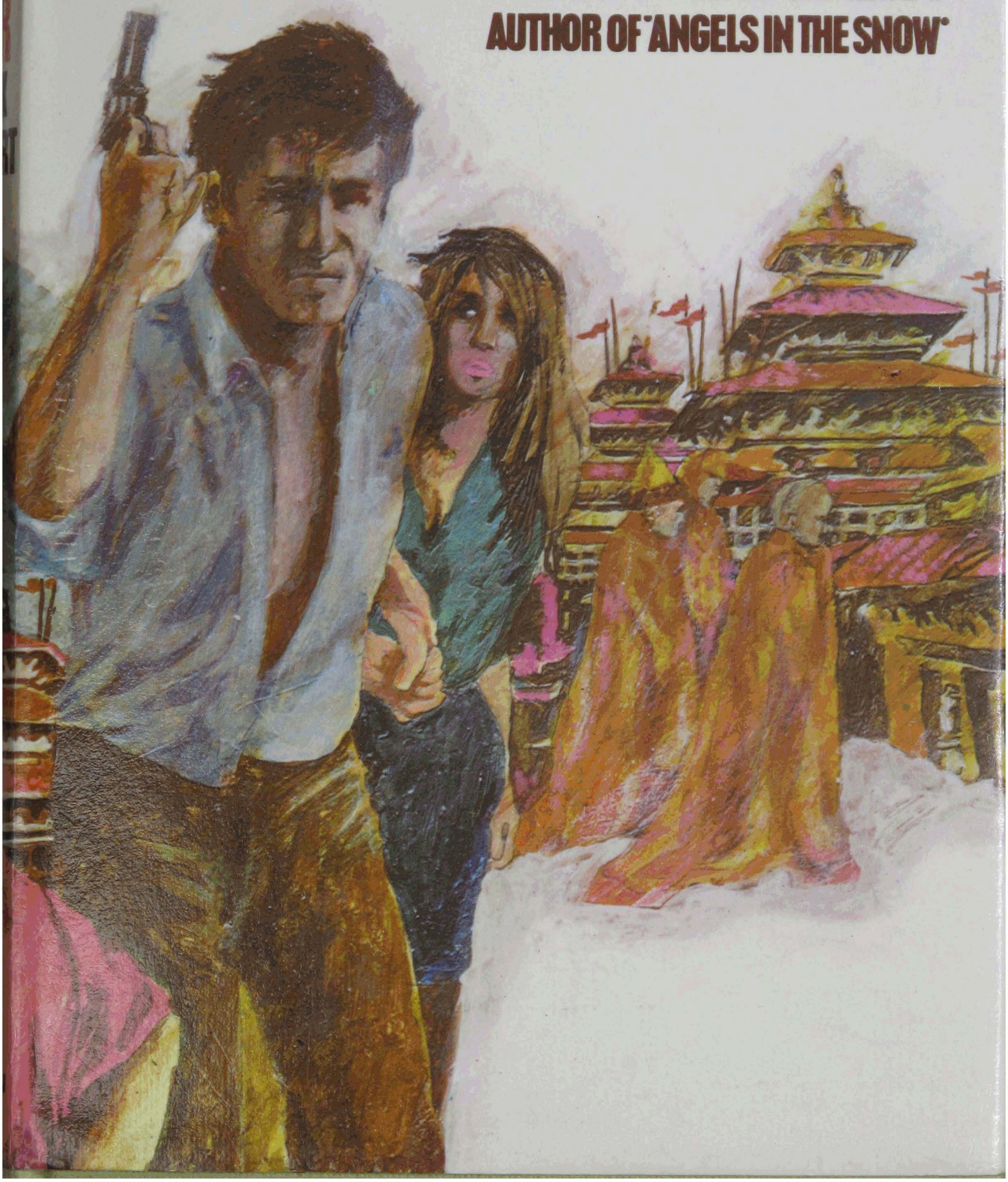
THE KITES OF WAR

DEREK LAMBERT

AUTHOR OF "ANGELS IN THE SNOW"



Also by Derek Lambert

THE SHELTERED DAYS
ANGELS IN THE SNOW

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GLOSSARY

Gya-mi *Chinese*

Rong-pa *Man of the valleys*

Land of the Inji *Britain*

Kata *Scarf*

Chang *A kind of beer*

Rakshi *Alcohol*

Prologue

On October 29th, 1950, the Chinese attacked Tibet. On September 9th, 1951, they entered its capital, Lhasa.

At first it seemed that the Chinese were trying to behave with correctitude. They were not allowed to fraternise with the Tibetans and one soldier accused of rape was tried summarily and shot by a superior officer. Nevertheless they increased taxes tenfold and set about brain-washing the population.

In 1956 there were major revolts in the provinces of Kham and Amdo and members of a tribe known as the Golks ambushed a Chinese unit and cut off their captives' noses. In retaliation the Chinese plundered a monastery, butchering all its occupants and throwing their prayer flags into the river. Thousands of Tibetans were jailed and at least one Dzong-bon (local governor) was tortured by Chinese seeking information: they alternately poured boiling and icy water on his face and forced his friends to slap him and spit on him.

The province of Kham ('Land of Flowers') was reduced to a state of slavery. Old people were made to dig their own graves, younger people were ordered to stab them to death. Often the young people deviated the thrust of the knife to avoid the actual act of execution; as a result their elders were buried alive. Many old people preferred to commit suicide.

The rebels looked to Lhasa for support, but little was forthcoming; although some officials did try their hands at gun-

running and supplied rifles for three hundred pounds and bullets for three to five pounds. These were sold to the Khampa bandits who had terrorised the land since before the time of Marco Polo but were now intent upon defying a foreign oppressor. The bulk of the aid was said to have come from Chinese Nationalists in Formosa.

The Chinese finally crushed the rebellion with gas and napalm. In 1959 the Dalai Lama fled from Lhasa to India. Most Tibetans decided to suffer the indignities and privations of Communist rule rather than endure further bloodshed: there was little else they could do. Only the Khampas fought on and they were driven to the borders of Tibet.

It was not the first Chinese invasion of the land. They had periodically advanced and retreated across the border since they first made contact with its people during the Tang Dynasty between A.D. 618-907. They established suzerainty at the end of the Mongol conquest in the eighteenth century; but by 1912 all their authority had ceased to exist.

During their various conquests the Chinese are said to have introduced barley beer, cheese, tea, whisky, mulberry trees and silkworms' eggs into Tibet. During this last conquest they brought only the equipment to prepare for an attack on India. In October, 1962, they launched that attack. Military historians disagree about the motive behind the campaign but no one has been foolhardy enough to dismiss the possibility that it was merely a preliminary to a full scale invasion of the subcontinent.

Chapter One

The Abbot of Kushlanga in Southern Tibet gently lifted a fly from his cup of butter tea and listened with sadness, distaste and a measure of disbelief to the bandit's stories of rape, torture and bloodshed. Shi-shok, sensing the disbelief, punched the palm of his hand with his fist and embarked upon even more lurid descriptions of Chinese atrocities. I sympathised with Shi-shok because I knew he would make no impression on the Abbot.

'It is true I tell you,' he shouted. 'Even now thousands of your countrymen are rotting in gaol while their womenfolk are forced to lie down with the Gya-mi and make children.'

The Abbot laid the fly on the stone wall of the monastery terrace and with a twig delicately unfolded its sodden wings. Even though the October sunlight was thin the breeze would soon dry them and the fly would be able to complete its short span of life.

Shi-shok rounded on me. 'You tell him,' he said. 'You know it is true. You tell him that men must fight for their country. You and I are like brothers. We think the same way. You too have been forced to kill for what you believed in.'

I shook my head. 'I killed to save a few lives—mine included. It is you, Shi-shok, who are the true man of war.'

Shi-shok groaned and stared across the gorge to the village of Kushlanga where paper kites crowded the sky, climbing, diving, or just floating with the same air of serenity that encompassed the ruff of white mountain peaks in the distance.

They reminded me more of fish than birds, a shoal of tiny tropical fish darting and hovering in clear water. Yellow, green, blue, a preponderance of mauve. But no red kites. They only flew red kites to summon the lamas from other villages if any war-like action was proposed. Red kites had not flown over Kushlanga for centuries.

Shi-shok turned away from the kites which, because none were red, symbolised to him the defeat of his people's spirit. 'Does it not bother you,' he said to the Abbot, 'that there is so much suffering? Do you not want to call upon your followers to rise and overthrow this tyranny?'

The Abbot regarded the bandit impassively. Their faces were as different as the faces of a Negro and an Asian. Shi-shok who was a Khampa from faraway had a lean wild face scarred from cheekbone to mouth by the stroke of a sword; it was a hard face moulded by a life of brutality; but still there were traces of sensitivity in the harsh features: the set of the mouth, the hint of compassion in the brown eyes. He wore a khaki robe and dusty boots, which he loved, high around his calves. He was well over six foot tall and he walked with the clumsy gait, rather like a robot, common to the mountain bandits accustomed only to walking up and down-hill. His black hair was long and sleek.

The Abbot's face was podgy and hairless, all its wisdom around the eyes, bright slits beneath lazy lids. He wore a robe of dull red sackcloth. The cup of butter tea into which the fly had fallen was possibly his fiftieth that day and there might be another fifty to come.

The Abbot said: 'Naturally it bothers me. It also puzzles me to hear you of all people talk of tyranny. For centuries the Khampas have roamed the mountains terrorising their own people. Why are you suddenly concerned about tyranny? Is it perhaps that you are jealous of the Gya-mi who have usurped you?'

'We robbed to live,' Shi-shok said. 'We did not kill for the

sake of killing. We did not rape and torture. In one month the Gya-mi killed more than we have killed since time began.'

The fly on the parapet fluttered its wings experimentally and rinsed its front legs. The Abbot pushed it with the twig to make it fly away. But the fly had no wish to depart from such an aura of kindness into unknown territories where other butter tea traps had been set to lure flies to their death.

The Abbot's bright slotted eyes switched to me. 'What do you think, Mr. Sangster? You have come with this brigand to see me. You must have some feeling in the matter.'

'I have a lot of feeling,' I said. 'But I have no opinions. I have no wish to meddle in other people's affairs. I told Shi-shok this when he asked me to come with him. Because he believes we are like brothers he believed that I would support him.'

Shi-shok took a dagger from his robe and felt its blade. It was a habit rather than a threat. Some men fondled warm yellow beads to pacify their troubled thoughts: Shi-shok liked the touch of smooth sharp steel. 'We *are* like brothers,' he said. 'You have chosen to roam the mountains like us. You have fought and killed like us. You feel great sadness when you hear of innocent peasants being gassed and burned to death with this terrible jelly that the Gya-mi use. Yes'—he held up the knife so that the fading, lemon sunlight played on it—'you and I are like brothers.'

The Abbot's little eyes flickered again, away from Shi-shok and myself, towards the mountains beyond the shoal of kites, beyond the immediate brown peaks of the Himalayas. They were haloed with motionless cloud, capped with eternal snow, the white crown of the world.

The monastery stood on a ledge of one of the lower mountains which climbed, spine upon spine of sharp starved peaks, to the distant white crests. It was built from wood and stone, with lofty chambers in which the temperature—like the temperature of some caves—never changed. The cliff behind the monastery was sheathed with ice which never melted and when the sun

was bright the monastery's gold rooftops were mirrored in it. From a distance it looked like a toy fortress which had been thrown against the mountainside and lodged there. Inside the monastery lived four Buddhist Gods—Lotus Born, Glancing Eye, All Good and Glorious Gentle One.

The monastery was divided from the village by a ravine so deep that the river below, combed into white tresses by crags and boulders, looked like a stream. After a funeral the body of the dead villager was cut into pieces and thrown into the water. In the summer villagers descended the precipitous flanks of the ravine to steal honey from the bees who turned its caves into hives; sometimes the fury of the bees made them lose their foothold and they reached the river before their funeral.

The village was joined to the monastery by a bridge made of chains and cedarwood which swayed in the slightest breeze. No one seemed to know when the bridge had been made or how it had been constructed, and no one seemed to care about either.

The Abbot said: 'In any case I have only heard of reports of all these horrors. I have no proof. There are Chinese in these parts but they have never caused any trouble.'

The Abbot's scepticism further infuriated Shi-shok. So much so that he pressed the blade of his dagger too hard and a hair-line of blood appeared on the ball of his thumb. 'Of course they haven't,' he shouted. 'They know that you have the power to make big trouble for them. They know that everyone in this region looks to your monastery and this village for the lead in such matters. They are not foolish—they have found a part of Tibet where the people are content to be ruled by them without making trouble. It is in their interests not to cause trouble here. Is that not so, brother Alex?'

'It's true up to a point,' I said. 'The real reason the Chinese don't make trouble here is that they don't want to be harassed on the border. There's not much doubt that they're planning to invade India and trouble here could disrupt their whole attack.'

'You see,' Shi-shok said triumphantly, 'Alex agrees with me.'

The Abbot shook his shaven, tortoise head. 'I am not concerned with India,' he said. 'I am concerned with my people here. In this village there has never been any violence. Never a crime, never a theft. The people live in peace and happiness. Why should such a state of affairs be sacrificed because men of war such as yourself want to fight? You and your people are as much responsible for the deaths of our countrymen as the Chinese. You persuaded people to resist the invaders and they died as a result.'

Shi-shok weighed the dagger in his hand. In the fading light the scar on his cheek was livid. 'Do you not think,' he said, 'that such terrible things happened because the Chinese knew that while there were such people as yourself preaching cowardice disguised as religion Tibet would never unite against them?'

'Shi-shok,' I said, 'I can't see how you can expect a Holy man to preach violence.'

Shi-shok scowled. 'I am beginning to wonder how I came to regard you as a brother,' he said. 'Surely if the Gya-mi are evil then a Holy man must help to overthrow them?'

'But not by force,' said the Abbot.

'What other way is there?'

'The way of Buddha. That is all I preach here. So we have no fighting, no misery. That surely is your answer. Men are always talking about fighting for peace. That is in itself a contradiction. What is the point of fighting for peace if by doing so you only create more suffering?'

'You are a hypocrite.' I could sense that although Shi-shok was not a religious man he was a little apprehensive at his lack of respect for the Abbot. But the apprehension had been swamped by the fury. And also he was showing off in front of me. 'Who have always been the most bloodthirsty soldiers in Tibet?' he demanded.

'The Khampas,' said the Abbot simply.

'No, not miserable brigands like us. The most bloodthirsty

soldiers, the biggest bullies and thieves in the whole land, have always been the Dob-dobs: the soldiers of the monasteries.'

'Not in this monastery. We have our soldiers, it is true. But they have not fought for centuries. Here there is no need for them to fight.'

'I cannot compete with such smugness.' Shi-shok sucked his thumb and decided apparently that the taste of his own blood was not disagreeable.

The first star glittered frostily in the pale sky and the mountains closed in upon the monastery. Behind us the monks began to play sonorous music on tuba, oboe and drum. If ever I had to leave the Himalayas, I thought, I would think of that music and the pain of parting would be a little easier.

On the parapet the fly, awaiting further kindness, continued to rinse its legs. The air was spiced with smoke from juniper wood fires burning in the village.

'It is, I think, time for us to part,' said the Abbot. 'It is not pleasant to cross the bridge after dark if you are not accustomed to it.'

It seemed to me a diplomatic way to terminate an abortive discussion. But Shi-shok was not quite finished; he made one more attempt to shock the Abbot into offering support. 'You would not talk so calmly,' he said, 'if you had a wife and had seen her used by the Gya-mi as they used the wife of myself and my brothers. Not this brother'—he pointed at me—'but my blood brothers who share her with me. They tied her down and used her until the blood ran and she screamed for mercy. I and my brothers were held at gunpoint and forced to watch. Later we escaped and returned and killed the Gya-mi.'

The Abbot said: 'If it is true then I grieve for you.'

'You do not believe me?'

The Abbot spread wide his hands with their dimpled knuckles and dainty fingers. 'I do not believe and I do not disbelieve.'

Shi-shok did not appeal to me for the excellent reason that I knew that he was not married. He decided to revert to the

truth. 'Even as we speak the Chinese are gathering around us to attack India. They will not stop until they have conquered the world and spread their misery and suffering everywhere. After India they will invade the islands of America and Britain —or the Land of the Inji as we call it—where this man comes from.' He pointed at me.

'I come from the Land of the Inji,' I said. 'It's a little smaller than America.' I had tried in vain to convince Shi-shok that the world was not flat and that Lhasa was not the most important city and that America and Britain were not barbaric offshore islands as most Tibetans believed.

The Abbot made a last effort to budge the fly which would be killed by the night frost. But the fly, having been saved from death by drowning, was intent upon suicide from exposure.

The Abbot said: 'If you were a believer you would realise that such arguments are of no consequence to me because life is of no consequence. We seek only ultimate extinction.'

Shi-shok's anger spurted. 'Then it is useless to talk any more. You keep your local peace—and allow bloodshed and suffering to spread throughout the world. What is the good of talking to a man who breaks the ice on lakes to save the lives of fishes, a man who saves a fly from drowning in a cup of butter tea but cares nothing for the lives of men?'

He thrust his knife away, raised his fist and smashed it down on the fly's tiny quivering body.

The Abbot's face, upon which life had drawn no lines, showed no emotion. Only the eyes set in cushions of flesh seemed to glitter more brightly than before. 'You may just have killed someone who was very dear to you,' he said. 'Your father perhaps.' If he had not been a Holy man and if he had not been reminding Shi-shok of the Buddhist faith it might have been presumed that his words were inspired by hatred.

Shi-shok brushed the crumbs of the fly from his hand. 'I care nothing for such beliefs,' he said. 'But I tell you this. I and my people will go on fighting the Gya-mi. You and your lamas

should feel only shame that you have left the fate of Tibet in the hands of such brigands as us.'

The Abbot gestured towards the inside of the monastery. 'Come,' he said, 'it is time to go.'

We walked past the unsmiling musicians intent upon their terrible music and down a flight of hollowed stone steps. In an adjoining chamber we glimpsed the Gods. I noticed that Shi-shok turned his head to avoid their placid gaze: he and the Glorious Gentle One had little in common.

As we walked across the bridge gripping the hand chains a gust of wind blew joyously up the ravine as if it had been trapped for a long time in the mountains; it swayed the bridge and agitated the prayer flags. The flags, printed with black ink, had been cut from lint, once white, which an optimistic American missionary had brought to Kushlanga. We stumbled as the bridge moved beneath us; for Shi-shok, with his clumsy robot's walk, the experience must have been worse than it was for me. Half way across he stopped, out of bravado I suspected, and peered down at the bed of the gorge.

'If I and my men had been on one side of the ravine and we had wanted to kill someone on the bridge we would have unhooked the chains and watched his body plunge to the river below,' he announced.

'Shi-shok,' I said, 'you're a bloody barbarian and I'm disgusted with you.'

'And I, my brother, am disgusted with you. Why did you not tell that fat Holy man that we must all fight to free our land. Do you not want to save the world? This round world of yours of which you know so much more than I.'

'Perhaps the Abbot is right. If you fight any more it will only bring more suffering to your people. And in any case I am not a soldier.'

Shi-shok walked on, talking over his shoulder. 'I only know that Man must fight for what he believes in. It has always been so.'

'I want nothing more to do with killing. I have seen enough.'

'In this place called Algeria?'

'Yes,' I said. 'In that place called Algeria.'

'Then you are betraying the people of the mountains. You have killed before in a land which you do not seem to love. But when the people you pretend to love want your help you offer nothing.'

'It is you who wants the killing. It is not what the people here want.'

'They do not know what they want. They are in the power of that fat Holy man.'

When we reached the stone and mud huts and yak-skin tents of the village they were pulling down the kites. The butterfly fabrics were inked with dusk and their colours were indistinguishable from each other.

Shi-shok watched them descending, skipping on the ground with the brief frenzy of animals in their death throes. 'One day,' he said, 'they will fly red kites. But by then it may be too late.'

I slept that night in a tent on the outskirts of the village. I fell asleep, listening to the music of the monks throbbing across the gorge from the monastery. It was, I thought, the most appalling noise I had ever heard.

Chapter Two

I saw the Chinese when I was about twenty-five yards from them. I had pitched camp some twenty miles south of the border in the North East Frontier Agency of India. The terrain had not altered; but at some time since I left Kushlanga I had crossed the vague and disputed border with Tibet.

The Chinese were sitting in a clearing, covered with tiny alpine plants, beside a waterfall. They were dressed in olive green uniforms and they were eating mounds of rice on metal plates. Automatic rifles lay beside them on the blanket of leaves which shone as if they had been sprinkled with gold-dust.

I had been wandering upstream from a village to draw water —a necessary precaution because the villagers used the stream for all ablutions. The clearing lay on the fringe of a pine forest in which the branches of the trees were snapped and shattered like the branches of trees fringing a battleground; they were the last outposts of conifers before the razored peaks beyond.

I was breathless from exertion and lack of oxygen—the tribesmen called the condition 'gas sickness' and sucked pebbles to relieve it—and as I rounded a boulder I leant against it to recover. When I saw them I ducked behind the boulder. Then I laid my rifle down and considered the situation.

No one in Indian military intelligence, I was sure, guessed that the Chinese had infiltrated so far behind their lines. There was now no doubt that they planned to invade—so much for non-alignment. I had to get the information to the Indians and

the only way was a forced march to Bomdi La. But not before this gathering had broken up because one of them might easily spot me.

One of them was trying to operate a radio transmitter without success. When he received an answer to his call sign they would probably go; but he was being pretty optimistic up here surrounded by mountains. I fingered the oiled butt off my rifle: I might get two or three of them but in the end they would get me. In any case I wanted no more killing.

Still they showed no signs of moving. They had a map between them and one of them was scanning the mountains with a pair of field glasses. They looked very young, but already their faces had been hardened by life in the mountains. They had probably been in Tibet for a year or more preparing for high-altitude combat.

Ten minutes later one of them decided to urinate. He sauntered across the clearing and aimed at a starved pine tree beside the boulder. I moved round the boulder as far as I could without exposing myself to the others. He enjoyed himself playing the jet as high as he could—which in his case was not very high—on the thin trunk. For a small Chinese he had a considerable bladder capacity. He peered deeply into the forest before returning to his colleagues. Then three more, inspired by his performance and encouraged by the waterfall, performed one by one on the same suffering tree. I shrank like a sea anenome against the boulder and found that I also wanted desperately to relieve myself.

The air chilled, the sky darkened and the peaks of the mountains became menacing fangs. The Chinese put away their map and sat staring accusingly at the wireless operator. Suddenly his face became animated and he chattered excitedly at the others, adjusting his earphones and fluttering his hands. Within five minutes they were gone, message received and understood.

I took pity on the much-abused tree and made use of its neighbour. Then I filled my leather water bottle from the water-

fall and returned through the skeleton trees to the village.

Before leaving I told Kungsangtse, the headman, that he and his people who had fled from Tibet would have to evacuate the village. He offered me a mug of chang beer which I had once thought I would never be able to drink. But in those days I had not even found the tribesmen particularly endearing; I had loved first the land and then its people.

'I have bad news for you,' I said, wiping my mouth with my hand.

'What news can that be?' He looked at me anxiously, his eyes not quite focussing so that I knew he had already drunk a lot of chang, probably laced with arak. His brother, and his wife whom he shared with his brother, stopped talking and gazed at me through the smoke of the open fire.

'The Gya-mi are among you. I have just seen a patrol upstream from here. I don't think there's much doubt about it now—they're going to invade India.'

'I cannot believe it,' Kungsangtse said. 'India is a big and powerful country. They wouldn't dare.'

Kungsangtse was a slim, smiling Tibetan with a shiny pig-tail of hair; he trusted people too much and had never understood why no one had helped his people resist the Chinese. Among other people he trusted me, the strange rong-pa who had come from the plains beyond Assam.

'I'm afraid they would dare,' I said. 'India's left it too late. Like you they trusted too much. You've seen the Indians up there. They don't stand a chance against the Chinese.'

I looked at the three of them drinking beer in their poor hut made of wood and mud and stones. And I felt pity, sorrow and devotion fuse into the sort of emotion which I had once decided I was incapable of feeling.

'I'm afraid you'll have to move on again,' I said.

'Is it really necessary?'

'It is. Otherwise I wouldn't tell you so. You know what will happen if the Gya-mi find you here. They will accuse you of deserting the glorious People's Republic of Tibet.'

'Then we will go. But it is very hard. We were just beginning to settle down.'

'Soon you will settle again. Down in the valleys. There you will find friends and much food.'

Kungsangtse's brother shook his head. 'Down in the plains we will die. We who live in the mountains cannot breathe the air of the valleys.'

I drank deeply of the beer. 'You will not die any more than a rong-pa dies in the mountains. But you will certainly die at the hands of the Gya-mi.'

'You are right,' Kungsangtse said. 'We must leave this place.'

Their wife nodded, transmitting her anguish across the small smoky room.

'And remember what I told you about spies,' I said. 'The Gya-mi are very good at planting spies.'

Kungsangtse jumped to his feet and gripped my arm. 'Your bad news almost made me forget. Already we have found one. He was caught composing a message about the site of this village and how many we number. We thought he was from another tribe and we gave him food and shelter because he said he was starving.'

'Where is he now?'

'In another hut in the village. He is a very frightened man. We have tied him up.'

When Kungsangtse opened the door the hut appeared at first to be empty. Then the figure of a man leapt from the darkness and, head down, charged past us and headed for the pine trees.

Kungsangtse's hand slipped into his smock. Moonlight glittered briefly on the blade of a knife. The movement of his hand inside the smock, the raising of his arm and the throw were a single oiled action. The fleeing shadow stumbled and pitched forward. When we reached him he uttered a plaintive moan

and died. Kungsangtse pulled the knife from between his shoulder blades. 'It had to be,' he said.

'I know,' I said.

'Once upon a time we would never have killed.'

I nodded. I was glad that Kungsangtse trusted me.

The sky was smeared with stars and the air sharp with frost. I loaded my irritable mule who was not accustomed to travelling at night, stroked his ears and apologised. I told him we had to make Bomdi La in two nights and one day but he didn't look enthusiastic.

The road chipped from the mountainside was narrow and treacherous with shale. In some places the precipices on one side plunged thousands of feet to valleys where the green flesh of the jungle was just beginning to grow. I could sense the moist heat far below and it made me shiver. I wondered if there were any other Chinese patrols watching me in the moonlight.

My thoughts hovered on the fringes of dreams and I saw again the mountains as I had seen them from the plains that first day. Across the whispering paddy fields, across the tea plantations to the foothills; above the foothills the white cumulus of peaks that advanced or retreated according to the weather; sometimes you felt you could step across the apple-green rice shoots and scale their flanks; at other times they were as remote as the stars. I knew then that I had to reach them, and I knew that I had found a place to settle.

When I returned to the present the stars were beginning to fade and the white mountains were re-assembling. The sun rose and they blushed. I gave the mule an affectionate pat and the mule, which could not believe that a night had passed without sleep, tried to kick me.

We walked on side by side until midday when the mule sat down and refused to move. I made a fire beside a stream and fed and watered the two of us. When the mule refused to get

up I kicked him and, recognising the language, he stood up as laboriously as a camel.

We passed a gang of woollen-booted Monpa tribesmen pick-axing a road to a new camp. They dropped their pick-axes and made prayer-like gestures of greeting. I waved and the mule showed its piano-key set of yellow teeth. We walked into another night along the road that had cost two hundred lives to build. They had blown themselves up, they had been crushed by falling boulders, they had fallen into the ravines. By day, from the valleys, the road looked like a fungoid root feeling its way across the mountainside.

On the dawn of the second night we walked into Bomdi La. The mule and I parted company without regret; but he had been a good obstinate mule.

The Indian lieutenant wore battle dress and spectacles which he kept taking off and pointing as men once pointed monocles. He was excessively polite, although his manners splintered when he became excited which he frequently did. A swagger stick lay on his desk in the flimsy wooden hut.

I showed him my papers and he said: 'I have never seen any papers like this before, Mr. Sangster.'

'I'm probably the only person to have got papers like that.' I was very tired and my feet were blistered.

'To the best of my knowledge the North East Frontier Agency is a prohibited area.'

I lit a cheroot. I would have preferred to make my report to a Sikh officer. 'I realise that,' I said. 'Otherwise it wouldn't be necessary for me to have those papers. If you read them again you'll see that your Government has given me special permission to move around here.'

His voice broke with excitement; off came the spectacles. 'I am perfectly capable of reading, Mr. Sangster. I am merely puzzled as to why you are allowed up here.'

'Because I know the mountains. Because I probably get on with the people a damn sight better than you do. Because your Government accepts this and knows that I can be of use.'

The lieutenant paced around the room, waving his spectacles as if he were rehearsing a speech. Then he sat down and polished them. Finally he said: 'Why, Mr. Sangster, sir, are you wearing the clothes of the hill people?'

I looked down at the smock belted at the waist and the loose trousers reinforced with leather at the knees. I said: 'Because they're comfortable. Now for God's sake take me to the officer in charge. I have some important information to pass on.'

'So you do not think I am a competent officer to receive your information?'

'Is there a more senior officer here at the moment?'

'Unfortunately not.' He walked to the window and gazed at the clouds heaped on the next ridge of mountains. Still facing the mountains he asked: 'What is this important information which you have to impart?'

'The Chinese have penetrated something like forty miles behind your lines,' I said.

He spun round. 'Nonsense.'

I bit hard on the cheroot. 'For Christ's sake, I've seen them.'

'And for all I know you are a spy.'

'If I'm a spy then why did I come straight to you with my papers?'

'Forged papers, perhaps.' The lieutenant looked pleased with his speculation. He put on his spectacles again.

'Look,' I said. 'Treat me as a spy if you must. Lock me up if you must. But for God's sake get a message through to GHQ.'

The lieutenant sat back transparently considering the possibilities. He could relay my information and make a fool of himself if it turned out to be wrong: he could ignore the information and make an even bigger fool of himself if it transpired that it was true.

'Will you do that?' I asked.

He waved his hand impatiently. 'I'm thinking,' he said. After a few moments he said: 'What about some tea, Mr. Sangster? I'm afraid that it's made with condensed milk.'

'I think,' I said, 'that if you don't relay that message we'll all be drinking China tea.'

'You do not fancy a good brew?'

'No,' I said, 'I do not fancy a good brew.'

He stood up and stretched out his hand. 'It has been a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Sangster.'

I stubbed out the cheroot savagely. 'You have not been interviewing me for a job. I came to tell you that your country is in the process of being invaded by the Chinese.'

'We have our own intelligence on these matters.'

'There's not much evidence of it in this room.'

The lieutenant cracked the desk with the swagger stick. 'Please leave,' he said. 'I cannot tolerate such impertinence.'

I regretted my attitude. The fate of NEFA, if not the whole of India, was at stake. It was more important than the lieutenant's conceit and indecision. 'I'm sorry, lieutenant. I'm very tired and my temper's in bad shape. Can you please promise me one thing? Can you promise me that you will relay this information to GHQ? I promise you I saw a Chinese patrol and I've drawn you a rough map to show you where they were.' I showed him the sketch I had made while resting with the mule.

The lieutenant looked at it briefly. 'Thank you, Mr. Sangster. I will examine it when you have left.'

'And you promise to pass on the information?'

He nodded absentmindedly. 'I'm sorry you didn't want any tea,' he said.

I slept for three hours beneath four Army blankets in a matchstick cabin. Then I changed into the slacks, jersey and sheepskin coat, which I had left in the Land Rover when I parked it on the way up the mountains, and drove down towards the plains. I

had no idea whether the lieutenant would transmit the message; there was nothing more I could do.

The raw hills and the beaten-up pines softened into deciduous woodland covered with the golden bloom of autumn. I drove past glades where in the summer you could gather wild strawberries. Down into the dripping, insect-singing valleys of jungle, down to the parade grounds of tea bushes and the pale marshes of rice.

I drove straight to the planter's house where I knew a woman and a telephone awaited me. I phoned GHQ and asked for the duty officer. It was he who told me that the Chinese had launched a full-scale attack against India in Ladakh and NEFA.

Chapter Three

The tea gardens lay between mountain and river. On the mountain side the tea bushes made an orderly retreat into the jungle, shiny and dripping, lining the first foothills. Tigers lived in this area, fusing their stripes with bars of sunlight and occasionally stalking the tea gardens for human prey; and elephants which devastated the planters' graceful flower gardens blossoming with poincettia, frangipani and roses. At this time of the year the flowers had a sad, wasted air about them; all except the scarlet leaf-flowers of the poincettia which had been waiting to blush all summer. On the river side of the tea gardens lay the paddy fields and then the broad reaches of the Brahmaputra with its islands of silt and sand, its wandering fingers, its lazy fishermen and lumbering Mississippi steamboats. The colours of the river were always the colours of dusk; the smells were smoky and fishy.

The British tea planters were healthy, hairy men who looked after their bushes and their Indian workers with care; although perhaps the bushes fared a little better. They lived in mellow houses transplanted from Esher and the Chalfonts and they met once a week in their clubs where they drank soapy beer and Black Knight whisky.

Sexually it was no place for a bachelor. The only white women in the gardens were the wives. So the bachelors drank a lot and, if they were in the know, attended blue film shows.

The performances were given by an apologetic Indian who

set out from Gauhati on the south bank of the Brahmaputra once a month on his own erotic and esoteric movie circuit. The films were projected on to the white walls of planters' houses and often broke down. Coitus interruptus was frequent and dramatic and the audience, suddenly embarrassed, was left staring at immobilised male and female organs. The hair-styles, moustaches and underclothes of the participants dated back to the early twenties; but, although they were now grandparents or long since dead, their antics still excited the bachelor tea planters; and they waited impatiently until they could reach the whorehouses of Calcutta to expend their desires. It was important to have some shots of penicillin before returning.

The planters' wives supervised their servants, pruned their roses, waited for the mail and the flimsy airmail editions of *The Daily Telegraph*—with which the Indians rolled cigarettes—and anticipated a luxurious retirement in Eastbourne or Torquay which their life's dedication to the shrub *Thea* had entitled them. While their men became hairier and healthier they became more sallow and desiccated. When they finally retired they often sighed: 'I'd give anything to get back.'

In these northern tea gardens of Assam it was almost impossible to get a decent cup of tea.

When I awoke under the mosquito net I sensed that she was in the room with me. I turned and saw her cigarette glowing erratically like a faulty neon sign. Outside the window fireflies danced in the dark moist air.

She said: 'You've been asleep a long time. You must have been exhausted.'

'I was,' I said. I was lying naked beneath a thin blanket.

She switched on the light. 'You not only look like a tribesman you smell like one.'

The woman, whose name was Sonia Ransome, was wearing a grey skirt and a fawn bush shirt. Very casual but some effort

had been made to establish the effect. The pony-tail of dark hair, the perfume, the third button of the shirt left undone to show the crevice of her breasts.

'I think I'll take a bath,' I said.

'Do you want me to scrub your back?'

'If you can stand the stench.'

'I can stand it.'

She scrubbed it hard and then began to massage the muscles at the nape of my neck. I was conscious of the whiteness of my torso and legs against the brown, almost like stain, of my face and forearms.

'You know what you're doing to me,' I said.

'I can see what I'm doing.'

'And you know my feelings haven't changed?'

'Perhaps one day,' she said.

'Why don't you marry one of these young bucks who keep proposing to you?'

'Because I don't love them. I've had one loveless marriage. I don't want another.'

Her husband had gone out one day hunting a marauding tiger. He thought he had shot it dead. The dying tiger had gently cuffed him baring his entrails and severing an artery. He had died before the tiger. And his wife had decided to continue managing the plantation.

I stood up and climbed out of the bath.

'Hey,' she said. 'My clothes.'

I tossed them in the corner in a sodden heap. Her breasts were full for a slim girl, her belly flat, her thighs strong. We moved quickly and easily, lubricated with soap and water.

Later, lying on the bed smoking and watching the fireflies outside, I felt tenderness and affection for her. Nothing more. When I returned to the mountains I forgot her. At least I was honest with her.

'You've been away a long time,' she said. 'Did you miss me?' She knew the answer.

'Aren't you afraid I'll be unfaithful to you up there?'

'Nothing about you would surprise me.' She stroked my chest. 'But it has been a long time.'

She cooked a meal and we ate it in the lounge still furnished as it had been when the house was built. Only the easy chairs and the scatter cushions, the books and a few paintings, were new. The snarl of the tiger-skin on the floor had been fixed for fifty years. We ate steak and drank tumblers of weak whisky. 'What's the latest on the war?' I asked.

'They're all over the border,' she said. 'They're supposed to have overrun Dhola and Khinzemane on the Tangla Ridge. There are a lot of rumours that they've taken Bum La.'

I grinned. 'How can you defend a place with a name like that? Anyway they'll take that and more. The Indians can't hope to stop them. It's just a question of time and where they decide to stop.'

'They're still a long, long way from here.'

'Don't you be too sure. I reckon the Chinese have infiltrated right through the range. Pretty soon they'll cut off the Indians. Round about Bomdi La.'

'But you've warned the Indians, haven't you. Alex?'

'I've warned them all right. But they're so bloody proud. And pompous with it. They don't want to know that the Chinese have slipped through their lines without their knowledge.'

'I suppose this means you'll be going back up there?'

'Perhaps. I don't know. I don't think there's much I can do to help up there at the moment. I'll be of more use to the refugees. You know how I feel about these people. Perhaps I'm a little crazy. I don't know. But a lot of them will die, you know, when they come into contact with the germs down here.'

'The Dalai Lama didn't.'

'I imagine he was looked after a little better than the refugees will be.'

She finished her steak and sipped her pale whisky. 'One of these days I'd like to go up there with you, Alex.'

I shook my head. 'Live in a yak-skin tent? Eat tsampa for breakfast, lunch and dinner? Drink chang in mud huts with men who smell ten times worse than I did just now?'

'I could manage it. I'm tough enough. You know that.'

And she was. But the mountains were mine. Everyone to his own madness. 'Perhaps one day,' I said; and we both knew I didn't mean it.

'You'll take it pretty badly if the Chinese occupy NEFA,' she said.

'Not as badly as the tribesmen,' I said.

I thought of Kungsangtse and his people and wondered if they had escaped in time. Of Shi-shok and his guerillas hiding among the starved peaks shooting with World War I Lee Enfields at the Chinese armed with modern automatic weapons and napalm. And I saw again the faces of the young terrorists in Oran, distorted with pain and the knowledge of death, and felt the Sten jumping in my hands.

'You've never told me why you stayed here,' she said.

'I've never told anyone.'

'If I could share it with you wouldn't it be better?'

'Your glass is empty,' I said. 'I'll get you another drink.' I kissed her forehead and touched her hair at the temples, still damp from the bathwater.

In bed we made love again, with gentleness and compassion. I wished that I could help her but, beyond the affection, beyond the compassion, there was an impotence of feeling which seemed to be incurable.

After we had made love my mind roamed away from the house on the plains back to the mountains.

Next morning I drove the jeep into Tezpur. The air was cool and the mountains were hidden with heavy, motionless cloud that had gathered overnight.

I passed a convoy of lorries, each filled with Sikh soldiers. They, too, were armed with old rifles and gas-pipe Sten guns. Their valour was beyond dispute. But valour was a pretty vulnerable armament against bullets pumping from an automatic rifle.

I drove down to the airport where fat transport aircraft were being unloaded on to the tarmac. At the far end of the runway stood a squadron of obsolete jet aircraft and an Air India Dakota quivering with eagerness to take off. There were more troops waiting outside the tiny customs hall, shabby and subdued; wondering, perhaps, about the results of non-alignment.

I headed back towards the town. The grass was dry and a breeze rattled the brown pods, as big as cucumbers, on the flamboyant trees. In a backwater of the river Indians in their underpants waded in the shallows with their big awkward nets occasionally catching a frantic silver body. There was so much languid space and yet the houses and shops in the town nudged each other towards the centre like iron-filings around a magnet.

I had never felt much affinity to these people of the plains; they seemed lazy and sly compared with the hill people. There was so much squalor, so much grovelling humility. The main street was lined with dim little shops which sold anything from curry powders, cricket bats, reed flutes and used tyres to paper kites. But there was a preponderance of book shops stocked with volumes which taught you law or cured impotence overnight, and pharmacies selling potions to get rid of any known disease. By night the shops became lamplit caves, candles haloed with moths burned on the street vendors' stalls and fireflies glimmered in the shadows.

As I drove along the street a barber stood outside his saloon snipping away at hair and ears, a greasy-haired fakir squatted among his bones and beads and believers, a Sikh photographer stood decapitated, his head inside his black box.

At the station club the barman, a beaming middle-aged man who had never been told that the reign of the Raj had finished, rushed up to me, bare feet slapping the floor, and said: 'Sahib, there is a cable for you.'

It was from the London office of my old newspaper. They appreciated that I was no longer an active newspaperman, but would I consider covering the crisis for them? Highest payment assured.

I stuffed the cable in my pocket and ordered two boiled eggs and toast. A few correspondents had already arrived; even if Air India closed down their services they would still get there —by car, train or steamboat. A group of tea planters in baggy shorts and long socks sat at the bar drinking Black Knight and discussing the invasion. They were concerned that the Indian Army was planning to commandeer all their vehicles.

One of them turned to me and said: 'Hallo, Sangster. I suppose you've been fraternising with the enemy again.' There was no humour in his whisky voice.

'No,' I said, 'I haven't been drinking with any planters lately.'

'Why don't you stay up in the bloody hills?' said another one.

'I wish I could,' I said.

The first planter said: 'You don't give a damn, do you? You haven't got a wife and kids living here to worry about.'

I was saved from a brawl by an Army motor-cyclist who skidded to a halt outside the club covering the indignant bicycle rickshaw drivers, waiting for custom, with dust. I opened the note he handed me. 'Sorry, gentlemen,' I said. 'I must leave you. The General wishes to see me.'

As I walked out to the Land Rover I heard one of them say: 'Bloody crank. I hope they clap him in irons.'

The soldiers in bottle-green pullovers sitting outside their tents were drinking tea. The general, the brigadier and the colonels

sitting around a table in the operations room were drinking tea. Like the lieutenant's tea in Bomdi La it was all made with tinned milk.

The general waved me to a seat. He was a small, wiry man with an exaggerated British accent; he was restless and impatient and he would have taken on a battalion of Chinese single-handed with a muzzle-loading musket. 'Sit down, Sangster,' he said, as if I were a very junior officer. 'I want you to meet Mr. Vincent Maxwell from New Delhi.'

The American on the other side of the table nodded at me. He was very tanned and he wore a glossy grey mohair suit, a button-down collar and a knitted tie. His face was slightly pitted by some old tropical disease. His hair was thinning but it didn't show too much because it had been cropped. 'Pleased to meet you, Mr. Sangster,' he said. 'I've heard a lot about you.'

I nodded again because there didn't seem much to say except something like, 'All good, I hope.'

Already the general was impatient with the formalities. 'I've been telling Mr. Maxwell all about the work you've done for us up in the mountains, Sangster. About the intelligence reports you've brought us in the past and about the Chinese you claim you saw miles behind our lines.'

'I didn't claim I saw them,' I said. 'I saw them.'

'Very well, you saw them. It's immaterial now.'

Maxwell took over from the general and I guessed he must be important because the general rarely relinquished the initiative. He turned his attention to his tea. Maxwell said: 'We think you can be of great use to us, Mr. Sangster.'

'Who's we?'

'The Indians. The West. Those of us who prefer freedom to tyranny. Take your pick.' He flicked a cigarette from a paper pack and lit it with a big, wind-shielded lighter. Americans, I thought, always seemed to make a business of lighting a cigarette. But there was shrewdness in his face as he peered through the lacework of smoke. 'We believe'—he included the

other officers with a wave of his hand—'we believe that the Chinese plan to call a halt when they reach the foothills. In fact we're ninety per cent certain of it. They'll be too extended to march on across the plains. In any case they won't have the air support. They'll call a truce and withdraw leaving behind an army of spies and brain-washers to prepare the way for a full-scale invasion in a year's time, maybe five, maybe ten. Communists think a long way ahead . . .'

But the general couldn't stomach all this. 'I think you are presuming a little too much, Mr. Maxwell. We hope to halt the Chinese and counter attack at Jang. Already reinforcements are being rushed up the hills.'

Maxwell placated him. 'All right,' he said, 'if the Chinese reach the foothills they'll call a halt.'

'All right,' I said, 'if and when the Chinese reach the foothills, and if and when they withdraw what do you want me to do?'

'The Chinese have had it too easy,' Maxwell said. 'If there had been any sort of resistance on the Tibetan side of the border they couldn't have prepared their assault. If the Tibetans had blown up roads instead of building them the Chinese wouldn't be in NEFA now.'

'And if the United Nations had given any sort of support the Chinese wouldn't even be in Tibet.'

Maxwell shrugged. 'Perhaps. But I guess it's too late to do anything about that now. But it's not too late to do something across the border. If we can raise some sort of Tibetan resistance then we'll be creating a buffer zone. It will give the Indians time to build their defences. With a bit of luck the Reds would never be able to mount another attack.'

'What does Krishna Menon think about all this?'

The general said: 'My information is that the Defence Minister will shortly be resigning.'

I looked through the window towards the mountains. They were just spiking the clouds. 'And you want me to go and raise a resistance?'

Maxwell nodded through his smoke.

'You must be crazy. Do you know why I came to this part of the world?'

Maxwell tried to look understanding, but his face wasn't fashioned for it. 'I know you were pretty upset by the shooting you had to do in Oran.'

'I only killed a few. Now you want me to organise an uprising that will bring suffering and bloodshed to thousands. You must be out of your mind. I'm sorry, Mr. Maxwell, general, you've picked the wrong man.'

'You're the only man who can do it,' Maxwell said. 'No Indian knows these mountains as well as you. You've lived in them for three years. You know the passes across the border and, more important still, you've got the ear of some of the leading Tibetans over the frontier. What's more you don't look like an Indian which could be fatal up there. When you've got your gear on I'm told you could easily pass for a Tibetan from those parts.' He gave the sort of smile that is supposed to invite friendship. 'In fact even in a shirt and slacks you don't look all that unlike a Khampa bandit.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'It's not on.'

The flesh on the tanned, pock-marked face tautened. 'The lives and freedom of thousands—even millions maybe—of people are at stake. All you have to do is persuade the Abbot of Kushlanga—a rather obstinate character by all accounts—to order the tribesmen in the area to rise against the Chinese.'

He could not, I knew, be as naive as all that. 'You presumably know from my reports that I've recently been in Kushlanga.'

'I know,' he said.

'And you must know that they've had peace—not even a small crime of violence—for centuries.'

'I guess I know that as well.'

'Then you *are* crazy. And in any case what is an American doing here interfering in a Sino-Indian war?'

Maxwell said: 'If that's all you think it is then you're

the crazy one. You were a journalist once. You know as well as I do that the States and the rest of the Western world is fighting the southward march of Communism.'

'I don't think the Abbot of Kushlanga would care tuppence about the southward march of Communism. But he would care about seeing his people killed because of politics which they don't even understand.'

Maxwell fingered the scattering of tiny scars on his jaw. I guessed that the gesture had become a habit and that he was very conscious of the marks. On a woman they would have been disfiguring but on Maxwell they weren't—they merely toughened the lean face with the eyes the colour of the smoke dribbling from his cigarette.

Maxwell said: 'I didn't think Buddhists took life very seriously. Isn't there some phrase about the dewdrop?'

'The dewdrop slips into the shining sea,' I said.

'I figure that gives the impression that they don't attach much importance to mortality.'

'They seek escape from "life's fitful fever". They seek Nirvana, a state where there is no pain. But you can take it from me that the tribesman living in Kushlanga does not relish death any more than you or me.' I asked for some more tea because we were in for a long argument.

Half an hour later the general's temper was barely contained, like a grenade held without a pin. Maxwell had finished his pack of cigarettes and the sun had burned the clouds away from the mountains.

The general was about to break-up the meeting when a messenger came in. The general scanned the piece of paper quickly—he never did anything slowly—and said: 'I think we have something which may convince Sangster. Come with me, gentlemen.'

They climbed into staff cars and I followed in the Land Rover. We stopped outside the hospital where some hill people were being helped from a lorry. Two of them were on stretchers,

others huddled together on the grass.

Kungsangtse looked up at me from a stretcher. His long, high-cheek-boned face cracked into a smile and he said: 'We did not flee fast enough.'

The general said: 'You know this man?'

I nodded.

'One of our lorries returning from the front picked them up. They needed hospital treatment so we brought them down here. Their village had been sacked by the Chinese. It could have been that patrol you saw.'

They took Kungsangtse and the other stretcher case into the hospital; the rest of the villagers stayed outside. A monk with a shaven head, a teenage girl with braided hair and shy eyes, an old woman with parchment skin and a pigtail of hair down her back, a little girl in a fur-edged hat smearing bread and jam over her face.

A doctor came out and said: 'Their leader is injured in the groin as if he had been tortured.' He added: 'I'm afraid they will die. Their bodies cannot resist our germs. Already they have pneumonia.'

The general, Maxwell and the other officers were looking at me. Maxwell said: 'If we raise a resistance many hundreds will die. If we don't, thousands will die.'

'All right,' I said, 'I'll do it.'

Maxwell said: 'I need a drink. Where can we go?'

I took him back to the station club. It was a mildewed anachronism set among tall, feathered trees and hibiscus bushes. The furniture was the colour of kippers and the servants were still called bearers. A portrait of Queen Victoria reigned over one section of the wall and if you wanted light relief there was a bound volume of the 1942 editions of *Punch* filled with jokes about careless talk and sleeping in underground railway stations. There was a dark bar, a shop which sold hair grips and cocktail sausages, a billiards table faded to a water-colour by

the sun.

The toilets were quick with cockroaches and mosquitoes slept by day in the two bedrooms. Holy cows wandered around the grounds, their silly faces inquisitive and arrogant, and goats peered round the doors, shyness overcome by hunger. On the tennis court behind nubile Indian girls with sleek limbs batted the balls gently to each other and giggled a lot. Soon, when they were married off, they would be tucked away out of sight in their husband's houses.

More correspondents had arrived. They were typing cables, drinking beer, arguing with the owners of the two battered taxis —which gave the impression, when moving, that the driver was running along holding the chassis up by the steering wheel —punishing the dead old telephone and arguing with the planters who remembered a similar invasion of newspapermen when the Dalai Lama had passed through Tezpur.

One or two British correspondents recognised me. 'Back in harness again?' they asked.

I nodded. They asked how they could get up the mountains. 'You can't,' I said. 'But I've just come back.'

'Christ,' they said.

I ordered two beers and took Maxwell on to the porch beside the rickshaw cyclists bartering with the poorer correspondents who had lost the price war for the taxis. The sky was placid blue, tufted with cloud, a Battle of Britain sky. I watched a goat masticate Maxwell's pack of cigarettes.

'You have some sort of plan?' I said.

'When the Chinese have gone back we will organise a Press trip. A very small, select Press party of five people. We will draw lots to avoid aggravating these guys.' He pointed at the journalists arguing with the rickshaw drivers. 'But the draw will be rigged. You, I believe, have already received a cable from your old paper asking you to cover for them.'

'So you read cables as well,' I said.

'Sometimes. This time I didn't have to. It was arranged in

London that you should cover.'

'You think of everything,' I said. I patted the goat as it swallowed the last mouthful of tobacco and paper.

'It's my job.'

'What exactly is your job?'

'I have business interests in Delhi. I also do work for some American papers. I reckon my other duties are pretty obvious.'

'Why can't you people ever say outright that you work for the CIA?'

Maxwell winced and drained his glass of cloudy beer. 'I don't know. I guess it's just one of those things. You get so bogged down with secrecy that you can never shed it.'

The rickshaw drivers pedalled away carrying the correspondents, regal and self conscious, in the direction of the cable office. The goat wandered into the club as if it had been a member for years.

'Okay,' I said. 'So I'm a member of a small select Press party up in the Himalayas. What happens then?'

'You get as near to the border as possible. Then you vanish and go it alone. With a bit of luck you will meet up with your Khampa friends. You will have with you several written requests from very important people in India to the Abbot. One of them in particular should do the trick. It's from a very important Buddhist. I reckon you can guess who I mean.'

'Why can't I go alone?'

'Because the mountains will be full of Red agents and brainwashed tribesmen left behind by the Chinese. I figure there'll be a few patrols left behind too. If they pick you up you're a gonner. But they won't take too much notice of an official Press party—although I guess they'll have their binoculars out.'

'What are you doing about the Ladakh front?'

'That's been taken care of. They are not so peaceful or obstinate there as your Abbot.'

I fetched two more beers. 'And who are the other members of the Press party?'

'One will be an Indian. Everything has to appear natural. Someone from a European country. A girl because I happen to know there are one or two on their way up here.'

'I'll fight that one,' I said. 'You must be out of your mind even contemplating sending a woman up the mountains.'

He shook his head and his fingers wandered over the tiny craters of his jaw. 'The presence of a girl will completely allay the suspicions of the Chinese.'

'I think you are crazy,' I said. 'Woman journalists on hard news stories are trouble. All they do is milk the men's brains, get emotionally involved so that they're incapable of writing an objective report and cry when you shout at them. They're also pretty sly.'

Maxwell began searching his pockets for the pack of cigarettes. 'I get the distinct impression,' he said, 'that at some time or other you've been scooped by a woman.'

'All right,' I said. 'That's three. With me four. Who's the fifth?'

'Where are my Goddamn cigarettes?'

'The goat ate them,' I said. 'Who's the fifth?'

'Me,' he said.

We ate chickens as small as thrushes dripping with rancid curry paste, and sweet bread washed down with tepid orange squash. Through the doors of a cinema adjoining the restaurant we could see a black-and-white saga about fixed marriages and dowries which intermittently broke into Technicolor and song.

There were four of us including myself. Maxwell in the same creaseless suit, a French journalist called Pierre Mercier and an American girl called Anne Mortimer who, I suspected, would soon be my travelling companion.

The girl was as I had known she would be. Aggressively hard-bitten, proving herself in a man's world, and disintegrating into helpless femininity when things got really tough. She had a head of short copper curls, freckles, grey eyes and a tiny

crease at one corner of her mouth which meant she laughed a lot. Her breasts were small and firm beneath her sensible shirt, her legs good between her sensible skirt and her sensible shoes. She smoked a lot which was in character and she wore a Japanese thirty-five millimetre camera over her arm. I could imagine her spoiling a cameraman's picture by interrupting him at a crucial moment to check her exposure.

The Frenchman whom I knew did not try to conceal his nationality. Tapered trousers, Gauloise, dark razor-cut hair, gold-rimmed sun glasses, black hair curling from his open-neck shirt, powerful brown forearms, born with an erection. He was already compulsively staking his claim to the American girl.

Watching them play their parts I experienced the same sort of emotions which had made me leave them and their kind three years earlier. They were presumably two of the journalists chosen by Maxwell for our mission. So far they seemed unaware of it; so far Mercier had failed to recognise me.

He offered his dark cigarettes around and we settled back in a Gallic haze. His conversation was general but channelled towards the girl who was probably assessing his future use to her. She was already sharing his taxi.

'We must try and get up the mountains,' he said.

Maxwell said: 'Sangster here has already been up them.'

The girl switched her interest to me. 'Gee, that's great,' she said. 'Perhaps you'll be able to fill in some of the background for me.'

'It's in all the best text books,' I said. 'Didn't you read up the Himalayas before you left Delhi?'

The girl's expression hardened and then relaxed again. The little crease at the side of her mouth deepened. 'Don't you approve of women journalists, Mr. Sangster?'

I shrugged. 'I can take them or leave them.'

Mercier said: 'I suspect that Sangster thinks you are the sort of girl who reads up all the background in a bar and then files a front-line date-line before the correspondents who have been

up there have returned.' He tossed back the dregs of his orange juice as if he were finishing a liqueur. 'You do not strike me as being that sort of girl at all.'

'Miss Mortimer,' I said, 'have you by chance filed a story already?'

The grey eyes opened wide. 'Of course I have, Mr. Sangster. Don't you always cable immediately you arrive?'

'It depends whether there's anything to cable.'

The crease deepened again and I knew I was about to lose a point. 'I did,' she said. 'I interviewed the general this morning.'

'And what was the dateline? Not Se La Pass or anything like that I hope.'

'You have a suspicious and nasty mind, Mr. Sangster. I datelined it Tezpur.'

'You must not take any notice of him,' Mercier said. 'I think perhaps Mr. Sangster is a little bitter about something from the past.'

Maxwell said: 'Break it up—we're here for a long time and there's no sense in fighting.'

'You are right,' Mercier said. 'I was a long time in Algeria. It was very tough there. If it had not been for the cameraderie among the Press I do not know what would have happened to us. I remember once in Oran we were—how do you say it?—holed up in a bar. There was a lot of shooting outside and a lot of it seemed to be aimed at us. We had to co-operate then. We agreed that one of us should take all the dispatches to the cable office. Such a thing would only have been possible if we trusted each other.'

'And did all the cables get through?' I asked.

'Certainly. The person who took the cables would not have dreamed of double-crossing his colleagues.'

'Gee,' said the girl, 'that's quite something. Who took the cables, Pierre?'

Mercier spread wide his hands. 'It does not matter who took them.'

'Pierre,' I said. 'You don't have such a good memory for faces. Or perhaps it's those sun-glasses. It so happens I was in Oran at that time.'

For a fraction of a second he was denuded of authority. His mouth slackened as it had slackened in that bar in Oran before he had collapsed palsied with fear. The muscles on his forearms tightened as he gripped the edge of the table. Then he recovered himself. He took off his sun-glasses and smiled. 'I am sorry,' he said. 'Now I remember your face.'

And so you should, I thought.

Maxwell, sensing that something was wrong, started to talk about the Chinese advance. 'I picked up the BBC back at the club,' he said. 'The Chinks are pushing on down pretty darn quickly. They've got every advantage. They're going downhill, they've been acclimatised to the conditions and they've got the communications behind them. I reckon they're probably near Towang by now.'

An Indian in soiled white flannels hovered around us. 'Sahib,' he said, addressing Maxwell, 'are you wanting any more delicious chicken, speciality of the house?'

Maxwell shook his head and the waiter wandered away. On his way back to the kitchen he met a large black beetle pottering across the floor and squashed it with his bare foot.

Inside the dark mouth of the cinema the hero became suffused with colour and sang with rapture because he had been assured of the dowry.

'I think I'll get a rickshaw back to the club,' I said.

Mercier said: 'You are very welcome to share my cab.'

'No,' I said. 'You take Miss Mortimer along.'

Maxwell said: 'I'll go along with you by rickshaw.'

When I got back to the club I took the Land Rover which was outside and drove back to the tea gardens. A breeze murmured in the young rice, a bird or a bat dipped through the beams of my headlights. It was very peaceful on the plains. I wondered how far away the shooting was.

Chapter Four

The general was right about the Indian counter-attack. During the lull in fighting between October 28th and November 14th, they recaptured Jang. But on November 15th the Chinese launched a new offensive and thirty thousand troops streamed through the mountains with humiliating ease. The 4th Indian Division was outflanked at the fourteen thousand foot-high Se La Pass, the Chinese took Bomdi La and in three days advanced ninety miles. Five days after the new offensive had been launched they were in the foothills of the Himalayas peering across the tea gardens and the paddy fields, across the Brahmaputra beyond.

The tea planters were evacuated to Calcutta. I said good-bye to Sonia Ransome at the airport. I kissed her and thought how dry and warm her lips were and what a loyal sort of person she had been. I wished I could love her but knew I never would.

A breeze bounding across the tarmac tugged at her skirt and played with her ponytail of hair. She had packed nearly all her personal possessions and they were loaded on the aircraft.

'You could still come,' she said. 'Most of the other correspondents are leaving. What's the point in being caught?'

'The Chinese are going to stop in the foothills,' I said.

'And if they don't? You'll be no good to your paper or anyone else.'

'They'll stop,' I said with spurious conviction. 'And you. What are you going to do? Come back here?'

'No, I don't think so. I've thrown in the towel this time. It all seems to have been arranged for me. You know I'd come back if I thought your feelings were going to change.'

'You're the most wonderful woman in the world.'

The muscles in her jaw moved as she clenched her teeth. 'I'm not going to cry,' she said.

The last of the muscular men, their worried wives and excited children boarded the aircraft. They were leaving behind a life which had once seemed as ordered as an eight forty-five to the City routine.

'Please, Alex,' she said, 'come with me.'

I kissed her again. 'Goodbye, memsahib. Look after yourself.'

I watched her walk out to the aircraft. Although she was leaving the danger I thought she looked very brave.

The very last to board the aircraft was the old Protestant clergyman. He had been in Tezpur for twenty-seven years, a wiry fragment of humanity wearing a pith helmet, the baggiest shorts in India and a pair of Army boots. For the last few evenings he had been inviting correspondents to his home at the end of an avenue of poincettia to listen to his records—*Lilac Time* and Churchill's war speeches—and eat goat-meat stews and rhubarb and custard and play a game which he had invented. The game was half squash, half table-tennis, played with wooden bats as big as tennis racquets. His bungalow was Victorian, Edwardian, Georgian, timeless. I suspected that, like Sonia, he would never return.

The aircraft gathered speed, passed the point-of-no-return, lifted slowly and wheeled away over the river into the placid evening sky, away from the tea gardens, away from the mountains. I imagined Sonia with fists clenched, staring down at the broad flat coils of the Brahmaputra, at us pygmies on the tarmac, at the house where we had lived and made love.

I drove back through the dusk to the club where about

eight correspondents were left. The aircraft had been the last out of Tezpur.

The population fled that night on the ferry boat's labouring backwards and forwards across the river. Cooking pots, blankets, goats and babies covered the grey beaches: on the far shore where refugees had already arrived camp fires burned and beckoned.

But not everyone went. The gates of the prison and the asylum were opened and all night criminals and lunatics prowled around the club where we played snooker and drank whisky and imagined we could see yellow faces peering through the windows.

Mercier sat in a corner under Queen Victoria with a typewriter on his knees. But he wasn't typing. Beside him he had a bottle of Black Knight. 'I know what you're thinking,' he said.

'I'm wondering if we're going to get out of this,' I said.

'No, you're not. You're thinking about Oran.'

'I wasn't. I'm not concerned at the moment with history.'

'You think I am a coward.'

'Because you had a breakdown? It could have happened to anyone in Algeria. I'm surprised more of us didn't go that way.'

'You're the first person I've met who was in that bar. I am sorry I did not recognise you. I hoped I would never meet any of them again.' He gulped at his glass of whisky and some of it dribbled down his chin. 'I suppose you will tell the others.'

'What others?'

'Maxwell, the girl and the Indian. I'm going with you up the mountains.'

'Who told you about it for God's sake.'

'I knew about Maxwell back in Delhi. I guessed that he was not here just as a newspaperman. I told him that I had to go up the mountains. He said I could join the party. You promise you

won't tell them about me?'

I looked at him, all the swagger knocked out of him, and remembered him sitting in the sun on the boulevard in Oran's main square with three OAS killers. Bristle-haired men in green sun-glasses, brutalised and dedicated, who enjoyed their job. Mercier, whose hair had also been cropped in those days, had looked like one of them, which was the way he had wanted it, although Mercier's only weapon had been his typewriter whereas the OAS men carried Army-issue guns on their hips. He had discussed the day's death toll of Moslems with them as if he had participated in the killing.

'I won't tell anyone,' I said. 'But I don't want you up in the mountains with me.'

'I have to go,' he said. 'It is my chance to prove myself. I know what you think of me. But I was much younger then and very foolish. Some people become Communists and Fascists when they're young. When they're older they hope no one remembers.'

'Not many young people assert themselves by associating with killers.'

'I was not the only one.' He poured some more whisky into his mouth and down his chin. It was somehow incongruous to see a Frenchman abjectly drunk; it had seemed equally incongruous when he had broken down in Oran. The French released all their emotion in argument and bed and usually managed to control their liquor and their fear.

'You're the last person on God's earth I would want to go with me,' I said.

He stood up and Queen Victoria looked at him coldly. On the wall beside the washroom a framed notice dated 1927 said that clean towels could be obtained from the bar bearer.

'Please,' he said. 'You saw me at the end. You know how it is with me. You know that I have to do something.'

'I thought you looked very much your old self at dinner that first night in Tezpur.'

'I cannot go around in sackcloth and ashes. I am a Frenchman. I have to behave like one.'

'You certainly do that. But I don't want you up in those hills with me. The people up there trust me.'

I unbolted the door to see how the criminals and lunatics were faring. Mercier followed me out. I could smell the smoke drifting up from the riverside fires. A man sat in the road in the moonlight considering his freedom and wondering what he was supposed to do with it.

In the town hungry dogs howled, jackals barked and the sacred cows which had been left unmilked lowed in pain. I jumped as the bushes to one side of me parted and teeth gently tested my hand; but it was only one of the goats. For all we knew the Chinese were just down the road.

As we turned to go inside again Mercier shouted a warning.

I jumped to one side but I was too late. I was on the ground and a cord was cutting into my neck. I clawed at my throat but I couldn't move the cord which seemed as sharp as a knife. I twisted on to my back. There was a smell of curried breath and unwashed flesh. The man's face was black in the moonlight, teeth flashing white. I tried to shout but the cord was biting into my wind-pipe severing my voice.

I could see Mercier struggling with another man against the wall of the club. My vision was filled with fireflies which moved slowly, like maggots, leaving trails of red behind them. The trails fused into red fire.

Then I was free. Lying there watching the stars return, breathing like a panting dog, feeling the raw wound on my throat. I nodded at Mercier because I could not speak.

'My assailant was much weaker than yours,' he said. 'He must have been in the asylum or the prison for a long time. When he drove the knife at me I deflected his arm and he killed himself. I was not very clever—he was very weak.'

I looked around. There was no sign of a second body. Mercier said: 'I hit your attacker from behind. But he was very strong,

that one. The strength of madness. He ran away.'

I made a rasping noise that was supposed to mean thank-you.

'Come, I will help you inside,' he said. And as we hobbled back he smiled and said: 'Do you think that perhaps now I may come up the mountains with you?'

I nodded.

'Thank you, Mr. Sangster,' he said. He was suddenly very Gallic and sure of himself again.

In the billiards room a delicately-built Indian correspondent with a silken dab of a moustache and thinning hair, alarmed at his valour in staying, cracked the balls around the table with desperate nonchalance.

The American girl told me to sit down and dabbed Black Knight on my throat. 'That would have been great,' she said. 'Getting bumped off by some Indian nut instead of a sinister, slit-eyed Chink.'

'I'm sorry I didn't get bumped off by a Chinaman.'

'Do you think they'll come through the plains?'

'You know as much as I do. I suppose Maxwell's told you that they're expected to stop in the foothills.'

'Sure, Maxwell's told me. He's also told me that you're against me coming up the mountains.'

'He told you correctly. It's not a place for a woman.'

'I'm doing a man's job. At least I don't go getting myself garrotted by a lunatic.'

'It doesn't much matter, does it? You're coming and that's that. But I'm warning you it's going to be tough. So when it does don't start the poor-little-girl stuff because it's just not on.'

'Quite the little gentleman, aren't we.'

'No,' I said. 'Now let me drink some of that stuff you're swabbing on my neck.'

The Indian hit the white ball off the table. He picked it up and said: 'I'm telling you we have nothing to worry about.

We have got the measure of those yellow blighters now. We will stop them at the foothills.'

'Why then has the Indian GHQ withdrawn across the river to Gauhati?' I asked.

'Oh lord, I don't know,' he said. 'But the blighters will never take me alive.' He tried to pot a red and the white ball shot straight into a pocket without touching anything. 'Oh crikey,' he said.

Maxwell came out of the kitchen. 'I hope we're not holed up here too long,' he said. 'There's not much food. A few tins of those Goddamn cocktail sausages and some meat in the freezer which will be rotten in a day because the electricity's gone.'

'We won't be here longer than a day,' I said. 'They're either coming or they're not. If they are then they can reach here from the foothills in half an hour. If not then they'll announce a withdrawal in the morning.'

'I guess this is quite a story if we could only file it,' Maxwell said.

'It'll keep,' I said.

No one spoke. The Indian knocked the tip off his cue; Anne Mortimer slotted a fresh film into her camera; Maxwell poured himself another Black Knight. The other correspondents curled themselves up in blankets. Despite the cows and the jackals and the dogs we could still hear the insects outside, the moths fluttering like snowflakes around the windows, the mosquitoes trying to find a way in for their evening meal. I thought, but I wasn't sure, that I could hear gunfire in the distance. But it could have been thunder. Then the phone rang.

'It hasn't rung for two years,' I said.

Anne Mortimer said: 'I expect it's for me.'

'You must be joking,' I said.

I picked up the phone. A polite little voice wavered in the receiver, a man's voice distorted into an old woman's by distance and the Indian telephone system. 'The Tezpur station club,' I said, conscious of the absurdity of it all.

'It is Calcutta here,' said the old voice.

'I don't know who you are,' I said, 'but if you can take a message for me there's a lot of money in it for you.'

The voice said: 'It is Calcutta here.' My voice was not picking up any vibrancy and I knew it was reaching as far as the receiver in my hand. Just the same I shouted. There was a click and my voice boomed away across Assam and East Pakistan to the city of beggars.

The voice said: 'I have a call for a Miss Mortimer. I am asking you if she is there please.'

I handed her the receiver and said, as if we were in her New York apartment: 'It's for you.'

She took it and almost immediately started dictating a story. It was the only story to get out of Tezpur that night.

When she put down the phone I said: 'You could have held on and tried to see if you could get some of us through to our Calcutta stringers.'

'You must be joking,' she said.

That night there was an earth tremor just to complete the picture. The ground moved slightly and Queen Victoria fell off the wall. The Indian who was, at least, used to such phenomena said: 'It is nothing to worry about chaps. I will restore her ladyship.'

But an earth tremor creates a special fear. An awareness that you are perched on the flimsy crust of the globe which could crack open like the shell of an egg at any moment. An awareness of fallibility and futility.

'Are you all right?' I asked the girl.

'I'm all right,' she said. 'My folks hail from San Francisco.'

All we needed now, I thought, was the appearance of a man-eating tiger. No one snored and I presumed that no one was asleep. I turned over in my sleeping bag and, waiting for the dawn or the Chinese, thought about Mercier in Oran.

Chapter Five

No one really knew at the time why the Algerians decided to attack that particular bar. There were half a dozen possible reasons—they had discovered that one of us was working for the OAS, they didn't like what we were writing for our papers, the owner of the bar was a traitor. By this time their loyalties had become so subdivided and the excuses for killing so flimsy that there was little point in analysing motives. I believed that some of the young Algerian thugs, who now stalked humans as the youths of other countries stalked rabbits, had seen Mercier posturing with the French gunmen and had associated all of us with the OAS.

First, as usual, the plastique exploded. But they had not used enough and, as we were huddled at the other end of the bar, none of us was hurt. The barmaid whose brown breasts had been diverting our conversation every time she bent down to take a bottle of Perrier water from the crate on the ground was killed. The bomb shattered the mirror behind the bar and a sliver of glass pierced her eye.

Most of the correspondents hit the ground. I vaulted the bar and crouched on the other side. Then the shooting started. The first bullet shattered the plate-glass door which had freakishly defied the plastique—no neat puncture Hollywood style, just a heap of glass swords. Two of the correspondents, a German and an Italian, had pistols and managed to keep up a pretence of defence.

Outside the hot day was fading and the plumes of the palm trees in the square moved languidly in the dusk breeze. Behind the bar the blood that had pumped from the dead girl was already congealing on the floor. Her only contribution to political warfare had been to serve drinks to friend and foe alike. Or had it? Behind the crate of Perrier bottles I saw the butt of a Sten gun. As I reached for it a bullet tore through the bar and shattered a bottle beside me. No sound-effects or glycerine ballistics have managed to simulate the impact of a bullet close by. I imagined it ripping my flesh, splintering my bone.

On the other side of the bar a bullet hit one of the British correspondents lying on the floor, in the thigh. 'Christ,' he sobbed. 'Sodding bloody Christ.'

It was then that Mercier broke down as if a bullet had snatched the veil of toughness from him. I saw his face in one of the pieces of mirror still sticking to the wall behind the bar. His expensive green-glass spectacles were cracked and his jaw and lips were out of control. 'Tell them we're journalists,' he screamed in French. 'Tell them we'll give them money. Tell them we will print anything they wish. Tell them something. For Christ's sake tell them something to make them stop.'

The German with the pistol turned and smacked Mercier's temple with the butt. Mercier stopped shouting.

An American said: 'If we stay here like this we'll be carcasses. We'll have to run for it.'

I wished I hadn't found the Sten gun. But there it was, butt already growing warm in my hand. 'Hold it,' I said. 'I've got a Sten. It's useless from here. It would be like throwing stones at them. But if you lay off the shooting they'll think we've run out of bullets. I'll get up by the door and blast them when they come for us across the road.'

I crawled towards the entrance trying to avoid contact with the dead girl; trying not to look at the beautiful young face which in life had taunted us correspondents, as clumsy and

obvious in our approaches as sailors on shore-leave.

I waited at the end of the bar. Outside the square was quiet, apparently deserted. Within five minutes of any killing the square filled with people again, even before the warm corpses had been taken away. That morning I had seen a smart girl in stiletto heels step daintily over a corpse as if the body had been a sack of vegetables.

The sky was dark now; the night smelled of diesel oil, mimosa and cordite. I wished they would hurry up because I had never killed anyone and the longer I waited the more I feared the task of execution. What was it they always said? 'It was them or us.' These gunmen were probably youths who should have been indoors doing their homework. I would try and aim at their legs, but a Sten was not noted for its accuracy.

The shadows beneath the trees lengthened and took human shape. They came cautiously at first, then with more confidence. I couldn't see how old they were. I wanted to shout to them to get back. But they would have vanished, kept us holed-up until our ammunition had really run out and then killed us. 'Them or us.'

I waited until they were almost at the entrance and then shot them. The primitive gun leaped in my hands as the bullets sprayed around the square. I was vaguely conscious of a sharp, sickening sensation in my hand. The figures outside jack-knifed and fell to the ground and I knew that my bullets had gone higher than knee level. They screamed and clawed at nothing. We waited until the screams had faded to whimpers, then emerged.

Some of them were even younger than I had thought they would be. Three died and three were taken to the over-filled hospital with stomach wounds—the Sten had shot very high. The American said: 'I've got a son older than them.' I threw down the gun and walked across the square; people were already emerging, sensing that tonight's incident was over.

That night one of the boys in hospital confirmed that they

had been ordered to attack the bar because Mercier was thought to be working with the OAS and, as he was often in our company, we were suspected too. So Mercier then was responsible for turning me into a killer of schoolboys.

Both Mercier and I were in the hospital that night. He was unconscious; I was in the casualty ward having my hand dressed because, being an amateur gunman, I had held the Sten incorrectly and its crude machinery had severed one of my fingers. I hadn't noticed the wound for several minutes after the killing. But the wound was nothing compared with the anguish now spreading through my soul.

For a year afterwards I never slept without dreaming about the boys I had shot. I saw them at school, on the football ground, growing older and going out with girls. But their faces were always dead.

Then the paper sent me to India. And I never returned to London.

Chapter Six

Dawn and no sign of the Chinese. Not even a lunatic or criminal in sight.

I took the Land Rover which I had hidden behind the little church and drove through the town. A few houses set on fire—possibly by a released arsonist—were still smouldering. Dogs leaped at the truck, cows with udders as taut as balloons peered in the rabbit-hutch shops looking for the masters who had always worshipped them.

Outside the bank the bonfire where the clerks had burned all the money was still hot. A few beggars left behind grubbed around in the ashes for coins which an official, taught to obey instructions however puzzling, had tried to burn with the notes.

The airfield was deserted. I looked in a Nissen hut beside a backwater of the river but the only inhabitant was a grinning God with four spidery arms. On the beach the last of the refugees sat slitting chickens' throats while they waited to be ferried to the opposite shore on the battered Robert E. Lee steamboats. The smoke from their fires uncoiled into the luminous sky.

There were also a lot of hill people there, squatting on the wet sand, passive and bewildered. I spoke to some of them and their faces creased into smiles when they heard their language. They said they were Monpas and there were thousands of Chinese in the mountains.

I hid the jeep behind the Church again and when I walked

into the club house Maxwell said: 'Where the hell have you been?'

'I've been for a drive,' I said.

'We thought you'd been kidnapped by one of those Goddamn loonies.'

Mercier said: 'How's your neck?' He was quite bouncy again, wearing his sun-glasses and holding a Gauloise between his teeth as he talked.

'A little sore. I'm grateful that it still joins my head to the rest of my body. Where's the girl?'

'Anne's trying to rustle up some breakfast,' Maxwell said. 'I'm trying to pick up the BBC. I guess I was right—the Chinese have called a halt.'

Anne Mortimer served breakfast in relays on the bar. Sweet bread, cocktail sausages and tiny eggs fried. The little Indian sat on the steps gazing apprehensively in the direction of the mountains which were still shy behind the clouds. 'It looks as if those damn fellows have stopped,' he said.

Maxwell played with his powerful Japanese short-wave set on the lawn beside the tennis court. I saw him stiffen and listen attentively. Then he ran back to the club. 'It's all over,' he said. 'They've stopped and they're going back.' When we were alone he said: 'It looks as if we're in business, Alex.'

'It looks that way,' I said. I hadn't yet managed to call him Vincent.

We sat on the porch in the thin sunlight watching the butterflies take their last waltz among the hibiscus blossoms and waiting for the wanderers to return—the civilian population, the Indian staff officers, the planters, the rest of the correspondents.

The fifth member of our party chosen in the rigged draw was an Indian from the south called Krishna. He was very quiet and when he spoke there was hardly any trace of the accent

which makes it difficult for a European to take an Indian seriously. But although he was reserved he exuded a sense of latent power, passion even. When the right catalyst was produced the passion would be formidable. He was a handsome man with wary brown eyes and sleek shortish hair greying at the temples.

He flew to Tezpur from Calcutta with the first batch of Pressmen to arrive after the cease-fire; most of them were newcomers, but some were old-hands who had accepted the Indian Army's offer to be evacuated and were keen to offer unsolicited reasons for their departure.

From the outset I sensed undercurrents in the relationship between Krishna and Maxwell. Nothing that was definable. Just a suspicion of strain in their conversation, a certain wariness in their approach to each other.

'Why Krishna?' I asked Maxwell. 'Why did you want him in particular?'

'Why not for Christ sake? Don't tell me you've got it in for him.'

'Far from it. He looks the best bet of the bunch. I just wondered why you were so keen on him.'

'I guess because I reckoned he was the best bet too.'

'I suppose that's a good enough reason,' I said.

It was our last night in the club. We were due to start at five in the morning. The Land Rover and a trailer packed with equipment waited in the forecourt. Restless and envious Pressmen paced about the club wondering how to explain to their editors that they had not been able to reach the battlefields and knowing that no editor would appreciate the excuse that they had lost the opportunity in a game of chance. Already one jeep-load of correspondents trying to cross the border at the village of Foothills had been turned back. Others would try, but there were patrols out to stop them.

Anne Mortimer came into the club with Mercier. They had both been to the cable office. I wondered who had helped whom

write the copy. Mercier propelled her to the bar with proprietorial assurance to which she didn't seem to object.

'I suggest we all have an early night,' I said. I sounded more like a scoutmaster than a mountain guide.

'We will just have a little night-cap,' Mercier said. 'A toast to the success of our mission.' He ordered Black Knights all round.

Maxwell said: 'Have you two been filing?'

'We sent a little story,' Anne Mortimer said.

'Projecting it a little bit into the future, perhaps,' I said. 'I hope that your readers will not discover tomorrow that you have already been up the mountains.'

'They might read that I'm going up them.'

I still had in my pocket the cable congratulating me on my story when I first returned from the mountains. But it had been superseded by another cable demanding to know why I had not filed the story of the evacuation of Tezpur which a girl—a girl mark you—had filed to her New York paper.

An American agency man joined us. 'It's a carve-up,' he said. 'A Goddamn carve-up.'

Mercier patted him on the back. 'How do you say it?—the luck of the draw?'

'I don't know about luck. An Agency man should be going up there. Then every bastard will have the story. Trust these sonofabitches to screw the whole thing up. I've called Nehru protesting.'

'Have you had a reply?' Maxwell asked.

'Of course I haven't had a reply. And why are you going up there?—a two-bit part-timer. And a broad, too. It makes me want to throw up.'

Krishna came up to the bar, compact and self-sufficient. 'If you do,' he said to the agency man, 'perhaps you would do it outside.' He ordered an orange squash.

The agency man opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. There was something about Krishna.

'Let's go into the Queen Victoria room,' I said.

I spread a map on a card table. It was a beautiful map; the plains white, the foothills pink, the mountains purple and the snow-capped peaks white and ice-blue. And it showed the pattern of the mountains, purple spines sprawling arrogantly across the weak pink, then blurring and fading, contemptuous of the white valley which they overlooked. The cartographer had chosen his colours well. I could hear the wind singing in the snow, cruel at dusk and joyous at dawn; the creak of an avalanche gathering power; the music of a waterfall muted by its own spray.

Even the Brahmaputra, or the Tsangpo as the Tibetans called it, appeared puny and impotent beside the purple mountains. A blue cable of frayed threads. Unless, of course, you were a rong-pa in which case you saw it carving its way contemptuously through the mountains. But I didn't see it that way; nor, I suspected, did the cartographer.

'This,' I said, 'is the way we go.' I pointed with the unsharpened end of a pencil because I didn't want to spoil the delicate whorls and islands of pink and purple charted with such devotion. I showed them the route from Foothills up to Bomdi La and on to the Se La Pass at thirteen thousand, nine hundred and forty feet.

Anne Mortimer pointed at the red footprints of the undemarcated border with Tibet. 'Aren't we going as far as that?'

'We'll see when we get there,' I said.

Mercier said: 'We must get to the border. We must get there.' He prodded the map with a well-manicured finger.

The name of the town was Bum La but I didn't comment.

At 5.5 a.m. there were four of us standing around the Land Rover shivering in a breeze that smelled of the river. Mercier had not appeared.

I looked in the room where he had been sleeping. There were

two or three heavily-breathing bodies under their blankets but no sign of Mercier.

I walked across the grass behind the club to the two toilets beside the tennis court. From one of them there came the sound of whimpering.

I called out and Mercier groaned back at me. 'I have dysentry. I am in agony.'

'Is it very bad?' There were so many types of dysentry ranging from gyppy tummy to haemorrhages that weakened and prepared the body for death.

'No, not very bad. When I get over this attack I will be all right. Please forgive me.'

'You'd better stay behind,' I said.

'No, please. Wait a minute.' The door opened and Mercier came out holding a bottle of opium mixture in his hand. He poured half of it down his throat. 'I will be all right when this takes effect.'

'We can't stop the Land Rover every five minutes for you to go behind the bushes.'

'It will not be necessary.'

But it was. Half way across the paddy fields. I sympathised with Mercier because I knew how agonising it could be. But I couldn't take him up the mountains in that condition.

'I'll have to put you off at Foothills,' I said as we drove through the tea gardens.

'No, please let me stay.'

'Impossible. We can't keep stopping on the mountain road. It's dangerous enough as it is.'

'Perhaps we could stop at Foothills for some breakfast and let him rest up,' Anne Mortimer said.

'Impossible,' I said.

She appealed to Maxwell who was sitting behind her. 'We can stop, can't we Vincent? There's no desperate hurry. This man's sick.'

'We'll see when we get there,' Maxwell said.

'We'll see nothing,' I said. 'And you'd better get it straight Maxwell that from the moment we got in this truck I'm the boss. If you start counter-acting my instructions in any way then I'll leave you on your own.'

Krishna said: 'I agree with Sangster. I think we should leave this man at Foothills.'

Maxwell said: 'Okay, you're the boss.'

'It's not necessary,' the girl said. 'You don't have to be as unkind as all that. It's all just part of this great big act. The hard cruel man from the mountains.'

'Miss Mortimer,' I said, 'if you wish to stay with this man at Foothills and look after him then please do. I'm taking this truck on up the road. It's quite immaterial to me whether you come or not. Do you want to stay with Mercier?'

It was a hard question. She would, I knew, come with us whatever happened to Mercier because she was a newspaper-woman and she had to get the story even more than we did because she was representing her sex.

She turned to Mercier who was sitting miserably in the back with his hands crossed on his belly. 'How do you feel, Pierre?'

'I'm afraid I must get out again.' He disappeared into the bushes.

'Miss Mortimer,' I said. 'I asked you a question. Do you want to stay with Mercier when we leave him at Foothills?'

I could feel her hatred reaching me in the darkness from the seat behind. 'You know the answer,' she said.

The darkness was warmer and damper now. We were in tiger country, snake country, elephant country. Ahead lay Chinese country.

Mercier finished off his bottle of opium mixture. I hoped he had checked its strength.

When we reached Foothills he said: 'I think I feel better now. I am very sorry about what has happened. It is so humiliating.'

Krishna said: 'Let me feel your stomach.' He kneaded

Mercier's belly with strong brown fingers. 'I think he will be all right,' he said. It might have been my imagination but I felt that there was a trace of regret in his voice. I warmed towards Krishna.

'So you don't have to make a decision,' I told the girl.

'And aren't you the disappointed one,' she said.

After that Mercier fell asleep, mouth open, head lolling, innards cemented with opium.

I started the engine of the Land Rover and we began to ascend the Himalayas.

Chapter Seven

During the first day the tensions between us retreated into the background, overawed by everything around us.

We passed Indian troops straggling along the side of the road, heads bowed with defeat, bandages blood-stained and dirty. And tribesmen who had been fleeing from the advancing Chinese bewildered that they had been overtaken and then left once more, along with the beaten Indian Army. They didn't know whether to return to their villages, to stay where they were or to continue on their way to the plains.

Dawn came noisily to the cathedrals of foliage on either side of us. The birds awoke together and the green ceiling was streaked with flying parrot colours; unknown animals pushing their way through the bushes and creepers froze when they heard our truck. The leaves, the vines, the giant rhubarb stalks and thick-fleshed flowers, sucked and breathed and dripped.

But the belt of jungle was very narrow. Soon we were clear of it, breathing the milky freshness of dawn in forestland which, still glowing with the dying flames of autumn, resembled the woodlands of New England. Little white roses known as the Flowers of a Hundred Heads and Himalayan musk roses bloomed in the thickets.

I was anxious to get as far as possible on the first day; but my motives were mostly selfish because I still did not consider myself to be in the Himalayas. This was picnic country, the

forests of childhood: I wanted to reach the battlements of the world. But I agreed to stop for an early lunch in a valley beside a stream littered with round boulders.

We ate legs of chicken, pinched and pitiful, symbols of the starvation atrophying the country we had left behind us, the great decaying tooth whose roots we were now exploring. And sweet tea from flasks. I anticipated with relish their reaction to tsampa, nettle spinach, butter tea and barley beer.

Only Mercier did not eat. He wandered thoughtfully around the boulders with a slightly drunken roll; tapered trousers crumpled, olive features drawn and thoughtful.

I lit a cheroot and leaned against a boulder. 'There's probably a Chinese patrol watching us up there right now,' I said.

Anne Mortimer made some notes and took pictures of the mountains. She might just as well have told her office to look up some prints of the Rockies. Then she took pictures of us and asked us to take pictures of her.

'When do we get into Buddhist country?' Maxwell asked.

Krishna looked up from a worn black book resting on his knees. 'Soon,' he said. 'You will know when we do.'

I looked at him speculatively. 'How will we know?'

'You will feel the decay and the corruption.' There was an edge to his voice that I had not heard before. He relaxed again. 'You will see their monasteries, their Gods. Their prayer flags, their prayer wheels. There will be no mistaking it.'

'Are you a very religious man, Krishna?' Anne Mortimer asked.

'I am a Hindu. I believe in my faith.'

But it seemed to me that there was more to it than that.

Five hours later the feathered woodlands were behind us and the hillsides had steepened to precipices. We were discussing camping out for the night when I took a hairpin bend too sharply. The trailer swung round behind us and we stopped with its two wheels over the brink.

I tried to persuade the Land Rover to pull them back on to

the road but they were jammed against the cliff-face.

Krishna and Mercier opened the doors of the truck to jump out. Krishna's action wasn't motivated by fear; possibly Mercier's wasn't either.

'For God's sake stay in the truck,' I shouted. 'If we all get out the trailer will pull the whole bloody thing over the edge.'

We sat there for a moment. Mercier was shaking and his forehead was moist with sweat—but he had been ill. Krishna just looked at me with his shrewd brown eyes. Maxwell's hand jumped to the little scars on his jaw. The girl's hand strayed to her camera but her hand was trembling and she left it on her lap. 'I guess there's not much to photograph,' she said.

'One of you get out,' I said. 'But very gently. Go and get some rocks. The heaviest you can carry. Put them on your seat. Anywhere in the truck so that it's weighted. The rest of us stay here. If you feel it starting to slide jump for it.'

Maxwell said: 'Okay, Mercier, you get out.'

'No. Krishna, you get out. But for Christ's sake be careful.' I hoped that I had only counteracted Maxwell's order because Mercier was still weak from dysentry and not because whoever got out first had the best chances of survival.

Krishna eased himself out of the truck as if he were getting out of bed and feeling for his slippers on a cold floor. He ran across the road and came back with a rock that would have taxed the strength of a coalman. We waited, feeling for the slightest movement beneath the wheels. I looked back and down, my eyes magnetised by the drop. A mile below I could see the road that we had driven along. I wondered how long it would take a falling body to reach the road. While I was wondering a small Indian reconnaissance plane spotting refugees and Chinese flew below us along the valley.

The girl turned her head. 'I shouldn't,' I said. But she looked down and I saw her jaw tighten. 'I told you not to,' I said.

'That aircraft,' she said. 'It's below us.'

Sweat was coursing down Mercier's forehead into his eyes.

'It's the opium,' he said.

Maxwell said: 'I must say you're one hell of a driver, Sangster.'

'I forgot to tell you to bring a parachute,' I said.

Mercier's body stiffened. 'The wheels,' he said. 'I felt the wheels move.'

'Not yet,' I said. And I thought: if anything will make his bowels move again this will.

Krishna lowered the rock on to his seat. He brought four more and stood back. He was only slightly out of breath. A strong, fit man Krishna. We climbed cautiously out of the Land Rover.

'Gee whiz,' said the girl. 'What do we do now?'

'We get the trailer's wheels back on to the road,' I said. I wasn't sure how but a score or so of Indian troops coming along the road did know. They found a branch, pushed it under the front of the trailer and levered it up until the wheels were on the same level as the road. I let out the clutch and we were off again.

We stopped at a village two miles off the road down one of the gentler slopes along a track pick-axed by tribesmen. Like Kungsangtse's people they had fled from Tibet when all resistance to the Chinese had stopped. The headman cleared two huts for us. I looked at the girl. 'Which do you want? To sleep by yourself or sleep with us?'

'I'll sleep by myself, thank you.'

'All right. Suit yourself. You don't have to. Make sure your sleeping bag is done up properly. It will be bloody cold tonight.'

Mercier said: 'I do not think that it is right for her to sleep by herself.'

'You wouldn't,' I said.

'I do not mean anything like that. I think she should sleep with all of us. She will be frightened alone there.'

'It'll make a good story,' the girl said. 'How I slept alone surrounded by fifty Tibetan tribesmen.'

'You needn't worry about them,' I said. 'Nor us for that matter.'

'You're very flattering.'

She wore jungle boots, khaki trousers and a dark green anorak issued by the Indian Army. The mountain air seemed to have encouraged her freckles to multiply.

'Where's Krishna?' I said.

Maxwell shrugged. 'I guess he's gone on a tour of the village.'

I wandered through the village looking for Krishna whose composure I admired, whose purpose eluded me. Inside the huts butter lamps flickered; resinous smoke from the fires rose, as true as the stems of wine glasses, before breaking into filmy bowls.

I stretched and yawned and inhaled deeply of the cooling air which smelled of the smoke and dusk dampness and—or so it seemed—the distant snows. The corrupt and fetid plains were behind me. I wanted to drive on alone, to scale the peaks and look down upon the world which the Tibetans insisted was flat.

I found Krishna at the far end of the village gazing through the trees down the mountainside which was now bottomless in the darkness. He turned as if he had expected me and nodded in his friendly, composed way. His teeth looked very white in the darkness. 'I always take a stroll before turning in,' he said, anticipating my question.

'You did well this afternoon,' I said.

'Thank you.'

Many people retain an air of authority, mystery even, by containing their words; but it is often a deception. Krishna certainly rationed his words, but I liked to think that when he chose to speak there would be no disappointment.

As we walked back towards our two huts children left the firesides to stare at us. I waved at them. 'They're good people,' I said.

'They're all right.'

'You don't like them?'

'I didn't say that. But they're not my people.'

'Nor mine. That doesn't prevent me from liking them.'

'You are different from me. I am a Hindu, they are Buddhists.'

'You feel very strongly about this?'

His teeth flashed in the dark. 'It is best not to talk about religion. It has caused more bloodshed in the world than anything else. More than politics, more than greed. I do not wish to discuss it with you.'

'Very well. I have no particular interest in your religious views.'

'But one thing does interest me,' he said. 'If these people are Buddhists why have they not built a place of worship? Even in the smallest Hindu village you will find such places.'

'I'm afraid a lot of these people have lost faith. They remember the lack of support from Lhasa when they were trying to fight the Chinese. They remember the out-of-date weapons which Lhasa officials sold them at exorbitant prices. They have seen a lot of killing and suffering and I think they are beginning to doubt the wisdom of a lot of The Enlightened One's teachings. It is difficult to believe that mortal life is of no importance when you have seen your parents buried alive, your leaders tortured, your womenfolk raped.'

Krishna nodded, more in agreement, it seemed, than surprise.

When we entered one of the huts the rest of our party were sitting around a fire eating tsampa and drinking chang beer from earthenware mugs.

Anne Mortimer sampled the tsampa and grimaced.

'You don't like it?' I asked.

'Of course I like it. What is it though?'

'They pour barley on hot sand and make pop-corn. Then they grind it down and make what you're eating now. You'll be used to it before this trip is over. And in case you're wondering about the fuel on that fire it's yak-dung.'

We were half way through our tsampa when a villager came in with some venison steaks.

'I thought they didn't kill animals,' Maxwell said.

'A lot of things have changed,' I said. I turned to the tribesman who was standing watching us with the candid curiosity of a child. 'How did you come to get the meat? And don't tell me the old story that someone from another village killed it.'

He grinned. 'No, we killed it. We found that when we were fighting the gya-mi we needed meat. The habit has remained.'

We ate the charred meat hungrily. Then sat smoking. Maxwell and Krishna hardly spoke, although they seemed to be very much aware of each other.

'It's time to turn in,' I said. 'We must make an early start.'

Mercier said: 'I will see Anne to her hut.'

'You can stay here if you want to,' I told her. 'There's no point in being obstinate.'

Her face was flushed from the fire, her eyes sleepy. 'I'll be all right. If you've lived alone in an apartment in New York you can put up with anything.'

'Even wild mastiffs? I didn't think you got too many of those in Manhattan.'

'You get a lot of wolves,' she said.

'Then you should be able to handle Mercier.'

I lay awake for a while, still exhilarated by my return to the mountains, and considered my travelling companions.

Pierre Mercier. At least there were no mysteries about him. An inadequate man intent upon proving himself to his friends in Paris, to his newspaper, to himself. There were a lot of Merciers in the world, each equipped with a wrong set of values; you could find them in any bar in the world round about midday, simulating an exaggerated hangover and recalling the night's sexual adventures with a girl who had in fact dismissed them at the door of her apartment. Mercier had been stupid enough to include toughness and brutality in his repertoire and had been caught out. I should, I supposed, have admired him for coming up the mountains with us: true bravery can only exist in a man who knows fear. But I could never

forgive him for turning me into a killer. Our motives for reaching the Tibetan border were as different as the hunter who kills elephant to preserve other game and the hunter who kills for sport.

There was a parallel, too, between Mercier and the girl. Determined to prove a false set of values, a suffragette of journalism, as incongruous in her jungle warfare clothes as a woman barrister in cap and gown.

Krishna's inner compulsions were becoming clearer now. He was powered by deep religious beliefs—a smouldering conviction which could, perhaps, be fanned into fanaticism. And there was some relationship, some enmity, between Maxwell and him; some shared knowledge which had not so far been made available to me. But the feeling was so suppressed, so obviously raw beneath the manners of necessary communication, that it was only a matter of time before I would be able to share the knowledge.

Maxwell was the enigma. Too conciliatory, too plausible, too pliable. These were the requirements of an American intelligence agent anxious to complete a mission without any in-fighting among his team. But he seemed to wear them too easily. I got the impression that if you found the core of Maxwell's character it would wriggle away as a beach-worm vanishes into the sand when you touch it.

We were, I thought, a rum bunch.

I was patrolling the borders of sleep, smelling the diesel air of Oran and scaling mountains, when I sensed that someone was entering the hut. Sleeping bags were not made to help their occupants overpower assassins. If I tried to wriggle out of it the intruder would hear me and flee—or kill me.

I drew my knife and as the vague outline of a pair of legs passed I wrapped one arm round them, heaved and prodded the fallen body with my knife. But no Tibetan assassin ever wore perfume.

She gave the sort of squeal that women are supposed to give when they see a mouse. Then she said: 'Is that you, Alex?'

'No one else.'

'Then for God's sake take your hand out of my shirt.'

I felt a hard nipple and firm warm flesh. I withdrew my hand. 'It was an accident. I'm sorry . . .' I said. 'But you asked for it. What are you doing here anyway?'

'Okay,' she said. 'You win. It was a bit scary in there. Now are you satisfied?'

'Get in your sleeping bag and go to sleep.'

But the feel of the nipple, as hard as if it had responded to stimulation, remained with me and drew back the warm covers of sleep. The awareness of her sexuality only faded when she began to snore.

Chapter Eight

At Bomdi La I changed into my mountain clothes; brown smock, rough trousers, boots that laced up high around my ankles. I looked for the lieutenant who had been reluctant to relay my information about the Chinese patrol, but they told me he was dead. Alone he had delayed a Chinese patrol with a machine gun while his men fled down the valley.

We were at nine thousand, six hundred and forty feet, surrounded by dark mountains supporting a thick layer of cloud; here and there the peaks broke the surface like icebergs knifing a motionless sea. You could feel the undisturbed silence, imagine the detonations of heavy artillery losing themselves among the chasms and valleys.

The town showed little sign of the brief occupation by the Chinese. They were neat, precise, callous soldiers. I remembered as a child how I had watched the Chinese troops defending themselves against the Japanese on the newsreels. Now my old heroes were the enemy. Another contradiction in the formless patterns of international hostility. Germans and British shaking hands at Christmas before shooting each other; Russians and Britons clasped together in the heady embrace of victory before declaring the Cold War; North Koreans fighting South Koreans and wondering why; children playing Boy Scouts with real guns and being shot in the stomach by the Sten gun leaping in my hands. I felt the pain in the invisible finger on my right hand.

I shouted across the valley and my voice answered me and

died in ripples of sound. I wondered if the Chinese could hear my voice talking to itself.

Maxwell joined me. He still managed to look dapper and he had managed a cleaner shave than any of us despite the coarsened skin on his jaw. He wore a wool scarf knotted at his throat with the nonchalence of a Desert Rat. 'Talking to yourself?' he said. 'It's a bad sign. They say an echoing voice can start an avalanche in the snow. Is that true or is it just for the movies?'

'It could happen.'

'When do we hit the snows?'

'*We* don't,' I said. '*I* do when I cross the border. Although you might meet a bit of sleet. It hits you like buckshot when the wind's blowing.'

'I want to go with you,' Maxwell said.

I thought then that I had known this all the time. 'Sorry,' I said. 'It's not on. You'll have to trust me.'

'Why? Two of us can do it together. I'm strong and fit enough.'

'You haven't got the right clothes. You don't know the mountains.' I decided to be brutal. 'You'd just be a hindrance. It would be like taking a wounded man with me. In any case why do you want to come with me? The people of Kushlanga know me but you'll only create distrust.'

'I want to cross the border. I want to see the job through. I want to be able to report personally that they're going to start fighting up there.'

'You'll just have to take my word for it. I'm just about the only person the Abbot will listen to. By myself—and with one particular letter you've given me—I might just persuade him that he should end centuries of peace and happiness among his people for the sake of Mankind. I wish I could convince myself.'

Maxwell didn't reply. As we walked back to the Land Rover he said: 'What do you think of Krishna?'

'He's a tough character.'

'I reckon he's a little unstable. I think we should leave him here.'

'But you chose him.'

Maxwell sent his cigarette butt spinning through the air. 'We all make mistakes. I guess I didn't realise his emotions were quite so raw beneath the surface.'

'You can't get rid of a man just because he's an ardent Hindu entering Buddhist country.'

'I think we should leave him here. We can't afford any trouble.'

'And I think we should take him with us. And you know something more, Maxwell?—I think there's something between you and Krishna.'

Maxwell said: 'My only interest is the success of this mission. But take him with us if you must. As you said—you're the boss now.'

The attack came at dusk as we were pitching camp in a clearing covered with a mat of alpine plants with the gold-dusted leaves. A couple of shots cracked out multiplying into a volley of echoes. The bullets ricocheted off the boulders behind us and sang through the maimed and starved pine trees.

'Hit the deck and try and work your way behind the Land Rover,' I shouted.

I was lying next to Mercier. 'Quite like old times, isn't it,' I said. I could feel his body shuddering.

Blurred shapes moved on the slope above us, flitting from boulder to boulder.

Mercier said: 'Who are they?' He tried to say something else but his voice dried up on him.

The girl was easing the leather case off her camera. 'For Christ's sake,' I said. 'It's too dark for pictures. And if you think you're going to start letting off flashes you can think again.'

'What are we going to do then?'

'Wait and see what they do. If they're Chinese I doubt if they'll show themselves because they're not supposed to be here. They'll probably send a brain-washed tribesman in to see who we are. We've all got papers—not that they mean much in these parts.'

'That all sounds pretty negative.'

'It's better to be negative and alive than positive and dead.'

It was then that I realised that both Maxwell and Krishna carried guns. They both looked as if they could use them.

'Don't start firing those things,' I said. 'We're all dead ducks if you do.'

We lay still in the deepening dusk waiting. You could hear the different rhythms of our breathing. The girl's quick and controlled, Mercier's fast and erratic, Krishna's as steady as a man in sleep, Maxwell's—you couldn't tell whether Maxwell's was faster or slower than normal; but there wasn't much that you could tell about Maxwell. I could smell the leaves of the plants, sappy and aromatic.

There was another movement of the shapes on the hillside, more positive now as they came nearer. A third bullet tore through the pine trees breaking dead branches. The echoes crackled through the valley; then the silence was more solid than it had been before.

Mercier made a small sound, a moan, a sigh, a whimper. I gripped his arm. 'Get a hold of yourself,' I said.

'I am all right. It will not happen again.'

The girl rolled on one side and whispered: 'What won't happen again?'

'Never you mind,' I said. If meddling curiosity was an asset for a woman journalist then Anne Mortimer was in for a Pulitzer.

The shapes were at the bottom of the slope merging with the boulders.

Maxwell said: 'If they come at us we'll have to shoot.'

Krishna said: 'Maxwell's right.'

'Wait,' I said.

The girl said: 'If it gives you any pleasure you might as well know I'm scared out of my wits.'

'We all are,' I said.

Mercier didn't speak.

A voice called out in Tibetan. 'What's he saying?' Maxwell asked.

'He wants to know who we are.'

'Then for God's sake tell him.'

I grinned fiercely and happily in the darkness. 'Shi-shok, you old bastard,' I shouted. 'It's me, your brother. Alexander Sangster.'

He sat in our tent feeling the blade of his knife, occasionally stroking the boots which he cherished, sipping the arak which slides down the throat like molten liquorice. In the light from our oil-lamp the hard lines on his face were softened and the scar was the kindly stroke of a loving artist. He was both overjoyed at meeting me and disappointed that we were not Chinese whom he could have killed. I liked to think that his happiness was the stronger emotion.

'You are in great danger here,' he said. 'There are many Chinese in the hills disguised as tribesmen.'

'I don't think we are in danger, Shi-shok,' I said. 'They have been told at the border that our party is coming this way. And I am sure that they have watched us all the way up here. But you—you are in danger by being here with us.'

'I have look-outs posted. And even a gya-mi cannot see in the dark. But tell me, my brother, what brings you here? I do not believe that you are merely acting as a guide to these people. And what is this girl who smells so strangely doing with you? Is she your wife?'

'No,' I said. 'You know I have no wife.'

'I am glad. She is not very meaty. And she smells of strange scents as if she is trying to disguise the smell of her body. The smell is bad, perhaps?'

Anne Mortimer who was making notes for her next scoop said: 'I know you're discussing me as if I were a carcass of meat hanging in a butcher's shop. What is he saying about me? You can tell him I think he's great.'

'He was commenting on your perfume.'

'Gee,' she said. 'Does he like it?'

'He wondered just what you were trying to hide with it.'

'Compliments. Compliments. It wouldn't be such a bad idea if he bought some perfume.'

'What does the woman say?' Shi-shok asked.

'She says she thinks you're very handsome.'

Shi-shok shook his head sadly. 'It is a pity because I cannot return the compliment. I think she is perhaps very learned. But she is too hard, too like a man in her ways. I think maybe she wants to be like a man.'

'What's he saying now?' Anne Mortimer asked.

I swallowed a mouthful of burning liquorice. 'He's a very shrewd man.'

'Maybe. But what did he say?'

'He said you had a chip on your shoulder. You were a very feminine girl and he couldn't understand what you were doing in a man's world.'

'I think you're inserting a little of what Alexander Sangster thinks.'

'Perhaps Shi-shok and I think the same things.'

'Perhaps you and Shi-shok are a couple of finks.'

'And perhaps you have got a chip on your shoulder.'

'Nuts,' she said. 'But tell him just the same I think he's great.'

'Shi-shok,' I said. 'Let us go out into the night air and have a talk. There is much I want to say to you.'

Outside the tent, beneath small motionless clouds luminous with moonlight, I told Shi-shok about the real purpose of our

trip and asked him if there would be enough Khampas in Kushlanga in the spring-time to help organise an effective resistance.

'There will be,' he said. 'At last my brother has realised the truth. You must let us escort you to Kushlanga.'

'I must do nothing of the sort,' I said. 'We're supposed to be a peaceful party of newspapermen. What would it look like if we were escorted by a band of brigands? And what's more, Shi-shok, you mustn't attack any Chinese this side of the border. There's been a truce and if you start killing them they will claim it's a breach of the ceasefire.'

Shi-shok considered this and threw the knife into the carpet of alpine flowers. It stuck there like an icicle in the moonlight. 'If there has been a ceasefire,' he said, 'then there should not be any Chinese in this part of India.'

'You're too damn logical. But they could always say they were still making their way back to Tibet. No, Shi-shok, please do what I ask. Let us go on our own way until we reach say Towang. Then perhaps I alone will join up with you and cross the border to Kushlanga.'

'If that is what you wish, my brother. But whatever you say we will watch over you from the hills. At Towang we will rejoin you.'

'All right,' I said. 'But no killing. There are greater things at stake than a few dead Chinese.'

Shi-shok plucked the knife from the ground. 'All right, my brother. But have no fear. We shall be looking over you.'

'Thanks, Shi-shok,' I said. 'I don't know which makes me the most apprehensive—the thought of you or the Chinese watching us.'

He grinned. 'I should fear us most.' He tucked the dagger away in his robe and looked at me speculatively. 'Have you tried to make children with that woman yet?'

'I have no feelings in that direction.'

He nodded, suddenly the sage and philosopher. 'That is well

then. If it is true. But I think maybe the one with the cross hanging from his neck would like to make children with her.'

'It's up to him. And her.'

He clumped me on the back. 'If you have no feelings in that direction then it does not matter. In any case I do not think that a woman who smells like that can attract a man. I do not like a woman who is too clean. I like the natural scents which were intended to arouse us.'

'I'm afraid we have become civilised,' I said. 'It's a tragedy.' But, having smelled a few Tibetan women, I wasn't too sure.

In the morning the Khampas had vanished. And there was not a sign that they had ever been there.

The stream hurried down the mountainside on its way to find the River Tenga which joined the Kameng which, like all moving water in this part of the Himalayas, eventually emptied itself into the Brahmaputra. It had chosen to ignore the clearing where we were camped and made its busy way down the other side of a hill flanking the clearing.

It was a bright morning with a blue, polished-ice sky. The gold-dusted alpine carpet was cold under my feet and the air smelled of frost; there wouldn't be many more mornings like this. I walked bare-chested towards the stream to wash and shave.

From the other side of the hill I could see the snow-covered peaks, creased and crumpled and as deceptively serene as a booby-trapped fortress. Up in those tranquil battlements the cold could remove your ears and the blizzards could bury you in a white tomb where your body would be preserved for eternity.

I saw Anne Mortimer as I rounded a crag. She was stripped to the waist, bathing herself in the steel-blue water. She was only about twenty yards away and I could see the detail of her breasts which I had felt beneath her shirt. Now the nipples

were starting with the cold, small and pink and tender. They were good breasts, small and firm, and they would not droop when she was older. Even her chest was sprinkled with freckles. She looked very young and vulnerable.

'When I was a boy,' I said, 'it used to be Dorothy Lamour who was always caught bathing in a pool. At least she used to wear a sarong.'

She jumped to her feet, and crossed her arms across her breasts and shouted at me. 'Go away. Get away from here.'

I moved behind the crag. 'There's probably a score of Chinese watching you through their binoculars. Not to mention Shi-shok and his lusty brigands.'

She came running at me, shirt flapping above her trousers, fists bunched. I caught her wrists but she was strong and one fist got through to my nose. It began to bleed. I held her away feeling the strength fade from her arms.

'You damned Peeping Tom. You cheap-jack voyeur. Great mystic of the mountains be damned. Why don't you stay down on the plains and peep through windows.' She remembered her feet and kicked me on the shin. I tripped her and we fell on the alpine moss. 'Get away from me,' she said. 'I don't even want to touch you.'

'If I let you go will you stop kicking and clawing like a frustrated schoolgirl?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Let me go you great ape.'

I let her go and she sat glaring at me, breathing rapidly, fingering a stone as if she would like to shy it at my head.

'You shouldn't exert yourself like that at this altitude,' I said. I sniffed back the blood oozing from one nostril.

'The whole darned range of the Himalayas and you have to pick the one spot where I'm having a wash. What did you do —follow me up here?'

'Miss Mortimer,' I said. 'You aren't the only one who washes around here. I walked around this rock and there you were. Next time hang a notice out.'

'You needn't have stood there staring.'

'What did you want me to do?—creep away nursing my guilty secret? For God's sake grow up. You've got breasts like every other woman and I've seen them. Are you ashamed of them or something?'

She laughed suddenly. 'It is a bit crazy when you think about it. All this space, all these mountains and you have to catch me bare-chested behind this one rock.'

I leaned against the rock, mottled with lichen, and felt the sun warming my face and chest. 'I apologise,' I said.

'It's the first time.'

'There hasn't been anything to apologise for before.'

'You've been a boor.'

I could feel the sun mellowing me. 'I've been myself. You decided to intrude into a man's world so you must expect to be treated like one. You can't have any complaints about that.'

She tucked the shirt inside her trousers. 'Just because it's a man's world—or so you like to think—you don't have to be boorish. Men are sometimes polite to each other, aren't they?'

I lit a cheroot. 'Who put that chip on your shoulder?'

'I don't figure you're in any position to talk about chips on the shoulder,' she said. 'What made you take to the mountains anyway?'

'I asked you about your chip first.'

'There's no chip. No story really. I came from a large family in Kentucky. All boys except me. It's not the one about the girl who was treated like a boy and grew up like one. It's the opposite. When my father died my mother decided that she preferred her sons to her daughter. She was kind of defeatist about her sex I guess. A sort of suffragette in reverse. Her old man had been a pretty dominating sort of guy—hence the big family. And when he went she reckoned that I should share the burden of her sex with her. I wasn't ill-treated or anything like that. But the boys were allowed to do whatever they liked while we cooked and scrubbed for them. Even when we were

at high school I was supposed to help prepare their meals while they studied out of hours.'

'You didn't lose your glass slipper at a ball by any chance?'

'Ha ha,' she said. 'You asked for the story. Do you want to hear it or not?'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Carry on.'

'Gee,' she said. 'That's two apologies in ten minutes. Anyway there's not much more to tell. I wasn't even supposed to study because careers were for boys only. Finally I thought to hell with it. I knew a boy on a local paper and I used to go round to his office in the evenings. That was where I got the bug. I used to help him and write some of his copy for him. And I decided that I'd become a famous columnist and make five times the dough that my brothers were earning.'

'And are you?'

'I'm doing all right. I had a lucky break. They made me a reporter on the local paper and one day an editor from New York came into town. He was a local boy made good and they wanted him to lay a foundation stone. I thought he behaved like a boor . . .'

'You mean he was a bit like me?'

'He acted about New York's skyscrapers like you act about the mountains. Anyway I made a few cracks about him in the paper and as my editor had a running feud with his family we printed them. The next thing I knew was he was offering me a job. I guess he wanted to hire me and fire me. But it didn't work out his way because when we got back to New York he was fired and there was me with a job. I did pretty well with a few stories. Or anyway I had the breaks because that's what you have to have in newspapers.'

'I know,' I said. 'I'm a newspaperman.'

She laughed and the freckles on her nose jumped around. 'I keep forgetting. But you can't blame me. You don't exactly look like a newspaperman sitting there showing off your white chest and your brown arms and wearing those crazy pants.

Anyway to finish off the saga. I decided I didn't want to be just any girl covering fashions and the antics of society dead-beats.'

'I know,' I said. 'You wanted to cover the same stories as the men.'

'Right. I got myself to South America on a facility. While I was there they had one of their revolutions. I managed to get a story out with a steward on the last plane before they closed the airport. As I say—you have to have the breaks.'

'And you certainly had your share of them.'

'You have to know what to do with the breaks when you get them.'

'I know it. I'm not belittling your efforts. Any minute now I'll be apologising again.'

She rolled over on her stomach and looked up at me, one elbow in the spongy, metallic leaves, head resting on her hand. 'That's me. Now tell me what you're doing up here in the mountains.'

'I prefer them to the lowlands.'

'That's a hell of a reason,' she said. 'What brought you here in the first place?'

'My paper sent me here on a story.'

'And why did you decide to stay?'

'You can put your notebook and pencil away. I've got no comment to make to the Press.'

'I thought we'd struck a bargain. A sort of shared confessional.'

'You jump to conclusions,' I said. 'A good newspaperman should never do that.'

'To hell with you,' she said.

I watched her walk back towards the Land Rover. Whatever I thought about woman journalists I had to admit that she had behaved well when the Khampas were shooting at us.

Chapter Nine

Higher up towards Se La, the pass where the Fourth Indian Division had been outflanked, we came across the jetsam of war. Burned out trucks, a shattered old field gun, some blood-stained uniforms.

Cold mists which from the distance had looked serene and motionless rolled down the mountainsides spangling our clothes with dew and hiding us from the watchers around us. The ground was littered with grey shale.

The oxygen content of the air was much thinner now. A dozen or so running strides and your lungs ordered you to stop. The Tibetans called it gas sickness.

I decided to allow my short-breathed team to rest for a while to help them become acclimatised. I turned the nose of the Land Rover downhill along the snail-path of a glacier towards a deserted monastery.

We were in Buddhist country now. But the prayer flags, sodden by the mist, hung limply along the route to the monastery and the prayer wheels were motionless.

'It feels sort of dead,' Maxwell said. 'I guess all the monks fled from the fighting.'

'Or perhaps they were killed,' Mercier said. A few corpses would help his story.

Krishna said: 'Has it not occurred to you that the Buddhists left the monastery long before the fighting?' He had a notebook

on his knee and was trying to write while the Land Rover bumped along.

'Why should they do that?' Anne Mortimer asked.

'They are after all Buddhists.'

Krishna was right about the monks leaving long before the fighting. Even in the sharp misty air the place smelled of decay. The monastery was built of wood but it was felted with moss and spotted with orange mildew; only the gold roofs still lived.

Inside a pot-bellied God grinned incongruously. An upturned butter lamp lay in front of him.

I switched on my torch and led the way into an anti-chamber. The beam picked out some pots and pans, a tuba which had once contributed to the monks' awful music, a pile of parchments and a skeleton.

Anne Mortimer screamed as the beam of light found the skull grinning at the stupidity and futility of life. The skeleton was perfect, the bones still joined by gristle the colour of over-cooked meat, except for the left arm: there was no hand and the ulna and radius had been severed six inches below the elbow.

We went outside again. The mist was pressing down cutting visibility to twenty yards or so. 'We'll have to stay here for a while,' I said.

Anne Mortimer said: 'Do we have to?' She shivered. 'It's a bit scary.'

'Unless you want to drive straight over a precipice.'

'I guess we'd better stay,' she said.

We put up one of the tents and tried to build a fire from rotting wood stripped from the walls of the monastery. It made a lot of smoke and gave out little heat.

Mercier sat miserably beside its faint glow. The act of being a virile Frenchman in these conditions was taxing him. The mist had blurred his sun-glasses and he had put them away, his Indian Army anorak didn't fit, his desert boots which he still wore instead of mountain boots were sodden, the Gauloise

between his fingers had gone out. 'I wonder what had happened to that monk's hand,' he said.

Krishna who was sitting in the back of the tent making more notes said: 'He had sinned. These people are savages. He had probably been with a woman so they punished him by cutting off his hand. They probably gave him a hundred lashes as well.'

Maxwell looked at me. 'Can that be true, Sangster? If it is I can't see why you've got this great obsession about these people.'

'I think Krishna has been reading too many books,' I said. 'There was a time when they used to punish people by cutting off their limbs. And an unfaithful spouse was punished by having his or her nose cut off. But that's history. If you want to find out about other inhuman punishments look up the history of the British Army.'

'Nearly all these monks are homosexual,' Krishna said.

Mercier's interest was rekindled at the mention of sex. 'Is that true, Sangster?'

'Some of them are. I can't see that it matters very much. There's also a lot of venereal disease in Tibet. But I have never understood why a disease spread by copulation should be any more distasteful than a disease spread by any other natural act.'

Anne Mortimer said: 'Can't we talk about the local fauna and flora?'

Krishna said: 'Mr. Sangster seems to be extraordinary liberal in his attitude to these people. Perhaps it is his wish to help spread Buddhism all over India.'

'Be your age, Krishna,' I said.

But his normally sensible eyes were staring and his knuckles were white where he was gripping his pencil. 'There are many such people. They want to destroy Hinduism. They are fanatics.'

'There's only one fanatic around here,' Maxwell said.

Krishna turned on him. 'You had better watch what you say.' Maxwell looked uneasy and I wondered again at the secret knowledge which they shared. Obviously Krishna was the more

dominant of the two. Maxwell muttered something about only trying to be funny, which he hadn't been.

The girl tried to steer the conversation away from trouble. 'Why do you think the monastery is deserted? I sure hope there hasn't been a plague or anything like that.'

'I think it's just one of those places in the hinterland between Hinduism and Buddhism,' I said. 'The religious border darts around a good bit here. I think the religion just died.'

In the mist billowing even closer to us I thought I saw a moving shape; Mercier saw it too. He jumped up. 'What was that? Did you see that?' He moved closer to the fire.

'See what?' Anne Mortimer said. 'You're giving me the creeps.'

'It was probably a goat or something,' I said.

Maxwell said: 'Goats in a deserted monastery?'

'Or a wild ass. Or it may just have been a formation of mist.' But I didn't think it had been.

'Or a Chink,' Anne Mortimer said.

Mercier relit his cigarette and sucked bravely at it. 'Or a bandit,' he said. He sat down again and put his arm round the girl's shoulder.

The mist created its own special silence absorbing noise like blotting paper absorbing ink. But somewhere, its resonance muffled by the mist, I thought I could hear the booming of a gong.

It wasn't till the mist began to lift that I realised Krishna was missing. Visibility was still bad but there was a new luminosity above. When I had gone a hundred yards I could no longer see the Land Rover or the fire. I guessed that Krishna was somewhere in the monastery prying around, making his notes, opening the valves of his own private madness.

I went round the back, tripping over the bones of another skeleton. This time the bones of a goat, the vertebrae of its neck

still tethered to a stake. Somewhere someone had opened a door causing a draught which was forcing waves of stale air to drift outside. I thought I saw footprints in the shale but I couldn't be sure.

I went in through the monks' quarters. In one corner was a pile of worn habits and cowls. Outside the thinning mist hovered in layers like the mist over marshes. I was sure that Krishna was somewhere inside the monastery; I had a feeling that there were others present too.

I found them in the main chamber. Four Tibetans wearing smocks and boots and fur-edged hats, carrying Lee Enfield rifles, which they must have looted from the Indians' abandoned equipment, and long knives in their belts. But their faces were blacked with soot, eyes and teeth shining, and I knew that they were not Khampa bandits. They were Dob-dobs, the soldiers of the monasteries.

In the past the Dob-dobs had managed to acquire an even worse reputation than the Khampas. They were supposed to guard the monks and the monasteries; often they went to war with each other while the monks rescued flies from cups of butter tea and fish from frozen ponds. When they were victorious they plundered the villages in the care of the defeated monasteries. But, like the sadists of the Spanish Inquisition, they were still religious fanatics.

They held Krishna between them. One of his wise brown eyes had been closed and blood was running from his mouth. His right arm hung uselessly as if it had been broken.

'Let him go,' I said. 'What the hell's going on here?'

One of the Dob-dobs shook his head and pointed at the God which had been grinning so incongruously when we arrived. A long knife lay on his snug lap and his smile had been ravaged by its blade. There were crosses slashed across the bland eyes, the flat nose had been sliced away and the fat lips were chipped and flowing with shavings of blood. The navel had been gouged from the plum-pudding belly.

I looked at Krishna and realised then that he was utterly mad. Crazed with the most dangerous sort of madness that is controlled enough to remain hidden beneath a civilised display of manners; a madness that only erupts in the presence of a single obsession. Now his body still jerked in the aftermath of his frenzy, his eyes were glazed and uncomprehending, spittle joined the blood finding its way down his chin.

I moved nearer to the Dob-dobs. One of them jerked his Lee Enfield threateningly. 'Let him go,' I said. 'He's crazy.'

One of the soldiers spoke. 'We do not let men go just because they are crazy. If all crazy men were allowed to go free then all the tyrants of the mountains would be free today.'

'This man did not know what he was doing. He has done you no harm. He has only mutilated a God that had been abandoned.'

'We had not abandoned it,' said the soldier. 'We stayed to guard it. But in this mist we did not realise what was happening. Now he has desecrated one of the images of The Enlightened One. For this he must die.'

'Die? Because he is a poor madman and in his madness he used a knife on a wooden image? That is not reason enough to die. Your monks would not want him to die for this.'

'Our monks have fled leaving us here. We shall do what we think right. We know about you rong-pa. We know that you are a good man and you wish to help us. But do not interfere with us now. We know what we have to do. But if it is necessary then we shall kill you too.'

I moved nearer but one of them, holding his rifle in one hand just above the butt, jerked it upwards in my direction. The safety catch was off. His teeth flashed and his eyes rolled coonishly.

'There's no need to kill him,' I said. 'He doesn't know what he's doing.'

'It does not matter. We have enough enemies in the mountains now without this one. Already since the fighting stopped

we have killed four gya-mi.'

'Then you've given the Chinese a good excuse to attack again.'

The Dob-dobs' spokesman gestured contemptuously with his old rifle. 'We have heard enough of such clever cowardly talk. We heard it from the Indians for a long time—do not take sides with anyone and no one will attack you. Look what happened. If we see a gya-mi who is stupid enough to wander abroad unprotected then we kill him. Just as we shall kill this man. We have no quarrel with you or your friends. We have heard about you from our ally Shi-shok. But do not interfere.'

Krishna hung limply between them; there was froth mixed with the blood flowing from his mouth. I guessed that a rifle butt had smashed into his ribs and a rib had punctured a lung. He was still conscious but there was no comprehension in his mad eyes.

They started towards the rear of the monastery pulling him along with them. His legs dragged behind him like the legs of a marionette abandoned by its master.

When they reached the opening two of the Dob-dobs stopped and turned to face me, rifles at the ready.

'Do not come any farther,' one of them said. 'If you do then we shall shoot you.'

'For the love of God,' I said, 'don't kill him.'

'Which god?' said the Dob-dob. 'That one?' He pointed with the barrel of his rifle at the scarred smile of the fat Buddha.

I went towards the opening and one of them stuck the rifle barrel in my stomach while the other took casual aim. The other two disappeared dragging Krishna with them. I started to walk towards the front of the monastery but they ordered me to stop. 'Wait,' they said.

We waited while the mist flowed past outside. Then we heard a faint gurgling scream.

The Dob-dobs put the safety catches of their rifles on. 'Now you may go,' they said.

I looked for the body in the mist. But the search was pointless: by this time it was at the bottom of a ravine. Probably beside the fractured bodies of the Chinese they had killed.

When I got back to the Land Rover the mist had cleared and the late afternoon sky was pale and clear. 'Where's Krishna?' they asked.

'He's dead,' I said. And, although it may have been my imagination, I thought I saw relief on the face of Vincent Maxwell.

Chapter Ten

After the mist the hail. We saw it bowling along the valley like a sandstorm. It hit us with the force of grapeshot before we had time to put up the side windows on the truck. When we climbed back after fixing them we were soaked and spattered with hail-stones.

'Frankly,' Maxwell said, 'I sometimes wonder what you see in the mountains, Sangster.'

'What do men see in the desert? Living in scorching heat, plagued with flies, parched with thirst, when they could be living in a cool watered city?'

'That beats me too,' Maxwell said.

'I can understand it,' the girl said. 'Even though I'm freezing cold and drenched. It's cruel and wild—and sometimes kind, I guess.'

'You mean you'd like to live up here?' I asked.

'I didn't say that. I'm not some kind of a nut like you.'

It was the first time we had spoken more than a couple of sentences since Krishna's death.

'I'm afraid we've come up here at a bad time,' I said. 'And now we're at a bad level. You think in levels up here rather than seasons. Here we're just climbing into winter. Below us it's still autumn.'

Soon, I thought, we would reach the level where I would leave them. I imagined with pleasure the expression on Anne Mortimer's face when she realised that they had been abandoned.

The road began to ascend a slope about five miles south of Se La in a long series of hair-pin bends. Ahead lay the fangs of the pass and beyond the arrogant white peaks. On the top of

a hill across the valley I saw the silhouette of a man and a mule. I hoped it was Shi-shok or one of his bandits.

Mercier said: 'I do not understand why this man Krishna was so crazy about his religion. Why did he hate the Buddhists so?'

'Ask Vincent here,' I said. 'He knew more about Krishna than I did.' I glanced at Maxwell who was sitting beside me in front of the truck; the man I knew so little about although I shared my tent and my meals with him. Not once had he shown any emotion, any passion, any dedication other than his determination to complete the mission. But he did not lack character: his act was the reverse of Mercier's: whereas Mercier tried to project personality Maxwell tried to contain it. But when you sat beside him you could feel the throb of muffled dynamos.

'I didn't know all that much about him,' Maxwell said. 'I knew he was a pretty devout Hindu. But not as Goddamn devout as all that.'

'Did you know that he wasn't just concerned with writing about the Chinese invasion?' I asked.

'Sure. He mentioned that he wanted to write some stories about these villages where Buddhism and Hinduism meet. I didn't see anything wrong in that.'

'You didn't realise that we had a religious fanatic on our hands?'

His hand flew to his pock-marks. Many people have nervous habits when they are lying—they yawn, they sneeze, they run their fingers through their hair. Maxwell, I suspected, touched the little white scars when he was about to lie. 'I had no idea,' he said.

'Didn't it strike you as funny that he was more interested in Buddhism than the Chinese invasion?'

'I didn't say he was more interested. All he said was he was writing a thesis about Buddhism. Although I guess he did get a bit steamed-up when he got on to the bit about the Buddhists breaking away from the Hindus in the sixth century B.C. or

whenever it was.'

'They had good reason to,' I said. 'They were protesting about the caste system. They would still have a good case today.'

I turned the Land Rover off the road along a track leading to a village where I had stopped in the past. I wanted to see how the Chinese had treated the villagers. The hail charged the side of the truck; some of it forced its way through the windows and bounced on our laps.

The village had been built by Tibetans who had fled from the Chinese after the failure of the revolt. The flat-roofed huts were made of sticks and grey clay. In one hut larger than the others they had made an altar on which yak-butter lamps burned. When we arrived they were waiting for the hail to stop to celebrate the defeat of the Chinese—and to make sure that all their evil had gone with them.

The hailstorm swept away along the valley and the sun came out melting the white pebbles and drawing steam from the shale which was embroidered with stone-crop and alpine plants.

The Chinese, they said, had inspected the village and taken some food. But they had not harmed anyone; they had been in too much of a hurry and had contented themselves with warning the villagers not to interfere. They had spent a lot of time measuring the road as if they planned to improve it one day.

I asked the headman if any newcomers had come to live in the village since the Chinese departed. There were two, he said; poor people who had been wandering in the mountains after escaping across the border a few months ago.

'Show them to me,' I said.

One was a man of about forty-five. He was fairer skinned than the other tribesmen, with a flat nose and nervous eyes. The other was in his late teens, smiling all the time, absorbed with whittling a piece of wood.

'Where do you come from?' I asked.

'From Dechen Dzong,' the elder of the two said.

'You've had a long journey then.'

'You know Dechen Dzong?'

'I know it well. I have often drunk butter tea under the willow tree in the centre of the town.'

He smiled warily. 'I too have sat there. It is very peaceful.'

I grabbed him by the scruff of his smock. 'There is no such willow tree,' I said—and hoped there wasn't. 'Now tell me truthfully where you come from?'

'I have told you the truth. I and my son come from Dechen Dzong.'

I let him go. 'This man lies,' I told the headman. 'He comes from much farther north where Tibet joins China. He has been sent to spy on you and persuade your people to join the Gya-mi.' I turned to the man and his son. 'You will not mind if we search your belongings?'

The elder man said: 'What we have in our possession is none of your business. You are not a true man of the hills, you are not even from the plains below. What right have you to order us about?' He addressed the headman. 'Perhaps it is these people who have come to cause trouble. Perhaps it is they who are agents of the Gya-mi.'

His son whittled away furiously at his stick.

The headman said: 'If you are truthfully hiding from the Gya-mi then you cannot object to your possessions being searched.' He spoke to two of the villagers and they went to the hut where the two refugees slept.

The father swallowed several times, sharp Adam's apple moving tortuously. His son was overcome by a spasm of shivering.

The villagers came back carrying a leather purse bulging with money. The headman opened it. 'You did not say you had money. Certainly you did not say you had as much money as this. Where did you get it? Did the Gya-mi give it to you?'

The boy began to sob and his father knelt on the ground, hands praying in front of him. 'They took my wife,' he said.

'This boy's mother. They said that if we did not do as they said they would kill her.'

'That does not explain the money,' I said. 'Why did they give you that?'

'They said we could use it to bribe people.'

'Tibetan money is not of much use this side of the border.'

'The Gya-mi said the people would be able to use it when they finally occupy the mountains this side of the border.'

Anne Mortimer said: 'Can someone kindly tell us what's going on? I gather you've very cleverly caught a couple of spies. Now what's going to happen.'

Mercier stepped in as prosecutor and judge. 'They must be shot. That is the law of the world where spies are concerned.'

I turned to the headman; his face was sad and bewildered; he had not been born for such crises. 'What do you think should be done with them?'

He shook his head. 'I have no knowledge of the punishment for such crimes. But from what I have seen from the happenings before we escaped to these mountains such crimes must be punished with death. A Gya-mi would have forced him to dig his own grave and then made his son kill him. We would not contemplate such an action. But I think they must die.'

The boy looked suddenly younger than his eighteen or nineteen years. His eyes filled with tears which overflowed and trickled over his flat nose. He had only done what his father had told him and now they were going to kill him.

I rounded on Maxwell. 'And you. What do you think should be done with them?'

Maxwell shrugged; he always shrugged. 'I guess it's up to the villagers. We can't interfere.'

'Can't interfere? Just what the bloody hell do you think we're up here for?'

Anne Mortimer looked puzzled. 'We're up here to get a story,' she said. 'Aren't we?'

I said: 'And what do you think should be done with them?

You wanted to get into a man's world. You'd better make a man's decision. I suppose you think they should be shot.'

But she didn't look part of a man's world at that moment. 'No,' she said, 'I don't think they should be killed. You can't kill the younger one—he's only a boy.'

Mercier said: 'He's old enough to shoot you in the back. I saw it happen in Algeria.'

I walked across to Mercier. 'I should watch what you're saying if I were you, sonny,' I said. 'Are you sure you want to see these two shot?'

Mercier who was wearing his green sun-glasses shut his eyes for a moment. When he opened them he said very softly so that no one else heard: 'You will never let me forget it, will you?'

'Do you think they should die?'

'Perhaps not,' he said. 'That one is very young.'

I turned to the headman. 'What do your people say?'

'They think they should die. But they do not want to do the killing. They think perhaps that you should do it.'

'Let them go,' I said. 'Take their money from them.' I got my rifle from the truck and pointed at father and son. 'Get out of here. Head south away from the Khampas and the Gya-mi. Don't try this again because I will be visiting the villages and I will recognise you.'

The boy said: 'What will happen to my mother?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I don't know.'

The boy's father was mumbling thanks, hands still outstretched in a gesture of prayer. The boy had stopped crying and there was an expression of surprise and possibly contempt on his face as he looked at his father.

They walked off together along the track leading to the road. When I went behind the Land Rover I found Anne Mortimer crouched crying. She didn't see me and I rejoined the others.

The eight small cages were made of wood and thread. Inside

them were gifts: gold, food, wooden carvings. The cages were placed outside the hut where the butter lamps burned on the altar.

Inside the hut two villagers started to make a terrible noise on a tuba and a drum. Without the full complement of a monastery band the sound was even worse than usual. A visiting lama intoned a repetitive prayer. The prayer wheels rotated and the flags rippled on a cord stretched between two rooftops. Bells hanging from the roof on the improvised temple tinkled plaintively.

When it was decided that all harmful divinities—presumably embracing all that was bad about the Chinese—had been enticed inside the cages the villagers destroyed their flimsy structures with rocks.

Three of us took pictures while Maxwell watched.

'Don't you think it would make you look more like a newspaperman if you used your camera?' I said.

We were standing apart from Mercier and the girl.

'I don't work for a picture paper,' he said.

His jungle-green anorak was unbuttoned and the scarf knotted at his throat still made him, by comparison with the rest of us, look smart. As always his lean tanned face was closely shaved. We strolled through the village and sat on a ledge overlooking the valley from which we had just climbed. He tapped a cigarette energetically on his thumb-nail and lit it with his big wind-shielded lighter.

'How did you get into your line of business?' I said. 'Or is that one of those things you never talk about?'

He stared down at the white vein of the road. 'These things just happen. A vacancy occurs in a city and they cast around for a likely candidate. I had been in India, I dabbled in newspapers, I had a business which could legitimately be expanded in Delhi and I knew people in Washington. I guess I was a natural.'

'Were you in the last war?'

'The last round. I was in the Army in the Pacific. I didn't see much action though because they dropped the bombs soon after I became fully combatant.'

'And then you went into business?'

'That's right. You seem to be in a very curious frame of mind.'

'Why not? I'm up here risking my neck because of the schemes of you and your country. I think I'm entitled to know a bit about you. What sort of business did you go in for?'

'Export-import,' he said.

'A pretty nebulous reply. It reminds me of all the defendants in court who say they're company directors. And all the girls who say they're models.'

Maxwell began to get irritated—it was the first time. 'You might say,' he said, 'that my business is no business of yours.'

'You seem to know everything there is to know about me.'

'It's my business to know everything about you. You, in case you're interested, have been thoroughly screened. In case you think we missed it you might as well know that we have all the information about your marriage and divorce.'

'Congratulations. You did a thorough job. Divorce is an occupational hazard if you're a journalist.'

'I guess so. But as I have it yours wasn't just a normal case of a marriage break-up brought on by being apart so much.'

'You'd have made a great private detective, Maxwell. Except that I can't ever see you wearing a dirty raincoat. All right, maybe I did act strangely after that incident in Algeria. What about it? Why bring it up?'

'You started the big interrogation act. A guy is entitled to hit back.'

I looked at him with distaste which could easily sharpen into hatred. He had brought to the mountains all the qualities, all the sly civilised knowledge, that I had tried to escape from. And now he was resurrecting memories of ugliness which I had tried to leave in London.

Chapter Eleven

'For God's sake,' she said, 'stop brooding like some sick animal.'

I said I was sorry and walked to the window of the apartment in Kensington. The Sunday rain fell lightly and steadily on the empty square.

'I know it was terrible for you,' she said. 'But you can't go on blaming yourself for it for the rest of your life.' She mixed herself another Martini. 'Try thinking about me for once in your life. What do you think it's like for me being married to a living guilt complex?'

'Not very pleasant. I said I was sorry.'

'For years I've put up with you disappearing for weeks on end to the four corners of the world while I've been stuck here telling people that I didn't really mind and seeing the disbelief on their faces. Now all of a sudden because you got yourself involved in a shooting match you want my sympathy. I've given you all I can, Alex. There isn't any more.'

Her sharp, pretty face was tense. I knew she had tried when we were first married. She had known her weaknesses and had tried to conquer them; but I had given her no support. She wore ski-pants and a Paisley blouse; she was on her eighth Martini and her second packet of cigarettes that day.

'I'm not asking for your sympathy,' I said. 'I just don't know what to do. Guilt is an incurable disease.'

She punched a cushion with a fragile fist. 'Guilt, guilt, guilt. For God's sake, Alex, you had to do it. They would have killed

you if you hadn't.' She paused and tendrils of smoke escaped from her nostrils. 'Or would they? Did you have to kill them, Alex?'

'You know I did.'

'I'm beginning to wonder. You're behaving very strangely for someone who acted in self-defence. For someone who saved half a dozen other journalists from being killed. You should regard yourself as a hero not a murderer. Which are you, Alex?'

'I'm neither. I'm just a man who shot down a lot of schoolboys.'

'Were they armed, Alex?'

'You know bloody well they were armed.' She was drunk and there was no point in arguing with her; but she knew how to provoke me.

'I only know what you've told me. Perhaps you haven't been telling the truth. The whole truth and nothing but the truth.'

She poured another Martini from the shaker and I knew that if I had any sense I should leave; drive across town to my parents' home or go to the cinema or have a few drinks in Fleet Street. But the taunts—prompted by spite and freed by alcohol—were being uttered by someone with whom I had once been in love; someone in whom I had once confided; someone with whom I had once planned a future; someone who had once respected me.

'I've told you the truth. They had stuck a plastic bomb in the bar and they were coming in to finish the job. They had guns.' I almost said: 'It was them or us.'

'It was six months ago.' Her voice was elaborate with alcohol. 'I can't go on like this. It's like living with a reprieved murderer.'

I looked round the flat which had never been a home. The deep leather chairs which should have sighed with comfort when you sat on them—instead they whined their protest. The photograph on the mantelpiece of a bride and bridegroom; a young man with badly-barbered hair and ambition shining

on his precocious face, the puppy-pretty girl—she had been a journalist in those days—determined to help her sharp young mate fulfil his ambitions.

'I suppose I am a reprieved murderer,' I said.

'Soon we'll be losing all our friends. People don't like coming round for a drink in the condemned cell.'

'Your friends,' I said. 'Not mine.'

'All right then, my friends. Surely I'm entitled to a few of my own friends. You know what I think of yours.'

'Are we having any of your friends around to the cell this evening?'

'Robert Mannering is coming round for a drink. His wife is still in the south of France.'

'You know my views on Robert Mannering.'

'The Mannerings happen to be friends of mine. You surely don't object to me having company while you're in Hong Kong or Nairobi?'

I wondered if Mannering was sleeping with her. And if he was, did I care? I found I only cared if I imagined him fondling the body of the girl I had married; if I imagined his hands on those sweet undeveloped breasts and soft thighs. If I thought about him sleeping with the woman now facing me it didn't seem to matter.

Outside a lone drenched dog trotted through the rain on important business. Or, because he was so alone, made a show of importance.

'I think I'll go up to Fleet Street and have dinner at the Press Club,' I said.

She tried to pour another drink but the shaker was empty. 'Do as you please. But aren't your friends getting a little tired of hearing your confessions?'

'Perhaps I don't tell them about it. Perhaps I think the only person one should confess such things to is one's wife.'

I walked along Kensington High Street and turned into Kensington Gardens. Dusk was thickening and there were only a few

lonely people walking beside Kensington Gardens in the rain which had thinned to a drizzle. A Mallard or two piloted their way through the floating autumn leaves on the Serpentine.

I cut across the park and came out in Park Lane just as the pubs were opening. Somewhere in the middle of Mayfair I drank a couple of pints of beer and then decided to go home again. Perhaps because I wanted to make it up with the girl I had married; perhaps because I guessed what I would find.

The scene in the flat was classical, farcical and squalid. Mannering: an elegant stockbroker, was hopping around trying to pull his trousers on. My wife was sitting on the sofa in her underclothes, her face still pouting and sensual and flushed with alcohol. She looked at me with hatred and then let her brassiere fall to show me what Mannering had been fondling.

I hit Mannering because that was part of this particular scene; but not very hard because I knew he would fall heavily with one foot searching for a trouser leg and, in any case, you didn't hit people hard in an Aldwych farce. He fell on a coffee table, hairless white legs waving. If his umbrella and briefcase had been handy I would have given them to him.

My wife picked up an ashtray and threw it at me. 'You bastard,' she screamed. The ashtray hit a picture on the wall shattering the glass. 'And as for you—' she rounded on Mannering who was trying to disentangle himself from his braces and the coffee table—'you might as well get out—you look ridiculous.'

He stood up and managed to get his trousers on. His hands were shaking and one of his eyes was beginning to close up where I had hit him.

'I'm sorry, Sangster,' he said.

My wife said: 'You're sorry. What the hell are you sorry about?' She pointed at me. 'He's the one who should be sorry. Leaving me like that for all these years and then coming back and nearly driving me crazy with his bloody conscience.'

'Put your clothes on,' I said. 'And as for you, Mannering, you

can do what you like—stay or get out. I'm going.'

'Don't worry,' Mannering said. 'I'll go.'

'Christ,' said my wife. 'What a lover. Caught with his pants down and then runs away from a jealous husband.' She began to cry.

I shook my head. 'I'm not jealous.' Before I left I said, 'I'm sorry' because there didn't seem anything else to say.

She sat hunched at one of the sofa looking at me with tears chasing each other down her cheeks. But because of the tears I couldn't tell whether she was looking at me with hatred or pleading; or perhaps she was looking past me at the photograph of the young bride and groom.

The divorce was prolonged and untidy and the judge in his adjudication gave the Press a lot of details about the incident in Algeria and my state of mind when I returned to my wife.

After that the paper sent me to India and when I quit I didn't return.

Chapter Twelve

We didn't speak much now as the oxygen in the air became scarcer and, even when we were going downhill, I took the Land Rover slowly for the sake of our lungs. The air was sometimes sharp, sometimes warmed by pale sunshine: mist, rain, sleet and hail—we had everything except snow in the no-man's-land between the highlands and the alps, between autumn and winter.

The smell reached us about a mile before Se La. A smell which I knew well—although in Algeria it had always been blended with diesel fumes: it was the smell of putrefying bodies.

I stopped the Land Rover a couple of hundred yards down the road. 'I'm going to have a look,' I said. 'If they're Indians we'll be able to tell them when we get back to Tezpur so that the Army can come and identify them. At least a few families will be able to stop wondering then whether their men are dead or alive.'

Mercier said: 'I'll come with you.'

'You don't have to. You're not proving anything.'

'I'll come with you.'

Maxwell said: 'I'll stay here with Anne.'

The bodies had been dumped within a circle of boulders like a miniature Stonehenge. The smell was as thick as smoke—sour and rubbery not sweet and sickly as people who have never been close to the aftermath of death sometimes describe it. They were Sikh soldiers and their limbs entwined each other

in grotesque cameraderie. But to me the sight of the rotting bodies was less horrific than the sight of bodies freshly killed.

Mercier retched once, painfully, hand to his mouth.

I put my arm round his shoulder. 'I said you didn't have to.'

'I'm all right. Let's get away from the stench.'

We walked back towards the Land Rover. 'You don't have to keep proving yourself, you know.'

'You don't understand, Sangster,' he said. 'You will never understand because you are strong and you do not have to act the way I do.'

'Most of us act,' I said. 'In our own ways.' Everyone on this trip certainly was, I thought.

Back in the truck I marked the site where the bodies were on the pink and purple map.

When we reached Se La I stopped the Land Rover. We were now in the middle of the climatic vacuum: snow ahead, vague sunshine behind, grey cloud glued to the peaks above.

A wooden board said: *'Se La. You are at height 13,756 ft. (MSL).'* I wandered around the puny Indian fortifications with Mercier. In one slit trench we saw a blood-stained balaclava, a mess tin punctured by a bullet and a pair of darned khaki gloves. We also found an old field gun wrecked by a Chinese shell fired with accuracy and venom which the Indian's museum piece had never been able to muster.

I picked up a wallet. It was empty except for photographs of a pretty girl with a caste mark on her forehead beneath her shining, centre-parted hair, and a little boy wearing a tin hat supported by his ears. 'There you are, Mercier,' I said. 'That's war for you. I imagine that's a soldier's wife and son. The soldier is probably dead.'

'You seem to believe that I like war.'

'No, not you Mercier. You're like so many people—you

pretend you do because you think it makes you a man.'

'I think perhaps that you are a little hypocritical,' Mercier said. 'I think as a correspondent you have covered much trouble, much violence. Why did you choose these stories if you do not like war?'

'I covered them,' I said. 'I didn't create them. Your sort—you and your friends in the OAS—create suffering. Through your own weakness you create it.'

Mercier sat down, leaned his back against a boulder and lit a Gauloise. 'All right,' he said, 'I will tell you about it. If you want to hear, that is.'

'If you think it will do you any good.'

'In a way it is good to meet someone who knows the truth about me. It is good to take time off from pretending.'

'Don't over-dramatise it,' I said. 'You know you love the act.'

'You do not seem to believe anything I say.'

'I have good reason not to trust you as a person.'

Mercier nodded. 'And you would not even be alive to trust or distrust me if I hadn't pulled that madman off you outside the club.'

'I've said thank you.'

'And I've said I am sorry for what happened in Oran.'

I sat down opposite him and lit a cheroot. Anne Mortimer was roaming the bleak battlefield taking pictures and Maxwell was sitting in the Land Rover writing. 'All right,' I said. 'Tell me about it.'

'I would appreciate it very much if you would not laugh.'

'You're the second person to tell me that.'

'Really? Who was the first?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Do you mind if I speak in French? It will come easier to me that way. I am, after all, not used to telling the story. Although it is not a very dramatic or sensational one. It is just that I would like to be able to explain to someone.'

'French will do fine,' I said.

'I went to a very good school in France. My father owns a hotel in Paris and during the war he was almost bankrupt. But after the war he made a lot of money from the Americans and British—particularly the Americans. And because I was an only child—my mother died during the German occupation—he decided he would give me the very best education. But unfortunately he chose the wrong education for me. I was a delicate child, Sangster. My mother loved music and books and I took after her instead of my father who loved sport—boxing in particular. Anyway he sent me to a very good but very tough school. And although I was not good at sport I gave the other boys plenty of sport. They used to enjoy seeing me beaten up in the boxing ring and once they threw me in the deep end of the pool because they knew I could not swim. But that time they went a little too far because I nearly drowned. I ran away twice but each time I was caught within a few kilometres of the school.'

I lit a cheroot. 'Couldn't your father do anything?'

'My father had lost interest. He considered he had done everything possible to make me into a man and he wasn't concerned with my snivelling protests about being ill-treated. Anyway by this time he had taken a mistress who had little interest in her lover's only child. As far as she was concerned the farther away I was the better she liked it.'

I found to my regret that I was beginning to feel sorry for Mercier.

'Throughout my stay at the school,' he said, 'there was one boy who liked to pick on me more than the others. A boy called Duval. I don't know why—perhaps he was a coward despite his muscles and his arrogance and saw his weakness in me. But he was very strong and no one ever challenged his authority.'

'There's always one,' I said.

Mercier nodded. 'The one sport I thought I might be able to do well at was fencing. But Duval heard that I fancied my luck and practised every evening until he was the best swordsman in the school, although I did not know about that at the time. When I was sixteen I fell madly in love with a girl who lived near the school. She was very beautiful and we used to go for walks together in the woods. You may not believe this, Sangster, but in those days I wrote poetry. Ridiculous, isn't it? However I used to read my poetry to her and it never occurred to me that I was expected to make love to her. Not very French, I know, according to foreigners' ideas about us. What I didn't know was that Duval was also taking her into the woods and acting the way Frenchman are expected to act.'

'The way you would act today,' I said.

'Exactly. But Duval had one weakness which he could not do much about—his younger brother. Jacques his name was, a shy and sensitive boy. A little like me, I suppose.' Mercier noticed the disbelief on my face. 'It is a little hard to imagine me like that?'

I thought of Mercier before the shooting in Oran. 'A little hard,' I said.

'Jacques was in a much lower class than Duval or myself. I quite liked him although I had nothing much to do with him. Duval never quite knew whether to shout at him or ignore him. Jacques had a funny little face, thin and too old for his years, and I sometimes saw him staring at his older brother as if he were stripping away every pretence and conceit. One summer vacation about six of us were left at the school because for one reason or another our parents could not have us at home —my father had taken his mistress to the Lebanon or some such place. They put us all together in one dormitory irrespective of our age. One night Duval and three of the others decided to go out and meet some girls in the village. But he said it was not the sort of evening I would enjoy—and in any case he

wanted me to stay behind and look after his brother.'

Mercier stopped speaking and his lips quivered.

'What happened?'

'There was a fire. God knows how it happened. A cigarette end, I expect—Duval and his friends used to smoke. I woke at about midnight and went to the toilet. Jacques was sleeping soundly in his bed. I sat in the toilet for some time thinking about the other boys in the village and all the boys who had been able to go home for the holidays. Then I heard screams and when I got back to the dormitory Jacques' bed was on fire and his pyjamas were blazing and his hair was alight. I tried to wrap a blanket around him but the flames were too strong. Then I ran down the corridor to where a master was supposed to be sleeping in a bedroom. But he wasn't there. When I got back to the dormitory I could smell scorched flesh. Jacques had gone crazy with the pain and the fear. He was running around screaming and the flames on his body were setting light to the clothes on other beds. I just stood watching him, feeling as cold as ice, shaking as if I were having a fit. But there was nothing I could do—or nothing I could think of doing. He was screaming. I can see his face now, his eyes white beneath his burning hair. Then he jumped out of the window. He broke his neck and a lot of people said it was a merciful death.'

'Poor little bastard,' I said. 'You as well.'

'I haven't finished yet,' he said. 'There was an inquiry and I was cleared of all blame. They said that there was nothing I could have done to save him. But his brother thought differently—or said he thought differently. He said he held me responsible for his brother's death. And do you know what he did, Sangster?'

'I can guess,' I said. 'Something to do with fencing.'

'He challenged me to a duel. And I took him on because I thought that at last I could pay him back for all the humiliations I had suffered at his hands. We met at dawn. The grass, I remember, was wet with dew. We had seconds—everything

you're supposed to have on such occasions. And the girl was there too—the girl who had listened so patiently to my poetry. Duval played with me for a while, drew a little blood, disarmed me a couple of times. Each time I saw the girl's face, little white teeth gleaming, nostrils flaring, loving it every time he wounded me. The others wanted Duval to stop but he refused and they were too scared of him to do anything about it. Every time he pierced my flesh he called me a coward and a murderer. He could have killed me but he didn't want that. Then I tripped and he pinned me with the point of his rapier at my throat. He made me admit in front of the girl that I was a coward before he would let me get up . . .'

'And that's why you became the Mercier I knew in Algeria.'

He lit another Gauloise. 'That's it, Sangster. I decided I'd become tough and hard like Duval.'

'You should have joined the French Foreign Legion.'

'No, I'm not a soldier. You are right when you say that I do not really like war or violence. It is all a pretence. And in any case I was not physically strong enough to join the Legion. It took me two years of training and body-building to get a physique which I knew would stand up to a fist fight. The trouble is that you cannot take a course on bravery.'

'That wasn't necessarily cowardice in Oran,' I said. 'You had a mental breakdown. It could have happened to any of us. You probably went quicker than the rest of us because you were more sensitive.'

He smiled ruefully. 'Thank you, Sangster. But cowardice is cowardice whatever form it takes.'

'Not necessarily. But what puzzles me is why you still continue to try and conform with false standards. You're a man now, not a frightened schoolboy—you must realise you're aping immature behaviour.'

'I realise it,' Mercier said. 'But since Oran the disease is incurable.' He stood up. 'Anyway you have listened to me without laughing. I am very grateful to you. You of all people. And I

want you to know that I am very sorry for what happened in Oran that night.'

'You weren't to blame,' I said. 'Anymore than I was for being there. Or any of us for that matter.' Pain stabbed through my invisible finger.

He stretched out his hands. 'Thank you again for listening.'

I shook his hand. Normally he would have given me one of those powerful grips that are supposed to assert strength. This time his grip was firm and friendly.

A few minutes later Mercier had a chance to prove that he wasn't a coward.

Maxwell was standing on the edge of a precipice staring down at the forests a couple of miles below us. Because the shale was loose and treacherous I shouted to him to keep away. As he turned the ground on which he was standing broke away. He flung up his hands and stood for a fraction of a second poised like a high-diver. Then he vanished. His scream was cut short almost as it began.

Mercier and Anne ran towards the precipice. 'Keep back,' I shouted. 'The whole lot's liable to give way.'

They stopped and Anne Mortimer rounded on me. 'We've got to get him.' She started to run towards the edge of the cliff again. I grabbed the back of her shirt and she fell. I told Mercier to keep her there.

I ran back to the Land Rover and fetched two climbing ropes. Then, skirting the ground directly behind the point where Maxwell had disappeared, I walked to the edge, treading delicately as if the ground had been sown with landmines.

Far below the forest looked like moss. Maxwell was crumpled on a narrow ledge about 75 feet down. I shouted to him but he didn't reply.

Mercier joined me. 'I told you to stay with the girl,' I said.

'She understands. She's staying where she is.'

'Your weight could have taken us both down to join Maxwell.'

'I will go down and get him.'

'Don't be bloody stupid.'

'You know how it is with me. I must go down.'

'Listen, Mercier,' I said. 'Just forget your heroics for now. Forget your complexes. It's now a question of saving a man's life. It's more important than making a man out of you.'

'I have as much right to go down there as you.'

'For the last time,' I said, 'you aren't going. You've never done any climbing in your life and you aren't wearing mountain boots. In any case I need you up here.'

We stared at each other for a moment. Then he nodded. 'You are right,' he said. 'I am sorry.'

'Luckily there's a rock here. We'll tie one rope round it, then I'll go down. You stay here and watch the rope.'

'How are we going to pull him up? I can never do it myself.'

'God knows,' I said. 'I'll have to come up again and we'll pull together.'

We tied one end of the rope around the rock and the other around my waist. I hung the second rope around my neck.

Anne Mortimer shouted: 'Be careful, Alex.'

I prayed for the first time in many years and, with my feet on the lip of the cliff-face and my hands tight and sweating around the rope, I leaned back into space. I let the rope slide between my hands about a foot at a time, my feet searching the precipice for holds. It was the way I had been taught on an Army assault course many years ago.

A breeze sidled along the cliff-face and investigated me. Far below me I could see two birds drifting over the mossy forest like flakes of burned paper.

The rope was beginning to burn the skin on my hands. Above me I could see Mercier's face peering over the edge. 'Keep your eye on the bloody rope,' I shouted. But there wasn't much he

could do even if he saw it slipping. Fear which could easily accelerate into panic stirred inside me.

Looking up at Mercier's olive-skinned face another thought occurred to me: if he severed the rope he would have the girl, the glory and the story; and he would have got rid of the one person who could tell the truth about Oran.

Once the rope slipped. 'It's all right,' Mercier shouted. 'A little piece of the rock snapped off.'

If I lost my grip I would fall until the rope jerked savagely around my waist. A little assistance from Mercier's knife and I would be disturbing the circling birds.

My feet touched something soft and rubbery. I looked down and saw that I was about to lower my weight on to Maxwell.

He was conscious now. Dazed, moving his body tentatively —in danger of rolling off the ledge. 'Don't move,' I said. 'This ledge is about four feet wide.' There was a swelling on his temple and a smear of blood. His face was sickly grey. I crouched beside him and said: 'Try and test the rest of your body without moving to one side.'

We stayed there—nurse and patient balanced on a cliff-face in the Himalayas somewhere near the Tibetan border—for five minutes while he tried to find out if any parts of his body were broken. Finally he said: 'Everything seems to be okay.'

'Right,' I said. 'Now listen carefully. I'm going to tie this other rope round your chest under your arms. Then I'm going to climb up again. Mercier's waiting up there and together we'll pull you up. I know you're in a bad shape but there's nothing else we can do. Try and keep your feet against the cliff-face and kick yourself away when it looks as if you're going to bump against it.'

'I'll try,' he said. 'I reckon I'm all right. I was just knocked cold for a few minutes.'

'A last bit of advice,' I said. 'Don't look down.'

The breeze, having completed its preliminary investigation, grew stronger as if it resented our puny presence. As I pulled

myself up, feet clawing at the rock like the feet of a drunken man trying to climb a ladder, the breeze pushed me to one side and then let me swing back; a pendulum on a mountainside. I tried to think of anything except the fact that I was suspended two miles above the forest; instead my brain tried to analyse the last sensations of a man plummeting towards death. How long would it take a human body to fall two miles?

My wrists were becoming weak. If I had been anywhere else I would have said that I could go on no longer. But not hanging from the side of a mountain. One hand over the other, slower and slower, the distance covered up the rope became less at every pull.

Then I felt Mercier's hand gripping my forearm. 'Steady,' he said. 'You are almost there.'

I looked up into his brown eyes and wondered if he had contemplated despatching me to the forest below. He said: 'Come on. Two more pulls and you're there.' The gold crucifix which he wore around his neck dangled over the brink.

He pulled hard, I scrambled with my knees, grateful for the leather reinforcement, and then I was lying beside him, pressing my face into the shale, panting like a hunted animal.

Anne Mortimer, still standing twenty-five yards away from the brink, shouted: 'Are you all right?'

I raised my face from the shale, managed a grin—a pretty sickly one—and nodded because I didn't feel like speaking.

Maxwell came up quite easily with Mercier and myself pulling and his own feet helping. We helped him to the side of the Land Rover and laid him on top of a sleeping bag.

As we reached the Land Rover the ground on which Mercier and I had been standing fell away leaving a large jagged bite out of the brink of the precipice.

Later, while Anne Mortimer bathed the small wound on his head, Maxwell said: 'I guess you saved my life, Sangster. Any-

thing I say is going to sound pretty darn inadequate. But anyway—thanks.'

I looked at him and wondered whose life I had saved. I didn't even know if he was married, what he exported and imported, what qualities had attracted the attention of the CIA; and I didn't know if, beneath the mask of reserve, there were any lurking passions. All of us love something—even if it is only ourselves; so far Maxwell had not indicated any feeling for anything or anyone.

Looking at Maxwell, with the colour returning to his face, and at Anne Mortimer frowning her freckles together as she applied aquaflavin to his wound, and at Mercier pondering on his own garbled values, I felt that soon each would make some sort of move which they had been planning since we left Tezpur.

Anne Mortimer said: 'I guess we've got to admit it—we'd never have got this far if it hadn't been for Sangster of Tibet.'

Mercier, Gauloise between his teeth, green glasses over his eyes spoke—but it was the voice of the schoolboy cuckolded and humiliated in front of his girl which I heard. 'I wish I could have gone down the cliff,' he said.

'I'm sure you do,' Anne Mortimer said.

Mercier looked at her speculatively as if he suspected that, like the girl of his boyhood, she would one day betray him. 'You don't believe me?'

She looked at him in surprise. 'Of course I believe you.'

'I thought perhaps you were suggesting that I hadn't the guts.'

'For heaven's sake,' she said. 'Whatever gave you that idea?'

'Sangster knows I would have gone down. I volunteered, didn't I Sangster?'

I nodded. 'You did. In any case I couldn't have got Maxwell up without you.' I wondered if Mercier would have gone down if I had let him; I hoped that he would have done.

Chapter Thirteen

About twelve miles ahead of us lay the Tibetan border. But here, on the outskirts of Towang, the terrain was just the same as it was the other side of the frontier: spine upon spine of mountain peaks unimpressed by men trying to share them out by drawing a border on a map. Now at last the snow-caps seemed nearer and we could see that the white veins below the peaks were ravines and glacier paths into which the eternal snows from above had drifted.

Outside Towang the tribesmen had built some small towers with stones in which they burned incense to repel storms. I had once doubted the power of the towers: while I was speaking to the tribesmen a wind had sprung up on the valley. The tribesmen immediately lit the incense. A few minutes later a black sandstorm came howling along; but when it was about a mile from the towers it faltered and almost stopped; then, like a great swarm of baffled bees, it veered off along another gorge. The tribesmen were hugely delighted and, feeling that any further argument would have been unsporting, I did not suggest that freak currents of air which case each other around the valleys might have diverted the sandstorm.

The local monks also tried to influence the weather by blowing on conches. But the winters remained long and cold and wild and it was difficult to accept that this was the weather they had requested.

There was also an oracle among the monks who answered

questions after falling into a shuddering trance. He was, in fact, an epileptic but he believed in his powers as much as his disciples. And there was an old woman in the town who practised astrology with considerable success; although I hoped for the sake of her reputation that she had not foretold a happy week for anyone immediately before the Chinese invasion.

The tribesmen were still returning to Towang in the wake of the Chinese. And it was impossible now, looking at the remote immensity of the mountains, to believe that the Chinese had ever really occupied this land; they had taken the villages, raced along a couple of primitive roads, sent patrols roaming through the valleys, swallowed a division of Indian troops. On newspaper maps thick black arrows gave the impression that the Chinese had occupied NEPA; but they hadn't. You could make a show of occupying the deserts of North Africa or the swamps of Burma within a few weeks, but not these mountains because they belonged to no one. The Chinese must always have been aware of that in Tibet.

I decided to stop about two miles south of Towang to wait for Shi-shok and his robot bandits. If they went into the town the inhabitants would presume—with some justification—that they had come to loot their homes. We waited inside a ring of boulders on a flat expanse of shale; the boulders had been rolled there to form primitive fortifications; but they hadn't done their job—an Indian unit had been attacked and had fled, leaving behind an ancient machine gun mounted on a tripod. The Chinese, contemptuous of all abandoned Indian equipment, had left it there with a ribbon of bullets still drooping from its mechanism.

Soon I would be on my own with Shi-shok and his men. With professionals instead of amateurs. But the relief at the prospect wasn't as complete as I had anticipated; unexpectedly there was a small area of regret. The same feeling that a schoolmaster experiences when the pupils he has castigated all year depart to another class.

I lay in my sleeping bag, smoking a cheroot, trying to convince myself that the three of them were capable of looking after themselves; that, when I had gone, they would have no difficulty in driving the Land Rover back to Tezpur. But I took a lot of convincing. When we started out the possibility that I might be concerned hadn't occurred to me. There was the girl, hard-bitten and self-sufficient; she didn't want male help so why should I bother? There was Mercier, hell-bent on proving his manhood so why not let him go ahead? There was Maxwell with his parcel of secrets; so, if he didn't want to share them, why not let him take the parcel back unopened to the plains of Assam?

But the sharing of danger had worked its old trick. Through the cracks of her hard, freckled shell I had glimpsed the sensitive pride of the girl; through the chinks in his armour I had glimpsed the inferiority complex of Mercier. My concern for Maxwell was weaker, but perhaps only because his training in self-discipline prevented me from penetrating his defences. I didn't know about Maxwell.

Soon it would be dusk, the time when I presumed Shi-shok would materialise. Already the blue of the cold sky was weakening and the mountain peaks were rearing up on the horizon. Somewhere near those peaks lived men of peace whom I, also a man of peace, had to persuade to go to war.

I stubbed out my cheroot on the shale and waited.

I may have strayed over the borders of sleep, or I may have been mesmerised by the stars frosting the smoky mauve of dusk, or perhaps I was drunk with the thin pure air. At first I heard the shouting as if it were part of a waking dream; then my brain recorded that someone actually was shouting. The shouts had something of the shrill resonance of the voices of children out playing on an autumn evening; but the girl's voice was tensed with anger and fear.

I unzipped myself from the sleeping bag and looked into the tent. Maxwell was asleep inside, but there was no sign of Mercier or Anne Mortimer. I took my rifle and ran in the direction of the shouts.

I found them a couple of hundred yards away behind a boulder. Mercier was leaning against it, his hand to his face. Blood ran from between his fingers. He was breathing quickly and laboriously, the breathing of someone who has forgotten that you can only exert yourself briefly in the rarified air.

The girl stood a few yards away breathing just as quickly. Her anorak was unzipped and her shirt was torn. In one hand she held a stone.

'What happened?' I asked. The question was academic.

'Guess,' she said.

'What happened, Mercier?'

'The little bitch hit me with that stone.'

All my compassion for him evaporated. Anger rose like a cough bringing blood from the lungs. To the purity of the mountains these people had brought the cultivated squalor of their own environment.

'I said what happened.'

'I told you—she hit me with a stone. She could have killed me.'

'You.' I turned on the girl. 'Tell me what happened.'

'For pity's sake, isn't it obvious?'

I held the rifle around the neck of the butt with one hand. My breathing was as hurried as theirs. I squeezed the trigger and the bullet ricocheted off a stone in between them and sang away accompanied by the echoes of the explosion. 'Tell me what happened.'

For a moment they both seemed to stop breathing. I suppose I looked a little crazy; perhaps I was.

The girl said: 'He started to maul me.'

'And so you had to hit him with a stone? A bit dramatic wasn't it? You're a big girl now, you know how to deal with

wandering hands.'

I tasted blood in my mouth and found that I had bitten the flesh inside my lip. The thought of Mercier's hands coming into contact with her body nauseated me. And so did the thought of the encouragement which she must have given him, even if it had only been a smile, or a compliment calculated to encourage him to help her with the story. I found myself thinking of Mannering's hands on the body of my wife—as it had been when I married her.

She looked at me with disbelief. 'For God's sake,' she said. 'You sound as if you're taking his side.'

'I'm not taking anyone's side. The whole thing disgusts me.'

'What was I supposed to do?—sit down and eat candy while he had his fun?'

'You must have encouraged him. Mercier is not as stupid as all that. He wouldn't chance his arm if there hadn't been any encouragement.'

'You make me sound like a whore.'

'Not a whore,' I said. 'A whore would have gone through with it.'

'You know something?' she said. 'You sound a bit sick to me.'

Perhaps she was right.

'Leave her alone, Sangster,' Mercier said. 'She didn't encourage me.'

I jerked the rifle at him. 'Shut up. Nobody asked you.'

His body was trembling as I had seen it tremble in the bar in Oran. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed the wound on his temple; it was a superficial laceration the size of a penny.

She took a step towards him, almost as if she were sorry for what she had done. 'I guess I panicked a bit. But he shouldn't have started it. Not up here in the mountains. I suppose I would have coped all right in an apartment in Manhattan. It was just kind of unexpected up here. A little ludicrous, I suppose.'

'I don't give a damn what either of you get up to,' I said. 'As long as you keep quiet about it and don't wreck this mission. If you do have to indulge in pre-mating hostilities for God's sake do it in private. Preferably contain yourselves until you get down on to the plains again.'

She dropped the stone and zipped up her anorak. 'There's something wrong with you,' she said. 'That's for sure.'

'Maybe. But just do as I say—keep a hold on yourself and this young buck here.'

Mercier said: 'I've had enough of this, Sangster.'

I threw the rifle on the ground. 'Fine. What are you going to do about it? A little duelling maybe?'

It was vicious and unnecessary but I was no longer in control of my words. This was the sort of situation, these were the sort of people, that I had come to the mountains to forget. I hated them for the ugliness they had brought to my sanctuary.

He came at me with more of a whimper than a snarl. Not because he wanted to brawl but because fighting was one of the rules of the code which he had studied so assiduously. I stepped aside like a bullfighter and, with a blow which was more like a push, sent him sprawling.

The girl looked at me contemptuously. 'Great,' she said. 'Just great.'

'Just one thing,' I said. 'Don't kid yourself that we're fighting over your honour.'

He was up again, lungs working like bellows trying to fan a spark into a flame. This time it was he who held a stone in his hand. I ducked as he threw it and it shattered against the boulder.

Then he was at me with his fists. He landed a couple of blows and I sensed that he had learned some boxing. I defended myself with as little exertion as possible and waited for him to defeat himself. His mouth was open, tongue lolling, breathing rasping in his throat. He mustered his last strength and swung a hay-maker at me. I watched it labouring towards me and ducked.

The impetus of the blow swung him off balance and he fell to the ground. He stayed there in a position of prayer sobbing for air.

I put my hand on his shoulder. He looked up, his face contorted with pain and humiliation. 'Get away from me,' he said. 'For God's sake get away.'

'Perhaps you'd better look after him,' I said to the girl.

She looked down at Mercier lying on the ground and I knew that she was hating herself because, although she could have forgotten the clumsy attempt at seduction which she might have unwittingly converted into attempted rape, she could not now respect him.

Maxwell, who must have been awakened by the gun-shot, knelt beside Mercier. 'Is he all right?'

'Of course he's all right,' I said. 'He's just a little out of breath after his exertions.'

'How the hell did this happen?' Maxwell asked. 'We're not up here to fight among ourselves. I thought you, Sangster, were above this sort of thing.'

'I didn't try and maul Miss Mortimer.'

'Is that right?' Maxwell said.

The girl nodded. 'But let's forget it for God's sake. I guess it was partly my fault.'

'I think so too,' I said.

'You pompous bastard,' she said. 'In my book Pierre is worth half a dozen of you.'

Mercier stood up. His breathing was still quick but it no longer rasped with distress. Without speaking he stumbled off in the dusk towards the ring of boulders. The girl followed him walking quickly so that she would catch him up before he reached them.

'I'm glad this happened in a way,' I said. 'I was beginning to get a conscience about leaving you all.'

'You and your Goddamn conscience,' Maxwell said.

The bruise on his temple was darkening, mauve to purple.

Some of the trapped blood had spread and given him half a black eye. It gave his lean careful face a piratical air. His anorak was open at the neck and his scarf was neatly knotted there.

'Isn't it about time that you told me why you're really up here?' I said.

'I've told you why,' he said.

'And I think you're a bloody liar. You're not up here just to make sure that the mission is accomplished, are you, Maxwell? You've got another motive like Mercier and the girl. Like Krishna had. What was it between you and Krishna, Maxwell?'

His face looked wary, but then it always did. 'Your journalistic instincts are still strong,' he said. 'Disbelieve in everything.'

'Not quite. Neither believe nor disbelieve. Let people prove themselves. You haven't.'

His hand strayed to the tiny craters of scar tissue. 'You know what I want. I want to cross the border with you.'

'And leave Mercier and the girl together?'

'They can fend for themselves. She's tough enough for the both of them.'

'You seem to forget that he just tried to rape her.'

'And look what happened. He ended up with a sore head. No, they'll be all right. Take me with you, Sangster. I won't be a hindrance.'

'Except for falling off precipices. No, I've told you, Maxwell, it isn't on. And you can't even say you'll make it worth my while because there isn't anything you can bribe me with. Once upon a time maybe but not any longer. All I want is to be left alone up here.'

Maxwell tapped a cigarette energetically and made his usual performance of lighting it. He didn't look at me when he spoke. 'You know,' he said, 'there's just a possibility I could get your permit to wander around NEFA revoked.'

'As a reward for rescuing you?'

'I didn't want to have to threaten you.'

'I really should have left you on that ledge, shouldn't I?'

'What about it, Sangster? Can I go with you?'

I grinned at him because, although he was as enigmatic as ever, his tactics were beginning to fill the shadows of his character with substance—a pretty callow substance.

I said: 'As from now, Maxwell, you're on your own with the other two.'

'You don't care if your permit is revoked?'

'You couldn't get it revoked, Maxwell. I can't see anyone taking orders like that from an amateur spy.' I guessed correctly that this would rile him.

'If you don't take me over that Goddamn border, Sangster, I promise you that you'll never be allowed into NEFA again. I've got more power than you think.'

'Since when did the Boy Scouts have power to restrict entry into NEFA? And why this desperate desire to get into Tibet? Your sort don't have to get to the front line. They never have. No, Maxwell, you can stay behind. You've made your point—a legitimate one. I accept that it is necessary to try and raise some sort of Tibetan resistance across the border. Now just leave it to me. There's nothing more you can do. Just escort Mercier and the girl back to Assam.'

His mind skated over everything I had said. 'Sangster,' he said, 'I've got to get over that border.'

'Why?'

'To see the mission completed.'

'As far as you're concerned it is completed. There's nothing more you can do. If you want to get me banned from NEFA just try it and see how far you get.'

'There's more to all this than you imagine.'

'Then tell me about it.'

He sucked at his cigarette while the veils of commonsense and self-preservation fell across whatever he had been about to say. 'Nothing really. I was just trying to intrigue you.'

'Come on,' I said. 'If we're going to play games at least let's play Scouts and not Cubs.'

'You're a fool,' he said.

'Maybe. But then I always was.' I gave the Scouts' salute. 'See you back at the tent. It's your turn to boil the billy-can.'

The darkness prickled with cold as if the wind was blowing powdered snow down from the peaks. The cold forced us all into the tent. Mercier squatted smoking one of his dark cigarettes; Maxwell lay on his back in his sleeping bag turning over his secrets; the girl looked as if she had been crying again.

We had been brooding there for half an hour without speaking when the tent flap opened and Shi-shok looked in. 'Hallo, my brother,' he said. He looked at the other three. 'I see you have been making the woman weep.'

'Not as much as she'll weep when we leave,' I said in Tibetan.

Shi-shok sat down on the ground beside the lamp. 'We must talk about that,' he said. 'Many things have happened since we last met.' He produced a flask from his smock. 'But first some rakshi.'

We drank and talked and, as the first snow dusted the outside of the tent, the hours melted inside in the gentle glow of the oil lamp.

Chapter Fourteen

Shi-shok said: 'We will leave at dawn. But first I must warn you that there is much trouble in these parts because the Gya-mi are very angry.'

'Shi-shok,' I said, 'what have you done? I thought I told you to leave them alone.'

He took his dagger from his smock and tested the blade on his thumb. 'It is not me, my brother. It is the Dob-dobs—the soldiers of the monks who for centuries have killed and tortured innocent people. Now that their monks have fled they have decided to fight the Gya-mi.'

I swallowed a mouthful of the molten liquorice they called rakshi. 'And you're jealous, Shi-shok?'

He shook his head. 'I and my men will help fight them when you have persuaded that fat abbot to call on his people to overthrow them. Now, through your wisdom, I realise that it would be foolish to kill Gya-mi this side of the border.'

'Tell me what has happened then.'

Shi-shok looked anxiously at the two men and the girl. 'They do not understand anything we say?'

'Not a word.'

Anne Mortimer looked up from the notebook in which she was writing. 'What are you two plotting? Wouldn't it be a little more courteous if you let us in on it?'

'Shi-shok doesn't speak English,' I said. 'Do you speak Tibetan?'

'Can't you translate or something? After all we're all supposed to be in this together.'

'Are we?' I said.

'Oh boy,' she said, 'wait till I write you up in my story.'

'Make sure you mention which paper I represent.'

Shi-shok passed the flask to her and confided to me in Tibetan: 'This will make her more passionate if you wish to make children with her before we depart.'

She drank some of the arak and said: 'What did he say?'

'He said it would keep you warm during the cold night.'

'You're a damn liar,' she said. 'But tell him I still think he's cute.'

Shi-shok said: 'What did she say?'

'She said she still thinks you're handsome. But I think she's short-sighted.'

Shi-shok took a stick from his smock and began to whittle it. 'She has eyes only for you that one. I do not think she smells as badly as she did last time. Perhaps she is trying to impress you.'

'Tell me about the Dob-dobs,' I said.

'They are very stupid. They caught some Gya-mi and killed them and threw them over a cliff. But the Gya-mi thought it was us who had done the killing.' Shi-shok looked indignant at such a presumption. 'And they have been hunting us ever since.'

'Do they know you're here?'

'Do not be alarmed, my brother. We split into two parties. The Gya-mi followed the other party while I and a dozen of my men came here. We came by dark so that if the Gya-mi are still watching you they would not see us.'

Maxwell said: 'For Christ sake can't we have some sort of fire.'

'Stay in your sleeping bag,' I said. ' You'll be warm enough. I don't want to attract undue attention.'

'Why the hell couldn't we have stayed in Towang?'

'Because Shi-shok isn't particularly welcome in some towns.'

Maxwell looked speculatively at Shi-shok. 'I can't say that I blame them,' he said.

I could see what he meant. The gentleness which sometimes softened his eyes was lost in the shadows and the long scar slashed his face with cruelty. The high cheek-bones, the fierce smile, the long blue-black hair, the blade of the dagger slicing away at the wood—he was not the sort of neighbour Maxwell would have welcomed in Washington or New Delhi.

'Where are your men,' I asked Shi-shok.

'Posted around this encampment,' he said. 'They will join us just before dawn. You and I will leave pretending—if anyone should be awake—that we are going to climb to the top of the mountain to survey the territory when the sun comes up. We will not return. I hope you have all the equipment you need. I have a spare mule for you.'

'It's in the truck. I've kept what I would need for this part of the mission apart from the rest of the gear.'

Mercier slid down in his sleeping bag and murmured goodnight. It was going to be hard for Mercier failing to cross the frontier; but that evening I had lost a lot of my pity for him.

I thought Maxwell might make one last bid to accompany us. But what could he do? Pull a gun on me and reveal the plan to the others? Not very sensible when you're surrounded by a dozen Khampa bandits.

The girl seemed to be asleep. I thought about leaving some sort of note in the Land Rover. But there wasn't much point. It was the sort of treachery that she expected in the masculine world in which she had chosen to live. In any case she would be able to file a story before me, and that's what she had come up the mountains to do. Her face looked very young as she slept in the lamplight; young and vulnerable although she wouldn't have liked the description.

I was glad that she and Mercier had reminded me that evening of the standards of behaviour to which they conformed. I

turned away from the three of them and went on talking to Shi-shok.

'Sometimes,' said Shi-shok, 'I wish I had not been born a bandit.'

'You're a liar,' I said. 'You know perfectly well that you've enjoyed every minute of your life.'

He picked up the dagger and examined the blade shining with orange light from the lamp. 'It is true that I have enjoyed it. But I still can regret that I was not born to other enjoyments. I can still regret that I have come to enjoy the violent pleasures of life. Do you not often regret what you were born to?'

I shook my head. 'I have much to regret. But I chose my way of life. I cannot blame the accident of birth for what has befallen me.'

Shi-shok swigged some more rakshi and poured some into my tin mug. Mercier, Maxwell and the girl breathed steadily in real or simulated sleep.

'I can remember the first raid I was involved in,' Shi-shok said. 'I must have been about six years of age. We were living in the west in those days, raiding the traders on the borders of India. One day my father decided that it was time that I saw what life had in store for me. My mother pleaded with him that I was too young but he took no notice. He loaded up a yak and put me on top of it. He took six of his men with him and we travelled all day to a valley where we knew the traders would pitch their tents. It must have been Buddha's birthday because I remember seeing criminals in chains begging outside a village—that is the only day they are allowed out to beg.'

'Did your father give them anything?'

'He gave them some meat from the wild sheep we had killed a few days before. I think if there had been time he would have stayed to cut their chains. But I do not think they would have been of use to us as bandits because although they were criminals they were religious men and they would not have

agreed to any bloodshed. They were also very thin and weak. I remember asking my father why they were in chains and he said they were thieves. This puzzled me because he said it with scorn and even at the age of six I knew that we, too, were thieves and stealing seemed to me to be as natural as fishing or carpentry is to other children.'

'Was your father the leader of your people?'

'He was,' Shi-shok said. 'There were about twelve men sharing five women in our group. He was a very stern man, but a just man I think. He was treated with great respect by all the other Khampas. And he was very proud of me because I was his only son. He knew this because I was my mother's first-born and until then only he had made children with her. He decided that although there were older children than me in the group I would be the leader when he died. No one dared to disagree with him.'

Shi-shok refreshed his memory with rakshi and poured some more into my mug. The tent was warm now with the heat of the lamp and our bodies. Anne Mortimer was snoring gently, Mercier twitched in his sleep, Maxwell lay on his back breathing evenly as if he had trained himself to give away nothing even in sleep.

'We journeyed throughout that day,' Shi-shok said. 'Travel was a slow business then. We stopped late in the afternoon on a hill overlooking the route which the traders took. The plan was to rob them of whatever they had traded with the Indians and leave them with enough food to survive. My father had not intended to harm anyone. But the plan went wrong because the traders who were tired of being robbed had armed themselves with rifles. The men left me on the hillside to watch and went down to the traders' tents at dusk. But when they got near the tents the traders opened fire. I saw my father fall and the rest of the men take cover. I ran down the hill to my father but he shouted to me to get behind a boulder. He dragged himself up the hillside and joined me. I could see the

blood pumping from a wound in his stomach. He shouted to the others to keep under cover, surround the tents and then attack and kill all the men.'

In the lamplight all the cruelty seemed to have left Shi-shok's face. 'I stayed with my father behind the boulder and tried to stem the blood. But he told me it was no use. His face became paler and his voice grew weaker. He told me to promise that when I was old enough I would lead our band of Khampas. He said that he had given instructions that until that day his brother would lead us. Then we heard the shooting. I looked down the hillside and saw men running from tents and falling as the Khampas' bullets hit them. It was the first time that I had seen men killed. It did not seem to me to be wrong because my father had ordered it.'

Shi-shok pointed the blade of his dagger at me. 'You know, my brother, you only believe killing is wrong because you are taught to believe it. Killing is as natural as protecting your wives and children.'

'Why then do you wish you had not been born a bandit?'

'It is just a feeling I have sometimes. You, my brother, disturb me with your hatred of violence. Although I have seen you handle your rifle and I cannot believe that you hate violence quite as much as you would have me believe.'

The rakshi removed another layer of skin from my tongue. 'We all have instincts of which we are not proud. I was fortunate enough to have a childhood which enabled me to suppress those instincts.'

Shi-shok nodded. 'That is what I mean. If my childhood had been different I might have grown up with your hatred of killing.'

'Perhaps,' I said. But I doubted it.

Shi-shok said: 'Anyway that night the Khampas killed all the men but left the women and children. I watched the shooting and when I turned back to my father he was dead. I had promised him that I would lead the band and I swore then to

myself that I would be as fine a leader as he had been. I did not weep because I knew my father would not have wished it —and I have never wept since. By the time I was fourteen I was the leader and now I command many hundreds. But I sometimes wonder if things had been different . . .'

'Do not worry about it,' I said. 'Nothing can be changed now. It was written.'

'I like to think,' he said, 'that all the time I was really being trained to fight the true enemies of my country—the Gya-mi.'

'Shi-shok,' I said, 'it is a clever thought. But you cannot deny that you have enjoyed being a bandit.'

Shi-shok said: 'I do not deny it.' He thrust his dagger back inside his smock. 'And now we must get some sleep.'

I switched out the lamp and the only noise was the gentle snoring of Anne Mortimer. Once I thought I heard gunfire. But I decided when I awoke briefly that my dreams had taken me back once more to Algeria.

I was awoken again about an hour before dawn by Mercier leaving the tent. 'Where do you think you're going?' I asked.

'Unfortunately this tent has no toilets,' he said.

I woke Shi-shok who was huddled beside me. 'We will have to wait until he returns,' I whispered. 'I hope he falls asleep quickly.'

But half an hour later Mercier had not returned. 'We shall have to go,' Shi-shok said. 'If he sees us we will have to tie him up and gag him so that he does not give the alarm.'

I opened the flap of the tent. The sky was dark and bright, just beginning to fade on the skyline. The ground was thinly sugared with snow. I saw Mercier leaning against one of the boulders on the perimeter of the encampment.

I beckoned Shi-shok. We were about to join Mercier when I saw the shadows moving across the snow about three hundred yards away.

I gripped Shi-shok's arm and pointed. 'Are those your men?'

He peered through the brightening dawn light and gave a thin, high-pitched whistle. But there was no reply.

Shi-shok shook his head. 'No, my brother,' he said. 'Those are not my men. They are Gya-mi—or Chinese as you call them.'

Chapter Fifteen

Mercier heard the whistle and looked in our direction. I pointed in the direction of the shadows and gestured to him to take cover behind the boulder. He folded up as quickly as a camera shutter.

'I don't think they'll attack,' I whispered. 'They know who we are.'

'I would like to think you were right, my brother,' Shi-shok said. 'But since they found the bodies of their comrades who were killed by the Dob-dobs they have become very angry.'

'If they're fully armed we don't stand a chance,' I said. 'But with a bit of luck it's only a reconnaissance patrol.'

'They will have guns,' Shi-shok said. 'And they will have grenades. We are trapped here with your friends. We should have left earlier.'

'You were still asleep.'

He nodded ruefully. 'It was the rakshi. A curse on rakshi and the Dob-dobs.'

I crawled back into the tent and woke Maxwell and the girl. 'The Chinese are paying us a visit,' I said. 'Get out of your sleeping bags and keep quiet.'

The girl awoke prettily with a little yawn and a stretch. Maxwell was wide awake immediately I spoke. 'They won't attack us,' he said. 'They know why we're here.'

'We wouldn't be the first Pressmen to be shot,' I said.

The girl said: 'Gee, what a story if they do attack.'

'Unfortunately,' I said, 'it will probably take the form of an obituary.'

'What are we going to do?'

'Wait. There's nothing else we can do.' And because I was annoyed at myself for admiring her unquenchable professional instincts I added: 'If they've got napalm we'll be roasted alive.'

She shivered, and because I was then ashamed of myself I said: 'But I doubt whether they have.'

Maxwell said: 'Why don't we identify ourselves? Two Americans, an Englishman and a Frenchman—I don't reckon they're after our blood.'

'Because Shi-shok is with us and if they captured him they'd kill him.'

If he had suggested that Shi-shok was expendable I would have hit him. But Maxwell must have sensed my feelings because he said nothing.

Outside the sun had risen encrusting the scattered snow with jewels. It was a cold and sweet morning, a morning from childhood: the bedroom luminous with blue light, ferns and fronds of frost on the window and the new white quietness outside.

The shadows had vanished. Shi-shok said: 'They're waiting behind those rocks.' He pointed to a crop of boulders about a quarter of a mile away. 'They are probably not sure if I or any of my men are with you. It is best if I leave you now.'

'You're staying here,' I said. 'There's no cover and they'll mow you down. And in any case if they see you they'll think there are more Khampas here and they will attack.'

Shi-shok frowned. 'I do not like this. For the first time in my life I feel helpless. It seems to me that we must rely on my men. Even now they may be preparing to attack the Gya-mi.'

Mercier was still crouched behind a boulder. I beckoned to him to join us but he shook his head. Long ago I had ceased to wonder about the coincidences of life, but I knew that he was now as conscious as I was of the similarities of our position with our plight in Algeria. But this time instead of a Sten gun

we had a machine gun brought by the Khampas and assembled by Shi-shok; and the enemies were trained soldiers and not children.

Anne Mortimer came out of the tent with a telephoto lens screwed on to her camera. Maxwell came out carrying his revolver. He looked more worried than scared.

'If you fire that thing,' I said, 'we're all dead. And if you point that thing at the Chinese—' I pointed at the camera lens —'we'll be just as dead.'

'It's not a gun it's a camera.'

'I've seen cameramen killed because soldiers mistook a long lens for a gun.'

'If you think I'm going to miss the picture story of the year you're crazy.'

'You'll do as you're told.' I grabbed the camera from her.

'So that you can get the picture story of the year? I'm sorry, mister.' She tried to grab the camera back.

I pushed her and she fell back in the snow. Then I unscrewed the lens and put it in my pocket.

'For Christ's sake,' I said, 'can't you get it through your head that we're liable to be killed without you aiding and abetting.'

'One of these days I'll fix you,' she said. 'Perhaps sooner than you think.'

Shi-shok said: 'Can you not control this woman? I still do not understand why you brought her with you if you have not made children with her. I think perhaps you should knock her unconscious.'

'I think perhaps you're right.'

Between one of the saw-tooths of the crop of rocks I saw a movement.

'If they attack,' I said, 'I'm going to make a run for the machine-gun.'

But nothing more stirred behind the rocks.

Shi-shok scanned the bleak white landscape. 'Where are my men?' he said.

'They've got no cover,' I said. 'If the Chinese are well armed they wouldn't stand a chance.'

He smote the snow with his fist. 'Then what are we to do?'

Maxwell said: 'There's someone coming up behind us.' He swivelled round in the snow and raised his revolver.

I pushed it aside and levelled my rifle.

The figure was approaching very slowly, body pressed against the snow, legs dragging. Behind him he left a scarlet trail.

Shi-shok said: 'It is one of my men.' He jumped up to run to the man but I caught his legs and brought him down. 'There's no point in getting yourself shot as well.'

'I must go to him.'

'Then keep close to the ground.' The wounded man was approaching behind the tent and I didn't think the Chinese could see him.

Shi-shok slithered towards him. There was no movement in the crop of rocks. Shi-shok and his bandit met at the perimeter of boulders and Shi-shok helped him to pull himself to the tent.

He could hardly breathe and his lungs were on the point of giving up the battle to suck oxygen out of the thin air. One of his legs was shattered and blood from a chest wound was staining his brown smock. He could hardly speak and Shi-shok had to put his ear close to the man's mouth.

When Shi-shok looked up his eyes were moist. 'My men in this area are all dead,' he said. 'The Gya-mi attacked them last night. This man was brought here by some people on their way to Towang. They were too frightened to come closer. It seems that the Gya-mi realised I was missing and thought I was here. I must give myself up or else you will all die.'

Anne Mortimer was trying to cut away the clothing from the Khampa's wounds. I looked closely at him and felt his pulse.

I said, as gently as I could: 'There's no need—he's dead.'

Shi-shok said: 'Then I must go.'

I said: 'If you don't get down I'll put a bullet through your leg. We've still got a chance because I doubt if they realise

we've got a machine-gun on our side.'

Shi-shok sat down and turned his head away from us so that we could not see the tears coursing down his cheeks. It was, I knew, the first time he had wept since he was six.

When I reached the machine-gun Mercier was in possession.

'Move over and take up a position behind another boulder,' I said.

Mercier shook his head. 'The positions are reversed. Last time you had the Sten. This time it is I who have the machine-gun. I will wait here just as you waited at the door of the bar in Oran. It is ironic, is it not?'

'Shove over,' I said. 'I'm not leaving you in charge of that thing. If you can't handle a woman like Anne Mortimer God knows what you'll do with a machine-gun.'

'I'm not moving.'

The knuckles of his hands were white but his brown eyes were steady. 'It is my chance, Sangster. You must realise that. I can handle a gun like this.'

'Who taught you?—the OAS.'

'It does not matter who taught me. I promise you that I can use it as well as anyone here. Better probably. Have you any experience with one?'

'It's none of your business.' But I remembered how the Sten had fired high in Oran.

'I was taught to shoot a gun just like this at Sidi-bel-Abbes. I spent a month there doing a feature on the French Foreign Legion.'

'It's not your ability to handle the gun that I'm worried about.'

'You mean you think perhaps I will break down again?'

'You can't blame me for being anxious.'

'I promise you nothing like that will happen. I was much younger in those days. I had been drinking too much to keep

up my image.'

'You've never stopped trying to keep up your image,' I said. 'And keep that bloody thing out of sight of the Chinese.'

Mercier moved the tripod further behind the boulder. The gold crucifix dangled from his neck; only the Gauloise was missing from his costume.

'You do nothing but try and make me feel small. Just because I was foolish enough to confide in you.'

'That's not true,' I said. 'You seem to forget yesterday's incident. It didn't exactly instil confidence.'

'I am sorry about that. I was a fool. I miscalculated the girl's feelings.'

A breeze besported itself in the no-man's-land between us and the Chinese driving a cloud of powdered snow in front of it. The brightness in the sky was losing its lustre and I knew that soon there would be more snow. In a fortnight's time it would be settling for the winter and these peaks would fuse with the white battlements ahead.

'Are you going to let me look after the machine-gun?'

Despite the miserable sexual encounter of the previous day I found I still felt sorry for Mercier; but sympathy for him did not justify me risking the lives of the others and the outcome of the mission. On the other hand it was quite possible that he could handle the gun better than any of us.

'I wish I could trust you,' I said.

'I realise that you have no cause to.'

'Do you realise that if Shi-shok gave himself up there would be no need to fight at all?'

If he suggested that it would be advisable for Shi-shok to give himself up, I thought, then I would take the machine-gun from him. Mercier nodded. 'I realise that,' he said. He fondled the ribbon of bullets and stared across the snow at the Chinese position. He smiled faintly. 'I know quite well what you wish me to say, Sangster. It is a pity because I would not have said it anyway. Now it sounds as if I am saying that Shi-shok should

stay because I know you are testing me. I do not think I am quite as cowardly—yellow I think you say—as you seem to believe. Even if we only had one bullet left I do not think we should let him go. If we did such a thing then there would be no point in fighting for anything.'

I smiled uncertainly. 'It looks as if you've got yourself a machine-gun, Mercier. I hope to God you do know how to use it.'

'You will see. But perhaps it will not be necessary.' I noticed that a nerve was twitching at the corner of his mouth.

'I'm afraid it will because they know Shi-shok is here. If they come at us hold your fire until they're almost on top of you. You should be able to get most of them with a weapon like that. If, that is, it's only a patrol up there. I'm banking on the fact that they don't know anything about this gun. If you don't fire when they first break cover they'll relax and think we're virtually unarmed. So you see everything depends on you.'

Mercier touched the bruise on his temple where Anne Mortimer had hit him. 'I am grateful to you for trusting me, Sangster.'

'Just one thing,' I said. 'If this comes off just don't boast to me about how many you've killed.'

'I understand. I am doing the job you once did in Algeria. I know how you felt after that.'

I saw him looking at my hand with four fingers on it. It was partially covered with snow but I could only feel the cold on the invisible finger.

'You'll never know,' I said. 'Now it's all yours. I'm going back to the others.'

Some of the old Mercier re-asserted itself. 'By the way, Sangster, I was going to stay with this gun anyway. I just hoped that you would agree so that I would not have to insist.'

'Insist? What the hell are you talking about?'

He delved inside his anorak and brought out a revolver. 'I

am afraid I would have had to insist with this.'

'Where did you get that from?'

'Krishna left it behind before he went into that temple.'

I considered changing my mind and taking both the revolver and the machine-gun away from Mercier. 'You'll never really learn, will you, Mercier?'

He cradled the revolver in his hand. 'I would not have used it.'

'I wonder,' I said. 'I wonder.'

He said: 'Thank you, Sangster, for giving me a chance. I know I will be worthy of your trust.'

'To hell with you,' I said.

I wriggled across the snow to the tent. The gold of the sun had faded to silver and the distant peaks were blunted by cloud which I knew was snow. I posted Maxwell behind one boulder about twenty yards to the right of Mercier and told Shi-shok to go with me behind a boulder the same distance on the other side of him.

'Where shall I go?' Anne Mortimer asked.

'With Maxwell. I'm staying with Shi-shok in case he gets any ideas about giving himself up.'

'Do you think we stand a chance?'

'We've got a machine gun. I doubt whether they have.'

Maxwell said: 'Are you sure Mercier's the man to handle it?'

'You chose him to come with us,' I said. 'He must be reliable.'

'I think you should be behind that gun. You or me.'

'Do you know anything about guns?'

'A little,' he said.

'Then make sure you don't waste any bullets in that pea-shooter of yours.'

I wanted to tell him to save the bullets for ourselves in case the Chinese captured us. But it sounded too melodramatic.

We took up our positions and waited as the first flakes of the new snow settled on us. In the distance, in Towang probably, I could hear the awful music of a monkish band. It

sounded as if they were playing a dirge; but everything they played sounded like a dirge. The noise which I refused to call music faded as the snow thickened.

There were about eight of them. Vague shapes in the falling snow which took blurred human form as they came nearer.

But they came from the right instead of the centre of the crop where we had seen the movements. And Mercier had to move the tripod of the machine-gun from the position where his body had been shielded by a boulder.

Shi-shok knelt beside me cradling the butt of his rifle in his shoulder. 'We are in luck,' he said. 'Only eight of them.'

'You don't think there are any more?'

He shook his head. 'I do not think so.'

Maxwell crouched behind his boulder, revolver resting on his forearm. The girl squatted beside shielding another lens, which she had brought from the tent, from the snow.

Then the blurred shapes disappeared as the Chinese creased up and lay on the ground to try and assess our strength. The snow thickened and settled on us. We looked like rebels in the Russian Revolution.

I blew the snow from the barrel of my rifle and wondered if I would have to shoot. The silence was so intense that you imagined you could hear the snowflakes settling.

Shi-shok whispered: 'Watch out for the grenades.'

I peered into the grey flaking sky and felt the snow touching my eyes. The waiting would not be good for Mercier. But if he failed now there was nothing left for him.

High above me the flakes seemed to crystallise into a ball. Before I realised that it was a grenade Shi-shok had jumped to his feet. The grenade fell just in front of him as he ran towards the tent. In one movement of blurred speed he picked it up and hurled it back towards the Chinese. It exploded in the air above them in colour and sound exaggerated by the

white and quiet of the snow; orange as bright as the sun, detonation as stunning as a blow on the ear.

One shape reared up with a thin frightened cry as jagged metal slammed into his body. I heard twittering voices, then snow-muffled silence.

Shi-shok whispered: 'They will attack any minute now. They will come along the ground, then they will run at us over the last short distance. This Mercier in whom you have so much trust must shoot as they stand up. He must be very quick and very accurate. I hope, my brother, that you have put your trust in the right man.'

I glanced at the snowman crouched over the ancient instrument of mass execution. I hoped so, too. He was so still that he might have been unconscious.

Shi-shok said: 'They are coming.'

I peered through the snow and saw a faint movement on the ground. I hoped Mercier had seen it, too. If he really knew how to handle the gun there would be no need for me to kill. I aimed my rifle at the movements in the snow.

Then they were on their feet shouting, flesh and bones conjured from a white veil; yellow faces snarling, rifles snouting. And the machine-gun was dancing in Mercier's grip as the bullets tore into the looming enemy and cut them down as cleanly as if a giant machete had sliced through them at waist-level. Even when they were all on the ground screaming in their agony Mercier went on firing, the bullets thudding into the contorting bodies and kicking feathers of snow on the ground.

I shouted to Mercier to stop and when he did his face was more wild with fear than it had been in the bar in Oran.

The snow thinned and we could see the twitching bodies and the crops of rocks from which they had attacked.

'I will go and finish them off,' Shi-shok said.

'Perhaps if any of them are not too badly injured we should interrogate them,' I said.

He shrugged. 'I do not think so. I am thinking only of my men who they killed. I do not think much is to be gained by questioning them. We know there are more Chinese in these parts and we know that we must leave quickly.'

Maxwell put his revolver down beside him. 'Do you think there are any more?' he shouted.

'God knows,' I shouted back.

But there was—just one. And as Mercier stood up, swaying slightly like a drunken man, the fear that had contorted his face relaxing into bewilderment, the Chinese soldier who had been left behind the rocks, opened up with an automatic rifle. One bullet hit Mercier in the chest; he fell backwards as if someone had pulled a mat from under his feet.

The girl ran to him. I shouted to her to keep down but she took no notice. The snow around him was spattered with blood, like poppies growing in the snow, and I knew before she reached him that he was dead.

She looked at the gaping hole in his chest—not like the neat puncture wounds of which she had read—and turned away laying her face in the snow.

I shouted: 'Lie down.' She fell sideways and lay there, knees drawn up, hands folded at her bosom as if she were asleep on white sheets.

Shi-shok said: 'I'll get the sniper.'

'No,' I said. 'I'll get the sniper.'

'Perhaps I am better at these things than you are, my brother.'

I shook my head. 'I let Mercier stay there with the gun. The sniper is mine. You keep me covered. Take over the machine-gun if you can. I'll get away behind the tent and the boulders and get round behind him. Let off a couple of blasts in the direction of the rocks while I'm on my way. Don't let the girl stand up.'

'I think that I should go. I am more experienced at killing than you are.'

'I've had some training,' I said.

I covered the distance between Shi-shok and Mercier's body on my belly. Mercier had died instantly, such was the size of the wound. The bullet which must have been made to spread on impact had hit the sternum, and the shattered tips of his ribs were bared so that you could imagine the skeleton when all the flesh had gone. In the last convulsion of death his facial muscles had pulled his upper lip into a mirthless smile. It seemed to me that he was smiling with wasted triumph at the girl who had once sneered at him as he lay beneath the point of a rapier. But it was not the moment for fanciful speculation.

I touched Anne Mortimer's face lying on the pillow of the snow. 'Try and get back to the tent keeping down on your stomach.'

But she made a small futile gesture with her hand and said: 'Go away. Please go away.'

I turned Mercier's body over so that she would not have to look at the wound again. Then I set off to kill his executioner.

I made the tent on my belly, crawling as they had once taught me in the army—holding my rifle in front of me just above the snow and propelling myself with my knees. Then I ran, still keeping low, to the boulders. By the time I reached them the snow was faltering and visibility was improving. I lay down again and worked my way across the snow in the direction of a hollow. My fingers gripping the rifle ached with the cold and my lungs called for oxygen. I stopped once, licked up a mouthful of snow and reflected that my rump presented a pretty target with an irresistible bullseye if the sniper spotted me. I hurried on.

When I reached the hollow I rolled down the gentle slope and lay in the depression sucking down the iced air until my breathing regulated itself. A few flakes of snow chased each other above me, but the sun was once again beginning to polish the sky blue.

Beyond the hollow the ground levelled out, then fell away into a steep hillside leading to a precipice. I covered the level

ground on my belly and loped along the hillside so that I could approach the sniper from a long way behind. I began my approach from about five hundred yards.

He was kneeling behind a rock gazing along the barrel of his rifle. Once he glanced behind; but Shi-shok fired a short burst and he fired back. As he was shooting I ran one hundred and fifty yards.

When I was about one hundred and fifty yards away I lay down again and took careful aim. But not careful enough. I saw the rock splinter to the right side of his head. He spun round involuntarily, forgetting to keep behind his cover.

I squeezed the trigger of my rifle again but Shi-shok's machine gun coughed and he slumped forwards. I relaxed the pressure of the trigger. He didn't move.

Shi-shok shouted: 'Is he dead?'

'He's dead,' I shouted.

The soldier looked very young. He had a starved sort of face with black, ragged hair and chipped teeth. I wondered where he had been born and what combination of circumstances had dispatched him from his home to die on a mountain peak in a foreign land. Had he been willing to die for his country, for Communism, for the doctrines of Mao-Tse-tung? Or had he, like so many soldiers, died without really appreciating who or why he was fighting?

Shi-shok took the rifle lying beside the soldier and inspected it. 'They are good guns,' he said. 'It is a pity that we do not have the ammunition for them.' He looked at me curiously. 'You have a look of sorrow about you.'

'I was just wondering why he had to die.'

'He would have killed us just as he killed Mercier.'

'I know he had to be shot. It was an act of war. But wars are created by so few people. A handful of politicians, a single dictator. And millions who care little for the ambitions of those men die.' I pointed at the thin body almost truncated by the bullets. 'There lie the thoughts of Mao Tse-tung.'

'I do not fully understand what you mean. But I do know that it has always been so.'

'And always will be,' I said.

We walked back to the encampment. Maxwell and the girl were inside the tent. I began to cover Mercier's body with stones because the ground was too hard to dig a grave.

Shi-shok said: 'Now we will have to move fast before more Gya-mi find us. We shall have to take routes known only to myself—and perhaps to you. How are we to leave these other two without them knowing?'

I finished covering the dark, razor-cut hair with snow and stones and looked up at Shi-shok. 'We cannot leave them,' I said.

'Cannot leave them? What is this you are saying? The plan has always been to leave them. We cannot take two such people to Kushlanga.'

And we cannot now leave them to be killed by the Gya-mi.'

'They chose to come.'

'They did not choose to be abandoned to the mercy of the Gya-mi.'

Shi-shok looked dubious. 'I am not accustomed to such feeling,' he said. 'I think it will be bad if we take them with us. We shall have to go on foot with the mules and I do not think that they are strong enough to go with us. Nor will they know what to do if the Gya-mi attack. No, I think perhaps you are endangering the whole expedition by taking them with us. Risking thousands of lives for the sake of two.'

'Shi-shok,' I said, 'you told me not so very long ago that you wished you had not been brought up as a bandit. What you are suggesting is the action of a man who was born a bandit. Now is your chance to prove to yourself that you are different. To show that you have feelings other than a love of fighting.'

'Even if it means risking thousands of lives?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Only don't ask me to explain why.'

'If you say we must then we must, my brother.'

I made a cross with stones at Mercier's head and stood up. You poor bastard, I thought. You stupid, arrogant, misguided bastard. You should have been writing poetry in a studio overlooking the rooftops of Paris instead of getting yourself killed on the side of a mountain in the Himalayas.

As we walked back towards the tent I noticed a point of gold glittering in the snow. It was the cross that Mercier had always worn around his neck. I picked it up and put it in my pocket.

Then I went into the tent to tell the two remaining members of the expedition that we were about to start the last and hardest part of the journey.

Chapter Sixteen

'Where's she gone?' I said. 'Where's the girl?'

'She's pulled out,' Maxwell said.

'Pulled out? What the hell are you talking about?'

'She found out that you planned to abandon her.'

'And you. Why haven't you gone with her? Where the hell does she think she's going?'

'She's gone for the Land Rover,' Maxwell said. 'I tried to stop her but she wasn't having any.'

'How long ago?'

'Five minutes. I reckon she's taken off by now.'

I ducked out through the tent flap and as I went I said: 'You should be proud of yourself, Maxwell—allowing a girl to face the Chinese by herself.'

I didn't catch his reply. A quarter of a mile away on the track they called a road I saw the Land Rover starting with a blue-smoked cough. I ran across the snow waving my arms and shouting. She looked in my direction once and then stared straight ahead. At the point where the track curved out of sight she braked too hard making the Land Rover skid. She straightened out and disappeared. 'You stupid bitch,' I shouted. The words echoed along the valley and swallowed themselves.

Shi-shok joined me. 'So she has deserted you,' he said. 'The girl you did not want to leave to the mercy of the Gya-mi. You should have made children with her, my brother. That is the way to keep a woman. If you do not lie down with them

they think you do not want them.'

'We've got to stop her,' I said. 'The bloody little fool will either kill herself driving on the snow or get ambushed.'

'It seems to me that you are very concerned about this girl.'

'I don't want her to get killed. That's all there is to it.'

'All right, my brother. If that is the way you want it I think we can stop her. The road winds round and round this mountain down into the valley and then up the next mountain. If we move fast enough we can go straight down the mountainside and cut her off where the road comes round for the second time.'

'Come on,' I said.

Behind us Maxwell came out of the tent and shouted: 'Where the hell are you two going?'

I didn't reply.

We ran across the snow, across the hollow still printed with my footsteps and over the lip of the mountainside. Below us, the track encircled the mountain twice on its descent to the valley. We were half way to the first circuit when the Land Rover appeared. We crouched low so that she could not see us. She was driving too fast; if she kept up that speed I doubted whether we would see her come round the second time.

'She has courage, that one,' Shi-shok said.

'She's a bloody little fool.'

'She thought you were abandoning her. And, after all, my brother, that is what you intended to do at first.'

'Come on,' I said.

Again my breathing was difficult as I ran faster and faster down the hillside, unable to control my speed. Whenever I found myself running too fast I let myself fall. Shi-shok, the true man of the mountains, ran ahead, helped by his gait and stance which seemed to make it easier for him to run down sharp angles than to walk along level ground. If the girl didn't accelerate—or hurtle over a precipice—I calculated that we might just reach the track ahead of her.

We slithered on to the track as the Land Rover came round the bend about three hundred yards away.

'Lie on the road,' I said.

'Do you not think that she will drive right over us?'

'Not even her,' I said. 'And not even the Land Rover will take the hill we've just come down.' I looked back and it seemed more like a precipice than a hill. 'And she can't go the other way round us because she'll drop straight to the bottom of the mountain.'

We lay down. Shi-shok said: 'I am afraid I feel rather stupid.'

'Never trust a bloody woman,' I said; and lay still sucking down oxygen.

The Land Rover stopped a few yards away from us. The girl leaned out and said: 'If you don't get up I'll drive over you.'

'Shut up and get out,' I said.

'I'm not joking. Honest to God I'm not.'

'You stay there,' I said to Shi-shok. I got up and walked over to the Land Rover. 'Get out.'

'To hell with you Mister Sangster.' Her hands were gripped tight on the steering wheel and her freckled face was tense. The Land Rover moved forwards towards Shi-shok. He looked up and said: 'I hope, my brother, that you know what you are talking about.'

'Tell him to get up,' she said.

'Stay there,' I said.

Far below us, where the snow had not yet fallen, the track wandered along the bed of the valley. Ahead of us the crests of the Himalayas watched our little performance.

The Land Rover stopped a few inches from Shi-shok. I opened the door, pulled her out and hit her across the side of the face. She fell on to the snow.

She stood up brushing the snow from her anorak. 'You really are quite a guy, aren't you,' she said. 'First you make plans to abandon me. Then when I beat you to it you stop me and knock me down.'

'I shouldn't have hit you,' I said. 'I'm sorry. But I think you've got quite a lot to be sorry for. Stealing one Land Rover for one thing. Did it occur to you that you wouldn't get farther than a couple of miles? You'd have driven straight into a Chinese ambush—if you hadn't crashed the truck first.'

'I figured that was better than being abandoned here. And you'd have looked pretty damned stupid if I had got back to Tezpur and filed a story before you.'

I began to understand. 'So you thought I was going to ditch you just so that I could get a story back first?'

'What other reason? You weren't going birds-nesting by any chance?' She was trembling with agitation.

Shi-shok stood up. 'I do not think we acted with much dignity,' he said. 'What does this woman say? And why did you hit her? I did not think people from the Land of the Inji hit their womenfolk.'

'This one should be hit across the backside,' I said.

Shi-shok grinned. 'If you are feeling too weak from gas-sickness I will oblige.'

The girl leaned against the Land Rover. 'What's the bandit chief saying?'

'He's volunteering to paddle you if I haven't the strength.'

'Two real gentlemen,' she said. She stuck a cigarette in her mouth and I went to light it but she pushed my hand away. 'Mercier was worth half a dozen of you. I suppose you were going to abandon him as well.'

'You and I have some talking to do,' I said. 'Just tell me one thing—how did you find out I was supposed to be abandoning you?'

'Mind your own damn business,' she said. 'Didn't they tell you that a newspaperman never divulges the source of his or her information?' She paused. 'I guess not. Or if they did you didn't take too much notice. I shouldn't think you were ever the great one for ethics.'

'Did Maxwell tell you?'

'To hell with you.'

I turned to Shi-shok. 'Would you like to bend her over your knee?'

Shi-shok shrugged. 'I do not mind. Although I would not get much pleasure from it—she is too much like a man.'

I said to the girl: 'If you don't tell me how you found out Shi-shok is more than willing to give you a thrashing.'

Tears formed in her eyes and she swallowed twice. 'You bastard,' she said. 'Tell that great scar-faced thug that if he lays a hand on me I'll kick him in the guts.'

'Was it Vassar you went to?'

'Oh brother,' she said, 'don't talk to me about the way to behave.'

'So Maxwell told you. Why would he do that?'

'I didn't say he told me. But if he did I guess he told me because it was true.'

'Let me tell you something,' I said. 'Neither you nor Maxwell was going to be abandoned.' And because it was time for her to know the truth I told her about the real purpose of the expedition.

She said: 'So Mercier, Krishna and myself were just the mugs.'

'You would have got a good story,' I said. 'And if anyone was going to be left to fend for themselves it was me. But I can't leave you now. Not just you and Maxwell. My guess is that Maxwell told you this so that you would take the Land Rover and we would be forced to take him across the frontier.'

'He said he was going to stay anyway so I might as well take the truck. I said he ought to come with me but he refused. There didn't seem to be any point in me staying so I decided to motor back to Tezpur and scoop the lot of you.' She dropped her cigarette butt into the snow where it hissed briefly. 'It would have been quite a scoop. Living with bandits, ambushed by Chinese, a religious murder . . .'

Shi-shok said: 'Do you want me to thrash this woman?'

'No,' I said. 'Save your strength for the other man.' I pointed up the mountainside. On the skyline we could just see the pin-head silhouette of Maxwell gazing down at us.

'It looks,' I said, 'as if we shall have to take both of you with us. But make no mistake about it—neither Shi-shok nor myself want to. And as for you, Maxwell, I've seriously considered leaving you here by yourself. And Shi-shok has suggested putting a bullet through your head.'

Maxwell shrugged. 'You're making a great big thing of it,' he said, 'but the truth is that Anne wanted to go. I don't think she would deny that.'

'The truth is,' I said, 'that she wouldn't have taken off if you hadn't told her Shi-shok and I planned to leave you both here.'

I wondered what would upset Maxwell. There was always one exposed nerve waiting to be touched in the most composed of people. One by one the others had revealed themselves—the girl, Krishna, Mercier. Now there was only Maxwell left.

We were in the tent. The breeze had already piled a small drift against Mercier's improvised gravestone. On the other side of the boulders the dead Chinese sprawled on their backs, guns still in their hands.

'God knows how you're going to manage,' I said. 'You haven't even got the right clothes. We'll be going on foot and I doubt if there'll be much food around. Shi-shok, Maxwell and myself can make it. It's you I'm worried about.' I nodded towards the girl.

'For crying out loud,' she said. 'Don't start worrying about me now. The way I read it you couldn't wait to leave me here. And you would have done if the Chinese hadn't attacked.'

'At least I went and hauled you back. The fact that you would have been ambushed by the Chinese didn't seem to bother Maxwell too much.'

'Be your age,' Maxwell said. 'I didn't know you had changed

your mind. I thought you were leaving us together. I was determined to cross the border and I thought it would be best for Anne to have the Land Rover.'

Shi-shok said: 'It seems to me that you must all stop arguing. If we do not leave soon the Gya-mi will be here and then none of us will cross the frontier.'

'You're right,' I said. 'Okay, we'll try and forget what's happened. The first thing is—what are we going to do with the truck?'

Maxwell said: 'What can we do with it? Leave it here or drive it over a cliff—it makes no odds. All we can do is get the hell out of here as fast as we can.'

'We need mules,' I said. 'We can't make it without mules. We'll have to get some in Towang. If they won't sell them to us Shi-shok will have to take them.'

The girl said: 'Do you mean steal them?'

'Yes,' I said, 'steal them. Borrow them if you like. What else can we do? Everyone has been very anxious to impress on me that thousands of lives are at stake. We'll just have to ask forgiveness.'

Shi-shok said: 'I hope that soon we will meet up with more of my men. They will have food and they will keep watch while we make for the frontier.'

I backed the Land Rover into an emergency lay-by, laboriously turned it, drove into Towang and parked it behind a wooden hut. An old man with a face embroidered with wrinkles lent us two mules. I asked him nicely but I suspected that it was the presence of Shi-shok that persuaded him to part with them. We also 'borrowed' yak butter, tsampa, and a couple of flasks of rakshi.

Both the oracle and the astrologer came to see us as we loaded up the mules. The oracle—a big man with a monkish stubble of grey hair—immediately threw a fit when he saw us. For about five minutes he lay in the snow, body rigid, teeth clenched, his breath inflating bubbles of saliva on his lips. Everyone came

to see the performance; but the children who had seen it all before were more interested in us and the Land Rover. When the oracle came round he stood up and regarded us sadly.

'Well,' I said, 'what have the gods told you?'

'It is better that you do not know,' he said.

Shi-shok said: 'Surely, my brother, you do not believe what this man says? He is a fake.'

The girl said: 'He gives me the creeps. He doesn't look too happy about our prospects.'

The oracle wandered away and the astrologer took over. She asked when I was born and spread some greasy parchments on the ground. She looked about a hundred years old. After some fine calculations she favoured us with a gummy grin.

'Well,' I said, 'do the stars look favourably upon us?'

She nodded happily. 'They will guide you safely through the mountains to wherever it is you wish to go. And you and the woman with the stars on her face will have many children.'

Shi-shok laughed hugely. When he had recovered himself he said: 'Whatever the oracle believes she always makes a point of saying the opposite. That way each of them succeeds in being right half the time. The people who live here are very impressed.'

Anne Mortimer said: 'For heavens' sake—what did she say?'

'She said you're going to die an old maid.'

'If the men I've met in my life so far are anything to go by she isn't far wrong.'

The townspeople who had no idea where we were going were entering into the spirit of our departure. The Land Rover was almost hidden by clambering children, and women who must have been short of supplies themselves offered us food. They were very kind and gentle, these people; and now, like kind and gentle people throughout history, they were involved in a war of which they knew and cared nothing. Again I wondered if what I was doing was right—if meddlers were ever right; if the West was ever justified in creating so much suffer-

ing to halt the march of Communism. Did villagers who had never heard of Mao or Krushchev or Kennedy really give a damn whether they were in the hands of Communists or Capitalists? Had only South Koreans been gallant while North Koreans were only treacherous? And was it not all more a question of the pride and political ambitions of a few men in distant capitals? I looked with affection at the children using the Land Rover as if it were some apparatus in a recreation ground, and I looked with hatred at Maxwell because he was the representative of the few who involved them in their scheming.

I left the star-gazer and walked round to the back of the hut. The sun had melted most of the snow; but it would return every day now until it finally stayed and fused the highest crests with the lower peaks.

I lit a cheroot and blew out a jet of grey smoke. If we were going to reach the border, I thought, we would have to travel by night.

Anne Mortimer said: 'Perhaps we'll find Shangri-la the other side.'

'Perhaps we won't even reach the other side.'

'The astrologer said we would.'

'And the oracle implied that we wouldn't.'

'So we stand a fifty-fifty chance.'

'I'm afraid the Abbot of Kushlanga won't have a teleprinter for you.'

'Then we'll just have to use pigeons.'

'Or vultures.'

'What's gotten into you?'

'It's none of your bloody business.'

'You really don't like women in the profession, do you?'

'Correct. And don't let's have the next line—"Who was she, Alex?"'

'Your wife, I guess. Was she a journalist?'

'She was when I met her. She wrote pieces for magazines.

They were pretty good. But that has nothing to do with my dislike of women journalists doing a man's job. You shouldn't be here, Miss Mortimer, and you know it. You might be a tough egg in Greenwich Village but you need more than a hat-pin to protect yourself up here.'

'I've got a secret agent, a bandit and you. I guess I'll survive. But why these sudden doubts about our chances of crossing the frontier? Is it because of me and Maxwell? If it is you needn't worry—we'll make it.'

A little girl with black hair which would soon be long enough to wear in a pigtail came up and handed me a spanner which she had found in the Land Rover. 'I'm not worried about whether we'll make it. I'm worried about whether we should make it. You know the reason why we're going—to make war. To bring bloodshed and suffering to people like this.' I ruffled the little girl's hair and said thank-you in Tibetan.

'You must have considered all this before you agreed to undertake the mission.'

'I considered it,' I said. 'And at first I said no. They told me that I would be saving thousands of lives. Maybe hundreds of thousands. You know the facts now. What do you think, Miss Mortimer? Bearing in mind that children like that'—I pointed at the little girl—'are going to get killed. Am I justified in meddling?'

'Anything I say sounds pretty mundane. And whatever I say you'll think it's all for the wrong reasons. If I say let's go back you'll think I want to get back to Tezpur to file a story. If I say let's go on you'll think I want to get an even better story. Anyway to hell with what you think. I reckon we should go back.'

'Thank you for making up my mind,' I said. 'We'll go on.'

She smiled suddenly and the freckles jostled each other on her nose. 'I rather thought you'd say that.'

'Do me a favour, Miss Mortimer,' I said. 'Stop trying to be smart.'

'Do me a favour, Mr. Sangster,' she said. 'Stop trying to be

strong and silent. Incidentally I know all about what happened in Algeria. Maxwell told me. I'm sorry.'

'So Maxwell read you my dossier.'

'Not all of it.'

'So you don't know where I've got a birthmark?'

'No,' she said. 'But I can guess.'

We loaded up the mules and covered the Land Rover with sacking in the hope that the Chinese wouldn't find it. Which was just possible because they would hesitate before showing themselves in a town which they had agreed to evacuate.

I kept trying to disperse the people of Towang because if there were any Chinese left in the heights around the town they would spot the gathering. But they were not easily dispersible.

'Come on,' I said. 'It's time to be going.'

I picked up the little girl, gave her a kiss and thought: forgive me.

Shi-shok led the mules across the track and up the mountainside. The sun was setting and the mountains ahead were darkening and sharpening. They were the mountains of Tibet and there was nothing inviting about them.

Chapter Seventeen

From the ridge the steam from the hot spring looked like the cloud from a small atomic bomb explosion. Except that it didn't move. Only when we drew nearer, cutting through a valley because the white-capped peak in front of us was too steep to climb, could we see its internal billowing movements. Each ripple and thrust seemed to be trying to escape through an invisible band.

Shi-shok said: 'We can rest here. We will be hidden and it will be warm. Perhaps there the rest of my men will find us. We have often rested in the steam in the past.'

It was dawn and we had been travelling for two days since the slaughter of the Chinese. The girl looked exhausted but wouldn't admit it. I told her that if she wanted to ride on one of the mules I would carry some of the equipment but she refused. Maxwell walked easily, with a restrained sort of movement, harnessing his strength; but even his aura of independence was gradually deflating—you could see it in the sag of his shoulders and the eagerness to lie down whenever I called a halt. Shi-shok strode easily up and down the steep hillsides but faltered into his clumsy, robot walk on the level.

We travelled by night bowing our faces into the squalls of hard gritty snow that hurled themselves at us; snow which bore no resemblance to the soft Christmas flakes of my childhood. We wore fur-lined hoods and ski-ing mittens. The mules wore nothing and made their protests by sitting down at the height

of a squall. After each white storm the clouds hurried on, with the peaks knifing their bellies, and the moon appeared like a scimitar of ice. Then it was good, trekking up and down the snow-dusted mountainsides in the silver shadowless light, breathing the frosted air, feeling that every crag and every boulder was a stepping stone to Kushlanga.

Each of us—except Shi-shok—fell a few times. Slid, grabbing handfuls of snow and shale, wondering if we were about to hurtle over a precipice. Whenever we fell Shi-shok was always there before us to pick us up and dust us down. And then we had to wait for the fallen one to regain his breath. Shi-shok sucked pebbles, but he still became breathless.

At first the mules refused to join us in the steam billowing from the spring. But when they felt the warmth they came in, treading carefully like old people paddling in the shallows.

On the outskirts the steam was warm and cloying. We left our equipment out in the cold and sat down, incongruous and clownish in our anoraks and hoods. Shi-shok took off his winter clothes first and lay down in his trousers and soiled brown smock. 'I suggest, my brother, that you and the other two do the same,' he said.

But the wet heat was still overpowering. It was like sitting in a Turkish bath fully-clothed. Again it was Shi-shok who made the next logical move. 'This steam,' he said, 'is very good for you. It takes away the dirt and the worry and the weariness. I shall take the rest of my clothes off.' He began to remove his smock.

'Hey,' said the girl, 'he's not going to is he?'

'He is,' I said. 'And so am I.'

Maxwell, his independent spirit wilting rapidly in the wet heat, said: 'We're going to look pretty darn stupid if the Chinese catch us.'

'If the Chinese catch us,' I said, 'that will be the least of our worries.'

Shi-shok stripped to his trousers.

The girl said: 'Now come on. Tell him not to take his pants off.' She began to giggle.

Shi-shok said irritably: 'What is the woman laughing so stupidly about? Has she never seen a naked man?'

'What does he say?' asked the girl.

'He wants to know if you've ever seen a naked man.'

'You can tell him one thing—he's not going to see a naked woman right now.'

'Perhaps,' I said to Shi-shok, 'we should keep our trousers on.'

Shi-shok looked puzzled and annoyed. 'The rong-pa were always strange people,' he said. 'Are you not allowed to look upon each other's bodies?'

'We don't have all that many hot springs,' I said.

'So we can take off the top of our clothes but not the bottom. Why is that?' He looked at Anne Mortimer and smiled maliciously. 'Is it because the woman has the same as us down here?' He pointed to his crutch.

'Hey,' she said. 'What's bandit boy saying? Tell him to lay off the sign language.'

'He was paying you a compliment.'

'Yeah? Well I don't think I like that sort of compliment.' She had stripped to her shirt and trousers. 'This really takes the cake. If I don't get a Pulitzer out of this I'll quit. Have you ever heard anything like it? Sitting in a hot spring in the Himalayas with two donkeys, three half-naked men—one of them a bandit—surrounded by the Yellow Peril.'

'If anyone ever believes it,' I said. 'That's what the explorers found when they returned—everyone thought they were lying or just plain crazy.'

Shi-shok took off his smock and his beloved boots and lay back, his brown chest heaving rhythmically, one hand clasping his dagger embedded in the ground. There was no fat on his body, just muscles which moved slightly over his ribs as he breathed. It was a body moulded by the mountains, tough and lean and independent.

Maxwell took off his shirt and lay on his stomach, one hand feeling the scars on his face. His shoulders were powerful but, although he was lean by Western standards, his frame was comfortably padded by easy ways of life unknown to Shi-shok.

'I suggest you take your shirt off,' I said to the girl. 'You've got something on underneath, haven't you? It's no different to the top half of a Bikini.'

'You first, mister,' she said.

I took off my shirt, conscious of the whiteness of my torso against the brown of my arms and face.'

'You look as if you're still wearing your under-vest.'

'Don't push your luck,' I said. 'I might take my trousers off.'

'That'll be the lead to my story,' she said. 'Englishman indecently exposes himself in a hot spring on the Tibetan border.'

She took off her shirt and lay down quickly. I looked at the small firm swellings cupped in white cotton and remembered how they had looked naked when she was washing by the stream. A schoolgirl's breasts. And the feel of a nipple, cool and hard, the night she had blundered into our hut. Ashamed of myself I turned over on my stomach and tried to sleep. I tried to imagine the spout somewhere in the middle of our steam bath tossing scalding water high into the air; but it was Anne Mortimer's breasts that my mind returned to as I dozed into deep steamy sleep.

I dreamed that boys with dead faces were trying to strangle me. I awoke choking, my hands clawing at my throat. The girl was kneeling beside me. 'Hey,' she said, 'wake up. You must be dreaming about the Dob-dobs or something.'

The steam had thickened and I could feel it in my throat and lungs. Maxwell and Shi-shok still seemed to be asleep. 'Did I call out?' I asked. I remembered how at first my wife had tried to soothe me after my nightmares; but after a while she had

merely been irritated by them.

The girl wiped the sweat and steam from my forehead with a handkerchief. 'You're not sick, are you?' she said.

'Not really. It's an old wound that occasionally comes to life.'

'And you keep it all to yourself, don't you?'

'It's nobody else's business.'

Her breasts were very close to me, white beneath their cups against a faded sun-tan—Miami, perhaps, or the West Coast. She had wiped her face but the steam was beaded above her upper lip, and the curls of her hair had coiled tighter in the moisture. I lay looking into her grey eyes and thought how young and vulnerable and boyish she looked.

The mist above us was luminous, which meant that outside our cocoon the sky was probably blue and bright in between snow storms. I stood up. 'I'm going for a walk,' I said.

'Inside or outside our private cloud?'

'Inside I suppose. I don't want to be picked off by Chinese snipers.'

'I'll come with you,' she said. 'It's a long time since I had a Turkish bath. Let's go towards the centre.'

'When it starts snowing again we can have a Sauna. Out of the heat and into the snow.'

'And you can beat me with birch twigs,' Anne Mortimer said.

'I hit you once and you didn't seem to like it.'

'I guess it wasn't the time or the place.' Her new friendliness retreated a little. 'It was also quite uncalled for.'

I was glad hostility was again edging our relationship. Just now, waking to find her beside me, emotions which I had thought long since dead had assailed me; and a disturbing acceptance by all my senses that it was quite natural that I should awake and find her face beside mine; almost as if as we had been sleeping together all our lives. I wanted no more of that; no more of the weary aftermath of love.

We walked towards the splashing core of heat hidden by

its own breath. The ground beneath our feet was rock and it was as slippery as seaweed. We could hear the water and smell sulphur in the steam. I sensed again—as I had sensed during the earth tremor—our fallibility and the rumbling, heaving powers which had thrown up these mountains and made this puncture in the earth's crust through which the water and steam were spouting.

'Gee,' she said. 'It's getting darned hot. Do you think we should turn back?'

'We can get a little nearer. It won't hurt you. In fact it will probably do you good.'

But as we walked nearer a spout of boiling water hissed past us and struck the ground like a whiplash. Anne Mortimer leaped to one side and into my arms. She stayed there for a moment and it seemed as if in her warm body I could feel all her determination and ambition and pride. I could smell the scents which the steam released in her hair, feel the thrust of firm, small breasts in my chest. I pushed her away. 'That wouldn't have done you much good,' I said. 'Come on, let's get away from here.'

We ran back towards the outskirts of the cloud.

'How are we going to find the others?' she said.

'Scout round the fringe of the steam until we see them.'

'Okay,' she said. 'But let's take a rest first.' She sat down on the smooth rock. 'That damn water could have scarred us for life. Aren't you the great guide?'

'We must have been nearer to the centre than I thought we were.' I sat down beside her.

She said: 'Do you really want to spend the rest of your life up here?'

'I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather spend it.'

'I don't believe you. It's wonderful up here, I agree. But not for ever. You're just escaping from something. What happened in Algeria, I guess. What was it between you and Mercier?'

'What makes you think there was anything between us?'

'I'm not a complete idiot. He was always full of gab when we

were alone. But whenever you were there he was a different guy. It was as if he were afraid of you. He wasn't so bad, you know, beneath all those complexes and that phoney Gallic charm.'

'Even if he did try to rape you.'

'I guess that was partly my fault. He had to prove himself. I suppose he thought I had been encouraging him just because I was friendly. It's a common male failing. But I'll admit I didn't handle it very well. I guess I just panicked.'

'You come across this male failing pretty regularly?'

'Here we go again,' she said. 'Stop picking me up. I didn't mean that. You've got a few complexes yourself, haven't you Mr. Sangster?'

'Perhaps.' I considered whether I should tell her about Mercier. I rejected the idea because the least I could do was keep his secret. 'And as for Mercier I knew him in Algeria. That's all. He was a good journalist.'

'I reckon there was more to it than that.'

'Then you can just go on reckoning, Miss Mortimer. And as Mercier's dead and I'm not going to discuss it any more that's just how it will have to stay.'

She lay on her back, her belly very flat, a little blonde down just showing above the waistband of her trousers.

'Do you think I had anything to do with his death?' she asked. 'You know—do you think he had to do the heroic bit because I made a fool of him?'

'If you think I'm going to come out with the don't-blame-yourself speech you're mistaken. I think we can do with a little less psycho-analysis up here. But just in case it is worrying you I shouldn't think you had anything to do with his death. Or perhaps that disappoints you.'

She looked up at me frowning. 'You really are a bastard, aren't you. That was totally unnecessary.'

I shrugged. 'I suppose so. I'm sorry. But if you're really curious about any relationships in our happy little party I should have

thought the tension between Krishna and Maxwell would have interested you more.'

She snapped her fingers. 'That reminds me. When we were in Towang and all those kids were climbing over the truck one of them found an envelope under the seat and gave it to me. It was addressed to you and I think it was from Krishna because I noticed his hand-writing once when he was making his notes.

'And you've only just remembered it?'

'I'm sorry. The kid gave it to me just as we were pulling out.'

'Where is it now?'

'In my pack on the mule.'

'I presume you've read it like a good newspaperwoman.'

'For Pete's sake lay off,' she said. 'No, I haven't read it. It was addressed to you and I don't read other people's mail.'

'Come on,' I said. 'Let's go back and have a look at it.'

'At least you can't blame me if it's been steamed open in here.'

'You sound as if you're preparing me for something.'

We walked around the perimeter of the cloud just inside the mist.

'If we ever get back to Tezpur you'll have a book not just a few newspaper stories,' I said. 'You can't miss.'

'I know it. Of all the lucky breaks I've had this is the luckiest.'

'Your brothers will be very proud of you.'

'You must be kidding. They read every newspaper in the States except mine.'

'Then they'll read your story because it will be syndicated all over the world.'

'Do I take it that you think I'm capable of doing a good job on this story? My, that's quite a concession.'

'Let's say that no one could fail to write a printable story.'

'That's more like the Alexander Sangster I know and loathe.'

'I didn't mean that. My guess is that you'll do as good a job as anyone. Much as I hate to say it you seem to be a pretty competent journalist, Miss Mortimer. I don't know how you write but I think it's probably very well.'

I choked as I sucked a thick coil of mist into my lungs. She grinned. 'Choking on your words?' She tucked her hand under my arm and it seemed as natural as it had seemed to wake up and find her beside me.

'I get a little ashamed of myself. I sometimes suspect that I didn't come up here to get away from people—I came up here so that there would be no scope for my own petty behaviour.'

'You're becoming very vulnerable all of a sudden. Doesn't it frighten you?'

'A little. But my confessions are confined to a steam cloud and an audience of one.'

'We can't all be as uncomplicated as Shi-shok.'

'Your journalistic instincts have let you down there. Shi-shok isn't uncomplicated at all.'

There was still no sign of the other two. I began to wonder if we had completed a circuit.

'We aren't lost by any chance, are we?'

'We'll move in a bit closer. We're bound to find them eventually.'

'I guess my paper must be wondering whether I'm alive or dead. At least they've had one story from me since we came up the hills.'

I stopped walking. 'What do you mean they've had one story from you?'

She looked embarrassed which was itself a novelty. 'I didn't mean to let that slip out.'

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'You're not going to like this.'

The unfamiliar desire to share my thoughts, at least with one person, which had been reluctantly opening up closed again like a sea anemone that has been touched. 'What are you talking

about, Miss Mortimer?'

'It's the duty of a newspaperman—or woman—to get a story to his paper first, isn't it?'

'Up to a point. If an agreement has been struck, though, most of us stick to it. Just what have you done?'

'Now you make me feel like a heel. I didn't think of it that way. I was just thinking of my paper.' She frowned and bit her bottom lip. 'I wrote out a cable and gave it to one of those Indian officers we met on the way up. He was heading for Tezpur and I asked him to drop it into the cable office.'

'And perhaps promised him the pleasure of your company when you got back?'

'I said I might see him.' She looked as if she might cry, but I doubted if she would. 'Gee, I'm sorry, Alex, I was just thinking about the paper.'

'Did Mercier send a cable with yours?'

'No, he didn't know anything about it.'

'So you double-crossed your partner as well.'

'For crying out loud. You were so damn sure of yourself. For all I knew you had some way of moving your copy that I didn't know about. I hadn't any idea of the real purpose of the trip. I did what I thought was right.'

I pushed her hand away from my arm. We walked on in silence. A few minutes later the phantom shapes of the mules appeared in the mist.

She stopped. 'Alex,' she said, 'are you going to forgive me?'

'Miss Mortimer,' I said. 'You are a bitch.'

Maxwell and Shi-shok were awake. Maxwell was shaving with some water in one of the pools in the smooth rock. It wouldn't have surprised me if he had produced a travelling iron from his kit. After shaving he began, with the aid of a hand mirror, to snip away at his hair which had grown too long for him during the journey—it was, that is, at least an inch long. But,

despite his attention to himself, there was nothing effeminate about Maxwell. He would have looked equally at home with a comb, a baseball bat or a gun in his hand.

Shi-shok was sitting cross-legged, dagger in hand, watching Maxwell. 'That man,' he said, 'looks after himself well. Too well, perhaps. I do not trust men who keep themselves too clean.' He looked at Anne Mortimer and me suspiciously. 'And what, my brother, have you been doing with that girl in the mist? I think there is more between the two of you than you like to admit. Has she perhaps lain down for you where we could not see you?'

'I'd rather lie down with a mountain goat,' I said.

'I do not believe you. When there is such hostility between a man and a woman it always hides some other feeling. Often neither the man nor the woman realise it.'

'You're in the wrong job,' I said. 'You should be a marriage guidance counsellor not a bandit. The sooner you get back to your own women the better.'

Shi-shok stood up and with a flick of his wrist threw the knife so that it stuck in some loose shale a centimetre from my foot. 'At least they are women. Not men in disguise. Look at her chest—there is hardly anything there.'

'I've never noticed that your women have particularly big chests.'

'But you have never seen them naked. Leaning over you with the light of love in their eyes. Then truly they are beautiful. And here'—he pointed at his own nipples—'they are especially big. As for that girl who you call Anne I should not think she is any bigger there than a child. But perhaps she is considered beautiful where you come from. Is that so, my brother? If it is then I shall bring one of my own women when I visit the Land of the Inji with you one day.'

'She would be considered passable,' I said. 'But I think we can find something more suited to your tastes when you come.'

'You know my women are always available to you. Just as

if you were my blood brother. But you never wish to accept my offer.'

I grinned at him. 'Because they only have eyes for you.'

Shi-shok shrugged. 'You have great tact, my brother.' He picked up the knife and wiped the blade on his coarse brown trousers. 'I hope that at nightfall the rest of my men will join us here. It has often been a meeting place in the past. They will be very angry and very sad. We must not fail them at Kushlanga.'

'Then you must stay away from the Abbot. He does not appreciate your arguments.'

'If you say so, my brother, then it shall be.'

The luminosity was fading overhead. In one hour it would be dark.

The girl said: 'If you two have finished your pow-wow I'll get the envelope.'

Maxwell put away his scissors. 'What envelope?'

'Apparently Krishna left one behind in the Land Rover,' I said. 'One of those children at Towang found it and gave it to her. Incidentally you might as well know that she's already sent a story back to Tezpur with an Indian officer.'

'I'll take the envelope,' Maxwell said.

'Sorry, Maxwell,' I said. 'I'm in charge up here. Or had you forgotten?'

'This is nothing to do with getting us over the Tibetan border. There could be confidential information in that envelope which I shall have to convey to my people.'

'Get that envelope,' I said to Anne Mortimer. 'And give it to me. I'm sorry, Maxwell. You handed over authority in the foothills. Remember?'

His grey eyes stared at me without blinking; they were the eyes of a man who would not mind killing to gain his objectives; the eyes of a man who had perhaps already killed. I imagined him rifling the clothing of his victim unmoved by the warmth of the flesh that had, seconds before, been living. A cold, clinical

and self-possessed man was Maxwell.

He flicked his fingers at the girl. 'Get the envelope.'

Shi-shok said: 'What is happening, my brother? Does this man mean you harm? He is acting as if he is our leader.'

I told Shi-shok what was happening. 'You must not give into him,' Shi-shok said.

'Don't worry—I won't.'

'Such things sometimes happen with my people. We have to fight to the death. I have been forced to kill two men that way.' He shook his head sadly.

'I hope that won't be necessary,' I said.

'Do not worry,' Shi-shok said. He tested the blade of his knife on his dagger.

His concern irritated me. 'I can handle it,' I said.

'Just the same it is well to be on the safe side.'

The girl rummaged in her kit and pulled out a large manila envelope bulging with papers. It was sealed with red wax.

'Who is it addressed to?' I asked.

The girl said: 'To you.'

Maxwell said: 'I can't help that—I'm having it.' He stretched out his hand.

The girl looked at me enquiringly.

I stretched out my hand. It was dusk now and the mist was thickening around us like a Jack-the-Ripper fog.

The revolver appeared in Maxwell's hand as quickly and neatly as an egg between a conjurer's fingers. I'm sorry to have to do it this way,' he said. 'But the contents of that envelope could be vitally important. I must warn you that I'm not playing games. Give the envelope to me.'

'I really should have left you down that precipice, shouldn't I?' I said. I walked towards the girl but the gun jerked in his hand with ugly, lethal authority.

'The envelope,' he said. 'Please.'

I didn't see the knife leave Shi-shok's hand. I was vaguely conscious of a fleeting movement like the wheeling of a swal-

low at dusk. The handle hit the gun and knocked it spinning through the steam. I leapt for it, but Maxwell's reflexes were fast; we reached the gun together. He was also stronger than he appeared to be and as slippery as a Lascar seaman in a pub brawl. Somehow I knew the way he would fight and as his knee came up towards my groin I rolled aside and hit his thigh hard with the side of my hand stunning the nerve. As he bent forward involuntarily I chopped him on the side of the neck—not too hard because it would have killed him and I had killed enough. But his hand was still groping for the butt of the gun. My hand found Shi-shok's knife and I pricked Maxwell's throat with the point. 'Come on Maxwell,' I said. 'It's all over.'

We lay there for a moment sobbing for air; but our lungs could only find mist and we choked as we tried to breathe.

Shi-shok picked up the gun and took the dagger. 'Well done, my brother,' he said. 'I could not have done better myself. But I think you should be grateful to my protector here.' He held up the knife. 'Many times she has saved my life. Now what shall we do with this man? Kill him? He is only a nuisance and now he is a dangerous nuisance. I shall be interested to know what is written on those papers that he wants so much.'

'So shall I,' I said.

'Alex,' said the girl. 'Are you all right?'

'Give me that bloody envelope,' I said.

But suddenly we were surrounded by shapes in the dark mist. Shapes carrying rifles.

'My men,' Shi-shok said. 'At last they have come.' There were half a dozen of them and they all embraced Shi-shok. 'They say there are Gya-mi in the area,' he said. 'We must leave immediately. But first we must kill this man.' He pointed at Maxwell.

'No,' I said. 'We won't kill him.'

'But why, my brother? He would have killed you if you had not let him have those papers.'

'It would take too long to explain,' I said. 'But I'll take the

envelope even though it's too dark to read it now.'

Shi-shok put away his knife. 'You are a very difficult man to understand. But you fight well. Now come we must dress quickly and leave. If the Gya-mi thought we were inside this mist they would kill us all with their jelly that bursts into flames.'

We put on our clothes, loaded up the mules and cautiously moved out of the cloud that had been our home for a day into the sharp dusk outside. I put the envelope inside my smock conscious of Maxwell watching me.

We moved steadily through a snowless night. The sun that day had melted most of the snow and the ground was dark, printed with occasional seagulls' wings of white. We had eight mules now and we moved in single file with scouts ahead and behind and a couple foraging on either side of us. They communicated by whistling to each other; the sound was so high-pitched that you were never quite sure whether or not you had heard it.

In the early hours of the morning the high clouds moved on and moonlight lacquered the mountains. The moon looked very thin and sharp; the higher we climbed the farther away it seemed to be. The stars were thick and blurred—muslin veiling infinity. On such nights as this even the mountains lost their arrogance and became the frosting on a fragile bauble in the firmament.

Later in the mauve and pink dawn, as water colours thickened into oils, we rested beneath a roof formed by a ledge shaped like the peak of a cap.

One corner of the envelope protruded from my smock and I saw Maxwell looking at it. His hand strayed to his shoulder holster in the nervous way of men accustomed to carrying guns.

'Don't worry, Maxwell,' I said. 'I've got your gun.'

His hand went from the empty holster to the scars on his jaw. 'You're a fool,' he said. 'What's in that envelope doesn't concern you. It will only confuse your decision.'

'How do you know what's in it?'

'I can guess. Krishna was a little mad. You'll just be reading the ravings of an unbalanced mind.'

'I thought you said there could be information in it that you would have to convey to "your people".'

'For Christ's sake read it then,' he said.

The girl whose eyes were sore with fatigue said: 'How much longer do you reckon it will be, Alex, before we cross the border into Tibet?'

I asked Shi-shok. He said: 'I know nothing about your frontiers. But it is my belief that we crossed the border during the night.'

I told the girl: 'Miss Mortimer, take out your camera. We are now in Tibet. In enemy territory. On the Roof of the World. I defy even you to get a cable out to New York from here.'

'Gee,' she said. 'Are we really?'

I nodded. 'We really are.'

'Gee,' she said. 'Gee whiz.'

I broke the seal on the envelope and began to read the papers inside.

Chapter Eighteen

It was certainly the writing of a madman. But a madman deranged only in one direction. Thus the writing was lucid and controlled: insane notions expressed with sanity.

First there was a potted autobiography. Krishna the little schoolboy with the silver-bright mind shining out among the intellects of his contemporaries. Krishna the orphan adopted by an old schoolteacher grateful that he had found a lively and fertile young mind in which to plant his Hindu teachings. The daily promises, as his tutor became more sick and feeble, that he would continue the teaching and preach the evils of Buddhism. The final promise on the deathbed of the delirious old man that he would journey to the founts of Buddhism and return to India armed with all the proof that was needed to denounce the faith to the whole world.

The delirium had been infectious but the incubation period had lasted half a lifetime. Krishna had studied Hinduism with fervour and application. But the madness had only developed within the past year or so. When China had attacked India he believed it to be the southward march of Buddhism rather than Communism. In New Delhi he heard that Maxwell had gone to Tezpur and—because he knew a lot about Maxwell—he followed him.

I looked up at Maxwell. 'I'm just coming to the bit about you,' I said.

Maxwell shrugged.

The notes went on: 'I had found out about Vincent Maxwell about two years previously when I was investigating the supply of arms to the Naga tribesmen. After three weeks of intensive work I discovered that the principal supplier was Maxwell operating behind the façade of an ordinary export-import business. When I confronted him with my knowledge he offered what was to me a great deal of money to keep quiet. I took the money without compunction because I intended to put it to good use—to finance the furtherance of the teaching of my faith and the eventual destruction of Buddhism.

'When I learned that he had gone to Tezpur I realised that it was not merely the call of journalism that had taken him there. My contacts in the Government believed that the Chinese would return to Tibet after they had taken the North East Frontier Agency. I believed that it was Maxwell's intention to somehow sell arms to the tribesmen left behind after the Chinese retreat. I also suspected from my previous investigations—although I had never been able to prove it—that Maxwell worked in some way for American intelligence. When I heard that a small press party was to be taken up into the mountains I told him that if I was not a member of that party I would expose his gun-running activities there and then. Needless to say I was *lucky* enough to have my name drawn for the expedition.'

I pulled Maxwell's gun out of my belt. 'Some of your own supplies?' I asked.

'You might as well finish reading the Goddamn thing,' he said.

Krishna's note continued: 'I am recording this now so that you, Sangster, will know the truth in the event of my death. This may sound melodramatic but it is my belief that Maxwell plans to kill me. I have seen him looking at me and there is hatred in his eyes. A man who has made so much money by selling the weapons of war would not be very upset at the prospect of one more death on his conscience. So if I should die, Sangster, keep this and take it back to New Delhi for me. What little material I have so far gathered will be of use

for the great work which I and my friends are preparing.'

There followed a list of names and addresses. I put the papers in the envelopes and shoved it inside my smock. It was in a way satisfying to know that my feeling towards Maxwell which had been bewildered by the mystery surrounding him had crystallised into a single emotion: I despised him.

'Well, well,' I said, 'all that strong silent stuff and you turn out to be nothing more than a gun-runner.'

He put up his hand with what would have been an imperious gesture had there been any substance behind it. Instead it was a plea. 'Let's go for a stroll. I want to talk to you. We can go down behind that rock.' He pointed to a crag a couple of hundred yards away from the ledge.

'I suppose you're entitled to a hearing. But remember I'm the one that's got the gun. It would be pretty fair justice if you died from a bullet from one of your own weapons.'

'Listen, Sangster,' Maxwell said. 'I know how you feel about guns and killing. All right—so I have sold guns in the past. If I hadn't sold them someone else would. But this is the point, Sangster. Whether or not I am or have been a gun-runner it makes no Goddamn difference to this mission. I do work for the CIA and it is vitally important to the peace of the world that we create this buffer zone. Forget me, forget what I've done. We've got to persuade the Abbot of Kushlanga to go to war.'

'So that you can sell him some guns? Come on, Maxwell, tell me some more.'

'For Christ sake,' Maxwell said, 'someone's got to give them guns haven't they?'

'You mean sell them guns, don't you?'

'Give, sell—what the hell's the difference? Whichever it is you're putting weapons in their hands. Someone has to make money out of war. Someone always does.'

I fondled the barrel of the pistol in the same way that Shishok felt the blade of his knife. 'Did your company ever sell guns to Algeria?'

'I'm just an agent,' Maxwell said. 'I only deal with this part of the world.'

'Agent be damned. You buy out-of-date weapons cheaply and sell them at six times the price. Maybe more. Don't give me that agent stuff, Maxwell. I'm not that stupid.'

'Sure I make a profit. Sweet Jesus, Sangster, I'm not an eccentric philanthropist.'

'You're certainly not that,' I said. I raised the gun and pointed it at his head.

'Put that damn thing down. And stop being so Goddamn holy. Doesn't it ever occur to you that people need the guns to defend themselves? That's why they come to us.'

'It's a dirty bloody game and you know it. When they come to you for guns you bleed them of all the money they've got.' Another thought occurred to me. 'Does the CIA know about your business interests? I should imagine they would be pretty interested.'

'Sure they know. They don't give a damn as long as I'm not selling guns to their enemies.'

'Ever trade in Stens?' I asked. 'Pretty dangerous weapons those.' I waggled my invisible finger at him. 'You can kill a lot of people without meaning to if you don't know how to handle them properly.'

He nodded. 'I know what you're talking about, Sangster. I've never sold a Sten in my life. So you say, "So what?—if it wasn't me it was someone like me." To hell with your complexes. There are more important issues at stake right now.'

I peered down the barrel of the revolver. 'It's funny, isn't it? Everyone who's selling something they're a bit ashamed of—pornography, drugs, guns—says they're fulfilling a demand. And yet there's only a demand because they know there's always someone like you to fulfil it.'

Maxwell tightened the scarf beneath his anorak. 'Come on, Sangster. Stop moralising about honest-to-goodness supply and demand.'

'Honest-to-goodness? Don't make me laugh.'

'Supply and demand then. While men fight someone's got to give both sides weapons to fight with. If only one side gets the weapons then the other is annihilated. That's sense, isn't it?'

'No,' I said. 'Not when you supply inferior weapons at inflated prices. You supply weapons to men determined to overthrow law and order regardless of the cost in lives of innocent people. You supply guns to the oppressed and the oppressors—whichever pays the highest price. You deal in death, Mr. Maxwell, and live in luxury.'

Maxwell embarked on the elaborate business of lighting a cigarette. When he had inhaled, exhaled, swallowed and sighed he said: 'You should have been a preacher not a journalist. I guess there's not much more I can say. What are you going to do—shoot me?'

'Shi-shok thought that was the best plan when he thought you were trying to take over from me. I stopped him. He wouldn't have wasted any of your merchandise, Maxwell—he would have slit your throat with his knife.'

Maxwell managed a smile. You had to admit, I thought, that there was nothing cowardly about Vincent Maxwell. 'Perhaps I should sell him a gun,' he said.

'The Khampas have got plenty of guns left behind by the Indians.'

'All right,' Maxwell said. 'Forget the Khampas. But listen to me. We've come up here to start a war. Right? Let's make no mistake about that. I know it and you know it so let's call a spade a spade—or a gun a gun, if you like. We've come up here because we reckon such a war is justified. Right?'

'I've never been sure.'

'Have you forgotten that Tibetan buddy of yours down at Tezpur who was shot by the Chinese? The one that the doc said would die of pneumonia?'

'All right,' I said, 'so we've come to create war.'

'Very well then. Without weapons it just isn't on, is it? You

can't expect the Tibetans to rise and overthrow the Goddamn Chinese with catapults. So someone's got to supply the arms. And why the hell shouldn't that someone be me?'

'You mean you want to get in first. Is that it, Maxwell? Persuade the Tibetans that you're the only person who can give them guns. What about the Americans? They're supposed to be backing this project. Can't they supply the weapons officially?'

Maxwell drew deeply on his cigarette. 'They are—through me. I told you the CIA know about my business interests. This is a joint manoeuvre for me—I get the ball rolling and I supply the guns. It's all been agreed in Washington. That's why I had to get across the border with you. But I didn't want to tell you why because I knew you were pretty darn touchy on this sort of subject.'

'You took a long time in getting round to it.'

'I had to. A strategic approach seemed advisable. It's very simple, Sangster. If they're going to fight they've got to have guns and I just happen to be the one who's going to give them to them. You might not like me for it but you've got to agree that if it wasn't me it would be someone else.'

'You're dead right I don't like you,' I said. 'I don't like dope peddlers, either.'

Under the ledge one of Shi-shok's brothers, Wangdula, who had joined us at the spring, was sitting cross-legged eating tsampa and gazing speculatively at Anne Mortimer.

Wangdula was younger than Shi-shok and, perhaps because he was unburdened by the responsibility of leadership, was more light-hearted in his approach to life. He was shorter than his brother and he wore his hair which was longer than Shi-shok's in a pigtail. His features were brown and harsh but when he was amused, which was often, they collapsed like a split chestnut into cracks of laughter; and he slapped

his thighs and all but rolled on the ground with mirth. He and another of Shi-shok's brothers shared a wife—a gentle and pretty girl whom I had once met. She had borne them two children and never complained about their wild nomadic life. She was living in a mountain hideout about twenty miles from the frontier inside Tibet.

Through me Wangdula conducted an interview with Anne Mortimer; it was as exhaustive as anything she could have managed. Why did she wear men's trousers? Why was her hair cut short? How old was she? How many men shared her in her homeland?

'I'll answer the last one for you,' I said. 'She has only one master and that is her calling, her job of work.'

Wangdula smiled uncertainly. 'You mean this woman does the same work as men?'

'She tries to.' And because that sounded uncharitable I added: 'She does it rather well.'

The girl said: 'What the heck are you telling him?'

'I'm trying to explain that you're known as Scoop back in the States. But it's pretty heavy going because he doesn't understand what a newspaper is let alone a scoop.'

'Gee,' she said, 'you really are bitter about that story I sent back with the Army, aren't you? I wish I hadn't said I was sorry. I reckon that if you had been any sort of a newspaperman you would have got a story back. Sour grapes doesn't suit you, Mr. Sangster. And come to that an olive branch doesn't become me. Let's keep it good and healthy and hostile—you crush the grapes and I'll burn the branch.'

Wangdula looked perplexed. 'The girl sounds very angry. What is bothering her? Is it anything I have asked?'

I shook my head. 'She is very sensitive about doing a man's job. She tries all the time to be a man's equal.'

Wangdula looked at me shrewdly—almost as if he had understood what the girl said. 'Could it be that you, the hard and clever man whom my brother accepts as a brother, is jealous of

this woman? Could it be that she has perhaps proved to be your equal in this strange work which you have described to me?'

I managed a shadow of a smile. 'Perhaps there is some truth in what you say.'

Wangdula's face disintegrated into a cobweb of amusement. 'You ARE jealous of this woman. It is ridiculous. Perhaps this happens where you come from. But you cannot imagine how funny it sounds to a Khampa—a man being jealous of a woman.'

The humour of the situation eluded me. I said nothing—because anything I said would sound pompous. But perhaps I was being pompous anyway.

Wangdula said: 'Could it be possible that you are upset because I asked how many men have shared her in the country where she lives?'

'No,' I said. But I wasn't sure. How many had there been? 'To hell with it,' I said in English.

'Is something annoying you?' the girl asked.

'Possibly.'

'Me?'

'Yes,' I said.

She took her sleeping bag off the mule and went inside the tent.

Maxwell took his bag from the mule and said: 'Do you see it my way yet?'

'I only wish,' I said, 'that I had left you all back at Tezpur. If we bring this thing off it will be despite the lot of you.'

'And we're going to bring it off,' he said.

'Maybe,' I said. The only obstacles, I thought, were the Chinese hunting us, a career-crazy girl, a money-mad gun-runner, a climate gathering its winter forces, a few precipices, lack of proper food, and an abbot whose views on peaceful co-existence were as instransigent as the mountains around him. 'Maybe,' I said again.

Wangdula was still chuckling. 'It is extraordinary,' he said,

'being jealous of a woman.'

'You are about as humorous,' I said, 'as that bloody mule over there.'

We started off again at dusk and travelled through the night. At dawn I looked up from the bottom of a gorge and saw the first rays of the sun finding the golden rooftops of the monastery at Kushlanga high on the moutainside. And behind the monastery the glow of the gold, as soft as the dawn, on the wall of ice.

The sun rose higher and the sunlight splintered on the ice. The bridge was a thin dark line only discernible to those who knew it was there. Beyond the monastery, beyond the bridge, stood the crests of the mountains, pearl-pink in the blossoming dawn; briefly shorn of their arrogance in this discovering light—like awakening tyrants who have not had time to compose their wrath.

The girl said: 'Is that it? Is that Kushlanga?'

Faintly I heard the first notes of the most unmelodious dawn chorus in the world—the Abbot's musicians tuning their instruments.

'Yes,' I said, 'that's Kushlanga.'

Chapter Nineteen

The procession moved with golden dignity past the village's shacks and cottages. Monks and dignitaries weighted with gold trappings heavier than all the precious metal displayed at a coronation at Westminster; as incongruous among the placid poverty of the people as tiaras in an East End slum. Except that here no great value was attached to the gold: it was merely an adornment of the holy and the important, a distillation of the rays of the sun.

The leaders of the procession wore hats and headdresses shaped like golden wedding cakes; robes and bracelets and anklets glowing with molten colour.

'Gee,' said Anne Mortimer, 'it's wonderful, isn't it. But what's the occasion?'

'I'm not sure,' I said. 'It may be a visit from a garpon—a sort of viceroy. Or it may be an ordinary Buddhist festival.'

Both the girl and Maxwell had changed into Tibetan clothes because Shi-shok's spies had told him that there were Chinese in the area. They had also stained their faces darker to further avoid being conspicuous. But there wasn't much you could do about the girls curly hair except make her wear a Tibetan hat with an ornate crown and a fur brim. The villagers gazed at us with curiosity, but there was no hostility in their gaze; although when they saw Shi-shok they whispered among themselves.

Shi-shok said sadly: 'They think I have come to rob them.'

'You can't blame them,' I said.

The procession moved gravely towards the bridge, fluttering with prayer flags, spanning the gorge between village and monastery. The ground was lightly powdered with snow and the lamas looked cold as if the warmth from the sun buried itself in the gold. The bridge swayed as they walked across it with ceremonial care towards the monastery.

Through the rearguard of the procession I noticed a man staring intently at us; he was dressed in brown smock and shapeless trousers but he was taller than the men around him.

I squeezed Shi-shok's arm and told him to look at the man without making it obvious that he had aroused our curiosity. Shi-shok nodded. 'I see him. He is very interested in us. I will find out who he is.'

Shi-shok walked casually away from us and doubled back on the other side of the procession. But the tall man moved quickly away from the procession and vanished behind one of the flat-roofed cottages. Shi-shok spoke to some villagers who shook their heads, gazing apprehensively at the wild looking stranger with the fierce scar on his face.

When Shi-shok came back he said: 'They do not know this man. But I think he was a Gya-mi or one of their spies. I do not know if he realised who we were but I think it would be better to believe that he did. I think, too, that it would be better if we went to the monastery.'

'It would be better if we went to the monastery,' I said. 'Not you.'

Shi-shok looked pained. 'Why not me? After all it was I who suggested in the first place that we should persuade these people to go to war.'

'And look what happened. You upset the Abbot, squashed a fly and left in a temper with nothing achieved. No, it would be better if the Abbot did not see you.'

'I was in a temper because I thought my brother was betraying me.'

'You were in a temper because you didn't get your own way.

If the Abbot thinks the Khampas are involved in this he won't co-operate, so do what I ask and stay this side of the gorge.'

The last stragglers in the procession crossed the bridge without looking down at the flowing tresses of the river a mile below and vanished inside the monastery. Behind the gilded rooftops the sheet of ice was polished gold like a giant gong.

Shi-shok grumbled a bit. 'You know,' he said, 'I am used to giving the orders.'

'But we are brothers,' I said. 'We command together.'

'And you, my brother, are very good at saying things in a way that will not anger people.' He brightened. 'But together we finished that other man, did we not?' He pointed at Maxwell who was gazing across the ravine at the monastery.

'We certainly did.'

'But I still say we should have . . .' Shi-shok did not finish the sentence; instead he knifed his throat with his finger.

Now that the last beads of the gold necklace of people had disappeared inside the monastery and the villagers had dispersed the sense of peace that had prevailed here since, perhaps the mountains first cooled and settled, was as deep as the quiet before a snowstorm.

One by one the diamond-shaped kites, as fragile as butterfly wings, took to the sky, swallow-swooping above our heads before the breeze accepted them and carried them high above the village. Blue, mauve, green, yellow.

The girl said: 'Do they fly them right through the winter?'

'Whenever they can,' I said. 'When there isn't a blizzard and when it isn't too cold.' And I told her about the red kites that might soon fly if our mission was successful.

She looked around and said: 'It's a shame.'

'Its more than a shame,' I said. 'It's a bloody tragedy. Do you see what I meant now?'

She nodded. 'Are we doing right?'

'I'm not the one to ask. Ask Vincent Maxwell there. Or Shi-shok. I suppose we are—if we're stopping more bloodshed. If

that's what we are doing.'

'Don't the kids here ever fight?'

'I expect so but I've never seen them.'

'It's incredible.'

'It is, perhaps, the way we were all intended to live.'

'And they would have gone on like this if we hadn't turned up from our rotten civilisation.'

'Perhaps they still will. I'm going through with this because people from our civilisation have persuaded me that I should for the sake of other innocent people. But a part of me hopes that I will fail.'

Maxwell strolled over. 'You're going to be disappointed,' he said, 'because we're going to succeed.'

'You hope.' I turned to the girl. 'Did you know Vincent here was a gun-runner on the quiet?'

Maxwell said: 'I thought you were going to keep quiet about that.'

'I didn't say so. But in any case you're very definite about the justification of what you're doing so why be so shy about it?'

'Is that true?' she asked.

'It's true that I sell arms. I object to the phrase gun-runner.'

I left them to it for a few moments and wandered round the poor clean cottages on this little platform of peace high above the squalor of the rest of the world. Everything was clean—the people, their homes, the crystalline crusts of mountain, the gorge washed by the river, the fading sunshine and the snow-smelling wind that was now panicking the kites.

Behind the cottages the children and their fathers were pulling down the kites. I walked beside a middle-aged man with a strong kind face. As we neared the kites he stopped me and pointed to the ground. I had been about to tread on a hardy old beetle determined to try and live through the winter. He smiled and carried the beetle to the shelter of a rock.

* * *

A monk with a walnut face greeted us at the entrance to the monastery. Very important people were visiting the Abbot, he said. Could we perhaps wait in one of the chambers?

As we walked through the stone-flagged caves of the monastery I caught a glimpse of Lotus Born, Glancing Eye. All Good and Glorious Gentle One.

We sat down in a small ante-chamber and a monk served us with cups of butter tea.

'I've never drunk it,' said the girl.

'You'll like it,' I said.

She sipped from her cup and grimaced.

'By the way,' I said 'they've got just the thing here if you fall sick. It's their own medicine. It's made of tsampa, yak butter, holy spittle and a holy man's urine.'

She closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

'If I know anything about these occasions,' I said, 'we're in for a long wait.'

More cups of butter tea arrived. Nearby we could hear monks intoning their endless prayers. The flagstones were cold and the air cool.

Anne Mortimer started to fiddle with her camera. 'For God's sake stop acting like a tourist,' I said. 'We're here to make war not to take transparencies to show the folks back home.'

'If you think I'm going to miss taking a picture of the Abbot you're crazy.'

'Miss Mortimer,' I said, 'I must warn you that if you do anything that in any way endangers the success of this mission then I'll have you bound hand and foot and put in the care of the Khampas.'

'I'd like that,' she said.

'I'm not joking. And that goes for you, Maxwell. Any premature negotiations about guns and ammunition and I'll hand you over to Shi-shok. And you know his views about you.'

'They've got to have guns,' Maxwell said. Now at last he

had abandoned all attempts to be debonair. The smock was too big for him and the tiny scars on his face were exaggerated by the brown stain. The girl looked like a chimney sweep except that her face was brown instead of black.

'Mention guns and you'll ruin the whole thing,' I said. 'Mention the fact that the Khampas are going to train them and we might as well get the next mule back to Tezpur. This is going to be a long and delicate process.'

The girl said: 'I don't see how anyone is going to train these people to fight.'

More butter tea arrived.

Maxwell said: 'They'll be trained just as men are trained in any guerilla war. They'll be taken up into the mountains where the Chinese can't find them. It's only the people in this particular village who have never known any crime or trouble. I'll grant you that they're pretty peaceful in the surrounding villages but it won't take long to teach them how to handle a rifle or a grenade. And they'll all do anything the Abbot says. So really we've only got one man to convince.'

'And he's going to take some convincing,' I said.

The band started up again in another chamber, like an orchestra minus the key instruments which provide the melody. I wandered down the passage and gazed out across the ravine. The procession was returning to the village across the bridge, each man gazing stolidly ahead as if the weight of the gold millinery would break his neck if he tilted his head.

At the other side of the ravine I saw a man crouching beside the bridge. When he saw the procession approaching he stood up and strolled away with clumsy steps. He looked very much like Shi-shok.

The procession was now stretched across the gorge like a golden snake. One raking burst of machine gun fire would be sufficient to chop them all down. They reached the other side and disappeared among the huts.

A monk came up to me and said: 'The Abbot will see you now.'

He was sitting on an old wooden chair, polished by use, as if it were a throne. Around him in the candle-lit chamber stood a score of shaven-headed monks in dark red sackcloth. The flames of the candles wavered in an imperceptible breeze and the air smelled old and buttery.

The monks gently restrained Maxwell and myself and led the girl to the space in front of the Abbot. The bright eyes in the wise baby's face flickered with interest. The girl smiled uncertainly and looked back at us. The monks smiled placidly.

The Abbot stood up, beckoned one of them, and walked over to the girl. The monk handed him a white muslin scarf which he placed around the girl's neck. She bowed her head and thanked him in English. He clapped his hands and the rest of the monks drifted away.

'Gee,' she said, 'what was all that about? Whatever it was could you thank him.'

'You're honoured,' I said. 'It's customary to present a kata —a scarf—to an important visitor. The Abbot obviously thinks you're more important than Maxwell here. I should have given you a kata to give to the Abbot.' I turned to the Abbot and said in Tibetan: 'She wishes to say that she is deeply honoured but she has no way of returning the honour.'

The Abbot nodded and clapped his hands again. Three monks came in with chairs for us and then went back to their music and their prayers.

'And now,' said the Abbot, 'please tell me why you have honoured me with another visit.' I was sure he knew perfectly well why we were there.

'First of all I ask that you consider what we have to say very carefully. The fate of thousands of people—maybe millions—depends on your decision. What I have to ask is against all your

principles. At first I believe that you will reject my request. I ask you not to be too hasty in your decision.'

'You have not brought the bandit with you?'

'I have not brought him to the monastery,' I said, trying to evade the complete truth.

'But he is here in the village?'

'He is across the gorge.'

The Abbot said: 'I would not have allowed him into the monastery. He is a man who cannot control his temper. That is supposed to be a failing of the people in the lands where you come from. He is also a bandit and a murderer.'

'Do you not believe that there is some good in all of us?'

'Perhaps.' The Abbot did not sound convinced. 'Now tell me the purpose of your visit. And tell me why you have brought this man and this woman with you.'

'When I was last here,' I said, 'I think we both knew that the Chinese intended to invade India. This they have done. Now they have withdrawn again. I think there is little doubt that one day they will attempt to occupy India and perhaps the lands beyond.'

'It was written that one day a great power from the north would move south and occupy this and other lands.'

'Does that not bother you? Does it make you happy to see Chinese soldiers in your land.'

The Abbot sent for more butter tea. 'It does not bother me. We know and care nothing of the loyalties and emotions which you bring with you. My people will be reborn into other lives more important than this. Why should we care if the Gya-mi are among us in this life?'

'Because they are bringing suffering to your people. Not in this village or those around. But in the north they have made your people into slaves.'

'And if I told my people here to rise against them they would make us slaves and bring suffering. I know that you have come here to try and lead me in the ways of violence. But there is

no sense in it. Although we are not bothered by suffering—a woman knows that if her child dies it will be reborn—we do not wish to encourage it.'

'You would not wish to help prevent the spread of such suffering?'

The Abbot said: 'These things do not concern me. Perhaps if other people in the world stopped fighting to prevent suffering then there would be no suffering.'

Maxwell said: 'How's it going, Sangster?'

'Badly for you,' I said. 'It looks like no sale.'

'Are you really doing your damndest?'

'Yes,' I said. 'But not for you. I've got one or two more cards to play. But every time I look at you, Maxwell, I hope that the Abbot has a stronger hand.'

The Abbot said: 'Perhaps we should stop talking for a while. I think the woman with you would like to see the monastery.'

I translated and Anne Mortimer gave one of those defenceless, little-girl smiles which professional women employ to get their way with male employers.

In the main chamber of the monastery a dozen monks were squatting on cushions praying aloud. Their expressions were placid and patient, hairless studies in unquestioning acceptance of their doctrines; all doubt and curiosity numbed by ceaseless prayer.

On an altar at the far end of the chamber stood the wooden Gods, fifteen foot tall, faces carved with sardonic and satisfied smiles, one with an obscene balloon of a belly. Butter lamps burned at their feet.

The Abbot showed us the other chambers, cool, high-arched, furnished with plain wood chairs and tables and hung with parchments, the atmosphere as dead as the air in a tomb.

'It's a bit creepy, isn't it?' Anne Mortimer said.

'One thing's for sure,' Maxwell said. 'It will make a wonderful fortress if the bridge is cut.'

'One shell, maybe two, would finish it,' I said.

At the back of the monastery we looked at the ice-wall. You couldn't tell its thickness. Bubbles of air were imprisoned inside it and high above we could see the reflection of the gold roof-tops.

'And now I think we should talk again,' said the Abbot. He took the girl's arm. Perhaps even in a Tibetan monastery female tactics could be effective.

We talked for an hour mustering all the irrelevance, evasiveness and concentration on side-issues of truce negotiators bargaining while their countrymen die. At the end of the hour we had achieved nothing; or rather I had achieved nothing because there was nothing for the Abbot to gain.

Then we adjourned to his private chamber to eat. 'I enjoy your company,' he said. 'It is good that we can talk like this without becoming angry with one another. It is very rare that we who live in these parts become angry but I have heard that it is a common failing in your land. Tell me, why did you bring this girl here? The journey must have been very hard for her.'

'Because I couldn't stop her,' I said.

He nodded. 'She looks as if she has determination.'

I wondered what the Tibetan for 'bloody-minded' was.

Maxwell said: 'So we've achieved nothing.'

'Everything takes time here,' I said. 'It matters little to these people whether a decision is made today or next week. We'll talk again tomorrow. In a minute I'm going across the gorge to see Shi-shok. You and the girl can stay here.'

'I'll come with you,' Maxwell said. 'I don't fancy being left here.'

'I don't mind,' Anne Mortimer said. 'I've taken a fancy to the Abbot.'

I told the Abbot that the girl would like to stay here while we crossed the gorge.

'To see your bandit friend?'

'I'm afraid so. But he did guard us on our way up here?'

'Very well. The girl will be quite safe here.'

'Before I go,' I said, 'I have some letters for you from India. One in particular may influence your thinking. I beg you to read them carefully.'

I gave him the letters inside a sealed envelope.

'I think perhaps I can guess the identity of the author of one of these,' he said.

'I think perhaps you can,' I said. And to the girl I said: 'Just leave your camera in your bag and don't annoy anyone.'

The Abbot smiled at her and poured some more butter tea. As we left he was ripping open the envelope containing the letters which Maxwell hoped would persuade the Abbot to preach war instead of peace.

According to Maxwell the letter from the Dalai Lama pleaded with the Abbot to call on his people to resist the Chinese and recalled the rebellion of 1956. I doubted whether the Dalai Lama would make such a plea and suspected that the letter was a forgery. Maxwell was capable of perpetrating almost any act of dishonesty.

The sun which had not even melted the scattering of snow on the ground was fading and the breeze funnelling its way along the gorge was laced with ice. Even the gold rooftops of the monastery had the sombre glow of a winter sunset about them.

We crossed the bridge carefully and I imagined the snouting muzzle of a machine-gun following us from a sniper's nest; and an impatient finger stroking the trigger. Far below we could see the pygmy figures of men kneeling beside the spouting water.

'What are they doing?' Maxwell asked. He stopped on the gently swaying bridge and gazed down at the river.

'I think you know,' I said.

'Know? Why the hell should I be asking if I know?'

'I knew there was something missing in your plan—something you hadn't bothered to mention. I hadn't realised what it was until now.'

'I don't know what the hell you're talking about.'

'How did you expect these people to pay you for the guns?'

'With money, I guess.'

'Their money's no damn good to you and you know it. Since when did Wall Street have any dealings in Tibetan money?'

The wind sighed—a lament at values which the interlopers had brought to simple people.

'Money's money—you can always get a price for it.'

'You can get an even better price for gold,' I said.

'Okay,' he said. 'You win. I want payment in gold. What's wrong with that? It isn't valuable to these people. I doubt if they even realise that it's valuable to us. But I tell you this, Sangster—in a few years' time there's going to be a world shortage of gold. Paper money will become worth less and less and then everyone will start buying gold. If we've got some of this salted away we'll be millionaires. Look at it.' He pointed at the monastery roofs. 'And think of all that gear those priests were wearing this morning. It's as if someone has stumbled on the secret of alchemy and doesn't realise what they've found.' He pointed down at the bed of the ravine. 'I guess that's what they're doing down there now—panning for gold like the old prospectors.'

'You know bloody well that's what they're doing. You know, Maxwell, the more I get to know you the less I like you. I can imagine you slaughtering seals for their pelts, hooking kids on heroin—and knocking the gold teeth out of corpses. God knows how the CIA ever came to pick on you.'

Maxwell said: 'Because they knew what they were doing. Every agent has to be a bit of a snide otherwise he wouldn't cotton on to what the other side was up to. Every policeman has to be a bit of a villain to beat the crooks at their own game.'

We continued on our way across the bridge as dusk doused

and froze the day. In the village the huts glowed with the fragile light of butter lamps. A mastiff dog trotted past on its way to a master who believed that he might be the re-incarnation of a father or brother.

'Where are we going?' Maxwell asked.

'Up the mountain a bit. Shi-shok and a few of his men are hiding out up there.'

'You know, Sangster, you're a fool with all your holy theories about life up here. Sure they're good, decent people. Sure they've had no crime and no violence since time began. But now they're going to have a little—for the sake of the rest of the world.'

'And for the sake of your bank balance.'

'I'm not a saint. Nor are you if the truth be known. You're just up here escaping your responsibilities. Trying to blow your Goddamn guilt away with a little fresh mountain air. Now what the hell difference does it make if they pay me in gold? Gold is only valuable to us because someone decided to make it the basis of our monetary system. They don't give a damn about it here. It's just a pretty yellow metal which they can get hold of easier than they can tin or iron. They find it in the rivers and they dig it out of the rock.'

'You were reckoning on the gold before you even set out from New Delhi, weren't you?'

'Sure I was. Once again I knew it would upset your phoney sensibilities if I mentioned it before.'

'You have a spectacular gift for reticence,' I said. 'Incidentally, how do you hope to get the gold away from here?'

'Through the arms route. The Indians will bring the arms as far as they can. Then the Khampas will cross the border with them on mules. When the guns have been distributed the boxes will be filled up with gold and taken back.'

Down in the village a dog barked and the sound cannoned around the mountains.

'The Abbot would be interested in all this.'

'But you aren't going to tell him. Remember your friend,

Kungsangtse? I'm surprised I keep having to remind you.'

'You're getting a little too sure of yourself,' I said. 'I can accomplish this mission without you. Remember I've got your gun.' I took it out of my smock and cradled it in my hand. 'I could shoot you now if I wanted to. I'm surprised I keep having to remind you.'

'You've done your share of looting,' Maxwell said; but he didn't sound too sure. 'Look,' he said, 'why don't you think over the question of this gold? We're not hurting anyone. Accept that first. It doesn't cut across any of your Goddamn principles. But it does mean that you and I could be rich for the rest of our lives. You could stay in the mountains if you wanted to. With that gold you could buy anything you wanted for the refugees in NEFA, medicine, books, food. Or you could go back to civilisation and write a book about it all and never worry about money again.'

'Or I could shoot you now and forget about the whole thing. Of the two alternatives I think I prefer the latter.'

'Then who would supply the arms?'

'We'd find someone,' I said.

Nearby a rifle-bolt clicked. I called out Shi-shok's password in Tibetan. The word was Ma—which means war.

Shi-shok and Wangdula were in a tent drinking rakshi, taking snuff and playing dice by the light of a butter lamp.

Shi-shok raised his hand in greeting. 'Hallo, my brother, would you like to join us? Wangdula is winning but as we have no money I am not very worried. He wants to play for my boots but I would rather play for my life.'

I sat down with Maxwell and took a swig of rakshi. 'Are there many Gya-mi in the area?'

Shi-shok said: 'My men saw a few heading towards the village just now. We thought about killing them but I realised that it would not be a good idea just now. But how did you

get on with that silly fat man, the Abbot?'

'Not much better than you,' I said.

'Did you have him with you?' He pointed at Maxwell.

'He was there,' I said.

'That was not a good idea,' Shi-shok said. 'The Abbot would not like his kind.'

Wangdula laughed and said: 'He certainly did not like your kind.'

Shi-shok said: 'And where is the girl?'

'We've left her behind in the monastery.'

Shi-shok thought for a moment and then said: 'Are you sure that is wise?'

'I don't see why not. I can't think of a safer place for her to be.'

'I suppose you are right. It was just a feeling I had thinking about those Gya-mi we saw heading towards the village.'

Fear lurched inside me. 'We must go back.'

'We will come with you,' Shi-shok said.

We ran back to the village, sliding and tripping down the hillside, and walked as quickly as we could across the swaying bridge. But when we arrived at the monastery the girl had gone.

Chapter Twenty

The Abbot's face was impassive but the bright slotted eyes flickered anxiously from one face to another as he told us what had happened.

He said: 'The girl was resting in one of the chambers at the rear of the monastery when the Gya-mi arrived. There were, I think, five soldiers and one officer. They left one soldier guarding the bridge while the officer questioned me. He wanted to know who you were and why you were here. It was very difficult for me and at first I did not tell them the truth. I said I knew nothing about you. But he said that you had been seen crossing the bridge. He asked if they could search the monastery and I refused them permission.'

All the authority seemed to have evaporated from the Abbot; his voice was defensive and apologetic.

'But I presume they did search it,' I said.

The Abbot nodded. 'When I refused permission the officer issued an order to the soldiers. They made menacing gestures with their guns in the direction of my helpers.' He pointed at the monks who were still incongruously murmuring prayers. 'The officer said that if none of you were here there was no reason why he should not search the monastery. He said that if I continued to refuse permission he would be forced to shoot some of my people.' The Abbot gestured helplessly with his fat little hands at the praying monks. 'I did not believe them. I lied again and said there was no one in the monastery. Then

the officer hit me round the face with the back of his hand.'

I noticed that the flesh around one eye was more puffy than usual. I also sensed that the Abbot was agitated by his loss of face in front of the monks. If he were still susceptible to such human frailties as vanity how did he really view the occupation of his land by troops who threatened to make his power illusory? Most of my mind worried about the fate of the girl; but a small portion of it recorded the fact that there was still hope for our mission.

'What happened then?'

'As you know we still have Dob-dobs here—although in name only because they have forgotten how to fight. Two of them were standing over there in the shadows.' He pointed behind the three Gods. 'When the officer hit me one of them tried to throw a knife. But he was much too slow. One of the soldiers fired his gun and killed him. One of the bullets hit the face of Lotus Born.'

I looked at the features of the God and saw that it now had three eyes—one freshly drilled by a bullet.

The Abbot said: 'You see, I had to give them permission to search the monastery.'

I nodded. 'I understand. Did they harm the girl?'

'I do not think so. When they returned from the rear of the monastery two soldiers were holding her arms. She was struggling and shouting but I do not think they hit her. The officer was very calm. He said that if I gave shelter to the rest of you there would be reprisals against the villagers. But if I co-operated then we would be left in the peace which we have enjoyed for centuries.'

Shi-shok said: 'Do you know where they took her?'

'No,' said the Abbot. 'I do not know. But the girl was very brave. She did not cry in the way that most women would have done.'

'She wouldn't,' I said in English. 'She knows she's in a man's world—poor little bitch.'

'I gather they've got the girl,' Maxwell said.

The Abbot said: 'I am very sorry that this has happened. But there was nothing I could do. My people must come first. I did not, after all, ask you to come here. But if there is anything I can do to help . . .'

'You can forget that we've been here again if the Gya-mi ask you,' I said.

The Abbot glanced at his Gods. Their expressions seemed to change in the flickering lights of the butter lamps; now they were cruel and triumphant as if they approved of what had happened to one of the interlopers. The Abbot said: 'I am not happy at having to tell untruths.'

'It's the least you can do,' I said, 'if we are to rescue the girl.'

He sighed. 'Very well. She was very brave.'

Maxwell said: 'What the hell are we going to do? If you had let her go in the Land Rover this wouldn't have happened.'

'If I had let her go she'd be dead by now.' I turned to Shi-shok. 'Have you any idea where they can have taken her?'

'I think so,' he said. 'My men tell me that the Gya-mi have a small camp about two hours march from the village. If we start now we can journey through the night and attack while it's still dark. We have the guns—and a few grenades. We will have the girl back by dawn.'

Maxwell said: 'I can guess what you're both saying. Hasn't it occurred to you that the Chinese will expect us to try and rescue the girl and will be waiting for us?'

'Yes,' I said, 'it's occurred to me. And if you're thinking of chickening out, Maxwell, you can think again.'

'I wasn't,' he said. 'I'm not that much of a coward.'

Shi-shok said: 'I have been thinking. If we pick up my men now and start right away we will probably catch the Gya-mi before they get back to their camp. I know the passes better than they. I think we may be able to ambush them.'

'Okay,' I said, 'let's go. I don't know about the ambush because they'll have the girl with them. We'll play it by ear.'

The Abbot said: 'Such violence is against all my beliefs.' He paused and turned away from the gaze of the Gods. 'But I wish you luck. I would not want any harm to come to the girl.'

Maxwell said: 'Ask him if this has changed his mind about ordering his people to declare war on the Chinese.'

'To hell with your war,' I said.

As we left the chamber the Gods seemed to be sneering at us.

All the time I thought of the bravery and obstinacy of the girl. Of the moments when we had been on the point of shedding our antagonism—until I had rejected her offers of friendship. I saw again her face beside me in the steam when I had woken up from my re-occurring nightmare, and I remembered how natural it had seemed to find her there. I thought about her small bare breasts, but with compassion instead of desire because they had seemed so young and sensitive. I tried to tell myself that it was her own stupidity that had led to her capture, but I couldn't accept the argument. And I prayed to God to look after her.

There were six of us in the main party, two scouts ahead and one behind. I carried my own rifle. Shi-shok and his men were equipped with Lee Enfields. They had also given Maxwell an old rifle. Shi-shok and Wangdula carried grenades hanging from their belts like fruit. Without the mules we moved swiftly over the thin, moonlit snow; climbing, running, ski-ing down hillsides on our rumps.

After an hour we came to a slope that stiffened into a precipice.

Shi-shok said: 'If we can climb around this we are bound to cut off the Gya-mi. They will not dream that we could have got ahead of them. But there is only one way—along a ledge that is hardly wider than the length of a man's foot. I have done it before but I do not know if you, my brother, and this man here will be able to get across. It is very dangerous and

when you are up there the ground is a long way away.'

I told Maxwell what Shi-shok had told me and said: 'What do you think? Can you make it?'

Maxwell's teeth gleamed in the moonlight. 'With all that gold waiting for me I can do anything.'

We inched our way along, bellies and chests pressed hard against the rock, hands instinctively clutching for holds which weren't there. Far below I could see the silver thread of a river. I was breathing like an exhausted racehorse.

I glanced at Maxwell and saw him slip and steady himself. Maxwell had guts—guts and greed, a formidable combination. I felt my foot slip and realised then that in places the ledge was coated with ice.

Maxwell said: 'I don't think I can make it, Sangster. I don't seem to have any strength left.'

'Stay still a minute,' I said. 'And think of all that gold.'

We waited, heels projecting into space. Shi-shok, Wangdula and the others reached the end of the ledge and shouted encouragement.

I said: 'Just think—you'll have enough gold to put South Africa out of business.'

'Okay,' he said, 'I'm coming.'

When we reached the point where the ledge merged once again with the hillside we rested.

Shi-shok said: 'What will you do when we have rescued the girl?'

'Get back to the monastery,' I said. 'By that time the Abbot should have read those papers. We'll make one more bid to persuade him to call on his people to fight. If that fails then we'll head back towards Tezpur before the winter really clamps down.'

'I did not mean that,' Shi-shok said. 'I meant what will you do about the girl? It seems to me that you should take her as your wife.'

Wangdula grinned—I reckoned he would be laughing when

he died. 'She would really lie down for you, that one.'

But there was no longer anything funny about their speculation. 'I just want to find her alive,' I said. 'How are we going to get her away from them?'

Shi-shok said: 'They will be in single file. I think the girl will be in the middle of them. I know of a point where the track they are taking turns sharply. If we wait until the girl is at the turn we can ambush the Gya-mi in front of her and behind her.'

'I don't like the sound of it,' I said.

'Have you any better idea? We should try and get to her before they reach their camp.'

'I have no other ideas. But the shooting will have to be very accurate.'

'You know how to use a gun, my brother. So do my men. There is no other way.'

'I don't know how to use a gun,' I said.

'But you have shot men before.'

'Not men, boys. I aimed for their legs and shot them in the stomach. But I'm sure Maxwell here knows how to handle a rifle.' I repeated the statement to Maxwell in English.

'I guess I can shoot straight,' he said. 'Crooked dealing—straight shooting. Or that's how you look at it, I guess.'

'Time to be going,' I said.

An hour later we reached the track, barely discernible under the powdered snow. It was a perfect site for an ambush—a gulley with boulders on the banks on either side. It turned sharply directly below the boulders. Wangdula, Maxwell, two other Khampas and myself took up a position where we could attack the rearguard of the Chinese; Shi-shok and three more of his men stationed themselves at a point where they could take the vanguard when the girl was hidden round the corner. Shi-shok sent two scouts along the mountainside to watch for the enemy.

But the plan worried me. How could we be sure which was

the girl? The moonlight was bright but not bright enough for us to be sure of recognising the boyish figure of the girl in her Tibetan clothes.

But I needn't have worried on that score because they had still not arrived when dawn began to light the sky.

'Are you sure they've got to come this way?' I asked Shi-shok.

'There is no other way.'

'Then what the hell's keeping them?'

'Perhaps they have made camp for the night. Perhaps they are not as accustomed to the mountains as we are.'

'Oh perhaps the girl's come to some harm.'

'I do not think so,' Shi-shok said. 'They will want to keep her alive.'

'Why should they want to do that? I don't think the Chinese would be too bothered about harming an American citizen.'

'They will want to keep her alive so that she will tell them who you are and what you are doing in Tibet.'

'You mean they'll torture her?'

Shi-shok gazed down the valley. 'The Gya-mi are not kindly people. But do not bother yourself, my brother, we shall rescue her.'

Torture had not occurred to me; and she was the sort who would needlessly endure pain; needlessly because these days the expert interrogator always won in the end.

The sky was brooding grey and full of snow. This time, at this height, the snow would stay; deepening each day until rocks and crags were buried in white fields and folds, peaceful and treacherous. My hands on my rifle were stiff with the cold.

'This is not good,' Shi-shok said. 'We will shoot badly with frozen fingers. We must rub them until the blood flows again.' He massaged his hands. 'You, my brother, need not shoot if you do not wish to—I have a feeling that you have had enough of killing. There are enough of us to kill all the Gya-mi without you pulling the trigger.'

His sensitivity, I thought, had never quite succumbed to brutality. 'If they have harmed the girl,' I said, 'then I want to shoot.'

Shi-shok said: 'Perhaps it would be better if you held your fire. If any of our bullets do not completely kill the Gya-mi then you can finish the job.'

'All right,' I said. 'If you wish.'

We waited feeling the cold numb our bodies like an anaesthetic.

Maxwell who was sitting beside me, his head almost hidden in his fur-lined hood, clicked back the bolt of his Lee Enfield and inspected the mechanism.

'What are you doing?' I said.

'Nothing. Just making sure the Goddamn thing works properly.'

'And does it?'

'I sure hope so. If the Chinks manage to turn their automatic rifles on us we're dead ducks.'

High up on the mountainside I noticed a movement. Shi-shok said: 'It is one of my men. He must have news for us.'

The Khampa came loping down the steep slope, more sure-footed than he would have ever been on the level. 'They are about half an hour's march from here,' he said. 'Seven of them. One we think is the girl.'

'Can you tell if she is well?' I asked.

'We cannot tell. One of the figures is on a mule. We think it is she.'

Shi-shok said: 'Is she in the middle?'

The Khampa said: 'The one on the mule is in the middle.'

Shi-shok said: 'It is good. I think our plan will work.' He patted the butt of his rifle affectionately and stuck his dagger in his belt. 'It may be necessary to finish them off this way.'

'Here they come,' Maxwell said.

They were about a mile away, coming straight towards us so that we could not count them; tiny black figures against the

scattered snow. I felt sick at the thought of what they might have done to the girl and this time I felt no compunction about the shooting that was to come.

'Keep down,' Shi-shok said.

You could see the yellow of their faces now; as they walked they looked around as alertly as feeding sparrows. I took first pressure on the trigger, then relaxed again. It would be another ten minutes before the execution.

'Each choose your man,' Shi-shok said.

'I'll take the first of the rearguard,' Maxwell said.

'Suit yourself,' I said; and told the Khampas to pick off the last two.

Maxwell looked very calm lying leaning on one elbow, legs straddled behind him in classic marksman position.

'Remember,' said Shi-shok, 'don't shoot until the girl is round the corner. As soon as she disappears from your sight give the order to open fire.'

I nestled myself comfortably behind the rocks and gazed down the ancient sights. Maxwell was examining the mechanism of his rifle again.

They were about a hundred yards from us and moving quickly; small, lithe and tough. Each carried an automatic rifle. The girl was sitting astride the mule but her head sagged forward as if she were unconscious. I thought I could see a bruise on her cheek. I decided then to shoot with the others—to pump each of my bullets into their bodies.

The first Chinese rounded the corner; then the second and third; then the girl disappeared from my view. 'Fire,' I shouted.

Their faces as the bullets kicked them to one side were surprised, as if they hadn't been time for the terror to register. But only two of the last three fell screaming in the snow. The first—Maxwell's target—ducked round the corner.

Maxwell stared stupidly at his rifle. 'It didn't fire,' he said. 'The bastard didn't fire.'

I guessed then why he had been examining the rifle so closely.

It must have been one of the old, unserviced rifles which had been sent to the rebels from Lhasa—one of the guns that Maxwell himself had sent to Lhasa from New Delhi.

Shi-shok said: 'We got ours. Did you?' He was grinning fiercely holding his smoking rifle in one hand: he had enjoyed the shooting.

'No,' I said. 'Get down. We missed one. He's round the corner with the girl.'

One of the other Chinese clawed feebly in the snow for his rifle. I put a bullet through his head. After the echoes had faded it was very quiet. I called out to the girl: 'Are you all right?'

'Yes,' she shouted. 'He hasn't got . . .' Her voice was cut off as if a hand had been clamped around her face.

'I think she was trying to tell us he hadn't got his gun,' I said.

Maxwell said: 'I guess he's going to use her as a shield. What the hell are we going to do?'

'That rifle,' I said. 'Was it one of yours?'

He nodded. 'I guess so.'

Shi-shok whispered: 'You stay here. I will get him.' He patted the dagger in his belt and began to move towards the towering rock shielding the soldier and the girl from us.

The rest of the Chinese were dead, all lying on their backs in the thin snow scattered with petals of blood. Shi-shok began to climb the rock as easily as if it were a ladder. I heard a noise from behind the rock and gazed along the barrel of my rifle; but it was only the mule on which the girl had been riding. It looked very docile and gentle, avoiding the sprawled bodies, gazing at us speculatively.

Shi-shok was nearing the top of the rock. He held the knife between his teeth. Then we heard the soldier calling to us in broken Tibetan.

'What's he saying?' Maxwell asked.

'What we thought he'd say. He's got the girl and if we attack him he'll kill her.'

To prove his point the soldier emerged from behind the rock

pushing the girl in front of him. Her hands were tied behind her back. But the soldier had got a gun—a long-barrelled pistol, and the barrel was stuck in the girl's back.

'What do you want?' I shouted.

'Bring the mule. I am leaving with the woman. If anyone attempts to follow me then she dies.' He dug the barrel of the gun viciously into her back. It was the last voluntary action he made. Shi-shok's dagger hit him in the back between shoulder-blade and spine and buried itself up to the hilt. The soldier dropped his gun, spun round and stared at Shi-shok; he put his hand behind his back and tried to reach the knife; then he pitched forward on his face.

I ran to the girl and cradled her in my arms. One of her eyes was closed, there was dried blood beneath her nostrils and bruises all over her face and one of her teeth was broken. She looked up at me with puzzled grey eyes and frowned as a baby frowns when it first catches sight of its own hands.

'It's all over,' I said. 'I'll look after you now.'

She nodded and tried to smile and I thought: We'll have to get that tooth fixed when we get back.

Shi-shok leaped down from the rock, pulled the knife out of the soldier's back, wiped it and cut the bonds holding the girl.

'She is a brave one,' he said.

The girl whispered: 'What did he say, Alex?'

'He said you're brave.'

'Do you think I am?'

I nodded. 'Very brave.'

She tried another smile but it didn't really work out. I noticed that it was beginning to snow.

The snow was falling fast, coming in from the north, slanting over the peaks where it never melted and driving into the hill-side where we had ambushed the Chinese. It was soon an inch

deep underfoot.

We bathed the girl's face with melted snow, and two of the Khampas took off their smocks and wrapped them around her shivering body. Then they stripped the anoraks and hoods off two of the dead Chinese and put them on.

Shi-shok examined the Chinese rifles and discarded them reluctantly. 'They are no good without the ammunition,' he said. 'But now we must get back to Kushlanga before the snow becomes too deep.'

The girl said: 'There are some more Chinese back there. They were left behind because they thought you'd come along the same track.'

'What happened back there?' I said gently. 'Why did they take so long in getting here?'

'They were waiting for you I guess. They occupied their time asking me what we were doing up here and who you were. That's how my face got this way. One of them kept hitting me with a webbing belt.'

Maxwell said: 'Did you tell them anything?'

'No,' she said, 'I didn't tell them anything.'

I turned on Maxwell. 'Don't worry—you'll sell your guns. Like the one you've got there. I wonder what your profit on that was.'

'It's a hell of a long time since we sold these. You can't blame me if it hasn't been looked after.'

'I can blame you,' I said.

Shi-shok said: 'I have changed my mind about this woman. She is very brave. She will be good for you. Did they hurt her in any other way?'

I translated. The girl shook her head. 'I guess I know what he means. No, there was nothing like that. I reckon they had some other tricks waiting for me up at the main camp.'

'Are you fit to travel?'

She tried another smile. 'I guess I'll just have to be.'

The mule had no desire to be left behind and we caught it

easily. She climbed on, wincing with pain, and I strapped her on side-saddle. 'There you are,' I said. 'That's the way the Queen rides.'

'On a mule?'

'You look pretty regal,' I said.

We moved slowly, heads turned to one side to avoid the snow as if we were marching past a saluting base. The skyline of peaks blurred and disappeared as the snow thickened. Once the mule stumbled and fell to its knees, but it stood up again and moved on testing the ground with its hoofs like a cat walking across a snow-covered lawn. It was a good mule, this one.

At one stage we passed in single file along the brink of a precipice. Not very far down the snow ended; and through the veil of flakes we could see the green and brown forest a mile or more below us. Which meant that when we left Kushlanga there was still a chance that winter would not yet have settled on the lower levels in NEFA.

But first we had to get past the Chinese soldiers ahead of us.

The snow faltered and thinned and Anne Mortimer pointed to a cluster of rocks on a flat stretch of land ahead of us. 'That's where they took me,' she said. 'Behind those rocks.'

I told Shi-shok. 'They're not there now,' he said. 'My scouts would have seen them.'

Maxwell raised his rifle and menaced the rocks.

'Why don't you get a catapult,' I said. 'It would be just as lethal.'

'It was only the firing pin,' he said. 'It was jammed.'

The girl said: 'Alex, will it be possible to rest for a little while? I don't feel so good.'

Her bruised face was drawn with weariness beneath the brown stain. And, although she was tied to the mule, she kept slumping sideways and clutching at its neck.

'It's impossible,' Maxwell said. 'We've got to get back to Kushlanga before the Chinese bring in reinforcements.'

'You mean we've got to get back to all that gold,' I said.

I told Shi-shok that the girl needed a rest. Wangdula grinned: the harder the going became the more he seemed to grin. 'I know where we can rest,' he said. 'If the Gya-mi have not already found it. But I doubt whether they have. It is a cave near a stream and it is well hidden because it is a Holy place. There are one hundred and eight water spouts in the stream and prayers issue from each of them.' He saw Shi-shok frowning at him and added hastily, 'Or so the Holy people believe.'

'All right, Wangdula,' I said. 'Take us there. Is it far?'

'Not far. It is where the local lama goes to meditate. He stays there for days and eats only nettle spinach. People around here do not go in the cave because it is a Holy place. I think perhaps they are a little afraid.' He laughed but without his usual heartiness.

The cave was hidden by a boulder; when we rolled away the boulder it became a black mouth wide-open on the white mountainside. Shi-shok strode in and Wangdula followed more cautiously. Shi-shok posted two guards and a look-out high above us. 'We will stay here three hours,' he said. 'Then we must move on to Kushlanga.'

It was warmer in the cave but Anne Mortimer was still shivering. Outside the snow thickened again curtaining the entrance, imparting a false air of tranquillity outside and security inside. Anne Mortimer and I sat down at one side of the cave and the remaining Khampas sat near the entrance with the mule. Maxwell wandered away into the dim caverns behind us.

The girl said: 'I'm so cold.'

'There's not much we can do about it. We haven't any blankets and we can't light a fire because the smoke would give us away.'

'You could lie closer to me,' she said.

I looked speculatively at Shi-shok and Wangdula. 'We could move inside the cave a bit.'

'Alexander Sangster, we are heaven knows how many feet up in the Himalayas in a cave being hunted by Chinese soldiers. It isn't the time or the place for false modesty.' She frowned. 'Unless of course you don't want to lie beside me.'

I lay beside her with my arms around her body. After a while the shivering stopped. She looked at me with the trust and contentment of a little girl being visited by her parents in hospital. Her eyes had closed completely and the bruises on her face were the colour and size of plums.

'Don't look at my broken tooth,' she said.

'We'll get it fixed when we get back.'

But back to where? To London or New York? Away from the mountains, their purity and arrogance, away from the mountain people, bewildered at the sudden onset of suffering? Back to the seedy values from which I had fled?

She said: 'You're not a great one at hiding your feelings.'

'You don't know what I was thinking.'

'I guess I do because I can understand it. You don't want to leave all this, do you?'

I touched her swollen lips with mine and felt their pain-filled response, as slight as the beat of a pulse. And I was frightened at the flow of compassion and tenderness inside me.

'I don't know what I want,' I said.

She attempted another smile and a globule of blood appeared on her swollen lip. 'I don't reckon either of us guessed it would end up like this. I loathed the sight of you when I first saw you. Conceited, obstinate, callous. You stood for everything I detested.'

'And you stood for everything I detested,' I said.

'You don't have to tell me. No one could have accused you of disguising your feelings. You're not even succeeding now. But don't worry—you don't have to leave your mountains.'

'You mean you would like to stay here?'

She shook her head. 'You wouldn't be able to stand that, either.'

'You make me sound pretty unbearable.'

'You are,' she said.

Behind us, silhouetted against the luminous screen of snow, the Khampas were playing dice and taking snuff. It sounded from his hilarity as if Wangdula were winning—but he would have been laughing if he had been losing.

'Do you want to sleep a while?' I asked. 'I think you should.'

'I want to sleep for ever.' She touched my forehead and cheeks. 'Alexander Sangster,' she said; and pondered on the name as if it were the first time she had heard it. Then she said: 'Do you know you are the first one? The only one.'

'That's how it seems now.'

'It's not how it seems. It's how it is and always will be.'

The freckles were distended over the bruises and the chip off her tooth made her look younger than ever.

'I'm too old for you,' I said.

The corner of her eyes smiled. 'You're not too old. You don't even believe that yourself. You're just dodging and it isn't characteristic.'

Shi-shok left the dice-players and stood over us. 'I am glad to see that you are caring for this woman. She will be very good for you.'

I looked up at him. 'Would it trouble you, Shi-shok, if you did not see me in these parts any more?'

'Am I to understand that if you go with this girl then you would not return to the mountains?'

'Something like that.'

'I do not believe it. She will let you return from time to time. But in any case the mountains are not your true home, my brother. I wish they were. But always I have known that one day you would leave us. Just the same you have been the only rong-pa I have ever known who could live as we do.'

'Shi-shok,' I said, 'you don't really mean these things. You

are just saying them because you have become sentimental because this girl is brave and you think I should stay with her. Often you have talked of us growing old together—the old man of the mountains and the old man of the plains.'

'Perhaps I did. But I knew deep down here'—he pointed at his heart with his dagger—'that one day you would leave us. I never knew that it would be because of a woman. At first I thought that you did not make children with this one because you did not find her attractive—even now I do not find her so in that way. Then I realised that you did not lie with her because of this strange hatred between you—the hatred which is close to love. I felt sorry for you then because I did not think she was the right woman for you. But I was wrong—she is the woman for you.'

'For Pete's sake,' she said, 'what's he on about?'

'He says you are the right woman for me.'

'Tell him I still think he's pretty dishy. Does that make you jealous?'

'Not as jealous as Mercier used to make me.'

'Honest?'

'Looking back at it—yes. I didn't realise it at the time.'

'Nuts,' she said. 'You weren't jealous then and you aren't now.'

Shi-shok returned to the dice players and inhaled snuff with relish. I lit a cheroot. Despite the noise inside the cave the falling snow made it seem quiet outside.

Anne Mortimer said: 'Do you think we'll make it, Alex? Back to Kushlanga and then back to Tezpur?'

'We'll make it,' I said. 'It's easier going back and with a bit of luck the snow won't yet have settled lower down.'

'And do you think you'll be able to persuade the Abbot to make these people rise up against the Chinese?'

'I reckon so. I've discovered one thing about him which I didn't know before—although he's not very concerned about mortal life, he's very concerned about mortal power. And I'm

pretty sure he doesn't like the idea of losing it to the Chinese.'

'They'll suffer terribly, won't they?'

'They'll suffer,' I said. 'But no more or less than any people rebelling against a tyranny. It won't happen immediately. The young men will go off a few at a time into the mountains. There will be plenty of Khampas around who can take them to parts of the mountains which the Chinese can never reach. If they don't rise up then there will be even more suffering.'

'You sound as if you're reciting it.' She curled up with her head against my chest. 'Alex?'

'Yes?'

'Do you love me?'

'Yes,' I said, 'I love you.'

'More than . . .'

'More than what?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'More than the mountains?'

'Yes,' she said. 'But it was a stupid question.'

And because it was a stupid question I didn't answer it. When she was asleep I gently disengaged myself and kissed her brow. She tried to smile but the pain registered in her sleep and she frowned instead. I walked away in the direction that Maxwell had taken.

The bones and black feathers of a dead bird lay on the ground, a crow by the size of it. Beside it stood an eating bowl containing a dark dry sediment which might once have been nettle spinach. In one corner stood a wooden bed, a yak-skin beaker, a string of yellow beads and a couple of parchment scrolls as dark as vinegar.

Opposite the bed in the other corner stood a wooden altar; on top of it squatted a Buddha—hands crossed above his acorn navel, fat cheeks creased with happiness. A butter lamp burned in front of him throwing leaping shadows on the walls of the

cave as a breeze fluttered the flame.

Maxwell said: 'I lit it. The butter was as hard as wax but it seems to burn well enough. What the hell went on in here?'

'A lama used to come here to meditate. But he doesn't seem to have been around for some time.'

'I wonder what scared him off.'

'The Chinese maybe. Or the Abominable Snowman perhaps—he's supposed to inhabit these parts.'

'Jesus,' Maxwell said. 'That's all we need.'

'They say they found its tracks here once.'

'I wonder whose side he's on—the Chinks or ours.' He took the butter lamp and examined the walls of the caves.

'Looking for gold seams?'

'Maybe. You never know your luck.' His face looked crafty in the wavering light. 'You won't be after a cut when we get back, will you Sangster?'

'I've only got one job left to do when we get back—if we get back.'

'Yeah? What's that?'

'To make sure these people don't get *your* guns.'

'Not a chance, Sangster. If you figure I've come all this way to go back without an order and a bill of sale then you're crazy. There's nothing wrong with the guns I supply anyway.'

'What about that one?' I pointed at the old rifle which he was holding.

'It was faulty. It was nothing to do with me. It hadn't been looked after.'

'Come off it,' I said. 'You bought them in quantity and sold them without checking them. You took the officials in Lhasa for a ride and they took the poor bloody rebels for a ride. No, Maxwell, if we get back I'll make damn sure that your guns don't reach these people.'

He had put down the butter lamp and was holding the rifle with both hands, thumb straying towards the safety catch. He swallowed once and stared at me without emotion or hatred

like any good businessman weighing up a business risk: in this case whether or not to kill me.

'I shouldn't bother,' I said. 'The rifle doesn't work anyway.'

He smiled slightly. 'It does now. I've done some running repairs on it.'

'I wouldn't bank on it. You're going to look pretty stupid if nothing happens. Then I'll kill you Maxwell—and no one here will give a damn.'

He shrugged, the business calculations finished. 'I wouldn't shoot you, Sangster. You seem to forget I need you up here.'

'And afterwards?'

'Afterwards we'll just have to see.'

I relaxed and withdrew my hand from inside my smock where I had been holding the revolver with its barrel aimed at Maxwell's heart.

He picked up the butter lamp again and continued his exploration of the walls. We were a couple of hundred yards inside the mountain and we could no longer hear the voices of the Khampas playing dice.

Maxwell was about five yards ahead of me when he stopped and said: 'Jesus, Sangster, come and take a look at this.'

On another altar stood a wooden God, its face carved with brooding lines of hatred.

Maxwell said: 'And you expect me to go back empty-handed?'

'What are you talking about?'

'That's what I'm talking about.'

I looked at the altar and saw the gold. A bowl, a chalice and a couple of plates. Coated with dust but glowing with the deep soft sheen that the alchemists had sought but never found.

'What goes on here?' Maxwell said.

'I'm not sure. But this God has been discarded. A long time before the other God back there I should think. I think we've stumbled on some by-way of Buddhism. Maybe the lama who came to meditate never came this far. Or maybe he did—and

that's why he never returned.'

'Anyway,' Maxwell said, 'some of this is for me.' He stepped towards the altar and picked up the chalice. 'Just think of the gold that there must be around here. And they use it like it was iron or something.' He brushed the dust away. 'Look at it. How many dollars do you reckon that's worth?'

'I'd put it down if I were you.'

'Sure, sure, sure.' His voice was thick with greed. 'Like I'd throw away the Crown jewels if I found them.'

'Put it down, Maxwell.' I took the gun out of my smock. 'Let's go back to the entrance of the cave.'

He looked at me with incredulity. 'You are crazy, aren't you? What's the point of leaving it here?'

'Because it's not yours.'

'So you think we should leave it for the Chinks?'

'Let them do the looting.'

'You should have been a Bible-thumper.'

I didn't bother to tell Maxwell that he had been about to steal from his own God—Mara the God of War.

One moment she was asleep, the next she was staring at me with her grey inquisitive eyes.

'What time is it?' she said.

'Time to be going.'

She stretched and winced. 'I seem to have stiffened up while I've been asleep.'

'It's only about another hour's ride. We'll be snowed up if we don't push off now.'

'Okay,' she said, 'give me a minute.' She put her hand to her face and winced again as she touched the bruises.

The snow piling up at the entrance to the cave was about nine inches deep.

Shi-shok came over and said: 'If we do not go soon we shall lose the track.'

I helped the girl to her feet and on to the mule. For a moment it seemed as if we could part the white curtain and walk out into the sunshine; but the illusion was short-lived. The driving snow enveloped us with deadly friendliness, covering our clothes and settling on our faces.

'We must keep together,' Shi-shok said. 'If one of us strays the rest of us will never find him again.'

I tried to talk to the girl but the snow-flakes filled my mouth. We cowered and cringed and moved forward as slowly and clumsily as manacled prisoners.

After an hour the falling snow thinned and below us, about two miles away, we saw Kushlanga, tranquil and cosy and vulnerable. And across the black wound of the ravine the monastery—the gold of its roofs hidden by snow.

I squeezed the girl's arm and said: 'We're nearly there.'

She jerked upright and said: 'Thank God.' She looked at me and smiled with her eyes. 'Scott of the Antarctic,' she said. The mule sensing that the journey was nearly over hastened its footsteps.

Half an hour later the snow had almost stopped and the flakes chased each other like courting butterflies. The sky gleamed metallic blue and the afternoon sun shone silver, then gold; a tiny mushroom of smoke blossomed from the village and straightened into a stem of bonfire smoke; across the ravine glittering leaves began to appear on the monastery roofs as the monks brushed away the snow from the gold tiles on the roof of the world.

Maxwell was staring in the direction of the monastery, his eyes hypnotised by the gleaming rooftops.

All around us the mountain-tops had reared up after the snow, sharp and white and grand. I could smell the smoke from the burning juniper wood on the polished air. The fatigue evaporated to be replaced by exhilaration, a sudden breathless gratitude to the fates which had led me to this land of wild skylines and blizzards and villages dozing in the sunshine.

Two kites took to the air—one mauve, one yellow—and hovered brightly above the ermine ground. A monk appeared at one end of the bridge and began to brush the snow into the ravine. A couple more kites climbed into the sky.

'What time is it?' Anne Mortimer asked.

'About three,' I said.

'It's beautiful,' she said.

'Yes.'

'I can understand why you never want to leave it.'

I nodded. And because her face looked so bruised and tired I squeezed her arm again; and remembered my emotions when I thought the Chinese might have killed her. I didn't want to leave the mountains and I knew now that I didn't want to lose her. Life, I thought, was all a matter of choosing—right from the moment when you chose your first suit, your first girl, your first job. And if you made the wrong choice life was all a matter of making the best of it.

We began to descend the last stretch of hillside leading to Kushlanga.

Chapter Twenty-One

Shi-shok and the rest of the Khampas came with us into Kushlanga in case there were any more Chinese there. And they were.

It was Wangdula who spotted the first one as we approached the bridge.

'There,' he said. 'In front just disappearing behind that hut. He's a Gya-mi.'

Wangdula said: 'You take cover in this house.' He pointed into a doorway we were just passing. 'I will go and see what that man is doing.'

Shi-shok shook his head as Wangdula slipped away behind the huts. 'I am the one who is supposed to give the orders,' he said.

Maxwell and I helped Anne Mortimer down from the mule and we went into the hut. A man and his wife and two children gazed at us with curiosity which was replaced by apprehension when Shi-shok, two Khampas and the mule came in behind us.

Shi-shok said: 'Do not be alarmed. We have not come to do you any harm. But there are Gya-mi in the village who wish to harm these two people. Look—you can see what they have already done to the girl's face.

The man who was about thirty years old, bow-legged and pig-tailed, examined the girl's face with concern. 'They did this? But why?'

'Because they did not agree with what she was doing,' Shi-shok said.

The woman who was younger than her husband and wore her hair in braids pinned above her head brought some herbal liniment and bathed the girl's face.

Anne Mortimer said: 'Gee, that feels great.'

The two children, a boy and a girl, squatted on the floor sucking their thumbs and gazing at us with continuing astonishment. A mastiff in the corner growled at the mule; but the mule, too exhausted to care any more what happened to it, lay down on its side more like a mastiff than a mule.

Shi-shok prowled around the hut restlessly waiting for his brother to return. 'I should have gone,' he said. 'I should have stopped him when I realised what he was saying.'

'He'll be all right,' I said. 'You have dispersed the rest of your men around the village. They will be covering him.'

The owner of the house looked at our guns apprehensively. 'There is not going to be trouble is there? Not shooting and warfare? We know nothing of that sort of thing here.'

I turned to Maxwell and said: 'This man wants to know if there's going to be trouble. Shall I tell him all about it? And what it's going to be like fighting the Chinese with guns that don't work.'

Maxwell said: 'Tell him what the hell you like. Also ask him if he's got anything to drink.'

But the man with the pig-tail was already pouring chang beer and rakshi and the woman was preparing tsampa.

'You do not answer me,' the man said. 'Is there going to be trouble? We have had no fighting here for hundreds of years. Not even any crimes. Sometimes we have wondered how long it could last. We could not understand why we had been so blessed by the Gods. In a way it was almost as if they had forgotten us.'

Shi-shok tossed back a measure of rakshi followed by a chang beer chaser and wiped his mouth with the back of his

hand. 'Why do you bother about death and suffering?' he said. 'You all believe that you will be born again on the path to Nirvana.'

The man nodded. 'It is wrong to worry about such things. I know that. I suppose it is because we have been happy for so long. I should like to think that my children will continue to enjoy the peace that we have known.'

Anne Mortimer who was sitting on the floor beside the two children said: 'What is he saying?'

'It's better that you don't know,' I said.

Maxwell rattled the bolt of his Lee Enfield. The boy who was about eight stood up and stared at the gun.

Anne Mortimer said: 'I guess he doesn't even know what a gun is.'

'He soon will,' I said; and tried to think of Kungsangtse to reassure myself once again that what we were doing was right.

Shi-shok punched his hand with his fist. 'Where is Wang-dula? If they have hurt him I will kill them all.' He took the knife from his smock and felt the blade.

The man with the pig-tail said: 'You are Khampas, are you not?'

Shi-shok nodded grimly. 'What of it? We have never done you any harm.'

'I did not say you had. I was just curious. We have not seen robbers before.'

'Then it's time you did. You have known peace for too long. If it were not for people like you the Gya-mi would not have overrun our land.'

The man looked puzzled. 'Does it matter if they have?'

Shi-shok hurled his knife at the floor and the mastiff retreated into the gloom. The woman pulled the knife out of the ground and handed it back to Shi-shok. Shi-shok said: 'It is impossible to argue with people like you. You are as foolish as the silly fat old man over there.' He gestured towards the monastery.

The house-owner said: 'The Abbot is very wise.'

Shi-shok said: 'Where are the young men of the village? The men who climb down the sides of the ravine to get honey. The sportsmen who throw boulders and jump great heights and run as swiftly as the gazelles that live in the valleys? Do not tell me they do not exist because I have seen them.'

The houseowner's puzzlement increased. 'I do not wish to tell you that they don't exist. They have been down in the lands where the river runs at the bottom of the gorge getting fuel for the winter. They will be back today or perhaps tomorrow.'

'They will make good fighters.'

'There is no reason for them to fight.'

'But they would fight well if they had to?'

'If they had to.' The houseowner looked unhappy. 'But I see no reason why they should have to.'

Shi-shok turned to me as if I had been doubting the physical prowess of the villagers. 'You see,' he said, 'they will make fine fighters when we get them up in the hills in the spring when the snows are melting and the rest of my men have arrived.'

'I have never doubted their abilities or their courage,' I said.

Shi-shok ruffled the boy's hair. 'Do you like to fly kites?' he asked.

The boy nodded shyly.

'And have you a red kite?'

The boy's mother said: 'Everyone has a red kite. It is a custom. But no one ever flies them.'

'Then get yours out and dust it,' said Shi-shok with relish.

But the boy didn't fetch the red kite. A rifle shot cracked out and we all moved away from the door. All except the village family who stood gazing at us and each other with astonishment.

I gazed through a crack in the wood and saw a puff of smoke rising in the bright frosted air. I shouted to the family to get away from the doorway.

'Wangdula,' said Shi-shok. 'They have shot my brother.'

Through the crack I saw Wangdula loping from hut to hut, keeping low.

'Don't worry,' I said to Shi-shok. 'He's coming now. But for once in his life he's not laughing.'

He dashed into the hut like a hunted animal, his face fierce with the effort of escape.

'Over there,' he said. 'In the direction we saw that Gya-mi running. They have a machine-gun aimed at the bridge. They were going to wait until you and the girl and the other man'—he pointed at Maxwell—'were half way across and then chop you down. Chu-chu-chu.' Wangdula tried to imitate a burst of machine-gun fire.'

Shi-shok said: 'You had your grenades. Could you not have wiped them out?'

Wangdula shook his head apologetically. 'They spotted me and one of them took a shot at me with his rifle.' He brightened. 'He was a very bad shot.'

'We must wipe them out,' Shi-shok said. He balanced the dagger on his hand.

'The knife won't help you much,' I said.

'I know that, my brother. But it helps me to think.'

'They won't stay where Wangdula found them,' I said. 'They'll be looking for us. And there isn't far to look.'

The owner of the house said: 'There is going to be fighting?'

'It looks like it,' I said. 'I'm sorry. Take your wife and children into the other room at the back of your home and keep close to the ground. We'll try and get away from here so that you do not come to any harm.'

'Death should not have any fears for us,' he said. 'But we have been so long without any bloodshed.'

The woman led the children away. 'I'm sorry,' I said again. But they looked at me as if they did not know why I was apologising.

Wangdula said: 'The machine-gun was a big one. They will not be able to carry it easily.'

'How many of them were there?' Shi-shok asked.

'More than I gathered from the girl. Some of them must have been out on patrol when they were questioning her.'

'Exactly how many?' Shi-shok asked.

'Fifteen, maybe twenty.'

'We don't stand a chance in a battle,' I said. 'We'll have to try and pick them off before it gets dark or wait till dawn.'

'Now is the time,' Shi-shok said. 'By dawn there may be more of them.'

Wangdula said: 'But what can we do? There are not enough of us.'

Shi-shok rounded on him. 'One Khampa is worth three Gya-mi. Never suggest that we are outnumbered. And never again take decisions without asking me. Look what has happened now—the Gya-mi know we are in the village and are looking for us. We could have surprised them and killed them all.'

Wangdula sulked. 'If it had not been for me you would not have seen that first Gya-mi and you would not now know their strength.'

'We have other scouts,' Shi-shok said. 'But let us not quarrel. We must decide what to do. It seems to me that we must wait until the rest of my men return here to tell us where the Gya-mi are and what they are doing. Three of us can keep watch at the front of this place, three at the back. My men should not be long.'

I went into the room where the family and the mastiff sat obediently on the floor. Anne Mortimer followed me.

I opened up a crack in the wall with a knife and knelt down with my rifle beside me. Through the crack I could see the bridge and the monastery and the golden mirror of ice. A breeze sent a coil of snow spinning through the village. The sun was beginning to lose its power and the sky was fading. The gunshot had sent the people indoors and the snow-quiet village waited

for whatever was to come.

I grinned at the children and told them that although it was a game they must stay on the ground. They smiled tremulously and began to draw pictures in the dust on the floor.

Anne Mortimer sat beside me looking at me from eyes which were like the Abbot's—bright and slotted between swollen flesh.

After a while she said: 'Have you made up your mind yet?'

'About what? How we're going to get out of this?'

'No—you know what I mean. After all this. Have you made up your mind what you're going to do then?'

'First,' I said, 'let's get out of this.'

'We can talk now—it will pass the time.'

I ran my hand over the oiled butt of my rifle. 'Beneath that hard-bitten exterior your feminine instincts are pretty well developed, aren't they.'

'You're not answering my question.'

'For God's sake let's get out of this first. Let's persuade the Abbot that he must go to war. Let's get back down the mountains to Tezpur. Then let's discuss it.'

'I think that we should go and live in the country somewhere while I write my Pulitzer.'

'What should I do?—be your agent.'

'You could write as well.'

'Thank you,' I said. 'Thank you very much.'

I thought I heard a noise outside the hut and raised my rifle. But it was only another mastiff heading for home, looking around for the people who would normally have been around at this time of day.

'You don't want to come back with me?' she said.

'Is this how you get your stories?—bludgeoning people until they answer.'

'I guess so. But I might as well know the truth. I never was one for verbal fencing. I've always wanted to know how I stood.'

'With two feet planted firmly on the ground,' I said.

'Okay,' she said. 'You win. Stay in the mountains like some damned cranky hermit.'

'I didn't say that.' Gently I pulled her towards me and kissed her swollen cheek. 'But let's get out of this first.'

'Okay,' she said.

Five minutes later one of the Khampas whom Shi-shok had sent into the village returned. Two of the Chinese had been left in charge of the machine-gun, he said. The rest of them were stalking through the far end of the village searching every hut.

Shi-shok said: 'We must do this in two ways. We must wipe out the machine-gunners in one action and the rest of the Gya-mi in another. But both must happen at once so that neither can come to the aid of the other.' He turned to me. 'Do you agree, my brother?'

'We've got to be fast if we're going to do it before it gets dark,' I said. 'I reckon two of us should finish off the machine-gun post—the rest should kill the others.' I sounded more like a prohibition gangster than a saviour of Mankind.

Maxwell said: 'For Christ's sake let the rest of us in on what's happening.'

'There's only you and the girl,' I said. 'You don't matter too much in this kind of emergency.'

'Screw you,' Maxwell said. 'If there's any shooting I'm going to be in on it.'

'What about your last bit of marksmanship? You nearly got the girl killed.'

'That was the rifle. I've fixed it now.'

'You stay here,' I said. 'With the girl.'

Shi-shok said: 'I think you, my brother, should concentrate on the machine-gun nest. It is on the other side of the huts facing us—not far from the bridge. Take your *friend*'—he knew my feelings about Maxwell and emphasised the word—'and

Wangdula with you. Use a grenade each. That should finish them. Can you use a grenade?'

'I learned once. But let me tell you this, Shi-shok—although we've never had any disputes about leadership I'm not taking Maxwell with me.'

Maxwell's head jerked up at the mention of his name.

'Why not, my brother?' Shi-shok asked.

'Because I don't trust him. That bloody gun of his is no good anyway.'

Shi-shok nodded thoughtfully. 'We have seen many such guns which did not fire when they were needed. But I thought you should all be together—you who want to get to the monastery. We shall not join you because we would not help you in your mission with the Abbot. And in any case the fighting with the other Gya-mi might not go all our way. I think that as soon as you have destroyed the machine-gun you should make for the bridge while we shoot the other Gya-mi.'

'And what about the girl?'

'Ah yes.' Shi-shok smiled and the scar on his face bent into an S. 'We must not forget the brave one. Perhaps you are right then, my brother—we will leave your *friend* to look after her here. It is nearby and you can pick them up after you have destroyed the machine-gun. Wangdula can then stay with us.'

I turned to Maxwell. 'Shi-shok agrees—you've got to stay here with the girl.'

'To hell with you and Shi-shok,' Maxwell said.

'There's no time to argue,' I said. 'Just try and be reasonable for once. Your gun is suspect and someone's got to look after the girl.'

'You'd better stay.' said the girl.

'Yeah?' He fingered his pock-marks. 'Okay I accept the majority decision. But only because there isn't time to fight it.'

Shi-shok beckoned me to one side of the room. 'I wish to have words with you my brother. As you know there are more Gya-mi than Khampas in the village. This does not worry me.

But it is possible that some of my men may be wounded and we shall have to take them many miles away from the Gya-mi to places that we know of where they can be looked after. But whatever happens I will see that one or two of my men are waiting for you on the other side of the monastery when you have persuaded the fat old man that he must fight the Gya-mi. There is a way to reach the other side of the monastery down the ravine and around the mountain.'

'What's wrong with the bridge?' I said.

Shi-shok looked vague. 'There is nothing wrong with it. But it is just possible that my men will have to come the other way.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Shi-shok grinned. 'It does not matter. But it may be we shall not have much more time for talking. If any of my men are wounded I shall have to care for them. And you will have to return to the plains to report success.' He gripped my shoulder. 'Good luck, my brother. I think you will succeed. If none of my men are wounded then I will join you behind the monastery. If I have to stay this side of the ravine then we will meet again in the spring when you return with guns.' He winked hideously flattening the S of his scar into a Z. 'And when you come bring your new wife with you.'

Wangdula came over and said: 'How are we to make sure that we all attack at the same time?'

'We will take longer than you to find the Gya-mi and take up our positions,' Shi-shok said. 'Wait with your grenades until you hear a rifle shot. Then throw them.'

Shi-shok and his men slipped out of the back of the hut. 'Give them a minute,' I said to Wangdula. 'Then we'll go.'

Anne Mortimer came over to me and, standing on tip-toe, put her bruised face up to be kissed. 'I don't know what to say,' she said. 'Good luck. Look after yourself. Come back safe and sound. All of them.' She clung to me for a moment and then went back into the other room.

I glanced in and saw the man and his wife and two children still crouched on the floor.

Wangdula went first, lithe and as fast as a hunted fox, to the line of huts facing us. He looked very dark against the snow. I waited to see if there was any reaction anywhere in the silent village, then followed him, diving into a drift piled up against a hut. We lay for a few moments in five feet of snow; but nothing stirred and we stood up—two hooded snowmen with brown faces.

Wangdula said softly: 'The Gya-mi with the machine-gun are behind that little building over there. It is a sort of temple. I think perhaps the villagers only go to the monastery on special occasions.'

The building was a white sugar-loaf with a pointed roof and curling eaves in which the snow lay two-feet deep. It was a poor building, like all the others in the village, set aside from the huts. Through a crack in the door we could see the wavering light of butter lamps.

'The Gya-mi will have a guard,' I whispered.

Wangdula grinned and produced his knife. 'I had thought of that,' he said, and made a cutting gesture across his throat. 'I think he will appear around the place of worship in a minute.'

As he spoke a Chinese soldier, rifle at the ready, came round the corner of the little temple, walking very slowly. We sank back into the snow-drift.

Cautiously Wangdula, eyebrows white on his clown's face, raised his head and gazed over the top of the drift. 'It is all right,' he said, 'the Gya-mi has gone round the other side. You stay here while I attend to him.'

He sprinted the hundred yards from the hut where we were sheltering to the temple, opened the door and slipped inside. I waited in the drift, inhaling snow. If Shi-shok fired his starting rifle now it would be too soon and the plan would be wrecked.

One minute, two minutes. Still no sign of the Chinese soldier.

He had probably stopped around the other side of the temple to talk to the machine-gunners. I wiped the snow from the mechanism of my rifle and swore sibilantly and venomously to myself.

Then the soldier appeared with steps as slow and measured as a ceremonial march. Just before he reached the door he paused and gazed around. I sank lower in the drift and watched him through a peep-hole bored through the snow with my finger. Behind him in the crack between the door and the wall, the light from the butter-lamps flickered wildly as a breeze skipped past.

The soldier, yellow face furtive inside his fur-lined hood, turned on his heel and continued on his way. From then on everything seemed to me to be in slow motion. As he walked past the door it opened behind him and Wangdula's left arm encircled his neck. Up came Wangdula's right arm; the sun flashed on the blade of the knife and a small red fountain gushed briefly from the soldier's neck as the blade of the knife sliced into his flesh. But no sound—not even as his rifle fell from his clawing hands into the snow.

Wangdula looked up and I saw the gleam of his teeth. He beckoned to me and I ran towards the temple.

'You stand guard,' Wangdula whispered, 'while I drag this poor, unfortunate Gya-mi into the temple.' He wiped his dagger on the soldier's hood and stuck it back in his belt. Then he pulled the body backwards into the temple. The soldier's blood sank swiftly in the soft snow.

Wangdula re-emerged grinning. 'That was easy, was it not?'

I nodded. 'Now give me a grenade. And let's hope that Shi-shok gives the signal soon or the two machine-gunners will be wondering what's happened to their guard.'

Wangdula took one of the lethal metal fruit from his belt and handed it to me. 'You know how to handle it?'

'Of course I know how to handle it.'

'Well do not hold it for too long after you have taken the pin out.'

'Can you see the men with the machine-gun from within the temple?'

'I think so. The temple is very badly made. There are many slits in the wood.'

'All right,' I said. 'You go inside the temple and keep watch on the machine-gun while I stand here. As soon as you hear Shi-shok's rifle-shot come out. It will take the machine-gunners a couple of seconds to work out what's happening. By that time we'll be on them—one round each side of the temple.'

Wangdula nodded. 'Your ideas are good—you should have been a Khampa.'

He opened the door again and I saw a grinning God inside and a gleam of gold on the altar in front of it.

The gold of the sun was deepening now and as the colours of the afternoon became more sombre so did the feel of the day; cold and brooding, beckoning the hostility of the winter dusk. Sabres and splinters of bronze leapt from the roofs of the monastery and the peaks of the mountains began to crowd in. I weighed the grenade in my hand and wondered at the power to kill and maim contained inside the metal casing moulded like jelly cubes. I hoped it wasn't a grenade supplied by Maxwell.

Shi-shok and his men should have found a position from which to attack the Chinese by now. I glanced at my watch—it was three-thirty p.m.

I peered through the crack beside the door. Wangdula was kneeling at the other end of the temple gazing through a chink in the boards. It was a bare and humble place of worship—a wooden altar, a happy Buddha, a couple of bowls fashioned from gold which was as valuable to them as iron was to us, two butter lamps with small wild flames. On the floor lay the body of the Chinese soldier, a red scarf of blood round his neck, terror on his starved, chip-toothed face.

Bells tinkled above me in the ripples of breeze brimming over

the top of the ravine. Prayer flags printed in black ink and made from the same white lint as the flags on the bridge fluttered beside me as I waited for the killing.

But if Shi-shok didn't fire his rifle soon the machine-gunners would come looking for their guard.

The shot was sharp and crisp. There may have been echoes but I didn't hear them. Wangdula was beside me pulling the pin from his grenade and pointing to mine. I pulled out the pin and felt the lever pressing into the palm of my hand. Wangdula went round the left-hand side of the temple, I went round the right. I released the lever and counted. Had I reached three or four. I came out into the open and saw the snout of the machine-gun swivelling in my direction. I hurled the grenade and saw it black against the sky. It landed a fraction of a moment before Wangdula's. They both lay there, two black eggs. Time froze as if a movie projector had broken down. If they were a couple of Maxwell's duds then we were both dead.

Then the movie projectionist got his machine working again. The two soldiers leapt at the grenades. As they leapt I hurled myself sideways into the snow in the shelter of the temple.

The two explosions were almost simultaneous. A red roar and a fusillade of metal and flesh pounding the walls of the temple. The walls bulged outwards and then bent inwards. There was a smell of cordite and burnt flesh. And the echoes of the explosions blundering around the moutains.

I stood up and walked round the corner to what had been the machine-gun nest. Wangdula was already there. The snow had been burned away in a black smoking circle and pieces of machine gun were scattered around it. The heads and trunks of the Chinese were still intact: their limbs were shattered. There was no movement except for the rising smoke and feathers of flame on the soldiers' clothes. Them or us. I turned away to hide the revulsion on my face.

Wangdula kicked the barrel of the machine-gun. 'We have done well,' he said.

'Great,' I said.

'You are not pleased with what we have done?'

'It had to be done,' I said. 'That's all.'

Wangdula's grin of triumph faded to a smile. 'I do not understand you. These men would have killed you.' He thought for a moment. 'And they would have killed the girl.'

'I know,' I said. 'Everything you say is true. And this is just the beginning.'

'I do not understand.'

'Come,' I said, 'let's go. Those machine gun bullets are liable to explode at any moment. And we must get back to see if your brother needs help.'

The door of the temple swung open. As we ran past I saw the God, with his back to the carnage, smiling plumply at us.

It was then, as my stunned senses began to recover from the explosions, that I became aware of the gunfire in the village.

We came up behind Shi-shok and the rest of his men beside the hut where Maxwell and the girl were sheltering with the family.

The Khampas had taken shelter behind the wooden cottages and were firing down the broad clearing that passed for a road at the Chinese who had taken up positions on the fringe of the village.

I joined Shi-shok who was crouched at the corner of one of the puny buildings. 'It is not good, my brother,' he said. 'There are more of them than we first believed. They must have reached their headquarters on the field telephone and another patrol in the area has been sent to help them. They have good guns, too. For every shot we fire we get six back.'

He fired a shot to prove his point and half a dozen shots fired from an automatic rifle cracked back.

'We'd better try and hang on until dark,' I said.

Shi-shok shook his head. 'Soon there will be more reinforce-

ments and then you will never be able to cross the bridge to the monastery. And after all that is why you have come all this way—to make the fat man see sense.'

Another Chinese soldier opened fire from somewhere behind a barrel with a handle on it used for churning yak butter. Shi-shok took careful aim, first pressure and second pressure, stopped breathing for a fraction of a second and fired. A figure reared up behind the snow-covered barrel, hands high above his head, and disappeared backwards. We heard the scream thin and high above the echoes of Shi-shok's shot.

He grinned with satisfaction. 'One less,' he said; and waited for me to congratulate him.

'Well done,' I said. 'But what about the people in the cottages —all the kids.'

Shi-shok ejected the spent cartridge case. 'There is nothing we can do. We cannot lie here and wait for the Gya-mi to kill us.'

As he spoke a child ran across the clearing in the no-mans-land between us and the Chinese. The child, a little girl with polished hair breaded into two pigtails, was calling for her brother. A door in a hut on the far side of the clearing opened and a woman appeared screaming, 'Yangchenla, Yangchenla, get back.' And then, to the Chinese and ourselves, 'Do not shoot. Do not shoot.'

The girl stopped in the middle of the clearing and looked at the woman with puzzlement.

Shi-shok shouted at her: 'Get back, my little one. Do what your mother says.'

We waited, hands greasing our rifles with sweat despite the cold, as the girl stood bewildered in between the hidden guns. Then she began to cry, turned on her heel and ran back to the cottage from which she had fled.

'At least the Gya-mi do not shoot children,' Shi-shok said.

'No,' Wangdula said. 'Because they want them to grow up and work for them.'

A rifle gave a stuttering bark and a salvo of bullets slammed into the woodwork above Wangdula's head.

'You see,' he said, 'I am old enough to be killed.' He looked over his shoulder. 'Here comes your friend—the one with the toothless rifle.'

Maxwell came across the snow on his belly, propelling himself with his knees and elbows. 'I guess you need some help now,' he said.

'Where's the girl?' I said.

'Back in the hut. She's okay. She's sitting on the floor playing with those two kids. Where are the Chinks?'

'Spread right across the far end of the village.'

'They'll be working a flanker any minute now.'

'Shi-shok's got a couple of men posted out there to pick them off if they try it.'

A spasm of firing broke out among the boulders and crags to the right of the village. And the body of a Chinese soldier rolled from behind a rock. It accelerated down a slope into a drift at the bottom and stayed there, one arm protruding from the snow like the arm of a drowning man.

The echoes of the gunfire fused into full-scale warfare in the mountains and a segment of snow detached itself from a peak shaped like the Matterhorn and fell a couple of thousand feet with ponderous majesty. The quiet in between the bursts of gunfire was as thick as fog.

A khampa came down the hillside, darting from one boulder to another. He told Shi-shok: 'We killed two of them. They were trying to come up behind you.'

'You have done well,' Shi-shok said. 'But why have you come down here?'

'Bullets,' said the Khampa. 'We need more bullets.'

Shi-shok said: 'I did not expect so many Gya-mi. The rest of the ammunition is in the pack on the mule.'

'I'll get it,' I said.

'Very well,' Shi-shok said. 'And tell the brave one to be

ready to run with you across the bridge to the monastery. Taking your *friend* with you, of course.'

I headed back towards the hut pressing my body to the ground, snow in my mouth, nostrils and eyes, conscious of frightened eyes watching me from the wooden cottages. Behind me an automatic rifle opened up and the bullets kicked up sprays of snow ahead of me.

In one of the huts a dog started howling. Why hadn't the dogs started up before? Scared into silence, perhaps, by shooting which they had never heard before.

Anne Mortimer was sitting on the floor playing games with her hands with the two children. 'Here's the Church, here's the steeple, open the doors and here are all the people.'

I crawled across the floor and joined her. 'How are they taking it?'

'Very well. I guess they don't really know what's happening.'

'They'll be getting used to it soon.'

'I suppose so.' She helped the boy get his church and steeple in the right order.

'We may have to make a run for it soon. Across the bridge to the monastery. You must be ready to come with me.'

'Okay,' she said. 'But what about Shi-shok and his men?'

'They'll be staying here holding back the Chinese. We've destroyed the machine-gun post.'

I unstrapped the pack from the mule, who was now standing up twitching his soft ears at every outbreak of shooting, and took out a box of ammunition. The family watched me without speaking.

'How will you be?' Anne Mortimer asked.

'Not long. I'll get this ammunition up to them. We'll make a run for it when there's a lot of shooting going on. I don't think the Chinese can see the bridge from their positions.'

'But when the fighting's stopped they'll come across the bridge to the monastery.'

'I'm hoping that when the fighting has stopped there won't

be any Chinese left. If there are then we'll have to fix the bridge so that they can't follow us.'

I crawled back to her and kissed her bruised lips. 'I won't be long,' I said.

'You sound as if you're just going down to the drugstore at the end of the street.'

'I'll bring you back an ice-cream soda.'

As I reached the door we heard an explosion louder and throatier than any rifle-shot.

'What was that?' she asked.

'A grenade probably.'

'Be careful,' she said.

'What flavour?' I said.

'Strawberry,' she said.

I slithered back towards Shi-shok and his men dragging the ammunition box behind me. The snow was freezing again and there was a crust of ice on the surface.

When I reached Shi-shok with the ammunition I asked what the explosion had been. He pointed at a body sprawled in the snow at the other corner of the hut. It was Maxwell. His face was raw and red and unrecognisable and the flesh around his mouth had gone leaving his teeth bared like the teeth in a skeleton.

Shi-shok said: 'It was that rifle. He fired it and it exploded in his face. He must have died immediately.'

I noticed that Maxwell had three gold teeth at the back of his jaws. I covered his face with snow.

Shi-shok said: 'I think it is time for you to go, my brother. I feel that the Gya-mi are preparing themselves for an attack.'

On the other side of the clearing a Khampa fired at a Chinese but lingered too long peering round the corner of a cottage. Two shots cracked out. One bullet ripped through the wooden walls of the hut, ricocheted off a boulder and whined around

the village looking for a resting place. The other hit the Khampa in the head knocking him five feet backwards.

Beside me Shi-shok swore and then murmured softly to himself. I thought for a moment that he was praying; but he was not a religious man.

'Now you must go, my brother,' he said. 'We are not sure how many of them there are.'

'I don't see how I can leave you here.'

'You must, my brother. If you don't there will have been no point in anything we have done.'

'I suppose so.'

A bullet chipped the corner of the hut above our heads.

Shi-shok said: 'Go, my brother. Remember everything I told you. Whatever happens you will find one or two of my men the other side of the monastery after the fighting is over. Good luck, my brother. And good luck to the brave one. She will make you a good wife.' He grinned. 'I still think that perhaps you made children with her in the steam.'

I turned and headed back towards the golden roofs of the monastery and the girl waiting for me in the hut.

'Come,' I said, 'we must go.'

'Now? I don't feel like leaving these kids.'

'Now. Quickly.'

Anne Mortimer ruffled their hair and they stared back at her very seriously.

'Tell them that I'll be back one day.'

'I'll tell them but it isn't true.'

'But you'll be back.'

'Maybe. Now for God's sake come on.'

'Okay. Just say good-bye to the children for me and tell them to stay where they are until the shooting is over.'

We went out of the back of the hut. The bridge was three hundred yards away and there were about three more cottages

before we would have to go out into the open.

'Keep low,' I said. 'They may have posted snipers on the hillside.'

She moved painfully, wincing with the effort. We stopped beside the last hut. There was two-hundred and fifty yards of flat white ground between us and the ravine. And no cover.

'It looks an awful long way,' she said.

'It's not so far. You can make it. You've got to make it.'

'I'll try.'

'When you're ready,' I said.

She nodded. 'Where's Maxwell?'

'He won't be coming with us. He's dead.'

She sucked in her breath. 'What happened?'

'I'll tell you later. But you could call it rough justice.'

'Good God,' she said. 'Just the two of us left.'

As we crouched in a small snow-drift piled up against the wall of the last cottage the shooting behind us increased in intensity. We heard screams and the sound of bullets singing among the huts.

'Wait a minute,' I said. 'I'm going to see what's happening.'

I crawled around the hut to see the Khampas' position at the other end of the village. Beyond it a dozen Chinese soldiers were running forward firing their rifles.

As they drew near the Khampas two soldiers lobbed grenades. The Khampas tried to reach them to toss them back but they were too late. The grenades exploded and when the smoke and flame had cleared I saw three bodies lying within a circle of melted snow. Behind the bales the Chinese—small and intense and inexorable—moved forward again.

Shi-shok shouted an order and the Khampas retreated down the village turning and firing as they ran.

I shouted back to the girl: 'You make a run for it. I'm going to help out here.'

'You're coming with me,' she shouted back.

'Don't be a stupid bitch. There's no point in you staying here.'

One of the huts where the Khampas had been taking cover had been set alight by the grenades. It was burning busily, flames bright against the snow, smoke smelling of autumn bonfires.

A man and his wife came running out in the path of the advancing Chinese. The man fell and the woman knelt beside him. Then he stood up beside his wife gazing at the backs of the Chinese who had swept past him. Homeless and uncomprehending.

The Khampas tried to make a stand half through the village. Two Chinese fell but the rest moved on remorselessly spraying the Khampas' cover with bullets.

Shi-shok waved his men back again. Then he spotted me. 'What are you doing here, my brother?' His face distorted with anger. 'Why do you think we are fighting and dying here? Not so that you can stand and watch. Get across that bridge. I do not know if we can hold them.'

'What about you? What are you going to do?'

'Get across that bridge. If you don't then all is lost.'

He flung himself on to the snow as a clutch of bullets whipped over his head carving three furrows through the snow on a rooftop behind.

The Chinese had taken cover half way through the village, preparing for the final assault on the Khampas.

I raised my hand in a meaningless salute. 'Good-bye, Shi-shok.'

'Good-bye, my brother.'

I beckoned to the girl. 'Time to go,' I said. 'I'll pace you. Try and keep up with me.'

As we set out on the two-hundred and fifty yard sprint to the bridge the shooting started again.

There were copper lights on the snow from the setting sun. Behind us the wood crackled and spat as the flames ate up the cottage and grey smuts floated in the iced air. The gold roofs of the monastery were deep bronze; on the other side of the ravine the monks stood watching.

I held her hand urging her to run faster. 'I can't,' she said. 'I can't. The bruises . . .'

The two-hundred and fifty yards stretched ahead like the last mile of a marathon.

'You've got to. Faster.'

'God,' she said. 'Oh God.' She fell in the snow and lay there for a moment. 'They beat me around the back and legs. I didn't tell you.'

'The little yellow bastards,' I said.

I held her hand tightly and looked round. The Chinese were running through the centre of the village firing indiscriminately. The bodies of two Khampas lay in the snow. As the Chinese passed them they fired a burst into each body.

I picked her up in my arms and began to run again towards the bridge.

My biceps began to ache, then the ache turned to fiery pain. My lungs pleaded for oxygen.

'Leave me,' she said. 'Get across yourself.'

'You're a stupid bitch,' I said.

'I love you,' she said.

'I love you.'

I glanced over my shoulder and saw Shi-shok following us, turning to shoot as he ran with his ungainly robot steps.

Then we were on the bridge.

'You'll have to try and run,' I said. 'I can't hold you here.'

The bridge swayed as we ran. The river far below was indistinct in the fading light. Ahead the bronze glowed deep in the wall of ice.

Now behind us there was only Shi-shok and the Chinese soldiers running. His voice came faintly to us, losing most of its power in the gorge. 'The bridge. I will . . . the bridge.'

We were three quarters way across and Shi-shok was almost at the brink of the gorge. The girl stumbled and clutched at the hand chain fluttering with prayer flags. A wind bowled along the ravine moving the bridge with pendulum movements.

'I can't go on,' she said.

I prodded her brutally in the back with my knuckles and she staggered on. A couple of bullets sang past us clipping chips of rock from the cliff-face ahead.

'Not much further,' I shouted. And as we stumbled on it seemed to me as if I were watching our progress from one of the crumpled white peaks lit with a faint orange sheen by the dying sun. We looked like wounded insects trying to cross a thread stretched across a crack in the soil.

Fifty yards ahead the monks waited for us; there was nothing else they could do.

'A few more steps,' I said.

She nodded, moving with weighted footsteps. Behind us we heard the sharp detonation of a grenade exploding. I looked back and saw flame and grey smoke between Shi-shok and the Chinese.

Shi-shok saw me looking and waved me on. The last rays of the sun flashed on the dagger in his hand.

And then we were on the other side of the ravine.

'Take her,' I said to the monks. 'She is wounded.'

But she stood beside me gazing across the ravine. Shi-shok reached the brink as the Chinese emerged from the smoke of the grenade and knelt beside the bridge.

'What is he doing?' the girl asked.

'I think I know.'

'But what?'

'Wait,' I said.

One of the Chinese knelt and took careful aim at Shi-shok. I shouted to him but the wind blowing up the ravine took my words with it.

The bullet threw Shi-shok to one side and he rolled to the edge of the ravine.

'Oh God,' said the girl.

The rest of the soldiers ran past his body and on to the swaying bridge. I remembered that Shi-shok had once said that

if his enemies had been on the bridge he would have unhooked the chains at one end and sent them plunging to the river below; and I had called him a bloody barbarian. I tugged at the huge hooks but they would not move.

All the Chinese except the marksman who had shot Shi-shok were now on the bridge running towards us. Across the ravine Shi-shok raised himself on one elbow and the flame in his hand that was his knife sped towards the soldier who had shot him. The knife hit the soldier in the throat: he dropped his rifle, hands clutching at his neck, and pitched forward into the snow. I could imagine the fierce grin of Shi-shok's face.

The soldiers were half way across the bridge, firing as they came.

I turned and saw the Abbot staring at the advancing soldiers. His arms were folded and his face was impassive.

'Get inside,' I shouted at him. 'Tell everyone to get inside.'

The bright slotted eyes stared at me. 'It does not matter if we die,' he said.

'You bloody fools,' I shouted—and then realised I was speaking in English. In Tibetan I said: 'We're going to die you don't have to. Get back inside the monastery.'

But the Abbot shook his head.

Anne Mortimer clung to me and said: 'There's nothing we can do, is there?'

'Nothing,' I said. I bent and kissed her.

Across the ravine Shi-shok was kneeling beside the bridge again, one hand clutching his stomach. The Chinese were about fifty yards from us. The leading soldier drew a pistol from a holster and I could see his finger tightening on the trigger.

The explosion on the other side of the ravine came as the hammer of the pistol was poised to fire the first bullet. Flame and smoke blossomed and a great flake of the cliff-face fell away. With it went the bridge.

Again it seemed to happen in slow-motion. The soldiers dropping their weapons and clutching at the hand-chains. Unable

to hold on and, one by one, dropping from the bridge as it fell down and swung towards the cliff-face on our side of the ravine. And each tumbling towards the faint white tresses of the river with the slow swimming motions of sky-divers.

There was no sign of Shi-shok on the other side of the gorge. Just a scorched wound in the rock, a few feathers of flame—and behind, dark against the snow, the body of the Chinese soldier with Shi-shok's last testament sticking out of his throat.

The bridge slammed against the rock face beneath us. Then there was a great silence. The sun slid behind the peaks and the lights went out on the gold roofs of the monastery.

We stood there for a few moments. Then the girl said: 'Come, let's go inside.'

'Leave me here,' I said. 'Just leave me.'

'I understand,' she said. She turned to go inside.

'He was my brother,' I said.

'I know,' she said. 'I know.'

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Abbot put down his cup of butter tea and leaned across the table in his chamber to look more closely at the girl's face. At the closed eye, the bruised cheek and the poor swollen lips.

'The Gya-mi did this?' he said.

'They would have done more if they had been given the opportunity.' I said.

'It is bad that they should treat a woman this way.'

'It is more than bad.'

The Abbot called out in his thin voice and a monk appeared with more butter tea. It was late in the evening and it could well have been his sixtieth cup that day.

'The bridge,' he said. 'What happened to the bridge?'

'Shi-shok laid a charge of explosives at the other end of it. I saw him laying it when we first arrived but I didn't realise what he was doing at the time. He was a very brave man.'

'Perhaps. He was a bad man, too.'

I ignored the remark because my grief was such that if I had argued with him I would have lost my temper—and perhaps my cause.

Anne Mortimer said. 'What is he saying about Shi-shok?'

'He says he was a bad man.'

'Tell him I think he was a good man. I don't know what he had done in the past. I only know that in the time I knew him he was kind and gentle and brave. And I know that whatever wrongs he had done in the past they were cancelled out

by the way of his death.'

'He once told me that he wished he hadn't been born a bandit,' I said. I translated the girl's words for the Abbot.

The Abbot studied his dainty fingers. 'He brought death and destruction to Kushlanga.' He pointed a forefinger at me. 'Just as you have done.'

'We could not help it. The Gya-mi had the girl.'

He did not reply. The lids had almost closed over the slit eyes and he appeared to be on the point of falling asleep. But I knew that his mind was far from sleep.

I walked to the door of his chamber and looked out at Glorious Gentle One, Lotus Born and All Good. They stared back with benign arrogance. I went back to the table.

'How are you doing?' said the girl.

'I'm not.' I waited for the Abbot to return from his reverie. When the heavy lids were raised fractionally I said: 'Will you help us now?'

He sipped his tea. 'Can you tell me why I should? Why I should order the people of fifty villages or so to involve themselves in bloodshed and suffering?'

'I think I've told you before. Now you have seen the Gya-mi in action you must believe me.'

'I have seen them chasing bandits. I have seen the leader of the bandits destroy the bridge.'

'Across the ravine,' I said, 'the Gya-mi were shooting indiscriminately. They didn't care who they killed. They set fire to one cottage. Can you not see what they will do once they have made use of you here? When they have invaded India and taken other countries then they will have no further use for you. They will have used you as a base to launch their attack and your role will be finished. Then they will terrorise your people as they have terrorised innocent people in other parts of your country.'

More butter tea arrived. The Abbot sipped it and I suspected, contemplated a future in which he no longer exercised autho-

rity. Finally he said: 'Even if I agreed with you I cannot see how the people here can fight against the Gya-mi. They are too strong for us.'

'By the spring-time there will be many Khampas here. They will make camps in the mountains and they will train your young men. We will see that they get guns and ammunition. You can never defeat the Gya-mi. But you can harass them so much that they will have difficulty in assembling their forces. By the time they are ready to attack the Indians will also be ready.'

'Many of my people will die.'

I nodded. 'Many will die.'

'You are an honest man,' he said.

'My heart was never in this mission. Only my reason.'

'You too had to make the terrible decision that you are now asking me to make?'

'I did. And when I saw what the Gya-mi had done to your people who fled across the border I knew what I had to do.'

'Stay here,' he said. 'I will be back in a few moments.'

'Where's he going?' asked Anne Mortimer.

'I don't know. How do you feel?'

'Tired, I guess. I'll be okay when I've had some sleep.'

I walked to the door again and saw the Abbot standing with his arms crossed in front of the three Gods. Their expressions seemed to have become more serious—but it must have been my imagination.

Then he came back.

'Have you made up your mind?' I asked.

He nodded and went over to the girl. 'I have.' He touched her face softly and she smiled uncertainly showing her chipped tooth. 'There is all the evidence I need of the intentions of the Gya-mi,' he said.

'You mean you will call on your people to rise against the Gya-mi?'

'I will.'

The girl said: 'What's happening?'

'It's your face,' I said. He's pretending your damned face has won the day instead of confessing that he's scared of losing his power.'

She put her hand to her closed eye and began to cry softly.

The Abbot put his arm around her. 'Come my child,' he said. 'You must sleep now. We have a lot to talk about.'

A monk took her away to another chamber and the Abbot settled himself in his chair. 'First,' he said, 'I think we should have some more tea.'

A monk walked with us along the tunnel which the Abbot had told me about the night before. It emerged on the other side of the mountain. In a nearby village the monk was going to find a mule for us.

'We've got a long journey ahead,' I said. 'Do you think you can make it?'

'I'm okay now. I just needed the rest.'

'The snow shouldn't be too bad as we get lower. The Khampas will show us routes that avoid the road.'

'How do you know they will be waiting for us?'

'They'll be there,' I said. 'Shi-shok said they would.'

The white mouth of the tunnel grew larger.

'Alex,' she said.

'Yes?'

'Have you made up your mind yet?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I can't leave them now. One day perhaps. But not now—they wouldn't understand.'

'And you want me to go back to the States?'

'I want you to stay with me. But that's impossible up in the mountains.'

'I could wait for you,' she said. 'Down on the plains.'

'It might be a long wait. But I could arrange for you to stay with someone and I could visit you.' I remembered another girl who had waited for me down on the plains.

'And when it's all over we'll return to the barbaric off-shore islands of America and England together?'

'I always was a bit of a barbarian,' I said.

'So was I,' she said.

Walking into the bright white day was like walking into a tissue of ice. The monk pointed to a cluster of huts about a mile away down the hillside.

'I will take you there and find you a mule,' he said. 'Then you will be on your own.'

'Maybe,' I said. 'But not for long.'

We walked down to the village with its stems of smoke rising into a sky heavy with snow.

Anne Mortimer clutched at my arm. 'Look,' she said; and pointed back the way we had come.

Over the tip of the mountain under which we had just passed I saw a red kite. Then another. Then another.

And very faintly, carried on the vanguard breeze of a snow-storm, I heard the sound of the monks' band. It was, I thought, the most appalling noise I had ever heard.

EPILOGUE

On June 1st, 1968, the Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, announced that India was more prepared that ever before to resist aggression.