

TO A
MOUNTAIN
IN
TIBET

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To a Mountain in Tibet

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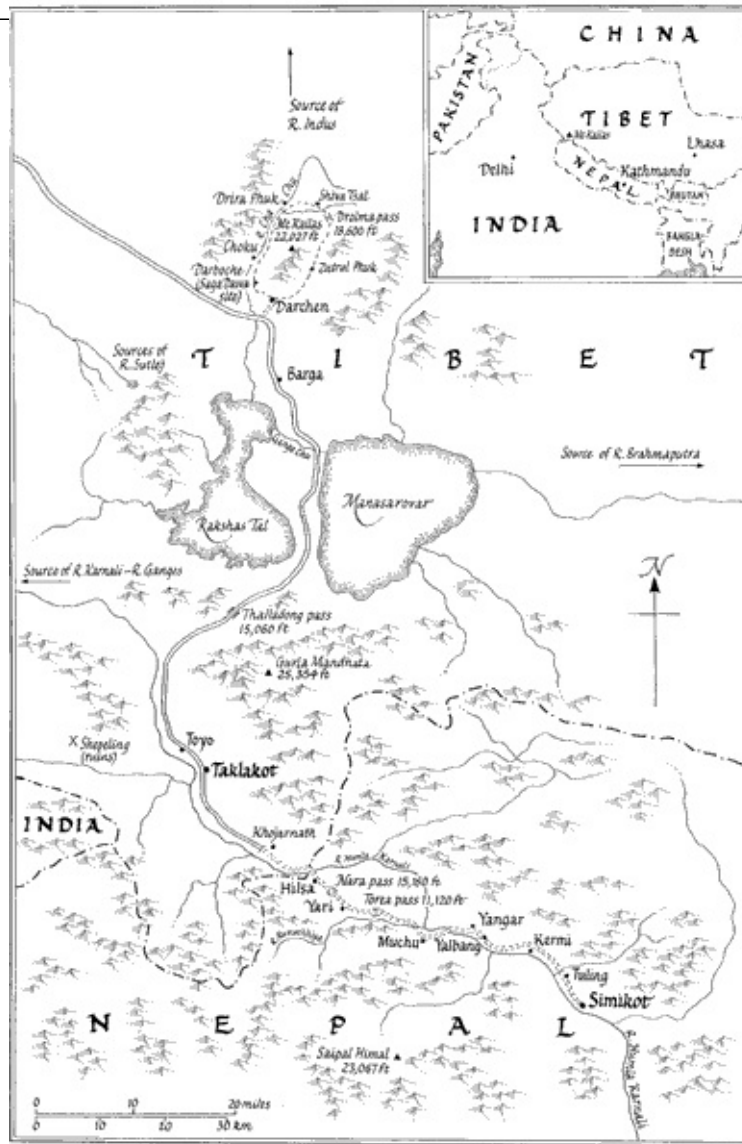
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CHAPTER ONE

The sun is rising to its zenith. Silver-grey boulders lie tumbled along the track among mattresses of thorns and smoke-blue flowers. The storm clouds that hang on the farther mountains do not move. There is no sound but the scrunch of our boots and the clink of the sherpa's trekking pole. Underfoot the stones glisten with quartz.

These first hours have a raw exhilaration. The track shimmers ahead with a hard brilliance. The earth is young again. Perhaps it is the altitude that brings this lightness and anticipation. Within an hour we have flown from near sea level to over 8,000 feet, and I feel weightless, as if my steps will leave no trace.

Beneath us the little town of Simikot hangs above an abyss of empty valleys. Its corrugated-iron roofs flash among patches of green barley. It is slipping behind us. From its runway of parched earth the Twin Otter aircraft that carried us in has already turned and flown away between the mountains. There are no roads here. Humla is the remotest region in Nepal, little visited by trekkers even now. The nearest paved highway—the lowland route from Kathmandu to Delhi—lies hundreds of mountain miles to the south, and to the east the climbers' lodestars—Dhaulagiri, Annapurna, Everest—are out of sight.

As we walk, a dark-forested gully opens to the west, carving a giant corridor through the mountains. Its walls rise in vertiginous foothills towards 15,000-foot summits gashed with snow and clouds. Noiselessly far below us, through this immense gulf so steep as often to lie out of sight, the Karnali river is raging coldly down from the highest source of the Ganges. It is nowhere navigable, but for the next ten days it will steer us northwards. It twists ahead with a chill magnetism, mounting by icy steps higher and deeper through the western Himalaya, for a hundred miles before us, into Tibet.

By trekkers' standards our party is small and swift: a guide, a cook, a horse man, myself. We move scattered above the river, while lone traders pass us the other way, leading their stocky horse and mule trains between lonely villages. They are dark, slight men in torn anoraks and brimless headgear, marching to the clank of their animals' tin bells and crying softly to the strays to keep in line. Their women walk alongside, sashed and scarved in magenta and blue, their sinewy wrists layered in bracelets, their nostrils and ears dangling golden discs. They look fierce and open, and laughingly meet your eyes. The delicacy of the plains has gone.

We reach a cairn stuck with weathered stakes, then descend through pines towards the river. Its noise rises to us in the hiss of far-down cataracts. Peacefully beneath us, and seaming the far banks in long yellow shelves, the terraces of an unseen village are ripening with corn. The slopes flame with the reds and purples of late spring, with shrubs I do not know. Giant walnut trees appear, and silvery aromatic shrubs, while overhead the mountain peaks gather in jagged crenellations and seem to enclose the place in a private peace.

We are through the village almost without knowing. Granite boulders overshadow dwellings frailer than they: cottages of dry-stone walls and bleached timbers sunk among the igneous rocks. They look half deserted, mellow and pastoral above their fields, so that as we go on high above the river, past rice paddies and a little shrine to Shiva, I imagine this a valley of Arcadian quiet.

Then a man joins us on the path. He is vivid with troubles. His jacket is patched, his trainers splattered. He fires a volley of questions at the sherpa. How can he get out of this place? There's nothing for anybody here. His family can't support itself on its patch of rice field...it isn't enough...

His eyes spear us out of a sun-blackened face. He follows us for miles. He cannot bear to let us

go: we, who carry the aura of a wider world. He has never been to Kathmandu, never left this region. But rain has loosened the earth around his house, and it is sliding down towards the river.

‘I am fifty-six now...my life is too poor...My son and daughter-in-law want to buy a new horse, but we cannot afford one...a horse is forty thousand rupees...’

Yet this dirge comes with a hardy sparkle, as if he were talking about other people. He grins with disordered teeth. ‘Their horse is old...it will die...’

Of course. This is a cruel region in a poverty-stricken land: bitter winters and narrow, rock-strewn earth. Arcadia is falling to bits as he speaks. The farmed terraces are dropping behind, and above us the naked rock is bursting through the green hillsides in huge, serrated shoulders. Sometimes the track lifts precipitously on steps hewn sheer from the cliff face, or ascends on rubble stairways where a stumble will pitch us into the abyss.

At one of these bottlenecks we find the rock daubed red with the Maoist rebel emblem—a hammer-and-sickle circled beside a swastika (here an archaic symbol of good fortune)—but the guerrillas themselves have gone. For ten years they paralysed this region, and would politely leech for money the few foreigners who ventured in. They took over 13,000 Nepalese lives. But now, three years later, with Kathmandu’s royal dynasty swept away, they are jostling for power with the decrepit politicians in the capital, and their old slogan—‘Follow the Maoist path!’—is flaking from cliffs and walls.

At last the farmer turns back, waving buoyantly, his voice fading among the rocks. ‘We have no king now...we have nothing...’ And then, as if, after all, he might follow us to the end: ‘Where are you going?’

When the sherpa cries back, ‘Mount Kailas!’ the name echoes down the river like a broken secret. The farmer does not hear it. It is the noise of somewhere imagined or hopelessly far away.

And so, in the West, it still seems. The most sacred of the world’s mountains—holy to one fifth of the earth’s people—remains withdrawn on its plateau like a pious illusion. For years I had heard of it only as a figment. Isolated beyond the parapet of the central Himalaya, it permeated early Hindu scripture as the mystic Mount Meru, whose origins go back to the dawn of Aryan time. In this incarnation it rotates like a spindle at the axis of all creation, ascending immeasurable miles to the palace of Brahma, greatest and most remote of the gods, and plunging as deep beneath the earth. From its foot flow the four rivers that nourish the world, and everything created—trees, rocks, humans—finds its blueprint here. In time the mystical Meru and the earthly Kailas merged in people’s minds. Early wanderers to the source of the four great Indian rivers—the Indus, the Ganges, the Sutlej and the Brahmaputra—found to their wonder that each one rose near a cardinal point of Kailas.

So people discovered the heart of the world. It was a site of astral beauty, separated from its companion Himalayas as if by divine intent. To the pious, the mountain radiates gold or refracts like crystal. It is the source of the universe, created from cosmic waters and the mind of Brahma, who is yet himself mortal and will pass away. The sun and the planets orbit it. The Pole Star hangs immutably above. The continents of the world radiate from its centre like lotus petals on a precious sea (humans occupy the southern petal) and its slopes are heady with the gardens of paradise.

But the God of Death dwells on the mountain. Nothing is total, nothing permanent—not even he. All is flux. In the oceans around Kailas-Meru, beyond a ring of iron mountains, countless embodiments of Meru, each identical to the last, multiply and repeat themselves, dying and resurrecting into eternity.

Around me in the Karnali valley, nothing yet disturbs these dreams. The infant Ganges steepens and roars out of a cleft far on the skyline. The sherpa is trying to sing.

Kailas, I know—the solid, terrestrial peak still invisible ahead—stands in starker terrain than this, stripped of everything but worship. It enters history quickened already by centuries of overlapping divinities. About a millennium ago the pagan gods in charge of the mountain were converted to Buddhism and became its protectors. A few slipped through the net, of course, with even a flying sky goddess, and linger still. But a multitude of Buddhas and bodhisattvas—saints who have delayed their entry into nirvana in order to help others—flew in to occupy the high crags and summits, lighting up the mountain with their compassion. Then the Buddha himself arrived and nailed Kailas to earth with his footprints before it could be carted off by a demon.

The mountain is swathed in such a dense and changing mystique that it eludes simple portrayal. It was on to such a peak that the first Tibetan kings descended from the sky (eventually to be cut off and stranded). Hindus believe its summit to be the palace of Shiva—the lord of destruction and change who sits there in eternal meditation. But it is unknown when the first pilgrims came. Buddhist herders and Hindu ascetics must have ritually circled the mountain for centuries, and the blessings accruing to them increased marvellously in sacred lore, until it was claimed that a single circuit expunged the sins of a lifetime. The mountain was dangerous to reach, but never quite inaccessible. Only in the nineteenth century did Tibet itself, swayed by a xenophobic China, become a forbidden land. And Kailas kept its own taboos. Its slopes are sacrosanct, and it has never been climbed.

But in recent years it has been protected less by sanctity than by political intolerance. In 1962, four years before the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese banned all pilgrimage here (although devotees still circled it secretly), and only in 1981 were the first Tibetans and Indians permitted to return. Twelve years later a few trekkers were tentatively allowed to cross the mountain borders between Nepal and Tibet.

My own small journey is one of these. The negotiation of permits—I am entering a military zone—has been fought by an agent in Kathmandu; but the Chinese suspicion of lone travellers compels me to join a group of seven British trekkers on the border—we will separate at the foot of Kailas—for the charade of not entering western Tibet alone. My Nepalese horse man too, a Thakuri from Humla, will leave us at the frontier. But Iswor, my guide, and Ram, the cook, will cross to the mountain with me. They are Tamangs, sturdy people close to the Tibetans, and now they march tactfully behind or ahead of me, their backs piled with over fifty pounds of gear each.

Iswor speaks fractured English. He has the thick shoulders and strong, bandy legs of his people, but at twenty-seven he is young for this job, and shy. Sometimes I imagine a fragility in him, not physical, but lodged in sudden, cloudy preoccupations. But he follows me with almost tender concern. When the track widens he comes alongside and proffers his water bottle by way of breaking silence. His Tamang people left Tibet more than a thousand years ago to settle in the mountains west of Everest, then scattered all through Nepal, and as we talk, I realise that he is not a highlander at all. His village is in the hills near Kathmandu, where his father, a cook, moved when the boy was three.

‘The tradition in our village is like with Sherpa people. We came as horse soldiers, I don’t know when, long ago. Now we go into trekking. Guides and porters. That’s what we are, Tamangs.’

‘But now you live in Kathmandu!’ I warm to him, but my voice sounds edgy. Kathmandu is sunken in a turmoil of mass rural immigration, broken infrastructure, political corruption.

‘Yes. We had to go. We Tamangs look for jobs. For education. But my family have a cottage in the village still. It is very quiet, very beautiful. My mother goes there to rent our land to other farmers. It’s corn land, but it’s too small.’

This was the plight of all Asia: the flight from the land. He loved and despised his village. There was no future there. He says: ‘Everyone leaves for somewhere else. Not just for Kathmandu but India

the Gulf, even farther.'

~~Yet he half belongs to the village still. Like the cook and the horseman, he can shoulder the load of a mule. But he is touched by an urban gloss. His hair starts far back on a high forehead, tied in a ponytail, and his face has the lemony blandness of a sumo wrestler's, faintly androgynous.~~

He says: 'The village is full of old people now.'

On a path below us a woman is striding fast above the river. On her back a sick baby is bundled like a sad, balding toy. Iswor calls out to her. She is walking to Simikot to find medicine, she cries. She is quickly gone.

He stops for a moment. 'This is not like England.'

Here fifty babies die to every thousand born. I ask: 'You have children?'

He seems to wince. 'I'm not married. I'll wait ten years before I marry. Yes, there are girls I like but I'll wait. In the village, men marry at eighteen or twenty. But I've left that life behind.' Then, as if licensed at last to voice a pent-up question, he asks: 'And you? Why are you doing this, travelling alone?'

I cannot answer.

I am doing this on account of the dead.

Sometimes journeys begin long before their first step is taken. Mine, without my knowing, started not long ago, in a hospital ward, as the last of my family dies. There is nothing strange in this, the state of being alone. The death of parents may bring resigned sadness, even a guilty freedom. Instead of need to leave a sign of their passage. My mother died just now, it seems, not in the way she wished; my father before her; my sister before that, at the age of twenty-one.

Time is unsteady here. Sometimes I am a boy again, trying to grasp the words *Never, never again*. Humans, it is said, cannot comprehend eternity, in time or space. We are better equipped to register the distance spanned by a village drumbeat. The sheerness of *never* is beyond us.

The sherpa's eyes stay mute on me, puzzled. Solitude here is an unsought peril. I joke: 'Nobody fool enough to travel with me!'

It is already evening. Our feet grate over the stones. You cannot walk out your grief, I know, or absolve yourself of your survival, or bring anyone back. You are left with the desire only that things not be as they are. So you choose somewhere meaningful on the earth's surface, as if planning a secular pilgrimage. Yet the meaning is not your own. Then you go on a journey (it's my profession, after all), walking to a place beyond your own history, to the sound of the river flowing the other way. In the end you come to rest at a mountain that is holy to others.

The reason for this is beyond articulation. A journey is not a cure. It brings an illusion, only, of change, and becomes at best a spartan comfort.

Iswor looks robust, but he stops to complain quaintly of a mosquito bite on his hand, splaying his fingers for my inspection. They are chubby as a baby's, I tell him. We laugh and go on.

To ask of a journey *Why?* is to hear only my own silence. It is the wrong question (although there seems no other). Am I harrowing myself because the world is mortal? Whose pain am I purging? Not theirs. An old Tibetan monk tells me the soul has no memory. The dead do not feel their past.

Meanwhile the sun is setting with a perverse radiance behind us.

In the village of Tuling, at dusk, a family takes us in. Among the huddled houses, mud-roofed and half-plastered, theirs is one of the poorest, reached by a notched log ladder against the hillside. They

live—a family of nine—in three narrow rooms. The walls are stucco and loose stones, built thick against the winter, pierced by a single window: a deep rectangle, closed by cracked cellophane. They have no furniture, no water. Their lavatory is a patch of ground scattered with rags.

Awkwardly we hunker on the mud floor: Iswor, the cook and I, feeling suddenly outsize. Our travelling kit—more than everything the family owns—is stacked against one wall. Everything we have looks excessive. Their possessions hang in a few bags from the beam ends poking through the plaster. A glaze of black flies shifts over the ceilings.

Lauri, the householder, sits with us, fervid and garrulous. He has moist, coal-black eyes. His ancient father and mother, his wife and five children come and go, or crouch round a rusty stove whose flue pokes through the ceiling. They are dressed almost in rags, ingrained with dirt, gaping at the elbow, shoulder, knee. The women walk on blackened feet—the children too, their skin striped harsh where sandals have once been. Three of the girls are pretty, but already knots of worry are puckering between their eyes.

At the other end of life, the two old people move oblivious among us: she like a tempest, he a wraith. She is hard-bodied, stick-thin. In the pitch-dark room beside us she is churning butter in a wooden trough, and barks to herself in angry phrases that Iswor doesn't translate. From time to time she emerges and lurches for the door beyond us, blind to our stares. Her head is twisted piratically in rags, but her ear lobes and nostrils are loaded with gold rings and pendants, still flaunting bridal wealth, and her ankles are bangled in brass.

Her husband sits outside in the last of the twilight. He has misted, dreaming eyes. He is dressed in what had once been white, with old-fashioned leggings and a long, tattered smock whose back is labelled enigmatically 'Cut Short'. He never speaks. His sacerdotal dress makes me wonder if he is not a leftover shaman—they survive alongside Buddhism in these hills. Only when the neighbours' children crowd to the door to gaze at the foreigner does he get to his feet and shoos them away with a tiny stick.

The family is so poor that at night they can offer us only a little of the heavy local rice. We mix with our own lentils and spinach, and offer biscuits, and so combine our hospitalities, while Lauri's wife presides with her ladle and tureen, and the children cluster behind her, and Iswor translates our soft, fragmentary exchanges.

Lauri is alert and rueful: the brutal facts of his region's isolation have long ago dawned on him. 'The trouble is we have no education,' he says. 'Only that would save us. It's too late for my father and mother—you see them—and it's too late for me. I'm thirty-five. My wife too, she is quite uneducated.' She smiles faintly. 'But my children go to school now. We have hope for them, and for the boy. But five children is too many. We had them again and again.' He rolls his arms, laughing. 'But now at last we have a son! With us the girls marry and go away, but the sons stay. The son sees you through old age.' In the nearby villages, he says, the birth of a boy is greeted by a fusillade of buckshot; the birth of a girl, by silence.

In the dimness shed by a single bulb, fed by the village solar heater, his children sit cross-legged against the wall behind him, and stare out with the importunate sweetness of children in famine posters. The oldest girl, who was perhaps welcomed, wears a once-beautiful apple-green dress, embroidered with pink leaves and flowers; but the others descend in deepening rags and disappointment, until the miraculous fourth child—the boy—then plummet again to a tiny, simian girl with streaming nose, wearing the last cast-offs.

'Will the girls' marriages be arranged?' I ask. 'What if they fall in love?' Already the eldest showed a wilful spark.

Lauri says: 'That will be all right. That should be the way now, the new way. We won't mind what caste they choose either.'

‘It’ll be expensive.’

—‘Yes, of course, the bride should be given away with money. But if the family’s too poor...then nothing.’ He looks at the ground.

Caste was outlawed in Nepal forty years ago, Iswor whispers. But of course it continues in everyone’s minds. These people are Thakuri, I know, proudly linked to a medieval dynasty of Nepalese kings. A shockingly simplified sketch of Nepal’s ethnic jigsaw might divide the country into two peoples: the Nepalese lowlanders of Indian intrusion, and the resistant, Tibetan-related highlanders, to whom we are ascending. But whatever once coupled the Thakuri with wealth, it has long gone.

Winter is the worst time, Lauri says. For days the snows coop the villagers in their fort-like houses, while they burn firewood and wait. His rice field was not enough to sustain his family, so they have built a shack by the track above the village, hoping to sell things. It stocks some toothbrushes and a shelf of canned drinks. And they have a cow.

I fear for them. Their girls, in this world of village exogamy, may marry far away, and their son looks sickly. Yet not all the region is so poor. ‘There are men who have two wives here, even more,’ Lauri says. ‘Their first marriage was probably arranged, the second made for love. So they keep two houses, one for each. My brother is one of them. He’s happy.’

Tentatively, imagining a new cause of his poverty, I ask: ‘And you? You have other wives?’

‘No. I will only have this one.’

I ask softly: ‘It was a love match?’

She touches his arm. They sometimes smile at one another.

‘No, it was arranged.’

She is oddly beautiful. Poor food has left her slender after five children, and although her cheeks and forehead show the dents and scars of accidents, her features are delicate and regular. Only when her mother-in-law passes near her do I see with a shock what she may become. Eerily they share the same facial structure, but the old woman’s skin is ploughed by vertical ridges, and her mouth hangs slack. Both women show dainty, level teeth, and the older’s golden jewellery is echoed glittering round the younger’s throat and face. But all the frailer ornaments the daughter-in-law wears—her eggshell-blue choker and coils of crimson beads, the coral necklace gleaming in the cleft of her torn dress—have long ago dropped from the older woman, if she ever owned them.

Now her daughter-in-law is gaily ladling out fresh rice, her laughter like a squirrel’s chattering, while the oldest girl—with the same haunting, regular face—peers over her shoulder, and the old woman mutters alongside with an anger so fierce and private that it becomes intrusive to look at her.

Later I go out into the clear night. It is still warm. The monsoons are late this year, and have not yet hit the Kathmandu valley, let alone up here. On the fringe of Lauri’s ground, by a brushwood corral where the cow sleeps close to the cliff edge, stands a white-plastered turret, perforated by little holes for offerings, and stuck with a rusty trident: the family shrine. Its only gifts are chunks of local marble laid outside its niches. In the starlight it looks like a pallid dovecote.

Who is worshipped here? I wonder. But when I ask Lauri, he sinks into a vague, confusing answer. The Hindu pantheon of his people mingles with other, more shadowy powers. He speaks uneasily of Masto, an ancient shamanic god, or family of gods. Masto cannot precisely be identified. No images depict him, but sometimes, through a medium, he dances and speaks.

‘Three times a year our family gathers for a ceremony at the altar,’ Lauri says. ‘At time of the full moon. Then my father leads us in worship...’

His father sits under the stars long after we have turned in, while his mother lies with the children in a room beside us, and he and his wife sleep in the storeroom beyond. A dirty cloth has been laid on the floor, where we lie in a row, Iswor complaining. Nestling in the ceiling among beams and broken

slats, cicadas send up a high, seamless cheeping, which must have been sounding unnoticed all evening. I lie listening to the rustle of sparrows under the eaves, the howl of dogs. In the room nearby a child sobs, and the retching and spitting of the old woman goes on for hours. Two or three times she bursts in and charges like a hurricane across the room, her hair loosed in an astonishing black flood, and the outer door flies open on a gash of stars as she rushes a naked child into the lavatory patch. They return in silence, and peace descends for an hour or two. The cicadas have gone dumb, and the noises of restless breathing have stilled.

Then, like another breathing going on unheard, the sigh of the great river rises from below.

CHAPTER TWO

I wake up to a stormy sky and a sallow light streaking the mountains to the east. Lauri's children gather round to gaze as we pack our magic things: a compass, a diode flash-light, some miniature binoculars. We eat a breakfast of boiled rice on the rooftop, while the village stirs beneath us. In the rocks near the river a mob of vultures is hopping and floundering around a dead buffalo. Then we hit trouble. Our horse drover cannot go on: his mare is lame, he says. In the warmth of the previous evening, a villager had offered to join us with his own horse, but now he is afraid. He has a weak head, he says; we are ascending too high.

So Iswor and Ram shoulder a double load—they must be carrying over a hundred pounds each—another hope to find a baggage animal somewhere ahead. All morning the path is easy. Behind us Tuling drops out of sight, but for another mile its paddy fields shine emerald above the river, and higher up ripple yellow terraces where barley and buckwheat are ready for cutting. Then the way narrows and the great trees—spruce, maple, cypress—throng darkly to the river. Ahead the mountains are tremulous with cloud. It rolls from their clefts and seethes round their summits like battle smoke. But we are walking in sunshine, still barely making height. Shrubs of papery cistus bank along our path, with many low, creeping rock plants, and flocks of butterflies blow like confetti over the stones.

Gradually we are swinging north-west towards the Nala Kankar Himal, which rises three and a half miles above sea level as it shelves into Tibet. By noon the May sun is burning. Iswor carries his monstrous load without concern, rigged out in summer shorts and a headstrap. His heavy calves taper to sturdy ankles in slack, oversize boots. Sometimes, when avalanches sever the track, he puzzles that these were not there before. In the past few years, with failing rains, the soil has eroded deeper, and we find ourselves clattering across stilled torrents of multicoloured rocks—veined marble, blood-red, crystalline grey—torn from the hillsides. But high above the far bank, steeper than ours, waterfalls come floating down in 300-foot drops, then vanish into wooded gullies and re-emerge to fall again in ropes of glittering light.

The Karnali itself—we are descending imperceptibly to it—is no longer an immured thread. It is pristine and violent. Its waters seethe and plunge among half-submerged boulders, alternately baulked and released, flooding into furious eddies and slipstreams—a beautiful grey-green commotion in momentary drift, then battered to white foam again. In local lore the rocks that strew it are silver fish from the Ganges that could struggle no further upriver. Here the Karnali seems less sacred than primitive and untouched. Yet it finds its source near the lakes beside holy Kailas, and sanctity will descend on it downriver, of course, with silt and pollution, as it eases into the Ganges plain.

We walk under apricot and walnut trees through the last silent Thakuri villages, past thinning paddy fields. Among the traders along the track, the Thakuri are giving way to stocky Bhotia people. Under their bobble hats the faces are broader, more Mongoloid: hardy men with polished cheekbones who carry their goods on their backs in wooden frames and lead horses slung with brushwood and fodder. Some, from the Tibetan borderlands, are driving buffalo and mule trains laden with Chinese clothes and cigarettes.

For centuries Nepal was Tibet's chief link with the outside world, and their trade goes back to prehistory. Here, in the country's west, Tibetans bartered their salt and wool for lowland grains, as they still do, and even in the early twentieth century, after many trade routes were diverted to British India, this Himalayan portage survived.

Now, within a few hours, we have passed the outer reach of Indian influence and crossed into

another world. In origin the local Bhotias are Tibetan Buddhists, and we are entering a sanctity more remote and arcane than the Hindu. The cairns of piled stones that mark the high passes are spiked with poles where prayer flags fly. Who hung them in these lonely defiles we cannot tell. As the wind funnels through the passes, their inscriptions stream in faded tatters. With every flutter, it is believed the wind disperses their prayer into the world, to ease the suffering of all sentient beings. And they will propitiate whatever capricious mountain gods control the pass.

I touch them gingerly: the Tibetan script that I do not understand. I have seen them before in China and in regions of Tibetan exile, and every time they stir a poignant wonder. They glare in five primary colours, embodying earth, air, fire, water and sky. Like the prayer wheels that circle holy sites or turn in the hands of pilgrims, they redeem the world by the mystique of words. Some, near monasteries, are even turned by flowing water. Many are stamped with the wind horse, who flies their mantras on his jewelled back; others with the saint Padmasambhava, who restored Buddhism to Tibet. Iswor circles them reverently, clockwise. I follow him, glad, for some reason, of his faith. Sometime the flags are so thinned that their prayers are as diaphanous as cobwebs. But this, Iswor says, does not matter. The air is already printed with their words.

Gently it starts to rain. At first we ignore this, but underfoot the path grows treacherous, sometimes winding 300 feet vertically above the river—and for the first time Iswor stops not for me, but to rest his burdened back against the rock. Then we change into waterproofs, and go on. Now water surrounds us. It churns through the ravine below, gushes out of every rock face, sheets down from the sky. I raise my face to it, hoping that it augurs the monsoons at last. Two and three hundred feet above us waterfalls loose themselves from the cliffs and spill down past giant ferns and bamboos almost to our feet. Here, where the Karnali squeezes between sheer walls, a narrow path has been hacked from the cliff side. We peer dizzily down to glimpse the river boiling through a canyon hung with vertical crevices, black and yellow. Beyond, the land grows ever more savage and precipitous. Our stone-littered track goes switch-backing emptily for miles. Intermittently, when the rain clears, we see the 23,000-foot snows of Saipal Himal to our south. The only person we pass is a cheery Bhotia woman smoking through a clay tube and cradling a potful of cannabis.

An hour later, in weak sunlight, we stop by a rocky overhang. Evening is coming on. We munch on cheese and biscuits, and Iswor dozes. Idly I spread a map on the ground, trying to locate our position on a grander scale: Dehra Dun...Lucknow...Ladakh in the north...Lhasa...Delhi...Then, with a shock, just beyond the border in India, I glimpse the name. Naini Tal! It strikes me with a strange, sad excitement. I'd sometimes wondered where it was. Eighty years ago my father had served in India as a soldier, and Naini Tal sounded through my childhood with a boundless romance. Incredulously I measure the distance again. On the map it is only a hand's breadth away from where I sit (or 140 miles, as the crow flies). Naini Tal, Bhim Tal, Chanda: they were engraved on shields beneath the mounted heads of leopards and deer in my parents' dining room. Naini Tal was the hill station from which my father had hunted big game.

I lie on the rocks, dreaming into another age. I found his hunting records preserved among early photograph albums after my mother's death. The episodes these albums embalm are, I suppose, the expected ones of their place and time: the callow young officers in pith helmets and knee-length shorts, marching in the scrublands of the Central Provinces or jokingly astride their Enfield motorbikes; the army wives and daughters in perms and cloche hats; scenes of pig-sticking and the Madras Hunt.

But my father's *shikar* records were different. In these he became solitary, perhaps himself. As early as 1925, at the age of twenty-one, he was departing alone into the jungle. The accounts of his hunting are as detailed and exact as if he were on campaign, penned in white ink on the black pages of photo albums. The hand-drawn maps—pinpointing areas of tiger, blackbuck or mouse deer—are

meticulous, even beautiful, and his observations sometimes have the near-scientific exactitude of a Victorian explorer's. The qualities that made him a wartime soldier, I realise, were first put into practice here.

Leafing through these records, I sense too the strangely intimate bond of hunter with prey, especially with the big cats—'old man stripes' he calls the tiger that eludes him, 'old man spots' the leopards he kills. Mixed with the sportsman's chivalric code—the strictly selected victims, the shame and distress at wounding—I hear the fascinated voice of the naturalist he had youthfully wanted to be. He applied an almost loving attention to the animals he was slaying: their gait, their sounds. The sharp *pook* of the sambhu and the deep, eerie *owoon* of the tiger make a noise in these pages not only for their significance to the hunter but as phenomena in themselves.

My father grew up in another age. Game was fairly plentiful in India then, and its killing accepted. The deer and pig he shot were eaten round the campfire, and leopards threatened local livestock and even children. Yet sometimes I struggle to understand. I gaze at the young man, my father, posed unsmiling above his kill. A great black bear is sprawled like a soft toy before him, its legs stiff in death; he squats above a seven-foot leopard carcass, or sits on the haunch of a dead bison with his Winchester against his knees. But the photographs are no more than blown-up snapshots, taken by his tracker, and his face looks less resolved than I ever remember it, and I do not know him.

Was it easier, in those times, to kill? Once, while he was hunting leopard, he wrote, 'A fine male bear came through the jungle from behind, and stood on a rock, all four feet together, sniffing the air very suspiciously. He appeared pretty silently without any previous warning, as is usually the case. Finally he came forward a little way, darted back, and then walked off at an angle from my tree. This necessitated a hurried shot in the kidneys, when the poor creature started whimpering like a human child. Two more hurried shots put him out of his misery.'

As a boy I liked to lie on this bear—it had been turned into a rug by then, complete with stuffed head—and to rest my face on its own.

For my father, the terrain around Naini Tal rose steeply eastward around minor Ganges tributaries before reaching the Karnali, where I now lie in the sun. He described it as 'rolling tree jungle', reaching to thick pine forest, and it was here that he shot the huge leopard that snarled for sixty years on my parents' dining room wall. He was only sad, he wrote, that my mother did not witness the kill—he had been married three years by then. The month before, with my mother Evelyn crouched in the dark beside him, he had shot a leopard near Hyderabad. He wrote simply: 'Took neck shot. Although many dead leaves, no sound. Eve very thrilled.'

But she secretly recoiled. Animals were always close to her. Even on her wedding day she had a pet Dalmatian on a silk leash. In India she thrilled to the adventure, but hated the killing. Sometimes, torn by disloyalty, she hoped his bullet would miss. All this he never knew. Back in England, the low Tudor walls of our house sprouted a stuffed wildlife that made me dizzy with excitement as a boy. Five leopards and two bears gaped from the walls or spread over the floor. A chital master stag with three-foot antlers hung above one stairway; a wolf grinned in the back lavatory; from upstairs passages the gentle eyes of chausingha and chinkara gazelles enchanted my sister Carol. Hugest of all, the taxidermised head of a bison over-hung one fireplace. My father had felled it at some risk, with a single hard-nose cartridge to the brain. 'A fine old bull, 17 years old,' he recorded, 'though the horns unfortunately were much worn. No grazing teeth at all. Covered him with brambles, and returned to camp singing sweetly.' In time the great beast threatened posthumously to tear down the fireplace wall, and was exiled to the garage. From there, years later, somebody stole him.

Yet my father, I suspect was not a born hunter. Once or twice in his journal he simply doesn't fire, just watches the animal move splendidly away, and cannot explain himself. In middle age,

although living in the Sussex countryside, he gave up shooting altogether. He preferred to walk in the woodlands and observe the calls and flight of birds. He would return glowing to report a cock pheasant glittering by a sunset field, or the zigzag trajectory of a snipe. The Indian trophies remained on the walls, although my mother never cared for them. But she knew better than I what they meant to him, and she never hinted her misgiving, so that in my adult eyes they became her secret gift to him.

My father neither boasted nor apologised for them. Compared to the monotonous inevitability of the abattoir, he might have said, the sporting rifle was a fine thing. In his journals he wrote that the jungle taught him three lessons: patience, endurance, and the ability to survive disappointment. In time he would need them all.

The Indian foothills steepen near the Nepalese border, and the people change. The mustachioed, mahogany faces of trackers and beaters that stare from my father's snapshots are replaced by paler, trimmer men. Towards sunset, as Iswor and I approach the village of Kermi, we are overtaken by youths indistinguishable from Tibetans, by broad-faced women with centrally parted hair and shining pigtailed. I had expected the Bhotia inhabitants, low caste and isolated, to be poorer than the Thakuri, but instead the village looks happier, its stone houses built firm against the hillside, Maoist slogans dimming on their walls, and the men who greet us are alert and soft-spoken. The Thakuri downriver, seems, pride themselves on caste, but it is the despised and stranded Bhotia who are forced into greater trading enterprise. Or so Iswor tells me.

Close by the village, to my astonishment, we cross a stream whose waters flow warm against our hands, and bluish smoke drifts in the gully above. Curious, we follow the path up, and soon the stink of sulphur rises above green-tinted rocks. A young woman is bathing in the strange river, naked to the waist, and turns from us unperturbed. We reach a clearing where the stream is boiling hot to the touch. The frames of rotten beds stretch over it, and the banks are scattered with palliasses of disintegrated brushwood, burnt yellow by the fumes. In January, a farmer tells us, villagers come out and sleep for nights on end above the vaporous river—it boosts their health in winter, they say—then bathe each morning in the freezing springs nearby.

We camp a mile beyond, where Ram, the cook, who has long preceded us, pitches my tent. This regimen will be repeated many nights. Ram, who has the lungs of a mountaineer, disappears every morning over the track ahead of us, until we discover him at evening on level camping ground, with our tents pitched and a crude supper on the boil. Tonight too he has found a Thakuri horse drover who will accompany us to the frontier: a shaggy, silent man named Dhabu, who rarely takes his eyes from me. We eat all together in a half-built stone hut where they lay out their sleeping bags among a litter of aluminium pots and pans. Iswor lights candles in the crevices of the walls, while Ram serves up noodles and tinned tuna from an ancient gas stove labelled 'Quality 3'.

At sunset the temperature plummets and a wind blows through the empty window frames and snuffs the candles one by one. But we are in high spirits, everyone glad of Dhabu's grey stallion cropping the weeds outside. Like my father, I am happy in these solitudes, sleeping in the pure air above the great river. Iswor and Ram, fellow Tamangs, talk non-stop in the soft Nepali that I strain hopelessly to understand, while Dhabu crouches in the darkest corner, tongue-tied, watching me. As the candles gutter, their faces darken and simplify. I rouse myself at last and go out to my tent, where I empty my backpack and try to write by torchlight. Instead, withdrawn into my sleeping bag, oblivious of the rock under my spine, I drop into sleep.

Hours later, I am woken by a snuffling and nudging at the canvas against my head. Crawling from my sleeping bag, too tired to be alarmed, I open my tent flap on a huge, stooping head with red-

tasselled ears. Somebody's yak has wandered down from Kermi in the starlight, lost.

CHAPTER THREE

Overnight the rain has cleaned the earth, blowing lightly up the valley from the east, then receding at dawn. From the track below rise the shouts and whistles of traders, driving their packhorses towards Simikot. I emerge from my tent to a sky washed clear. The wind has gone. Birds are singing in the shrubs. Ahead the river winds between mountain spurs that recede and overlap ever fainter, before misting away through gullies dense with deciduous forest. The water sounds below like smothered talking. Files of solitary pines patrol the hilltops above. And the last horizon to which the river points far away under high cirrus cloud—seals the sky in a glistening, snow-lit wall to which we are unimaginably going.

Ram and Iswor crouch alternately at my tent flap at sunrise, bringing lukewarm coffee, a bowl of shaving water, a breakfast of chapati and jam. They treat me with dutiful reserve. They wash in a freezing rivulet. Within half an hour the horse is laden with rope-lashed tents and ground-sheets and blackened kitchen ware, and we are moving into the dawn.

This is the hour of elation. You fancy you are walking into a pristine land. There is no sign, for a while, that it has ever been peopled. Your steps fall light. The trees chatter with birdsong and the river invisible below, roars in its green chasms. It will be an hour, perhaps, before your body or mind habituates. You go as if dreaming. Rock pigeons are flitting between cliff crevices below, and the sun climbs warm behind you.

The terrain looks thin-covered, yet wherever the valley sides ease out of sheer rock, tremendous trees take hold. Firs and hundred-foot blue pines bank up with cypress and poplar in precipitous tiers and weeping spruces thrust along the middle slopes. Soon we are among them, ascending in their shadow. As we toil up close to 10,000 feet, the heights that circle round us darken, crows croak from the pine tops and we are tramping among powder-grey boulders. A smiling woman passes by us, led by a youth. She is lovely, and mad, her ears hung with gold. They are gone before we can speak with them. The pines look diseased around us. They die upright, leafless and charred-looking, their stripped branches all intact, like ruined totem poles. A small village is here, whose terraces of buckwheat and potatoes shelve down to the river. Its people fell the pines for trade, and fill me with misgiving for these near-untouched forests.

We are entering the mountains as if following a jagged knife thrust. The smallest earth tremor, I feel, will snuff us out. Rather than making height, we are going deep. Whenever the valley walls part the pinnacles of ice-bound mountains gleam beyond, and razor-sharp palisades, scarred with snow melt, stream up into powder-puff clouds. Such views grow hypnotic, especially, in the valley cleft ahead. I wait for any change in its parapets, any sign of a breach into Tibet. But they shift with the twisting river like stage scenery, as if conspiring in the old mystique of Tibet as an inaccessible otherworld.

I am travelling with this mystique myself, I know. It has grown out of childhood, and adolescent reading. This looking-glass Tibet is a realm of ancient learning lost to the rest of the world, ruled by a lineage of monks who are reincarnations of divinity. Recessed beyond the greatest mountain barrier on earth, in plateaux of cold purity, it floats in its own time. It is a land forbidden to intruders not by human agency but by some mystical interdiction. So it resonates like the memory of something lost, a survival from a purer time, less a country than a region in the mind. Perhaps it holds the keys to the afterlife.

The source of these imaginings is a complex one. The tiny handful of early European travellers

Tibet brought back contradictory records, portraying a land of faith and squalor, ruled by a lama elite at once oppressive and benign. Morality coexisted confusingly with idleness and rank superstition. As Tibet's Buddhist isolation deepened into the nineteenth century, infected by Chinese xenophobia and an isolationist Nepal, Europeans could enter it only by subterfuge, often in disguise. The few who did so created a country—refracted through Victorian eyes—peopled by pious primitives steeped in magic and sexual depravity (polyandry was rife) and so perverse that the only wheels they permitted were those for generating prayer.

Then, towards the end of the century, just as European scholarship began to grapple with a more porous Tibet, a cloud of spiritual expectancy brewed up. It took bizarre forms. The notorious Madame Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society, claimed guidance from a lost Atlantean kingdom in Tibet—a brotherhood later exposed as nonexistent. Soon Tibet was rumoured a laboratory of occult miracles, where the paranormal was studied as a science. Its monks performed prodigies of telepathy and sonic power, moving rocks by their voices alone. Its yogis levitated and flew. Its statues spoke. The *lung-pa*, 'wind men', after extremes of meditation, could speed like ghosts across the landscape, barely touching the ground. And all through the land were hidden sacred and prophetic texts, buried by great masters centuries before, to be unearthed only when the time was ripe. The country's mystique touched even Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*; and when Conan Doyle was forced by public demand to resurrect Sherlock Holmes from the dead, he opted for Tibet as the country in which Holmes might temporarily but convincingly have disappeared.

The fantasy of Tibet as an exalted sanctuary continued far into the twentieth century, and has never quite stilled. The country's religion, which Victorians had considered a distant and decadent deviation from the Buddha's truth, was gradually hailed, on the contrary, as the refined pinnacle of a developed faith, and its scriptures as a treasure house embalmed by Tibet's isolation. The sense of a miraculously preserved past was crucial to the myth. The country had a dreamlike quality, as if time had stopped. Travellers might feel themselves re-entering childhood, or an innocent and unruly unconscious. Others likened the voyage through Tibet, for all its mountain fastness, to a descent into the underworld, and the burgeoning popularity of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, variously translated, shed its strangeness even on my own journey.

As the West reeled in disillusion through two world wars, the last strictures on Tibet faded away. It became a site of pure human longing. The name Shangri-La had entered the language through the mythic Tibetan utopia of James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon*, published in 1933, whose seers would redeem the world after its self-destruction. And something of this millennial yearning went on clinging to the country, shadowed by a foreboding at its fragility once it was exposed to the outer world.

These fantasies, of course, were distorted echoes of the earthly Tibet. The country was born in violence—most of its early kings died young—and for centuries it waged aggressive war against itself and others. In this bitter land and climate the people were prey to disease and earthquake, and within living memory worked as indentured labour for an often callous monkhood. The pious Buddhist folk whom travellers knew as gentle, cheerful and honest were haunted by evil spirits and by starvation. Even pilgrims to Kailas were sometimes so impoverished that they took to banditry, which might be punished by public mutilation.

Only after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959 did the fantasy finally fragment. After the Dalai Lama, with much of the monastic elite, fled into India and beyond, Tibet itself—while never quite emptied of sanctity in the Western mind—became a place of violated innocence, at first brutally persecuted by the Chinese, then half sanitised for the secular gaze. As its homeless Buddhism opened to the West—whether as a faith, a therapy or a fashionable cult—the country itself was lost. In exile, Tibetans looked back (if they remembered) on a land of pained wish-fulfilment.

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