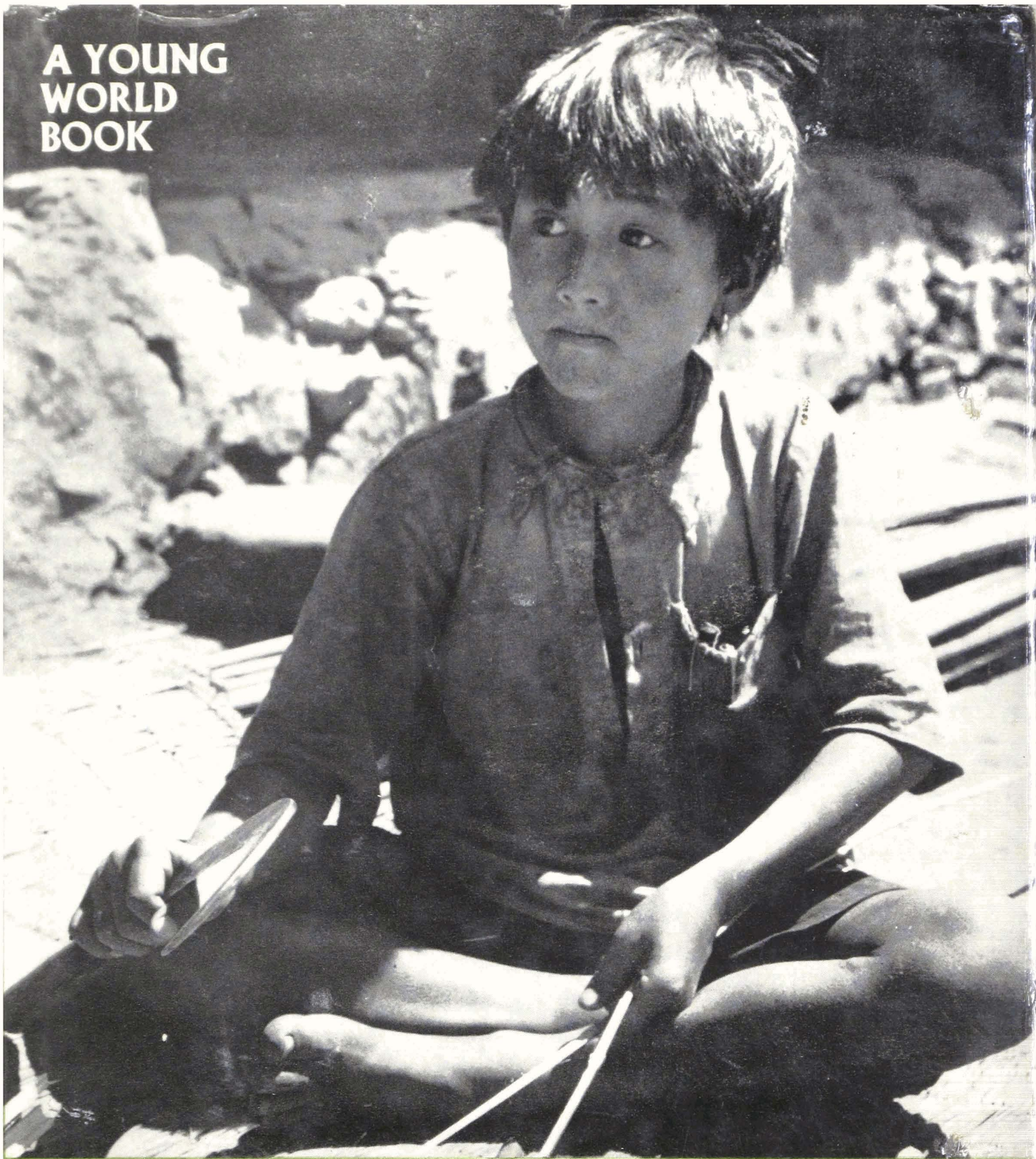


**A YOUNG  
WORLD  
BOOK**



# **GURKHAS AND GHOSTS**

**MARILYN SILVERSTONE & LUREE MILLER**







# GURKHAS AND GHOSTS

THE STORY OF A BOY IN NEPAL

by Luree Miller

*with photographs by*

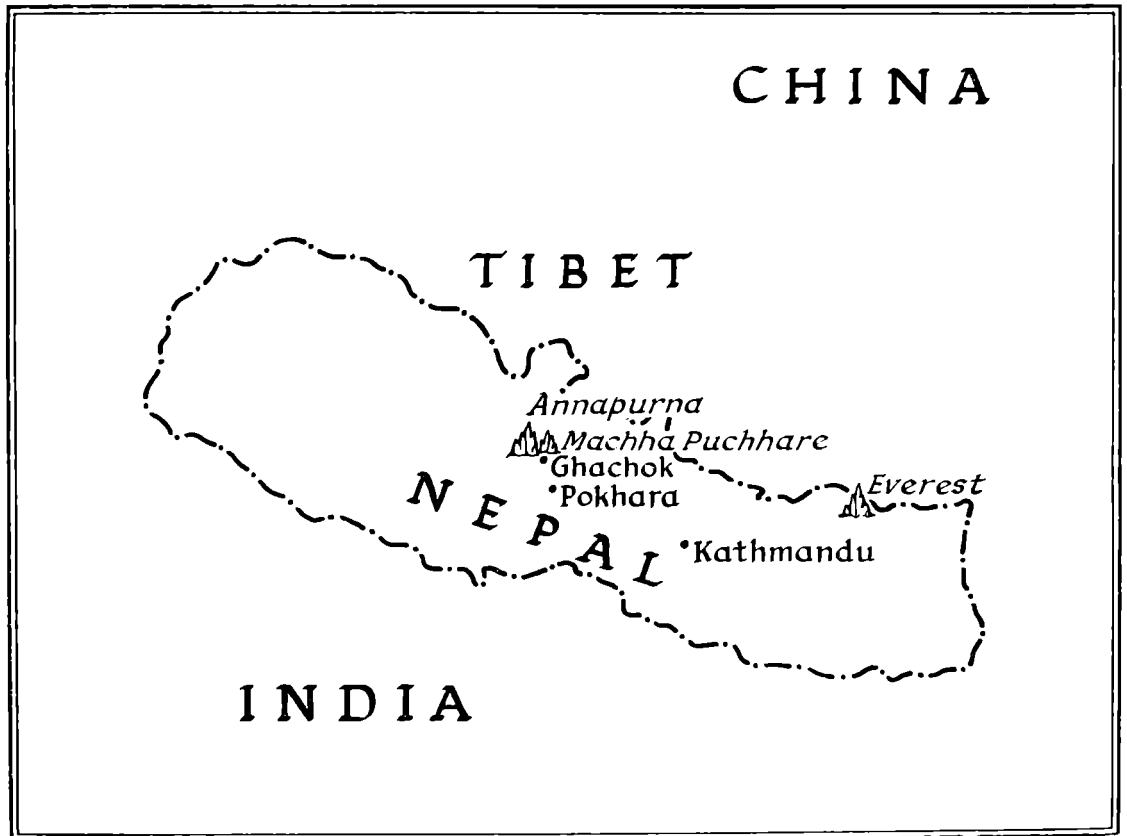
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## CHAPTER ONE

MASINA awoke suddenly from his dream with a feeling that he was alone in the room. The silence startled him and he sat up quickly, rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked around.

He was in the largest of the three rooms in his long, narrow house. Each room was the width of the house and had low, beamed ceilings and small, square windows. The main room was where Masina slept with his mother, father, sister and brother and his three aunts and uncles and their families. Sometimes they also ate and sat and talked in this room when it was too cold or rainy to be outside on the wide porch that ran the length of the house.

Now the room was empty. Masina was the last one up. Everyone else had rolled his sleeping mat, stacked it in the corner and gone outside to wash and eat.

Masina sat still a moment, suspended in the half-way state between sleeping and waking when it is hard to tell which world is real. Something was scratching his ankle like the stiff wheat stubble in the field he had dreamed he was ploughing, and a feeling of fear that the dream was real flooded through him. More than anything else Masina did not want to plough fields. He did not want to be a farmer like his father. He wanted most of all to be a soldier.

Then he saw that it was a torn strip of straw from the mat he slept on that scratched against him. He stood up, stamped it flat, stretched and blinked his eyes hard. Already a stripe of yellow sunlight crept across the brown earth floor into the darkness of the room and almost touched his toes.

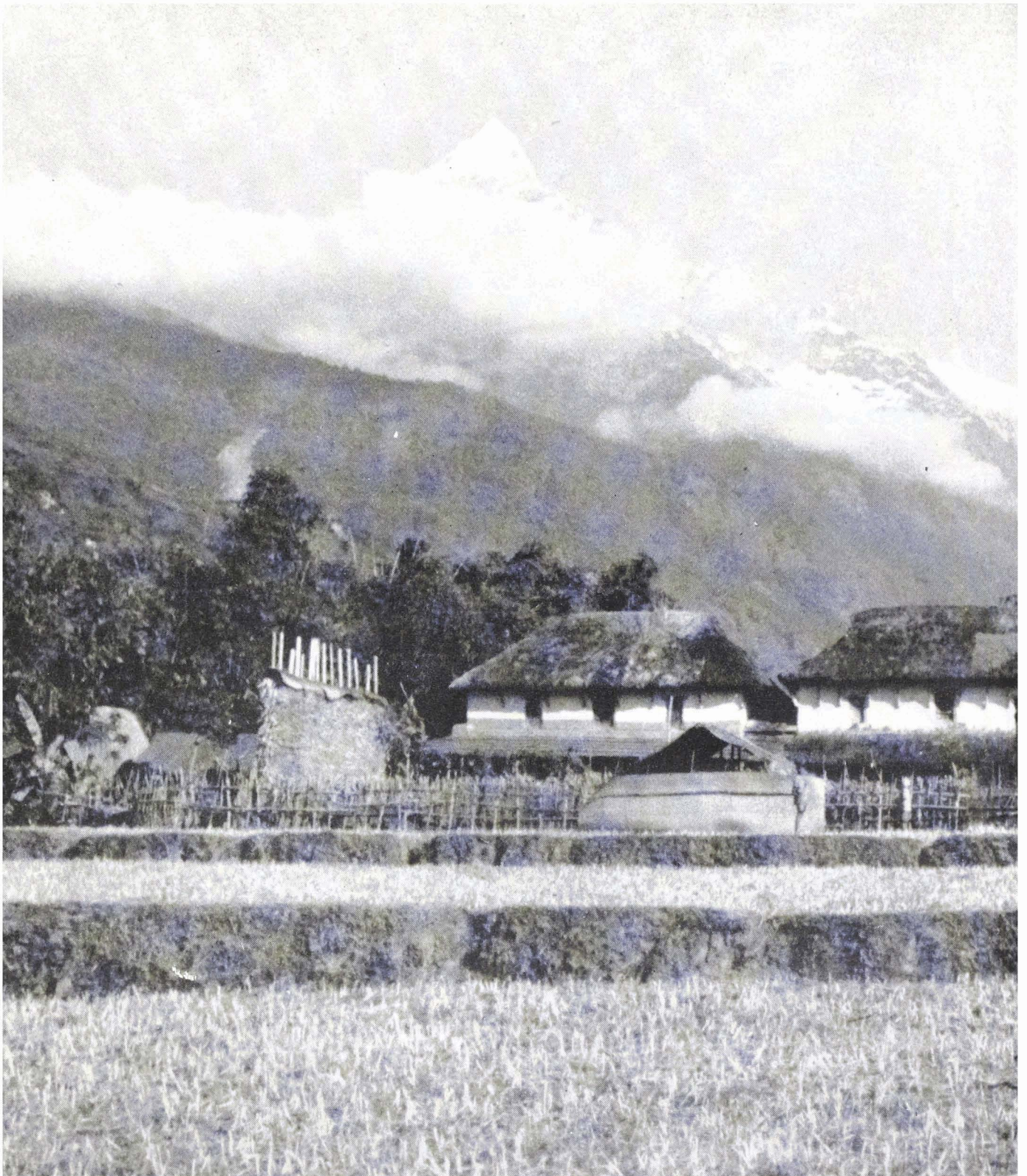
It was a strange feeling for Masina to have slept past sunrise. He was always at the back of his house, shivering and shaking as he splashed himself with ice-cold water, when the first streaks of dawn began to shine, pink and shimmering on the snowy peaks around him.

Ghachok, Masina's village, was high in the Himalayan foothills in the kingdom of Nepal. Nepal lay in the lap of the Himalayas, the highest mountains in the world, between India and Tibet. One of the Himalayan peaks, Machha Puchhare or Fish Tail Mountain, rose like a single white sentry directly behind Ghachok, and farther back, to one side of Machha Puchhare, was the Annapurna IV range.

Masina was a Nepalese hill boy and he loved all the mountains, but Machha Puchhare most of all because she stood so close and watched over his village.

Masina's house, like all the houses in Ghachok, had thick stone walls plastered with mortar that kept out any warmth of the sun. Masina shivered

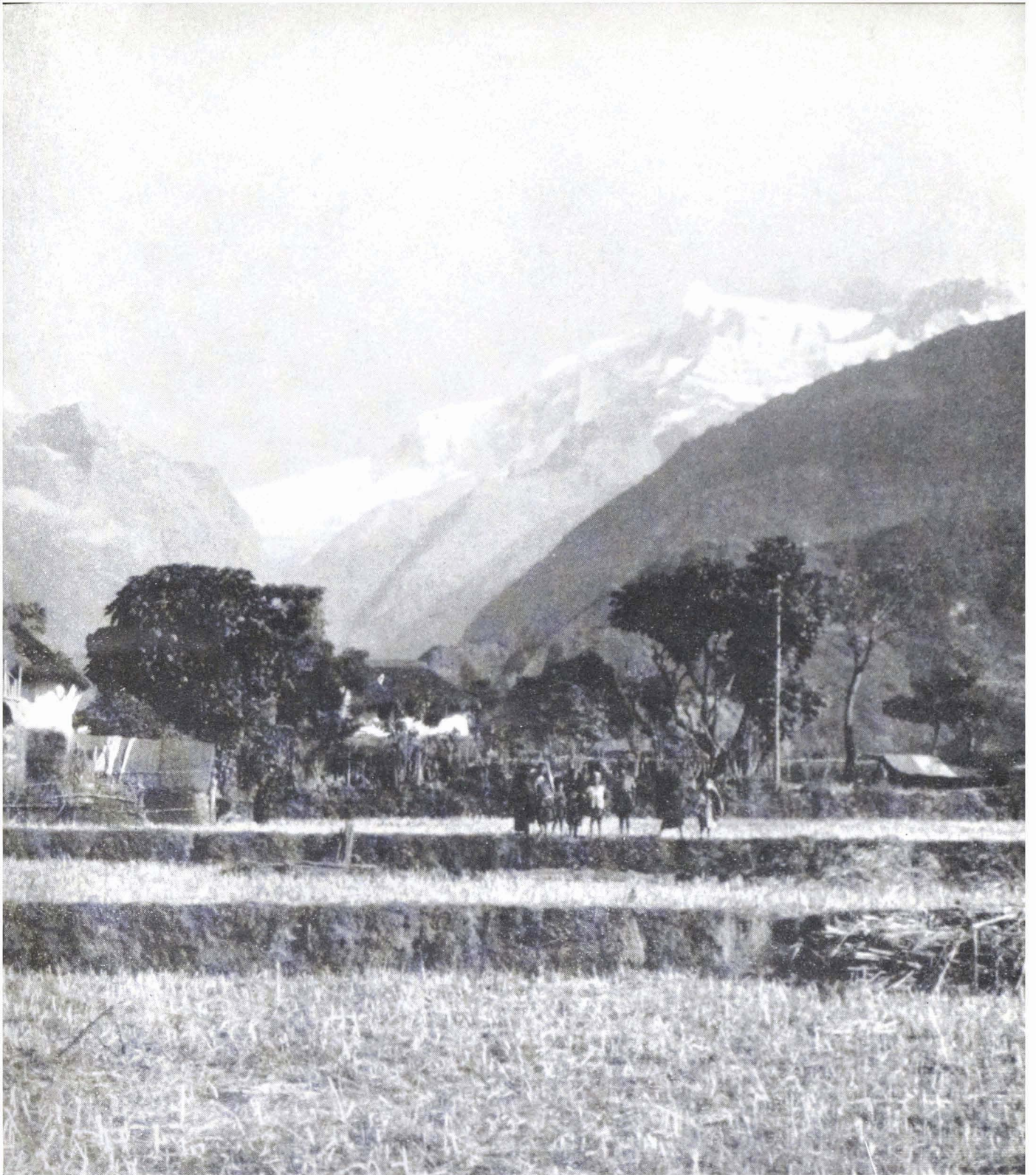




a little as he stood up and wondered how he could have dreamed he was hot.

From the kitchen he heard his grandmother singing and clattering the brass cooking vessels, and he could hardly believe his nose when he smelt the corn already popping in the pan for his morning meal. Grandmother was taking the separate kernels of corn that had been pulled off the dried cob and was tossing them into a pan of hot oil. Masina could hear the sharp phtt,





phtt, as the kernels popped out of their tight yellow jackets and became soft white balls, tender and tasty to eat.

The smoke from Grandmother's cooking fire had no chimney to go up and it seeped over the yellow mud sill, through the cracks in the wooden door and stung his eyes. Quickly he pulled up his short trousers and buckled the wide elastic belt with three silver buttons that Gurung boys wear,







Gurung was the name of Masina's tribe. In Nepal almost everyone belonged to a tribe and the Gurungs were a proud warrior people. They had to farm every bit of land in the hills that was flat enough to plough, but they would rather leave their villages to be soldiers in the Gurkha regiments than stay and be farmers in the fields.

Masina's stomach growled and he thought of the nice hot tea flavoured with pepper he had missed at six o'clock. Then he heard his mother's voice outside.

"The sun is shining on the snows," she called. "Does no one care that the schoolmaster will soon count his classes?"

Masina picked up his cap and books and ran out of the cold room into the bright sunshine on the porch.

His mother, whom he called Ama, was combing his little sister's hair. Bir Subha looked glum, but Ama smiled when she saw him. He squatted down on his heels beside them.

"Masina has been in the jungle wrestling with ghosts," Ama laughed. "Look at his hair!"

Masina searched her face anxiously to see if she were joking. Maybe a ghost or demon had sent the dream as a sign to show that he would grow up to be a farmer instead of a soldier. Dreams often told a person what would happen to them in the future. What if he had to be a farmer! How disappointed his father would be! He did not make Masina work in the fields as many boys of his age had to do. Instead he let him go to school because he wanted Masina to have a better chance of being accepted by the army when he was old enough.

Masina was going to ask Ama about the dream when his father, Babu, came into the courtyard. Babu was carrying baby brother tucked snugly under his peaked winter cape while his own legs showed below, bare and brown. His strong face was serious, and Masina and his mother waited for him to speak.

"The fodder for the buffaloes is finished," Babu said. "I shall have to go far into the jungle to find enough leaves to feed them."

Ama nodded her head to one side. Usually she cut the leaves and the firewood too, using a short heavy knife with a broad curved blade called a kukhri. All Gurkha soldiers carried two kukhris each and were famous all over the world for the speed and skill with which they used them.

Masina longed to cut with a kukhri too and his eyes lit with a sudden thought.

"Let me go to the jungle with you, Babu! Please! I could help cut leaves. And carry them."



Babu looked startled. "Your arms and legs must grow more, Masina, before you can carry a kukhri into the jungle with me. Have you learned all the schoolmaster has to teach you that you ask to go with the men?"

Masina looked at the floor and said nothing more. But he thought that Ama could use the kukhri almost as well as Babu, and the time would never come when he himself would be big enough to handle the heavy knife.

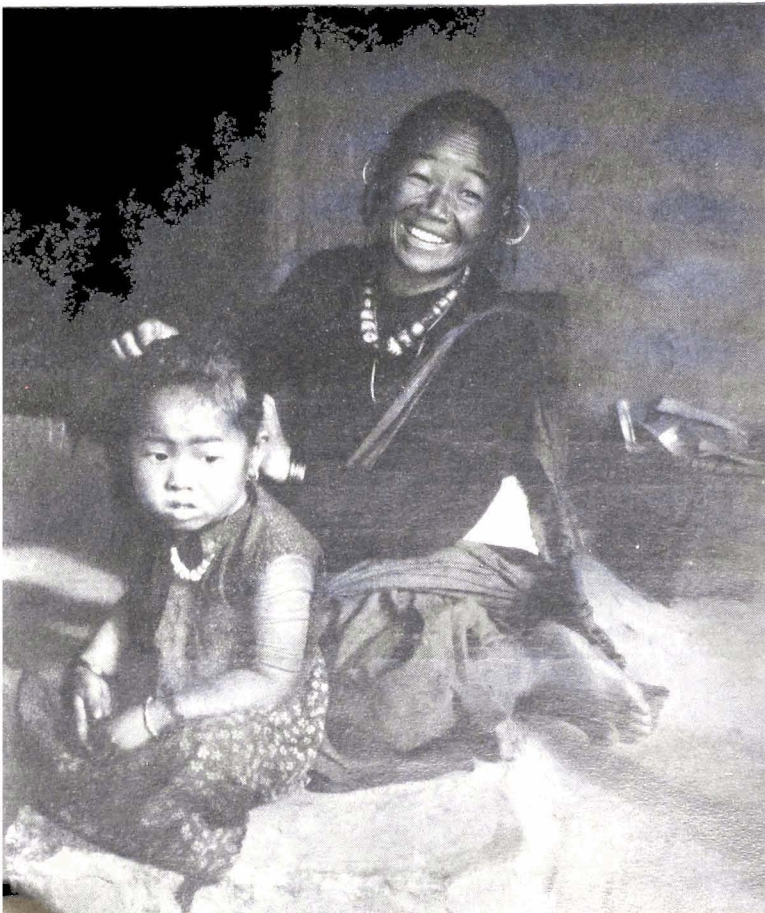
Still Ama could never go into the jungle as far as the men. Women must work at home. She had to wash and cook, work in the fields, milk the buffaloes and weave the blankets and mats. Twice a day she made the hour-long walk into the deep gorge to get water from the river, carrying the heavy pot in a basket on her back slung from a strap across her forehead. Ama was always working, always smiling and singing. She was soft music and laughter in Masina's life, so constant he never stopped to think about her good nature.

But when Babu laughed the mountains shook, and when he shouted the stones rolled off the ledges. When he sang Masina sang with him, and when he worried Masina worried too as men must do.

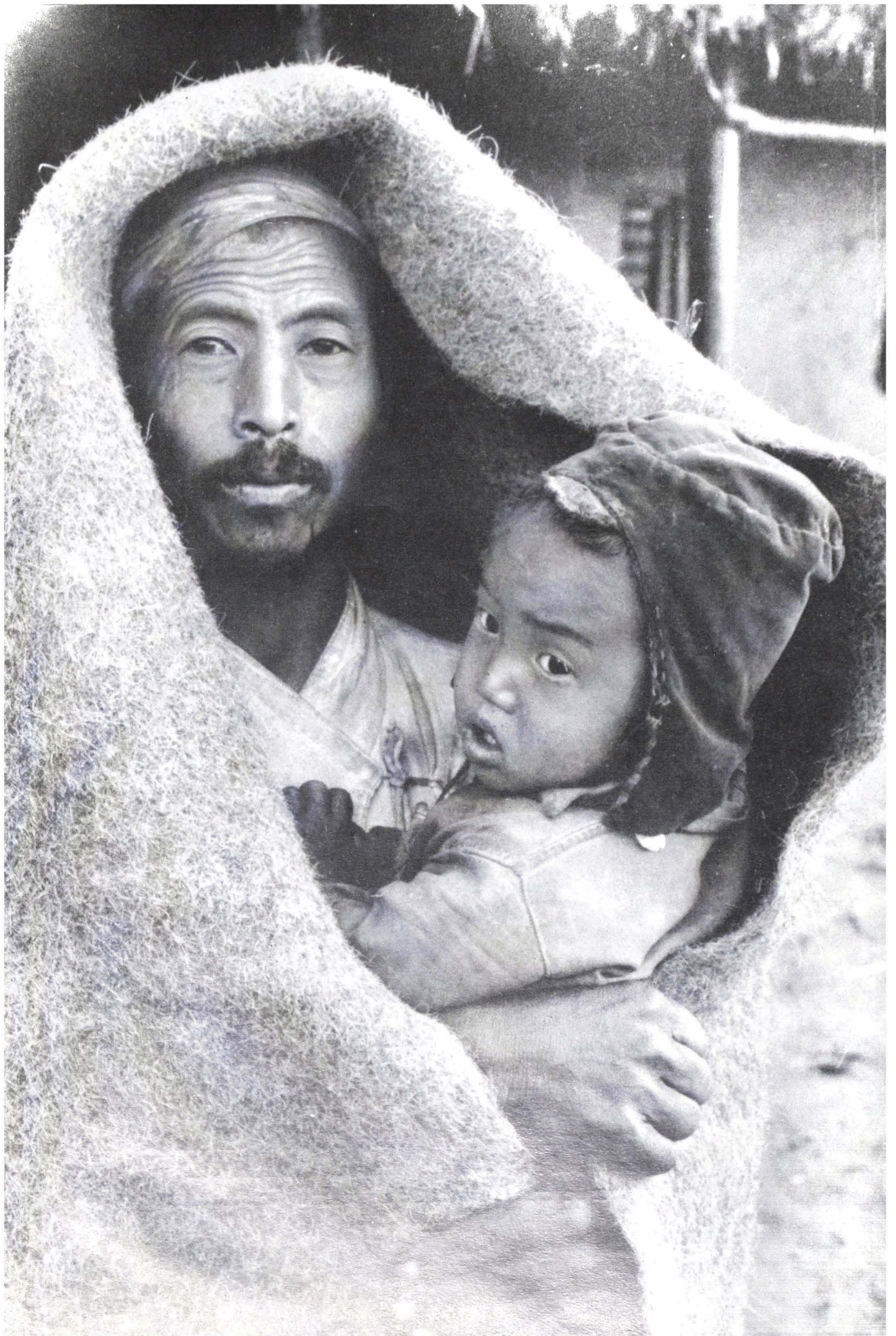
Babu was older than Masina's uncles so he was the head of the large joint family which was made up of his own family and Masina's three uncles and aunts and their children. They all lived together in the long pink-plastered house; they owned everything together and Babu was the head of them all. He had to decide when they should plough and what to plant; whether to buy fertilizer or a baby buffalo; and how to get the best crops from their rocky fields, which were separated and scattered around the hills.

His joint family did not own any sheep as did some of their neighbours. Only the two males, of the eight buffaloes they owned, could, by law in Nepal, be used for work. The females were kept just for milk. The whole family worked hard and shared everything; yet there were times when there was not much for all of them to eat.

Now Babu had to find food for the buffaloes. He would have to walk far up near the snow line to search for enough leaves. Masina knew it was not a good time to ask about his dream.









Then Grandmother, making little clucking sounds as if she were calling the chickens, came out of her smoky kitchen carrying two thalas – round dishes with straight sides filled to the top with the fluffy, white, popped corn. She set them down on the straw mat and Babu, Masina and his little brother sat cross-legged in front of them to eat. A soft breeze chilled by the high snows ruffled Masina’s hair and thin shirt – a wind from the Himalayas, the home of the gods.

With quick scoops of his hand Babu ate the popped corn and Masina knew better than to speak to him. The crisp air was quiet. Then suddenly shouts from the other side of the stone wall split the stillness.

“Ho, Masina! Ay-o, Masina!”

“Since when have crows called ‘Masina?’” Babu asked.

“That is Purna,” Masina replied seriously. His thoughts rushed back to the frightening dream and he knew he would have to tell Purna. He scooped his books up in his arm, jumped from the porch and dashed down the narrow lane between the high stone walls.

At the clump of banana palms he saw Purna’s shadow-speckled figure ahead of him, rounding the corner out of the shaded village. Before Masina could catch up with him, Purna was half-way across the wide stubble field.

“O, Purna,” Masina called.

The slap of Purna’s bare feet on the hard ground slowed to a stop. He turned and shouted, “You are a slow and scrawny one, Masina.”

“You are bigger, but I am quicker at school,” Masina retorted breathlessly as he raced up to him.

“Yes, you are right,” Purna laughed. “But hurry up. It is late.”

Masina glanced over his shoulder and saw the other boys coming.

“I had a dream last night,” he said. “I’ll tell you after school.”

“Wait,” Purna called, but Masina had a head start and reached the long tin-roofed building first.

Classes were not held in the building except during the rainy season, and already the rest of the boys were sitting on the ground in a semi-circle in front of the schoolmaster. Masina slipped into his place and opened the geography book he shared with three other boys. Together they studied out loud, chanting their lessons in unison. Next to them all the other classes in the school were saying their lessons from the books they shared.

Masina’s class studied arithmetic, geography, history, hygiene and Nepali, and had physical education and drill which Masina liked best next to Nepali, the national language everyone had to learn besides his own tribal language.

The Nepali books had stories about ghosts and demons and strong men such as soldiers must be, and as he read Masina thought about his karma.





According to the Hindu religion a person's karma determined the actions of his life. The Gurungs were Hindu, so each had a karma. It guided his present life and was the result of all the previous lives his soul had lived. Each Hindu was born into a caste or special group which had its own duties and ways of worship and kinds of work.

Since Gurungs were of the Kshatriya or warrior caste, Masina knew he could be a soldier if his own special karma allowed it. His karma could not control everything for him though, because in the sacred ancient Hindu writings, the Rig Veda, it said that good comes from good and evil from evil. To do one's duties faithfully and choose good over evil was still necessary for each person. His reward would be a better life when his soul was reborn into another body.

Suddenly the schoolmaster's voice cut through Masina's thoughts. "Masina, are you reciting to the wind? I asked you a question."

Laughter rippled around the circle of students and Masina scrambled to his feet.

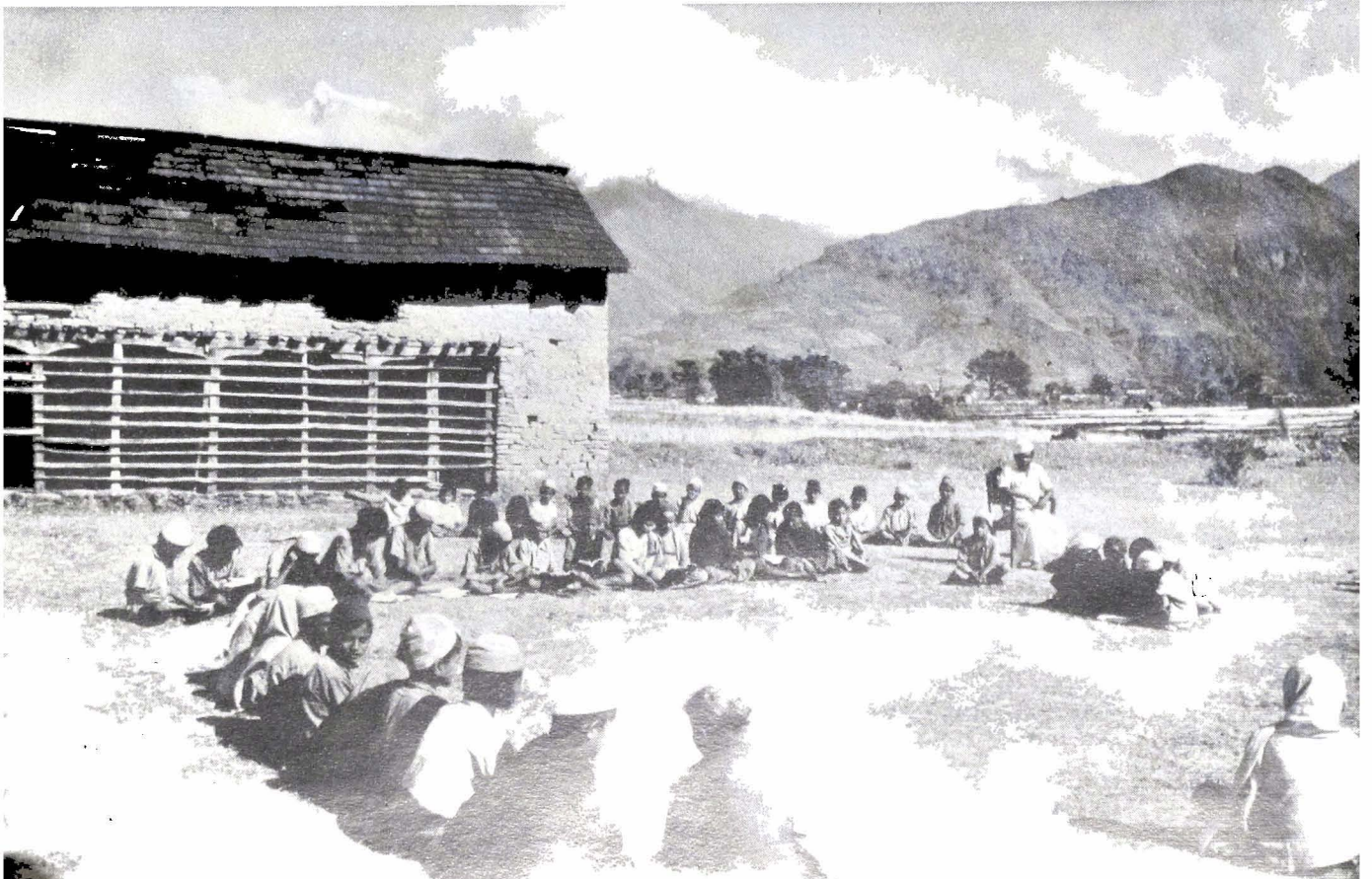
"Yes, sir!" he mumbled.

"I asked you," said the schoolmaster, "to name the capital of Nepal."

"Kathmandu," Masina replied softly.

"Correct. Now come with me!" He got up and Masina hurried after him to the school building.

Inside the small office Masina waited while the schoolmaster sat down and straightened piles of pink exercise books in front of him before he looked up.





The master was the head of the only Brahmin family in the village. Brahmins were the scholars and priests, the highest caste of Hindus. Everyone respected him greatly. Masina was proud that the master encouraged him in his studies.

But now he shuffled his feet on the earth floor, afraid to meet the schoolmaster's eyes. He watched a fly he could not feel alight on his toes.

"Tomorrow we have our examinations," the master said. "I hope you have studied your lessons well, Masina. Today you were not paying attention. School is serious. Not everyone is lucky enough to be able to come. Even though you are the oldest son and could help your father at home, he lets you come to school. I have told him you are a good student. When I give you your examinations, I expect you to do well."

The thought of all he would have to remember for his examinations made Masina shudder. Then the fly crawled to a tickly place on his leg and as he bent to brush it off, he blurted out, "I had a dream last night!"

The master looked at him curiously for a moment.

"Dreams are important," he said, "but it is not for you to say what they mean. In school you are to pay attention," and he motioned Masina out of the office. Masina put his finger-tips together, then raised his hands to his forehead in respect and ran out.

The rest of the day he listened carefully and recited loudly. At four o'clock when school was let out he and Purna said "No" to the boys who wanted them to fly kites. Instead they climbed over the stone wall into the field by Purna's house where they could sit in the sweet-smelling hay and talk to each other.

"Now tell me," Purna said.

"It was a dream," said Masina. "I was ploughing a field and a soldier sat on the bank saying over and over, 'You are Masina, small and thin'."

Purna grinned. "But you are. That is what Masina means: small and thin. That is why you have the name."









“It is not my real name,” Masina reminded him. “It is only a nickname. The astrologer chose Ran Bahadur for me and Bahadur means courageous.”

Among the Gurungs no one is called by his proper name, only by a nickname or a name that tells his position in the family, such as “oldest son” or “second daughter”.

“And Purna,” Masina continued, “I think that soldier in my dream was your brother.”

Purna picked a smooth stalk of yellow straw from the heap in front of him. He chewed it thoughtfully before he answered.

“Don’t be angry, Masina. My brother was only teasing you yesterday. He is a very brave soldier and when you said you were going to be brave too, he teased you. That is all.”

Then a happy thought restored his usual grin. “I’m your brother too, and sometimes I tease you.”

It was true. Purna was his “mit” brother now. Before Purna’s real brother had come home on leave, Masina and Purna had done a puja. They said some special prayers in front of a god, offered him some rice, curd and boiled butter called ghce and put a tika, the dot of red paste, on each other’s forehead. Then they swore to be loyal to one another as God was their witness, and they became “mit” brothers forever.

It made Masina feel better to remember the puja and know he could count on Purna to stand by him and help him out no matter what happened. But for the first time in his life he thought about his nickname Masina – small and thin – and he did not like it. If only he knew about signs and if only a sign would come to show him that his karma called for him to be a soldier.

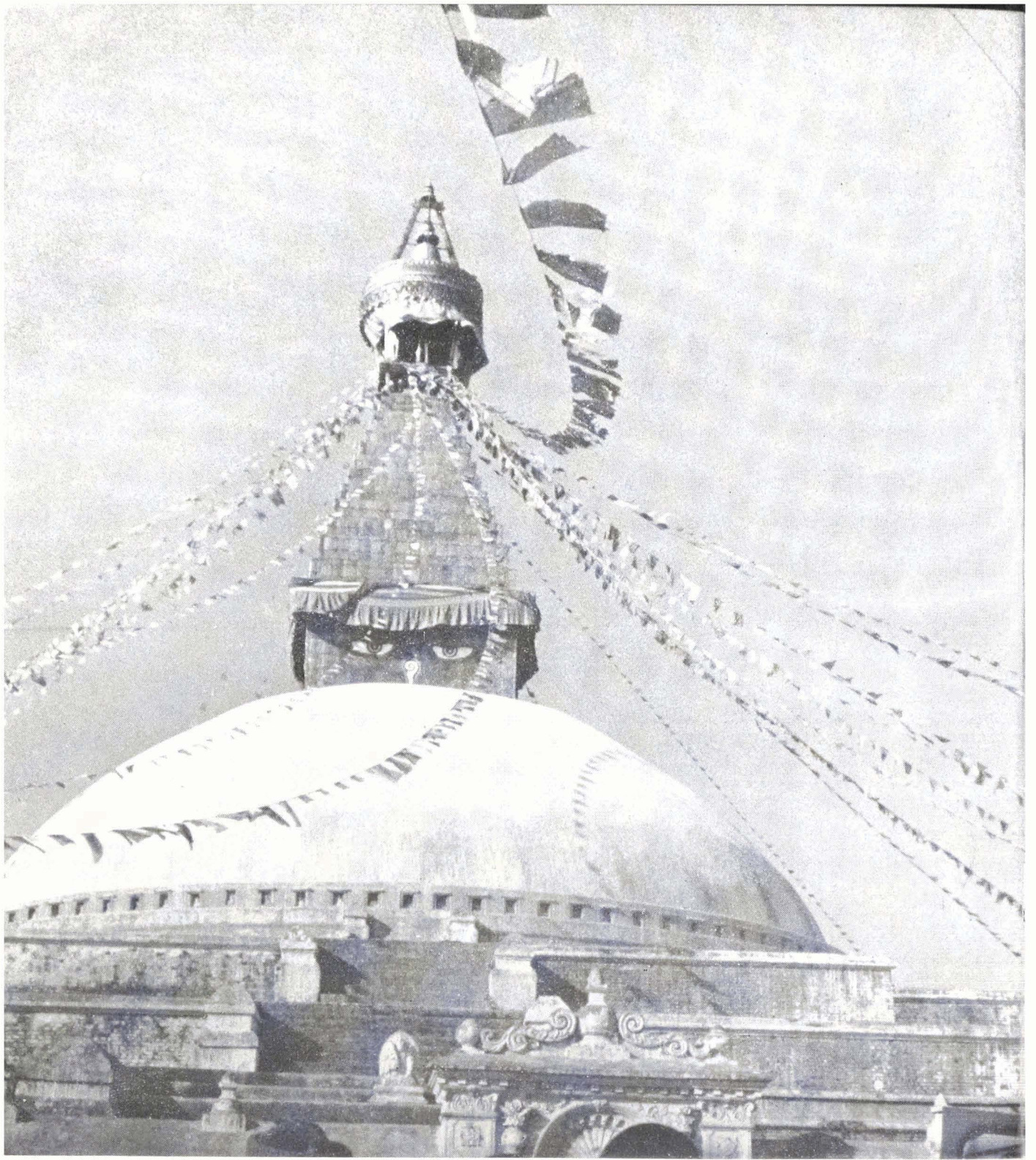
Purna flopped back on the straw with his arms stretched over his head while Masina sat trying to find words for the new feeling upsetting his thoughts. Finally he sighed and stretched out beside Purna. From flat on their backs they looked up at a single eagle swooping through the vast dome of blue sky above them, higher and higher until it seemed to reach the very peak of Machha Puchhare.

After a long time Masina said, “Do you think something is going to happen?”

“Thai-chhaina – don’t know,” Purna answered. “Come. We will ask my brother to tell us some more of his adventures.”

Masina got up slowly and followed Purna across the field. When they reached the path he kicked a stone ahead of him all the way to Purna’s house. He wanted to hear the stories but he did not want to see the soldier again.









## CHAPTER TWO

“I HAVE travelled very far and served in many places,” said Purna’s brother, the soldier, “and Kathmandu is the jewel of all the cities I have seen. Kathmandu lies in the Great Valley of Nepal, thirteen days’ march from Ghachok, and the Himalayas reach far around it with peaks higher than Machha Puchhare. Near by are the mighty mountains named Everest, Lotze, and Kanchenjunga.”

A shiver of excitement ran down Masina’s back and he leaned forward to listen. The boys sitting on either side of him hunched in closer.

The soldier raised his hand, sweeping away time, and said, “Long, long ago when the gods visited the earth more often than they do now, there was no city of Kathmandu. Then the Great Valley was filled with water; it was all a big, blue lake.

“The lamas who worship the Buddha say that in these ancient times a powerful god, the Great Manjusri, came across the tops of the mighty Himalayas from China. He gazed down on the valley and saw the lake.





Then, with his sword raised high, Manjusri strode to the southern end. There, with one tremendous slash of his sword, he cut through the rock and made a passage for the waters to gush out.

“Thus the Valley became dry and from that day to this the sacred waters of the Baghmata River flow out of the Khot-bar or Sword Cut to





join the holy Ganges far down on the plains of India.

"Others say it was our Hindu god, Vishnu, who cut the Khot-bar and drained the Valley," said the soldier.

"What was his name," thought Masina, "he was a powerful god and he performed a wonderful deed."





Far back beyond the memory of Masina's tribe all the hill people had Buddhist beginnings, and little bits of the Buddha's legend and learning lingered on in their Hindu way of life.

And in Kathmandu the Hindus and Buddhists have lived together so long that each has borrowed a little from the other's religion and sometimes a Hindu god has sat in a Buddhist temple.

"How did Kathmandu look when you were there?" Masina asked.

"It was full of pagodas, temples, tall towers and golden spires," said Purna's brother, "and when I looked up at the towers, my hat fell off my head. The Buddhist temple at Bodhnath was like a big white bowl turned upside down. On top of the bowl was a spire with pairs of all-seeing eyes painted on all four sides. For two thousand years these eyes have been keeping watch for righteous behaviour and human prosperity. Everywhere you go in Kathmandu, eyes follow you."

Masina rounded his shoulders a little and wondered if Buddhist eyes could see into his Hindu soul.

"There were great bronze bells and many-roofed temples of wood carved all around with gods and demons and enchanted animals," the soldier continued. "I heard the Bell of the Barking Dogs toll like the Voice of Death and set all the dogs in Kathmandu howling.

"I saw a golden Buddha sitting on a golden lotus. He was many times bigger than a man. At his feet lamas, the Buddhist priests, sat chanting, 'Om mani padme hum - O, Jewel in the Lotus Flower'. A small lama blew a conch shell so loud it hurt my ears and when they beat the big drums I ran.

"I found a Hindu temple and sat on the staircase that was guarded by giant statues. The first two statues were fierce fighters, champions of rajas, and they had the strength of ten men. On the next step were elephants ten times stronger than the rajas' champions. Each step had statues with ten times the strength of the ones below them. There were enormous lions and goddesses with supernatural powers."

Masina shut his eyes and seemed to see the huge statues staring at him,







smiling strangely, one above the other on the steps. They appeared so real in his mind's eye that he fell under their spell. With his eyes closed tightly he watched them come closer and closer, their stone eyes set on him, their large lips parted. As they grew bigger and bigger they became more terrible to behold and the champions of the rajas seemed ready to speak.

A cold sweat covered Masina and he shouted, "Stop! I am small but strong as a lion!" Then he started violently at the sound of his own voice and opened his eyes wide. Purna's brother looked down at him angrily, narrowing his eyes, and Masina's throat went dry.

"Masina, your talk is always big and unasked for. But listen to me, little one! Your scrawny legs will never carry you to Pokhara in the first valley from Ghachok."

Hoots of laughter rang out from the boys on the porch and Masina scrambled to his feet to escape. But the powerful arm of Purna's brother shot out and grabbed him tightly by the wrist.

"Wait," he said. "You want to be a soldier? Let me tell you what will happen. Perhaps you will get to Pokhara. Maybe Purna can put you in a basket and carry you on his back."

The boys sniggered and Masina struggled to slip out of the soldier's grip.

"In Pokhara," he went on, "you will find an army camp and you will tell them you want to be a recruit. So they will send you to a recruiting camp where the doctor will examine you to see if you are strong enough to be a soldier. He will listen to your heart beat. 'Ah, Masina,' the doctor will say, 'you tell me you have the heart of a lion. But I hear nothing. Have you given it back to the lion? I am sorry. We take no recruits who do not have stout hearts.'"

"Let me go," Masina begged, but his voice was lost in the laughter around him.

"Then what will you do, Masina of the lost lion heart?" taunted the soldier. "Come home to Ghachok and hear everyone say, 'Hi, how was the army? Where is your pay? Tell us about your adventures.' No, you had better stay at home and plough the fields, Masina. Stay at home and save yourself from disgrace."

With a wrench Masina broke free, jumped down from the porch and ran as fast as he could. He darted through the village, startling chickens that squawked and scurried from his path. He raced across the open fields to the far edge of the flat land. There in a patch of jungle Masina shinned up the special tree that belonged to him and Purna. He pulled himself through the first clump of dark green leaves and scrambled out on to the strong branch jutting over the valley.

When his heart finally stopped thumping loudly he could hear the soft







murmur of wind-blown leaves all around him. For a long time he just sat, staring at the cool white snows of Machha Puchhare.

After a while Purna came and scuffled round the foot of the tree. Then he sat down and called up through the leaves. “Masina, are you very angry with me?”

“You are my brother,” Masina said. “But what could you do to stop my boastful words? I don’t know my own tongue and your brother spoke to me as if I were a fool.”

“No more,” Purna said. “His leave is over and he must go back to the army. This is his last day at home.”

Masina picked up a broad leaf, sent it out on the wind and watched it dip and soar until it disappeared deep down into the valley below.

“Remember, Purna, when your brother told us about Prithvi Narayan? The Gurkha king from these mountains? He conquered all of Nepal.”

“That was a long time ago,” Purna answered.

“Yes, but his descendants have been our kings ever since – for nearly two hundred years. He was very brave. He conquered all the tribes and took Kathmandu.”

“Come down and we will play soldiers,” said Purna. “You can be Prithvi Narayan.”

Masina slid down the tree. “Not now,” he said, “I don’t feel like it.”

The boys walked along the little earth banks that divided the fields. A









farmer shouted at his buffaloes and rode hard on his wooden plough to dig it deeper into the ground. As he turned round at the end of the furrow, the fresh smell of loosened earth stopped Purna and Masina. They sniffed deeply and stood watching him.

“Ploughed ground smells good but farming is too much work,” Masina said. “I would rather have adventures, and the only way to have adventures is to be a soldier.”

“I like walking behind the buffaloes,” Purna replied. “I like seeing things grow.”

Something nearly always was growing in the fields round Ghachok.

“The winter is a good time,” he said.

Then the wheat, barley and oats waved their yellow tasselled heads all round the village and the air was clear, sunny and crisp.

“But I don’t like the monsoon. It is too wet and cold working in the fields and there is nothing to do at home.”

During the long rainy season from July to the end of September there was not much to do but sit on the wide porches and watch the solid sheets of rain bend the bright green rice plants and beat upon the slender millet and sturdy maize or Indian corn.

“When I am old enough I will go up the mountains to the summer pastures with my father,” Purna declared. “Up near the snows and stay through the monsoon with the shepherds.”

The Gurungs who owned buffaloes and sheep took them high up the southern side of Annapurna to search for grazing spots. All through the long wet months of summer they moved from slope to slope, stopping only long enough to build goths – rough branch and leaf shelters to protect them from the wind and cold.

“But, Purna, don’t you want to be a soldier?” Masina asked in amazement.

“Thai-chhaina – don’t know,” Purna grinned. They walked on silently. Finally Purna said shyly, “I want to climb the mountains and sleep in the goths near the stars.”

Masina was so startled he couldn’t say a thing. He turned to his friend but Purna squatted quickly, scooped up a handful of pebbles and tossed them plinking down the long narrow courtyard of Masina’s house.

Masina’s mother looked up a moment, smiled at them and again bent her head over the thal she was scouring.

One of Masina’s cousins came running towards them with a handful of stones. “Come on, let’s play gatta,” he said.

Masina started the game called gatta. He threw one stone up in the air







and picked up the five on the ground with the same hand, first by ones, then by twos until he had them all without a miss.

“When you get all the stones on your first turn it is no game for us,” Purna said crossly. But he took his own turn anyway.

When they got tired of playing gatta Purna went home and Masina looked round for his big black dog. He found him sleeping behind the baskets, and Masina knelt down and scratched the dog under the chin.

“Today I made both Purna and his brother cross with me,” he told him and the dog promptly licked him clean across his nose and cheeks.

“Purna doesn’t want to be a soldier like I do. He doesn’t want to have adventures,” Masina confided and he buried his face in his dog’s warm fur. “I know I should be content to see what my karma is, but sometimes don’t you wish a sign would come or something would happen?”

Then he was so glad his dog couldn’t answer “thai-chhaina – don’t know” like Purna that he threw his arms round the dog’s shaggy neck and rolled him over. He was getting tired of that same old answer all the time. All of a sudden he decided not to ask Purna any more questions, but just to tell him what they both were going to do from now on.





## CHAPTER THREE

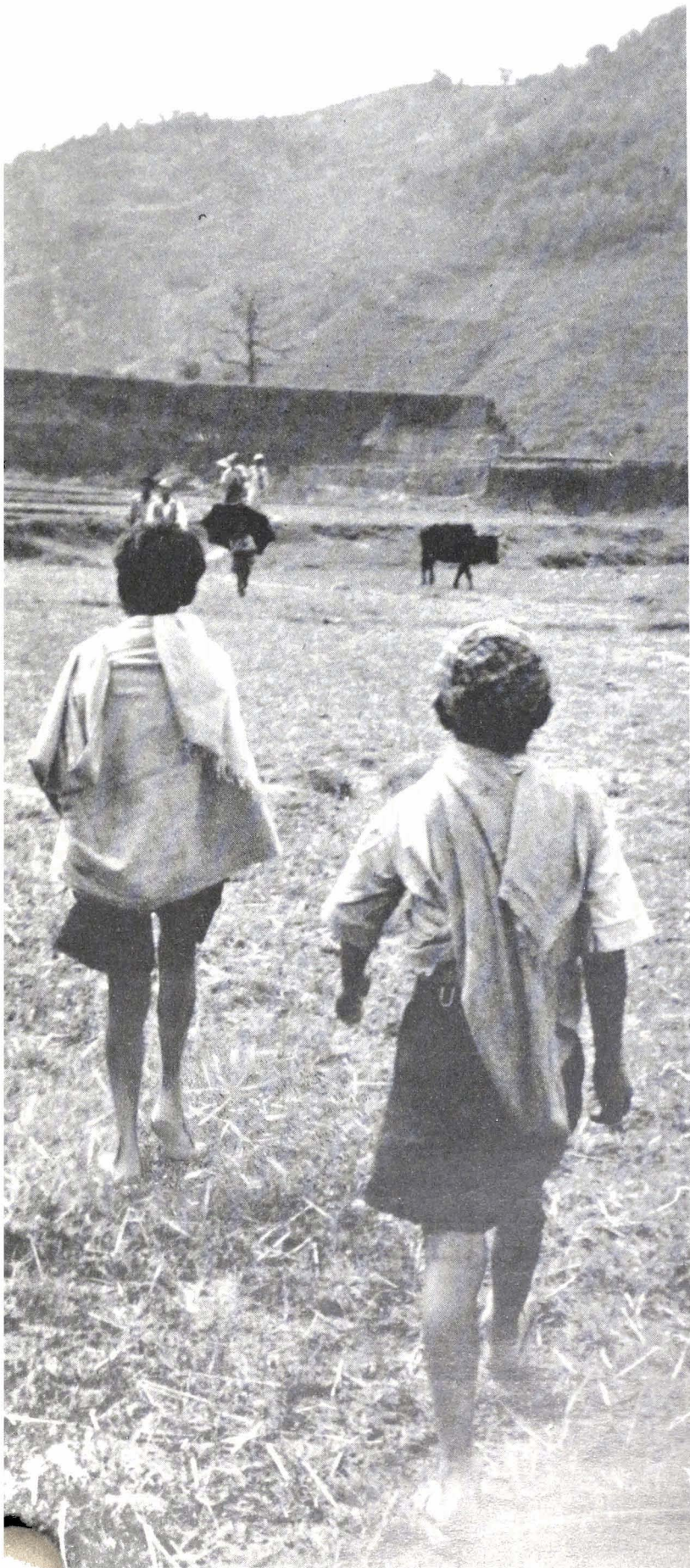
**B**UT the next day it was Purna who came running into the courtyard shouting, "Come on, Masina. Are you sitting on your hands? What are you waiting for? Let's go!"

A loud blast from the narsing, a long curved horn, bounced back and forth between the hills around Ghachok, announcing the beginning of the puja.

"Wait!" Masina gurgled as he spat out a stream of water and tossed away the frayed stick he was using to brush his teeth. He grabbed his wool scarf and ran to catch up with Purna. Together they cut across the field to the Khot, the large sacred pit at the edge of the village where the pujas were performed.

As the beating of the drums grew louder and faster they broke into a run and Masina shouted over the noise, "Look, it's beginning!" Excitedly he pointed to the men ahead of them carrying a tall young tree, its slender





trunk bobbing back and forth as they jogged toward the Khot. Fluttering from the tree was a small white flag to show that a god was present. It was Ram Naumi, the god Ram's birthday and the Nepalese New Year.

"Hurry," Purna yelled. "To the other side of the Khot."

Suddenly the drums and horns were quiet and the air filled with an expectant stillness. The boys raced round the knoll where the musicians sat and through the gathering groups of people to the far end of the Khot. There it was not so crowded and they found a place to sit on the steep side of the sacred pit where they had a good view. Below them in the Khot was the altar, a single great stone with a rectangular slab shading it. Across the altar lay three long pointed swords crossed near the handles.

Masina felt his heart hit his ribs when he looked at the swords. Their power was ancient and awful. He knew that if anyone were to pick up the swords, he would immediately be stricken with misfortunes too terrible to tell, and all of Ghachok would suffer as well. The magic of the swords would cause dreadful hailstorms to destroy the crops and damage the village. It was no wonder that the swords had lain on the stone altar longer than anyone could remember.





“They have planted the tree,” Purna said, as if Masina couldn’t see the men dig the hole and carefully lower the small sapling into it while the headman drew magic designs on the earth before the altar.

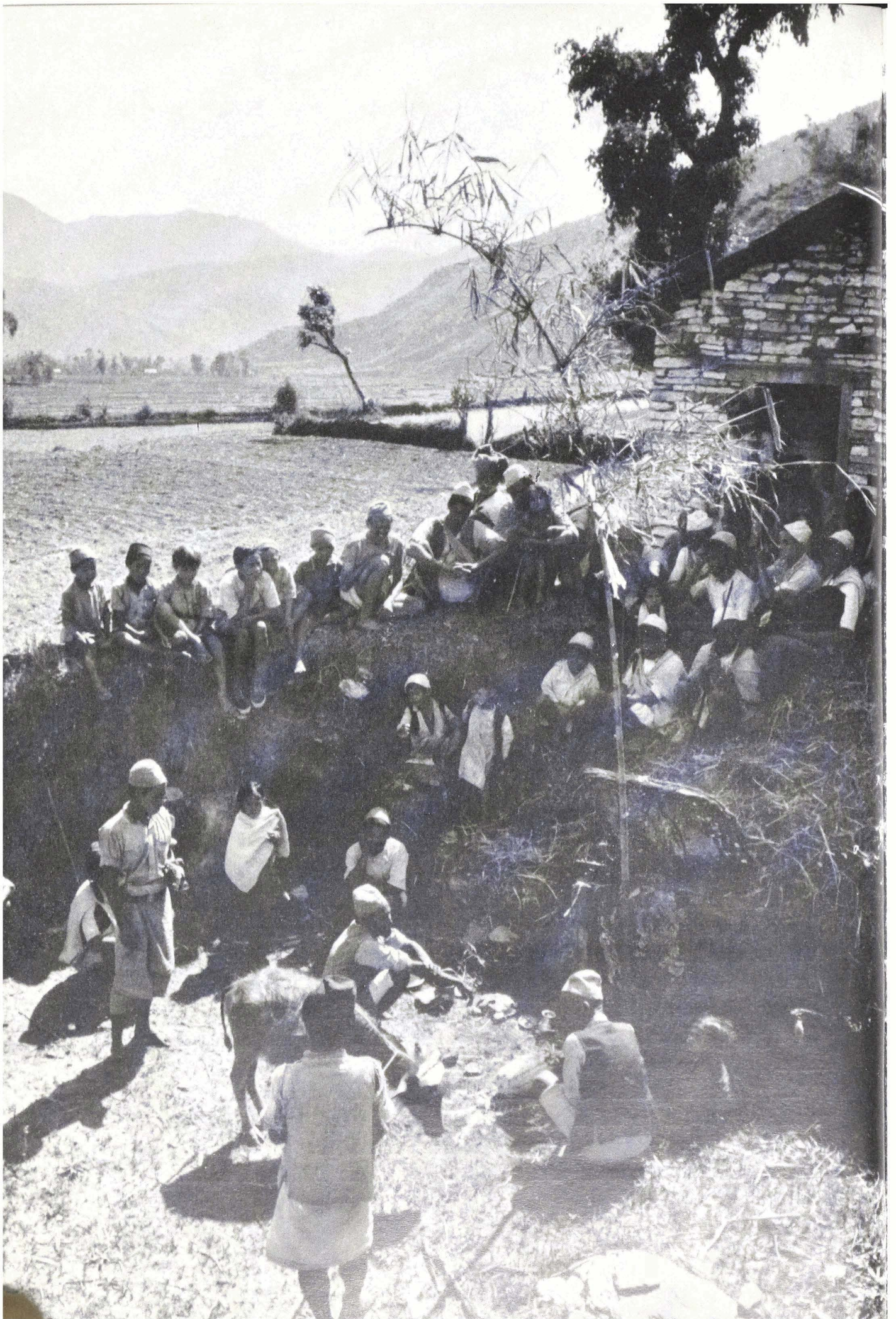
“It is done. Now the offerings for Ram will be given,” Masina replied and he dug his heels into the earth bank to steady himself. The sensation of unseen things all round him was strong. To his left was the stone house built for the use of the gods when they visited Ghachok. Above the thatched roofs of the village he could see Machha Puchhare, whose snowy summit belonged to the gods.

When the English climbers had come to Nepal they had listened to the Gurung’s warning and had agreed to stop short of the summit of Machha Puchhare so they would not anger the gods by setting human feet upon their home.

Now Masina hoped the gods would be happy with this puja. After the offerings of melons, eggs and pigeons, the animals were led down into the Khot.

They all came quietly and the headman asked for their consent to serve as offerings to the god, Ram. First the goat was led forward and it nodded its head to show it agreed. Instantly a man severed the goat’s head with a kukhri and Masina gave a sigh of relief that the first animal sacrifice had gone so well.







Then the big, grey buffalo was brought before the altar and it too bowed its great horned head in consent. Masina drew a deep breath and held it as the kukhri was raised again. Then, before his eyes could follow the downward flash of steel, the buffalo's head was on the ground. Masina let out his breath and smiled at Purna. The puja was performed perfectly and Ram would be pleased. The new year had begun auspiciously.

He put his arm around Purna's shoulders. From the very marrow of his bones Masina felt the year would bring him the sign he wanted to show that he would be a soldier. But he did not dare say so, even to Purna, for fear it would spoil his luck. Instead he said softly, "I got a new shirt for Ram Naumi," and Purna answered, "So did I".

They stood together happily watching the headman put the dot of red powder on people's foreheads to make the tika mark now that the puja was over. Then Masina started home and Purna stayed to wait for his father.

As Masina walked along a feeling of joy flooded through him and tingled in the tips of his fingers and clear to his toes. The wind felt cool on his face and the air smelled sweet.

A small girl was swinging from a corn rick beside the path. Masina saw her out of the corner of his eye, so he turned his head the other way to watch a shiny brown myna bird hopping sideways and scolding loudly. Then, suddenly, above the myna's 'Kok-kok-kok', a high little voice sang out,

*Masina is so thin and small,  
He'll never be a soldier at all.*

Quick, hot pangs of rage flashed through Masina, killing his joy. Such an insult was too much to ignore. He picked up a large stone and threw it with all his might into the corn above her. A shower of straw fell down upon her head and Masina walked on without looking back. When he heard the girl wail at the top of her lungs he felt a little better, but she had spoilt his happiness.

At home in the courtyard Babu was cutting bamboo into strips for mats and baskets, and Masina sat down beside him. Both were silent. Then Masina edged closer to Babu so their arms touched and he could feel the rhythm of his father's muscles as he sliced the bamboo with long swift strokes.

"Babu, do you have to be very big to be very brave?" Masina asked.

"How big is your father?" Babu answered. Masina felt foolish and didn't know what to say. Babu was just Babu, brave, of course. He had never stopped to think whether his father was big or small.

"I will tell you a story," Babu said. "It is a tale about the Rontes, the









ghosts of the jungle, and some men who lived not so long ago in Ghachok. The men had to go to the jungle one day to cut bamboo. They were working quietly and quickly with their kukhris when one of the men bumped into a Ronte, which, of course, he could not see.

“The Ronte was so angry at being disturbed from his sleep that he sent the man flying over the edge of the mountain and he fell very far down, into the valley below.

“The man did not know what had happened for a long time; it was as if





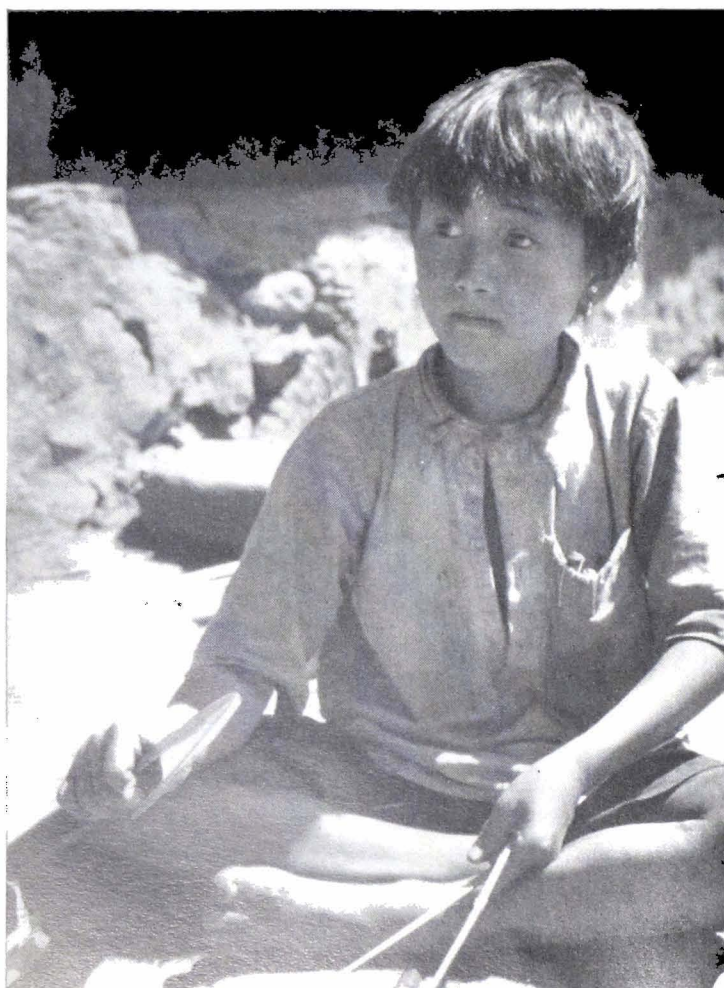


he had been in a deep sleep. But when he woke he saw that he had had a very great fall and he knew at once that only a Ronte could have pushed him off balance over the edge of the mountain. Fortunately he was not hurt badly and had awakened crouched on his hands and knees. As long as men are crouching the Rontes cannot see them but only walk across their backs looking for them. The man could feel the Ronte walking on his back and heard him cry out, 'You have escaped. Where are you?'

"So the man remained very still until the Ronte left and then he returned home.

"You know, Masina, how brave the men of Ghachok have always been. When they heard this man's story about the Ronte knocking him off the mountain, they decided to drive the dangerous ghost from the countryside. So the next day they went into the jungle and the Ronte came and dragged them through the trees and bushes. But the men were very strong and fought back. When the Ronte saw that they were not frightened by him, but continued to do battle, he fled and he has never come near Ghachok to push people off the mountain again. But if these men had shown fear," Babu went on, "and stayed away from the jungle no one would ever have been able to cut bamboo near our village from that time on."

Masina thought about the story and wondered if he would have been brave enough to do battle with a Ronte. He looked up at Bir Subha and Grandmother sitting on the porch. Grandmother was making sheep's wool into thread for blankets by twisting it on a spindle tucked under her arm. As it fell, coiling into her basket, she spoke to Bir Subha who looked very interested, though it was probably nothing but a girl's story that Grandmother was telling – nothing about courageous men and brave deeds. All girls had to do was stay at home and learn to spin and weave mats and make rain hats. Then when the soldiers came on leave from the army, the girls dressed up in their best clothes, would









yards of velvet round their waist and put on all their gold ornaments.

Masina looked at Bir Subha and thought that even though she was his sister, she might be pretty enough for Babu and Ama to arrange a good marriage for her when she grew up.

The Gurung custom was for the mothers and fathers to choose the brides and grooms for their sons and daughters. For the boys who would inherit good land and flocks, and for the girls whose families could give them money and gold jewellery, there was no difficulty in arranging good marriages. "But for me it will be different," Masina thought. "I shall have to be a soldier."

He knew that his family did not own enough land or money for him and his brother and sister to make good marriages if he stayed at home. And since he was the eldest son, it fell to him to increase the family fortunes by becoming a soldier and sending home his pay. For only a moment Masina wished he were Purna who did not have to think so much about being a soldier because his older brother already was one, and because his family had enough land and flocks for everyone.

"Masina," Ama called, "are you ready for your rice? Why are you sitting like the hump on a bullock's back when I am fetching food?"

"I am not running for the sake of my stomach," Masina answered and sliced a stalk of bamboo to show this woman that a man could wait.

But he had to swallow hard on the words that rose in his throat as Ama set the rice down on the porch and went inside the house. He wanted to say something to her so that when she made the family puja in the early morning she would ask their household god to protect him well and give him the strength to become a soldier. Yet he guessed that Ama always said some special prayers for him, her oldest son, when she made the puja before the niche in the wall where one small stone sat to show the presence of their ancestral god. All he could do was hope that in the new year his stars were set in a course to bring him courage and adventure.

Then the delicious smell of steaming rice filled his nose, his mouth watered and he couldn't sit still any longer. He hopped up on to the porch, dug his hand into the mound of white rice and with the first mouthful he promptly forgot all his serious thoughts.

Eating made Masina remember there would soon be a fair where he could buy his favourite food: round twists of sel, a sweet, crisp bread. The village where the fair was held was only a three-hour walk away and Masina meant to ask Babu if he and Purna could go there by themselves. Since they were allowed to walk alone to other villages nearby, Masina felt sure Babu would say "Yes" and let them go a little farther to the fair.





## CHAPTER FOUR

MASINA and Purna stood on a bluff looking down on the village where the fair was held. The wind sang softly through the trees above them and they listened, expecting to hear the drums, and the shouts and clapping hands of people urging on the dancers at the fair. But only the faint voice of a woman, shouting at a cow to get out of the corn, floated to them on the quiet air.

Anxiously they grabbed each other's hands as they started down the hill toward the village. When they reached the wide path that led into the bazaar, their hearts sank. No drummers or dancers were in sight; no men lifting heavy stones in contests of strength were anywhere to be seen. Most of the straw-roofed stalls set up for the fair were empty and only a few merchants had their wares – cigarettes and matches, bangles, bits of cloth, and celluloid dolls – still spread before them on the ground to attract customers.

Masina glanced round for at least a stall with his favourite sweet bread,



sel, but even the man who sold the sel was gone. So he pulled Purna toward the tea-seller and they settled dejectedly on their heels in front of him to buy a glass of tea and think things over.

The tea-seller saw their glum faces and said, "Yes, boys, the fair was finished yesterday. Some of us have stayed today to settle our accounts."

At those final words such a lump of disappointment rose in Masina's throat that he couldn't say anything or even look at Purna. This was the first time that he and Purna had been allowed to go to a fair alone and they had arrived a day too late!

"But cheer up, boys," the tea-seller urged. "Since you have missed the fun here, why don't you go on to Pokhara? Pokhara is a big place with much more to see than there is here in this small village."

Masina's eyebrows shot up at the impossibility of such a suggestion. But the tea-seller laughed. He straightened his hat carefully and smoothed his moustache.

"Why not?" he asked, frowning suddenly. "Gurung boys like you would not be frightened of ghosts you might meet along the way, would you? Why, I don't think a Mathkata, the ghost that carries its head under its arm, has been seen along the trail to Pokhara since the last monsoon."

Purna choked and coughed as if he had suddenly swallowed a gulp of scalding tea, but Masina kept his eyes steady and straight on the tea-seller.

"Gurungs show no fear, so why should ghosts worry them?" he said.

"Did I suggest such a thing?" the tea-seller answered smoothly. "You are quite right. If the smell of fear is not about you, even a Bhakunde will leave you alone."

"A Bhakunde?" Masina asked.

"Why, you must have heard of the Bhakundes along the trails," the tea-seller answered. "They come out only after darkness falls when no one travels except the foolish man who has not found his destination in good time. Then the Bhakunde, in the shape of a large ball, overtakes him and gets between his legs so the man cannot move and when he tries to take a step he falls down – right off the side of the mountain. It is most unusual for anyone ever to get a Bhakunde out from between his legs and escape. However, if the man is able to disguise his fear and stay standing up, he may get home alive. Then he must go immediately to the lama-jhankari and ask the lama-jhankari to say some mantras for him to save him from the wrath of the Bhakunde."

A mantra is a powerful phrase which can make good out of evil. Only lamas and lama-jhankaris know the magic mantras and by repeating them over and over and doing special secret rites, they can often save a person



from an evil spirit. Lamas know the most mantras, and they know those which can protect a person from the strongest evil spirits. The lama-jhankaris know fewer and more ordinary mantras that are useful against common spells and lesser spirits. In Ghachok there were five lamas and six lama-jhankaris.

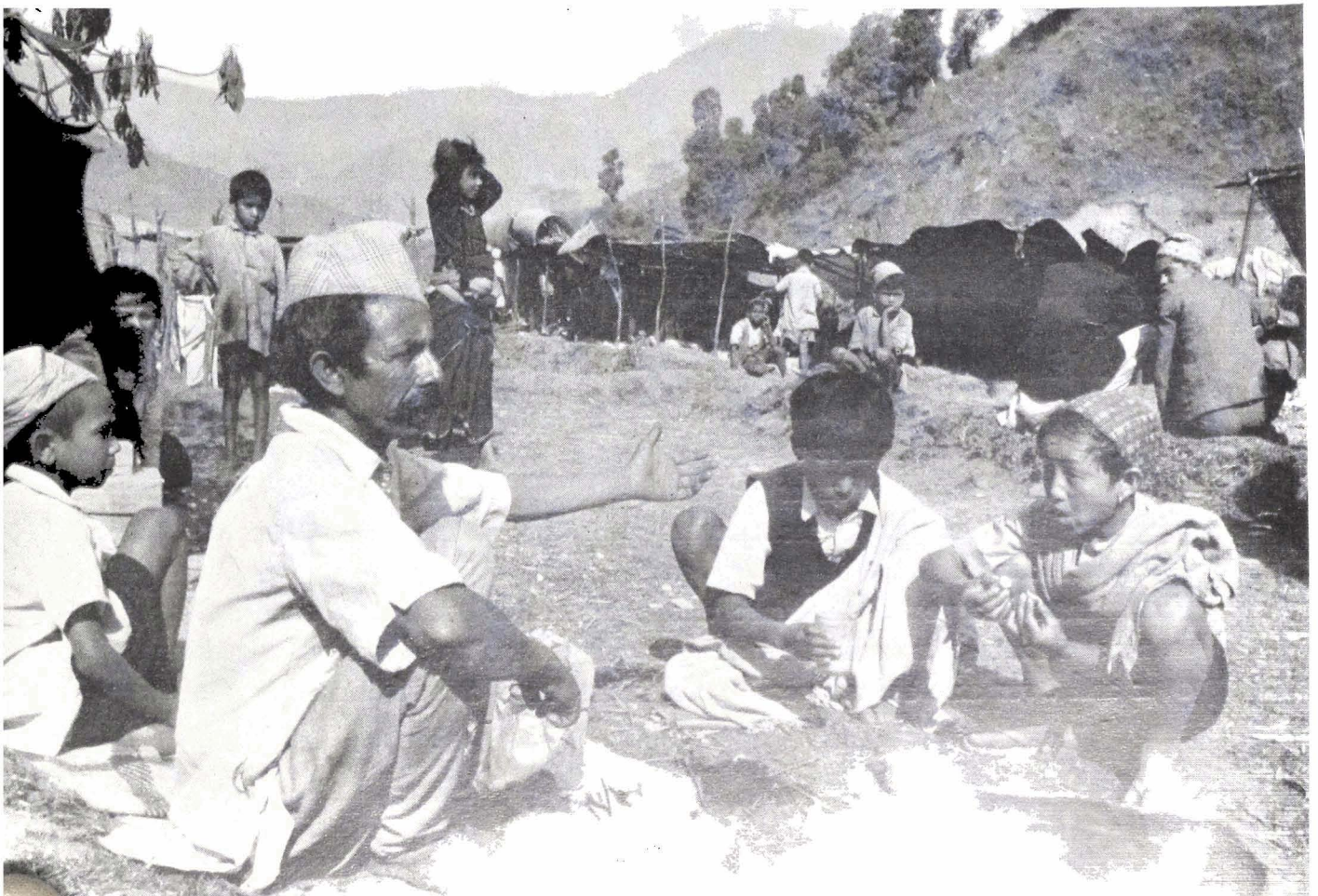
“Of course you boys will not have to worry about the Bhakundes,” the tea-seller continued. “Just spend the night at Yamdi, a village about half-way between here and Pokhara where there is a tea-house, and stay off the trail after dark. It is only after dark that ghosts come out. All you have to look out for in the daylight is a Kichkani, the witch that appears as a woman. But it is easy not to be fooled by a Kichkani because she must always wear her feet backwards.”

“We know the cleverness of the Kichkani,” Masina answered. “But we are not going down the trail to Pokhara. We just came here to see the fair.”

“But you have missed the fair and surely that is a sign to go on,” the tea-seller said.

Masina looked at Purna, but he was busily blowing into his glass of tea.

“Since you are Gurung boys I suppose you want to be soldiers,” the tea-seller said knowledgeably. “Then you should go to Pokhara. You can see plenty of soldiers there. They come down out of the sky in a giant iron bird,” he went on.





Masina's eyebrows shot up again and the tea-seller clucked his tongue and shook his head impatiently.

"It is true," he said. "The soldiers come to Pokhara on leave from the army. They come through the sky in this giant bird that tears at the air with a terrible roar. But when the bird sits on the ground it is quiet and the soldiers climb out of the side of its belly. Then they walk away, into the hills, to their villages to visit their families. Surely you should see this bird before you become soldiers."

He straightened his hat once more and took the money Masina handed him for the glasses of tea. Then he picked up a cloth and snapped it over his glasses to shoo away the flies. It seemed to be a signal that he had finished talking to them.

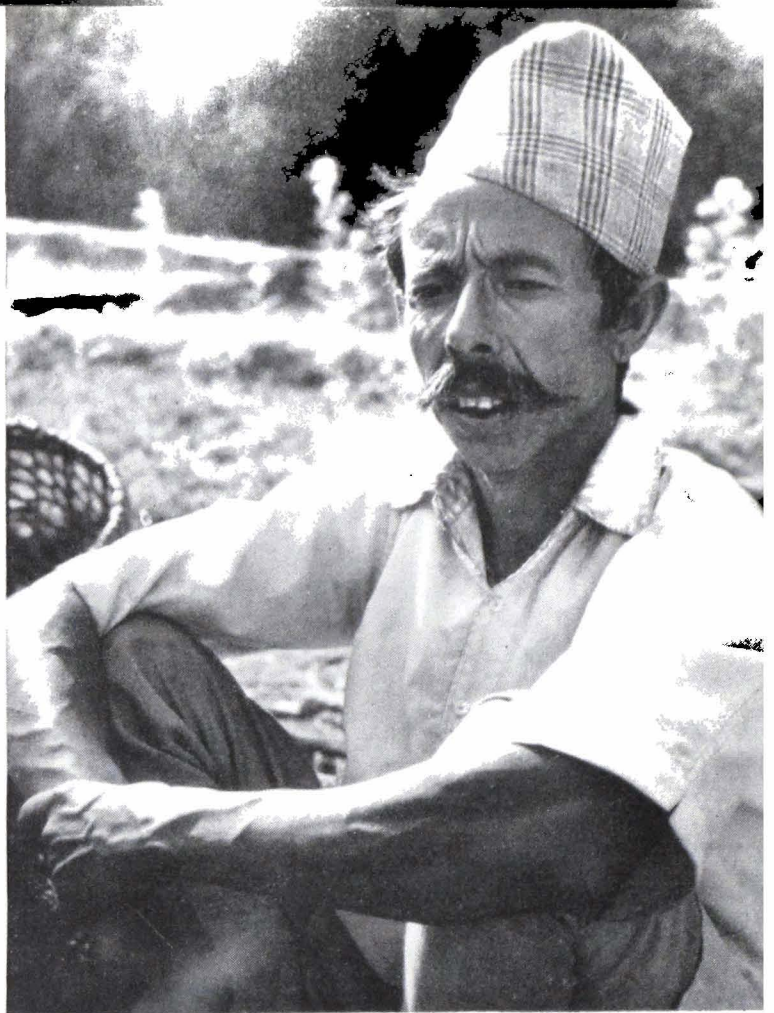
Masina grabbed Purna's hand excitedly and hurried him along the bazaar. "Did you hear him, Purna?" he asked. "Did you hear him say that since the fair was finished here it was a sign for us to go on alone? To go to Pokhara by ourselves to see the soldiers?"

"I don't think he said it just like that," Purna answered and he put his arm around Masina's shoulders. "I'm not sure what he said was a sign and if it was, something else will happen to make us certain." And he squeezed Masina's shoulders gently. "My feet are hot. Let's take a swim in the river before we start back to Ghachok."

Purna sounded so firm Masina didn't dare disagree with him. Besides his mind was in a whirl. What the tea-seller had said seemed so reasonable to him and yet so daring he didn't know what to do. Purna was probably right: if fate were to take them to Pokhara, a clearer sign would come to send them on their way.

He followed Purna to a place in the jungle where they hid their caps and scarves under a rock before they went to swim.

Still trying to straighten out his thoughts, Masina tagged along silently









behind Purna through the village toward the river. He was thinking hard and looking down at the dusty path when suddenly a woman screamed, "Stop!" Her voice seared through him like a bolt of lightning and rooted him to the ground. He saw Purna stopped short, frozen in his tracks. Then Masina saw farther down the path a woman with a wild look staring at them, holding them motionless with her fierce gaze. The silence was spell-binding. Slowly the woman raised her arm and pointed at them; her whole body shook with rage. Masina felt first hot, then cold, and he could not move.

"Begone!" the woman said in a low, awful voice. "Begone!" she repeated, her tone so menacing Masina and Purna trembled from head to toe.

"You are the Gurung boys from Ghachok." Her voice rose with anger. "You let the cows into my corn field! I shall have the evil eye upon you before you reach home!" she shrieked.

Masina and Purna didn't wait to hear more. They turned and fled through the village as fast as they could go. They ran till their chests felt like bursting and, panting and gasping for breath, they collapsed in a heap by the rocks where they had hidden their things in the jungle.

When he caught his breath Masina said, "Did you see her feet? Was she a Kichkani, a witch with her feet on backwards?"

"How could I tell?" Purna answered fearfully. "She appeared so suddenly I don't know where she came from. But I heard what she said."

"So did I," Masina whispered. He picked up some pebbles and rolled them between the palms of his hands. "And I am sure what she said was a sign. We didn't let her cows in the corn. What the tea-seller said was the first sign and the woman was the second sign. It was not meant for us to return to Ghachok now. We would have the evil eye upon us if we did. There is nothing to do but go to Pokhara now."

Purna broke off a dry branch and stirred the yellow leaves lying on the ground with it.

"It is a long way. We don't know the trail." He began to stir the leaves, faster and faster until





they rose and whirled in a frenzied dance. Then he dropped the stick and looked at Masina while the leaves settled back to earth.

“But you are right,” he murmured. “We can’t go home now. May the gods protect us on the trail.” And he sighed such a sad sigh Masina felt sorry for him.

“It is not Saturday, Purna,” he said encouragingly. “So it is safe to start a journey. And if it is our fate to go to Pokhara we have nothing to fear.”

“That is true, but how long will it take?” Purna asked. “We can’t return home on a Tuesday. If we did it would bring us bad luck.”

“We will be careful to count the days, Purna. But we should start right away so we can reach the village of Yamdi before dark.”

They left the jungle and started down the trail, glancing back over their shoulders to see if the woman, or witch if she were one, was following them. No one was in sight. They walked through several very small villages of pink plastered huts with melon or gourd vines growing on their thatched roofs. No one called out or followed them. They began to feel much better and took more notice of the countryside the trail led them through.

The land was much like it was around Ghachok: rocky everywhere, steep hills and small fields with stone walls separating them. In some places the stone walls crossed the trail and were so high Masina and Purna had to climb over them. Then there were stones in the walls that jutted out like steps, or a notched log was propped against the walls to serve as steps over.

But several times the boys came to places where there were no logs or stones to climb on and the wall stopped just short of the edge of a cliff. Masina looked straight down – down so far that the buffaloes pulling the ploughs on the valley floor looked no bigger than beetles. Then the only way to get to the trail on the other side was around the end of the wall. Masina grabbed a gnarled branch growing from a crack between the stones and for a dizzy moment felt as if he were flying as he swung round the end from one side of the wall to the other, at the very edge of the cliff.

Most of the time the trail was downhill, dropping from one small plateau to another, and Masina and Purna passed heavily laden porters climbing up with steady even strides, their feet splayed outward for balance, their strong toes curled to grip the ground. The dokos or baskets on their backs were supported by bands across their foreheads, so their arms were free, and some porters eased their way with walking-sticks.

A porter with a load of wood in his doko looked up at the boys and grinned as he passed. “Okhalo,” he said, and the one word meant that going up it was a very steep tough track.

“Orhalo,” the boys answered politely, meaning it was the same difficult way going down the trail too.







They were slipping more and more on the loose stones and their legs wobbled and bent jerkily the harder they tried to hurry. Sal and shisham trees stood black against the far hills and the shadows grew longer. At last they seemed to have come down as far as they could and they stopped to rest beside a big river.

“It is wider than our Seti River,” Purna said. He spoke softly because it seemed so wild and lonely here and his voice was the only sound in all the open space around them.

“It just seems wider because no one is washing clothes here,” Masina whispered and they stepped closer to each other. They thought of the Seti River in the valley below Ghachok where it was noisy with the splash of boys swimming and women slapping their clothes on the rocks to wash them.

It was so silent here, so out in the open away from familiar fields and sheltering trees. They felt very small and defenceless under the big, darkening sky so they hurried on, following the trail along the banks of the river. They hoped to pass someone but the trail was deserted now. No one would travel after dark and by this time everyone would be close to a place where he could take shelter.

Then suddenly the trail stopped dead at the foot of a mountain. Masina and Purna looked up and up and gasped. Huge stones of grey slate were stacked up to the sky on the very edge of the mountain like a stairway into space. They couldn't see anything at the top but sky and the steps were so









steep, the side of the mountain so sheer, that their knees shook. Yet there was nothing to do but climb.

“Don’t look down,” Masina called back to Purna as he started up. “Just hurry.”

They climbed watching the sky, hoping the light would last until they could get to Yamdi, the village where they might be able to stay in the tea-house. They knew that if they looked down the height might make them dizzy so they would lose their balance. Their hands hurt from grabbing at sharp edges of the cliff wall to help themselves up. They climbed and climbed and still there were more steps ahead of them. Masina did not dare look round to see if Purna were coming, but he could hear him breathing in gasps through his mouth.

Then one last step up and first Masina, then Purna, stood on the brink of the mountain on the one stone slab that was the top: a narrow spot just big enough for both of them. Down, far, far down below them was the Mardi River swirling white and swift. And high over the river swayed a swinging bridge joining the two sides of the trail.

“We should have gone home,” Purna’s voice quavered. “I can’t cross that bridge. Never!”

“We must cross it,” Masina replied weakly. “Yamdi is on the other side and it is getting dark in the gorge.”

Shakily they started down into the gorge, sending showers of pebbles over the side of the mountain as they slipped and slid along the steps.

Then the trail levelled and led up to two stone towers at the edge of the high river bank. Fastened to a big iron ring in each tower were the cables of the bridge. Ropes tied at even spaces all along the cables hung down and were knotted together at the bottom like a net to hold the loose boards laid between them for the walkway of the bridge.

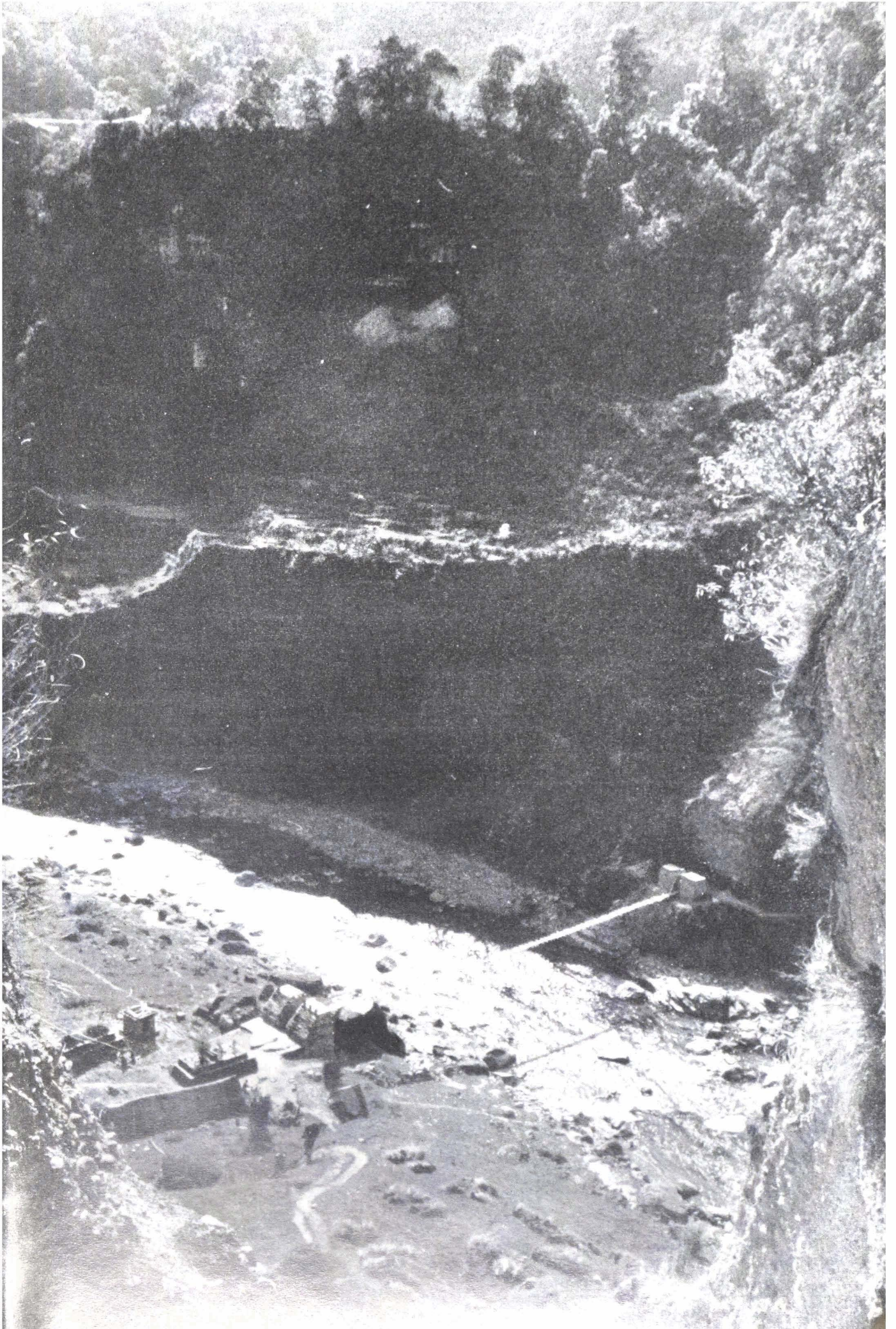
“I can’t cross it,” Purna cried. Masina looked up. The sky was darkening and fluffy white clouds were piling up at the end of the river gorge.

“We can’t wait, Purna. Take my hand,” he said, “and don’t look down. Keep your eyes on my back.”

They stepped out on to the bridge, Masina first and Purna in step behind him. The bridge swayed and Purna gave a little cry. The cables on either side were too high for them to hold on to to steady themselves, and between the loose boards they could see the roaring waters foaming around sharp rocks far below.

They took another step. The bridge swung more and Purna clenched his fingers harder around Masina’s hand. Then slowly they found the right rhythm and by walking in step with an even pace they kept the bridge from







swinging too far to either side. In the middle Masina glanced down through the loose boards to the swirling river below and his stomach dropped like a rock. He seemed suspended in air with nothing to hold on to but Purna's clammy hand. For a moment he thought he would fall; then he looked up at the stone towers on the other side and kept walking.

At last he stepped up on to solid ground and turned to help Purna off the bridge. Purna grinned weakly and two big tears spilled over the rims of his eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

They both looked up. The trail ahead lay along the cliff like a narrow ledge with the cliff side of solid stone slanting out over it so one could scarcely stand up straight as he climbed. Far, far up, at the top of the gorge, they could see there was still a faint light, but it was growing darker around them. Masina thought of the ghosts: of the Mathkata, the Kichkani and the Bhakunde.

"Purna," he cried, "we shall have to sing to scare away the ghosts."

"I have no breath to climb and sing too," Purna objected.

"You must, Purna. You will have no breath to wrestle with ghosts, either. Hurry! The village of Yamdi can't be too far away now."

So, stumbling and singing, the boys scrambled up the stony trail out of the darkening gorge and into the dusky light of the level land at the top. Without stopping to catch their breaths they raced along the winding trail. It grew darker and darker. Trees beside the trail turned into brown silhouettes and then blended into a wall of darkness. Finally, when it seemed they could not run a step farther, Masina and Purna rounded a sharp bend and there before them flickered the few small lights of the tiny village of Yamdi.





## CHAPTER FIVE

**Y**AMDI was a small village by a river where rushing waters turned a mill wheel that ground millet and wheat into flour. Delicious little fish called phaketa were caught in the quiet pool at the top of the small waterfall. There were only a few houses: two-storied, built right against one another and crowded closely on either side of the trail. Yamdi was the first village on the trail north from Pokhara where a traveller could stop and buy some food and tea.

Masina and Purna had no trouble finding the tea-house because the ground floors of all the other houses were occupied by animals: buffaloes, cows, chickens, and a pig or two and even a horse in one. They smelt the animals and heard them shift and make soft noises in the darkness. But the door of the tea-house stood open and Masina and Purna looked in at the cosy fire on the floor in a corner. They waited for the woman in front of it to see them.

She was proprietress of the tea-house, a woman from the Thakali tribe







near the border of Tibet. She wore a purple blouse and her scarlet sari was wrapped round her waist. Her head was covered with a tight scarf, but her long black plait hung down her back and ended in a red yarn tassel below her waist. Rows of tiny gold earrings, fastened clear round the outer edges of her ears, glittered and flashed as she turned her head towards the door.

“Who is there?” she cried. “Two boys! Why are you out at night?”

“We are travelling to Pokhara,” Masina replied.

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“Step up and stick out your tongues,” she ordered.

Obediently Masina and Purna stepped up on the wooden doorstep and stuck out their tongues to show they were not black like the tongues of Tibetan devils. Tibetans greet one another by sticking out their tongues to assure each other that they are not allied with the evil one.

When the woman saw the boys’ pink tongues she smiled. Then, remaining in a squatting position with her knees straight out from her hips and her scarlet sari draped over them to the floor, the woman seemed to glide sideways. She picked up a wooden spoon, slid back to the corner and stirred a pot on an iron stand in the corner.

“Come in,” she said.

Masina hesitated and ran his toe along the wooden threshold.

“We have no money now,” he said. “But when we become soldiers we shall walk this way many times. Then we will bring you more rupees than we owe you if you will give us food and let us rest here tonight.”

The woman threw back her head and the rows of glittering golden earrings shook violently as she laughed.

“Small featherless birds become eagles, after all. You may have some tea and spend the night beneath my roof. I shall remember you.”

Gratefully Masina and Purna settled down on a straw mat in the corner opposite the fire. The woman took a small wooden churn banded with brass down from one of the shelves set in the plastered wall. She poured some hot water into the churn, tossed in a few tea-leaves and added some ghee or boiled butter, and a few spices. The boys watched, fascinated, as she put the dasher in the churn, pressed the lid firmly in place and plunged the dasher up and down vigorously for a few minutes. They had never seen a churn before.

“This is Tibetan tea,” she said as she poured each boy a tall glass.

With both hands around the warm glasses they raised them to the level of their faces to show their thanks and then they sipped the tea. It was very hot and good, and its warmth spread through them. Their eyelids became so



heavy they could hardly hold them open. Masina watched the man on the mat next to them crack peanuts and feed them to two small, fluffy, white Lhasa terriers. Then his eyes closed and he was almost asleep sitting up with his glass in his hand when he heard angry voices rise from the other side of the room.

Both Masina and Purna jerked round and looked over their shoulders. A group of card players were sitting on the floor round a kerosene lantern and they had started to argue. Masina and Purna had scarcely noticed them before.

Now one man shouted above the rest, "I tell you it is so. My cousin-brother came from Pokhara only today. The aeroplane brings the soldiers to Pokhara on leave. And the soldiers themselves say that a man can no longer become a Gurkha by proving he has a strong body and is willing to serve obediently in the army. No," the man's voice became more shrill. "Now a man must pay some scoundrel to get his name upon a list before the army will even examine him."

"Your cousin-brother hears with false ears."

"Or perhaps he tells you this story and asks for money so he can gamble in Pokhara," another voice answered.

The rest of the men laughed uproariously and slapped the first speaker on the back. But Masina listened and felt afraid.

"What if the man is right about the list?" he whispered to Purna.

"Thai-chhaina - don't know," Purna answered and he lay down on the mat and went to sleep immediately. Masina lay beside him and looked up at the sooty black ceiling. Baskets, bunches of onions, chillies and chicken feet hung from the beams, and the card players' shadows flickered over them, huge and menacing. He tried to think things out but his eyes smarted from the smoke of the fire in the corner and he had to keep closing them.

The next thing Masina knew, a cock was crowing and it was morning. He and Purna washed and quickly ate the rice the woman gave them. Then they hurried on their way, hoping to reach Pokhara in time to see the great iron bird called an aeroplane come down out of the sky. Maybe the aeroplane would bring a soldier who could finally settle all their questions about how to become Gurkhas.

The trail was over flatter country now and porters told them it was their own Seti River they were following. Some of the porters were walking as far as thirteen to fifteen days away from Pokhara and they carried cloth, sugar, salt, matches, cigarettes, chillies, spices, kerosene oil, shoes and soap to the small interior villages. Masina and Purna met Bhotiya traders with their pack trains of little brown mules, and once while they stopped to rest











a trader told them that sometimes smugglers travelled this trail. He said they came from Manangbhot and smuggled jewels from the thrones of the gods and that the smallest gem would bring a price higher than the boys would believe.

They passed Tibetan women, carrying children on their backs, who turned and looked at them curiously. But they did not feel they had to greet the Tibetans by sticking out their tongues; it was not a Gurung custom and now it was daylight and the trail was full of travellers.

Bold myna birds hopped and scolded among the purple primulas and white anemones at the side of the trail and Masina answered them, but all the time he was thinking about what the card players had said in the tea-house at Yamdi. Yellow sunbirds, orange fly-catchers and scarlet minivets flashed between the trees, and Purna pointed to a graceful bul-bul balancing with his long, sweeping, forked tail on a slim twig, but Masina scarcely noticed.

At a chautara, a stone seat built round two shady trees, the boys stopped to rest again. The chautara enclosed a pipal tree and a banyan tree. The banyan's long, free-hanging roots strung down from its branches so thickly they could not see through them to the other side of the chautara. Porters sat beside them, resting their dokos, or baskets, on the top ledge of stones while they smoked small, brown cigarettes. Masina and Purna were too tired now to talk to the porters. The trail seemed to go on for ever and their legs ached.





But the sun was still high above their heads when, at last, they walked into Pokhara.

“How big the houses are,” Purna said. “But where are the people?”

They saw no one. They passed houses and shops and more houses and shops and still not a person was in sight.

“Pokhara has the longest bazaar in Nepal,” Masina said hopefully. “Maybe everyone has gone to a market at the other end.”

Purna looked at him in dismay and just then they heard the noise of drums and the clashing of cymbals, faintly at first, but coming closer, right up through the bazaar of Pokhara toward them. In a few moments a great crowd of people surged round the corner and in their midst Masina could see they were carrying a palanquin, and in it was Ganesh, the elephant-headed god, his pink neck garlanded with marigolds.

Masina stared with horror. He had forgotten today was Lord Ganesh’s birthday – the day he was carried from house to house to receive offerings. Then Ganesh bestowed his blessings for prosperity and promised to use his powers as a remover of obstacles for the householders who worshipped him. No one ever started a new venture without asking Lord Ganesh’s blessing and Masina had forgotten all about the elephant-headed god who had such powers.

“Purna,” he cried. “It is Ganesh’s birthday! What shall we do?”

“Thai-chhaina – don’t know.”

Purna’s voice sounded so small and tired that Masina held back his impatient retort and pleaded instead, “Purna, don’t you see? We have started on a new venture and we haven’t asked Ganesh to bless us. Now it is his birthday. Surely he will be angry.”

“How could we ask him?” Purna said reasonably. “When the woman at the fair put the evil eye on us, all we could do was leave for Pokhara right away. So how can he be angry? Keep back, Masina, and Lord Ganesh won’t even see you.”

Wearily they watched the procession of singing, dancing, shouting people wind in front of them. People filled the small street and others leaned over balconies to throw down flowers and to call greetings to the gay beloved god, Ganesh. The crashing of cymbals and beating of drums rose to a deafening pitch each time Ganesh stopped at a house. The householders made their pujas to him, received their tika marks of red powder on their foreheads from the priests, and then the elephant-headed god was moved on in his palanquin.

As the crowd carried Lord Ganesh down the bazaar away from them, Masina nudged Purna to move on, but Purna sat down suddenly on a large stone in front of a shop.



“My feet are shouting stop!” he moaned.

He stretched his legs straight out in front of him and rolled his feet outward, toes up.

“They won’t go a step farther,” he said with finality.

Masina looked at Purna in desperation.

“But we are here. We are in Pokhara. All we have to do is find the soldiers. Come on, Purna, you are my ‘mit’ brother. You can’t desert me now!”

“I’m not deserting you. I’m just not going on.”

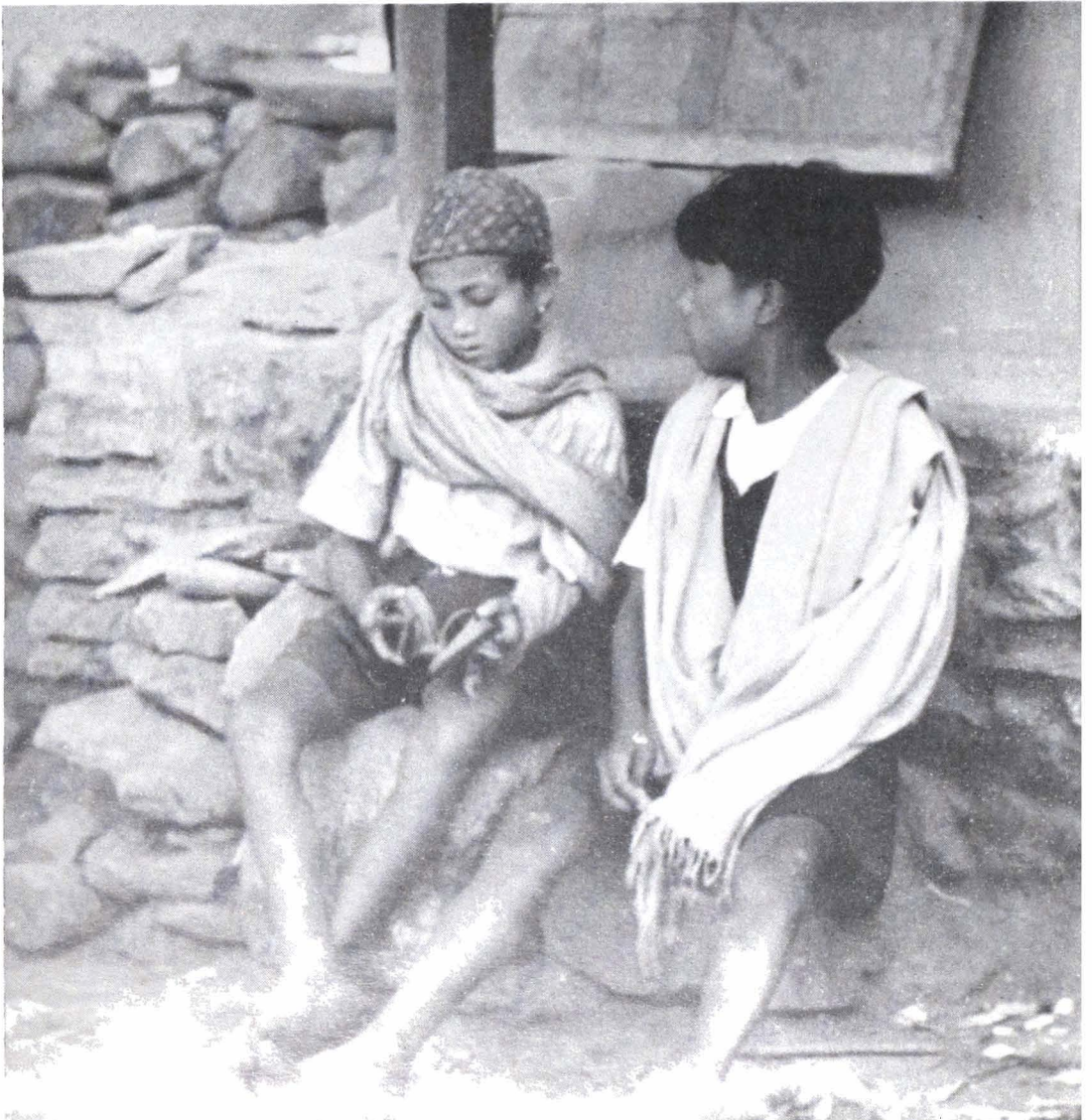
Masina sighed and sat down heavily beside him. He wound his woollen scarf round his neck, then picked up some scraps of wood and clapped them together.

“We can’t stay here,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because we shall fall asleep and there is no wall to protect us from the wind.”

“I could sleep sitting up in a storm,” Purna groaned, but he got up and shuffled on behind Masina.









They walked and walked; the bazaar went on and on. Finally Masina felt he could not go another inch and he flopped down on some steps. Purna sprawled beside him. Neither of them knew how long they had been lying on the steps – maybe they had slept, they were not sure – before they realized that a man was standing in front of them looking down. They sat up fearfully. Purna blinked and then exclaimed, “Uncle!” but he was still too tired to stand up and greet his uncle as he should have done.

“Purna! Are you lost?” his uncle asked in an amazed tone.

“My parents are in Ghachok,” Purna answered timidly.

“Have you permission to be in Pokhara without them?”

Masina and Purna moved closer together and looked down at the ground.

Purna’s uncle was so surprised that for a moment he could not speak. But when he recovered from the shock of finding the boys in Pokhara without their parents, he scolded them so much that Masina was afraid he would beat them next. But he seemed to wear himself out with his shouting and ended it all by saying, “I will certainly send you both back to Ghachok in the morning with a porter going up the trail!”

Masina’s heart sank and he wondered if he should run away now. But he did not know where to go in Pokhara and besides he was almost too tired to move. He just managed to struggle up and follow behind Purna and his uncle through the bazaar to a small two-storied house squeezed between two more houses just like it. Inside the house the smell of cow dung was strong, and as he climbed the ladder-like stairs to the living-quarters, Masina looked down and thought he saw a buffalo cow and her calf in the darkness, on the ground floor.

All through the evening meal Purna’s uncle told his family about how he had found the boys lying on some shop steps and how he expected their parents would beat them well when he sent them home. Everyone but Purna and Masina enjoyed the story very much.

At last it was time to sleep. The family took down their mats and Purna’s uncle gave one to the boys. They rolled up in blankets and stretched out on the floor, feeling their tiredness like weights in their arms and legs.

“You see, Masina,” Purna mumbled sleepily. “Ganesh is not angry with us. He let uncle find us and we can walk back to Ghachok with a porter so we will be safe from ghosts along the trail. And my parents won’t beat me. Will yours?”

But before Masina could answer, Purna fell asleep. Masina turned down the wick in the kerosene lantern until there was just a small arc of flickering light. Then he lifted the warm glass chimney and blew out the tiny flame. He lay back with his eyes open, dead tired, but not sleepy, and listened to the heavy





breathing of the uncle and his family. Slowly it came to his mind what he would have to do.

It was certain Purna would go no farther on this adventure. He wanted to walk back to Ghachok in the morning. So Masina knew he had to go on alone. He couldn't stop now, after he had climbed those steps to the sky, crossed that swinging bridge high above the Mardi River, finally reached Pokhara, and escaped the wrath of the elephant-headed god, Ganesh. He just could not go home until he found a Gurkha soldier he could trust, to tell him the truth about how to become a soldier. Sure at last of what he would do, Masina fell asleep hoping he would wake in the morning before Purna's uncle or any of his family.



## CHAPTER SIX

MASINA heard a calf moo, then the heavy sound of hoofs below him and it was quiet again. He opened his eyes. It was still dark. Purna, his uncle and the family were still asleep. Slowly, carefully, Masina slipped out of his blanket, crawled to the top of the stairs and crept down them. On the ground floor he felt his way in the darkness, out past the buffalo cow feeding her calf, and into the early morning light of the street.

Quickly he walked through the deserted bazaar. The ground was cool on his feet and the dawn air fresh and sweet. Already women were getting water at the well, their brass vessels glinting golden in the early sunlight. But the women were quiet like the morning, not wide enough awake to gossip and call out questions to a passing boy as they would have done later in the day.

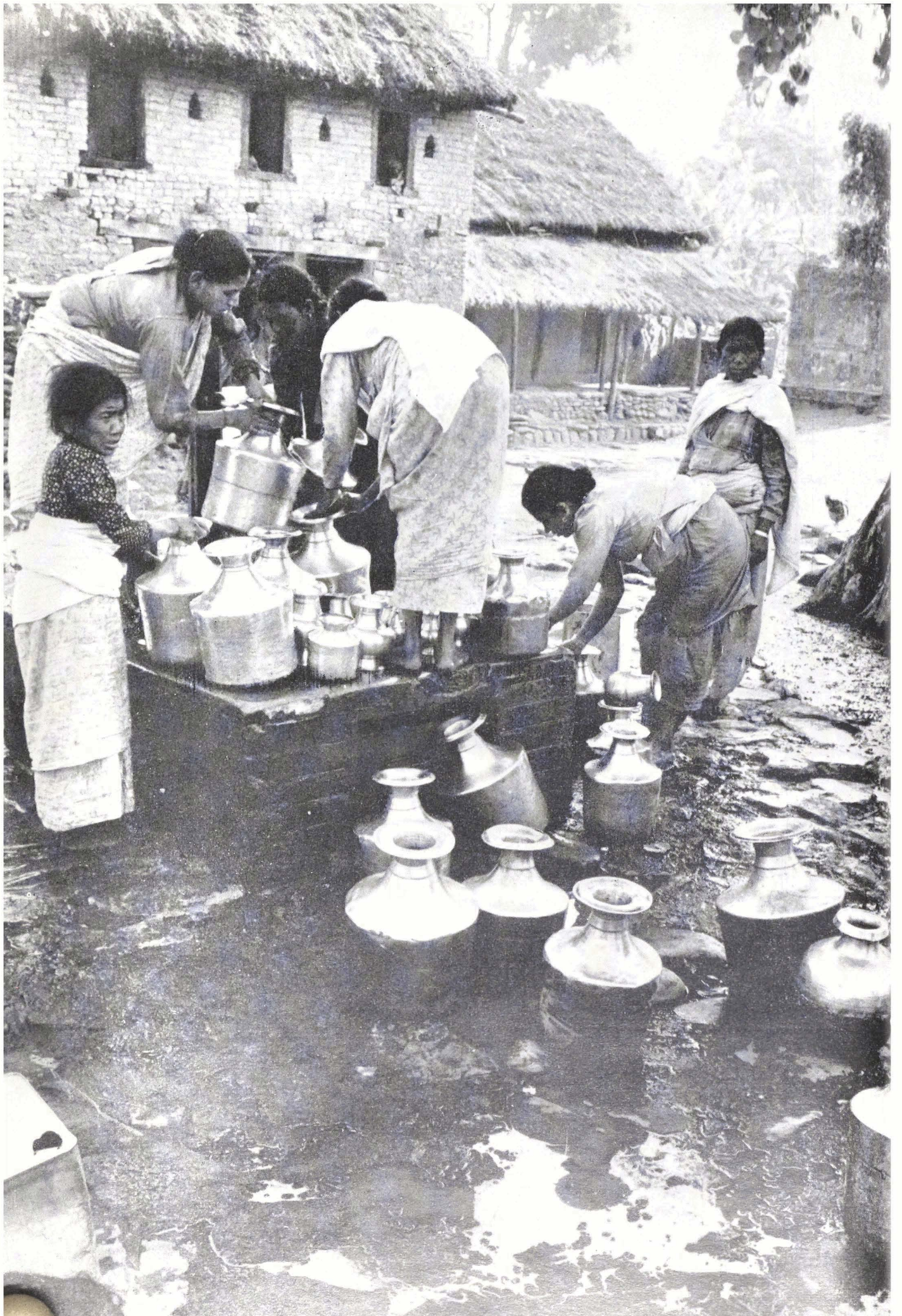
At the edge of Pokhara was a small hill and on top of it Masina saw a lone soldier silhouetted against the sky. He hurried up the steep, rocky path, his heart thumping hard against his chest.

What luck to find a soldier so soon and one who was standing all alone so that he could talk to him!

When Masina reached the top of the hill, the soldier was standing with his













arms behind him, next to a straw-roofed shelter. He was staring straight ahead and did not move or seem to notice as Masina edged closer. Masina's heart was pounding wildly now; he was so near!

He straightened up, clasped his hands behind his back and looked up into the face of the Gurkha soldier.

But the soldier remained rigid. Not by any sign did he show that he had seen Masina. There was not a sound on the hill; the soldier did not even seem to breathe. Time passed and still the soldier stood motionless, staring out over Pokhara. Masina did not dare move and in the strange silence he could not speak. Then a clammy sweat covered him. Perhaps he was under a spell and the soldier could not see him! Maybe the woman in the village who had shouted at him and Purna had finally found out where he was and had made a powerful lama put the evil eye upon him! Perhaps the soldier was not real, but put there just to trap him!

Flashes of fright shot through him and Masina turned on his heels and fled down the other side of the hill.

At the bottom he sat down panting and shaking. Suddenly a rumbling noise filled his ears. It was faint at first, but rapidly grew louder. Masina raced up the ridge in front of him and looked round frantically. The ridge he was on ran along the edge of a big, grassy field where buffaloes were grazing. He saw a man at the side of the field take hold of a handle on a stand which held a loud-speaker shaped like a horn.

The man cranked the handle vigorously and the wail of a siren floated out of the loud-speaker, softly at first but quickly growing to a piercing scream.

The buffaloes raised their heads at the siren's sound and lumbered off the field. Masina clapped his hands over his ears and looked up.

Floating down from the sky, between the hills at the far end of the field, came a great silver bird, the aeroplane, just as the tea-seller had said. Its roar filled the air until even the siren could scarcely be heard. Then the aeroplane bumped down at the edge of the grassy field and changed its sound. Masina saw it had wheels which touched the ground and bounced up a few times before they settled down to carry the aeroplane to the other end of the field, turn it round and bring it back to a stop near a large banyan tree where a crowd of people waited in the shade.

Masina kept his eyes on the aeroplane as he raced along the ridge towards the banyan tree. Running full tilt, he dodged round a boulder and almost bumped into four soldiers who were looking down into the field too. Their backs were to him and Masina could see very clearly the two kukhris that each soldier wore on his belt. The soldiers rested their rifles on the ground









and held them by the barrels. Masina was so close he could see that their khaki uniforms were made of strong smooth material and that their hats sat on their heads at a stiff, proud angle. In that moment of looking at them, the ache to be a soldier swept through Masina again, strong as a sharp pain.

Then he backed away a bit, made a detour to avoid them and ran on as fast as he could go.

The people under the big banyan tree were beginning to fan out into the field now that the noise of the aeroplane had stopped.





Some Tibetan women twirling their prayer wheels in their hands stood on the chautara or stone seat around the tree, and Masina climbed up beside them to see better.

He watched, wide-eyed, as a door on the side of the aeroplane was opened and a jumble of boxes and bed-rolls flew out into a heap upon the ground. Then two men rolled some steps on wheels up to the side of the aeroplane and Gurkha soldiers came scrambling down the steps, laughing, shouting and waving to their families and friends who rushed forward to meet them.







Porters swarmed round the pile of bed-rolls, knapsacks and boxes and carried them closer to the banyan tree where they set them down in smaller separate heaps. People scurried back and forth, jostling each other, joking and calling out directions. Proud wives waited while their soldier husbands collected their gear and handed them shiny new kerosene lanterns, bundles of cloth, boxes of cigarettes and sometimes a flashlight torch and their stout soldier shoes, to carry home.

Masina twisted his hair in strands as he watched. He yanked it so hard it hurt his head. He could not think what to do. He could not let all these soldiers leave without speaking to one of them. Finally he jumped down and elbowed his way through the crowd.

Not far from the aeroplane he saw a group of Gurkhas standing by their piles of gear, talking and looking about. Some leaned on their umbrellas and they did not seem to have any families or friends meeting them. Masina decided they would be the best soldiers to talk to since they were not busy – one of them had such a kind face and seemed to be smiling at him.

He walked toward them quickly, wondering anxiously what to say, and did not see a stray bed-roll on the ground in front of him. His foot hit the bed-roll, he stumbled and, unable to keep his balance, fell full length in front of the surprised soldiers.

“Here! What’s this fly falling at my feet?”

The smiling Gurkha grasped Masina by the shoulders and helped him up. Masina flushed and felt so foolish he wanted to sink out of sight on the spot.

Then he looked up and saw the handsome Gurkha, strong, sure of himself, not angry, but smiling down at him. The ache to be a soldier flooded through Masina again with such force he blurted out in an anguished voice, “Let me be your boy! Give me your blessing so I can be a Gurkha! Get my name on the list to be a soldier. I will serve you for ever!” He stepped back, wrinkled his forehead and waited, hearing nothing but the pounding of his own heart in his ears.

The soldier stroked his chin and smiled. “Where is your village?”





“Ghachok,” Masina whispered. “I am a Gurung.”

“Yes,” the soldier said. “I can see that. Did you leave your village to join the army?”

“No,” Masina answered with growing courage. “I know I am not big enough yet. But I could be your boy.”

“You are too small for that too, Masina,” the soldier said and turned away from him.

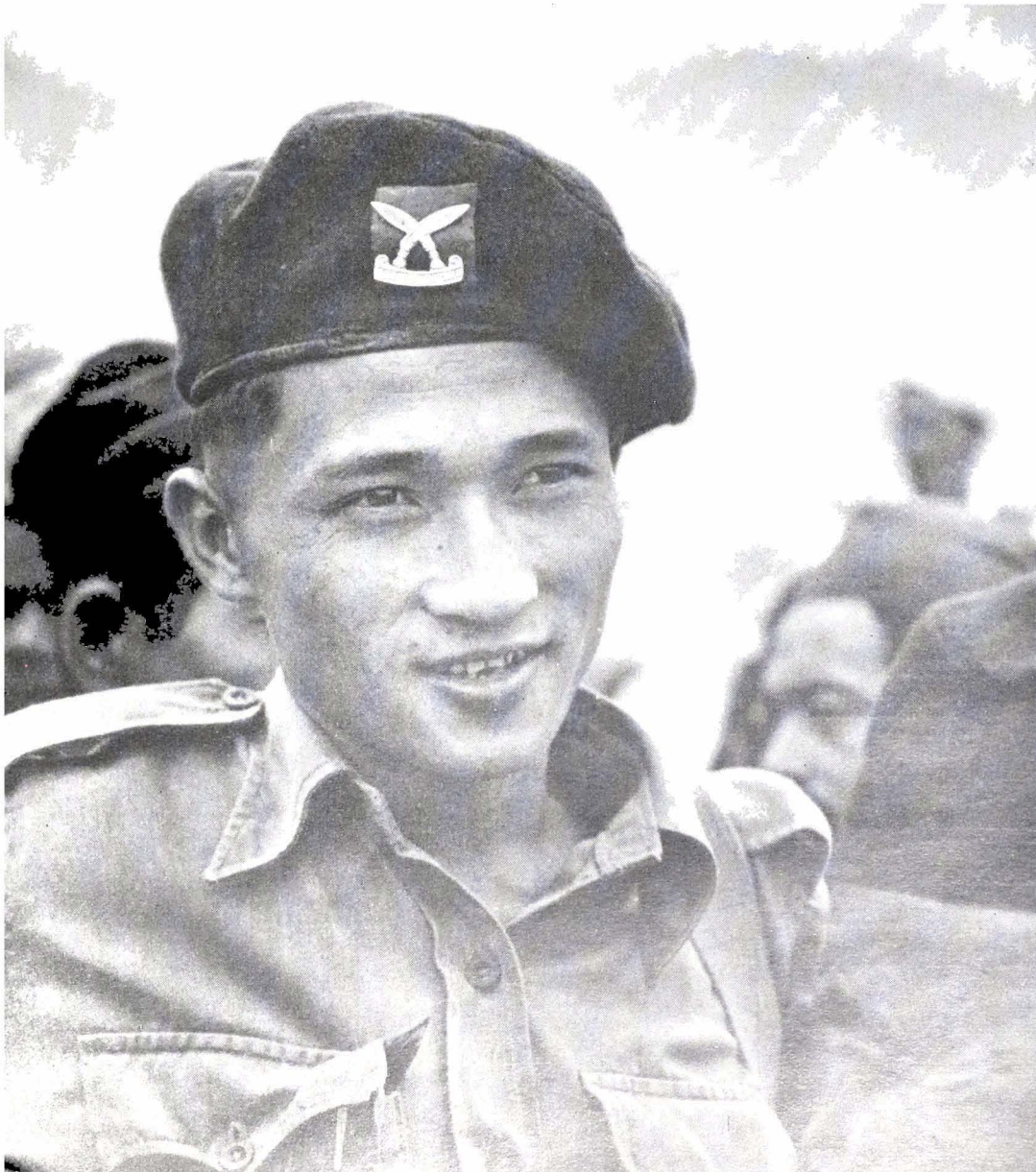
“Wait,” Masina cried, grabbing him by the wrist. “How did you know my name?”

The soldier turned back and laughed loudly.

“You are a skinny Gurung, aren’t you? Masina is what all small Gurungs are called.”

A flood of tears welled up in Masina’s eyes.

“I want to be big enough to be a soldier. Please tell me what to do!” he begged.





“Grow,” the soldier said and ruffled Masina’s hair.

He started to walk away again but Masina caught at his trouser leg and stopped him.

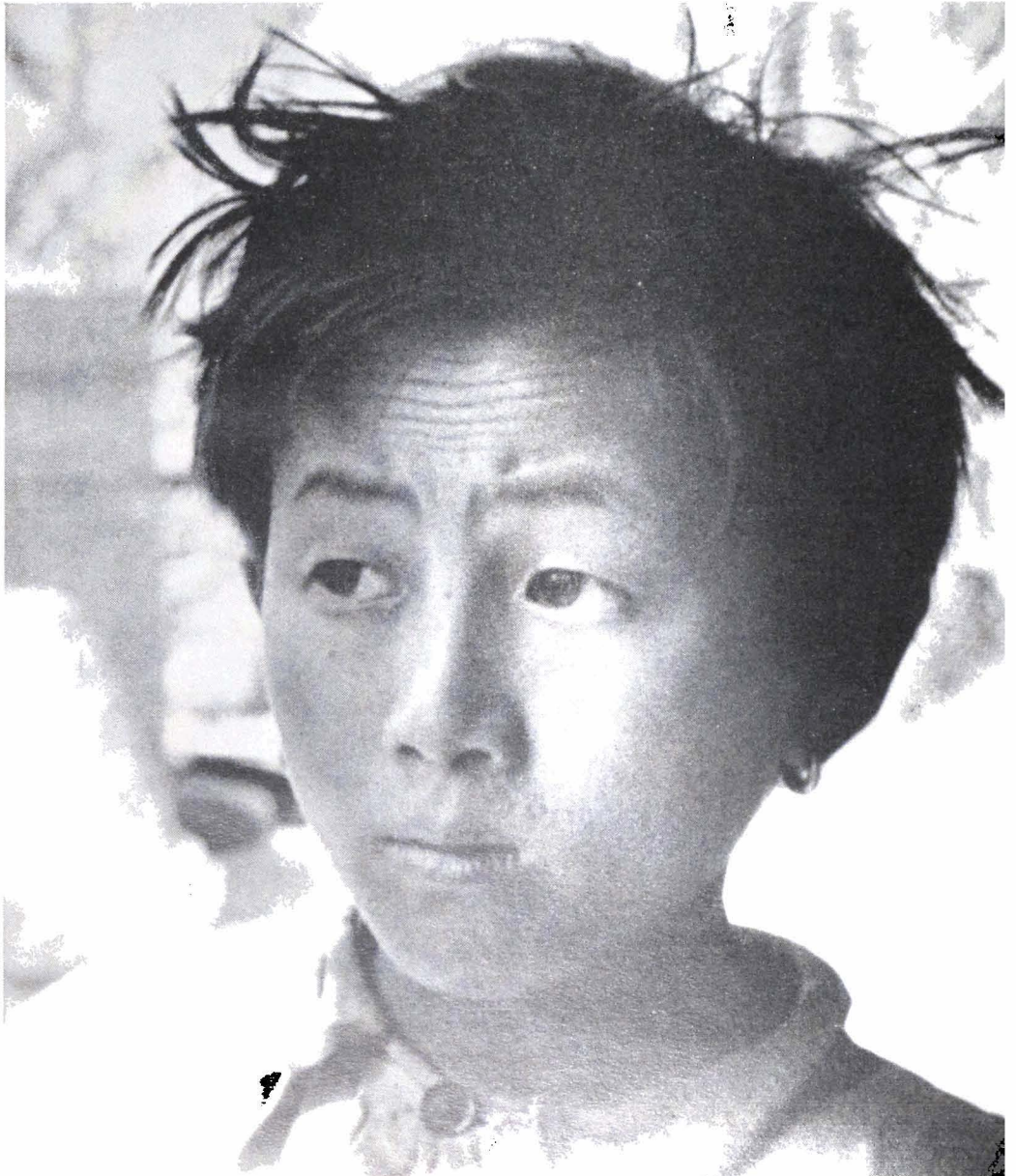
“If the gods will it, I shall grow. But I beg you, get my name on the list to be a soldier!” he pleaded.

“What list do you shout about so wildly?” the soldier asked, amazed at Masina’s distress.

“The one you must pay money to get your name on, so the army doctor will examine you.”

“You have listened to foolish talk, little one,” the soldier said severely. “There is no list and no one pays. To be a Gurkha you must first grow up to be a man: a strong and healthy man willing to serve obediently and with courage. Who tells you such foolish tales about lists?”

“Card players in the tea-house at Yamdi,” Masina said sheepishly and looked at the ground.





He could not meet the soldier's eyes.

The soldier spat and said, "They drink too much rice beer and hear words that were never spoken. How old are you, Masina?"

Masina hesitated.

"I am not sure."

"Well, you are small and thin. Anyone with eyes can see that. But there have been many Masinas in the past who have brought glory to their regiments."

Masina drew circles in the thick dust with his toe, but he could not look up.

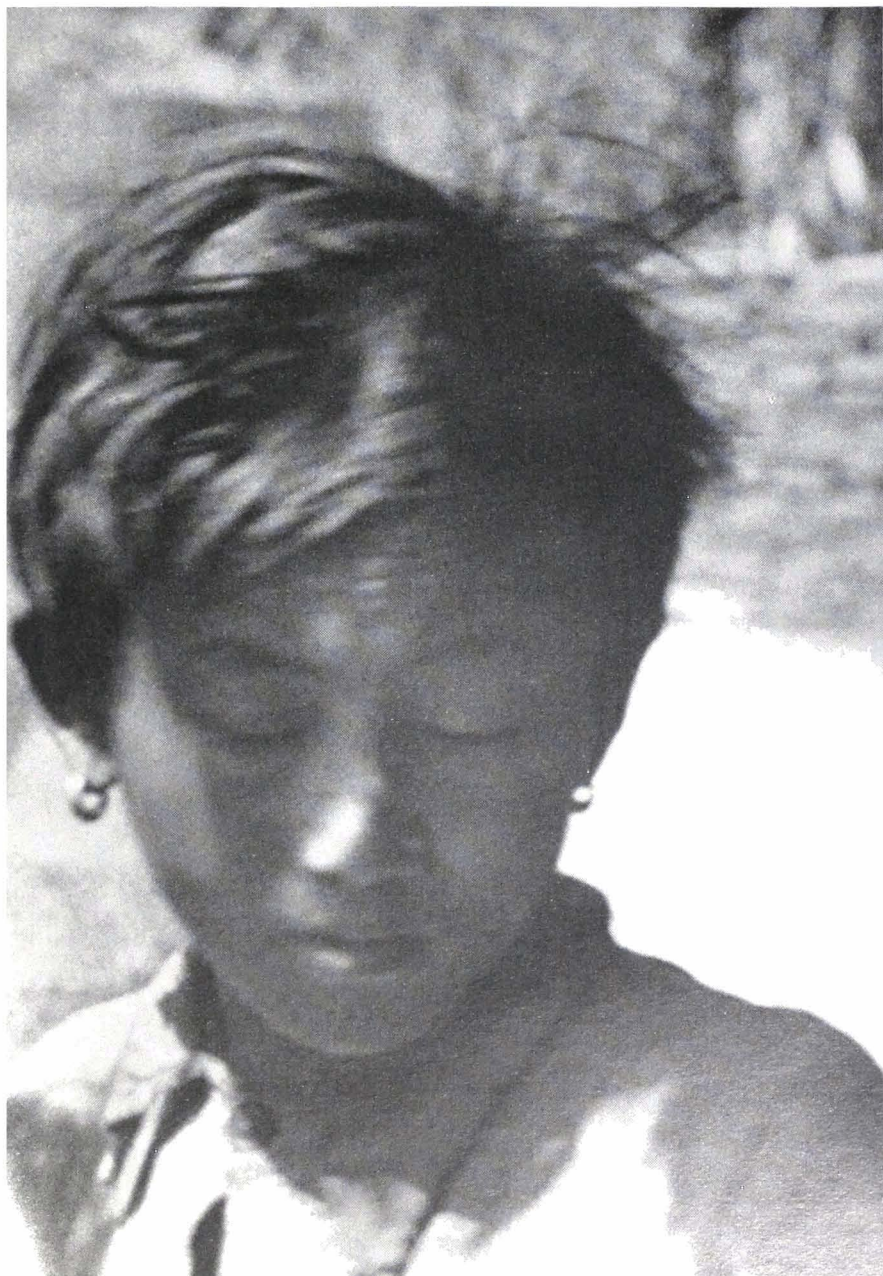
The soldier put his hand on Masina's shoulder and shook him gently. "It is not the length of your stride, but the courage in your heart that makes you a man, Masina."

Masina watched the feet of people walking past him and he blinked hard,

but still he could not look at the soldier and show his wet eyes.

He heard the firm voice speak again. "If you have the courage to go back to Ghachok now, alone, you have the courage to become a Gurkha, Masina."

Then he felt a hand ruffle his hair once more and the soldier turned him around by the shoulders and gave him a little shove in the direction of Pokhara. The jolt it gave him made the tears he had held on to so hard spill over the rims of Masina's eyes. He hated the tears that kept him from looking back at the Gurkhas. Now there was nothing to do but go the way the





soldier had pushed him and he ran – through the crowd, past the banyan tree and up the ridge. At the top he was out of breath and he stopped. He wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands and looked out over Pokhara.

The sun was low in the sky, making long shadows in the bazaar. It was late afternoon and Masina felt more alone than he ever had in all his life. Purna was gone – back to Ghachok – and Masina did not dare go to Purna's uncle's house after he had run away. The soldier had sent him off and said he must go back to Ghachok alone. How could he, alone, escape the ghosts along the trail! How could he cross the swinging bridge, climb the stairs to the sky, and swing round the ends of all those stone fences at the edges of cliffs, by himself! Even if, by some wonderful luck, he should manage to get home, would his father understand or be terribly angry and beat him for going to Pokhara to find out how to be a soldier?

Great gasping sobs rattled through Masina so hard he had to sit down. The sun sank lower, the shadows grew longer and still Masina sat. His eyes stung, his stomach was empty and all he could think of was that he was alone and that he was afraid.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

AT last Masina stood up. He had thought so long his head hurt and then he remembered what the soldier had said: "It is not the length of your stride, but the courage in your heart that makes you a man, Masina."

When he repeated the words it occurred to him that they sounded like a mantra or magic phrase. So he said them over and over and all at once he felt that he could make the trek home to Ghachok alone. He hurried down the hill to the main path through Pokhara, hoping he could walk fast enough to reach the little village of Yamdi before darkness settled, black and final, on the trail.

The Pokhara bazaar was very long and Masina passed Bhotiya traders with their pack trains of sure-footed mules, trailing into the village. Puffing porters jogged past them. But Masina strode rapidly in the opposite direction, out of Pokhara. It was a strange feeling for him to be walking alone. He glanced into the small shops lining the bazaar: open-fronted shops just big enough for the owner and one or two customers to sit cross-legged on the raised floors.

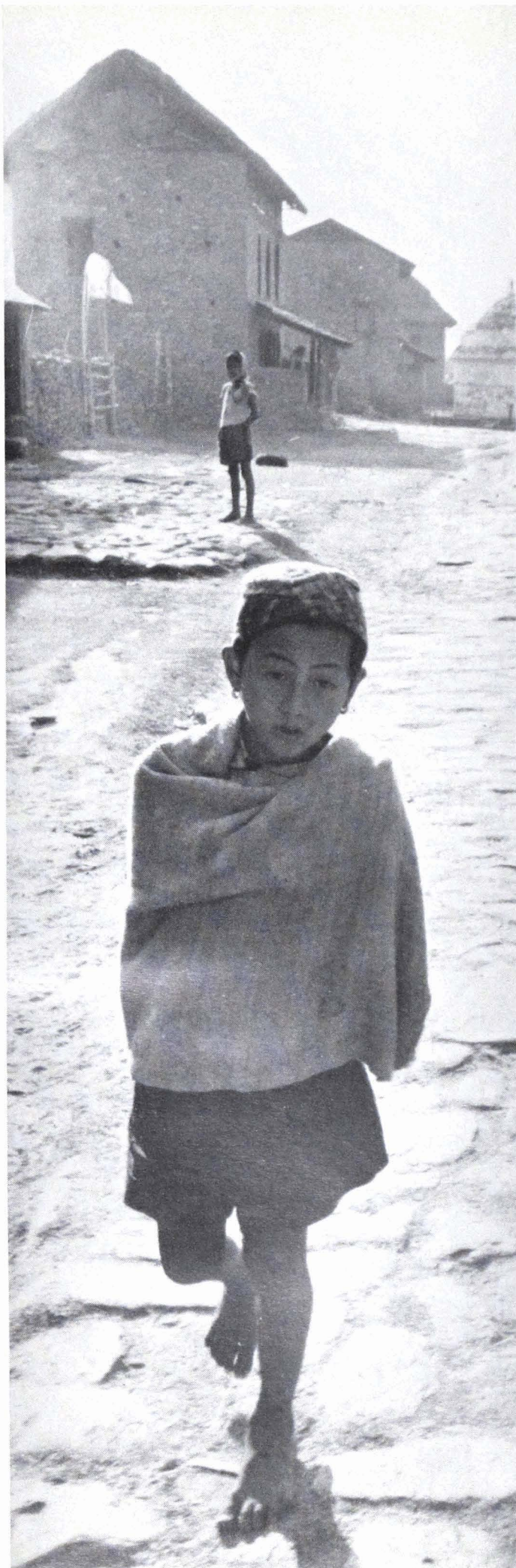
Inside some of the shops kerosene lanterns were being lit. Their soft lights cast a cosy glow on the green or blue walls. Yet it was still light enough for a young man wearing half-glasses to read a newspaper aloud to a group of men sitting beside him on the steps of a larger shop. And he passed wells where small children splashed and played in the water spilt by their mothers as they filled their brass pots for the evening.

Then Masina passed the last big houses in Pokhara. A curious dog sniffed along at his heels. Finally the dog wagged his tail, trotted back into the bazaar and Masina was alone. Ahead of him lay the long trail to Ghachok. He pulled his scarf closer under his chin and wished with all his heart that Purna was with him.

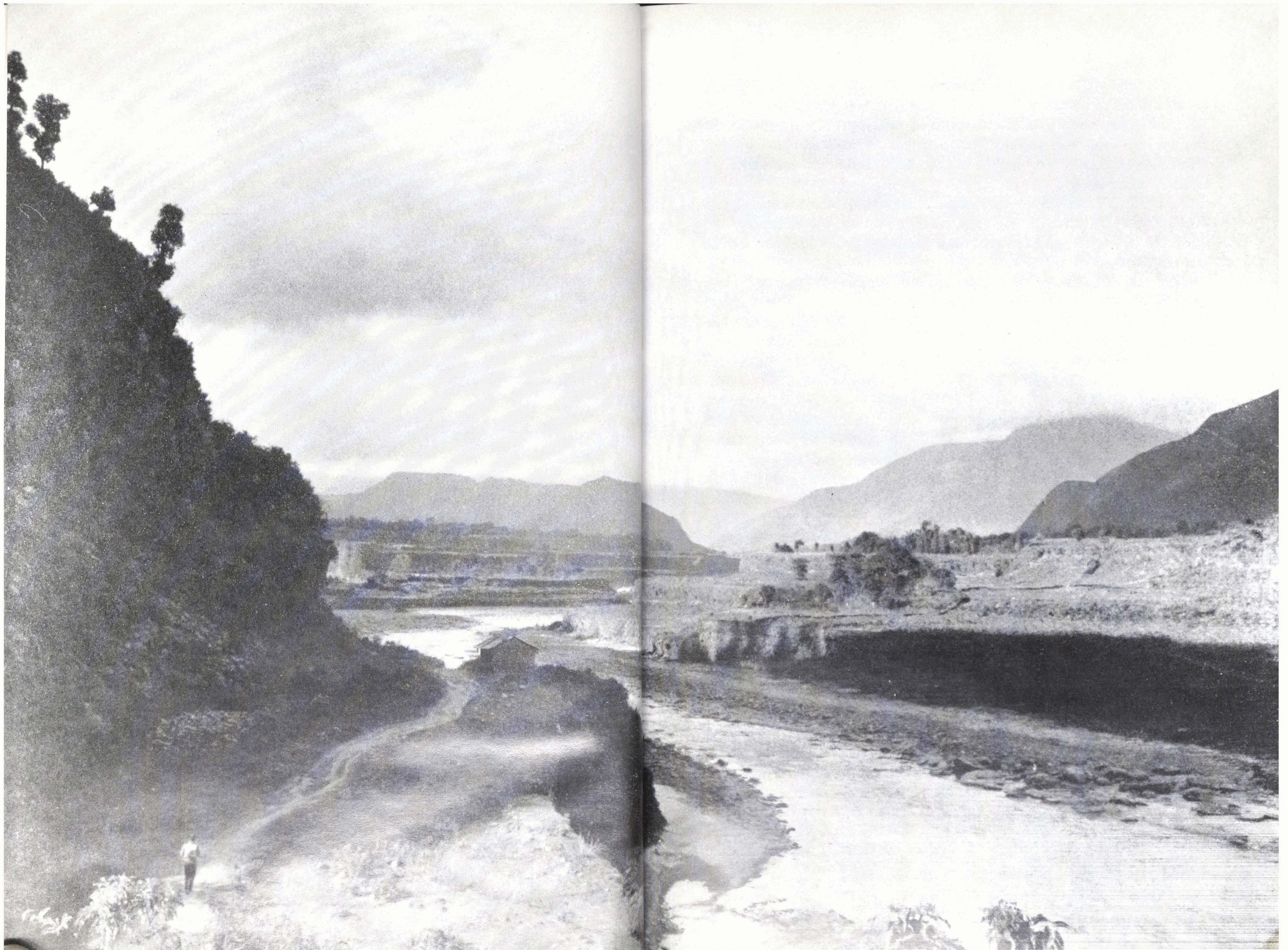
He walked as fast as he could for more than an hour and then he stopped at the top of the long hill out of Pokhara. Before him stretched the Seti River Valley with the trail running along beside the river for a little way and then disappearing around a bluff. Not a person or an animal was in sight.

All the way up the long hill Masina had seen the shining snows of Machha Puchhare. The mountain seemed so close and to think of Ghachok just in front of it helped him feel less lonely. But now thick clouds were rolling in fast, covering Machha Puchhare and other Himalayan peaks on either side.











The only sound in the air was the soft whistle of some bird and the gentle, twilight whirr of insects in the grass.

Masina sighed heavily and started down the trail into the valley. When he was level with the river he longed to plunge his hot, tired feet into the cool water. But he did not dare take the time to stop. "If Purna were with me, I would," he thought.

Then the trail hugged the base of the bluff and Masina felt a chill run through him as he walked into the bluff's cool shadow. The dimness of the trail in the shadow frightened him. So little time was left to get to Yamdi before dark!

He tried to walk faster, but the pull of the muscles in the backs of his legs told him the trail was uphill now and he could not hurry much. He tried to keep an even pace as he had seen the porters do, up hill and down. But when he passed through the small villages of five or six houses where he was fearful someone would call out and ask him where he went, alone, at this time of day, he ran. He did not want to meet a ghost and he did not want to be mistaken for one either!

Where the trees were heavy over the trail and scarcely let the last faint shafts of sunlight filter through, Masina thought only of the ghosts and he tried to sing to scare away any that might see him. But his own voice sounded so strange and lonely he could not sing a song. So he settled for a sort of whistle through his teeth that he hoped would sound like some strange animal if any ghosts were hovering about.

Dusk was just about to give way to darkness, even in the open fields. Masina trotted faster, hoping desperately that Yamdi was not very far, when suddenly the trail narrowed and ran between two high stone walls. Masina checked his pace and hesitated; it was so dark between the walls. Still, it was the way the trail led. He took a deep breath and started on, straining to see the stones so he would not step off into the mud.

He went three steps forward and stopped short. Something was ahead of him in the trail. It was so dark he





could not see anything but he felt it there before him. He stood still, scarcely breathing. A sloshing sound came closer and closer. Before he could turn to run something wet and scratchy hit his legs hard and his skin prickled all over. Then everything was quiet.

Cautiously Masina felt with one foot for the stone behind him. He touched it with his toes just as a heavy wheezing breath blew in his face. He jerked back and sank with both feet into the cool, squashy mud. Clammy with fear, he flattened himself against the stone wall. Immediately something rough and warm pressed against him, lightly at first, then harder, squeezing him against the wall, until he felt as if his breath would be forced out of him forever. He closed his eyes and bit his lower lip. He was pinned flat by a weight from his waist to his knees.

Crossing his arms in front of his face, he tried to say his mantra – his magic words. “It is not the length of your stride, but the courage . . .”

Suddenly he knew what held him to the wall! Not a ghost! Not a Bhakunde! But a buffalo! A big black buffalo whose bulging side pressed him to the wall! He brought his arms down with all his force on the buffalo’s broad back and pummelled it with his fists. He wanted to laugh out loud and throw his arms around its neck. The buffalo wheezed again and its tough hide scratched the skin above his knees. Finally it lumbered on, leaving him free.

Masina groped forward, feeling his way along the wall. He slipped in the mud and slid into nettles that stung his legs. At the end of the passage between the walls he could see well enough to make out the dark shapes of trees and boulders beside the trail. Just as the last traces of light left the sky he turned round a bend and came into Yamdi.

The Thakali woman showed no surprise when Masina stumbled into the tea-house and sprawled upon a mat without asking her leave. Tired as he was, he noticed that she even smiled a little.

“Your friend passed this way early today,” she said. “He travelled with some traders. Why were you not with them?”

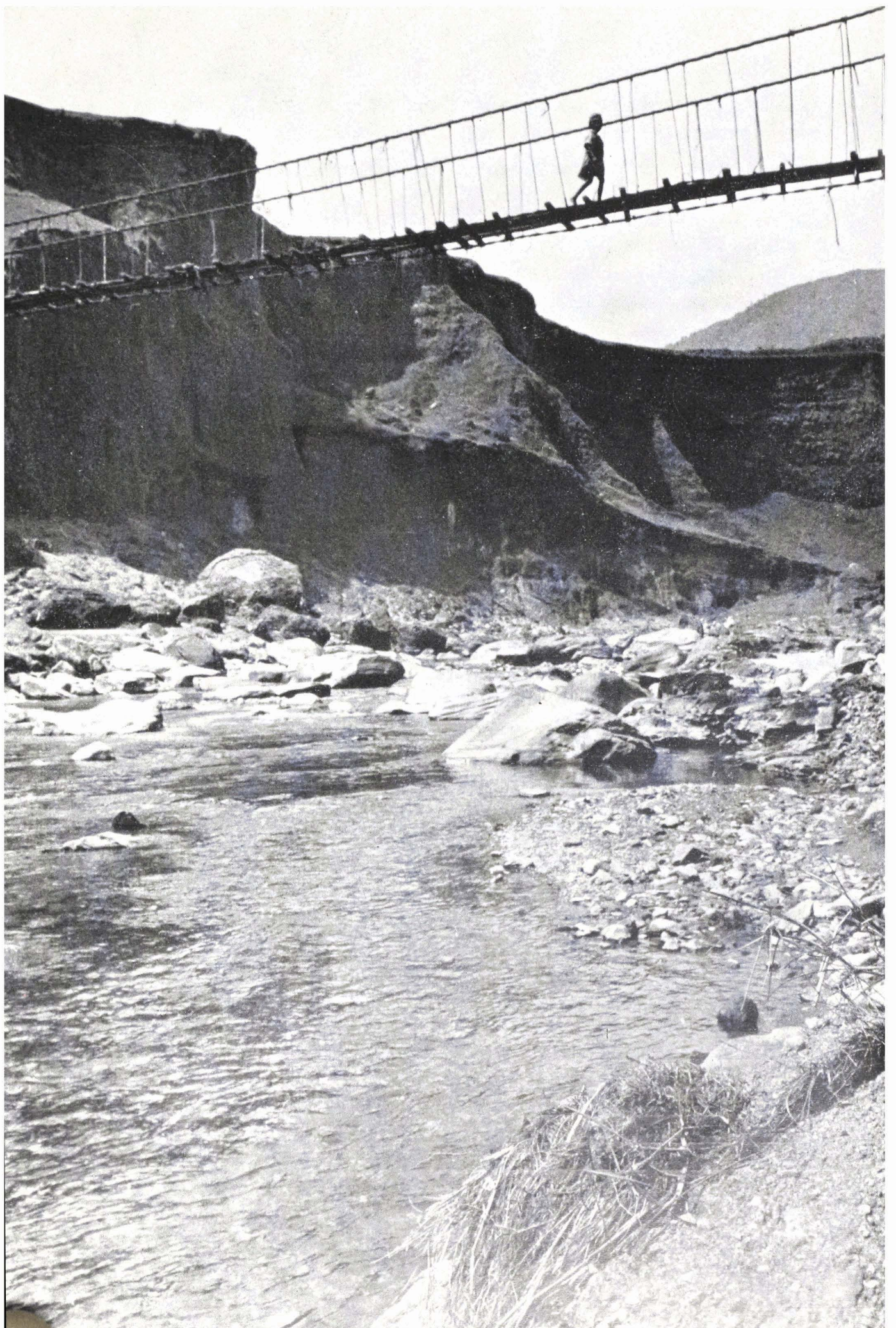
“I travel alone,” Masina replied. “Please give me some rice and tea. As the rains come and make the fields green, I will return and repay you.”

The woman put back her head and laughed so hard her strings of green beads bounced about and her rows of gold earrings shook wildly.

“Such talk from a small one,” she sputtered. “He will be a lion yet!”

Masina winced and wished he had not spoken so boldly. But the woman fed him with fish fried in oil to go with the rice and he ate hungrily. It was his first food all day and so delicious he did not want to stop eating. Yet with the last handful he was full and so sleepy he just licked his fingers and lay







down. One of the little Lhasa terriers trotted over to his mat, put his wet nose to Masina's, and that was the last thing he remembered until morning.

Masina left Yamdi early the next day, after he had drunk one cup of good Tibetan tea the Thakali woman said he must have to start his journey. The tea warmed his insides and he walked briskly, feeling the fresh dew in the air. It was only a short distance to the swinging bridge over the Mardi River and Masina was anxious to get across it.

He went down quickly into the gorge, balancing with one arm outstretched and the other lightly touching the rock cliff slanting over the trail. He stood for only an instant by the stone towers at the head of the bridge and glanced down before he stepped out on to the wooden boards. The bridge swung, so Masina looked up and saw two porters coming across with their loads of firewood jutting above their heads, out of their dokos. They came at a fast trot, almost a run, and the bridge swung from side to side in an even rhythm. Masina stepped back as the porters came off the bridge, smiled at him, and went on up the steep trail at the same speed.

"Courage will carry me across," Masina said to himself, though his knees shook a little now that he had stood waiting long enough to look far down at the wide, swift river below the bridge. He set his eyes on the opposite side and started across. The bridge began to sway and Masina felt a powerful urge to reach for one of the side ropes. But he knew it was too far out to grasp safely and keep his balance and he held himself in tightly.

With one foot forward, he waited for the swinging to stop. "It will be the same with the next step," he thought. "I can't stay here." He put his other foot in front and the bridge swung to one side; he took another step and it swung back. Then Masina found that the sooner he took his next step, the shorter the swing of the bridge. Soon he felt fairly steady and a sensation of joy swept over him. He was crossing alone – standing upright! Not crawling on his hands and knees as he had been afraid he might have to do. Instead he was almost running! He jumped up off the bridge and tore down the slope.

The steps to the sky did not seem quite so high, though Masina's legs ached when he reached the top. He did not stop to look round, but went straight down the other side and along the trail, looking now for landmarks to tell him how far he was from Ghachok and home. When he neared the village where the fair had been held he left the trail and skirted through the woods so there would be no chance of seeing the woman who had put the evil eye on him and Purna.

From now on it was familiar country and he was walking straight towards Machha Puchhare with only one last long climb up to the plateau his village was on. He cut across the floor of the valley and felt the soft, warm earth







under his feet. Suddenly his favourite song filled his head and he burst out singing at the top of his voice:

*Look! Machha Puchhare is the starting point of the River of Snow  
Which gets the name Seti Khola after flowing below.*

*Look! During her course near Pokhara, the Seti Khola, she does hide.*

*Past Pokhara, the same river dances round on her side.*

*Nepal is our country, green through the good gifts of nature all around.*

*And the beauty of our Machha Puchhare knows no bound.*

Masina was leaping from one high terrace to the next, singing lustily, when two farmers called out, "Ho there, Masina. Back so soon? You haven't served in the army long."

"Long enough to know they will have me," Masina shouted back.

"Listen to the little one," the farmer laughed. "He speaks like a man with seven sons and settled in life."

Masina scarcely heard them. He was nearly home and he hoped he would find his father alone in one of the fields. But when he came up over the edge of the plateau he saw Babu in the path, striding along with his staff in one hand.

They stopped abruptly and stared at one another.

"Well, Masina?" Babu asked.

Masina clenched his fists behind his back.

"I went to Pokhara, Babu."

"I know."

Masina licked his lips and looked straight at his father. "I spoke to some Gurkhas, Babu. They said many Gurung soldiers named Masina had served in the army; that they were brave and brought glory to their regiments."

"So I know, if you had asked me."

"And one of them said if I had the courage to travel the trail to Ghachok alone I was sure to become a Gurkha."

"This I know also. Have you nothing new to tell me from your travels?"

Masina let his arms fall to his sides and grinned widely. Babu gave him a light smack on the legs with his stick. Masina jumped and yelled and they both laughed. Then they turned toward home and walked together, wondering how to face Ama's anxious fussing. Villagers fell in behind them, asking questions, but they strode on, seriously considering what to say to Ama.

Ama was standing at the edge of the courtyard watching the crowd coming up the path.

"Masina," she shouted as soon as she saw him.







He stood in front of her and hung his head. She slapped him gently on the cheek and said, "I thought a Bakhunde had sent you flying off the mountain side."

"His courage kept him safe from ghosts," Babu said and Ama was silent.

The villagers crowded into the courtyard. They touched Masina to see if he were all right. When they saw that he was, they teased him until he broke away from them. He raced across the stubble field to school. He had to find out if Purna was angry with him for slipping out of his uncle's house and leaving him in Pokhara.

School was still in session and Masina slipped into his place in the circle on the ground.







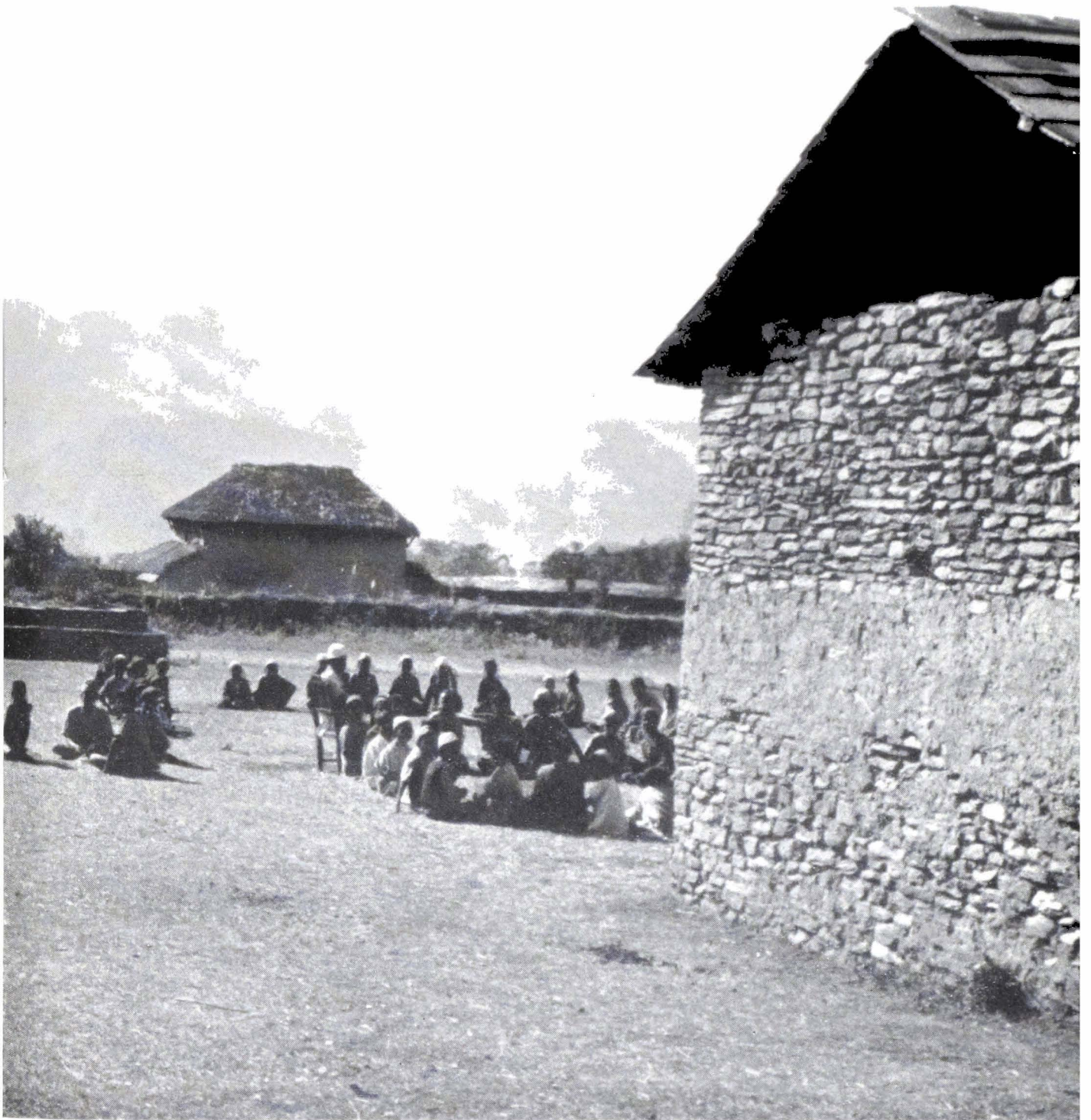
“So the mighty Masina returns,” was all the schoolmaster said.

Before the boys could break into laughter the master held up his hand for silence.

The classes were quiet, but Masina could feel the boys looking at him from the corners of their eyes as they chanted their lessons out loud.

With the sound of the school bell, Masina leaned over and grabbed





Purna's head. "Mit brother," he whispered urgently in Purna's ear. "Are you angry that I left you at your uncle's house?"

Purna turned his head away.

"Thai-chhama—don't know," he said abruptly and stacked up his books and slate.

"Don't be angry," Masina hissed. The boys were closing in round them







and he had to tell Purna quickly. He shook Purna by the shoulder to make him look round and said, "I had to go on alone. I saw the aeroplane and talked to a soldier. He told me there was no list. No one has to pay money to get into the army. But you must have courage."

Purna looked serious. "And did you find you had courage?"

Masina lowered his eyes. "My karma – my fate – was to travel from Pokhara to Ghachok alone."

"So you are content now that your karma has shown you you have the courage to be a soldier?"

"Yes."

"So I am satisfied to know that I will be a better farmer than a soldier."

Masina glanced at Purna anxiously. "You really want to be a farmer even after we went to Pokhara?"

Purna hesitated a moment; then he grinned broadly. "Yes. My feet get tired walking so far."

Masina laughed and slapped him on the back. "All my feet want to do is march."

Purna grabbed his arm and they broke through the ring of startled boys and raced across the wide field. The wind, straight off the snows, stung their cheeks red and watered their eyes.

Purna threw back his head and yelled, "Ayo!"

"Ayo!" Masina answered and sailed over a bank like an eagle in flight.

Together Masina and Purna raced on, singing at the top of their lungs: "Look, look, at Machha Puchhare, the clouds are rolling in above."

While behind Ghachok, from the snowy summits of the mighty Himalayas, the gods looked down and smiled on all the kingdom of Nepal.