpreter, from Duta village.

TENYO BIDA.	An Apa Tani interpreter, from Hong village.
HAGE TARA.	The youngest Apa Tani interpreter. A lad of about eighteen, from Hari village.
KAGO TAJO.	An Apa Tani interpreter. Of a noble family in Haja village. Is also a priest.
KAGO BIDA.	An Apa Tani nobleman and a close relation of Kago Tajo.
CHIGIN NIME.	An Apa Tani priest and statesman from Duta village. Is also Official Rainmaker attached to the Political Officer's Staff.
KHUIKHE. LUNGCHIWONG. NAMDE.	The Political Officer's three Naga servants.
HAJ BUDA. HAJ KODA. DUSU RUDO. KAGO TAKI.	The Political Officer's Apa Tani servants.
JORUM KHRU. JORUM KULI.	A notorious Dafla thief, and his kidnapped brother.
LICHA TASSER.	A Dafla headman from the village of Kirom, in the Kiyi Valley.
LICHA SERA.	A Dafla warrior from Kirom village. Notable for his heavily slashed and scarred face.

TOKO HOLI.	A Dafla headman from Talo village, in the Penior Basin, just below Kore outpost.
JORUM KAMIN. JORUM TACHO. JORUM KOPI.	Headmen of the three villages of the Jorum clan, near Kore outpost.
KJODA TALOM.	Headman of a remote Dafla village, Dadum.
BEURI HASSE.	The powerful Dafla headman of Beuri, a village in the distant Palin Valley. The ceremonial friend of Chigin Nime of Duta.

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