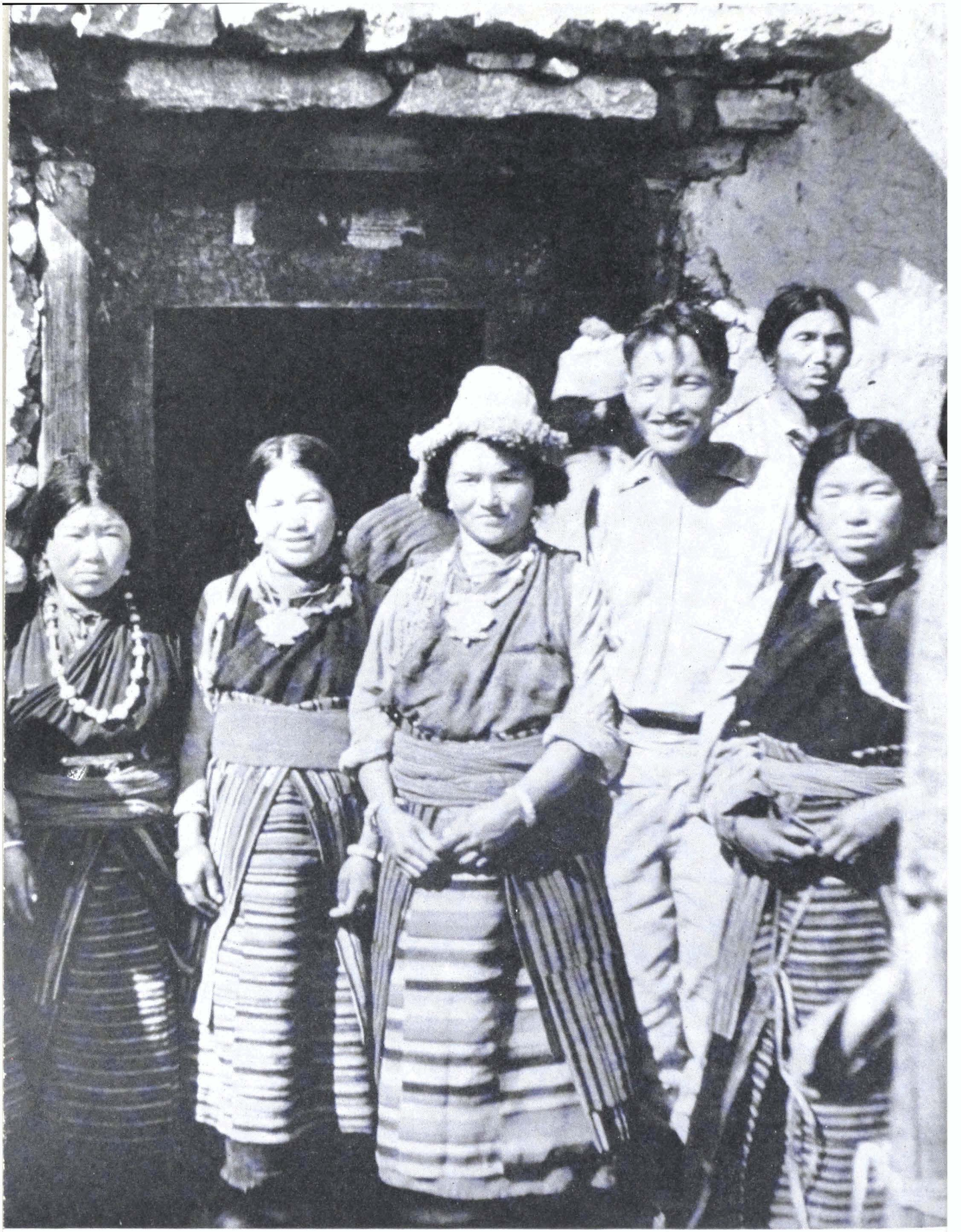
JENNIFER BOURDILLON

VISIT to the SHERPAS



Guests at the Wedding Feast at Namche Bazar

Jennifer Bourdillon

VISIT TO THE SHERPAS

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CHAPTER ONE

East Together

MY HUSBAND came home from Nepal with strange and wonderful tales. Mainly he talked about Mount Everest. He told me all about the Reconnaissance Party under Eric Shipton, and said how surprised and delighted they had been when they found a likely way up to the south. We talked and talked about everything that had happened on the mountain and Tom had to answer all my excited questions, until at last I was satisfied and almost felt as if I had been on Everest myself. Then, from talking over the report which the Reconnaissance had brought home, we turned to the chances of the next expedition. Tom was eager to go back to Everest for a full-scale assault, and I quickly caught his excitement.

Everest itself was not the only source of stories and interest. I asked about the journey through Nepal and I heard of the wild and majestic country which the expedition had crossed in the three weeks' march from the nearest road to the mountain. Tom showed me photographs of the track they had followed: alarming bridges waved in the air above swollen rivers, paths

climbed in zigzags out of narrow gorges, and great jungle trees grew right out of the pictures while the climbers could only just be seen on the ground below. All my ideas of size and scale were shaken. Tom gave me figures for the height of mountains and the depth of valleys, but they meant very little to me. Many peaks are over five miles high, and the track up the side of a valley, from the river bed to the nearest col, commonly climbs 5,000 feet in a couple of miles on the map—a gradient of perhaps one in two, which lasts for hour after hour. Since Everest is so high, it should not be surprising that its neighbours are comparably huge and its foothills, by any other standards, enormous. Yet I could not grasp the scale of things, and I still thought of the Himalayas only as overgrown Alps.

Though I could never think of the country on a large enough scale, I was able to have some small idea of how beautiful it is. Colour photographs showed the magnificent forests in autumn, and picked out the radiance in the snow. Tom talked with joy of the high valleys with their strange birds and flowers, and I knew that he was longing to be back.

Most tantalising of all were the stories about the Sherpas. These people had for many years gone with Himalayan expeditions as porters and, indeed, as friends. They had been a vital part of every attempt on Everest and had shown themselves tough and cheerful and willing. Before the war, nothing was known of their way of life at home, and when Tom came back at the end of 1951 the Sherpas' home country had been visited by only two small parties of climbers. Shipton's Reconnaissance was the second; the first, in 1950, had been a party of four

American climbers, led by Mr. Oscar Houston and joined by the British explorer Mr. H. W. Tilman.

These two expeditions went to look at Everest from the south, hoping to find a route up that side since the original route could not be used now that Tibet had been closed to the West. Their way to the south side of Everest took them through Sherpa country, and they had the thrill of being the first Europeans to see the Sherpas at home. They were greeted with noisy delight, welcomed into all the houses, toasted and feasted and cheered. The climbers learned all they could of these strange and happy people, but there was no time to branch off from the one main track to visit the smaller, scattered villages, or to join in the plain routine of the Sherpas' daily life. They were sorry to have to go on, but they could not delay for long; both parties had come to Nepal to climb, and their interest in the people had to be put second. To reach Everest they crossed the snowline and left behind them the last of the Sherpa villages.

When they returned home, months later, their main reports were of Everest, but they brought back, too, unusual stories of the remote and cheerful villagers. Tom described them to me, patiently, again and again, and I tried to imagine what it feels like to be a Sherpa. I saw the Sherpas smiling out of photographs and I saw pictures of their low stone houses, their yaks and their gay Tibetan dress, but I could not begin to understand them. One thing which always amazed me was their huge delight in the climbers. They were much too pleased with their new visitors to allow them peace or privacy, but would stand and watch and roar with laughter all the time. Tom told me how soon one tires of being poked and scratched

and how awkward it can be to be permanently on show. I could hardly believe that anyone should think of Tom as a circus exhibit and I wondered again and again at these mysteries of Sherpa manners.

I had my idea at supper one evening. It now seems the most obvious thing to have thought of, but at the time it surprised us both. I told Tom that when he went back to Nepal I should like to go too, and that while he climbed his mountains I would live with the Sherpas and travel round their villages. I wanted to know more about them, and there could clearly be no better way than this.

Tom was gloriously understanding, and though he pointed out the difficulties he did not try to change my mind. He told me that travelling conditions would be hard and the living conditions not much easier. He himself has on occasion led quite a tough life but he had come home from Everest hungry and weary, having lost two and a half stones, not on the mountain but on the journey through Nepal. I was not a climber, nor had I ever thought of walking for pleasure. I had never had to go without bed or breakfast, hot water, baths or electric light, chairs or tables, knives or forks, or a pillar-box at the bottom of the road. Tom wondered a little if I knew what was in store. I would have to cover many hundreds of miles, travelling often across difficult country and always on foot as the tracks are too steep and awkward for animals. Food might be limited and odd. Usually there would be shelter for the night but as the country grew higher and wilder I might have to sleep in the open and, if it rained, keep as dry as possible under the most solid boulder I could find. Sherpa houses are not equipped with beds, so that even when there was a

convenient house to offer shelter I would have to sleep on the floor.

Tom touched on the danger of disease. He told me that he had passed a village of some sixty people, of whom forty had died within ten days of some obscure infection, possibly typhus, possibly a sort of plague. For some reason this did not worry me. I was quite confident that London inoculations would be able to resist all bugs, even of unexplored Nepal. I was wrong, but have never regretted my rash confidence. If I had known the risks and the horrors I would have stayed at home, and that, I am sure, would have been a great mistake.

I planned to leave the track that had been followed before and to visit the unexplored valleys on either side. Tom warned me that I would have a lonely adventure, cut off from him and from home for weeks at a stretch, and the prospect did seem a little alarming, simply because it was unknown. But at the same time this made it abundantly exciting. So few places are still unvisited by western travellers that I longed to find some valleys where I might be the first. I had looked on Tom with a new awe when he came back from Nepal. Here was a man who had been to far places and seen strange people. It thrilled me now to think that I might do the same myself.

There was another major advantage in the scheme: though I should be alone for much of the time I would travel with Tom as far as the Sherpa country and we would be together coming home. This would be happy and cut out several weeks of miserable separation. It was this hope that cheered me when I hesitated before the problems and difficulties, and this, I think, was the final and compelling reason that urged me on.

Time was short. We decided to act on the plan and, through the British Embassy in Katmandu, I at once requested permission to enter Nepal.

As we waited to hear the reply, the fever of planning died down. We calculated my chances of being allowed into the country and we thought them very slight. Nepal before the war had stayed apart from outside influence, and the very few Europeans who were given entry—British diplomats to the Residency, and an occasional engineer—were restricted to the small plain round Katmandu. The mountains and their foothills remained unvisited. Mallory had looked down from Everest on the rich and beautiful valleys, and Lord Curzon had hoped to see them for himself, but this privilege had been withheld even from the Viceroy of India. Nepal was a secret mountain kingdom, and chose to remain so.

Several risings since the war have led the ruling family, the Ranas, to share their great power with an elected council. This has started a change of policy and Nepal now gives entry to a few selected travellers and, with them, to new ideas. Her closest contacts are with India. Many of her present politicians were educated there and the Indians showed a ready sympathy for the risings. Nepal shares her northern frontier with Chinese-occupied Tibet, and it is natural that India should take a pointed interest in Nepal's safety, and natural, too, that Nepal should look to India for friendship and protection. But India has worked for peace between Communist countries and the West, and under Indian guidance Nepal was not likely to join in the cold war on either side. At first it was not at all certain that she would wish to make friends with the West, but now, in 1956, she follows India in

trying to live in harmony with all the world. The frontier to Tibet stays open and can be crossed freely, but at the same time Nepal has contacts with Europe and America. Various United Nations agencies have brought help, good will and advice; under the American Point Four programme Nepal's resources of land and minerals are surveyed and where possible put to good use; and Nepal has taken part in discussions under the Colombo Plan. Mountaineers and scientists are allowed to try their skill and increase their knowledge in the unknown Himalayas and a welcome has been shown to parties from Europe and New Zealand, the United States, Latin America and Japan. But in the winter of 1952, when I waited for permission to go in, Nepal's unveiling was still slow and cautious and gradual. Even for major climbing expeditions permission was uncertain and hard to obtain. As the weeks passed without a reply we grew more and more despondent.

While I was waiting I went to see one or two missionary societies. It occurred to me that some mission outpost could use untrained help, and I thought that perhaps I could take a few routine jobs off some hard-pressed missionary and still have plenty of interest, though somewhat less adventure. That I should even have thought of this shows how little I knew of Nepal. I learned from my visits of inquiry that foreign missions have been firmly barred and that although there is now one Catholic school near Katmandu this has been tolerated on the express condition that religion should not be taught. Other missionary societies prefer not to function on these terms, and to them Nepal remains a closed country. Their secretaries were friendly and agreeable people, but they

took rather a poor view of my chances and I came away discouraged.

Tom, meanwhile, was preparing to go, for he was due to leave for Nepal in the first week of March. He was not going to Everest, since 1952 was to be the year of the Swiss; the British party planned instead to try Cho Oyu, to test oxygen and to exercise climbers in readiness for the assault on Everest in 1953. Cho Oyu is a smaller mountain (26,860 feet instead of 29,002 feet) but it is only fifteen miles from Everest and from my point of view the change made no difference. Tom would be taking the same route through Nepal and, if only I were allowed to go with him, I could carry out my plans just as easily.

All the time Tom was moving around at high speed. He was arranging for oxygen for Cho Oyu and he also hoped to take out and test various devices planned for use on Everest the next year. I saw very little of him as he chased these several gadgets all over the country, and we were conscious of how short a time was left to do so many things. I was stirred to action by his example, but could not be wholehearted about it, for I dreaded the disappointment of staying at home and the more thoroughly I made my preparations the worse the disappointment might be. Still, time was short and I had to act. I could not think it was necessary, yet to do nothing might lead to chaos. As a gesture I went to be inoculated against the lurking plagues of the East. I bought a pair of walking shoes and I made an evening dress. The dress, of course, was for Katmandu: the edges of civilisation support a far more civilised life than we expect to lead at home. The shoes, with some elderly

clothes, were all I could think of for the many weeks of mountain walking. Later, at Tom's insistence, I added a sleeping-bag to the little pile.

Time passed, and it became more urgent that I should hear from Nepal. I had written to Katmandu late in January; Tom was to sail on the first Friday in March.

On the Tuesday, three days before Tom sailed, I had to go up to town. The cable came while I was out and our village postmaster, the most helpful and competent of men, promptly phoned it through to my parents in the hope of reaching me there. My mother took the message: there would be no objection to my entering Nepal. It was not clear if I should be kept docile in Katmandu or if I would be free to wander at will in Sherpa country, but I did now know that I would be sailing with my husband and sharing at least a part of his adventures.

We had to leave home on the Thursday and as we were setting out our postmaster came with a letter. This was from Katmandu again and was more detailed than the cable. From it we learned that I was not to be in any way restricted. There would be nothing to prevent me from carrying out my full plans of moving in the wilder mountain country and of living with the Sherpas. We locked up the house and went off in great excitement. A few rushed farewells and we had sailed.

The voyage itself was for me the start of the adventure. My acquaintance with boats extended only to channel steamers, hurriedly boarded and gratefully left, and the long, slow journey to India was a new and different pleasure. Most of the people on board, one gathered, were travellers of great experience and of copious recollec-

tions, and I felt small and landbound. But I quickly came to enjoy the regular pattern of meals and rests, and it was most pleasing to have so much leisure. A good part of the long days on deck was spent in trying to learn Urdu, to take me round Nepal with fluency and ease; but I made less progress than I had hoped with my new studies. The textbook had been devised for officers of the old Indian army and my good intentions evaporated before such phrases as "Boy, the enemy is about to attack with bayonets and rifles" and "You are charged with going absent without leave." It seemed futile to memorise long lists of military vocabulary and I was offered little else. I shut my books and took up my needle, to produce a wardrobe fit for an explorer. I sewed useful pockets to everything I planned to wear and I knitted half a pair of stout nylon socks.

From time to time there were ports of call, each stranger than the last and closer to the East. At Algiers alone I felt defrauded: I had expected darkest Africa and found the south of France. Everyone was speaking French. Only the thickly-veiled women who walked secretly by French buildings and down French streets were foreign to me, and they seemed out of place. Port Said, in contrast, was exciting, hot and crowded. There were many more wrapped women and more hopeful, shouting merchants selling their bright leather-work up the sides of the ship. Our boat left harbour and we moved slowly through the Canal and into the Red Sea.

Aden has camels, and Indians who sleep on nails; I felt happily convinced that we had really reached the East. It is a great centre of free trade, and we chased up and down in the great heat, looking for a small camera that

would be suitable and cheap. Half-cooked but successful, we returned at last to the boat. I had never met a camera before, and as we crossed the Indian Ocean Tom explained to me the workings of its many knobs and buttons. I hoped I would remember all I was told, and bring back a recognisable record of the Sherpas, and I decided to aim high and try mainly with coloured film.

We landed in Bombay and I loved India at once, though at first it was different from my dreams. I had expected something more oriental than the solid Victorian public buildings, post office, cathedral and railway station, or cricket on the green, open maidan. The large cars and the bright lights, the noise and speed and trade, are no doubt genuinely a part of India, but they are far less distinctive than the people and the country which we later saw from the train.

This was much more as I had imagined India to be. Every station was packed, not with travellers but with whole families who brought their meagre bedding and camped on the dusty platform. Children and beggars sought your attention and your money, and to win a readier answer to their incessant appeals they paraded their sores and deformities. So often it was a miserable sight. Meanwhile sticky fruits and bottled, tepid water were being hawked the length of the train, and cows wandered at will, too sacred to be moved and bringing life to a standstill whenever they got in the way. The weighing of luggage would come to an end if a cow chose to use the machine. At every stop we met this same noise and bustle, this dust and heat and smell. The din of hundreds of voices chattering in many languages almost covered the fretting whistle of the engine. The driver,

who had given his warnings with no effect, would decide at last to leave. From every carriage door legs and arms waved in the air as people tried to board the moving train, and the business on the platform went on as noisily as ever, neither hearing nor caring that the train had gone.

Inside the carriages people settled down, and men in loose cotton dhotis went back to squat by the open doors, trying to catch the breeze and lurching with the movement of the train. They were amazingly stable and never fell out. Not many women were travelling, but there was one near us, a strict Hindu lady who picked up her prayer book on leaving Bombay and chanted her way across India. At rare intervals she ate or slept, and once she spoke to me to find out if I had any sons; on hearing that I had none she lost all interest and turned to her canticles again.

Most of all I enjoyed the nights we spent on the train. The air was warm, still and heavy, and the rattle of the wheels through the silent night sent me to sleep happy in the knowledge that we were steadily travelling east. From time to time we were half-awakened by noises of stations, and listened drowsily to people banging furiously on the door of our carriage, convinced that there was room inside. Then the train would start to move and the wheels take up their regular, soothing rhythm as we went on again towards Nepal.

It took us three days to cross India and by the end we had seen something of the Indians themselves. There were the other travellers, there were crowds at every station, and in the long journey we passed many small villages and could see the peasants busy in their usual jobs, all unconcerned that the train was rattling by. The

women, perhaps, gathered with their waterpots at the well, or swept the omnipresent dust thickly into the air. Children played half-naked on the ground. Men rested in the shade of the deeply thatched houses, while a slight meal was prepared and cooked outside. A few lean and listless animals made up the scene. So many of the villages were poor and the dusty earth seemed to promise little in the way of crops, and we remembered that life here is always precarious and that a late monsoon means famine. Yet, even passing quickly by, we could see that there was more to these Indian peasants than just their great numbers and their poverty. The women had dignity and grace, the children smiled happily, and once or twice we passed scenes of dancing and joy. I wanted to leave the train and join them and I was impatient to reach Nepal, for there at last I could travel on foot and meet and mix with the people.

Several members of the climbing party had been with us on the boat but we separated at Lucknow. The others went to Jainagar on the Nepal frontier, taking with them the great weight of the expedition's stores. From Jainagar they planned to walk due north, leading a long procession of porters to Namche Bazar. This route had been chosen to avoid confusion with the Swiss party, which was approaching Everest from the south-west, but Tom and I were to fly into Katmandu and, travelling light, to follow a few days after the Swiss. This pleased me very much. I wanted to see Katmandu and I liked the idea that Tom and I should travel on our own.

We went to Patna, which was hot and dusty in the great flat plain of Bihar, and we took a rickshaw to the airport to book our flight to Nepal. Here we ran into

trouble, for our passports and our various papers did not satisfy the officials. They were not unfriendly, but they said that they had never heard of us and firmly refused to let us board the plane. There was much discussion in many languages, and we were told that we should have to wait until our story could be checked. We drove back to the town, sadly, reddening in the strong sun and coughing with the dust. We did not like Patna—at any other season it may be a charming place, but in the spring, before the rains, it is hot and dry and overwhelming. The sun pours down and the baked earth gives off a spreading heat which invades even the cover of the shade. We had to wait two days before we were allowed to leave and we stayed there very miserably, dreaming of the cool, clear hills and chafing at the delay.

Katmandu, when we reached it, was the more enchanting by contrast. Within one hour of shaking from our feet the dust of the plain we had touched down at the small, rough airstrip in the hills. The air was fresh, grass was all around and growing gaily, everyone seemed cheerful and bright. It might have been another world and I loved it from the start.

We were met on the airstrip by Colonel Proud, the First Secretary at the British Embassy. He was to be our host for the next few days and he drove us in his shining modern car to his home on the far side of Katmandu. It was a beautiful drive. All round us high hills and small green mountains guarded the edge of the plain. The plain itself is miniature, some fifteen miles long by ten across, but it is green and fertile, the richly silted bed of a former lake that once was trapped in the mountains but now has broken through and drained

away. The rivers which cross it are wide and cool and the fields are a lush and vivid green. Through the clear, crisp air we could see the carvings on even the distant houses, and the bright paintings on the shrines. We drove slowly through the narrow streets of the city, past the high and guarded walls of the royal palace, and along a pleasant shady road to the Embassy buildings.

The Embassy stands on a slight rise, and from its gardens you look down on the plain below. The site is very lovely, yet a century ago it was neglected and shunned as the home of evil spirits. It was given to the British, who built first a Residency and then, just before the war, a graceful and elegant Embassy. The wood is still thought to be haunted but the expected vengeance of outraged spirits has not dared to disturb the dignity of the quiet and spacious house. Near to the Embassy, just through the wood, is the house of the First Secretary, and here Colonel and Mrs. Proud gave us a generous welcome. Our visit to them was an unbroken pleasure and we greatly enjoyed the comfort and peace of the house and the friendship of our host and hostess. Colonel Proud had been an officer in a Gurkha regiment and from him I learned of the bravery and loyalty of the Gurkhas; he was dignified and very kind, and I came to have a new respect for their officers. Mrs. Proud was a fine woman, intelligent, chic and active, who spoke with knowledge and enthusiasm of the many strange parts of the Himalayas which she had visited in her searches for unknown or unusual birds. We met, too, the youngest of their three daughters; the other two were of school age, and in England.

We saw a good part of Katmandu in the four days we

were there. Sometimes we were taken round by Colonel or Mrs. Proud, both of them expert guides; for the rest we wandered at our leisure and explored odd corners on our own.

Katmandu, like most places, shows as its treasure things new and old, but here all that is old has come from the eighteenth century while all that is new is conspicuously fresh. There is nothing older and nothing in between. The town had a long history of trouble and disturbance and in 1750 suffered a great and final sack at the hands of the Gurkhas, who had overflowed from the high valleys of the north-west and settled in the tempting and prosperous plain. They rebuilt it completely on the ruins of the town and for nearly two centuries no change at all was made.

All over the town there are temples and shrines : I was told that there are more than seven hundred in all, and even in the separate squares I very quickly lost count. They are of many shapes and sizes, from little ones rather like drinking fountains to proud buildings set on vast pedestals of stone and brick. These look like pagodas with three, four, or even five layers of tiled, red roof. In the afternoon sun they are bright and spectacular, in the evening they are mellowed and rich. Decorations are painted boldly and gaily and the wood of the many pillars and rafters is carved into intricate designs. To guard all this splendour fierce stone animals stand before the shrines, in pairs and at attention. They are sturdy, stocky little beasts, their growls fixed for ever by the sculptor, their coats painted on as an afterthought in startling and improbable shades. Mostly, I think, they are lions, but some are elephants and others must belong

to new and exciting species thought up for the occasion. Hindu and Buddhist temples stand side by side, and this I believe is very rare. There is a pleasing tolerance and the worshippers interchange quite happily for the greater variety. Tolerance may of course be the product merely of apathy, but here the hundreds of shrines are well attended and stocked with offerings and with gaily-coloured flowers. Sadly, too, on the appointed days the Hindu temples are the scene of animal sacrifice.

The streets are for the most part narrow, shut in by tall, straight buildings which stretch on either side in an unbroken row. These houses, like the temples, are old. They show a wealth of dark carved wood in their doors and wall arcades and in their high balconies which sit on huge supporting beams. The town has been lucky to last for two hundred years, for the risk of fire is surely as great as anywhere in the world. If this close mass of dry wood were once set alight, in no time at all the whole town would go up in flames. The houses give straight on to the streets and it is simple for anyone, man or beast, to look in through the open window or cross the threshold of the open door. It is dark inside and the heat is strong, stronger even than in these narrow streets, so all the families come outside to do their work, to play, or just to sit.

We liked the people we saw. The women smiled and went on with their work, sitting cross-legged in the road as they winnowed rice or fashioned their short tight blouses; the men usually stared, but in a friendly way; only to the children were we a mild sensation. Whenever I pointed my camera at some rich carving or at some fine vista, all the children of the neighbourhood rushed

towards me with waving arms and with shrieks of joy, utterly wrecking the view. I hoped to muddle them if I pointed first in the wrong direction, but they were bright enough to guess what was happening and they seemed to love the game. Time after time they ruined my artistic efforts; but perhaps it is nicer now to have them grinning at me out of the prints, even though there are various fine buildings in Katmandu that I have put on record only in part.

Soon these children will have seen cameras in action so many times that they will no longer rush from their play to investigate the ritual, but now they find the whole performance fascinating and new. All sorts of surprises have suddenly been put before the people, modern machinery, strange gadgets and manufactured goods, and with them new ideas. Katmandu, once so remote and sheltered, cannot take in everything at once and the results are on occasion incongruous and a little droll. The plane flies in and out twice a day when the sky is clear, and it is accepted and known; but if you show a zip-fastener to the crowd they will treat it at first with suspicion and awe and then, as they learn to work it, with extravagant and noisy delight. There are many fine new cars in Katmandu, and one short stretch of tarmac. But in 1952 every gleaming vehicle which was driven around had been carried over the hills from India on the shoulders of stalwart coolies. And even on the beautiful and crowded tarmac, progress may well be held up by the sanctity of a stationary cow, for as steam gives way to sail so petrol must give way to milk, and if, being a cow, you know you are inviolate, then there is no need to hurry off the road.

There is a smart modern shop, with glass in the windows, which displays its goods on polished tables. There are rows of small dark shops in the bazaar, where the stock is thick with dust and the owner squats outside. If for any reason you should need English cold cream, tinned condensed milk, or a battery for your torch, you will find what you want in the bazaar. If, on the other hand, you are seeking the traditional metalwork, caskets and jewellery still made by hand in the old designs and with inherited skill, you will see them only in the fine new shop.

New ideas, too, give rise to some excitement. Politically, things are changing: before the last war the Rana family were absolute rulers, but now there is an elected Congress to advise the King. There are no traditions of cabinet rule, nor a civil service of long standing, so ministers come and go and the changes are upsetting. Education spreads and there is a university college, but when we were there a great part of the university had left its studies and gone to prison. Some trouble had led to the incarceration of large numbers of students, and their detention in quantity was throwing such a strain upon the guard and upon the resources of the prison that a general amnesty had been proclaimed. The students, however, could see no reason why the incident should end so tamely. They were quite happy as they were and they refused the offered pardon and ignored the pointedly open doors. It was a rare dilemma for the governor, and supporters had gathered to cheer on the defiant students and the indecisive guards. To our great regret we had to leave before the end.

The lively people and the town's rich charm were

snares to my plans, for my great delight in Katmandu was utterly driving away all eagerness to reach the Sherpas. I could think of nothing to rival the splendid fascination of this extraordinary town, and even though we intended to return at the end of our time in the hills I was very reluctant to leave.

I was a little cheered by Mrs. Proud's encouragement, for she had great experience of trekking: indeed, both Colonel and Mrs. Proud wished that they could spare the time to join us on the march. My curiosity revived still more when I met Peter Aufschnaiter. He had come to Katmandu from Tibet where, with Heinrich Harrer, he had lived for seven years, and he hoped to go back to the mountains to map the frontier for the Nepali government. This would be a mighty work in the wildest country, for the frontier follows, very roughly, the great Himalayan watershed. Herr Aufschnaiter was reserved and spoke little of his wanderings, but his very silence seemed rich with memories and he looked quietly content with the strangeness he had seen.

Our preparations were few, for we were travelling light. We met Namgyal, the small Sherpa who had been sent from the Himalayan Club at Darjeeling to join us and to stay with me for the season, and he produced an even smaller friend. This was Norbu, a shy, thin, smiling man, who had come with Namgyal from Darjeeling in the hope of finding a job. He looked useful and pleasant and we agreed to take him with us for the journey in. These two in their turn arranged to find three porters from Katmandu to help to carry the loads as far as Namche Bazar. Our first efforts at oral Urdu were halting, and when Norbu and Namgyal rushed

cheerfully away we wondered how much they had understood. But all was well, for they returned the next day, still beaming broadly and bearing a vast and varied collection of light aluminium mugs and dishes and plates. We arranged with Namgyal the exact time of our departure and went indoors to enjoy to the full our last evening of comfortable living.

The next morning was cool and fine, and we woke to the sound of Sherpas and porters clamouring for loads. It was, it seemed, essential to make an early start. We dressed quickly and ate hurriedly, and then climbed into the lorry which was to take us, our Sherpas, our loads and our porters, for the first few miles across the plain. In no time at all it had started and was steaming noisily out of the Embassy grounds. We waved good-bye to our host and hostess, we took one last glance at the house where we had stayed so happily, and we turned out of the gate towards the hills.

CHAPTER TWO

Across the Lower Hills

THE MORNING air was clear and bright and we started off in good order to drive across the plain. We had to force our way against a stream of people who were pouring into Katmandu for some celebration and were driving before them unlucky sheep and goats for sacrifice; but groans from the engine and shrieks from the lorry's raucous horn soon cleared a path and the animals and men jumped aside and fled into the houses that lined the narrow streets. We moved confidently ahead, honking our way past a military policeman who stepped forward to challenge our right to proceed, and lurching to avoid the little shrines that are scattered like traps across the road.

Some way out of the town the lorry began to make the most alarming sounds. From the offside back axle came a hideous grating and Tom diagnosed privately that the axle hub—a very necessary part of the vehicle—was rapidly and irreparably falling apart. Our driver, however, seemed much less concerned at this than at the

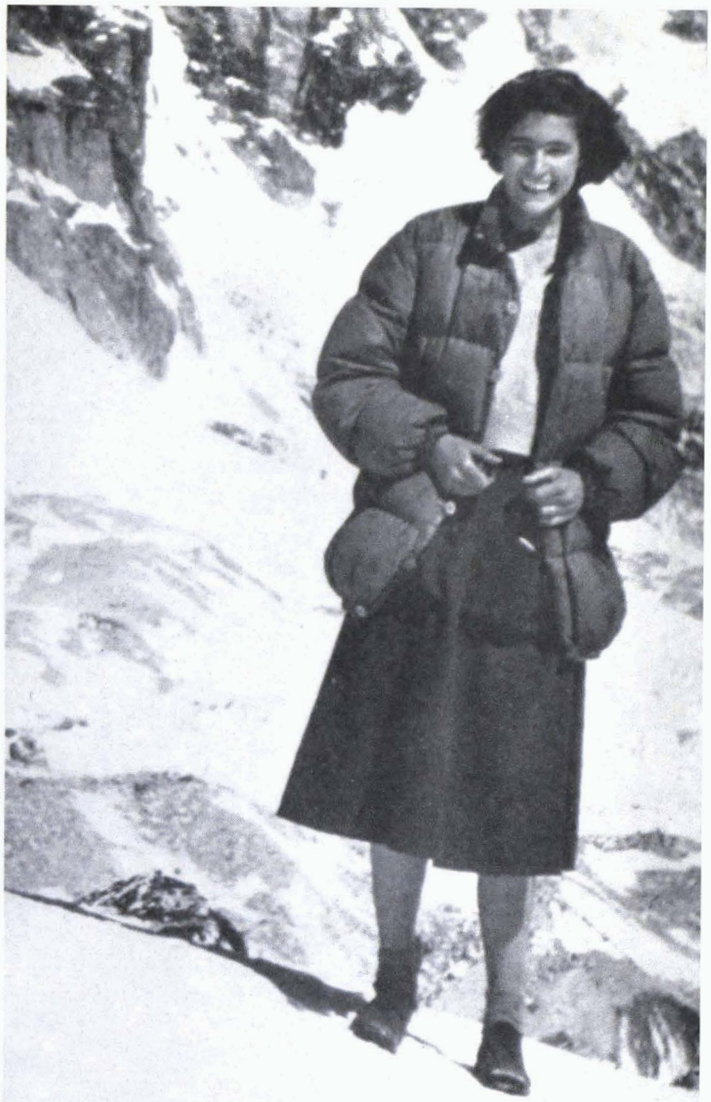
churning noises in the radiator, which presently hissed forth wild gusts of steam, blocking all view of the road and pouring its hot spray into the open cabin. We stopped. Our Sherpas, our porters, the driver and his mates all jumped down, made for a small stream at the edge of the road and started to scoop up water in anything they could find, our useful new tin mugs, somebody's hat, and in their own bare hands. Most of the water was spilt in the general confusion but some reached the radiator; the hissing grew more furious, but then it calmed to a gentle, steady bubble. After so much excitement the lorry and the driver needed a rest, and for ten minutes we sat and waited at the side of the road. Then we began again and we covered a couple of miles before we had to stop to cool off for a second time. After that we were nearly there. We drove into Banepa to the noise of a breaking axle and we came to a halt with a screeching of brakes and in a cloud of steam.

Quickly we unloaded the lorry, and our baggage was thrown into a heap at the side of the dusty road. Namgyal bustled about, sorting it into large loads for the three coolies and into two lighter loads for Norbu and himself. This was quite fair, for the coolies were engaged only to carry and would be free once we reached camp in the evenings, while our two Sherpas would carry a little, cook a great deal, and act as guides where necessary. On an expedition the Sherpas are usually separated from the other porters. At home they live a hardy mountain life and graze their yaks round 16,000 feet; they are used to heights and to the cold and they are small and sturdy and tough. Many years ago some of them left their homes and went to settle in Darjeeling and they quickly

learned to make a living for themselves by going with European parties who were climbing and exploring in the mountains. Soon it became the standard practice to take Sherpas on these expeditions for they are cheerful companions, they travel easily in hard, high country, and as porters at great altitudes they are magnificent. As well as carrying loads they act as personal servants, one Sherpa to each climber, and many climbers come to look on them as friends. The coolies, by contrast, come from the hotter valleys and the lower hills. Usually they are recruited near their homes and here the coolies were all Nepalis. There are several different Nepali tribes but all these tribes are, racially, cousins to the Indians and are quite unlike the Sherpas who originally came over from Tibet. Even the lower hills are too hard and steep for pack animals and the Nepalis are expert at carrying loads; in the hotter parts of Nepal they feel at home and there they are better porters than the Sherpas, who may be wretched in the heat. But the Nepalis rarely go high and they come only as porters for the early, lower stages, and since they are employed for a limited time they do not act as personal servants nor do they grow into friends and companions. They do not share the Sherpas' duties of buying local food and cooking it, nor of finding somewhere for the party to sleep at night, and it is accepted that in the hotter valleys the Nepali porters will bear the main weight of the load.

Our three coolies seemed very capable. Two were old but still well able to carry; they wore white cotton trousers, shaped at the legs but billowing above, and roughly fashioned cotton coats. The third was dressed differently, with a scanty loincloth fixed with string and

The author. This photograph was taken by the Sherpa Namgyal at about 17,000 *feet*



A Nepali house

a tiny, shrunken shirt. At first sight he looked odd and a little embarrassing, but in fact he was young and enormously strong and he did very well on the march. All three brought light wicker baskets, inverted pyramids which they carried on their backs but which were supported partly by a cloth band round the forehead. Our baggage was sorted, thrown into loads and piled into the baskets, and all was going well until suddenly there were signs of trouble: the coolies said they were unhappy at the weight of their loads and they firmly refused to move. These loads, between sixty and seventy pounds each, seemed to me unbearable, but by ordinary Nepali standards they were usual. Namgyal argued at length with the coolies in some dialect we could not follow and in the end we agreed to take on one more coolie if then they would travel much faster. This arrangement suited us all: the coolies liked the thought of lighter loads even if it would mean fewer days' pay at the end, and Tom and I were anxious to save time. We were already behind with our schedule, for we had wasted two days at Patna and then stayed at Katmandu for longer than we had planned. The rest of the Cho Oyu party was taking a more direct route across Nepal and Tom was seriously worried that he would arrive at Namche and find that they had gone. It seemed sound to speed up our party by cutting down the loads.

All this took time, and there remained the problem of finding a man who would come with us on the long return journey at such short notice. If the trouble had been discovered at Katmandu we could easily have recruited a new coolie from the town's surplus of casual labour, but at Banepa it was more difficult, and Tom and

I left Namgyal to arrange things and took the chance of looking more closely at Banepa's one main street. The town is much smaller than Katmandu, and far less prosperous. The houses are plainer and dishevelled thatch droops from the roofs. But we liked it, for we were lucky and saw some small festival where half the children of the town were taking part. There was dancing but no singing; a long, slow column of children moved quietly from one shrine to the next while the graceful girls who led the procession scattered little bright flowers as offerings to the gods.

We were still watching when Namgyal came to find us. There was no one in Banepa who could leave at once, but our three coolies from Katmandu were willing to carry full loads for the first two days and after that we were to be joined by a fourth. Everything was stacked in the wicker baskets, and these were being lifted into place on the coolies' backs. Namgyal wanted us to lead the way.

I set off up the track at a great pace. I knew that we had miles and miles to go, all of it on foot, and that to meet the others at Namche we must shorten the usual marching time by several days, so it seemed important to charge ahead at full speed. I puffed up the long and gentle slope from Banepa, hot in the strong sun but determined not to rest, and when the path turned at the side of the hill I looked round to see what progress the others had made. Tom was some way behind and walking steadily; the others were small spots in the distance, resting. I waited for Tom to catch up and protested at the general sloth, but he was unperturbed. He explained that no one could sprint day after day for hours at a

stretch, least of all among the mountains, and that even a slower, easier pace goes better with regular rests. The whole scale of the country calls for a steady patience. The coolies had been delayed at first by some trouble with a headband, but otherwise they were doing well.

Together we climbed the side of a mild hill, through terracing ready for rice and up to a little col about a thousand feet above. From here the track went roughly and sharply down, away from the prosperous plain. In every direction from the col we looked across to long lines of hills, not laid out in a tidy pattern but rising on all sides in a vigorous disorder, and they were so many and so confused that no way led between them. The hills seemed to be inevitable and the hard track always went up and down.

From the col we saw this wide display of ranges, their colours fading into the distance and their slopes often darkened by trees, and I felt happy and elated to be moving in country so complex and so grand. But as soon as we had dropped a few hundred feet the aspect of the country changed. We lost all view of the distant hills and the nearer ones seemed very much higher and harsher now that they shut us in. The lower we went the more oppressive they became, and instead of being elated I now felt very small. We toiled uncomfortably for two hot hours, first down from the col and then up again, and it was not until we came out on the crest of the next ridge that we had a further vision of the mountains and the hills ahead. From this new ridge they looked dignified and very fine, but when we lost height once more they again loomed solidly above us and made us feel oppressed. The change was sudden and complete, and since all the

time we were either climbing or falling it never seemed that the country stayed the same for very long.

We were walking on rock, hot in the sun and hard beneath our feet, and I slipped and stumbled as the track curved in twists and double bends. The heat and the uneven ground quickly made me tired, and it was with relief that we came to the first of the great shade trees. These trees, many of them banyans, have been planted at intervals along the track, and their size and their solidity make them welcome landmarks to the overheated and the weary. All round the enormous trunk are built two narrow ledges of stone, the lower a seat for the traveller and the higher a support for his pack. Many of these havens had been set up by the pious as a holy duty and the cool peace of their shade may be hallowed by rows of little stones engraved with prayers. Here everybody stops to rest and greetings are exchanged. The people sitting down when we arrived looked up at us with interest. Where were we going? "Namche Bazar," I said proudly, hoping a little that they might be impressed. They looked at me blankly. "Sola Khumbu," I tried, using the name given by the Sherpas to the whole of the high region where they live, but still they stared and turned for an explanation to Namgyal who had just appeared. "Himal," he told them. Himal, the snow mountains: they understood at once. It was clear that the Sherpas and their proud centre of Namche meant nothing to the people of the lower hills, and this added to their mystery for me. I had known that the Sherpas are a race apart who live in Sola Khumbu on their own, but I had not imagined that they would be completely cut off from the other tribes of Nepal. Now I was shaken

to find that these Nepalis had never heard of Namche, for I knew from Tom that that is the Sherpas' capital village. The Nepali tribes, those in the lower valleys who are racially close to the Indians and who form the greater part of the people of Nepal, mix readily together, and in the crowds who gathered at the shade trees it was only the Sherpas who sat like strangers to one side.

After a rest we thought we should be moving and we went out again into the sun. I was wearing as little as I could, a loose nylon blouse, a cotton skirt, and sandals, but I was hot and dusty and soon began to feel tired. I was new to long distance walking and I found it arduous in the heat. That first afternoon seemed very long as we followed the dry red path up and down, and up and down, through a straggling village and then over bare and rocky land. The mountains in front of us came no nearer from one brief appearance to the next, and what had looked from a distance like slighter undulations turned out, when we reached them, to be genuine hills. Once we crossed a clean cool river and the few green fields on either side, but soon we were back on the dusty and waterless slopes. As it grew late we looked for somewhere to camp, but the hillside was completely dry and we had to go on. Just as the sun went down we came to the little village of Huckse, set high above the river yet with a well of water for our needs.

Namgyal arranged that we should sleep in one of the houses and we climbed a stone outside staircase to a tiny upper room. A large part of the village climbed it too, to study us more closely, and all was set for me to retaliate with some observations of my own. But I forgot my interest in the people, which had brought me seven

thousand miles to this, my first wild village, I found my lilo, stumbled down, and fell asleep at once.

It seemed much too soon when I was woken in the morning, but in fact it was nearly six and the others had been up for some time. It was still a little dark but I could see Norbu with his usual enormous beam, holding two mugs of warm tea. He told us that the coolies were ready to start, so we drank the tea quickly, rolled up our sleeping-bags, and climbed out of the house and down the steps. We were hardly awake and the path was rough and hostile, but the prospect changed as we reached a little col. Here we caught the first cold, bright rays of the sun, which lit up the valley below us and gave to the rows and rows of sandy terraces the shine of polished copper. We could see that the track wound easily down the valley for perhaps a couple of hours, and yesterday's tired aches vanished at once in the fresh, clean morning. It was good to be walking freely, well on our way and already in the hills, not knowing exactly what lay ahead but sure that each new valley would take us nearer to our goal.

Everyone shared our delight in the morning. Down the valley we were overtaken by a funeral party, and they seemed as happy as ourselves. They announced their approach with a blowing of horns and with cheerful songs, and we stepped off the path to give them more room. The mourners hurried down the hill, almost running as they jumped from stone to stone on the uneven path, and the gentleman in question, sewn in his shroud and hung from a pole, was swinging briskly in the breeze. At the end of the procession came a shorter man, scattering bright flowers to propitiate the gods; he had some

trouble in keeping the pace and was nearly left behind. They hurried ahead. The shouting grew muffled as they went into a wood, then burst clearly out from the other side like an engine from a tunnel. We did not see them again, but later we learned that the body had been thrown into the river. Undertaking is simple and there are no graveyards to waste the precious land, but it cannot be good for the villages downstream who use the river for their water supply.

In fact the principles of hygiene are not understood at all. We saw no signs of sanitation in any of the villages we passed, and since there are no lavatories the people use the track or any convenient stream. This very casual attitude must do much to spread disease, and apart from this it can be quite unpleasant when the sun is hot and smells are strong. And every stream becomes a probable danger, so that we could not drink the water until it had been boiled. This was tantalising when the sun was hot and the track was dusty and our throats were sore and dry; the long afternoons in the lower valleys were always a temptation and a strain.

It was half-past eight on the second morning when we stopped for breakfast, and after walking since six we were glad of the rest. A small stream trickled down a rock to collect in a puddle at the foot, and Namgyal lit a fire for some tea while I looked for somewhere to sit. In such steep country each little patch of moderate slope is terraced for crops or holds a house; everywhere else it is sheer and rough and suitable ledges are rare. The puddle made the place a recognised breakfast spot, and all the seats under the young shade tree were crowded before we arrived, so we balanced uncomfortably a little

way off. It was good to sit down, and we looked at the company. A few quiet women stood shyly apart, but mostly the travellers were men, thin, brown and lively, talking and chattering loudly as they in their turn regarded us. They told us that they were taking hens to sell in Katmandu. The poor birds were still alive, crowded into light wicker cages, and some sad specimens, afterthoughts or overflows, were tied by their legs to the lids. They squarked unhappily and were wretchedly hot, for by this time the sun was strong and we were low in the valley, with no breath of wind to move the burning, heavy air.

Soon after breakfast we came to Dolalghat, a hot, wooden village where the Indrawati River runs into the Sun Kosi. It was a stifling, dejected place. Men and women in old, cotton clothes sat in the cover of their wretched shacks, and a few thin hens were scratching sadly in the red dust but finding nothing to eat. One man was in the later stages of some horrible disease, and moved hopelessly around on his elbows and on the stumps of his legs. We thought it was probably leprosy and were sickened and unhappy at the sight. I did not gather how the people of the village kept themselves alive, for there were no crops in sight, the chickens were too thin to make a meal and looked unlikely to produce an egg, and nobody was doing any work. Probably things are done in the evening when the sun has set, but it was hard to see just what there was to do.

The bed of the Indrawati here is wide, but in April the river itself had shrunk to a few small channels among piles of dry white shingle; in the main stream a man was watching a herd of water buffaloes who were doing their best to cool down, but the man's knees were dry and the

poor beasts were vainly trying to splash their great backs and rolling awkwardly in the water. I was told that these animals are unable to sweat and in hot weather can only cool themselves by bathing, so that when water fails it is serious indeed. I was sorry for them. I knew that they must be even hotter than I was, for I was sweating furiously and that is said to help.

Across the river we followed the path for a short way down the bank, and then turned to climb a hill which loomed five thousand feet above us, stretching higher over Dolalghat than Ben Nevis stands above the sea. From the river it rose abruptly, and the track had worn a shining zigzag on the dark red rock. For the first hot half hour there were no trees, shrubs, or even grass, and the baked earth burnt our feet as we started the long and weary climb. We drank the water saved from breakfast, but there was too little to ease the soreness in our throats and we went on in silence as it hurt too much to talk. We had left the river at noon when the sun was at its height, and it was hard to climb unprotected in that glaring heat. Slowly the afternoon wore on, and at last the sun began to sink. At five o'clock we gave up for the day and settled exhausted in the dark thatched porch of a little house. We had waited outside while Namgyal went in first. He did not know the people but he asked if we could stay there for the night and offered them a few annas as rent. As he had expected, we were welcomed at once. Since there are no beds for sleeping, a sudden visitor is no trouble, but means only that one more body is added to the group already on the floor.

The household here had been sleeping all the afternoon and had just begun to stir to greet the evening. A woman

was carrying a huge metal pot hopefully to the nearest tiny stream, while her husband sat and fashioned a wooden plough. They were most intrigued to see us and came near to stare at our faces and tug at our clothes, but all this was done in a friendly way and they showed no doubts or suspicions. At last they were satisfied and smiled and turned back to their work. The household was much smaller than many we had seen, just the man and his wife and one boy of eight, instead of the usual jumble of rather dirty children. They seemed to be happy and content. Their clothes were old and poor and they squatted all the time on the rough and dusty floor, but they ate an enormous meal of rice so at least they were fully fed. Rice is the main food of the lower valleys, though maize is often grown as well, ground into flour and then eaten stirred in tea.

As we rested we looked back on the way we had come: the river was several thousand feet below and completely out of sight, for the hill dropped sharply down and then fell almost sheer, but in the pale distance, far beneath us, we could just pick out the little col which we had crossed at dawn. It had been a hard day, too hard perhaps for a beginner, but we were making definite progress and that cheered the aching from our legs.

We did not drop as low as Dolalghat again, and so we were out of the very worst of the burning heat. Our third day's march led us along a high ridge and gave us glorious views of the steep and jagged country all around. To our left we had a sudden and spectacular sight of the snow mountains, with Gauri Sankar and its neighbours standing high and clear and white against the sky. To either side we could see ranges of hills which stretched

in layers into the distance, the nearest green and definite, the others shading through blue and grey to a dim and hazy mauve. At our feet bright flowers were scattered in the short green grass, and the track led between great bushes of gay rhododendron, red and purple and pink. The air was clear and it was not too hot, and our coolies sang as they strode along the ridge.

We stayed that night at Risingo, a clean and tidy village sitting neatly on a col. The houses here were cheerful, with carving and painted wood; great numbers of maize cobs hung from poles tied under the eaves, and on the narrow terraces the first shoots of maize showed already, with the promise of an early harvest. The people were smiling happily as they worked to care for their land and their houses, and a monastery on the slope above, the first we had seen since Banepa, brought an unusual touch of sanctity to complete the scene. It stood in sharp contrast to the dirty lower villages where the people had sat listlessly around under crumpled wooden shelters or on the dusty path, and where the scattered terracing was half-hearted and unkempt.

We could understand at once such a contrast in the villages, for we felt the same marked changes in ourselves. We were travelling from west to east, parallel to the great chain of mountains that forms the Himalayan watershed, but straight across the grain of the supporting ranges and the rivers which drain from north to south. Either we were rising painfully out of a valley to cross the next mountain range that barred our way, or we were losing height again as we climbed down to the river on the other side. The hills, which had been so fine when from the crest of a ridge we saw them laid out before us, seemed

steeper and harder when we tried to climb them and menacing as they shut us in. Sometimes we were in dry and open country, sometimes we climbed through woods, with rhododendrons and other dark shrubs or fresh and delicate pines. We passed from great heat to moderate heat, or from sultry stickiness to a clean, fresh wind, and my whole outlook changed to mark our progress. Shut in the valleys I was limp and desperate, but as we reached the higher ground it was exhilarating to breathe the clear air and rejoice in the splendour of the view. We felt like the chameleons we saw, perfectly at home in the country, for as the land changed we changed too.

The greatest delight was the different prospect from each successive pass. The valleys draining the Everest region are sharper and higher than those which run down from lesser mountains in the chain, and whenever we crossed a new range, climbing higher than we had been before, the country ahead grew steeper and more wild. We were heartened at each new prospect as a further stage in our progress. On the fourth day we left Risingo at six, crossed a small tributary and then the main river, and spent the rest of the day toiling up the long hill on the far side. It was hot but colourful, wooded in patches and with vivid flowering shrubs. Women sat around in the shade, smoking cigarettes and feeding their babies, and they laughed with delight to see us go by, for we were white and that was very odd. Late in the afternoon we came to the pass and looked down the new valley on to our next day's march. The trees and shrubs and people had gone completely and the land now fell much more sharply to the river which was out of sight, somewhere far below. The farther range was distant and

indistinct, but clear above it we saw the snow mountains, shining pink and gold in the setting sun. They seemed to balance lightly in the air, fifty miles away at least and high above our heads. We knew it was too soon to see Everest, which in any case would be more to the east, but the strange, unearthly beauty of these unknown mountains in the clouds was a lovely magnet to keep us on our way, and I longed to reach the Sherpas and the snows.

Half an hour down from the pass we reached the first house. It was now growing dark, only the mountains above the clouds still shone with the departing sun, and Namgyal went inside to ask if we could stop there for the night. It was agreed, and we went in. We were always fascinated to come to a new village, for they were all so different that we never knew what to expect. Some were poor, others sat among fertile terraces, and in no two were the people very similar or the houses built alike. This house stood on its own a little way above the village; it seemed to be self-sufficient and certainly it was superior to anything we had passed that day. A private courtyard, the first we had seen, set it apart from the track, whereas often a porch or a wide veranda would open directly on to the path and any traveller could see for himself just what was happening inside. Here we admired the intricate woodwork, a carved veranda before the house with a balcony above, and saw well-made wooden gadgets, a rake and a ladder and a strong frame for weaving bamboo mats. These three gadgets were the first we had seen in any Nepali house. The chickens in the courtyard were plump and active, and the people were very ready to sell us one to eat. Children played happily

on the ground: all of them were decently dressed and proudly wore round their necks long strings of fine wooden beads. Everyone was cheerfully occupied, carving or weaving or fetching water, and one woman sat on the ground patiently winnowing rice. They asked where we came from and why we were travelling. To talk of the Sherpas left them puzzled, but they seemed politely interested and their welcome was unusually restrained.

This house was set on the right bank of the Charnawati Khola, high over the river at about 8,000 feet, and the clear, fresh air up on the hill must help to make the family so happy and industrious. But we were lucky to come into so friendly a household, for we could never know in advance what kind of reception we should meet. In the close heat down on the rivers the villages would always be poor, but each would seem to be sluggish in quite a different fashion. At Dolalghat the people had sat listlessly inside their houses and had hardly seemed to take any notice of us as we went by; other riverside villages were almost as wretched, but in these we might be met with hostile stares and with direct unpleasantness should we stop to ask the way. The higher villages were always much more active, but they might be either welcoming or brusque.

I wish we could have stayed much longer to learn more about these differences. We were walking for eight or nine hours every day, always in difficult country, and when we came in at night my whole body would be so weary that my mind, too, felt tired and numb. It was not easy, like this, to keep track of the changes in the villages we passed, but all the time I marvelled at the rich diversity of faces and habits and houses and speech.

There are many Nepali tribes, each separate from the rest, and their complex variety can stay undisturbed in such steep, wild country where travel is hard and slow. I did not know enough to divide the Nepalis we met into their respective tribes, or to work out a catalogue of the changes in the people. I was hurrying through to the greater thrill of living with the Sherpas, and I saw the Nepalis mainly as a happy foretaste of the interest in store for me with the people of valleys which were even more remote. It was good to know that though the present was exciting the future would be even better.

It seemed a long way down the valley the next morning, but at last we stopped for breakfast by the Charnawati Khola. This in April was shallow and we could cross it easily on foot. I was glad to avoid the ramshackle bridge which hung uncertainly, high over the water; half its rough boards were broken or missing and the rest pointed hopelessly into the air. Bridges, it seems, are seldom repaired, and the casualty rate for travellers is high. Even when the structure seems sound the crossing can be anxious, for the planks are balanced on widely spaced, narrow supports, and one false step on the edge of a plank could tip it up and leave a great gap at one's feet. One's confidence improves with practice, but for the first few times I was mildly alarmed.

Breakfast took time to prepare, and our morning halts lasted for about two hours, for we had only two meals a day and we meant to eat all we could. We were carrying some European food, sugar and biscuits, a few tins of butter and seven pounds of boiled sweets, but this had to last me all the summer and on the way in we tried to live off the country. Often we persuaded the people to

sell us rice, sometimes potatoes as well, and occasionally eggs or a hen. Our coolies and Sherpas cooked themselves chapatis, flat pancakes made from maize or barley flour, and often they also ate rice. We always boiled at breakfast as much water as we could, some to drink with our meal and the rest to put into two aluminium bottles and carry with us for the afternoon. It seemed very fair to have a break for two hours while all these things were prepared. We settled ourselves by the river in a pleasant sandy spot and under two fine boulders, while Namgyal and Norbu started to light a fire. It was idyllic in the shade, quiet and calm, with the river running gently by.

All at once the peace was shattered with shoutings and noises from the path above our heads, and a great crowd of men burst into view, knocking roughly against each other as they hurried down the bank. They were waving poles and some of them were staggering beneath the weight of huge baskets filled with cactus. As they came to the river the confusion cleared, poles were thrown into the water to alter the course of the stream and piles of cactus heaped on top to act as little dams. Soon the whole flow of the river was altered; wide pools were left at the side, and the one small channel that had escaped undammed ran choking and bubbling through the centre. In a few minutes the pools were clear and still and then the fishing began. With shrieks of excitement brown hands stretched into the water, and baskets were dragged through the pools. The noise and commotion went on for over an hour, but for all this activity we could see no sign of any fish and when we left the baskets were still empty. This was a pity, for us as well as for the fishermen. It was clearly a communal effort, and we should

have liked to know in what way they planned to divide the spoils.

After breakfast we started to climb and the busy figures on the river grew smaller and smaller below us, though we could still hear their cheerful screaming which echoed up between the hills. At last this died away as our path began to slope less steeply and we came to a stretch of terraced land on the rounded end of the hill. Here, for the first time, the track failed us. Usually it is firm and definite, leading from one village to the next without a fork, so that although we were without a map we rarely had to ask the way. The simplest route has been found long ago and there has been no reason to change it, so that over the years it has become more clearly worn. Here, however, we came to a complex of branches and diversions and we could see no way of telling which was the one to take. At first the party split up and everyone tried a different route, trusting in his own sense of direction and sure that the others were wrong. Ek, our leading coolie, willing but aged and not very bright, started up a line that was obviously hopeless and it took some time to coax him back. He came down again sweating and depressed. Poor Ek kept making mistakes; he always carried the heaviest basket and once he forgot to stop for night and we had to spend a tiring time looking for him in the dark. He was the extra coolie recruited from Banepa and for all his dimness he was the nicest and the most devoted of the bunch.

None of us at first could find a likely route and we gathered again, uncertainly, at the fading of the track, all except little Norbu who had vanished out of sight and out of call. We looked for shade trees, sure signs that

the track passed underneath, but there was none in sight. There was only one house near, and that stood broken down and empty; on the deserted terraces we could see no one at all. It seemed sound to go round the hill, neither climbing nor losing height until we saw some signs of life, but we met with new and unexpected snags. All sorts of obstacles stuck out to check the view and spoil our line, and over the rough, dry terraces the going was laboured and slow. For an hour we kept moving, often retracing our steps, feeling lost and a little distressed. We were talking of turning back when at last we came round a spur to see on the horizon a couple of welcoming shade trees, great reassuring landmarks to guide us to the path. Feeling suddenly happy again we pressed towards them, but as we moved nearer they seemed to go farther away. After two or three more miles of rough going we reached them at last, and found them the most monumental of all the great banyans we had seen, their trunks each fifteen feet across and their massive branches stretching fifty yards on either side. Underneath, and almost invisible in the thick shadow, sat Norbu. He had found the right path at the start, but lost us completely and was growing very anxious at our long delay. We crept into the friendly shade and took a long and blissful rest.

We had lost so much time in wandering from the track that we were hard put to it to reach our next stopping place by nightfall. It was a hot afternoon, for by that time we had come quite low again to cross another river; our coolies were tired and despondent, and the last climb up to Busti went on and up and on. We came in late, and in the growing darkness the village seemed very

dejected, its houses small and rough and dirty, its little wall of prayer stones unsteady with neglect. The villagers stood round to greet us. They were curious but quite friendly, and when we bent down to go into one of the houses they all poured in cheerfully behind. The room inside was small, but this did not worry them and they came quickly through the open door to shut out the last of the light. Norbu tried hard to clear a space large enough for a lilo, so that we could sit at ease, while just beside it Namgyal lit a fire for tea. Some of the villagers tried to shift to avoid the flames but they found it too hard to withstand the general surging and swaying as new spectators pushed into the room. I thought of the risk of fire: there was no hearth and the floor was already littered with ashes and charred wood while, outside, the thick dry thatch hung in sad bunches from the eaves. We had seen two other houses burnt almost to the ground and had heard how few survivors came out of the horrible roast. But nobody seemed at all concerned and there was nowhere else to suggest that Namgyal should go to light his fire.

In every part of the room we could see eyes shining, staring at us solemnly and following each move we made. Then the fire grew brighter and we could make out the faces of those who were nearest and were crowding round with lively wonder to find out all about their visitors. They were cheerful and happy and excited. They felt my blouse and were loudly amazed at the crinkled nylon; they bounced joyfully on to the lilo; one little boy, who had been crawling in the ashes on the floor, put his head on my hand and heard my watch's gentle tick. He was mystified but pleased and startled and started clucking

gaily in reply. At once the whole company was begging to share the new toy, and I held the watch in turn to all the ears I could reach. Too many of them were deaf and seemed to hear nothing, but more than half of the crowd jumped with surprise at the tick and looked at the watch with suspicion. Some were really worried, but most of them soon put their ears back for more. It was, I suppose, their first introduction to anything mechanical and they did not see how something dead could make noises like that on its own.

It was a happy evening and the people grew more and more friendly as they examined the strange things we were carrying. Zips, again, were a great attraction, and the children soon overcame their alarm at my torch and struggled to work it themselves. Even the women, coming shyly out of a room at the back, mixed freely in the crowd. There was so much goodwill that they readily sold us a chicken and the poor, scraggy bird was killed, plucked, cooked and eaten in less than an hour and a half. Tough as it was, it was a rare treat, for most of the villages on our way had refused to exchange a hen that might sometimes lay an egg for money of limited use. There seemed to be very little trade, and if food was short our three rupees could do nothing to ease the hunger and even if the deal was made they were accepted without much joy.

Our meal over, the household settled down for the night. The women went back to their dark little room, and the remaining hens were gathered up and bundled in as well. Not even the hope of an egg for breakfast could persuade me to join the ladies, and I stayed firmly in the outer room and very quickly fell asleep.

The next day we hurried on, and climbed through closely terraced, sandy land into wilder country and up to a pass; we dropped down the other side into a greyer, bleaker valley. We were now well in our stride and were covering good distances in some nine hours' walking every day, but even so Tom thought we might arrive at Namche to find that the others had gone, and all the time we were struggling to make an even faster pace. It was a little exhausting. Our Sherpas and our coolies were going very well and each time we came to a col or a pass they would wave with great excitement at the next stage on our way. We climbed and we descended and the hills grew steeper and higher and the rivers small and swift and very cold with the snows they drained. Each day the houses grew poorer and the villages were now many miles apart, for most of the land was far too rough for animals or crops. Sometimes we had to sleep out since we walked until the sun was going down and by then the nearest house might be several hours away. Not many people passed us on the track, while those who did were travelling in the protection of a party. A few groups of Nepalis were making the long journey from one small village to its nearest neighbour, and once we came upon a party of Tibetan traders. They were magnificent creatures, huge and genial, gay in their purple tunics and boots of coloured felt, with great embroidered floppy hats and with long black pigtails ending in a tassel of scarlet silk. They were delighted to see us and I warmed to them at once. We shook hands several times all round and beamed our pleasure in enormous smiles for talking was no use as we could not understand a word they said. They were large men, broadly built, and seemed overgrown and out

of place in a small Nepali village, but they may perhaps have thought the same of us. Our ways divided and we did not see them again, but I went on happily, remembering that the Sherpas came from this Tibetan stock and might very well be like them. If so, I knew I would be staying with cheerful, friendly people, and I pressed on very eagerly for the next few days of the march.

Most of the time now we could see the snow mountains at the head of the valleys we crossed and against such a background the views became more startling and more beautiful. Every day was exciting and vivid and different, and on our ninth day out of Katmandu we crossed the Lhamjura Bhanjyang, the last and highest pass before we came to the Sherpa country. The pass was wilder than anything we had seen so far. We had started at dawn from a tiny village on the river at 6,000 feet, and soon we were climbing through rhododendron forest which lay across the hill in coloured bands, first huge bushes with bright pink flowers, then trees gay with little red ones, and then, still higher, soft, cool flowers, white and pale yellow, on old, bent rhododendrons that leaned across the path. We were now at 12,000 feet and in a low, light cloud; snow had been falling, and it was silent. The track came to the crest of the great ridge and then turned under it for some way, seeking a suitable place to go down the other side. We were walking quite easily here for it was nearly on the level and the snow was melting from the path; as the afternoon drew on the mist grew thicker and we felt curiously separate from the silent world, high above the valley and completely on our own.

Just for one moment, when at last we crossed the ridge,

a sudden strong wind tore back the cloud to show us the wild grandeur of the place. The crest of the range rose heavily on either side, and at our feet the track dropped sharply down. Out of the mist there appeared a huge and tumbled cairn of dull grey stones, raised over the years by the timid or the devout, and its little white flags, inscribed with prayers, flapped wildly and in shreds on their broken sticks. The pass was harsh and cold and the noise of the wind was furious. We made for the shelter of the cairn and stood there glowing and out of breath, but we had barely time to take in the grey fierceness of the place before another cloud swirled roughly down and the cairn, the track, and the pass itself, went back into the cover of the mist.

That evening we stayed in our first Sherpa house. We had come down from the pass, through dark red rhododendron forest, to a village at about 10,000 feet, and all at once Namgyal and Norbu burst into a small frenzy, waving with enormous vigour and shouting joyful greetings into a large wooden house which stood slightly apart from the rest. A man peered out of an upper window and then waved back with evident delight. Very quickly a great collection of assorted faces had gathered at his side to see the cause of all the fuss. Clearly they approved of what they saw, for the whole household rushed to the door to welcome our two small Sherpas and to take a closer look at ourselves. There was handshaking and much hugging, and everyone was friendly and very kind. They soon noticed that we were really weary and they led us carefully up a shaky flight of steps on to a small, covered balcony, where they made a clearance on the wooden floor so that we could sit and rest. The balcony

was small and the floor creaked doubtfully beneath the weight of such a crowd. After loud discussion it was agreed that the four coolies should be sent off, with their loads, to settle in the chapel for the night. The chapel was richly carved and painted with rows of golden images of Buddha, but no one worried when the Hindu coolies made themselves at home and started cooking supper at the shrine.

The family squatted round us on the floor, talking noisily and all at once. There was so much they wanted to know. Who were we, why had we come, what were we going to do? Namgyal and Norbu did their best to tell them and in return poured forth excited questions of their own. It was many months since they had been home and they were eager for all the little bits of Sherpa news. There was so much happy noise and laughter that we could not hope to follow what was being said and it was some time until the first flush of excitement had calmed and Namgyal turned to offer us enlightenment.

This family, we learned, were Sherpas who had left the rough villages of Sola Khumbu to settle in this open, softer valley. I thought the country was already bleak, but Tom promised that there was greater wildness still to come and they had in fact moved into an easier life. For all their new comfort they were exiles among the Nepalis, and they kept quietly to themselves, missing the friendly gaiety of their earlier home and wild with joy when any Sherpa traveller went by.

They talked into the night, and when at last the torrent of Sherpa gossip started to subside Namgyal asked if there was news of Eric Shipton. Yes, they had seen a man only that afternoon, and he had said that there was

an expedition at Okhaldhunga less than a week ago. Hands pointed eagerly somewhere to the south. We probed gently to find out where they would be now, but everyone gave us a different answer and things grew somewhat confused. No one knew how fast the party was travelling, nor exactly which route it would take. We had no map to place the villages they mentioned, but with Namgyal's help we worked out that even on the worst forecast we could not be far behind. We had two days still to go before we should join the track they had probably taken, but once we were there we could count on more definite news.

I went to sleep happily that night. We were nearer to the others than we had dared to hope, so perhaps we could travel more easily and still arrive in time; and I was in my first Sherpa house, and it was good.

CHAPTER THREE

Sherpa Welcome

Two DAYS later we crossed the Dudh Kosi by a fragile and quivering bridge and climbed the farther bank to the little village of Jubing at the point where two tracks meet. As usual there was nothing to show the way, and here perhaps this was a pity: it would be good to see a plain white signpost showing Namche—3 days ahead, pointing back to the south with one narrow arm, 4 days to Okhaldhunga, and more firmly to the west, to Katmandu—1 fortnight. But it was a feeble little path that trickled up to join our own small track, and there was nothing to mark a major junction in the highway system of Nepal.

We had hoped to hear news of the main party, but Jubing was a tired and dusty place and there seemed to be no one to ask. The dry terraces were deserted, and inside the dark wooden houses there was nobody moving at all. Namgyal and Norbu climbed off the track and made hopefully for one of the smaller huts while the rest of us went slowly through the village. We turned a bend and caught sight of a bunch of coolies asleep in the thick shade of a cluster of graceful bamboo, with a great many loads piled roughly beside them on the track. We went

over to disturb their rest. Tom thought as we came near that the boxes looked very familiar and suddenly I felt wildly hopeful that our hectic chase across Nepal might be coming to an end. It was true. The plain black lettering on the loads was clear enough—British Himalayan Expedition, 1952. The sleeping coolies, we learned, had fallen behind the rest, and we were still talking to them when the Sherpa sirdar came back along the path to round them up. It was Ang Tharkay, who knew Tom well from the Everest Reconnaissance of the autumn, and he lost all interest in his slothful coolies as he bounced with joy to greet a friend. The hot lethargy of the village was broken by his loud and evident delight. In a rush of excited talk he asked how we were; he told us how he was; he rejoiced in the new expedition; he asked after Namgyal and Norbu; he could not say if Eric Shipton was very far ahead but he wanted to rush off and take us up to him at once; and he changed his mind and said we ought to eat at Jubing and then go on gently after breakfast. At this point Namgyal and Norbu appeared and the joy of reunion began again. We found a small clump of bamboo and settled happily in its shade to wait for the talking to end and the cooking to begin.

Breakfast took time to prepare, for our two Sherpas were much too excited to tend the fire or peel potatoes, but at last a kettle began to boil and we became more hopeful. While we were waiting I washed my clothes in honour of the expedition and because it was Easter Day. It was uncomfortably hot and I did not fancy my only other outfit, a woollen skirt and heavy pullover, so I dressed again while the clothes were wet and found this a good way to cool down. Tom produced a piece of

string to tie up my hair and I felt very clean and well groomed. Breakfast arrived and I ate it delicately.

We moved on again at eleven o'clock, and half an hour later came round a rib of the hillside and saw the whole expedition having a long, late breakfast by a quiet and pleasant stream. Most of the party I had met before, though now they were very changed, brown and bearded and dressed for the heat; three new faces were presented to me (Edmund Hillary and George Lowe from New Zealand, and the physiologist Griffith Pugh), and I to them. We sat down in the shade to enjoy an after-breakfast rest, and the eating and the talking, which had halted just for a moment, went on steadily and gently all around us.

It was a happy party to join, with everyone sitting at ease in a warm and beautiful valley and obviously glad to be among the mountains. I have never wished to climb or to be a mountaineer, but in a year of marriage I had come to absorb most of the technical terms and I could take a gentle and intelligent interest in what was being said. Plans for Cho Oyu were under discussion. This was the standard conversation all the way to Namche, and after our tiring journey across Nepal I found it good to sit in the shade and listen to other people planning to exert themselves. Everyone else was eager to cross the snow line and start to climb in earnest, but I was entirely happy where I was: in contrast to the projected mountaineering these present valleys seemed the sweeter.

Tom was glad to have met the expedition quite so soon, and we felt that we could now relax our rather desperate rush. For the next three days to Namche we

would stay with the main party. Before we met them I had meant to keep as separate as I could, for I had arranged my journey independently, I was not quite sure of a welcome, and I had no desire to intrude. I did not want to be a nuisance, to Tom or to anyone else, and I had always been clear in my own mind that I would not distract Tom from his first duty to the expedition, for he had agreed to go to Cho Oyu long before I had thought of coming to Nepal. I had brave and frantic visions of dying on my own and never sending for help. But once we had joined the expedition it was so very pleasant to go at their pace and nobody seemed disgruntled at the thought that I should join them, so I gave up all idea of hurrying on. In fact during the day the party always split up into little groups and Tom and I were mostly on our own, but at breakfast and in the evenings for the next few days I had the pleasure of joining in the general camps.

The stages to Namche would be short, to suit the straggling train of porters. There had been a shortage of manpower at Okhaldhunga and these porters were carrying tremendous loads, some of them over a hundred pounds, so that they covered far less ground in a day than the lightly-laden bunch that had come with us. We had not allowed enough for this in our calculations, and that was why we had caught them up so soon. We were very happy to stay with the others and to travel at our leisure for the last part of our journey, for we were now coming into Sherpa country, the most exciting part of all, and we had no desire to rush through it as fast as we had hurried through the lower Nepali valleys.

It was lovely to walk into Kharikhola with plenty of

time to spare and to know that the light would hold for several hours. A small river comes cascading from the snow line and then runs smoothly for an easy mile until it tumbles into the Dudh Kosi, a thousand feet below. On the one short ledge where the river flows at ease there is set the little village of Kharikhola, and even in the afternoon the air was fresh and the grass was soft and green. Houses and fields were packed together all across the ledge; men and women were digging with some energy; two millstones, harnessed to the river, were noisily grinding maize, while the same water power was working a couple of holy barrels and sending, at their every turn, standard prayers up to a Buddhist heaven. We knew that this was a Sherpa village, and we were charmed at its cheerful blend of good, hard work and mechanised piety.

At the far end of the village one field was not yet ploughed, and this seemed an excellent place to set up a camp for the night. Camping there was a simple matter, for the risk of rain was thought to be slight and we needed only sleeping-bags and lilos. The lilos were soon blown up and laid in a neat orange row, and everyone settled down for a rest and a leisurely tea.

Quickly the little field filled up. The first of the long train of coolies came in to dump their loads, and all the Sherpas of the village left their work and gathered to have a look at us. They were a vivid and a decorative people, with bright cloth boots and with strings of beads, and the women wore thick woollen aprons which stretched in gay stripes almost to the ground. They were, of course, in their working dress, but they were heavily decked with jewellery, armlets which looked like silver, coloured

beads, and large beaten brooches of black and white. There were one or two very fine red rings and I was trying to think what stones these might be when I found that the Sherpas too like strange bright things and, fascinated by my wedding-ring, were trying to drag it from my finger. It is a very close fit so I let them try, and in the end they had to give up, but they took their failure in very good part and were as friendly and happy as ever.

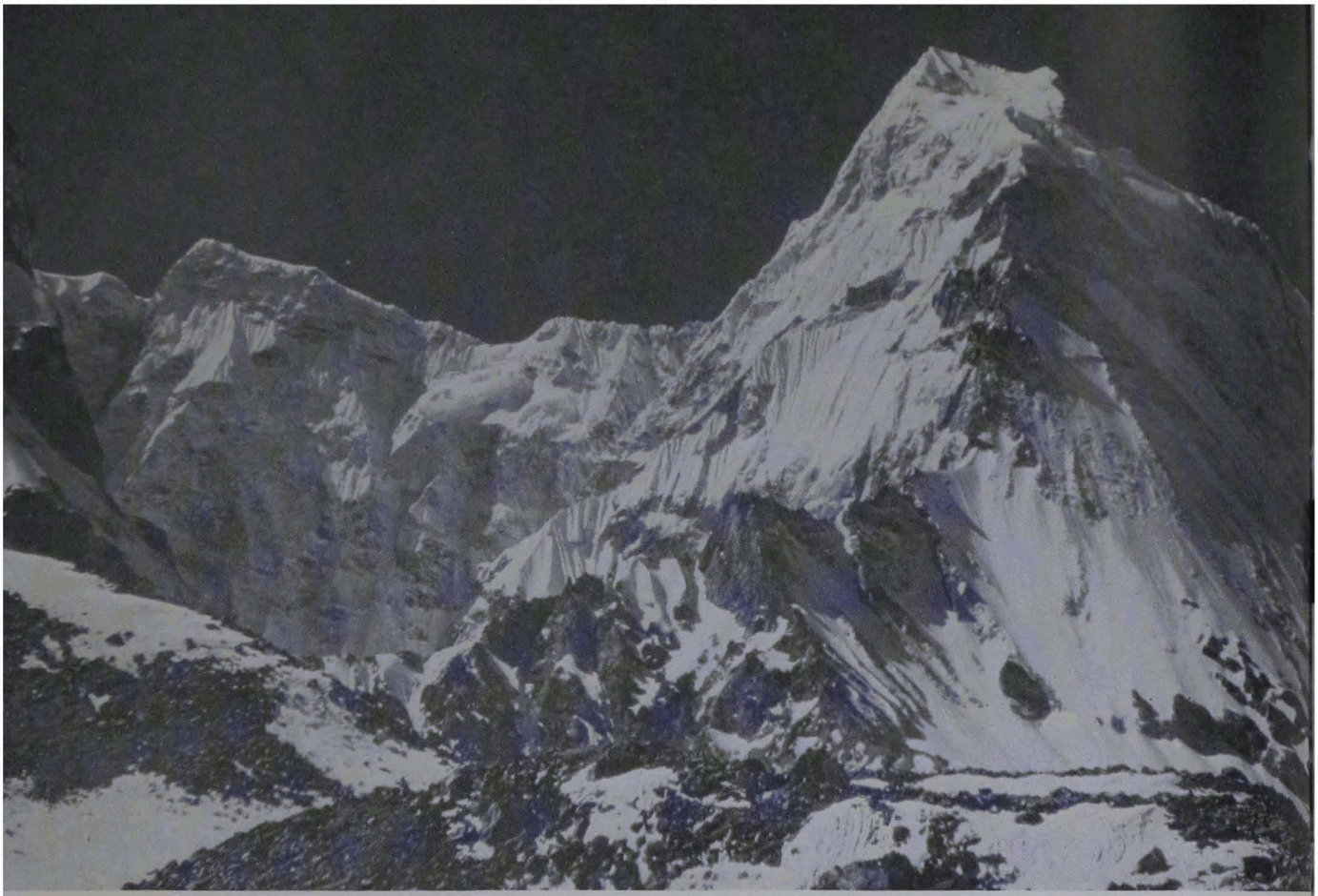
Perhaps the most striking thing was how very freely the women joined in the crowd. In other villages the women had hovered in the background, straining to see what was going on but not daring to come too close. Here everyone mixed happily together, and although there was some jostling as people struggled to get to the front there was no idea that the women as a group should take a back place, and they held their own well in the scrum.

After tea I wandered off on my own, to look around more thoroughly in the cooler evening air. It was calm, and very lovely. At the river I left the path and climbed the great tumbled mass of boulders at the side of the waterfall until I found a little stable ledge where I could sit and look down on the village spread below. There was much movement in and out of all the houses, and grey drifts of smoke were escaping through the doors; the crowd at the camp was not so great and the women had gone to fill their pots with water while the men had returned and were digging again in the fields. Clearly the people were busy. Yet for all its point and purpose Kharikhola seemed a tiny speck, out of place on the high, inhuman hillside. The mountains spread above me and

out of sight, solid and austere; the river was strong and fell with a torrential roar; across the main valley the long range of hills rose for a clear ten thousand feet, too steep for a house or a field or a path, and a distant line of white, another waterfall, hung steady and did not seem to change. The land was huge and strong and motionless. All the action, all the people, were gathered on the one small ledge. These Sherpas could build their houses or tame a few fields, but the country was made without a thought for man and in it they seem small and lost.

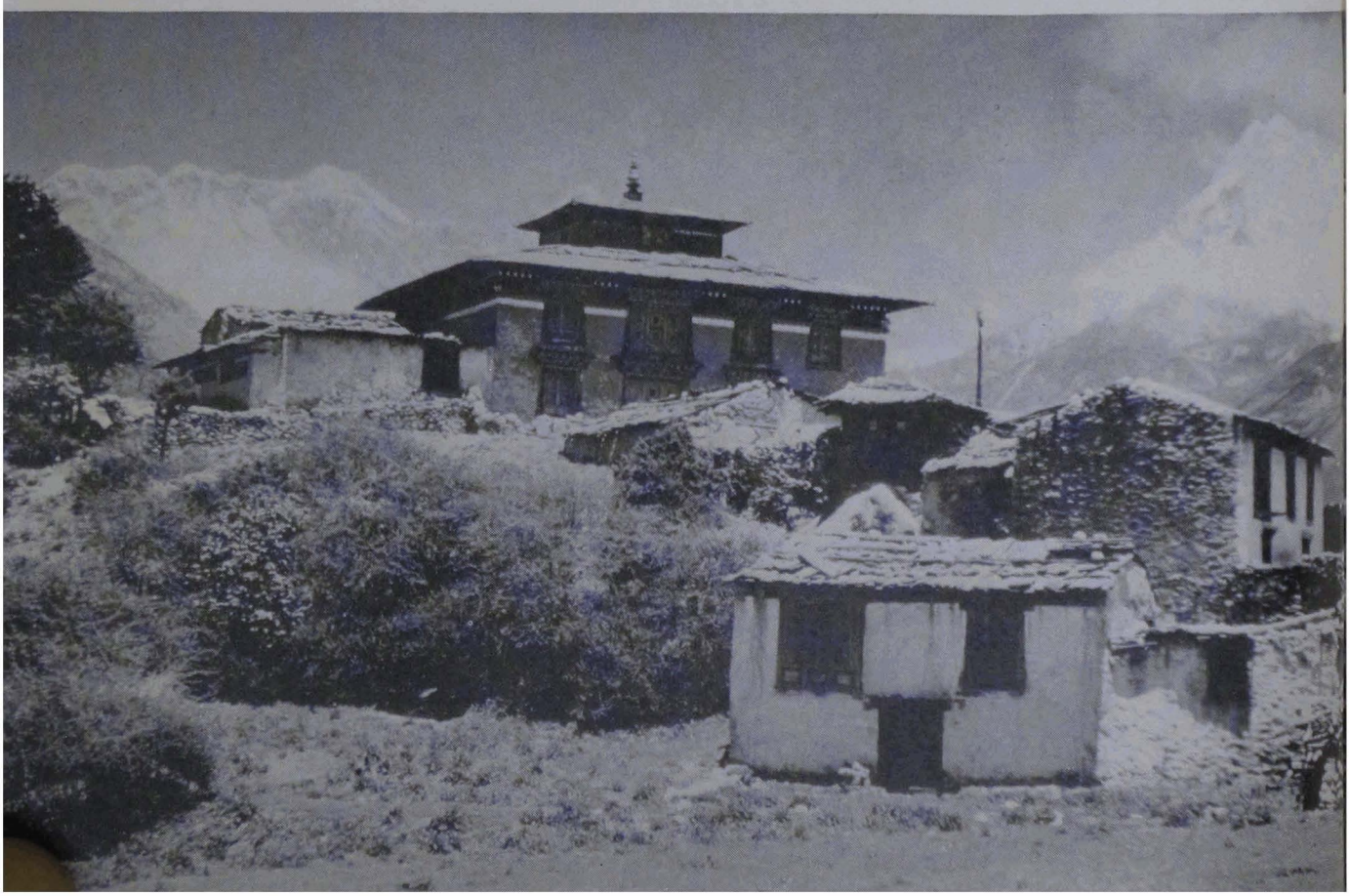
For the next three days to Namche the country was wild like this, and as we came higher up the great valley of the Dudh Kosi the air was colder and the way was rough and steep. The marches were hard but magnificent. For half the time we were climbing slowly up the great rock shoulders that stuck out in a careless line high over the river; for the rest we curved back into the deep side valleys and crossed the tributaries falling from the snows above. The track was sharp and narrow and twisted up and down the hillside, but the ground was far too steep to make it safe to try another route. We twisted with it and our progress was slow.

Usually I was with Tom and separate from the others, and as the path wound in and out among the trees and bushes it seemed that we were walking on our own. Sometimes in a clearing we could see a porter or a climber, but then the track turned or the trees thickened and again we were alone. We were walking through rich woods of rhododendron and the ground was spread with strange new plants and tiny shrubs. Quite often now we passed beneath magnolias, great forest trees not yet in leaf but bearing on their dark brown branches a shining



Mountains near the Nang Pa La

Thyangboche. The summit of Mt. Everest may be seen above the Lhotse-Nuptse wall to the left



array of sculptured flowers. We were very much shut in with all this beauty. If the path was level and the ground fell steeply away we could turn to look above the trees to the farther hills, but we had no picture of the lie of the land on our own side of the valley and only when we came out on a shoulder could we see the way ahead. Then, in clear weather, we saw the snow mountains to the north-west, Cho Oyu, Gyachungkung, and their smaller nameless neighbours, though these were still a week away. In any weather we marvelled at the depth of the mighty valley and we could measure our progress by the mountain at its head. Kumbila rises over Namche in a great rock triangle: less than 20,000 feet high, it is the nearest of the peaks and from the valley of the Dudh Kosi it dominates the scene. It slowly grew larger and we were mildly pleased to know that we were coming near to Namche.

When the track came to a sacred monument, as very often it did, it always split in two so that travellers in either direction could keep to the left as at a roundabout. To go to the left is a sign of respect and the Sherpas would devoutly take the proper turning and start to chant the sacred Buddhist prayers—*Om Mani Padme Hum*, *Om Mani Padme Hum*, Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus.

Sometimes the holy cause of the obstruction was a mani wall, long and low and covered with prayers, sometimes it was a chorten. Chortens are monuments of stone, usually many feet in height, and built in several layers: on a broad square base sits a large squat dome, and above that is a little headpiece, often topped by a jaunty cone. There may be four flat faces to the headpiece, each one carrying a pair of painted eyes. These

eyes could be strange and I doubt if a traveller would like to meet a chorten if he carried some bad secret on his conscience; the eyes are a sermon in stone on the text of another religion, Thou God Seest Me. They stare unblinkingly as you come near, again as you pass to the left, and still stare at your departing back as you go away into the distance. I learned that sometimes a chorten holds the ashes of a venerated holy man, but that often they were built not as a tomb but simply as an expression of faith. I still knew far too little about the Buddhist religion, but from the beginning I liked what I saw. These chortens are usually built in the best places on the hillside, and look for ever through the changing seasons on some very beautiful view. As you climb to a col or a pass you lift your eyes to a chorten. I wanted to learn more about the ideas of which they are a symbol, and I was ready to like their Buddhist architects who so clearly enjoyed the splendour of the country and from its beauty turned their thoughts to good.

Usually the days were fine and bright, but early one afternoon it suddenly started to rain and even under the trees we were very quickly soaked. It was several hours since we had seen a sign of life and we felt damp and far from any cover, but all at once we came to a clearing on the hillside where the hamlet of Puiyan sits in its few small fields. We turned with delight into the shelter of the nearest house. The others, we found, had had the same idea; a halt had been called for the day, lilos blown up, and chocolate and biscuits passed round. The house had one long low room, its only furniture a roughly fashioned bench. It took some time to see things clearly through the smoke from an open fire, and just as our eyes

were growing used to the strain they had to be shut again to avoid a cloud of dust. The man of the house quickly had found a broom and was standing over his daughters, showing them how to sweep the room by beating the broom with tremendous vigour on the quivering wooden floor. All this was new to the daughters, but they applied themselves with glee. The process only served to spread the dust, but luckily this settled again quite soon and our Sherpa hosts were very proud to have cleaned up in our honour.

The floor was uneven and our sleep that night was bad. Lilos might cover up the little dents and bumps, but they could not counteract the very marked slope of the boards, and several times I woke to find myself in the central mass of sleeping-bags, each with a climber inside. I always tried to struggle uphill again, but in a sleeping bag one feels as clumsy as in a sack race, and my efforts to board a bouncing lilo were decidedly awkward and slow. The Sherpas slept solidly on the same floor, too used to the slope and the bumps to let them spoil their rest.

It was raining again the next evening and again we made for cover, but this time we were not so lucky. At first sight it seemed hopeful, for we were near a good-sized house, larger and grander than our shelter at Puiyan. We went in, diving through an open door and across the littered stables, locating the various cows by touch as it was much too dark to see. At the far wall was a rickety flight of steps which led directly into a long upper room, and here it was wonderfully light with many fine holes in the wall. We could see the good order of the room. At one side an open fire crackled underneath an enormous pot, and a mixed bunch of Sherpas sat

around on the floor while one of them prodded and stirred. Along the walls were shelves, tidily filled, and many implements and tools hung below from spikes and hooks. There was even some rough decoration, white dots and wiggles on the very dark wood. We thought we had come to an excellent place and we brought out our lilos, books, and biscuits, sure signs that we were planning to settle for the night.

The first disadvantage we noticed at once. The gaps in the walls might bring in the light but they let in at the same time rain and hail and a splendid draught. And later in the evening the Sherpas by the fire began to liven up. Three travellers—they were larger and heavier than the Sherpas and I think they may have been Tibetans —came loudly up the stairs and into the room, staggering unsteadily and waving great pots of chang. This is the common local brew, distilled mostly from maize; it may be clammy and taste like cold soup, or clearer and much more potent. This must have been the clearest sort, for its effects were sudden and strong: the whole party soon was laughing and singing, chanting extraordinary songs and squabbling over the drink. They were enormously noisy and quite unrestrained; this may not be peculiar to the Sherpas, but I have never before had to sleep with a drinking party in the room and certainly I thought them louder than any revellers I had ever heard. Tom and I decided at last to move outside into the rain, and we brushed past the drinking party and down the feeble stairs. It was cold outside, and wet, but at least it was peaceful. We felt our way in the darkness and settled out of hearing of the house. When we awoke in the morning we found climbers scattered all around and we

learned that the noise inside had grown steadily worse and all but two of the others had followed us out into the quiet rain.

There were Sherpas, of course, in the villages we passed, but these were now many hours' journey apart and it was becoming very rare to meet anybody on the way. We were surprised, the next morning, to overtake three separate pairs of Sherpas. The first pair, a man and his wife, travelled slowly at the head of a short train of goats, nice little creatures each weighed down with two striped packs of rice. We were not yet up to the level of the yaks and this was the first time out of Katmandu that we had met animals in use for carrying. Perhaps it is a clever way to solve the problem of transport, but laden goats seem reluctant to move and progress is desperately slow.

The next pair must have known we were coming for they were waiting at the side of the track. One of them stepped in front to stop us. His friend, he said, had cut his leg: please would we mend it for him? The friend struggled out of his long felt boot and we took a look at an ugly wound right across the sole of his foot. They would not tell us how it had happened and it seemed in an odd position either for an accident or a fight, but it gave me a new respect for the kukri, that sharp curved knife which is carried in Nepal and flourished when tempers grow high. We explained that the doctor was a short way behind and we left them waiting happily for Charles Evans to arrive. In these wild parts the confidence in medicine seems to be complete and any white person is expected to work all sorts of cures. Pills in particular are very highly prized. We had fed some

Paludrine to our party to guard against malaria in the lower valleys, and they loved it and always asked for more.

The last pair of Sherpas to meet us that morning carried a small marmot in a squashed bamboo bag and came to us to offer it for sale. The poor thing was very cramped and squeaked sadly through the holes. It seemed all wrong to buy it and encourage the heartless trade but we could not leave it captive and miserable, so we haggled for a while and then parted with two rupees. It was a charming animal, like a very small squirrel or a great big mouse, but it was obviously terrified, and as soon as we were out of sight of the Sherpas we climbed off the path to set it free. It came out of the bag a little bewildered but it sniffed about for a moment and then scuttled quickly away. We went back to the path, anxious lest dozens more should be caught and brought to us to be redeemed, but either the marmots were too clever or the Sherpas were too dim, for neither we nor any of the others had to face the same problem again.

We crossed the Dudh Kosi again and again, as first the right bank and then the left seemed the better able to take a path. The icy water churned noisily on the boulders in the river bed and the mountains rose steeply from the water to shut us in at the bottom of a gorge. When we came to the point where the Bhota Kosi rushes in, the land in the broad angle between the two rivers rose up before us like the corner of a house. Hard as it looked, it had to be climbed, for Namche sat more than a thousand feet up, somewhere out of sight on the cliff. We started up in sharp zigzags, treading close to the heads of the people below. We were at ten thousand

feet and as we climbed from the gorge it grew suddenly cold. It was raining slightly and this turned to driving snow as we came higher. The trees were gaunt and not yet in leaf and there was nothing to soften the bleak and cheerless rock. The weather had turned bad, I was tired and short of breath, and like all the Sherpas we had met I was carrying a miserable cold. Perhaps I judged too harshly, but at this first meeting the centre of Sola Khumbu seemed very forbidding and grim. I tried not to feel depressed.

I had my first sure sight of Everest as we paused for breath on a little ledge high above the river. The clouds were swirling and lifting above us, and Tom pointed up the Dudh Kosi valley to where we hoped we should see Everest. A sudden clearing in the sky showed a great and glorious mountain, fluted and pointed and shining in the sun far above the level of our storm. I was so impressed that I did not speak, and Tom, too, was silent. The clouds closed and then parted again and this time we saw another summit, squat and heavy and very much less fine. " Yes," said my husband, " that's Everest." I argued firmly that it could not possibly be the lesser of the two, but Tom was just as certain and he, of course, was right. The first splendid peak had been Lhotse, the nearer by several miles: all we could see of Everest was the final pyramid which sticks above the Lhotse-Nuptse wall, and seen from our low ledge the top was foreshortened and dull. I had been told that the Sherpas had once had no name for Everest alone, but when they talked of Chomolungma and revered it they meant the whole massif without distinction, Lhotse, Nuptse, the long high wall between them, and Everest itself. From our

ledge I could understand how it was that the highest mountain in the world had been so long without honour in its own country.

Half an hour later the path swung round a sacred boulder and we saw Namche Bazar, set out in dull grey stone round the side of a depression in the hill. If a giant had pressed his finger on the mountain side he could have made that single shallow basin, flat enough to support a village and hidden from the path as we approached. On the small terrace in the centre were the holy symbols of the place, the long low mani walls, the round and solid chorten, the huts for the barrels which were carved with prayers. From the far side a few rows of flat stone houses stared across the basin through the snow. Walls, chorten, huts, houses, all were built of the same grey stone. A single tree, a rhododendron, stood to defy the gloom with a splash of brilliant scarlet, and it was one glorious sign of hope in a cold and cheerless scene.

The Sherpas with us were loudly delighted to be home. Families and friends rushed from their houses to meet them and brought out welcoming bowls of chang to cheer the last few yards. Sherpa greetings are warm and whole-hearted, a slap on the back for excitement and joy, a few gay pinches given with merry shouts. The air rang with happy laughter, and then all at once the crowd felt the cold and scattered into the shelter of the separate houses. Outside the snow still fell, quite softly, and sounds of joy came dimly through the windows.

For a little while Tom and I stood wondering where to go, but then a door in the distance was opened and Norbu looked out to wave. We made for the door and carefully stepped inside. Norbu was wonderfully happy

to be in Namche and he led us through the house with obvious delight. The ground floor was the usual stable, so dark that at first we could hardly distinguish the animals, and in the far corner a rough wooden staircase leaned against the wall. We climbed it with some caution and at the top turned left into the crowded upper room.

Norbu cleared a way for us through the tight crowd of Sherpas and we came into the middle of the room. There we found the rest of the party sitting either on a wooden bench or on the floor, drinking and resting and talking with the headman of the house. It was all very friendly, though badly noisy as the room was crowded and low. The seated expedition shifted a little for us to join them and the chang was passed round again. I took my first taste of the brew and found it lumpy and unpleasant; I tried not to show what I felt and hoped the commotion would cover me, but our host must have known for he brought out a little china cup of rackshi and handed that to me instead. This was very good, not unlike whisky and distilled, I think, from rice. The laughter and the talking went on all around, with the crowds of visiting Sherpas discussing us in some detail while Eric Shipton talked quietly to the people of the house. Then, to add a new flavour to the mixture we had drunk, we were treated as an honour to a round of tea. Made to an old Tibetan recipe, this is a sickly drink brewed from a very coarse leaf, boiled three times, salted and shaken well, and served with stale yak butter floating slimily on top. The serving of tea has a ritual all its own. The well-trained guest should refuse the honour and his host must urge him to accept; whenever the cup is set

down for a moment it is filled again to the brim with the same short ceremony of protest and persuasion. I was glad that we were a large party and could share the kind attentions of our host, for I did not wish to hurt his feelings but I could manage to drink only a very little at a time.

The room was grander than I had expected. The windows boasted a few panes of glass set into large and movable frames, and where these had stayed intact there was light without a draught. Just above the open fire was a long thin slit in the roof, and the greater part of the smoke drifted up and out of the room. The glass here was the first we had seen since we left the Katmandu valley and with the smoke hole in the roof it made a marked and happy difference to the feeling of the place. Where the crowd was not so thick we could catch glimpses of huge copper pots, or rows of elongated spoons, and of wooden shelves fixed neatly to the wall; near the hearth were a few small cupboards, and just as you can buy at home a set of tins called sugar, coffee, tea and rice, so here the cupboard doors carried little pictures of what was kept inside. A cob of maize, a cup, a tin or perhaps a plate, were painted on the front in white, with other strange symbols which were lost on me but which may have been full of meaning to the lady of the house. Just behind us were great sacks, made of yak hide and filled with potatoes, and from their numbers and their weight I thought the housekeeping must be provident and good.

Behind us a small door was set high in a wooden wall, and we clambered awkwardly through it and into another, much smaller, room. This was a little dejected and chunks from the rafters fell at short intervals on to the floor

below; we learned that normally the room was a storing place, but it had now been cleared and handed over for the expedition to use. Quite obviously things were going to be squashed, and as the whole party expected to stay in Namche for two nights at least, and probably even for three, Shipton suggested that Tom and I should spread ourselves in another house. It was a sound idea and we were pleased. We were even more pleased a few minutes later when Ang Tharkay came up to say that he had found a resting place for us in the private chapel of one of the grandest houses in the village.

Norbu went with us to show us the way. We found a house with the usual stable, staircase and straw, and the upper room just as before, but instead of the extra storing place there was built a large and ornamental shrine. A door, a passage, and a curtain shut it off from the rest of the house, and the shrine, with its narrow antechapel, was private and strangely quiet. As a bedroom it was unusual and rather weird. Coloured paper at the windows gave a suitable religious light, and fiery gods and goddesses danced in wild abandon on the walls. The outer chapel was painted vividly in gold and in rich and definite colours, and the symbols and scenes portrayed had been scattered in a pleasant incoherence: an ætherial winged creature might be flying underneath, with a good solid elephant on top. Sometimes writing was attached, I suppose in explanation, but we could not read Tibetan and we had to guess the meaning of the pictures on their own.

The inner shrine was small and square and dark, with faded papery flowers draped along the walls and a large painted drum hanging sadly to one side. Rows and rows

of pigeonholes held the sacred Buddhist books, and a long line of little buddhas sat, waiting very patiently, below. Two low altars carried tiny copper bowls. These should be filled with water at dawn and in the evening as ceremonial offerings to the gods, but the dust in them stayed undisturbed for the three days we were there and I began to be afraid that we were upsetting the pious ritual of the shrine.

Later that evening I crept back into the main room of the house, but by this time the household was asleep. In the feeble light of my torch I could see them all lying neatly in one corner of the floor, and I could see, too, that the room itself was long and low and bare. All their extra energy and wealth had gone into the making of their chapel, and nothing had been done to make things easier for themselves.

The next morning we went back to the others for breakfast and we found the whole party working with tremendous zeal. The porters from Okhaldhunga, who were cold at this height and anxious to go down, were being paid off and sent home; their loads were checked and put in a central store; things for the first few weeks on Cho Oyu were sorted and divided out afresh for the last stage up to the mountain. Tom set to work on the oxygen supplies. The cylinders, it seemed, had travelled safely on the porters' backs, and they were tested and counted and stored. But after that there was trouble. We knew that one of the loads had been lost to bandits on the fourth day out of Okhaldhunga, but it had been thought that this contained only stores of sugar and tea. Tom now found that a camera was missing, and it seemed horribly likely that this had been part of the stolen load.

The loss was serious, for the camera had been made specially for recording the depth and weight of high altitude breathing and it was to have played a big part in the planning of oxygen for use on Everest in 1953. Tom searched through every load that had come in, and then he looked again, but at the end he was sadly certain that the precious camera was lost.

A runner had been sent at once to the headman at Okhaldhunga to tell him of the theft of the load, and there was now nothing more that could be done. The next two days were spent in arranging supplies and in choosing high climbing Sherpas, and then the expedition was ready to move off. Most of the party went straight to Cho Oyu up the valley of the Bhota Kosi, but Tom and Earle Riddiford, one of the three New Zealanders, had been admiring the fine rock peak of Khumbila, and they wanted to go and try it. They planned to catch the others up in three or four days' time. I stayed at Namche.

For the next few days I was on my own and though I was still shivering sadly with a cold, very conscious of the bleakness of the place, it was in fact an exciting chance to come to know the people of the village. Everyone was friendly and made me welcome wherever I went, and as all the doors stayed open I could go into any house I chose. I wandered up and down the narrow streets, with straggling groups of children running behind to laugh and stare. One or two of the smallest children threw stones at me at first, but I think that was only because they did not know what I was and they felt instinctively scared. They were miserable shots, so it did not matter. When they found out that I meant them no harm they left their stones and started laughing with the rest. For

as long as I was in Namche the children were amused, but in a day or two their parents accepted me very readily and when I stopped to watch them at their work they would carry on quite calmly.

Wherever I went in the village I had a wonderful greeting. In a very few days they had all recovered from their first surprise; they treated me as an equal, without doubts or shyness or any reservation, and clearly they expected that I would do the same. Their good spirit was refreshing and entirely delightful. They might laugh joyously if I did something silly, stumble or take the wrong turning or muddle a sentence, but they would do just the same if the victim were one of themselves. He never minded, so neither did I. It was taken for granted that I would sit with them on the floor or in the dusty road, share the common bowl of chang when it went from mouth to mouth round a cheerful group, listen to their gossip as they sat round the fire in the evenings, and sleep beside them on the floor. Sometimes I would be poked, for they wanted to be sure that I was a normal shape beneath my unusual clothes, but I soon accepted the treatment without another thought. If they showed no qualms about pinching and poking each other, why should I expect them to be reticent with me?

The Sherpas do not share the caste system of the Hindu Nepalis, and this may make them readier to accept a stranger for himself alone. Certainly some of the Nepali villages had been friendly, but none had been as eager and whole-hearted as this, and some had treated us with sullen reserve and had hesitated to give us even a reluctant welcome. Once we came to the Sherpas all trace of suspicion had gone. The Sherpas are open and

friendly among themselves and accepted me into their houses without any thought that I might be in some important way quite different from themselves. They have never thought of setting up a colour bar and it would not occur to them that anyone else might do so. They would welcome any traveller into their homes and it was natural that they should do the same for me.

In the evenings we all sat round an open fire and the Sherpas talked and sang strange songs. By day I went round the village and watched them at their work. The women always worked the hardest and as this was the season for making cloth they sat on the track in bunches, cleaning and carding and spinning the wool. Like me, they had colds; like all Sherpas, they had no handkerchiefs. Many of them had large and awkward goitres on their necks and some of them could turn their heads only with trouble and pain. This is common among the Sherpas, for iodine is missing from their diet. But each small group seemed highly delighted when I went across to join them. They would ask all sorts of questions about why I looked so different from themselves, and they would clutch at my clothes with obvious approval.

There seemed to be plenty of raw wool, for spinning went on most of the time, yet I had seen no sheep for many days. I asked about this and learned that it was still rather cold for sheep at Namche, so they were grazing lower in the valley until summer should bring the grass out here. Goats, it appeared, were hardier. I saw one on the roof of a house having a small chew at a prayer flag, and others were wandering vaguely about the hill.

There are seventy-nine houses in Namche, and usually each holds a family, one husband, one wife, and a collec-

tion of children of varying sizes. At first all the buildings looked very much alike, their wooden roofs weighted down with stones, the gaps in their flat grey walls filled in with whitened mud, their two downstairs doors and three upper windows staring out in a regular pattern. Soon, however, I came to see the subtle changes in the hierarchy of housing, for as the road curves round the basin the buildings grow larger and are decorated with care. To the west are six houses with no upper story at all; to the east seven houses have their private shrine attached, and nine have coloured paper in the windows. I met no hired servants among the Sherpas, there is no caste nor any firm distinction to rank the rich and poor, yet there can be no doubt of this growing prosperity as one moves eastward through the village. One house alone seemed out of place. The home of the headman, a large and smiling fellow who had made a call of courtesy on the expedition when they first arrived, had all the elaboration of the grander houses to the east, and yet for some reason it was built a little to the west of the centre. Apart from this the change was steady from the poor, through the simple, to the decorated. I wanted to know when the houses had been built, for if the grandest were also the newest it might just mean that the fortunes of the village had recently improved, but if all of Namche had been built at once there must have been some conscious social grading. Or perhaps there was some other reason for the change. No one could tell me the dates of the houses and they had all been patched up on the outside with fresh white mud and blackened inside with smoke, so I found it quite impossible to guess their relative ages.

The track by Thami

Namche Bazar

Signs of religion, too, were stronger to the east. The houses with private shrines boasted also huge and mast-like poles which carried long thin strips of cloth closely printed with the usual prayers. Above the entrance to these houses were balanced carved religious stones, looking as though they had been taken from some decrepit mani wall, but giving a good touch of sanctity to the stable door. At the other end of the village fourteen houses had no flags, not even the little ones strung on poles of light bamboo. Sometimes the sticks stood empty, probably ravaged by goats; sometimes there was nothing to show that the household had put up any holy sign at all.

Namche Bazar sounds like a centre of trade and I had even expected to find a few shops, but all this week there was no sign of any buying or selling. Each household seemed to be self-sufficient, and I was told that the passes were not yet open for the short summer trade with Tibet. But in one of the houses I was shown the treasures they had collected over the years. The man and his wife opened a heavy wooden chest and pulled out glowing silks and tassels, in scarlet and vivid blue and green, and embroidered floppy hats just like those worn by the Tibetan traders whom we met on the journey in. The man handled the precious things gently and lovingly, and I asked what was to be done with such gorgeous materials. The hats, he said, might be worn on a special occasion, perhaps at a feast or a wedding, when both he and his wife would wear the same huge floppy style, but otherwise they were puzzled by my question. They always wore Sherpa dress, they would not make up the lovely fabrics into clothes. They folded them with pride

and put them carefully back in the chest, satisfied that all was well with their beautiful possessions and happy to leave them stored away if they could but bring them out from time to time.

These days in Namche were very reassuring: it was pleasant to be with the Sherpas and I now felt more at ease. Of course I was counting the hours until Tom came back from Khumbila, but at the same time I was happier at the thought of spending many weeks alone. There was so much to learn about the Sherpas and I wanted to see more of their hard but beautiful country and to visit their remoter villages. There might not even be time to do all I planned in the two or three months before the expedition ended and the rains began.

In a day or two Tom and Earle were back again, a little sad because high up on Khumbila the snow had been too fresh and the weather too wild to make it safe to try for the summit. They hoped perhaps to go back later in the season for another attempt and meanwhile they made ready to follow up the Bhota Kosi to Cho Oyu and the rest of the party. Tom made one last quick search for the lost camera, for he knew its value in the oxygen tests and he was very concerned that it had gone; but still it was missing, and there was sorrow.

Nothing had been heard from Okhaldhunga, and I suggested that I should take Namgyal and go south again. I would have to pass through the bandit country and here I might find the camera; if I failed I could go on to the Barra Hakim at Okhaldhunga. He is the man responsible for law and order in the whole vast district of Number Three East, which spreads from the lower valleys near his town to the farthest, highest Sherpa

village. He was said to have a few policemen, and he might well do something to help. The journey should take a week in either direction, and it seemed a good idea: it might recover the camera, and with such a definite purpose it certainly would not be dull. There were a few mild objections, but once I had had the idea it would have been feeble and sad not to go.

CHAPTER FOUR

South After a Camera

NAMGYAL RAISED the loudest objections and made himself as awkward as he could. It was too difficult, he said, too dangerous. We might be taken by the bandits[1] and it was not safe to travel on our own. It was too hot, too far, too wild. I think he had hoped to attach himself to the party for Cho Oyu and he grew sulky and unhelpful when he learned he was to stay with me, though it was for this reason that he had been chartered for the season and the expedition had not even offered him a job. He felt much too dignified to run with the mail and he was not wanted on the mountain, though now it was clear that he had planned to walk out on me at Namche and go with the climbers instead. He grew hostile and unattractive, but I did not like to dismiss him into unemployment. He had been a good cook and a good organiser on the way in, we had done the march

[1] To describe the thieves as bandits is perhaps misleading, though that was the word we normally used. The people living in one or two villages in a particularly wild and wooded region have formed the habit of stealing from travellers and from surrounding villages; they have a bad reputation and the Sherpas refuse to travel through the region except in pairs—but the only serious risk is that of theft. Armed violence is uncommon, and to use the word bandit may exaggerate the perils of my journey.

in excellent time, and until now there had been no reason to complain.

I would have liked to keep Norbu with me for the whole of the summer, for he was such a friendly, happy little man, but I felt more responsible for Namgyal and I could not afford them both. Norbu had attached himself to us in Katmandu entirely of his own accord and he had known there was no contract, nor promise of a long term job. He was a dear, smiling and cheerful and delighted to do anything to help. On the way in he was always thinking of new ways to be useful. At a difficult bridge he would be there to give me his hand and steady me across, and when we were sleeping out he would put up complicated shelters to protect us from the rain. We had grown very fond of Norbu and were worried when his job was coming to an end, but Tom was able to arrange for him to take the expedition mail and by this time he had left again for Katmandu.

For short journeys in Sola Khumbu Namgyal and I could very well manage on our own, and that was what I had planned. To go to Okhaldhunga would be a bigger undertaking, and I agreed to take a second Sherpa just for the next fortnight, partly as a spare porter but mainly to give us a greater weight of numbers and so to persuade the wretched Namgyal to venture near the bandits. There was only one man who was ready to start at once, so I engaged him as our bodyguard though no one could have been less suitable. He was quiet and very timid, over-awed by Namgyal's airs, and painfully sensitive of his poor right hand, which by mistake had sprouted a couple of thumbs. I did not hear him talk above a whisper at any time in the next two weeks, though by the end he

was definitely friendly and sometimes managed a smile. Like many of the Sherpas I had met, he answered to the name of Mingma.

I said good-bye to Tom and started quickly down the mountain on the way to Okhaldhunga. I felt a little nervous, and very much alone. The journey seemed rather alarming and at that moment I wished very strongly that I had never had the bright idea.

But soon I was happy again, for we were going pleasantly downhill, the weather grew milder as we dropped, and we were covering the ground much faster than before. There was a glorious sense of ease and speed and we saw that trees and plants which ten days ago had still been bare were now breaking gently into flower. It was lovely to be back in the sheltered gorge and warm again in the sun. The Dudh Kosi tumbled and bubbled as it rushed its way to the south, and we moved quickly down beside it.

For the first few hours Namgyal and Mingma did well and I began to think that, now we had started, the sulks of yesterday had disappeared. I kept a short way ahead, and this was perhaps a mistake. Suddenly I turned and could see no sight of the others, so I waited a while on the path and then went back up the valley to see if something was wrong. It was. My two Sherpas had fallen in with five or six gay loiterers, coolies who had come up with the Swiss expedition and were now going back, rich and carefree, to their homes in Katmandu. They had been sitting some way off the path the first time I went by and though I had vaguely heard voices and laughter I had not taken very much notice. Now I could see that they were drunk; they were pouring pints

of their chang into Namgyal and Mingma and the whole crowd was maudlin and out of control. I was accosted, not very civilly, by one of the noisier coolies. Namgyal did not try to stop him, but laughed and hugged him in a great embrace, and the two of them stood there entwined and smiling. I was not quite sure how to part them, but I moved out of range of the party and began to walk slowly down the valley, calling to Namgyal and Mingma in my firmest tones to ask them to bring their loads and follow. There was a short, sudden silence, and then everyone started to move and staggered behind me on the track, laughing and singing in a loud disharmony. I could easily keep ahead, for they walked uncertainly and from side to side, dragging out in a long and winding tail. The effort was too much for them and soon they stopped, exhausted. I called again to my two Sherpas, and to my joy they detached themselves from the confusion and came a little sheepishly behind me. We walked slowly round a bend and out of sight of the others, and though the Sherpas waved their hands with smiles and sadness they did not try to turn back. After some ten minutes they began to be more steady on their legs and soon they had quite revived and were going as well as before.

The next small trouble happened just beyond the straggling grey village of Chaunrikharka. It was beginning to rain and I had stopped to put on my anorak, a half-length waterproof coat, when a fierce Sherpa woman with a baby on her back came up and growled and grabbed at my clothes. She muttered crossly to herself but I could not follow what she said. When I stepped aside to free myself she turned and started to scratch. I

did not like to scratch back so I jerked away and hurried down the path and soon I had left her a long way behind. For a long time I was worried. Had she been meaning to beg or to ask for help for her baby? Should I have stayed to find out? Whatever it was she had not been successful for all she had done had been to send me quickly on my way.

The storm was heavy for twenty minutes, but then it cleared and left the country clean and fresh and lovelier than ever. I stopped brooding over the unfriendly woman, and I was now completely happy. We were still moving south down the valley, but we were a thousand feet up on the left bank of the river, out of the gorge and better able to see the way ahead. The track was leading up and down to cross the many ribs and spurs that stick out from the mountains to the river, or curving deeply into the quiet side valleys, which were green and richly wooded. Whenever we came out on a spur the view ahead had softened, the country looked easier, the mountains were lower and opened out more gently. We had a great feeling of progress, and after a peaceful week at Namche it was good to be moving again.

It was late in the afternoon when we came to the tiny hamlet of Surkya, and we agreed to stop there for the night. After Namche we found it a change for the worse. Fifteen small huts huddled by a cold and rushing stream, and to reach them I had to take off my sandals and wade through the water, for the people had not bothered to build themselves a bridge. Most of the houses had drooping walls of matted bamboo and at first I took some of them to be shelters for cattle until I looked through the doors and saw whole families crouched inside.

The track narrowed and seemed very shut in as it wound between the houses, and even after the rain the air was stale with rancid smells.

The village was wretchedly poor and the people had to forego any refinements either in their faith or in their homes. The usual signs of piety, prayer flags, a chorten, a mani wall, were nowhere to be seen. We went into one of the houses, one of the better ones with regular walls of mud. It was low and dark and the air was heavy with smoke, so that at first I could do nothing but choke and shut my smarting eyes. When I could at last make out the dim outline of the room I was very surprised to see how bare it was. There was no glass in the window or slit in the roof, no shelves or cupboards or rows of useful pots. I began to see that my week in the rich ante-chapel at Namche Bazar had been thoroughly misleading. Namche is the Sherpas' centre of trade and easily their most important town; in these smaller villages I would have to lead a tougher life if I were really to mix with the people. I wondered how soon I would be used to it. I had my own aluminium plate and mug, knife, fork and spoon, and soap for washing, so it would not be too bad, and luckily the marches were hard and tiring so that at night I always fell asleep at once, even in a crowd of dirty people on a rough, uneven floor. The prospect seemed a little harsher than I had realised at Namche, but on reflection I decided that it would be easily bearable.

The house at Surkya might be poor but the welcome I received was as friendly and warm as ever. The woman of the house greeted me with a wide smile and cleared a space on the floor among her many children who were

squatting by the fire and eating boiled potatoes. The children were too busy to take much notice of me. They were using both hands to pull off the peel and drop it on the floor; they could hardly wait to get at the white inside, and they stuffed the whole potato into their mouths and swallowed it in a couple of bites. Their mother handed a potato to me, making a little bow as she did so and smiling all over her face, and she beamed even more widely to show her pleasure when I took it and started to eat. When the first was finished I was given a second, then a third and a fourth and a fifth, and the more I managed to eat the happier she became.

After supper all the neighbours came crowding in to see me, and the good woman and her husband beamed with pride to have me as their guest. Everyone talked very fast and very loudly and all at once, and I could not follow much of what they said. From their gestures I knew that they were discussing me, marvelling at my strange clothes, my height, the curl in my hair and the odd colour of my skin. I told them that we were on our way to Okhaldhunga, and for a moment this left them silent. Okhaldhunga may be the capital of the district and the centre of law and order, but I was quite sure that the people of Surkya had never heard of the town.

At last I was able to slip away and I went out into the night. It was quiet outside, and still. Above the little village rose the mountains, dead black and solid, and then they changed to a dazzling white on the higher slopes where the afternoon's snow lay fresh and crisp. The country by day is magnificent, rich in colour and variety; by night, in the shining contrast of snow and rock, the

mountains rise with overpowering majesty. The splendour was intense, the scale was vast, and I was startled into awe.

When I went indoors again the family had settled for the night and I found my lilo and joined them. Since the house had only the single story the one main room had also to serve as a stable and we shared it with the animals, several weedy hens and an elderly goat. Half-way through the night I woke to find that the waves in the floor had unsettled my lilo and I had tilted off it and on to the family goat, who had woken under the impact and was moving away in obvious disgust. I was left with the firm impression that the animal objected to strangers, but I could hardly blame it for that and I went cautiously back to my lilo and tried to keep steady and still.

One very strange thing that I saw before we left in the morning was a pile of old and shabby books. On opening them I found that they were English grammars. The only explanation that I could invent was that our host had perhaps been out of Nepal as a soldier with the Gurkhas, but even this seemed most unlikely as the tribes are quite distinct and I had never heard of a Sherpa's being recruited with the others. In fact my guess was wrong. The man of the house could not read or write in any language and the pages of the English grammar meant nothing at all to him. He had been as far as Katmandu but had never left Nepal. Perhaps the books had come into the country with a returning Gurkha, been prized as curiosities and so passed round by way of trade. I glanced through one of the books and as I turned the pages a folded sheet of paper slipped out and fell to the floor. This was a page of aircraft photographs and

though the top was badly torn I could see that it had come from a *Tatler* of 1946. The man picked it up reverently, held it upside down in admiration, and put it back again between the pages of the grammar.

We went on again and for the next few days we made a very good speed. One night we slept at Kharikhola, the village on the ledge where Tom and I had camped for the first time with the main expedition. When we had come through then it had been a happy place, but now we found the people agitated and upset. Yesterday evening, they told us, bandits had made a raid from the other side of the Dudh Kosi and had gone away with three stout sheep from the fields beside the houses. They had come after dark and only to ease their hunger; the people of Kharikhola had been in no personal danger, but the village was worried and alarmed and Namgyal of course was gloomier than ever. He told the villagers in sepulchral tones of what we were planning to do, and they agreed at once that everything was sure to go wrong. We were to cross into the bandit country the next day and we did not spend a very cheerful evening, and as it was pouring with rain outside the house I was forced to stay and listen to elaborate tales all about the many ills that would come to us to-morrow.

I was pleased when Namgyal and Mingma started the next morning without making a scene. Just past Jubing the bridge was down, and we crossed instead by a miserable structure of wood and sticks which had been tied together in haste and thrown from boulder to boulder. We went across one at a time, with each man's weight the bridge touched the river, and the water here flowed fast and noisily. I wondered just how long it would be

before this bridge would be carried away to join the one it had replaced, and I hoped that no poor traveller would be crossing at the time.

A stranger was waiting for us on the farther bank and when we reached him he asked politely if he could join us. He had no wish to do that stage of the journey on his own, and I was pleased to have him with us. Namgyal and Mingma were visibly encouraged and I had no more need to be afraid that I might have trouble from them. The stranger was a Sherpa, dressed in the usual woollen tunic and long, gay boots of felt, but his hair, instead of hanging in a pigtail, was short and straight and stood on end like bristles. He was friendly and cheerful and we went much better after he had joined us. With great courtesy he took my pack and he led us up the steep hillside at a very good, fast pace. The path was little used and often hard to find, but the stranger went in front of us and we were never lost for long. We were in fact completely in his hands and for one mad moment it occurred to me that perhaps he had only joined us to act as a decoy. At the first halt I gently recovered my pack but I need not have been afraid, for he was only a very friendly Sherpa, guiding us in order to be helpful, and I ought to have known better than to dwell on such a wild suspicion.

The sun grew hotter and stronger, the climb seemed unending, and the track, where we could make it out, was rough and steep and dry. At first we had to push our way through shrubs and tiny trees, and as these reached only to our waists we must have been conspicuous for miles. But if the bandits could see us we certainly could not see them. As we came higher the trees grew

taller and thicker and soon we were shut in completely in a forest of rhododendron and pine. Here the path was steep and sandy, too soft to bear us easily as we tried to climb; we slipped and slithered and hardly made progress at all. Again we would have made excellent targets for any practised bandit, but again we were left to pass unhindered.

It was dark in the forest, and very much cooler, but even so I was most surprised when we walked straight into a storm of cold and drenching rain. Although we were under the trees we were very quickly soaked. My anorak soon streamed with water, my unprotected skirt was clammy and dripped heavily, my sandals squelched unpleasantly every time I took a step. Far more serious, even the sandy path was drowned in flowing water. We were still trying to climb and the water was pouring downhill, so that we were moving against the current and finding it very hard work. For half an hour we went on, but the going was so discouraging that we paused for a consultation. Just above the path was an enormous boulder, so vast that all four of us could surely sit beneath it and still have room to light a fire. No one was certain how far we had still to go before we reached the next village and were safely away from the bandits, but the others thought it might take many hours if the path stayed under water, and with the storm it was already growing dark. They disputed whether or not to spend the night in the open, well within reach of the bandits, but quite clearly that was the only course to take. Here at least we could be sure of some shelter. We climbed up to the dry ground underneath the rock and began to wring out our clothes.

It took a very long time to light the fire and until then we stayed wet. I wondered vaguely about these far-famed bandits. Everybody spoke of them in tones of awe, and certainly they had proved a nuisance to the expedition, but all day we had been vulnerable and yet been undisturbed. I felt that any businesslike bandit would make a point of knowing who was on the track and, if so, their disregard of us must surely be deliberate. It was, I thought, just possible that they would come by night, but as they had neglected us while it was light and fine I did not believe that they would choose to turn out after dark and in the rain. I was relieved, but at the same time I felt it was a trifle tame. If we had seen them I had planned to ask about the camera and they might very well have handed it over, for it could be of no value to themselves. I did not plan to leave the path and seek them out. We might get lost, it could be dangerous, and my Sherpas would not have come too. We would go instead to Okhaldhunga and hope that the Barra Hakim would in some way be able to help. It was an anticlimax, and I felt subdued. If you are all keyed up to do business with a bandit and find that you are pointedly ignored, it may, in fact, be a great relief but surely anyone would feel a little flat.

In the last light of the evening the forest was very lovely. It was still raining, but more lightly now, and not enough to hide the view. All around us, and rising from the hillside far below, were graceful trees of scarlet rhododendron, their dark leaves clean and shining with the rain, each small bright flower as vivid as a jewel. The air was pure and the scent was soft and fresh. It was beautiful to be sleeping out in a place as perfect as

this, and I was happy that the storm had kept us back from the crowds of another village.

In the early morning it was just as lovely, but the colours were dulled and it was gentle and subdued. We moved from our boulder before it was light and the rhododendron flowers were still half-closed and the leaves dripped steadily from yesterday's long bath. The track was steep and slippery but we climbed at quite a good rate and after an hour and a half we came out of the forest into radiant daylight and into open country high on the crest of a ridge. From there we saw that our way led down and I thought that the track would be pleasant and smooth, for the slope this side was very much easier than the one we had just come up.

In the open we were quite clear of danger and the Sherpas were obviously cheered. I alone had one small worry, and this in fact gave me more anxiety than had the fear of a possible bandit. At Namche I had talked to Dr. Pugh, and found that he held very strong views on the dangers of disease. He had warned me that to sleep in a crowded Sherpa house would be the surest way to catch an infection, and my resistance to indigenous germs would, he said, be very low indeed. I knew from what Tom had seen last year that such infections could be most distressing and were often fatal, but as an economy I had come without a tent and I could not always sleep outside. There was nothing to be done about it and soon I had forgotten the perils of disease. That morning, under the boulder, I had woken to find with a shock that I was covered in a strange mauve rash. It pricked and burned and soon began to put forth constellations of tiny, hard, white spots. Perhaps I had

caught something, just as I had been warned? For a moment I really was frightened, for I was days away from any help, but I calmed myself by remembering that all that mattered was some sign of weakness or fever, and in myself I felt perfectly well. We went on and I found that I walked as fast as ever, so I was reassured and only mildly puzzled. In a day or two the little spots had grown together and swollen into blisters and by the end of the week the surface of my skin had peeled completely away. I must have been suffering simply from some strange effect of the sun, but the symptoms had been unusually vivid and on the first morning I had found them quite alarming.

Once we were out of the forest the Sherpas hurried ahead, but I found a comfortable place to sit and took out the map to see where we were. The one sound map of this part of the world is official and restricted and copies are scarce, but when I had decided on the Okhaldhunga journey Earle Riddiford generously said that he would lend me his. This was a trophy from the Everest Reconnaissance, valuable since such things cannot be bought, and it gave me a good confidence when the way was hard to find or when my Sherpas, reluctant to move, multiplied the distance to the next village and early in the afternoon talked of stopping for the night. The survey itself is a little miracle. It was directed by the Survey of India Office some thirty years ago, when Nepal was still closed to Europeans, and no instruments or white geographers were allowed to enter the country. Indians went in, worked out their measurements by pacing or by eye alone, and came back across the frontier with long lists of results firmly fixed in their memory. These methods

could be fallible enough in a small, flat plain; in wild, mountain country the difficulties must have been extreme. Yet a very competent survey was produced, covering the whole country on a scale of four miles to the inch, and I have a tremendous respect for these Indians who did the field work, and who did it so brilliantly.

The path through the forest had not been marked, but the contours told me roughly where we were. The river flowing far below, in the wide and pleasant valley, was the Solu Khola, and we would have to drop about 6,000 feet, gently and over many miles, to cross it and go up the other side. The lie of the land had now completely changed. The snow mountains were behind us, still shining on high and in the distance when we turned and looked to the north, but with no part in the prospect of our journey to Okhaldhunga and the south. The vast mountain scenery of the Sherpa country, with its long white waterfalls, its grey stone hillsides, its few small ledges fit for crops, had softened into easier slopes bearing woods and calmer rivers and green farming land. Cows grazed gently, there were hens and goats and even a few little pigs. The soil was richer and new crops were showing through, beans and peas and much more maize in place of the Sherpa potato. Terracing was no longer needed, and patches of crops spread across the hill at random, free and quite unfenced.

The houses, too, were spread at random all down the side of the valley. They were not built of stone, which in Sola Khumbu had been so plentiful as it fell from the rocks above. Here the buildings were wooden and brown and the smaller, poorer houses were held together with mud. The Sherpas in Sola Khumbu always built in

villages, little collections of homes clustered on any rare ledge or sudden flatness, and each village was a resting place on the wild hillside, isolated from its nearest neighbour perhaps by miles of difficult walking. In such hard country the villages were cheerful, friendly places. Now that we had come to an easier valley I missed the signs of happy village life. Houses were built all over the place, sometimes in long, straggling groups and sometimes on their own. Nor was there one particular track, but many little paths that started and ended to suit the various houses and fields but not to help the traveller. We moved down the valley, not quite sure of the best way to the river, and as we went by there was no longer the happy welcome of people calling to their friends, and coming out in crowds to watch. Each household stared at me, but separately and in quiet surprise.

The people were very mixed. Prosperous, two-storied houses stood near to tiny hovels, and some families looked reasonably clean while others went around in rags. What surprised me most was to find a few Sherpa families scattered among the Nepalis, for we were well outside Sola Khumbu and cut off from it by a day and a half of rarely travelled path. The Sherpas in this valley were poor and ragged, living in the smaller houses and wearing old and dirty clothes. They did not even make the effort to keep together but were to be seen only at intervals and overshadowed by the neighbouring Nepalis. We had breakfast with a Sherpa family at a sprawling hamlet not worthy of a mark on the map but called, by Namgyal, Khidda. The family had the obvious Tibetan features shared by all the Sherpas, small eyes, straight hair, a well-proportioned frame, and they wore

the usual striped aprons and typical black and white beads. But they had lost the lively Sherpa happiness, and certainly they were sadly poor. The mother's clothes were old and torn and her breasts fell through holes in her blouse, a fashion which simplified feeding the baby but looked careless and unkempt. The whole family, with their few hens and a goat, lived in a low shed thirty feet long by thirteen wide; the wooden walls were stuffed with straw and light came in only where straw fell out. The Sherpas could stand up straight in the room, for it was just over five feet high, but I found it decidedly cramped and chose to breakfast outside.

As far as I could find out, the Sherpas in this valley had no regular links with Sola Khumba. I did wonder for a moment if they were not true Sherpas at all, but some other descendants of the Tibetans who had come from Tibet by a different way, but Namgyal thought they were Sherpas and his ideas should be better than mine. I looked at the map and saw that the only likely way from Tibet into this valley lay through Sola Khumbu, and I thought it very probable that these people had been in the valley for some time and had slowly lost touch with their cousins in their former home.

All down the valley were ancient mani walls and chortens, sadly neglected by the Hindu Nepalis and tumbling into ruins. Sometimes fields had been ploughed to the edge of the walls and now the path can no longer divide to bear the traveller to the left as a token of respect. These monuments are sacred only to the Buddhists, but I had been told that many years ago Buddhism was strong among the Nepali tribes, and these overgrown, neglected walls and chortens must have survived from then. The

Buddhist religion arose at first as a purer reaction against the older Hindu, but in recent centuries Hinduism has regained its hold on the Nepalis and now the only branch of Buddhism left in Nepal, outside Katmandu and in the places where I went, is that brought over by the Sherpas from Tibet.

Apart from these broken and disregarded chortens, signs of religion were now becoming scarce. In Sola Khumbu all but the poorest villages flourish their prayer flags and bunting, and show a good collection of holy stones and walls and barrels, most of which are tended and repaired from time to time. In the Hindu valleys I missed these small observances. I heard no prayers or chanting; twice I saw a little carved stone adorned with a handful of flowers, but I had to wait until Okhaldhunga to see a complete shrine. Prayer flags had now disappeared, and no sacred barrels were fixed above the streams. I missed the simple Sherpa charm of harnessing wind and water power to multiply their prayers.

In contrast to the Sherpas the people of this valley at first seemed irreligious, but soon I found traces of a useful and practical piety. The country abounded in welcome good works, and I learned that these had all been put up in the name of religion. We were back now among shade trees and resting places, and when at last we came down to the river at a tiny place called Garma, we crossed it by a very fine new bridge. Certainly it was the safest bridge I had seen since Katmandu and instead of moving across it quickly and carefully I stopped in the middle to look downstream and enjoy the view. The river banks rose steeply on either side; they were wooded and richly green. The water tumbled noisily past the

boulders on its bed and the bridge itself was dry, high above the level of the spray. It was a delicate wooden structure, firmly supported on the trunks of massive trees and neatly roofed to guard against the rain. Every detail had been tidily finished, and garlands hung in triumph from the sides. It had stood, I was told, for five years, and had been built by a pious and prosperous merchant from Okhaldhunga in tribute to his father's soul. I do not know how the soul was helped, but it had surely been an excellent work to build the bridge and bring pleasure and safety to the living.

Resthouses, too, are often built as a pious duty to some dead ancestor, and there were several scattered at intervals along the track. We slept in one which was particularly fine, with a wide veranda, wooden panelling, and carving over the stairs. Others were darker, older, and might be falling down. Sometimes we had a resthouse all to ourselves for the night, but sometimes there was a crowd of other travellers, unrestrained and noisy, and if a village was near I always preferred to sleep with a family on the crowded floor of a house.

We were still a day out of Okhaldhunga, but the people and the country now showed very little change. Once we had crossed the river at Garma there were no more Sherpa houses, and our progress along the track was watched entirely by groups of silent, wondering Nepalis. I missed the Sherpas' welcome and their cheerful spontaneous joy. Here the men just stood and stared; the women peered from a distance, and if I happened to pass close to where they were gathered they would rush into their houses in a fright. Late one afternoon we crossed a ridge and walked into a cloud. I could not help

appearing suddenly, a tall grey figure looming out of the mist, to take the people completely by surprise, and to my distress they jumped and squeaked and hurried off as quickly as their frightened legs would run. I was most relieved when we dropped from the pass and came below the level of the cloud.

We spent that night at Thare, a village of a dozen houses not very far from the pass, and early the next morning we started down on the last short stage into Okhaldhunga. It was still dark when we left Thare, but I was fully awake with the excitement and very glad that at last we were almost there. The track was wide and clear, swollen from time to time by paths running in from the neighbouring villages, and as we went on we were joined by other travellers who came from every part of the hillside and were all on their way to the town. We turned down a spur and all at once I caught sight of Okhaldhunga lying below us, in the sun and on a little sandy ridge; it seemed enormous, closely packed with wooden houses, nearly a mile from end to end, and dwarfing the ordinary villages we could see on the farther hills. We could pick out, in the distance, several well-worn tracks, all of them leading straight to the town, and as we came nearer we saw that every track bore its moving groups of travellers. Poor Mingma was bewildered to see so many people, and we had to lead him gently down the path and into Okhaldhunga. We sat him down in the shade of a tree while we stopped to get our bearings.

CHAPTER FIVE

Okhaldhunga

It was hot even under the tree, dry and sandy and dusty, and we waited there very uncomfortably, not sure of what to do. The two small Sherpas shrank awkwardly into my shadow, ill at ease in a big Nepali town, and all the men who were standing in front of their houses and leaning against the walls simply turned their heads in my direction and stared at me without a word. Some of them chewed reflectively, some of them spat on the ground, but not one had the smallest friendly smile. They looked at me with a hard fixed stare and waited for me to move first. There was one man sitting quite close to me, in a dirty tunic and an old cloth cap, who looked perhaps a little kinder than the rest, and I turned to ask him if there was some house where I would be able to stay. He went on staring at my face and gave no sign of having heard.

The crowd had shifted uneasily when I turned to speak to the man, but no one seemed at all forthcoming so I thought we had better move on and look for a resting place without their help. Just where we were the street was full of shops, dark lower rooms each open to the air and filled with dusty goods, and we walked slowly down

the road in search of somewhere more suitable for the three of us to stay. It was a little daunting. Namgyal and Mingma followed reluctantly, and in every doorway there was a crowd to stand and stare and bar the way. At last we came to a small house at the far end of the town and here there was no one to keep us out; Namgyal said he thought that this would do very well and I followed him inside, but the rooms were so dark and hot and dirty that I took one look at the corner where he planned that we should sleep and came quickly out again into the road. It took some time to coax Namgyal out of his chosen hole, but I went on down the road and after a little while I heard him following behind. I too was beginning to feel awkward and unwanted when at last my indecision ended with a sound idea; I remembered that of course the expedition had spent two days in Okhaldhunga and I knew that they would have found somewhere better to go. We asked the crowd in general if they knew where Shipton's party had stayed, and after some hesitation one thin youth offered to show us the house. We turned back again into the town.

The road forked and the thin youth led us into another part of Okhaldhunga, past a low brick wall, between some evergreen shrubs, and up to a second group of shops. Here he turned and took us into a new, half-finished building which was rough and partly open to the sky, but empty of people and full of light and air. It had not yet been lived in, and it was clean. In the far corner of the room a neat wooden ladder leaned against the wall; our guide climbed lightly up it and we followed him into an empty upper room, which was small and square, quite bare but light with three good windows,

and this, we were told, was where Shipton Sahib had stayed. Shavings of wood lay thick on the floor but we cleared a comfortable corner under one of the windows and sank down to enjoy a quiet rest. I was glad to be here in peace, away from all those staring eyes and hard, unfriendly faces.

We should have known that our rest would be disturbed. After a few minutes we thought we heard footsteps below and then turned to see a silent face staring up from the hole in the floor. The face rose and showed a neck and shoulders, rose again to show a chest, then a waist, and then the whole body of a man appeared to view as he climbed the ladder rung by rung and stepped into the room. Still he stared and did not speak, but as he moved away from the space at the top of the ladder another face appeared, then a third, a fourth, and a fifth, until more people than I could count had come to have a look at me and had crowded into the room. Since I was sitting on the floor they chose to squat to have a closer view and as more and more people climbed the ladder those at the front shuffled nearer and nearer. Nobody smiled, nobody took any notice of my tentative Urdu greetings, and at last I searched in my rucksack to find a book to read. As I read it I tried to forget my audience and I felt more sorry than ever for creatures kept in a zoo.

After a silent ten minutes the crowd in the room began to talk, not to me at all but to each other in low and solemn mutterings. Those at the back tried to draw forward but those at the front refused to move away, and very soon small pushes were being answered by vigorous shoves, low mutterings had turned to louder growls, and

I was worried that things might get out of control and somebody fall down the stairs. The room was growing hot and stale and noisy and if there was to be a fight I did not want to take part. I thought of breaking through the crowd and going outside for a walk, but this might have led to some trouble and I was still hesitating when the confusion on the ladder grew much greater. For the moment at least there was no way down.

The extra noise came slowly up the ladder and a large round figure pushed his way into the room. His face was hidden behind a pair of huge dark glasses, he wore a floppy shirt hanging loose over bright green corduroy trousers, and he seemed to be three times the size of anyone else in the room. The Barra Hakim had arrived.

A small dark man came softly in his wake, and the procession ended with two very thin servants who were struggling hard to push an awkward metal object up the ladder. After much banging and scraping they hoisted it into the room and it turned out to be a chair, a solid metal seat on a frame of twisted wire, perhaps a sign of office or a mark of dignity but certainly too bent and frail to bear its owner's weight. The chair was straightened out after its rough passage and set solemnly down on the floor. The crowd looked at the thing with some resentment, for its arrival had forced them back against the wall; then they turned their attention to the Barra Hakim and gave no sign of being at all impressed.

I shut my book and stood up, to give me the advantage of height over everyone in the room. The Barra Hakim started talking very quickly, much too fast for me to follow what he said, but then to my joy the small dark

man came forward to turn his words into broken English. What was I doing there? Where had I come from? Who was I, in any case? And what did I want? I began to tell them the story of the camera, and as the little man translated the crowd pressed forward to hear, keeping quiet as they listened to what was said but growing noisy again as soon as he had finished. The Barra Hakim talked louder and faster and looked unhappy and worried and eager to be away. I started to describe the camera and the rest of the stolen load, but long before I had come to the end he had murmured vague promises of help, grabbed the small dark man and vanished down the ladder, leaving behind his two thin servants to rescue the official chair. In their hurry they pushed it through the hole and on to the men below, and then they too went down and out of sight, leaving me on my own again in the middle of the restless crowd.

For a moment I was worried, but since the headman of the town had hurried away from the crowd I felt that I had every right to do so too, and while all was confusion I followed the party down the ladder and out into the street. The men were too surprised to try to stop me and once outside I felt much happier, with air to breathe and free again instead of being trapped.

The Barra Hakim had already disappeared and there seemed to be no point in trying to seek him out, so I decided to look round the town at my leisure. It was good to think that we had hours to spare, for it was too hot to feel very active yet there was so much I wanted to see. I wandered slowly down the street between the shops. It was early in the afternoon; the stones of the roadway were hot under my sandals and the whole place

smelt strongly in the sun, but even so it was exciting to come into a town again after several weeks in small and scattered villages. The road leads along the crest of a sandy ridge and through gaps between the wooden houses one can look down on either side on to the brown and dusty slopes of the hill, in some places carved into tiny fields, in others left rough with scattered shrubs and stunted trees. And then one looks farther, over distant, sandy ridges, across hills and valleys and ridges stretching gently away to the south. From all this wide area come paths and tracks, winding through the fields and then joining together to cross the hills and climb to Okhaldhunga. The town is high and lifted up, both a centre and a watchtower to dominate the country all around.

There were many new things to see as I walked slowly through the town and I took out my diary to write down some details before I had time to forget: the lady with the gilt ear-rings as large as saucers, who peered down at me from a high balcony, trying not to be seen by the men standing round in the streets; the intricate lines in some of the carving; maize cobs hung below the eaves to dry; the vast amount of cloth displayed before the shops; and, on another balcony, the two old ladies knitting. When I looked up from what I was writing I found a group of curious children staring at my book and pen. They studied me with tremendous interest, giggling and grinning and calling to their friends to come and share the joke, and when I moved down the street the whole collection came straggling along behind. I went faster and they all broke into a run; little boys, barefoot and trouserless, larger boys in old cloth tunics and gaily-coloured caps, youths with loose waistcoats and

folded umbrellas, all trailed me in a long procession down the hot and dusty streets.

Their elders sat resting in the heat of the afternoon. No work was done, hardly anyone moved. The only signs of any activity were the sudden hideous noises from military trumpets somewhere on the hills, from a man who sat practising his mouth-organ and from a little boy with a drum. My personal procession moved on, but apart from this it was left to the animals to bring some movement to the scene. A very small puppy chased a couple of worried ducks through the open door of a house, goats nibbled among the shrubs beside the road, and a few knowing hens ravaged a household shrine to eat the beans set up there as offerings to the gods. But even beside the ravaged shrine the men still sat and stared.

The houses in Okhaldhunga are large and wooden, neatly fixed together with nails. They are perched on the sloping hill, two storeys in front and three at the back, and they must have seemed great palaces to our two small visiting Sherpas. Rows of outside struts hold up the roofs which thus can stretch beyond the walls to throw a deep shadow on to the men who sit on the ground below. Nails are a luxury outside Katmandu—they are almost unknown to the Sherpas who have to keep their roofs in place with the weight of chunks of stone—but here they are used to make life more attractive for those who like to sit at their ease, in the shade of wide overhanging roofs, in deep verandas, carved balconies, or on little wooden seats beneath the trees.

I had expected more stir from the capital of the district, for Number Three East would make a fair-sized county and I had walked for several days in search of the forces

of law. I knew, too, that Okhaldhunga is linked to Katmandu by a short week's march along an easy track, a track broader and much more level than the rough path which we had taken across the mountains on our journey into Namche. But only the shops showed any contact with the capital, and even they were lifeless. Strange goods were piled in the open windows, all of them carried along the track from Katmandu, shoddy bracelets, rusty torches, soap, cotton, sweets and face-cream, and cardboard games like Snakes and Ladders, dumped on the traders of Okhaldhunga by the merchants of the capital and sitting unwanted in the shops under heavy layers of dust. Nobody was buying anything, no one expected to sell. Only the sillier products of mechanical civilisation had found their way along the track to Okhaldhunga and as far as I could see the torpor of the place stayed undisturbed.

Six jars of English face-cream sat on a shelf and I took one up and looked inside to find that it was bad. I opened another, which was just the same, green and mauve and evil-smelling, but a third was better preserved: though it was part wax, part molten and part crystalline, it was still a reasonable shade of white and it hardly smelt bad at all. My face was rough with the hot sun, my only tin of cream was nearly dry, I could not afford to fuss. I waved the jar at various resting men and a tall, thin chap came up to make a sale. He asked for two rupees, only a few pence above the standard English price; that seemed very fair and I did not try to force him down. It was the first transaction I had seen that afternoon and the man himself seemed very surprised to have done some business at last.

After two hot hours I felt that the upper room had had time enough to clear and I went back to find it almost empty, with Namgyal and Mingma sitting by the window and some six or seven local men squatting on the floor, talking together in low and muttered tones. It was good to sit down again. I took out my diary and started to write, so absorbed with all the new things I had seen that I hardly noticed the noises in the room or the scufflings up and down the ladder until I looked up by chance to see that Namgyal and Mingma had both disappeared and the usual hostile crowd had gathered in their place. Some men in the corner were arguing fiercely, pulling out of their pockets small scruffy pieces of paper and waving them about as if to prove a point, then dropping their voices to settle some detail and drawing into a huddle to plaster the documents with prints from their dirty hands. It was faintly mysterious. Outside there were sounds of some disturbance and I moved across to look out of the window. Quite a crowd had gathered in the street and all the men were standing round, taking an interest and beating their hands as a short wiry man waved his arms in the air and harangued them with an orator's zeal. A few paces away stood a taller man with a gun. Something must have happened to rouse them from their rest, and I wondered for a nasty moment if it might be connected with me. Why should they have collected just beneath my window? And why had Namgyal and Mingma gone so silently away?

For a long half hour I waited and wondered. Then Namgyal came back up the ladder and squeezed through the growing crowd in the room. He took up one rucksack and handed the other to me, and, talking very fast

Sherpa children at Chule

about the Barra Hakim, he led the way out into the street. Here two more men were waiting to take charge and they hurried us away between the houses and into a quieter corner of the town, where at last we stopped and they answered some of my questions. The Barra Hakim, I was told, had asked to see me again and preferred that this time I should go to see him. For my safety and comfort he had planned that I should stay the night in his house as his guest, and he had sent the two men as a guard to show me the way.

It was a sudden move to grandeur. We came to a high stone wall and our guides knocked twice on a heavy gate. Someone on the other side opened it to let us through and then closed it carefully to shut out all traces of the sullen, dusty town. We were in an old courtyard, peaceful and pleasant and warm in the early evening sun; mellowed sandy walls kept out unwanted noise and splendid apricot trees grew above them to make a rich green barrier to the world. A friendly horse, tethered in one corner, looked at us with interest, and a cheerful dog, some sort of spaniel, scampered up to roll over at my feet.

A large round figure in bright green trousers came bounding up to greet me. It was a good surprise to find that when he took off his huge dark glasses the Barra Hakim had a cheerful, smiling face. Here in his home he was completely at his ease. He nodded to dismiss the servants, bent down to pat the dog, then ran up a few wooden steps to lead me into the veranda of the house where an old man and a young girl stood in the shadows, waiting. The Barra Hakim spoke to the girl and she stepped gently forward. She was dark and slight, graceful in a pale blue cotton sari, and she greeted me with a quick

shy smile. I thought that she must be about fifteen but the Barra Hakim introduced her as his wife and then called out of an inner room a sturdy little three-year-old, their son. The wife was charming and I liked her at once, but she was not used to meeting strangers. For a few moments she bowed and smiled, looked anxiously at her husband to see that she was doing right, but soon she was overcome with the excitement, put her hands in front of her face and ran giggling into the house. It was quite a while before we saw her again.

The elderly man was her father and he gave me a deep and courteous bow. The two of us followed the Barra Hakim into the house and up a safe and stable flight of steps to a light and lofty hall. Straw lay on the floor, but it was fresh and clean. Several doors led out of the hall and we went through one of them into a large and comfortable room, well stocked with a table, chairs and beds and rugs, and out on to a neat wooden balcony. This was fine with delicate carving and from here we looked down to the courtyard and across to the gate in the wall. Three chairs were brought, and a silent servant came with a tray of tea. After some weeks of squatting on the floor it felt strange to be sitting in a chair, but I soon found that I adapted to the change and it was good to be at ease and see a cup of tea. Resting in a peaceful home, with kind, attentive hosts, I was happy and very well content.

They asked me to tell my story and I explained again about the loss of the camera, why it mattered so much and how I came to them for help. They wanted to know every detail, asking questions to make certain where the load had disappeared, and I found Earle's map and

pointed out the place; then they asked about our journey down from Namche and I traced the route roughly on the map. I gave them the description of the camera as I had learned it from Tom, for I had not set eyes on it myself, and to make things clearer the Barra Hakim called in the small dark man who had been in attendance in the morning, to act as interpreter again. He came with a smile to speed our long discussions. It seemed that he was a Katmandu man who had picked up some English at college in India, and who had come to Okhaldhunga a few months back to start the first school in the history of the town; he was pleasant and eager, halting in his English but proud to be able to help. Someone brought out a piece of paper, Shipton's letter reporting the theft of the load, and this was read and translated and read again, while my hosts looked wise and nodded to themselves. Then we went over the whole story once again, this time with our interpreter to help, and at last the Barra Hakim and his father-in-law left us and went off to confer on their own.

Suddenly the gate in the wall burst open and three fiery little men came running in from the town. They had racquets in their hands and one of them carried a net. In a moment the net was strung high across the courtyard, fixed to a standing pole on either side, somebody had produced a shuttlecock and they flung themselves into the game. Three small boys let out of school could not have been happier or have made more noise. All the time they seemed to be knocking up; there were no lines on the ground to cramp their style, none of them bothered to score, and whenever the shuttlecock flew over the net towards a player he would let out a whoop of delight and

hit it as hard as he could. The smallest player, eager and agile, squatted behind the net, ready at any moment to spring into the air with a joyful cry and to slam the shuttlecock with all his might at his poor opponent, a larger, cheerful fellow who seemed to be continually surprised. The horse took quite an interest in the game and jerked himself about, the dog barked loudly, even the quiet servants came out to watch and cheer.

They played on and on, laughing and jumping and shouting. The sun went down and suddenly it was dark, but that hardly seemed to matter: they hit more wildly, they missed more often, but that was all. Clearly they saw no reason why the game should be brought to an end.

The interpreter had stayed on the veranda and from time to time he talked about the players. One was a soldier, another was an Indian from Darjeeling who had come to teach in the school, and the third, the smallest, bouncing one, was a civil servant fresh from Katmandu. This was a surprise for me, for it seemed odd to think of an office job in a town where the people were illiterate. Presumably he dealt in taxes for the government? Yes, I was told, he was a revenue official, trying to raise taxes on the cloth that was sold in the town. It was not easy, the interpreter agreed. People were not accustomed to paying: only a few of them kept records even for themselves; and often the cloth woven in the lower villages out of local cotton would change hands in Okhaldhunga not for money but for goods, for maize or rice or pots and pans or oil. Our vigorous little official had to try to make the people keep accounts in terms of cash, but it was futile to expect to raise rupees from men who never handled money. I mentioned the slightly sinister huddles

in the upper room that morning, where the men had sat round like conspirators, passing dirty scraps of paper among themselves and signing them with their finger-prints. This, it appeared, was part of the system. How it worked my companion could not tell me, nor whether much money was raised, but I had seen that the whole thing was loathed and resented, and the records, if they survived at all, were likely to be cooked.

From there our talk turned to the people of the town, reluctant taxpayers ready to complain. My companion hinted at the changes of the last few years. The Katmandu risings had brought to power a Congress and a Cabinet to replace the Rana family as advisers to the King, and the central government was trying to make its rule felt in the outlying parts of Nepal. A great census was in progress, tax collectors had been sent out to bring in a revenue, and the local Barra Hakims, once secure in their position, were now appointed by the government for three years at a time. The men of Okhaldhunga were unhappy at the change. Poor and lazy, they hated to be organised and taxed, or in any way controlled. A few weeks back the new Barra Hakim had been chosen by Katmandu to take the place of his father-in-law, whose term of office had expired. The elder man was summoned on a visit to the capital, and while he was away the people of Okhaldhunga rose to demonstrate their discontent. The son-in-law could not keep order, the police were too feeble to help, and it was not until the old man came back again that the feelings of the town calmed down into their usual sloth. Clearly it was not safe that he should be retired, and now there were two rulers in the town: the son-in-law who was

still in name the Barra Hakim, and the dignified old man who advised him in private and was ready to appear in public at any sign that things were going wrong. The elder man was called the governor, a title thought up especially for himself, and he was held in very general respect. My companion was full of his praises, for it was the governor who first had the idea of starting a school in the town, and he had always been ready to help and encourage the teachers in their work.

We were still talking when my hosts came back to the balcony and the governor explained just what they were planning to do. He was very distressed, he told me, that the theft had occurred in his district and had we lost an ordinary camera he would have sent at once to Katmandu for it to be replaced. He held himself responsible and he felt that he had failed. I was so sorry for him, for he looked very solemn and sad, but I could not cheer him. He planned, he went on, to collect a band of soldiers and to send them off to hunt the bandits and save the load, and I was to travel one day behind with another soldier as an escort. In the meantime, would I stay in his house as his guest? He wanted me to feel perfectly free to do whatever I chose, and he begged that I would think of myself as the daughter of the house. He smiled kindly and sadly, and murmured to himself " like a daughter, just like a daughter."

We sat and talked until late in the evening when a servant came with an oil lamp and I was taken to my room. There was a rug on the floor, a chair and the wooden frame of a bed, and a scrap of cloth had been dipped in scent and left to cast its sweetness on the air. I admired the comfort and the Barra Hakim was

delighted. He smiled with pleasure, bowed good night, and went happily away. I shut the door and turned back into the room: it felt luxurious to see furniture again, it was good not to have to sleep in a dirty room where a fire had smoked all day, and above all it was a welcome change to be left entirely alone.

The next morning Namgyal brought me breakfast and I found my way into the grounds behind the house, hoping to find some stream where I could wash. I had forgotten how dry and dusty the town and hills had been and my search led me farther and farther away. I climbed an old stone wall and came out on a public track which followed, very roughly, the dried-up course of a stream. This stream, as I later learned, was the town's main water supply, and certainly there were signs that the banks had been tended and cleared, but it was summer and very hot and I had to go along the path for half an hour before I found a meagre trickle which could be dammed for half a cupful of water. The hills were dry and sandy and the stunted bushes offered little shade; I washed very quickly and quite understood why the people of the town had been so dirty.

I went back to the house to find that everyone was waiting for me, very worried lest I was lost. When I was told to think of myself as a daughter I took that to mean that I was free to act as if I were at home, and I had slipped away quietly without drawing attention to the fact that I was going out to wash, but the daughter of the house, married woman and mother though she was, left the grounds only once or twice in the year and the household had assumed that I would be like her. When it was found that I had gone they all became alarmed.

I was sorry to have upset them, simply through thinking in my own terms when they talked to me in theirs. To make it worse, a parade of policemen was drawn up in the courtyard, waiting for me to watch them set off to find the camera.

The governor took me to the balcony and the Barra Hakim went into the courtyard to deal with the parade. There were five policemen lined up at a right angle to ourselves and when we came on to the balcony they turned to stare over their shoulders and fell out of line to see to their own satisfaction just what was going on. They carried no arms and wore no uniform; one had orange and black striped trousers, another sported a cap of a violent pink. With difficulty the Barra Hakim induced some of them to turn back to face him while he told them of their mission to hunt the camera, but they drooped and slouched and stood in a wavy line, inquisitive to have a look at me and unconcerned about their orders. At last they were brought to attention, turned to the right, and dismissed. They picked up their various bundles and belongings and went out through the gate in the wall.

All this time the governor stood stiffly at attention. He was an old man but he had fought with the British army in the first world war and he held himself proudly erect. He had learned high standards and had kept to them, and now he tried to give some dignity even to this disorderly parade. I liked him very much and respected him for trying so hard to impress his standards on such disheartening material. The people of Okhaldhunga are careless and uneducated and it will take years of training to give them any pride in their town as a centre of law

and order, yet this must come before the opening up of wilder Nepal which the Katmandu government plans.

The Barra Hakim's wife came on to the balcony and sat shyly at my side. To-day she was perfectly composed, and her soft brown eyes looked at me steadily out of a childish face. I liked her but I found it very hard to draw her out, for she knew so very little of the world outside her house; she was even puzzled by the face-cream I had bought in the town, and all through the long hot afternoon she hardly spoke a word. But she seemed to be quite contented and very proud of her son, and she smiled happily as I showed him the usual round of watch and zips and torches and he tried with some success to make them work. When she learned that I at the great age of twenty-two had not yet had a son she looked modestly superior and fondled the boy with pride. The boy in his turn stroked the spaniel and everybody seemed pleased.

In the evening badminton began again, as vigorous and noisy as before, and this time the Barra Hakim joined in the fun, entering into the game with tremendous zest and dancing about with delight when he hit the shuttlecock over the net. Suddenly a man rushed through the gate waving a large white envelope. The Barra Hakim saw him, dropped his racquet and left the game, grabbed the envelope, tore it open, and looked at the letter inside. Then he came bouncing upstairs to us, beaming all over his face. Proudly he said that he had news of the camera. He handed the paper to me but since it was written in Nepali I could not make it out and the teacher from Katmandu came forward to read it out loud. Never have I seen a large and bouncing man

deflate as quickly as the Barra Hakim did then. The letter had nothing to do with the stolen camera but dealt with the measurements of some new recruit for the police, giving details of his height and weight and for good measure putting five smudged fingerprints right across the page. The poor Barra Hakim looked so sad. He was wrong about the camera, the bubble of his triumph had been pricked, and to make things even more upsetting it had been shown to us all that he did not know how to read. I had been very touched by his genuine delight when he thought that the camera was found, but nothing I could say would comfort him and he crept sadly down the stairs.

The rest of the day was spent on the balcony. All the time people were coming and going. The governor arrived to watch the game, his daughter went into the house to put her young son to bed, strangers came up to be introduced and stayed to sit and talk. I met the other master of the school, the Indian from Darjeeling, and heard from him another long list of praises of the governor; the teacher from Katmandu turned up again to tell me all about the school; the Barra Hakim slipped back quietly to stay on the edge of the crowd; even the badminton players broke off their game to come and pay their respects. Night fell quickly as it does in this part of the world. A servant brought an oil lamp and I sat watching the earnest brown faces and looking out across the warm, sweet darkness. These men were kind and eager to tell me of their schemes to help the town, the loans to those entangled in debt, the teaching of better farming, the extensions planned for the school. I saw them gathered round the dignified old governor, one

little group lit up against the background of a friendly night, and I thought that such high hopes might even work a miracle and make the men of Okhaldhunga happier citizens in an ordered and prosperous town. It was good to sit and dream of a wonderful future, and I was sad when at last the lamp went out and we stumbled off to bed.

I had a ceremonial send-off in the morning. The teacher from Darjeeling, whom I knew now as Sriprashad Chetri, arrived to be my escort for the next few days and he in his turn was escorted by a soldier, a lean and wiry man who kept restlessly fingering his kukri as if he could scarcely wait to draw it and do battle. Obviously we should be well protected, and with such an eager warrior around we should not find our journey dull. Next a procession of youths marched into the courtyard, garlands of yellow flowers hanging from their shoulders; it was the school, turned out in style to honour the occasion. After some manœuvring they were drawn up in a line somewhere out of the way. Then the Barra Hakim came up with a cup of milk, a ritual offering to delay the parting guest. It was strange stuff, still warm from the buffalo, and I duly swallowed it down. Everyone flocked round to wish us well in our hunt for the camera, and I did my best to thank my hosts for all their care and kindness. The Barra Hakim beamed and looked delighted; the governor was solemn and insisted over and over again that he had done nothing at all and that anyway it was a pleasure and a joy. We sorted ourselves out from the crowd and Namgyal and Mingma appeared from somewhere to take their places in the queue. The governor said a few last words to the escort and we

moved slowly across the courtyard while the school stood by and cheered.

At the wall we turned to bow and wave to the governor and his family, and to smile to the school and the servants, the spaniel and the horse. Then we turned through the gate and saw them all no more.

* * *

We crossed the great ridge that afternoon; it was still in mist and we came down again on the other side into wilder, rougher country. The next morning we reached the Solu Khola and crossed it by the charming wooden bridge, and here we came upon our five policemen. They had been sent ahead to brave the bandits on our behalf and to see that the way was safe, but someone had waylaid them with a local brew of beer. Two of them stood uncertainly, propped up against each other and smiling inanely into their cups; after a little while they noticed who we were and turned away with a sheepish grin. The others were too far gone to worry when we arrived: they lay on the ground in a sprawling heap, completely dead to the world.

The poor governor had tried so hard to help us. He had done his best to protect my return and was so very anxious that the stolen load should be found. He was the ruler of the district, the source of authority, the guardian of the law, yet there was no one he could trust to carry out this mission. He had been so proud of his policemen and now they had let him down. He worked hard to spread his high ideals but the people did not care. I knew that he would feel a failure and it was tragic to think that his plans had come to nothing.

Yet there were compensations. If this could happen only one day out of Okhaldhunga, the farther corners of the district can be in little danger of coming under close control from the town. The people of Number Three East are uneducated and untrained. They resent the central government when it touches their own affairs and they are entirely unsuited to be the agents in extending the power of Katmandu over remoter parts of Nepal. All this augured ill for the return of our camera, but it promised a long independence to the Sherpas, and that, at least, was good. Much as I admired the governor himself, I would not want the men of Okhaldhunga to go out and disturb the Sherpas. This may be a part of the present plan for the opening up of Nepal, but it seems unlikely to have any quick success.

CHAPTER SIX

Shu Shu

THE SILLY policemen had made things very awkward: they were in no state at all to come any farther and even if they could stage a very quick revival we had now lost all our confidence in their value as a bodyguard; it seemed unlikely that we should have much success if we went on alone to approach the bandits, yet I was bitterly reluctant to give up the whole idea. The camera was important, I had come so far in search of it already, and I had no desire to go back to Namche and break to Tom the news that I had failed.

We decided at last that we would go up the valley to try to raise some extra manpower to replace our fallen guards, and the drinking party was sent home in disgrace. It seemed more tactful to move away while Sriprashad Chetri took it upon himself to upbraid the two still-conscious policemen and to impress on their wandering minds that they must all go back to Okhaldhunga and report their lapse to the governor. For some time they just looked blank, but at last Sriprashad seemed satisfied that his words were understood—the two sinners grinned together, put down their cups and tried to stir their

fallen friends. I found it very hard to believe that they would all go soberly home to tell the story of their shame, but the theory was that they would do so and we did not wait to watch them on their way.

Instead of striking up the hill on the route I had taken before, we kept to the broad main track that led beside the Solu Khola, and after two or three easy miles we came to the village of Derbu. Here we had greater luck than we had dared to hope. The village itself was small with only twelve houses, some of them tall and wooden, others little better than shelters made out of mats, but to-day they were holding a market on the path and men from all the hamlets in the valley had gathered to buy and sell. Some from the lower villages staggered up with bales of local cloth, some from the hills came down with baskets and mats of bamboo, a flock of sheep arrived in the care of a harassed youth and proceeded to run amok among the wares. All was life and movement. If we hoped to recruit fresh labour we could not have found a more promising place, and Sriprashad fell into talk with some of the men to find out what they thought about enlisting with us for the next few days to join in the hunt for the camera.

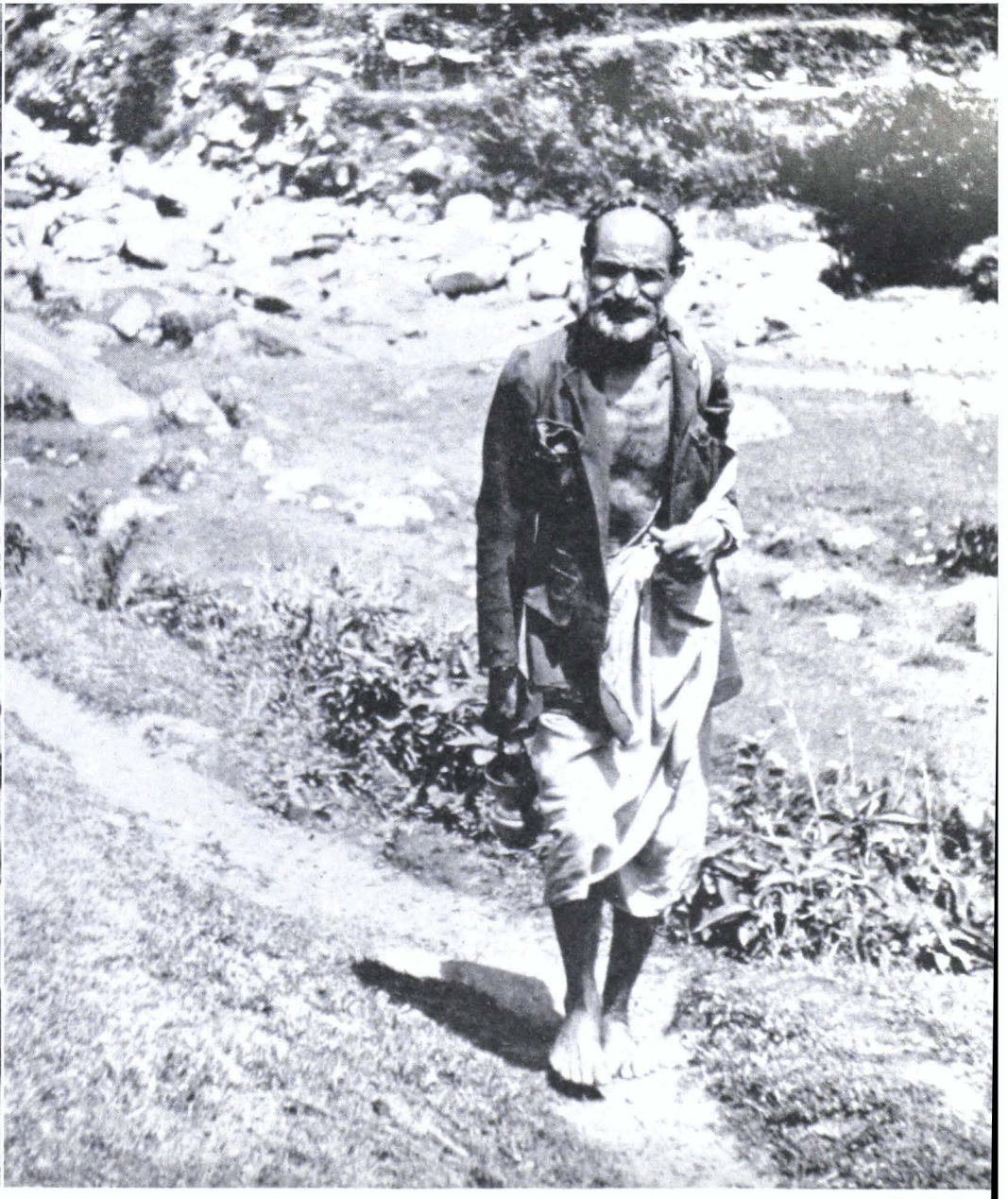
He was still talking when I caught the sound of bells jingling merrily down the valley, and soon I heard the sound of horses' hoofs. Round a bend in the track swung three grey horses, their heads held high, ribbons streaming from their bridles, and little bells bouncing on their long, thick manes. Their riders were large and cheerful men and they wore standard Tibetan party clothes, rich purple tunics and embroidered floppy hats. They made a striking sight as they rode proudly and easily into the village, and the men on the track surged forward to admire

them; the sheep looked worried and scattered at speed.

They greeted us with a friendly salute and reined in their horses. Who were we? What were we doing? Why had we come to the village? The usual questions poured forth and we told them the story of our mission, starting with the theft of the load and the loss of the valuable camera, describing my journey from Namche to Okhaldhunga and then our return in the wake of the drunken police. Most of the time the riders looked puzzled and uncomprehending, but when we came to our present stranded position they nearly fell off their horses in their readiness to offer help. They lived, they told us, at the village of Phaphlu a few miles up the valley. They begged that we would stay there as their guests while they raised the men to search for the camera. They would do their utmost to find it for us. They had had contacts with the bandits before and were hopeful that all would be well, and they were sure it would be better for us to stay quietly at Phaphlu while the hunt was going on. Everything in their power would be done to make us comfortable for the two or three days we should have to wait. We accepted their very generous offer and they beamed at us with obvious joy.

They told us that they had business lower down the valley and suggested that we should make our own way to Phaphlu and wait for them there. The directions were easy: simply keep to the track. Phaphlu was not far away, we should be there well before the sun began to set. They smiled at us again and waved as we started out along the path; then they turned their horses down the valley and we heard the cheerful tinkle of the bells as they trotted away into the distance.

A woman of Thami



The sadhu returning from his pilgrimage in the hills

It was a beautiful walk to Phaphlu along the easy, empty track. We were at about 8,000 feet and the air was pleasantly fresh. The grass was green beside the path, and dotted with a few small, brilliant flowers; as we climbed gently up the valley we passed through scattered woods of cool and fragrant pine. Then we came out of a wood and saw with a sudden start of delight the two twin snow mountains, Numbur and Karyolung, balanced at the head of the lovely valley, twelve thousand feet above us. Solid and delicate and radiantly white, they shone with an unearthly beauty against the clear blue sky. I had never seen anything more lovely or more majestic, and I could only stand still with happiness and try to absorb as much as I could of the shining beauty of the scene.

Namgyal and Mingma had fallen a little way behind; Sriprashad and I and the soldier escort were walking ahead, quite close together and in single file. The path itself climbed gently up the valley, but the slope of the hillside to our right was steep and over the years the track had worn a cutting in the sandy soil. We walked along in silence, enjoying the peace and loveliness of so perfect an afternoon. All at once we heard a mighty crack from the high bank just beside us, and an enormous pine came crashing down and fell across the path. The soldier and I were no more than ten feet apart, and the great tree landed squarely between us leaving us both unharmed. The soldier let out a piercing shout of rage, pulled out his kukri and waved it in the air, then charged up the bank to bring to justice whoever had caused the crash. He screeched with fury and clearly he was out for blood. A small and very worried man peered over the bank to

find out the meaning of the noise; when he saw our soldier wielding a kukri and charging up the bank towards him he too let out a terrible shout and scuttled up the hill to save his life. The chase went on and we heard them climb higher and higher, while bloodthirsty snorts gave place to pitiful squeaks, and then Sriprashad, too, scrambled up the bank and hurried after them, making intermittent soothing noises in an effort to calm them down.

I stayed on the path by the fallen pine. It was a large tree and it was just as well it had not come down a fraction of a second sooner or later, or one of us would have folded beneath its weight into a very undignified pulp. I wondered how the chase was ending: all was now silent on the hill and I began to fear the worst.

A few minutes later Sriprashad returned, a very crest-fallen soldier at his heels. He had arrived in time to stop the threatened bloodshed and had prevailed upon our escort to put his weapon back in its case; while this was going on the little man had beetled away in unconcealed relief. It was better to have spared his life and I was definitely happier, but our escort took a radically different view: his prey had been snatched away at the very last moment and now he showed a tendency to sulk.

We came to Phaphlu about half an hour later; as we crossed a small rib which had blocked the view the village stood there before us and we stopped for a few silent moments, and gazed at it in sudden awe. In every way it was perfect, and the cool crisp air brought us an exhilarating delight. The sparkling snow peaks stood out against the clear blue sky, the hillside was green and even, a pine wood stretched nearly to the track and bathed the village in its clean, sweet smell, two gay streams

tumbled across the path; everything joined to set a scene of shining beauty. Before us lay fields of healthy young corn, and from among them three great houses rose up in striking glory, their high walls rich and coloured, or white and gleaming in the sun, their large windows painted and carved, prayer flags fluttering happily on their tidy wooden roofs. These must be the houses of our friendly Tibetans, and we were to be the guests of all this splendour. It was a wonderful chance that had led the policemen to drink and so had made us change our earlier plans, for otherwise we would now have been many miles away, making for the bandit country on the route I had taken before.

The village was peaceful and still; no one came out to see us and after a few minutes we made our way through the corn to the first of the three great houses. Passing round the side we came to a small courtyard, and here a cheerful little lady in Tibetan dress hurried forward in pleased surprise. Her striped skirt was clean and new, her long black hair hung in one lustrous pigtail down her back, her smile was warm and friendly. When she heard that we had been invited to stay in the village she raised her hands in welcome and led us into the house. We followed her up a flight of well-built stairs. Wide passages led to right and left but still she led us up, until on the third storey we came out on to a covered balcony and could look through its twisted wooden pillars to see Namgyal and Mingma in the courtyard far below. At the far end of the balcony a door opened into a large and airy room, and this was spotlessly clean, painted white and green and draped with fragile muslin. Our hostess begged us to make ourselves at ease and offered

us a bewildering choice of comfort. Perhaps we would care to sit in the ornamental chairs? There were seven, all of them cleverly carved and padded with thick woollen rugs. Or would one of us prefer to rest on the bed? She bowed to me and pointed to a great fourposter, decked with an elaborate fringe and spread with a vivid blanket, yet out of the way and unobtrusive in a far corner of the room. Could she take our rucksacks? A low bench ran the length of the room and our various goods were stacked upon it in a tidy pile.

We thanked her as warmly as we could and we all sat down. Sriprashad began to explain our mission and I looked in wonder round the room. It was rich and pleasant and very light. The windows looked across the valley to the gentle slopes and the clusters of pines on the other side of the river. Outside the world was beautiful, and in here it was comfortable and cool. I was entirely happy and content.

The lady of the house was amazed to hear our story. She had been told about white people and had been perfectly ready to believe that such strange creatures did in fact exist, rather in the way that I believe in the Snowman, but she had never met one in the flesh before and now she was overjoyed to have me as her guest. She was thrilled with the excitement, and in one respect she was superb: never for a moment did she allow her bubbling curiosity to swamp her natural kindness. I was her guest and her thoughts ran on all my possible needs, and even while she was staring at my clothes, my face, my hair, my height, she was planning little touches for my comfort. She exclaimed about my strange pale skin as she fetched another rug; she admired my printed skirt

as she brought a cushion; and we could hear her murmuring her amazement and delight as she hurried down the stairs to warm some tea.

The tea came, hot and sickly but served in a delicate china bowl. By now I had trained myself to drink it without any signs of revulsion and I was glad to be able to play my part as the honoured guest, properly reluctant to take too much but duly and gratefully drinking when urged again to do so. The lady beamed happily, conscious that she was treating me with the care and attention she felt that I deserved, and I was pleased to manage my share of the ritual without showing what I felt. Thrice brewed tea may be unpleasant, but the taste can be acquired in time; it is far harder to learn to swallow the rancid butter that floats in molten blobs on the top and greases your lips before you start to drink. Yet common courtesy to one's hosts makes it an essential exercise for the traveller in these parts.

We heard heavy footsteps coming up the stairs; the door opened, and a pigtailed young man came cheerfully into the room. Sriprashad and I recognised him at once as one of the three Tibetan riders we had met down the valley, and he seemed delighted to welcome us again. He brought up another chair and we sat in a wide circle and began to discuss our plans.

I was surprised to learn that he was the headman of Phaphlu and the unofficial ruler of the valley, for off his horse he looked much smaller and he was hardly more than a boy, but he told us that his father had died less than a year ago and he himself now filled the two hereditary roles. The lady of the house who had entertained us so well was the headman's mother; there was

no sign yet of any wife. The young headman enjoyed his new authority and he was full of exciting schemes for mustering recruits from all the hamlets in the valley and going out at their head to tackle the bandits himself and make then surrender the camera. I had no desire at all to start any fighting in this beautiful valley and after a long discussion we were able to curb his zeal a little and to encourage him to make some less ambitious plans. The plan he called Shu Shu sounded the most hopeful and we quickly decided on that. Shu Shu is delightfully simple: you send out a small party to parley with the bandits, to promise them that if the camera is delivered to Phaphlu, secretly but safely, no questions will be asked and no reprisals taken for the theft. You hope that the bandits will co-operate, for after all the camera cannot be of the slightest use to them and they may even be glad of a chance to dispose of the incriminating object. If all goes well, everyone gains. And I would have a few days in this perfect village, waiting while the parleying took place.

The young headman then suggested that Sriprashad and I should call on the two other riders who had been with him at Derbu in the morning. They had all returned together and now the others were eagerly waiting to receive us in their homes. We were very happy to fall in with the idea and his mother led us down the long flights of stairs, through the courtyard and into the fields of corn; from here she pointed out the path to the nearer of the other two great houses and then turned away with a smiling bow, leaving us to pay our calls alone.

We went through a painted gate into a walled court-yard and saw the nearer house in all its splendour. The walls were highly coloured, red and orange and pink, the

blue square roof sloped like a little pyramid, a shining golden knob was perched on top. Rows of bright prayer barrels were waiting to be turned, prayer flags waved gently in pious abundance. Everything looked well constructed and seemed to be tended with care. Someone had even had the enterprise to acquire some corrugated iron to make a porch, and this was given an honoured place before the entrance to the house, much as some incongruous treasure imported from the East will be installed in a western sitting-room and shown to the neighbours with tremendous pride.

No one came to greet us. There was no knocker to herald our arrival and it seemed unsuitable to turn a prayer wheel just to sound a bell, so we pushed open the heavy wooden door and Sriprashad led the way boldly into the house. Here it was very dark and we quickly lost ourselves in a confusion of strange low passages; stairs led off in all directions, a couple of steps stuck out to trip us up, two more went suddenly down to take us by surprise. It was a painful way to announce our approach but quite soon we had made ourselves heard and a large Tibetan woman came running up with a lamp. She welcomed us with an enormous grin. Then she turned and showed us the way into a large and comfortable room where we were greeted by her husband, a monk.

I had known that some orders of monks might be married, but I had not thought to meet one living in comfort and independence at home, and it seemed a little unusual that he should be playing the part of a perfect host while his wife ran off to make some tea. He pulled up some chairs into a circle, he found some cushions, shook them and put them in place, then sat down beside

us and carried on a vigorous conversation as he stroked the folds of his deep red robe. He wanted to know if we liked the village, he was overjoyed when we praised the treasures of the room and when we asked to be told the meaning of the curious pictures on the wall. Most of them were replicas of the paintings in the chapel where Tom and I had slept at Namche and they were all religious. Elephants were everywhere, as symbols of the Buddha; fiery dragons were there to show that just as they are the most powerful creatures in the air so is the Buddha the most powerful man on land; a long series of horror pictures of murder and sudden death had been painted to tell that suffering is very necessary to men. Our friendly monk seemed perfectly happy as he pointed out the gruesome details and underlined their moral. At the end of the row there was one picture which differed in style from the rest; the Buddha sat in his usual staring pose, on his left was Gandhi wrapped in contemplation, on his right was Christ on the Cross. One has often been told that all religions are but different ways of looking at the truth, all of them valuable attempts to worship the same God. Usually when this idea is put to me I look at it with some mistrust. The fundamental divergences in their outlook on the world and in what they think about good and evil, life and death, cannot easily be reconciled or blended; the assumption that all religions have much to teach ought to be an inspiration to those who hold it to work out what mighty synthesis can lie behind the varying beliefs, and unless the assumption does lead them into very great efforts of thought I have felt that it was somewhat suspect. Yet without any reservations I was surprised and glad to see that in this

lovely, distant village Christ and Gandhi were allowed to share a little in the great reverence and respect accorded to the Buddha.

The lady of the house came back and we began another ritual of drinking tea. While we drank we answered the eager questions of our hosts and I found that Sriprashad was taking my place as the centre of their attention. It was pleasant to be able to relax and to know that I was no longer being closely examined, for though by now I was used to such treatment and I knew that it was very kindly meant I still found it something of a strain. Our host and hostess, it appeared, had one child, a young son of whom they were delightfully proud, and this son had recently been sent to Okhaldhunga to the new school. When the proud parents discovered that Sriprashad was one of the teachers they wanted to hear all about the boy's progress and I was forgotten in the great excitement of the unexpected first report. Luckily the lad was up to standard and Sriprashad could report in glowing terms. The tea was left on one side and allowed to grow cold and the lamp burned down as the excited parents asked all sorts of questions and were told about their son. Our visit became a triumphant success.

At last all their questions had been answered and we rose to go. They were sorry that the party should break up, but there was another house still to be visited and it was growing late. The monk smiled farewell in a happy beam, still thinking of his son; his wife led us through the village and into the other house.

Here again there were low, dark passages, leading to the same large comfortable room, but at first the family was nowhere to be found. In the end we traced them to

the chapel and were led on our way there by a dull intoning which floated steadily through a solid wooden door. The door opened and a large and cheerful monk looked out. He had been expecting us; his rosy face lit up with delight but no surprise, he greeted us with hearty slaps on the back, dragged us into the chapel and sent his wife to fetch some tea.

It was an intriguing place, holy and homely all at once, with a rich background of vivid paintings on the walls and a group of cheerful people, men and women together, sitting on the benches underneath. On a table in the middle of the chapel were little cups half-filled with water, and one fine china tea-pot with a large embroidered fan sticking awkwardly out of its spout; if anyone moved, as they did from time to time, the fan fell on to the table and had to be put back again with care. A gilt unblinking Buddha presided over the rows of cups, and every now and then our monk would stop in the middle of a sentence to give the little statue a cheerful but reverent nod. High on the walls were long lines of pigeonholes—I counted two hundred and five in all—and each small hole held its appropriate holy book. These books, it appeared, were the cause of all the intonation, for a gloomy little man sat on a low bench by the window and strained his eyes to read through the pages in a high-pitched drone, as fast as he possibly could. If he came down a note or two just for a moment he soon climbed back to his monotonous chant and he went on and on, pausing only for the briefest of gulps when he ran out of breath, and rattling through the large thick pages so fast that I was afraid he might swallow his tongue. It was a marathon of chanting. He came to

the last page and I felt quite relieved, for his effort was alarming to watch, but someone scrambled up a ladder to bring down another book, quickly untied its string and took away the wooden covers, and flaunted it under the little man's nose before he had time to draw breath. The little man chanted his way sadly and rapidly into another volume.

Apart from seeing that he was well supplied with reading matter, nobody took much notice of this smallest monk, though his chanting made them strain to raise their voices as they gathered round Sriprashad and me and talked about our plans. The largest monk, Ang Babu, had great faith in Shu Shu. He told us wonderful stories of how it had worked in the past and he had high hopes that in a day or two the camera would be safe. Some of the others were much more doubtful but Ang Babu was so completely confident that I think that the scheme itself may have been his own idea. He smiled broadly, slapped his thighs, stroked his lovely scarlet robes, and nothing that anyone else could say succeeded in shaking his faith. All would be well; life was good.

The tea arrived and was drunk with all due ceremony; a trayful of food was set before us and we enjoyed its rich surprises, roasted maize, eggs, sultanas, coconuts, dates; then the tea was taken away and a glass of rum brought in its place. It was a strange, exciting party. The rum was good, everybody was happy, the talking grew more and more gay. The welcome was so warm and friendly that I could nearly believe I had known these people all my life; it seemed the most natural thing in the world that I should be sitting in this small, bright chapel, sharing the laughter of this household of Tibetans

in a shut-away village where no white person had been seen before. Only the chanting from the window and the hard gold stare from the little Buddha reminded me with a start of surprise that I was in fact a stranger in an alien way of life.

At last the party broke up. Sriprashad and I went back through the evening to the headman's house, and as we walked we talked of our amazement in finding such a rich, exciting village. Even at Okhaldhunga the glories of Phaphlu had been unknown: how was it possible that such a startling flowering of wealth and grandeur could have remained a secret? The people had told us very clearly that they were genuine Tibetans: why were they living in style in this beautiful Nepali valley? And when all the neighbouring villages could manage to wring only a plain living from the soil, how could Phaphlu be so abundantly furnished with goods from all over the East? I had seen a grandfather clock from Japan and tins of polish with strange exotic labels; Sriprashad had admired an embroidered Indian cloth; we had been shown carpets from China with their patterns of snarling dragons, silver cups from Tibet, and rows and rows of shining copper pots all made in Katmandu. What could be the origin of all this wealth and trade?

We talked with the young headman over a lavish meal of rice and eggs, and from him we learned a few of the answers. More than a century ago his family came over from Tibet and chanced to win the friendship of the Maharajah of that day, who had settled them at Phaphlu and given to them the rights over much of the valley. We gathered that the family must have been wealthy before they left Tibet, and their fortunes have been

improving ever since. Their servants have ranged India and Tibet in search of greater treasures, and over the years Phaphlu has been growing richer until it has come to its present splendour. This, we were told, was now to change; all this time the family has been free of any liability to pay taxes, but when the country is opened up as the Government plans this immunity will come to an end. How much difference that will make the headman could not say. Phaphlu is perfect now, a lovely village in the most beautiful valley I know, and with the happiest people you could ever wish to meet; I hope that any change in the future will be slight.

Three men had been sent on a Shu Shu party and we spent two glorious days waiting for them to return. There was time to wander in the pine woods, to breathe the clear, crisp air, to sit quietly on the slopes above the village and wonder at the radiant majesty of the valley as it stretched up to the snow mountains that shone high against the sky and down to where the tumbling river calmed at last to an easier, softer flow. Most glimpses of beauty are sudden and short, but now I shall always have with me the memory of two long days as a lasting vision of perfection. I wanted Tom to see it too, and I wished that all the world could come, one by one, to share in the beauty of the place. It seemed unfair that I should have such loveliness all to myself.

But I was not altogether alone in my delight, for there are many birds and animals in the valley, and surely they too must all be well content. I saw one rare and lovely bird among the pines. He was tinier than a young sparrow but vivid in the brilliant blue of a medieval manuscript and flecked with touches of gold; I must

have alarmed him for he gave a quick high cry and darted away among the trees. While I was wandering in the undergrowth in the hope that I might see him again I came upon a startled langur monkey. We met almost at arm's length and both of us suddenly stopped. He was as unexpected to me as I must have been to him, and for half a minute we stared at each other in puzzled surprise. Standing on his two back legs, he must have been nearly four feet high; his body was black and white and he had a round intelligent face that clearly showed its bewilderment but gave no sign of any fear. At last something seemed to worry him and he grabbed a low branch of the nearest tree, swung himself up with an easy movement, and bounded quickly away. Several times afterwards I saw these very attractive creatures, but never again quite as closely as this. Like most of the wild animals in this Buddhist country they show a refreshing absence of fear; the good Buddhist will not take life of any kind, and the monks enforce an absolute ban on hunting, so that the animals here have never learned to be afraid of men. It must be good to be a langur monkey, lively and intelligent and healthy, and living in so beautiful a place.

On the third day the Shu Shu men came back and we heard that they had failed. Offers of an amnesty had not recovered the camera. There was nothing more that we could do; we thanked our hosts for all their help and kindness, Sriprashad found his fiery escort and turned down the valley on his way to Okhaldhunga, I collected Namgyal and Mingma and started sadly back to Namche.

* * *

I was crestfallen and disappointed. The camera was

irreplaceable, the only one of its kind and the product of hours of hard work; Tom, I knew, would be sad; all the kindness and willing help which I had met on my journey had been showered on me in vain. It seemed all wrong that after such a glorious fortnight I should be returning to Namche with nothing to show for the wonderful time I had had, and once my heart had been set on finding the camera I found it sad to fail.

The first stage of our journey back would be new, for our hosts at Phaphlu urged us to avoid the bandit country and to make our way up the side of the valley for another day until we came to Ringmo, where we should strike the main track from Katmandu to Namche, and for the last three or four days we would be following the route I had taken with Tom. I fell in very readily with my hosts' kind suggestion, partly to please them and ease their minds and also to gain another day in this very beautiful valley.

The valley was as lovely as ever, as we climbed towards its head; perhaps the pines were thinner now on the higher slopes, but we still had the shining snow mountains to lead us on and clean bright air to breathe. Side valleys came in to break the stillness with the cheerful noise of tumbling water, and even Namgyal smiled contentedly as we covered the happy miles.

Ringmo prospers on a sudden flatness a good way up the valley, and I remembered very well its solid wooden houses set in the fields of young green maize. We turned here and went to the right along the major track, struggling up a slippery slope to cross a col; we dropped quickly and steeply to Taksindhu on the farther side. There is no village at Taksindhu but a monastery stands

in splendid isolation on a small flat shelf and looks out over the deep valley, which is empty of all sign of human life but is rich and bright with forests of scarlet rhododendron. Last time we had hurried past in our race to meet the main party, and it had taken us two tired hours to reach the next flat shelf where we could set a camp; this time we remembered the difficult hillside below and came to a definite halt. Namgyal spoke to a couple of monks and we went into the courtyard of the monastery to put down all our belongings in the shelter of a wooden arcade.

There were no women at all at Taksindhu and I am afraid that my invitation may have been against the rules. Certainly some of the older monks looked uneasy, but there were no direct objections and I settled in the courtyard for the night. It was strange and exciting to be in the monastery and to see the monks at work. They all wore the dark red robes of their Tibetan sect, for this was a daughter foundation to Thyangboche and so a granddaughter to the famous monastery on the Rongbuk glacier in Tibet, and their hair was cut short to bristling point. Some had goitres, others had smiles. A few sat in the courtyard threshing ears of maize and singing while they worked, but most of the monks were inside the monastery building and busy on the paintings on the walls. The monastery, I learned, was only four years old; all the building was now completed, but the decorations were unfinished. The four walls of the square temple had been freshly whitened and two monks were drawing in charcoal the outlines of the customary sacred designs, stories from the life of the Buddha, gods and goddesses in intricate embraces, birds and beasts and

dragons, and the sufferings common to men. Behind them followed monks with brushes of paint, each one responsible for a particular colour and daubing it on wherever he found an appropriate place. All the blue had been filled in as far as the outline went and the orange was only a short way behind; the green, on the other hand, was some yards back and the red had hardly begun. There can be no scope for any change in the traditional designs, nor in the colour scheme which every monk must have known by heart, for they all worked without hesitation and if anyone had poached on a space which belonged to someone behind him in the queue one felt sure that there would have been trouble. Soon the scattered daubs of colour grew to one completed whole and the design emerged in its full glory, just as I had seen it in the shrine at Namche and in the chapel at Phaphlu.

The monks at Taksindhu fall into two opposing groups, each group wholehearted in its actions. There are those who drink and there are those who pray. As soon as the light had failed they had to leave their painting and everyone settled in the courtyard, one party just on my left and the other close on my right, and while those with the chang grew more and more cheerful and broke into riotous songs, those with beads and little bells kept up a continuous chant, singing louder and louder as the drinking songs increased. As far as I know this cacophony went on all night, for I stirred in my sleep some three or four times and each time the din seemed the same. It is a tribute to the hard walking and the good air of the country that I slept well enough to feel rested and refreshed when we started on our way again

at half-past four in the morning, and it is an even greater tribute to the toughness of the monks that with the first light they could all walk into the temple to begin the rounds of another day. But Taksindhu is less than a day out of Sherpa country and all its monks are Sherpas, and I am only one in a long line of travellers who have said that the Sherpas are tough.

The last three days of our journey passed very quickly; by now we were travelling light as the stores we had taken were nearly exhausted, and as we moved unencumbered in familiar country there was all the joy of coming home. But even in the time we had been away great changes had come to the route. Two more bridges had fallen in and roughly balanced trunks took us across the river in their stead, and in the warmer May air the line of flowers was higher by some three thousand feet. Shrubs had put forth new leaves, pale orange, red, or green, the dwarf rhododendrons burst into colour at our feet, and brilliant, tiny flowers sheltered at the side of the track. The snow line on the hills was much farther above our heads, and the valley of the Dudh Kosi had now put on the sudden richness of a Himalayan spring.

In all the Sherpa villages we were given a wonderful welcome, for the people had been anxious to know what had happened and they all seemed pleased to see us come back. We passed from one cheerful village to the next, hurrying easily up hills which had once looked steep, and we told our story time and again to all the Sherpas who came crowding round to hear. I was surprised to find how quickly the maize and potatoes had grown, and still more startled to see women whom I remembered as heavily pregnant now working vigorously in the fields

with brand new babies on their backs. And then we climbed the last long hill to Namche and our minor adventure had come to an end.

I could look back on it all with wonder and delight, for every day had been full of strange excitements and there was so much to remember that was good—new valleys and different people, the mild thrill of the bandit country, the great kindness of the governor and his family, the sudden glory of Phaphlu. Life had been fuller and richer than I had ever imagined, and it was pleasant to spend a quiet day at Namche, thinking of all the past excitements and planning where to go next. But for all that we had failed in what we set out to do, for the camera was still lost. I could not feel completely happy when I knew how disappointed Tom was sure to be.

* * *

And then, a few days later, to my very great surprise, the camera was returned. It appeared quite suddenly, still in working order and still in its cardboard box, just by the side of the expedition's stores. No one had seen a stranger in Namche and we will never know who brought it back nor how it was returned, but it was safe again and in our possession and that was all that mattered. The thief, we could be sure, had been worried by the fuss which was made about the camera's loss, and had prudently decided that it would be safer if he put it silently back. All was well again; the oxygen tests could now be completed as planned. Tom need no longer be worried and sad, and it was good to know that our journey to Okhaldhunga had ended, after all, in success.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ice Country

I HAD come back to Namche to find to my delight that a letter had arrived for me from Tom. Things had not been easy for the party on Cho Oyu, as most of them had suffered from heavy colds and bad sore throats, and Charles Evans had decided to send Eric Shipton and Tom himself down the valley for a day or two to shake off their infections at a lower camp. Tom had taken the chance of hurrying right down to Namche to see if I was back, and I was sad to think that I had missed him and that he had done a very long march in vain. But even so the letter brought the hope that we might meet before too long: only part of the oxygen had been taken to Cho Oyu, and when the expedition came off the mountain someone would be sent to Namche to collect the rest for the physiological trials. Tom had every intention of coming to fetch it himself.

This settled my plans for the next two or three weeks. I had missed Tom once already and there must be no risk of my doing so again. I decided at once to travel towards Cho Oyu, exploring some of the side valleys on the way but never leaving the main track for more than

two days at a time. Tom would then be sure to hear exactly where I was even if I were making a small digression when he went by, for news travels fast among the Sherpas and I intended to take every care that my movements should be known.

I explained my plans to Namgyal and as usual he began to sulk. He wanted to stay in peace at Namche, he had no intention of going any farther, and certainly he did not propose to help me carry my things. All this gave me one more reason for going towards the expedition. I was tired of having to carry around a cross, reluctant Sherpa; I felt now that Namgyal had been given every chance and was only proving more and more unwilling; it seemed entirely fair to exchange him for little Norbu whom I could trust completely and who, I hoped, would love to make the change. Norbu's job as mail runner would certainly be over by now and the Sherpas at Namche said that he was waiting by Cho Oyu in the hope that the expedition would sign him on for something else. He was perhaps four days' journey away and I thought that if I had to I could make this on my own if at the end there was the hope of a cheerful, reliable Sherpa for the rest of my time in Nepal.

When Namgyal saw that I intended to start whether he went with me or not he began to change his tone and even hinted that he might be prepared to come too. But of course, he explained, he was not going to help with the load. I did not bother to argue, but sorted into two equal piles the stores I wanted to take. Those that mattered most I shouldered myself; I put the rest into Namgyal's sack and in my firmest voice I suggested that he should bring them up the valley. Then I set off,

wondering if I should ever see either Namgyal or my things again. He had threatened mutiny, but I owed him some money in wages and he would surely come after me, if only to be paid.

Two hours later I looked round to see a small Sherpa figure walking a long way behind me on the path. Nagmyal had decided to come too. I was pleased to see that he was wearing his rucksack; with any luck my things were still inside. I sat down to wait for him to join me and meant to overlook our little scene, but it appeared that we were not to be friends for as soon as I stopped he sat down too. I started again and he followed; I sat down to rest and he stopped at once. After a minute it struck me as ridiculous that we should be behaving like this, so I stood up to make my own way along the track, expecting, quite rightly, that Namgyal would catch me up when I came to a halt for the night. And so we went on, a very silly pair: whenever I turned to see his progress he would come to a sudden halt and stare vacantly ahead, just as though we were two small children in a game of grandmother's footsteps and he would lose his place if he let me see him move.

All this time we were steadily climbing, higher than I had been before, but the track was so lovely as it led among the flowers that I did not notice the height. Rhododendrons arched across the path, some white, some mauve, and some the deepest red; rich purple irises grew between the stones and pale blue primulas made a rustling carpet on the hill; fresh young firs now took the place of the heavier pines. We kept well above the Bhota Kosi, twisting deeply into its many rich side valleys and climbing gently and easily to about 13,500

feet. The sun was bright, the air was clear and warm, and the mountains still stretched so far above our heads that we had no sense at all of going high.

It was only from the villages along the track that we knew for certain that we must be gaining height. Lower down every house can be lived in the whole year round, but now we were coming to villages which are too cold and bleak to give any shelter in the winter, and even in May we found them still deserted with their terraces not yet dug. The empty houses stared blankly across the valley, their prayer flags hung in pieces after the winter's storms, the mani walls were falling down and the prayer wheels had long ago come to a stop. We went through three such mournful villages in the one afternoon, and out of season they all seemed ghostly and lost.

Thami, where we spent the night, is at just under 14,000 feet, but its sheltered position gives it a good protection and it is lived in the whole year round; it stands high above the main river on a sudden flatness, in a side valley all of its own. Its own small stream, the Thami Khola, flows gently through the village and then cascades five hundred feet into the Bhota Kosi roaring on the rocks below. As you climb up the steep and stony path to Thami the noise is deafening in your ears, but as soon as you reach the village the hills shut out the sound and all at once it is still and strangely quiet. At 14,000 feet the trees are usually nearing their limit and giving way to small, tough bushes and to stunted shrubs, but Thami's grey fields are sheltered by juniper and yellow rhododendrons and when we first came there, in May, these pale and lovely flowers were coming into bud.

The valley of the Thami Khola is high and austere,

shaped like a hairpin with Thami at the bottom and heavy mountains rising up on either side. The village is quite large, with forty small stone houses standing in neat walled fields, and in every field there were men or women turning the soil to prepare the ground for the season's first crop of potatoes. Next would come the late potatoes; I was told that nothing else is hardy enough to be grown.

Everyone put down their tools, climbed over the walls and out of the fields (they manage very well without the luxury of gates) and came crowding round to see me. Namgyal appeared and they overwhelmed him with their questions. The people of Thami were by now accustomed to Europeans, for the whole expedition had passed through the village on their way to Cho Oyu and many of the villagers had gone with them for a day or two to carry the stores to the mountain, so I was much less of a freak than in many places where I had stayed. To my great surprise I found that I was something of a legend and they were all very eager to see me in the flesh. The story of our hunt for the camera had spread up the valley and they knew how Tom had gone back to Namche to find I was not there. They told the story to each other over and over again, lifting up their thick brown hands in amazement when they said where I had gone. Okhaldhunga! Okhaldhunga! The Memsahib went to Okhaldunga! The very idea seemed strange and remote and they prodded me with some care as though to make sure it was true. I think that very few of them can have penetrated to the capital of the district, and this short journey brought me all the glamour of a traveller returned from a distant and fabulous place. To say that I had come

from London would have meant nothing at all to them, but to have been to Okhaldhunga made me famous.

The women of the village seemed particularly proud of me and in a very few minutes we were all the best of friends. We all sat on the ground and they brought out their knitting and their spinning and while they talked they worked. They admired my gaily patterned skirt and they laughed at the curls in my hair, the more so when they found that try as they would they could not pull them out; and every few minutes the talk would turn back to my visit to Okhaldhunga and the cries of astonishment would start all over again. One old lady sat a little to one side. She did not join in the poking or hair pulling and she was much calmer and more composed than the others, though she too had a very ready smile. I only discovered much later, when I saw her photograph in one of the books on Everest,[1] that this charming old lady is Tenzing's mother. I wish I had known this at the time, though I had not then even met her son, and certainly I had no idea of how famous he was to become. Had I known it I would have been even more pleased when I met him a few weeks later, and more delighted than ever when I heard of his success.

In the morning we started on the next stage up the valley. It was snowing, we soon had passed the limit of the trees and the hillside seemed cold and grey and bleak as we went at a yak's pace along the track. Our host of last night was driving one of his twenty yaks up to the grazing village of Chhule, and he cheerfully added our rucksacks to the creature's considerable load. The animal carried in all 130 lb. and seemed hardly to notice the

[1] The Swiss account *Avant-Premières à l'Everest*, Arthaud, 1953, p. 40.

weight; we made slow progress, not because it flagged beneath its burden but because it would keep jumping off the track to nibble at a tuft of grass under some sheltering stone. The yak skipped happily from side to side in its search for something to eat, and we shivered as we followed slowly behind.

Yaks are very fine creatures, powerfully built with great thick bodies on short and sturdy legs, and with long hair, usually black, which reaches almost to the ground. They have curling horns and can look very fierce, but those that are tamed for domestic use seem not to know their strength but behave like nervy sheep. The day before, I had come round a boulder to walk straight into a yak. I was still not used to such great creatures and for a moment I was startled, but this was nothing compared to the fright of the poor yak who took one worried look at me, jumped with alarm and ran away. Even the toddlers learn to manage their father's herds, and I have seen a yak controlled by a boy so small that he hurried to his mother's breast for breakfast as soon as the job was over and the animal had been turned to graze. (I should perhaps add that Sherpa children supplement their diet with mother's milk for very much longer than their counterparts in England.)

The weather grew worse and for the last hour up to Chhule we had to make our way through a whirling cloud of snow, sometimes walking blindly, sometimes able to see a yard or two ahead on the rough and rocky track. It was still quite early in the afternoon but I was tired and cold and once we had come to Chhule and settled in the shelter of a small stone hut we had no thought at all of going on. Even inside the hut it seemed to be

freezing, for no one had stayed there since the autumn, and Namgyal and our host from Thami tried to light a fire in the hope that the temperature would rise. There was no stable and the three of us were crowded as it was, so the yak was left outside; luckily the creature was very much tougher than I was, and it seemed entirely happy in the snow.

The fire flickered and then went out and I saw that Namgyal was trying to perform with sodden twigs of juniper culled from the few stunted bushes which grew so close to the ground that they were almost swamped beneath the snow. Fire lighting with such material was not an easy task, and Namgyal struck match after match in an effort to resuscitate the flames, at last producing a feeble flicker and a rush of dark grey smoke. I raised my eyes to watch the smoke and saw for the first time that the roof of the hut was thickly lined with juniper, not damp and living twigs like those being kindled below, but old, dry branches and small crisp leaves all waiting to burst into flame. Then for a moment the fire burned brightly and in the sudden strong light I could see that most of the hut was packed with loads of hay. Namgyal's fire was on the floor in front of the only way out and if anything were to go wrong we would be inescapably caught. I began to realise why I had seen so many burnt-out houses and heard such sad stories of the people trapped inside, and I had sudden unnecessary visions of our own impending cremation; but in fact it was silly to grow concerned, for despite a whole lot of puffing and blowing Namgyal's fire soon expired beyond hope of revival. I could not share his gloom; it seemed better to freeze in safety than to thaw in peril, and I

settled down with some relief to a chilled but carefree night.

The snow had cleared by the morning and I had a chance to see what sort of country we had reached. It was too harsh to have any immediate appeal: where the ground was flat or only moderately steep it was white-with drifts of snow, but mostly the hillside was a dull and stony grey. A valley to the west ended in the bulk of an old moraine and boulders and rocks were strewn about the ground, lying in a jumble as they had fallen over the years. Chhule itself has a dozen grey huts set among thick stone walls, walls which have been built less to separate the land than to move the stones from the ground and so to clear a grazing place for yaks. We were only at 15,500 feet, but the country already seemed hard and barren and bleak.

The next short stage took us up to Lunak and we climbed slowly into country which was greyer and stonier still. The thin path led along an old moraine and as we walked little stones would slip down the sides and fall with a gathering echo to cut the stillness of the lifeless place. The sound shot to and fro between the hard grey hills until it too was swallowed into silence.

We knew of course that we were climbing: the sky was now a deeper blue than I had seen before, and I remembered that Tom had said that as one goes higher the sky grows darker and darker; my legs tired very easily, I soon grew short of breath, and we had left far behind us every trace of trees or shrubs or grass. But the tall grey mountains all round us effectively shut us in and made us feel sadly small and cramped and still at the bottom of things. We were denied that feeling of

uplift which comes from looking down on a miniature world stretched neatly at one's feet, and we were left to toil up the slow and stony path with none of the elation of achievement.

To make things harder, there was trouble again with Namgyal. He had not wanted to leave Chhule without the useful yak, and he had done his best to convince me that the stage to Lunak was long and harsh and quite beyond our powers. Next he had argued about what we ought to take, sulked for a time and finally hurried on ahead with a very small share of the load. I left most of our things in the hut at Chhule in storage for when we should return, and then set out to follow him along the track. He was going too fast for me to catch him up and slowly the distance grew greater between us; after some time I felt so dizzy through hurrying uphill in the rare cold air that I sat down to rest. When I felt better and came to my feet my wretched Sherpa was nowhere in sight, and to make it worse it was soon not clear what had happened to the track. Several false starts came to nothing; it seemed that the usual route had fallen down the side of the moraine, and I could not tell which way to take instead. I called for Namgyal; nothing happened. I hunted round and came upon his rucksack abandoned in the shelter of a rock. It carried many of his own supplies as well as a few of mine, so I sat down beside it to wait for his certain return.

Nearly an hour later he appeared again, wearing now a highly guilty smile. He told me that he had met some Sherpas on their way down from Lunak and had stopped to share their breakfast; I never found out how they had managed to keep so quiet and leave me without a

suspicion of what was going on. I wanted to dismiss him on the spot: it was inexcusable to have gone away without a word. I decided in the end to give him one more chance, mainly through a strong reluctance to be left on my own just there, and at least he had the grace to seem ashamed and he agreed to make things easier by taking part of my load. That helped a very great deal, for with less to carry I did not feel the height so much, and I stayed firmly and closely at his heels for the rest of the journey to Lunak.

Nobody ever lives at Lunak. It is simply a stopping place on the track which leads up from Chhule towards the pass of the Nang Pa La and so goes over into Tibet, and since the pass can be used only for a few weeks in the year Lunak spends most of its time deserted and falling in ruins. There are five stone huts, only two of them with roofs: if you want to shelter in the other three you have to bring your own bamboo mat to spread across the top. No mud has been available to plaster the gaps in the walls, there are no doors to close the open doorways, no windows or holes in the roof to lead off the smoke from the fires. Even the two huts which are covered all the time are draughty and smoky and cold.

There was one tent set on the moraine just to the right of the huts, and I thought that one of the expedition must have come down again from Cho Oyu. We had been hearing strange conflicting stories of their progress, but all reports agreed that the party was now complete and based on the Nang Pa La, and I was afraid that since the last piece of news had filtered down someone else had perhaps turned sick. In fact I was completely wrong. It was not a British tent at all, but belonged to Professor

Lombard, the geologist who was attached to the Swiss expedition and who was making a survey of the country while the rest of his party was on Everest. I had had no idea that he was anywhere in this valley, nor even that he was travelling around, and it was a charming surprise to meet him. He is a climber of skill and great enthusiasm, and he was overjoyed to be exploring new cols and passes and glaciers in the preparation of his survey; he was full of the views and prospects he had seen that day, and explained with absorbing delight the many sketches for his map. I was very interested to learn from an expert something of the hills and their history, and it was refreshing to meet someone who was so wholly excited by his task.

The Professor was able to give me reliable news of the expedition, for two days earlier he had visited the base camp at the foot of Cho Oyu. When he came down the whole party was about to leave for the mountain and it seemed very probable that by now they would have established several higher camps. This settled my own plans for the next few days. I was ill-equipped to go any higher, and I had no desire at all to be a camp follower and to disturb them on the mountain. I would go back down the valley to a slightly warmer spot and look around the villages while I waited for Tom to return. It seemed that when they left Cho Oyu most of the climbers would come down at least to Chhule, to divide into three or four small parties and set out again from there. Norbu, who was now at the base camp, would certainly come down with them and I would hope to catch him then. Meanwhile I would continue to manage with Namgyal.

I had every intention of going higher later, perhaps with Tom when the expedition had broken up, but at the moment I was far too cold. I had only a short skirt and my legs were chilled, the zip had broken on my sleeping bag and it was now not a bag but a blanket and in consequence far less warm. Perhaps later I might be able to share a tent; this was the highest covered hut and even here I was far too cold to sleep. And there was one more point that really settled the matter: to travel light that morning I had left most of my things at Chhule and in a day or two I would run out of food.

Had I been on my own with Namgyal I would have started down the next morning, for there seemed little purpose in dragging any farther up the desolate grey valley. Namgyal, indeed, was most insistent that there was nothing to see higher up, that the going was nearly impossible and unless we turned back at once we might never see Chhule again. To my great and lasting pleasure I was able to seek a second opinion, and Professor Lombard encouraged me to go ahead. In an hour or so we would reach the main glacier, the Ngojumba, and from there we would see Cho Oyu, the base camp and the Nang Pa La. There would still be time to go down to Chhule before it grew dark; he himself was planning to camp there that evening and he would be on the watch for my return. His judgment gave me confidence. Namgyal was cross and unwilling, but his objections could now be firmly overruled.

We went up, and for an hour or so the valley seemed very much the same, hard and rocky and shut in by dull, forbidding slopes. Then we turned a bend to our right and scrambled up the boulders of a very much larger

moraine, to find ourselves on the Ngojumba glacier and at the foot of a different world.

All at once the valley had widened and now we saw the mighty sweep of the snow mountains circling the basin, to the west a panorama of unnamed peaks, then a smooth white pass, the Nang Pa La, then Cho Oyu and its neighbours to the east; the glacier lay before us with its huge moraines and tangled lumps of ice. The grey rock world had vanished and we were in a dazzling scene of white. The delicately fluted peaks stood out against the dark rich sky, their great sides tightly banked with long, clean stretches of snow. Most of the snow glistened in the sun; some was in the shadow of rare overhanging rocks, and its darkness was a foil for the brilliance of the rest. I was dazed and overawed by the whole tremendous scale and by the vast white beauty of the scene.

We went very slowly up the glacier; Namgyal was not in any particular hurry and I kept tumbling over stones along the track rather than take my eyes for a moment off the peaks. We passed Jasamba, the last stopping place before the Nang Pa La, a dejected group of three small roofless huts, and we went a short way farther on until we could see the tents of the base camp just to the right of the pass. I was satisfied, and we stopped. There was no sign of any higher camp and I was puzzled at the time, but later the Professor told me that the party was trying the mountain from a different face. We rested for a glorious hour and gazed at the view, then turned with reluctance to start the journey back.

Tom calculated afterwards that I had been to about 18,000 feet. The sun was out and it was warm, we had

left our sacks at Lunak and without the extra strain I had lost my dizziness of the day before, and I felt no effects at all from the height. It is said that to go to a new altitude can have strange effects on the brain and to prove that I had kept my powers of thinking I drafted a letter in Latin to Tom. This may not have been in Cicero's finest style, but it was accurate and down at Namche it read quite well; unfortunately we lost it in the troubles of our journey back and I could never check it in the saner air at home.

* * *

At the end of the great moraine there was time for one last long look at the splendour of the snows, and then we turned down the sharp bend to cut ourselves off from all this beauty and went back into the dull, drab world of lifeless stones. We came to Lunak and found our packs, then hurried down the hard, grey track as quickly as we could. We were shut in for hours between the high rock cliffs, the only noises our hurrying footsteps and the echo of falling stones, and to come into the broader valley at Chhule was like bursting out of a tunnel. The valley widens here as a side stream flows down from the west, and we came out into the open to hear the gay sound of rushing water, the shouts of children in the village calling to the yaks and the deep grunts of the animals themselves as they balanced on the hillside to look for tufts of grass. All at once we had come down to the height where life began again.

For all the next week summer was fighting winter in the high villages of the valley: sometimes we were caught in storms of driving snow, but the snow never settled on

the ground for very long and soon we would be drying in the sun. Namygal and I spent one more day peacefully at Chhule and then we went from one small village to another as the first families came with their yaks to open up their summer huts and start the season's grazing. In some protected villages we found the season well advanced. At Chhule itself the number of yaks had increased dramatically: I counted now one hundred and twenty-two, all of them full-grown beasts brought up from somewhere lower in the valley, yet I doubt if there had been more than ten on the first day we arrived. Most of the little stone huts had now been opened up, and dark grey smoke came thickly through the doors from the newly-kindled fires. Infants staggered in the fields under huge loads of hay, brought from Thami to feed the yaks until the grass should grow more strongly. Two men sat in the sun repairing their tough leather boots. Women dug in the little fields, and I learned to my surprise that they meant to plant potatoes as soon as the soil had had a chance to warm. But all these hardy people had taught themselves to guard against the cold, and over their usual woollen clothes they wore thick coats of skins which they turned inside out to give them greater warmth. These coats were so bulky and cumbersome that if their owners started off by being rather fat they had to move very slowly when they were fully dressed, and they waddled round like awkward barrels. Summer might indeed be on the way, but when it rained down at Thami the same cloud reached Chhule as a storm of freezing snow, and the Sherpas huddled in their skins to keep away the cold.

We went to Hilajug and Mingbo and found that these

two villages were very much more advanced. Hilajug sits on a neat flat shelf on the east bank of the Bhota Kosi, and two alarming bridges form the only approach from the track and the rest of the world. I went cautiously across, wondering if they would bear my weight on the way over and still hold together to bring me back; to my pleased surprise, they did. The flat shelf makes a pleasant pasture for yaks and goats, and I even saw some stunted juniper growing in the shelter of a rock to give the promise of a pleasant fire. I was delighted. Most of these high villages have no supply of fuel and either one carries up heavy stores of wood or else one uses yak dung and learns to tolerate the smell. In time one can learn to accept anything, but food must be cooked on an open fire and I always thought that yak dung left a specially nasty taste.

At Mingbo, too, the grass was turning green; men and women were working hard in the fields and they said it was nearly time to plant potatoes and maize. Mingbo is in a sheltered side valley, a little way along the fast Langmoche Khola, and it seems to be so well protected that at 14,000 feet maize is a regular crop. There is even a tiny water mill, fed by a long canal, waiting to grind the grain when it ripens late in the summer. I liked the people of Mingbo: they had plenty of time to talk and laugh as they worked in the fields or tended their goats and yaks.

It was quite different on the next day when Namgyal and I made our way to Thyangbo. First we had to go down to Thami and then we branched up the track which leads beside the Thami Khola; soon we had left the rain below us and were walking through a whirling cloud of snow. The ground was deeply covered and we had

trouble in avoiding sudden drifts. It was bitterly cold and we pressed on as quickly as we could, smiling at each other in great relief when at last we came round a bend, the clouds thinned for a moment, and Thyangbo came into sight. But when we went from house to house in search of shelter the whole place seemed to be deserted and we were filled with a very chilly gloom, until we saw a few sad yaks on the leeward side of a boulder and decided that their owner must surely be somewhere around. At last we found one young girl in a small, dejected hut. She opened the door very cautiously and looked at me in some amazement, but after a moment's hesitation she stacked her things in one corner of the hut to make room for us to go in and sit down. We went in very readily, and once we were inside she shut the door to keep out the draughts and the snow and to leave us in the dark. Slowly my eyes made out the details of the room. Hay was stacked in the corners, beams and pillars had been added, I think as an afterthought, to try to support the roof, and an extra post at a curious angle buttressed a doubtful wall. The place was cramped and very uncomfortable and it seemed hard on the girl to be staying here alone, though she herself did not seem to mind in the least and we learned that she had only arrived the day before and was expecting her parents to come to-morrow with the rest of the family yaks. She told us, too, that one other hut had already been opened up and that in a week or so there would be families in all the fourteen houses in the place.

I thought it rash to assume that the snow would let them through, but the girl was entirely confident and I hoped that she knew best. We sat and listened to the

wind outside and curled up in the hay for warmth, trying to avoid the flakes of snow which were blown through the cracks in the wall. The girl knelt to blow the fire and to put on another lump of dung, and she seemed so calm and happy that I soon began to feel more cheerful and even to enjoy the cold romance of our position, well above the human world and cut off for a while by the snow.

Once the wind had dropped the snow cleared quite quickly, and to my great amazement we were able to leave the same day. It felt wrong to leave the girl on her own, but I think she was entirely content and Namgyal had developed a miserable toothache and wanted to go down at once. I peered inside his mouth and saw the hole: it was huge and raw and I could easily believe that the biting wind had made it very painful. Very foolishly I had left my bottle of aspirins at Namche. They would probably ease the pain until Namgyal could find one of the expedition doctors and get him to draw the tooth, and as soon as he heard that pills would be available Namgyal brightened visibly and hurried out of the door. I made our farewells to our young hostess and followed him down the track.

Back at Namche, I did not have to wait very long for Tom's return. One evening as I was sitting on the floor at supper I heard heavy boots moving in the stable below, grunts from the yaks as someone walked into them in the darkness, a short and hurried scramble up the ladder, and then Tom's head appeared at the top. He climbed up smiling and came quickly into the room. It was wonderful to see him again, heavily bearded, sunburnt and peeling, and thinner after hard days on the mountain. Never in my life have I been happier than I was then. Over the

last few weeks I must have been more lonely and more on edge than I had guessed at the time, for suddenly all those hidden worries fell away in a warmth of exhilaration and joy. Tom was here, all was well again, we were safely together and life was very good.

There was much to talk about. I heard that the party had been stopped on Cho Oyu by unstable ice cliffs too dangerous for laden men to cross; the mountain had had to be abandoned, and the party was now divided into three small groups, two to explore the unknown valleys seen in the Everest Reconnaissance last year, the third to carry a camp to a high snow pass and to go through a series of physiological trials. Tom, with his interest in the oxygen, had no option but to take part in these tests, though the programme sounded very much duller than the plans of the other two groups. There were, however, decided compensations in the scheme. The whole series of trials was expected to be over in three or four weeks at the most, and after that Tom would be quite free to make his own way back to Katmandu. If all went well and the monsoon did not break early, there would be time for us to go home by a new and higher route, and we should still arrive in India in time to catch our boat.

Even with this short programme of trials we had no sense of rush, for we had to wait in Namche to recruit a new team of Sherpas to take the oxygen and the testing gear up to the camp on the pass. Recruiting Sherpas always takes time, for no one village can normally spare all the manpower which is needed and the news has to go out to the many neighbouring villages. The prospect seems to be bleak and one has discouraged visions of being stranded there for ever, but just when all hope has

been given up a caravan of porters will arrive. This time we were quite content to wait in blissful peace by the river.

Norbu had come down with Tom and it was good to see his cheerful little face again. Ang Tharkay arrived to arrange for porters for the two exploring parties, and we took the opportunity of arranging through him to substitute Norbu for Namgyal. Namgyal was not very pleased to lose his job, but I left him with good wages and a precious bottle of aspirins, which was more than his behaviour had deserved, and Norbu was radiantly happy when we told him about the change.

The high pass selected for the trials, the Menlung La, was at the head of the lateral valley running down to Chhule, and I decided to make one more quick journey up the Bhota Kosi and so to be with Tom for three additional days. This was a good idea and it made me happier than ever. As far as Chhule I was well familiar with the track, but even so I was interested to see the changes brought by the last ten days. There were more yaks grazing, more shrubs sprouting, more women at work in the fields. At Chhule we turned west up the side valley to the bleak stopping place at Pangbuk. Here we found one enormous boulder where all the Sherpas, men and women, slept in one vast heap for warmth; there were also two cold stone huts like the ones at Lunak, but this time Tom was with me and I slept in the luxury of his tent. The next day I went with the others on to the glacier which hangs below the Menlung La, but after an hour or so I had to leave them in order to be back at Chhule before it grew too dark. The joyful interlude with Tom was over and the next day I went back to Namche on my own.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Life in the Sherpa Villages

In the morning I woke to hear Norbu and Ang Tharkay holding a long and excited discussion. I could not follow what they said for they were both talking at once, in low and rapid tones, and from time to time a new and breathless voice puffed out a few quick words. I went to see what was wrong and I found that the news was worrying indeed. A messenger had come from Okhaldhunga with a telegram for the expedition. He had been told to bring it with all possible speed, and as soon as I read it I knew it was for Tom. It had been sent from England to Katmandu, and from there by wireless to Okhaldhunga; its English message had been sadly garbled on the way, but the gist of it was horribly clear. Some fault had been found in the oxygen cylinders and further tests made on similar bottles in England had resulted in a fatal accident. It was stressed with urgency that if the cylinders were to be used at all their pressure must be kept below a certain maximum figure. I did not know very much about the technicalities of the oxygen equipment, but I

was quite certain that the cylinders were charged to a greater pressure; and I knew that the tests had begun.

The Nepali messenger was out of his element at Namche, puffed and unhappy and longing to go down, and it would have been foolish to ask him to take the message any higher; every other possible porter was already out with one of the three small parties or had gone to Everest with the Swiss, and we were at a loss to find anyone to send. I was planning to take the telegram up to the Menlung La myself, though I knew I would travel more slowly than a Sherpa over the high ground and the glacier, when Ang Tharkay came up with the good news that he had found a suitable man. What was more, he said with pride, the man could set out that very morning and we should waste no time at all. The man looked discouragingly old and feeble, but Ang Tharkay assured me he could travel very fast; it took perhaps an hour for him to collect his things and eat some food, and that hour seemed as long as a day as I thought of the dreadful explosions that might be happening already at the camp. Ang Tharkay and Norbu and I all impressed on the poor old man the imperative need for speed, and at last we had waved him off and seen him scuttle like a worried beetle round the corner of the track.

It was just as well that someone had been at Namche to redirect the telegram, for none of the Sherpas had any idea of what it was about and if they had, on their own, decided to send it on they might easily have dispatched it to one of the other two parties or even to the Swiss. But now it was hurrying up the valley on the proper course, and there was nothing for me to do but wait.

I was much too worried to enjoy the next few days, for I was scared into a cold, sick terror in case something had happened to Tom. I calculated that the old man would reach the pass in a couple of very long stages, but there might be trouble before he arrived with the warning and if so it would take some time for me to hear the news. If I had not heard of any disaster by the end of four or five days I should know that all was well, but until then I could only wait and hope. Nothing would be gained by staying and fretting in Namche, so I left on the tour I had planned, taking care to leave a conspicuous note with details of my route so that I could be called back at once if something had gone wrong and I was needed.

There were two main valleys which I intended to visit, the upper Dudh Kosi which ends in the Nup La pass, and the Imja Khola which leads to the north, to the Chola Khola and to Everest. The two rivers flow on either side of Taweche, a fine massif which rises to a 21,000 feet peak; high above their confluence, on the steep south slopes of Taweche, sits the little village of Phorcha. The track to Everest avoids the village by several miles and I knew of no one who had been there, but it seemed a very suitable base for journeys in either valley, and to have the one main centre would save much carrying of stores. Phorcha is only one day's journey from Namche, and on the map the way seems very short. But the track is hard to follow, little used and often crumbling dangerously away, so that on the steep and stony hillside we had to waste much time in looking for safer diversions. At noon we lost our way completely. We were not very far from the little village of Tesinga, but the fields here had already been dug and planted with potatoes, and now

every house was locked up and we guessed that all the families had gone high to graze their yaks. There was no one left to tell us where to go, and the track for Phorcha had disappeared down a steep and dangerous slope. We could see a small chorten a mile or so ahead and Norbu felt sure that it pointed out our way, but the track towards it had disintegrated and had slipped down the side of the hill. An occasional stone still fell with a clatter, and it took us an hour of false starts and hard scrambling to find an alternative route. Norbu and I set out for Phorcha as soon as the messenger had started with the telegram on his way to the Menlung La, but it was late in the afternoon before at last we reached the village and by then we were surprisingly tired. The physical effort had kept me from worrying too much about the oxygen trials, and though Tom was always in my thoughts my mind was so numb when we stopped for the night that it could not keep me awake.

The next few days passed miserably slowly. Norbu and I made very short excursions up the Dudh Kosi valley or up the Imja Khola. We climbed on the lower slopes of Taweche and saw how the Sherpas have been labouring in vain to make a richer living for themselves by pushing the limits of their farming far beyond what is easy or wise. Sometimes we would come to a yakking hamlet far from any water and still sadly desolate though summer was by this time well advanced; sometimes we saw terraces which had been carved in the stony hillside with enormous care only to crumble irretrievably when left for the winter, pouring their precious earth all over the hills below; sometimes a terrace or a hut lay in ruins, overwhelmed by a sudden fall of stones from the treacherous slopes

above. We saw all this quite close to Phorcha, for we did not like to go up the valley for more than a few hours' journey and every evening we came anxiously back to the village to see if any news from the Menlung La had arrived while we were away.

But all was well with the oxygen and at last the anxiety came to an end. Three clear days had passed since the messenger must have reached the Menlung La and if anything had gone wrong before the warning had come through I would, I was quite certain, have heard of it by now. The world regained its rosiness. No longer anxious to keep within a few hours' run of Namche, I could be rather more ambitious in my plans, and Norbu and I prepared to set out for the small and distant villages at the heads of these two new valleys. These would be minor expeditions only, for the distances involved were never very great and we need only leave Phorcha for a day or two at a time. We intended to keep the village as our central base for this would have many advantages, and on these shorter trips we could move quickly over the country because we were travelling light.

I was glad that we would still be in touch with Phorcha, for here we had received the warmest welcome of any Sherpa village, and I had made friends with its delightful people more quickly than anywhere else. From the moment when we reached the long, low mani wall on the outskirts of the village, our visit had been a glorious success. Norbu took me straight to the house of one of his friends, and men, women, and children all left their work on the terraced fields and crowded behind us up the stairs. They came of course to have a good look at their unusual guest, but they came with warm smiles

instead of curious stares and they all had presents in their hands. Little children came with offerings of flowers, while their parents brought me cold potatoes by the handful, and they gathered round and watched me with approval while I started on a long, substantial meal. Small mauve irises, scarlet rhododendrons, primulas and yellow flowering thorn all kept arriving in the grubby fists of very tiny children, and when I showed my pleasure the people were delighted and the children all rushed off again for more. Chang was produced when I showed the first signs of flagging with the enormous bowls of potatoes, and when at last I had come to the end they treated me to a cup of vigorous rackshi.

They watched me eat and all the time they talked, discussing my clothes, my hair, face and skin, and they played with my torch and my zips. They asked my name and I told them. At this there went up a sudden shriek of incredulous joy and everyone did their best to pronounce what seemed to them extremely unusual sounds, but the laughter was loud and uncontrolled and their spluttering attempts had little hope of success. I asked their names and they made me repeat them, one by one and very slowly; I flattered myself that I was managing this far better than any of them had done, but even so it seemed to be an enormous joke. There was Pember Kinzu, a dear old woman with a wonderful toothless smile, Norbu's friend Mingma, who beamed at the world from behind a great black pair of goggles, his perquisites from several days of portering on the Nang Pa La; Passang Dormer was a cheerful youth, and then there was another Mingma. A very serious child told me that his name was Passang Bobo and at this the crowd was more

delighted than ever, though nobody could be induced to tell me why.

Then somebody mentioned Okhaldhunga, and it became quite clear that even in this new valley my story was very well known. The people here had not seen the expedition going up to Cho Oyu, nor Tom returning, as it was believed, in search of a vanished wife, and their version of the story lacked some of the romance imparted by those who knew us both and who took a very tender interest in the tale. But to have been to Okhaldhunga was in their eyes a great achievement and by now our mild adventure had swollen to an epic. The news had spread fast through all the Sherpa villages and I saw that now, when I came to somewhere new, I would have lost the advantage of surprise. Everyone seemed to have heard of my existence and each small hamlet was waiting for a chance to see me for themselves. It was a strange sort of fame, on a flimsy foundation, but I could do nothing to tone down the glamour of their dramatised accounts. The feeble bandits who had kept themselves so carefully out of my way grew now into violent marauders; the distance to Okhaldhunga doubled or trebled; the way became much harsher and my alleged bravery increased with every telling of the tale. I had gone to see the Sherpas because I had heard wonderful stories of what they were like, and now they were eager to see me for exactly similar reasons. Perhaps it was not surprising that these journeys were such a success.

The story of our journey had reached the most wild and improbable places, and now wherever we went we were met with an eager excitement instead of a bewildered surprise. Norbu and I came to one solitary ledge, at

16,000 feet in the upper Dudh Kosi valley, where there was room for just two roofless huts and half a dozen yaks. It was cold, and snowing hard; the hillside fell steeply into the mist and it seemed like another world. One of the huts had a temporary cover of bamboo, and feeble puffs of sad grey smoke came out of the open doorway. Signs of habitation: Norbu looked inside. There was a wonderful shriek of welcome and a man and his wife rushed out to greet me, to take me into their hovel and to share their scanty meal. They had known that I was in the valley, they were thrilled that I had come. The dung on the fire was poked, I was put in a corner out of the worst draughts, and treated to a generous share of their small supply of porridge, an insipid but probably wholesome mixture made out of water and beans. The wind and snow blew through the open doorway; the fire went out and the woman shivered and tried to snuggle more closely into the folds of her heavy skin coat. It was the coldest party I have ever attended, but I have never been welcomed with a greater warmth of pleasure and delight.

Later that day, and not far away in the same high valley, we came to another ledge. This one was broader and, at 15,000 feet, it boasted a few small shrubs. There was room for some twenty or thirty yaks and for two rough portable shelters made entirely of bamboo. Here again our welcome was radiantly friendly; yak milk was put before me in profusion, and little lumps of hard white cheese. The people encamped here were clearly proud to see us and no one could have been more kind, but they too had already heard of our story and they showed no sign of surprise.

The hillside by Khumjung at about 13,000 *feet*

Only one man showed the slightest astonishment in either of these two valleys, but this one instance was rather a bad thing for the man was a monk and his surprise was so great that it led him to break a major Buddhist rule. The village of Pangboche is divided into two; half is on a high slope, half is on a lower slope, and they are joined by a very long mani wall which must stretch for quite two hundred yards. Since one should always, as a sign of respect, walk to the left of a mani wall, as soon as one has passed the fork in the path there can be no retreat. It is in fact exactly like musical chairs. This monk from upper Pangboche was coming down on his side of the wall when Norbu and I were going up on ours; he stopped in his tracks, stared in startled horror, then clutched at his long red skirts and rushed back to the upper village on the wrong side of the wall. I was mildly amused that anyone should be so badly affected at the sight of me. A few minutes later we arrived at the monastery and I met a whole collection of highly decorous monks, but the first one must still have been quite worried for I did not see him again.

Apart from this one bad case of shock the monastery at Pangboche gave me the wonderful welcome which by now I had come to expect. At the entrance to the monastery two monks were busily painting an outsize prayer barrel, and it tinkled very merrily each time they turned it round; when they saw me coming they both put down their little pots and beamed with joy. Another monk came out of a small stone house and invited me to go inside for chang and a dish of potatoes. We went into the house and a long queue of monks followed us through the door, up the ladder, and into the one main room.

They talked and chattered happily, taking it in turns to wield a fine pair of wooden bellows until the fire revived and at last the potatoes started to boil. With tremendous pride they showed me all their treasures. Most of these had been left behind by the Everest Reconnaissance of the autumn, for we were now on the main track from Namche Bazar to the Khumbu Glacier and in 1951 Tom and the others had certainly passed this way. I was amused to see some pages out of *Punch*. The monks could not read a word of the script but they gazed hard at the pictures and took them very seriously indeed. Then they showed me the cover of *The Water Babies*, and I wondered which member of the party had chosen that as reading matter for the mountains: usually one remembers that there will be long hours in camp when the weather is bad and these long hours will provide an excellent chance for one to master such good works as one has always intended to read but has so far avoided through lack of time or of solid mental application. *War and Peace* and a Complete Shakespeare appear on these expeditions again and again and again, and if the weather is at all disappointing they will be read from cover to cover.

The next exhibit was, for the monks, the most exciting of all. It was a copy of a newspaper, *The New Statesman of India*, dated 4th November, 1951, and it carried an article on the Sherpas which was illustrated by a photograph of Ang Tharkay himself. All the monks knew Ang Tharkay well, and they were proud and thrilled to see his picture in the paper. It had been fingered so often that now it was badly blurred, but even so it might have been the monastery's greatest treasure.

The potatoes boiled at last, the chang was produced, and someone brought out a few grains of the salt which is so very precious as it has to be carried over the passes from Tibet. Just like the poorer Sherpas who huddled in the cold with their few sad yaks, the monks of Pangboche gave me the best they had.

The hospitality was the same wherever I went; the villages themselves differed greatly, but their people not at all. A Sherpa is a good thing wherever you may find him, and the size of his herd of yaks, the number and splendour of his houses, and the state of the weather outside, are never likely to spoil his spontaneous good nature.

* * *

Sola Khumbu is not large. It stretches some thirty miles from north to south and some twenty miles at the farthest point from east to west; the greater part of this is filled by giant mountains whose bare high slopes support no life at all, and it is only in the few deep valleys that the Sherpas can build their homes. The pressure of the population on the land is very great. For many years there has been a steady migration of Sherpas to Darjeeling, but even with this outlet to make things easier every possible site at home has had to be tightly packed. The villages are scattered wherever the hillside allows them a flat enough ledge, from Kharikhola at 7,000 feet to the upper limit of vegetation at 17,000 feet. Suitable sites are rare. Terraces are painfully carved out of the hillside and banked with enormous care to prevent them from falling away, and it may take hours of arduous walking to go from one lonely village to the next. Con-

ditions in the different villages vary with the changes in their height. Lower villages like Kharikhola, the first to be reached on the way from Katmandu, can grow maize and barley and beans, and still have some rough pasture for cows and sheep and hens. Namche and many other villages produce potatoes very easily, beans with some care, and maize and barley not at all; here the cows are crossed with yaks to give a hardier breed. Up at Chhule they can raise a few tiny potatoes, but above this one's whole economy must depend entirely on the yak. It was against this background of changing conditions and isolated villages that I found to my astonishment that the Sherpas were all so very much alike.

All Sherpas are very ready to mix with each other on terms of equality, and I saw no sign at all of any rivalry or bad feeling between the different villages, nor of any class or heirarchy within a village itself. Anyone can see that some Sherpas are richer than others, living less barely, growing a greater surplus of beans or potatoes and so better able to engage in travel or trade, but I could not find that this made any difference to their standing with each other or to the way in which they behaved.

Standards of living, habits and customs vary from village to village and from height to height, but these customs and standards are proper to the altitude and not to the people concerned. If the people migrate for a season they will expect to change their ways. The most obvious example is the sanitation. There is none at all in the lower and more fertile villages, nor in the very high hamlets where the yaks give ample dung for the fields as well as for the fires, but in places like Namche, Thami

and Phorcha, where potatoes are grown in feeble soil and animals are relatively rare, nearly every house will boast its private lavatory simply as a way to collect a little manure. At the top of the stairs you go to the right instead of turning to the left into the one main room. There may be a rough door or the lavatory may be always on show, just a thick layer of straw and a hole in the floor which gives on to the stable below. The families with such a convenience clean out that corner of the stable very regularly and so help to enrich their dusty fields, but they are no more sensitive or more hygienic than anyone else, and the same families will abandon the habit at once when they go to another house where the need of the fields is less.

People change their habits with the height at which they find themselves. Their standard of living may change too and it would be misleading to make a permanent distinction between the rich and the poor. Our host at Thami, for the first time when I stayed there with Namgyal, was a very rich man as compared with the rest of the village. His house had a small private shrine, his windows had been painted in red and blue and green, he had the largest store of potatoes and the greatest number of yaks. Without a doubt he lived in very real prosperity if you judged him by the standards of his neighbours. When we reached Chhule we found that here this same man owned the poorest hut in the place, small, dark and windowless, and the fewest, stoniest fields. Here he had lived in cold discomfort, with very little to eat and little to put on the fire. He could, I suppose, have brought wood and stores from Thami when he came up to Chhule with his yaks, but

he found it simpler to travel as lightly as he could and he seemed quite content to make the change. Both at Thami and at Chhule he mixed on the best of terms with everyone he met, and he seemed to be as contented to sit and shiver on the floor of his low stone hut as he had been at Thami in the comfort of his furnished house and surrounded by his family, his herds and all his stores.

It must be the repeated upheaval of changing one's house to suit the season which mixes all the Sherpas up and so checks the growth of any hard distinctions. It is time to move to the yakking grounds, and a village which has kept together and shared the winter storms will split at once into its separate family groups, each one going off in a different direction to its own summer hut. Some families have two or three grazing grounds, each one many miles away, and they may spend a mobile summer as they take their yaks from one to another and then at last with the autumn come back to settle in their lowest, warmest house. One family from Thami will go direct to Chhule and stay there for several weeks; another will strike west up the valley of the Thami Khola as far as Thyangbo or, in the warmest months, perhaps to some bleak ledge beyond. Here they may find people from Namche and from its nearest neighbour Khumjung, already installed for the season in their portable bamboo huts. It is hard for any particular village to have a coherent life of its own, hard for it to have natural leaders with any sense of authority, if on a sudden sunny day half the people will go away at a moment's notice, scatter over the hillside and up the remotest valleys, and not come back for weeks or possibly even for months.

Namche Bazar is the most important town and the

centre of the trade which comes over the Nang Pa La. Many families leave it in the summer to go to the heights with their yaks, but it is only in the summer when the pass is open that the trade from Tibet can come through, and so Namche can never be locked up completely or abandoned for the season. Its life goes on the whole year round, and alone of all the villages it boasts some sort of permanent local authority. There is a headman, a large and friendly fellow; he lives in one of the grander houses, with coloured decorations and a richly painted shrine. His living-room is furnished with carved wooden benches and decked with gay Tibetan rugs, and I saw no other Sherpa house which could compare with it for splendour. In front of the house stands what must seem to the people of Namche to be a symbol of strange authority, and certainly it is a symbol of the headman's connection with the outside, Indian world. It is a rain gauge, left by an Indian scientist several years ago, and it is read twice a day with the same ritual and care that is lavished on the household shrine.

The headman at Namche is advised by the panchayat, a council of five wise men. The panchayat is not an elected body: it seems to have come into being at some dim time in the past and has perpetuated itself by co-option whenever one of its members dies or goes away. There are no police in the Sherpa villages, and such power to enforce their commands as the headman and the panchayat possess must be derived from Okhaldhunga and thence from Katmandu. I had seen how frail was the link with Okhaldhunga and in practice the headman can count only on the delayed support of my five drunken policemen should he meet with any trouble and stand in

need of help. If he is to rule at all it must be with the free consent of the village. He is generally respected, and this, I think, is because he is rich and cheerful and large and likeable, and not by any virtue of his very nominal powers. A little while before I came to Namche he had shown himself to be capable and sane. There had been trouble up at Khumjung, where a wedding party had ended in a drunken fight. The headman from Namche is apparently responsible for a very wide parish; he went up to disentangle the combatants, he restored the peace and even extracted a fine. Chang can be potent (it all depends upon the brew) and this was no slight achievement for a solitary, middle-aged man. I was told that in theory any felon or disturber of the peace can be sent to a prison at Charikot. I remembered that we had been near to the place on our fourth day out of Katmandu, and the prison is therefore some ten days' walk away from Sola Khumbu. It did not surprise me that no one could remember an instance of a Sherpa's spending any time in gaol.

The headman at Namche has a few duties, and when we first arrived in Namche he came round to see our permits just to satisfy himself that all was well. But he has very few effective powers, and it is lucky that the Sherpas are happy and hard working and that troubles and fights are rare. The other villages seem to manage quite easily without a headman at all, and the only checks on disorderly behaviour are those provided by the monks. The lamas enforce certain rules on the people in the villages nearby: they forbid the killing of all wild life, with the happy result that animals which elsewhere are shy and frightened and rare, musk deer, langur monkeys

and tahr (wild and beautiful animals not unlike enormous mountain goats), here come within a very few yards to have a look at you with a calm and unworried curiosity; the lamas restrict the collection of wood where the forests are thin; and they preach the great virtue of peaceable living. Such is their moral authority that they are all the time respected and nearly always obeyed. When the chang has flowed too freely there may be some slight excitement, but I never saw a sober Sherpa who was very far removed from a smile. In the higher villages men will sit and shiver while they wait for the yak dung to burn and give out a low, dull heat, but even when no monastery is near and there can be no risk of being caught they will not think of cutting down the protected trees. And, only a mile or so away from Phorcha, Mingma pointed out to me with a sudden shout of delight three fine animals, large and horned, who stood watching us from thirty yards away. He called them rero: I found out later that this is the Tibetan name for the Himalayan tahr. Certainly they were magnificent creatures, interested and peaceful and entirely unafraid, and I am sure that they were so quiet and so tame simply because they had learned over the years that they had nothing to fear from the Sherpas.

The monasteries clearly have a deep authority, and they use it well. Just as the great reshuffle in the summer has prevented the rise of rivalry and high feeling between the separate hamlets, or of any marked hierarchy within a village itself, and has kept the Sherpas as a free and friendly community, so too in their own way the lamas have helped to unite and unify the Sherpas. Their mild and gentle influence is exerted for the same good ends

all over Sola Khumbu, and when they hold a feast or festival people from all the villages will flock to the monastery with all the friendliness of some great family gathering.

The Sherpas as a whole form a happy, coherent tribe, and they have a wonderful loyalty to each other as against the rest of the world. Any Nepali is a foreigner, and outside Sola Khumbu Nepal itself might well be a different country. Two Sherpas who meet by chance in some other part of Nepal will rush into each other's arms with glorious shrieks of joy, with far more emotion than Stanley is said to have shown on meeting Livingstone in a truly unknown land. The Tibetans are the Sherpas' cousins and they are greeted with delight, and European climbers are now coming to be looked upon as friends. But apart from this the division is perfectly clear; either you are a Sherpa, a friend and a very Good Thing, or else you must be foreign and odd.

The tribe is the whole, the family is the part. Sherpa society has no other fundamental unit. There is no system of caste, nor could there be one on the Hindu model, for this is the erection of social and religious barriers between the different hereditary occupations, and the Sherpas have no such differences. Every family works on its own to make an independent living from its scattered patches of land, and every family hopes at some season or another to save a small surplus and to take part in trade, or to carry loads to the mountains for wages. The Sherpas are a society of equals, and this state of affairs is plain and simple, very friendly and extremely good.

All the Sherpas grow up in an atmosphere of laughter

and equality and this may be why they make such very good friends. They are not quite sure what to make of the Nepalis, and when they go in small numbers outside Sola Khumbu they seem suddenly strangely shy—for day after day on our journey to Okhaldhunga Namgyal and Mingma spoke hardly a word to anyone else but to each other, and they both looked unsure of what they ought to do, awkward and miserable and lost. But the Sherpas meet the climbing parties on their own home ground and are very much more at their ease.

It was an excitement and a joy to travel from one small village to the next, never sure at what sort of place we should stop for the night but quite certain from happy experience that however rich or poor its people its welcome would be the same. The Sherpas have no great respect for wealth or rank and they mix with each other without hesitation on perfectly equal terms; and just as they would not think of setting any barriers between themselves so, as soon as they had recovered from their first great shock of amazement, they showed the same open friendliness to me. They did not scruple to poke or pinch to feel what I was like, nor to roar with laughter if something I did seemed to them comic or odd. Very quickly I learned to accept the treatment in the same spirit in which it was handed out, and it was good to know that they could lose their shyness so soon and so completely. They welcomed me into their houses readily, they generously shared their potatoes and their chang, and as we sat round the fire on the floor in the half darkness I could almost pretend that I was a Sherpa too. They laughed at me. But then they laughed at each other. I was nudged very often, but so was everyone else. And

the drinking and the talking and the singing went on quite freely far into the night. Then at last we settled, one by one, just where we were on the hard planks of the floor; the singing came to an end, the fire died out, and we slept soundly and happily and all together in a tired and friendly heap.

CHAPTER NINE

The Sherpani in her Home

JUST BEYOND the very small village of Millingo and two easy miles away from Thyangboche, a small and cheerful monastery sits beside the river. From the outside it appears entirely normal: there are long coloured walls, a sloping, slated roof, a well-kept chorten to ensure a touch of sanctity, and little tinkling, holy barrels for pious hands to turn. Norbu told me that this was Debuje and he seemed curiously eager to show me what was inside.

The inner courtyard had been built to the usual plan, small and square with a wooden arcade round three of the sides and with steps to the door of the temple in front of us on the fourth. It was clean and trim and empty and I could see no reason for Norbu to be so bouncingly excited, for the place looked exactly like all the other monasteries which he had shown me with perfect calm. Then a lama appeared at the door of the temple, a large and friendly figure in flowing rich red robes; Norbu beamed with a modest delight as though the scene

were all his own creation, and I realised that this smiling, stately lama who was coming forward to greet me was not a man but a woman.

She moved with authority and her robes fell in rich folds as she came slowly down the steps. Her hand was lifted in a salaam of blessing, and Norbu knelt devoutly while I bowed with deep respect. All the time she was smiling with good will and completely at her ease. In fact she was more composed than I was, for she had clearly heard of my existence and had been expecting me to call, whereas I had met her without any warning and found it difficult to check my surprise. No one had mentioned a monastery for women and I had rather foolishly taken it for granted that all the Buddhist lamas would be men.

We spoke very little, for I had arrived at Debuje in the middle of a service and the other nuns were gathered in the temple and waiting for the Lama to return. She led me up the steps into the dark and incense-filled temple and showed me to one of the low wooden benches which ran along the side of the walls. Then, with a bow, she left me and went to her own place at the end of one of the central benches and just to the left of the altar. There were perhaps a dozen nuns, all of them dressed in the same red robes and all sitting cross-legged on the benches, but not one of them had seemed to stir a muscle when the lama and I had entered the temple, and after she too had taken her seat there was a very long hush of silence. In the stillness I looked round the building. It was dim, and grey with smoke, but just like other temples I had seen. On the altar a huge gilt Buddha sat in eternal contemplation; at his feet were rows and rows of little

copper bowls, and several pictures of the Dalai Lama, each one carefully shrouded in gauze. Long thin horns and a leather drum had been stacked to one side, for these are used only at dawn, when they wake the nuns and call them to the first long service of the day. The nuns on their benches sat like the Buddha, motionless in the silence. The censer set by the altar gave out a slow cloud of light grey smoke and set them apart from each other in its gentle, sacred haze. Nobody stirred. And then the stillness was broken by the delicate tinkle of a bell; the nuns, without a sound, bowed low.

I sat and watched them in the silence. At first I had thought that they were quietly waiting for the service to begin, but soon I was sure that this heavy silence was a part of the service itself. Again they bowed together, and then one nun leaned forward in a ritual obeisance all on her own. Every movement was calm and decorous and unhurried, in keeping with the reverent stillness of the quiet temple.

At last I looked at my watch and saw that it was growing late, and I slipped very quietly out of the temple and down the steps. Norbu was waiting anxiously in the courtyard, his pack already loaded on his back. He thought it was time to go if we were to be at Phorcha for the night, for though our journey was only some four or five miles it would be a hard steep climb uphill. I took up my things and followed him out of the gate.

On the way home I learned more about the monastery. I asked if any of the nuns were married and was told that this was not allowed. At Thyangboche and most of the other monasteries some of the monks are permitted to marry and are even provided with small stone houses

where they live in comfort with their wives, but the nuns of Debuje are given no such freedom. They must choose between the convent and a husband, and I learned much later that the village of Millingo is formed very largely from the families of nuns who have lapsed from the difficult path and who now live there in domestic bliss surrounded by their husbands and their children. Those who keep the rules and stay in the convent are all unmarried, and this must have been why Debuje had seemed so neat and empty. Elsewhere one sees crowds of children running about the place and a monastery is in fact a village on its own; here there had only been the nuns.

Although, like all the main Sherpa monasteries, Debuje comes under the distant surveillance of the mother house in Tibet, in practice the nuns manage the routine of their life entirely on their own. They are fully competent to arrange their own affairs; their services, as I saw, have a wonderful peace and discipline, their buildings are well cared for, their chorten is beautifully clean. Quite clearly Debuje is run as well as any other monastery I saw.

This good organisation is not at all surprising, for the Sherpanis, the Sherpa women, are solidly capable people and most of the time they are working even harder than the men. The men alone, it is true, tackle the very high altitude climbing, but the women are ready to carry heavy loads at an ordinary height, and they carry these loads very cheerfully and well. At home and in the fields the women do most of the work; the family is the one permanent unit of Sherpa life since the people of any one village keep changing with the seasons, and in the Sherpa family very much depends on the industry and skill of the mother. She produces the children and cares for

The man in a basket. His umbrella and his way of travelling were less for comfort than for show

them; cooks the food which she has helped to grow; plays her part in building the family house and afterwards keeps it in order; tends the sheep and takes their wool to turn it into clothes. The Sherpa woman has much to do, she does it well, and she is generally respected. Never in Sherpa country was I asked that irritating question so common among the Hindus, how many sons had I, with its unkind suggestion that a mere daughter would be too worthless to bother to count. Sometimes the Sherpas asked if I had any children, including in their question both sons and daughters, but in fact it was only rarely that the subject was raised at all.

Since the family as a unit is so vital to the whole Sherpa way of life, marriage is a solemn and a serious proceeding, and once you have chosen your wife you may not take another for a change. There may well be a long and definite betrothal before a couple finally marry and settle down together, probably at first in the house of one set of parents or rarely in a hut of their own. The wedding ceremony is much enjoyed by all the neighbours. Men and women gather from all the surrounding villages and parade their newest clothes, their heaviest ornaments of turquoise, their brightest felt boots and their glorious floppy hats. Drums are beaten, horns are blown, and chang flows readily for hours. I went to only one Sherpa wedding, at Namche late in May. In fact the bride and the bridegroom and their parents had departed in a block some time before I arrived, but this scarcely seemed to matter and the feasting and the singing were still only warming up. Everyone was happy. Pokes and embraces were exchanged in a wild confusion; I was luckily too tall to be treated to many wholehearted hugs, but I could

not avoid the frequent goodhearted slaps. Uproarious singing broke out and went on for most of the night, starting with shouts of joy, swelling into a loud and very cheerful chanting, and growing fainter a little before the dawn as one by one the revellers dropped off into a dazed and chang-filled sleep.

Sherpa girls are likely to marry at any age from ten to about sixteen, and soon after marriage will come the new family. The Sherpani, with so many other things to do, has brought to a fine art the bearing and the rearing of her children, and neither seems to give her any trouble. The birth itself happens easily and quickly; there are no beds and one would not choose to lie in on the hard rough boards of the floor, so the Sherpani is up and about again within a matter of hours. She wraps the squirming infant in a woollen cloth and slings it across her back as she sets about her usual household jobs, and soon she will be working in the fields with her usual vigour and zest. At Surkya, on our return from Okhaldhunga, we had met a mother whose son was two days old. The mother was running busily about the village and chasing the family hens, but for her the position was easier than I had seen elsewhere, for the new father sat and entertained the baby while his wife did all the work. Normally the mother is left with the baby as well as with the work, but even girls of twelve or thirteen seem entirely able to manage both and are not in the least perturbed. I never stopped admiring their wonderful calm, nor their good spirits and abundant energy which carries them so cheerfully through a long and hard day's work.

Some of the mothers are extraordinarily young. On one occasion we came upon a group of women sitting and

spinning, all of them prematurely old with work. To one side sat a young girl who could not have been more than eleven, and I admired her freshness and her happy face and wondered how soon her charm would vanish when she came to the solid hard work of Sherpa married life. As I was musing to myself in a vaguely sentimental way the girl took up a sturdy young infant and began to nurse it at her breast. I could scarcely believe that this charming child should already be a mother, but it was not open to doubt, and after that I was much more cautious in trying to diagnose the married state. It is probably true to say that most Sherpa girls are married at thirteen to a husband a few years older, but this is no more than a guess at the average and clearly there are many exceptions to the rule.

Sherpa infants have to learn very early to be tough, for they are given very little in the way of special care. They are all fed naturally, and even when they are old enough to run about and boil potatoes for themselves in the great black pot on the fire it is very likely that they will still go back to their mother's breast from time to time. At several different villages I have seen tiny children put down their loads and hurry to mother for some quick refreshment. Once I saw a small boy suckling when his elders started to smoke; his face lit up and he quickly turned from his mother's milk to stretch out his hand for a cigarette.

Nearly all the Sherpa children are allowed to grow up freely and quite untrained, but at Namche itself a school had just been opened at the monastery and some of the children were learning to read and write. The fees are very reasonable—three Nepali rupees, or about four

shillings a year. Not long ago the Sherpas had very little money; each family tried to be self sufficient and most of their trade was carried on by means of barter. But now that climbing expeditions come to the district and the Sherpas can work as porters for wages it must be much easier for the families to raise the fees and send the children to school. When I was there, there were some twenty pupils, all of them sitting in the courtyard and busily learning to count.

Most of the children spend all their time running about the home and the village, but the Sherpa woman sees to it that they give her very little trouble. Their clothes are allowed to stay torn and grubby and will be worn until the rags disintegrate with age; I have seen small children in the fields with nothing on their feet, even at places like Chhule when the ground is covered with snow. As soon as an infant can walk it comes out of the sling on its mother's back and learns to work beside her on the terraces and to wield its own small mattock. In a year or two it will be given a short sharp stick and perhaps a handful of stones, and thus armed it goes out to drive in a herd of gigantic yaks. When the family leave their winter quarters little children of five and six are expected to help with the move and they trail stoutly at the end of the family procession, each one shouldering his tiny load. Tiny, that is, when compared with the size of his parents' loads; in fact it is likely to be nearly as large as himself. What better training for the next generation of Sherpas? The treatment may seem a little hard, but the Sherpa woman would not mean for a moment to be unkind; she is genuinely fond of her children and if one of them is ill she will be pitifully

distressed. But the mothers lead a tough and hardy life and they take it for granted that their children must learn to do the same. The mothers have no time for useless pleasures and they give their children no toys; they work all the time and train their children to help; but they themselves are happy people, smiling as they go about their work and ready to see a joke, and their tough little children have the very good fortune to grow up to the sound of constant laughter. The Sherpani is a very good mother simply because she is such a very good person, but the process is entirely unconscious and her only idea on the subject of bringing up her children is to harden them off at the earliest possible age.

When she is not at work in the fields or going as a porter with some climbing expedition either up to the mountains or back to Katmandu, the Sherpa woman's place is mostly in the home; but since most families own two or three widely separated houses, her life has little chance of being stagnant or very dull. Probably she will have helped in the building of one or more of the family houses; at Namche there is one Sherpa who is so clever at woodwork that he makes nearly all the windows and stairs, but otherwise there is no specialised building trade and each family tries to manage on its own, calling on cousins and neighbours and friends only to help with the awkward corners or to lift the few great beams. I saw one family hard at work on a new stone hut. Two small infants were joyously plastering mud on the rough foundations; their elder brothers and sisters made little piles of stones; to the parents fell the anxious task of building a firm and weatherproof wall. They had already cut and woven thick bamboo matting for the roof, and

this would be kept in place through the winter storms with heavy stones and long, rough logs of wood. The house would conform to the pattern of all its neighbours, but even so it must feel pleasantly special to live in a house which you yourself have built.

There is ample work around the house to keep a Sherpa woman busy all the time. She wakes and rises at dawn and steps carefully over her husband and children who are sprawled and sleeping on the dusty floor. She hoists a stout wooden barrel on to her back and hurries to the nearest stream for water, shouting a few gay words to her friends as she meets them on the path. Wood or yak dung will be needed for the fire. The family must eat, water is boiled for tea and an old wooden grinder is brought into action to grind a few ears of roasted barley or maize. The flour which comes out, the tsamba, is stirred into the tea to make a hot and mushy porridge and this is devoured with a smacking of lips and with definite grunts of approval. The Sherpani looks as pleased as anyone else to spoon up great mouthfuls of the stuff, but almost at once she is on her feet again and in search of yet more work. The stable needs cleaning; the yaks may give a little milk to be shaken into cheese, or their dung must be piled into a basket and carried out to enrich the feeble fields. The Sherpa woman hurries up the hillside, the dung very heavy on her back, and still she laughs and jokes with anyone she passes on the way. She notices odd strands of wool left on the shrubs and bushes by the grazing sheep. All these must be gathered and washed and carded, spun and woven and dyed, until at last new tunics and blouses are fashioned to replace the family's present rags. Soon it will be time

to move up the valley to a colder, higher hut, and pots, mats, yaks and children have to be sorted and collected for the journey. Or the move may be very much harder, over the Nang Pa La and down into Tibet, and again it is the mother who works to make ready all that is needed for the trip. Vast bamboo mats must be carried, for the way is hard and cold and these make an excellent portable shelter. Potatoes and beans are sewn into sacks of hide to be taken across the pass for barter for salt and for the gaudy Tibetan dyes. When the Sherpani has made everything ready there still remains the journey itself; very often all the family will travel together and she must care for the children on the way. Her load will be as heavy as her husband's, and while she walks her hands will probably be busy with her knitting or her spinning, just to make sure that no time at all is wasted from her work.

When life is so full and so hard, close to the soil in not very fruitful country, something has to be sacrificed in the difficult struggle for a living. The Sherpa woman has a cheerful, bounding energy, but it takes her all her time to keep her family clothed and fed and she has nothing to spare for frills or graces. Sherpa life is very hard and plain, and the only relaxation in the evening is merriment and chang. Perhaps on a warm afternoon a group of women may be seen sitting in the sun, happily talking and apparently taking their ease, but in fact they will all be doing something useful, spinning or knitting, suckling their babies, or searching for the lice in their children's hair. It is rare indeed to see a Sherpa woman resting.

The huts and houses have little decoration, except for

the occasional shrine. Perhaps some mystical designs will be painted on the dark wooden walls, an inverted swastika, a geometric pattern, a pyramid of small white dots, but these are uncommon and may easily be hidden by sacks of potatoes, a basket of barley, or rows of pots and pans. The food and the pans are of first importance if the family is to eat and such things are kept in careful order and given pride of place. The decorations are an extra, and must stay in the darkness behind.

In just the same way the Sherpanis spare little time or trouble to adorn themselves. They are scarcely interested in their appearance; and how can they know what they look like when they have no mirrors, and when the rushing mountain streams go far too fast to show a clear reflection? If it happens to be easier to carry their belongings wrapped up in the folds of their belt, they will not for a moment be deterred by the thought of their ungainly silhouette. It is far more important to be practical than to worry about one's shape.

Sherpa women are not beautiful, and probably it is the strain of carrying heavy loads which does more than anything else to spoil their looks. In a country where houses and fields and water may be long, hard distances apart, load carrying is one of the major tasks of life. There is no wheeled transport at all; on the rough steep tracks it would soon be out of control. Even the wonderful yaks are kept mainly for long distance travel. They are magnificent creatures, but a little too vast to be suitable for the normal daily tasks; if you merely want to shift a load of dung to the fields it is hardly worth the fuss involved in getting the yak out, loading it up and encouraging it to move, and putting it away at the end.

Far better to stick the dung in a basket on your own back and carry it up there yourself. Nearly everything that has to be carried is shouldered by the Sherpas, and shouldered by the women as much as by the men. The women are experts at the job, and in fact when they carry for an expedition they will take a standard load in return for the standard wage, but their carriage and their whole appearance suffer very badly. Loads are piled high in a conical wicker basket three feet long and over two feet wide across the top. The point sits in the small of the porter's back and the top sticks high above her head. A thick band of cloth goes round her forehead, over her shoulders and under the basket's point, so that when she tried to move beneath the weight she naturally hunches her shoulders and leans forward to stare at the ground. The usual load is sixty pounds, and to carry this up the steep and crumbling track must be a serious strain on the muscles of her head and back and neck. The Sherpa women manage to stay very cheerful underneath their burdens, but they lose all claim to any charm or grace.

They may not be beautiful, but if there is a party in the village they will try to look gaudy and gay. They hang round their necks their huge and clumsy ornaments, and if finery seems to be lacking they make do with a wonderful smile. For feasts and festivals and weddings they bring out their newest set of clothes, but these have only their cleanliness to mark them out from the rest; if a poor Sherpani has only one tunic and one apron it may not be noticed in the crowd, and if it should chance to be noticed, who is fussy enough to care? A happy smile is just as welcome as a suit of expensive clothes. They all bring out their lovely floppy hats and the heavy turquoise

ornaments imported from Tibet, and with these their dressing up is complete and their thoughts turn to dancing or to chang.

There may be seven ages of Shakesperian man, but there are only two of Sherpa woman. The young girls meet the cares and the hard work of a husband and children and home and they very soon lose the fresh charm of their youth and enter into a toughened but cheerful old age. There is no equivalent to the woman in her twenties or thirties as we know her at home, active, good looking and assured, but growing in character all the time and not yet fully mature. The Sherpa woman in her twenties is already set and worn with her work and her children; she may have lost her teeth, she is probably growing a goitre; at thirty she is definitely old. It is sad that her life should treat her so harshly. But it would be wrong to have too many regrets, for she herself is perfectly happy and, granted that this early ageing has to come, the Sherpa woman takes to it as well as she possibly could. Her face may be wrinkled at thirty, but it has wrinkled into permanent smiles.

I have seldom met a Sherpa woman whom I did not like at once, but there are three whom I remember with very special affection. Two were old, the other still young. There was Tenzing's mother at Thami, with her calm and peaceful manner and her ready, intelligent smile. There was a girl of ten who joined us at breakfast some miles outside Kharikhola. Her straight black hair framed a very delicate face and she looked at me out of small and very serious black eyes. Her clothes were falling in rags and she wore no boots though the track was hard and rough. She led by the hand her younger

brother, a small fat child who was just beginning to walk, and whenever he plopped on the ground she picked him up patiently and dusted him with care. He made himself as much nuisance as he could, whining to distract his sister when she began to talk to me, but she had a quiet serenity which would not be annoyed. Where was I going? To Okhaldhunga. She nodded gently when I told her, as if she knew the harshness of the way but knew too that the effort must be made to find a good reward. The little boy began to howl and clamour for his mother, and the girl led him gently and carefully away, leaving me with a charming memory of her serious smile and her happy serenity and peace.

And there was Eskimo Nell. I had heard tremendous stories of her efforts as a porter to Everest in 1933, when she had been the driving force among the Sherpas and her caustic tongue had spurred the others on to carry to even greater heights. This year she came to renew her old acquaintance with Eric Shipton, and by very great good fortune I was there when she arrived. I had expected to meet someone large and loud; in fact she was small and neat and very dainty. Her voice was low, even a trifle subdued. Then she smiled at something Eric Shipton said, some incident they both remembered, and her face lit up with a sudden keen delight. For a moment the old fire leapt into her eyes and I suddenly could see this charming and fragile old lady as she must have appeared on Everest nearly twenty years before.

But these three women are the exceptions, and most Sherpanis are far too involved in their unending round of work to know any of the graces of detachment. There is no time to sit and think. Life is short and it is there to

be lived, urgent tasks are waiting to be done, and the Sherpanis do them wholeheartedly and live it to the full. It is all very simple, very straightforward, and the Sherpa women with their wonderful zest and their natural good humour live a happy and uncomplicated life. For all their hard work they wrest a very meagre living from the soil, but all of them are rich in generosity; I was welcomed into the poorest hut with open arms. I have not met anyone who works so hard for such a bare return, nor have I met anyone more infectiously content.

CHAPTER TEN

Monks and Monasteries

YOU CAN always tell when the track is approaching a monastery. The mani walls are neat and long, and their low grey stones kept in good repair; any fallen rocks that chance to lie close to the path are covered on each face with sacred carvings; and perhaps some small holy barrels sit in a patient row, waiting for pious hands to turn them and so to release their prayers. A cheerful Sherpa in a dark red dressing-gown may come forward with a happy smile of welcome, or a few small boys run gaily down the path, each one dressed in a junior size of the same red holy robes.

When we first went up from Thami to the monastery on the hills above we were walking through heavy cloud. The track was indistinct and the hillside was hard and steep. Two Sherpas, visitors to Thami, were with me at the time, and we were all a little worried in case we had missed the way. The path, it appeared, came completely to an end. There was no danger at all, for simply by going downhill we could strike the Thami Khola and follow it back to the village, but we had set out with the firm intention of visiting the monastery and now we felt

doubtful and cold and gloomy in the mist. One of the Sherpas took a few steps among the stunted bushes to his right, shouting for me to come too, and I stepped into the mist after the sound of his voice. I found him standing in triumph beside a tiny chorten and pointing with pride to a mani wall which could just be seen as a dark grey line through the lighter grey of the cloud. The wall, we were sure, would lead us to the monastery. All would now be well. We went beside the wall for twenty or thirty yards, and when it came to an end there were several carved rocks, more tiny chortens, and then another wall. We followed the signs of sanctity slowly up the hill, and suddenly the rhythm of drums and of many people chanting broke through the dullness of the cloud. A minute later and the track had led us up to the temple itself.

The monastery was set in a colony of little houses, each with its solid wooden door and with two flat windows which stared at us in turn as we passed them slowly through the mist. The drums and the chanting seemed to be coming from some of the distant houses and not, as I had imagined, from lamas at prayer in their shrine, and we made our way along a small stone path towards the source of the sound.

The path turned and twisted between the houses, and we found it leading us away from the noise of the drums and up to a small stone hut. As we were turning doubtfully back a monk came darting out of the hut and asked if we would come inside: here, he told us, the head lama of the monastery sat in ritual contemplation, and here he would receive us to see me for himself and to ask me all about my journey. When we had paid our respects to

the lama the eager young monk would take us into the temple.

He pushed open the low wooden door of the hut and we went into the darkness inside. A thick grey cloud of incense hung heavily across the room, and it was several seconds before I could make out the lama himself. He sat on a small high stool in the far corner of the room, behind a long wooden counter and enclosed, like a sentry, in a box. The hut abounded in signs of his piety. Dusty gauze hangings were draped at his side and there were rows and rows of tiny copper pots. With his right hand he turned a little barrel set before him on the counter, and at each revolution the barrel rang a bell; with his other hand he fumbled with a string of holy beads; and all the time he was singing very quickly to himself, working his way at an enormous rate through the usual monotonous chant, never halting in his words and pausing for breath only for a second and often in the middle of a phrase. We stood quietly before the counter and he nodded in our direction without slackening his threefold devotions; the young monk spread a mat on the dusty floor and motioned to us to sit down.

We sat and watched the lama through the grey and heavy air, and he, through half-closed eyes, looked back at us. I think he was almost blind, for though he did not fully open his eyes he leaned forward at intervals as if to make us out more clearly, and his old hands groped unsteadily with the barrel and the beads. Long years at his prayers in the choking air of the hut must surely have affected his eyes, and though he was now so old and venerable he was very pathetic as well.

For many minutes we sat on the floor, breathing the

stale smoke of the low, dark hut and watching the old man at his prayers. At last he dropped his beads, the barrel swung slowly to a halt and the chanting came to an end. The lama leaned across his counter and peered down at me through the gloom. In a soft, tired voice he asked about the journey to Okhaldhunga, whether the town was far away and how long it had taken us to reach it. He seemed satisfied with what I told him for he shut his eyes and nodded several times. Then he picked up a tiny censer from the counter and swung it on the end of a chain, groping with his other hand until he found his beads.

This was the signal for something to happen; the Sherpas from Thami and the young monk all stood up and went before the counter to be blessed. The lama waved the censer in the air above them and tapped them on the head with his beads, breaking again into a long and rapid chant while they murmured something in reply. I stood up in respect but stayed quietly to one side. Soon the chanting grew louder and faster and the lama sang on and on without waiting for any response, turning his little barrel again and slowly telling his beads. The old man had returned to his devotions. We slipped silently out of the wooden door and into the clean fresh air.

While we had been sitting in the smoke-filled hut the clouds outside had lifted and now we looked down the green, deep valley to Thami, far below us in the sun. Across the valley, and a thousand feet above us, the clouds still clung gently to the hills, but all the time they were growing lighter and suddenly they would break apart to reveal some distant, hidden peak. The air was thin and

cold, but it was so refreshing and pure that I wanted to fetch the lama from his hut and show him the glorious view. He might not have seen it very clearly, but even with one's eyes shut one could still feel and enjoy the clean, shining beauty of the mountains.

The doctrines of Buddhism have always taught a renunciation of the world. It was the sight of human suffering, of an old man dying, a dead body, a sick man and a poor ascetic, which is said to have turned the Buddha from his comfortable life as a prince and to have driven him from his palace to meditate in poverty on an answer to the problem of pain. After six hard years he won enlightenment, and what he then taught about suffering has been fundamental doctrine ever since. Starting with the fact of suffering, Buddhist teaching finds the origin of this evil in human cravings for life, for pleasure, for passion; if these cravings could once be stilled there would then be no more pain. The noble Eightfold Way lays down the state of mind and the standard of conduct which will release a man from his cravings, and when at last, after slowly growing in spiritual stature and following this noble Way through a long succession of lives, a man arrives at full enlightenment and at the perfect discipline of his actions, he then passes into Nirvana and is not born into the world again. The Buddha himself was more concerned to find relief from evil and suffering than to describe Nirvana, and with the lack of any very definite teaching from the master several differing schools of thought have interpreted what this final state is like. Some of his followers had seen Nirvana as complete annihilation, others as ultimate bliss. Since Nirvana is the goal of all existence, unless it has a

positive value over and above the negative merit that in it all suffering has come to an end, the whole procession of human life is one long, meaningless waste. Each life has been brought into existence only to struggle towards extinction. Life is a training ground for the non-survival of the fittest, and it would surely have been simpler, less painful and therefore much better, if life had never emerged at all.

This is pessimism at its most extreme, and it is one valid line of deduction from what the Buddha taught. But on the other hand some Buddhists have seen Nirvana as a sort of heaven so pleasant that the painful training of life on earth is made, by its end, worthwhile. Where Buddhist scholars themselves do not agree, I would not pretend to guess what was in the Buddha's mind, but one thing at least seems clear: to the Buddhist, life on earth and this present world have no value at all in themselves. The problem of pain and evil must always check any easy optimism, but to those who see the world as wholly to be shunned there still remains the problem of accounting for the good. Buddhist teaching is preoccupied with pain and suffering and seems to overlook the satisfactions of working and living, and the happiness and delight which are surely no less real than misery and pain. And not only is human life seen as an unmitigated burden, a point of view which can be understood in parts of the crowded, hungry, and disease-swept East, but a spirit of complete renunciation must ignore all the splendour of the natural world. A world which boasts silent and majestic mountains, the shining beauty of snow and ice, and valleys rich with flowers, deserves an honoured place in any cosmology, but in Buddhist teaching it is seen first and

foremost as somewhere from which men must want to escape.

I had gone out to the Himalayas expecting to learn something about the people, through meeting a tribe so very different from ourselves. I learned a lot about Sherpa life in contrast to our own, but most of all I learned to think of them, and so of all men, in relation to the world in which they live. The Sherpas are dominated by the mountains; their country was not built for ease of human habitation, and the Sherpas must fit into it as best they may. The beauty of the mountains was not created in order to be enjoyed by men: some of the peaks may be seen from the valleys, but many can be glimpsed only in part and only at certain seasons of the year, and more may be utterly unknown behind passes which cannot be crossed. We live in a pleasant and gentle country which has been well tamed to our needs and it is easy to come to suppose that nature exists for the special benefit of man. The Himalayas remind one with a solid shock that men are very small creatures scattered on the surface of the earth. Men have minds and consciences while mountains have none, and moral values may be far more important than physical and elemental strength, but there must be more behind the universe than simply the spiritual destiny of man.

Life is surely a mixture of pain and pleasure, sadness and delight, in a world which is dazzling in its majesty and yet where every creature is some other creature's food. The Himalayas stand as a sermon in rock and snow, a a witness to the greatness of the world. Among the mountains one may meet suffering and even death, but one knows that it is good to be alive, and one cannot

forget that the vast glory all around was not designed to the scale of man.

Buddhist philosophy may teach a hard renunciation of the pleasures of the world, but not every Sherpa monk is as sternly ascetic as the half-blind head lama of Thami. In all the Sherpa monasteries I met a happy group of individuals, cheerful or serious, round or tall or thin, all of them very different but tolerant of each other's ways. While one monk prays in semi-darkness another paints gay designs around the walls of the temple, a third is grinding maize for the evening meal and a fourth drinks chang in the sun. Little bells ring out from time to time, but they are bells of prayer and not a call to any communal activity and against this holy and musical background the monks stay undisturbed.

The youthful monk who had met us at first and had taken us to see the head lama now led us very proudly into the temple itself. There were two shrines, one a large room loaded with hangings and full of books and benches and drums, the other a smaller brighter room at the top of a rough flight of stairs. Both carried the usual pictures painted on their walls, but upstairs the pictures were much more vivid for their colours had just been renewed. One monk was painting very industriously and another was adding a coat of varnish as soon as the colours had dried; they beamed with pleasure when we came in and admired their work, and they pointed out the details of animals and dragons, of stricken headless men and wild and dancing gods.

I had seen the same pictures several times before and I was to meet them again and again, but I was still very puzzled to know what part all these passionate gods could

possibly play in the structure of Buddhist thought. I had been told that the Buddha himself had given no place in his teaching to the existence of any gods, yet here they were, a whole galaxy of gay and extraordinary beings, very vividly depicted on the walls.

I have often wished that I had been better prepared for my visit to Nepal, and in particular that I had spent much longer, and worked much harder, in trying to master the language. Neither the military Urdu I learned on the boat, nor the everyday Tibetan words I picked up when I stayed in the villages, could be of use when I wanted to find out the answers to questions of this kind. The monks, quite clearly, accepted all the gods and goddesses as part of their religion as fundamental to their thought as the teachings of the Buddha himself, and I doubt if they had any idea at all of what I was trying to ask. Certainly no one could tell me how it was that these impassioned gods had found their way into a Buddhism which had started as agnostic and austere, and I had to wait until I came home and could read the explanation in Western writings on Tibet.

From these I learned of the changes which took place within the doctrine between the death of the Buddha in the fifth century before Christ and the conversion of Tibet from the eighth century A.D. The teaching which was brought to Tibet was not the original faith, to which only one branch of Buddhism has stayed loyal. This branch, known as the Little Vehicle or the Hinayana, is found to-day mainly in Burma and Ceylon and Siam. The other main branch, the Mahayana or Great Vehicle, had from early centuries been ready to accept a multiplicity of gods and goddesses, of priests and ceremonies and rites, and

had begun to offer to the soul a short-cut to merit. Ritual prayers and worship of the gods were thought to speed the soul on its way towards Nirvana, and they might ease the rigour of the Buddha's discipline of long years of meditation and stern detachment from the world. On reaching Tibet the Mahayana changed still further, adding to its pantheon the many strange gods of the Tibetans and finding room for a belief in their old devils and demons and ghosts. This great collection of gods has been expanded over the years with the rise of a belief in the Thousand Living Buddhas. These Living Buddhas have left Nirvana and returned to the world in order to help mankind; the most famous of them is Chenrezi, incarnate in each lifetime as the Dalai Lama who is at once god and high priest and ruler of Tibet.

It was this form of Buddhism which the Sherpas brought with them when they crossed the high passes to settle in Nepal, and in every Sherpa monastery you can see pictures of the Dalai Lama given pride of place, and calm and placid statues of the Buddha sitting in eternal contemplation before voluptuous paintings of the ancient Tibetan gods.

The two monks in the temple at Thami went on very busily with their work of brightening the painted demons on the walls, and our guide led us down the stairs again and back through the lower room. We stopped this time to look more closely at the shrine, but it was sadly unattractive. The altar was loaded with yak butter, set out as an offering to the gods, and the stale and rancid smell blended strangely with the remaining drifts of some incense which had recently been burned. The gauze hangings were dusty and the dark walls were a dismal

contrast to the fresh, bright paint upstairs. It was good to leave the temple and go out again into the cold, clean mountain air.

The last call which we made at the monastery was very much more cheerful. The monk who had made himself our guide took us along a small stone path between two rows of houses, towards the source of the chanting we had heard when we first arrived. The chanting itself had now come to an end, but from one of the farther houses came sounds of happy laughter and the monk banged loudly on its door and pushed his way inside. We followed him rather cautiously into a tightly crowded room. All at once there was a friendly roar of welcome and I was handed a great bowl of chang. Everyone seemed to be drinking and beaming and they shuffled themselves a trifle unsteadily to make room for us to come in.

The little house was divided inside by a wooden partition, and one of the monks beckoned to me to come through the door and into the inner room. Here, in a scene of crowded exuberance, some five or six very small and chubby monks were holding a fashion parade while their friends stood round and cheered. The monks who were acting as the models were trying to dress themselves in flowing robes of brightly coloured silk, each robe a brilliant patchwork of blue and orange and green, gathered at the waist by a rich red cord and topped by a scarlet scarf. The poor models were having great trouble in deciding which way round their robes were meant to go, for they had no mirror to see the effect and they struggled rather wildly with the folds. The other monks gathered to offer their advice and at last the

performers were dressed. The cheers grew louder. Everybody was clearly delighted with the robes and I learned that they had made them themselves. In a few weeks' time a festival was to be held at the monastery, and Sherpas from all over Sola Khumbu would come to Thami to take part. These gorgeous robes had been made in preparation for the great entertainment. The silks came from Kalimpong, the town just by Darjeeling where Tibetans often settle for the winter, and the gowns had been made up at Thami to a standard Tibetan design. They had, in fact, only just that moment been finished, and it was to watch this final fitting that the party had gathered at the house.

The party went on gaily. Several cheerful monks took a turn at dressing up in the glamorous robes, and I felt sure that the coming festival would be a very great success. Sherpa monasteries are homes of ritual and prayer, of worship and services and patiently tended shrines, but they are also homes of laughter and it is this happy side of the monks' life which the other Sherpas see. The Sherpas love bright colours and singing and dancing, and they look forward with delight to the festivals and feasts when they will leave their work and gather to join in the fun.

Apart from the instruction of the junior monks there is no definite teaching of religion, and most of the Sherpas learn about their faith just by coming to the festivals and watching the ritual dances. The monks enjoy themselves greatly and perform their parts with glee, while the gathered Sherpas join in the songs and the chanting and refresh themselves with chang. The Buddhist way of life must seem to them solidly pleasant and they go back

to their villages to put into practice some of the things they have learned. The prayer flags on their houses are mended or renewed, they rush through the sacred prayers as often as they can while they walk very slowly round a chorten, and some of them wear with obvious pride an odd assortment of religious charms. Holy beads, little cloth bags bearing prayers written out by the monks, and heavy, decorated boxes with pictures of the Dalai Lama may all be worn as sacred tokens and the Sherpas hang these round their necks or fix them to their belts and finger them with constant loving care.

The many little observances are carried out by the Sherpas with simple enthusiasm as though they were part of some new and exciting game. A few of the lamas may be ascetic and austere, but the ordinary Sherpas see their religion as just one more thing to be enjoyed. You turn a holy barrel and ring a little bell: what could be more fun? I have seen loaded Sherpas waste many minutes on the march as they hurry round and round a long line of barrels and ring them again and again.

But there is more to Buddhism than these meritorious practices, and the monks also teach a very kindly moral code. The Buddhist belief in reincarnation, the idea that one will live the next life on earth in a station to be determined by the merit acquired in this, encourages a careful respect for every form of life. Your domestic yak may have the soul of a fallen friend or perhaps of a future saint, and both animal life and human life should be held in reverence. A Buddhist must not kill, but must be kind to all, and certainly Sherpa life is pleasantly free from quarrels and hostility. Other Eastern religions may teach the same, but these peaceable precepts are followed

by the Sherpas far more regularly than by the other tribes I met. In Sola Khumbu it is safe and common to move around unarmed, but when Sherpas go down to the lower hills they prefer to carry their kukris and try not to travel alone. In the lower hills I found the people instantly suspicious and on their guard, but in all the Sherpa villages I was greeted with warm and spontaneous smiles.

The Sherpas are in fact such very delightful people that it is tempting sometimes to think that they must live in some state of pristine goodness and to see ourselves, by contrast, as degenerate. They are cheerful and friendly, hard working, unsuspicious and happy, and in all these ways we have very much to learn. But they can, without meaning to, be cruel in the blunt, tactless way that children are often cruel. Once when I was in the middle of a large cheerful crowd a mother came shyly up to see me. By the hand she led her son, a large lad of about fifteen whose whole face and neck were swollen into one enormous goitre. The poor boy could not turn his head or even look down to his feet to see where he was going; he stumbled uncertainly behind his mother and once he almost fell. They were a pitiful pair, he with his affliction and she with her obvious distress, yet as soon as the other Sherpas caught sight of them they all broke into shouts of delighted laughter. The mother turned and led the boy sadly away, and the shouts and the laughter followed them until they were out of sight.

It would be all wrong to blame them too severely, for they did not mean to be unkind, but this sad little incident was a salutary reminder that the Sherpas have their faults. It may be that in their hard struggle to live in difficult surroundings they can spare little thought or care for

those who are unfortunate or weak; or it may be that they were too simple to sense how much their laughter could hurt the mother and the boy, and only saw in his awkwardness the entertainment value of a clown. I am quite sure that none of them knew that they were being cruel.

No one is perfect and the Sherpas' thoughtlessness can easily be understood. They are simple and uncomplicated, and usually it is this frankness that is their greatest charm. It does not seem to occur to them to be hostile or suspicious: they are very ready to give you a welcome, and they take it for granted that you will feel the same.

It is hard to know how much their religion has helped to produce this good spirit. I suspect that the Sherpas are by nature happy, just as some people are born to worry and others are naturally gay. They are prepared to enjoy themselves as much as they possibly can, and though their life is hard and sometimes very bleak it does offer them the satisfaction of solidly useful work. Everything they do is very obviously productive, and they do not grudge the hours of labour when greater comfort is the prize. They dig in order to eat; they build houses for shelter and fetch wood or dung in order to keep warm. They travel and trade to gain for themselves the things they cannot produce at home. All this is hard but it is directly rewarding, and all the time the Sherpas are living in what is perhaps the finest country in the world. If you are by nature simple, cheerful and hard working it may not be too difficult to enjoy that sort of life.

The Sherpas are always busy; their energies go wholly into their work and they have little time to spare for making any troubles. Too much chang can lead to

excited words, but serious quarrels are rare and the Sherpas are wonderfully friendly and contented. Their religion suits their happy spirit, for the hard teachings of renunciation, often overlooked in the monasteries, do not reach the ordinary Sherpas, and the festivals and feasts, the bright pictures of the gods, are a welcome enrichment to a plain and cheerful life. The Sherpas are satisfied, and their moral code is high.

I doubt if the Sherpas are deeply religious, for they are not profound at all. They take life as it comes to them, meeting the challenge of the land and the seasons, exhausting their bodies with strenuous work but not developing their brains. They have no taste at all for abstract or complicated thought, and I think that the ordinary Sherpa has no interest in the ideas at the back of his faith. But the Sherpas work hard, they live peaceably, and they are happy and content; and it seems to me now that this in itself is a simple tribute to God.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Difficult Return

SOON IT would be time to meet Tom again and start the journey home. Much as I had liked living with the Sherpas I was counting the days until we could leave them and go down to the lower hills, for I had not been well for the last week or so and I blamed it on the height. It seemed to be nothing serious, just mild sickness, dull headaches all the time and a feeling of weariness and sloth, but to do anything at all was taking too much effort and on a long day's march I would have to fight against fainting from exhaustion as the afternoon drew on. I could not think what might be wrong, but at last I put it down to some strange failure to acclimatise. This seemed a little odd since when first I had gone high I had felt so vigorous and well, but it was all I could think of and it held the hope that I should be much better as soon as we began the journey home. Meanwhile I waited rather anxiously for Tom.

Norbu and I went back to Namche in very good time to be sure to be there when Tom arrived. For two days I made small quick trips to a few odd villages I had missed before, to Monjo a short way down the valley, to

Kundi which lies in a beautiful flatness hollowed in the hillside above, and then the third day of waiting at Namche ended my time on my own. Charles Evans and Alfred Gregory had come to gather stores for a camp up at Thami, where they were planning to wait, with Eric Shipton, for the oxygen party to end its trials and come down from the Menlung La; they suggested that I should join them, and Norbu and I were very happy indeed to go gently up the valley with them and to settle in a quiet and lovely camp.

Thami early in June was warm and calm and idyllic. We camped in a flat green field beside the Thami Khola, and all round us the azaleas rose from the grass in glorious shades of orange and red, and the rhododendrons were out in a fresh and beautiful splendour of yellow and white and pink. The sun shone and the air was clear. The mountains stood in their high majesty on either side of the valley; by day they were dignified, impersonal and grey, a frame to the gaily-coloured picture of the flowers and stream and fields, but at night the valley fell into shadow and the strength of the hills stood out. Their great rock faces loomed very black against the darkness, and their snow peaks gleamed in the fierce light of the moon. All the time there was calm, and ease, and peace. Already I felt fresher for the rest, and after three very beautiful days Tom came down the valley to join us and my happiness was complete.

There followed much planning and talking as everybody decided what to do. Tom and I discussed our earlier scheme of going home across the Tesi Lapcha and taking a short and very high route direct to Katmandu. The Tesi Lapcha is the pass at the head of the Thami Khola;

at 20,000 feet it is blocked by snow and storms for nearly the whole of the year, but now it had just been opened up and could be used for a few short weeks. Tom had crossed it the day before as he made his way back from the Menlung La by a partly unexplored route, and he knew that the going would be possible but hard. It would have been fun to try it, for I had had only glimpses of the world of snow and ice and I longed to see more, but when Tom heard how I had felt for the last two weeks he agreed at once with my sad decision not to go high again. We settled instead to take the longer, lower track as we had done on our journey in. Alfred Gregory and Ray Colledge and most of the baggage would be going out this way, so we planned to wait a few more days until they were ready to go and then to join their caravan of stores and equipment and Sherpas. The others had no fixed time to be home and they planned to enter the Barun valley by an unknown pass near Everest and to travel south from there, to reach the Indian frontier at the railhead of Jainagar. Charles Evans had already gone ahead for a short reconnaissance of the pass; if he sent back a hopeful report the others would follow with three or four selected Sherpas.

We all moved camp to Khumjung, another lovely site on a flower-filled ledge not very far from Namche. Here the Barun valley party could wait at ease for Charles's report, and from here it was simple to launch an attack on the equipment stored at Namche, to sort it into separate loads and to marshal a train of Sherpas to come as porters on the journey home.

Three more days and all was sorted and ready and we prepared to start for home, but just before we went we

had the unexpected pleasure of a meeting with the Swiss. They had come off Everest after a very fine effort in which Raymond Lambert and Tenzing had climbed higher on the mountain than anyone had been before, and the whole expedition came to camp at the col above Namche on the evening before we left. With great kindness they invited us to cocoa, and we all went up to see them in their camp. It was Tenzing who had brought the invitation and so he was the first I met: dressed in khaki shorts and shirt and a large, crisp Boy Scout hat, he treated us to a cheerful salute and a flash of his wonderful smile. I liked him very much indeed, and his high spirits and abundant vigour were all the more surprising when one remembered how great a strain he had had at the end of his notable climb. But he seemed to be entirely fresh and fit as he hurried down with the message, stood for a moment to talk about the mountain, and shot smartly up the path with our reply.

The party with the Swiss was a great success. I thoroughly enjoyed myself as I sat drinking cocoa in a crowded tent and listened to earnest discussions in English and French all about the problems of the hills. It was dark outside, and cold; the cocoa was rich and warm, and there were crisp wheat biscuits in clever air-sealed boxes. Swiss milk chocolate added glory to the feast, and I decided by the contrast that I had lived for far too long mainly on Sherpa flour and rice, with any amount of potatoes. All round me sat the climbers, some of the finest from Switzerland, Britain and New Zealand, and they all looked hefty and huge and strong, with their long, thick beards and their padded eiderdown coats. But if they seemed tough and even slightly wild they could

not have been more friendly and I enjoyed myself far more than at the grandest party at home. It was fun, too, to hear French spoken again—one had never guessed, when struggling with the syntax at school, that it was going to be so very useful in the wilder regions of Nepal. At last it was time to go, and we went happily under the stars to our own tents which were pitched on a small, sloping field quite close to Namche.

We had planned to make an early start in the morning, but as so often happens there was last minute trouble with the porters. Enough men and women had been mustered the evening before, and at dawn they had chosen their loads and were packing them into their conical baskets when someone discovered a shortage of Sherpa food. At home the Sherpas eat mostly potatoes, but these are heavy and cumbersome to carry, and on a march their basic foods are two kinds of flour, tsamba and atta, ground from barley and maize. These make a lighter and an easier load and are eaten either as pancakes, roughly shaped in the palm of the hand, or as a dark stiff paste in tea. At this season, when the rains have only just come to the lower hills and the crops, though vigorously growing, are not yet ready or ripe, it can be very hard indeed to buy extra food on the way. The only thing to do was to search Sola Khumbu for supplies of atta and tsamba, and it might take some time until enough had been found to last all the Sherpas for the journey.

One hour went by, and then another, but still nothing seemed to be happening and we wondered rather wistfully if we should leave at all that day. Ang Tharkay was worried; everyone else seemed bored. At last it was

decided that Ang Tharkay himself and two or three other Sherpas should stay behind to make a rapid search for extra stores of flour while the rest of us set out for Katmandu. We were to travel in easy stages and hoped that in a day or two Ang Tharkay and the food would catch us up. Sherpas who had been sitting down, clearly not expecting to make a move for several days, were roused and persuaded to take up their loads and set off in advance of the food. One by one they trickled out of the village, and Tom and I went in front with the leading group. We stopped at the boulder where the track swings round the side of the hill, and we took one last long look at Namche, a small, plain, grey village which seemed to me now like a second home; and then we hurried down the sloping path to begin our long return to Katmandu and then to England and to home itself.

The parting would have been very much harder had I not been feeling ill. The days in camp had been a pleasant relief but I still felt sick and dull and weak when I made any effort or walked at all far. One side of my mind overlooked the sadness of going away from Sola Khumbu and was anxious only to go back as soon as possible to the easier, lower hills. I was still quite confident that the trouble lay in some unusual reaction to the height, and I was thankful that at last we were beginning the journey down.

The morning had been well advanced before we started, and the first day's march was short, but even so I wondered how I should find the strength to complete it and I was painfully counting my steps before at last I got in. This is a good discipline if you are feeling weak: you set yourself a target, of say five hundred steps, and

decide that on no account will you rest or allow yourself to faint until you have come to the end. The only trouble is that you must stay sane enough to be able to count, but on this short and easy day I found this not too bad.

We camped on a happy ledge beside the Dudh Kosi, not far from the village of Ghat, and as soon as I was resting I revived. The water rushed cheerfully and noisily against the boulders and threw a cold, wild spray into the air; a small cloud came up the valley with a short, sweet shower of rain and warned us that lower down the monsoon had already arrived, but we went into the shelter of our tents and stayed completely dry. Then the sky cleared and the sun came out and the grass was greener and fresher than before.

On our pleasant little ledge the evening was delightful, but we heard from Sherpas coming up the valley that the last few days had brought heavier rain lower down; the main bridge at Jubing had again been washed away, and the river was rising fast. To throw another bridge across the river was thought to be unsafe, and they told us that we should have to make a long detour to keep out of trouble for the next few days. The Sherpas who were with us agreed at once: this happened every year with the coming of the rains, and they all knew the rough alternative track which crossed the Dudh Kosi at Ghat, led over one or two low passes on the other side, and linked up again with the usual route at Ringmo, some three days ahead.

So far, of course, I had known the track quite well, for I had been up it twice and down it once, on the journey in and on our way to Okhaldhunga. But when we came to Ghat in the morning and crossed to the

opposite bank, the way ahead was entirely new. This right bank of the Dudh Kosi is very much steeper than the left, and holds very few houses or fields. The route along it is rarely used except when the rains have wrecked the lower bridges and there is no other way to Katmandu; we were no longer on a broad and well-worn track but on a narrow, slippery pathway which zigzagged up the hill, and dived into several sizeable waterfalls which were bitterly cold as they came cascading straight from the snows above. It was raining rather more heavily now, and for most of the time the steep grandeur of the hills hid behind a wet, white cloud. The going was harder, the weather was depressing, and the march became more and more grim.

The others had made an early halt for the Sherpas were growing anxious about their stock of food and it was hoped that Ang Tharkay and his party with the flour might join us late in the evening. It was just as well that the march was short for I could not have done any more, but at last Tom and I arrived at the camp and the struggle of the day was over. It had not been pleasant: all the time I was growing worse, dizzy and shaking and sweating and alternately feverish or faint. I crawled into a sleeping-bag and lay down inside a tent.

The fever came and went in cycles, but every time it eased I was left a little weaker and it was clear that Tom and I could not hope to move on the following day. Tom picked out a couple of Sherpas to stay behind as well, the faithful Norbu for me and Mingma for himself, and he sorted out a share of the food. Ang Tharkay arrived with the atta and the tsampa and the next morning the long trail of Sherpas set off across the hills, travelling

much more happily now, for they knew there was plenty to eat. From the end of the tent I could see them go, and then we were left on our own.

We felt very much alone, for though our tent was set by the small wooden hamlet of Tate, this hamlet had only some seven dirty houses and these were all locked and deserted. Time passed painfully and slowly. There was nothing we could do but wait and see what happened to the fever and though I did not appreciate his troubles at the time it must have been quite horrible for Tom. When the fever rose I was nearly delirious—I knew there were snakes in my brain; when it sank again it left me utterly feeble and weak. Tom had no one to turn to for help or counsel, he was far from sure that I should live, and I might very well have been highly infectious. There was little scope in the tent for the kind ministrations of nursing. Tom's sleeping-bag, which I had to use since the zip of my own had broken, had been made to withstand the full rigour of an arctic winter. It was admirable when I shook with rigors or shivered with sudden cold, but for the most of time I was giving off so much heat that Tom could warm his hands simply by holding them two feet away, and then the bag was sticky and far too hot. Norbu came sadly to the door of the tent with an endless supply of cocoa and potatoes and Tom helped me as I tried to eat, but their efforts and attentions were all in vain for after the first brave mouthful I always sent the mug and plate away.

For Tom it was worrying and sad; but from my point of view there were solid compensations for falling ill just there. A serious illness is more than physical: it has its mental and emotional sides, especially when the outcome

is in doubt and the trouble is a fever in the brain. The physical comforts at Tate were crude in the extreme, though Tom did all he could, but more than anything in the world I needed his moral support and I am sure it was his strength that brought me through. A hospital can provide sheets and a mattress and suitable invalid food, and very probably it can work a cure, but when your whole being is ill and disturbed you would rather be with somebody you love.

And Tate itself was a beautiful place. The houses may have been dirty but they were a few yards below us on the path, and the hillside fell so steeply here that we looked out well above their roofs. The rains came, but when they lifted the air was fresh and the woods a clean, rich green. From our tent we could see the mountains which rose on the far side of the Dudh Kosi in a tall and splendid chain; every detail of their magnificent lines stood out through the clearness of the air, their side valleys were deep and dark and wooded and their higher slopes shone brightly in the sun. These days of fever may have had their troubles and their horrors, but they were not without their rewards.

One night, it is true, things were especially nasty and I seemed to be growing worse. Tom had found among the stores a tiny jar of large white pills of chloramphenicol, a strong new drug which is used against tropical fevers. They were clearly marked as dangerous, to be taken only on the orders of a doctor, and Tom did not know what was a suitable dose, or indeed whether they would be effective against whatever germ I had. But it was a situation for catching at straws, and Tom felt it was safer to risk the pills than to leave me to grow

any worse. After some thought he cautiously fed me with two. A little later I went to sleep and I stayed asleep until dawn.

In the morning I felt definitely more at ease, but before we could be sure whether the fever had merely ebbed to return again with greater force, or whether the chloramphenicol had really taken effect, Norbu came hurrying up with a cheerful beam to tell us that the Swiss expedition was coming this way and should reach Tate in about an hour. This was a great and welcome surprise; we had thought that they were travelling due south to India and we had no idea at all that they were anywhere near. Mingma hurried off to post himself as a look-out a little way down the track, and soon he too came running up with the news that the first of their Sherpas had been seen in the distance, coming round the side of the hill. Twenty minutes later and the whole party had appeared, and Tom went out to talk to their two doctors and to ask for their advice.

They came at once to see me, and no one could have been more kind. I had met them both at their camp above Namche—Dr. Wyss-Dunant, the leader of the expedition, and Dr. Chevalley who was to lead a second Swiss attempt on Everest at the end of the monsoon. They looked at me, asked all about my symptoms, and talked earnestly together. They wanted to know if I had been inoculated against typhus, and we assured them that I had. They were puzzled, and were careful not to commit themselves to any firm diagnosis, for what I had was not quite the same as any disease they had seen, but they thought I might have some rare form of malaria and they took me off the chloramphenicol and put me instead

on to quinine. Tom had been entirely right, they told him, to risk giving me a couple of pills, for they might have been the proper cure and they could not have done any harm, but if the trouble was malaria the answer was quinine. Very generously they left with us all the store they had. Then, with all kindness and good wishes, they left us and led their long party of porters up the track and out of sight. Again we were left on our own, but this time the future seemed very much more hopeful.

All day I continued to get better. The fever came back, but never quite so strongly; the rigors died down, and the squeezing pains in my head began to ease. Soon I was sitting up again and we both became more cheerful.

It was not until at last we were back in England that we knew for certain what had been wrong. The various hardships of the journey home checked my final recovery and for months on end I continued to be troubled with headaches and an intermittent fever; blood tests in London showed to our great surprise that the cause was a form of typhus. We asked at once how this could be so since I had been inoculated against the disease before I went to Nepal, but the hospital explained that little-known strains of typhus were to be found in some rarely visited places, and one could not be sure that the immunity would cover each new type. The two white pills which Tom had given me may have done some good, for chloramphenicol is the latest cure for typhus, but the full dose may be anything from fifty to a hundred pills. It was a pity that since he did not know the dose Tom had only given me two, and it was very bad luck that I had to come off the drug so soon. It was unfortunate, but in no sense at all was it the fault of the two Swiss doctors:

they had thought of typhus at the start, and we had assured them that I had had inoculations to guard me against the disease. At Tate we knew nothing of the long sad months of recurrent mild attacks that were still in store; we simply knew that the fever was subsiding and we rejoiced that the danger had passed.

Norbu and Mingma were still quite worried and Tom went to find out why. It seemed that our store of food was seriously low, and on checking the load Tom found that much had been removed and was now presumably with the main party and many miles away. We never discovered who was responsible, nor why this should have occurred, but it meant that if we stayed at Tate for very much longer we should run out of anything to eat. Mingma went out to forage, and came back with a mug of dhae, a pleasant sort of yoghourt, which he had bought from a Sherpa in charge of a herd of yaks, but apart from this there was nothing at all to replace the food we ate. Our diet was dull already; now it promised to be meagre in the extreme. I was still weak and the track ahead looked hard, but even so we decided that the next morning we would make our way to the nearest inhabited village and there replenish our stores.

We woke at dawn, packed up the tent, and set off on the way to Katmandu, in search of something to eat.

* * *

I started off quite cheerfully, interested to be on my feet again and tottering slowly along the path. My legs felt feeble beneath me, but that was only to be expected and the real cause for rejoicing was that I should be moving at all. Then the track began to climb more

steeply; every step became more of an effort and I wondered faintly how far we must travel that day. Slowly we raised ourselves up the rough and slippery path. Norbu and Mingma, heavily loaded, went in front; soon they were out of sight though we could hear their laboured footsteps and they were only ten or twenty yards above our heads. Tom stayed with me to cheer me on.

Neither of us knew how far it would be before we came to a village, but after half an hour of painful endeavour we decided to stop for breakfast on the first flat ledge we found. An hour later we were still climbing heavily up the unrelenting slope, still looking for somewhere to sit. Another hour and I was hungry and dizzy and tired, but still there was nowhere flat enough to lie and rest. When we paused for breath we had to stay standing up, and when I felt that I was likely to faint with weariness I had to lean forward against the hill to stop myself from losing my balance and from slithering back down the track. Tom very valiantly took me in his arms, but when he tried to carry me our progress was dangerous and slow: he could not watch his footholds nor balance with his hands, and after a few sharp slips and stumbles I found myself shaken back to life again and able to go on walking on my own. It started to rain, heavily and steadily, as though it had set in for the rest of the day. We were climbing now between tall trees of rhododendron, and their thick and shining leaves began to drop cold raindrops down our necks. Leeches swung in the grass beside the path, waiting for us to go by.

At last the climbing stopped and we found ourselves out on a col. The little square chorten made a good safe seat and we balanced on its side to have a rest. The

clouds lifted for a moment and we looked down on the way ahead. The valley below us was the steepest I had ever seen; it was thickly covered with trees and there was not a village or a resting place in sight. Norbu and Mingma, and with them the hope of any breakfast, were lost completely, somewhere far below us and hidden among the trees.

We went on again, and it was very much better now that we were going downhill. I still had trouble with my balance on the rough wet stones of the track, but where the path widened Tom could be beside me to steady me. Where it narrowed again he had to go on in front and at every few steps he would stop and give me his hand; this kept me upright and stable but made our progress distressingly slow. It was nearly noon and we had not yet stopped for any breakfast, and though at every angle in the path I hoped to see our Sherpas there was no sign at all of Norbu or Mingma, fire or food or tent.

I had hoped that the river banks might hold a few fields, some form of shelter and perhaps some migrant yaks, but even by the river the slope of the hillside hardly softened at all and the way was just as rough. The disappointment was overwhelming and I could only remember that I felt weak and weary and faint. By the side of the track I saw one small green ledge, two yards long and two or three feet wide, and the thought of a rest was too much for my good resolutions to go on. I sank down, thinking very vaguely how much simpler it would be if I never moved again, and dimly resentful to feel my shoulder being gently shaken and to hear Tom saying something in my ear. I tried to tell him to leave me alone to die, but luckily I could not manage to make

my meaning plain, and still he did his best to wake me up. I came back very reluctantly to a weary life, to find that Tom held out a mug of steaming cocoa and Mingma stood by with an encouraging smile. I drank a little cocoa and slowly revived. The news Mingma told us was good: the tent had been pitched some fifty yards ahead; Norbu was cooking some food; the lilos were blown up, the sleeping-bags laid out, and the Sherpas thought that we should stay there for the night. I stood up to make the last short effort, Mingma led the way and Tom helped me very gently down the track and into the open tent.

Breakfast was plain, just boiled potatoes and a plateful of rice and another mug of cocoa (unsweetened: there was no sugar left), but it was warm and filling and we ate it gratefully. Then Tom went over to discuss with Norbu our chances of buying more supplies. To-day we could clearly go no farther, but what were the prospects for to-morrow? The answer was worse than I had feared. Norbu told Tom that it would take two more hard days to reach the nearest village, that we were not likely even to meet a Sherpa family with a herd of grazing yaks, and that if by chance we did meet such a family they might very well be unwilling to spare us any milk. We should have to manage as best we could on the stores that remained. The rice should last and there were enough potatoes, at least for one more day; we had several tins of cocoa, though our store of powdered milk was very nearly at an end. We could only console ourselves with the good thought that part of the journey home now lay behind us: one day of the desperate march was over and we need never live through it again.

The next day, too, was hard and wet and grim, and the

march was longer and steeper, but this in its turn was over at last and we came round a bend in the track to see that Norbu and Mingma had set our tent in a sudden blue field of primulas. Dwarf white rhododendrons grew on the hillside above, and a full, clear stream hurried past the tent to tumble in a waterfall just below the ledge. The rain and the clouds had lifted and the air was cool and clean. I lay on my lilo among the flowers and forgot my weariness and my weakness in a scene of great beauty and peace.

A well-fed party in the best of health would have covered the ground more quickly, but when we thought of our troubles we were pleased and amazed that we had come so far. Norbu hoped that one more day would bring us to Ringmo, where the main track to Katmandu cuts across the head of the beautiful Phaphlu valley, and at Ringmo there would be good shelter and probably a chance to buy some food. It would be good to reach inhabited country once again: we had seen no sign of any people during the whole of the day, no houses, no fields, no Sherpas, no yaks, and in hours and hours of walking our beautiful ledge was the only place we had found that was flat enough and wide enough to bear the one small tent. We set off early the next morning, and we had such high hopes of reaching food and shelter by the evening that for the first few hours I scarcely noticed my hunger or the dangerous weakness in my legs.

It was not quite as simple as we hoped. We were already high and climbing steadily, so that now instead of walking through heavy rain we had to make our way against a cloud of driving snow. We were above the level of the trees and on the loose grey rocks the track was hard

to find. We came to a criss-cross of cols and here in the snow and the mist we nearly lost our way. We started down a likely line, but in a few minutes Norbu looked very worried and was sure that we had wandered from the track; we turned sadly back to try to find it again. The four of us kept very close together but it was hard to see each other through the cloud and impossible to know if there was a path beneath the fresh snow at our feet: even our footsteps had been covered over at once. The wind was keen and the air was bitterly cold. Suddenly we found a mani wall and knew that the track must run along its either side, and Mingma went forward cautiously to prospect the way from there. He came back still doubtful, with the news that he had found what might be a route, but he had very little confidence and none of us felt sure. In the end we decided to try it, and followed him slowly down a rough pile of boulders, scrambling rather than walking and slipping where the snow had turned to ice. By now I was seriously concerned, for if we were wrong the way back to the mani wall would be difficult indeed, and Mingma himself looked glum, but just for a moment the wind blew more strongly to lift the cloud at our side, and Norbu caught a glimpse of a cairn of small grey stones. With a sudden beam on his worried brown face he called out that all was well. We went forward more quickly and with a new confidence, and soon we came to another cairn; a few minutes later and the track itself showed in places through the snow. We followed it very happily as it twisted over the rocks, and in an hour or so we were down again to the level of the smallest trees.

Later that year we read that the Swiss autumn ex-

pedition to Everest had lost two porters on that very col; on the march in they missed their way in a storm and both of them died of exposure.

From the col the track led downhill all the way to Ringmo, and we reached the village in the pouring rain late in the afternoon. Norbu went into one of the houses and a moment later a man and his wife came out to greet us and happily led us inside. It was very dark and smoky in their one main room, but it was warm and thoroughly dry, and slowly our dripping clothes began to give off steam. It felt strangely civilised to shelter from the rain in the stout protection of a house.

All the family was cheerful and friendly, but for all their kindness and goodwill they were very reluctant to part with any food. Ringmo is one of the more prosperous villages and we had fully expected to replenish our scanty supplies, but we had come there at the very worst season of the year. The crops were growing gaily in the fields, maize, potatoes and beans all thriving in the rain, but nothing was ready to harvest. Last year's stores were low and the man and his wife were anxious lest they should fail before the new season's crops were fully grown. The money we offered was useless by contrast. In the end they were persuaded to sell us a handful of potatoes, but nothing else could be spared and we could only hope hungrily that soon we should come to a village with a better store of food.

The next day we found to our sorrow that every village was the same. Hungrily we asked the people we passed if they could sell us any food, but each time they told us that their stores were very low and they had nothing at all to spare. It was not until late in the afternoon, at

the large, rich village of Junbesi, where we settled for the night, that we met with any luck, and here we persuaded our hosts to sell us a dozen very small eggs. Twelve eggs were better than no eggs at all, but two tired and hungry people need more than that to give them the strength for a long and arduous march. And we knew that to-morrow we should have to cross the lonely Lhamjura Bhanjyang pass, where there would be no villages at all, nor any hope of food. For the first wild days out of Tate we had set our hopes on Ringmo as a haven of comfort and rest, where I might indulge my weakness in a few days' quiet convalescence. At Ringmo we had sadly decided to go on for another day, and now I saw that we might have to struggle on without a break until we came to Katmandu.

Soon I grew used to weakness and hunger, but it was hard to train myself to take my mind off food, and through the long hours of the march I planned enormous meals to cook as soon as we were home. Most of the time I counted my paces and this was a very great help, for one can count almost without the need to think and once a regular rhythm has been set up one's walking becomes mechanical too and it takes far less effort of will to decide to move another step.

Sometimes I allowed myself to wish I had died at Tate to spare myself the rigours of the march, but on our third day out of Ringmo I had a very salutary shock which brought such feeble thinking to an end. We had been climbing for hours and I was almost in despair. Even when we reached the pass and began to go down the valley beyond I was far too tired to be able to think, and felt that I could never move another yard. All I wanted was to be left alone to die. Tom tried very gently

to encourage me to come on, but I told him to leave me alone and after waiting near me for perhaps ten minutes he went slowly down the track. I was too weary to watch him go, but I could hear his footsteps, and soon they died away among the trees. The pass was deserted, and utterly still. In a dull, numb way I could feel the strangeness as I let myself sink into an effortless daze.

Some time later I came out of my faintness to feel that the atmosphere had changed. I opened my eyes and saw nothing; I slowly turned my head, and as I moved a small, lean man in dirty clothes slipped into the cover of a tree. He was not completely hidden and I could see him looking at me with a hard, unpleasant stare, his right hand firmly on his kukri. His whole manner made me thoroughly alarmed, and my weakness was forgotten as I rose to my feet and staggered away from him down the rough and narrow path. I looked back once and he was close behind me; the next time I turned I saw him dart into a tangle of shrubs, his hand still on the handle of his kukri and the same fixed stare still on his face. I broke unsteadily in to a run.

Half a minute later and I hurried round a bend to see Tom standing at the side of the track. I had wanted to be alone and he had left me, but he was waiting a little way away, meaning to give me time to rest and revive and then to go back and try to help me on. As soon as he saw me he came quickly up the path and I told him what was wrong, happy to be with him again and sure that I was safe. We waited for a little but there was no more sign of the lurking Nepali, and after a short, calm rest we went on together down the hill.

My encounter with the hostile Nepali had done me a

great deal of good. It showed me just how shallow my wish to die had been: I had had beautiful visions of ending all my efforts and drifting peacefully out of the world, but I wanted to die in my own easy way and when I was confronted with a stranger and a kukri I found that I preferred to live. It had been a failure of the will quite as much as a failure of the flesh, and after the anti-climax of running away from a chance of being killed I was shamed into keeping my will under very much firmer control. There was no more thought of stopping or expiring, and when I felt that I had come to the end of my strength I knew that a good, solid fright would prove that there was something in reserve. For the rest of the hard march home we just went steadily on.

* * *

As soon as I made an effort to be cheerful I found the prospect much less grim. When we thought of the distance we had covered we could feel that our progress had been good, and this gave us much more confidence to face the way ahead. The next day was our seventh out of Tate. We went for a few miles down a wide and gentle valley, then through the large grey village of Those and over an easier col; when we set up our camp for the evening we were half-way back to Katmandu. We had thought at first in terms of sixteen or seventeen stages for the march, and for the first few days we concentrated our strength on dealing with the present and tried to forget that each hard day was only a small fraction of the journey as a whole. Now we revised our figures and calculated that the march need only take us fourteen days; as we went into the second week we had the very good

feeling that there was less still to do than we had already done, and with every hour we travelled this feeling grew more strong.

Not only that; the way itself grew easier. The passes we crossed were not so high, and each time we dropped down farther to the river on the other side. There were now more villages, a greater part of the hillside was carefully terraced for crops, and in the mud beside the rivers the people were already planting rice. It was so warm at night, and humid, that we could put our sleeping-bags aside, and we were very glad to feel free of the damp and sodden things that never had a chance to dry. Now that the track was wider and more open the leeches were easier to avoid. This was one discomfort reduced, though I had already decided that leeches are an overrated horror —certainly they are unpleasant when you feel them swelling with your blood, and after they have fallen off you in a bloated state their bites take time to heal, but unless these fester they do you no serious harm. Tom and I had been exceedingly lucky, and although we received our fair share of the bites not one of them went bad.

Every ridge we crossed was a little lower than the one before; we came to its crest more quickly and then, if the clouds had lifted, we looked out upon a smoother view. The snow mountains now lay behind us, and the hills we were crossing were sandy and much less sharp. We were still very weary and badly short of food, but I had every intention now of lasting to the end of the journey and each new horizon was a happy sign that we were one stage nearer home.

We were back in the low, hot country of the banyans,

but the crowds no longer gathered idly in their shade, for the monsoon was breaking and people chose to travel as little as they could. The few stray travellers hurried along the track, some of them making for Katmandu and some going back to the hills, but as we dropped lower and the track widened it was easier to move in the rain and we passed a few more people every day. The way was easier: that is, one could stand up straight and move without looking for a handhold; it was still too hard for animals, or for anything on wheels. Those who wished to avoid the trials of walking had to move about the country on a porter's back, just like an ordinary load. One such traveller was a stern old man, conscious of his own importance and far too aloof to trouble to acknowledge our salute. He sat in a basket, parading a black umbrella as a sign of his social grade, and riding slowly up the hill on the back of a staggering porter. It had been raining and the porter slithered awkwardly across the worn, wet path; the basket lurched unsafely and the umbrella waved wildly in the air as the group fought to regain its poise. The stern old man looked very aloof as his human mount paused for breath, and then his black umbrella started bobbing up and down as they stumbled out of sight among the trees. Clearly we were expected to admire the social distinction of the traveller, but this seemed a meagre compensation for a seat in a cramped and lurching basket. Tom had thought at Tate that I ought to be carried home, but I was thankful that the place had been deserted and no one had been forthcoming to undertake the task.

The next traveller was much more friendly, poor and cheerful and with no pretensions at all. Wearing only an

old brown jacket and a length of cloth draped roughly from his waist, he looked thin and brown and genial as he sat by the side of the path. In one hand he held two tattered sandals; in the other, a worn, brown begging bowl and a tiny wooden flask. He was, we learned, a sadhu, a Hindu holy man; he was now on his way to the plains at the end of many weeks of pilgrimage among the hills, and for the whole of his arduous journey he had managed to survive without any warmer clothes and had relied for his food on the offerings of the faithful. Hopefully he tried to sell us his blessing, and several times he nearly succeeded in creeping quietly up when Tom was sitting down and in pouring holy water on his head. Each time Tom spoilt his plan at the very last minute simply by standing up and so moving out of the little sadhu's range, and the holy man was a very good loser and always went off with a resigned but cheerful grin. He was going in our direction and we saw him several times in the next few days, but he seemed to travel at the strangest hours. He would pass us when we camped for the night or when we rested for a while in the great heat of the early afternoon, but in the mornings and evenings, when travelling was best, we would pass him sitting in a cheerful trance a few yards away from the track. On the third day he hurried past us at a tremendous rate as we were slowly climbing a hill. This time he did not wait to stalk Tom with the water, but gave us his usual friendly nod, waved his sandals, and vanished quickly out of sight. We did not see him again.

Most of the time Tom and I travelled very closely together, but one afternoon he was behind with Norbu and Mingma, and I was in front on my own. I had not

seen any sign of the others for the last three or four miles, and I sat down to wait for them under some shrubs not far from the track. It was hot and humid, for a long and heavy rainstorm had soaked the ground in the morning and now the air was sticky and heavy in the heat of the afternoon sun. I had come through a village where even the women lay resting; on the track itself for the last few hours I had not met anyone at all. On such a day one could only feel hot and heavy and languid and I waited very lazily, half asleep in the shade of my stunted shrubs.

Suddenly I awoke to hear lively, happy voices. A family party had come round a bend in the track: four women, neat and erect, in clean and gaily patterned clothes, were talking and laughing together, and a smart young soldier in khaki shorts was hurrying up the hill in front. He saw me and stopped in amazement; but probably I was the more amazed when he called to me clearly and in English. I went to greet him and found that he was a Gurkha who had served with the British Army in Malaya and had now come home on leave. His family had met him in Katmandu and there they had acquired their clean and shining clothes; now they were all going proudly home to the little village he had left three years ago. They invited me to join them for afternoon tea. A fire was lighted and a kettle put on to boil, and we sat on the ground in a circle while the soldier opened a tin of evaporated milk. The women could not decide whether I or the tin of milk had the greater claim to their awe, but they sat in startled wonder and loudly admired us both.

We had a very happy tea-party and just before we

finished Tom came down the track to join us. He, too, was made very welcome and provided with a cup of steaming tea. The young soldier spoke with great delight of his life with the army in Malaya and of the strange new places he had seen. I can never feel entirely happy that we should train people simpler than ourselves to take part in wars whose rights and wrongs they cannot understand, at least at the time when they enlist. But the soldier was thrilled with the army, with the adventure he had found there for himself and with the money he had saved for his family at home, and the discipline and training of the army had certainly done him good.

Although we were now in inhabited country and were meeting many people on the track, we were still very sadly short of food. Terraces were plentiful and were carrying vigorous crops, but the shoots of maize and the young, green rice plants were not yet ready to harvest, and still we found no one who would sell us any of last year's stores. When we had been here before we had passed long caravans of chicken dealers on their way to Katmandu to trade their skinny, squarking birds for use as sacrifice or food, but this time the chickens had disappeared and most of the people we met on the track carried loads of local cloth. The villagers would never agree to sell us a hen and only rarely would they spare us any eggs: one day we had only a little rice and eight small eggs between us, and we ate the eggs very hungrily even though seven were bad. More and more we longed for Katmandu and counted the days until we could hope to arrive.

The next day we came to Dolalghat, the hot and dusty village on the Sun Kosi which had so depressed me on

the journey in. This time it was even hotter than before, and we had a long and weary climb up the farther valley to Huckse on the col. By this time it was late in the afternoon and we were feeling nearly desperate for food when to our great joy we saw a little man sitting in the shade and trying to sell bananas. Trade was bad and he seemed dejected, but he cheered up at once when we bought his whole supply. Ten minutes later we felt very much better and also very full—we counted the pile of empty skins and found that between us we had eaten forty-eight bananas, so we stayed in the shade at Huckse for a short digestive rest.

After that life grew much more cheerful. Walking was very much less of an effort and we even had the energy to notice the view. The hills were more gentle, we were dropping quickly to the broad flat bed of a river, and we knew that beyond the ridge on the horizon lay Katmandu and its fertile plain.

Many more people now passed us on the track, Nepali women with their babies on their backs and men with their distinctive cotton trousers with short tight legs swelling into spacious seats. A few of them smiled at us or raised their hands in greeting, but most of them only treated us to long and curious stares. In the distance we could see a large party of smaller, stockier figures, perhaps twenty men and women dressed in heavy purple tunics and bent beneath their loads. As soon as they saw us they began to shout and wave and we hurried down the hill to meet them. They were the Sherpas whom last we had seen at Tate; they had carried the baggage to Katmandu and stayed for a few cheerful days to enjoy the sights of the city. Now they were trudging happily

home. All of them were clearly delighted to see us; they asked how I was, they asked about our journey, and they all beamed with pleasure when Ang Tharkay handed over a large and mysterious parcel. We asked them how they liked these lower hills and they told us, quite cheerfully, that it was far too heavy and hot and they were going back to Sola Khumbu as quickly as they could. Some of them pulled off their thick felt boots and showed us the blisters on their heels. Tom produced a roll of plaster and cut it into many little bits, one piece of plaster for everybody's blister, and these were taken with great delight and fixed to the blisters with pride. Then their boots were pulled on again, their baskets taken up and hoisted on their backs, and with beams and waves and repeated farewells the Sherpas set off again on their hard, long journey home. We could hear their laughter and we waved to them until they came to the crest of the hill. When we could hear them no longer we turned in the other direction, away from the hills along the track to Katmandu.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Katmandu and Ease

TOM OPENED the mysterious parcel which Ang Tharkay had handed over with such a happy beam. Inside, to our joy, there was food: barley sugar, jelly crystals, a large tin of Ovaltine, and with them a letter from the Embassy. Mrs. Summerhayes, the wife of the British Ambassador, was full of kind sympathy for us in our troubles. She had sent us, very thoughtfully, the most nourishing foods she could collect, and she invited us to stay with her when we arrived in Katmandu. The thought of staying at the Embassy opened up new prospects of comfort and delight; sustained by the sweets and by our recent great meal of bananas, we gave up our earlier scheme of stopping for the night by the river in the valley below. We crossed the river quickly, slithered our way through the bright green fields of rice, and then pushed on and up the hills on the farther bank. Soon it began to grow dark and it was hard to see where to put our feet on the sandy and slippery path, but it was not until we thought we had a chance of reaching Katmandu in one more day that we halted to set up a camp.

In the morning it was raining hard and it was difficult

even to see where we were going as we climbed the final ridge. Just as we came to the crest the rain cleared and the clouds lifted and we looked back across the way we had come. The valley below us lay in a deep and gentle haze, the farther hills were mauve and indistinct; but high in the air above them a line of snow mountains stood sketched in the sky, tantalisingly far away but shining pink and golden in the early morning light.

A few more yards, and the track began to curve gently and easily downwards, to Banepa and the plain. Soon we were walking through the narrow streets of Banepa, and though last time I had thought the place hot and crowded and squalid, by my changed standards it seemed to be a richly civilised town. For the journey out we had chartered a lorry to take us across the plain, but to-day we had less to carry and it would have been a waste of time and money to wait for some form of transport to come out from Katmandu. We walked the last fourteen miles, rejoicing in the flatness of the ground and marvelling at the prosperity we suddenly saw on every side, the fertile soil, the abundant crops, and the rich and elaborate homes. Our extra efforts of the day before had left us very tired, but this was the end, to-morrow we could rest, and we forced ourselves to carry on until we came to Katmandu, made our way through its long and crowded streets, and came out on the other side into the green and peaceful gardens of the Embassy. Our tired feet took us happily indoors and we sank down to rest in the comfort of two welcoming arm-chairs.

Mr. and Mrs. Summerhayes had heard that we were coming and had set out to meet us in their car. In the narrow, crowded streets we must have missed them, but

ten minutes later they returned and it was very good to see them again. We had met them, of course, in the spring, but then we had been staying with Colonel and Mrs. Proud, who now were home on leave; now that we were guests in the Embassy itself we came to know them much better and to learn more of their kindness. The Ambassador was tall, with a quiet friendliness; his wife was gracious and charming, and had turned the dignified Embassy into a cool and lovely home. They greeted us so kindly that, ragged and dirty as we were, we felt entirely at our ease in the very beautiful house. Mrs. Summerhayes showed us our bedroom, which was high and spacious, with long french windows leading on to part of the roof, with a dressing-room for Tom and a private bathroom each. I had never known such peace and comfort, and I could never have welcomed it more. Slowly we bathed and changed and rested, and at last we emerged from our quiet sanctuary as clean and wholesome people once again.

We stayed at the Embassy for more than a week and gradually I came to feel rested and refreshed in its gentle atmosphere of peace. Everything was pleasant and easy. We paid a few leisurely visits to the town, spending a happy hour in the bazaar and taking our camera into some of the small and elaborate side streets we had missed on our visit in the spring. We called on the five members of the Swiss expedition who had, after all, come out through Katmandu to make plans and arrangements for the autumn attempt on Everest, and they came to a very agreeable supper party held at the Embassy one evening. I met Herr Aufschnaiter again, and now I could listen with more understanding when he told me about Tibet.

Tom helped to sort out the expedition baggage which was going out by land, though we ourselves had planned to leave by air, and when that was settled there was nothing else urgent to do. We walked in the cool, green shade of the garden or sat indoors and read. Tom was able to read for as long as he liked, but I found that my feverish headaches were not completely cured and it was too much strain to concentrate on the words; I sat at ease and idly turned the pages while I looked at the pictures in the books, or else I put the books on one side and indulged in happy dreams about the Sherpas.

One evening at the end of the week there was a scene of such splendour that it left me with a dazzling memory of the glories of Katmandu. The Indian Ambassador was holding a great reception in honour of the birthday of the King of Nepal; the King himself would be present with his two Queens, and the Court, the Generals and the Cabinet would all attend in style. Mr. and Mrs. Summerhayes had asked that Tom and I might be invited, and we went with them to the glorious gathering in their elegant Embassy car. It was dark, but the fine home of the Indian Ambassador was shining in a radiance of light. The car came smoothly to a halt at the foot of an imposing flight of steps; we alighted and felt the watching crowds staring at us out of the warm and heavy night. A band began to play our National Anthem. The music ended with a ceremonious roar, the car had moved away unseen, and we swept out of the darkness, up the steps and into the brilliant hall.

The room was long and high and ornate, and its walls were glittering with lights. Men stood talking very earnestly in groups and they looked extremely dis-

tinguished in their eastern formal dress, their long black coats hanging straight to the knees over closely-moulded trousers. The women stood gracefully in their bright and beautiful saris, the vivid colours of the soft-draped silks rivalling the richness of their jewels. There was a sudden silence: Their Majesties had arrived. Slowly they moved down the centre of the room and men and women gave the little bob of respect and raised their hands together in the eastern salutation. Two handsome couches had been placed a little to one side. The King and his Queens took their seats, and the murmur of earnest conversation at once broke out again. Men moved from one small group to another, talking very hard all the time, and they made it seem as though the questions they discussed so seriously must be the highest business of the state. The women stood apart and talked very little among themselves. It seemed a pity that when they had taken so much care with their dress they were left on one side and disregarded by the men, but I was told that until the revolution the ladies of the court had stayed all the time in their own private quarters, and it is in fact a sign of some progress that they come to these functions at all.

Mr. Summerhayes had joined the two Queens on the second royal couch, and at a sign from him I went forward to be presented. The Queens, two sisters who were Indian princesses before their joint marriage to the King, received me with a pair of gracious smiles. Mr. Summerhayes then mentioned to Their Majesties that I had been to Sola Khumbu and had visited the Sherpas, but these names quite clearly meant nothing at all to the Queens. They looked a little blank and the conversation flagged; after a few moments' silence I curtsied again and with-

drew. The former seclusion of the ladies of the court must indeed have been complete, and although they had come out in the last four years they still knew very little about their wonderful land. It seemed sad that one could have lived for twenty years in Katmandu and not have heard of the great beauty of Sola Khumbu, little more than a hundred miles away.

The reception continued in a shining glory of jewels and silks and lights, and all too soon the magnificent evening had come to its end. The band played an anthem and Their Majesties departed in state; the music began again and we recognised God Save The Queen, the signal for the Ambassador to leave. Tom and I followed Mr. and Mrs. Summerhayes out of the richly-crowded house and into the peaceful night.

Two days later it was time for us to go and we stood on the Katmandu airstrip, anxiously watching the sky to the south and listening for the plane. The rain itself held off but the clouds sat heavily between the hills; in the difficult flying conditions the plane coming in from Patna failed to find its way. All day we waited and watched the silent sky. A night at the Embassy broke our tiring wait, and at noon the next day we saw with delight the little Dakota from Patna chugging through a gap in the clouds. It came in cautiously, circled and landed. Our sudden joy was overcast by the gloom of the airstrip officials who thought that the clouds were thickening and that the plane, now in, stood little chance of flying out again that day. The pilot was more optimistic and prepared to take the risk. Passengers and freight were rapidly unloaded, those of us waiting to go were hastily taken on board, the door was closed, the engine

started, and the plane moved off at speed. We bumped our way between the hills and by luck or good navigation the pilot found his course. We headed south, for Patna and the plains.

We rose above the clouds to see the snow mountains in the distance. They were higher than the aeroplane and glistening in the sun, and though they had been my daily background through the summer I still felt a sudden exultant wonder that anything could be so beautiful. The first time I had seen them, on our journey in, they looked remote, mysterious and unreal; one had felt that they might vanish from the sky as lightly as the clouds on which they sat. Now I knew them to be solid and unchanging, standing in their white majesty high above the great valleys and the little Sherpa villages. To see them again, silent and still and as lovely as before, brought back a right sense of proportion to drive away the discouraged weakness left by fever and hunger and strain. Once you have caught typhus in lice-infested huts you cannot be sentimental about the simple life, but the snow mountains still shone above the clouds and I knew I could not go away from them for ever. First I had to go home, to recover completely, live my own life and do some solid work, but some day I would go back to the Sherpas to share again their hard and happy life at the foot of so great a splendour. And when I go back the snow mountains will be the same.

We dropped into cloud again, and when the sky cleared we were over the Indian plains and circling down to Patna. Three more weeks of civilised travel, the journey was over, and we were at home.