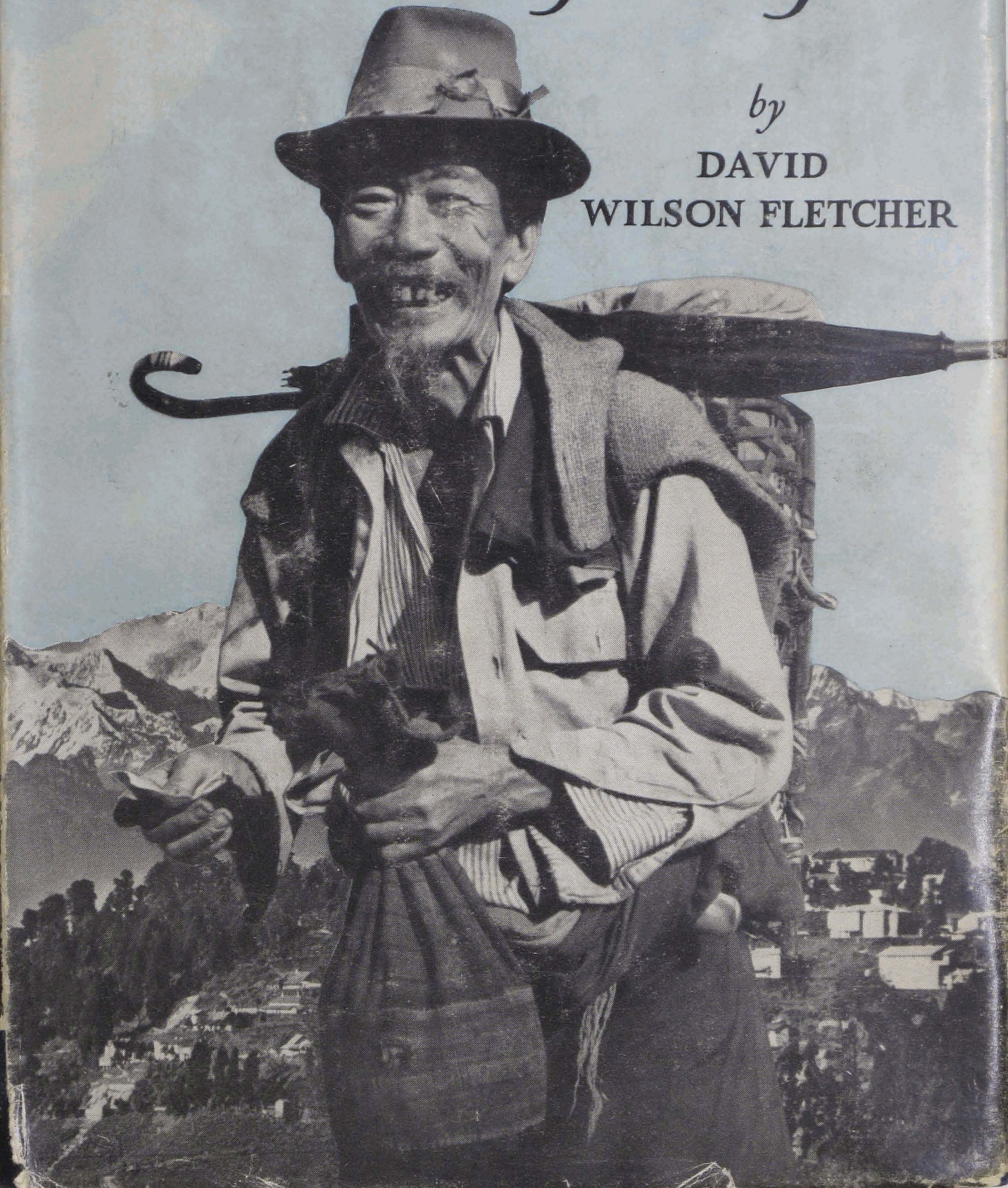


The Children of Kanchenjunga

by

DAVID
WILSON FLETCHER





The old roti-wallah.

THE
CHILDREN
OF
KANCHENJUNGA

DAVID
WILSON FLETCHER

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FOR
JETTI and KANCHI
TWO OF
THE CHILDREN OF KANCHENJUNGA

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*One day too late . . .
Hath clouded all thy happy days on earth:
O, call back yesterday, bid time return.
Richard II. iii. 11.*

*. . . not further than my thoughts canst move,
And I am still with them . . .
47th Sonnet.*

I

Beyond the Blue Horizon

Down the steep track, pitted with the dainty hoof-prints of countless tea-garden ponies, an old man is walking, head bent low to keep his face from the fierce Indian sun, watching his naked toes sink into the red dust. In his hand he carries a letter, clenched tight so that the sweat trickling down his arm and across his sinewy brown wrist rings his thumb and stencils his print on the English postage stamp. He smiles as he walks and his simple heart is filled with gladness, for he is thinking of the happiness that he knows he brings with the letter.

The track is slashed out of the side of a five-thousand-foot hill and every few hundred yards it changes direction in a series of hair-pin bends, to cut back upon itself a little lower down the slope. At one of these bends the old man stops and, raising the front of his patched shirt that hangs outside his tight-calved trousers, wipes the sweat from his face. He feels the sun strike like a blow on his uncovered belly, for he has no vest. The heat seems to thrust to his vitals. He has not eaten since dawn, but he heeds hunger no more than the sun, for both are familiar and both are seasonal.

The letter stretches from end to end of his mind's horizon, for this is a letter of great importance, long awaited. It comes from far off, beyond the borders of Hindustan, and it is written in English!

There is pride in the old man's thoughts, and joy, for he has

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been trusted with the task of bringing this letter to the Sahib and he believes the Sahib's pleasure may be reflected by the passing of *bakshish* from hand to hand.

Below him the river is broad and silver with sand. Only a narrow ribbon of water threads the huge rocks, worn smooth by the action of the torrent during the rains. The whole hillside is olive green with tight rows of waist-high tea bushes that march in relentless profusion on the acid, limeless soil. From where he stands, tea bushes stretch on both sides of the valley to where the union of three swift rivers marks the border of the tiny state of Sikkim.

A thousand feet lower down, the red corrugated iron roof and whitewashed walls of a bungalow stand on an apron of turf scraped from the slope. The old man can see the Sahib on the steps of the bungalow, the pale disc of his face upturned, watching for his coming.

On the other side of the valley the hill mounts in steep tiers to where a ragged crest joins the sky at eight thousand feet. Sprinkled with apparent indiscrimination along this ridge is the little town of Darjeeling: The Mountain of The Holy Thunderbolt. Every house is at a different level and the old man can just see a thin line of smoke drifting slowly in the rarefied air from the passing of a miniature locomotive of the Himalayan Railway.

The old man turns to look north and tilts his head to fill his eyes with magnificence, for there in all glory stands the sacred mountain, Kanchenjunga, The Lord of Five Treasures, the third highest summit upon the globe.

His thoughts are reverent, for this is the abode of the gods and the five crowns of Kanchenjunga dominate the minute state of Sikkim, which is bounded on the north and east by Tibet, on the south-east by Bhutan, on the south by India and on the west by Nepal. Though the hillfolk who live in the shadow of the great mountain are diverse of race and creed, all owe allegiance to the deity and are known as the Children of Kanchenjunga.

The old man hurries on down the track for he remembers how anxious the Sahib who waits below must be.

When he reaches the last bend he walks proudly along the rock-chip drive and across the parched lawn and hands the letter to the Sahib. The Sahib takes it with fingers that are a trifle unsteady with suspense, and turns and goes up the steps on to the veranda and into the bungalow, for he wants to read the letter in the privacy of his room, not trusting his dignity in the face of the news the letter may contain.

The old man stands shocked, tasting bitter disappointment, for the Sahib has forgotten his *bakshish*.

★ ★ ★

Thus came news that my wife was leaving England within a few days to join me on the Darjeeling tea garden. We had been parted for more than six months. When I left England to take up our new life and get settled before the arrival of my family we had no definite idea when we should meet again. At that time Melody, our elder daughter, was two years old; our younger, Kandy, was only three weeks. Now comes the time for me to go down to Calcutta to meet them and bring them to our new home.

★ ★ ★

A week later we are all climbing into a Dakota in the short, cool dawn of Calcutta's Dum Dum airport. Kandy is in a carrying cot.

In the plane, Sheila looks with curiosity at the other passengers. "I can hardly believe such people fly!"

"Necessity," I explain. "India's frontier with Tibet and Nepal along the foothills of the Himalayas is cut off from the rest of the state by the division of Bengal between India and Pakistan."

A lean Mawari with an amber-coloured turban has kicked off his chupplies and sits in total unconcern with bare feet curled under him. A stout hill-woman with cheeks like a

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Dresden shepherdess is ensconced amid a heap of wicker baskets. A dignified Parsi in an impeccable sharkskin suit reads an air-mail edition of *The Times*. A *dhoti*-clad Bengali nurses a baby whose tiny head lolls beneath the weight of a crimson bonnet. His young wife holds a corner of her *sari* shyly across her face.

A mass of palm fronds pass beneath us. We are borne on the air, which is still dewed, fragrant with the odour of the Indian plains. Calcutta lies below; we pass over it, climbing steeply, and head north to where a pall of dust hangs over the zealously marked border of East Pakistan.

The great tentacles of the Hooghly sprawl across the delta. The segmented landscape is chequered in variations of green and rust. The engines stabilize on a high steady whistle and in front of us the Mawari is neatly sick into a small paper bag.

For an hour we fly above square miles which have a depressing appearance of being shadeless and are relieved only by tortuous water courses and the occasional breadth of a main tributary.

I am relaxed in half-slumber when Sheila grips my arm. "Look, the hills!" They serrate the horizon, blue in the gathering haze, starting quite suddenly, like humps, from the plains. We crowd our faces to the narrow port. The plane starts to lose height. The indicator flashes the warning: "tighten your safety belt".

I make sure the carrying cot is fast on the seat opposite. Baby Kandy is asleep. I notice the faint, clear line of perspiration above her soft mouth.

Scattered, motley buildings litter the ground below—the rising township of Siliguri. Just beyond is the steel mesh of an aircraft runway embossed into the turf and looking ludicrously short. None of the conventional signs of an airport here. Two small huts and a corrugated iron *godown* flank one edge, orderly rows of tea bushes line the other. A dusty macadam road meanders from the landing strip towards the town. There is no sign of a living soul.

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The Dakota dips sharply. I notice the flaps almost at right angles to the wings. We come rushing down on a crest of air.

The Mawari takes off his orange turban. His head is shaven except for a dozen or so looped strands which lie on top like a small curled snake. I remember having heard that Hindus leave these strands so that the gods can reach down and draw them up to heaven.

The air is waiting for us outside; an evil vapour which there is no escaping, stagnant with fetid dust. I look at my watch. It is nearly ten o'clock. "Three hours from now," I tell Sheila, "we shall be at seven thousand feet, above all this, breathing air straight from the snows."

Sheila looks disbelieving, for the mountains are shrouded in dust and seem to be many miles away.

A station-wagon from Darjeeling is waiting for us. The cheery little Gurkha driver comes up and salutes. Sheila watches him brusquely order the coolie porters to the car with our baggage. "He's my first Nepali," she says. He is a typical example of the sturdy people of the Darjeeling hills. Less than five feet tall, his shoulders are broad and muscular, his body thick and stocky, his legs beneath shorts are knotted with muscle, the calves corded with large blood vessels and incredibly strong. His feet and hands are very tiny. He looks at the fair curls of the babies and an astonished smile comes slowly to his face, so that his eyes crinkle to a line as his high cheeks thrust upwards to his wide, low forehead.

"*Mum, mum, mum!*" He uses a typical Nepalese exclamation. "Come *nannie!*" He holds a hand towards Melody and points to the car.

Melody pauses. So much has happened to change her world in such a little time, confusion is in her mind. The young animal instinct warns caution. Suddenly she runs to the outstretched hand, ducks beneath it and heads for the car. She looks across her shoulder and confidence is in her laugh.

The baggage is loaded on to the tailboard and the driver lifts the carrying cot on to the front seat beside him. I pay off

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the coolies. The car starts across the uneven grass and circles close to the empty Dakota. With a slight jolt we settle into the ruts of the track and head for the blue hills.

Beyond the airstrip precincts we come to the bridge spanning the Mahanadi river. Here the twenty-four-inch gauge Himalayan Railway joins the road, and the two are bound by the rock shelf slashed from the sides of the hills, to climb to eight thousand feet in less than forty miles.

Up and up we mount through blind avenues of magnificent sal forest, straight trunked as pines and dignified above the welter of undergrowth. Vines and ropes of parasitic creepers bind the trees in an impenetrable wall of foliage. Blue, orange, crimson and white blossoms lie amongst the greenery in profusion. The dappled sunlight half-conceals, so that our eyes are dazzled by the confusion of shade and colour. The scent of musk and humid vegetation pervades the car. We sit spellbound by the fascination of it all.

Though the rains are overdue the road is slashed a dozen times every mile by the crystal streams that tumble noisily from rock to boulder in deep clefts that scar the hillsides. When the monsoon breaks these will become fierce torrents hurtling brown and thick to the high couloirs that segregate the spurs, and thence on down to the river below. Great tree limbs straddle the ravines, white as bones, stripped of bark by the pounding of water-borne rocks.

The narrow road follows the contours, turns back upon itself, mounts higher and then winds again along the undulating hillside in repetition that is never monotonous. The polished lines of the tiny railway track run parallel with the road, surmounting the same obstacles, spanning the breaches in the mountain walls on hewn stone culverts.

"Look!" cries Sheila in excitement, "orchids! Great clusters of them in the forks of the trees. How lovely. Do ask the driver to stop." The little Gurkha has seen her pointing finger; heard her exclamation. He has brought many tourists up this road and is wise in the ways of Memsahibs. I see the grin

on his face as he stops the station-wagon at a point where the gradient is gentle.

We clamber out and immediately feel the delightful breeze cool upon our skin. We stand drinking in the clear air with eyes half-closed, heads thrown back to let the breeze play on our throats.

Strange trees—simal, toon, sal, and massive clumps of bamboos—pack the primeval forest. Among the sprays of the bough-tips at the fringe of the road a pair of paradise flycatchers cavort animatedly. Sheila exclaims in pleasure as the cock flaunts the ten-inch white streamers of his tail.

Beyond the shoulder of the spur the plains stretch away in a fantasy of ethereal blues and greys. The river coils like a gilded serpent to where, forty miles away, our vision blurs.

We walk back down the road. Fast on ancient limbs, epiphytic orchids sprout masses of small white flowers with a narrow yellow eye, like patches of snow shaded from a thaw. Their fragrance is sickly-sweet. "Not far from our bungalow you will find dozens of different sorts of orchids," I tell Sheila, and realize I am boasting with all the pride of a man who holds some place very dear. If only my family can come to feel the same about it. . . .

So we go on, higher, where the air grows chill, deep amongst the hills, so that the plains seem to belong to a different world. As we climb the moment for which I have so longed draws near; the moment when Sheila will get a first glimpse of Kanchenjunga and the allied peaks of the snow range. I have marked exactly the point where the road skirts a spur and the whole panorama comes rushing like some fantastic projection straight across the sky.

We reach the scattered shanty-buildings of Kurseong town. In fifty minutes we shall be at Darjeeling, in thirty-five we shall reach Ghoom and Sheila will see the snows.

The forests fall behind. Tea bushes sweep the length of every slope, the white bungalows of the planters are bold

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against the smooth hillsides. Melody falls asleep across my lap. We sit in silence as we near Ghoom.

Sheila senses my anticipation. She cannot fail to be moved by the magnificence of the view. People travel half-way around the world to see Kanchenjunga, and she will have her home within sight of it. It is the moment when she first gazes out across the boundaries of Sikkim that I feel must be of the greatest significance, for in that moment all my dreams of our future can be spoiled or, like any Hindu pilgrim journeying to set eyes on the Himalayas for his soul's absolution, she can come under Kanchenjunga's spell.

I take her hand and wait. The engine labours in second gear. The monastery village of Ghoom is in sight. At seven thousand five hundred feet it is often in cloud. Today, there is only a filter-passing haze that should not obscure the view. The sun lies at our backs in a wash of rose and gold. The car takes a right-angled bend and starts on the last sweep to round the spur. I can see where the tarmac disappears at the shadow of a huge boulder perched above an outcrop. The strip of road shot with sunlight seems to be all that lies between us and the edge of the world.

The road steepens and the driver changes down to first gear. We creep towards the final bend. Sheila's concentration is upon the road; mine lies beyond to where I know the dramatic vision of Kanchenjunga awaits us.

I realize now that this is the focus of all the months we have been apart. If only, I think, she can come to see with my eyes for the brief minute it will take to round the spur.

Her fingers tighten on mine; it is easy to divine her thought; surely we must overshoot the edge and go over the precipice? I turn my eyes to watch her face as Kanchenjunga looms to sight.

The driver edges the car very slowly round the bend. I look away from the drop, searching Sheila's eyes. She has only to raise them to look upon Kanchenjunga. By now we have rounded the spur. Still she gives no sign. The engine

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picks up as the gears change, and I know we are heading straight for Ghoom.

Is it all lost on her? Has the spell of Kanchenjunga failed? Bitter sorrow fills my heart. It all means nothing to her, and my most searing thought is that had she known my hopes she would have shammed enthusiasm.

Wretchedly I turn from her and Melody stirs on my knee. Then I understand. Kanchenjunga is not to be seen. The whole snow range is obliterated in a welter of writhing cloud. The valley is filled with mist and black cumulus clouds mass low above Sikkim. The monsoon is at hand.

So we go on through Ghoom and into the saddle of the hills to Darjeeling, where a room awaits us in the Planters' Club for our first night among the hills of our new home. I do not tell Sheila of my hope for her first sight of Kanchenjunga, for there are many years before us, and the snows are eternal. . . .

THE CHILDREN OF KANCHENJUNGA

II

The Malevolent Forest

At six-thirty next morning Sheila and I stand on the flat circular roof of an annexe to the Darjeeling Planters' Club, known as the "quarterdeck". We have crept from our room in dressing-gowns.

Beneath us stretches a turbulent sea of cloud, blanketing the bazaar, reaching across the valleys and coiling around the glaciers on the face of Kanchenjunga. From where we stand the whole massif has a look of inviolability. Against the dawn sky the icy seracs lean into space, hover baseless, buoyant on the shifting mists, dissolve before our eyes and merge into the azure backcloth, so that our eyes haze with brilliance, falter in concentration, blink and refocus, never seeming quite to be able to fix the feature so startlingly clear a moment before.

Sheila is spellbound. "I never thought . . ." she says. "I never guessed . . ."

From somewhere along the ridge, towards Ghoom, comes the resonant drawn note of a monastery trumpet, mellowed by the impermeable cloud but by some strange acoustic echo of the hills sounding close at hand. We are the only people in this fantastic world; I have the impression that we have only to step over the parapet and walk upon the cloud carpet, invoking the magic of The Lord of Five Treasures to reach the edge of the world. I dare to glance at Sheila, fearful lest



the spell be broken. Her eyes are alight with the excitement of undreamt beauty.

Then before our gaze the magnificent panorama begins to fade as the gathering mists creep upwards and across the serrated horizon. First a fine haze that enhances the effect, softening the cruellest outlines and bestowing a touch of mystery to every cleft and fissure. Then gradually the mist hardens and spreads, imperceptibly merging with the dazzling whiteness of the snow, shifting restlessly on the wind eddies around the summits till finally we realize that the great range has passed from view and now we gaze upon cloud formations that writhe through the beautiful shapes of the Chinese character alphabet.

Reluctantly we leave the quarterdeck and go back to our room, to find the new Ayah waiting outside for instructions to dress Melody and Kandy.

Sheila looks at the woman critically. It is a hard thing at first for a mother to accept an Asiatic ministering to her children.

“She comes of good family that has provided bungalow servants for generations,” I explain. “Her husband, the *Burra Sahib*’s bearer for many years, died, and she has had a hard time bringing up her own children, that is why she is so keen to become Ayah to ours. It is a tremendous lift in the social scale of the garden.”

Ayah’s eyes are crinkled with nervousness. Her skin is the colour of cloudy amber. She is about forty. She wears the Nepali dress of six yards of cheap cotton wound thrice round her waist and reaching to the ground, so that only her bare toes are visible. The surplus cloth is gathered into a pleated bunch at the navel and held by a twisted waist-band. Thus the skirt is stretched tightly across her hips while hanging in folds in front. She wears a short-sleeved blouse open down the front to show the spacing of her well-formed breasts. It exposes her supple midriff above the skirt and is fastened by a horizontal safety-pin. Her hair is oiled back in a single thick

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plait and covered by a headshawl just off her crown. Her clothes are faded and worn, but clean and neatly patched. She is rather less than five feet tall.

“Salaam, Sahib! Salaam, Memsahib!” she greets us. “Can I see the *nannies* now, Sahib?” Clearly she is excited at the prospect of meeting her new charges and my heart warms to her. There is a quality to her flat face, with wide-set eyes and bridgeless, retroussé nose, that is wholly likeable.

I open the door. “Go to them, Ayah, and from today watch them well!”

She runs forward. “Jetti, Kanchi,” she calls, “come!” and she takes Kandy into her arms.

To Sheila I explain. “These words mean eldest daughter and youngest daughter. Nepali children are called by these terms from birth. There are words to indicate the placing of every son and daughter in a family. Names are seldom used, so these terms stay with them through life, and it is not uncommon to hear an old, bent woman addressed by her contemporaries as Kanchi—youngest daughter.”

Directly after breakfast Sheila says, “Our cases are packed ready to leave.”

“I’ll get someone to carry them.” Sitting on the steps of the shops in the roadway below the quarterdeck, a group of old Tibetan women knit raw wool on bamboo needles. I call down to one of them. She smiles up at us and nods, setting ajangle the massive ear-rings stretching her lobes. She hoists her basket on to her back and pulls a plaited bamboo headband around her forehead. Still knitting, she starts up the steep path traversing the embankment.

Melody is fascinated by the old woman and when she stands before us, her wrinkled face smiling, Melody cries, “Look, Mummy, she is wearing a ‘pinny’!” This long apron of gay-coloured horizontal stripes, worn over a wide-sleeved gown, is the national dress of Tibetan women. On her breast, suspended from a necklet of crimson beads, is an amulet in the form of a brass box set with blue stones and micaeous

gems. Sealed within this is her horoscope, drawn up by monks at the time of her birth.

Ayah puts Kandy in her carrying cot and squats beside her to tuck her in. The old Tibetan woman grins delightedly. There is a warmheartedness about these people that makes an instant appeal. I indicate our cases. Sheila and I take the handles of the cot and we start downstairs.

Down the diagonal path we trail and a number of bearers and servants gather on the quarterdeck to watch our departure. The roads of Darjeeling are all at different levels, mostly extremely steep. On some of them traffic is banned. Such is the road before the Club, and our little procession has to descend two or three hundred feet in a series of zig-zags.

Immediately we are confronted by a jostling crowd of drivers proclaiming the comfort and reliability of their respective vehicles. "Where to go, Sahib?" "Just here, Sahib! My *ghari* is a good one!" "Memsahib like my car, nice blue one!"

"Don't worry," I reassure Sheila. "I have booked the same station wagon that we came up in yesterday. The office is here."

The proprietor waves us to chairs. "One minute, Sahib. My driver is coming now!" Coming now is a colloquialism of the district, irritating and inaccurate. The man is a Bengali, with close-set eyes and heavily oiled hair. He shuffles the papers on his desk importantly. "Where is it you go to, Sahib?"

"Chungtung tea estate," I answer firmly.

His little eyes pop in agitation. He runs a plump finger between his grimy collar and the roll of fat that overhangs it. "You say Chungtung, Sahib? You mean on the forest road?"

"Is there another?"

"Ah, Sahib! I did not know; I did not think . . ."

"Listen," I say forcibly. "I booked a car for today and you took the order." I feared some hitch in our plans for this notorious road is the nightmare of every driver in the district.

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The wretched Bengali wriggles his flabby hands vaguely. "I think my car is broken, Sahib. I think my driver is ill . . ."

"Is this road really so terrible?" Sheila demands of me.

"Not in daylight!" I turn again to the Bengali and try to browbeat him. "You accepted my booking and I expect a car to get me to the garden."

"I will see to it, Sahib, I will see." He pushes past Ayah and the old Tibetan woman who is crowding the doorway with our mountain of luggage on her back. We put Kandy's carrying cot on his desk and settle down to wait.

After ten minutes the Bengali comes back, beaming expansively. He leads us down the line of cars and comes to stop opposite a dilapidated jeep at the extreme end. The chassis sags depressingly, the body is attached at intervals. It has no bonnet and what I can see of the engine through the oil and dust gives no encouragement to my hope that its appearance may belie its performance. The windscreen seems to have been shot up recently and the hood hangs in tatters on bent angle bars. A cheerful little Nepali grins at us and salaams delightedly. "Chungtung, Sahib? *Bahut accha!*"

We start to load our cases on top of the spare wheel which fills the body, helped by numerous other drivers and well-wishers, all with conflicting views on the loading of jeeps. On top of the whole pile there is just room to slip the carrying cot under the torn hood.

When we are at last packed in, clutching at insecure pieces of metal that hang on the frame like barnacles, I realize that one of the watching crowd is the driver's "mate", indispensable to the complement. This is a rascally looking fellow with relaxed muscles on his eyelids, so that his eyes do not fully open and he has to tilt his head to peer from under his lashes. However, he is strong and, without prompting, seizes the starting handle and begins to wind. The jeep bounces on tired springs, coughs and spits like an old tramp roused off a park bench, then suddenly sparks and roars to life with a jerk that sets our babies whimpering.

Very slowly we move forward on to the road, turn past the line of cars and begin to pick up speed on the fierce gradient that winds away through the bazaar.

We clear the town and start along the contour road that links Darjeeling with Ghoom. Light rain begins to fall. The clouds thicken. Huddled in the jeep, peering through the shattered windscreen, we can just make out the drunken stone pillars spaced at twenty-yard intervals to mark the edge of the road and the drop of a thousand feet to the hill buttresses at the head of the valleys below. We cannot see the valleys; we only know they are there, wrapped in eerie, writhing vapour.

The wretched little jeep seems to grope forward, nuzzling the inner bank. We start the gradual ascent to the Ghoom ridge and the cloud grows perceptibly denser. "Will the forest road be very bad, Sahib? I hear there were no repairs done to it last cold weather." The grin does not relax on the driver's cheerful face.

"It was not too bad when I came up on it a few days ago." I tried to sound confident. "Once you know the worst places and go steadily, it's quite easy."

The driver remains silent for an appreciable time, then, still grinning broadly, remarks, "I've not been down to Chungtung before!"

"What does he say?" asks Sheila. "It's infuriating not being able to understand."

"He's asking about the road," I say evasively.

The tottering railway station at Ghoom looms beside the track and we feel the jeep bump heavily as the wheels ride the lines at the crossing.

The road which we ascended yesterday fades in a few yards before our gaze. Of the junction there is no sign. We turn off the road and strike into an apparent void, but we make the turn successfully and once again have the vague shape of the inner bank to hug.

The road drops away steeply before us. The engine back-

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fires fiercely as it strives to check the gathering momentum of its load. Now and again the indeterminable shape of some ramshackle hut or shop is glimpsed through the mist as we rattle past. I look across Sheila's knees and see the gear-change shaft wrenching and straining to free the cogs from their burden. I remember the tendency of an old jeep to jump out of gear.

Down, down we go. The road has never seemed so long. I begin to wonder whether we have missed the turning at the start of the forest track, so that when we finally reach the macadam incline branching from the main road it is with a feeling of relief. Almost as soon as we are off the main road the mist thins. A stir of air among the upper boughs, forced to abnormal heights by the rank undergrowth, goads the clouds to disperse.

The whole dense jungle tract covers a vast ridgeside and acts as watershed for the torrents that course through the valleys at its feet. In places landslips have eaten into the slope and here the drop is almost sheer, cutting through to bedrock and exposing the entrails of the mountain.

Through this strange place the track leading down to our garden is cut as a narrow, treacherous shelf, set at a startling gradient. It winds round great rock bastions, traverses barren scree and plunges through tangles of jungle. Down this track, graced with the official designation of a District Board Road, we proceed. At only the least perilous points does the edge lie more than thirty inches from the jeep's outer wheels. Sheila says with obvious sincerity, "Thank God the cloud lifted before we got here!"

The forest is perpetually damp. There is a faint ominous rustle as though the undergrowth is alive with unseen figures jostling to get a look at us as we go slowly past; a faint dripping from the trees as though they weep on being roused at our coming from timeless slumber. A prerogative of forests, this eerie stir, in which Sheila and I find an affinity of fascination.

The Malevolent Forest

The sky is glimpsed through overhead foliage; grey as lead and heavy. Fine, chill rain falls steadily, so that the puddles that lie on the track before us are flecked with dancing drops.

We reach the first of the seven bridges that span the fiercest of the tumbling streams that slash the track. These are made by felling a couple of stout trees across the breach and planking unevenly between the trunks. There are neither sides nor rails, and as they are only just wide enough to take the wheels of a car, one can only hold the steering wheel steady and trust to luck that one's first alignment is right. To add to the difficulty most of these bridges are set at the wrong angle so that immediately before or directly after crossing a violent turn of the wheel is necessary to avoid shooting the car over the precipice or ramming the inner wall.

The trees are festooned with trailing creepers; pothos, pepers, convolvulus and bignonias. Splashes of coloured rhododendrons show amongst the sodden foliage. Tree ferns, luxurious and handsome, are bound by cables of vines to magnificent black junipers, graceful Himalayan larches and long-leaved screw pines. Criptomeras dominate the splendid array by their height. Every trunk is thickly daubed with great patches of moss, and the undersides of many branches are tufted with virile, foliaceous lichen. Gnarled and warped giants, birch and Himalayan oak of tremendous age, have held the hillside fast against the onslaught of centuries of fierce rain and erosion. Their roots sprawl nakedly across the slopes, thrusting here a tendril, there a limb, consolidating a hard-won triumph over the inhospitable, shifting earth.

Reflecting wanly through the green tangle a waterfall looms in view. Not until we are nearly upon it is its height apparent. The track is jointed at this point by a rustic bridge which spans the chasm within strike of the spray. The cascade shoots from a ledge eighty feet above and comes tumbling and foaming down an arm's length from the bridge, hits the rocks below and goes hurtling down through the trees to the valley bed.

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“This waterfall is called *Banda Beir* by the locals. It means The Monkeys’ Leap.”

“A lovely name,” Sheila agrees. “I shall appreciate it better once we are on the other side.”

The laden jeep edges over the bridge, each of the warped planks dancing independently like the keys on an animated cartoon piano. I realize that the slats are not nailed down. I glance at Sheila to see whether she has guessed this, and see from her expression that she has.

The spray from the fall is icy and a bitter down-draught catches us as we pass. Kandy starts to cry; the thunder of the water is terrifying, but once across the bridge she is lulled again by the movement of the jeep.

All the while we are dropping steadily lower, and quite suddenly we run into a patch of sunlight which litters the wet track with tiny coloured prisms. As we round a promontory I point down the valley where the steel roof of our *koti* glints damply. Patches of sunlight show through the fine rain, like giant footprints, marching across Sikkim to the edge of the world where, behind the threatening monsoon clouds, lies the snow range. Sheila stares, setting the panorama fast within her memory; it is magnificent and spacious, the greenness of the packed tea bushes soothing to the eyes, broken only by the play of shadows marking the long defiles that breach the hills.

“So that is Chungtung?”

“Yes. That is where we shall live.”

“There is space and light and air; the sky does not press upon us and our world is not bounded by walls!”

“You have come straight from the city,” I remind her. “You notice these things. England seems very small when you survey this. Perhaps it will be too lonely, though, and the sky seem too high?”

“Perhaps,” she says, and smiles as she turns to me. “But I do not think so!”

We break out of the forest at last and jolt along the ridge

between the tea. The engine seems muted by the breeze and quiet without the echo from the rock walls. We turn a corner and there, perched on a spur five hundred feet below, leaping surprisingly to view, is a neat bungalow.

“Our nearest neighbour, James Evendon, lives there.”

“Somebody interesting?” Sheila asks.

“One of the old school of planters. Been on that garden thirty years. He’s a bachelor. Seems to have found complete contentment on his own little domain. Goes to Darjeeling once a year for the Planters’ Association annual meeting. People call him a hermit, but I met him on this track once and I felt sure I spoke to a happy man.”

“Was he friendly?”

“Very. He’s well read. He does a bit of shooting around his own estate. It’s just that he has found he can do without the company of his own countrymen. It’s not unusual. Plenty of tea planters find a harmony in their own lives after a time. It seemed strange to me at first, but I’ve had glimpses of what I think he feels about this place. . . .”

The track descends in zig-zags, past the thatch and wattle huts of tea garden coolies, past the tall, urn-shaped tombs of their illustrious ancestors, beneath ancient holy trees. Here and there faces peer at us in curiosity from the narrow spaces between huts, and mangy pi-dogs, brave with surprise, chase in our wake, snapping furiously at the trail of blue exhaust smoke.

We round a final bend and come to a large square bungalow. “This is the *burra koti*,” I tell Sheila. “The road from here is not yet made up. We shall have to walk the last mile down to our bungalow.”

The driver pulls up outside the *koti* and a number of servants appear on the veranda. They salaam Sheila with staring eyes and start to unload the luggage. “The *Burra Sahib* is at the factory,” they tell me. “He thought you would stay for tea.”

“No. We must go straight down. The *nannies* are tired.

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We shall leave the luggage here and send coolies for it in the morning.”

Ayah gathers baby Kandy in her arms and grips her umbrella. “Shall I go on, Sahib?”

“Yes, Ayah. Don’t wait for us. But go carefully, the path will be very slippery.”

The rain is increasing steadily and as I turn to pay the driver a heavy peal of thunder breaks from near at hand.

I pick up Melody, who is too tired to protest that she will miss the pleasure of wallowing through the mire herself. We set out through the rain, resigned to a drenching and oblivious of the mud that comes up in clumps on our shoes and splatters the backs of our calves. The leaves of the tea bushes to right and left of us are dancing rhythmically under the weight of raindrops; the clouds are massed each side of the ridge and the track winds away into the pall of rain.

It is at this point that we meet the *Burra Sahib*, the estate manager, advancing beneath a huge umbrella. I stand in the rain and make an inane, formal introduction. Sheila, with hair streaming about her face and clothes creased and wringing wet, is at a definite disadvantage. I see the *Burra Sahib’s* canny little Scot’s eyes twinkling in amusement. His vast bulk blocks the path.

“Brought the monsoon with ye, it seems, Mrs. Fletcher. About time, too; long overdue,” he says in a rich, lowland drawl. “Sorry about the road. Landslips cut it last year. Well, I’ll not keep ye. . . .”

We hurry on down, but his voice reaches out in an afterthought. “Like to borrow the umbrella?”

Its span keeps the rain from our faces, and we are able to concentrate upon the streaming path. Rivulets have already cut deep furrows in the surface. The red clay is greasy underfoot. Sliding and stumbling, clutching at each other for support, we press on down the hill. Sheila tries in vain to keep the umbrella over us, while Melody increases in weight with every step I take!

The Malevolent Forest

The track seems interminable. Corner after corner falls behind only to reveal another gradient. This track I thought I knew so well becomes a nightmare. The rain drums a tattoo upon the taut cotton of the umbrella, our squelching shoes are full of water. Out of the grey sky thunder rolls incessantly. Then the glistening roof of the bungalow comes into view and the end of the trek is in sight. The track cuts back upon itself twice in long shelves to circumvent the steepness of the slope.

We are walking like automatons and impervious to the elements by the time we reach the final corner and the drive that runs past the veranda steps.

I set Melody down and stand for a moment under the umbrella. "Listen, Sheila," I say uncertainly. "I know I am a fool, but I wanted everything to be so different. I imagined waiting here while you went forward alone and saw your new home, as beautiful as it can look, bathed in sunlight and with all the servants along the drive to greet you. . . ."

She smiles at me, her lovely, slow, understanding smile, and says quietly, "If it had been like that it would have been pleasant; pleasant but not memorable. Because the monsoon broke today, and we have had this journey that is certainly beyond imagination, it will stay in my memory, and yours, all the rest of our lives. Wherever we go in the future, we shall always remember how we first came to Chungtung!"

With Melody between us, each holding a hand, we go up the gravel drive.

III

Measure of a Sahib

A tea garden in the Darjeeling hills is run on tradition; the whole structure founded on the ideals laid down by the pioneer planters who set out the estates and introduced the industry into the district at the turn of the century.

This adherence to custom and the fostering of tradition is because the Nepali peasant, in company with all primitives, is extremely conservative. He dislikes and resents any changes in the little world of his own garden. So when a new manager or assistant moves in, all the coolies feel a vague resentment and a desire to impress on the intruder their own small part in the making of the garden's tea.

Once they are convinced, however, that the new Sahib is a sound and strong character, they accept his authority without question, and every year they become more firmly attached to his methods. They are amenable to discipline once they are sure of impartiality.

Because the manufacture of tea at remunerative prices is largely dependent upon cheap, unskilled labour, the relations between garden coolies and estate managers is the single most important factor in the production of tea.

The planter is isolated by great distances, quite without recourse to the usual contacts which allow people with more conventional jobs to keep a sense of proportion. He is entirely

dependent on his own judgment and must stand on his decisions at the risk of them proving wrong. Hence the need for tradition; to give a guide on all matters on which he must show magnanimity, and a code to which it should be his aim to make his labour force adhere.



The weather is kind to us after Sheila's arrival at Chung-tung and for a few days we awake to fine mornings, with the overnight rain still lying in puddles on the drive, the air sweet to our lungs, and the hills emerald green—cleaned of the red dust that bound them for long months.

With the rain came the first weight of new-season's tea—tender, succulent shoots, starting from the table-surfaces of the bushes like little stabbing spears, showing quality of flavour in the tiny hairs on the curled tips.

At the beginning of April the bushes produce the first flush. This is brought on by the rising sap—a fine growth of pale tips. But once these have been gathered the bushes are dormant until the monsoon, when they start throwing out the mass of shoots that is to be expected every five or six days.

Sheila's arrival has coincided with the second flush, and from now until October plucking goes on six days a week. Daily the factory turns out up to six thousand pounds of tea. The day starts at six o'clock, when the sun reaches the shoulder of the Darjeeling ridge and peeps over at Chung-tung, spread across the lower opposite spur. As the sun gains height, the line of light trickles evenly down the slope, over-running the groups of coolies' huts. It passes across the smooth acres of tea bushes, bringing life to the dappled shadows beneath the clumps of bamboos that fringe the valley, and finally, touching the swift river between the great boulders, strikes pristine tints from the micaceous formations.

Within the thatched huts families begin to stir. They have slept since the fall of night ten hours before; slept in that dreamless oblivion which comes after manual labour.

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The grandparents, the youngest children, the sons, each with a young wife, the maiden daughters, the mothers and fathers; each has an allotted place. The huts are eighteen feet long by twelve wide, surrounded by neat patches of Indian corn which now tops the roof at ten feet.

A small thatched pen behind every house keeps the families' kidding goats. Chickens scratch purposefully nearby and gaudy-plumed cockerels make fluttering leaps to the roofs where, scurrying to the apexes, they crow in strident rivalry.

From the veranda I can see a group of these huts, stacked in orderly line down the spur that runs below the bungalow to the valley bed. Here, among bamboo fronds that invite a breeze, the coolies have selected their sites, built their simple wattle-walled huts and plastered them with deep-dug red clay. The smoke from the fires within seeps through the thatch and drifts lazily across the valley. The rice is being boiled for the first meal of the day. Here and there I detect a slight movement among the corn where a child is hurrying back with a copper pot of icy water from the spring.

The bungalow at my back is still heavy with sleep. Sheila did not stir when the bearer crept in and set the *chhota huzri* tray at my bedside. After shaving and dressing I went through to the babies' room and opened their door that leads on to the veranda. Ayah, waiting outside, slipped inside to dress them.

I go down the steps and on to the dewed lawn. The terraces beyond fall steeply, held by crude rock walls, now lichenous and stable after standing half a century against the pressure of sodden earth. Eight peach trees have allied themselves to the walls and, though their trunks are gnarled and twisted entities leaning out over the terraces as though to peer into the valley, their roots go deep.

Away to the north-east, at the side of the bungalow, the undulating hills of Sikkim roll in profusion, like a gigantic sea arrested in movement. The defiles and gorges are filled

with mist, so that only the wooded hills rise to receive the grace of the sun and are laid about with cloth of gold.

I follow the drive to the back of the bungalow and pass out of the compound along a footpath leading past the stables. Already the *syce* is rubbing down my grey Tibetan gelding, Northern Shot. The pony is playing up without malice in the sharp air. The *syce* sees me and his hand jerks up in perfunctory salute.

A short distance from the bungalow is a levelled clearing from which paths run in all directions to the group of huts scattered on each side of the ridge. Along these paths files of coolies are now converging on the clearing for the daily muster. I stand at the edge and watch them line up while the *munshi*, or headman, counts them. Overseers tell them which part of the garden is to be plucked today. Down the winding paths they trail, as the sun warms the earth and the earliest of the vivid-coloured butterflies take the air.

When the coolies are gone, the *chowkidars* gather round to give me news of all that is happening on the garden. These men are watchmen, a sort of private police force whose job it is to settle the minor disputes among the coolies, prevent the theft of leaf from the bushes for hand manufacture and sale in the bazaar, and to guard the replanted forest areas against itinerant woodcutters and charcoal burners. There are nine of them, dressed in an ill-assorted collection of Nepali and European clothes, several proudly wearing items of military equipment, relics of service in Gurkha regiments during the war. One wears a huge pair of army boots, the rest are barefooted. One article they all have in common is the broad, flat blade of their *kukris*, the Gurkha chopping knife, encased in a buffalo-hide case like an overgrown bean pod, and tied with thongs around their waists.

They salaam in turn, then the self-appointed leader steps forward. "Sahib, there was a leopard in the lines last night. He carried off old Lalbahadur's only goat."

As I look from face to face they nod in accord, their eyes

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like black almonds above high cheek-bones, short bridgeless noses and full, sensual mouths, all without the trace of an expression. They look to me for reply, hanging upon my answer to see how the Sahib will react to this announcement.

Many months they have observed me; slow to give confidence yet remaining polite and conscious of decorum. I realize this is the opportunity to prove my worth. They must *mean* something to me, these people of the tea garden, for I am anxious to gain their trust.

“How do you know it was a leopard?” I ask.

Their eyes say plainly, does he think us fools? “The prints of its feet, Sahib, are very clear. Old Lalbahadur heard the sounds in the night, his dog howled and its hackles rose. We followed the pug marks through the corn to the edge of the jungle.”

I nod, and try to sound non-committal. “I shall come at mid-day to see the tracks myself.” They accept this with reserve and move off to the plucking areas.

I return to the bungalow somewhat preoccupied. Breakfast is laid on the veranda. Sheila awaits me. She rings the tiny silver bell and the bearer appears with a laden tray.

The sunlight is streaming across the lawn. From beneath the peach trees, where the grass verge gives on to the first of the terraces, the sound of treble voices comes to us. Melody and Kandy are playing in the sand-pit with the gardener’s boy, an ugly little fellow of limited intelligence. He has been quite overwhelmed by the demands of our elder daughter, who is under the impression that he is a new sort of toy, and hers to command.

I wait until Sheila is pouring out my second cup of tea before saying casually, “There was a leopard in the lines last night.”

“Where did it go? Did it kill anything?”

“It killed a goat.” I point across to the spur, some three hundred yards from the bungalow. “It was there; amongst those bamboos. I am going to see the pug marks later.”

“Are there many leopards on the gardens up here?”

“Occasionally I believe they do come up the valleys from Sikkim or Nepal Terai. I’ve heard talk in the Club of people who have shot leopards from their own verandas.”

Sheila eyes the spur speculatively. “Yes,” she says, “I suppose it is possible!”

“Don’t worry,” I laugh. “I bet we never hear of this fellow again. He’s had his meal and won’t risk another visit.”

After breakfast I set out for a tour of my division of the estate. I have six hundred acres to cover, of which three hundred are under tea. The rest is jungle with clearings for the coolies’ lines.

I tramp down the paths in time to the swish of the damp grass, as the *syce* leads the pony behind me. Down the valley the mist has dispersed. A black pall of cloud hangs low in threat over Sikkim, blotting out the horizon and hazing the defiles in shadow.

From the top of a concave slope I look down a thousand feet, across the packed lines of bushes, to where a serrated chain of figures sprawl among the tea. Away beyond the curve of the river bed, where the tail of the ridge stretches out to the headwaters of the Little Rangit, I can just make out the baskets of another group of coolies. The various groups are usually split up; all the young women, the best workers at plucking leaf, go together. The less skilled older women, and those carrying young babies, make up a separate group. The men prefer not to work near their womenfolk, for the women chatter incessantly, their tongues matching their deft fingers, while the men gather the leaf hardly exchanging a word. The children, in two groups—the older ones called *chokras* and the younger *lokras*—are apart from their parents, in charge of overseers, and have a good deal of fun during the day whenever they are not being watched.

Great shade trees interspace the tea, for tea in its natural state grows amongst jungle. Indian sau casts a gentle shade that is ideally suited to cultivated tea; the fanlike branches

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spread in graceful symmetry and sway on the breeze with a ripple of lighter green as the undersides briefly flicker out of true.

From a tree that overhangs the path a Himalayan cuckoo calls plaintively. I stop so sharply that the pony comes on behind me and nuzzles me firmly between the shoulders. The plump grey "parasite" is barely discernible, perched on a leafy twig. He calls again before taking wing. I turn to the *syce* in curiosity. "What is the Nepali name for that bird?"

"Cuckoo," he says in surprise, as though it would not be possible for it to have any other name. "Cuckoo," he repeats and grins delightedly. And, after all, would it be possible for this ridiculous bird to be called by any other name? I go on down, suddenly transported with happiness, seeing for a moment with appreciative eyes the beauty of the valley around me; and I wonder why it is that these moments are so rare?

Tea bushes run right to the river bed, where a crumbling bank drops twenty feet to a sandy waste littered with immense boulders. Odd tufts of coarse grasses sprout intermittently. The whole barren expanse is a couple of hundred yards across. Through the centre of this desert a fierce cataract, hurtling over obstructing rocks, slices into the banks, bearing downstream a welter of twigs and rubbish from the jungle slope of its source. Then it plunges for many miles to join the great waters which flow to the plains. It is the savagery of the river that lays waste the valley. Boulders, hacked from the water-source and carried down during the height of the rains, are worn smooth by action and flung in disarray. The driving torrent carves through to bed-rock, shoots off at an angle, and switches from side to side of the gorge.

On the further bank of the river, a mile downstream, is Bijanbari, reached by the only span across the river for fifteen miles; and with this advantage the village is the commercial centre of the district.

It is very hot in the valley, for the breeze cannot penetrate, although it is two-thousand-five-hundred feet above sea level. The overseers are standing along the line of plucking women, with umbrellas raised against the sun. The women are sweating as they work.

The bushes are four feet high and the same distance apart, but the table-spread of the surfaces interlock, and it is necessary to force a way up the lines. Each woman takes two rows, plucking to left and right. Plucking at speed is not easy, a quick eye and nimble fingers are needed. Most good quality teas are made from the bud and the first two leaves of young shoots. If the shoot is plucked too long, the hard stalk will not crush down when the leaf is rolled, and will make its appearance in the manufactured tea as a light brown stump. If the shoots are nipped off before they are long enough, however, the growth of the bush is retarded and weight of leaf is lost. It is my job to see that the mature leaf is gathered properly.

I start thrusting my way between the rows behind the line of women, examining the stripped bushes. I come to one that still shows a number of mature shoots. I look up the line and see it is being plucked by a woman whose name I know. It is Motiphul, which means Pea flower. I call sharply, "You have left much leaf here!"

The woman turns, looking shamefaced, and comes back down the row. She is not carrying a basket like the other women but is putting the leaf into her headshawl which she holds by each corner. On her back she bears a wickerwork cradle slung from a woven bamboo strap around her forehead. Her baby is too young to be weaned and left at home with an old relative, so she must stop work every time the baby wakes and, crouching between the bushes, give him her breast. When she reaches me, I try to look severe. "Are you an egg," I demand in idiom, "that you have no eyes to see this long leaf?"

"Sahib, my baby was crying," she says by way of excuse,

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and starts to jog the cradle up and down as she works. Her fingers move quickly over the bush and she hums on a single note, "Ahhh!", a long-drawn sigh, broken only as she takes breath. And as I move away from her another woman carrying a baby starts to hum, and yet another and another, so that the dirge is like the incessant drone of bees among the tea.

I come to the man who is in charge of this group, a *chaprassi*, or senior overseer. He has inherited this job from his father under the custom accepted by the coolies as fitting. This helps to perpetuate traditions. "How many people are there in your group today?" I ask.

The *chaprassi* consults his little book in which the name of every worker is written. "One hundred and fourteen," he replies. This is about a quarter of the coolies on my division. There are nearly twice as many women as men.

So I make my way from group to group scattered among the acres of tea, riding my pony up the steep gradients with the *syce* trotting behind me, and walking downhill as he leads the pony at my heels. Towards mid-day I reach a little thatched shelter, sideless and with smooth floor of baked clay. It is on the edge of a patch of jungle and fronting a tea-covered slope up which a group of women are toiling. Eight shabby little ponies are tethered nearby, their owners lounge in the shade.

The heat is intense now; my shirt is soaked with sweat, but the cloud mass is fast approaching and there is the heady smell of rain in the humid air. I stand by the little hut and cupping my mouth with my hands call across the middle distance, "Come, come now! Weigh in your leaf!"

The women start to scamper up the path. The bright colours of their headshawls and blouses are merged by the shimmering heat. They swing their laden baskets from their heads and press around laughing and chattering.

An overseer weighs each basket on a spring balance; while I write the figure on a tiny slip of paper. Each woman spikes her little token with the pin that holds her blouse. She will

have to surrender this slip when her second basketful of leaf is weighed at the end of the day. She will be paid a quarter of an anna for each pound of leaf over twenty pounds. Already some of the best pluckers have thirty or forty pounds. They will collect several rupees *bakshish* at the end of the week, to spend on some bright trinket or length of cloth on bazaar day.

The leaf is sacked and loaded upon the sturdy little ponies in huge, sagging bundles, three hundred pounds or more to a bundle. The men shout to their ponies as the beasts stagger and brace beneath their loads. They have two miles to go, up the steep paths, to the factory on the ridge. The last pony is loaded with its grotesque burden, the file moves off up the slope, dainty hooves pawing at the coarse grass tufts.

The overseers settle in the shade, untie their bundles of food and set their bottles of cold tea before them. I recognize the distinctive shape of a gin bottle that we emptied in celebration on the night of Shelia's arrival! I have known for long that our bearer runs a profitable little business in such merchandise, but we accept it as one of the compensations for long hours of attendance in the bungalow, and only curse him when he helps us search, with bland innocence, for an empty bottle when occasionally we want one for a specific purpose.

I step out of the hut to where the *syce* holds my pony. As I am about to mount, I notice two figures coming up the path. The first is a woman, dragging her feet, walking reluctantly and carrying a large cloth bundle, the other is a *chowkidar*, obviously urging her forward with angry gestures. The overseers have also seen them, and I know from the hush that has fallen over the little group that there is likely to be trouble. I hand the reins back to the *syce* and wait.

They come into the hut and the *chowkidar* snatches the bundle and throws it at my feet. "There, Sahib!" he shouts triumphantly, "I caught this girl, Tuli, hiding leaf in the jungle. She would have come back tonight and picked it up."

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The woman is very frightened. She holds her headshawl across the lower part of her face, places her other hand under her armpit and hugs herself in self-pity.

“Tuli,” I say gruffly, “have you weighed in your leaf?”

Her neat head nods. Trembling, she unpins her blouse and unspikes the slip of paper. I glance at it. “What is this? Only eight pounds! So you only brought in a little leaf and were going to steal the rest?”

“It was only a handful, Sahib! For myself; I was not going to sell it,” she gabbles, and tears spill out of her eyes and are absorbed by her grubby shawl. The *chowkidar* makes a noise of disbelief, seizes the bundle and hangs it upon the spring balance.

“Fifteen pounds!” he announces vehemently. “Look at that, Sahib! A handful of leaf, she says. She’s a liar!”

The overseers sit around watching me with hooded eyes. At such a moment a Nepali will never look anyone in the eyes, even if they are not guilty or concerned in the trouble. They feel that they might see guilt through the windows of the mind and guilt is somehow loathsome to look upon.

There is a little silence during which the first light spots of rain fall upon the thatch, and a sudden breeze stirs the foliage of the jungle. In an instant the sun is blotted out by a racing cloud.

I try to assess the crime. It is strictly forbidden to take leaf, but all the coolies on the garden filch enough for their own use. Could they work on a tea garden and buy tea from the bazaar? But this is more than may be considered reasonable for the woman’s needs. There is nearly always a personal slant to such affairs. Possibly the *chowkidar*’s family have had a row with this woman or with one of her relatives. Only a sort of sixth sense, almost an instinct developed of long acquaintance with these people, will show up the intricacies involved, and that experience I have not yet gained. I dare not show leniency, for this will be interpreted as weakness.

The woman I know as a good worker, with three young



children and a husband in the British Gurkhas in Malaya. If I forgive her, great quantities of leaf will be stolen regularly, and I will have created a precedent of which every apprehended culprit will remind me.

"Tuli, you are a thief," I say with finality. "Your work on the garden is stopped." I turn to the *chaprassi*. "Cross this woman's name off the list." The man takes out his tattered notebook and fumbles through the pages without looking up at me. Now that pronouncement is made, even the *chowkidar* is subdued.

Sobbing quietly, the woman picks up the bundle and spills the leaf on to the ground. She puts the cloth over her head and goes out into the rain. There is a tenseness in the little group, so that it is a relief to step from under the shelter and feel the rain upon my face.

I swing into the saddle and start up the slippery path.

The woman's figure is just ahead of me. When the pony is close behind her, she steps aside and waits for me to ride past, keeping her head averted.

I curse the foolish sensitiveness that makes me feel this thing. A single coolie woman, I tell myself. An example. After a few weeks, when the matter is forgotten, she can be allowed to slip back to work with the others. And with this compromise I try to placate myself.

The rain falls steadily. I leave the tea behind and ride up a slope with jungle on either side. The tangle of foliage is in constant motion under the rain. A pair of fantail flycatchers swoop gracefully across the track and plunge into the undergrowth where they flutter their chocolate brown, white-tipped tail feathers in flirtatious coquetry. There are myriads of other birds, all twittering and chirruping, harshly crying warning of my coming or piping in alarm, but only the rustle and movement of leaves and an occasional swift flash of colour betrays their flight.

The rain upon the warmed earth has a strange powerful scent, astringent and exhilarating to the senses. The girth of

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the pony between my knees has the feel of strength; the rapid forward thrust of his tufted fetlocks drives the slope behind. His ears are forward, and I have the measure of his keenness with my fingers on the rein.

We reach the far angle of the path that touches the spur beneath the bungalow. Crouched at the end of the path under his umbrella, a *chowkidar* is waiting for me. "The leopard's pug marks will be hard to follow, Sahib," he says. "The rain will have washed most of them away."

I dismount and follow him along a narrow footpath between the bushes. The spur is largely covered with bamboos, but here and there spaces are planted with corn; the stalks rise in profusion around the houses. Before one of the more dilapidated houses the *chowkidar* stops and points. "This is where the leopard came, Sahib!"

In front of the house a six-foot-wide porch is tucked beneath the overhang of thatch. An old man squats upon it, gazing at me intently. The odour peculiar to Nepalis is very marked. "Are you Lalbahadur?" I ask.

"Yes, this is Lalbahadur," says the *chowkidar*. "He is rather deaf."

The old man's face is as furrowed as the husk of a walnut and is the colour of burnt sepia. He places his long fingers together as in prayer and touches his forehead in obeisance. The *chowkidar* points to a narrow bamboo pen, poorly thatched, in front of the house. It is empty. "The goat was there last night, Sahib. I saw it myself!"

"Where are the pug marks?"

The *chowkidar* leads me along the dripping eaves behind the house, among the corn, where the earth is soft. He points to a number of shallow prints, about three inches in diameter, leading away down the slope towards the jungle. The rain is heavy now and I am soaked to the skin. As I bend forward the water runs in a steady trickle off the rim of my hat.

Most of the prints are already filled with water. Even if I had seen leopard tracks previously I should not have been

able to identify them. I shake my head in what I hope to be a fair imitation of disappointment. "Impossible," I say superfluously. "We shall have to wait until the leopard comes again."

The *chowkidar* gives me a hard look, but agrees that the tracks are beyond recognition. I lead the way back between the tea bushes to where the *syce* holds the steaming pony.

The rain has increased steadily and is now a sheet of water before us. Through this deluge the pony carries me up to the last curve which gives on to the drive.

That evening I write a note to the librarian at the Club, asking him to send me every available book on big-game shooting and tracking. . . .

IV

Wages of Indiscretion

Last week the gardener's boy left, worn down by the demands of two-and-a-half-years-old Melody. In the weeks that followed our arrival he came to do less and less gardening, and for some strange reason his very reluctance and disinclination to have anything to do with our eldest daughter spurred her interest in him. She followed him everywhere: in the trail of the leaking watering-can, among the huge Indian zinnias in the flower borders, along the lines of egg plants and squashes in the vegetable garden behind the bungalow, goading him to play with her, demanding his attention, always staring in fascination at his low-browed, slant-eyed brown face, and, if presented with his back, plucking determinedly at the faded patches on his grubby shirt.

Melody has very delicate features and a mass of golden curls. She is dainty and light, in such startling contrast in every way to the Nepali children whom the gardener's boy is accustomed to seeing that he remained in a state of constant wonder from the day of her appearance. But it became too much for him. His inherited conservatism rebelled; his intelligence was too limited to accommodate the strange little Missy-sahib who suddenly filled his every waking hour; and one day he quietly ran away and joined the other coolie children working among the tea.

The disappearance of his assistant was duly reported to me by the *mali*; and Sheila and I immediately guessed the reason. Some days later I came across him. The little lad was quite happy, the nightmarish days of his haunting by our elder daughter had already receded from his memory. The only person who remained puzzled was the boy's father, who straightway began to miss the small illicit bounty of an odd cabbage or a handful of peas to which a gardener's boy considers himself entitled by tradition.

Sheila and I have finished late tea. The babies are bathed and asleep. The brief Indian twilight has faded and darkness is gathering when Ayah comes out on to the veranda and stands before us in the nervous posture of a Nepali about to ask a favour; hands clasped behind, head on one side, eyes glancing hither and thither, anywhere but on my face. "Sahib," she says breathlessly, "we have no *mali-boy* now. My eldest son, Harkabahadur, is eleven. He is a good boy. I will see he works hard. Can he have the job?"

I can think of no objection, apart from the advice of old planters never to employ more than one member of the same household, so that in the event of trouble the domestic staff is not inconveniently depleted at one blow. *Mali-boy* is such a minor position, however, that I do not consider this. "Eleven is rather young, Ayah. He is only a *lokra*!"

"Oh no, Sahib! Harkabahadur can do the work easily."

"Very well, Ayah, he can come tomorrow. I will try him for one week."

Ayah salaams and hurries off before I have a chance to change my mind.

"I wonder if this little lad will be able to put up with the children?" remarks Sheila.

"No servant will be much use in this *koti* if he can't abide children," I laugh. "At least the Ayah's son comes of a family with servants' traditions and he's young enough to get used to anything."

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For a week it rains throughout every night; a deafening torrent upon the corrugated steel roof of the bungalow, so that we have to shout staccato sentences to each other across the dinner table and sit reading on opposite sides of the room during the long evenings, for conversation is impossible and with the risk of lightning striking the aerial we dare not plug in the wireless.

Then comes a break in the monsoon and one of these unaccountable spells of fine weather.

I lie in bed and gaze up at the shaft of sunlight that penetrates a gap between the curtains and plays upon the uneven boards of the ceiling. The illumination is so vivid that by contrast it makes the white paint appear quite dingy. Sheila is curled beneath the sheet on the other side of the bed. Even before I opened my eyes I knew the rain had stopped. The sound of its falling has been incessant for days. The bearer taps upon the door and I mumble, "Come in." His bare feet patter lightly across the room. He sets the laden tray beside the bed, steps back a pace and salaams with his hand to his brow. Then he goes through to the bathroom and unlocks the outside door.

I continue in the bliss of semi-anaesthesia, listening to the sound of the *pani-wallah* pouring hot water into the basin, to the gyrating gurgle as he fills the tooth mugs with filtered water from the refrigerator. After a while, from behind the door on the other side of the room, I catch sounds of my daughters' awakening; the creak of cot springs, their baby voices chattering in an unknown language, and eventually a scamper of feet as Melody gets out of bed and pulls back the curtain at the double doors to see if Ayah is waiting on the veranda.

At this stage I have to concede that the day has begun.

The clock on the table beside me points to six o'clock; in half an hour the coolies will be gathered on the muster-ground awaiting orders for the day. I sit on the edge of the bed to drink the first cup of tea, and note immediately that

the milk is heavily watered. I think back. Yes! Nearly two months have passed since I last warned the cowmen about this. It is about time for me to mention it again. As usual, at such moments, I wonder how many years will elapse before I come to accept this occasional little practice as inevitable and stop beating my head against a wall.

As I shave, I hear the common Indian mynahs squabbling in the mango tree outside the bathroom door. Their raucous cries are strident in the quiet dawn. When I go out on to the veranda after dressing there are three mynahs strutting across the damp grass on their strong, bright yellow legs, with the pomp and arrogance of great dowagers. They are as big as pigeons, but more handsome and their boldness is remarkable. Not until I am nearly upon them do they take wing into the peach trees, when they turn and scold me vehemently, with harsh croaks.

As I am about to go round the side of the *koti* I notice a group of people talking among the bamboos on the spur below me. I can see their puppet-like arms moving stiffly, pointing towards the jungle, heads bobbing in unison, the coloured head-shawls of the women and the small cloth skull-caps of the men like wild flowers among the undergrowth.

The long grasses at the side of the path are bowed by droplets of moisture which have the look of seed pearls threaded the length of the stems. As I brush against them they fall in a little flurry of spray, so that by the time I reach the barren, stony road at the edge of the compound my shoes are already supple and heavy with water.

The coolies squat around the edges of the muster-ground, their knees thrust into their armpits, the soles of their feet flat upon the ground, rolling coarse shreds of tobacco into odd scraps of paper. Their baskets lie on the ground and within each is a bottle, corked by a dried corn cob, and a small cloth bundle wrapping the mid-day meal. They chatter to each other with excited gestures and it is obvious that something

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is afoot. I am slightly apprehensive in case it should prove to be something with which I cannot deal summarily. But I must wait until they choose to tell me; it would never do to let them know my curiosity.

I have not long to wait. Along the path that leads from the spur comes an excited, chattering group. They are headed by old Lalbahadur who is respected more for his age and cantankerousness than for his erudition. They gather round me, and a hush falls upon them all. The old one can barely contain himself long enough to salaam; then he bursts forth, "Sahib, the great tiger came again last night . . .!"

"No, no," they cry. "Not a tiger, a *chitwa*, a leopard!"

"A great big tiger," continues the old man determinedly. "I heard him outside my house." His old eyes grow round, and his scanty brows crawl higher towards his white hair with the telling. "I heard the monster, Sahib. Walking around my house. It was scratching at the door, Sahib!" He is completely carried away now. "My old woman nearly died of fear. I had my *kukri* in my hand ready to cut it down. . . ."

"Wait a minute," I say, to check the flow. "Did it make a kill?"

"Ah, Sahib!" he answers with dramatic intensity, "a few days ago my dog gave birth to a litter. She was lying on the porch of the house with the pups. I heard her screaming as she turned to fight the tiger to protect her pups. I banged on the door with my *kukri* and shouted and the tiger made off. I would have gone out and chased it, but my old woman wouldn't let me leave her alone!" A ripple of laughter greets this, which the old man ignores with admirable dignity. He goes on, "In the morning, I found the pups dead."

"And the bitch?"

"She lives still Sahib, but the tiger gave her a terrible wound." There is a scuffle from the back of the crowd and a man emerges dragging by a short rope a pi-bitch with ghastly mutilations the whole length of her spine. Certainly the bitch shows signs of a fearful struggle, and I can see that

the coarse matted hair and excess loose skin after her recent pregnancy may well have cheated the creature of a kill. The bitch is very docile, and I do not rate her chances of survival high, even allowing for the remarkable powers of recuperation of the village pi-dog.

I commiserate with the old man and congratulate him on his bravery, but nothing will satisfy him but that I promise to go and see all the signs of the struggle as soon as the muster is finished.

The coolies greatly enjoy any such excitement, and as it serves to delay the start of work they are delighted to stay and listen to the old man's tales as long as he can think of them. At last they all go off, and only the *chowkidars* are left, gathered about the old hero.

He leads us down the narrow path between the bushes to the top of the spur, crossing a lively stream where a couple of old women, having washed, are wringing water from their hair, stooping to flap the yard-long tresses on their knees with the crack of a whip. Through the patches of corn, laden now with swollen cobs, among the broad clumps of bamboos with massive boles, six inches in diameter, rearing to slender fronds forty feet above us, the track leads from house to house down the spur.

Just above the jungle fringe skirting the valley bed we come to the old man's dwelling. The pug-marks of a leopard are all around. A piteous huddle of tiny dead puppies litters the raised porch. The wounded bitch drags herself up the baked mud steps and stretches out to resume her vigil.

Now I find myself able to apply a little of the theory I have gained from book-reading since the last visit of the leopard. Firstly, I have learned that a dog is a prime morsel to a leopard; secondly, that, cheated of an easy kill, it seldom fails to return in the hope of a meal; thirdly, that a leopard has remarkable sight and hearing but no sense of smell, so that it is possible for it to brush against you if it has not seen you first. Lastly, I understand that it is best to wait for a

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leopard whilst lying on the ground, but a hide in a tree will serve if one prefers it. I have no second thought about this, and immediately start to look around for the highest tree.

Outside the jungle there are no trees at all suitable and in it the undergrowth is so dense as to reduce visibility to a few yards. "I must have a *machan* made," I tell the *chowkidars*.

One of them has an idea. "We could pull four bamboos together, Sahib, and make a platform between them."

The pug-marks show that the leopard must have closely followed the line of bamboos studding the spur. A *machan* here will directly overlook the path he might be expected to take if he returns. We go a hundred yards lower, where a clump of massive bamboos, still green with growth and topped by a great canopy of intermingling fronds, casts a deep pool of shadow across the corn.

"Go to my stable and get ropes and planks," I tell four of the men. "The platform must be high, for a leopard can jump ten feet with a goat in its mouth."

The remainder pull out their *kukris* and begin to clear the lower undergrowth. One climbs a bamboo with the agility of a monkey, clasping the smooth pole hand over hand and simply walking up it by pressing his toes against the culms. I notice the extraordinary wide spacing between his toes, he seems to be able to manipulate each one separately.

I indicate the height for the *machan*—some twenty feet from the ground; and go off leaving them all busily engaged.

The next thing is to borrow a gun from the *Burra Sahib*. Back at the *koti*, I write a note explaining my need and asking him for the loan of his .400 rifle. I send the *syce* up to the factory with it.

Sheila is waiting on the veranda to start breakfast. In the centre of the table is a neat pile of ripe mangoes. A great jar of dahlias and zinnias, backed by gypsophila and fronds of bracken, which Sheila has cut and arranged before the sun has taken the dew-glisten from the petals, stands on the low exterior window ledge. The veranda has been recently white-

washed, and its cleanliness is shown by the bright geraniums set in pots along the front edge.

Golden corn on the cobs are served to us boiled, with neatly trimmed little sticks thrust in each end for us to hold as we nibble off the buttered and salted grains. During this month the corn is still soft and silky; within a few weeks it will be ripe and dried hard as pebbles.

Melody comes across the damp grass and up the steps. "There is a coolie-lady, Daddy, with a cut on her head," she announces, slipping a small dehydrated lizard into the front pocket of her blue trousers.

"Where?" I demand, startled.

"What have you got there?" Sheila is no less appalled.

"Out there," she says, pointing through the french windows to the back of the bungalow, then carefully withdrawing the lizard from her pocket she holds it towards Sheila and explains that Harkabahadur, the Ayah's boy, found it for her.

"That little lad seems to be making sure of his popularity," remarks Sheila dryly.

The bearer, appearing with hot toast, confirms that someone is waiting to see me.

"Probably someone fallen over," I suggest hopefully, "thinking to get attention from you, a day's leave from me, and save a walk up to the compounder at the hospital."

We hurriedly finish breakfast and go through the central room of the bungalow to the service door that leads along a covered footpath to the cookhouse. Beneath the orange tree that draws substance from the perennial dampness around the *nullah* beside the cookhouse a woman is sitting in the shade, surrounded by a sympathizing group of our servants. The side of her head and face are matted with blood; her blouse is daubed with crimson spots and she has used her head shawl to stanch the flow. She wails loudly when she sees us and assumes a look of misery, made more bizarre by the vermilion trident *tikka* mark painted between her eyes.

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“It is the woman I sacked for stealing leaf. Remember I told you about her?”

“She looks badly cut about!”

“Tuli, what has happened?” I ask.

Then begins a torrent of explanation, so fast and idiomatic that I can only follow the outline of her tirade. She screws her face into a thousand grimaces, her hands vigorously emphasize every word. She mimes her story stage by stage, her eyelids flutter, her voice trails the scale and sinks to a whisper, she cavorts and spits and puts the palms of her hands together in prayer. The silver bangles on her ankles and wrists jangle in accord and all the while her voice goes on and on, repeating every feature of her tale a dozen times, with a stylistic arrangement of words and a ready use of jargon that cause the servants to shoot half-apprehensive glances at the Memsahib, while being rapturously entertained. But it is all far beyond us, and after a minute I give up trying to follow all that is said, content to know the plot without embellishments. The end will not come for some time yet, but it is best to let it all flow out.

The deluge sweeps over us and leaves us unmoved. I think, perhaps this is why these people find us strangely cold and indifferent towards the high-lighted tragedies and humours of their lives. They do not realize our lack of comprehension or, comprehending, that our reserve does not allow us to show our feelings with the same delightful lack of inhibition as themselves.

When at last the woman talks herself to silence, and the words catch in her throat and tears reduce her thoughts to brief misery, Sheila says, “I suppose I had better do what I can for her!” To the little *pani-wallah* she says, “Bring hot water,” and disappears through the outside door of the bathroom.

I point. “Go inside, the Memsahib will put medicine on your wound.”

With the woman seated on a low stool, Sheila cuts a clotted

tangle of hair from her scalp and drops it on to the ground. Tuli sees it and gives a little startled sound with an indrawing of breath. "No, no, Memsahib, do not cut off my hair!" She flutters her brown fingers, so that they look like hovering birds before her face.

I grin at Sheila and explain. "For a Nepali woman to cut her hair is a disgrace that marks her as wanton."

"Just look at this wound! If I don't get a bit of this hair away I can't dress it properly."

"Don't worry! Go ahead; take off as much as you want. From the pieces of her story I gather it would be quite fitting!"

"Why?"

"Remember I told you I was worried about stopping her work because her husband was in Malaya? Well apparently she has been having a rather gay time with a certain man from her village, and when she was caught stealing leaf, the last shreds of compunction fell away, and this individual moved in with her; to console her I suppose!"

"Did he do this to her then?"

"No. It was a crowd of her female relatives, led by her brother-in-law's wife. She says she was sitting outside her house this morning when the other women were going to muster. When her relatives saw her they started abusing her and then pulled her hair and called her a whore, and lots of other things!"

"Well, just look at this cut on her head, they must have been pretty rough!"

"I gather she got that when she started to fight back. One of the women struck at her with a stone."

Sheila works grimly, slicing off strips of matted hair. "The smell of this oil on her hair is frightful. Cinnamon, I think. It's so acrid it makes my nostrils tickle!"

"Well, not many coolies can afford such a luxury, so it looks as though her relatives had some justification for beating her up."

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Tuli sits motionless, staring in awe at the gleaming taps above the washbasin; the only movement she makes is a slight start when Sheila goes across and turns on one of the taps to soak cotton-wool. When the wound is clean, Sheila looks at me. "I think iodine is the best thing I have. Do you think she'll take it all right?"

I nod. "To the coolie mind, a medicine that doesn't have some immediate effect is not potent enough to be much good. I remember being told that the foaming action of peroxide in a cut has a greater curative effect psychologically than any other antiseptic. Iodine will at least convince this woman of its potency!" I say slowly, "Tuli, the Memsahib's medicine is very good. It will hurt a little for a moment, but then your head will be well again."

Sheila tilts the bottle against a swab. I watch the orange stain creep across the white cotton, then she gently dabs at the woman's head. Tuli's shriek echoes in the lofty bathroom, but it is a sound of shock, not pain. A single high note, then silence. Still she does not move. The iodine on the abrasion must be smarting severely, but her face has no expression to betray it.

"What remarkable control!" says Sheila.

"She is satisfied," I reply, "that the medicine is good."

When Sheila has finished, and the woman is ecstatic with a swathe of bandages round her head, I lead her outside again into the heavy sunlight. From the door Sheila calls, "Tell her she must not take the bandage off. She had better come back tomorrow."

I explain this to Tuli, with great elaboration, for the large safety-pin in the bandage is a considerable temptation, and the excuse that it got lost so complete!

Now the woman stands before me, waiting to hear how I intend to dispense justice. The complications of this whole affair appal me. Both sides feel injured. I can see no alternative to a compromise, and this is best arranged between themselves, for it is a family matter first of all, and the fact

that the woman's work is stopped is only incidental. Tuli has been taken by another man, and the relatives of her husband feel it incumbent upon them to protect his interests in his absence. This is an accepted custom of these people. The woman is part of the family and, as a potential font of children to expand and strengthen the family, a valuable property, which has been duly purchased from her father's family by a marriage dowry.

Tuli's injuries, however, cannot be taken lightly. It is also a matter of importance that a man who does not belong to the garden has taken up residence here, without permission. If I turn Tuli off the garden with her chosen, her husband, upon his return from Malaya, will find her gone, and his family will be quick to explain that the Sahib sent her away with another man. Then what of her three children?

The family will look to me to uphold what is accepted as their indisputable rights over this woman, and if I do not take some action they will deal with the intruder in their own manner. And, despite the apparent rudimentary justice of this, it may involve me in considerable trouble, for I am faced with the fact that the ultimate responsibility for the behaviour and harmony of the people on the garden is vested by tradition in me.

I decide to discuss the affair with the headman before committing myself at all. "I shall call your family together tomorrow, Tuli," I say severely, "and hear what they have to say."

She bows her head in submission, offers *namasti* to Sheila by pressing her palms together, and turns to go. Then with the extraordinary disarming naïveté of the primitive, it occurs to her that this is the ideal moment to press home the advantage of our sympathy for her. Over her shoulder, she says casually, "I can go back to work tomorrow, Sahib?" Certain that anything short of vigorous rejection of her plea can be interpreted as acquiescence she hurries down the drive.

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“No!” I shout after her, suddenly aware of the implication that could confuse the matter yet further. “Your work is stopped.” I retreat into the *koti* as I see her turn and start the tirade all over again. To Sheila I say as I slam the bathroom door decisively behind me, “A kindness is nearly always taken as a sign of weakness.”

“What a horrible cynic you are,” Sheila reprimands me.

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V

Leopard in the Night

When the sun stands overhead and shade is at a premium and the last in the line of tottering little ponies is moving slowly up the hill, all but hidden beneath the sacks of tea leaf, I go to the spur where the *chowkidars* have just finished building the *machan*. They have put a platform, six feet by four, high among the bamboos, with such consummate skill that from the ground it is hardly noticeable. They stand in a group surveying their work with sweat glistening upon their dark faces, their eyes confident of my satisfaction.

I walk among the boles of the bamboos, peering up at the *machan*, marking the best place to tie the bait of a live goat, fixing my position on the platform that will give me the best field of view, taking in the details of the surrounding ground, so that I shall not put a foot wrong in the darkness of night. Then I turn to the group of men. "Very good," I compliment them. "There is cleverness in you all to have made this so well. If the leopard comes and is killed, it will be because of your skill. There is only one thing I must ask; how am I to get up to the *machan*, and once up there, how shall I get down again?"

They look at each other in dismay, crestfallen at my finding a fault, so that I feel my question should have been put with greater subtlety. They stand in silence looking at

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the smooth bamboos bereft of the smallest foothold, rising twenty feet to the overhang of roped planks, they have scaled a dozen times without thought during the morning. They look down at the supple, leather-like skin of their bare feet and muscled toes, then with one accord they transfer their gaze to my own clumsy shoes, so that I become ridiculously embarrassed and shuffle my feet, suddenly aware of the appalling inadequacy of my limbs and wishing for the life of me that I had not tried to exercise my wit! Then I notice them begin to smile; one after the other their faces break into a grin. Their little eyes all but disappear into the creases above their cheeks. The shoulders of one of them shake slightly, another releases a giggle, a third opens his mouth wide, so that I can see the betel-nut stain along his gums. Slowly they dissolve before me, start to chuckle, nudge each other, laugh out aloud, nodding their heads in unison as their laughter grows louder and gathers momentum. At first confused, but hopelessly affected, I start to laugh too, for their laughter is quite irresistible; not subtle, but filled with certain satisfaction. I am swept along into laughter with them, and in this moment I know that the secret of understanding this humour and its cause is the key to their hearts, and I resolve that if it can be learned and not merely inherited, I will try to fathom the nature of this people's joy.

When I get back to the bungalow I find one of the *Burra Sahib's* servants waiting with a gun and a note. The note is brief and characteristic.

Dear Fletcher, Here is the gun. No indiscriminate shooting in the lines or you'll go killing some b—— coolies, then there'll be the hell of a row. Good luck.

It is not until this moment that Sheila realizes just what I intend to do. "But David," she remonstrates, "you can't sit up all night waiting for the leopard. Supposing you drop off to sleep and roll off the *machan*?"

"I shall not stay there all night. If the leopard doesn't come

by about midnight, it isn't likely to return at all. The best time is just after dusk according to the experiences of everyone I've read."

During tiffin she takes up the subject again. "Imagine me," she says, "sitting listening for the sound of a shot! And if I don't hear it, I shall visualize all sorts of things that might be happening. And if I do hear it, I shall imagine a whole set of other things! Supposing you miss the leopard or only wound it?"

I realize that there is no answer to this sort of question, and in fact it is not categorical answers Sheila wants, but only an assurance that might go some way towards convincing her I shall be sitting down normally to breakfast in the morning.

The evening is warm with a ghost of a breeze that touches the skin as a caress. Lightning sets the dark humped hills sharply in silhouette. Beyond the strip of lawn, already toneless in the neutral dusk, the night gathers under a dust-laden cloak of most delicate violet hue. Waiting for me at old Lalbahadur's house is my young *syce*, who is not more than twenty years old; his adventurous turn of mind uncharacteristic of his race. He procured a goat for ten rupees earlier in the day, and now he is anxious to sit up with me, to be in at the kill, if indeed, a kill is to be made. . . .

I have the rifle and a pouch slung across my shoulder containing a long torch, and, to make Sheila smile as she watches me walk down the drive, an umbrella!

There is a heaviness in the still air, portent of a storm. The bushes are already damp with dew, I can feel it on my legs as I brush past them. The valley bed is encased in a strange purple light that blurs outlines, and the sky is overcast and threatening. At the head of the spur I follow the track between the Indian corn and come to the first of the little houses. The narrow, rough-hewn door is closed; no chickens scratch outside, all are shut safely within.

Each of the thatched huts is shuttered in the same way, but

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from inside one or two of them I can hear the soft voices of the coolies. Though there is light enough for their usual small tasks around their houses, this evening all have retired within and have shut fast their doors. I wonder if they disapprove of what I am going to do? Perhaps some ancient inherited fear cautions the taking of such a fierce life as that of a leopard, and they wish no hand in it?

Only old Lalbahadur's door remains open. The *syce* is squatting upon the little mud veranda, the shadows upon his face, so that he starts when I stand before him. "Ah, Sahib! I have the goat ready here, for old Lalbahadur to tie beneath the *machan*."

"Good! We must hurry, for the night is coming quickly."

The old man crouches as he emerges beneath the low door frame. "Salaam, Sahib."

"Speak quietly," I warn him. "The leopard may be close."

"Ah, Sahib! I pray that your eyes shall see this creature, but soon it will be dark. Do the balls of your eyes open as his, to let in the light?"

"Here is my eye," I say and take out the torch and press the button to flash the light upon his face. "The *syce* shall hold it and at the moment that the leopard shall strike down the goat the light shall come out of the tree and I shall send a piece of metal from the gun along its beam into the body of the killer."

"*Mum mum mum!*" he mutters and shakes his head in amazement.

"Do not feel fear when the gun shouts, Old One," says the *syce*, proud to air his knowledge. "For the death cries of the leopard will follow."

We go down the slope to the edge of the jungle. Beneath the bamboos the gloom is accentuated. To solve the problem of my ascent the *chowkidars* have fixed a dangling rope from the *machan*. I secure the rifle to the end of this then, taking hold of the coarse fibres, haul myself hand over hand to the level of the planks. It needs considerable effort to project

myself on to the platform, and as I hang with the end planks across my stomach, thrashing about with my legs and seeking to drag myself forward, I kick a nearby bamboo and the whole platform sways. The creak and rustle of the fronds seems sufficient warning to every creature within miles. At last I get into position, and lying prone, haul up the rope until I retrieve the gun. The *syce* comes nimbly up the bole of a bamboo and spreads himself soundlessly beside me. He has brought up my umbrella by crooking the handle over the back of his shirt-collar.

Some fifteen feet from the base of the *machan*, old Lalbahadur fastens a half-grown white goat to a stake by a length of wire. As he walks away the goat strains from the jungle fringe and bleats desperately, all its gregarious instincts aroused, as it believes itself alone.

We hear old Lalbahadur go back into his little house and force the door shut. Then come the sounds of him securing it from within.

I settle upon the unplanned boards, with my head at the edge, and very cautiously ease the rifle in front of me, with the barrel jutting outwards and downwards across the end plank. Trying to be as quiet as possible, I open the breech and slip a round inside, then depress the magazine spring with another round and ease the bolt forward. I leave the safety catch off.

The *syce*, grasping the long torch in both hands, lies alongside me.

Below us the little white goat bleats piteously and strains at the wire leash. It is rapidly getting dark.

So we lie, my finger holding the first pressure on the trigger, the blunt end of the rifle barrel silhouetted vaguely against the white goat; the *syce's* hand, close beside my face, tense with his finger on the torch switch. Though no breeze stirs the foliage the jungle all round us moves with faint rustlings, and the sawing of the grasshoppers and cicadas seems suddenly increased. There is an interminable

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expectancy which vibrates, I suppose, from ourselves, so that almost with relief I recognize the sharp croak of a giant bull-frog, which is in turn taken up from a number of throats, and settles to a monotonous, low-toned purr up and down the spur.

The night comes with startling swiftness. I suddenly realize that I can no longer see the end of the rifle barrel. I dare not move it, for there will be no time to aim when the moment comes to fire. It will mean a snap shot, a second after the light cuts through the darkness to reveal the leopard crouched above the goat. My hands begin to ache with the weight of the rifle. My elbows are numbed with pressure on the boards. I direct my mind from the fear of cramp. I try to imagine how the eyes of the leopard will look, staring up the beam of light, afire with startled fury, blazing without fear at the flash in that split second before the deafening crash of the report. I imagine the recoil of the rifle, kicking at my unbalanced shoulder, jerking the barrel upwards, jarring my elbows. How will the roar of the leopard sound? Will it make a mighty leap for the *machan*, extended claws reaching to tear down the beam of light? And if I should miss . . . ?

From somewhere far down the valley a barking deer calls to its mate, the harsh, rasping bark, carrying easily on the still air. As though at a mysterious jungle signal all the insects cease to grind out instantaneously. After a few moments the bullfrogs, too, stop croaking. The barking deer alone still calls intermittently.

The night is very dark. The moon does not rise until just before midnight. The overcast sky lets through no light of stars. I can hear the swift, shallow breathing of the *syce* at my side, now and again I hear him swallow. I am glad to feel the edge of his hip against me; this is no ordeal for a man to endure alone. The smell of wood-smoke, peculiar to a Nepali, is strong in my nostrils. I wonder how his thoughts run as he lies here with me. Perhaps he is thinking how foolish is this

effort of endurance, of physical and mental tension? Does he, I wonder, feel fear?

The minutes pass away into the night, my eye is drawn to the luminous dial of my wrist-watch, though I try to concentrate upon the point in the black void just ahead of me where the tip of the barrel must be aligned upon the goat. A great and weighty silence ensues. The tiny jungle creatures have ceased to stir. The barking deer gives one last coughing, throaty call and then falls silent. How long we go on lying here, without the slightest movement, I cannot tell. The conspiracy of silence is awful to bear. Several times I feel my finger grow too tense upon the trigger, and have to force myself to ease the pressure.

When the silence is broken at last the sound is so subtle to the senses that at first I do not notice it, then I realize with a certain horror that I have been listening to it for some little while. It is the faintest stir of foliage.

I strain to locate the direction of the sound. First here; then there. But surely it is all around! There is a stealthy, creeping horror about it, perhaps it is only imagined . . . ? But no; what is that touch upon my cheek! I am momentarily too petrified to think. And then I feel it upon my hands, and cool upon my cheek. Rain! Spaced drops of cold rain are falling lightly, and the leaves are bowing to its weight.

I move my position a little, easing my elbows and arms, letting the breath out of my lungs but still keeping the rifle upon the fixed line. The rain sets in to a steady, drenching drizzle. Beside me I feel the *syce* raise himself as his hands grope along the platform. There is a gentle sliding sound as he opens the umbrella and holds it over our heads. Immediately the noise of the rain is accentuated as the drops drum upon the taut silk; but without the rain on my hands and face I have a strange, false sense of cosiness, lying here on this frail platform, insecurely rigged on green poles twenty feet above the ground, where a leopard may be lurking just beyond the jungle fringe.

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The waiting starts again. My watch dial shows faintly eight o'clock. Have we been here only a couple of hours then? I feel certain that my oyster watch must have stopped! And it is while I am debating this with myself that the goat bleats sharply, frantically, in a sudden cry of fear there can be no mistaking.

The *syce* is instantly tense. A current seems to pass between us, binding us in nervous expectation. My breathing becomes subconsciously stilled, so that I have to make an effort to refill my lungs and the air, expelled, seems to whistle warning to whatever lurks below.

The goat thrashes about desperately. Its hooves tear at the soft ground with a slicing sound, and I can hear the wire throb tautly from the stake. The terrified bleat is horrible to hear.

Somewhere down there, just below us, a leopard is crouching among the undergrowth, hearing the sound. The falling rain blurs its quiet footfalls among the leaves and twigs. I imagine the length of its tail twitching as it fixes the position of the goat in the darkness. It is pausing, waiting, listening, its sharp ears cupped to catch a sound above the shrill bleating of its victim and the muffled patter of rain. Now it is dropping low to its belly, gathering the power of its haunches beneath its weight, tail still, eyes steady in the night, the killer's brain calculating. . . .

I can feel my elbows trembling with strain. My finger wrapped round the trigger is so tense that I fear the explosion may leap forth from the gun at any second, but I am powerless to relax it now. A single drop of rain runs down my face. I know there is sweat there too. . . .

The goat's scream rises to a crescendo. Any instant now the leopard will be there beneath us in the clearing. A single blow with its pug and the goat will be dead. Then will come the ear-splitting crash of the rifle. My eyes bore at the impenetrable darkness. If only I could be sure that the rifle is aligned!

Leopard in the Night

There is a click! A sudden livid stream of light shoots downwards. I hold my breath. My whole being is concentrated upon this moment, to shoot, and shoot to kill.

The *syce* holds the beam hard upon the goat. Its bleat cuts off. It is alone.

From the edge of the jungle, just beyond the pool of light, comes the sound of a creature moving swiftly through the tangled growth.

In the tremendous tension of those last few vital seconds the *syce's* finger pressed just a fraction too hard upon the button of the torch. If he could have held it just a few seconds longer we might have had the leopard squarely in the circle of light, fast upon its kill.

In the sharp ensuing anticlimax, my first immediate, secret thought is of relief that I did not have to fire after all. And I realize at this moment just how great was my fear that I might miss. . . .

Certain there is no danger, we climb out of the *machan* and descend the rope, uncaring now of any noise we make. The *syce* unties the goat and leads it up to Lalbahadur's empty pen.

The rain begins to fall more heavily and the air is fragrant with the smell of warm, damp earth. In the eastern sky lightning flickers above the hills and I hear the low, deep rumble of approaching thunder.

As we climb up the spur and press between the tea, towards the bungalow, the *syce*, torn by remorse, weeps very quietly at my back. . . .

VI

Puja Drums

To awake at first light with the insistent throb of hide drums in one's ears is like waking from a bad dream and not being sure where the dream ends and reality begins. At some moment shortly after the sun topped the range flanking the opposite side of the valley and gilded the bedroom-side of our *koti*, my subconscious mind registers the sound of drums. Is it a childhood fear, deep-buried beneath adult reason, that grips our minds with apprehension at the sound of native drums? Or is there truly some spell, as all primitives firmly believe, woven by the rhythm? Among the hill-people the drum has the power to sway and degrade, so that under its influence strange wild passions come to them and sometimes terrible thoughts take them against all the teaching of tradition.

The drum is a symbol of virility; potent and challenging. There is no ceremony in which the drum does not demand a place. In the vibrating ring of hand-struck leather is a power that may not be denied. It is given to the drum beat to master the minds of primitive man; its challenge and compulsion are irresistible.

I have always been disturbed by the sound of the drums, but more especially during the dark hours; now as I get out of bed and fling back the curtains from the window the sound comes rushing into the room with the glare of sun-

light, out of place and bizarre at this hour. The windows are held wide by swivelling chocks in the jamb, inviting the pleasant breeze that races up the valley. Taut wire-mesh fits the frame of the windows to cheat the night insects.

Above the profusion of cannas that skirt the bungalow in the beds outside the windows I can see across the acres of tea to where the waters meet at the foot of the spur. Beyond, mist is rising from the Sikkim valleys and the hillsides are laid about with patches of golden sunlight. Only the steady beat of the drum mars tranquillity and leaves me faintly uneasy.

When I reach the muster ground I suspect that my watch is fast, for few coolies have yet arrived. The muffled drum still sounds from beneath the brow of a hill. The *munshi* comes up to me and salaams unctuously. He is tall for a Nepali, and his eyes are above the level of my own. His family is of the Gurungs, not very high in the Nepalese caste system, and he is acutely aware of the dignity of his position as headman. His face is bland and hairless, the white of his humourless eyes flecked with brown speckles so that it is hard to determine the point of his gaze. "There will be few coolies working today, Sahib." The lips of his sensuous mouth hardly move as he speaks.

"Why, Munshi?"

"A full moon will come this night. Today there is a *puja*."

Then I understand the drumbeat. A *puja* is a ceremony of worship. "For what is the *puja*, Munshi?" I am careful to keep the suggestion of a smile from my face and a casualness in my tone.

He is embarrassed by the question, because he knows that Sahibs do not respect the Gods worshipped by his people. No Nepali speaks willingly of his religion. Some are Hindus and some are Buddhists according to the castes into which they are born; there is no question of choice. All, however, respect one another's Gods, and apart from minor variation in caste customs everyone takes the opportunity of doing

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puja at appropriate times, regardless of the deity to whom it is offered, as they take the view that no chance to accrue benefit should be lost. The *munshi* says, "By doing a *puja* today they shall have a year of fortune: the corn will grow high and loaded with cobs, illness shall pass by the household, male children may be born to the womenfolk, all things that they touch prosper, all troubles they have be halved."

"It is well, Munshi! Where is the *puja* being held?"

He points his sinuous brown hand. "In the lines on the far side of the garden, Your Honour. Among the houses there is a big chilouni of great age. Today many people will go there with offerings." Chilouni means "the tree that causes itching", because of the irritant properties of its sap. It is the holy tree of the hill tribes.

Although the sun is now well above the distant hills, no more coolies are making their way along the converging paths. "Send them to work, Munshi," I direct. "There will be little leaf plucked today."

When he has counted them and I have sent the *chowkidars* to various parts of the garden he comes to stand beside me, shuffling awkwardly, so that I think he has a favour to ask. Perhaps he wants leave to attend the *puja*? This diffidence in broaching a subject is usual. We stand chatting of little things until he perceives an opening which will lead him to the matter he has in mind. I am used to this custom now, and know better than to try to hurry him. It is mention of the woman, Tuli, that gives him opportunity. My problem about her resolved itself when she ran away with the man of her choice the day after she was beaten by her relatives. She left her three children, and I had only to make sure that her husband's relations had taken them into their houses for the whole matter to pass from my responsibility, greatly to my relief.

"The main trouble was that the man was not of her caste," says the *munshi*, and I know by his awed tone the magnitude of such a misdeed.

“Ah!” I say, nodding with a show of wiseness. This question of caste is so involved that few Europeans ever come to learn all the obscure traditions. It is, of course, the old folk who keep alive many of the customs that have become divorced from meaning by passing years. Caste restrictions on a tea garden are not nearly so rigorous as those prevailing in country villages. Contact with civilization in the person of the Sahib, and the break up of families by young men joining the Gurkha regiments during the war, has taken toll of some of the most ancient and obscure rites. Sufficient remain, however, to enforce segregation between castes at opposite ends of the social scale, and punishment for any breach of custom relating to these observances is provided by traditional edicts and enforced by elders of the different castes.

“A serious matter has arisen, Your Honour,” says the *munshi*, “and as it will affect Your Honour, it is my duty to explain it to you.”

I try to think how I might have impinged upon their codes. It is all too easily done, but with their usual tolerance and acceptance of certain rights of the Sahibs, unless the affair causes a scandal that will stigmatize a family they excuse the Sahib his ignorance and do not raise the issue. “Tell me, Munshi,” I say shakily, “what custom has been broken?”

The *munshi*'s face is a mask; the situation appeals to his primitive dramatic sense. He pauses to sort the words in his mind, and his little eyes dart from end to end of their slits, not for an instant settling upon my face. From the highest vantage of a nearby tree, a hawk-cuckoo sounds again and again its exasperating, shrill call, each repetition higher in the scale, but just missing the chord, to earn its title of “the brainfever bird”.

“Your *syce*, Sahib, is a Chettri, one of the highest castes. He has been going each night, for a long while now, to the house of a girl of the Gurung caste.” I wait for the dénouement, remembering that the *munshi* is a Gurung himself.

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“Everyone on the garden knows of this affair. It is a great scandal, Your Honour!”

I nod slowly, wondering if the sins of those employed by me are to be visited upon my own head. “I thought you should know about this, Sahib, for it cannot go on much longer. Soon it will become said that the girl is to have the child of a man not of her caste. So it has been decided to hold a *panchayat*, a gathering of the elders, to sit in judgment upon the man, and he will be made to take the girl for his own, for none of her caste will own her now. Also he will have to pay the fine, laid down by tradition, to the parents of the wronged girl.”

Still I wait to hear how this matter is to affect me.

“The sum that will be demanded of him for this thing he has done is sixty-one rupees, nearly three times the total of his monthly pay. He has no father to pay this money for him, and so, Your Honour, he will come to you. For you, Sahib, according to the traditions of our people are the father and mother of all who live and work upon the garden.”

This long explanation has obviously cost the *munshi* considerable effort, for there is a fine sweat upon his brow. He does not linger to embellish his statement, but with a deep salaam, in the old tradition, with the fingers of his right hand on his forehead, left hand clasping the elbow, he goes off down the narrow path in the wake of the line of coolies.

After the solemnity of his approach, it is with a feeling of relief that I go back towards the compound for breakfast. Sixty-one rupees is a large enough sum to have to find in the middle of a month, but not so large as to deny Sheila a laugh when I tell her the story attached to it.

I approach the bungalow from the back. Through the medley of foliage I notice a white-clad figure outside the back door. As I mount the stone steps to the pool of shadow from the orange tree I see it is the washerman, wielding his great charcoal-filled smoothing iron on the table beside the service door. He is a plainsman, with his *dhoti* yanked high

between his slender shanks and his look of servility, in contrast to the independence of the hillman, worn like the badge of his calling. "Salaam, Sahib!"

"Salaam, Dhobie!"

This is almost the only communication we can make, for he speaks only Bengali, and the ungrammatical Nepali idiom that I use is quite unintelligible to him. Sheila relies on the bearer to translate her instructions, and this he does with a free range of gestures and much repetitive shouting.

Inside the *koti* there is confusion; furniture jumbled everywhere, servants in all manner of places, scrubbing and polishing and brushing. Amid it all stands Sheila, directing operations like a general on the battlefield.

"I've decided to spring clean," she announces, "while this fine spell lasts. Once the monsoon proper starts there'll be no chance until the autumn."

In the sitting-room she strips the loose covers off the massive chairs and bundles them up. "Give these to the *dhobie*," she instructs the bearer, "and tell him to wash them very carefully, as they are new! Tell him I want them back in three days."

She follows me out to the comparative order of the veranda which has been left untouched. "I'm sorry to have to send those covers already," she says, "I suppose they'll fade."

The covers are one of the expenses in which I was involved with the arrival of the family. A bachelor can live in so much greater squalor than a married man! Certainly, though, the loose covers have transformed the sitting-room, and round their design Sheila was woven a colour scheme that makes the place gay and charming.

"Two little girls coming in from play with muddy shoes is the reason," I laugh, casting a glance to where Melody and Kandy are playing on the lawn under the peach trees with Ayah's son. "Look at them," I point. "Nobody could ever guess two such angelic-looking children could be such rascals!"

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Harkabahadur, I see, has hardly managed to do a stroke of gardening since his arrival!"

"No, they've taken him over entirely. But he seems content enough."

Over breakfast I tell Sheila of the *syce's* amours. She is hugely amused. "That's the end of my plans for new summer dresses for the babies this month," she says ruefully. "To say nothing of my own. Really, David, anyone would think you had rights over the girl, if you pay the fine!"

"Perhaps I will have," I remark. "There are so many customs I do not know. I must make enquiries!"

The drums have stopped when I leave the *koti* after breakfast, but later in the morning I hear them again. The deep valleys seem to retain the sound and bring the echo back and forth across the slopes. I go to the low-lying block of tea that stretches over twenty-eight acres along the river bed. From the top of the winding path I can see moving figures among the tea, sprawled in an irregular line, cavorting and stooping, whirling their arms and ducking beneath the level of the bushes. They are young men engaged today in sickling down the dense ground jungle that springs up round the bushes every few days. This fight to keep the surface of the bushes clean so that the women may pluck the new tips fast is constant from now until the end of the monsoon. The men are working like demons, slashing and hacking down the wall of weeds between the lines. As they advance, the overseers walk behind them, urging them to greater efforts, admonishing them to cut the jungle close to the ground and to pull out the trailing vines that entwine the bushes.

It is not enthusiasm for the work that prompts their efforts, but the fact that five men have the task of clearing one acre to earn their day's pay, and once this is finished they are free for the rest of the day.

I start between the bushes, trampling the carpet of severed stalks, feeling the dew chill upon my legs. Here and there

clumps of weeds remain uncut, or only bent over to appear demolished.

“Come back here, Nangdu,” I shout. “Cut the jungle properly.” Then as I progress, “Here, Rungalall, you have left a vine on top of this bush!” or, “The stalks in your lines are too long, Kancha Rai!” The men are impatient at the delay of being brought back, but if they are not continually chivied the work gets worse and more slovenly, until they do little more than simply brush the weeds down. It is the *Burra Sahib’s* experienced warning to me that I hear, each time I call a name: “To get the work done properly and still maintain good relations with labour, get to know every one individually. Then you can tell ’em off with a personal touch!” His principle; once you know the coolies and they trust your impartiality, they will obey and respect you.

To the *chaprassi* I ask, “How many men are working today?”

“Thirty-two, Sahib.” He checks the total from his notebook.

“That is nearly all the men. Then are only the women going to do the *puja*? Many of them have not come today.”

“No, Your Honour, the men will do the *puja*, but they do not want to lose their pay. That is why they are working so hard. They will be finished very early today, and then go off to the *puja*.”

A little group of men come thrusting a way through the bushes, swinging their keen silver sickle blades in elation. They wear only singlets and short pants, their glowing brown flesh blooms with sweat. “We have finished our tasks,” they tell the overseer. “Will you write our names in your paybook?”

“Now are you going to the *puja*?” I ask.

They show their even, white teeth in an array of delighted grins. “Yes, Sahib, that is where we go, to the *puja*!” and they start up the steep track to their houses at the head of a spur.

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I press between the bushes, down the roughly terraced slope. It is these terraces that have held the steep slope fast against years of rain and wind and have checked the erosion that strips the hillsides down to subsoil and exposes patches of bed-rock. Tentacle-like tap-roots of the tea bushes, combined with the spread of tree suckers, have taken such a grip upon the earth that now the danger of erosion is slight.

I come out of the tea at the angle of a path, where the *syce* is waiting with my pony. I take the reins and thrust a foot into the stirrup. As I swing up over the grey's broad flanks, he plunges slightly and then throws his head to get away. The path is wide and almost flat here, leading into a thicket of jungle that breaches the tea area with a great belt of unproductive land. Once settled in the saddle I give the pony his head and drop my toes. Away we go in a fine canter, high stepping over the tufted grass. The warm air brushes my cheek and is driven into my nose and down to my lungs. The exhilaration of the moment is strong upon me. All the fragrant scents of the jungle rush towards me; the smell of damp, putrid timber, dew absorbed into the loam, fast-growing, lush vegetation, and the strange light perfumes of myriads of wild flowering plants and trees.

The path plunges into the tunnel of greenery that flanks and overhangs it. A sharp incline that skirts an old moraine brings the eager pony to a jog. A coarse yellow spider's web, spun across the path, catches me full face and clings damply. The strength of it surprises me. I find it easier to run my hand over my face and roll the web into a sticky knot than to tear it away in single threads. I catch a glimpse of the spider scurrying along the upper bonds of its ruined web. It is orange and tortoiseshell, fully four inches long. In dense jungle these insects are legion. The coolies have a lively fear of them; horned and menacing, it is sufficient to dissuade me from a closer scrutiny. I ride forward now, with a hand before my face.

The track winds along the contours between the young



gaunt trees thrusting to the light from the tangled undergrowth. There is the whispered alarm of a million tiny startled insects resenting my presence. A brace of crested kalij pheasants break cover from the side of the path and sweep up the tunnel, the bare crimson patches round their eyes and the cock's steel-blue and white plumage are vivid against the jungle.

Three hundred feet below the swift waters of the river run close to the bank and glisten invitingly between the trunks. Two little lads are bathing from the far edge. They are naked, and their thin brown bodies are lithe and supple in play. The mixed herd of goats and bullocks they guard browse among the tufts of broad-blade grasses growing from the silt to the water's fringe. The scene is idyllic and typical of the unhurried peace of the hills.

The path breaks out of the jungle straight into the middle of a large area of tea. The women are plucking here. I dismount and start down the extended line. The sun is high in the sky now, and the heat is cupped in the valley. No breeze stirs the air. The mass of dried twigs underfoot crackle and snap. These are prunings from the bushes, laid along the lines to form a carpet of brush to check the growth of weeds and eventually to rot, adding wood loam to the topsoil. The prunings present a considerable fire risk during the long, rainless months of the Himalayan winter, but they should all have turned black and pulpy by now with the first rains, so that I am struck by the unseasonal spell of dry weather.

The day drags on until the sun is set at the zenith of its arc. The women's baskets are packed to the rim with leaf, and they are flagging in their work as they look frequently to me for the sign to weigh-in.

Across the bushes I can see the flanks of the ponies and their thrashing tails as they crop the grass round the little thatched hut in the centre of the block. I raise my hands to attract the attention of the *chaprassi* and, when he sees me,

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I give the quick, sideways jerk of the head which is the Nepali gesture indicating acquiescence.

The *chaprassi* puts two fingers in his mouth and sounds a piercing whistle. Immediately the shrill is taken up on all sides by the other overseers. Hundreds of startled birds rise from amongst the bushes and flutter hither and thither to escape the echoes that come back from each side of the valley. The coolies turn with one thought and hurry back to the paths that lead to the weighing shed.

So I start to weigh the laden baskets and hand out the little slips of paper, while the ponies are loaded. The men chatter and laugh among themselves as they stuff the fragrant leaf into the sacks. "Ho! my pony is lame," says one, indicating his skewbald gelding. "Yesterday he fell into a *nullah* as I led him home in the dark. Today his load must be light."

"Was he drunk as the man who led him?" asks a ruggedly built little man whose brow is smeared with ashes, proclaiming him as one of the highest Nepali castes, a Bauwn.

A roar of laughter greets this sally. "Well, your pony should carry an extra load," returns the drunkard, "because you have not cut out his eggs. He is always troublesome unless he has much work!"

"That pony is like his master," says a third. "Since his old woman ran away last year no girl in the lines is safe. It would be best if the Bauwn carried a maund or two on his own back!"

Such a display of mirth follows this quip that the work of roping the loads is much delayed. Most of the coolies have eaten their mid-day meal and returned to their places in the plucking line before the last of the little ponies sets out on the long drag up the hillside to the factory.

I remount and follow the slow-moving line up the first gradient, but where the path touches the fringe of the jungle strip I fork off and take a subsidiary track that curls round the hill for about two miles and brings me at length to the spur where the coolie houses are ranged around the old chilouni

tree, for I have it in mind to see the *puja* celebration myself.

The drum has restarted before I reach the narrow path of slab rocks that mounts from hut to hut up the ridge. It is too difficult for the pony, so I send the *syce* off to lead the pony by a circuitous route to the top of the spur, and I proceed on foot.

Once among the cluster of little houses, perched on shelves scraped from the slope, the peculiar odour of the Nepali race comes forcibly to my nostrils; it is of wood-smoke and cooking oil, and lamp oil and sweat—pungent and distinctive, instantly contagious, clinging tenaciously to the belongings of every coolie. It is sharply acrid to my sense, coming from the coarse-weave blankets spread in the sun on the thatch of the houses. Here and there, tiny naked children and plump, brown babies tumble together in a delightful heap of limbs and smooth flesh on the baked clay porches. Motley, cankerous dogs rise at my coming and with hackles abristle yelp shrill warning, to scurry with curled tails behind the mud-plastered, wattle walls when I stoop as if to pick up a stone for a missile. Of adults there is no sign.

The huge tree surmounting the spur casts an immense patch of shade, its gnarled and ancient limbs take to its bosom multitudes of birds and insects, all instantly hidden from view as they plunge into the cool depths, but their chirruping and twittering and the hum of tiny wings is dirge-like to the accompaniment of the drum.

My footfalls are slow on the steep, worn rocks. I enter the shade some way below the tree and round a final house before coming suddenly upon the gay scene of the *puja*.

As though they awaited my coming, some thirty or forty people, gathered in a wide half-circle around the great trunk, turn towards me. There is a momentary hush in their chatter and only the drums beat on. I pause, uncertain of my welcome amongst them at a religious ceremony. I am remembering that my mere presence can defile some of their holy places, for I am out of caste and not acceptable to their

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Gods. Then I notice a little group of children, resplendent in brightly coloured cottons. Girls, dressed as their elders in gathered skirts and blouses with headshawls of contrasting hues; and boys like their fathers and brothers, in tight-fitting Nepalese trousers and jaunty little skull caps, all grinning broadly, their eyes hidden in the creases above their flattened noses. I cannot help smiling in return. It is the sign they await. The Sahib is gay! He comes in peace, without anger to mar the *puja*; their friendly hearts go out and they instantly try to show me welcome.

“Salaam, Sahib!” says a very old man, who crouches at the base of the tree. I return his greeting and immediately salaams are showered upon me.

Beside the bole a spring gushes. Many years past, some pious man, thinking to set his feet firmly on the road to heaven, built a tiny grotto here and directed the spring to shoot across a grooved rock and fall to a pool below. Above it he set a number of stone slabs carved with images of the deities, and in pride of place directly above the spring he had his name and the name of his father embossed upon a cleft rock. The man has long since passed, but his act of generosity remains to benefit all who draw water at the spring in the shadow of the holy tree, and it is incumbent upon all who drink to murmur a prayer in memory of the benefactor, to remind the Gods of his devotion and enhance his claim to a place in heaven. The little grotto has been freshly daubed with whitewash and, like the trunk of the chilouni, hung about with garlands and marigolds, wild dahlias and the vivid purple of bougainvillea.

On the ground before the tree are a number of sacrificial offerings. There are betel-nuts, and sweetmeats arranged upon strips of banana leaf, slender yellow and mauve stalks of sugar cane propped against the trunk, and shallow brass pans of milk set amongst the raised tortuous roots that spread from the tree like transfixed serpents.

The coolies wait to see what I shall do. I am suddenly

embarrassed. It occurs to me that my curiosity must seem to them no less than gross bad manners! They are quite prepared however to accept me amongst them, and when a small boy brings forward a low cane stool, with a deer-hide seat, they urge me to be seated.

This I know will mean no brief visit, for once I have signified willingness to stay I shall have to conform to the demands of courtesy and take a part in the ceremony. Ignorance of their customs cautions me against this, for I shall be bound to contravene some tradition and so bring discredit upon all who take part in the *puja*. My one chance is to pretend that I came upon them unawares and leave quickly. So feeling slightly ridiculous as I put the palms of my hands together and nod towards the holy tree, I pass through the semi-circle of people and start up the path behind the spring.

I am aware of laughing eyes upon my back and a little buzz of surprise at the unpredictableness of the Sahib, who refuses the chance to bring a year of luck upon his own family.

It is much past my usual hour for tiffin, so I hurry to the head of the spur and find the *syce* awaiting me with the pony. "Did you go to the *puja*, Sahib?" he asks in curiosity.

I nod perfunctorily as I mount.

"You did it very quickly!" he says, thinking perhaps to draw me out. I merely grunt and clapping my heels to the pony's sides set off at a brisk pace up the winding path, round the hump of the hill and up the final gradient to the *koti*.

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The last of the light has slipped from the sky and the shapes of the hills have merged with the darkness when we hear the bearer running heavily through the bungalow from the cookhouse. Sheila and I sit on the veranda reading; the subdued radio is relaying the comments of some nonentity on a production of Hollywood that we are never likely to

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see, and Sheila has just looked up from her book to remark how little such things matter to us now. "Only a few months ago," she says, "I might have been listening avidly to decide whether this man's opinion agreed with my own. How our values have changed!"

I reflect. "Do you know I have not seen a film for over a year."

Sheila's reply remains in the balance as bare feet patter on the floorboards and a moment later the bearer appears before us. His face is as bland and inconsequential as ever, but his voice betrays his excitement. "Sahib, Memsahib, there is a big fire in the village down the valley. There are many houses ablaze!"

"A fire, you say? In Bijanbari?"

"Yes, Sahib. It is spreading through the whole village!"

Sheila and I are on our feet, though undecided what to do. "We can see Bijanbari from the muster ground," I say. "We can see how bad it is from there."

As soon as we reach the path at the back of the bungalow we see the glare in the sky. All the servants are with us, and we stand a moment appalled by the crimson edge of the cloud banks and the flicker of flame against the purple night. The servants are hushed and trembling. To them such destruction is an act of the gods. Small misfortunes and minor losses are man's own carelessness, but a disaster of this magnitude is proof of the terrible potency of the gods' wrath.

We hurry along the compound path and reach the main track. As we ascend, our feet jar and trip on the uneven rocks. Our eyes are riveted on the growing light that mounts with a pall of smoke above the silhouette of the black hill, like the eruption of a volcano.

We gain the plateau of the muster ground and cluster on its far edge. The huge blaze just across the river, deep in the cleft of the valley, is intense and fearsome. The flames leap into the violet sky, detach themselves from the fire and penetrate the darkness like fangs of lightning. Both slopes are

clear to view in the bloody-orange light. A column of dense grey smoke rises sheer, bearing glowing embers on the draught and scattering them for miles across the hills. The whole village seems consumed by fire, and even as we watch we can see the line of fire advance a pace along the river bank where thatched houses cluster.

From this distance the houses are tiny boxes and the flames seem out of proportion, but across the flushing slopes of tea the sound of heat-split bamboos crack like shots. We stand silent, watching the horror as the homes of many people are burned before our eyes; a creeping relentless power, quite invincible among that collection of frail dwellings.

It is a spectacle, savage and gorgeous that touches our hearts with awe.

Helplessly we watch the village being devoured by fire, tiny house by rude hovel. The heart of the fire is white as the sun, the outer fringe tempered with gold and crimson. I am suddenly glad that the distance is too great for us to see people running before the advancing heat of their burning homes.

The fire is very brief. Already the flames cannot leap so high; the intensity of the blaze is spent. The fuel is all consumed.

While we are standing here coolies pass us and go on down the path into the valley. The men are running, the women shuffle more slowly, fearful but still irresistibly drawn to the sight. Children race in groups towards the river bed. There is nothing that any of them can do, yet they cannot resist the primitive urge to go to the scene of a disaster.

As the flames die back towards the ground, I see a heartening sight. "Look, Sheila, the whole village is not destroyed, only the front edge along the river bank. The line of fire has moved from right to left, but has not crossed the village street!"

The fire is dying fast. The servants, too, notice that the largest part of the village has been spared. They mutter

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among themselves and shift uneasily. Here is yet another indication that the fire was selective, fanned by an indivisible force. There is no feeling of relief or gladness at this fatality, only conviction that the righteous have been spared, the wicked served!

The valley is locked in a strange iridescent glow. The line of red ash is neatly laid along the river bank. As we turn away, the first drops of rain splatter noisily on the ground around us and are cool on our faces.

Before we reach the *koti*, we are caught in a blinding, drenching torrent.

Once in the shelter of the bungalow, Sheila faces me with a look of despondency. "Only part of the village is burned," she says, "but it's the one part that affects us! Do you realize whose house went up in flames?"

The shocking fact dawns upon me. "My God! The *dhobie's*! Half our total wardrobe gone. . . ."

"And that's not all," wails Sheila. "Think of our lovely new chair covers. . . !"

VII

The Strangers from the Snows

Two old men sit on the grass verge of the track, staring down in fascination at the two children playing in the sunlight on the lawn below. Their florid robes are patched and faded, the high, winged caps on their shaven skulls dull with exposure and age. They have been there since dawn, assessing their welcome, spellbound by the fair hair and white skins of the children, watching, watching, with simple patience. . . .

Melody and Kandy sit surrounded by dolls and stuffed animals. Their game is beyond mere adult understanding. Besides themselves, only Harkabahadur, Ayah's little son, knows what is going on. Melody directs him in idiomatic Nepali. Already she speaks their language as any coolie child. Kandy is beginning to use words now, but always, we notice, Nepali words; and Sheila and I have become used to speaking to her in Nepali, for the conflict of languages will obviously be too much for her, and we are confident that she will learn English quickly enough when she comes to need it.

Harkabahadur's large eyes are riveted upon Kandy. He is in many ways a strange little boy. He seems weighed down by his responsibility towards our younger daughter. To Melody he owes no allegiance. Kandy, however, can do no wrong! He has seen the two lamas on the hill and is terrified by their presence. He has been urging the two little Missy-sahibs to go and play on the veranda.

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Some of his fear is communicated to Melody. She is aware of the old monks, but too stubborn to move. As long as they stay on the path, the game will go on.

Sheila is cutting flowers from the borders, coreopsis and cosmeas; masses of asparagus fern and delicate mauve bamboo orchids from a great clump that flanks the drive. "Mummy, there are lamas on the hill," says Melody, pointing.

The sun creeps across the lawn like molten gold. As Sheila looks up the heat strikes her eyes. The old holy men are motionless. Their vivid robes are bold in silhouette. By noticing them, Sheila prompts them to movement. They start towards the bungalow, disdaining the deviations of the path, thrusting between the damp bushes down the steep hillside. The heavy dew turns their robes black to their broad thighs. As they come nearer, Sheila sees that their flat faces are wrinkled in smiles, golden brown, russet cheeked, with all the pleasant mellow tones of autumn.

Their track through the tea is left like a wake where the silver dampness has been shaken from the leaves. "They are coming!" cries Harkabahadur in sudden terror, and clasps Kandy's wrist to drag her away. Melody, galvanized by their swift approach, runs and buries her face in Sheila's skirt. Kandy struggles up, takes three baby paces and promptly sits down again; largely to be contrary to the little boy's urging, but also curious, for visitors are rare. She turns to face them without fear or shyness.

"Kanchi, Kanchi!" wails Harkabahadur, every animal instinct in his primitive little being screaming at him to leave the Missy-sahib and run. "Come quickly, come quickly," he pleads, but the same uncultured little mind has a bond of loyalty that prevents him abandoning Kandy to the awful presence of the holy men.

The lamas break out of the tea just above the junction where the drive and the track divide. They pick their way between the muddy ruts and reach the granite chips of the drive. One carries a prayer wheel which he spins ceaselessly,

the other has a human thigh-bone trumpet and a tattered scroll of handmade paper.

Melody glances over her shoulder and sees them close; her howl of fear is muffled as she clasps Sheila's knees tighter. "Hush, darling, don't cry, these are kind old men, just look, they are smiling at you!"

Melody ventures another glance and finds it is so. The two old men bob their heads as they walk, their eyes mere slits above their wide smiles, but it is beyond Melody they look, to where Kandy, ignoring Harkabahadur's entreaties, starts to crawl steadily across the grass towards them. Harkabahadur is too petrified to follow. Horror is plain on his face.

Kandy's chubby hands and knees cover the ground at surprising speed. When she reaches them, she gets to her feet and stands staring incredulously. The lamas' faces are wreathed in smiles. She takes two uncertain paces, totters and falls flat. Their smiles are gone in a flash; consternation replaces them. They make soft clicking noises as they stoop towards her, holding their hands in appeal.

Kandy raises her baby face, unsure of the advantages of crying. Before Sheila reaches her the lamas are upon her. Their voices are gentle and melodious in sound, quite without meaning to her, but filled with sympathy and charm. They lift her and set her on her feet with surprising tenderness.

Looking at their great blunt-fingered hands, furrowed and warped like oak bark, Sheila is struck by the cleanliness of the nails, quite pink, with oval half-moon cuticles, and firm tapered points, contrasting strangely with the rich brown of the weathered flesh.

Kandy is unhurt and placid. She turns the slender stalk of her neck and smiles up at them. Their golden caps bob in unison, their faces crack into answering smiles of pure joy. They clasp the girths of their considerable bellies and beam at her. The simple enjoyment they glean from just standing looking at her is very evident. Their ancient faces are lighted with kindness and Kandy senses this, for though they must

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present to her a spectacle quite astounding and beyond her comprehension, she accepts their presence with equanimity.

Harkabahadur has ceased to cry out and stands in trepidation, afraid to approach nearer to the lamas; but his agitated voice has carried to his mother, and like one of the avenging Eumenides Ayah bursts upon the scene, down the veranda, and across the lawn.

“It’s all right, Ayah,” says Sheila.

Ayah pauses, but is unconvinced. Her face is shadowed with fear of men who have dealings with the gods. Caution prompts her against angering them. “Memsahib, Kanchi must not stay near them!”

“They will not hurt her. Why do they come?”

Ayah moves nearer to Sheila, but keeps her eyes upon them. “See, Memsahib, they are very dirty,” she volunteers in a whisper. “They smell very bad! They never wash. Beyond the snows, where they come from, nobody ever washes! They come here to beg. They are too dirty for Jeti and Kanchi to go near.”

Sheila has difficulty in concealing her amusement. Until Ayah came to us she was as uninterested in the properties of water for washing as most other coolies on the garden. Sheila’s persistence, however, has now given her a positive mania for cleanliness.

“Do they beg for food or money?”

“They will take anything, these lamas,” declares Ayah emphatically. “See, Memsahib, that roll of paper one carries. If you give them something they will write your name upon it and when they get back to their monastery they will turn the prayer wheel once for each name.” Ayah mimes each part of this procedure as she talks, so that Sheila may easily follow her.

Melody is piqued by Kandy’s friendliness towards the old men. “Mummy, where do the lamas come from?”

“A long way!” Sheila points to where the clouds are massed on the horizon, suffused, gold and grey with sunlight

and shadow. "Beyond the snows. See, their boots are all torn and broken!"

Melody studies the old strips of variegated felt that make up the lamas' knee boots. Her gaze moves up their rubicund gowns, stiff with grease and dust, to the serene, kindly faces surmounted by the yellow hats. One has a sparse, white beard, every hair sprouting fine as down from the ruddy flesh of his cleft chin. There is a little pause, and then, "Mummy, what are the lamas?"

Sheila is conscious of the moment of the question. She says evenly, "Men who pray." She waits for the inevitable return.

"Mummy, what is pray?"

A wind from the valley stirs the trees and the last of the dew is shaken in a brief welter of minute prisms. From the topmost branches of the peach trees a dozen minivets dart across the open space before the lawn and hurtle in a riot of scarlet and black and yellow plumage to the nodding safety of a massive Indian lilac.

The two old lamas look from mother to child, as though politely appreciating the conversation. Sheila says very slowly, "You know how the people in the lines do *puja*? Well, that is praying!"

Melody is immediately enlightened. Sheila remains faintly uneasy that her explanation might have been too evasive. But how can one describe prayer to a child who has not yet known four birthdays, living in isolation on a tea garden?

"These are nice men!" says Melody in wonder, getting used to their appearance.

Sheila is relieved. At least the child has it established that prayer is an act of goodness. "Yes, dear," then with sudden inspiration, "Show them your dolly. I'm sure they would like to see it." Melody bolts into the bungalow.

The old lamas turn to Sheila and bow from the waist, low and unhurriedly. "They are asking for *bakshish*, Memsahib," says Ayah on a slight note of hysteria.

"The Sahib is not here!" Sheila says to them.

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“Not here; the Sahib is not here,” echoes Ayah, both hands fluttering negation. “They don’t understand, Memsahib. They don’t speak Nepali.”

The smiles on the two old faces grow broader. Again they bow elaborately, and Sheila has the ridiculous inclination to imitate them. Then with one accord they seat themselves cross-legged upon a corner of the turf and compose themselves to meditation of little Kandy, who has remained before them, staring in fascination.

Sheila is taken aback. They obviously intend to wait until the Sahib’s return, but so courtly is their attitude, so kindly their reactions to the children, that she feels no annoyance at their presumption.

Melody comes running down the steps carrying the doll which came in a recent parcel from England. The old lamas’ eyes light in amusement and their smiles reflect the simple pleasure of the children. Melody, with swift confidence, hands it to one of them and stands, as any grown mother, expectant of praise.

They examine the western toy with its nylon hair and delicate features. They click their tongues in astonishment, and pass the doll from one to the other, turning it round with gentle hands, stroking and patting it in fascination.

Then Melody and Kandy start to shuttle back and forth from the circle of animals and dolls on the lawn, bringing their toys for inspection with evident pride, surrounding the old men with them, chattering in sure local idiom. The lamas’ eyes show no comprehension, but they nod gravely at intervals.

Ayah and Harkabahadur, still querulous, squat some yards off, resentful of the lamas’ attraction for their charges.

Sheila returns to the veranda and her sewing. The high yellow hats bob up and down below her. Around the bungalow, the swifts circle and dip to the eaves, fling outwards and rise with striking regularity.

So, as I ride up the drive on a sweating pony just after mid-

day, this is the scene set for me. But I am bringing a surprise of my own for Sheila and my daughters, for perched on the prow of the saddle before me, fastened with a double binding of string, is a tiny baby monkey.

As they see my approach, the old lamas get to their feet ponderously. Sheila comes across the lawn, and Melody and Kandy shout and clap their hands: "Daddy's coming, Daddy's coming!" At first they do not see the monkey, but when I rein in and dismount they rush towards me with cries of joy. "A monkey! How sweet." "It's only a baby." "How did you catch it?"

The tiny creature is terrified by the eager hands and excited faces. It clings to my shirt with a desperate grip and glances over its shoulder with huge, appealing eyes. It is a Bengal Macaques, light brown on the back with soft cream fur in front, pink face, palms and soles, and large protruding ears.

"The coolies caught it at the river bed," I explain. "It got separated from its mother while the tribe was raiding a corn patch and they cut it off up a stalk. They were delighted when I promised them some *bakshish* for it."

We have a job to make it release its hold, then suddenly it lets go and leaps for Sheila, clinging to her blouse with hands and feet. She pets it while I transfer the string.

"It's such a tiny thing to be without a mother! Do you think it will live?"

"The coolies assure me it is old enough to feed itself. Anyway we'll try it. It'll be a lovely pet for the children."

Melody and Kandy dance around Sheila in excitement. They want to fondle the little creature and play with it straight away. I point to the lamas. "When did they arrive?"

"They've been here all morning watching the children play."

The old men, seeing themselves under scrutiny, put the tips of their fingers together and bow. Standing side by side, they fix us with their serene gaze and clear their throats purposefully. Then with one accord they begin to chant. Their voices

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rise melodiously, catch on the lifting breeze and go winging away up the hill. I find myself trying to follow the rhythmic flow, for the notes fall into a definite pattern. The words, if indeed they utter words, run together in a drone of sound, though their strong lips articulate in synchronized rapidity. Now and again, one of them pauses for breath; the other continues, taking up the tirade with practised fluency.

Above the chant, I say, "They are offering a prayer for us. I suppose this means we shall have to give them something."

Sheila says, "They have come a long way!"

The incantation goes on and on. The brief harmony begins to accustom itself to our ears, so that we can follow the rise and fall of their voices with some anticipation. It has a strange resonant quality, wrung from those ancient throats, and I have the vague impression that there might truly be something just a little holy in their prayer, said for us alone, among the green exile of the garden, for though repetition dispels the slightest hesitation, their devout sincerity is convincing, and the gentle warmth in their sloe eyes makes me certain there are keen thoughts within those bobbing heads.

So, when the last sibilant note is uttered, and silence follows, and their old gnarled hands are folded and replaced again within their wide sleeves, we pause a moment, and glance at each other, half smiling, and hold the other's eye. And I remember it was a Buddhist abbot in a Tibetan monastery who told a churlish member of a long forgotten Himalayan expedition that an old man's blessing could only offer good. With something of surprise it occurs to me that this is in line with the beliefs of the coolies of the garden!

The lamas accept with dignity the coins we offer them. They bow low for the last time and smile, showing their incredibly long teeth, their faces puckered like dried apples, so that their eyes seem to disappear. They look once more, steadily, almost with longing, at Melody and Kandy, then turn and shuffle down the drive.



We watch them take the zig-zag path down the valley, their broad crimson shoulders and high yellow hats in relief against the tea bushes, and we wonder if they will ever pass this way again.

Many mendicant monks and lamas wander across the border from Tibet and Sikkim without let or hindrance, for the border is defined only at check points on the mule trade route and the high ranges, and gorges can never be closed against these itinerant travellers. Some seek knowledge, some are on missions between monasteries; a few are men of great learning and with the gift of many tongues, oblivious to the hardships of the open track, bent upon attaining Nirvana. But most are idle, ambitionless fellows begging their way from town to village, accepting alms of the humble, superstitious folk, who revere them in fear.

The rattle of a swivel drum strikes a demanding note that the villagers dare not defy. The drum is gyrated by a flick of the wrist and the pommel twists from side to side of the two hide faces. The *dorji*, or holy thunderbolt, is a lama's badge of office, a metal shaft about six inches long with a strange four-pronged formation at the ends, rather like the bars of a crown. Every lama is able to explain how he acquired his own *dorji* for, they say, *dorjis* are not made by the hand of man, but fall, ready-fashioned, from the sky as symbols for use of the seekers of truth.

A few lamas travel in pairs, as the two who have come to us, collecting money for building new monasteries or shrines. Not least of the attractions of all these wandering ascetics is their ready sense of humour, for a smile comes more easily to their lips than words, and laughter is the language that is always in their hearts.

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We are sitting on the veranda drinking our after-tiffin cups of tea, watching the *mali* putting up living quarters for the little monkey; a box on a six feet pole. "We'll have to get a

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light chain,” says Sheila, “and fix it to a ring which will slide up and down the pole.”

“Yes, it must run loosely, or he’ll not be able to retire up to his box when the jackals come around at night.”

“I’ve decided to call him Joey,” says Sheila with alacrity; and taking a banana from the table she goes to the veranda edge and throws it across to her new pet. The little monkey seizes on it, strips the skin with tiny deft fingers and stuffs it into his mouth, where it fills the curious sacs underneath his small jaw.

The rain clouds break across the valley. There is a strange diffused light overhanging Darjeeling, breached by slender shafts of sun shining through gaps in the cloud ceiling. The rain moves down the valley behind a vanguard of vapour. Colours are blended to shadow in the middle distance, but above and beyond every tone is accentuated by the weird effect. Sheila puts into words the thought that is in my mind. “It is like viewing a stage across a vast amphitheatre and that rain is a gauze curtain that is drawn at the end of an act!”

The sweep of rain drives a breeze before it, quick and cool to the lungs. It moves with graceful impetus, curving slightly outwards as it nears the ground as though reaching forward, feeling the ground it must cover. Slowly our vista is cut down. Features on the opposite side of the valley, re-entrants and spurs, prominent trees and clusters of coolie houses, are merged into the blue mist and gradually obscured. When the rain cloud is directly in front of our bungalow it strikes the shoulder of a broad spur and turns with the air currents towards us. It is eerie to watch the grey-blue mass approaching and the first wraiths come across the lawn with a sharp drop in the temperature; then within a minute the rain has reached us and is hurtling upon the corrugated steel roof with an incessant rattle.

“Look!” says Sheila in surprise, “whatever can this boy want?”

Padding along the drive is a small, soaked figure, splashing

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through the puddles that have formed already, his pathetic clothes stuck to his body and his head bent low against the driving rain. He goes along the path that runs behind the bungalow and we sit waiting for the bearer to come through to us with some message.

A few drops of rain splash from the guttering on to my knee. The rain is still cold. The early monsoon rains are often icy, and I think of the coolies caught among the tea, with an afternoon's work still before them. It is not so much the falling rain that troubles them as the damp-laden interlocked bushes between which they must thrust, making their clothes heavy with rain and chilling and numbing them from the waist. I resolve to call them in a little early if the rain continues.

The message is from the *Burra Sahib*, a brief characteristic reminder of the annual football match, now become a traditional struggle between the Bijanbari villagers and the Chungtung garden team. Rivalry has mounted with the years, and keenness allows scope for the Nepali love of betting.

The note is terse, and shows that the *Burra Sahib* has set his heart on winning. "*Don't be late or these b——s will claim the match. Hear they've got a crowd of bazaar-wallahs down to play for them!*"

VII

Coolie Cup-tie

It is Sunday morning. We wake early, as usual, but rise late once each week, to mark the occasion. The summits of the hills are overhung with clouds, but by the time we have breakfasted the ceiling has lifted and a slight breeze has begun to shift the cumulus. We are hopeful of a fine day.

By eleven, our retinue has assembled and we set off. First comes a small boy, grinning cheerily as he leads Melody's aged donkey. The donkey, Dobbin Grey, is emphatically living up to the traditional stubbornness of its race, but this little lad has proved himself fully its equal and has discovered a particular spot on the beast's spine, just behind the saddle, which he has only to press to induce it to break into a shambling uneven trot. Melody sits her donkey with her back perfectly straight and her toes pointing heavenwards, with confidence to make me proud. Next comes Ayah in her best *sari*, walking with that graceful swing from the pelvis and the superb carriage of the head that marks all the hill women. She carries her umbrella; very conscious of her elevation from the ranks of the coolies. Behind her, Harkabahadur carries Kandy, strapped into a tiny chair, on his back. It is slung from a bamboo band around his forehead, and the back of the chair fits his narrow shoulders while his forward stoop to bring his body under the point of balance, tilts the seat just enough to keep Kandy in position. The back of her fair head is on a level

with the back of his cropped black hair, and her baby face is creased with delight as she sits relaxed, watching us walk behind her.

Sheila is in front of me, wielding a walking stick purposefully amongst the lank grass overhanging the ribbon of worn path. Behind me comes the bearer carrying a rucksack, laden with the picnic things. It is strange to see him out of his white ducks and mess jacket, bareheaded now, to reveal that he keeps his hair beneath his huge turban long and well oiled. Next comes the cook, plump and soft-fleshed, very young but making up for his lack of experience and limited capabilities by a genuine affection for the children and a painstaking willingness to do his best. He is not really necessary to our complement, but Sheila has allowed him to come because he is so enamoured of the idea of a picnic. At the rear of the column is my *syce* carrying my football kit and a collection of odd mackintoshes and umbrellas.

So we march, in single file, out of the compound and up the track to the muster ground. From here we can see Bijanbari village on the river bank beyond the grey ash belt left by the fire.

The path leads us through the coolies' line. The path is very narrow and in some places there is a steep drop to a shelf of cultivated land where Indian corn reaches up towards us. The little lad at the head of our cavalcade leads Melody's donkey carefully round the corners. I watch the donkey's dainty hooves mincing along before us, and note how it places each hoof directly in line, as though it is walking along a tight-rope. Despite its gross belly and obvious reluctance it is remarkably sure-footed.

It is Melody who sees the kids outside a house. "Look Mummy! Little baby *bakras*." The Nepali word for a goat comes most readily to her. Kandy looks, too, from the vantage of her chair and chuckles with glee. The tiny creatures are only a few days old, rickety and uncertain on their toes, pommelling furiously at their mother's swollen udder with

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their snub noses, while their ridiculous little tails whisk agitatedly from their small elevated sterns. The mother goat is covered with shaggy hair and watches our passing without interest from pale oblique eyes as her jaws go round and round in a ritual of mastication.

From under the eaves of the houses pi-dogs menace us, setting up a strident barking that carries warning of our coming through the lines ahead. There is a dog at every house; many have the pricked ears of a jackal and the same half-crazed eye and alertness of a wild creature, for like jackals, and in rivalry, they live largely by scavenging. Few coolies can feed the watchdog of their house once it has grown from a puppy, for scraps are scarce. Yet these emaciated creatures remain loyal to their first adopters, and it is impossible to approach a coolie's house without starting a hostile harangue of yelping from the lines' pariahs.

At a bend in the path we overtake six men, dressed in their best clothes. They stand on the narrow verge to let us pass, their brown faces pleasant with smiles as they see the children. "Are you all going to Bijanbari?" I ask them as I approach.

They nod vehemently, and their grins widen. "*Ju, Sahib!* We go to see the game of ball. Our team must win!"

Their enthusiasm is remarkable. Football is the only game that adults play in the hills, its popularity established by British army units stationed in the district through fifty years since Darjeeling first became an army sanatorium and rest station for heat-fatigued troops. It is my *Burra Sahib* who has built up enthusiasm for the game on the estate, though his own playing days are long past. He has infected the coolies with his own passion for football and nearby villages have tried to emulate the prowess of the garden team.

"Be careful of the pineapple leaves," I warn the little lad leading Dobbin Grey, for the tough serrated spikes overhang the path at the side of a fine plantation.

“What huge ones!” exclaims Sheila, stopping to admire the great mauvish-coloured, tufted fruit springing from the centre of each plant.

“Yes, and they need a guardian.” I point to a boy who sits beside a little pile of stones under a crude shelter on stilts in the middle of the plantation. “The monkeys will clear the lot in a single night! That boy is ready to do battle if a tribe appears. He’ll kick up a terrific row, and everyone in the lines will turn out to drive the monkeys off.”

Below the cluster of little houses a deep cleft in the hillside runs straight to the river bed, filled with dense jungle. The tangled growth is dark green and sweating with humidity. The fleshy leaves are vaguely disgusting in appearance unstimulated by the relief of a breeze, growing from the gully in tight-packed profusion, oily and repulsive, like the scales on some obscene reptile issuing from forgotten depths. Up this natural cover the monkeys swarm, along the ropes of vines that bind the low jungle. They are not nocturnal feeders, but they usually raid cultivated areas just before daybreak and gorge themselves till about seven a.m., as though aware that these are hours when man is least vigilant.

The path rounds a huge slab rock with an overhang laden with orchids. Twenty feet above us the sky is shut out and it is chilly close to the rock wall. Scores of varieties of mosses cover the dank face. The rock seems balanced precariously, though the parasitic growths prove its age; but instinctively our footsteps quicken as we pass beneath it.

We come again to tea bushes, and here the path descends steeply in a long series of zig-zags that lead right to the bamboo thicket that lines the river bank. Groups of people in single file are winding ahead of us. “Look, the crowd is beginning to gather already!”

Melody’s donkey walks very slowly, its old front legs stiff against the incline. Melody calls to us: “Mummy, I want to walk.” She is having difficulty staying in the saddle, though a crupper prevents the saddle sliding forward on to the

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donkey's neck. I call the little lad to stop and lift Melody down. We pass the donkey and set off at a good pace.

At almost every bend we catch up with a group of coolies, who stand aside to watch us pass. The men raise their hands in salaam, but their eyes are on the children. The women, who never salaam or make any sign of recognition, stare openly, clicking their tongues from the roofs of their mouths or uttering the ejaculation, "*Mum, mum, mum!*" as Melody and Kandy go by. The women are wearing their best clothes, all in vivid colours and laden with native jewellery—great wheels of ear-rings, filled with sheet gold in the centre and braced by threads over the tops of their ears to relieve the weight on their lobes; nose rings set with chips of local gems, necklets of silver rupees or of eight-anna pieces hanging to their waists, or thick ropes of green and crimson beads interspaced with beaten gold ornamentation.

Melody and Kandy accept the admiration of the coolies with genuine indifference. They know they look different to coolie children, but they have been touched already by the strange friendliness of the hill people, and Melody replies promptly to every woman who makes a remark, while Kandy puts her chubby palms together in the polite gesture which Ayah has taught her, awkwardly, but with complete unselfconsciousness.

"Jetti! Where are you going, Jetti?"

"To the football game," replies Melody solemnly. "Where are you going?"

It is polite custom for hillfolk meeting on a path to enquire each other's destination: "Also to see the football game!" Then comes the quick little sideways jerk of the head, to indicate the ritual is finished.

The sound of the flowing water is thrown up from the steep valley and the great stones that thresh the torrent to foam come into sight. Humidity increases as we descend. I can feel the familiar motif of sweat between my shoulders, stirred by exertion. Here the tea bushes grow huge and dense,



crowding against the ribbon of the path, flushing tender shoots, light green and aromatic. Above them flutter a galaxy of royal Sikkim butterflies—Yellow Rajahs, Krishna Peacocks and Great Newabs. We round a final bend and Melody runs ahead to where the path levels out and pierces the fringe of scrub at the river bank.

“What are those people doing?” Sheila points to a group standing on the path, staring into the tea. As we get nearer we can hear the excitement in their voices.

Melody reaches them and pauses uncertainly, listening to their talk, peering with them. As Sheila and I come up to the group Melody darts forward, dodges between the gay-coloured *saris* to the edge of the tea, and at that moment I catch the word, “*Sarp!*” *Sarp!* Snake! the frightful realization strikes me; there is a snake amongst the tea.

The coolies cry out shrilly, “Jetti, Jetti, don’t go! Snake! there is a snake!” Half a dozen hands reach out and drag her back, and then I am up to them, clasping Melody’s arm, backing away.

The coolies point stabbing fingers. “There, Sahib, look! The snake is on the bush!”

Then I see it—lying extended amongst the level foliated table of a huge-framed bush, only its tail tapering in a coil around a twig to show where it forced its way up the plucking surface. It is light brown and shiny, as though the scales are steeped in oil, no more than an inch and a half in diameter and about four feet long, with a flat diamond-shaped head and evil beady eye set above large dorsal scales. Its head, pointing away from the path, is deftly poised on an upstanding shoot, waiting for some small creature to alight upon the foliage within range of its deadly strike.

Sheila’s eyes are wide with horror. Hers is an unreasoned dread of the creatures which I can well understand, for my own phobia is rats! The coolies fall back now and watch to see what I shall do. It is difficult to pick out the snake against the leaves and twigs, only the narrow strip of yellow

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under-belly which shows beneath the snake's slightly raised head betrays it, otherwise its colours blend with the bush remarkably.

"It's an Indian Bronzeback," I say with certainty, for I have seen a picture of this little reptile only a few days previously and I am vaguely elated at being able to identify it. Very deliberately I raise my walking cane and gauge exactly the point at which I must land squarely upon the narrow spine. If I can hit it hard and true its vertebrae will be dislocated and the *coup de grace* will be easy.

"David, be careful," warns Sheila needlessly. There is a moment of tension and then the cane cleaves the air, strikes with a sharp crack and drives the snake into the tangle of foliage.

"Ahhh!" the coolies draw in their breath with a wailing sigh for the moment of death. Even the death of a snake holds some mystery for them, although their fear of reptiles is inbred and they rejoice when one is killed.

"Look out, it may not be dead!" But I can see the motionless shaft of half its body split neatly at right-angles, hanging amongst the upper twigs, whilst the other half thrashes helplessly. I hook the snake upon my cane and flick it up and outwards, so that it falls upon the path. The coolies press back in sudden terror, then see its broken spine. One man, braver than the rest, comes forward with a piece of rock. Aiming above the snake, he drops the rock squarely upon the evil diamond head and then with his bare foot upon the rock grinds the loathsome reptile into the ground. The tip of the tail continues to writhe.

We prepare to go on. Harkabahadur, who has set Kandy in her chair on the path, well above the scene, takes her up again. The bearer and the *syce* lift their loads. They all press back close against the bushes to skirt the snake as widely as possible, and each hawks and spits vehemently as they pass, a Nepali custom after being near anything evil or malodorous.

"It's a strange thing," I remark. "These people will never step over a dead snake." Behind us we hear a shout.

“Apparently that’s true of donkeys, too!” Sheila says. “I’ve read of horses being afraid of snakes. . . .”

The little lad leading old Dobbin Grey at the back of our caravan is pulling on a long rein, while the donkey is sunk on her haunches bracing her front legs. The *syce* takes Ayah’s umbrella and runs back. With the point he drags the snake to the side of the path. Even so the donkey shows a round white eye and skips past with a nimbleness that belies its age.

We find the *Burra Sahib* perched upon a great black boulder in the shade of drooping fronds. He wastes no words on formal greeting. “Come on up here, there’s no bloody ants!”

Sitting on the warm plateau of rock we eat our picnic meal. Melody and Kandy lean each side of the *Burra Sahib*, propped each against one of his great limbs, while he teases them and talks to them gruffly in a voice distorted by Scots dialect but with some hidden tenderness of which they are supremely confident, for they are not the least in awe of him. Sheila and I have often considered this phenomenon and conclude that it is the sure instinct of childhood which fathoms the gentle heart of this tough, inarticulate old planter.

The smell of wood-smoke is heavy on the air from the fire where the servants boil tea at the foot of the rock. Across the boulder-strewn sand of the river bed silver grasses stand motionless. Briefly the sun strikes through and the swift river is transformed from muddy lead to a torrent of rainbow gems. Groups of people wade the ford and climb the steep bank facing the precincts of the village. Already we can see the football pitch defined by deep rows of people on the touch lines, while urchins putt an improvised ball of tight-rolled rags between the goal bamboos.

The *Burra Sahib* is as nervous as any big league manager. I suspect my light-hearted attitude towards the game is at variance with his keenness. “Got to win today, Fletcher!” he says pointedly, as though to remind me of the weight of my responsibility in the position of goalkeeper. “Come on! Better get across the river!”

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He jumps down from the rock and calls his *syce* to bring his fine chestnut polo pony. "I'll take Melody," he announces, swinging her into the saddle before him and urging the pony to the water's edge.

The pony is surefooted on the sharp stones underwater. Behind him Sheila and I wade, hand in hand, groping for footholds in the swift water, leaning heavily on our sticks and on each other. Our tender feet are unsure on the slimy boulders and reluctant on the pebbles between. Sheila holds her skirt insecurely, while the icy water flows above our knees. The servants wade with complete indifference, carrying their loads and our shoes and socks, hardly troubling to gaze down through the clear water for places to step. Only Dobbin Grey slithers and flounders as we do, but then she is very, very old. . . .

We put on our shoes again to climb the bank, and by the time we reach the football pitch the *Burra Sahib* is ensconced centrally on a long low bench on a tiny promontory, with Melody beside him. To right and left coolies throng the touch-line, and men and boys swarm on the bank behind and in the branches of every nearby tree.

Harkabahadur sets Kandy in her little chair just in front of the bench, and before the other servants have put off their loads about forty children have gathered in a tight-packed circle round us, staring in open-mouthed wonder.

There are children of the very poorest peasants, quite encased in the grime of all their years, with thin serpents of phlegm trickling from each nostril and woolly mops of hair, tangled meccas for countless parasites. Such clothes as cover parts of their emaciated little bodies are reduced to the identical neutral shade of their earth-coloured skins—rent and formless strips of cloth from which the blown eyes of their little navels stand out from pot-bellies with incongruous arrogance. Yet through all this display of poverty each has the stamp of the Gurkha hill-child; round face, almond eyes and bridgeless nose, without a sign of unhappiness; and every

child has a broad and winning grin, without a rotten tooth amongst them.

Others among the children show the wealth of their homes. These children are lean and angular, though well nourished. Their features are sharp and foxy, their hair oiled and lank. The boys wear shorts and cotton shirts hanging outside, the girls have long dresses of shiny satin in startling colours. They stand slightly apart from the hill children, for these are the offspring of the Bengali plainmen and the Mawaris, contractors and shopkeepers, who hold the wealth of all the district.

Melody and Kandy return stare for stare, but it is to the cheeky Nepali children that they give their smiles. They feel an affinity with them, for they are children of the hills themselves.

Walking across the football ground and pushing through the throng comes the headman of the village. His short rotund figure and owl-like beaming face, surmounted by cracked lenses in crooked brass wire frames, make his attempt at dignity appealingly ridiculous. The children stonily disregard his vague gestures to disperse them. He puts the palms of his hands together and bows to each of us in turn. "Mem-sahib," he says in uncertain English, "It is good you have come. Later to present the cup you can?" Sheila smiles assent.

"What time's the kick-off?" The *Burra Sahib* is on edge. "Better go and get changed, Fletcher."

I turn to the headman. "Is there a place I can change my clothes?"

"Ah yes, sir! Please to come with me, I show you."

We go across the ground to the head of the village street. The *syce* follows with my bag of football kit. The hundred yards to the river bank is barren, thick still with ash, which raises a faint acrid scent. The pathetic squares of sooty clay are all that remain to mark where the cluster of little houses made up half the village. The ground is littered with broken pottery and odd charred boles. "Where are the people who lost their homes in this fire?"

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The little headman looks grim. "In the schoolhouse. There is hardly room. The people quarrel among themselves and say that the rest of the village must feed them."

"Was nothing saved from the fire, then?"

"Little. It was hard to tell who owned things. Everybody said everything was theirs!"

"How did you settle this?"

"Everything was used to help everyone!" he replies and I can tell from his sudden beaming smile that this happy suggestion came from him.

"Tell me," I ask, "where was the house of the *dhobie*?"

The headman points his plump brown finger. "There, right by the river bank."

"And was nothing saved from his house?"

There is a pause and the little man's eyes tear away from mine and start to search the ground at his feet. He shrugs expressively. "I do not know. Many say that the fire started in the *dhobie's* house. They say he was very drunk and knocked over his lamp."

"Where is the *dhobie* now? When I sent *chowkidars* to bring him to me, they told me he had left the village the day after the fire."

"He ran away!" The headman shrugs. "Here, sir, this is the place for you to change."

The stench of urine and goats is strong in the narrow alley between the houses. The ground is scarred by water-courses beneath the eaves. A pair of scrawny hens flee before our approach. A door yawns at one side, and I follow the headman out of daylight into the smoke-heavy gloom of a little house. A six-inch slit in the far wall serves as a window, the floor is smooth with ochre clay. "My grandson's house," explains the headman. "It is nearer than mine!"

I do not notice the squatting woman until he speaks to her in Nepali. "Get out. The Sahib will change his clothes." The woman does not take the baby from her breast, but pads out silently, clasping it.

I change quickly, chatting to the headman. "Many people have come to watch the football."

"Yes, people have walked many miles across the hills from *bustis*. There is much betting on the result!"

"And who are favourites to win?" I laugh, remembering the Nepali love of gambling. But this he will not tell me, pretending not to understand, only shaking his head and repeating, "Much betting, much betting!"

The start of the match is delayed for ten minutes while a flock of goats is driven from the ground. The creatures are impervious to all but the most violent demonstrations and in this nearly every spectator joins with joyous determination, so that when there is not a goat in sight ten minutes more are lost while the village schoolmaster, in his capacity as referee, cajoles the spectators back behind the lines. In fact there *are* no actual lines, only deep grooves scraped roughly where lines should be.

Before the opening cheers have died, someone takes a mighty kick at the ball. Up and up it soars, while the roar of approval grows and seems to bear the ball on, half-way across the river-bed, until its cheer-aided velocity is expended it falls into the river and is swept downstream.

The whole crowd is on its feet within the instant, rushing along the river bank, leaping the boulders, waving arms, shouting like mad creatures.

I suddenly find myself alone on the field. Looking to the touch-line I see it deserted except for Sheila, Melody and Kandy, sitting beside the impassive bulk of the *Burra Sahib*, who is staring stoically ahead, his arms crossed on his great chest, only his suffused complexion belying his appearance of calm resignation.

The ball is retrieved and gradually the spectators drift back. Our team is complete, but somehow one of the Bijanbari players has got lost in the *mêlée* and a shout goes up for a reserve. The game has been resumed for five minutes before it is noticed that two players have answered the call! Even

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so the extra man might not have been noticed but for the fact that the original player has now returned, and the field has an overcrowded look!

The game is played at a furious pace. From time to time a pig or a mother hen with her brood of chicks gets mixed up in the exchanges, or some late arrival cuts across the field to a likely vantage-point and takes the opportunity to bring a little glory upon himself by a passing prod at the ball. The din is appalling, but above it all the great voice of the *Burra Sahib* sounds infrequently at some crisis or at a goalmouth scrimmage; "Come on, Chungtung!" Then in Nepali, "Put your backs into it, you lot of lazy *soors!*"

Half-time and no score means vigorous advice from a dozen quarters. The near-exhausted players gather in groups to munch slices of cucumber.

Just after the resumption, the ball goes into the river again. Again the whole crowd streams after it. Once again I have a brief glimpse of my family sitting sedately beside the *Burra Sahib*, whose only sign of mounting enthusiasm is a slightly more exotic shade of crimson that has started to work down his trunk-like neck.

Almost as soon as the teams get back to their places Bijanbari score a goal. Pandemonium breaks out! The ground is invaded and the hapless player who achieved the feat is so manhandled by delighted supporters that it is obvious that his physical capabilities, in this match at least, will be seriously impaired. I am left to run between the posts to retrieve the ball. I am completely ignored by everyone except the *Burra Sahib*, and from beneath lowered lids I glimpse him shaking his great fist at me. I have never felt less adequate! I stand now between the posts as though I am bearing the weight of the cross-bar on my shoulders.

The game goes on, and as time drags out the pace actually increases.

When Chungtung manage to scramble the ball into the goal, the very hills vibrate. Up go hats and mufflers in a

shower of colour. Children scream and run in excited circles all over the ground. Every dog in the village lends tongue, and on to the field, bucking viciously and throwing her ears between her forelegs, comes Melody's old donkey, roused at last from the lethargy of age and tranquillity by the astounding maelstrom. The little lad, unable to resist the spectacle, has crept closer for a glimpse of the match, leading the old donkey on a long rein. He chases behind her now, and the last I see of them they are disappearing up the village street for a game of tag among the intricate maze of houses.

The game is won in the dying minutes when a Bijanbari player puts the ball neatly into his own goal. For a moment there is a terrible hush upon the ground. Quick as thought, the schoolmaster referee whisks up the ball, places it on the centre spot and blows his whistle for resumption, before the crowd can recover its breath.

The closing seconds are crucial. Every time the ball rolls near a Chungtung player that man takes a belt at the river bed! Yet somehow it never gets there. The Bijanbari team have a dozen golden chances, which my nerveless hands could never get near, but always they try just a little too hard; they fall or trip or miss the ball altogether.

So at last the torrent of cheering greets the final whistle, and the last rush is made by the crowd, this time towards the little promontory where a rickety cane table is being thrust between Sheila and the edge of the crowd. A silver cup is then set upon it.

I stand on the fringe seeing Sheila across a sea of heads. There are long orations by the headman and the village schoolmaster, in such erudite Nepali that nobody can understand them. The Chungtung *munshis* reply, and though they speak almost completely understandable Nepali and repeat exactly what has been said already, they are cheered with no less enthusiasm.

I watch as the captain of the Chungtung team is thrust

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forward. With his finger-tips together, he bows very low before Sheila. She presents him with the cup. Then each member of the team wriggles through the crowd to receive his individual medal. Last of all I go up and very seriously bow before Sheila. Everyone thinks this uproariously funny. My medal is sewn to a square of card and is wafer-thin, stamped in the shape of a shield. Upon the card is printed: "*Karanted 99% silver*".

The Bijanbari team is now thrust forward, and to each Sheila presents a medal. I am shaking with ill-suppressed laughter as each man bows before her, and I see Sheila's expression become more and more wooden. Her eyes are fixed upon their shirts. . . .

At last the ceremony is over and the crowd begins to disperse. One of the Chungtung people has got hold of the cup and holding it aloft, suddenly cries out, "Who won the cup?" in a slow chanting voice.

Immediately the answer roars from scores of throats, "Chungtung . . . Chungtung!" with the same sing-song drawl.

"Who beat Bijanbari?"

"Chungtung . . . Chungtung!" howls the mob.

"How many goals?"

"Two . . . ooo . . . One, ooo!"

So the procession starts, headed by the cup and the crier and followed by a long tail of chanting coolies, all convinced that a little part of the cup is a personal gain. Across the ground the procession wends, up the village street, around and between the houses, chanting all the time in answer to the persistent questions. Subtly mocking the villagers, proclaiming their own triumph and superiority, in a tradition they regard as the main prize of victory; an opportunity to gloat over their rivals that must not be missed, for next year, the balance of luck may swing the other way.

Sheila comes towards me and I can see that she is torn between wrath and laughter. I can contain myself no longer,

and I think this forces the indignation into her tone. “David, did you see them? Did you see their shirts?”

I nod dumbly, rocking with laughter.

“The whole team!” she says. “Every one with a brand new shirt, and all made from my new chair covers. . .!”

IX

The Miracle of Tendong

The rain falls lightly, as though strained through fine muslin, its drenching quality and persistence vaguely disturbing. It has been raining for four days without a break. The earth is at saturation point. The hills cast off the falling rain with inhospitable fierceness, and the gathering deluge sweeps to the ravaged valleys below. The spate courses along the gorges and assaults the bastions of the great hills at every tenuous curve, savagely and determinedly, until the wall is breached and falls in surrender to be swept ignobly in a welter of threshed foam and mud. When the fury of the torrent is turned, it eats a way across the huge rocks, lying like corpses on the scene of previous battles, and lays siege to the next promontory.

The *munshi* and I are walking along the overgrown path, deep in the valley at the extremity of the estate. It is humid and still; the thunder of the water intrudes upon even our thoughts and we must shout, faces close, to make our voices heard. The tea bushes at this level are rank and drawn, the shoots standing off the surfaces like darts, with two inches between the leaves. Tea manufactured from such leaf will be stalky and flavourless. I stop and turn. "When was this block last plucked, Munshi?"

The *munshi* pulls a record book from his pocket, grips his umbrella deftly between chin and shoulder blade and flicks

the pages. "Thursday it was finished, sir," he announces with the air of a conspirator.

"And today is Tuesday. Five days!" The phenomenal growth never ceases to amaze me. "Well, we had better leave the high blocks and come down here tomorrow. The coolies should pluck fast. They can earn lots of *bakshish!*"

I push along the path again. The coarse grass brushes my thighs. I am already sodden to the waist; the umbrella shelters only my head and shoulders. Within my heavy jackboots, which will have no chance to be properly dried out for several weeks yet, my socks have rolled down, the shrunken wool drawn into hard, squelching ridges under my insteps.

Across the river the hillsides rise in tier upon tier of remarkable terraced slopes, following the contours, indented and out-thrust, the terraces narrowing and broadening with un-failing precision, holding the water to a positive three inches by low mounds, breached at a single point to give on to the next step. Here is a display of skill at earthworks no westerner could undertake or learn. It is the inherent art of the peasant, to him a necessity, to ensure his crop of rice and keep his family fed.

The water holds muddled mirrors to the sky, and the young green rice seedlings, only recently set, some straight, a foot above the water, others of the same clump drooping and nodding to the falling rain, march across the surfaces like a great army on the move with plumes tossing and lances held aloft.

I catch my foot and sprawl forward on my hands. My umbrella flies up, my hat jerks off. "Damn!" I roll over and sit with the lank grasses around my shoulders and look at the *munshi* ruefully. Something peculiar about his expression causes me to look hard at the place where I tripped. A handful of grasses at each side of the path have been pulled down and tied neatly in a perfectly designed tripwire. A typical example of Nepali sense of fun, and by no means confined to the children, this is a joke much practised on the steep narrow paths

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of the tea gardens. I do not need more than a glance at the *munshi's* veiled eyes and firmly controlled lips to know that the designer of this particular trip will soon have reason for extraordinary satisfaction at his success—not some unfortunate coolie carrying a load of leaf, but the Sahib himself! The news will spread like a ripple on the pool. More than one will lay claim to the trip and taste a moment's fame. Even as I sit there I resolve to watch every step I take for several days for, childlike, elated with a single success, there will be a horde of would-be practical jokers tying grasses on every path on the garden while the story is passing from lip to lip.

The *munshi* solicitously helps me up, muttering a number of curses indiscriminately upon the culprit out of consideration for me. There is nothing for me to do but smile, scrape the mud off my hands and knees, retrieve my hat, straighten the buckled spokes of my umbrella, and stroll on with the remnant of nonchalant dignity left me draped somewhat pathetically, I fear, around my naked pride.

The path pierces a strip of jungle and curves with the broad sweep of the river round a group of massive rocks. The path mounts up and over this bulwark, overhung by fifty-foot creepers of bignonia and lianas which dangle from insecure holds among the tangle of jungle-magnificent blossoms, white and orange, tauntingly just out of reach of the upsurging torrent. I catch a glimpse of the glorious plumage of a pair of kingfishers, out-thrust beaks cleaving the air as they dart shyly around a bend upriver. All the time as we penetrate the jungle myriads of harshly scolding black-throated jays stutter threats at us, although the only signs of them, apart from their calls, are the shaking branches fringing the dense thickets each time we circle a bamboo clump.

We break out of the jungle on to twenty acres of low-lying tea. The men as well as women are plucking today and from opposite sides of the block the two groups converge. A long string of ponies is tethered, lean and sweating, at the side of the weighing hut. The drovers loll on sacks within the

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shelter. "There are two hundred people here today, Munshi. It will take a long while to weigh in all of them. We had better start with the women right away. Call them in!"

The piercing whistle goes out across the level bushes and is taken up with relief and delight on every side. "Women only! Women only!" shouts the *munshi*, waving his arms. "Men wait! Men later!" But his order is too late. Already the stampede has started. Men from one side, women from the other, stream towards the hut. To check them now is impossible. The prospect of discarding the load of sodden leaf from their backs, followed by a break in work to eat a snack of roasted corn swilled down with cold tea, is irresistible to them. If they had been told before the move started, that women would be weighed in first, men later, they would have stood fast, but once the scurry has begun there is no turning it. The best that can be done is to make sure they keep in some sort of line.

I start on the long job of weighing in the leaf and handing out the little slips of paper showing the amount each coolie has plucked. The pile of leaf grows higher, outstripping the efforts of the pony drivers to stuff it into the sacks as it is shot from the baskets.

The line seems to stretch interminably down the path before me. The coolies are wet and hungry; they jostle each other, sweating in the humidity, and there is no room for them to shelter in the little hut. Most of the babies carried by the women are crying plaintively, and the dirge of the mothers as they jog their offspring vehemently rises above the rabble of chattering, calling, demanding voices.

My head starts to throb intolerably and I cannot concentrate to answer the cheery jibes of the coolies as they take their little slips of paper. The steady rain on the roof becomes a pernicious tattoo that I long to halt. Sweat runs from my brow, across my temples and into my eyes. The smell of sweat and fermenting tea leaf and the pungency of the coolies' rank tobacco brings a wave of nausea over me. All day I have

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felt listless and heavy, now a fever starts to take my body. I long to get back to the bungalow for a cup of tea and an aspirin. A chill, I think, I must have taken a chill.

Basket after basket is levered up to be suspended from the steel hook on the spring balance. The arrow spins, quivers and rests. I scrawl figure after figure on the irritating damp slips; hands old and worn, hard and gnarled, puffy, unhealthy-looking, reach out, like claws and with little relation to human hands; or, passive and docile, unable to transfix the tiny slip of paper which goes fluttering down amongst the leaf and has to be rummaged for while the line is held up. Hands thrust at me with tedious repetition, faces that blur before me, and as they move off in groups I hear them discussing me; "The Sahib is ill! Sahib *bimari!*"

At last the end of the line. Here are some of the frailer people who have been thrust to the back, and a few of the women who have been suckling their babies until the crush has eased. A pyramid of leaf rises from side to side of the hut, three thousand pounds at least! The pony drivers work quickly, packing sixty pounds to a sack and deftly closing the mouth with a sliver of green bamboo bent back upon itself and twisted round and round until it knits.

I go out of the hut and take off my hat, feeling the rain cool on my aching head. Down the valley the clouds are spinning, caught on a sudden lift of breeze traversing the Sikkim ranges. Quite unexpectedly, framed by the steep slopes of the valley, a strange hump-backed mountain is uncovered, a familiar peak above the hills that make up the panorama during the spring months, but one I have not seen for several weeks. The *munshi*, following my stare, looks up and also sees the dramatic revelation. Mist and writhing cloud are all around the peak, which stands out clear to our view. "Ah Tendong!" The ejaculation is wrung from the *munshi* before he knows it.

"Tendong? Is that the name of the mountain?" I take him up.

The Miracle of Tendong

“Yes, Sahib. Tendong is a very special mountain to the people of these hills.”

“Why?” I try unsuccessfully not to let the question sound curt, demanding.

The *munshi* looks awkward and remains staring down the valley. The silence between us lasts long so that I fear he does not wish to tell me, and chooses to pretend he had not heard in preference to offering an excuse, for many of the tales of the hills are not repeatable or fit for the ears of Sahibs!

When he speaks again his voice is low, and all the while he is talking the mist closes again gently, tenderly, about the naked, dome-shaped mountain. The *munshi* talks fast, as though he may only speak of the peak when it stands to view and will tolerate no talk about it while it is obscured!

“Many hundreds of years ago,” he begins, “rain began to fall, just as it is falling now. But this rain went on and on . . . Days stepped into nights and out again the other side. The rain brought floods and filled the valleys with torrents that flowed hither and thither, filling every level and swamping every village on the river-banks, and the people fled before the rising water, higher and higher up the slopes. Yet still the rain fell and the water rose. And soon the land became a land of lakes, only the highest hills standing clear above the water, and on these summits the people clustered and prayed to the gods for the rain to cease.”

The *munshi* is talking fast now, and all that he says is not easy to understand with my limited knowledge of the language, but I follow the thread of the story. He moves two paces from me, puts a finger to his nostril and blows phlegm fiercely into a tea bush. Then he returns to me and continues:

“As the water rose and summit after peak was submerged, the people floated aimlessly on tree logs. Soon but two peaks remained; the summit of Tendong, ‘The Uplifted Horn’, and an adjoining peak, Mainom, ‘The Disappearing Sister’. The people on Tendong watched the water slowly advance, and

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Mainom disappeared under water. Then Tendong got smaller until there was only just room for everyone clustered together on the extreme summit, and many fell in and were swept away by the flood. Then the people began to cry with one voice to the Mountain; 'Save us! Save us, and we shall worship you forever!'

"Then, as the waters rose, so the level of the mountain grew higher. Still the rain lashed down and still the peak held its level just above the flood. And the people, perceiving this, cried their thanks; and so Tendong became higher and higher, until it stood nearly twice the height of the other hills already submerged. Then at last the rain stopped and slowly the water began to subside. After a long while the land became its own shape again, but Tendong did not shrink, but remained standing high above the hills of Sikkim, that all the people should remember. And so each year a great crowd gathers on the summit of Tendong and does *puja*, and at that time, it is said, the shrieks of the drowning on 'The Disappearing Sister' can still be heard from Tendong. And that, Sahib, is why Tendong is so high, and when the rains go on and on, the people look towards the mountain and remember. . . ."

There are no words in Nepali for thanks, so that I can only smile and touch my palms together, to let the *munshi* know that I am glad to have heard the story. The last outline of Tendong is now obscured and he turns away from me suddenly, constrained, I believe, by shyness.

The leaf is sacked and weighed and the ponies are being loaded, so I go up the path to where the *syce* is holding Northern Shot and, not without an effort, clamber into the saddle.

As I ride slowly up the long winding path, I feel the fever in my system laying hold of every joint and limb, and my head lolls with what I feel to be a weight of pain and my stomach twists with nausea; and I am suddenly sure that this is more than any common chill. . . .

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The Miracle of Tendong

The whole bungalow is filled with a strange and powerful fragrance, exotic and heady, capable of quickening the blood as only the bouquet of an eastern flower can. It is frangipani, the temple flower, which is remembered with nostalgia by Sahibs and their Memsahibs living in secluded retirement on meagre pensions in the quiet country towns which they left thirty years before. All the years they lived under the hot Indian sun amidst the galaxy of gigantic blooms of fantastic colour they dreamed of slight-scented English violets and the delicate tones of a June rose. Now they have returned, the eastern blossoms stay rich and compelling in their memory, and none so vital as the waxen cups of the fiercely-scented frangipani. It is a holy flower, used lavishly to counter the aromas of every Indian temple, and it is worn by girls in the plaits of their hair.

As I lie in bed now, with fever mounting through me, the pervading perfume of frangipani, by psychological association, becomes an integral part of my illness.

The vase of fleshy blossoms borne in clusters of twelve or fourteen on a thick stalk, from which the sticky latex-like sap still bleeds, is set on the table in the dining-room, beyond the bedroom door. I saw it there when I came in. Melody and Kandy knew that I was ill, and took a hand each and led me sedately across the veranda. Usually I sit at the top of the steps and sip a glass of ice-water while the bearer pulls off my boots. Today the bearer took one look at my face and went straight inside to take the counterpane from the bed and turn down the sheet. I must look as bad as I feel!

As I undressed and sponged myself down I began to vomit. Sheila was with me; efficient but tender, somehow getting pyjamas on me and putting me to bed. She stands by me now, her fingers cool on my pulse, waiting for the thermometer to record, and I get a glimpse, hazily, of the girl of six years ago, before we were married, when she wore a staff nurse's buckled belt on an eighteen-inch waist in a large Home-Counties hospital.

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She draws the thermometer from my mouth and frowns as she twists it horizontally, shakes it vigorously, smiles, and goes out without saying a word. I know she is shocked and worried.

The scent of frangipani becomes part of the ache in my head. When I close my eyes the pain becomes translated into symbolical colours, crimson and purple, orange and sepia, so that I open my eyes again and lie staring at the uneven white boarding of the ceiling. In the centre, like an island on a sea of milk, a square is cut, covered with close wire-mesh and framed by beading. From a cross lath a single inverted tree sprouts from the island to produce a monstrous hanging glass lamp-shade. Theory has it that rising hot air passes through the mesh and into the loft beneath the steel roof. A very small lizard, undersized and looking undernourished, has ventured out upon the wall and remains motionless, waiting for a fly to be beguiled into settling within range of his long tongue.

Strange thoughts drift into my mind, uninvited and frightening, without form or depth. The steady beat of falling rain upon the roof seems to fit these thoughts to a pattern, as though a word of each unspoken thought falls into precise formation; then the thoughts begin to lag, and the ranks of words break and come jostling and tumbling in an effort to keep up with the staccato beat of the rain. I am forced to sweep the whole lot aside and start the fantastic game over again.

The air is hot; the scent of frangipani overwhelmingly beautiful. The ache above my eye and the clamour of heat in my body finds no relief. Spasms of nausea shake me and leave me feeling that the virtue of my strength is drained away; the receptacle beyond repair.

The sounds of the house go on. The shrill voices of Melody and Kandy are not stilled in play, but they seem to call from a great distance. Sheila is constantly at my side. Flashes of awareness take me, when her cool hands hold my wrist or

when the ice-water with which she sponges me temporarily soothes the fever.

It is one such moment, when lucidity returns, that I find her tired eyes smiling down at me. It is dead of night. The rain still falls. She raises my head, slips two sulphonamides between my lips and holds a glass of lime juice for me to sip. I swallow with an effort; my stomach convulses and I retch again. To vomit is sharp relief. I lie, shock-chilled, while within the fever races on. My thoughts are suddenly coherent.

We do not speak. There is nothing we can say. From across the valley comes a low, gathering rumble like thunder distant beyond the hills. It gains momentum and changes key to urgency; the noise goes on and on. Then begins the crackle of rock grinding rock, the occasional bounding progress of ton weights, hurtling boulders racing before shale. We look deep into each other's eyes. "Landslide!" whispers Sheila. The rain falls relentlessly. "The hills are coming down!"

"Better have the *Burra Sahib* telephone the doctor tomorrow."

Sheila nods. We try to ignore the ominous rumble of shifting earth. We both have an idea what it means. The *Burra Sahib* has told us how the face of the hills changed overnight during the disaster a few years previously. Ours is one of the few bungalows in the district that remained standing. I glance up at the wall and notice that the small lizard is no longer waiting.

Out in the teeming night the protracted reverberation goes on. The ominous rumble of the earth's crust sliding off the hillsides sounds a requiem for destruction; low, to strike harrowing fear at the treachery of the ancient land.

All around me is impermanence, save only the presence of Sheila and the cloying perfume of frangipani. I cling to the thought of Sheila's nearness. The scent has become the essence of some evil force, so that I long to cry out for them to take the flowers out of the *koti* and fling wide every door and window to dispel the fragrance.

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The quiet call of the collared scops-owl in the hollow rong-bong tree in the garden is persistent and eerie. Spasmodically a night-flying dung scarab or huge moth, attracted by the subdued light, rings a flat chord from the braced wire mesh at the windows and falls stunned or with dislocated thorax to the outside ledge.

I try to speak, but raise only a whisper. "Why doesn't the doctor come?"

Sheila smiles wearily and says in a flat voice, "Perhaps he will come tomorrow. The road is blocked by landslides. They may take some time to clear a passage for a car."

"Sheila, listen!" I try to impress her with my saneness and normality. "Just what do you suppose this fever can be?"

She looks very tired. "I don't know; don't worry, try to sleep."

I sink back into a comatose fever. I am vaguely aware of day following night following day. . . . Finally there are voices, muted, as though they reach me across time itself. Then the sensation of being lifted. . . .

The struggle to come to the surface of consciousness is exhausting, so that as I succeed I sink back again; but in that brief moment I glimpse a mud-bespattered Land-Rover astride the drive, and recognize the voice of the company medical officer.

Then begins a fantastic journey; nightmare intrinsically mixed with actuality. The Land-Rover ploughs through squelching mud that oozes in an obscene liquid torrent down the steep track, shuttles and skids crazily to round each bend, chains clanking, exhaust belching blue smoke and the pungent acrid stench of burnt oil. I recline insecurely with my feet sticking out over the tailboard, wrapped in blankets on one of the side seats. It is not until we have gone many miles that I realize that the bearer, who has elected to travel in the back with me, is supporting my whole weight, bracing me against the canvas hood to prevent my sliding on to the floor or over the tailboard.

The Miracle of Tendong

The bearer's intent sweating face is close to mine. I catch the odour of his breath, the Nepali smell of his clothing, and I can also feel his concern for me, his anxiousness to help me.

Up into the forest we toil, above the tea gardens, above the bamboo line where the rain falls heavily now and the trees, furred with lichens, loom on the slopes through mist-rollers that lap up from the valley two thousand feet below. Across the reeling bridges we go, into the aura of chill wrought from the cascade of water falling from rock ledges high above.

From time to time I break through to consciousness to find the vehicle stopped, and myself alone, hanging within a foot of some precipice edge, while a great boulder or tree or pile of crumbling earth is dragged off the path and sent hurtling through the ground jungle on the lower slopes.

Wraiths of mist drift between the trunks. Until the engine is restarted the silence is oppressive. No birds call from the thickets.

The journey takes many hours. The higher we go, the heavier the rain falls. The main roads, when at last we reach them, are lashed by rain, but here we can make good time.

Darjeeling is obscured by a thick cloud bank that has settled across the ridge. It thickens as we draw up before the Planter's Hospital, so that I am lifted and borne through a void, and so at last into the fastness of the building.

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I am rapidly drawn into the routine efficiency of the hospital. Again time stretches interminably in the fantasy of fever, but gradually its grip is loosened and I begin to differentiate night from day, and then the divisions of the day by treatment of injections and medicines and, finally, food. . . .

The doctor has finished his morning examination and stands at the foot of the white-railed bed. He makes his usual

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cheerful little joke. "Tell me, doctor," I ask impulsively, "what is this fever that got me?"

For a moment he looks serious. "You had a pretty bad bout, you know, but I think the worst was over before you got up here. Your wife must have done a good job of nursing you. You've had paratyphoid!"

Some time later there is a gentle tap upon the door. I call out in Nepali and the door-knob is fumbled and wrenched, so that I know it is not one of the hospital staff. The door swings inwards very slowly, and a bunch of warped knuckles and chewed finger-nails tentatively overlaps the jamb, so that I am not altogether surprised when the tattered black pill-box above a brown, oval face appears around the door and I find myself staring at the nervously grinning little *roti-wallah* or bread-runner, who carries our supplies from the bazaar to the garden. He comes in awkwardly and closes the door with exaggerated stealth, then suddenly jerks into a salute. "Salaam, Sahib!"

"Salaam, Roti-wallah."

"Memsahib sent me," he announces importantly. His poor clothes cling soddenly, his umbrella exudes water, his bare feet have left prints on the polished linoleum. He takes from his breast pocket a sweat-damp envelope and lays it on the bed with a flourish. On the bedside table he sets a conical newspaper package. Flower stalks protrude from one end. I slip the pin from the covering flap and look aghast at the rumpled blossoms, which have not travelled well, while the amorphous, exotic perfume of frangipani diffuses into the air. . . .

THE CHILDREN OF KANCHENJUNGA

X

Whom the Swallows Honour

The rains are spent and the monsoon winds have ceased to drive laden clouds across the Bay of Bengal long before strength comes slowly ebbing back into my body. I am a scarecrow of a man, with pinched face and gaunt limbs, but these limbs are beginning to carry me around. I stand on the path below the bungalow, soaking up the warm vitamins of sunlight, watching a man coming up the hill towards me. He has a long, deep basket with a cane lid slung from the strap around his forehead. His load is heavy and he walks slowly, stooping to take a part of the weight on his hips. He has nearly reached me before he looks up. His worn face, fluid with sweat, breaks into a great smile.

“You are well again, Sahib? You can walk? It is a good thing to see our Sahib is better!”

“A little, Roti-wallah; I can walk a little,” I smile. “But not yet as far as you!”

His laugh is a wheeze like a cicada in full cry. I am not sure whether he laughs because he thinks this remark really funny, or simply out of courtesy. He has just walked eighteen miles on the tortuous rubble track that meanders up the steep hillside to Darjeeling bazaar.

Three times every week he does the trip, and despite his official designation of “Bread-runner” it is incumbent upon him to bring all our commissions, besides collecting books

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from the Club library and delivering any other notes to addresses about the town. He has done the job for sixteen years for many different Sahibs, and so far as our own experience of him goes the only time he was late in returning was when he was knocked down by a taxi in the bazaar and had to spend some hours in the mission dispensary having stitches inserted and other cuts and bruises attended to. Then, he explained to us contritely, he could not make good time on his nine miles return walk, down into the valley and half-way up the other side.

“Your load looks very heavy, Roti-wallah.”

He squints at me, grinning with innocent delight at the chance to prove his knowledge. “Is it not soon the *burra* day of the Sahib? Does not the Memsahib send me for special things for the *nannies* to eat on the big day? The Memsahib told me to walk carefully in case I stumbled and broke something!” The *burra* day is December 25th.

“How is the path now, Roti-wallah?”

“It is bad, Sahib. Very bad! There were many landslips and the path was cut in many places while the Sahib lay ill in hospital.”

“Are they not repaired?”

“Not well, Sahib. Now the orange-carriers are coming from the villages across the hills. For many days they will come, hundreds of them, bringing the oranges for sale in the bazaar. Their feet are beginning to stamp out the path once again.”

I nod and signal him to precede me up the path to the *koti*. He is wearing shorts and I notice the powerful muscles of his calves; his broad feet pad through the fine dust, flicking up at each step to show the strangely white soles as though they were the expendable parts of his legs!

We go up the lichen-encrusted stone steps that groove the terraces and are overhung with vivid poinsettias. The *bigonia* meshing the arch at the edge of the lawn is laden with bud and on the south side a few flame-coloured patches have

broken out, like the promise of a blaze showing through the chinks of a well banked fire. There is a rustle among the entwined foliage overhead as we go under the arch and a pair of white-cheeked bulbuls take wing into the peach trees nearby and wait for us to emerge on to the lawn, their punch-cap, crested heads cocked inquisitively.

The *roti-wallah* goes round the bungalow to the cook-house.

Sheila is standing in the *nullah* fronting the bungalow, painting the line of flower pots along the edge of the veranda. Half the classical earthenware shapes glow sentinel red, green, mustard and blue; those she has not finished are bespattered and dingy by contrast. "They will look fine," I say; "make the front of the bungalow like a spick and span Dutch cottage, so bright against the whitewash."

She twirls a pot dexterously on its narrow base, adds a finishing dab and straightens. "I hope you haven't been too far? Your legs can't be very strong yet for walking anywhere steep!"

"I just went along to the muster ground. I met the *munshi*. He reminded me it's high time to start inspecting the coolie lines for repairs. That will be an easy job for me to start on. I can do a few each day."

"Well, you'll have to take it easy for some time yet. Was that the *roti-wallah*?"

"Yes. He's got the hell of a load!"

"Mostly Christmas things. I have to get them early. The shops in town have such small stocks, everything soon gets sold out!"

Sheila steps from the *nullah* over the border of budding sweet william and dianthus. We go into the house, through the dining room to the service table on the outer veranda where the *roti-wallah* is unloading his basket.

As he stoops to take out a huge slab of beef wrapped in banana leaves I notice the sweat-saturated square across his back where the basket leaned against him. He puts the last of

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the commodities on the table, tips potatoes and onions into a box, takes off his skull cap and wipes his face with it. With gnarled-knuckled hands he extracts a crumpled letter from a pocket and gives it to Sheila. It is a circular from the Club. "About the New Year's Eve ball," says Sheila, glancing rapidly. "I wonder if you'll be fit enough by then?"

"Three weeks? Of course! I wouldn't miss that for anything."

Sheila takes up the pile of library books and scans the titles. "Good! two new ones!" She goes inside. There is always a brief moment of excitement when the *roti-wallah* gets back. Sometimes he has a note from a friend on another tea garden, deposited in the library for collection, for that is the common meeting ground of all the *roti-wallahs* in the district. Sometimes he brings special things we have ordered, and at the beginning of each month he brings a bill and a handful of order vouchers from every shop.

"Sahib," says the *roti-wallah*, "I have a prayer to make to you!"

"Well?" I wait for the inevitable request. My face must have been registering pleasure at the moment of his arrival. These people have an unerring ability for choosing the auspicious moment!

"Sahib, now you are better, soon you will be repairing the lines. My house is very old. The thatch is all rotten and the walls crumbling. Could I have a new house; just a little one?"

"I'll see, I'll see. Tomorrow I shall go to your house and see how bad it is."

The *roti-wallah* salaams. He feels he has made his point. He is fairly sure I will acquiesce.

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The December morning sunlight garbs the hills in strips of Buddha's holy saffron. The air is still chill from night; there

was a hoar frost from the alpine line. The bouquet of such things is never sweeter than after illness.

Musters on these mornings are early. I had a sharp struggle to drag myself out of bed.

Sweet peas, edging the drive, are dense with vigour and first bud. The *mali* is stooped in an impressive tableau of weeding, awaiting my appearance. He comes trotting dapperly, leaving his bared prints in the dew. "Salaam, Sahib!" his face wrinkles nervously.

"Salaam, Mali." I pause expecting a request; guessing it will be for a new house.

"We have need of some dung, Sahib, for cauliflowers and celery. Already it is late."

I nod gravely, relieved. "I'll send children to collect some today."

As I walk up the compound path an array of indistinguishable oval faces turn to heed my coming, the figures beneath, squatting along the edge of the muster ground like martins on a cable. There is a perceptible stir amongst them and other faces press in to break the even spacing. I can see the word passing from lip to lip. "The Sahib is coming! The Sahib is coming!"

They stare in open curiosity; the children jostle to walk beside me. I can feel their eyes taking in every detail of my appearance. Some of the women click their tongues, noticing, I think, my thinness. The overseers salaam with obviously mixed feelings; my presence will mean a general re-tightening in standards of work. The thought is clear behind every eye I meet. "What will be the personal effect on me of the Sahib's return?"

When the *munshi* has counted the coolies and all have left, the *chowkidars* gather in a close half circle to tell me the news of the garden. I hear of babies born, drunken men fighting, unfaithful wives, crops reaped or ruined, the coming of a bear to the top corner of the garden. For twenty minutes the entertainment goes on, at length the oldest of them all, a

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stalwart who served a lifetime and lost an eye with a Gurkha regiment before starting his second career as a *chowkidar* on this garden fifteen years ago, volunteers a remark which galvanizes me.

“Most of the coolies are surprised to see you back, Your Honour. The talk in the lines is that you made the metal from your gun go amongst the branches of a chilouni tree when you shot two pigeons flying across the valley.”

“Two pigeons? A chilouni tree? What story is this?”

Their faces are suddenly abashed. Up, down and around goes their gaze and settles in the dust at their feet. I compel the *munshi*'s attention. “Did they expect me to die? Tell me this story, Munshi, that I may stand with you and laugh at the talk of old women!”

As soon as I have said this I realize my mistake. The faces around are grave. No flicker of expression answers my smile. My tactless words have offended their beliefs and the source of a legend is lost to me. Mention of the chilouni, the holy tree, should have been sufficient to caution my reply. Perhaps at some time while I was out shooting pellets from my gun did spatter a chilouni. Knowing that every experience in life has a religious interpretation for these folk, this is probably how they account for my being struck down.

The *tête-à-tête* is over. The *chowkidars* move off quickly now. The *munshi* and I are left. He says, “Up till yesterday, the men had cut eight hundred bamboos from the jungle for lines repairs.”

“Good, Munshi. Today we shall start inspecting the village at the top of the spur.”

“Ah! Sahib, ten men are rebuilding a house there today.” A look of apprehension touches his face and I wait for the explanation. “Your Honour, Kaley, the eldest son of the household, is taking a wife next week! The father of Kaley came and begged me to repair the house, in case you were not back before the wedding.”

“And must the house be finished before the wedding?”

“There is an old custom that a house must never be repaired or rebuilt during the first year of marriage, otherwise it is visited by death before the year is out.”

“Very well, Munshi, let us see how the work is going.”

We walk along the contour of the hillside, moving in and out of the shadows cast by the rising sun. The air is rich with the tang of autumn, but there is a pungency I have not noticed before. We round a short spur, and I am suddenly presented with the origin of the smell. Trotting down the path is a serpent of tiny figures, about thirty *lokras*, smallest and youngest of the working children, bearing their little baskets towards the bungalow, and in each basket are several large handfuls of rank glutinous cow dung. A first consignment bound for the *mali's* celery and cauliflowers.

Each child in passing looks at me with a delightful twinkle of mischief. They are fairly bespattered with dung. Their hands and arms are smeared to the elbows, for they gather the stuff in their hands and slap it into their leaf-lined baskets. Far from being considered unclean, the dung of the holy cow has many uses. The interior of every house is coated with it, for it has remarkable properties as an insect repellent and dries to a smooth wearing surface preventing the mud walls flaking and cracking through the seasons.

At the end of the line is a young man; Kaley, the prospective bridegroom. He walks with conscious dignity in his role of a new overseer. He is twenty-three, but carries his years lightly and could be mistaken for a boy. This illusion is common to most Nepalis, as hair is always sparse upon their faces and until wrinkles plough the skin their looks remain youthful. He wears a new khaki drill jacket, not yet affected by the elements, for the overprinting “Kawnpore Cloth Mills” still shows in patches across the shoulders. His coarse wool balaclava helmet is rolled to three thicknesses above his ears and is surmounted by a large pom-pom. He swings his bamboo stick with unpractised awkwardness. “Salaam,

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Sahib," he says in a boyish alto, and leans forward and gives the nearest *lokra* a dig in the back.

"Salaam, Kaley. I hear you are to take a wife next week. Your father's house is being rebuilt today."

Kaley's face goes a shade darker as he blushes. He straightens his lithe figure. "Yes, Your Honour." He pauses, collecting his thoughts to say something else, and gazes raptly at his sockless feet in broken shoes which are much too big for him. He wears the shoes with a proud air, for such accessories are luxuries indeed and mark him as a young man of certain future. I gaze, too, and recognize with a start a recently discarded pair of my own shoes. His possession of them is logical; the bearer acquired them, put them on the market and Kaley, wishing to flaunt his new-won elevation and to impress his bride, bought them. "I would make a prayer to you," he mumbles nervously. "May I have three days leave for my wedding ceremony?"

Three days sound little enough to fetch his bride from her parents', take part in the celebrations at each in-laws' house, consummate the marriage, sober from the surfeit of *rukshi* which is an indispensable part of the rites, and return, chagrined and wedded to the routine of work. I nod assent.

Kaley's face clears immediately, and I see my mistake in too readily granting his request, for he is quick with another "prayer". "Well, Kaley, what now?" I reply warily.

"Ah! Sahib, it is an advance of pay that I need. My old father is a poor man, and the expense of the wedding is very great! Your Honour is my father and my mother! In your mercy could you grant me an advance of sixty rupees?"

This is the recognized address for begging a loan, the invariable policy being to ask for exactly double what is hoped for. No worker of the garden is ever out of debt for long. To owe money is a desirable state, for much can happen before the reckoning, and as the management charges no interest they are ardent believers in their proverb, "a bride with a pock-marked face is better than a sight of the Queen!"

“Sixty rupees is a great deal, Kaley. It would take many months to repay. I will ask the *Burra Sahib* if he will let you have thirty.”

“It is your mercy, Sahib!”

“Very well. Come to me this evening. Meanwhile, see that there is plenty of dung put in my garden!”

He gives the customary sideways nod of obedience and hurries after the line of *lokras*.

The *munshi* and I continue up the track to the top of the spur. Water springs from a cleft rock beside the path and goes clattering under a culvert. Like the legs of a monster centipede, split bamboos laid end to end tap this source and take a trickle of water to the little thatched houses littering the ridge. Near to the path is an earthen platform about eighteen feet square and three feet high, edged with stones. Upon this ten men are working on the bamboo frame of a house. The *munshi* points. “Kaley’s father’s dwelling.”

In the brief hour since muster they have demolished the old house; the jumble of smoke-blackened thatch and powdering bamboos is humped nearby. It seems hardly possible that last night a family slept within the walls and beneath the roof of a dwelling constructed of no more than these old poles and wattles; indeed, had done so for many years, secure against the changing climate and content with the meagre comfort of the little house.

Squatting among the family possessions—a conglomeration of copper pots and cane baskets, fusty sacks and blankets—an old crone rocks back and forth on her heels, massive ear-rings jangling, humming feebly to herself, peering belligerently from the folds of her crinkled face like an ancient acquisitive toad. From her side her husband, the father of Kaley, cajoles and goads the men who are building his new home.

The men work impassively, ignoring the admonishments of the old man. They have set the four corner posts two feet into the earth and bound horizontal bamboos to fit slots cut

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in the tops. Three taller bamboos spaced down the middle of the house support the apex of the roof. They are binding in the intricate lattice-work that will bear the thatch. Already the frame of the house is clear. The men swarm along the green poles, tying every right angle with ribbon-thin strips of bamboo. Cut from the heart of young poles, this is pliable but tough, it cannot be tied, but the ends are twisted around each other until knit and bent back upon each other. As the bamboo fibres dry, they tauten and set and will never give up their hold until weevils through the years reduce the bonds to powder. Not a nail is used in the whole structure.

Kaley's father hobbles up to me and salaams. His toothless lips stretch to a grin, but his little eyes are sharp. "Sahib," he pipes woefully, "there is not enough thatch for my new house."

I turn to the *munshi*. "What is this?" I enquire. "How much did you send, Munshi?"

The headman consults his notebook. "Fifteen maunds, Your Honour. It is not a large house."

"And is this not enough?"

"Your Honour, it is never enough! Had I sent twenty bundles, five more would be needed!"

I see the *munshi's* point. Every coolie tries to persuade the *munshi* that his house needs an extra allotment. The areas where the reeds grow on the estate are adequate but not unlimited.

"Sahib, I am an old man. If my house leaks when the rains come, I shall take fever and die!"

"Your house will not leak, Old One," says the *munshi*. "If you do not give these men too much *jhar* for their mid-day meal, they will do their job well!" *Jhar* is the local millet beer which all coolies brew at this time of the year.

Clearly there is no more to be said. We leave the old man blinking in the sunlight, trying to think of a convincing rejoinder, and descend beneath a filigree canopy of gourd

vines. I ask as I walk, "Does the owner of each house have to give food and drink to the men who repair his house?"

"He does not have to give them anything, Your Honour, but it is the custom. If the men were not fed their work would be careless."

We come to the deep shade of an ancient tamarind tree where a tiny house is ringed by orange marigolds, the *puja* flowers. The bright heads nod against the ochre clay walls which, from half-height, are whitewashed to the eaves. Old kerosene tins ranged along the porch are filled with yellow chrysanthemums. On the wall beside the door is a two feet geometrical design of entwined triangles and arcs, vivid with stains of crimson, blue and green. From a pen at one side goats bleat dolefully, a brace of speckled doves pointedly ignore us as they strut across the flesh-smooth clay fronting the little house. An old pi-dog eyes us warily and sounds a sharp croupy bark before a slender girl appears at the doorway and silences him with a word. She smiles welcome and as she bows above her folded palms I see the hibiscus blossom plaited into her oiled queue.

"This is the house of Dunbahadur Chettri," announces the *munshi*. "It was new at the time of his marriage to this girl last year."

I take out my notebook and write the name. "The house is clean and neat. It has been well looked after!"

"The Chettris are always like this, Sahib. Most of the higher castes, the Rais, Mangers, Limbus and Gurungs, are the same. It is the low castes, the Kamis and Dummis, who do not care if they live in filth!"

We move round the little house, poking with our sticks at the bases of the wall posts to see if the bamboos are rotten or riddled by weevils. Four need changing. I note it down. The girl is waiting on the porch. "Munshi Babu, see inside. Part of the roof leaks badly."

The *munshi* goes within and I stand at the door peering into the gloom. I may not enter, for the Chettri caste is second

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only to the priesthood, and strictly orthodox. For me to set foot in the place where the family's rice is cooked would be to render it unclean. Even the *munshi's* presence will mean that the floor will have to be relined with fresh cow dung. I am an outcaste, without a place in the Hindu social pyramid. It is a strange situation, but one they do not think to query. As the barriers of caste come down all over India, it is inevitable that these customs will be eventually forgotten, and I am not sure that it will be to the improvement of the land. These traditions are being usurped but not replaced, and the peasant folk who honour such customs as their forebears have done for generations are losing their primitive instinct for common courtesy as emancipation alters the old way of life. Yet I doubt if there will be great changes in my lifetime at least, and I am glad. . . .

My eyes begin to smart from the thin wood smoke with which the interior is laced. It is rising from a hollow in the mud floor, the cooking place. The few smouldering embers give off a sweet tang of burning gums. The people are careful in their selection of firewood. They know the noxious odours of some, the dense smoke given off by others. They recognize woods that will burn when damp—slow firing hardwoods which generate great heat. The smoke is filtering across the thatch and dispersing at the top of the wall where the wattles protrude unevenly from the mud covering and adjoin the eaves. The whole ceiling of thatch is black with soot, the minute smoke specks have powdered the hairs on the reeds and bound them in a dense web.

Ranged along the wall are brass goblets and platters, copper pans and ewers, all gleaming from meticulous daily scrubbing with fine river sand. Suspended on thongs above the fire is a bamboo rack on which a hunk of meat is drying. The little house has no furniture other than a few hand-hewn boards laid at one end, piled with neutral coloured blankets. This is the family bed.

The *munshi* is prodding at the roof with his stick and a fine

cloud of smuts floats about his feet. Then when he moves I see hanging on the wall at the far end a small coloured picture set in a carved frame and overhung with a garland of orange marigolds. It represents one of the Hindu Deity, the Goddess of Destruction, who holds the secret of life and death. She sits cross-legged on a pile of human bodies, adorned by an immense head dress, and she is gesticulating symbolically with each of her six arms and hands. Upon the ground beneath is a shallow bowl with a minute steady-burning wick, surrounded by an offering of a little rice, flower petals and a few ripe chillies. Most houses have such a shrine to their chosen figure in the Hindu Pantheon.

“What is needed, Munshi?” I enquire.

“One bundle of roof slats and six maunds of thatch, Your Honour.”

I jot the details down in my notebook. The girl offers *namasti*, and watches us go on down the path. “If only every house was kept as well as that, Munshi, how easy this job would be!”

“Ah! Sahib, the next is bad! It belongs to a Dummi with two wives. All the two women do is fight, except for a brief period each year when each begets an infant! Last year there were thirteen. Now there must be others!”

The winding path leads us to another small plateau cut in the hillside. The house on it is dilapidated and unkempt. A clutch of naked children swarm and gambol, urinate and whimper on the apron of tufted clay before it. On the low porch a ragged, harassed-faced man turns the handle of an old and noisy sewing machine. The Dummi caste, very low in the social scale, provides tailors to the community by hereditary custom. The man clambers off the porch and makes obeisance. The *munshi*, hard-faced and making no pretence of ignoring the pungent smell that engulfs the little house, marches round it, poking viciously with his stick and rapping disgustedly on the uncoated walls. The house is in need of extensive repairs.

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Followed by the wretched Dummi, the *munshi* goes inside. "Mum, mum, mum!" He registers shocked surprise. To me at the doorway he calls, "Look Sahib, this man sends his women out to work, stays in his house himself and is too lazy even to collect firewood!" All round the top of the walls the wattles have been broken off to leave an eighteen inch gap to the eaves. The *munshi* turns on the cringing fellow, and drawing upon the extensive vocabulary of vituperation makes a telling indictment of all Dummis in general and this one in particular, for several generations back! There is nothing left for me to say.

So we go on through the lines until we come to the old *roti-wallah's* house. "Ah! Sahib, I have waited all morning for you."

He brings out a small cane stool with a seat of untreated deer hide. I sink on to it gratefully, for I have begun to find the sun very hot and my legs not yet as strong as I had believed. His wife emerges from the house with a platter of fresh cucumber slices which are cold and juicy, with little flavour but most refreshing. I sit relaxed, watching a speckled hen fussily chivy her brood from between my boots.

The *munshi* wipes his brow with a strip of crimson cloth and starts his inspection. The *roti-wallah* says nothing, but stands quietly beside me.

After a while the *munshi* comes back. He does not meet my eye as he says nonchalantly, "This house is very old, Your Honour, most of the thatch is rotten, most of the bamboos broken!"

Still the *roti-wallah* does not speak, only shakes his head sadly and clicks his tongue against his teeth.

Then I know that the *roti-wallah* has already approached the *munshi*. Obviously the *munshi* has succumbed to pleading and accepted the gift that is an integral part of the request. If I reject the *munshi's* suggestion I will be damaging his reputation in the eyes of the coolies as my advisor on rehousing, and nobody will resent that more than the *munshi* him-

self. It is a problematical test of integrity. I am stung to refuse to let the *roti-wallah* have a new house, but am checked by the miserable expression on the face of the *munshi*. Obviously he regrets his lapse. I shrug and choose the easiest way out. "Very well, if you think a new house is necessary . . ." I make a note in my book.

Then there are smiles on all sides. The *munshi's* relief is plain; the old rascal of a *roti-wallah* clearly well satisfied, his wife delighted.

"I think that will be enough for today," I tell the *munshi*. "We will just go back and see how Kaley's father's house is getting on."

It is just after noon. The air shimmers with heat. Half way up the path I pause for breath and turn to gaze down into the valley. The swift waters between the great boulders are shallow now, lapped by sand bars like pale serpents resting in the clear, green flow.

A pair of brahminy kites, graceful and effortless in flight, are making from the far side of the valley straight towards the lines. I can see their smooth heads turn from side to side as they fly, scanning the landscape so that no slightest features shall go unnoticed. They lose height rapidly, their great wings flexing from their first joints in leisurely strokes and short glides, the buoyancy of movement belying their size. They sweep in across the hillside and rise on the current of air, pass directly above us, turn with swift cants, and come spiralling down past us, plummeting towards the last house in the lines a hundred feet below. It is the *roti-wallah's*. The great birds swoop low and for a moment they are lost to our sight among the vegetation. Then we hear a sharp cry and both birds rise to view with powerfully beating wings. In the talons of one is a small yellow ball; one of the *roti-wallah's* chicks!

Out across the valley they go again, stooping and chivying as the killer endeavours to get away with its snatch and as its mate hopes to rob it.

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Up the path tumbles the *roti-wallah*, shouting and gesticulating as he tries to gain height, stopping to fling a stone and wave his fist. Long before he comes to where we stand the kites are out in the middle of the valley. Then we see the chick is dropped. The bird which made the snatch has lost hold. Immediately the other falls like a stone, talons poised. Within thirty feet it has landed on top of the chick and has fastened on to it, then the great wings spread and brace to check the fall, tail feathers form a fan. With rapid beats it picks up way, now playing the role of pursued.

The *roti-wallah* reaches us, red-faced and mouthing hard. The *munshi* laughingly commiserates with him. "A *cheel* has honoured you with a visit, Old One. Be sure tomorrow he does not come back for your daughter!"

By the time we reach the house of Kaley's father my legs are decidedly unsteady. I am glad to pause in the shade of the little house. Already the thatch is on, held down by long strips of bamboo. The men are sitting within, eating from heaped rice on brass platters and sampling with relish Kaley's father's millet beer.

The old man is sitting apart, weaving a small triangle of thin cane. "What are you making, Old One?" I ask.

He looks up and his watery eyes fix me for a minute and I feel he is trying to gauge the reception of his reply. "Your Honour, it is the one reason that I am sorrowful for the loss of my old house. There on the porch, close up under the eaves, was the nest of a swallow. It was on a little sitting-place that I put there many years ago, when Kaley was just a boy and the mud on the walls was still damp! Every year since a swallow came. It meant peace and health for my family. Now the old house is gone and with it the nest. Will the swallow come again? It may not care for the smell of new thatch, or know again its sitting-place. But I shall put a new sitting-place on the porch of my new house, and watch when the swallows come again, for I am an old man now and it is not good that I should live in a house without a nest in the roof!"

The *munshi* nods solemnly. "This," he says, "is the custom. The houses where the swallows choose to rest have always much . . ." Then he pauses, groping for an explanation he knows I will understand. Finally with a flash of inspiration he adds in English, "Gooluck!" and beams with self-satisfaction.

Back we go to the muster ground, where the *munshi* leaves me to go to his own house for his mid-day meal. As I descend to the compound path I notice a strange piebald pony, tethered outside my stable. Northern Shot, with pricked ears, has his head over the half-door of his loose box, and his dilated nostrils show that he resents this intruder. Lounging in the shade, chatting to my groom, is a huge Bhutanese.

"Syce," I call. He comes running. "Whose is that pony?"

"A Sahib has come! He is talking with Memsahib in the bungalow. He came from Darjeeling."

"What Sahib?" Visitors are rare enough and never unannounced.

"The Padre Sahib," the *syce* replies with the confident air of the recently informed. "This Bhutia carries the Sahib's pack and looks after his pony. I am just going to take him to my house and give him tea."

The man from Bhutan saunters up to me, raises a huge hand and shows his massive teeth by way of salute. His unkempt hair is plaited to a queue and wrapped round his head. The turquoise set in a gold ring hangs low from his left lobe. The smell of him is very strong, but he is an engaging looking character.

"Where does the Sahib go?" I have to repeat myself twice before he understands.

He grins again and points with his thumb to the far range across the valley demarcating the Sikkim boundary.

Full of curiosity, I hurry to the bungalow.

XI

Hark! The Herald Lepchas Sing

Sitting on the veranda sipping tea is a delightful old gentleman straight from the pages of Dickens. His face is pink but with skin soft as a child's. Snow-white, wiry hair stands above his bushy brows. His face wreathes to a smile of certain pleasure as he gets to his feet and ambles across the boards with hand outstretched. The *koti* trembles slightly under his gaitered boots, for he is rotund as a sphere and looks as if he has been lowered into his cord riding breeches much as an armoured knight was lowered on to his charger.

He is a missionary, whose fifty-three years in the Darjeeling hills have endeared him to hundreds of folk in the tiny villages all over the district, though they know him only as the Padre Sahib who rides a pony where another man would not lead a goat! His great non-stop ride on relays of Bhutia ponies, seventy-four miles from Gangtok on the Indo-Sikkim-Tibet border to Darjeeling, over some of the stiffest country in the world, has long since passed into the realm of legend.

He is now seventy-nine, and he has just walked down from Darjeeling bazaar, ten gruelling miles in a descent of four thousand feet. His first words to me are characteristic. "My dear fellow, I'm delighted to see you so well after your illness. Your wife tells me that today is your first day out on

the garden. You must be hot; tired too. Come, sit down," and despite my protest a large hand eases me gently into the chair he has just vacated.

Then he goes on, in rich tones, still with the Scots lilt which a lifetime and a half of speaking Nepali has not submerged, "I'm on my annual tour of the outlying villages. We've got a dispensary at Kizom. I go about Christmas time each year, travelling light you know. Thought I must drop in and see you all as I cross this ridge."

"You'll stay the night, of course?"

"Would love to, m'dear, but can't possibly manage it. Got to be at eight thousand feet by nightfall. . . . We've a little church up there, ye know. Should be able to see it from here . . ." and then he is off again, clattering down the veranda steps and across to the edge of the lawn, looking back over the roof of the bungalow to where the dog-toothed horizon is already pallid in the winter sunlight, barely an hour past high noon. We are drawn in the wake of his exuberance and turn to follow his pointing finger. "Yes, I thought as much! Ye can just make it out. Right in that fold on the crest, between that clump of dark pines and the conical pyramid."

Would we ever have noticed it by looking, or identified it as a building? It looks no more than a rock. "But," I say in amazement, "does anyone live there?"

"Indeed! There's a colony of Lepchas. We sent a young Lepcha convert we trained as a teacher to open a little school up there. He's had a success that all the Mission is proud of!"

"But, Padre, you can't get right up there tonight!"

The old man turns to Sheila with mock severity. "Why? Are ye intending to give me no tiffin?"

"Of course," says Sheila, smiling. "I must hurry it up. . . ." She runs into the *koti*.

"And the bairns?" asks the Padre. "I've had no sight of them."

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“They’ll be with the Ayah I suppose. Off on a little walk. They should be back soon.”

The old man is a veritable store of knowledge and full of anecdotes and reminiscences of his years in the district. We sit on the veranda where Sheila joins us again, listening to his yarns, charmed by his whimsical style.

Only half the hillside of the valley opposite is washed by pale sunlight. The rest is in heavy shadow. The days are very short. By three o’clock the sun will be below the ring of western peaks. Already the temperature is dropping fast. A slight breeze blows through the *koti* across the dining-room out to the veranda, and with it comes the first pungent effluvium of maturing dung.

The old Padre grips the arms of his chair. Sheila’s eye catches mine. At this moment a little procession appears at the end of the drive.

Walking sedately, with heads bowed, though we can see their little eyes glancing in curiosity, the line of *lokras* bears down upon us. Each small basket has its allotment of hand-picked dung; each small person is liberally smeared. All in replica dress of their mothers and fathers and all smoking vigorously, they are as grotesque as a troupe of midgets. We watch the long line pass before us and turn the corner to the vegetable garden at the back. A second breeze-gust ripples the sweet peas bordering the drive and stirs the powerful smell again. My explanation is superfluous. “Padre,” I say with forced gaiety, “we live pretty close to the earth down here!”

It is at this moment that we catch sight of Melody and Kandy. They are marching in faultless imitation of the dung-carriers’ slow-footed shuffle at the extreme end of the line. Immediately behind them comes Kaley, sheer incredulity frozen on to his Mongolian features. Ten yards in the rear, wringing her hands in resigned despair and trying to look at once disassociated from the performance yet still vaguely in control of the children, comes Ayah, shadowed by the

Hark! The Herald Lepchas Sing

ghost-faced little Harkabahadur. It is evident that Melody and Kandy, although not deigning to relieve one of the *lokras* of a carrying basket, have taken an active and enthusiastic part in collection of the commodity!

The bearer pads lightly on to the veranda and with a face that is impeccably devoid of expression announces that tiffin is served.

★ ★ ★

It is a good meal, well contrived by Sheila and the cook at short notice, taking into account the old Padre's well-founded reputation as a gourmet. It is marred on two counts; firstly by the tumult of noise which issues from the bathroom as Melody and Kandy are plunged unceremoniously into a bath, and secondly by the gathering odour which flows into the dining-room notwithstanding the efforts of the bearer to slide with a laden tray through a foot-wide crack, while the *pani-wallah*, operating from the outside, contrives to rattle the handle and adroitly shut the door with a resounding slam to punctuate his Houdini-like entrances and exits!

Sheila and I make animated efforts at conversation, eating practically nothing and praying silently for a speedy deliverance. The old gentleman however refuses to be hurried, munching steadily through each course, caring little for polite repartee but occasionally offering a non-committal noise by way of reply from behind an uplifted fork, and fixing us with a gaze that shows his eyes are filled with laughter.

The bearer comes in with the finger bowls at last, bringing with him a final gust. The air is rich and gamey, without stint or doubt!

The Padre drops his head forward on to his chest. He waits for us to fall silent, then in stentorian voice, he intones: "For the precious gift of our seven senses, The Lord's holy name be praised. . . ."

★ ★ ★

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The last we see of him in the cooling afternoon is his sturdy militant figure pacing ahead of the Bhutia leading his pony. He turns to wave.

“What a fine old gentleman,” says Sheila quietly. “It seems they don’t make Padre Sahibs of his calibre any more. . . .”



It is Christmas Eve, wanting two hours to Christmas morning. The radio, tuned softly, is bringing us Carols by Candlelight from Melbourne. The little *koti* is gay with decorations. Along the pelmets above the deep alcoves of the windows we have laid yards of trailing stag-antler fern interspaced with scores of oranges from our trees.

The graceful fir sapling which I dug from the fringe of the forest at six thousand feet early this morning has been set up in an ancient champagne bucket which we inherited when we moved into the place. We have often speculated on the *koti*'s former occupants. Did they need a champagne bucket with great frequency?

Sheila, in a crimson Kashmiri wool housecoat, is encasing the tree in a cocoon of tinsel. The scented logs of Indian lilac hiss and splutter on the fire. The dancing flames catch lights in her dark hair.

From somewhere close at hand a jackal bays its weird, resonant call. The dog is on her feet immediately, hackles bristling. Then, quite clearly, we hear the shrill, terrified chirrup of the monkey. “That’s Joey!” says Sheila quickly. “Something has startled him.”

“Perhaps the jackal?”

“It may be a leopard?”

I go through to the dining-room, open the french windows and put on the veranda light. The sudden chill makes me catch my breath. There is the exhilarating tang of frost on the air. The night is very still. The fluorescent moonlight casts a splendid quilt of silver filigree on the hills. The moon, close to full in its first quarter, stands high above the Dar-

Hark! The Herald Lepchas Sing

jeeling spur. The garden is full of dappled shadows. That strange sixth instinct warns me of an alien presence. I know there are eyes upon my silhouetted figure.

I half catch a movement in the deep shadows beneath the rong-bong tree at the end of the drive. The dog at my side points instantly and sets up a clamour. Round the side of the bungalow pelts the old *chowkidar*, brandishing his stick. I call out sharply, "Who's there?" In the fastness of the night I hear voices whispering in trepidation. The shadows stir and resolve into figures; many of them. They come into the pool of light and I see there are men, women and children, keeping close together as they face me shyly.

A young man steps forward and now I can see his Lepcha features and sallow skin. His clothes are patched and neat. He carried a small silver salver. "We are from Kisom *busti*. The Padre Sahib said we should find welcome here. We come to offer you salaams and sing to you hymns of Christmas." Without waiting for reply, he turns to the group and speaks to them quietly. Straight away they start to sing. Very softly at first, so that their voices are little more than a hum they pick up the drawn tune. Sheila comes on to the veranda behind me and smiles at them in wonder and pleasure. Their voices gain volume and confidence. Then above the strange Nepali words, I recognize the theme of *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*.

So there they stand, these aboriginals of a forgotten land, singing to us in a tongue we cannot understand their own interpretation of an old carol that we at once associate with England and home, and Christmases long past.

Their faces are filled with placid happiness. They have walked many miles down a naked mountain side, suppressing their inherent fear of the night and with only the prospect of several hours' toil up the broken track after offering us Christmas greetings. They have no tradition of carol singing; they can have little conception of the meaning of Christmas. They have never seen us before, and the message of peace

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and good will on earth towards all men is far beyond their understanding. Yet they come because they have been told that the Sahib and Memsahib wish to hear them sing these unyielding songs that may only be sung at a certain time of the year. And they come because they have been told that this is what Christians would do; and they are, they tell each other emphatically, Christians.

And Sheila and I, in our hearts, wonder if this is not truly so . . . ?

The soft-vowelled voices go into the crisp night. There are about a dozen men and women and as many children. They are singularly clean in appearance, the women mostly with light-coloured head-shawls, the men in white cotton pantaloons. The children's faces are clear olive—flat-nosed and oblique-eyed, with prominent bones heightened by rosy cheeks. All the boys wear woolly caps with ear-flaps. Some of the girls are sharing blankets draped across their shoulders. As they sing, their round, pink mouths distend in unison; they become confused with shyness until we glance away.

The last note of the strangely sung carol drifts to silence. They stand serenely watching our reaction. "Tell them to come up here," says Sheila. "We must give them some hot tea. Those kiddies must be frozen at this time of night!"

I invite them up, and with much self-conscious gaiety, giggling and jostling, they climb the steps and seat themselves along the edge of the veranda. Sheila brings them out a tray heaped with oranges. "Go and put a big pot of water on the fire," I tell the *chowkidar*, who has stood all this while on the lawn, watching and listening in amazement. He goes hesitantly, doubting the propriety of it all, unable to comprehend our condoning such an invasion . . . and by mere villagers!

Sheila touches my arm. "Look," she says. From beneath the edge of the curtain, noses flattened on the glass of the french windows, two little faces blink uncertainly at the Lepchas. Melody and Kandy have woken.



Hark! The Herald Lepchas Sing

“Let them come through in their dressing-gowns. They will love to see these children and hear them sing.”

“Well, pull back the curtains, so that they all can see the decorations and the tree.”

When all the windows letting on to the veranda are thrown open the Lepcha children gather, peering into the brightly lit room. Their eyes are filled with wonder. Their shrill voices are muted as they stare at the dressed tree. I think of all the little houses like their own which I have seen during the last weeks. Our small, shabby *koti* must seem a veritable palace of warmth and light to them. I am suddenly moved to remember that this is Christmas to these folk as much as to ourselves.

When Melody and Kandy come, flushed with sleep but wide-eyed with excitement, we sit them before the fire and the Lepchas crowd the windows and sing again. This time *Silent Night*, with the words in their own vernacular and allowing for the curious rhythmic break of their voices between lines. Then they sing a version of *Once in Royal David's City*, and then *Away in a Manger*.

When the old *chowkidar* brings the great pot of scalding tea and sets it on the veranda steps, we pour it into tumblers and bakelite picnic mugs, for we have not enough cups. Sheila gives them sweets and biscuits from the tree. The young schoolmaster says in halting English, “Sir, there are some people in our village who would not venture down the mountain tonight. When we tell them how you have received us, they will wish to have come. Tonight is a Christmas my people will always remember!”

Sheila says quietly, “We hope to live in this *koti* for many Christmases to come!”

Lastly we offer a donation of a few rupees to the mission, and the young Lepcha accepts these on his silver salver.

The children are reluctant to leave the light and warmth and have to be cajoled away by their elders. Once more they gather on the drive. The sky is broken by a drifting

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mass of mare's tail cirrus, behind which the moon seems to scud. The air is bitterly cold; the stillness of the night entrancing.

The little party moves off slowly. Sheila holds Kandy in her arms and I carry Melody. We stand on the veranda, listening to the crunch of gravel under the bare feet until they turn out of the compound.

For a moment the night is silent, then we hear, faintly, the sound of their soft voices singing as they go into the valley. We recognize the ancient strain, *O Come, All Ye Faithful*. . . .

Kandy's head is against Sheila's crimson gown, her little limbs relaxed, her eyelids drooping already with sleep.

Melody yawns; "Mummy, Daddy, they have brought a lovely Christmas tree. Where are they going now?"

"A long way," replies Sheila. "Right up to the hilltops; a long way away. . . ."

Melody's weary smile is contentment. "Oh yes! I know," she says drowsily, "they are going back to Father Christmas!"

XII

Kanchi's Wedding Day

It is the last day of the year.

Sheila and I have risen early and stand now on the veranda, looking across the valley to where the roofs of Darjeeling town glisten damply in the sunlight. The air is clean and sweet in our lungs, and scent of the dew upon the dust mingles with the scent of massed flowers in the borders.

We think of all the planters who must be standing thus contemplating the last day of the year, with the journey into town before them and the prospect of the Hogmanay ball at the Club. Sheila says, "Of all the people whom we shall meet in Darjeeling today, I'm sure we shall be the only ones to have ridden ten miles on horseback before arriving!"

I survey the footpath that cuts among the tea bushes like a narrow groove, mounting steeply in a series of zig-zags from the river-bed to the summit ridge. "And," I add, "how many of them would think it worth celebrating Hogmanay with the prospect of a walk back to this garden on New Year's Day?"

The low beat of a Gurkha drum sounds from the spur below the bungalow. The resonant note catches an echo from across the valley and returns to swell the next tap; back and forth the sound speeds, a soulless note, carried on the desiccating air.

Sheila stares at me in puzzlement. The monotonous boom

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of drums is always so ominous to us; disquieting, stirring imagination to dark thoughts we can never quite explain. She is thinking of our two little daughters who will be left in charge of Ayah and the other servants until our return on the evening of New Year's Day.

Six shrill blasts from a horn run into each other as they wind upwards and hang on a last, long note that stretches out in the thin air and dies somewhere faintly, deep in some unmapped re-entrant far beyond the Sikkim border. We look at each other and smile, for the sound is one of joy. The drums and horns herald the coming of some Nepalese bride, for the gods have marked this day as auspicious for her wedding.

The *syce* comes along the drive in company with another man whose pony I have hired for Sheila. They salaam as they pass. The bearer runs across the veranda and down the steps to hand the *syce* a vacuum flask of tea. We watch them lead the ponies down the path, take the first of the bends and turn back upon the cutting, lower down the slope. The geldings' flanks glisten from an early grooming, the muscles moving beneath their cropped hides with controlled power. Sheila says, "Shall we go while the children are quiet? It will be better if they do not see us leave!"

From the drive we can look across the young tea that stretches to the path above the bungalow. It is pruned across at thirty inches from the ground. Our little girls' golden heads just show above it, they are walking sedately up the hill followed by Ayah. "Have you given all instructions for their meals?" I ask.

"Yes. I've told Ayah exactly what to do. They should be all right. She is so fond of them. . . ."

The bearer, the cook and the *pani-wallah* come out on to the veranda to see us off. We walk along the drive and join the steep track. Our feet sink into the red dust and a fine cloud is thrown up which progresses with us, clinging as a web, filling our nostrils with a sweet, acrid scent, lightly powdering our hair and lying along our eyebrows and

lashes, fastening upon our skins where perspiration has broken out, barely perceptible yet lending a false bloom to the flesh.

The beat of the drum on the early air grows louder. At irregular intervals the six-note trill of the horn is flung on the morning, a challenge for all the coolies of the garden to remember that this girl has been taken in marriage. Sheila cries suddenly, "Look! there is the wedding procession." From the bamboos on the spur, two hundred yards below us, we see a party of gaily clad people emerge and start along a path between the tea-bushes that crosses our track.

"Walk slowly," I say, "we can meet them lower down."

The wedding party is headed by two young men, twisting their bodies and cavorting in an exuberant dance, keeping the significant movement of their hands and wrists in rhythm with the beat of the drums and chanting as they advance. They have fortified themselves for this test of endurance with much local *rukshi*, a potent home-brewed product made of rice. They are followed by the drummers, beating upon their hide drums with uncanny rhythm. Then comes the man with a huge curved horn, held aloft by a string across his shoulder. At every rise or promontory he winds it from spherical, crimson cheeks.

We reach the junction of the tracks as the horn sounds again. Everyone in the wedding party is smiling broadly, delighted to see us. The bridegroom in new clothes, with a crimson turban on his head, is mounted on a debilitated pony with roving eye and ready hooves. Two men hold the nag's head as the procession stops and offers us salaams.

"We are going to fetch the bride, Sahib," they volunteer gaily.

"Where does she live?" I ask.

They point across the valley to where a ridge is crowned by a group of thatched huts. "Over there," they say. "She works on that tea garden."

"And I suppose she will want work on our garden when the wedding is over?"

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They nod eagerly. "You must give her work, Sahib. She is a good plucker!"

"I shall see," I answer severely, thinking of my top-heavy labour force. It is incumbent upon the management to provide work for the coolies who live on the estate, but year after year, as families increase and wages rise, the problem of employing everybody becomes greater. Good leaf-pluckers are always in demand. Young women are the best pluckers, for they will work day after day, disregarding the streaming rains during the height of the monsoon, bringing in as much as a hundred pounds of tea tips; but after marriage, when the inevitable cycle of reproduction begins, their families may become liabilities.

We leave the wedding procession and start down the hill. The tea bushes end some three hundred feet above the river bed and from this point dense scrub jungle stalks each side of the narrow track. Visibility is a few yards. The roar of the torrent in the river-bed is magnified to fearful proportions. The sound seems to beat at our ear-drums, ricocheting from mottled tree-trunks to bamboo thickets and on into the impermeable tangle.

A great black, racket-tailed drongo comes flying blind up the tunnel of the track formed by the eight-foot grasses. The bird's beak is open in some frantic cry of terror as it sees us advancing, yet the sound does not pierce the incessant boom of the water. We see the powerful wings beat at the air to gain height and both of us duck instinctively. It passes over us and goes hurtling on amongst the foliage.

Sheila's thought is of snakes. As she walks in front of me she prods at the tufts of grass and weeds. Though I try to belittle her fears, she knows that this is a likely place to encounter a slumbering cobra or short, deadly krait, and her vigilance remains. "Wasn't it here that you killed that five-foot cobra?" she demands to know.

"Well the *syce* did! I was riding, he was walking behind the pony when a snake wriggled through the grass beside

the path. He broke its spine with my cane. By the time I got off and went back, he had finished the brute off."

"Didn't it try to attack you?"

"No." I try to sound convincing. "I believe a king cobra is the only snake known to attack unprovoked. Others always try to get away. Of course the *syce* swore that the snake was raised to strike the pony's leg, but that was only to try to put the question of a little monetary reward beyond doubt."

Sheila is not reassured.

The path steepens and curves to round a moraine that has slashed the track, starting from far above, embroiling the scrub and bringing down saplings and boulders in a glissade straight to the river-bed. The whole littered mass of the moraine is dry now, but, as we can see, rivulets have coursed during the monsoon and have scarred deep furrows. This is a tricky place to cross for only a narrow thread of path has been stamped out in the crumbling dust. At some time every year the path at this point is swept from the hillside.

Through the foliage we can catch a glimpse of the river-bed. It lies in a wide gorge, cutting between vertical cliffs that support the jungle seventy feet above the torrent. The whole river bed is a jumble of huge boulders and splintered rocks. We come out of the jungle in a little clearing on the top of a cliff. Sheila stands gazing across the drop to where slender Himalayan larches crowd to the edge of the gorge. They are silver and orange among the flecked shadows. Two of the limbs lean at forty degrees upon their neighbours. A movement shows among the trunks. "Look!" I say gesticulating violently. The sight of those lovely trees, wantonly cut for a few slats of firewood, fills me with rage. The coolies would denude acres every year if they were allowed to cut unchecked.

"For Heaven's sake!" says Sheila. "They're not on our side of the river. Besides, it's Hogmanay!"

We look at each other and laugh. The sound is torn from our lips and merged with the upsweep of the water's thunder.

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Many years ago some intrepid engineer drew a couple of cables from twin bastions on opposite banks and formed a six-foot wide suspension bridge. It hangs now, somewhat drunkenly, on a rusting hawser to span the Little Rangit and to link the innumerable tiny hamlets a mile or so upstream from the Sikkim borders to the mother bazaar of Darjeeling.

We venture out upon the bridge, highstepping on the shifting planking. Immediately the bridge takes up a sickening rhythmic swing, held in check by a slight forwards lurch that seems to make the cables buckle as we advance. We have ninety yards to endure on this contraption.

At about the centre we pause and look cautiously over the rail to the river, seventy feet below. The cruel rocks are beautiful and malignant with the play of early sunlight upon them, ranging in colour through ochre and pink to yellow and mauve; the gneiss formations and micaceous boulders catch the rays and throw back a prism, so that the whole valley seems littered with jewels. Indeed, there are many semi-precious gems to be picked up in the border valleys of Sikkim and its environs—quartz, amethysts, zircons and opals, which are set in a putty-like compound of local clays surrounded by filigree brasswork and fashioned into necklets and brooches by village craftsmen.

Suddenly I become aware that although we have been standing motionless the bridge has continued to swing with increasing momentum. We look up and see a huge black water-buffalo, driven by a small Nepalese boy, edging with ponderous steps along the frail slats. The great docile creature's head swings from side to rail, scraping the cables with its curved horns.

The buffalo advances upon us, blowing through its wide nostrils, showing the whites of its placid roving eyes. We look in desperation for space to pass its great bulk. The little boy, realizing that we are crossing the bridge in the opposite direction, waves his arms and beats a tattoo on the tough hide of the old beast, railing against its stupidity with a

fluency of which any grown Nepali would be proud. But we see that any show of dignity on our part would be futile, and retreat along the swinging bridge to the safety of the bank.

Once the buffalo has passed, disdaining all its young master's urging to hurry, we set off again across the bridge. The *syces* are waiting with the ponies on the far side.

It is now twenty minutes past eight. It will take us a little more than two hours to reach the Club. We settle into our saddles for the long pull up from the valley.

The track is laid in places with huge, flat rocks, in uncertain imitation of crazy paving, but in many places these are washed out by heavy rains or have deep furrows scoured between them, so that the ponies are continually slipping or overstepping. The gradient in places is one in four, so that our knees and thigh muscles ache with the efforts of trying to keep ourselves from sliding over the low rims of the saddles on to the ponies' flanks. I take the lead to set the pace, for flagging ponies can add an hour to the ride.

The *syces* walk with a lovely smooth action from the hips, directly behind their ponies. Though sweat starts to pour from them as soon as we start their breathing is never tried for a moment. The bunched muscles of their calves hoist them step by step; their bare feet fit the malformed rocks and their toes wrap over the rim of every fissure to propel them upwards, as booted feet never could.

At the turn of every hair-pin, where the track changes direction, we look down and see the bungalow on the opposite side of the valley, receding into the lifting dew-haze.

We toil up the winding track, lined with tea bushes and overhung by ancient shade trees, and reach a tiny plateau dotted with thatched houses. "The bride's house," I call out to Sheila. "This is where the wedding procession will come."

On the baked mud strip that fronts one small house are the preparations for a marriage ceremony. A brand new prayer flag has been set up before the house. The tall bamboo

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is still green, the strip of cloth, stencilled with a repetitious prayer in Tibetan calligraphy, is startlingly white against the mauving sky. It stands out from the pole bravely, pointing to the mountains that serrate Sikkim which, from this elevation, obscure the snows of Kanchenjunga. Above a fire a huge iron pan has been raised on rocks, ready for the ceremonial tea-making when the groom arrives to claim his bride. A conglomeration of people, all relations of the bride, squat before the little house, necessary witnesses to the propriety of the traditional rites.

“How lovely,” calls Sheila, quite charmed with the scene. “They have no inhibitions to spoil their enjoyment.”

“They haven’t started on the *rukshi* yet,” I remind her. “The orgy goes on all night before moving back to the bridegroom’s father’s house for another feast. There is usually at least one quarrel at these affairs, when liquor jogs somebody’s memory about some feud that split the family before most of them were born.”

An old man, slightly apart from the group, sits watching our approach. His tired eyes peer from folds of skin that overhang his face. He wears the true Nepali dress of cotton pantaloons, tight-fitting below the knees, baggy at the backs of the thighs, with an over-shirt fastened with tapes on his breast, and a six inches high, black pillbox hat, heavily embossed with embroidery and surmounted by a pompom. He places his left palm beneath his right elbow and touches his fingers to his brow. “Blessings and peace, Sahib and Mem-sahib,” he mumbles. We smile and offer our salaams. It is pleasant to be greeted thus, and I wonder what memories lie behind the wrinkled brow, for here clearly is one who recognizes the tea garden Sahibs as friends.

“Is it your daughter who is to be married today?” I ask as we come up to him.

“Yes, Sahib, it is Kanchi, my youngest daughter.”

“So now you will be left with only your old woman in the house?” I ask.

"That will not be, Sahib," and his toothless old face breaks into a grin and he gives us proof of the prodigious virility of the Nepalese as he points to two tiny, naked urchins playing in the dust. "I have two sons yet to feed."

Sheila calls to me, "He must be very old!"

I ponder a minute, then guess. "He'll have taken a second wife. It's only in recent years, since rice became short, that the old practice of taking two wives has become less usual."

The ponies tramp on resolutely. We round a short promontory and from this vantage we can see beyond the crest of the farther hillside to where the snowy range emerges from early cloud. The summit peaks of the Lord of Five Treasures are shot with gold and crimson, and the glaciers that fill the immense fissures radiate a score of variations on indigo.

Our eyes traverse the great panorama, taking in magnificence that ever is different, revealing or concealing some feature with a subtlety of light and shadow variation, arresting for a single glance the growth of some wild plant or tree through the seasons, so that there is excitement in the thought that in a hundred ages of the world no man will set eyes upon this scene exactly as we see it now.

Sheila calls. "Stop here. Let us have some tea."

I rein in my pony and dismount on the steep, uneven slab-rocks littering the track. We walk to the corner where the track turns back upon itself at forty-five degrees. Just beyond this point a great scree slope marks a landslip and falls almost sheer to the valley bed.

The scar lies barren and ugly upon the face of the hill, and so it will remain for many years, for bed-rock shows among the loose rubble, as though the flesh has been torn from the mountain and its very bones laid bare. "This was the slip we heard that night during your illness, remember?" says Sheila solemnly. I nod, groping uncertainly in my memory, for the fever did not allow that night to seem quite real.

Across the valley the limewashed walls and red roof of our

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bungalow show vividly at the fringe of the creeping sunlight. It is too far for us to see people, but as we stare we see in our minds' eyes the eager faces of our daughters, for they are probably looking across at the place where we stand, and waving joyfully.

We sit drinking tea from the vacuum flask, perched on the lichen-warped timbers of a high seat erected at the side of the road. It has been put up by some wealthy *sirdar*, probably to perpetuate memory of one of his illustrious relations and to gain an extra foothold on the climb to heaven. There are several such seats by the side of the track, but none of the others commands such an extravagance of scenery.

The ponies are steaming as the sun plays on their sweat-damp flanks. They wrench at the tufts of coarse grass sprouting from between the stones of the track. Our *syces* squat comfortably nearby, averting their gaze as we drink with that instinctive politeness peculiar to all hillfolk.

Sheila beckons to them. "There is some tea here for you." She pours a little into an empty cigarette tin. One boy comes forward and takes it gratefully, after pressing his palms together in a gesture of thanks. Sheila also gives them two cigarettes. They squat puffing contentedly and passing the tin from one to the other, taking a mouthful at a time, swilling the sweet liquid from cheek to cheek to relish the sugar, for this is luxury in contrast to their usual brews laced with salt.

"We had better push on," I say. "The sun is getting hot." Though the altitude drops the temperature with every yard we climb, the thinning air and lessening refraction make us more vulnerable to the ultra-violet sun rays.

From the banks of the gorge far below we had been able to see Darjeeling, but the hill which we are climbing is convex, so that as soon as we crossed the river we lost sight of the buildings that stagger on the summit like a model alpine village. Now as we breast a ridge and reach a far-flung angle of the track the town is again revealed.

Kanchi's Wedding Day

With the lifting of the dew-haze, visibility is exceptional. Darjeeling stands in the centre of a horseshoe ridge, one extremity of which we are mounting, while the far limb, which the motor road follows, is heavily forested right to the head of the valley. Against this backcloth of rich green the disarray of houses is bold in outline, so that we have the impression that a pebble thrown from a bend in the track would land in the bazaar area. In fact, following the intricacies of the track and the broad sweep of the curved ridge, a good hour's riding lies before us.

The tea bushes fall behind and scattered beside the track for the last mile before the main road are little houses and shops of a Sherpa community. It is from here that Himalayan expeditions draw their high altitude porters, for among the community are many of the Everest "tigers". The people come to the doorways of their dwellings to watch us pass, and plump, naked children point in wonder at the astonishing sight of a Memsahib in breeches like the Sahib's riding a sweating pony through their small domain.

At the main road Sheila says ruefully, "I was not bred in the saddle of a hill-pony climbing at an angle of forty degrees!" and thankfully slides off her gallant little mount.

"This is really cheating," I banter. "We should carry right on into the bazaar. Anyway we may have to wait here hours before a car comes along."

"We'll chance it," she replies emphatically.

XIII

A Gaggle of Planters

The vegetation here presents a very different appearance from the lower elevation of our tea garden. No sign of the bamboos that prefer the humidity of the valley bed or of the lush ground jungle that covers the hillsides. Magnificent pines reign in spaced plantations, criptomarias predominating, with hoary Himalayan oaks and larches to offer hold for the sprays of epiphytic Bengal moth orchids, vandas, cymbidiums and crocus orchids that abound along this ridge.

The *syces* seem unperturbed by their climb and pull the saddles off and begin rubbing down the ponies.

Sheila and I sit on a stone wall and relax with cigarettes, feeling something of the mountaineer's glow of achievement when a summit is gained.

After a while the *syces* resaddle the ponies and stand awaiting dismissal. They will loiter on the long walk down the hill, buying innumerable cups of tea from the little shops and oranges from the houses beside the track with the *bakshish* they confidently expect me to give them.

Sheila says, "Do you think they'll stop and join in the wedding feast?"

"Probably! They'll undoubtedly have some *rukshi* with the bride's father, and then they'll be there for the day. But they'll want to get past that strip of jungle that skirts the

river-bed before evening, for the bravest Nepali becomes like a child at night, exposed to the demons of the hills." I hand them each a silver rupee. They salaam and set off in high spirits.

We are left at the side of the deserted tarmac. The ponies are led around the first bend and a quietness falls on the scene, stirred only by the dripping of the perpetually damp trees.

A very old German Opel motor-car comes along and the driver pulls up. It is one of a fleet from a local hire service, usually engaged during the season in driving visitors from the plains to nearby beauty spots and vantage points for a view of the snow range. We clamber in and settle back, grateful for the comfort of the springless, tattered seat.

The old car roars from a broken exhaust as it picks up speed. I notice that the driver has to turn the wheel half lock before the wheels respond, but this does not seem to worry him and he looks over his shoulder to give us the benefit of the broad smile which wreaths his face in cheerful wrinkles. "Where to go, Sahib?"

"The Planters' Club," I answer briefly, anxious not to distract his attention further.

He gives the road a perfunctory glance as his arms wrench violently at the wheel, and neatly cuts around a huge-wheeled bullock cart, laden with tea chests, then turns back to me. "What garden have you and the Memsahib come from, Sahib?"

The Nepali trait of insatiable curiosity is as fully developed as that of any English village busybody, and I find myself replying to his stream of questions as he skilfully flashes round cart after cart drawn by ponderous lumbering bullocks. These creatures are the residue of an age before motors and are obsolescent on the steep hill roads where jeeps and high-g geared vehicles now race the fifty miles journey from the plains in two hours to eclipse the two days' plodding of the bullock-cart teams.

The road is lined irregularly with ramshackle houses of

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rough-hewn lumber and rusty iron. Here dwell the Tibetans who have come to make Darjeeling their home. Most of them have little stalls in front of their houses selling peanuts and vegetables and a miscellany of indigenous sweetmeats and betel-nut.

We pass a large Government high school for girls, and a little further along the road a number of students, demure and straight-backed in their white *saris*, hair oiled and plaited and tied with coloured ribbons, carrying their books in gay, striped shoulder bags. Education for girls is a new idea among the hillfolk, and the Nepalis find something vastly funny about girls going to school to learn. The driver presses his croupy horn in a long, derisive blast as we sail past the girls.

We pass a convent on one side of the road and a Scots mission school on the other. Darjeeling, as the hill station of Calcutta, is littered with schools; and teaching establishments run by missions from many parts of the world are congregated here. The Belgians, Canadians, French and Australians are in strength.

The old car rounds a final bend and ploughs into the congested bazaar area. Immediately we are aware that the little town is *en fête* for the expected gathering of planters coming to celebrate Hogmanay. From the servants' hall at the Club the news of a *tamasha* has filtered down to the humblest stallholder. From some secret source a variety of goods has appeared in the bazaar, confidently calculated to prove irresistible to the planters.

Tibetan women have walked for many days to arrive at dawn with great baskets full of red-cheeked apples. As we drive slowly through the throng they peer at us through the paneless windows, flashing their white teeth and smiling with great charm, waving their plump hands and indicating the proffered apples.

We wind among the narrow unpaved roads, turning left and right, always on a gradient, climbing upwards to where the Planters' Club is situated just below the ridge over-

looking the well of the bazaar. Already the parking lines below the club are full; cars and jeeps stand wing to mud-guard. We get out and pay the driver. This is the moment Sheila dreads. A footpath traverses a steep bank leading to the tiny plateau before the main building at an angle of forty degrees. Upon this bank people are gathered, watching the arrival of friends. All are dressed with an elegance befitting the occasion and under these appraising eyes we now advance in dusty breeches and wrinkled socks, with shoes dampened on the insides by the ponies' sweat, caked with dust, our shirts awry and hair breeze-blown.

We greet friends perfunctorily and mount the quaint outside staircase to the overhead veranda running the length of the wooden-fronted building. Our cases, carried up from the garden by coolies before dawn, are waiting for us in our bedroom. We wash and change.

I stroll out and join friends on the quarterdeck, and exchange all the mundane, cheerful remarks that tea planters are wont to make when they meet after long sojourns on their gardens.

Bearers move rapidly among the groups of planters and their wives, their number swelled every moment as jeeps and cars arrive from most of the seventy-seven estates of the district. Many people have travelled up from the great tea-growing areas of the Dooars plain that stretches from the foot of the hills to the border of East Pakistan. Some intrepid Scots, bent on celebrating Hogmanay in fitting manner, have even made the journey from Assam.

There is exchange of greetings between people who have not met for months, though they live on opposite sides of a valley and daily sit on their verandas gazing a crow-mile or so to their neighbour's bungalow on an adjoining garden.

We spend the day passing among groups of people, chatting. As we move from shop to stall we meet planters' families who have just returned from six months leave in the U.K., or who are going on leave shortly. There are new

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babies to be admired and transfers among the gardens to be speculated on, and threading all this conversation the ever-present subject of tea; tea in all its aspects, from a new hybrid seed, yet to be cultivated, to the chances of tea sales promotion in Brazil.

Then, as the brief Indian dusk shadows the little township, the groups of planters disappear from the bazaar streets and the quarterdeck is deserted as everyone retires to dress for the final scenes of the fading year.

The moon is half-high in a cloudless sky by the time I am ready, and from the balcony I look down on the flickering lights set irregularly among the jumbled houses of the little bazaar. The white mass of the snow range is faintly luminous against the purple sky. From the heart of the bazaar the reverberant clangour of a single temple bell is muted by the night.

Sheila comes on to the balcony to stand beside me. "Look!" she says, "across Sikkim the villagers are burning the hillsides for their spring sowing." The lines of fire weave unevenly up and down the slopes and we recognize the slight acrid smell of far-drifted smoke borne on the breeze.

From downstairs comes the sound of hale, laughing voices and the beginning of revelry. Sheila remarks quietly, "I suppose the babies will be asleep by now!"

"They'll be sound asleep," I try to reassure her. "And before we know it the night will be over and we'll be on our way down to them again. Let's not waste a moment!"

So we see the last of the dying year with all tradition. The kilt is in evidence, haggis is on the menu—though there are wise heads shaken in dismay when it appears later. We dance beneath coloured streamers and clustered balloons until midnight when, with linked arms and warm hearts, under the glassy-eyed gaze of ovis ammon, ghoral and buffalo, sambar and panther, trophies to the prowess of members long passed, we sing *Auld Lang Syne*. Hot rum punch is served and the great round of offering good wishes begins. The band plays

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on and on, and when the New Year is four hours old many people abandon all thoughts of sleep before dawn. Sheila and I slip out for a breath of cool air.

Scales of silver fleck the sky atop the dark hills; first light of the first day of the year. Darjeeling bazaar is soundless. Only a few scattered lights remain. The firmament of stars is very bright by contrast. The Indian night has a quality that we know will imprint this Hogmanay deep within our memories.

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New Year's Day has the scintillating lustre of cut zircon; the air is thin and sharp to catch at our lungs, the sun warm without oppression. Dew has brought out the fresh green colours of the hills. Strips of naked earth, cultivated land or erosion, scar the slopes with the look of unmatching patches on a threadbare quilt. The huge belts of tea bushes girding the valleys are hibernating now. Myriads of leafless stumps march up and down the hillsides behind the cruel pruning knives. Out across Sikkim, transient coils of smoke from the lines of fires set the far hills in relief and blend with the landscape.

Sheila and I, dressed again in breeches and boots, take a last farewell of friends on the quarterdeck. "What!" they ask in mock horror, "Ten miles back to the garden on foot this morning? Better have a glass of beer before you leave!" But this we know can be fatal to our resolution.

We make our way down the zig-zag-footpaths through the bazaar to the wide *maidan*. It is gay with great heaps of oranges, their glow dominating the flamboyant scene.

A smiling, handsome Tibetan with a single huge turquoise set in an eight-inch ear-ring accosts us with a furry animal in the crimson lining of his gown. "For the Memsahib," he says, "I will sell for ten rupees!"

"A tiny leopard cub!" Sheila exclaims in a tone that causes me some anxiety. She takes the cub and fondles it.

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“One can't rear a leopard with two babies in the bungalow,” I expostulate.

She reminds me of a planter on a nearby garden who presented a leopard cub to the Edinburgh zoo after keeping it on his garden as a pet for many months. “But he's a bachelor,” I point out, and reluctantly she acquiesces and hands it back. The Tibetan urges us with inaccurate Nepali phrases, and looks disappointed when we shake our heads.

We see the driver of the decrepit vehicle we hired yesterday and he hails us joyfully and leads us to his taxi. We travel back down the ridge to the junction of the main road.

The sun is already high. Three hours walking lies before us, for the steepness of the track prevents us striding out and footholds from rut to jutting boulder require skill and concentration. The snows are hazed in the gathering heat and the vista down the valley seems to have narrowed since we rode up in the lucent dawn of yesterday. In the middle distance of the opposite hillside our bungalow is the single splash of colour among the rich tones of sepia and olive. Each time we traverse the slope and change direction at the turn of the track the valley bed comes nearer. We walk with steady concentration, talking little.

We reach the seat above the landslip and pause again. As we sit eating chocolate, resting our feet and ankles, the first man in a long line of orange-carriers mounts to where we sit. There are perhaps thirty men and boys, each bearing a wide-woven cane basket on his back slung from a bamboo thong around his forehead. The muscles of each man's neck are braced against the weight of about four hundred oranges. They plod tirelessly, selecting each foothold with unhurried care. They have come many marches distant, these orange-carriers, from the hamlets on the Nepal border which are linked to Darjeeling bazaar only by a series of tortuous footpaths over high passes and deep vales. The oranges are all the sweet, pithy, Darjeeling variety, enclosed in a loose-fitting skin.



A Gaggle of Planters

Besides oranges, each man carries his personal cooking pot, several seers of rice and a raw-wool blanket, for it may be a week or longer before he returns to his village for the next load. For three months this flow of oranges continues, and caravans trail the hills bringing with them the delicate perfume of the ripening fruit.

As the line moves slowly upwards one young fellow falls out and comes towards us. His head is bowed as he leans into the weight of his load, but his eyes rove from side to side of the track and he has noticed the silver paper wrapping from Sheila's chocolate. He stops before us and using his alpenstock-shaped stick to balance, dexterously stands on one leg, stretching the other to pick up a fragment of paper with his toes. It is a valuable find to his jackdaw-like mind.

So we continue to descend and the sun keeps pace with us; drawing nearer to the forested ridge at the brim of the valley. We reach the little plateau where the wedding was celebrated the day before. The ground in front of the house is littered with large leaves, clipped up round the edges with thorns to form shallow bowls to hold the rice and curried meat of the feast. The old father of the bride still sits in front of his home and repeats his salaams to us. "Has your daughter gone, Old One?" I ask.

The old man points across the valley. "The wedding party has taken her!" he answers. "They are still in the river-bed."

"Was it a good wedding?"

The old man considers. "They ate and drank everything in my house!"

"Then it was good!" We exchange salaams.

The track forks and turns to the bridge. Through the trees we can see at last the broken waters, startlingly white against the boulders of the gorge.

The tumult of sound engulfs us. As we step on the bridge we pass into shadow; we shall not see this day's sun again. We cross the river and go amongst the trees. After straining to check our weights for so long, our muscles rebel against

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the sudden demand to propel us upwards. The jungle to the right and left is already silent with evening caution, and a damp chill has moved in where before dappled sunlight lay. This, we agree, is the severest part of the walk. . . .

Once through the tunnel of jungle at the fringe of the tea bushes the six notes of the wedding horn come to us clear and resonant. They are bringing the bride to her new home.

We trudge up the twisting path. We are suddenly aware of a multitude of sensations crowding in on us; hunger and thirst and above all a deep and satisfying weariness.

At the final corner we see the gay clothes of the wedding group. They are gathered in a circle awaiting our coming, the bride and groom mounted on their ponies, the drummers pummelling, the man with the horn blowing his repetitious scale at random. We come among them and are aware of their cheerful faces and hands raised in greeting. We are too utterly tired to do more than smile and nod acknowledgement.

So we come to the last corner and from here the track runs straight to the bungalow. We look up. In silhouette against the dimming sky we can see the two figures of our little girls, standing beside Ayah on the drive. We wave to them wildly, and call out.

Faintly to our ears their trebles pipe in welcome,
“Mummy, Daddy! Mummy, Daddy!”

XIV

The Doe and the Fawn

“Thirty-five years is a hell of a long while, Fletcher!” Standing knee deep in the icy rushing waters of the river, plying his rod with huge, sensitive hands, the *Burra Sahib* speaks with the gruffness of embarrassment. He is a man who has lived alone too long for words to be his tools, but at the core of the brusque exterior is the heart of a philanthropist.

All day we have worked along the valley to where the rivers Ramam and Rangit marry. Here, at the line of demarcation, where the green water flows into the blue, are big mahseer, redoubtable fighters, the salmon of India. Three times I have watched the *Burra Sahib* battle with fish weighing over ten pounds, and it has not been hard to divine his thoughts. “Will this be the last fish I shall take from these waters which have given me so much sport?”

“It’ll be a wrench!” It is the first time I have heard him admit regret at the prospect of retiring. I suddenly feel very young and immature, and the years of my life seem to stretch away interminably before me. I wonder if I shall stay to see a pension from tea?

I think I shall always remember this Sunday; the golden sunlight on swift waters; the caress of a steady breeze to temper the gathering humidity of the valley, a breath straight through the tortuous defiles of Sikkim from the living

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glaciers of Zemu and Talung. And from the moment we set out, when the sky was still flushed with dawn, the spires on the Kanchenjunga range have spread across the horizon, charged with minute prisms of red and blue and green as the fire from a tiara of well-cut diamonds. Now mounting seas of cloud are rolling up from the foothills, diverging round the gigantic massif.

The best season for fishing is October and November, when the water is clearing, but with two months to go before the monsoon breaks chances are still good. The tide-race flows swiftly, broken by cataracts; and where the rocks stand close to the surface the water is flecked with foam. Fierce eddies and cross-currents give warning of the deadly undertow. Every year the relentless waters take a toll in lives from the folk who live on its reaches. Because its source is among the holy snows its sanctity is acknowledged the length of its course. Offerings are made to propitiate it and painted clay models of gods and goddesses are cast into it on the important *puja* days of the Hindu calendar.

Looking at the *Burra Sahib* now I try to imagine him integrated with the retired India civil servants assembled in minority communities at the spas up and down the British Isles. The effort of picturing him not in the shorts and folk-weave check shirt and battered felt hat of his present dress but in clothes that would make him acceptable among such a select group is beyond me. His taciturn Scots character invested with acquired mannerisms of the hill people and rich in Nepali colloquialism are too much a part of him ever to be changed. He glances at me from beneath his craggy brows and at the instant snaps, "Watch your line, Fletcher." My reel begins to sing. . . .

The nylon goes spinning out. The cork grip on the rod comes alive. What monster has seized the spoon? I thrill to the challenging note of running line. The very waters of the river seem to quicken in common alliance with its familiar against the intruder, me! As I play the fish, certain

that I have a record within grasp, I swear the hills look down in fascination. From the sand flats along the bank I hear the whoops of encouragement from the bearers, who have been preparing our tiffin.

The line slackens and the rod goes limp in my hands. This can only be a mahseer; the brute has turned. I start winding in desperately. I dare not let the nylon slacken. The jerk when it comes nearly wrenches the cork from my grasp. The *Burra Sahib's* torrent of instruction in broad dialect is quite wasted on me. The note of the oiled reel rises to a thin scream. Then for a moment the nylon is slack again. Quite close to me, where the water streams in a smooth race unhampered by jutting rocks, a small silver-grey shape leaps from the water and I catch a flash of colour on its underside before it plunges back. I return my concentration to where my line still floats in the opposite direction, and it is a moment before I realize that the little fish who has shown himself to me, almost in derision to deflate my excitement, has my spoon and the deadly triangular hooks fast into him.

The gallant little fellow, only a few pounds weight but symbolizing the qualities of its breed, disputes every inch of line. Several times I get him into the shallows among the breccia rock particles jumbled at the water's edge, but he fights clear with desperate energy. Finally he comes in on a short line and one of the bearers wades in and with deft care gets his fingers into the gills and lifts him out.

We sit on the washed sand in the shade of a leaning tree. The bearers, who love these breaks from the routine of *koti* life, serve us boiled rice and curried vegetables on tin plates, and huge mugs of sweet, milky tea.

The *Burra Sahib* and I have little to say to each other beyond an occasional perfunctory remark. We have a mutual feeling about this; it seems better so. I believe he is busy with his own thoughts, storing memories against the prospect of a lean future.

We go on trolling for an hour. The sun seems to be high in

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the sky, but glancing across to the opposite bank I realize that the heavily forested slope mounting unbroken for a thousand feet from the valley bed is already sombre with shadow. The sun has dropped just clear of the summit. The sun-line starts to recede up the hillside, sapping the light back heavenwards.

The *Burra Sahib* comes along the bank striding heavily, slowly. "Got to start back," he says. "Can't wait for the afternoon strike." Mahseer feed at eleven a.m. and three p.m. He has killed his last fish from the highland rivers of the Indo-Sikkim border. He speaks as a man who realizes that a phase in his life has ended.

We are coiling traces, packing up our tackle. Suddenly he turns to me and says, "Know your Kipling?" and then in a rough, unmusical voice, which makes the words the more telling, he mumbles,

*" 'The Lamp of our Youth will be utterly out, but we shall
subsist on the smell of it,
And whatever we do, we shall fold our hands and suck our gums
and think well of it,
Yes, we shall be perfectly pleased with our work, and that is
the Perfectest Hell of it! ' "*

He wrinkles his tough, brown face into a wry smile. His eye catches mine briefly, then he turns away and sets off up the river. This is typical of the man; of his unpredictability. I have had evidence before of his passion for verse. On first impressions it seems so out of character—this great, raucous Scot, imbibing the works of poets; yet when I heard him recite screeds—Burns is his favourite—on the few occasions when I have sat and drunk whiskey with him in his draughty, cheerless bungalow, I have been sure of his feeling for the lines, and envied his understanding.

We tramp the valley in silence. Where the river has swung and left a broad meadow of aquatic reeds sprouting from among the sand and boulders our approach sets up a flock of gadwall duck. They rise cleanly with a great whir of beating

wings. The white speculum, edged with black and divided by a dark bar from a patch of chestnut plumage on the wing-coverts, throws them in sharp relief against the foliage on the far slope. The flock cants and wheels, makes formation quickly, and then not caring to be driven further up the narrowing valley comes hurtling low out across the water, passes us on the flank and goes on downstream.

The *Burra Sahib* stands staring long after the flock has passed from view behind a jutting spur. As he turns, I notice his powerful shoulders sag a little. He gives me a hard look. "Och! they're late, very late," he says as though his action needs explanation, and he spits viciously, without effort, right into mid-stream.

My shirt is soaked with sweat from the effort of keeping up with him. Long before we reach the fringe of the estate the sun has ceased to reach into the valley. We traverse the belt of jungle flanking the river and break out on to the lowest areas of tea. Three hundred yards up the slope, where the path begins, our ponies, held by *syces*, crop the grass at leisure.

We come jogging up the track, feeling the air cool as we gain height. The ponies are sprightly from delay, and challenging in each other's presence. The scent of evening is strong where the dew is rising from the thickets. A brief frantic activity of myriads of birds preparing to settle before the dusk strikes is like a great whisper carried across the hills.

The tea bushes in this low-lying area already show signs of an early flush. I am about to remark on this, when I notice that the *Burra Sahib* rides looking straight ahead, and it occurs to me that comment on the prospects for a new season will be tactless in the certainty that he will not be here to see it.

The sky is overcast before we leave the tea and follow the track through jungle. It is gloomy here, for the foliage droops to form an arch diffusing the light. Immediately the *syces* and bearers close up to us. They have lagged in the wake of our fast-stepping ponies, but they have no wish to pass

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through this strip of jungle alone at the dangerous sundown hour. As we penetrate deeper the sound of the river recedes. The birds' agitation is muted. Our servants' breathing is harsh and strained as they toil beneath their loads. The zig-zag path skirts a small conical hill and follows the ridge of a saddle. Here the jungle growth gives way to a great belt of thatch reed which is largely cleared, for cutting has been going on since January and most of the coolies' houses are now repaired.

From across the amber stubble the valley bed can be seen on either side. The tributaries of the Little Rangit cut sharply inwards here to form a peninsular of the lower areas of the estate. Clumps of thatch stand still uncut, tangled with bindweed or nettle, reasons for immunity. Later, when the last blades of thatch have been taken and the residue of weed slashed back and dried to carry fire in a consuming line across the stubble, the area will remain scorched and barren until the first rain induces the reed to sprout again.

From half-way across the saddle I can see our *koti*, a thousand feet higher, perched on a projection of the spur. Against the white walls I try to discern figures watching for my coming.

Behind me I hear a sudden commotion; the thump as loads are dropped, sharp cries from the servants. I turn across the pony's flanks and see that the four men have leapt from the path and are racing diagonally down the slope. "What is it?" I call out in Nepali.

My cry causes the *Burra Sahib* to turn. He reins in hard and takes in the scene at a glance. "There! There! See 'em go. A *milga* and its *butcha*. Look at 'em move. . . ."

Immediately I see the creatures—a doe barking-deer and fawn. The doe flees with a remarkable graceful stretch so that she has the appearance of hardly seeming to touch her tiny hooves to the ground, neck well arched, white dab of tail cocked, the ruddy-brown of her pelt making her a difficult target for the eye against the background. The young

deer, however, is moving awkwardly. Only about eighteen inches high, with long, spindly legs which do not seem to obey their reflexes and look inadequate to bear it forward, it heads after its mother for the lower fringe of jungle.

The men are running over the stubble in extended order, rather in the manner of attacking rugby football forwards, shouting and whooping with excitement. The doe reaches the edge of cover and turns her fine, dainty head to encourage her fawn. "*Milga ho! Milga ho!*" the cry comes up the valley.

I try to shout instructions to the men to ignore the doe and go for the young deer and take it alive. Above the clamour the *Burra Sahib's* powerful bass booms out. For a moment excitement produces confusion. The ponies, taking sudden fright, begin to play up. The *Burra Sahib's* rears high, paws the air. Riding superbly, he turns it to the near edge so that it will not back over the track, and brings it down facing me. He is completely at ease, elbows well in and a broad smile of exultation on his face.

While we have been steadying the ponies, the men have closed with the fawn. The doe is well clear; ten yards further she will be into the thicket and out of view. Then she does a remarkable thing. Apparently abandoning her own chance of safety she starts back to her young. In a few graceful bounds she reaches it, pauses but an instant, then, moving directly across the front of the extended line of men bearing down on her, begins to mount again the steep slope.

The fawn turns to follow its mother, propelling itself up the stubble-littered slope with its long hind legs with far less effort than on its descent.

The men see the manoeuvre. Now they have to change direction. Already out of breath, they have to check their headlong charge downhill and try to reascend the slope. Advantage swings sharply in favour of the deer.

From the path above, still astride our ponies, the *Burra Sahib* and I watch this extraordinary stratagem and marvel at the doe's cunning.

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The two men who descended furthest are already flagging. The grown deer is at the same level as the third man. The man nearest the top sees his chance to cut off the creatures and spurts, having only to follow the contour.

We see the doe glance across her shoulder and observe the danger. She veers away slightly and starts to climb diagonally. She gives no sign of being under pressure, moving well within herself. It is obvious that her aim is to keep near enough to guide her fawn. We see the gloss on her fine coat, the lissom power in her haunches, her delicate head, eye bright with intelligence. Her slender legs, tapering to neat black cloven points, make no mistake on the rough slope. She is level now with the highest of her pursuers.

Below her, beginning to flounder, the little chap climbs steadily. The two lowest men now present no danger except to cut off return to the fringe of jungle. The third man's energy is nearly spent, but the fourth, my *syce*, the youngest and the best mover over difficult ground, forges ahead, and thus the fawn is boxed in on three sides.

The doe is on the ridge now, no more than a hundred yards along the track from us. She turns to look down the slope, assessing the position of her young. There is still a chance, and I find myself almost hoping the fawn will take it. If it ceases to climb and runs straight along the slope it may outstrip the men. But the young creature is trying to get to its mother and my *syce* is now almost directly between them.

The doe seems about to turn once more to save her young, skirt the *syce* and lead the way along the hillside out of the closing noose, but the *Burra Sahib* swings his pony suddenly, digs in his heels and canters smartly forward. My pony carries me on unwittingly.

I see the doe's head turn, fear in her eyes, ears pricked in terror, and her chance is lost. . . . Faced by two charging horsemen her nerve breaks. She turns tail and disappears over the prow of the saddle.

We rein in where she stood a moment before to watch the dénouement. I have a sneaking feeling that we have curtailed the sporting chance she deserved.

The little fawn suddenly realizes its position. The disappearance of its mother and the vision of two more humans astride strange monster-creatures completely unnerves it. It turns and runs blindly downhill a few yards on its frail, tired legs, sees two more men ascending, and becomes rooted with terror. The men ring it relentlessly and close slowly now, with arms outstretched.

The little creature glances hither and thither; sees hostility on every side. Its last stance before captivity is pathetic. It looks toy-like; the white spots in its sandy coat just beginning to show; its tiny legs propping its hunched body, the ridiculous scrap of tail tucked fast under its little bony stern.

The men close stealthily. Then, from behind, the *syce* launches himself in a flying tackle, seizing the fawn's hind legs. There is a moment's flurry; a glimpse of white underside fur, the other men spring forward, and the chase is ended.

They bring the little deer to us in triumph. We dismount.

The men's faces are running with sweat, but they grin delightedly. "Huh!" ejaculates the *Burra Sahib* in disgust. "Not big enough for the pot!"

"Of course not. We must try to rear it as a pet. Sheila and the children will love it!"

"Close season!" he retorts crushingly.

"For shooting!"

I stroke the little creature's head, noting the curious parallel grooves running from the top of each nostril to the inner corner of its eyes. Its nose is black, damp and cold. Perhaps it is the docile clarity of its eyes which gives it an expression of intelligence.

We remount. I lean down and take the deer in my arms, holding fast both its hind legs. It struggles briefly before I get it tucked inside my open shirt. The fur is warm and downy. I button my shirt above and below its neck leaving only its

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head outside and, supporting its weight with my right forehead, snap the reins with my left and move forward behind the *Burra Sahib*.

Night is now at hand. A peculiar grey haze, damp and chill, is beginning to spread across the hills.

Once over the saddle, the track rises steeply again. Uneven stones which once cobbled it have become badly disrupted by many monsoons. The ponies' hooves clatter and their irons strike sparks. Up past the group of tombs, like huge water carafes dominating a false spur, our little caravan wends in silence. Eyes have been freshly painted on all sides of the monuments and gay cotton frills are hung from the little ledges surmounting each. Our servants fall silent as they pass this spot, for dusk is the hour when spirits are released from limbo and they have no wish to draw attention to themselves.

The little deer is motionless against my chest, only the button of its nose winks steadily and its bright eyes take in the passing scene.

We reach a few coolies' houses scattered on the hillside. Children, hearing the hoof-beats, rush to the track-side to watch us pass. As the *Burra Sahib* rides by they giggle nervously, their glowing faces filled with laughter. Welcome from the children of the hills can be embarrassing. They seldom speak, they only stare with insatiable curiosity and let slip little ripples of joyous laughter, as unaccountable as it is harmless. When they catch sight of the tiny deer I am carrying their eyes grow round with surprise, and a broken chorus of Nepali ejaculations follows me; their shrill voices resonant on the evening.

We come at last to the final rise, and the stones of the track give way to dust. At the edge of the compound Melody and Kandy, with Ayah, excitedly await our coming. We dismount.

"What is it?" demands Melody, in an awed voice.

"A baby deer."

“A *milga*,” says the Burra Sahib.

I kneel on the yellowing grass. The little girls cavort with delight. The fawn suddenly makes another bid to escape. I can feel its sharp little hooves scrabbling desperately. One hind leg pierces the fabric of my shirt, the other drives in deep and hard just above my hip. The little creature opens its mouth and lets out a high-pitched shrill of fear. Melody and Kandy are instantly sobered. They stand stock-still and reach out tentative gentle hands to touch its head comfortingly.

Ayah, too, is fascinated, but remembers a moment later that she has news. “Ah, Sahib! the Memsahib is very bad! A *zuslay* fell upon her!”

Now the Nepali word for caterpillar covers a variety of different insects, and my thoughts immediately jump to the most horrific, an obscene, revolting caterpillar fully six inches in length, covered with long bristles and with eight pairs of suckers quarter of an inch across. The gardener recently killed one of these monsters on a peach tree in the garden. Perhaps this is its mate! The coolies have an inherent terror of the creatures, and consequently tell an often-repeated tale of its habit of dropping from a tree on to a person and clamping its foul suckers on to the neck, from which it can be induced to let go only when the victim is dead!

It is one of those disconcerting stories which one can never hope to disprove. Every hill-child knows the legend and there are months of the year during the insects' life-cycle when nobody will venture to stand under a tree. Tea bushes at the base of trees are left unplucked and remonstrance is met with bland-faced assurances that a moment before a *lapri* was seen on an overhanging branch. I remember Sheila's shuddering horror at the sight of the giant caterpillar the *mali* proudly displayed after his conquest.

“Is Memsahib all right, Ayah?” I demand.

“She is better now, Sahib; but all swollen up!”

“Swollen! Where?”

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Ayah makes a vague expansive gesture, "Ooo! All over, Sahib!"

"Please bring the deer along," I ask the *Burra Sahib*.
"Anyway, come in for a cup of tea."

I start at a run for the *koti*.

XV

The Night of the Caterpillar

Sheila is sitting in a basket chair on the lawn. She exudes an aura of vinegar. “Ayah says a caterpillar fell on you and you’re all swollen!”

Sheila laughs. “Look,” she says and turns her head: The side of her neck and throat are covered in blotchy crimson weals. “It spreads across my back and right down my shoulders. Just like nettle-rash, and the smarting irritation is much worse! It’s better now, but at first I nearly went mad. I was on the veranda sewing and one of the brutes must have been crawling on the ceiling and fell down on to my neck.”

“Good heavens! Was it one of those awful *lapris*?”

She laughs again, but shudders. “No. I should certainly have gone mad if it had been! This was only one of those little black things. I’ve often seen them about. I just brushed it off, but within a minute this rash started. The irritation was frightful. It spread and spread, and then broke out on my hands. The cook was bringing tea. He recognized it immediately. He said that at this time of the year these little caterpillars shed the tiny hairs that cover them. The hairs, too fine to see, are blown about by the breeze. Lots of coolies in the lines break out in the rash. He said vinegar was the best thing. I poured half a bottle into the bath and scrubbed myself all over with the stiff nail brush! You can probably smell it. . . .”

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"I can. The *Burra Sahib* will be tickled. We met Ayah on the path. She told us. I thought it was a *lapri*. . . ."

"He's not coming here?"

"The *Burra Sahib*? He is. I asked him in for a cup of tea."

"David, how could you . . . ?"

"My dear girl, I didn't know you had just had a bath in vinegar . . . !"

She springs up. "Keep him out here. I'll go . . ." but she is too late. Along the drive in the gathering dusk comes Ayah, the children, bearers, *syces* and ponies, and in the van of the parade the *Burra Sahib*, carrying the young deer.

In the ensuing *mêlée* of excitement, as Sheila takes charge of the little creature, she forgets to make excuses. It is not until he asks what sort of caterpillar fell on her that she remembers the overpowering smell of vinegar to which we are all being subjected. To her explanation he replies casually, "The things don't worry me. Only affect a sensitive skin. I've always heard the best thing is a rub down with slices of onion!"

There is a moment of silence. In the gloom Sheila is unable to see his eyes which are surely twinkling with mischief. "That," she says tartly, "is a piece of advice which an hour ago I might almost have taken. How glad I am you were delayed!" Clutching the baby deer and disregarding our chuckles she marches up the steps to the *koti*.

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The monotonous trill of a bamboo pipe, played somewhere deep in the lines and coming from the darkness like a faint summons to a pagan ritual, seems strangely apposite to the light tap of a score of moths' wings on the electric bulb shade. In the weird, tuneless dirge there is, I think, the personification of all that is eastern and melancholy; five thin notes wrung unthreaded from a slither of bamboo, the meanest of instruments.

Night of the Caterpillar

We are sitting on the veranda talking in desultory fashion. Sheila is feeding the fawn on diluted condensed milk from a beer bottle with a teat affixed. The little creature is curled up in a lined box, its graceful neck arched to suckle noisily. "Better get a pen made," warns the *Burra Sahib*. "If it survives the next few days, it'll eat everything in the garden, flowers as well as vegetables!"

"I suppose every young deer in the world nowadays is called Bambi," Sheila remarks wistfully. "Still, it's unthinkable that we should call him anything else!"

The *Burra Sahib* seems reluctant to stir. From his ungainly, dialectal phrases we realize the loneliness he is experiencing during the evenings of these last few days before retiring. He is not the sort of man to admit it, but it is evident that he sees the years before him as futile. Abruptly he says, "I'd sooner die in harness!" We look at him in astonishment. He adds puckishly, "Still, if they kept the old ones on like me, I suppose there'd be an outcry from young chaps like you that there's no prospects!"

He gets up to go; stretches. His knuckles brush the sloping roof, his great bulk blotting from view the lights of Darjeeling.

From the side of the building we hear his pony restively stamping on the gravel of the drive. He goes down the steps and calls sharply, "Syce!" He looks back across his shoulder. "By the way, have you decided about the car?"

I shoot a keen glance at Sheila. This is a point we have been discussing for a long while. The *Burra Sahib's* offer of his small open tourer is generous enough, but it has taken much persuasion to get Sheila to fight down her fear of the forest road. Her eyes meet mine. She takes a deep breath and gives a perfunctory nod.

"All right," I say slowly. "I'll buy the car."

His nod is no more than Sheila's. The deal is clinched. "Better get this track done up before the rains then. It'll need widening a bit to get a car down."

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The *syce's* hurricane lantern bobs as he leads the pony up the drive. The *Burra Sahib* takes the reins and swings into the saddle. He pulls off his old felt hat. "Thanks for tea, Sheila," he calls. "Good night. Hope the *zuslays* don't trouble you again!" Preceded by the jogging *syce* holding the lantern high, he canters the fretful pony along the drive.

"Good night," we call after him into the darkness. "Good night. . . ."

Sheila turns to me and says soberly, "Well, now we have a car!"

The fire-flies drift on the velvet night like blown sparks. The air is mild in promise, lightly impregnated with scent from flowers in the garden. From the rongbong tree our familiar collared scops owl, having stirred with the failing light, now announces its preparedness for a night's hunting with a low, mournful hoot. The lights of Darjeeling wink irresolutely in profusion on the dim-defined crest across the valley. The notes of the reed pipe are as true as the tone of a harpsichord. We sit vulnerable to all these things.

"Look!" says Sheila quietly, recoiling as she points. "There's another of those awful insects."

A black furry caterpillar, no more than an inch long, is creeping along the stucco plaster edge of the veranda. I get up and put my foot on it. A little further on, behind one of the line of flower-pots, another caterpillar seems to be in hiding. I deal with it summarily. Two green smears are left on the whitewash. At the moment that I see a third caterpillar and exclaim sharply I put my hand on one crawling up the central roof support.

Sheila gets up and joins in the hunt. We have killed a dozen before my palm begins to irritate. It is a peculiar sensation. I can feel the skin tighten as a slight swelling rises. I scratch vigorously; relief is as ecstatic as rubbing a chilblain and as impermanent, for the irritation increases. Under the light I examine the blotchy, white marks. The whole of my skin begins to itch. The tiny hairs have taken hold. Before I

know it I am scratching my neck. The tender skin here responds immediately. I notice two more of the pests on the wall under the light. Picking up a folded newspaper I swipe them off the wall and tread on them.

Sheila says, "No, no! Not like that. You'll only spread their hairs about more."

My wrists and arms are affected next. I can feel the skin tighten as the irritation spreads. "We've got to kill the wretched things. As long as one of them is crawling about now I suppose we'll be allergic to it."

Sheila goes down two steps and looks along the veranda front wall. "Good Lord," she says in an awed voice, "it's an invasion!"

I take one glance and yell for the bearer.

I think he detects the urgency in my voice, because he comes running. He pads across the boards and takes a quick look. "*Mum mum mum! Zuslays!*" he says unnecessarily, and promptly races back through the *koti*.

"Where the devil does he think he's going?" I demand peevishly. "Does he think I called him from entomological interest?"

"Perhaps he's gone to get something to deal with them," suggests Sheila mildly, swotting one of the little monsters going up the nursery french windows.

The bearer is resourceful; within half a minute he is back with reinforcements in the shape of the cook and the little *pani-wallah*. He has a bundle of old newspapers which he divides between the three of them. Quickly twisting three sheets into long brands he gives them one each, lights the tips and jumps down into the *nullah*. They begin to work their way along the wall. Every time one sees a caterpillar he gives a whoop of delight and jabs a flaming brand down on to it. Sheila and I momentarily relax.

The mongolian faces of our servants are grotesque by the flickering flames. Crouched in the shadow of the wall, peering into the *nullah*, scrutinizing the crevices of the old

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plaster, they are like three unholy sprites. The bearer, thick-set, a turbaned jinn in his serving uniform; the cook, plump as tradition demands, with a bridgeless nose spreading vastly across his flat, bland face; the *pani-wallah*, short and bandy, split-almond eyes and a toothy grin, wearing an elongated woolly helmet with a pompom at the summit.

Sheila and I are by now itching without respite. Is there any spot more sensitive than directly under the chin? If only we could see the fearful little particles that are afflicting us. It must be because the hairs are invisible that one becomes allergic to them immediately. And still we notice caterpillars on walls, ceiling and floor, on doors and window frames, on the underside of the table, among the geranium pots. The killing of the insects has already become a fetish for us. We cannot stop. We do not want to; we do not dare!

Ayah appears, bleary eyed from her sojourn in the cook-house since the babies went to bed. "You and Ayah go inside and kill any of the little brutes there," I suggest.

"Sahib, Sahib! See here! See here!" the bearer calls from the outer corner of the building below the nursery window. I run down the steps and out of the carpet of light from the veranda. The three servants stand aghast, staring at the wall. By the light of their flares I see hundreds of the evil little caterpillars swarming in droves up the side of the *koti*, heading for the low eave of the room in which Melody and Kandy are sleeping. "They are trying to get up to the roof," says the bearer. "The steel is warm."

"But why?"

"They will stay until they change to moths, Sahib," he replies wisely.

"Yes, but why tonight? Why all together like this?" I demand desperately.

The bearer glances up at the cloudless sky and by the weird light I see his eyebrows rise as though to say, I can only tell you the facts, Sahib, if you don't care to believe them

I can say no more. He says emphatically, "It must be going to rain tonight, Sahib."

I am left to draw my own inference. The servants return once again to the attack. It seems inconceivable that this fantastic horde of caterpillars should attack the *koti* like this, casting off their evil, invisible hairs to torment all who oppose them, on an evening that shows not the slightest threat of rain. The drought has gone full five months now, but it is still early for the rains to break. It is possible that a few showers might fall prior to the monsoon, but how should an army of caterpillars muster and with this knowledge, march to the place of the greatest safety, there to perpetuate their progeny? Yet what other explanation is there?

The *pani-wallah* leaves the group and comes back a moment later carrying a long bamboo with which he starts to flick caterpillars from high under the eaves. As each falls the bearer and cook stand ready to singe it to death. Already the minute drifting hairs have come to rest on their bare arms and legs. They are all scratching vigorously.

Once the wall of the children's room is cleared we turn our attention to the *nullah*. Dozens more of the resolute little caterpillars are weaving between the squashed and burned remains of their kith, swarming across the *nullah* that runs around the *koti* like a dried-up moat.

The massacre goes on. Slowly the servants work their way along the side wall. The back of the *koti* is not under heavy pressure. I believe this must be because it is on the sheltered side; the breeze is cutting straight up the valley. Some of the insects have encircled the building and returned to the front veranda; some have crossed the *nullah* and started the ascent.

The old night *chowkidar* has now joined the hunt. Sheila has covered the inside of the bungalow. She comes out to tell me how the caterpillars had wriggled through to every room. "It's a nightmare!" she exclaims. "Fantastic! Ayah and I have killed scores. The babies are awake and Melody's

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eyelid is swollen. There were several in the nursery so the hairs must have settled on her.”

“Aren’t they ghastly?” The whole of my body is tingling with the irritation.

“It’s your first dose. I had it like this earlier.”

“Did you find that vinegar stopped the itching?”

“Not much. Anyway, I’ve been thinking that if this is caused by an acid toxic then vinegar is only going to make it worse. We’ve no way of finding out whether it needs an acid or alkaline antidote.”

“Perhaps the *Burra Sahib’s* suggestion about onions wasn’t meant as a joke?”

“Quite honestly I’m prepared to try anything.”

“Well, let’s see what the servants do. They are as badly affected as we are.”

The acrid smell of burnt newspaper pervades the bungalow. Still the wretched little caterpillars are undeterred. We start a second round of the building. This time we examine the ground edging the *nullah* and exterminate hordes massing for an assault.

The intensity of their drive is phenomenal! That these insects should suddenly appear in unprecedented numbers when before we had only occasionally seen a few and that they should now hurl themselves upon the *koti*, is a bizarre situation.

And now we realize that the darkness of the night is intensified. Looking up, I see that great masses of cloud have forgathered over the forest and moved down the valley to blot out the lights of Darjeeling. A cloying breeze is gaining momentum.

The bearer emerges from the *nullah*. He has discarded his turban and I see only the shine of his oiled hair and highlights of sweat glistening on his face as he speaks to me. “Sahib, pepper will stop them!”

“A good idea!” I call out. “Sheila, have you lots of pepper?”

Silence for a minute as she comprehends, then her voice

comes back from the veranda. "Yes. Are you going to encircle the bungalow?"

"It may stop them."

After a while she comes out with a large jar of pepper. "Don't put it in the *nullah*," I explain to the bearer. "If it rains, it will be washed away."

He shakes some of the red powder on to his palm and begins to sprinkle it thinly along the top edge of the *nullah*. The cook and *pani-wallah* precede him, burning, stabbing, crushing every caterpillar in sight.

The breeze stiffens. A ripple from a vortex fills the air with the rustle of swaying foliage, a great foreboding whisper through the trees. Then we hear the rain advancing.

It comes over the hills like a trailing cloak; sweeping into the valley and effortlessly up the other side to envelope the bungalow. Great spaced drops sizzle in the dust of months, endowing the land with virtue and releasing a fine, pungent odour that is rich to our nostrils.

So the bearer was right! It was the coming rain which drove the hateful caterpillars to the bungalow. Sheila and I wait on the veranda, relishing the stimulant of cool air, until the servants come scrambling up the steps, having encircled the *koti* with a protective ring of pepper, giggling and jostling each other, shirts damply clinging to their bodies, excited as children at the novelty of rain after the long drought.

"Shall we ever come to know these hills?" asks Sheila.

I catch her mood and smile. "Perhaps when we are very old . . . ?"

"Can one ever grow old in such a place?"

A thought strikes me. I answer soberly, "That, I think, is how the *Burra Sahib* has come to feel. . . ."

XVI

The Essence of Leisure

The old planter standing in the bright sunlight blinking, listens to the metallic clang of the gong summoning the coolies out of their houses to morning muster. Through the hedge at the edge of the compound the discs of children's faces peer at him.

Everyone has known for a long while that he is to leave today. They have come to regard it as an inevitable event, rather in line with their attitude to death. Over a long period they get used to the idea of its happening in the fullness of time, so that it ceases to be a subject for speculation. The comfortable tedium of their days drift on without a thought of the urgency of living. And this, he tells himself, is the measure of his thirty-five years among them. He has strayed into their orbit as a drifting planet is caught by the pull of the sun; now he will pass from the cosmos without his departure being more than casually noticed.

Kanchenjunga is clear of cloud. From where he stands the whole snow range is warm with sunlight. He sees it through a tracery of foliage from a seris tree. For thirty-five years he has lived under the spell of the God Mountain. Here is his home more surely than any tie of blood or nationality.

Suddenly he realizes why the children are staring at him. He has dressed in grey flannels, with a tie under his sports coat. The shorts and old shirts of all his yesterdays are put

away for ever. People don't wear such clothes in Britain; at least not men who must admit to his years.

Feeling strange to be dressed formally on the familiar path to the factory, he strolls with languid air, trying to savour the essence of leisure. The children scatter before his approach. A group of old men ruminatively rolling cigarettes, reluctant to fall to work, are startled by his coming. They leap up and begin to wield their hoes, energetically scraping the rank grass from the path, smoothing dust into the ruts. Each offers salaams as he passes. He nods perfunctorily, answering from the side of his mouth; the Gaelic rasp of his voice a little harsher than usual. He pauses to give petty instructions, remembers, and passes on.

The factory dominates the hogsback, a fine commanding aspect, the long building running north to south with satellite buildings, office and stores like malformed growths on each flank. A faint aura of tea fragrance has already started to exude from the drying-room, though the season is but a few days old.

He had hoped the new flush would not be through. To begin the procedure of manufacture for the thirty-sixth year might rekindle something inside him that he has wrestled with through a winter and which he believed he has laid for ever. Starting the new season will make his going a fraction harder. Better had he gone while the sap in the bushes was still unstirred.

Down the broad sweep of track he saunters, noting how the hills are laid about with patches of pale green. In the hollows, where dew lingers against the sun, growth is already verdant. Naked strips run the length of the hills where the pruning knives blazed through weathered stems. Morbidly, he visualizes how these areas will look before the rains are spent.

He avoids the office and takes the path running to a ramp which gives on to the first floor of the factory. Wire racks rise in six-inch tiers the entire length of the building, intersected by narrow catwalks. The meagre plucking of the

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early leaf covers but a few tiers at one end. Within a month all the three floors will be packed with leaf every day.

A group of men are lounging by the open windows. They straighten, stare at his unfamiliar attire, realize its significance, and look away in sudden embarrassment. One man comes forward, rakes a handful of leaf off the rack and brings it to him on a board.

The wither is poor. He takes a stalk and tries to bend it back upon itself without breaking it, but it is too brittle. "The night was cold."

"Yes, Sahib, the night was too cold," the man agrees readily.

The old planter shrugs. "All right," he says brusquely. "Send it down."

The men begin to flick the leaf off the racks, gather it in armfuls and drop it through a trap-door on to the chute.

As he goes down the steps to the rolling room below, the booster engine whirls and the great rollers begin to pick up momentum. The rumble of moving metal parts is thrown off the concrete plain of floor and hurtles upwards in crescendo.

The factory *babu*, product of a Christian mission and tall for a Nepali, greets him with subdued respect. He is brother to the head clerk, and of a family which has staffed the garden for generations. He walks just behind his Sahib, tongue-tied with the sadness in his heart. He longs to be able to say something to let the old planter know how much he will be missed. If he spoke in Nepali using the flowing rounded phrases, the traditional metaphors, similies, and illustrations of the Upanishads and Vedanta, he could reveal the depths of his feelings, but he is restricted to the use of English by reason of his position. He and his brother alone have the honour of speaking to the Sahib in his own language. His set-phrase stock of half-English is inadequate. So he says, "Do you think there will be much leaf today, sir?"

The old planter smiles wanly. "A handful, Babu!" He is baffled by the pretence that today is normal. Yet, he asks

himself, what else did he expect? The work must go on. Tomorrow, when he is gone, the routine will not alter. He tries to be honest in his thoughts; would he have it otherwise? Far worse to have a voluble demonstration. Better that he should go, in apparent unconcern, keeping the bitter ache locked up inside him. Unregretted, unsung, his passing shall be a selfish thing. He can make his face hard until he has turned his back.

The huge rollers gape beneath the chutes, receiving the leaf from the loft above. Their polished brass faces have rolled tea that has brought cheer on two sides of the world for over a quarter of a century. He rests his hand familiarly on the first in the line of six. From the fermenting room comes the sound of scrubbing-brushes on the smooth-surfaced, cement tables. Humidity is being worked up. When the leaf is crushed and twisted it will be spread thinly on the near-sterile fermenting beds until its odour is rich and mellow, its colour coppery-red. This is the moment when experience counts. The aim is to catch the tea when its quality has been fully brought out, then get it into the dryers before it deteriorates.

The planter turns with a little weary gesture and the *babu* follows him through to the firing-room.

The stokers stand beyond the great dryers at the mouth of the sunken furnaces, like seasoned troops awaiting the call to action. They glance at him covertly, and he squares his still-powerful shoulders in case there should be a trace of pity in their stare. The dryers are already warm from the fires in their bowels. The metal strips of the broad conveyors which carry the fermented leaf through the heated interiors are polished after the winter overhaul. Soon they will be stained a dull ochre with tannin. A small boy is sitting beside a basket, waiting for the first batch of tea to emerge.

After a brief second firing, the tea will be passed through the varying meshes of the sorters. Empty tea-chests, ready lined with tissue and tin-foil, are stacked against the wall.

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A robust, cheery-faced little man leaves the group of stokers and pads up, grinning nervously. "Sahib, I would like to make a prayer of you! My brother got married last week. His woman comes from a village in Nepal. May she have work on the garden?"

The *Burra Sahib* smiles gravely. The simple formality of the request brings home to him the thought which he has been trying to stave off for many weeks. He looks down at the Mongolian features and slowly shakes his head. "Dunjit, you will have to ask your new *Burra Sahib*," he says.

The man's broad mouth sags in astonishment, his eyes glaze with incomprehension. It is the waving hand of the factory *babu*, signalling him angrily aside, which penetrates to him first. He realizes that he has done something wrong, though he cannot understand what it is. Today the *Burra Sahib* is leaving. The people have talked of nothing else since dawn. He is going away and will not come back, they say. Well then, the *Burra Sahib* should be *cushi*! Nothing should be troubling him; certainly not a little thing like a woman getting work on the garden. It seems an ideal moment to come up with a request that he felt sure, until a moment ago, would be granted. It would mean no loss to the *Burra Sahib*; he would not even be here to see the woman, yet there is the *babu* angrily waving him away as though he has done something awful. He falls back without attempting to plead, so great is his amazement, and watches the *Burra Sahib* go into the sorting-room. Great tears of self-pity well in the little man's eyes. It may be a long while before he gets to know the new Sahib well enough to repeat his request. Somehow he feels he has been cheated. . . .

The sorting and packing-room offers only an echo to the old planter's measured tread. The silent machinery seems to strain at the leash of the driving belts behind the wire guards. The great empty space stands ready to host the maunds of black curled tea leaf that will soon bank it to window level.

He thinks of bumper seasons long past when mountains of tea grew to tremendous proportions with hardly room to walk between, and when extra coolies had to be brought in from the garden to work late into the night to get it packed. The emptiness of the place seems to mock him now.

At the far end, hard against the double sliding doors, a number of women encircle a diminutive heap of tea—yesterday's paltry plucking. They are winnowing the stalk, tossing it deftly and leisurely on circular bamboo trays, for there is little enough to be done.

He goes over to the women and stands watching them. They look up at him with amused eyes, taking in his strange attire. Most of them are elderly by the coolie standard of life expectancy, some forty rains have passed them by. When first he came to Chungtung most of them were children, scratching the weeds from under the bushes. They have grown used to him. "Our father and our mother" they call him, and they have come to know that the rasp of his voice is no more than a mannerism. They speak of him with affection to people of neighbouring estates when they meet on bazaar day. "Our *Burra Sahib*," they say, "has a hard mouth but a soft inside!" They cannot know that he has boasted of his coolies to friends at the Club when he has heard other managers cursing their labour forces, for he is proud to be their Sahib. . . .

"Will the Sahib take a Memsahib when he goes to his own land?" asks one old crone, and the others raise a chuckle at the sally.

A ready Scots wit has always been his asset in dealing with these folk and they still cherish many of his bawdy rejoinders. Now he is at a loss. They sit in puzzled silence as he turns away without reply and goes across to the door.

The early promise of the day is fulfilled. Warm sunlight touches his kindly, ugly face. He notices that the shade trees on the slope below the factory have slipped from their buds

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a filigree tracery of palest green. He swings suddenly on the factory *babu* and thrusts out his huge hand. "Good luck to you, Babu," he says gruffly.

The *babu* takes his hand tentatively, he has never shaken hands with a *Sahib* before. He feels the warmth of the powerful grip and knows that this is the moment to utter the English words of farewell he has so diligently prepared. But somehow the words will not come! And for long minutes after the *Burra Sahib* has released his hand he goes on standing there stupidly, watching the big man walking up the dust slope towards the office.

The clerks stand and sound a ragged chorus to which he offers general answer. They look miserable and vaguely guilty. He goes through to his office where a *chowkidar* is setting out a line of gleaming porcelain tasting cups. An old copper kettle sings over a hissing Primus.

He watches unseeingly as the *chowkidar* weighs pinches of tea in a tiny balance against a four-anna piece, and puts lids on each of the little cups. He leans heavily on his desk while the tea draws and then the cups are turned upside down in a row of porcelain bowls. When the amber fluid is drained into the bowls the *chowkidar* shakes the infused leaf into the lid and rests it on the cup.

He starts down the line, examining the leaf, sucking the scalding tea noisily into his mouth through pursed lips, rolling it across his palate, savouring the bouquet, tasting the flavour of the young tippy tea. Then unceremoniously ignoring the slop bucket, placed conveniently near, he blows the tea from his mouth in a great amber jet out of the open window. He has always scorned the decorous bucket since the time he was impressed as a young man by a shrewd cockney tea-taster from Mincing Lane and he has held it as a point of honour to spit out of the window. It has become as much his habit as that of the old *chowkidar* always to set the bucket in readiness.

Slowly he tastes each grade of tea. "Why am I doing this?"

he thinks, and when his brain refuses to offer an answer he stops and leaves the last cup untasted.

The *chowkidar* looks at him in concern, but the natural tact of a simple man dissuades him from making a remark. Sorrowfully he begins to empty the cups; by habit, out of the window!

The *Burra Sahib* stands watching him for a moment, then without a word he picks up the bucket and holds it up to the light. The metal base is completely eaten with the rust of years, riddled like a sieve in a dozen places. He looks at the *chowkidar* and the old man looks at him. They smile at each other then, the slow, confidential smile of old friends who well understand one another.

He goes through to the office and shakes hands with each of the clerks. They mumble something in turn, each more wretchedly embarrassed than the last. The head clerk's old eyes are swimming with tears behind his thick-lensed glasses. When it comes to his turn, he remembers his Christian upbringing. "God bless you, sir," he says fiercely, and then, unaccountably, "I hope you have a nice time!"

At last it is done! The old planter goes out of the office and turns his back on the factory. He begins to walk up the hill towards his bungalow.

At the top of the ridge he is prompted to look back once more. He resists what he feels to be a temptation. So far his spirit has proved to be strong. He believes he has shown no sign of weakness, yet within him, his innermost being is trembling uncontrollably. It is the shout that makes him turn.

He looks down and sees two ponies coming up the valley path; his assistant and wife, and on the saddle in front of each rides a little fair-haired girl. He can see their short arms waving to him vigorously and faintly their voices come up to him. "Uncle Mac!" they are calling. "We are coming, Uncle Mac."

And now he knows is the moment to take a firm grip on himself and quell any foolish sentimental emotions. He tries

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to compose his expression to taciturn normality. He seats himself on a large rock beside the path and with the fresh breeze blowing up the valley stirring his sparse greying hair, he lights a cigarette to await their coming.

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The little open tourer stands outside the garage. It is duck-egg blue and freshly polished. The canvas hood is folded back. The *Burra Sahib* reaches inside, switches on and touches the starter. The engine stirs at a touch and purrs smoothly. Beside his great bulk the car looks like a toy model. He moves round to the front and throws back the bonnet. "There you are," he says expansively. "Satisfied?"

I acknowledge that I am. I checked the car pretty thoroughly before the question of buying it came under discussion with Sheila.

He switches off. "It's the best size for these hills. These tracks weren't made for cars originally."

"The cheque," I say, taking it out of my wallet.

He accepts it nonchalantly and without glancing at it stuffs it into his trousers pocket. From the *koti* come sounds of saucepan lids clattering. "That's tiffin!" he says with a smile. "The gong is packed."

Sheila joins us on the veranda. Melody and Kandy run ahead of us down the long, central hall of the bungalow. The half-empty rooms resound with their voices.

The dining-room is cool, its loftiness accentuated by the bared walls and curtainless windows, but the table is flamboyant with cyclamen bougainvillea petals, scattered on the polished surface, and handfuls of flower heads indiscriminately heaped. The effect has a disorderly charm. Sheila exclaims in pleasure.

Melody and Kandy are lifted on to cushioned chairs. It is a great treat for them to be sitting at table with us, and they are awed to silence and attention to manners. With the extraordinary presentiment of children, they sense that some-

thing is about to happen. We have told them that Uncle Mac is going away, but the garden without him is inconceivable to them, and they received our statement with open disbelief. Ayah ties napkins round their necks and stands behind them, obviously conscious of the occasion herself.

It is a melancholy meal, our desultory conversation merely increasing the strain. The food seems tasteless. It is a relief when the bearer serves coffee and withdraws. Ayah takes the napkins from the children and helps them off their chairs. We hear them scampering down the passage.

We sit in silence, all three of us aware that the moment we dread is very near. It is the *Burra Sahib* who speaks. Across the petal-scattered table he seems to obscure most of the wall at his back. It is as though I had never appreciated his girth and breadth until now. His voice is rough but steady. He looks penetratingly first at Sheila, then returns my stare. "All my life I've cursed this country and slandered its people . . ." He breaks off as the bearer enters.

"The *jeep-ghari* has come," he says laconically.

We get up; our chairs scrape with raucous protest on the tiled floor. We move to the door and Sheila passes ahead of us. The *Burra Sahib* pauses and looks back into the room. The old Lepcha bearer has started to clear the table. He looks up, feeling our gaze upon him. For a moment he is perplexed, then he puts his hand up in salute and mumbles, "Salaam, Sahib," before continuing to gather up the mats.

The *Burra Sahib* does not answer. He goes up the passage with measured tread. The company timepiece on the wall chimes briefly; a quarter past two. Through the open door, on the drive beyond the veranda, I can see the body of a green jeep but it is not until we step outside that the great concourse of people comes to view.

They have gathered quietly, in twos and threes, over the last hour. From every part of the garden they have come. Children, girls, young men and old; mothers carrying their babies; all creeping into the compound and across the lawn,

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closer to the jeep that waits to bear their Sahib away. The garden has filled, yet still they come, until they are packed in serried ranks, their faces expressionless, turned towards the veranda door.

As he comes out a stir seems to ripple through the silent coolies; there is a great indrawing of breath, like an inverted sigh, yet not a feature changes; only their eyes focus on him, as though to compel him with the weight of their gaze. Among the crowd I see the servants from our own *koti* standing together. My *munshi* is there to the fore, the whole factory staff; coolies of every caste. The silence of all these people is uncanny.

I see the *Burra Sahib's* step falter. He stands a long moment on the step, as though he would address them. Not an eye-lid flickers. I feel a disquiet seize me. The inscrutable gaze of this huge gathering is disturbing enough, yet it is the *Burra Sahib's* reaction that affects me most. He turns and his face is a mask, so devoid of expression to be nearly unrecognizable. He stoops and picks up each of our daughters, kissing them farewell without a word. Melody clings to him for a moment, but neither child speaks. Something of the awe of this moment must be conveyed to them, for their baby faces are serious with thought.

The *Burra Sahib* looks squarely at me, then turns to Sheila before speaking. "Good bye, m'dear. The best of luck!"

He goes down the steps without looking back. At the jeep he gestures the driver to move over and eases himself into the driving seat. I notice his great hands gripping the wheel ferociously.

Suddenly there is a movement from the edge of the crowd. A little girl, the daughter of the head clerk, comes timorously forward. She is carrying a long garland of threaded flower-heads. She rounds the bonnet of the jeep and approaches slowly, walking on her bare toes. Her palms are pressed together, the garland, resting across her wrists, reaches nearly to the ground. At the side of the jeep she puts up her arms and

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the *Burra Sahib* bows his head to let her slip the garland on to his shoulders. Still keeping her palms pressed together, she backs away.

He glances once to where we stand, and now I see his expression relax. He smiles. The silence of the coolies is oppressive. I try to say, "Good luck," by way of farewell, but my voice is drowned by the engine's revs as he touches the starter.

He raises a hand above his head and in a steady voice, resonant as thunder, shouts, "*Jai Chungtung!*"

The jeep leaps forward and streaks in a swirl of dust, along the drive and up the first gradient, rounds the turn of the track and passes from our sight.

XVII

The Negligent Son

It is always disconcerting talking to a man who is convinced he has seen a ghost! The man before me now is positive. "Sahib," he says, with a restraint quite remarkable for a coolie, "I have seen this *bhut* for many days. Every evening after work I go back to find it sitting on the roof of my house!"

The sun chequers the hills in gold and grey. The breeze has the faintest tang of autumn. To stand here amid greenery and space and to try to visualize some monster perched on the thatched apex of a coolie hut waiting for the unfortunate occupant is fantasy beyond my reason. "Who has seen it," I demand incredulously, "besides yourself?"

He shakes his head. "It is not possible for anyone else to see it," he says miserably.

"What is it like?"

"Sahib, it is terrible!"

"How, terrible?"

The wretched man shakes his head forlornly. "Sahib, my belly is empty but I cannot force rice past my lips! I cannot sleep, for at night the *bhut* hurls great rocks upon the roof of my house and I fear that the thatch may break in! Soon I shall be too weak to work and then, Sahib, a fever will take me and I shall die." This fearful prospect fills him with such self-pity that tears overflow his eyes and course his grimy cheeks.

“Rocks?” I query, fastening on the most positive part of his story. “Where do the rocks come from?”

“Some from the track above my house; some from far away!”

“If the rocks are thrown on your roof, then your woman and children must hear them.”

He looks at me in pity. “All night we hear them, Sahib. That is what I am telling you now!”

I regard the wretched man before me in his filthy, tattered shirt and pantaloons, with his shaven skull upon which the remnants of his saffron-coloured cap adhere like the husk of an overripe nut. I wonder if there is some instinct left over from a lower form of life; an instinct that no human has any business to possess. Is it just possible that this order of life could have retained some feeling, some awareness, of an infinity beyond our conception? Is it too much to believe that these primitive folk living so close to the earth, with instincts blunted to some things but sharpened by the laws of compensation to others, might experience phenomena and accept them as the order of things, themselves amazed by the Sahibs’ incredulity. No one who has lived in the east has failed to encounter something out of the pattern of living which cannot be explained away.

“And is the roof of your house broken?” I ask. “Where are the stones which were thrown on to your roof?”

Sudden misgiving takes me as he replies. “The roof is damaged, Sahib. The stones are all round my house. Please to come and see!”

“Listen,” I say sharply. “Why do you tell me? If others cannot see the *bhut*, shall I?”

He shakes his head again sorrowfully. “I must go to my village in Nepal and bring a very learned *Jankri*, a holy man, to get rid of the *bhut*. I come to ask for leave, Sahib. I may be gone many days.”

“I shall come to your house, Randoz! Where is it?”

The man points down the valley. I take the track leading

The Essence of Leisure

to the coolies' lines. The man follows silently, the wide-spread toes of his bare feet setting between the grasses.

My eye catches a slight movement among the tangle of overhanging weeds above the *nullah*. A snake, I think, and lash out violently. The weeds part and there on the stones, overswept by a trickle of water, is not the deadly krait I feared but a ponderous old land-crab. It is black and squat as a knob of coal. Crabs are common enough during the rains to deserve death on sight. They live in the *nullahs* and waterways all over the garden and cause damage by burrowing which brings down small piles of earth, blocking the *nullahs* and sending the flow across the path.

The coolies' houses start abruptly at the side of the track. The slope is steep, but every square yard of ground between the mud walls is utilised or planted. Neat bamboo pens contain goats or pigs. Trailing vines of fleshy-leaved vegetables supported on an overhead trellis flaunt trumpet-belled yellow blossoms round which a multitude of insects hover noisily. I lead the way between the little houses, ducking now and again to avoid the immense gourds that hang like Chianti bottles from the creepers. Here and there bushes of gardenia and crimson hibiscus have been tended to flower beside the clearings of smoothed clay fronting each dwelling. Chickens and kids root and gambol in the shade of the eaves.

A tiny, unkempt baby, teaching itself to toddle, is startled by my approach, sets up a wail of terror, drops to its hands and knees and presents its little brown bottom as it attempts to crawl away from view. From the porch of a house a girl stops grinding corn between slabs of granite to shout it to silence. I feel an interloper among these quaint dwellings.

In patches the path is cobbled with worn slabs of rock. Countless bare feet and the passing of seasons have induced the surface of each to caress an insole. At a point just above a steep incline I notice several of these rocks have been prised out. The dark earth spaces indented and barren are like gaps

in a hag's gum. "See, Sahib," the man calls, and when I turn, he indicates the holes expressively.

"Which is your house, Randoz?"

He stretches forward his nail-bitten thumb. Thirty paces lower down the russet thatch of his roof is level with the bank of a cutting. The thatch is badly disarranged. One edge dips and trails brokenly. The whole has the inward drop and sweep of a Chinese pagoda. I reach the edge of the bank and pause above the hair-pin path, looking at the scattered boulders that ring the little house. Many lie below the eaves, obviously rolled from the thatch; others are imbedded in the red clay, near-misses on the target.

I am suddenly aware of the utter silence that has settled upon the scene as positively as though ordered. No sound of insects in the motionless air, no shrill coolie voice, no childish wail. No leaf stirs on the foliage. I cannot find words to break the silence.

During the minutes I stand here a single blue-fronted red-start darts across the little clearing, but there is no sound of the gregarious mynahs, usually so raucous among the lines.

The quiet in this deserted section of the village is uncanny—fold in the slope, I think, fumbling for the reasons; an acoustic trick of the hills, perhaps, which are riddled with such places? When I speak, my own voice jars. "The *bhut*." I demand uncompromisingly. "Where do you see it?" I turn on the man and find he has crept close to my back, and he startles me now by his unexpected nearness. His eyes are like saucers, staring across my shoulder, his dark face ugly in grimace. Involuntarily I turn back to look at the house again.

It is at this moment that I hear the sound. I try immediately to fix it to a definite likeness. It is low and dismal, half moan, half sigh. I glance sharply back at the coolie. Perhaps the sound comes from him, strangely ventriloquized. Though his mouth is loosely open and I can see the bright vermilion stain of betel on his tongue, I can swear he has uttered no sound. The cords of his throat are slack. While I stand looking at him the sound comes again.

The Children of Kanchenjunga

It is from inside the house. "Ahhh!" a wail so melancholy that I am struck with foreboding. Without moving I call out, and my voice falls harshly on the air. "Who is there?"

There is a brief silence, then the wail comes again. I catch the glimpse of a furtive movement under the overhang of thatch above the veranda.

It is eerie to see the circle of boulders that have been flung on the fragile roof and to speculate on the hand that lifted them from the path thirty yards above, conveyed them to the bank and hurled them with intent to inspire terror. It is easy to imagine this man and his wife crouching within, whilst their children whimper and all the unholy superstitions of tradition crowd their limited minds.

And now, in the stillness of the little clearing with this picture set before me and the composite evidence at hand, some faint telegraphic impulse must be relayed from the coolie at my side, for I feel an uneasy stir of wonder.

Very slowly, with an infinite economy of movement, a figure detaches itself from the house and issues painfully on to the tiny forecourt.

It is an old, old woman, stooped and tottering, supporting herself with an unsmoothed length of bamboo.

"Randoz, who is this Old One?" I enquire, perhaps a trifle sharply.

The man answers, "The mother of my wife, Sahib. She is very old. It was only a short time ago that her husband died in their village, and I brought her to live with us." He adds casually the familiar Nepali phrase, "It is time for death to come!"

The old woman notices me on the bank above and puts her palms together in greeting. Her face is overhung with loose skin; her eyes reduced to the barest slits. Enormous gold discs are suspended from her ears, the lobes hideously elongated. I notice that her feet beneath the multiple folds of her skirt are deformed by clusters of yellow warts.

I raise my stick. "Salaam, Old One!"

She catches sight of Randoz and points accusingly. "That one, Sahib!" her screech is hardly intelligible. "See the trouble he has brought upon his family." She indicates the scattered rocks beneath the thatch. "A *bhut*, Sahib! A *bhut*! It has come because he did not perform his father-in-law's funeral ceremony properly. The holy man warned him . . .!"

"What is this the Old One says?" I demand, turning to the man.

He looks evasive and avoids meeting my eye. "Talk, Sahib! Woman's talk! The old talk of an old fool whose mind has broken!"

It is a problem beyond my understanding and I am glad to be able to shirk responsibility for taking action. Yet the whole matter intrigues me. I long to ask questions. "Is the ghost anything like his dead father-in-law in appearance? What were the funeral ceremonies that were left undone? Has he a feud with a family nearby to account for the thrown rocks?" But these are questions so personal that even the most elementary forms of polite Nepali custom forbids the asking of them.

"Very well, Randoz, you may have leave to go to Nepal and bring back someone to help you."

The man looks instantly relieved. I turn to go, but pause, determined to drive my enquiry as far as courtesy permits. "One thing," I say casually. "Will you bring the holy man from your father-in-law's village? The one who performed the funeral ceremony?"

The man does not hesitate. "The same," he replies guilelessly.

As I climb upwards, past the gap in the cobbled path where the vines overhang, I become aware again of the tumult of the busy insects among the blossom and, set like discordant interruptions in the symphony, the curious wheezy calls of the redstarts from a thicket of guavas.

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The Children of Kanchenjunga

The end of the monsoon brings gaiety to the hills. Days of toiling in sodden clothes are at an end; the crops of millet are nearly ripe and, most exciting of all, soon will be the great festival of Dassai in honour of the Goddess Durga, the chief event of the Hindu calendar.

The rains have been long this year. To Sheila, confined to the bungalow, the brief hours of sunshine between days of torrential rain were wretchedly inadequate. Sometimes for days we lived at the centre of a dark cloud that settled on the ridge as though for ever. It is a long while since we saw the snow range on the horizon, and on this criterion we set much store.

Now comes a day to gladden our hearts. The verdant hills, lush under the morning sun, are at once exciting though familiar. Shall we ever cease to remark with mild surprise those features which must have escaped our scrutiny a thousand times? With the passing of every month and the changing colours of the seasons our attachment to these hills grows stronger.

Only one thing more do we desire; always to be able to see Kanchenjunga! In this, perhaps, we are as childish as the simple folk who have seen no other land. They long always to have the great icy massif before their eyes, to worship and revere this ever-present reminder of the gods. That Kanchenjunga should for at least two thirds of all the days of the year be shrouded serves only to heighten their need; lends drama to the phenomena of its majesty; pique their indolent consciousness. And are we to deny that this is true also of us?

The fragrance of the first yellow chrysanthemums mingles with the smell of fresh-cut grass. As I round the corner of the drive and pass under the slender pole supporting the monkey's little hutch, Joey chirps and makes a wild leap from the roof, trailing the hitch rope fastened around his minute loins like a parachutist falling through space the instant before the line unravels. He lands squarely on my shoulder and deftly hooks the Gurkha *topee* from my head, then jumps with it

to the ground. Without a moment's hesitation he resumes his attack on the gleaming chrome badge of crossed *kukris*. Something in the tiny cast shape must infuriate him, for his dislike of it is evident on every occasion I get within range.

When I stoop gently to put aside his little grasping hands with forefinger and thumb, he looks at me balefully. His eyes are round and brown as pebbles and singularly expressive. As long as I move very slowly he remains docile, only rapid movement disturbs him, then he clambers to the top of his house and sits uncomfortably on the sun-warmed tin, making a rasping chirrup of annoyance. Now he rolls over and stretches languidly on his back, raising his slender arms above his head, hoping that I will stay to ruffle his narrow ribs, a trick Sheila has taught him and from which he obviously gets voluptuous enjoyment.

The *syce* is waiting beneath the mango tree. His face forewarns dismal news. "Sahib, the donkey! The missysahib's old donkey is dead."

"Dead? When did it die? It was all right when the *nannie* rode it yesterday."

"In the night, I think, Sahib," and he laughs as though he has made a joke. I see the nervousness in his eyes and realize that I am beginning to learn the subtle difference in tone between a Nepali's laugh of mirth and his laugh of trepidation.

"Have you moved it?"

"No. It is in the stable."

He follows me along the path. From the end loose box Northern Shot hangs his head over the half-door and rolls a wary eye. A bead or two of dawn mist has culled on his eyelids which are usually invisible against his glossy coat. He tosses his head at my approach and his hooves thud on the stout plank floor. He can smell death in the loose box next to his own.

Dobbin Grey lies on her side. The mound of belly seems

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disproportionate to the dainty unshod hooves. The immense teeth protrude. Dobbin Grey was very, very old.

The tiny saddle and crupper and polished metal stirrups hang forlornly from pegs. It will be hard to explain death to Melody. I round on the *syce*. "The *nannie* is not to come here. She is not to see that her donkey is dead. Do you understand?"

"It will be as you say, Sahib," His voice is muted as though he feels some personal loss. His inane grin remains.

"I will send men to dig a hole. Until it is ready, keep the stable door shut."

Outside, the little lad whose special charge was the old donkey stands wide-eyed. The presence of death is always frightening to these people. They cannot understand how a spirit can pass from an organism, leaving flesh and blood lifeless, yet remaining ethereal and potent. They cannot understand; they only know it as fact. Of spirits there are signs at every turn!

The *munshi* has sent the coolies to work before I reach the muster ground. Two elderly men at the end of the straggling line are within hailing distance. I send a *chowkidar* to call them back. They come reluctantly, their hoes across their shoulders, the question obvious in their eyes: "What new task would the Sahib set us to?"

Obstinacy is plain on their creased faces. I suddenly wonder if their caste will allow them to perform the burial of a dead donkey, and decide not to mention the donkey until the grave is dug.

I point out the place they are to dig, amidst the tea, well down the slope from the stable. "The hole must be deep as your height," I instruct. "I shall come back at twelve to see it."

They exclaim in exaggerated wonder, "*Mum, mum, mum!*" and wait for me to tell them more. Deliberately I turn away and begin to detail patrol areas for the *chowkidars*. The old men shuffle off. Only the *munshi* remains.



As we stand talking three strange figures come slowly down the hill and start to cross the muster ground. The first is an old man of powerful frame and upright stance. He wears the tattered, white dress of a *jankri* and upon his head is a massive orange turban. Long necklets of holy beads hang to his waist. He walks with dignity to command respect despite the poverty of his clothing. Behind him comes a boy, eager faced and crop-haired, wearing a small replica of the pundit's gown and carrying a large bundle on his back. The third is Randoz. Fatigued and glass-eyed, he reels as he walks and stumbles repeatedly on the loose rocks.

The old holy man pauses some way off and gazes at me solemnly. He raises his arm in salute and with leisurely dignity turns and goes on down the path towards the lines. His boy disciple follows his example with studied gravity. Lastly Randoz salaams sheepishly and hurries after the holy man, as though anxious not to let him out of sight.

I watch them go in silence, then in a tone from which I try to eliminate all inflection I say, "Randoz has seen a *bhut*. Will this man get rid of it?"

The *munshi's* face is a mask; his eyelids droop. Expression is erased with the strange dexterity of the oriental to conceal thought, but I notice a slight twitch of his sensuous upper lip the instant before he speaks. He uses that single infuriating, evasive ejaculation which has such a variety of meanings and subtle shades of suggestion, "*Kawni, Sahib!*" I don't know, my knowledge is limited, I would rather not say anything more, so please don't press me!

"I have heard that this man did not perform proper funeral ceremonies for his father-in-law?"

"That is a great sin, Your Honour!"

"What are the things that must be done?"

"First a man must shave all the hair from his body, even his eyebrows. Then for fifteen days he must go into the jungle to where two streams join, and offer food so that his dead parent will not be hungry on the journey to heaven. All day

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he must stay there, praying to the gods to accept the soul amongst them. During this time he must eat no meat, no salt, only a little rice, and for every mouthful he eats he must offer one to his parent, leaving it on a leaf by the stream. On the fifteenth day the priest must read from the holy book and prompt the soul in its answers when it comes to face the gods. Then everyone of his family must gather for the feast to show how glad they are that the soul has reached heaven."

"And Randoz did not follow this custom?"

The *munshi* looks at me strangely, and suddenly I perceive that he is fast in a little aura of fear. "I have heard, Sahib," he says with the air of a conspirator, "that Randoz did not want to stay in the village for fifteen days. He did the ceremony after only three days!" The enormity of this crime reduces his voice to a whisper.

"So now the *bhut* has come back?"

He moves nearer and his voice is husky with unease. "Tonight he must go down to the river, far from the lines where others may not be harmed by the *bhut*. The *jankri* will call back the spirit and Randoz must ask forgiveness of his father. Then the *jankri* must teach him the prayers that may get the soul to heaven."

"And if he fails in this, what then . . .?"

The *munshi's* face has a queer greenish tinge. A light sweat has bloomed along his upper lip. His breathing is shallow. He only shakes his head and glances at me imploringly. Clearly he has said too much already. . . .

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The golden morning stretches before me, to be spanned with thought. As I pass along jungle paths I am startled from reverie by the bloody splash of Flame of the Forest blossoms that stand out in vivid contrast to the varied greens. Simal trees are shedding the last of the gossamer baubles from their splitting crimson pods. Each time the breeze touches the symmetrical branches a wraith of minute cotton particles

float slowly down and carpet the jungle like fine snow. Wherever I go, I seem followed by the brain-fever bird. The monotonous metallic cry rings in my ears without ceasing. Towards mid-day, when the air shimmers from heat and humidity puts a weight across my shoulders to encumber progress through the tea, the herald peal of a thunderclap sends warning from somewhere deep in Sikkim. Clouds begin to splash the earth with shadow. Electric sparks that arc between them, though invisible in the white light, charge the oppressive air. Northern Shot streams beneath my knees as he toils on the gradients leading back to the stable.

I go down to see if Dobbin Grey's grave is ready.

The two old men are lathered in sweat. They have struck a huge rock at five feet and are having difficulty throwing the earth out of the pit. I make a rapid calculation. "That will be deep enough. Come and get the body."

Their twin gnarled faces gape at me in horror. I explain, "The missysahib's donkey died last night." My words take long seconds to penetrate. They toss the explanation back and forth to each other and gradually it chips a way through to realization. Relieved, their leathery jaws crack into dour smiles. They clamber out of the pit and follow me up to the stable.

The *syce* has brought two bamboos. We raise the supine carcass and slip the poles beneath. Carried stretcher-wise, a pole apiece, the bulk is surprisingly heavy. Out into the sunlight we stagger and down the path. The donkey's head lolls an inch from the grass, her little spindly legs are rigid. I think with a sudden pang of all the pleasure the old creature has given to children during a long life. Her docility and patience must have endeared her to several generations before Melody accepted her services. Had we known her end was so near we might have put her out to pasture for a brief pensioned spell.

From the direction of the bungalow I hear shrill voices—Melody and Kandy. "Hurry, hurry," I urge, cursing Ayah

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for not keeping them back, though I had sent her no word to do so. We are squarely on the path when the two gay little cotton dungarees show round the corner. Melody starts to run towards us. "Quick," I say, "Down the slope among the bushes. The *nannie* must not see her donkey!"

The two old men get flustered. They cannot grasp the necessity for speed. They pause, waiting for my order to filter through to consciousness and start a reaction. The *syce* and I tug harder and start down the slope. The old men hesitate, one starts, the other stops. The poles slide apart. Dobbin Grey's head touches the grass, her broad cheek beds down. Slowly the rest follows and we are left holding parallel bamboos.

I look up despairingly; start towards Melody to head her off. I can see Ayah, shuffling reluctantly in the hot sun, still some way behind Kandy. "Stop, stop!" I call. "Go back Ayah . . ." I am too late. Melody's eyes are fixed upon the still bulk of her pet. She pauses and then comes, running.

"Dobbin Grey, Dobbin Grey, Dobbin Grey!" she shouts, tears starting from her eyes on the instant. She rushes past me and flings herself upon the old dead creature.

The old men stare in amazement. Things are happening too fast for them to absorb. I take hold of Melody and pick her up. She screams and wriggles in anguish. I do not think she really understands that the creature is dead, but she knows that something terrible has happened to it, and that if she leaves it now she will never see it again.

"Go on," I call over my shoulder. "Bury it quickly"; and I carry Melody back along the path to intercept Kandy and Ayah.

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It is evening. The sky is moonless though riddled with stars. An electric storm of great intensity is raging in the upper air. Chill blue lightning rebounds in a series of flickers, throwing the black, humped hills into relief. Thunder rolls in

a continuous barrage above and beyond the dancing horizon. The lights in the *koti* dim and flicker as the lightning strikes and earths.

The pinhead lights of Darjeeling stud the dark backdrop, reach amongst the firmament and rival the stars in brilliance.

Sheila and I stand out of reach of the fingers of light that stretch from the veranda. We are waiting to see the flowering of a giant cactus that is heavy with swollen buds. The buds are writhing to uncoil. The movement is deceptively slow but with every second that passes the fleshy petals spread and a heady, exotic scent is released. In one brief hour, at the dead of night, this strange plant comes to maturity, blooms, wilts and drops, so that before dawn there is nothing to show for the growth of years but a slight protrusion where the flowers sprouted from the limb.

The cactus is eight feet high, tied by strips of bamboo to the Rongbong tree that towers above all the surrounding trees and acts as a lightning conductor for the *koti*. There are only four blooms, but they look as though they might all open within a minute or two of each other. The petals and stamens will remain rigid for about ten minutes. The camera I am holding is set and charged with a flash bulb.

From the great hollow of the valley, where the waters converge at the tail of the ridge, comes the resonant note of a conch-shell horn. We stand motionless, listening, while the zephyr tone is laid upon the night. It is so low that from near at hand it is scarcely audible. Cast in echo, back and forth across the valleys, amplified by vibration from a score of blind defiles, the sound is aggrandized only half a tone above our hearing sense, so that after a few seconds we are not sure if it is merely a disturbance in our inner ears; and when at last the note is strangled in some dark defile we are left wondering if we really have heard anything at all. . . .

“How eerie it sounds!”

“To call back the spirit,” I say. “Tonight Randoz will ask forgiveness of his father-in-law.”

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A flicker of lightning reveals the moon of Sheila's face. The blur of her light blouse is close beside me. The only other features relieving the darkness are the four white blossoms of the cactus.

"I wonder what is going on down there in the river bed?"

"I don't think any European has ever witnessed one of these ceremonies, though I believe they're not uncommon."

"Tell me," asks Sheila slowly. "If you had the chance, would you go down there and see what happens?"

I say "Yes," with unthinking bravado, and laugh. Then I think again.

Now comes the sound of a drum. The beat is steady. I imagine the swan-necked pommel that only a *jankri* may use, tapping the hide surface of the heavily ornamental drum. The unceasing burr of the streaming waters to which our ears are habitually attuned nearly drowns the slight, rhythmic thuds. "Look!" Sheila exclaims, "the cactus is blooming!"

Before our eyes this strange plant has come to magnificence. The scent is powerful; too concentrated for us to appreciate, potent and startling in our lungs. Scores of nocturnal insects congregate within a few seconds. The air is stirred by their tiny quavering wings. A pair of beautiful moon moths swoop out of the darkness to hover above the blooms, their six-inch tapering wing spans palely luminous against the dark bole.

As the magnesium bulb flashes with my film exposed we are left blinded in the white pan of light. This is the moment when the blooms are at perfection, within half an hour they will be brown and decomposing.

"A noise!" says Sheila quietly. "There it is again. It's getting nearer. It sounds like a child wailing!"

We are motionless, listening. For perhaps thirty seconds the night is silent with the medley of insect sounds and the incessant murmur of the river. When the bleak wail comes again it is suddenly near at hand; among the bushes, just beyond the compound. We stare into the night, trying to

The Negligent Son

identify the strange cry. It is a feline sound of pain or anguish, drawn out to a high whine and ending in sharp yelps.

At the crunch of gravel underfoot we whirl to the drive. The old *chowkidar* has come around from the cookhouse, shuffling awkwardly and glancing across his shoulder. From the veranda the dog comes barking, races over the lawn and plunges through the hedge amongst the tea. "What is it, Chowkidar? What creature is that?"

He is very agitated. Silhouetted against the houselights, we see his jerky gestures. "A jackal, Your Honour! A *bowler* jackal!"

"*Bowler!* Mad! Quick," I say, "into the house. . . ."

"Call the dog. Get the dog in. If she's bitten, she'll have to be destroyed." We start across the lawn.

At the top of the steps I turn and call as the mad creature cries out again.

The dog's barking increases. I shout desperately. There is a vivid stab of lightning, followed immediately by the crackle of thunder. I see a dark shape moving down the drive at the moment the lightning dies.

A mad jackal runs in a straight line, heedless of sound and seeing only directly in front of it. Anything it encounters it attempts to bite, and the germ of rabies flows from the saliva and foam of its mouth.

My eyes are still dazed from the light when I spot a creature heading straight for the steps. Sheila calls from behind me and I realize it is our dog obeying. The *chowkidar* has disappeared. I hear the thud of the cookhouse door being closed violently and guess that he is locking himself in.

We hurry inside and shut the veranda door. Again comes the cry of the mad jackal, and then, hard on it, the note of the conch streams up the valley.

And so we go to bed.

The night is sultry. I lie staring into the darkness waiting for the shafts of lightning which cut through the curtains. I think of the coming of the cold weather; the loveliest time

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of the year, when every day is zircon-clear and the nights bear the tang of frost. Electric storms always mark the end of the monsoon.

Faintly the sounds of the ritual drift up. Is the *bhut* exorcized by now?

From the room adjoining I hear one of the children stir. The whimper stops, goes on, breaks and starts again. Tentatively I put out my hand to see if Sheila is awake. She does not respond. Reluctantly I swing out of bed and reach for my slippers.

It is Melody. I switch on the light. Both children are uncovered. I gaze down on their sturdy little limbs, noting the tan and glow on the flesh. Their hair is tousled, fair and soft. In repose, they are very beautiful.

I take Melody on my knee and we sit for a while in silence. At length I ask, "Did you have a dream?"

She nods vaguely and shivers despite the warmth. Her eyes remain tightly closed. "What was it about?" I have it in mind to swiftly dispel her nightmare.

"My donkey!" she sobs quietly. "My donkey is dead; I know. I can hear the trumpet. Listen! They are doing a burying *puja*, aren't they?"

"I expect so." My reply is cautious. "Listen, my pet, do you know that Dassai will be soon?"

She nods doubtfully.

"It will be great fun. All the little coolie boys and girls will have new clothes; they will dance and sing. There will be a big swing on the muster ground, and Kandy and you shall go on it. . . ."

She nods sleepily, thinking this new thought. Gently I put her back between the sheets. "Dassai," she says slowly, "Dassai . . ."

"Yes, soon will be Dassai . . ." but already she is asleep.

XVIII

Snake in the Woodpile

Nothing is quite so infectious as peasant gaiety. Melody and Kandy are enchanted. They stand staring at the four, tall, green bamboos, bent together to form an arch, mesmerized by the pendulum swing of the rope entwined from the apex. They are caught by the happy laughter and shrill cries of the coolie boys and girls gathered round the great swing.

Backwards and forwards sweeps the rope, higher and higher the child dares to go. Up among the fronds of the slender palms and papayas, from where uplifted faces seem to float unattached above the ground, then rushing towards the dust-powdered grass. Small hands clasp desperately as the momentum carries the child outwards and upwards again, for a brief glimpse of the village at the base of the convex hill on the flats beside the river.

At the heights he may not linger. Having tasted the ecstasy of this sensation he becomes aware of the clamorous cries of his companions, waiting to scramble for the rope's end when he begins to slow.

The jostling children edge forward, their limbs protruding as though dissociating themselves from their new garments. The little lads are in Nepalese pantaloons as yet unshrunk, gathered in folds so that their behinds appear mis-shapen, the flaps of their shirts fluttering jauntily with movement. The

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girls' headshawls are vivid crimson, green and azure, their handprinted blouses, fastened with bright safety pins across their narrow chests, the lengths of dyed cloth conceal but do not restrict the antics of their legs, so that they bob and weave into kaleidoscopic patterns of gaudy colours, as arresting to the eye as their laughing voices are to the ear.

"Here he comes!" "Seize him!" "Hold the rope!" "Catch his legs!" Down sweeps the rope, the little mob sways forward, hands out-thrust to grab the swinging figure. Into their midst the rope comes hurtling, thudding against the foremost bodies. There is a moment of panic as its momentum ploughs on; small figures are brushed aside, knocked down in the dust, but the weight of the children tells and the swing is checked. The child whose turn is finished is plucked from the rope like a fruit and hustled from the vortex.

The struggle to occupy the shaft of wood bound at the loop with lianas is sharp and fierce. A boy and a girl glare at each other, both clutching the ropes. With a deft movement the girl leans back, puts one bare foot on the bar, plants the other squarely in the boy's stomach and heaves him flat on his back. Many little hands begin to push the girl. The vanquished boy rolls clear and away goes the swing, bearing the shrieking child, headshawl trailing like an orange flame.

It is the first day of *Dassai puja*. Melody and Kandy have come with Harkabahadur and Ayah to the muster ground to share the excitement. They are dressed in new prints, for it is the custom at this festival for all the hillfolk to have new clothes, and it is incumbent upon parents to provide something bright and cheerful for their children. And would it do for the missysahibs to wear old everyday pinafores when all the coolie boys and girls delight in their own finery?

The plateau is a scene of great activity. Groups of coolies squat around the great swing, gambling fervently. Piercing whistles are tossed across the valley by men summoning luck to their aid as they shake the crown and anchor dice before thumping the upturned brass goblet on to the flamboyant

chart. Then the whole school peers forward as the cup is raised, either slowly or with brash movement, depending on the fluctuating confidence of the gambler. There lie the chipped, discoloured dice, and a great shout goes up to herald the changing hands of annas long-hoarded or hard-earned.

An inherent trait in the diverse races among the hills makes them incorrigible gamblers. Close to Melody and Kandy a Tibetan sits, straight-backed and burly, before his crown and anchor board. At this time every year such professional gamblers come down to the tea gardens. They know that for the few days of Dassai the coolies have a little money in their hands, a few rupees advance of pay. The Tibetan has a roving eye and a jocular manner to foster his ready wit. From beneath his battered pork-pie hat his greasy queue swings free.

Observing Ayah to be without her own menfolk near, and to attract others to his board, the Tibetan directs a subtly obscene remark in her direction. His stentorian voice is resonant; a howl of laughter greets his sally. Ayah pretends to be offended. She hustles the children across to the far side of the plateau.

Melody suddenly darts forward at the prompting of her insatiable curiosity. "No, no, do not go there, Jetti," calls Ayah appalled. "Those men are cutting up a buffalo!"

The great beast has been beheaded; four men work on the dissected trunk. The head, complete with curving horns and lolling tongue, surveys Melody glaze-eyed from the pivot of a bamboo post. Melody stands before the scene of bloody slaughter and returns the stare.

Today, every hillman will eat meat. The annas of households have been hoarded for long weeks, the goats or sheep bought when prices fell favourable and fed punctiliously until last night. Then, soon after dawn, the long *kukris* were sharpened, the creatures daubed with vermilion powder and hung about with garlands of marigolds. The master of each household offered a brief prayer before making the stroke, for a year of luck may be confidently predicted if the head

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falls under a single blow, while the omen of ill-luck comes with the second attempt.

Those whose household is not graced with enough sons and daughters to make the collection of the price possible have to depend upon the slaughter of buffaloes to obtain their meat. So the great creatures have been driven by slow stages up from the plains and today are sold at a rupee for about two pounds. Up and down the lines all over the garden carnage has been going on. Melody is struck by the sight of this carcass, vivid against the placid greens of the hills. Her dress is starched and frilled; her legs straight and firm in the small socks and chalked sandals, but it is the gold halo of her hair which startles the coolies, that and the arrogant tilt of her miniature chin.

The men who are cutting the meat pause in their work and salute her gravely. "Salaam, Jetti!" They wait to be amused by her answer.

Ayah descends and seizes her hand. "Come away, Jetti, this is a dirty place." She waves disdainfully at the fly-covered hide and emptied bladder, flouncing in her new white clothes, glad of a chance to show-off.

A drum tap distracts Melody. She turns to where the long leaf-weighing shed is bedecked with banana leaves and bamboo fronds and hung with paper flags. Kandy, shadowed by Harkabahadur, is already inspecting the decorations.

"What is that for? Will there be a *tamasha*?"

"Yes. Tonight; a play!"

"Kandy and I will come?"

"If Mummy and Daddy will let you."

"I will ask," replies Melody importantly.

A man is squatting in the shade. He holds two drums between his calves; a male and a female drum. In the centre of the larger, a black circle of bituminous compound is glued and by striking this with the heel of the hand at varying distances from the rim the tone can be altered. At the same time the fingers flick lightly near the centre to wring a higher note.

One hand is continually flashing out to jerk a variation on the theme from the second drum, taut to produce an echoing, fuller note.

"There's going to be a *tamasha!*" shouts Melody gleefully to Kandy. "Let's go and tell Mummy. . . ."

"Tell Mummy . . ." echoes Kandy, whose grasp of English is built on reiteration. Hand in hand they scamper across the grass. Ayah and Hakahabadur follow reluctantly, but both little girls with a single purpose are more than their match.

Down the winding path go Melody and Kandy. Grasshoppers leap from the coarse blades, the air is shimmering with dragon flies, normally either attraction would compel investigation for they are intrigued by the myriad small creatures they meet on their walks every day, but now they are too excited to pause.

They turn in at the compound and their little legs go helter-skelter along the shorn turf. Down goes Kandy with a thud. Melody does not break her pace; the news must be carried without a moment's delay. Kandy rises, bottom first, brings her feet up to her hands, and stands on the fullness of her new dress. There is a rending as she straightens, and she promptly topples forward again. Harkabahadur is on her in a flash, his own little face grave with apprehension. He helps her up and looks aghast at the ripped seam of the missy-sahib's *puja* clothes. Kandy fights off his restraining grasp, Melody is already far along the path, first with the joyous news. It matters not that Kandy cannot express it in words; she must be there when Mummy and Daddy learn of the *tamasha*. She sets off in hot pursuit.

Their shrill voices precede the little girls along the drive.

Sheila and I are watching Bambi, the deer, frisk in the sunlight. Quite often we entice him out of his wire-netting cage and he follows us across the lawn, nuzzling at Sheila's palm expectantly. Though he has long been weaned, an occasional bottle of condensed milk is still a treat. The fawnish spots

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have quite faded from his pelt now; he is a glossy rufous, with dense, white underfur and twitching tail. He puts his moist nose to a lupin and delicately nibbles a leaf.

A pair of magnificent swallow-tailed butterflies chase each other in loops, up and around the dahlias. The water-silk sheen of their delta wings catch variations of sunshine and the triangular patches on their lower wing segments change through a galaxy of colours from palest green to violet. Dual crimson stripes show on the undersides when they settle briefly. The bat-shaped appendages at the trailing edge of their wings give the appearance of tails, so that with their five-inches span they look more like birds than butterflies.

I glance at Sheila to catch a reflection from the pleasure in her face. Her skin is tanned to the colour of wild honey; her eyes are clear and full of laughter. Does one's heart always leap when one sees a happy person?

"Listen, I can hear the children. That's Melody calling."

"Ayah took them to see the swing." The voices grow louder. "Here they come now. . . ."

Bambi stands for a moment, then moves in three effortless bounds back to the safety of his cage.

Joey, the monkey, from the vantage of his little house at the top of the pole, is affected by the excitement. He lets out a sharp chirp of surprise, stands upright on his bowed shanks and gesticulates wildly. Around the corner runs Melody, and a moment later Kandy's chubby legs, going like pistons, bring her into the home straight.

"A *tamasha!*" shouts Melody. "Mummy, Daddy, there's a *tamasha!*"

The word can mean any sort of gathering of people and may ambiguously be used to describe either a gay feast or a riot! "Where?" I demand, noticing Kandy's torn dress and having a dreadful moment.

Melody gasps for breath and points. Kandy nods vigorously. "'Masha!" she asserts positively, "'Masha!"

Invariably there are private quarrels at the *pujas* when

rukshi and *jhar* begin to flow. I am suddenly concerned as to how our children might have been involved. When Ayah and Harkabahadur appear and explain the children's excitement we laugh with relief.

"Can we go?" asks Melody.

"It sounds great fun," adds Sheila.

I agree, and send Harkabahadur to call the *munshi* to give me details.

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We are sipping lime juice under the Indian lilac and enjoying the prospect of two or three idle days when Sheila has an idea. "The *munshi* said the play will be at about eight, didn't he?"

"Yes, he'll send some boys to carry our dining-room chairs up to the leaf shed."

"We'll have a sort of buffet supper then, so we won't need the servants! Let's give them the day off! After all it's the *burra* day of their year, and it'll be rather fun being on our own for once. I'll get the lunch; they can leave a salad supper prepared in the 'fridge."

There is little doubt that the servants will be pre-occupied. We shall get very little work done about the house. The cook burnt the toast and the *pani-wallah* broke a cup to initiate the day. The bearer is wandering around with a far-away look, doubtless thinking of his young wife in her gay, new clothes, culling glances from the bucks as she walks among the festive throng. His widowed father is supposed to be keeping an eye on her, but the old man has lost nothing of his own capacity for enjoyment, and with a fanciful eye himself is no guarantee of respectability! The old sweeper was drunk half an hour before sunrise; he stumblingly made an attempt to clean through the *koti* before we were up, then crept off to his little house to continue celebrating in blissful solitude. Ayah has her attention diverted from the children, and Harkabahadur, for all his devotion to Kandy, must find it hard to stand by and watch the other little boys romping in exuberance.

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So Sheila sets out the conditions; when such and such a job is done, when a meal is prepared and refrigerated, when the children are washed and Kandy's dress changed and their hairs redone, all the servants may go. Then ensues such a hustle of activity that the *koti* is like a hive.

I retire to the extremity of the garden and watch a pair of brahminy kites quartering the landscape in wide sweeps. Their red-brown wings and white breasts merge with the autumnal scape. When they circle in directly overhead they are bold against the silver-blue sky.

Within a very short time each servant comes to offer salaams and is gone.

There is a soft, cool breeze that ripples down the valley. The autumn day is faintly charged with flower perfume and filled with the hum of insects among the last of the summer blossom. The magpie-robins, which have stayed around the garden during the monsoon, root familiarly on the lawn within a few yards of the children.

I sit with Han Suyin's *A Many Splendoured Thing* open on my knees, watching the long column of ants plying from among the grasses to a massive clump of bird's eye orchids in the fork of a tree. From the far side of the *koti* I hear Sheila's voice calling. Reluctantly, I leave the comfort of the cane chair.

I find Sheila in the cookhouse, pink-faced from the heat of the ancient cast-iron stove which stands staring with its single glowing eye on three uneasy legs and a pile of stones in the darkest corner. Sheila has donned an old nursing apron and is floured to the elbows. "David, I've run out of wood. Could you chop some? This stove devours sticks like a monster!"

I look around the place with interest. So this is the lair of our little army of servants; this is where our meals are concocted.

Led on by curiosity, I fling open the double doors of a large standing cupboard. An avalanche descends upon me and flows about my knees. All the hoarded treasure of months

past and uniform clothes for wear in the *koti*. There are bearers' white drill smocks and trousers; cooks' aprons; ready-made turbans wound round the cut down crowns of Sheila's old straw hats; a stack of Hindu religious pictures for warding off the evil eye; old tin cans, punctiliously cleaned for tea; bottles; a box of crimson chillies; a couple of pounds of rice in split newspaper; old spoons and knives; a pile of coloured paper which I recognize as our discarded Christmas decorations; string; two eggs; Ayah's spare *saris*; burnt-out electric bulbs; a pair of broken plates, obviously awaiting a favourable moment before being produced at confession; umbrellas; torn shoes; polished brass platters; still serviceable pieces of a cracked mirror—rare value these; armfuls of feathers from chickens long eaten; bits of wire; pots of dried paints; stacks of old newspapers; and a conglomeration of articles that I have difficulty in identifying. The jackdaw coolie mind can find a use for the most fantastic bric-à-brac. I hastily stuff everything back and lean against the door, but not before Melody has slipped into the cookhouse and alighted on a length of tinsel from our Christmas tree trappings.

“She's as bad as the coolies! Such habits are catching!”

“Now what about some firewood?” demands Sheila, laughing.

I go into the hot sunlight and round the back of the cookhouse to the wood stack. The logs are four feet long and up to eighteen inches in diameter. I consider the inadequacy of the wretched, blunt little axe on a splintered haft, that is leaning by the cutting block, and begin to look for the smallest and driest log on the pile.

A movement against the bark catches my eye; the slender scaled length of a snake! It is wriggling into the pile between two logs.

I seize the axe and swing. The blade strikes at an angle across the snake and cuts it cleanly in two. One half slides into the crevice, the other half remains, twitching slightly, stretched on the log.

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Now I am in a quandary. Only the severed end of the reptile is in view. How can I tell which is the half with the head on it?

I reason, the snake would not be moving backwards; it must be the tail remaining. Cautiously, however, I pick up a stick and flick the length off the log. Sure enough it is the tail.

The wood pile, I realize, is an ideal residence for a cobra. Mice, perhaps a family or two of field rats, a host of grasshoppers and other insects available to vary its diet; and I have only cut the creature in two! I do not even know how much I have severed of its complete length, nor whether it is enough to kill the venomous half. I have no alternative but to tear down the whole wood stack and make sure!

The sweat streams from every pore on my body as I heave up the great logs and trundle them a few yards. I intend to only shift the logs at the centre, but as I pull each log out those on each side roll inwards. Every hulk seems a little heavier than the last. My back is protesting painfully.

I methodically curse the little *pani-wallah* through every day of his existence to the depths of his miserable future, as far as possible keeping to a rhythm and restricting myself to one curse per log. If he had troubled to ensure there was sufficient cut wood this, I feel, would never have happened!

Then comes Sheila's urging voice with a number of scathing comments on my wood-cutting prowess. The pile is nearly reduced to the ground. The fetid smell of touchwood is strong. The last logs are slimy with fungus, repulsive to my sense. The starched cleanliness of my white shorts and shirt are no more than a recollection. My breath wheezes, my hands and arms are scratched, my legs are shaky. It is, I believe, impotent rage which drives me to the end. When only a single line is left, half rotted, embedded in the ground, I see the mutilated snake, motionless between two logs.

I am uncertain whether it is dead, so I take up the axe again and this time using the reversed edge I pound flat the evil, poison-filled head.

Snake in the Woodpile

I sink to the cutting block light-headedly. Sheila's voice again; "This stove will be out in a moment. Fine *pani-wallah* you are!"

Mercifully, there are a few slivers and twigs amongst the logs. They only need trimming to length. Moving sluggishly now, I manage to gather a small bundle, but not before Sheila's voice with desperate urgency summons me yet again.

Some fiend prompts me at this stage. I take up the battered length of snake, lay it parallel on the sticks, heap twigs on top, and gather the whole lot in my arms.

When I enter the cookhouse, Sheila stares at the apparition before her, but wisely offers no comment. I dump the pile of wood beside the stove and walk out.

"Good heavens!" says Sheila, as I go, "how the servants ever provide us with service and the meals we get, with things like this to contend with is a miracle. I think it behoves everyone to do their servants' jobs for just one day to appreciate that they do earn their pay!"

I think my hollow laughter is lost on her as she rakes the ashes from the stove.

XIX

Laughter from the Heart

I am sitting in the garden, showered and slightly recovered, analysing the delay in the anticipated clamour from the cookhouse. Melody and Kandy have been picking the heads off the marigolds in the wild garden below the *koti*. They have heaped their doll's pram with the bright orange-gold petals. With her piece of salvaged tinsel Melody has made two crowns to fit their heads, and each child wears one, like a narrow silver halo.

When Sheila calls us in to lunch she does not mention the snake. She is probably not going to allow me the satisfaction of knowing that she was in the least concerned!

It is strange not having the bearer in attendance to serve the meal. The distance from the dining-room to the cookhouse is quite considerable, so I help Sheila to clear the plates and serve between courses. As cook, she brings the dishes from the stove and sets them on the service table outside the door. I act the part of bearer and take them into the dining-room.

The afternoon is very warm. We sit in the shade, indolently listening to distant snatches of sounds from the coolie lines. The fronds obscuring most of the little houses are limp flags against their poles. The breeze has died. From the thatched eaves of one or two houses comes a haze of smoke showing where the *puja* meal is being cooked. The sunset hour is given to the chief meal of a coolie's day.

Laughter from the Heart

Voices sound on the hill above. It is a party of gaily dressed, chattering folk. "I expect they're off to pay ceremonial visits to the houses of their families. They have to have rice stuck to their foreheads as a sign of welcome."

"What is the origin of Dassai *puja*?" Sheila asks.

"It commemorates the Goddess Durga's fight with the monster Maheshur. The battle was long and terrible, but Durga was triumphant and slew the monster. She continued on her way to her parents' house and there they received her with love and rejoicing. Thereafter, Durga paid an annual visit to her home and set the example of respect and approbation which every Hindu owes to his parents."

"Do sons and daughters have to stay with their parents, then?"

"No. It seems to be sufficient for them just to drop in some time during the *puja*. Of course, lots of people in these hills have to travel across the border, to the villages of their origin in Nepal. The journey may take several days; then they stay awhile to exchange the news of a year's separation."

"I think it's rather a lovely idea; a sort of pilgrimage once a year to the house where one was born, and a gathering of all the sons and daughters to acknowledge that the old folk are still important in the family." Sheila pictures the pleasant custom and races on in thought. "The old people must look forward to the *pujas* all the year round, particularly when there are new additions to the family to be shown off for the first time!"

"Lots of the coolies here go into Nepal. They make up a big party and travel together. It means that for a week or so after the *pujas* labour is very short on the garden. During the holiday, the tea bushes flush for the last time before the cold weather, but after the excitement of the *pujas* the coolies are reluctant to start work again, and it's not until the parties arrive back from Nepal that work settles down to normal."

The coolies disappear beyond the brow of the hill.

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Sheila is wielding a diligent needle. She says very quietly, "Isn't it time you lit the bathwater boiler?"

My repose is utterly destroyed. I suggest tentatively that perhaps we might overlook the formality of baths, as today is rather special; but it is really only a token resistance and Sheila does not even take me seriously. Back I go to the wood pile. . . .

The boiler is nothing if not efficient. It has never occurred to me to question a plentiful supply of hot water, now I am confronted with the necessity of finding its source. The ingenious simplicity of the boiler surprises me. It is a forty-gallon oil cask with an eight-foot chimney protruding. Pipes take an inflow and outlet. The whole contraption is on a small dais against the outer wall of the bathroom. Heating the water is achieved by lighting a fire in the pipe. After a second wood-cutting session I am relieved to find the method so simple until, with dismay, I find the pipe will take no twig longer than six inches!

Back I go to wield that hateful little axe for another quarter of an hour. The shadow of the orange tree lies gauntly across the cookhouse roof before I coax a delicate flame up the soot-blackened pipe.

My eyes are smarting from the acrid smoke, I am begrimed past recognition for the second time today. The *pani-wallah* gets thirty-two rupees for doing this job every day of a month. I am satisfied that he earns it all!

It is fun bathing our little girls. We all get very wet and the bathroom is flooded. The sudden twilight moment is upon us before they are dressed.

We go out on the veranda and find that the evening cool has descended. The lights of Darjeeling lie against the sky like scattered gems on a strip of jeweller's velvet. Sheila brushes the childrens' hair into masses of soft, golden curls. They insist upon redonning their tinsel crowns.

The night is stealthily becoming filled with the sound of muted drums. From the lower spur an oscillating chain of

lights is threading slowly up the hill. The coolies are gathering on the plateau.

The dog's sudden barking heralds the arrival of four lads who have come to carry chairs. "The *munshi* sends you salaams, Sahib and Memsahib," says the eldest of the little group. "He says that all are ready to be honoured by your presence."

"We shall come," I reply.

Melody and Kandy are prancing about trying to snatch at the numerous moths that have crossed the light barrier cast from the veranda and now stipple the wall beneath the electric bulb. There are moths of all sizes, from minute orange specks to bullet-thoraxed giants covered in powdered hairs with eyes like glowing coals. But it is a tiny, silver moth which attracts the children most. They point and shout in excitement. "A fairy! Mummy, Daddy, look! A fairy has come!"

Indeed the dainty little moth is quite dazzlingly burnished, and Sheila says at once, "They are right, it is a fairy! What a delightful little insect!"

The delicate wings seem touched by hoar; the slender body the finest mother-of-pearl. The effect in flight is like a chip of diamond. Melody is immediately possessive. "I must have my fairy. Please, Daddy, catch it for me."

"We can put it in a bottle," says Sheila, and she goes through the cookhouse to find one.

At last we leave the bungalow escorted by the old *chowkidar* carrying aloft his hurricane lantern. Melody clutches a bottle containing her "fairy". The moon lies in a tranquil sky. Chiaroscuro mists gather in the valley bed. The night wind stirs with a tang of spicy cooking and wood smoke.

At the end of the compound path the *chowkidar* stops. I can see his silhouette peering as he obscures the light. "What is it? Hold on a minute!" I warn Sheila.

I move past the children and see a body propped untidily against the low stone wall. It is an old fellow, blissfully,

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paralytically drunk. "Only an enthusiastic celebrator," I explain. "Having a good sleep," I add for the benefit of the children.

We stumble on the rocky path and mount slowly to the muster ground which is overhung by an opalescent violet glow thrown from flares around the leaf shed. The burr of coolies' voices is melodious. As soon as we walk into the arc of light a hush falls upon the gathering. There are three or four hundred people, most of them squatting in a solid block in front of the leaf shed, the outer fringe extending to the shadows beyond.

Every face in that vast gathering is turned within an instant. We stand blinking while our pupils adjust, aware of the upturned, disc-like faces. It is a very peculiar sensation to step out of the night into the midst of this suddenly silent multitude. We do not know which way to turn. Figures press in on every side. I feel the swift panic of a recognized interloper, then a quiet voice at my side says. "Salaam, Sahib. Please to come to your chair here." It is the *munshi*. I turn to him in relief.

Our chairs are ranged at right angles to the leaf shed, a little in front of the great crowd. We take our places amidst a certain confusion which serves to restart chatter. A woman has placed her baby, in a basket, on Melody's chair. As she pulls the basket off, the baby wakes and lets out a wail of protest. With unconcern, the woman unpins her blouse and exposes the fullness of her breasts. Melody and Kandy, now seated, watch with casual interest as the baby fastens upon one breast and settles down between his mother's knees.

On our left, the leaf shed is curtained. Ill-fitting lengths of unmatched cloth are slung from a crossbeam. They are blue and yellow, purple and red, yet somehow the diffused light mellows this galaxy of colour, so that they blend to a subtle neutrality. The proscenium is encircled with fronds and trailing creepers on which some of the ripening berries still cling. Lamps and lanterns hang everywhere in tremendous

variety. Naked flames move with the breath of the multitude and gesture weirdly black fingers of soot.

Women, children and men are all smoking. The slow-drifting fug adds to the violet pall. Dozens of babies pepper the mass. We sit accustoming ourselves to the distinctive effluvium. Oxygen is at a premium, but nobody seems to worry. After a few minutes we get used to remaining under the closest scrutiny, relax and begin to take in the fascinating scene. I lean across to Sheila, "See there, our bearer with his young wife. I've just realized who that drunken individual is who was asleep on the path—the bearer's father!"

Sheila laughs. "There's Ayah, too. Look how smart and clean she is compared to most of the women, despite their new clothes. And that's a new gold ring she's wearing in her nose! She fancies herself, that woman!"

The little *pani-wallah*, well to the back and wedged in a long row of animated youths, is wearing a rakish skull cap and a startling white shirt. With malicious satisfaction I clench fingers over my blisters and remember the soot in the boiler pipe!

There is a sudden blow struck from the hide of a drum; a single deep note. After a brief flurry among the huge audience, a hush settles. The curtain twitches, once, twice, half opens, then falls away as the wire parts in the middle and brings the whole lot down. The interior of the leaf shed is revealed, packed with young men and boys tiered from the roof to kneeling children at the front edge. All have their eyes fast shut and their hands clasped in prayer. The drum sounds a rhythmic tap and all begin to chant. They pray for the success of the performance.

The volume of sound swells, perhaps a little haunting even to the western ear, fluctuating through a range of half tones while the drum weaves in and out amongst the notes, rousing a stentorian bass, diminishing to a choked tap as the voices fade. On and on it goes, and the singers never move, only the dark holes of their mouths retracting with the pitch.

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After ten minutes the singers show no sign of stopping, and the *munshi* walks forward, calmly seizes the two ends of wire, twists them together and jerks the curtains closed. Behind it the voices tail off gradually and the drama proper is now ready to begin.

The audience do not applaud. There is a burst of excessive hawking and spitting as they take small bags of tobacco from the folds of their clothes and roll cone-shaped cigarettes or stuff wads into crevices between their teeth. Melody and Kandy have hardly moved. Melody takes a quick peep at her fairy in the bottle and returns her attention to the stage.

The curtain twitches, once, twice, and falls down! The play goes on. The scenes last only a minute or so, sometimes a single actor appears, makes a casual remark—just sufficient to forward the action—then wanders off. At the end of each scene the *munshi* comes forward, determinedly repairs the wire, obviously certain that next time the curtain will draw. It never does!

I begin to study the *munshi* closely, and at last detect the trace of a stagger. Each time it becomes a little harder for him to collect the loose ends and join them. I am satisfied that he is allowing himself a little stimulant for his task between scenes, as is meet and proper for the headman at *puja* time.

The play does not continue consistently. Occasionally a clown will appear with face blackened and a large target painted on his posterior, go through a routine which mainly involves trying to pick up a length of bamboo, during which operation he puts his head between his knees, falls over backwards, presents the target to the audience and gets the bamboo in a variety of awkward positions. The coolies howl, roll on the ground helpless with laughter, beat each other on the back, weep tears of mirth, shriek breathless advice and are reduced to limp impotence for fifteen-minute stretches.

The countless scenes drag on, the plot seems barely to have hatched after an hour. Sheila leans towards me. "How long do these performances usually go on?"

“Most of the night. They are dragged out as long as the audience remains.”

“Do we have to stay until the end?”

“No. Having put in an appearance, we can go any time from now.”

None of the players know their parts. Dialogue is supplied by a prompter who sits behind the backdrop and reads out each sentence. The actor simply repeats it with his own impromptu variations. The use of make-up is lavish, especially by the boys who take the female parts, so that each face is a startling caricature which the coarse hemp wigs make more bizarre. The Nepalis have a natural aptitude for acting and seem devoid of shyness. One scene in which two people have a quarrel is most realistically performed. At the point where the prompter is ignored, the rivals come to blows. Encouraged by cheers from the audience, the scene continues for some time before one of the actors steps backwards off the stage and lands on top of an old man who is engaged in following the time-honoured custom of surreptitiously relieving himself where he sits.

It would seem that any scene after this will be in the nature of an anticlimax. We prepare to leave. Suddenly the reedy notes of a harmonium take up with a tenor drum. The music is bold and brisk and on to the stage leaps a slender Nepali girl.

Fast and compelling the tempo throbs. The girl keeps time by tapping one foot steadily on the boards, jangling the double circle of silver bells tied round each of her ankles. Her body is supple and sensuous; high breasted above a bare midriff. Her raven hair is loose to her waist; features even and aquiline beneath the heavy greasepaint. Here is no garden coolie, but a professional touring dancer. A girl following the trade of her outcast family. The hillfolk, while having a strict code about such matters, are never adverse to patronizing the dancers, so that their livelihood is assured and they are made welcome wherever they travel.

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The girl's grace is astonishing, following the drum with extraordinary precision in a host of tiny movements of finger, thumb, wrist, elbow, shoulder, neck, hips and legs.

"Do you know that every movement in the dance has some religious significance?"

Sheila is fascinated. She nods.

The girl spins and weaves, her slender arms contorting gracefully. She wears a green *sari* looped high about her loins. A short, yellow, fringed blouse, massive gold ear-rings and a nose ring set with coloured chips.

Faster, faster flows the music, forced by the pulse of the drum. The girl's hips and hands jerk as though shocked, her neck makes sharp sideways tilts so that her chin comes over her shoulder but her head remains upright. Her ankle bells become a burr of sound. The excitement of the dance becomes intense.

The coolies are mesmerized. Almost to a person they take up the rhythm, clapping and swaying, their eyes riveted on the cavorting figure.

I glance around at the dark-set faces—some are blank, some filled with lust and daring. Eyes hold fear, faces are suddenly primitive, almost to a level below human, gripped by the message which the dancer is bringing to them. On and on winds the music, and then suddenly it stops. . . .

It stops dead and not a sound is heard. The dancer leaps behind the curtain. For several seconds there is a poignant hush, then slowly the audience begins to stir, looking about them as though uncertain where they will find themselves. It is over, they realize. The strange erotic land their minds have been inhabiting is now shattered and they cannot return. On some faces I see relief.

Sheila stirs. Kandy is sound asleep, slumped in her chair. "I think we should go."

"Yes."

I signal to the *munshi*. He comes unsteadily towards me.

“That was very good dancing, Munshi. Who made arrangements for the girl to come?”

He looks at me strangely, but I conclude he is puzzled by the question. “Come, Your Honour,” he says smiling broadly. “For one minute can you come behind the curtain?”

I follow him up on to the staging and behind the backdrop. The dancing girl sitting on a box is breathing heavily. A thin man with sharp features stands by with a goblet of water. “This is our Sahib,” says the *munshi* heavily, waving an effluent hand. “He wants to see the one who dances!” He stifles a belch and laughs raucously.

The girl stands up, and I am suddenly acutely embarrassed. Everybody seems to be grinning broadly. Several of the actors have gathered round, and I wonder what conventions I have flouted to bring about their amusement. “Salaam the Sahib,” commands the thin man severely, but still smiling.

The girl seems ready to laugh herself. She puts her thin hands together and says, “*Namasti!*” in a strange, half-broken voice. Everyone’s smiles grow broader, and then the shocking truth begins to dawn upon me. The dancing girl is a boy!

He opens the yellow blouse, peels it off and lets fall the padding. Taking up a strip of towel, he begins to briskly rub his smooth, boyish torso. Everyone bursts into a delighted roar of laughter in which, eventually, I am forced to join.

As I return to where Sheila waits I realize that of all that huge gathering Sheila and I were the only people not to appreciate the impersonation.

I pick up Kandy and carry her carefully, stepping between the packed figures to the edge of the light. A *chowkidar* has seen us and has seized a hurricane lamp. He lights our way back down the path.

The darkness has a quality tonight that may almost be felt, like smoke brushing the cheek. As we reach the compound path the sound of the drums starts again.

With turf springy under my feet, I carry Kandy up the

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steps to the back door. The harsh lights of the *koti* stream out and our smoke-tortured eyes protest.

We put the children to bed and Melody is asleep before Sheila has undressed her. I go through to brush my teeth and when I come back Sheila has put the light out and is a dark hump under the sheet.

In darkness I undress. As I climb into bed, I hear the drums faintly, and the sound of coolie laughter.

My foot encounters something in the bed. My senses restir on the instant. I leap out of bed, wrench back the sheet and flick on the light.

It is the tail of the snake in the wood pile!

From the other side of the bed comes a tired, happy chuckle. . . .

THE CHILDREN OF KANCHENJUNGA

XX

Prelude to Disaster

Our little car stands on the drive absorbing the conglomeration of items being shuttled into it. The picnic hamper, filtered water, camera, spare films, the children's sunbonnets and cardigans, bottles of boiled milk, vacuum flasks, fruit, cigarettes. Our day's outing begins to take the proportions of a fully equipped expedition.

Melody comes down the steps of the veranda, her huge Teddy-bear with its single button-eye and torn breeches clutched in her arms. "He wants to come too, Daddy!"

I am checking tyre pressures, feeling the early sun pleasantly warm on my back. She watches me in apprehension as I appraise the capacity of the four feet long back seat. A Teddy-bear that has flown from England in the care of his mistress and has settled so uncomplainingly to life on a tea garden cannot be left out of a picnic at *puja* time.

We have chosen today, the Diwali *puja*, the Hindu festival of lights, in true Indian style, as an auspicious day for our first long trip. Our destination is Kalimpong, furthest charted point before the ill-defined frontier of Tibet. Here the muleteers arrive from Lhasa, clinging to their traditional India trade. It is the last bastion before the bamboo curtain, a tiny shanty town, with a single hotel full of journalists, mountaineers and anthropologists, all anxious to record their interests while time remains and memory serves.

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Dew on every upturned leaf shimmers like silver frost at the moment of evaporation. The bite of dawn is still exhilarating; the thin air, fresh-washed from darkness, brings the snow range into startling proximity. One by one, our servants come out and stare, with the awe that moves all hillfolk when they gaze upon the abode of their gods.

Sheila turns and surveys the ridge mounting from the *koti* to the wooded head of the valley. Somewhere, like a vein on the limb of the hills, runs the track we must take to reach the main road. Only the crest is gilded by sunlight, the slopes shadowed by the Ghoom spur. "It is like some enchanted place," she says lightly. "Are we ready? Let us leave quickly, before the spell is broken!"

As I put the pressure gauge back with the tool kit, my eye runs over the spare cans of oil and petrol. "All ready!" I affirm.

Ayah emerges, fatter, blander and more complacent than the last time she travelled with us in a vehicle. That was when Sheila first arrived on the garden. Kandy was a tiny baby then, Ayah nervous in threadbare clothes. Sheila shoots me an intimate glance; laughter in her eyes. Ayah is now very different. In a new *sari* with an embroidered border and fine wool headshawl, she wears the conscious dignity of her position like an emblem, not sparing the other servants so much as a glance as she walks with an elegant, hip-rolling gait, holding Kandy's hand. She exudes an aura of sandalwood oil from her beribboned plait.

The springs of the little car creak and sag as Ayah heaves herself between the children. The servants line the drive to watch us pass, raising hands to their brows in salaam. The long day of relaxation stretches before them to be unbroken by tiresome directions from an energetic Memsahib. Only Harkabahadur looks pensive, unhappy to be left behind. They watch anxiously as we settle and I touch the starter to stir the engine.

I race high for a moment to warm the oil and they leap



backwards wide-eyed. They regard the car as a beast of uncertain temper to be trusted only from a distance. Then as we move forward sedately in bottom gear their brown faces crack into delighted smiles and they wave back to the excited gestures of Melody and Kandy.

I brace myself for the effort of taking the first hair-pin at a gradient of one-in-six.

With my shoe flushing the accelerator against the foot-board and the back wheels spinning sporadically in the finely powdered dust I bring the little car to within six inches of the precipice, swing sharply to full lock and just fail to graze the fender on the rock wall of the upper bank. The engine sobs a trifle, picks up and begins the steady ascent to the next corner. Sheila says with exaggerated gaiety, "I thought you had repaired the road!"

Up and up toils the little car. The wheel under my hand bucks and wrenches from side to side as the tyres grind into ruts or ride protruding rocks. The track meanders between the tea bushes at different levels. The engine rises to high E and holds the note. Behind us Melody starts to sing the first bar of a Nepali folk song, her intonation without falter on the difficult half tones.

Threading our way out of the valley we pass the deserted factory on top of the ridge and breathe the tang of warm tea leaf. An indolent *chowkidar* offers us a desultory salute, watching us sail past with baleful eyes. Ayah calls out to him, flaunting her position.

Now the breeze comes to us cool and refreshing. As we gain altitude the children's spirits soar. They are chattering excitedly to Ayah; calling out their observations. "Look, a little baby goat!" "See that old man, Mummy! He's laughing at us. He hasn't any teeth!" "Kandy, there, there! Lots of chickens!"

We mount the steep gradient through the lines. Coolies throng the track, rushing from their houses at the sound of the engine to watch us pass; averting their heads from

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billowing dust that is sucked behind the car by the displacement of air.

Where the track levels along the crest of a saddle we see the small, dilapidated bungalow of James Evendon. "One day," says Sheila with infectious bonhomie, "we'll call on him unexpectedly and let Melody and Kandy bring a variant to his life!"

At last we leave the high-growing bushes at the top of the garden and plunge suddenly into jungle at the fringe of the forest area. Immediately the aromatic tang of damp vegetation assails our senses. No dust here upon the road, but parallel depressions in the sodden surface, worn by the turning wheels. In the contrasting chill, once among the trees, a little tremor passes through Sheila. Melody stops her tuneless singing. A sombre compulsion to concentrate seizes me.

We come to the first bridge and edge across it timorously. The warped timbers shift under the wheels, creaking protest. Sheila, beside me, stares straight ahead, not daring to glance into the void below. On the other side the impermeable jungle closes in on us again.

Here and there orchids splash relief to the variegated greens. Remote in dignity and sorrow, a few impressive weeping cypresses tower to eighty feet. Perhaps it is the very breadth and sweep and magnitude on every side which awes us!

Ayah sits still as a rock, eighteen inches from the back of my neck, a hand clasping each child's dress, her short brown fingers entwined in the fabric, her eyes round as marbles, focused, like Sheila's, just beyond the bonnet of the car. The children, unmoved by our spectacular progress, hang over the sides and delight in the sensation of height.

We come to the longest of the bridges. "The *banda beir*" I call, and my voice is swept without echo into the abyss.

"The Monkey's Leap," chorus the children in excitement as we venture slowly on to the sideless ramp. The fall hangs

a curtain of fine spray across the centre boards, which are slimy with verdant moss.

As the icy spray touches their bare arms, and the thunderous shuttle of water overwhelms their hearing, both children are struck by sudden terror. Their wails come thinly to me above the crescendo of sound. Once across Sheila takes biscuits from the glove box and hands them over her shoulder. Mollified, their high spirits quickly return.

We stop and put on our woolies. In less than an hour we have climbed five thousand feet and the change in temperature is very marked. From an outcrop, we see we are on a level with Darjeeling, spread in the saddle of a ridge away to our right.

We start again and are immediately thankful for the manoeuvrability of our little tourer, for here and there the track has been blasted through sheer rock of enduring hardness, and is no more than a ledge, eight feet wide, not least of which dangers is a low overhang. The rock is scarred where the angle-irons supporting the hoods of tea garden jeeps have grazed it.

We are edging along one of the narrowest places when Sheila stiffens perceptibly and mutters under her breath, "My God!" I stop the car and switch off, for I too have heard the sound of another engine coming towards us.

I depress the hooter desperately in staccato barks, and in that treacherous place, with the rock wall only just beyond my elbow, thrusting the sound back at me, and with the dank ever-restive noises of the rain forest seeming loud in contrast to the straining engine, we sit galvanized, praying for the sound of an answering horn.

Not ten yards beyond us the track is obscured by a sharp turn. I debate in a single thought the chances of leaping from the car, reaching the corner and signalling the approaching driver; but the thought is futile, for round the rock forges the blunt nose of a jeep. I hold my finger rigid on the horn button. At this moment some intricate part of its mechanism

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defaults and the sound cuts out. The second of ensuing silence is appalling. The windscreen of the jeep comes into view and the driver sees us. We watch the jerk of his shoulders as his hands make a reflex lunge for the gear lever. He stops dead.

There is a moment of heavy respiration, for unconsciously we have all been holding our breaths!

The jeep is a mass of bodies. Fifteen coolies have somehow found hand and footholds and still the driver has room to turn the wheel. It is a jeep from one of the Indian-owned gardens which has carried chests of tea to the railhead at Ghoom. The coolies, returning quite without fear from visiting relatives or from a day's trading in the bazaar, are excited as children on a funfair scenic railway at their reprieve from a long trek home.

The driver disentangles himself from the packed jeep and comes towards us, grinning broadly. I say a few things to him in Nepali, a little too colloquial for Sheila to understand, but Ayah squirms with delighted approval and I remember too late that both Melody and Kandy already speak the language with all the colourful idiom of hill-children.

"My horn is broken, Sahib, but I heard your car shouting," the driver says reasonably.

"Well, my reverse gear is broken," I declare untruthfully. "You will have to back up!"

He salutes acknowledgement, still grinning. "First unload all these people," I shout, prompted by a pang of conscience as he walks back to the jeep, but he does not seem to hear.

The engine roars to life and the jeep takes a two-foot jump towards us, then jerks into reverse and shoots back round the corner, steered, I suppose, mainly by the confused shouted directions of its occupants.

I start the car and follow. The jeep is backed up in a narrow alcove cut in the bank. As we pass, the coolies cheer and wave to the children, pointing to them with delight.

The last of the bridges is left behind and soon the track

widens and levels off and the trees begin to thin before giving on to the main road.

Released from the toil of bottom gear and a rugged surface the little car purrs contentedly and the tyres sing on the good tarmac. Within a few minutes we arrive at the village of Ghoom.

At the apex of the ridge, just above the road, a cluster of prayer flags stand out from their poles to demarcate the holy ground of a monastery. To the Buddhists, the highest temples and monasteries are the most holy, so Ghoom is a place of pilgrimage for many wandering monks. We pass a pride of them striding along, shaven heads bared, impervious to the sharp breeze that hurtles fragments of low-flying cloud across the vista. They are strapping fellows, fair skinned as Europeans, deep-chested and broad. The coloured strips of their felt knee-boots are gay beneath their rubicund robes. They watch us approach with faint surprise, but as we draw level the children wave and their faces break into ready smiles.

One of the tiny locomotives is standing in at the ramshackle little station, emitting steam with an angry hiss disproportionate to its size. Just as we are about to pass it, the driver leans out of his cab, sees the children, reaches for the pullstring of his hooter and gleefully blows a long, shrill blast. The train leaps forward with a tremendous jerk and we find ourselves moving alongside.

The children clap delightedly. "A race, a race!" shouts Melody. The two-foot wide track runs parallel to the road, and they have a chance to see the small pistons pumping furiously, the high, polished brass smokestack belching a white canopy.

Where the track dips sharply the two men sitting above the buffers begin sprinkling ashes on to the lines to give the wheels purchase. The sight is so amusing that we all roar with laughter for the next half mile, until we reach the village of Jorebungalow, where the line crosses the junction of the road and we stop to let the rattling carriages pass.

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The quaint train goes round a bend, its shrill whistle sounding, descending to Siliguri and the plains. Our route lies on the opposite slope, and we bump over the rails and between the open shops on each side of the narrow road.

Here, on the crest of the ridge, the commercial focal point, is the stronghold of the *Mawaris*, the moneylenders of the district; reminiscent of the old central European ghettos. The interior of each shop is spread with cotton-filled mattresses, and upon these the orange turbaned plainsmen sprawl inelegantly, checking their endless accounts which they keep in triplicate; one copy for themselves, one for tax auditors and one copy for their partners.

We begin the long glide down the Teesta Valley, for the Kalimpong range lies on the other side of the river. I switch off the engine and we move with the keen breeze in our faces, glad of the silence. Sheila relaxes a little and starts to enjoy the trip.

A splendidly girthed coniferous plantation stalks beside the road for six miles out of Jorebungalow. Ahead of us, a constant stream of birds shuttle from overhanging boughs. Family parties of mynas strut in the dust at the turn of every corner, only rising and taking wing into the trees when we are nearly upon them, from which vantage point they scold us arrogantly, opening their wattled beaks in vehement articulation. Among the foliage, scarlet and black minivets dodge and swoop with incredible swiftness. "Three cheers! Three cheers!" shrieks the small spotted babbler as we pass, and he has a cousin to take up the call every fifty yards, while from the deepest thickets the timid shamas sing as sweetly as any English blackbird.

Down and down we drop into the valley. We pass clumps of thatched and whitewashed houses, neat and charming and surrounded by masses of marigolds. At one of these villages a huge-humped cow stands beside the road, mildly inquisitive. "Look," shouts Melody, jumping up and down on the back seat in excitement. "It's wearing a necklace!"

The cow has been garlanded with a string of orange marigolds and its great head has been daubed with vermilion powder. Dogs also, among most domestic animals, are thus honoured during the Diwali festival.

Sheila says, "There's Kalimpong." I draw in to the side of the road and stop.

Seen from the opposite side of the valley it is hard to believe that the panorama includes a town. The river, five thousand feet below, is harsh as a carbon line by contrast with the greenery. The swell and fold of the mountains that bar Tibet stretch fifty miles West and East. The snow caps are salient against the sky. I think of our box camera, but reject its inefficiency as unworthy. We all sit gazing until the sun scorches our eyeballs and we turn to each other with prismatic tears on our cheeks and agree that here we shall have lunch.

I allow the car to run forward beneath a black seris shade tree that overhangs the culvert. We get out on the grass verge beside the sparkling water.

As we sit munching sandwiches in the dappled shade a troop of Bengal macaques monkeys come swinging through the trees. There are forty or fifty of them of all sizes. A large female comes into the tree above us and we see the tiny pink-faced baby monkey clinging to her underfur. Melody and Kandy can hardly contain themselves. Kandy's hand is suspended in mid air conveying a biscuit to her open mouth.

The monkeys, chattering and grimacing at the car, are every bit as fascinated by the fair-haired children as Melody and Kandy are by them! Their whistles come on the still air with remarkable shrillness, as the largest males, guardians of the troop, take up vantage positions among the trees and keep the females and young monkeys within safe limits. "Joey's uncles and aunties," says Sheila. The children nod in complete comprehension. So absorbed are we by the antics of the monkeys that an hour passes before our picnic is finished.

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As we reload the car, the whole tribe makes off down the valley.

It is now two o'clock and I try to make time down to the Teesta bridge. Sheila says quietly, "We want to get home before dark!" Then I know that her fear of the forest road has been a shadow in the back of her mind all day, and it dawns on us that to reach Kalimpong will mean a night drive back.

We go on for another quarter-hour allowing ourselves to get used to the disappointment without admitting it to each other, for we realize we shall not reach our objective. At a village just above the bridge we stop. The gradient is very steep and the road very narrow, but there is no cutting into which I can back the car. We come to a decision. To turn back here will allow us a leisurely return in daylight.

Sheila gets out of the car to signal to me as I reverse. The road quickly becomes lined with children, all dressed in their new *puja* clothes. I edge round gingerly in a series of short moves, careful of the deep *nullah* that lines each side of the road. It is not until the car is turned to face the road we have descended that I realize just how steep and long is the climb before us. I refill the radiator from a stream. Already, fingers of shadow are starting to reach up from the valley bed as the sun slips towards the line of hills.

It will be dark by six p.m., our return is a race against time. I push the little car hard, hoping the engine will not overheat, second gear most of the way, for even where the road levels off slightly the distance between the hair-pin bend allows little time to change up.

We reach Jorebungalow and cross the railway line. A brief pause here to let the car cool off. Melody and Kandy notice a big bunch of coloured balloons hanging on a way-side stall, and they clamour to be given one. Sheila submits and there is a further delay while red thread is tied to two gaudy balloons and Melody and Kandy take possession.

At Ghoom clouds have concentrated to a density that

compels the use of our fog lamp. We stop again to put up the collapsible hood and fit the celluloid side-windows. The car seems very small and cosy inside. There is no chance of making good time now. I edge the car slowly forward descending from Ghoom, hoping that each bend will show us a clear road, but the damp mist continues to envelope us all the way down to the forest track that turns off the main road. Here, mercifully, we reach the limit of the cloud.

The brief dusk denudes the panorama of colour, except for the peaks of Kabru, Jubonu, Simvo and the southern face of Kanchenjunga, which are shot with florid light. In the glacier's beds mists diffuse.

We reach the *banda beir* and rattle across the disjointed planking. The trees on the jungle-bound slopes seem to draw closer together, their weird clothing of vines and parasitic vegetation seems denser. No birds call from the thickets. The furtive rustling of falling water that assailed our ears earlier in the day, now seems muted and passive.

Sheila says, "I feel the forest resents the noise of the car engine." I laugh, but I know what she means.

Melody and Kandy, clutching their balloons, have fallen asleep on either side of Ayah in the back of the car. Ayah has pulled a blanket across them for the dew has begun to strike. The chill increases every minute.

Ensclosed behind the engine, I feel warm and comfortable. I am filled with an exhilarating confidence and satisfaction in the little car. Already my mind's eye is filled with pictures of us all on other picnics, further afield; perhaps we might get to the plains, or over the border to Gangtok.

We round an overhang and nearly run down three Nepalis walking in single file down the track. They jump to the rock wall and press against it as we glide past with little room to spare.

They are two men and a woman, laden with bundles and carrying cooking pots, so we know they have come a great

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distance. They stare in curiosity, and the men salute. Sheila remarks, "It is a pity we are not able to give them a lift!"

We have been driving for about fifteen minutes after passing these people when we come to a series of irregular turns where the track steepens. Trickling water has cut a groove down the inner side of the track. The hillside falls away almost sheer in places, but studded with huge, naked slab rocks for about five hundred feet before the jungle thickens and trees sweep a further two thousand feet to the valley bed.

I notice the track is very damp and the wheels are sluggish on the spongy surface.

At one moment we seem to be proceeding with perfect equilibrium; the next, I am aware of the off side front wheel making an independent move outwards and downwards, With the gentlest sideways surge I feel the outward edge of the track crumble and drop away into space. The bonnet of the little car dips and begins to roll away into the chasm. We seem to hang in space. . . .

With the two babies asleep in the back, and us three adults sitting bolt upright, the car slowly topples over and outward. . . .

I am counting each time the car rolls over; once, twice, thrice. Each time we are righted, the car lands with a splintering crash on one of the rocks. My hopeless, desperate thought; this has gone far enough, I must do something to stop it.

I do not recollect being flung from the car, but at some moment during the eternity since we left the track, I find myself stretched over a shelf of rock, listening to the sickening sound of the car rolling and twisting, bounding and crashing from rock to boulder, going on down into the abyss.

A reflex brings me to my feet, and there is the car, with, I believe, my dear ones in it, hurtling in a welter of crunched metal and shattered glass.

The wreck goes on down out of sight into the rank jungle below. A terrible silence follows; a silence so brief and yet so

timeless, charged with such loneliness and desolation, that I immediately think myself a stranger in another sphere.

Two gaudy balloons, abjectly pathetic, yet filling the nightmare pattern, drift slowly past.

What fear, what terror fills my heart! What unquiet, lifetime slumber lies before me? And as the slow and dreadful realization fills my mind, I am swept forward to, I think, the brink of madness.

I feel the urge to hurl myself downwards on to the blazed trail slashed by the car. The jungle growth that sprouts in patches between the slab rocks is shorn to an even, near-vertical path. My wife and two little daughters with their Ayah, have gone to their death.

I am alone.

The slope is littered with parts of the car, battered or crushed out of recognition; here a headlamp, half the bonnet cover, there the splintered shell of the battery. The wind-screen, intact, balances wierdly upon a rock.

A spasm shakes me and my legs refuse their burden. I sink to the ledge and sit stupefied with horror at this thing I have done, while blood trickles slowly down my forehead and into my eyes.

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XXI

Festival of Lights

The resonant, single-note call of a thousand cicadas begins on some secret signal. The pulsating burr sounds from the jungle all around. I lie with a dreadful awareness of the trees, which seem to move together under cover of gloom, menacing, gloating. Sheila's words come back to me; "The forest seems to resent the noise of the car . . ." And I remember that I laughed.

Sheila and the children fill the mellow scenes of yesterdays that come crowding upon me. Only my love for them is left, and the burden of it will remain now to be dragged through all my tomorrows.

Then comes a voice, calling my name. From some distance, clear, yet at first without tone. Again and again it calls, bleakly with frightful desperation and with a terror and loneliness to match the chill that strikes my heart.

I recognize Sheila's voice.

For long seconds I cannot answer. Fear rivalling hope comes coursing through me. I draw breath deep into my lungs and call in flat futility, "It's all right, Sheila. Stay where you are, it's all right;" and I hardly know the voice which speaks the platitude!

There is no reply.

Blood hangs in a clotted fringe from my eyebrows. When I put up my hand, the touch of my own fingers is strange and

disturbing. Pressing my palms against the rock face, I get to my feet. Movement stirs nausea within me and I lean for a moment with tightly shut eyes, trying to fight down the animal instincts which urge that I do not move.

Toiling, zombie-like, with infinite weariness, I start to scramble up the slope, clawing at the razed jungle growth that sprouts between the rocks. I am conscious of my movements, yet seem to be watching as though from outside myself, unable to help co-ordination of my faculties.

I drag myself over a ridge of rock and find Ayah, lying motionless. I shake her shoulders and watch her eyes slowly refocus and recognize me. As I jerk her, she lolls; her left shoulder is obviously out of joint, but it is her right leg that she points to. A jagged cut, slashed through layers of fat and muscle on her calf, exposes silver tendons behind her knee and about six inches of bone.

She is too shocked to speak. I pull her upright and make signs to her that she must try to drag herself up the slope.

A little way from Ayah, in a cleft between two massive slabs, I see Melody lying, still desperately clutching her Teddy bear, with an arm that is twisted unnaturally. The toy's face rests against her cheek, the single goggling button-eye like some ghastly caricature. Melody's pallor is terrible. Her mouth is open, the jaw muscles limp. She has vomited across her chest. As I pick her up, she makes no sound and does not seem to know me.

Among the littered chips of wreckage I crawl. Behind me, Ayah gallantly struggles higher. The slope is convex so that in the dimming light I cannot see the track, nor how far we have fallen. With agonizing slowness we urge our bruised limbs to haul us upwards.

Then at last as I grope over the rim of the track for a final hold, I feel a hand touch my wrist and peering up I perceive Sheila kneeling, with the soft bundle of Kandy beside her. They were flung out of the car after it made two or three

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turns, and beyond scratches and bruises neither seems seriously hurt.

So we gather on the track and sit, not speaking, while the cicadas wind their strange love calls through the forest and night comes down, and the Diwali *puja* lights spring to brilliance along the Darjeeling ridge. And on the dark hill-sides, and far below in the valley depths thousands of tiny lamps are lit by the villagers and tea garden workers outside their thatch and wattle huts. From the great dominance of my position on the jungle-clad slopes I survey the myriad scattered lights that makes of the valley an enchanted place on this night of all the year.

The countless lamps outline the smooth hills, undulating like huge waves on a petrified sea, across Sikkim to the pale snows of Kanchenjunga, faintly luminous against the night. And when the firmament grows bright, it becomes hard to see where the sky ends and the world begins, for one is a reflection of the other. If the Hindu goddess, Lakshimi, is abroad this night she must look upon the scene and be well pleased at the glory heaven and earth accord her!

After a long while the people whom we passed earlier come down the track, lighting their way with resin flares.

I ask one man to go to the nearest tea garden to summon help from James Evendon. The other man and the woman I persuade to stay with us, for there is comfort in unshocked faces, and they seem not in the least surprised to see us; and when we point to where the car has hurtled, they spare not a glance for the scene of disaster. Also I feel that our message will reach competent ears more quickly if the man has to return for his companions.

We light a fire and wash the blood from our faces in the *nullah*. Sheila realizes that Melody's arm is broken. I go part of the way down the slope again to drag up the rear seat which had been flung out of the car. On this we lay Melody, for the icy ground frost has reduced her to shivering.

The night seems endless.

Far below, we see the headlights of a jeep moving among the trees, climbing steadily towards us. It is not until this moment that, ironically, I notice that our clothes are hanging in shreds. But it is futile to worry now! Ayah's *sari* has served well, torn in strips and used as bandages. My shirt also has been torn up and the legs of my shorts are in tatters. Sheila's dress holds in patches.

It takes the jeep twenty minutes to reach us from the point when we first saw it, but we can bear this philosophically for the end is in sight. The vehicle finally comes up to us, the fierce lights, like eyes, glaring at our miserable little group clustered on the track. We are immediately surrounded by a crowd of people who emerge from the jeep. Last comes James, bland and inconsequential, with the platitude, "Hello! What's happened?"

He has brought a first-aid box, but we think the children are too shocked and chilled to wait a moment longer than necessary, and we fear that unless Ayah's leg is stitched soon it might be beyond recovery. Now begins the task of fitting everyone into the jeep. Four of the original complement have to be left to walk back. These individuals make no pretence that they have come for any reason but curiosity, and set off gaily down the track.

The driver, with a nice sense of dramatic timing, waits until this moment to announce that he has not enough petrol to get us all the way to the hospital. With this load, he explains, on the bad surface of the forest track, he will have to drive in first gear nearly all the way and in some parts with the four-wheeled drive. James curses the driver with all the fluency of thirty years in the hills, but the luminous petrol indicator remains flickering just above the empty mark. We leave it to James to decide what to do. I do not think that Sheila or I have it left in us to make any sort of resolve.

"We'll chance it," says James characteristically. The driver lets in the clutch and then begins a ride back into the realms

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of nightmare. The driver's best hope is to cover the ground in high gear without changing down into the four-wheel drive, for this would drain the petrol tank very rapidly. He drives at a furious rate, spinning the steering wheel in his hands, swaying his body as he takes the violent bends, while the jeep bucks and leaps about on the scarred surface like a mad thing, lurches towards the precipice edge and grazes the hood on the rock overhang. But, miraculously, it holds the track.

Ayah, now quite paralysed with fear and pain, crouches on the floor and repeats over and over "Not again! Please, Sahib, not again!"

The trees of the forest hurtle past, and between them, far below, the scattered lights lining the valley seem to multiply with every yard we cover and take on the horror of an underworld of demons who seek to lure us to destruction. And all the while the needle of the petrol indicator trembles at zero. What secret elixir kept the jeep in motion we shall never know, for long after the needle has ceased to twitch and jerk and lies lifeless at lowest ebb, the engine throbs steadily and the miles fly beneath the wheels.

At last, the main road.

Through Ghoom and into the saddle of the hills, where the driver switches off the engine and we glide through the night, crushed in the overloaded vehicle, silent and tense, as the crop of lights surmounting the ridge draws Darjeeling slowly nearer. Then the lights are all around us, thousands of wicks floating in tiny clay saucers of oil, placed row upon row before the low mud houses. And when we reach the final gradient, and the ignition is switched on, the engine responds and we climb the last mile into Darjeeling.

We feel the gentle hands of huge Bhutia porters lifting us carefully, and their soft voices talking in soothing tones to the children.

The Planters' Club beside the hospital is resplendent with light, and as we are borne up the steep slope to the open doors,

Festival of Lights

a vivid trail of golden fire weaves into the sky behind a Bengali rocket and bursts in a shower of crimson light above the bazaar. . . .

THE END