Mirror of Dreams

by

Ganpat

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> " 'Ganpat' was the sobriquet the sepoys had bestowed on the Captain when, as a very callow second lieutenant, he had been posted to an Indian infantry regiment. He was long and thin, and it would have been difficult to conceive any one more unlike the conventional presentment of the jovial, pot-bellied, elephant-headed deity of good fortune known to India at large as 'Ganesh' and to the Mahrattas as 'Ganpat.' But it was the nearest his men's tongues could get to his real name, and so it stuck."
>
> —"Landgrabbing,"
> *Blackwood's Magazine*, 1916.

The Nagri Inscription below the god's picture is his name; pronounced "Gunput." He is a kindly soul and even the mouse gets a meal in his shelter.

MIRROR OF DREAMS

A STORY BY
"GANPAT"

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

NOVELS BY

"*GANPAT*"

Dainra
Mirror of Dreams
High Snow
The Voice of Dashin

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STOUGHTON
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TO
HAZEL CAMPBELL

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Mirror of Dreams

CHAPTER I DHYANAND

This is the story of Tom Carruthers, who dreamed dreams when he was a child, continued them during his schooldays, dreamed the same dreams after he had left school, and, as far as one knows, may still be dreaming them, although, having by now translated most of them into fact, possibly he has given up dreaming. During those years, really before the main part of this story opens, he found a mirror when he was wandering on the edge of Central Asia, and the finding of it was the key that opened his dream country.

It is also in some sense a portion of the story of Major John Oxley, who was a school friend of Tom Carruthers, and remained his friend ever after, although he disbelieved whole-heartedly and completely in Tom's dreams—indeed, in most of Tom's ideas, and said so flippantly and openly. Needless to say, he equally disbelieved in everything Tom thought about the queer-shaped mirror—he could not disbelieve in the thing's existence, because he saw it many times.

It is, further, the story, or extracts from the stories, of various other people of different types.

For instance, it is partly the story of Tarzi—an honest cut-throat of Turkestan—and of his friend, Tor Bez, by descent a riever and brigand, who lived in the same part of the world, although racially the latter belonged to the Indian border hills north of Peshawur. There was Jane Prentis, a spinster, who hailed from the north of England, only she followed the wrong road early in her life, and so comes into the story. Then there is a page from the story of Krishna Rao, a Hindu gentleman who had studied engineering in London, obtained a temporary commission in the Great War, stopped a couple of bullets, and got himself mentioned in despatches a few times—a very excellent example of the modern India, which dreams of combining the old virtues of that country with such good things as the West can teach it. Unfortunately, trouble had come upon him and his, and, for a time, he retired from the world that knew him. Some day he will be in the Legislative Assembly, which is our name for Parliament in India, and be a power for

good in the land. He is a cultured person, an excellent tennis player, and popular with most folk who know him, British or Indian, Mussulman, Parsi, or Hindu, as is also his attractive little wife, who speaks English like an Englishwoman, but refuses to alter her picturesque national costume, except in the minor detail of wearing Paris shoes. But this extract from his story is quite unsuitable for the civilised life of Parliaments, which do not believe in people taking the law into their own hands, even when the cumbrous edifice erected to blindfold justice fails to work. The polite, neatly dressed Krishna, who will some day make telling speeches in the Assembly, pouring buckets of horse-sense over the visionaries who think ancient countries and old peoples can be altered in shape and manners by strokes of the pen, would hardly be connected with the distinctly primitive man whom anyone who has the patience to read this story will meet in its pages.

There is also a Muhammedan or two whose actions enter into the story, not to mention a few Buddhists, such as Rinpoche, a really learned priest, who at one time, before he sought greater things, held an office of rank in the Buddhist hierarchy of monks.

Lastly, the story is particularly concerned with that foul blot on the world's fair surface—Dhyanand—an unhealthy excrescence of a kind that occasionally disfigures the face of India and so brings into disrepute the enormous mass of Hindus of all kinds who are law-abiding, kindly, well-living folk, among whom are quite a large number of proper men such as Krishna Rao or Thakur Singh, or priests of the type of Rinpoche. By birth the latter happened to be a Buddhist, but if he had been born in India he would certainly have been a Hindu priest of the best type; in fact, he said he had been one in a past life—for Buddhism, like Hinduism, believes in transmigration.

Dhyanand, perhaps, is as good a thread as any to catch hold of, if one wants to find one's way into this possibly rather intricate story in the fashion of the Greek youth, Theseus, whose lady-love threw him a skein of wool when he went into the labyrinth, to the subsequent great profit of her lover. One of the incidents from Dhyanand's varied career will serve to open this story as well as any happening from the lives of the other people who come into it.

The point that seems to be the best to select is some two years before the main action starts, perhaps eighteen to twenty months before Major John Oxley met with the one misfortune which he had never reckoned with in his scheme of life, and which, therefore, duly befell him. The locality of this particular adventure of Dhyanand's was in Northern Ladakh, where for

various reasons he happened to be, though his proper country was Southern India. The reasons were many, some connected with his own personal profit and certain grandiose schemes he was projecting, others to do with his comfort and even safety, and also, possibly, his religious prejudices, for Dhyanand, as he called himself when the story begins—he had many names at different times—had a prejudice against being hanged. He was twice born—a Brahmin by birth—and the thought of being hanged by the neck by people of lower caste under the order of the hated Indian Police offended his susceptibilities. He knew that such would be his fate on at least three counts if they caught him.

So for the moment, as he had upon occasion done before, he was sojourning in the vicinity of the Central Asian trade route which leads from Northern Ladakh over the Karakorum Mountains into the heart of Central Asia—one of the most barren bits of the world with few, often no, inhabitants, a tangle of immense mountains and glaciers and wild rock gorges, where there are no roads other than pony tracks, no telephones or telegraphs, no police or other kindred annoyances of civilisation. It had the serious disadvantage that women were few, and, such as there were, were unattractive to Dhyanand's cultured taste, a taste he had educated through the fifty years of life he had passed at the time he first appears in the story.

In nearly all civilised countries there exist a small number of people who really worship evil as evil, quite earnestly and seriously, not merely as the savage indulges in childish devil-worship. India has its share, and Dhyanand belonged to that small portion which disfigures, or rather tries to disfigure, the old and kindly Hinduism of which the essence is something entirely opposite, being concerned with the search for good. Such cults invariably tend to lust as an accompaniment to bloodshed, the two actions which, by common consensus of opinion, seem to be inseparable from the proper worship of the powers of darkness. Whatever the devotees of such cults do gain, they undoubtedly seem to obtain from their masters an inexhaustible vitality of the senses and powers mistakenly called animal, which is a libel on animals, since these are governed by laws in such matters just as strictly as decent living men. Dhyanand certainly had this vitality and used it to the utmost.

India, which is a hotch-potch of peoples and creeds and tongues, contains some three hundred and twenty million inhabitants. Census figures are hard to remember accurately, but one is probably safe in saying that at least one hundred and seventy million of these are women, and therefore Dhyanand did not hate that portion—one does not hate one's toys or those

whom one thinks can possibly be made one's toys; one may despise or torture them—Dhyanand did and had done both—but he hated no women. Of the remaining one hundred and fifty million inhabitants of India, Dhyanand disliked, despised, or hated all except a few thousand of his own type. He hated the few Europeans, he loathed the Mussulmans, and he had a solid detestation of a very large number of Hindus. And all for the same reason, to wit, that they all disapproved fiercely of the cult which Dhyanand practised, and although they might disagree among themselves over various parochial matters, politics, votes, positions, laws, money, they were quite united on the opinion of Dhyanand and that tiny fraction of India which was of his way of life.

However, he hoped that presently things would brighten, that that excellent régime in Russia would shortly upset India and overthrow his arch-enemies, the British. In the subsequent mess he trusted that the Muhammedans would probably go under and thereafter all progressive Hindus could be eliminated by various stratagems, from poison downwards, and the rest of India be brought to its proper state of obedience to him and the powers he followed. Dhyanand worked hard to that end, and it was the main reason at the moment for his being where he was, sitting in a most dilapidated shelter in the lee of a rough stone wall at Pangdongtsa in the Thalambuti ravine on the Central Asian trade route beyond the point where the so-called road leaves the last vestiges of human life in the Nubra Valley and turns east to the bleak desolation of the Upper Shyok and the Depsang plains. He was talking with his most reliable agent, one Tarzi of Khotan—a burly, Turki-speaking gentleman of Kashgaria, who was nominally a thriving Kirya Kash, owning a large caravan. Dhyanand, as a matter of fact, referred to him in private as Bakhtiyan, and sometimes they talked a strange tongue which no one else would probably have understood. But then continuity of names had never been Dhyanand's failing. They were hatching a very nice little scheme connected with a certain hidden valley which both of them knew. From Dhyanand's point of view that valley was going to be his future headquarters from which to work, since it gave convenient access to the north whereby he could keep in touch with his friends—he really considered them friends—the real Communists of Russia. Although Dhyanand recognised their limitations—it requires a superb brain to be really evil, and Dhyanand had one—he recognised the goodwill they displayed in pursuing the aims he himself followed. In time, if they acquired the knowledge which he possessed, they might get nearer to his standard. The valley also held gold, as he had learned. That was essential to him to possess, and would require a little elimination among the foolish folk in the

valley. Fortunately they had accepted Dhyanand whole-heartedly, and he had attained to some eminence among them, for he had a great knowledge of many things—not the least useful of which had been his vast erudition concerning the more esoteric details of what is vaguely termed theosophy. Dhyanand rarely smiled, but his face brightened as he thought of that little colony of earnest men and women who looked up to him verily as one of the great Masters to come. With one exception, the women did so even more than the men. He was a great bull of a man, most powerfully built, of fine features and presence, with a silver tongue.

Tarzi had also been there—a fervent convert from Islam to the true religion. He had been exemplary in his bearing. Tarzi, who was more genial than Dhyanand, smiled frankly at the thought, the more so as he flattered himself that even Dhyanand believed in him. He also intended profit in that valley; Dhyanand, who regarded Tarzi as a fool, thought that a little gold was all that he really wanted. Not that he intended him to get it in the end. In actual fact, Tarzi proposed to take all the gold and everything else and to slit Dhyanand's throat into the bargain when the Hindu had served his turn.

For the present, however, they were loyal allies, and when Dhyanand broached the subject of threatened danger to himself, Tarzi was all attention. He thought Dhyanand had been a little anxious the last two nights, and to-day at Pangdongsta was obviously on the *qui vive* for something or other.

"I am certain that I am right, Bakhtiyan," said Dhyanand. "The man is something other than what he appears to be. Moreover, I have a feeling that I have seen him somewhere before. He is said to have come up from Kashmir in the tail of the Set Goculdass and I do not trust Goculdass over much—not, of course, that he knows anything. But I know he wants to stand well with the Government, and quite likely he has been approached to give this man a place as one of his servants and told that it will be noted in his favour if the man is able to do his work. It would cost Goculdass nothing, he risks nothing and has naught to do himself. On the other hand, if successful, then he has a claim to some mark of favour—I know he would lick a Feringhi's boots for one of the smaller titles which they shower out on occasions of festivities."

"But what could one man hope to do?" queried Tarzi.

"Much, if he definitely located me. You know as well as I do how the man who killed the trader, Dalgleish, was tracked right across Central Asia by a single British officer, and had to commit suicide in a Chinese prison to save himself being brought back to be hanged."

"True, Dhyanand."

Tarzi remembered that tale, albeit it was an old one. It had considerably enhanced British prestige over half a continent.

"Moreover, in finding me the man might also come to know of the valley, and that would not be well—in no way would it be well."

Tarzi considered this seriously. It would certainly not be well. He wanted no one poking round there until he had, as he expressed it, squeezed the lemon dry. Moreover, he did not want Dhyanand to be caught or forced to flee. There was work for Dhyanand to do first to clear the ground for him, Tarzi.

"That is certainly serious, Dhyanand," he agreed. "What like is this man and why do you suspect?"

"A lean, thin man, tallish, a Rajput, I should say. He speaks somewhat as though his mouth were full, and appears to be rather unintelligent. This is obviously a blind. Moreover, only last night I observed him not so far from our things; he moved away when I came out, but I recognised him. He is able to write, for I saw him scanning a piece of paper the other day, a letter I dropped on purpose, one of no import. Later he brought it to me and said he had seen me drop it, which was true. I think he came to see me more closely and to speak with me. To-night we shall see, for I believe he seeks to hear us talk together. I propose, therefore, that we give the men a sheep for dinner, and let none of them be about here so as to leave the road open. We two will sit and talk together in Hindi that all may hear with ease. One desiring to eavesdrop would come behind that wall where usually Ahmad sleeps. He will not be there to-night if the men have a feast. I will arrange a simple means whereby I shall know if anyone comes there, and when I give you the signal we will begin to talk about the arms—discreetly, of course, but sufficiently clearly that one listening who suspects something will immediately take greater interest. Thereafter you will get up and say you will bring the list to read it to me and go out. The man, if he be there, will lie close, awaiting your return to hear the details, but you will go round behind quietly and fall upon him and I will come directly I hear you speak."

"It might succeed," said Tarzi reflectively. "And after?"

"Rope were simplest," said Dhyanand, with a shrug. "Cleanly also."

Incidentally, it was a favoured method in use among the more exotic and old-fashioned portion of Dhyanand's cult.

That evening they carried out their little scheme. Tarzi's men rejoiced in the gift of a whole sheep and made merry over the fires, for they would be on scanty fare for the next fortnight in the utterly uninhabited tract ahead, and it behoved them to loosen their belts and stuff while they might.

A thin, wiry Hindu looked upon the occasion as favourable when he worked himself noiselessly up towards the stone wall at the back of the shelter Dhyanand had erected for himself for the night. He cursed very silently at a small pile of brushwood which caught him, and which he had to push out of the way before he could reach the wall itself, through whose chinks he could see the light on the further side and hear two men talking, in one of whom he was deeply interested. They were talking in Hindustani, too, which made it easier. The man smiled quietly as he pressed himself to the wall, thankful that the slight noise of the brushwood had attracted no attention. Then, as he listened, he realised that he was, indeed, in luck, for they were talking openly now, confirming his suspicions about their plans. He wished that he had not despatched the short letter he had sent off only the previous day by a sure hand to those who sent him—it could have been far fuller to-morrow. Then Tarzi got up, saying he was going to fetch a list of the arms from his shelter just opposite and check it over with Dhyanand, and the hidden man realised that he was going to get the very kernel of the matter. Maybe he would not have to go much farther. He heard the Turki stumbling out in his heavy clothes, then a rustling in the shelter, as though Dhyanand were also getting out some papers. He lifted himself a little to see better, and the next thing he knew was that he was crushed to the ground by a heavy weight while two hands like steel had fastened about his throat, effectually muffling the least sound. Tarzi could be very quiet in his movements when he chose. The Hindu fought desperately—he was a tough man and wiry—but he had no chance even before Dhyanand appeared, ran a rope round his ankles and then caught his hands, bending them back behind him until one of the bones snapped, and his wrists were fastened together. He lost consciousness just as a thin cord replaced the hands round his throat.

Dhyanand and Tarzi considered the man when they had hauled him quietly into cover. He was still unconscious, but on the point of coming to. They bound a thick cloth about his mouth as a precaution.

"No, I cannot recognise him," said Dhyanand at last to Tarzi, who was busily engaged in running over the prisoner, on whom, so far, he found nothing. He stripped him clean and examined his garments. The man, who had come to by now, watched him quietly, despite the pain of his broken left arm. The only thing at the moment was silence, for even if he could call,

there were none to help—he was playing a lone hand. With a thin knife-blade Tarzi slit the various seams of the garments, and the prisoner shivered a little involuntarily, for the night was very cold. In the distance he could hear the cheerful talk of Tarzi's men around their fires. Possibly he also shivered somewhat when the man examined his loincloth, a garment that the Hindu only takes off to replace immediately by another. He hoped that might escape. Tarzi, however, was thorough, and from the seams of it dropped some little slips of oilskin and silk, hidden away with some small squares of fine paper carefully rolled up—such things as men might use who desired to send messages by hidden routes.

"I thought so," said Dhyanand, with satisfaction, after scrutinising the papers to see if there were anything written upon them. They were blank, however. "Loose his feet, Tarzi."

These last remarks were in the strange tongue. It is sometimes easier to make a man walk than to carry him. Probably the Hindu knew what was coming as he was forced out into the night, but he was a man of noted courage, and he was glad now that he had sent off that other message. It gave some definite news, and he knew now that he would have no chance to send another.

Pandongtsa camping-ground was some way off when they finally stopped near some big rocks surrounding a softer patch of ground a good distance from anyone. Dhyanand carried a couple of mattocks. Tarzi sheathed the knife, which he had kept pressed into the man's ribs, and drew the cord tight again about his throat, while Dhyanand knocked his feet from under him so that he fell on his face.

"I would like to have had more time—we might have made him speak," remarked Dhyanand, as he knelt down over the man. "But it must be done quickly, before the men come back. Hold his legs."

Dhyanand slipped back his long sleeves to free his muscular arms and twisted the cords about his hand. Then he put out his great strength—the body between his knees gave a convulsive jerk that nearly pulled it free of Tarzi's grip, and then lay still. Dhyanand smiled a little, thinking that he had not lost his skill, despite lack of practice of late years. He gathered the cords into one hand and felt for the man's pulse. It had stopped. Dhyanand, among his other accomplishments, was a doctor, and he was not likely to make a mistake in the matter.

He loosed the cords and stood up to receive Tarzi's honest appreciation.

“Art really skilful, Dhyanand,” the latter remarked as he picked up a mattock and began to dig, Dhyanand following his example. The hole should really have been dug ready before, but there had been no time. It was hard work, of a type which Dhyanand did not love, but he stuck to it manfully until the last earth was rammed back and the ground round about cleared so as to show no traces. In any case, the next snow would hide anything, and the clouds had been banking up heavily; indeed, snow fell before morning, and the journey over the pass promised to be bad.

The Set Goculdass wondered what had happened to his recently engaged servant, but as the early morning had been rather a rush to get over the pass before the snow got too heavy, he thought he would find him on the further side, and, when he did not, presumed the man had come to grief in the snow. But one could not hold up a caravan for a thing like that on the Central Asian road; the snow was now heavy and likely to continue.

Two days later Dhyanand, after crossing the Shyok fords, sat in his shelter looking through his things, and became aware that he had mislaid a certain mirror on which he set some store for its mysterious powers, in which he firmly believed. He wondered, at first, if he had lost it in the snow. Then he remembered the passage of the fords where, being absorbed in thought, he had gone too far down-stream and had been lucky to escape with his life, thanks to a quickly flung rope by one of Tarzi’s men. He usually carried that mirror on him, and, presumably, it must have fallen out in the water. He looked at the Shyok torrent and realised that the mirror had gone for good, and was extremely annoyed about it. But he was philosopher enough to see that there was nothing to be done in the matter.

CHAPTER II JOHN OXLEY

Major John Oxley emerged from a solemn-looking house in Harley Street with an air of determined dejection upon his usually cheerful face, and there was a certain irresolution in his step as of one who does not quite know where to go. His small, rather dapper figure and brisk step were usually marked by a crisp definiteness of purpose, but to-day, for some reason, he had the appearance of one who does not know his own mind, and he stood upon the top step as the neat maid shut the door behind him, looking, for him, most hopelessly irresolute.

The trouble at that particular moment was that he really did not know his own mind—that portion of his make-up had, in fact, let him down, and this was entirely perplexing and most frightening to a man who all his life had banked on that particular asset of his, one which he had found in the hard world of work to be in many ways infinitely superior to the similar article of equipment of most other men, and the last portion of his being he had ever expected to play him false. If his lungs or his legs, or even his heart, had refused to function in proper fashion he would have taken it philosophically, but that his mental machinery should grate like an uncared-for gear-box—this was so utterly unexpected and unthought of, that for the moment it defeated him completely.

Mechanically he settled his hat at a shade finer angle, pulled out his cigarette-case and lit a cigarette. An ultra-fashionably dressed damsel coming up the steps to the great man's door looked at him, and for once Major Oxley—always ready to gaze at anything so attractive—stared straight through her into space. Then, as she pressed the bell viciously—she was not accustomed to men looking through her—he hurried down the steps on to the pavement, walked twenty yards, and stood still to reflect again.

What was it the doctor had said? The same old nonsense that two others had told him, that his own doctor had so insistently, and so fruitlessly, impressed upon him for the last six months, and that finally his chief at the War Office had made a last effort to drive home, before, in mean and traitorous fashion, making a disciplinary matter of it and, with the connivance of those low fellows in the Medical Directorate, arranged this interview in Harley Street, and, without asking Oxley's permission, had written out a draft order granting him one year's leave on medical grounds.

After a short three-quarters of an hour the pince-nezed, thin-faced, grey-haired gentleman in the house he had just left had told him, coldly and firmly, that he was to go away—he had intimated brusquely that he did not care where Major Oxley went—the further the better; that he was to sleep ten hours out of every twenty-four and twelve on Sundays; that the rest of the day could be spent in any form of physical exercise he liked, the more strenuous the better, provided that it did not prevent him sleeping, which for the first month or so it might do if he were not extremely careful. He was to read as much as he pleased of the lightest and cheapest kind of fiction he could lay hands on, but on no account to read detective stories, nor touch any kind of work at all—that he could eat or drink anything he pleased, but that, for the first week, he was to cut his tobacco by fifty per cent., and thereafter progressively up to eighty per cent. of his present allowance—the balance of twenty per cent. remaining would be quite enough to send any ordinary strong man to his grave in reasonably quick time. The doctor was Scotch and a non-smoker. Lastly, he was to thank Providence that he was a soldier who could be forcibly restrained from work and not a civilian over whom no such wholesome discipline exists. Consequently, the doctor trusted that he would never see him again, and that, after a year or eighteen months, Major Oxley would resume the usual current of the normal soldier's existence, having learnt his lesson. The fee would be three guineas—thank you.

Oxley, who had not slept ten hours in the last eight days, and that only with the aid of drugs, was still able to smile a rather wan smile at the recollection of the way in which he had been handled; he was still man enough to realise that he had broken one of the commandments in overworking for about seven years on end, and must, therefore, take his inevitable punishment with as much of a grin as he could muster. He must further resign himself to the loss of the job which he had first created and then filled with an ability and zeal which his few-worded chief—behind his back, of course—called entirely superhuman. He had, moreover, hung on until the bitter end, and only when the last voluminous reports and schemes had been handed in did his tired grasp relax for an instant, only to find that it had gone completely and refused to come back. The machine appeared to have seized from hot bearings and, as far as he could be thankful for anything, Oxley was thankful to find that there was hope for the future. The Harley Street man had thrown that in *gratis*—perfect recovery was certain, in time, provided he did implicitly what he was told to do now and for the next year or so.

From force of habit, he wandered towards Oxford Street to take a bus for Whitehall until he remembered that strong-minded men—his painstaking, excellent G.S.O.3 primarily—would eject him forcibly if he appeared in the little room which had been his so long. Possibly his chief would interfere and put him under arrest and have him marched under escort to his club, to be fed and put to bed, or taken to Victoria Station to spend the week-end at the chief's place in Sussex under the firm supervision of Mrs. Chief, who would certainly make him have breakfast in bed and force food upon him every two hours.

Where should he go so as to kill time until he could try to sleep? And then he bethought himself of Mrs. Carruthers' hospitable roof in Chelsea, where she lived, sometimes alone and sometimes with Oxley's schoolday friend, her son Tom. He hailed a passing taxi and tried to stimulate his numbed brain with further tobacco.

At the same moment his chief hung up the telephone receiver after a few minutes' brisk chat with the same house in Harley Street and heaved a sigh —he was alone—as he penned an order appointing Oxley's successor. Three days later various international gentlemen—mostly of Hebraic extraction—read with great thankfulness that Major Oxley's place would know him no more in the Intelligence Department at the War Office, and passed the good news by devious channels to the Middle East, where other gentlemen wept tears of relief. One of them went so far as to buy two extra expensive dancing-girls as a thank-offering.

"Got the sack," said Major Oxley laconically, as he was ushered into Mrs. Carruthers' morning-room. "Going to take the dole. Got a year to kick my heels in, during which, if anyone sees me within ten miles of any form of work, I am to be shot at dawn."

"I'm so glad," said Mrs. Carruthers, a brisk, white-haired little dame, quite unfeelingly.

Oxley subsided into a chair, and Mrs. Carruthers looked him over as she pushed away the letter she had been writing.

"Extraordinarily glad!" she reiterated. "It's just about time."

"Rub it in!" retorted Oxley. "I came here for sympathy and drink, and you offer neither. I shall go and drown myself off the Embankment, I think, only the water looks muddy and cold to-day. I'd better wait until Monday—perhaps it'll be fine then."

"Yes, *do* wait until Monday," said Mrs. Carruthers soothingly. "The paper says it's going to be fine over the week-end. Besides, that will give me time to get some black for the funeral. Beer, I suppose?" she added, as the maid came in in response to the bell she had pressed.

"A good, honest, plebeian taste in these democratic days. Moreover, the doctor told me alcohol kills more slowly than tobacco."

"What else did he say, John?"

"Merely what you and Tom and everybody else has been saying. Lead a dog's life—eating, sleeping, and taking that loathsome drug—exercise. I—me—that have jeered at my fellow-men on the subject of exercise ever since the time at school when I found that I was not constructed to hit a ball with a stick like such creatures as Tom. Where is it?"

"Out, buying camp kit, I think," replied his mother, indicating Oxley as the person to whom the beer was to be offered—a quite unnecessary proceeding, since the servants knew Oxley well, had known him, in fact, for very many years. The cook, indeed, could remember him as a small, quaint boy with a dislike for games, quite different from Master Tom, who radiated athletic glory.

"Then he goes definitely?" said Oxley, considering the amber liquid which the maid poured out for him.

"Quite definitely."

"How long for?"

"A year at least," said Mrs. Carruthers with a little sigh. "Possibly more. One never knows. He'll tell you all about it after lunch. What are you doing this week-end?"

"Nothing," replied Oxley truthfully, and then suddenly realised just what that meant. "Nothing for a whole blooming year—just stagnate—go to some loathly health resort and play some loathsome game." He foresaw himself conscientiously learning golf or some other form of ball-chasing in an effort to avoid going mad from boredom. "Nothing!" he reiterated, and his lips twitched a little.

"Near the breaking-point," commented Mrs. Carruthers mentally, and subconsciously began to think out meals such as might be suitable to a sick man of his type. Then aloud:

"You'd better send for your things after lunch, then. Simmons can get them from the club porter if you phone what you want. There's no need for

you to go back yourself; you told me often that they know your ways and can pack a week-end suitcase for you."

It seemed to her that his club was the last place he ought to be in this week-end, wandering around like a ghost, answering sympathetic inquiries about his health and his plans.

"And you and Tom can take the car down somewhere to-morrow for the day and get out into the fresh air. He's been in too much of late; it'll do you both good."

Oxley caught at it as a drowning man catches at a straw. The one thing he wanted to do was to get away from his kind for the moment, from the men who led the same life as he had led, who lived in offices and did the work that he was now forbidden to do. He was sensitive and shrank from all their well-meant inquiries and sympathy—felt, moreover, that he would be looked upon as something rather queer, somebody whose mind was not functioning as it should. And the average man's mind never fails to function in its inefficient fashion. He can speak with tender pride of a sluggish liver or a halting leg—but a mind! It was one degree worse than doubtful nerves, unless, perhaps, they were the same thing. And Oxley thought of the unfortunates who had gone under during the war, not victims of respectable bullets or shells or gas or even decent germs of disease, but of strange, unaccountable lesions somewhere inside which unfitted them to do what he considered real work—brain work—the work that distinguishes the man from the horse or dog.

Undoubtedly the Carruthers' house was the place for the week-end while he considered with what the future might be filled. Moreover, in listening to Tom he would forget about himself, because he knew Tom would talk to him —Tom always did—and he knew that he would disagree more or less flatly with nine-tenths of what Tom said, and that is entirely healthy. Then, perhaps, he would sleep and his rather numb mind would get number and more restfully dog-like, instead of suddenly coming to life and spinning in ill-balanced circles, as it had done every night for the last week. He might even sleep without any of those little tablets.

He burbled meaningless thanks, and Mrs. Carruthers renewed her thoughts about the breaking-point and thanked God for the possession of a little house and a small car whereby she was able, upon occasion, to help those who were down and out, either financially or in any other of the various complicated ways which modern life brings in its train.

Thus, when Tom came back from his morning with various outfitters—sellers of tents and camp gear—fitters-out of wanderers in strange places—with long lists of orders and schedules of stores, he found John Oxley dozing in an armchair, the first fifteen minutes' undrugged sleep that Oxley had had for over a fortnight, while his mother sat knitting opposite and put her finger on her lips as he entered.

Then, after lunch, the two men sprawled in chairs in Tom's room, absorbing pipes in restful quiet, so that John Oxley almost went to sleep and began to feel that perhaps some day life would come all right again and he might regain what he held to be his manhood, the power of highly concentrated brain work, and which he was almost convinced that he had lost for ever only last night. He listened dreamily to Tom talking of his arrangements for his projected trip—as yet only of initial routes and stores and tents and the like—concrete, rather non-committal details, so far, with nothing much of the purpose that lay behind them.

Even so there was just enough material for John to argue. Sizes of tents and strength of following, for instance. John was narrow-mindedly convinced that he had forgotten more than Tom had ever known about travel, and considered his friend to be an idle sybarite.

"The proper way to travel," he emphasised, "is with what you, or you and your horse, can carry—a small suitcase in Europe. I've been to Constantinople and up and down the Balkans heaps of times with that—a pair of decent saddle-bags and a couple of blankets, if you're going off the beaten route. I did half Kurdistan on that scale and lived like a fighting cock. You can always get shelter and food from the local scallywags. What's the good of cumbering yourself with store-boxes and a string of servants and buying pack-animals? You lose all the fun of it. Go and live with the people and eat their food and share their life."

"Yes, and catch their bugs," retorted Tom. "But, anyway, there aren't any people where I'm going, so that scheme doesn't work. At least, in most of the country there aren't supposed to be any people. And even if there were, the white man doesn't thrive on the kind of food they eat."

"Rot!" said Oxley, with a sudden spark of his old vitality coming back. "I've lived on Arab grub for weeks on end—eaten with my fingers—and flourished on it. You soon get accustomed to it and like it."

"Arabs and Kurds aren't Ladakhi Thibetans," said Tom. "Moreover, you've got an ostrich stomach—I haven't."

And then, of course, they argued indefinitely over Tom's kit—the futility or necessity of sleeping-bags and Whymper tents and the like. Oxley advocated a poncho, which, he explained, was a sort of blanket with a hole in the middle, through which you put your head, and which served as bedding, waterproof, or tent, as desired. Nothing further was required by any reasonable man, unless he happened to be going to the North Pole.

And as for servants, what good were they? Couldn't Tom cook his own food over three stones? Oxley had done that for days on end, it seemed, in the desert. He was apparently masquerading as a sheikh or a Buddhoo or something in that line with quite a lot of nasty-minded people looking for him. They looked for him so hard at one period that, in self-defence, he had been forced to join in with them and help in the hunt for himself. It was a lengthy and vastly amusing story with a lot of side-lights on Middle Eastern morals mixed up with the adventures, or rather misadventures, of a plump and comely Armenian lady of kind heart, but easy manners and Eastern untrustworthiness, wherein for a short period Oxley had successfully sustained the rôle of a Syrian dancing-girl. He was short and slim with just the hands and feet for the part.

That night Oxley slept for at least five hours, and woke up in the morning with the feeling that the doctors had talked even more nonsense than he thought. Whereupon Tom put him into the car and removed him for the day into woods of beech and oak and such things entirely different from offices in London. By the time they returned, Oxley was convinced he was so completely restored that before going to bed he played with a cipher for twenty minutes. At the end of that time the twinges at the back of his head told him that he was a fool, and he cast the papers into the fire and went to bed, didn't get to sleep for three hours, and resolved, finally, to be good and obey orders.

Even so, in the morning, after a cold bath and a hearty breakfast, he looked more like himself than he had for weeks, and Tom felt that he might safely broach his project, which he did as Oxley sprawled in the armchair in his room, smoking the first tobacco of the day—a considerable advance on last week, when the prelude to the most feeble breakfasts had been half a dozen cigarettes.

"What are you going to do?" asked Tom as he sorted books, assisted, or rather hindered, by a large Airedale puppy, a year or two old, who sometimes answered to his name of "Tosh."

“God knows!” said Oxley. “Switzerland for a start, I think—probably walk for a bit, perhaps even go in for that disgusting form of hard labour known as climbing. It has the saving grace of being one degree less inhuman and less detestable than trying to hit a ball.”

“Come and walk with me,” said Tom. “I’m going to walk for miles and possibly climb a certain amount. Much better for you than Switzerland, where you’ll meet all sorts of people you know and don’t really want to see. You’ve never seen my sybaritic corner of the world, where people have luggage and pack-animals and servants. It’ll broaden your narrow little views on the art of travel.”

Oxley looked at him.

“Mean it, Tom? What the devil good will I be to you? You know my views of things—you know I disagree with nine-tenths of your ways of doing things on trek. Also you’re off on one of your hare-brained stunts in search of something or somewhere that doesn’t exist, and I shall chuck buckets of cold water horse-sense over it until such remnants of mind as you’ve got will force you to come home again.”

“Not a bit. I always welcome cold water—keeps one braced up and the faculties going. Either you disagree with me and so strengthen my belief in my own views, or else you come to agree with me eventually, and then I know that I’m even righter than I thought I was.” Tom stopped for a minute to light his pipe. “Come along and get out of your Middle East grooves—disappear for a year or so.”

“What *are* you going for?” queried Oxley. “Let’s know the worst, and then I’ll see.”

“I know quite well what I’m going for, but I don’t quite know where I’m going or what’s going to happen or whether I shall find it. But I’m going to connect up some disconnected links in a chain, or try to. Sort of thing you’ve crocked yourself trying to do, only there aren’t any offices or secret codes—it’s all open air with nobody to worry you and no report to make at the end of it. Once upon a time I had dreams . . .” Tom spoke rather diffidently now.

“Meaning you’ve never woken up; we all know that.”

“. . . had dreams,” continued Tom imperturbably. “Then I found an old mirror and saw things from my dreams in it.”

Oxley leant forward and tried to imitate the Harley Street manner.

" 'Sleep ten hours a day and twelve on Sundays. Eat and drink anything you like, but cut down tobacco.' Poor old bird, I didn't know it was as bad as that. And you really look quite well. Have you seen anybody about it yet?"

"And then I actually found one of the things that had been in the dreams and the mirror . . . that peak over there." He pointed to a photograph of a magnificent rock peak with a great hanging glacier on one face.

Oxley turned his head with a curious, bird-like twist to look at the picture.

"Nasty, cold-looking place. Looks as if there wasn't a pub for miles. Are you going there again?"

"And once I saw a ghost. . . ."

"You couldn't have, because there aren't any such things. I should burn those books over there on mysticism and muck generally, if I were you, and read the murder columns in the daily papers or some healthy literature of that sort. *News of the World* is as good value as you can buy when you're out of sorts."

"And lastly I got an invitation to go to a monastery which I don't think anybody's ever visited."

Oxley threw up his hands and subsided into his chair with a groan.

"You'll be turning Roman before you know where you are—not that I mind them. Most monks I know seem cheerful souls with cultivated palates and sense enough to drink wine instead of whisky. I respect the Church of Rome for showing a lot of horse-sense in matters like that. But you won't last five minutes, Tom—they'll chuck you out for lack of common sanity, and you'll float round again till you become a medium or something. I'd no idea it was as serious as this."

"Not that kind of monastery," said Tom. Oxley was regaining his health at some speed, it seemed, and Tom was grateful, for Oxley was the very best friend he had. "A Buddhist monastery, or, to be more correct, a Lamaist monastery in the back of beyond, with a Skushok, which means a reincarnation of Buddha. It would do you good to go to a place like that. They've never seen a typewriter or a telephone, let alone a wireless set or a cinema."

"I know the sort of place—seen pictures of them in the papers. But it would be a change from anything else I've seen, though, and I might save

you from being reincarnated or losing your astral body or some catastrophe of that kind if I did go. But what about the chain and the missing links?"

"I've given it you—at least, most of them. I want to find the ones in between."

Oxley counted on his fingers.

"Item—dreams, which mean indigestion. I always told you, dutifully echoing your mother, that you eat too fast. Item—a looking-glass—awfully unlucky things to break—the pieces always seem to get alongside of your bed and then you invariably hop out without your slippers one morning. Item—a ghost. A more difficult problem that, because it can't strictly be put down to indigestion since you're awake. Still more difficult since you can't really have seen one, and therefore your trouble must be older than I thought. Item—an invitation to a Lamaist monastery by a reincarnation of Buddha who hasn't got a wireless set. I fail to see a chain of any description."

"You've forgotten the mountain."

"All mountains have bits of rock and bits of snow and all look equally beastly and inhospitable. I've seen heaps of them—in the distance, whenever possible."

"Well, are you coming?" asked Tom. Behind Oxley's jeers he thought he detected an inclination to close with the offer.

"When are you going?"

"Sailing Thursday week, or, rather, taking the P. and O. express that day to Bombay and then Kashmir via Pindi, where Sanderson will have got things ready. You remember Bob Sanderson in Mespot?"

"He used to be comparatively sane and ate his food slowly and stuck to facts. And what do we do after Kashmir—get reincarnated?"

"Walk or sometimes ride—walk for a few weeks, and then walk some more—and then do a bit more walking."

"The Felix stunt, in other words." Then suddenly his tone changed from the mocking to the serious. "Yes, I'll come, Tom, and thanks very much. You won't find any chain or any links or anything of that sort, but it'll do us good all round. What kit do I want? The only bit of India I've ever seen is the somnolent south—seven months of it, just before the war. I didn't like it, but the north sounds different. I'm in your hands, but, for the Lord's sake, cut down the kit a trifle and travel reasonably."

And thus it happened that Major John Oxley faded from the paths of the Intelligence Service and fled from the lure of the Middle East, abandoned prophecies of gas warfare and air horrors wilder far than any of Tom Carruthers' dreams, and bought a berth on the P. and O. mail-steamer, *Narkunda*, bound for a land where people still ride horses and kill each other with such antiquated things as rifles and knives and, generally speaking, behave more or less like human beings instead of trying to be machines and, consequently, retain quite a large amount of the natural human animal's inefficiency and interest.

CHAPTER III THE MIRROR

"Now then, Tom, tell me what we're starting out to look for—or, rather, what you think you're going to find—it's sure not to exist, but I should like to know the plot, so to speak."

Thus Oxley, after dinner a few nights later, sitting in Tom Carruthers' room. Mrs. Carruthers had persuaded him to stay with them until he and Tom sailed.

Tom Carruthers, sitting opposite with Tosh fast asleep at his feet, laughed. He knew that John Oxley had no faith in his ideas, and, if anything, that made him all the more determined to carry through with his quest.

"In other words," he said, "explain to you once more the holes tied together with invisible string—the chain, you say, doesn't exist, and therefore presents no problem. It's wasted on your prejudiced mind, of course, but here goes.

"The beginning of it all is the dreams which I've had ever since I can remember. I won't waste time over them except to remind you of one or two. Some of them I've already told you at different times."

"Taken as read," said Oxley. "You were lucky to own the chance combination of hand and foot and eye which the barbarian English youth and man worship more than all the intellectual qualities which ever happened. Hence you did your lunacy in a haze of stick and ball skill. If I had dared to have dreams—thank God I didn't. . . ."

"You'd have been hunted more than ever—greatly to your soul's good," retorted Tom. "Shut up! I'm talking now." Then he continued: "They were all about places I'd never seen, mountains and glaciers, and things like that. They were so vivid that I used to give names to them. There was the great mountain which looked like a tent; the Giant's Stairway of ice; the mirror dream with the mirror that used to turn into a window, and you could see all sorts of queer things through it—battles and ships and men fighting prehistoric animals. And the temple place where they kept the mirror, with the old man who used to stand beside it in queer clothes—an old man who looked as if he was about a hundred years old."

"I remember him all right," remarked Oxley. "It was my first inkling of how dreams are made, because it was the night after you had been caught

smoking in the lower copse at school, and, according to your account, old Pendlebury really surpassed himself at the interview that evening. Next morning—lying on your face—you told me that dream, and said that the old man's eyebrows twitched just like old Pendlebury's used to do when he was stuffy."

Tom grinned at the recollection. He had recently met old Pendlebury, who still played a mild game of golf and attributed his skill at the game to his practice on Tom Carruthers in earlier days. Then he went on with his story for the benefit of the unbeliever opposite.

"Well, anyway, the dreams still came after I'd left school—went on for years and years—and I was convinced that they meant something, were some sort of message for me. I was sure I was meant to find out something, only I didn't know how or where, except that I was convinced it was off the beaten track. Later on, when I knew more and had travelled a bit, I felt certain that it was somewhere in the middle of Asia. As you know, I left the army before the war and was just going to begin exploring when the blooming Hun started upsetting things and I had to come back. However, the dreams went on all the same, although on your theory I ought to have dreamt of other things in France.

"When the war was over, I went out to India again and travelled up Ladakh way because I was sure now that whatever I was to find was somewhere up Thibet direction, and Ladakh was a good place to begin learning the language and the customs and how to trek about in that sort of country. I spent a year on the first trip and learnt a lot.

"I took two years for the second effort, and even then I always worked eastward towards the Thibetan border, still with the same idea in my head. I really don't know what it was that made me turn north towards Nubra and the Karakorum, which is going away from Thibet and into quite uninhabited country. But as soon as I got into Nubra I felt that I was on the right track. Also I had an interest in that bit because that was where old great-uncle Steven was last heard of. You know about him and how he vanished."

John nodded, for he knew that story, which was a tradition in the Carruthers family. "Great-uncle Steven," as they always referred to him, had been the cousin of Mrs. Carruthers' grandfather, Fenwick by name, and, like many another adventurous spirit, he had gone to sea for a space. Then India had called him, and for a short time he held a post under the British East India Company, only to find that settled work was not to his liking. He had abandoned that for the more risky, but potentially more profitable, business

of private trade, and had moved steadily northward until, in time, he reached Ladakh and the Thibetan border in the days before the Dogras came in through Kishtiwar to make an end of the old Western Thibetan dynasty which ruled in Leh.

And from there, in the late thirties of the last century, he had set out for Central Asia and had never been seen or heard of again. Central Asia, and even Ladakh and Baltistan, were more or less unknown in those times, nearly a century ago, and the worthy merchants who ruled the middle and south of India had other things to think of than the whereabouts of a private trader, whose period of service in their employ had mostly been spent in acrimonious bickering with his possibly hide-bound seniors. Steven Fenwick just disappeared, and that was the end of him, though whether his caravan was overwhelmed in an avalanche or blizzard on one of the high passes, or whether, possibly, he came to his end by poison or disease, or whether, even, he still languished in the noisome prison of one of the independent Khans of Central Asia which had not then come under Russian domination, only possibly his relatives at home cared.

"I knew that Nubra country the moment I got there," continued Tom Carruthers. "It wasn't because I felt I'd been there in a previous life—I don't believe in reincarnation. But it was because it seemed to fit in with my dreams, and, after a march or two, I was certain that somewhere in front must lie the Tent Peak, the Giant's Stairway of ice, the Crow's Nest, and all the other things.

"But I went wrong at first because I started out over the Saser, on the Central Asian road, into the Upper Shyok, and on to the Murgo route, where I found nothing at all. Then I came back to Nubra and thought I'd go north and have a look at the Siachen glacier, which is the biggest thing of its kind in the world. It's very hard to reach in summer because there's an enormous volume of water coming down—the late autumn's the proper time. However, with a good deal of trouble, I made my way up to Kungma, about eight miles short of the glacier snout, where there was said to be a small monastery. There are no villages up as high as that, of course; the last of them was two long marches further back, and there is no road for most of the year. But I wanted to see the monastery which very few other people had ever seen, and which no one seemed to know much about.

"It was quite a small place, on the side of a hill, with a most gorgeous view of glaciers and snow-peaks, at about fourteen thousand feet up, high enough to be snow-bound for part of the year. And when I got there I was

certain sure that I had come somewhere near the beginning of my dreams, although there had never been any monasteries in them.

"It was a yellow cap monastery—that means one belonging to the reformed sect of Lamaistic monks, whose founder tried to bring them back to something more like what Buddha had intended monks to be. As a rule, the yellow caps are more monk-like than the red ones, but the Kungma monastery was quite the most monastic place I'd ever seen in Ladakh, and the monks really seemed to behave as one would expect them to. By that time I could speak Thibetan passably, and even write a little, and when they found that out they were very keen to talk and show me over their monastery.

"Although the layout was the usual type, with the main chapel for the images and the room where the sacred books are kept, the painted walls and the silk hangings, yet somehow it seemed a little different, and yet I couldn't quite place the difference. The thing that finally caught my attention was a picture painted on a small door behind the main altar in the chapel, a locked door, such as you often find there, a sort of shrine.

"At first sight it seemed to be a picture of a thousand-armed deity, Avalokita or Dukar. Looking closer, I saw that it was a woman, like Dukar, only, instead of making a sort of centipede figure out of it, the artist had put extra arms as a background in halo form. The result was that you seemed to see the woman standing before a crowd of unseen people who were lifting up their arms towards her, as though asking for something. The picture was very beautifully done and very alive, and it seemed as if the woman was looking down at something which she held in her hands, and almost as if she was reflecting whether she should give it to the people who stood behind her.

"The thing she held in her hand was green and silver, oval, with a short handle; and that fixed my attention very much, because the whole shape was that of the looped cross which was the symbol of life among so many old peoples—among the Egyptians, for instance. I'd never seen it in Lamaism before, nor in India, which is where Buddhism began, and Lamaism is a debased form of Buddhism.

"The head monk was showing me round. He was what they call a gelong—a degree higher than the rest—and wearing the special robes with gold brocade on them; a quiet man, with rather an intellectual face of refined Mongol type. I asked him who the picture represented, and he smiled a little as he told me it was Dukar. I said that I'd seen plenty of pictures of that lady,

and this was quite different, and I also wanted to know what she was holding in her hands. He told me that he didn't know—that it was an old picture that had been there for years and years before he came. I felt certain then that he was not telling me all the truth. But when I left he was very friendly, and said he thought I would come back again before long, which, at the time, struck me as queer.

"One of my reasons for going up to Kungma was that I suspected the old map—the only one there was of those parts. It showed big glaciers north of the Saser route, draining eastward. There'd been a scientific expedition on the east side just before the war, who'd surveyed that part pretty carefully and found no glaciers draining that way. And yet there must be big glaciers in those hills, and if they didn't drain north or east, which I knew they didn't, then they must drain west into Nubra. So I decided to go back on to the Saser divide before winter set in and have a look. It was a problem worth clearing up.

"I struck off northwards from the trade route by a long glacier, which was fairly hard work, although, of course, I'd left my heavy kit behind. Also I had a little trouble with my Nubra men, who hated going off the trade route or the known parts. However, eventually I got them up to the head of that glacier, but when it came to climbing the divide beyond it, they weren't coming. In the end, I got four of the best to come with me, leaving the rest below, and could thus carry enough food and things to let me go on for a couple of days. Just then we were on a light enough scale even to suit your taste, John.

"We climbed the divide and dropped down on the farther side and, as I had expected, came on the head of a big glacier, where we camped for the night on the edge of the névé. Next day we pushed on down the glacier, which, after a while, I found was trending westward, and not eastward, as the old map had shown. It was fairly hard going nearly all the way. We followed it all day until almost dark, and it seemed to go on for miles and miles in front, so I realised that there could be no question of following it to Nubra. We must turn back and go over again into the Saser country.

"Next morning, however, I decided to do something rather risky, in view of our few supplies and the difficult country. If snow had started we should certainly have been done in, but the weather was perfect, and I felt that I simply must chance something, for I was convinced that somewhere close by I should find a key to all those weird dreams of mine. I was absolutely certain of that, though I can't explain why.

“I decided that we would halt there that day while I took the two best men, Anchuk and Tseing, and climbed a rather high but fairly easy spur on the north bank. I thought that from there I should not only get a long view down the glacier and see where it went to, but that I should also see what lay to the north, for by now I knew I was too far west for the glacier to be any part of the Shyok drainage system, which it ought to have been, according to the old map.

“Anchuk and Tseing were both fairly used to ice and snow now; I had been training them for some time, and we managed to go pretty fast. Also we were lucky in having no step-cutting to do, as, most of the way, we were able to keep on easy rock where we didn’t even need the rope. We managed to make over four thousand feet before we were stopped quite close to the head of the spur by a rather sheer rock-face, which was bad for several hundred feet. However, we climbed it in the end, using the rope at times, and, as the weather was just perfect, with a full moon that night, even if we were late getting down, it wouldn’t matter much.

“At last we hauled ourselves up on to the crest. And then I knew for certain that I had reached the place I had been dreaming of all these years. In front of us there was a great, wide valley with a glacier running down the centre and some smaller side glaciers, while beneath us was a very sheer drop to one that I knew—one I had dreamed of and called the Snow Sea because it seemed all broken up into green and white waves. About ten miles away, on the opposite side of the valley, which seemed to be closed all round by big mountains, rose a single rock peak. The moment I looked at it I realised that I knew every cranny and ledge on its face and all the folds of the hanging glaciers on the northwest side of it. It was the peak which I had called the Tent Peak in my dreams because it does look rather like a tent, as you can see from the picture over there—an enlargement from one I took with my small camera and a telephoto lens on the day I’m talking of. At its foot was a flattish stretch, probably two or three miles long, above the glacier, and, although I could not see it from there, I knew that below the farthest point I could see the central glacier dropped in an ice-fall—the place I used to call the Giant’s Stairway when I was a kid.

“The men were too done to take any interest in it—they had bad headaches, and, anyway, to them it was merely another patch of ice and snow and hills such as I had been dragging them over for the last few months. The only thing they wanted was to get down and back and on to the trade route and so home to the warmth of Nubra, for it was getting cold up where we were.

“But after I’d taken some photos and had a bit of food, I got out the telescope and had a look round. And I’m perfectly certain that on that flat space I could just make out something that I’m sure was a big building, though how on earth such a thing could be there, in an enclosed valley miles from anywhere, beat me at the time, and I tried to tell myself that it was only a queer-shaped rock.

“Then we came down—nasty going, the first bit on the rock-face, but somehow I felt I couldn’t make a mistake that day—things were bound to go right. I think the men felt it, too, for we came off in about record time and reached the other two men and the mummery tents just before it got dark, or rather before the moon rose.

“The following morning we started back, and, the day after, got over the divide just in time, for the clouds were banking up and we had some heavy snow before we hit the trade route, and, although it cleared again over our side, it still covered the hills we’d left and the clouds kept low, hiding everything behind us. I was very glad to make Pangdongtsa, where I’d left my servant, Nawab, and the bigger tent. I had an ex-Sepoy, too, on that trip, a Pathan called Makhmud, that Sanderson got for me, but I’d left him at Panamik with the heavy kit because he had been a bit out of sorts for the last few days.

“That night at Pangdongtsa I couldn’t sleep at all. I lay awake for hours, and then at last I got up and went for a stroll, hoping that moving about might send me to sleep later. There was a bright moon and very few clouds. We had the camping-place to ourselves, although Nawab said there had been a caravan there the night before, but they’d gone on in the morning. I was very surprised, therefore, after I’d walked a little way, to see a man on the slope just above me, moving about as though he was looking for something. I thought, at first, that it was one of my fellows, and then realised that it couldn’t be, as I had no one dressed like him. He seemed to be a merchant of sorts, with the usual long coat and felt boots.

“I walked up towards him and he moved round behind some rocks, still apparently hunting for whatever he’d lost. I saw him again as I got closer, bending down in the shadows, and I called to him. He stood up, and I could see clearly in the moonlight that he was no one I knew. Then, suddenly, he ran in among a cluster of big boulders and I lost sight of him. I was interested, so I followed, but I couldn’t find him at all, which seemed queer. There were lots of boulders all over the place, and, of course, he could have hidden behind any of them, but I felt that I ought to have seen him move

from one to another, because it was bright moonlight, and full moon at a high altitude is about as strong as English sunlight on a winter afternoon.

"I thought it rather funny and looked round for any trace of an encampment, expecting to find a few pack-saddles with some bales piled up against a rock and a man or two asleep. But there was just nothing at all. Then I went to the place where I'd last seen him. Nothing there either, until I stubbed my foot against what I took to be a stone, and, looking down, saw something shining. I bent down and saw that it was the metal handle of some object half buried in the ground, which was soft there. I dug it out presently and found the mirror you've heard of."

Carruthers stopped for a moment and went over to his writing-table, unlocked a drawer, and took from it what seemed to be a mirror of some green substance like very opaque bottle-glass, set in an oval frame of silver or some other white metal chased over with what looked like some strange writing. He handed it to Oxley, who looked at it with mild interest and admitted that it was not a common sort of thing and might be old. Carruthers had mentioned also that no one had been able to decipher the writing. But, as a mirror, it seemed useless, since it did not reflect—the surface was quite dull.

"I know," said Carruthers, "but when it begins to show things that changes; you get lights coming into it until it clears and becomes transparent. Only it won't do it for everyone. So far, it only has worked for me. But it worked that first night when I found it, and it really frightened me, because it numbed my hand and I couldn't let go—it was just as if I'd got hold of the terminal of a low-power battery. It began when I got back to my tent and was looking at the thing and puzzling over its shape, which was the same looped cross that I had seen at Kungma. Suddenly I began to see pictures. First of all there were all sorts of things I'd forgotten about, things at school, and so on. Then it started to show the things I'd dreamed of so often. Last of all, it showed me the chapel at Kungma and the picture behind the altar, and I could see the gelong standing there. I'm not inventing; it's all literally true. But what attracted me most then was that I could now see that the thing the woman in the Kungma picture held in her hand was a mirror just like the one I had.

"Then suddenly it all veiled over again with shadows and dancing lights and as suddenly went dull and dead just like it had been before, and it was a long time before I could use my fingers, they were so numb. It's worked several times since, but I have no control over it, and I've tried heaps of times. I can't say when I'm going to see anything or what I'm going to see.

“That night, however, it worked twice. I was just going to put it down when it came to life again, and showed me a man I’d never seen before. I couldn’t see him very clearly; it seemed to be night and he was doing something, working hard, with his back to me. But suddenly he turned round, and I could see his face for a minute, a rather heavy, dark face, clean shaven, and very sensual. And his eyes were what I call really foul. He stared at me, and then the mirror clouded over and nothing I could do would make the pictures come back.

“We started back for Panamik the next morning, and all my people insisted that there had been no one else at Pangdongtsa that night. I let the men and animals go on and stopped behind a bit to search round those rocks once more. I thought something might have been hidden there with the mirror, but, although I raked about and turned up some of the earth, found nothing at all. But, instead of going to Panamik, once we reached the Nubra, I sent the men on, and with just a bedding-roll and some grub and two or three men I went to Kungma. I wanted to have a talk with the gelong before I started for home, for I was certain he knew a lot more than he had told me on my first visit.

“The old man seemed to be expecting me, which again was queer, since no one could possibly have got word to him that I was coming. But he had a room ready for me in the monastery and was actually waiting for me at the gate. That part was easy, however, because there is a fair view from the roof, and they must have seen me coming for the last half-mile up the hill, and visitors are uncommon at Kungma. But, after I’d had a meal—we got in late—he came into my room and told me he’d been watching me all the time, which I thought a bit of a steep yarn considering where I’d been. He might, of course, have been asking the men, but he certainly gave me pretty accurate details about my trip. Then, last of all, he told me he knew I’d found the mirror—‘The Eye of Vision’ he called it—and none of my men knew about that; I’d not said anything to anyone.

“He took me along to the chapel and opened the door behind the altar, the one on which I’d seen the painting the first time. Inside was a little cell, and in that was a most beautiful statue of the woman shown in the painting. It was so lifelike that I’m certain it was made from life. The little shrine was all lit up, and the woman really looked as if she were alive. It sounds silly, but her whole attitude made me think of a mother who has got something which her children want but is afraid to give it to them lest they should hurt themselves with it. There was one other thing about the statue which struck

me, too. You know my one ghost-story about the deserted bungalow in Bashehr and the old man and the baby?"

Oxley nodded, thinking hard the while. He knew that story and it was not very accountable. Neither did what he was hearing now seem to be very accountable. Carruthers was a bit queer at times, but he did not invent yarns.

"Well, round the neck of that statue was just the same kind of necklace with the looped cross that I saw the old man fasten round the baby's neck in the bungalow.

"I asked the gelong what the statue really was, and he told me a lot of things. That night I wrote them all down in my diary, as near as I could in his own words, so far as I remembered them. I'll read bits to you." Carruthers reached over to the bookshelf for a small diary, looked through and then selected a page. "This is what the old man—Rinpoche was his name—told me that night by the statue:

" 'It is the statue of the Mother of Vision—she who has all knowledge. She has been represented somewhat in the guise of Dukar, so that the ignorant may not ask foolish questions if, by chance, they see her. But she is not Dukar—a mere imagination of men—she is more—more than Dukar, as the sun is more than the least star. Yet she is not all things, only our vision of the tiniest fragment of what lies behind her. This monastery, which the Nubra folk call Kungma, is truly styled the 'jewel gate of vision,' and was set here many, many centuries ago by those who dwell in the hidden valley you have seen. There is the true home of the Mother of Vision and her few servants in the house that is called the City of Vision. From here, and from here only, may it be reached from Ladakh, though the way is hidden and sometimes perilous, and this house is set here, as it were the gate which is the reason for its name, so that none may pass who are not summoned. You have been summoned—that has been revealed to me—and I suspected that when first you came, but my lips were sealed at that time. Now they are loosed, for I know that you have looked down on the valley of the Mother, as only one other man has ever done, and, moreover, that you have found one of the Eyes of Vision which, in truth, it was ordained that you should find. The summons has come to you, and I am to say that if you return after two winters I will guide you to the City of Vision, where, maybe, you will find nothing but danger and what men call death. Maybe, you will find other things; of that I am not permitted to speak now. But if you return, then bring with you others, trusted men, three, four, five, perhaps one of your own kind. You have the Eye of Vision—guard it well, it can show all things. But it will show naught but what is commanded, so seek not to learn from it idly

nor concerning worldly affairs, nor wealth, nor health, nor your own safety. These it will not show you, save only if such be necessary to the task which is given to you to fulfil. See you that the Mother herself holds just such another Eye as you have found.' Rinpoche leaned forward and turned the silver object in the hands of the woman, and I saw that it was the same kind of mirror as I had found. 'Look into it well, for I think that the Mother has somewhat to show you.' I looked into the mirror and saw that it was clearing—the lights and the shadows were playing in it, and presently it cleared altogether and I found myself looking at the great ice-falls I used to call the Giant's Stairway. There were men climbing up them—I could see Rinpoche and other strange men. Then I saw myself, and there was another white man walking close by, and a dog. Then the man turned so that I saw his face, and it was . . ."

Carruthers stopped reading and passed the book over to Oxley, indicating with his finger the place where he had stopped. Oxley read the handwriting—obviously unchanged from the day it was written—and saw the completion of the sentence—"it was John Oxley."

"How much chance was there of that being true eighteen months ago, when it was written, John?" asked Carruthers as Oxley returned the book. "You were at home, and there was not the slightest prospect of your going to India, still less of accompanying me on a journey that would take more leave than you were ever likely to get from England. But there it is—the page I wrote that night after the gelong had put the lights out, closed the shrine, and taken me back to my room."

"I wouldn't suggest for a moment you're inventing, Tom," said Oxley. "I expect you really did see something like that. But I don't believe for a moment anybody made you see the future. I admit that I'm going with you, and, as far as I can see, there's every chance of my having to follow you up several loathsome ice-falls, judging by your descriptions and photographs of the country. I expect it was some mild form of hypnotism."

"And how do you explain my finding the mirror?"

"I don't think you really did find it. I think the gelong got Chuk-Chuk—or whatever you call him—to hide it by those rocks and to watch there that night and lead you that way, pretending to be a stranger, until you fell over the blooming looking-glass. Meanwhile, Chuk-Chuk hid among the boulders till you were safely out of the way. It was much neater doing it that way. If you hadn't found it, then of course Chuk-Chuk . . ."

"Meaning Anchuk," corrected Carruthers.

"Sounds all the same, Chuk-Chuk or Anchuk. . . would have brought it to you with some weird story of how he found it. Then the gelong turns on the hypnotic tap and you think you see things. You say no one else can ever see anything, and that's just what you'd expect. He probably hypnotised you the first time you went."

"And what about the dreams?"

"That's about the easiest part. You've made a habit of those damned dreams of yours until you expect them to come as a matter of course, and the moment he hypnotised you, of course, you saw them all again. The only reality you can point to is the mountain which you say you recognised and, as I've said before, all mountains are the same beastly cold, wet places made up of bits of brick and bits of ice, each just like the rest."

"And seeing you in the mirror at the shrine?"

"Obvious. He suggests you should bring another white man along and then, of course, your thoughts turn to your oldest pal in the good, sentimental way by which writers of music-hall ballads make their living, and you see his strong, kind face before you. You'd do well in the film scenario trade, Tom! However, it's fortunate that you did think of me—you want someone with some common sense—you might have hit on some mutt who would have taken all your moonshine as serious stuff."

"Then kindly explain what we are wanted for, if it's all moonshine and hypnotic rubbish," said Tom rather crossly.

Oxley lit a cigarette and contemplated the blue spirals of smoke.

"You are now beginning to talk sense, Tom, asking a question like that—one that must obviously be answered presently. I should like to know myself. Probably the gent has stumbled upon a large gold mine and wants a couple of reliable white men to help him get the boodle away. Meantime, he has had the sense to hide it under a cloud of pseudo-religious tosh which, from your accounts of that part of the world, seems to be quite the best and neatest thing he could have done—everyone up there appears to be ultra-superstitious. But I expect we shall find it our duty to remove the gold which would be wasted on people who live in such places. I shall take up a consignment of pink and blue celluloid mirrors and glass beads to trade them in exchange. Meantime, your fairy-story has made me sleepy, for which I'm really grateful. I shall sleep without drugs to-night."

Oxley got up and stretched and then moved over to mix himself a night-cap from the whisky and siphons at the side-table.

CHAPTER IV PROFESSOR WALDENSTEIN

Professor Waldenstein was undoubtedly Austrian—and German-Austrian at that—in fact, he made no bones about it. For which reason probably John Oxley made up to him on board the *Narkunda*—Fate, in the person of the P. and O. steward, having put Carruthers, Oxley, and Waldenstein into the same cabin. Oxley had views about the future of Europe, and, moreover, a certain feeling that, quite apart from world reconstruction for mere selfish ends, the proper way to end a contest was with a certain amount of dignified hand-shaking and some measure of new-found mutual respect.

Further, Waldenstein was a gentleman, and he was an earnest student of the type that used to fill Germany before Prussia got the whip-hand. He was also—which is essentially German—a dreamer of dreams, and so at the opposite pole to Oxley. On the other hand, he could amass facts in a fashion that compelled Oxley's admiration. It was Oxley's own long suit, though he had several other Aces and Kings in the hand that Fate had dealt out to him to play the game of life with.

Waldenstein was an oldish man—a good many years older than his cabin mates. Nevertheless, he limped slightly from a shortened thigh-bone which had come into contact with the fuse of an 18-pounder somewhere in 1917.

The Austrian was a professor, and his business was archæology of the most archaic. He took no great interest in such modern matters as Rome or Greece, or even the day or two older civilisations of Assyria or Egypt. The recent excavations in India aroused his interest somewhat more—they added a few thousand years to history, but that, according to Waldenstein's mind, was merely like arguing as to whether it is five minutes to midday or five minutes two seconds to the same hour. The clock that he envisaged went back to the small hours, and the pictures that he was trying to construct in his methodical, German way were of civilisations of the dawn of time, and the matter that lay at his heart was as to whether he could prove by cold, hard facts that man had existed—man as we know him—in the inter-glacial periods. The ticks on the dial of that clock are by tens of thousands of years.

Before the war his name was beginning to be known all through Europe among such circles as are interested in this line of research. America knew him, too. He had a theory that what was wanted was more research in the East, and his great sorrow was that the war had put a stop to all chance of

that. Now, however, it seemed that things were getting better; prejudice was fading away, and after infinite trouble, and thanks to the good offices of some British scientists, he had succeeded in getting permission to travel through India and carry out certain journeys in the Eastern Himalayas. For this he was really extremely grateful and humbly prepared to put up with distrust and dislike on the part of many folk he might meet in his wanderings, though they, as a matter of fact, had much less reason than he had to be bitter about the late war.

He was grateful, also, that he had been put into a cabin with Oxley—his remembrances of dealings with British officers were more pleasant than those of his meetings with many civilians. He expanded, therefore, from time to time and talked more and more as the voyage went on. His talk was worth listening to if one happened to be interested in his line of work.

"You go to High Asia, too—*hein*?" he said to Carruthers and Oxley one evening when the three were sitting out on deck, watching the lights of Aden fading astern. "It is good—there is much to find there—it is the nursery of life, of human life, which is so old, so old. So much work to be done that we may read the book of the past of which some little is written in the folk-lore, the legends, which every race has. Men talk as though they knew all, that the little piece they see is all there is, that they know everything. We become like senseless children because we have so many toys now, and all of them machinery—aeroplanes, wireless, newspapers, all so great, wonderful things. We are convinced that they are new, that never the world knew any such wonders, that long ago men had nothing but stones and sticks. And talking always as if it were all progress, as if man never retrograded. Yet all the while other men dig up older and older things, forgotten cities whose handiwork is as good as that of to-day. And never they think of other powers that men might have had and lost again. No—anything new must be modern—the result of man's great advance these last few years. They don't understand that a century is less than a hair on the yard measure of time. Just because we have begun to know something about electricity. And what is electricity? Just life—just that—as Bose showed us with the flowers—how they live—how they die. And so wireless and television and all such things are but life again—nothing new—life so old. Only men have found a new way to make it work with copper and brass and wire made in so big machines, and so they think no one before could make it work—because they have never found any big machines in the old cities where they dig. Never they think that cleverer men might have used those powers without all the new, clumsy machines."

“And what do you think, Professor?” asked Carruthers.

“Me? I think they are all wrong. I do not think we discover; I think we begin to find again—that is all. Slowly we find again that which was lost, or destroyed like the library of Alexandria. Man gets so far—a little way—and then he thinks he knows so much. And then come the Barbarians with fire and sword, and away it all goes, and he begins again and forgets that he knew anything ever. And still he comes, the Barbarian, only now he will come for a time with new fire and new swords—cleverer machinery—until he makes such wreck that he has to go back to the old things again, like in Russia.

“Or sometimes it may not be the Barbarian—it may be disease or famine or natural cataclysm—but always comes something to push man back as though to make him start again—to keep him busy. It is like as if the Almighty did not want him to go too fast—wants to stop him, like a father would stop a child too forward—bring him back to simpler toys.

“Why did the Ice Ages come? I think—only no one listens to me yet; they will perhaps some day if I live long enough to show them what they call facts, nails that can be driven into their too thick heads—that man was before the Ice, that the Ice swept over him like the Barbarians and took everything he knew, brought him back to the beginnings once more, and made him humble again. And perhaps some day it will come again—it, or the Barbarian or the new germs—but I think perhaps the Ice. And then they will not talk any more of progress and of civilisation and of wars or of peace—they will huddle in holes and caves and go back slowly to the Stone Age, because the machines cannot be made any more, and they will forget they were ever anything different. Then, when some clever man makes an axe of metal instead of out of stone, they will clap their hands and say how clever he is, man, because he has found out something that no man ever found out before.

“And here and there one or two will have kept some little memories and tell old, old stories, and legends will grow up about the wonderful things the gods used to do—how they talked without being near, and how they flew into the sky like birds, and could see in the dark, and had wonderful weapons that killed far, far away. Man always talks of killing, for it means power to him, God-power. But, after a while, they will get much cleverer, so clever that they will laugh at the talk of these odd people who tell the stories and call them folk-lore and superstition, because such things could never have been possible. How could man kill farther than a spear or an arrow could reach? How could he fly without wings, like birds? And so they will

go on, getting cleverer and cleverer until they get clever enough to start scientific societies and make theories to show that nobody ever knew anything before, and then, perhaps, find out the use of steam again and clap still more loudly and give up all the superstitions and get quite civilised once more."

The Professor stopped his oration for a minute to light the ragged butt of his Dutch cheroot. Then he continued again:

"Then they will take up archæology and, a hundred thousand years hence, some professor he will dig up a skull—yours or mine, or my cousin's, who was killed by a shell splinter. And they will prove from that, that the man was one of the first who had learnt to walk upright, and although he was still very near to the animals and could not talk properly, yet he could make very rough stone weapons. They will point to the hole in the skull made by the shell splinter and draw pictures of the stone axe that made it. They will call him the 'Dawn Man' and draw pictures of him and his wife, who lived in holes in the ground and ate raw meat, because they know nothing about crops or fields."

Carruthers sat looking at the tall, spare figure in the rather ill-fitting, loose clothes and the unkempt beard with the gaunt face of a seer who sat in the deck-chair next to him, gazing out over the darkening sea. A lonely man, he thought, a seeker of visions on a lonely road; and perhaps following mere marsh-lights that had no substance. Oxley would think that, of course, only he would not put it into those words; his phrasing would be terser and less grammatical. All the same, John encouraged the Austrian to talk like this. He could be good enough at getting people to talk—half his success in the Intelligence Service had been due to that. He could, moreover, act, if necessary, and make people think that he really believed what they were saying—a gift entirely denied to Tom.

"You think, then, that human life is much older than we imagine?" put in Oxley. "But what reasons are there for your theory?"

"Only calculations on an unreliable time-piece," said Waldenstein. "It is a clock we want, and no clock have we. We make a clock of the earth—of the strata of the rocks, only we are not sure—we say that that is older than this and this came before that, but when we have to put it into years and centuries we are lost and uncertain. One man talks of ten thousand years, another man of five million, and they both talk of the same time, and the one who talks loudest, the papers, they print all he says, and the people who read say that it must be the truth because it is in the papers. I make my

calculations, and they do not agree with any of the others, but I do not make so much noise that the papers they print me. But I think I am right, and if I am right, then man, he was here with and before the Ice, and he was the same man as we are now. Therefore, he must have known very much, for he had had a long time, such a long time, to learn. Then, why did he forget it all, unless it was that life became for him so difficult to live that he had no time to think or learn at all? Only the old memories remained a little—what we call folk-lore—the old stories—the fairy-tales—some little of the past that he had kept.

"Sometimes I think that he did not forget—not all of him—that some of him kept the old knowledge, only it was hidden, and it will come out again some day. Perhaps it is hidden in the great hills or in the old countries like China—perhaps a few still know it. But that is not the professor who speaks; it is the dreamer. Once Germany and Austria had many dreamers, only materialism stopped them dreaming."

The Professor stopped a minute and sighed because materialism had done worse things than stop dreamers dreaming.

"And when I think that, then I think sometimes that it is not all the Almighty who does things. I become a child and think of devils who would use knowledge to blind man whom they hate and wish ill to, and that perhaps sometimes wise men have hidden knowledge lest it should be used for bad purpose. If the papers heard me say that, they would print it in fat, black letters and talk about democracy. As though all men were fit for the same things! Does one give to the child the tools one gives to the grown man? If one did, the children would soon have no fingers left. And yet that is democracy, put shortly. And democracy is not new, as the talkers would make us think. It is old—so old. But it is an old toy pulled out of the rubbish-heap of the nursery, and so the children shout and call it new, and the wise men have to be quiet because the children make so much noise."

The Professor rose to his feet and looked at his rather turnip-shaped watch.

"It is time we changed for dinner," said he, "and it is my turn to go first to-night."

He walked forward to the companion-way, punctiliously moving aside to allow a couple of laughing, chattering girls to pass, and they looked at him rather superciliously as they did so. Waldenstein was scrupulously polite in his foreign way, excessively so sometimes. Then he went down to the stuffy cabin to put on the rather old-fashioned and ill-cut dinner-jacket which

British convention demanded that he should don to eat his somewhat sparing evening meal.

Oxley and Carruthers looked after him in silence as he went.

"Rather a quaint type to find on a post-war P. and O.," remarked Oxley when the Professor had disappeared. "A mixture of Germany and Austria at their best, I think—polite, what you people call a sahib, amazingly erudite and yet modest beyond the average of his type. And talks like something that's outside of time altogether. He'd probably be perfectly at home if he walked into a pyramid and found a living Pharaoh—one would hear them swopping notes without any restraint. He'd probably feel in more congenial company than he does here."

"Except that he'd certainly rub Pharaoh up the wrong way by telling him that he was ultra-modern and lacked a proper sense of proportion of time," said Carruthers. "But he's interesting and makes you think a bit. I wonder what he meant about knowledge having been hidden and that it might be found in the high hills or in the old countries?"

"Probably been reading theosophic books, like you have. I've met lots of that type from time to time, but they're generally women. They're all imbued with the same idea, that knowledge must be old and must be hidden and mixed up with something exotic, such as your lamas and skushoks. Personally I think most of it is twaddle and generally goes with an inability to understand facts. But there, Waldenstein is an exception, and that intrigues me about him."

Oxley relapsed into silence again. The voyage had done him good out of all proportion to the short period of time he had been on board; he was beginning to sleep regularly without any drug assistance, and his head no longer ached from concentrated thought.

Carruthers pulled out a packet of letters from his pocket, received that morning at Aden, where they had arrived from India the previous Wednesday, selected one, and began re-reading it, a letter from a friend of his, Bob Sanderson, dealing mostly with arrangements for their trip which Sanderson was making for him.

One paragraph in particular attracted Carruthers' attention, a paragraph that sent his thoughts back several years, and which referred to one of the links in what Oxley would persist in calling his Irish chain—"a lot of holes tied together with invisible links."

"I spent Christmas at Delhi with Ross, who seems just the same as ever—he's got a job at the Secretariat, but I think he hankers after a district once more. We talked a lot about the old days and the police officer's life in a district—rather to Mrs. Ross's annoyance. I think she's trying to wean him from such things. She loves Delhi and Simla, and has frankly no interest in wild and woolly life. I fancy it is that that made Ross take the job—he felt he owed her something for the plucky way she'd played up when he had a district. Bashehr, of course, cropped up and the old bungalow. Ross still says he's sure there was something there that night, although he saw nothing, and of course I certainly didn't, and still am perfectly convinced that you dreamt it all."

Carruthers put down the letter and leant back in his chair, thinking of the past—of a year before the war, when he was stationed in Northern India and, with Sanderson, had gone for a two months' shoot into Spiti via Bashehr, and on the way had run into Ross, then a comparatively junior member of the Indian Police.

The three of them had spent a memorable night in a disused and tumble-down bungalow, which they had been glad to reach because there was heavy rain—aftermath of the monsoon—and everything was soaking wet and cold.

Carruthers could see it all again so clearly. The big room with the crude fireplace, in which sizzled a fire of wet pine-wood, giving more smoke than flame—three men round a rickety old table with a couple of broken chairs—the third man, himself, sitting on a soaked mule-trunk, over which he had spread his mackintosh—the aluminium plates and cups pushed back on the table. A couple of hurricane lanterns gave just enough light to make the shadows darker and threw up the dinginess of the colour-washed mud walls of a sickly green hue, from which, here and there, the plaster had peeled off in patches. On the walls an old picture or two hung crookedly, and the ghosts of some old, faded curtains flapped in the wet wind that beat against the shattered panes of the windows. The servants were putting out the beds, and Carruthers remembered how, whenever they went out of the lamp-lit room, they never went alone, but always in pairs.

The bungalow, of course, was reputed to be haunted; nothing extraordinary in that, because the Indian is superstitious to a degree, and every old bungalow in India is automatically supposed to be haunted. But of this one the men were really afraid, and only the presence of Ross and his couple of policemen had forced the unwilling coolies to bring up the luggage in the dark. They were now huddled together round a fire in one of the outbuildings whose roof was, for the main part, holes—but that was, to

their minds, preferable, despite the pouring rain, to spending the hours of darkness in the rather less leaky shelter of the house itself.

"What's the story?" Carruthers had asked, and Ross admitted that he didn't really know himself, but that the police naik, who was a local man, could probably enlighten them on it. They had sent for him—a tall, well-built Punjabi Mussulman—and he had given them the story as he knew it, obviously torn between the veneer of civilisation gained by contact with sahibs who say that ghosts are not and the racial fear of the supernatural inherent in his composition.

"It was a long time ago, sahib, quite thirty years ago, that part of it, though there was more before when Finlison Sahib came here first after the great trouble."

"He means the Mutiny," Ross had explained. "Old Finlayson lost his wife at Cawnpur, and it rather turned his head, so he chucked his job and tried to start a plantation out here. I've heard that part of the story before. He found the plantation didn't pay, and joined trading to it as well, in which he was helped by his son, Hugh. The latter made several journeys up towards Central Asia for trading purposes, but didn't do very well out of it. The old man died somewhere in the seventies, and, a good deal later, the son came back with a lady, presumably his wife. She never appeared in civilisation, but she was supposed to be a native of some part he'd been to—either a Turki or a Thibetan damsel. At least, that was the story. I came across scrappy notes of it in some old records of my office. Then both of them died, and there was a baby too. Anyway, about a week after that the policeman happened round here and saw the three of them buried. There was a cholera epidemic on, and nobody worried very much. The place has been deserted ever since."

He nodded to the naik, who continued:

"It was the year of the bad sickness, when thousands and thousands of people died. Finlison Sahib and the bibi were here, and they did not want to go away because the bibi was near her time and it was her first child. There was no one to help, but Finlison Sahib had got in a hill-woman to look after the bibi, one to whom the bibi had been kind when her baby was born. The night that the bibi's hour came upon her the sahib was smitten with the sickness and died before he saw the child, and later the bearer died too, and the other servants ran away, all except the pahareen, who was a brave woman. And then, before dawn, when the child—a girl—was but a few hours old, the bibi died also.

"So the hill-woman put the baby in a small room with her own child, which was but a few weeks old, and set out to her village, about a koss away down the hill, to get her husband and his brother that they might bury the sahib and the bibi and the bearer. But when they got back, lo! her child was dead—bitten by a snake—and the other child was no longer there, and yet the doors of the bungalow had been locked so that no wild beast could have come there, and there were no men anywhere near.

"They feared exceedingly, therefore, and consulted what they should do, because they were afraid to go and say that the sahib's baby had disappeared. And after a while they thought it best to bury the body of their own child, which was very fair, with the sahib and the bibi and say that they had buried it somewhere else. This they did, and then the brother went into the Commissioner Sahib and made report, but it was several days before he got there. Then came the Police Sahib, and, doubtless thinking that there might not be truth in the story, for in those days there were many bad men in these hills, he opened the grave just enough to see that it was indeed the sahib and the bibi and a baby, and that they had not been killed. Then he read out of a book over it, as is the sahibs' custom—my father was with him—and had a mound made. Thereafter he went down to the village and such of the servants and coolies who had worked about the house as he could find he beat violently with his own hands, being a sahib of the old kind, because they had run away. Some also my father beat afterwards. But to the hill-woman the Commissioner Sahib gave reward and some land, but shortly afterwards her husband also died. Only when she was dying did she tell the story to my mother, whom she knew, and, since it was an old story, my father said nothing about it to anyone. Doubtless the woman had not locked the door properly, and the child had been carried off by a panther, of whom there are many here. No men could have come there, nor would they have taken away a baby a few hours old and stolen nothing else."

"The graves are outside in the garden," put in Ross. "Later on they had a stone put up—the Commissioner did that—you'll see it to-morrow. Naturally, after all that the local people swear it's haunted."

"No one will come here now, especially at night," continued the naik, "because there are terrible ghosts. As the sahibs know, many of our people fear greatly the ghost of a woman dying in childbed—she who walks with her feet turned backwards. And they say also that the sahib comes here seeking the lost child, and that if any see him they die, for he is very angry because the servants ran away when he was dead and left the bibi alone except for the hill-woman. They have not even stolen much from the house,

and yet there were many badmashes in these parts who would steal whatever they could."

Carruthers could recall the incidents as clearly as if they had been yesterday—the Punjabi's talk as he told the story, Ross's interjected explanations—his and Sanderson's bearers listening in the background with something not unlike fear on their usually stolid faces. Remembered, too, the steady drip-drip of rain on the roof and the patter against the windows, and the sudden gusts of wind that flapped the faded curtains. It had been eerie enough that evening to satisfy any lovers of ghost-stories.

And then they had gone to bed; all three in the same room, with the excuse that it was the least leaky one in the house. Sanderson's exploration of one or two of the others had possibly been rather perfunctory, and, anyway, they certainly did smell damp and vault-like.

In spite of ghost-stories, they slept, all three of them. But somewhere in the small hours Carruthers woke—or so it seemed to him—and got up and went into the next room. He didn't know why he had done this, and he remembered that he took no light, which was most unwise, because there are always snakes in old houses of that sort. But in the big bedroom next door no lamp was necessary, for there was a lighted lamp on the table, on which was a cloth and jugs and some cups and saucers and a plate or two. And on the bed was a woman, and somehow he knew she was dead. There was light showing through a room beyond, in which also was a bed, on which lay a bearded man, and he, too, seemed to be dead. From a door on the right came the thin wail of a child, and Carruthers, going over to it, looked within and saw upon a heap of blankets, wrapped in a strange assortment of clothes, the wizened face of a new-born baby. Near it lay another, slightly older, baby of darker hue, and that was undoubtedly dead.

He turned back for a minute irresolutely, but it never seemed to him that he dreamed. Then he became aware that he was no longer alone: from the farther room, clinging feebly to the door-jamb, and then to chair and sofa, foot by foot, sweat streaming from his forehead above the sunken, hollow eyes, came the gaunt, bearded figure of a man struggling to make his slow way to the bed where the woman lay—a man who strove to speak, but from whose pale, twisted lips came no sounds. Carruthers seemed unable to speak or act, and it appeared to him that the man did not see him as, painfully and slowly, he made his way to the bed and collapsed. It was as if Carruthers were bound hand and foot and gagged. Presently the man raised himself tremblingly, pulled himself up to the bed, and tried to feel the woman's bosom, as one would do who sought to see if life was still fluttering there.

Then he looked wildly round the room, as though in search of something else, tried to call again, then swayed back to the floor in agony. A minute later his face calmed—calmed in a most wonderful way—calmed as though he understood that his doubts and fears were childish—calmed and grew contented; and then Carruthers understood that this was really death. But still he stood there, unable to move, for what seemed hour after hour. Again he became aware of footsteps, soft, muffled footsteps, and the sound of doors opening, and the lamp fluttered as a gust of air beat into the room and two men entered—a gaunt old man and a younger man of Mongol aspect, wearing a hill-man's duffle. The old man was clad in a heavy, wadded coat of rather Chinese cut, and on his head was a close-fitting riding-cap of fur. He looked around the room and then at the woman on the bed, and his look was one of great tenderness and compassion. The younger man stood there impassive, as though awaiting some orders.

Then again came the wail of the child in the little dressing-room, and with a surprisingly swift step the old man passed so close to Carruthers that the latter could have touched him, and yet the old man seemed not to see him. He was back in an instant, bearing in his arms the child, and there was a fierce joy in his face as he looked down at it, standing by the side of the dead mother, scanning first her face and then the features of the child.

At last he laid the child upon the sofa and spoke to the younger man in some strange tongue, and the two of them took up the body of the bearded man and carried it over to the next room, where Carruthers could see them straightening it out on the bed.

The old man came back and bent over the dead woman, smoothing her rich, dark hair. And presently he loosed something about her neck—a row of small stones, it seemed to be, bearing a quaintly shaped gold ornament—one that was to become strangely familiar to Carruthers in the after-years—and, taking it, bound it round the baby's neck. Then he gathered up some clothing and a cloak that hung upon the wall, wrapped the baby in the cloak and, with one last, long look at the dead woman, went out of the room. Carruthers heard a few low words in the strange tongue; then came the sound of receding footsteps, the cautious closing of doors, and silence. And suddenly blackness descended upon him, and the next thing that he remembered was being back in his own bed again, feeling chilled and cold, with the first light of dawn stealing in through the ragged curtains.

He sat up in bed, looked round him, and saw that the others were fast asleep, got out of bed slowly, and then realised that the safety-pin with which he had fastened his pyjama-jacket the night before was missing—his

servant was careless in the matter of buttons. He looked for it in the bed and couldn't find it—pulled on the great-coat that served as dressing-gown and extra blanket, and deliberately and quietly walked across the room to the door at the far end, which was shut, as it had been all the evening before.

His movement aroused Ross, who asked him what he was doing, and Carruthers explained just a little.

"You look as if you'd been seeing ghosts," said Ross, a matter-of-fact Scotsman. "Ghost-stories at night, mixed with tinned sausages, are bad for you. Go back to bed."

"I'm going to look," said Carruthers doggedly. "I've never been into that room, but, unless they've taken away the furniture, I'll tell you exactly what it's like."

He did so in detail, and Ross marvelled at the way the man could remember a dream.

"All right—I'm coming, too. I'll bet you a bottle of whisky that you're wrong in every point," said he, as he opened the door which was stiff and needed considerable force.

Somebody had evidently moved the furniture, and some of it was missing, but such as there was, the old-fashioned bed, the long chair to which the bearded man had clung as he came in, the now moth-eaten sofa at the far side, were just exactly what Tom had described and Ross havered.

"Maybe it's second sight," he said; "I've heard of things like that. But you dreamed it, man, all the same; you never opened that door without waking me and Sanderson, too, if he's anywhere near as light a sleeper as I am."

Carruthers stood looking round the room, and then moved over to the corner where, just as he had seen it during the night, a door stood half-open giving on to a small dressing-room. Almost he had expected to see the heap of blankets in the corner and hear the child's wail. But there was nothing there now, and the only thing on the table was a broken saucer of old willow-pattern, which Carruthers remembered had been the pattern on the other crockery he had seen and subsequently described to Ross. Then, suddenly, he caught the faint gleam of metal on the floor as the first rays of the sun—the weather had cleared during the night—shot in at the broken window. He had stooped down to pick up a small, shining object, and Ross had asked him what it was.

“Only the pin I lost last night,” Carruthers had replied, in a matter-of-fact voice. “It was fastening my pyjama-coat when I went to bed and I couldn’t find it this morning.”

“Honest?” said Ross, struggling still between incredulity and the conviction born of Carruthers’ description of the room which, as Ross knew, none of the three of them had entered the night before.

“Honest,” Carruthers had replied, as the two of them returned to where Sanderson was making loud noises to attract the servants with the morning tea.

Carruthers sat there on the steamer’s deck, in the growing darkness, recalling all that, until at last Oxley roused him out of his thoughts by reminding him that there were only five minutes left before dinner, and they had better hurry down to change, and thus brought Tom back to the present as he folded up Sanderson’s letter and put it back into his pocket.

But, while he was dressing, he recalled the scene once more, and his thoughts concentrated again on the shape of the ornament attached to the string of stones which the queer old man had bound about the baby’s neck.

It was possibly that incident which, somehow or other, turned the conversation to the path of ghosts and the occult generally a couple of nights later, and Waldenstein had launched out on a theory which might or might not have satisfactorily accounted for some of the apparently inexplicable experiences which two other men—acquaintances of Carruthers—had retailed in the smoking-room.

“The photographic plate,” said Waldenstein. You make an exposure and then the picture is there on the plate. But until you have made development with chemicals you see nothing. It is what you call latent. Perhaps, also, everything is like that and takes in pictures and hides them until something—it may be some certain light, it may be some other factor we know not, perhaps some particular power of some particular individual—calls out the picture again.

“We all live by electricity—perhaps, also, we are transmitters of waves like those of wireless, and so can make pictures on things without knowing it. And if that were so, then such powers would be at their highest at moments of strain, times such as death or great peril. That would explain very much of the ghost-stories, of the deathbed appearances, and things like that. It would explain why most ghost-stories deal with murders or death in some unusual way. Perhaps, also, some of us are receivers and are able to

pick up such transmitted pictures, like the wireless does. Why not? Only people are so stupid and superstitious, and they talk of ghosts in such silly fashion that the other half of the world laughs at them, just because neither half knows how to think properly and to reason. It may be so—it may be so. Perhaps it is something remaining of the lost power of the lost ages before the Ice came when people did not require wireless to communicate over space."

And then the Professor slid out of the conversation—slid back a few hundred thousand or a few million years into some speculation about the inter-glacial periods, the book on which and on man's life therein was, he hoped firmly, to be the monumental work of his studious life.

CHAPTER V THE MOSAIC GAME

Lahore station was, comparatively speaking, crowded as the arrival of the Punjab mail-train was signalled early in the morning of an April day. Among the people waiting on the platform was Lt.-Colonel Bob Sanderson, who commanded the Indian infantry battalion then stationed at Lahore. In the train should be Carruthers and Oxley, and Sanderson looked forward to meeting them both—Carruthers, whom he had known for many years, and Oxley, whom, although he had only met him for a short time in Mesopotamia during the war, Sanderson regarded as an interesting personality.

As the train appeared, steaming in slowly, Sanderson turned and spoke in Pashtu to the man who stood behind him, a tall, hook-nosed Pathan in neat, white clothing with the loose baggy trousers and leather chaplis of the North and rather tightly tied pagri round a low skull-cap—an ex-Sepoy of his own regiment, whose services Carruthers had secured through Sanderson some years back on his first trip to Ladakh—a good representative of that excellent, soldierly race, the Khattacks, of the North-West Frontier province.

Makhmud, who had followed Sanderson for many years since he had first been enlisted, over half the globe, grinned at the Colonel's brisk remark apropos of a fat bania, who was gathering his possessions together in a hurry lest he should miss the train, which only stopped there for half an hour, and then pointed to a first-class compartment where he had observed Carruthers looking out of the window and waving to them. Makhmud, calling to another somewhat younger man not unlike himself, hurried along towards the carriage as it passed them, and Sanderson followed. A minute later he was talking busily with Oxley and Carruthers while the two Pathans, after fervently embracing a rather walnut-moustached Punjabi Mussulman—Carruthers' old bearer, Nawab, whom he had warned to meet him at Bombay, and whom the two Sepoys had known for a long time—were busy clearing the carriage and, in the intervals, trying to make friends with a large, excited Airedale dog. Makhmud succeeded in that pretty quickly, for he had a way with dogs and animals and with most men. Tosh, having failed to bite the large man who laughed at him, decided to be friendly.

"I've got everything ready for you, Tom," said Sanderson. "All the stores arrived safely, and they're packed and listed now, and I've shown Makhmud through them; he knows exactly where everything is. He's

awfully glad to get the chance of going with you, as I'm off home on leave and shan't be coming back to the regiment. They're giving me a job next year at Simla. Makhmud has no use for sitting down in his village and jumped at your offer. The other lad's name is Spin Gul; he's some distant relation by marriage of Makhmud's, a likely lad who should do you well, and, of course, also an ex-Sepoy. You may remember him the last time you stopped here; he was batman to young Finnis."

"We shall be able to keep up the programme, then?" said Carruthers, as, after collecting the heavy baggage from the brake-van, they left the servant and the two Sepoys to bring up the kit—a couple of mule-carts from Sanderson's regiment were waiting for it outside—and passed out of the station.

"Easily," replied Sanderson. "I've booked berths for you by the night-train to Pindi for to-morrow night, fixed up a car and lorry on from Pindi to Kashmir, and got a boat for you at Srinagar. Unless you want to be staying in Pindi, you can get straight on the next day to Kashmir, and let the men and kit follow in the lorry. I've also written to James in Srinagar, telling him what day you arrive, and he'll be able to help if there's anything you want there."

Sanderson settled himself at the wheel of his car, and presently, in the growing warmth of an early April morning, they were speeding along the four-miles' stretch of road leading to Lahore Cantonment. Oxley, sitting in the back seat with Tosh, looked around him with curious eyes—it was an India he did not know, quite a different country from the one in which he had spent some months a matter of thirteen years ago, and which had not greatly attracted him. This seemed different, more alive, the folk brisker and more manly. In particular the two ex-soldiers Sanderson had produced for them pleased him; "husky-looking knaves," as Oxley would have described them; lean, hard-bitten men of a type he had seen in Mesopotamia in certain of the Northern Indian regiments which he had met there.

Carruthers was busy talking to Sanderson in the front seat, and presently Oxley leant forward to join in the conversation.

"By the way," Sanderson was just saying; "Ross is here for a few days on some job of work or other. He calls it leave, of course. He's on some special duty now, working in the C.I.D. When he heard you were arriving to-day—I ran into him at the club yesterday—he was very keen to meet you again, and said he particularly wanted to see you before you left. So I asked him to come round to dinner to-night; my missus went down to Karachi last

week, but I'm still living in the bungalow. I rather suspect he has something particular he wants to bukh about—I think he's on the seditionist and Bolshie line at present instead of the dacoity work he was doing at first. But one never quite knows what Ross means—he's damned good at saying one thing and meaning exactly something else. But he's a coming man these days, and I believe there are a lot of nasty-minded folk who would rather shoot Ross than bomb a lieutenant-governor or a viceroy. Oxley will probably find a kindred spirit."

Possibly they were not altogether unlike. At least, Sanderson thought so that night when, after a very busy day helping the newcomers to make final purchases, handing over stores to Carruthers, checking tents and camp furniture and all the miscellaneous impedimenta required by men who are off into the blue for a year or more, they finally sat down to dinner, Ross having duly arrived. Both Ross and Oxley were small men, but whereas Oxley was fair and blue eyed, Ross was dark, with iron-grey hair and a somewhat saturnine expression in lieu of Oxley's constant air of cheerfulness. Like Oxley, however, he was dapper—very dapper—and, moreover, affected an eyeglass.

Makhmud, who had been in the veranda when Ross arrived, looked at the stranger and then at the man driving the car, and came very promptly to the salute. Thereafter he fell upon the neck of the driver, a stalwart man of his own breed, whose village lay some five miles away from Makhmud's home.

"I thought it must be Rāss Sahib," said Makhmud, after they had greeted each other with a string of "May you never be tired's," "May you always be strong," and the like, somewhat picturesque greetings in which the Pathan delights. "He is still the same—his eyes as quick as ever. What doth he now?"

"God knows, O Makhmud!" replied the other. "But it is not so good as the days when we hunted raiders. This is office work, which is not man's work—there are many babus and much paper. I think, however, there be some who fear Rāss Sahib even as the raiders feared him in the old days, but these be not men who fight in the open as did Yar Gul. Dost recall that day beyond Spin Ghar when we caught Yar Gul, who said none would ever catch him, and whom Rāss Sahib had promised to hang?"

And the policeman and the soldier went off into a string of recollections about past days on the frontier when, in their eyes, Ross had been a power in the land instead of being, as he was now, a daftar wallah, one who sat on a

chair in an office, smoked an enormous number of cigarettes, laughed immoderately upon occasion, and seemed to drift through life achieving nothing much except many signatures to many stupid papers.

In actual fact, however, Ross was a very important nerve-centre in the intricate machinery of government. In a sense he was what Oxley had been at the War Office, but in some ways on a bigger scale. He collated reports that nobody else would have thought of collating. When other people read of a dacoity in the south of India they did not connect it with certain happenings on the Kohat frontier, nor did they think, when reading one-line communiqués from Kashgar, of linking them with mentions of an ordinary murder in Benares or Calcutta. But to Ross all these things were the connected portions of a perfectly legible mosaic.

And because of this ever-growing mosaic he had been anxious to meet Carruthers and Oxley before they started off on their little jaunt into Ladakh. They might possibly be able to do something for him; they might not, but Ross had made his reputation by using everything that came to his hand. In this case, moreover, Oxley was a man who had himself done a good deal in a similar line. Ross wanted to know certain things about the part to which they were going, and there were various reasons, at the moment, why he could not send one of his own men to inquire. Possibly this party would serve his turn. Carruthers he remembered slightly; Oxley he had never met, and he studied them carefully during the meal as he kept up a flowing conversation about everything and nothing, displaying considerable knowledge of a life which had, presumably, nothing to do with his work; the world of sport and of the stage, the merits of horses and guns of different types, the trend of European finance and politics, the latest books. He and Oxley studied each other, mutually but inconspicuously—it was their trade to study men—and the verdicts were mutually satisfactory.

But when the servants had gone and the four were sitting in Sanderson's study, Ross changed the drift of the conversation and brought it round to the subject of Central Asia. He explained that he took a certain amount of interest in the part of the world where Carruthers and Oxley were going, although he himself had never been there. It was off the beaten track, of course, and, as Oxley would realise, militarily speaking, it had no great importance. But it might serve other purposes besides. War was no longer entirely a business of moving large numbers of machines and men. There were other methods of upsetting countries. On the other side of Central Asia was Soviet Russia, which had announced quite definite aims against the British Empire, and India was the nearest point of that Empire. Disturbances

in India would be a strong lever for the Soviet to manufacture and use. And, in order that subversive elements might be easily introduced into the country, a rather unknown route would be of value. Such a route might be found in that mountainous waste to the north, and the fact of its being militarily more or less impossible for modern armies would naturally tend to prevent people taking much notice of it. The things required for subversive purposes were gold, literature, emissaries, and small quantities of arms. Quite a poor kind of road would do for that purpose—the less trodden, the better, since there would not be the risk of detection which must naturally exist on main routes with ports and Customs and police.

"I believe, myself," he said, "that there may be such a road and that it is being used. I have two definite facts which make me believe so, and it is just possible that you might be able to help in the business. The first point on which information is needed is the whereabouts of a certain man whom we want rather badly, but whom, so far, we've not been able to catch. He's a south country Brahmin, educated at home, extremely clever, who was once known as Tilok Nath. He's changed his name a few times since, and when last heard of had still another one. I'll give you a description of him later on.

"He first came to notice in an unpleasant murder trial—he had been educated as a medical student—I don't think that one was political—it was just a private business over some money and a woman. However, Tilok Nath suspected that the police were watching him, and he just vanished—not very difficult for a man of his class—he's got a hundred bolt-holes. But he's an unsavoury person; a member of a little-known sect with a leaning to the more unpleasant forms of worship—one meets some nasty kinds out here occasionally. He's said to have a big influence over women, which is probably correct—his class have that in some parts of India.

"Four years later he came to light again, although, at the time, no one connected the missing Tilok Nath with the hidden figure behind a series of dacoities in Bengal, of undoubtedly political nature. One of the gang turned King's evidence, and, although he gave very clear details as to the man who ran it, it was some time before anyone realised that friend Tilok Nath was the gentleman known locally as Rama Dass—a name only; he never came out into the open. Smith, of my service, tumbled to it eventually—he was clever, was Smith. You may remember they shot him eventually before he had time to get Rama Dass. However, other people were also moving, and Rama Dass disappeared, and we never heard of him again until 1919, the year of the Punjab riots. By that time I had come into the picture—I didn't

want to leave the frontier, but they had me out of it, and put me on to this line, where I've mostly been ever since.

"One of the first things I had to tackle was an arms-running scheme. We got to the bottom of that; you may have seen all about it in the papers; they gave me most of it and we caught one or two fairly big fish. But we did not get the chief organiser. But what I did do was to prove most clearly that the brain of it was Tilok Nath again. He was referred to now as 'The Pandit,' but, from the information I got, his identity was quite certain. And that time I traced him back into the Punjab and then to Kashmir, and there we lost him altogether, although the Kashmir Durbar were doing their best to help us. They had no use for revolutionaries upsetting the country any more than we had.

"He was quiet for the next four years, and then the United Provinces reported someone so like him that I hopped down myself, which may have been a mistake on my part. Dacoities were very rife and a lot of terrorism going on, and there was clearly someone big behind it all, someone devilish clever, and I, personally, had no doubts about it. Moreover, I had certain information which would have clinched it, but, unfortunately, the informer was found with his throat cut inside his house one morning. Very shortly after, Kashmir reported someone not unlike our friend, but by the time they'd communicated with us and I'd sent back the information they wanted, he'd gone again.

"I then decided that we must go a bit further out ourselves, and I put on one of the best men I had—a Rajput called Thakur Singh—a man who should have gone very far in the service. It was a tricky job to carry out, and more risky than many of the things that Thakur Singh had had to do. But I had confidence in him.

"I gave him a roving commission, and fixed up the necessary help, and off went Thakur Singh. He started in Kashmir as a perfect imitation of a servant to a Hindu merchant. He was a wizard at disguises, was Thakur Singh, and would have made his fortune on the stage—one of those fellows who can disguise himself as anything with the minimum of properties, sometimes with none at all.

"From there he sent word—we had good means of communication—that he had no doubts either that the man we'd heard of was our friend Tilok, and that he had started for Ladakh, apparently as an earnest Hindu holy man seeking knowledge about Buddhism, going now by the name of Anand Ram—saffron robes, a large rosary, and all the rest of it. Thakur followed him,

just failed to catch him at Leh owing to having been laid up for five days *en route* with a sprained ankle. I got word from him again from Leh.

"There was a very long silence after that, close on nine months, and then I got a letter from Thakur. Of course, it was code; we had a special code that Thakur himself invented. It had to be simple, because he couldn't carry round code-albums and things like that, but it was pretty fool-proof, and I'm certain the news was genuine. It had Thakur Singh's mark and, from other marks on it, I knew how it had come back; he'd fixed up a sort of post system which was fairly safe, although the other people in it didn't really know what they were carrying or who Thakur Singh was. I think they thought he was an opium smuggler.

"This is what he wrote me." Ross took out a slip of paper from his notebook and put it on the table—a typed slip. "I've decoded it, of course; this is only a copy.

" 'Am now in Nubra going over Saser. If necessary, will continue on Central Asian route to Kashgar. 12 is here, identification established—now called Dhyanand. Believed to have been in outlying monastery lately. I think he has opened another route north. Now travelling in caravan belonging to one Kale Khan in company with a Turki called Tarzi. Believe Tarzi is 23, but cannot establish identification for certain. Was able to overhear them last night, and they have a big scheme for next year. Am now in train of a Shikarpuri merchant going Yarkand. Hope to bring or send full report in two months from now.' "

Ross folded up the paper, twisted it into a spill and lit his cigarette with it. Even a typed, decoded copy was too risky to lose. It might get into certain hands. Then he went on:

"The numbers refer to a little 'Who's Who' which I had made up for Thakur Singh to memorise before he left. No. 12 was Tilok Nath. No. 23 was a doubtful gentleman, believed of mixed Russian and Turki parentage, who came to notice during the war. Subsequently he was reported as being at a Soviet Training-School in Moscow. Then we lost sight of him, and this is—if it's really him—his first reappearance.

"Now, the point is this: Thaker Singh has never come back and, as far as I can find, never reached Kashgar. Neither did anyone like our No. 12, last heard of as Dhyanand, ever get there. They just disappeared again. It's a habit of Dhyanand's, but I'm disturbed for Thakur Singh—it's a long time—and I'm afraid something has happened to him.

“The first thing I want to know is, of course, the whereabouts of Dhyanand and Tarzi, and what they’re at. At the moment I can’t send anyone to look; I haven’t got a man properly fitted for that job just now. I can’t make a lot of noise about it, either. As Oxley knows, the Intelligence agent loses his value if he’s talked about. If he disappears you can’t send the police to look for him, least of all in a country like that where no police ever go.

“The second thing that I want to know is whether there is some passable route other than the main Central Asian trade route. Everybody says there is not, but there may be, and Thakur Singh seemed to think there is. You’re going north of Nubra, I understand, more or less exploring, and if there is such a route you might come across it and possibly see something. You can’t inquire openly for Thakur Singh—two wandering sahibs on a joy-ride couldn’t do that without giving things away—but you can keep your eyes open. If you do find anything worth reporting, get it back to India as soon as possible; we’ll reimburse you for any expense incurred for it.”

Oxley, who had left home with instructions to do no work for a year, listened keenly. This certainly added spice to the prospect ahead. He realised that he was rather useless, knowing nothing of the country and nothing of the languages. But with Carruthers’ aid that might be got over. He would like to find some secret route, and still more would he like to find the elusive No. 12.

“But what do we do when we find No. 12, by whatever name he may be sweetly smelling at the moment?” he asked. “Can we shoot him or tie him to a yak or a llama or whatever they have in those outlandish parts, and bring him home with us for trial?”

“Hardly shoot him, I am afraid,” said Ross, “though he’s earned hanging half a dozen times. We aren’t Russia yet, although a lot of people are trying their best to make us into it, or would do if they got the chance. But you might find out what he is playing at if you did locate him, and that would be a great deal to know. We could lie for him after that—he’s bound to come back sooner or later—his work’s in this country and he’s about as rabid a hater of the British Empire as you’re likely to meet. Of course, if he were to do anything so foolish as to shoot you up, that would be different, but I’m afraid he’s not likely to. Of course, if he thought you were looking for him, that might stir him, but I think, if he’s got anything really going, he’d prefer to keep quiet. Shooting you up would create a little stir, and the Kashmir Durbar would ask questions of the Ladakh Governor, and then, perhaps, get busy and send some troops out, or something like that, which probably

wouldn't fill Tilok Nath's bill. You will most probably see and hear nothing, but there is just a chance, and I felt I ought to see you. And, remember, you say nothing to anyone; but there's no point in rubbing that into you, Oxley—I understand you've played the game almost as long as I have, only in a different way."

Thereafter they shifted the talk back into other channels, and it was fairly late when Ross rose to go. His man was in the car outside talking to Makhmud and Spin Gul, who greeted Ross in Pashtu, and talked of the district where Ross had spent four arduous years at the beginning of his career, and where he wished very much that he was back again, dealing with raiders and suchlike healthy, open-air folk instead of being in the office in which he now saw himself for the rest of his service.

Next day, in a rather squalid corner of Lahore city, a mean-looking little Hindu from Delhi way sat among a multitude of flies, writing a letter. It was not a very long letter, but he took pains over its composition. It reported to certain people in Delhi the very uninteresting details of the movements of Mr. Ross of the Indian Police and of his subordinate, Gorbaksh Singh, a jovial, bearded, burly Sikh, and as a letter it was dull. In fact, when the recipient opened it at Delhi he came to the conclusion that Ross really had gone to Lahore without any serious intent. Probably the other people to whom he passed on the news thought the same, except for the Turkish-educated young Muhammedan with a pock-marked face, who happened to recognise the name of Oxley. Ross, it seemed, had dined with someone who was entertaining Oxley and another man from England, and who were going shooting in Ladakh. The young gentleman thought for a while; then he went round to see a bland, spectacled Hindu with whom, in the interests of the world's future, he had a temporary alliance, with every intention of downing the Hindu as soon as the British had been ejected. The young man was quite convinced that he and his like would certainly eject the British.

"It must be the man who was in Iraq," said he. "Why, therefore, should Ross go to see him? It may, of course, be nothing; but one does not know. Word should certainly be sent north that Ahmad keep watchful."

"Maybe you are right," said the bland Hindu. "That name was mentioned to us some time back from Paris, but it was not considered of real interest. Perhaps now it were well to write." He reached for pen and ink.

In the mail-bags in the train in which Carruthers and Oxley, with their men and baggage, travelled to Pindi next evening reposed a certain inoffensive post card to one Ahmad, merchant, c/o Postmaster, Leh,

reporting the despatch of certain bales of goods to his address and telling him to be very careful to look out for their arrival. The post card went on to state that further details of the consignment had been sent by one Mohun Lal, a Hindu, who would presently arrive on his way to Yarkand to join a Hindu firm of traders. A post card is safer than a letter, since everyone can read it. But, of course, all who read it may not deduce the same meaning.

CHAPTER VI NUBRA

Carruthers, of course, knew well both Kashmir and the road thereto, but to Oxley, who had never seen either, the journey had all the advantages of novelty, and he enjoyed every moment of it—enjoyed even what he still continued to stigmatise as the sybaritic luxury of Indian methods of travel.

Despite his dislike of boats, he even found the week they spent on a houseboat in Srinagar very pleasant, possibly because it was so extremely restful and free from any trammels of civilization, and Oxley was now sufficiently well again to realise that he had been really very ill and that he certainly did want rest and quiet and what he called the "dog tosh" life.

But still more did he enjoy the marches forward from Srinagar when they set out on the road to Ladakh, the two hundred and forty miles of marching that would presently take them to Leh, which was to be their real starting-point. As usual, of course, in his estimation it was all too luxurious—the easy marches were rendered still easier by pleasant meals on flower-grown turf, in the shade of great trees, by sunlit torrents under the shadow of vast, snow-clad hills, where, after eating, they lay and talked and smoked until the slow-moving transport of little pack-ponies caught them up and passed on again into the distance in the direction of the night's halting-place. It was something entirely different from any kind of travel Oxley had ever undertaken before, and he actually admitted to himself that, for a short space of time, it could be extraordinarily enjoyable. He qualified this opinion, however, by adding: "For anyone who's been forced to convalesce for a bit."

Then, when they crossed over into Ladakh, where the hills were much higher and the road harder, he found more fascination in the quaint types met by the roadside—the pig-tailed men, the laughing, picturesque women, and the half-bred yaks, the quaint, cliff-perched monasteries, and the rather ragged and dirty lamas who inhabited them. Moreover, it was obviously a land where time was at an even greater discount than in the rest of the East, and for a little that might be, and indeed was, distinctly attractive.

Of course, it was all wrong in his estimation; the country badly needed a little work; it was time the right people took it in hand and started a service of six-wheeler lorries or semi-tracked vehicles to replace the pack-animals, whose inefficiency hurt Oxley's ultra-modern mind every time he looked at them. And no wireless, no aeroplanes, not a drop of petrol or a machine of any type in the whole country! That almost made Oxley weep sometimes,

and then his conversation would turn to the benefits of civilisation, for he belonged entirely and completely to the age of steel and electricity. Carruthers, of course, was a complete reactionary of the Stone Age—one of those queer people who hanker after a life of bows and arrows, who would infinitely prefer a world without any machines of any sort to this modern world of ours, who would cheerfully sacrifice most of what we call progress, scientific and otherwise, in order to go back to a medieval atmosphere.

But the diversity of temperament served to keep interest alive and to savour the endless discussions at each meal; for, after all, the sauce of life is a well-sorted diversity, and by the time they reached the Indus Valley and began the last series of their marches to Leh there were few questions left that they had not discussed or mildly quarrelled over at one time or another on the way up. Leh—in the person of Aziz and Ghulam Kadir, two Muhammedan Ladakhis, old followers of Carruthers—received them with open-armed welcome as they rode up the long, stone-strewn plain to the town, which lies at 11,500 feet above the distant sea, under a ring of hills rising up another 8,000 feet at the highest point of the gaunt rock mountains, now all covered with the winter snow.

Makhmud, Aziz, and Ghulam Kadir embraced all round with Oriental fervour, for they were old acquaintances and had a mutual respect for each other. The arrival of Nawab and Spin Gul, who came in a little later with the ponies, required more embraces of ceremony and further tea-drinking, and that night camp was pitched with a feeling of completeness, pitched for a few days' rest before they should set out on their real journeys, which might, or might not, bring them to something interesting.

Leh bazaar, accustomed at that time of the year to the seasonal arrival of odd white men in search of big game, also looked upon them with interest; and the one or two European missionaries, of course, received them with open house as the forerunners of the season—a great matter to those who have been shut off from their kind for the six long, dreary months of winter with the passes to civilisation more or less closed.

But two people in particular took the arrival of these sahibs and their following with considerably greater interest than anyone else—to wit, two so-called Central Asian merchants who had been spending most of the winter in Ladakh. They had come up from India too late to get over the passes before they shut down, and were now supposed to be waiting for the spring opening.

One was a Pathan, whose father had settled in Central Asia some thirty years before; the other was apparently a pure-bred Yarkandi. Their interest was natural, for, since the sahibs were going over into Nubra, it meant that there was every chance of the passes being forced earlier than usual, and they would be able to follow without the labour and possible danger which would have been their lot had they had to go alone. They had naturally, therefore, made inquiries from Aziz and Ghulam Kadir as to the movements of the sahibs who, as all Leh knew, had engaged the two men over six months before.

But as the two merchants sat in the room they had hired in Leh bazaar for the winter, drinking tea for about the tenth time that day, their talk was not of the passes nor of the snow, as it should have been. The room was on the upper story with a little balcony, which one reached by a dark and tortuous staircase. It gave privacy, always sought after in the East, and also sunlight, which is good in cold places in winter. The only other person in the house was a Hindu who had recently arrived from down country, and whom, it was understood, the two merchants were escorting—at a price—to Yarkand to join others of his tribe, flourishing moneylenders in Turkestan. At the moment he was somewhere below, cooking his food.

"It must certainly be he," remarked Yusuf, the Pathan, a short, sturdy man with a close-cropped black beard—a Yusofzai or possibly a Mohmand—clothed, however, in Turki fashion, wadded coat and long black boots. "I saw them in the street this morning, and the description is just what we were given. Moreover, I had speech later with one of the men—they have two Khattacks, men of my speech, soldiers—and when I asked they said that the small sahib spoke no Hindi, but spoke Arabic, having been much in Arab countries. Undoubtedly it is the man we were told to look for. Now comes the matter of why he is here. It may be that it is the truth that he has been ill and has been ordered to travel, as is the foolish custom of the Feringhi. On the other hand, why should he travel here when, as we have heard, he has been working for years at matters which touch closely on things you and I know of?"

"Truth, Yusuf," replied his companion, who was known as Ahmad, a taller and fairer-skinned man than the Pathan opposite. "It is strange, and a matter that should be looked into carefully. Moreover, he is not the kind that would come hither, as do so many, in search of game. It is to be remembered also that Carruthers, the tall man, has been here much, and we know not what he seeks, either. And why should they go up to Nubra, where, from what the shikaris say, there is but little to shoot? Nor do they make maps or

pictures. It would seem as though more like they have been sent to watch for or to seek out something, and that is dangerous. The upper road becomes of more value each year, and it is not good that white men should travel upon it, and perchance, for all that they are for the most part undiscerning, observe something of the traffic whereby honest men may make a living in spite of the hell-doomed foreigner."

"And why Nubra?" queried Yusuf. "Can it be that they have heard of the old snow road and seek to reopen it? If they did that and found a way to it, then, following that road, they might be in time to reach ours and see that which they should not; and *that* story would certainly be told and search be made for those who use it. There is time as yet—the pass cannot open for another week, and the Saser will not be passable for at least three weeks. Nevertheless, it were wise to send word by a sure hand that these be the men against whom we were warned, and that our people act with due caution.

"And, most of all, that these be well watched all the summer. It is not likely that they will find the road, but it would be awkward if they did so, especially this year."

Ahmad nodded slowly and spat twice.

" 'Twould be easy to settle them if that happened," he remarked.

"Easy—yes," said Yusuf. "But that which is easy is not always expedient. Search would surely be made, and others would come, and, even if naught were found, we might be much hindered in many things. Moreover, there is the other matter, and that must be done quietly and the road blocked, for it will take two summers, perhaps, to get it all away, and in the winter little can be done."

"What news did the Hindu bring?" asked Ahmad, changing the subject.

"Little of note: he said that the work went well and that all we had sent had been passed into the hands for which it was intended. He said that gold was essential, and that we know. He is but a learner as yet, and doubtless not trusted with much. It is a strange thing that we should work with such a worm as this Mohun."

"It is but for a time, Yusuf; one has to use all tools for work, poor or good, as the occasion requires. When the work is done, if the tool is poor one throws it away."

"True," said Yusuf. "It will squeal, certainly, after the manner of its kind, when it feels the knife at its throat and knows that its time of usefulness is passed. How blind must their father, the devil, have begotten them to think

that such as we should help them for any purpose but our own! But when the time comes, then I will go down again into Hind. The women are notable in the south, as my ancestors knew and as I have seen. I noted Mohun Lal's sister particularly. I shall enjoy slitting the worm's throat before I gather any such of his women-folk as are well favoured and their jewels, which are always good."

Yusuf spat with relish and then rose and pulled his coat about him.

"I go forth to see about the animals. When Mohun Lal returns, see if he has learnt anything new regarding telegrams or letters or suchlike."

The Pathan swung heavily down the little staircase and went out into the bazaar, leaving Ahmad reflecting over men and manners. The reflections were doubtless pleasing, for he chuckled from time to time.

A week later Carruthers and Oxley set out again from Leh by the Khardong route to Nubra—John's first experience of a really high mountain-pass, for the Khardong is 17,400 feet, and a glacier-pass on the north side. They had a biggish caravan, for they did not know how long they would be away, and it seemed wiser to take all their stores with them rather than to have to send back later on. They had three ponies of their own, purchased in Leh; the remainder of the transport was hired yaks.

Snow was still heavy, and the crossing difficult enough to necessitate their staying two days at the camping-ground below the pass, the first day being spent in using unladen yaks to tread out a road through the softening snow. The second day they were able to get the bulk of the kit over, and the third saw them well down on their road to the great Shyok Valley, through which lay their way to Nubra.

Oxley still maintained his opinion that snow-mountains were the abomination of utter desolation, but, all the same, he enjoyed the trip, barring an extremely bad headache on the pass. Nevertheless, he frankly preferred the lower Shyok Valley, while Nubra, with its flowers and orchards, its thorn-fenced gardens and quaint little villages, its glacier-fed torrents sweeping down the old alluvial fans and irrigating long series of little terraced fields, was altogether more to his liking, the more so since it was obviously a country where wheeled transport might be introduced without great difficulty. Oxley indulged in visions of the, to him, dismal quiet of Nubra being brightened by the hum of passing motors, the halting-places rendered homelike by petrol-pumps and decent pubs and a hotel or two. In those conditions, he thought, Northern Ladakh would be quite a pleasant place. In the interludes of putting forth such views he still spent

many hours trying to find the real solution of Tom's quite absurd and illogical story about the mirror, which was beginning to haunt him more and more in his endeavours to clear it up. He also pondered more seriously on the question of the disappearance of Ross's man, Thakur Singh, of the plots of the mysterious No. 12, and the chances of finding a hidden road.

They made the very last group of villages about Panamik without incident, and knew that thereafter there would be no more villages, no more human life, save for such little time as they would follow the Central Asian route, and that also was at present deserted since the Saser Pass in front was not yet open.

They had decided on a long halt at Panamik to give them time to visit the monastery at Kungma and ascertain whether the gelong was now prepared to guide them to the hidden, mountain-hemmed valley. If all was well, then the bulk of the stores could be brought out to Kungma and such of them as were not immediately required left there, to be fetched later. Makhmud and Aziz were to remain at Panamik and await further orders.

So, on the second day after their arrival at Panamik, a tiny, scattered village whose inhabitants, for the most part, lived by hiring their little ponies and half-bred yaks to the traders during the summer months and selling them forage and grain, Oxley and Carruthers, with Ghulam Kadir and Spin Gul, set out for Kungma. Their first day's march lay still along the trade route, a sandy and stony track in a desolate valley marked out more and more clearly with the bones of the pack-animals who, worn out by the passes ahead and their long march through utterly desolate country, had fallen and died by the roadside, unable to stagger in the few remaining miles to the Panamik hamlets, where would be rest and food.

On either side rose great mountains, running up another 8,000 feet above the 10,000 feet level of the valley floor, and behind these again a few miles further back, showed now and then the ice-bound summits of still higher peaks. From the melting snow-beds and glaciers hidden in their flanks poured down the torrents that, every three or four miles, swept out through narrow gorges to join the main stream of the Nubra river, born from the giant Siachen glacier, of which they caught their first glimpse near the point where the Central Asian trade route swung up 2,000 feet over a steep rock-shoulder to disappear into the mountains on their right.

For the most part of that three days' slow journey the ponies were of little use, the so-called path being practically non-existent, and they had the utmost trouble with such baggage as they had brought with them. On the

afternoon of the third day, however, they sighted, far off, the low buildings of Kungma, sheltered on the flank of the mouth of a great gorge, and by late evening reached the few small fields below the monastery, where a lama was awaiting them to guide them up to the monastery itself, at whose carved and painted doorway the gelong received them.

Despite his impassive appearance, he was obviously glad to see Carruthers again.

"I knew you would return after the snow, and for many days now we have been watching. The time is ripe for you to go further, to the City of Vision, where they await your coming. But you have not brought all your men and your baggage?"

"They await us at Panamik until either we send word for them to follow or return ourselves. We have much baggage, for we came prepared to remain a long time if need be, and we have with us five men of our own, all of whom are trustworthy, and two of whom are Ladakhis, but speaking Hindi also, so that they may serve as interpreters between the other sahibs, the Indians, and the people of these parts."

"If you will write to your head man, I will send it by a messenger at once so that he may lose no time in joining you. The spring draws on and the track becomes more perilous every day as the snows melt more and more. I will send one who has much influence in Nubra so that there shall be no delay or trouble in getting men to carry your things, for the road here is bad, as you have seen, and most difficult for animals—indeed, there are many places where the laden beasts cannot pass at all and the men have to help."

"Quaint-looking old bird," thought Oxley, looking after the gelong as he went out to call a lama while Carruthers sat writing a letter to Makhmud that the Pathan would be able to understand, in the queer, low-roofed room with the carved and painted beams and the frescoed walls and the one small window looking out on to the eternal ice of the great glacier above them. "I wish I could understand what he says. He's obviously not No. 12, however —that's sure—his face is pure Mongol."

Carruthers finished writing the note just as the gelong returned with a short, stoutly built lama to whom he gave the envelope with instructions to deliver it to the sahib's man at Panamik as soon as possible, and to assist him in every way with regard to getting transport.

Two days later the lama walked into the camp at Panamik with the missive, and was duly assaulted by the Airedale, Tosh, who regarded the

purlieus of the camp as sacred ground indeed.

Makhmud, who happened to be outside his tent, remarked the somewhat strange fact that the lama ignored the dog, merely waving it aside, and that Tosh stopped, nonplussed for an instant, sniffing at his red robes and queer-shaped cloth and felt boots, and then sat down, looking first at him and then at the Pathan in puzzled doubt—a procedure most unlike his usual attitude to any strangers who approached the tents. Aziz, who came up in a hurry, partly to secure the dog if need be, partly to act as interpreter, was also rather surprised at the lama's calm entrance.

"Tell him we shall march to-morrow if he can get men and animals in time," said Makhmud after he had laboriously deciphered the note and explained it to Aziz.

The lama smiled a little when the question was translated.

"It is Kungma's order," he said, as though that were quite enough to turn out every pony and man in Nubra. And with that, refusing Aziz's proffered offer of a meal, he turned on his heel and disappeared again through the thorn-fence. But, by tea-time that evening, twenty men and as many ponies were assembled outside the camp, twenty men who, strangely enough, made no objections, clamoured for no extra pay, and, in the morning, took their loads without a murmur, instead of fighting for the light ones and stopping continually to find out that their crude pack-saddles were broken or their loading-ropes missing. They had, moreover, all got their rations in goat-skins and string bags slung over their broad shoulders. Makhmud, accustomed to the manifold delays of Oriental travel, reflected deeply on the unwonted smoothness of it all, and decided that Kungma seemed to be a power in the land, for all that no one talked about it much. He remarked also to Aziz that the pony-men were much more silent than usual, as were also the women who came out of the last two or three hamlets ahead to give the men some last morsels of food to cram into their rough string bags. They greeted the strange lama with a respect that was noticeable even in a country where the lama is almost invariably reverenced as the intermediary between man and the myriad devils with which the country swarms—devils of wind and snow, of avalanche and rock-slide, devils waiting always to catch the unwary who has neglected his duty towards the lamas.

The usual crowd—a crowd, that is to say for Panamik, perhaps as many as twenty individuals of both sexes and all ages—came out to see them off. Among that crowd was an inconspicuous pair of Central Asian merchants who had followed them over the Khardong, and of whom one exchanged

greetings with Makhmud in Pashtu as that worthy strode past with the animals, very important in his temporary rôle of leader of the expedition.

Makhmud answered back hurriedly as he passed. Makhmud was a genial soul, and had many friends on that road, but he was not sure if he liked that man, Yusuf. Possibly it was the natural feeling of the Khuttack of the plains for the hereditary enemy of the hills; in his day Makhmud had hunted, and once been hunted by, the likes of Yusuf, and there is little love lost between the border villager and the trans-border riever, even though they may sometimes make common cause against the mutually despised Hindu.

"They go up to Nubra, then," remarked Yusuf to Ahmad as they watched the last animals disappear along the thorn-fenced lane. "It is well for the moment. Perchance the story is true, for I saw their men cleaning those strange pick-axes which the Feringhi—whom Allah destroy!—use when, in their madness, they go among the ice and snow and such places where no other men would go. Furthermore, they were uncoiling and coiling long ropes, which is also the Feringhis' custom upon such occasions."

"Nevertheless," said Ahmad, "it were well still to watch them and to learn something of this Kungma monastery. Is it possible that in some way it connects with the valley where Tarzi says the gold is to be got? It seems that the lama who came with the letter has much power, for I had spoken with the head man and he told me that of a surety there would be difficulty in getting them transport, so that they would have to remain many days here. With him I will speak presently."

"Be not too outspoken, Ahmad," said Yusuf. "It were not well than anyone should think or say that we desired that they should meet with difficulties. But, if it may be done, find out somewhat concerning this place, Kungma, which, as far as is known, leads nowhere and from which the people here say there is no road. To-morrow we will set out for the Saser and, it may be, cross and meet with Abdulla, who, as Tarzi wrote, should by now be waiting at Saser Bransa with news."

CHAPTER VII THE ROAD OF VISION

"Thank goodness, they've arrived," remarked Oxley to Carruthers three days later, as the two of them stood on the path below Kungma monastery whence they had seen Makhmud and the rest of the Panamik party approaching over the shoulder of the hill on the other side of the torrent that foamed down below the monastery from the glacier, whose snout protruded in the gorge above them. It was an old, stationary glacier which had once formed an arm of the gigantic ice-river that, in prehistoric times, must have filled the whole of the Nubra Valley for well over a hundred miles, and whose traces of ice-scored rocks are clear to see for a thousand feet on either bank.

"It's time we got moving again—you're getting more and more like Nirvana every day; you'll be a Buddha before you're done. You spent the whole of yesterday talking with the super-lama and leaving me to twiddle my thumbs or sit on the roof and admire hundreds of square miles of potential road-metal which nobody in these parts has the intelligence to use."

"Well, hang it! I must fix up the details of the journey on, mustn't I?" retorted Tom.

"What is the scheme?" asked Oxley. "Let's have it with all the moonshine and looking-glass part cut out. All I've gathered so far is that shortly, possibly to-morrow, we set off for somewhere in the mountains to some place where weird people live busy with mirrors and joo-joo generally. Presumably, we are to be initiated into something or other. I gather the trail is worse than anything we've done so far, and begin to wonder if it's the secret one your friend, Ross, hinted at, only it seems to lead nowhere. Moreover, you haven't yet said whether we're going to take on the Panamik men, or not. In fact, you are getting cloudy and lack the sense of detail—you've got the mirror on the brain."

"We're not taking the Panamik men, anyway. According to Rinpoche, this is the hyper-hush-hish track which we're going to hit now. Just ourselves, our own men and, I understand, two or three lamas with a few strange men who seem to have materialised out of the ice in the last two days—short, squat fellows, but a tough-looking lot and very silent, which is unusual in these parts."

“Sounds all right,” said Oxley, as they went slowly up the steep path, hoping that perhaps Tom would expand a little more now that the whole outfit was together again. That Carruthers’ main outline had been correct he realised an hour later when the Panamik men off-loaded at the foot of the hill, carried up the baggage, dumped it at the gate, took their pay and left. A little later he saw them filing back through the torrent on their way home.

“They say no one is allowed to stop at Kungma, Sahib,” explained Aziz, as he watched them go. “It is a very holy place with many devils, and anybody who does not obey the gelong’s orders is always killed by the snow or the falling rocks the next winter. They do not talk much of Kungma in Nubra, and if you ask they just say that it is a small monastery where no one ever goes. If it had not been for that lama, we should have had much trouble in getting any men or ponies to come here.”

“That’s so,” said Carruthers, as he translated what Aziz had said. “They seem afraid of Kungma for some reason or other, and yet there’s no reason to be really; I’ve never met a more decent lot than these Kungma monks—really earnest people and very full of learning.”

“I told you you were reincarnating,” said Oxley. “The next thing I shall hear is that in your past life you were a gelong of Kungma and an earnest and learned soul who for some great crime—probably selling the monastery butter—has been reborn as Tom Carruthers. Meanwhile, let’s go and see how much of the kit’s been smashed on the way by your transmigrated pals.”

They found the baggage laid out in the veranda, from which gave off the small suite of cells allotted to them, where Aziz and Makhmud were discussing the half-dozen or so strange men who had carried it in, and whose Thibetan, according to Aziz, was more or less incomprehensible. Ladakhis they might have been, but of ultra-Mongol type, and even to Oxley the talk seemed strange. Carruthers said he could understand only a word here and a word there, and that with great difficulty.

“Their clothes are not quite the same, either,” he pointed out; “and I’ve never seen a knife like that the whole time I’ve been in Ladakh.”

He pointed out a heavy knife swinging from the leather belt of a squat, sturdy man, with a great development of chest and shoulder. He went up to the man to examine the knife, and the hill-man watched him curiously, but without comment, with beady eyes under the rough thatch of hair.

“Bronze-hilted and iron blade,” remarked Oxley, as they studied it. “The iron’s not over-well welded, but that hilt’s a beautiful thing. I fancy it’s much older than the blade—looks as if someone had fitted an old hilt to a new blade, and not done it over well, either. There’s some kind of strange writing on the hilt, too.”

“I should say,” remarked Carruthers, as he examined the weapon, “that it’s the same kind of writing as there is on the handle of the mirror, and nobody’s ever been able to read that.”

“Tell us something more about where we’re going, Tom,” said Oxley, a little later, as the two of them sat drinking the tea which Spin Gul had brought. Spin Gul and Makhmud were by now well accustomed to strange people and peculiar places, but even they considered Kungma to be out of the ordinary, an opinion the dog, Tosh, seemed also to share, for he remained very close at hand all that evening.

“I can’t tell you very much, for I really don’t know. We start to-morrow by what the gelong calls ‘The Road of Vision,’ and, sooner or later, we shall get into that valley I saw from beyond the Saser glaciers. The gelong himself is coming, but he won’t tell me anything further.”

“You’ve been talking to him all the time,” objected Oxley.

“Yes, but not about the future. It’s all been about the past. He’s an extraordinarily interesting man—the first lama I’ve ever heard who seemed to understand glaciers and things of that sort, and he talked about them in the way Waldenstein might have done. Waldenstein would have given his eyes to hear it all, I’m sure.”

“What did he say about them?” asked Oxley, who was getting mildly interested.

“Talked rather like a geology book sometimes—about ice ages and varying climates, about the age of man and of life generally. I should say that he has an understanding much like a European scientist with regard to whole heaps of things. Only, of course, he rather implies that he knows it all from having seen it in some of his past lives. He asked about the civilised world, too, and seemed very interested, and yet somehow familiar with most of what I told him. He also asked a lot about wars, but he didn’t seem over-interested in what I told him of the last one, but was very keen on the social movements of civilisation—Bolshevism, Communism, reaction, and so on. And then, again, he went back into the past and drew parallels.”

“Parallels from what?” queried Oxley.

"Things he'd known, or said he'd known, in other lives, in different places in the world. And always as though he was waiting for something; as though some of the things were going to be repeated again some day, and he would have something to do with it all when they did. The one thing that really held him was when I talked of wireless. Quite on his own, he asked if people could make pictures by wireless, and when I said they were just beginning to in a rough way, he got quite thoughtful."

"He's probably not a lama at all—he's a Bolshie spy who's starting a Communist cell and wants to find out definitely whether he can rig up a set here without getting jammed too often," suggested Oxley. "Probably his statue and your blooming looking-glass are something to do with wireless." Oxley sat up as one who has stumbled on the germ of a great idea. "That's what it is—the fellow's perfected some new line of wireless photography—probably gets his power from the torrent below—it must have a tremendous head on it. That little building higher up that they said was a prayer-wheel turned by water handing out 'Om Mane padme Hum' by the hundred revolutions is obviously a dynamo disguised! And that, of course, is why the Nubra people aren't allowed here."

"And that, of course, is why we've been invited, being, by virtue of our nationality, naturally friendly to Bolshies and the like. Try again, John!" retorted Carruthers.

"Not a Bolshie, probably—he's a White Russian, I expect—a Slav Mussolini who's waiting his opportunity. This is better than a goldmine." Oxley was waxing quite enthusiastic over his thoughts. "He's going to make an empire in Central Asia, and then start a Mongol movement westward, and so wipe out the Soviet Federation, and wants a few white men to lend him a hand. I can see it all now. Probably his big works are hidden in the valley you saw, and when the gelong heard you'd found it, he saw he'd have to do something quick to prevent you handing the news out to the world and getting a scientific expedition to explore it. This is a good country—I foresee fun ahead. I knew there couldn't be anything occult because there isn't any such thing. The first thing I shall do, as soon as it gets light, is to slip out and have a look at his power-plant. Those things you call prayer-masts, with the yak tails and streamers and the banners on the clothes-lines, are obviously his aerials. He's a cunning fellow to think of dressing them all up like that—I feel brotherly towards him. But I must find out how he arranges for the reception on that mirror he got you to pick up so neatly. He must have got an almighty clever baby aerial hidden in behind the green screen which shows the pictures—probably some fluorescent composition.

And the man's a perfect genius at designing the whole thing in such a microscopic size. If he'd only commercialise it, he'd make his fortune, which would be much more sensible than sitting up here playing at being a lama. But perhaps he's out for something bigger; he wants to get power first, and then money will roll in. Let me have another look at the mirror."

He was allowed to handle the mirror on condition that he didn't tamper with it in any way, and spent the rest of the evening trying to work out what mechanism it contained, and complaining bitterly that Tom wouldn't let him prise off the back with a screw-driver—he was perfectly certain that an aerial must be contained in the back, and that the pictorial mechanism was in the quaint-shaped handle.

That night Carruthers dreamed, and his dream was one that had not recurred for a very long time indeed, though it was one which he had had before, and which, at one time, he had been in the habit of having very frequently.

The dream always began the same way. He was making his way up on the rock-slope opposite the Snow Sea, beyond the Giant's Stairway of ice, and he was always alone. Somewhere above him he knew he would come presently to the pair of giant rock-gendarmes crowning the slope, from whence one could look down on both sides over a glacier-filled landscape ringed with immense mountains—sometimes gaunt rock-peaks, sometimes smooth, easy-looking snow-hills with gentle, rounded heads. And he knew that when he reached the great gendarmes of limestone which towered up as though set there as sentinels over the deep valleys, he would find a rock-built tower, quite small compared to the rocks on either side, and yet spacious enough in its way—an old tower that was slitted for arrows, and which you entered by a little doorway high up in its side. There would be a queer-shaped ladder propped up to the door. And when he had climbed the ladder he would find the little door open and enter it, and so make his way up stone stairs inside to the flat roof of the tower.

On that, in the brilliant sunshine, would be sitting the girl—the girl he had never seen in his waking moments, but whom, somehow, he felt he had known all his life. She would be sitting there, leaning against the low wall, in her rich garments, whose whole cut was so utterly unfamiliar, and yet which he knew so well, the gold ornaments glittering in her dark hair and her eyes fixed on the great mountains beyond, gazing intently, as though waiting for something or someone to come over them. On the bosom of her gown, as she turned to speak to him, the sunlight would flash and sparkle on the looped cross that hung there—gold and vivid colour of gems. And then,

as always, she would turn again and point into the distance, and somehow he felt that away there beyond the ice-summits lived something perilous—something to be feared and also something to be fought against. But when he woke up he could never remember what it was she had said—what message she had given him—what it was she told him was to be watched for—what, indeed, they had talked of.

It was always a steep and difficult climb up there, but in his dream to-night it seemed ten times steeper than it had even been before, and, moreover, he was doing it at night with the moon just rising. Yet, somehow, he knew that he must hurry more than he had ever hurried in his life—that every second counted in the race, for he knew subconsciously that it was a race against something or someone. Although he was alone as usual, yet he knew also that behind him came others, but whether friends or enemies, he could not tell.

From long practice he knew every step of the way; where to go straight, where zigzag, where to climb. Yet to-night it seemed to him that he went more slowly than usual, and that those behind were catching him up. And then, finally, as he came over the last big cluster of rocks, he saw the tower as he had always seen it—saw that the door was open and the ladder in place. Beyond him, in the shadows, lay the body of a man whose hand still clutched a sword—a man who lay huddled upon his face, and the back of whose head was crushed all out of shape.

Then, when Carruthers reached the body, all was still there in the empty space and nothing showed, save only another splash of blood and a wisp of torn clothing; and on that clothing was a quaint pattern of embroidery, a chain of what might be eyes, ending in a loop which Carruthers knew was the upper half of that same looped cross he had seen so often. Only one other thing showed on the smooth ground—a little, yellow metal object that caught the moonlight as Carruthers picked it up and examined it—the spent shell of a large bored automatic pistol. Then came the noise of voices, the panting of hurrying men, and Carruthers woke to the actualities of the quaint, frescoed cell, the painted beams and the dim shadows rendered a little dimmer by the light of the hurricane lamp which Spin Gul was carrying as he and Nawab entered with some tea to tell their masters that it was past five o'clock, and Tosh stretched and yawned at the foot of his bed.

Carruthers sat up and, with an effort, slowly wrenched his mind back to the material facts of life as he watched Oxley, who was a light sleeper, sitting up to pour out the tea from the enamelled iron teapot. But he woke, somehow, with a sense of tiredness, even of actual shortness of breath which

might be natural at that elevation, but which, somehow, seemed as if it was only proper after the quick, steep climb he had just done in his effort to reach the tower in time.

Then—as he drank the tea Oxley passed him—he put aside his dreams for the moment and turned his thoughts to the actualities of the day, and soon was busy helping Spin Gul strap up the bedding-rolls and close the yakhdan, which he had opened over night.

Oxley disappeared to inspect the great, water-driven prayer-wheel, and came back presently with annoyance on his features.

"They've locked the damned place up," he said, "and, anyway, the water's running so slowly now—I suppose it's mostly frozen higher up the hill—that probably there's no power. I wonder what they do during the winter?"

"If you're still keen on the theory, you might find out a reason why anyone who has had the *nous* to fit up a dynamo in the Karakorum didn't think of putting in a small lighting set as well," said Carruthers.

"Much too obvious a thing to do," retorted Oxley rather crossly. "That would give the game away straight off."

An hour later they were making their slow way up towards the big glacier which hung above the monastery, and presently were cautiously following the guide up the steep side of the slanting old ice snout, from under which poured out torrents of muddy water. Behind them came the line of laden men—a dozen or so of the silent, Mongolian-featured men who, as Carruthers had said, seemed to have materialised out of the ice—two red-clothed lamas, and the servants—Makhmud, jaunty and debonair, his black bobbed locks protruding under the folds of a rolled, grey Balaclava cap, stopping occasionally to lean on his ice-axe and look back down the gorge—Aziz Muhammed in his shapeless leather pubboos over his long, felt Yarkandi stockings, his loose-flowing, plum-coloured gown girt about the waist with a many-folded girdle, his hands hidden in his long sleeves, for the air was crisp and cold.

Oxley followed the guide, the heavily built man with the peculiar knife, who trod unerringly on the boulder-strewn ice between the crevasses that showed vivid green in the early morning sunlight. Close behind him came the gelong, who, despite his age, went well and surely. Next to him was Carruthers, at the back of whose mind, now that there was nothing particular to occupy it, still lurked his dream of the night.

All the long morning and the early afternoon they followed that heart-breaking glacier, which, however, presently grew more even and would have been easier, save that now the sun's rays poured down, softening the snow, so that going was sometimes even more tiring than it had been earlier in the day in the crevassed portions.

Then, to Carruthers' surprise, as they slowly came round a corner he saw that they were near the end of the glacier, or so it seemed, for they had reached a great cirque of what looked like névé under a precipitous wall of splintered rocks—a cirque of white snow dotted with gigantic boulders hurled down from the cliff above. Then he realised that it might not actually be the end, since to his right a narrow gorge seemed to open off, and through that, presently, he could see a long ice-fall.

There they halted for the night, in the shelter of the rocks, making fires with the wood and the dried fuel they had brought, and slept presently under the starlit sky in the intense silence of the frost-laden night.

John Oxley, however, did not sleep very well, and lay looking at the dim shadows of the men moving against the glare of the little fires. Presently he began to amuse himself by counting them, as one counts sheep in the futile hope of getting sleep thereby. He counted them several times, and the process was not in the least helpful. On the contrary, it roused him to greater wakefulness. If you happen to be observant, as was John, and, during a long and wearying day, have been watching eleven strange men apparently of a different race from those of the country round, who have suddenly been thrust upon your notice, and have been endeavouring to learn their faces—Oxley prided himself on that gift—it is most disconcerting, at eleven o'clock at night, to lie and watch the same men and remark that they have increased to fifteen in a place miles from anywhere, on a glacier which could not possibly be traversed with any safety at night and where no men ought to be at all.

It was extraordinarily disconcerting, and, far from inducing sleep, only retarded it as Oxley lay there trying to make out whence had come these four new men, who had certainly not been there when darkness fell, and who could not reasonably have followed them from Kungma. It seemed to lend colour to Carruthers' original remark at the first appearance of the strange mountain-men that they had apparently materialised out of the ice.

And then his thoughts turned to the mysterious mirror, in which he had never been able to see anything, although on two occasions on the way up Carruthers had insisted that there were things to be seen in it; described

them quite vividly. It was obviously either a case of hypnotism on Carruthers' part, or else some queer use of wireless which could only be picked up by someone whose physical electricity was made at the right pitch. He wondered if it was something to do with Ross's mysterious criminal, No. 12, and then wondered if the whole thing was a trap, and if Rinpoche was really the missing Dhyanand, who'd managed to disguise his face a trifle by making his eyes slant. His build was exactly that which Ross had described in talking of No. 12, very heavy and powerful. He must try and see if he could trap Rinpoche into admitting that he understood English. It would be rather fun to return from the trip with a tangible result in the shape of No. 12 as a prisoner.

CHAPTER VIII THE HIDDEN GLACIER

Oxley mentioned the strange phenomenon next morning at dawn when the two men, closely muffled against the biting cold, were drinking hot tea as a prelude to the onward march, which must obviously lie up the ice-falls ahead. His remarks aroused Tom's interest, who then and there counted the men roping up the loads, and made the number only thirteen, which, nevertheless, was still two more than they had started with from Kungma the day before.

But the explanation of the difference between his and Oxley's figures was soon forthcoming when they reached the foot of the ice-fall and stood waiting for the others to come up; it was obviously a place that would require ice-axe and rope to negotiate, as Carruthers pointed out when they looked up the great tumbled slope of green and grey ice towering above them.

Then they became aware of a man standing a little above them in the growing light, a man who signed to them to come his way higher up the slope on their left, towards a hollow in the steep rock-wall. They went over to him and found that he stood in what was apparently the mouth of a cave of great width, but very low; the entrance was a bare six feet at the highest point, and lower in many places, and the floor was of solid ice. In the cave-mouth they observed the fifteenth man, who was squatting in a corner with a bundle of rough-made torches, one of which he was just lighting with flint and steel.

Then Rinpoche came up and talked a minute or two with Carruthers, and the latter's face cleared as though some difficulty had been explained, and yet at the same time showed considerable surprise.

"It's rather weird," he explained to Oxley when the gelong stopped talking. "It seems that those ice-falls on the right lead up to the big glacier I first found. What we're now going to follow is the lower reaches of the second glacier—the one I looked down on from the farthest place I reached. Apparently there is a tunnel several miles long—I suppose once cut by a subterranean river, and which now serves as a path for the glacier to drain out by. Otherwise in time that second valley would have been filled to the brim with ice and choked up. That's what he meant about the way not always being open, because, sometimes, after bad winters, it must block up

when the ice level gets higher, and probably it sometimes gets washed through with floods when the snows melt quickly."

Oxley agreed presently that that long, cold tunnel, feebly lit by the wavering light of the torches, was one of the weirdest places he had ever been in, in all his somewhat adventurous life. It was, of course, pitch-dark, and the breath froze on their moustaches. It was still, too, though the air was fresh, but at times there must have been strong currents of air when the great storms swept down in the valley beyond. The roof varied in height, and at one point where the ice rose they had to bend low to get past under the arched rock that seemed as if it sought to crush them.

Beyond that, however, the roof rose again suddenly, and the gelong, Rinpoche, who was now walking in front, stopped and pointed to the wall on their right, which here opened out into a high, natural cave. At least, it seemed to be natural, but at some period it had been worked upon by man, for the walls were heavily carved with strange carvings, most noticeable among which were the frequently repeated representations of the great looped cross of life. The cave had been hewn into the form of a temple, with high, straight pillars and a central niche, up to which they climbed and stood in wonderment at the group of pictures they saw there—boats of strange shape and animals and giant reptiles of types that are no longer to be found outside museums, and then only in the shape of odd bones or pictured reconstructions.

"It's absurd," remarked Oxley. "How could they even have dreamt of them?"

"They couldn't possibly," said Carruthers, "but they might have seen them. If Waldenstein was here he'd go clean mad with excitement at what seems to be something like a proof of his pet theory that man was certainly contemporaneous with the Ice Ages, possibly existed even before them. Look at those mammoths fighting and that cave-tiger being speared! We couldn't carve anything more vividly nowadays.

"Nor half as real," he continued, studying the reliefs again. "We'd put up some horrid, conventional thing that would look what it is—just dead stone. These are alive. That thing there is a pterodactyl, unless I'm going mad, and there's a man trying to shoot at it with a bow; and it's an uncommonly fine-looking bow too—nothing of the primitive Stone Ages about it."

"Ask him what it all means," said Oxley, indicating Rinpoche, who stood silent, looking, it seemed, not at the pictures, with which he was

doubtless familiar, but at the newcomers who were getting so excited over the carvings.

Carruthers did so and then turned to Oxley.

"He says—which is rot, of course—that he remembers it being made—ever so long ago. He says it was the first time after the ice went away, whatever that means, and that this place was then turned into a river, and the people who came here and lived higher up used to bring their dead to this cave and set them in the stream in little boats, like the ones in the pictures, so that they were carried down to the big lake that at that time filled up the Nubra and Middle Shyok. He says people were very ignorant then—almost as ignorant as they are now—and they used to think that life after death would be just the same as it was before, and so they carved pictures of all the things they would do when they were dead; hunting and sowing crops and making love and all the things they've shown here. But he says that there is nothing left of those people now, and their cities are gone, buried somewhere under the ice. There used to be a rock-cut path above the river from the far end to this temple, but it's ice-buried now."

"What a topping liar!" remarked Oxley, looking with admiration at the gelong who could reel off that sort of stuff with a straight face, and thinking what a perfect Intelligence officer the man would have made if he had not hidden himself in the Karakorum for some unknown reason; probably to perfect his wireless invention, doubtless with some ulterior aim such as Oxley had thought out. He wondered what language the man spoke really, and whether, possibly, he understood English. If so, he ought to have risen to that last remark, made deliberately and distinctly, but—and Oxley had watched carefully—there had been no flicker of comprehension in the impassive old eyes.

Then Rinpoche made some more remarks, which Carruthers translated for Oxley's benefit.

"He says if we are interested in old things like that, later on he will show us part of one of the old cities which wasn't entirely smoothed away by the ice, and where you can still see the foundations of the houses; it's melting out now, for the ice is still going back. Of course, there's nothing left above ground, but you can see the foundations and some of the cellars they dug when it began to get very cold before they gave up the place altogether. He remembers that, he says; how they used to have to huddle together in the cellars during the winters because of the tremendous cold, and how, slowly, they began to forget all their arts and their work got rougher and rougher,

and they couldn't get fuel enough to forge iron and steel properly and had to use the softer kinds of metals. Later on they couldn't forge anything at all and had to make shift with the old things that were left over, or even with sharp stones. And all the animals were driven home from the higher hills, and the tigers and bears used to kill people in the open streets. That was the last winter before the people—what was left of them—finally gave it up and either died in the mountains of cold or hunger or wild beasts or else got down to the warmer places in the north of India. He did that, he says. He remembers a later life when he was a monk at Taxila in the year the White Hun sacked the place."

"He ought to be writing fiction," remarked Oxley. "He's wasted up here, as I've said heaps of times."

The remainder of the men had now caught them up, after having had some difficulty in getting the loads through the low stretch, and so they left the strange carvings in the deserted temple and went onwards again until, presently, a growing greyness in front showed that they were nearing the mouth of the tunnel, and the steady increase of little glacier streams pointed to the fact that the unseen sun was climbing higher above them and melting the ice in the valley beyond.

Then, at last, in what seemed blinding light, they came to the end and stood once more in the open air, looking back at the entrance to the tunnel they had left, which, at this end, was no longer the bare, natural rock, but a great carved face with repetitions of the scenes they had seen in the central hall, and here, further, were long inscriptions in panels, in an unknown lettering which Carruthers declared was the same strange writing as that upon the handle of the mirror he had found. Even yet, Oxley had sufficient assurance to point out how cunning it was of the old man to put that trade-mark on his new invention, so that if, by any chance, it got into the wrong hands before he put it on the market, instead of examining it seriously and then hurriedly patenting it, people would take it round to a dusty museum and forget about it.

Before them the glacier sloped gently upward, cutting off all view of what lay ahead, and even when they had surmounted the rise, before them again was a new series of ice-falls at a point where the rock-walls narrowed. But this time Carruthers stood staring—as well he might—for every detail of the scene before him was familiar; he felt that he knew every step of the way. He proved it, moreover, to his own satisfaction, by leading ahead of the guide and never making a mistake, though the falls were intricate enough to have caused a very experienced mountaineer to go extremely cautiously,

since there were several points where the obvious route was the impossible one and the safe route something entirely different.

But to Carruthers every yard of it was familiar. Had he not seen the Giant's Stairway night after night in his dreams—in his childhood when he had sometimes been afraid of the great seracs which to him, knowing nothing about glaciers, had seemed the teeth of some great white animal that lay in wait for him—seen it later in life, time after time, again and again—seen it, last of all, just as it was now, with the laden men following, walking very carefully in their guide's footsteps, and Tosh, who loved cold and generally rushed madly hither and thither the moment he set foot on ice or snow, was now treading like a cat from ledge to ledge behind Master?

In front, as Carruthers knew, they would come back on to level ice again—the rocks would fall away to either side, and before them would be the great Tent Peak—the real view which he knew so well; the photograph did not give the exact aspect that he had always dreamed of for it was a little too much to one side, although it still showed the great, hanging glaciers forming one side of the tent. His speed increased still more, to the great wonderment of the guide, who never thought that any stranger could have made his way up the ice-fall like that, and thus Carruthers came out on the level alone, twenty yards ahead of the nearest man.

There, in front of him, it stood up under a cloudless sky, sharp-cut against the vivid blue, towering at least five thousand feet and more above the upper reaches of the long glacier, which sloped northeastward from where he stood, the summit perhaps eight miles from him, the lower flanks a bare six miles away. To his right lay a long wall of lower peaks, somewhere among which must lie the point that he had climbed two years ago when first he looked down into this glacier. And on his left, about five miles off, he could make out, in the clear mountain air, the long stretch of flat on which stood the buildings he had seen with the telescope and which even now he could discern faintly with the naked eye.

"Unmistakable," said a voice behind him, as Oxley stepped up over the edge of the last ice-ledge. "It's your peak, and no mistake about that. I'll admit that, though I won't admit anything else. Where do we go now?"

Carruthers pointed to the long stretch of level ground on the north side.

"Over there on the further bank, under that big rock-wall. There's a stretch of flat above the glacier with buildings on it—you can just see them."

Oxley looked along and then pulled out his glasses to study the point that Carruthers indicated.

"Yes—you're right—those are buildings there, and it looks as if there's a bigger one in the gorge at the back under that col with the two gendarmes on it—you can see them clearly with the glasses."

Carruthers put the glasses to his eyes and discovered that on the col, which looked like a definite pass, the lowest point in all the long range walling the valley on the northern side, stood two great gendarmes like those which should be above the little tower he called "The Crow's Nest" in his dreams, and further, unless his imagination deceived him, between them was a low object which might easily be a tower. He wondered if even now the girl would be there looking out over the valley to see if they were coming; these strangers of whose impending arrival by now she must have heard.

The rest of the party caught them up, and presently they were once more making their way across the blinding expanse of sunlit ice and snow in the direction that Carruthers had pointed out; sometimes easy going over level stretches of smooth ice whose slightly fretted surface gave good foothold, sometimes over tiring medial moraines brought in by the branch glaciers on the left bank, until, late in the afternoon, they pulled off on to the right bank over a very steep lateral moraine and came back once more on to solid ground.

A steep climb over a high spur, and then they stood looking down upon the level ground where they had seen the buildings far off from the glacier—a long stretch of flat, backed by great rock-hills on whose lower slopes grew stunted bushes and coarse grass. There were some small, terraced fields just showing the first traces of summer ploughing after the winter snow had cleared—fields where, possibly, a little barley might ripen in a hot summer, or, if the summer were too short for that, would at least yield something in the way of barley-stalks, useful as fodder for the few diminutive cattle which could be seen among the fields.

In the centre of the level ground, sheltered by a high, detached rock-outcrop, stood a cluster of buildings nestling at the mouth of a deep ravine running back into the hills behind, from whose entrance a torrent of water poured down the sloping fan, to lose itself again under the ice of the glacier half a mile away. In the ravine showed the corner of a tall building of grey stone.

"The City of Vision," said Rinpoche to Carruthers. "Only three men of your race have ever seen it, and they never returned to tell the story to the

world they had left. For centuries now has it lain hidden, as indeed it may lie for centuries still, unless, as we think, the time approaches for its secrets to be revealed to a world that has need of them. Those who guard its secrets have kept the knowledge well hidden, no matter how far they may have travelled, and some of the servants of the Mother of Vision travel far indeed. But we believe that no word of the City has ever been breathed by any one of them, even by those who have been slain, since others believed that they held the key of great treasures. Far away in all lands they have lived and voyaged according to the orders given to them—bearing messages and bringing news and doing such work as was laid upon them—dying far off in passing the torch to other hands that the work might continue, but guarding faithfully the oaths they took on the day of their initiation—men of all types and of many tongues and of diverse breeds, united only by one thing, the bond of the service which, of themselves, they had taken up. And now, for the first time, enter men who have taken no oath—men who could spread wide the secret—whom, as yet, nothing restrains—men whom we ourselves have called hither." The gelong paused and looked at Carruthers and Oxley. "But the Eye of Vision never yet lied, and so clearly it was intended thus," he added, almost to himself. Then, in a more audible tone: "Come—let us go forward to the City where, even now, they are awaiting us."

He led on again down the steep, rock-strewn slope, and Oxley asked Carruthers what "the Ancient," as John would insist on calling Rinpoche, had said.

"Most mysterious show altogether. What I can't quite make up my mind is whether we've stumbled upon some ancient sect, some secret stronghold of the Illuminati, spiritual home of the Elders of Zion, or whether we've got dragged into the opposite camp. Whichever it is, they were pretty cunning over the situation of their headquarters—it's about a million to one against anyone finding them—especially since they had the sense to disguise the front door as a monastery in a benighted country like Ladakh, where the lama appears to be on top with a vengeance. But I wish I'd been able to get a glimpse of that dynamo; I shouldn't be surprised if it is something as revolutionary in design as the mirror—something about the size of a sewing-machine with a 5,000 kilowatt output."

At last they reached the group of buildings to which Rinpoche referred by such a high-sounding title—perhaps twenty small, stone houses, built in very severe style, with all the windows and doors facing down the glacier, and saw for the first time the real size of the great building perched upon the flank of the ravine, a towering edifice of many storeys, with an imposing,

sculptured entrance-gate in the form of the looped cross—the lower limb forming the stairway, the loop the actual entrance.

Passing through a few small groups of men similar to those who had joined them at Kungma and who saluted the gelong with considerable respect, and stared with stolid faces at the newcomers, they made their way up a winding path to the foot of the staircase, where several men, better clothed than the others they had seen, stood awaiting them.

The half-dozen men were all dressed alike in long, thick robes, somewhat after the same cut as Rinpoche's, but yet different. The caps they wore, too, were other, being high in the crown and bearing the sign of the looped cross. The faces were of varied type, from unmistakable Mongolian countenances to the clean-cut features and well-shaped eyes of the Aryan races. But the speech with which they greeted the gelong, whom they appeared to know well, was something neither Oxley nor Carruthers had ever met before—a curious, low-toned tongue with very little change of pitch, a language that at first recalled no other which either of them had ever heard.

The gelong who, from their method of greeting, seemed to hold a position above them, talked with them shortly, and then pointed to the two Europeans and, for the first time, his words appeared to convey some meaning as they heard clipped variations of their own names. The men before them bowed courteously, keeping their hands folded in the wide sleeves of their crimson robes—heavy robes, wadded against the cold.

"We will go up now to the rooms which have been prepared for you," said Rinpoche to Carruthers, speaking again in Thibetan. "There are quarters for your men also next to you so that you may not feel separated and distrustful. Then presently, when you have rested, I will take you before the Master who, in this City, is what I am held to be at Kungma, only, in truth, he is as much above me as I am above the coolies who brought your things from Panamik when first you came."

He led the way into the building and the others followed him, gazing in astonishment at the vast proportions of the courtyard into which they entered after passing through a long tunnel that, at some time, had evidently been designed for purposes of defence. There were great, bronze gates and arrow-slits and, at the far end, stood two men in curious clothing, bearing heavy swords, their faces entirely hidden by brass masks with narrow eye-slits, masks wrought to look like fierce faces.

The sentries stood like statues as the others followed Rinpoche into the courtyard, whose crossing gave them time enough to see that it was entirely surrounded by buildings, with rooms all opening inwards. There was an air of silence and mystery about the place, and but few people to be seen. From inside the main block, which they were now entering, came the faint sound of distant music and chanting voices, but what these were they had no chance to ascertain, as their guide led them up another steep stairway. He turned down a long, stone corridor and then, at the end, after passing many heavy doors, mostly of worked metal, ushered them into a well-lit room from which gave off two or three smaller rooms. The floors of stone were well covered with rich rugs of different countries, and the walls were frescoed with intricate designs in colour.

"Your things will be here shortly and will be sent up to you at once. Later, I will return and take you out, and then you may see the whole building. Till I return, I pray you to stay in these rooms. There is a small, walled courtyard behind, if you wish to take the air."

With that Rinpoche left them, and, a minute later, Makhmud appeared nursing Carruthers' slung rifle, which he preferred to carry rather than to trust it to any strange coolie. He looked round the room.

"Another But Khana,[1] sahibs," he remarked. "It is well that they seem to be your friends, for it would be an ill place to get out of if the folk were evilly disposed. Moreover, there is now a sentry at the end of the passage—one of those men with his face hidden. I sleep with this rifle while we are here."

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[1] Idol temple.

CHAPTER IX THE CITY OF VISION

"It is a most strange place, sahibs," remarked Spin Gul half an hour later, appearing with the tea-things. "There is no wood, it seems, but these folk cook with oil even as we had to do in Basra."

For some reason or other, possibly because it is the first place one reaches on going to Iraq from India, the ordinary Indian Sepoy or servant refers to Mesopotamia as "Basra."

"There is a stone fireplace with a pipe from which the oil comes that one of these men showed us. But it gives good heat, for the kettle is boiled now and the water was very cold. I have also seen two women from the window. I was looking out when they passed, and they looked up as if they knew we were here. Their clothes were somewhat strange, but they are better favoured than the women of Ladakh."

A most strange place it certainly seemed to be, as Carruthers and Oxley agreed later when Rinpoche returned and they followed him through the long passages out on to the roof of the main building.

"Now you see the City of Vision," said the gelong as they stood against the high parapet of the flat roof and looked down on the lower buildings beneath them. "And soon you will be enlightened concerning many things about this place which has stood here so long, and see mysteries that are revealed to few."

"I wonder if he's going to explain his wireless outfit," remarked Oxley as Carruthers translated.

"That's the thing I really want to understand. One other point of interest is, where do they get the good-looking *bints* from? That couple of women there are almost as fair as Europeans and passably good looking."

He picked up his glasses again and looked down into the courtyard below.

"Tell us something about it now, Rinpoche," said Carruthers. "It is a strange place, and, moreover, it seems old, like old buildings that I have seen in other lands. But in such a country as this there could not be old cities. Yet, to have built such a place would require many men—far more than we have seen. And here can dwell but few men—indeed, it seems hard to believe that

even the few we have seen can find living here where the crops, if there be any crops that ripen, must be scanty in the extreme."

"It is old. So old, indeed, that none know its real age, save only those to whom the story has been revealed. And it was built by those same men-folk who made the carvings upon the walls of the tunnel through which you came. It was a great city in those ages until the ice swept down and destroyed the most part, leaving only this building here which, being made of solid stones joined in a manner of which the secret is now lost, has survived through the ages. Many, many centuries ago its secret was revealed to one who, in a previous life, had been an inhabitant of this city, one who remembered the old knowledge and was ordered to return to take up the work once more. So he came, finding all the stonework as it had been, and thus it only required a century or so of men's work to be done slowly before it resembled once more the place it had been in old times. With him came others also of the brethren from the lands where they dwelt, men also who had something of the knowledge of the past."

"How long ago was that?" asked Carruthers, looking round over the stonework, which was indeed very massive, and which, moreover, seemed to be built in some strange way, showing no joints or crevices, though the edges were smoothed and rounded as if by the passage of time.

"Maybe a thousand years, as men count time—maybe it is longer—it matters naught," replied the gelong. "What matters is that they obeyed—they came—so that the sanctuary was re-established and the old secrets were taught again as they had been taught in the past."

"But who was taught?"

"Those who were called from time to time—called, perhaps, as you have been called, though I think that you have not been called for the learning of knowledge, but for other reasons, for work which perhaps only you may be able to do. But, year after year, men came—now one, now two, now perhaps three or four. They were taught that which they had to know, and then sent forth again to fulfil the tasks which were laid down for them. Women, also, but in less numbers, and some few of those also are now here, learning. I was called many years ago, when first I came to know of those lives which I had led in the past and which are hidden from most men. I had not so much to learn, and so, in time, rose quickly to the high office which I now hold. But it is time we went to see him who called you. There stands his messenger."

The gelong pointed to a man who was approaching them, a man clothed in rich crimson, with a white veil bound about his face, so that only his eyes were visible. He came up with folded hands and spoke to Rinpoche in the strange tongue, taking no notice of the others.

"It is so—we are awaited," said Rinpoche, when the man stopped speaking.

"It's a good bit of play-acting," said Oxley. "I really think 'the Ancient' is beginning to believe half the hot air he's handing out to us. He must have rehearsed it dozens of times to get so word-perfect. Fancy expecting any person of ordinary sense to believe that this place can be several thousand years old when it looks like this now! Three hundred would be the outside limit."

"I don't think he means several thousand years old," said Carruthers. "He's trying to make out it's tens of thousands if he wants us to believe it was here before the glacier was. And yet that is just what he says, and, unless every geologist's calculations are hopelessly out, that literally does mean tens of thousands of years. And he rather implies that there was a sort of freemasonry going on all that time to keep the secret of it; that the purpose for which it was built was known to someone or other; that the knowledge was handed on through the years until it was time to come back!"

Carruthers stopped as though unable to talk further on such an inconceivable idea.

But it seemed to him that anything might be believable when, after passing through stone corridors that seemed endless, past silent, brass-masked guards, they stood at last in a big room lighted brightly by strange, glimmering flames that ran along a cornice—flames burning with a most intense, white light, and yet seeming to give off no smoke or fumes. Oil probably, but these strange folk knew as much about how to use that method of lighting as any modern designer of mantle and pressure-lamps.

Before them, on a high, stone seat, over which was spread a wonderful rug and a few rich cushions, sat a man robed in white silk that was only one degree whiter than his colourless face, from which the old eyes peered out keenly at those before him. His bare head was bald, but his white eyebrows were thick and bushy, and below the great, hooked nose the long, white moustaches swept down into the beard that fell upon his chest, snow-white also. The hand that lay upon the carved arm of the seat was also old with knotted, blue veins standing out upon its wrinkled, ivory skin.

The room swept back further behind the throne, but whatever it held was veiled now by rich hangings, as were also the walls—hangings of plain crimson relieved only at the borders with designs of the eyes and the looped crosses worked in gold, such as Carruthers had seen in his dream of the Tower.

Rinpoche bowed low before the man on the throne who listened to his words without a sign as he sat looking at the two strangers whom the gelong had brought into his presence. He looked them over quietly, each in turn, and then he spoke a few words in the strange tongue and the gelong indicated their names—that much they could follow. Presently the old man spoke again.

Rinpoche translated, and the conversation was at first conventional. Were they properly housed? had they all they wanted? were their men comfortable? and so on. Then it began to take a more personal note and to centre particularly on Carruthers. For what had he been seeking when first he came to these mountains? Had he heard anything of strange cities or peoples? Did he look for treasure, or was it merely curiosity or, possibly, the desire for fame, such as it seemed was one of the motives of his people in undertaking long journeys to unknown parts?

Carruthers looked at the ageless man before him on the high, stone seat, his white-robed figure standing out against the vivid crimson background. And he wondered what he should reply. Possibly it was, as Oxley insisted, all play-acting, and why not play-act in return—tell some queer story that might shake these impassive people, and perhaps make them give themselves away? He was beginning to be just a little annoyed at the somewhat indefinable and yet easily felt affectation of superiority—Rinpoche's indifference to time—his continuous talk of past lives and of vast knowledge shared, apparently, with all these strange folk.

Then he reflected again. Why shouldn't he give them the truth—the truth which, according to Oxley, was infinitely stranger and more improbable than anything he could make up?

"Because of things that were made known to me in dreams," he replied. That at least was the next best thing to past lives—in fact, it was really better; it implied that either he also possessed uncommon powers or else that he was guided by some Power. "Because I have dreamed all my life of this place, and when I saw the great mountains yonder from far off I knew that it was the place of which I was in search. I knew then, and also from other dreams, that I was wanted here for some purpose, and so I came to fulfil it,

although as yet it has not been revealed to me what that purpose may be. That also will come in the fulness of time. Rinpoche here speaks of his past lives. Of such things I have no knowledge, save only my own feelings, which are that I have lived no lives here in the past. I can speak only of what I know, therefore—of the dreams that have guided me here. Of my finding of the strange mirror doubtless you have heard, and what that may be or mean I know not. My friend has come with me because he desired to see strange places which, as you have truly said, is the bait of our race, and thanks to which my grandfather's uncle came into these same mountains and perished—none know where. Also, I asked him to join me, partly at Rinpoche's instance, since the gelong said that if I returned I should bring companions with me. But now that we are here we wish to know something of what lay behind Rinpoche's words when he bade me return with some trusty companion and with a fighting man or two besides ourselves, as though he thought we might aid you in some way, which, if the matter appeared reasonable to us, we might be willing to do."

The old man looked at him in silence for a moment before replying to his questions, as though pondering over something. Then he answered, speaking now in Thibetan.

"I see you speak truly, for all these things were known to me, even the story of your relative of old time—more, indeed, than is known to you, his descendant. True also is it that the gelong Rinpoche asked you to return, bringing friends with you; wherefore you need have no fear for the future. It may be that there will be work to do, work such as you, and you only perhaps, might be able to fulfil. Of that we will speak later on. Now tell me somewhat concerning your companion here and the other men whom you have brought with you."

Carruthers gave a slight sketch of his party, and the old man nodded as though in approbation.

"It is well—soldiers nearly all. Until all mankind learns the true law there is still place for such, just as there is for the guard dog. As yet humanity seems still to keep its animal instincts, retaining always the desires and instincts that it had on the lower planes of being. To shed blood is wrong, leading only to sorrow hereafter, as we know. But sometimes it becomes necessary to restrain those who would destroy things of even greater worth, and then there is place for the soldier, who, if he perform his duty as his duty and not from lust of blood or power, may in time be reborn upon a somewhat less lowly plane, one somewhat further removed from the lesser beasts."

"Blighter!" said Oxley, when Carruthers translated the old man's speech. "He ought to be in Parliament or on the League of Nations Council. I'd rather own Tosh than him any day of the week; Tosh is five planes up on a thing of that class, in my opinion. He's got the cheek of the devil, though. I suppose he thinks because we happen to be inside his bally museum he's got us cold, and thinks we're going to be good little boys and say 'Please' and 'Thank you' whenever he opens his mouth."

The old man continued again:

"Tell your friend that he is welcome here. It seems to my eyes also as if you had some slight knowledge of the great laws. It seems to me, who can see not only that physical body which man and beast alike perceive by their primitive organs of eyes, but also that finer portion of man—the projection of his real self—that maybe you have travelled a step further than many on the long road which leads to knowledge and are slightly less restricted by your senses than is your companion, Ox-la, for instance."

Carruthers watered this down considerably for Oxley's benefit, for the latter was getting rather out of hand at the old man's bearing.

"Doubtless," went on the old man, "you are curious as to who and what may be the inhabitants of this place. Shortly you will learn more, and to-night he who in Kungma is called the gelong Rinpoche will bring you to the ceremony in the great chapel where, if you desire, you may learn much, if indeed your faculties are sufficiently attuned. Moreover, he will answer such questions as you may put to him, if it be that you are capable of comprehending his answers. Knowing the material limits of your race, among whom, for past faults, it was my fate to pass certain lives, it is, I fear, doubtful if you will understand much. On the other hand, it seems to me that you show forth certain qualities—germs of greater ones which most men of your race usually share with the animal you most cherish and admire—the dog—a notable trustworthiness and fidelity, and therefore I feel that you may safely be admitted to ceremonies which are usually denied to all save the initiates."

"Tell him to go to the devil and say we don't want to see his damned Punch and Judy show," spat out Oxley.

"The man's clean daft," said Carruthers. "But he probably doesn't mean to be insulting. He firmly believes he's got on to a different plane of life—which quite likely he has in a sense—and living tucked away here for years has made him forget how to talk to anyone except the people round him. He's probably looked upon as a god here, and is beginning to think he really

is one. No good our being rude to him at the beginning, even though we do happen to have rifles and ammunition enough to put it across them if they behave nastily. But they won't do that. I'm perfectly certain Rinpoche is genuinely friendly, and for some reason or other they really want us here."

"Well, have it your own way, but I'm not sure if I'm going to his blooming prayer meeting! I've always posed as broad-minded and the number of clerical friends I own, from Roman Catholic cardinals to Muhammedan fakirs in rags with begging-bowls, is more than you are likely ever to meet. But most of them were reasonably polite, and I draw the line at lack of manners. Nasty-looking little animal!"

"Your friend seems somewhat disturbed," put in the old man. "Is not all to his liking? If anything be amiss, speak at once to Rinpoche, and all will be put right as far as is in our power—there are certain things, of course, which lack here. May be your friend misses the intoxicating brown liquors which I understand—indeed, I remember—it is the custom of your race to drink in large quantities. That, unfortunately, we are unable to supply."

"No; he was somewhat put out at your remarks about planes; doubtless, I translated badly," said Carruthers diplomatically. "He, like me, does not believe in such things, and possibly misunderstood your intentions in speaking of them, which surely must have been good and not intended slightingly."

The old man looked down benignly on them, as one might look affectionately upon a litter of puppies.

"Of a surety good," he said. "One does not slight guests in one's own house."

And with that he signed to Rinpoche that the interview was terminated, and, a minute later, they found themselves neatly ushered out into the great entrance corridor and on their way back to their own suite of rooms where Spin Gul was laying out the things for dinner upon a low table of strange shape—low enough to demand that one should sit upon the floor to eat.

Oxley, somewhat mollified presently by the pains which had obviously been taken to make them comfortable, finally wished the man they had interviewed no worse fate than that he might speedily die and be reincarnated in the West as a junior subaltern in Oxley's own battalion. Then his sense of humour overcame him as he pictured the methods in which the rejuvenated old man would be dealt with by the doubtless animal-natured and dog-like, but simple-minded, pink and white faced youths of his

distinguished corps, who knew nothing of astral bodies and planes, and cared, if possible, even less, but whose muscles were hard from much worship of sticks and balls.

"It's a lunatic asylum—a private lunatic asylum," he declared finally, as he dealt with a bully-beef stew. "I think I will go to the prayer meeting, after all—they probably all get hysterics and then find salvation, or dematerialise into ectoplasms, whatever ectoplasms happen to be. I've never seen a show of that class, though I've seen whirling dervishes foaming at the mouth."

"Whatever it is, it won't be anything like that," said Carruthers. "It'll be intensely respectable, if 'the Ancient' has anything to do with it. They're not mad in that way, I'm certain."

"I wonder if the *bints* are let in," pondered Oxley aloud. "I should like to see that couple a bit closer. I've seen a great many worse in London and Paris, not to mention Baghdad and Constant."

"I'm sure I've seen that old man somewhere before," remarked Carruthers, apropos of nothing. "But I can't remember where. His face is perfectly familiar, and yet I can't fit it on to any peg in my mind."

"His manners are more than familiar," said Oxley. "I shouldn't worry about his face, except to push it in if he gets any ruder."

But, nevertheless, for the rest of the meal Carruthers sat silent trying to remember where he had seen that keen, old face, with the craggy nose and the rather beetling eyebrows.

"I'm perfectly certain he's a white man," he said at last. "I wonder where the devil he comes from and what he's doing here."

"Probably wanted by the Moscow police," said Oxley, lighting a cigarette. "I don't love Bolshies, but they can have this gent, if they want him, and I shan't stop them."

The arrival of Rinpoche stopped the conversation. He came to inquire if they were ready to come as the ceremonies were shortly to begin, so they followed him along the stone passage, turning in through one of the bronze doors which hitherto had been shut, but which now stood wide open with brass-masked sentinels on either side. In front they could see the archway at the further end into a hall that opened out beyond—a big hall, with dim shadows and lights.

CHAPTER X INITIATION

They took their places in a small, overhanging gallery of stonework projecting into a cross-shaped hall, in which were a good number of people —more men than women—all in the same red robes and caps that they had remarked before. The women were dressed in much the same fashion as the men, save that, in place of the high, pointed caps, they had their heads bare, and their hair braided in peculiar fashion. From above, it was not possible to see the faces of these people below, even had they been in the full light, but the hall was only dimly lit by those same naked flames as had been in the old man's room, but which here were burning faint and dim, so that carved pillar and archway and dim niche showed only as black shadows.

At the far end of the hall stood a high, metal throne upon a raised plinth of carven stone—a throne that gleamed dully yellow, and on which sparkled the colours of great jewels. Behind the throne hung a curtain of red, bearing the looped cross in heavy gold embroidery.

Before the throne were three persons—two men and a woman—clothed all in white, standing in an open space separated from the rest of the audience. With them stood three other people, also two men and one woman, but clothed in the red robes.

From somewhere behind the curtains came the sound of music—soft, sweet music of strings and reed instruments—a plaintive and monotonous, and yet strangely attractive air, with a hint of sadness and longing in it.

Above the curtains, which evidently concealed an archway, the stonework was carved with a rayed disc divided by a horizontal line—a piece of symbolism lost on Oxley, but which interested Carruthers not a little.

"It is the initiation of novices," said Rinpoche to Carruthers. "These standing in white have completed their probation and will now be admitted to the higher stage and the first secrets after they have taken the necessary oaths. Those standing beside them are their teachers, whose duty it has been to prepare them, and who will vouch that they are fully instructed and worthy of advancement."

"But what are you all—Buddhists?"

“Are we not all Buddhists? Who was Buddha? One of the masters, and there have been many. Buddhism is but a name, and he who was known as Gautama is no longer Gautama, and so they who were once Buddhists may also pass beyond. We were of all faiths—followers of different gleams of the light that, from time to time, have been set to glimmer faintly in the darkness of the world. Here we are more—we follow the great light of which Buddhism and such are but dim reflections serving to lead men towards the truth—lights that have glimmered through the ages in this land or that, in lands where now is sea, among peoples whose very name is forgotten, and of whom no trace exists. Those who have attained true knowledge follow that which lies behind Buddha and his fellow-masters, follow that which he could not teach to an ignorant world, being compelled to word his message in such childish terms as might be understood by men. This is the initiation of those who attain the first low steps towards the complete understanding of all that lies behind all faiths—who seek the illumination whose faintest sparks have been perceived far off by all who have sought honestly to read the great Law.”

“Sounds like the super-Theosophy talking,” remarked Oxley, as Carruthers translated. Oxley flatly refused to take it seriously, but he hoped to find out some machinery hidden somewhere. Carruthers was not in the least a Theosophist, but he had built his own ideas of the riddle of the universe and had read a good deal on the comparative study of religions. Thus, to meet a new form of worship naturally held great interest and great possibilities. Moreover, he had reason to think that possibly he was now going to see something very old, something more akin to the real mysteries of ancient days than the debased forms of lamaism or the doubtful rites practised by certain circles of the folk who call themselves Theosophists and dabble in the occult and psychic—children playing with high-voltage dynamos of which they have no understanding.

The music swelled up more loudly as a small procession entered the hall—priests bearing sacred fires in silver bowls, others following with gold ewers—and lastly, the old man whom they had seen in the afternoon, now richly robed in gold brocade and upon his head a high, pointed cap of white silk, with the looped cross worked in gold and gems. Upon his breast, suspended round his neck by a jewelled chain, rested a circular disc of some green substance.

The congregation bowed low as he entered slowly to take his place upon the throne, and presently called the neophytes before him. The music ceased, and then followed what seemed to be a long catechism in the strange tongue

as, one by one, first the men and then the woman were interrogated from the high throne, each in turn being led up by his or her teacher.

When that was concluded all three were again led before the old man, and he addressed them at some length. After that followed a rite of purification with fire and water carried out by the priests, and once more the music began. Then the old man rose and turned to face the great curtains behind him, and the congregation began to sing in time with the music, words fitted to the same strange, haunting chant which had been the air when first Carruthers and Oxley had entered the gallery above the great hall.

"They call upon the Mother of Vision, who herself is but a symbol of that which lies behind, to reveal herself to these, her new children, and gaze upon them," explained the gelong, as the curtains were drawn aside, revealing two doors of gilded metal, wrought in various symbolic pictures. Then, as the music hushed again, slowly the great doors folded open—apparently untouched by hand—showing a shrine lit brightly by some unseen source of light, and Carruthers held his breath at the sight of the same image as he had seen at Kungma, but infinitely more perfect than ever before; almost it seemed that the woman breathed as she stood there gazing down into the mirror. And then he became aware that the lights in the hall had faded down to nothingness, leaving only the brilliantly lit shrine beyond the darkness.

In the hushed silence the old man began to speak—to the statue, it seemed, if indeed statue it was—speaking in that strange tongue, and as though he were asking some favour of the being whose representation was before him.

And then it seemed as though the woman did, indeed, move, and that the mirror in her hand turned so that the green surface caught the light in the shrine. More and more, somehow, the mirror appeared to draw attention from everything else as the surface came to light and the green shadows played about it. It seemed, also, to grow until Carruthers could have sworn that there was now no hall, no shrine, no image—nothing but a vast green surface into which one gazed, oblivious of everything else, a surface over which played strange lights and shadows, and which presently cleared until it was as though one looked through a great window into infinite space.

What followed kept them sitting up very late that night, for it happened that neither of them saw the same, though each had the strange illusion of seeing nothing but the gigantic mirror. But to Carruthers there came a whole

series of pictures, all the scenes he had seen and known in his dreams in the past, those that he had seen in the mirror he had found.

To Oxley, however, came strange pictures of the past—incidents of his busy life—his adventures in the East—he saw himself in disguise bearing his life in his hands among hostile people—saw himself back in his office in London—saw himself in the consulting-room at the house in Harley Street. The scene changed, and he saw the mountain landscapes with which he had now become familiar—saw again his first view of the buildings in which he now sat. Then he began to see other things, of which he had no knowledge, but with which some day he was to become familiar, although he would have derided the idea had anyone told him so then, for he had the ordinary person's intense conviction that the future is most wisely hidden from us.

At last the mirror began to fade to dull green, and suddenly both men simultaneously became aware that they looked not at the mirror, but at the brightly lit shrine before which the old man still stood, and still, it seemed, chanted his prayer, and that the lights were growing again in the hall and they could dimly see the worshippers. The great doors swung slowly to as the lights brightened and the curtains fell noiselessly into their place, and once more all was as it had been, save only for the weird sense of unreality that oppressed them both, even matter-of-fact Oxley—a feeling that endured, however, only for a moment as they came back into the world of fact.

Only one thing was different: the three novices no longer stood erect; they lay still upon the floor, face downwards as though dead, and they did not move as the lights brightened and the music swelled up once more when the old man turned round to extend his hand over the prostrate, white figures before him.

"They have died to the old life," explained Rinpoche. "They will be borne hence now and, after a day, they will live again and be brought once more before the shrine to learn what commands are laid upon them in the new life which now begins."

Even as he spoke Carruthers saw priests approaching with litters, and, one by one, the still forms were borne away—utterly motionless and to all intents dead.

"Hypnotic trance, that part surely," said Carruthers. "It is an old ceremony, and I thought it was never practised nowadays. It is symbolical, of course. For you and me, since each of us must have seen differently, your

wireless theory won't work, or we'd both have seen the same picture. But whether it's mass hypnotism or not is beyond me."

Oxley was furtively rubbing his eyes and trying to reason out things. But it was not until they had got back to their rooms that he became sufficiently normal to explain that since one could send several messages simultaneously over the same wire in multiplex telegraphy, there was no reason why one should not be able to project several pictures simultaneously on the same screen, each of which would naturally only be visible to the person equipped with the particular receiver for the identical wave length of the picture intended for him. Probably that had been Rinpoche's real job, to see that they each took such a place in the gallery as would ensure each one's feet being in contact with some distinct and separate hidden electrical instrument.

Later that evening they obtained some understanding of what this strange place was, from a long conversation with Rinpoche, such a conversation as Professor Waldenstein might have initiated.

"You think, as I understand from what you have said," began Rinpoche, "that man progresses continuously; but in truth it is not so. We know that the worlds and the universes repeat themselves in the great scheme which is being worked out and by which life, in time, will attain to the highest. Each race, in its time, brings out something which may be of value and much which is of no value, and it is the business of those who understand to guard such progress as is good, lest it be lost for ever, buried in the mass of useless knowledge which each race evolves and which, in time, becomes its downfall.

"Those who dwelt here before the Ice had discovered much, standing far ahead of the world to-day in certain matters of real importance—in the use of the great powers that lie latent in man, such as transmission of thought, of speech, of images. In other ways, such as you of the West value so greatly, in the matters of material arts, and of sciences, they were somewhat less advanced. Then, in the fulness of time, their purpose being ended, it was decreed that they should disappear. Certain of them, however, to whom the future was revealed, set forth in the world to other places; a handful here and a handful there, chosen men and women who might guard the valued secrets and pass them on from hand to hand, as men pass on a torch, until the world should again be fit to receive them. The remainder of that race, for the most part, perished; only some few survived the age of cold, and their descendants exist to-day, such as you have seen in these hills and in the countries about us, men but little better than the brutes in most ways,

performing tasks which might equally well be performed by intelligent animals.

"Far away in the heart of what you call Asia, another race was founded which, in time, spread over the world and, in the course of the centuries, evolved into that of which yours is a branch—a race whose great power lies in material things, in the understanding of matter, in the making of machines of all types—and which now, in clumsy fashion, begins to harness to its service, though only by means of machines, those powers which are really inherent in man himself if he but knew as we, who hold the secrets of the past, know indeed. But of deeper knowledge you remain ignorant.

"Presently will come the decline when your race, too, will vanish, after fulfilling its allotted task, and much of which it has learnt will vanish with it, and thereafter a new race must arise. That is the function of this city—to send forth into the world those who shall teach that new race, who shall hold the valuable secrets of all past races to instil into the newer world.

"Each race in turn is destroyed by the aftermath of its powers, just as they who carved these stones and raised this city in this lost valley were, in time, destroyed by the powers of nature which they had learned to use, but used to wrong purpose, so that the cold swept down and made the earth unfit to live in. The ice ground away almost every relic of all they had made, and such as were spared became little better than beasts, preoccupied with the most primitive needs, the fight for food and warmth, and so had not time to spare for thought or for the search after true knowledge. Thus also, in time, will your race be overpowered by its own machines, blotted out by the sciences it has created, by the powers it has half learned to use—draining the earth of its hidden stores of light and heat until, in time, back will come the ice once more, the cold of death, and force men again into the barbarism from which, long centuries ago, your race emerged. And we who watch see that it will come far sooner than we thought; that it is even now at hand.

"But some must be retained, some who hold the higher knowledge which will guide the new race yet to be born to fulfil whatever destiny may be appointed to it. And that secret is locked from all but the very highest, so seek not to learn it from me.

"Why you are called here I cannot tell you yet, save only that you have not been called as were those whom you saw initiated to-night, who, like us all, come from many lands and many races—one here, one there, as they are found fitted.

“The strange speech which you hear us use is the speech of old, old time —the pure speech which has been lost and which alone suffices for man fully to voice his thoughts and hopes, which has been kept pure and free from the degradation that, in each age, spreads more and more into each human tongue as it gathers words from other lower tongues, just as knowledge itself must suffer and disappear when it is poured out before the ignorant who distort it to suit their own unformed minds, and to serve purposes for which it was not intended.

“That is the meaning of the symbol which we call the Mother of Vision —a symbol, for all must be symbol in a world where spirit and matter are still entangled. It is infinite Wisdom guarding knowledge from the hands that seek for it lest, in gaining it, they should bring upon themselves suffering and loss which otherwise would not be their portion. And so she is represented as you see her, as a mother guarding her children against themselves.”

“Then all the people here are not Ladakhis or Thibetans?” said Carruthers.

That would explain the old man and one or two others, like the women, who seemed of quite different race.

“Nowise. We are of all races, even of your own, though these are few. Those who are chosen to come here learn the true speech by which alone full knowledge may be gained. Then, in time, some of them return to their own countries to spread the knowledge they have gleaned; but because of their oath they must never speak of this place nor of what they have seen here nor of the language they have learnt, just as, while here, they never use the tongue they learnt as children—the imperfect, stumbling speech with which they lisped their ideas in the world they have now left for a while.”

“Mad—mad as hatters—all the lot of them!” said Oxley when the gelong had gone. “I told you it was a lunatic asylum. But I wonder how they get their recruits up here. They must come up disguised if there really are Europeans among them, or by now something would have leaked out. You couldn’t have people wandering into Ladakh and then disappearing, one after another. It must be a large organisation.”

“Not so large as all that really,” remarked Carruthers. “At the outside there may be as many as eighty or a hundred of them, and if they only studied ten years apiece, that would only be nine or ten a year to come and go. Allowing for as much as half to have to pass back southward through India, that would only be four or five people, and very seldom any

Europeans among them, and they would be disguised on the way up, and, if they ever went back after a good many years here, they'd be just like the rest of the people here."

"Even so, the whole idea is perfectly mad," said Oxley. "Fancy sitting here and calmly saying you're going to set about creating a new race and a new world after we poor misguided idiots have destroyed ourselves with our own brains. Within a few years they'll have some aeroplanes wandering over them to have a look-see, and Heaven knows what they'll do then."

"And, according to the geology books, ice ages move almighty slowly. About twenty or thirty thousand years seems a fair time for a small ice age to get active enough to freeze out even quite a small bit of a continent. The glaciers are still retreating from the last ice age, so that these people have got some little time to wait before they can start rejuvenating the world."

Tom looked out of the window to the faintly seen snow-peaks opposite under the starlit sky as though he were calculating how long the ice would be before it got really active.

"I still think it's all a blind," reiterated Oxley. "There's something else behind it, and all this semi-religious frilling is thrown in to hide the real game, whatever that happens to be. Nobody could ever collect sufficient lunatics to believe all the rot that Rinpoche talks."

"I don't agree with you there," said Carruthers. "After your work you ought to know what a lot of queer people there are in the world and what they'll believe. I know there are heaps of people who do believe much on these lines—there's any number of books on it. They'll tell you all about the lost history of the world and the rise and fall of races of which no scientist has ever yet discovered a single trace—give you the names and pedigrees of the men who led colonists from Atlantis when they had a revelation that Atlantis was going to be buried under the sea—you know, the continent that's supposed to be where the Atlantic is now. And they believe it all quite seriously. No—if you wanted a hundred, or even a thousand, people who'd believe it all, you could collect them without the slightest trouble. And if you then locked them up in this place with a certain amount of mysterious stuff, which they certainly have got, and made them do periods of seclusion, meditating on the higher mysteries, they'd only believe all the more. Probably a bit of hypnotic suggestion comes in; the Masters hypnotise themselves into believing things and then, in turn, their influence acts on the lesser lights. I know they do a lot of meditation because Rinpoche told me we shouldn't usually see many people; the place would look more or less

deserted except at the ceremonies like the one we went to this evening, since about nine-tenths of them would be meditating in their cells. You know with all these kind of cults meditation in solitude is supposed to be the main recipe for attaining knowledge."

"You may be right," sighed Oxley. "It may be merely a Theosophist lunatic asylum like my dear old Aunt Jemima used to attend. She used to waffle about the nasty colour of my aura which, apparently, clashed with hers. I'd hoped it was the Illuminati with No. 12 as the High Priest running Communist propaganda. However, I've not given up hope yet of finding something underneath it. Meantime I'm going to meditate—in bed. I shall also continue it till a late hour in the morning, so don't endeavour to haul me out on any early morning stunts to-morrow."

CHAPTER XI DHYAN

The following morning, however, Carruthers had no intention of sleeping late. There was something he particularly wanted to do, something which he would prefer to do alone. He whistled up Tosh, who was playing in the courtyard behind, and set out down the corridor, at whose far end he could see the brass-masked sentry. He wondered what he would do if the man tried to stop him—nobody else seemed to be about—and quite likely the man would understand no language which he could speak.

However, the sentry took no notice of him other than to stand even more rigid than usual, and Carruthers passed on down the long, stone-flagged corridors and out at last into the open air of the main courtyard, on whose farther side opened the gate through which they had entered on the previous day, where there was now, however, no sentry, and the great gate was open and deserted.

It was a very perfect morning of early summer in the high hills, the air like wine, and beyond him, under an unruffled blue sky, showed the great snow-clad hills with the long, dazzling sweep of the glacier on his right. To his left opened the dark mouth of the great rock-gorge, rather eerie-looking even in that light, down which poured, more slowly than yesterday, the melting ice-water from the heights. At present the torrent was easily passable, but later in the day, when the sun's heat increased, it would probably be quite impossible to ford the stream. That, however, mattered little, since it was spanned by a small stone bridge, arched high above the boulder-filled stream, a well-made bridge of Chinese shape.

From the farther side of the bridge a little, winding path led up the shoulder of spur above—a fairly steep pull. There was no one to be seen about on this side of the stream, but when Carruthers had mounted a little and looked back he could see a few people astir in the fields behind, where ploughing was in progress, men and some women—evidently the rougher class that he had first met at Kungma.

The dog tore up and down the hillside as far as the steepness of the slope would let him, chasing the few birds which they came upon on their way up—two or three chikor, and once, higher up, a real snow-cock, which made Carruthers regret that he had not brought his gun.

The path got steeper shortly, but it was clearly a made path, though not kept in very good order, and presently, where a slight slip had occurred during the winter, it was completely obliterated, so that he had to make his way over a jumble of boulders. Then presently, crossing a slope of loose gravel, he came on to another rib of rock over which the path lay unmistakably, and he felt once more that strange feeling of familiarity which had haunted him on previous occasions, as when, for instance, he had been just about to reach the great ice-falls.

He stopped here for a minute, looking back at the buildings, now over 2,000 feet below him, very tiny in comparison with their setting of ice and rock-mountain and snow-peak. It seemed, from here, that the valley was entirely enclosed, and he understood how it was that the first people who had set out to map this portion of Asia would have missed it even if they had come so far or climbed so high, which he knew they had not. Obviously the only point at which the drainage could break out was the tunnel through which they had come.

He went on again, following the dog, who was now no longer so energetic and more content to walk peacefully along the little path, tongue well out, although the air was cold and in front showed occasional patches of snow on the shady side of the boulders.

Then, at last, he turned another corner and saw before him a steep slope of loose rock, and at the crest of it the tops of the two great rock-gendarmes, and knew that he had been right, that in front of him lay the col of which he had dreamed so often, and that most certainly between them would lie the tower of his dreams—the tower he had also seen in the mirror he had found.

He scrambled up the slope over the slipping rocks and, five minutes later, saw the top of the tower, and then, by degrees as he climbed higher, the whole tower rose up before him—round and of grey stone with the little door halfway up, and leading up to the open door, the ladder propped in place, just as he expected it to be. The dog, somewhat tired now, shot ahead of him to nose around this building they had reached, rearing up, making futile efforts to get his great paws up to the doorway and barking up at the tower.

Carruthers stood still; surely the dog's barking would attract attention if anyone happened to be in the tower. Then, over the parapet at the top, a woman looked down at the man standing twenty feet below her—a bare-headed woman in whose dark hair sparkled great gold ornaments, and round whose neck flamed the vivid red and green of a jewelled chain.

She looked down at him unconcernedly, and yet somehow it seemed that he was not unexpected, that she knew he was coming as she stood there. And even at that distance he could see that she was beautiful and that the half-seen arm and hand which lay along the stonework were very shapely.

Carruthers took off his puttoo hat and put forth his best Thibetan greeting suitable to a lady of rank, and asked if he might come up and look out from the tower over the great valley which he saw now lay beyond him, another valley of glaciers with new peaks of rock and snow beyond.

The girl—she seemed to be but a girl—listened to him and smiled slowly as she looked down. Then—and to Carruthers it sounded perfectly absurd and yet somehow only right and proper—she called back in English, perfect English, almost too perfect to be absolutely natural:

"But yes; surely you may come up if you wish. The ladder is strong and the door is open. But bring the big dog with you; I saw a white leopard near here yesterday in the snow, and leopards are bad when there are dogs, though they would never hurt me. If you will wait there I will come down and help you."

She disappeared and, a minute later, appeared in the little doorway—a slim figure in gown of flowing silk of green and crimson, bordered with rich embroidery, her waist girt with a silken girdle, into which was tucked a gold-hilted dagger.

"If you pass up the dog I will help him in through the door," said she, leaning down and reaching out one shapely arm, on which sparkled a great gold armlet of strange design.

"He bites strangers," said Carruthers, looking up.

She was certainly beautiful, this lady of whom he had dreamed so often. She seemed, moreover, to be pure white, so far as he could tell; he had seen fair women of many Asiatic races, but never had he seen the transparency of skin that this girl showed, save only among women of his own race. That is really the hall-mark of the real white race—not the fairness, but the transparency of skin, under which one almost thinks one can see the blood moving.

The girl laughed cheerfully.

"No animals bite *me*," said she. "You will see. Make the dog come up first."

Carruthers seized Tosh and helped him up the ladder, the dog squirming violently in his endeavours to keep his big pads on the thin rungs, and the girl leaned down, caught him by the collar, and pulled him in to the door with a movement that was all grace and lithe strength. Tosh shook himself violently as he felt his feet on firm ground again, and then jumped up at the girl. She lifted her finger, and he dropped and crouched like a cat before her, wagging his tail excitedly, and never taking his eyes from her face.

"You see," said the girl. "I will tell him to sit still."

Her lips moved, though Carruthers heard no word, but, to his utter amazement, Tosh never moved a muscle, but lay there like a statue save for his moving tail—Tosh, whom even he sometimes had the utmost difficulty in controlling.

Carruthers came up the ladder and passed in through the small door into the round chamber inside the tower—a room of bare stone, lit only by the door and the arrow-slits on all sides. It was evidently built for defence and watch purposes, for the door, which hung open, was of metal and very solid, while round the wall ran a plinth, upon which men might stand to shoot, or upon which they could sit and so be below the reach of any missiles passing through the slits. Up one side ran a slanting stair of narrow stone steps leading out on to the roof.

"Shall I tell the dog to go up?" asked the girl, smiling.

"Yes," said Carruthers. "He won't go."

The girl turned to the dog, and again it seemed that her lips moved—perhaps, also, she moved her hand the least little bit—and the next instant the dog was crawling rather carefully up the narrow stairs on to the roof. The girl laughed as she pointed after him.

"They are all like that when I talk to them in the talk that some people cannot hear. You, I think, cannot hear what I say to them. Would you like to learn that talk?"

"Yes," said Carruthers. "That and many things. Shall we follow the dog up on to the roof? I want to see out from the top. I know this place."

The girl looked at him, wondering a little.

"You only came here yesterday. I saw you come and I saw you at the initiation in the evening. But I think that you know the place. I think you have seen it before. But why have you got a beard now? You ought not to have a beard."

Carruthers ran his hand over the bristly excrescence that adorned his chin.

"It's been too cold to shave this last week," he said. "I'll take it off now I've got under a roof again for a bit."

Then he followed the girl up on to the sunlit platform above. The quaint-shaped shoes and the embroidery on the hem of her gown were just exactly what he knew they would be, as was also the looped cross of gold hanging from the thin, jewelled chain about her well-turned neck, and he could shut his eyes and still see the gold ornaments in her braided hair, so well did he know them.

They stood side by side on the platform, looking out over the parapet, the dog rearing up beside them in his endeavours to look out also. There before them to northward showed a vast mountain panorama of snow-peaks and glacier valleys. Almost overhanging them, on their right, towered the cliff-like side of the Tent Mountain, the smooth side beyond which the hanging glaciers drooped. Far away, on their left, rose up—ivory against the cloudless blue skies—a series of ice-clad giants, some of the biggest peaks Carruthers had seen in all his life.

Before them the mountains were lower, though still very high by most standards. And just ahead of the tower the ground dropped sharply in a long, snow-covered slope towards a glacier-filled valley, somewhat similar to the one from which Carruthers had climbed that morning, save that it seemed void of life; no buildings showed anywhere, no expanses of flat that might be habitable, nothing save rounded slopes of snow, long fields of creviced ice, or sheer rock-faces in whose crannies snow still clung, though the main walls were too sheer for anything to hold. Here and there, however, to northward were gentler slopes, from which, as they faced south, the snow was fast peeling away, leaving big, bare patches of red and brown, showing the stratified rocks—the roof-trees, as it were, of this corner of the roof of the world.

Behind them, as Carruthers turned, lay spread out the long valley which he had first seen from those gaunt hills to southward, all snow-clad from this side, and he looked long, trying to recognise the col from which he had gazed down two summers ago on that memorable day when, for the first time, he had learned beyond all doubt that his dreams held something more than the usual moonshine and gossamer that most of our dreams are built of, which fades so soon into nothingness when the sun's rays come up over the distant hills.

“I knew it was like that,” he said at last. “I’ve seen it all so often. And I knew, too, that you would be here—just like this—just as I’ve seen you before.”

“And I,” replied the girl, looking at him. “I knew that some day you would come here; I’ve always known it ever since I can remember. That’s why I used to come here and sit looking out over the snows, for I knew some day I should see someone coming and that presently he would come up to my tower, where hardly anyone else ever comes. And when I heard that there were two strangers coming here I was certain that you were not the same as the other people who come, because I had dreamed that you would come with another man and a big red dog. I’ve never seen any dog like this one except in that dream,” said she, bending down to pat Tosh’s head a little as he pawed up at her, his feet almost on a level with her chest as he stretched up to his full reach.

“The only thing I don’t know,” she continued as she raised her head again, “is your name. You never had a name, or perhaps we didn’t want them in the dream.”

“Tom,” said Carruthers promptly. “That’s my real name, although most people call me Carruthers. I don’t know yours either—we didn’t use them, did we? But then, I never could remember any talk either.”

“There isn’t any talk in dreams,” said the girl quite seriously. “One doesn’t use words then, does one? One knows without speech—one just understands. My name is Dhyan. It comes from the old speech that is used here. I think I’ve got another name, too, only it’s never used. I don’t know where it comes from, and I’m not allowed to talk of it to most people. I was told it by the woman who has looked after me since I was quite small, and I think someone was angry with her for telling me, because she wouldn’t use it any more. It sounded like Vinsein. But I don’t use it, and no one else does, so it does not matter. So we are really Tom and Dhyan, which is easy.”

She sat down on the stone step under the parapet and looked up at him, as though trying to recognise various things about him.

“It’s all as it should be,” she said reflectively. “You’ve got the same strange clothes, and your hands and wrists are burnt—your nose is red, though, which it wasn’t in the dreams.”

“Wind and snow coming up here over the mountains,” explained Tom, rubbing the damaged organ from which the skin was peeling badly.

“But in the dream you always had some kind of weapon hanging from your belt—I think it was a sort of gun, though it was quite different from the only gun I’ve ever seen, which was much bigger and heavier. And you look a little older—how old are you?”

“Just thirty-nine,” answered Tom, watching her stroke the dog’s head. Her power with animals seemed rather marvellous, for Tosh was not too certain tempered with strangers, and yet here he was, standing quite still with his head in the girl’s lap.

“Thirty-nine. I don’t really know what I am, but I think I’m twenty-eight,” said the girl.

“You don’t look it,” replied Tom, considering the face before him—the well-turned nose, the sensitive and yet firm mouth, the rounded chin, and the broad forehead above the clear, hazel eyes.

“Don’t I?” said she quite naturally.

There was no pleasure in her remark; it was merely one of interest. Perhaps in this place of past lives the women did not worry very much about ages, or perhaps no one thought about time in any way at all. Tom wondered if she were one of the initiates, such as the woman he had seen the previous night, and, if so, whence had she come, and when and why? But then she ought not to be talking English to him, unless that was permitted since he did not know the other tongue.

“How long have you been here?” he asked, sitting down and pulling out his pipe, a procedure she watched with considerable interest.

“Always. I’ve never been anywhere else. I belong here,” she said.

“Were you born here?” he asked, in some surprise.

“I suppose so—only nobody ever seems to be born here—at least not people like us—only the lungma pa, the men who look after the fields and the animals and bring the people who come from outside. And, of course, the animals—the yaks and the goats and the dogs—they get born here. But I must have been born here because I can’t remember anywhere else at all, and I can remember ever so far back when I was quite small.”

“Then where did you learn to speak English?” asked Tom, as he lighted his pipe.

“What are you doing?” said the girl. “That must be tobacco, which I’ve read about in books. Nobody here has any.”

“It is,” said Tom. “But tell me where you learnt English?”

“Here, of course,” said Dhyan. “I’ve told you that I’ve never been anywhere else. I’ve always spoken English. I think I spoke it almost before I spoke the true speech—the one they talk here. I like English best, only I’m not allowed to speak it with anyone except Sityana. She likes talking English, and when she does she doesn’t let me call her Sityana—I have to call her Aunt Jane. She says she likes being called that; I think she got it out of a book.”

“Who is Aunt Jane—or Sityana? Was she born here?”

“Oh no—she came here ever so long ago. I don’t think she wanted to stop until she found me when I was quite small. She says my mother and father are dead, and she’s looked after me always. She came from England, and she says I ought to be in England. I should like to go and see it because it sounds nicer than this place, which is so small. Aunt Jane says there are all sorts of nice things in England, and that people are quite different there. But I don’t like the ones—there are three or four whom I know do speak English. But Aunt Jane says they are not all like that. You are not, are you?”

“Like what?” asked Tom.

Dhyan was an enigma altogether. But he would have bet his last shilling on her being English. Moreover, he agreed with Aunt Jane, whom he badly wanted to meet.

“Like the other people who come here. They are all the same. They don’t seem to like anything really, and they live in the clouds, as Aunt Jane says. Fancy living in cold, wet things like clouds! But they’re always talking about their past lives and about all the dull things that people talk of here, and they don’t seem interested in the things I like—puppies and babies and the lungma pa. I like the lungma pa; everyone says they’re lower plane beings and very dirty. But I like them, and they like me, and I can talk their language when there is no one else to stop me. I go and see their babies—funny, little, wriggling things that bite your finger. I’d much rather have a lungma pa baby biting my finger, or a puppy tearing my clothes, than sit and stare into the Mirror of Vision in the chapel, which is what other people want me to do.”

“You live down there, I suppose?”, said Carruthers, indicating the buildings far below them. Obviously she couldn’t live up here.

“Yes, of course. But I often come and sit here. Aunt Jane’s too old to come now; she says it takes her breath away. They used not to let me come

alone because they were afraid that something would happen to me. So I came by myself one day and I found a leopard here. But she didn't bite me because I talked to her. And then some lungma pa came after me with bows and spears and a gun and wanted to kill the leopard. Only I stopped them, and the leopard went away—she had babies. After that they let me come because they said nothing would hurt me as I had the talk of the animals; which I have—Sityana taught me that long ago; she says she must really belong to a lower plane because animals like her, and wants to go back to it. It's quite easy, the animal talk, because there are no real words in it—it's almost thought really, although you move your lips, and the sounds are so low that most people can't hear you at all."

She stopped and looked down at Tosh, who instantly lifted his paw to lay it on her knee.

"I came up here early on purpose this morning," she continued, "because I knew you'd come here if you were really you, because you'd know the place. I felt sure it must be you, although you didn't look quite the same, and then when I heard the dog I was quite sure it was you."

"Will they let you come here now that we've come?" asked Tom.

"Why not? I always go where I like. We shall certainly come here and you shall tell me about England and the other places that I've read about. Aunt Jane hasn't seen any of them for ever so long. And some day, perhaps, you will take me there along the old road; you and your friend—the little man who looks as if he laughed a lot. And the two big men who came with you, with the dark faces? I suppose they are a sort of lungma pa from India—they don't seem a bit like the Indians who come here—they are always clean shaven with strange faces. Aunt Jane doesn't trust them; she says it must be because she is a woman and on a lower plane, nearer the animals. But I prefer the animals."

She stroked the dog's head again, and he moved his tail slowly, utterly contented.

"What and where is the old road?" asked Tom.

The girl turned and pointed northward over the snows.

"Over there," she said. "Nobody uses it now, but it used to be there ever so long ago; so long ago that nobody remembers it at all—nobody except Rinpoche who came with you and who says he used to live here before the Ice came. I like Rinpoche, even though he does not talk English. I think he is

good, and so does Aunt Jane. He says he remembers all his past lives. Do you?"

"No," replied Tom flatly. "I don't believe I ever had any. Can you remember yours?"

"No; I can't remember anything except what happened here. The Master—the old man you saw yesterday—says I ought to and that I will presently. But I don't, and I don't really want to. One life is quite enough. Aunt Jane says once she thought she could, but now she's sure she cannot—that it was a mistake—that past lives are hidden from us."

"Why do you call the old man the Master? Do they all call him that?"

"Yes, the others call him the Master. But I used to call him some other name when I was a baby—the only baby except the lungma pa babies that I wanted to play with, and they wouldn't let me. He was always kind to me then; he's kind now, but now I don't like him so much, he's getting so strange."

She stood up and looked out over the snow in the direction that she had spoken of as the old road.

"Some day I think someone will come over that," she said at last. "Perhaps it is a dream, but I think so, and I often watch. And when it or they do come, then I know everything will change. The Master says if I really tried I could see the future and tell him, and gets angry because I won't let myself be lost in the mirror. But I feel that I mustn't, that if I did I should lose myself altogether, only I can't explain how. So, when he makes me look into the mirror I make myself think of other things—all sorts of things that I know—the lungma pa and the animals and the mountains. I don't mean the big mirror that everyone sees—the one in the Mother's hands—but the small one hanging on his chest when he sends the novices to sleep, and I won't go to sleep. But I'm sure that there is something coming over the old road some day."

She stopped talking and looked out again, and Tom tried to piece it all together—her life in this quaint place—what her purpose was—who the Master could be in reality.

Then she turned to him.

"We must go down now. Aunt Jane will be waiting for me at the bridge. She wants to see you, she says. To-morrow we will come here again."

She swung down the steep descent with an easy grace that entirely astonished Carruthers. She never made a false step, and she walked as a white woman walks and not at all with the gait of the Eastern. Undoubtedly she was badly out of place here—that was more and more obvious. Aunt Jane must be talked to as soon as possible.

And then they turned the last corner down towards the bridge and saw waiting there another woman—an oldish woman with sparse grey hair, dressed somewhat in the same way as Dhyan, and who sat on the rough stone at the head of the bridge, screening her eyes with her hand as she looked up the slope in the vivid sunlight.

CHAPTER XII AUNT JANE

"I knew it was he, Aunt Jane," said Dhyan as she reached the bridge. "I told you so last night after the initiation, and you said I was silly. But it is. He's just the same as I've always seen. He says his name is Tom."

Carruthers took off his puttoo hat as he came up to the old woman who watched him approach, a woman who must be well past her sixtieth year, and who might once have been beautiful. Now her face showed nothing save a certain quiet charm—a charm that might perhaps have come with age, a charm of soul rather than of body.

The old woman looked at him closely. It was a long time since she had seen anything of this type—common or garden man—to her eyes very much alive and of the earth earthy. She judged he would have no past lives to talk about, and would probably laugh if she discussed his aura or the plane to which he belonged. He smelt England to her, and Aunt Jane—locally known as Sityana—hungered for something really truly English. She mistrusted most people in this forgotten valley; she ought, doubtless, to mistrust this man and his companion. But somehow she didn't; perhaps they were sent here in answer to her prayers—for, with advancing years, she was reverting to the customs of her childhood and said archaic prayers to an extremely personal and doubtless anthropomorphic kind of God, but one who really did satisfy her craving far more than the attenuated, etherealised first causes that she had once concluded ruled everything in the cosmos. And her prayers were not for herself at all; they were always tied up with the concerns of this girl, as she called her; in her heart she looked upon Dhyan as a baby still, as her own baby, for Aunt Jane had a passion of motherhood which, having been denied, may have once been responsible for making her fill her head with strange thoughts which now she looked upon as the most empty of illusions.

It was thirty-five years since Jane Prentis had left England for India in search of what she had then called "the way." She had been born and brought up in a strict Presbyterian atmosphere against which, in time, she had revolted. What she really desired was love, and love did not come her way, so she had filled her soul instead with forms of religion, or quasi-religion. Possibly she suffered from what the modern psycho-analyst, I believe, calls an inferiority complex connected with sex, and in the course of time she happened upon something which was new, or newish, to her world

of those days—Theosophy of a kind—presumably one of the less good kinds. Sex seemed no disability here—in fact, one ignored it.

She took to it, therefore, seriously, and, having some little money of her own—her people were hard-headed manufacturing folk of the North—she came East seeking the Masters. She found some who said they were such, and she drifted for a while until, at last, she came into contact with one who apparently belonged to the inner circle of inner circles. She disappeared from the world that knew her, became Sityana, and pored over the law in the white raiment of the adepts. A little later she had followed the great one into the north—aflame with a vision of a regenerated world—and thus reached this lost valley of the snows.

Five years of the life, plus certain other disillusions, had taken the fire from the vision, and she became convinced that here certainly was not that of which she was in search, and those about her realised it, and there she stayed—no mission back to the world for her—and, with no money, there was no chance for her to find the long road home.

And then had come the baby, Dhyan, brought back by the Master from some mysterious journey, a tiny, helpless morsel of feminine flesh, hailing from no one knew where, in charge of a buxom lungma pa woman, deposited among a community who ostensibly considered children to be an illusion about which no one would trouble his head. For reasons of his own, the Master delivered the baby into the care of Sityana—Sityana who had once been Jane Prentis—a rather thin spinster approaching middle age. The baby clung to Sityana, who forgot that she had ever sought anything so abstruse as first causes and illumination and the great law; she reverted to type, and her whole soul was poured out over the baby.

Thereafter she remained content with life as it had to be; there was no escaping, it seemed, and life for her was Dhyan—Dhyan and nothing else. In the process she slowly drifted back to something of what she had used to believe, but in a far wider fashion, and, thrown back upon herself, she developed into the better type of maiden aunt. Physically the result seemed to be the slow addition of a quiet charm that had been missing from the rather hard features of the late Miss Prentis.

Of late years her one preoccupation had been Dhyan's future when she herself was gone, and she sometimes felt that that would not be very long; she tired easily; she suffered pain at times, and, of course, doctors were not to be found among a folk who held quite seriously that the flesh was pure illusion. And what then would happen to Dhyan, who was, in Sityana's

adoring eyes, growing daily more and more beautiful? With her restored heritage of hard-headed common sense, Miss Prentis had learned to look at men and women again without any mystic trappings. In so doing she had come to the conclusion that sex might indeed be an illusion, but that many found it a pleasant one, the more pleasant for referring to it as an illusion and not as a fact. She distrusted, therefore, several people who came there, more particularly two or three Oriental gentlemen with impassive faces, whose proper setting was, undoubtedly, the more peculiar and esoteric Hindu temples. She distrusted them even more than she distrusted one Bakhtiyan whose home was, she believed, in Central Asia, a brigand-faced man who was held to be one of the coming teachers. He would be easier to handle, she thought, because he was nearer to the normal animal, and Jane Prentis' one gift had been an uncanny understanding of all animals. Bakhtiyan, however, had left three years before, and she had been thankful for his going. Those who went hardly ever returned, so Bakhtiyan need not be thought of with regard to the future. But the others were still here, and she feared. She knew a little too much about life as it is in certain parts, and, though she still saw that many of the people about her were genuinely good, and honestly believed they sought the light of the world—Rinpoche, for instance—she felt that others were not so good, that they sought the initiation into the greater secrets, of which undoubtedly certain people such as the Master did hold the keys, possibly merely natural powers developed to an almost unnatural degree, solely for gratification of their own ends on return to the world. In the theory that they were the elect, called to renew the human race, she had long since ceased to believe. Some of them, she knew, or thought she knew, belonged more surely to the evil beings, from the insistence on whom in her early life she had conceived her first distaste for the religion of her upbringing.

She looked, therefore, with a keen degree of pleasure upon Tom Carruthers standing before her in the sunlight. His puttees were frayed, his shooting-coat torn in two places, he was unshaven, and his hair had obviously been rather hurriedly brushed. Judging by his physical appearance, his mind seemed to run upon positive matters—upon the killing of wild beasts, for instance. Aunt Jane entirely disagreed with that, for she was convinced that men and animals are one, and that, in time, the animals' souls would rise to being those of men. Also she hated the thought of suffering. But things like that were far preferable to other things that some men did, as she had known to her own cost, notably men who inveighed against the wickedness of taking life and held themselves to be planes and planes higher than Carruthers and his class.

She did not think, either, that he would regard sex as an illusion. The fact that he looked upon it as a concrete and desirable fact of life was shown by the courteous way he took off his faded hat when he approached her. Obviously he possessed that decent British gift, a respect for women, even though he probably did think it was entirely indecent for them to preach in church, or to take part in any way in such matters as, with no reasonable sanction, he considered the prerogative of his own sex.

"Good-morning," she said. "Dhyan tells me your name is Tom, but I suppose you have another."

"Carruthers," amplified Tom, looking at her and wondering how on earth she had come into this mad place.

"I used to know people of your name," said she. "That was a long time ago, though."

"In this life or a past one?" queried Tom, with unmoved face.

"In this life, young man," replied Sityana with a certain snap. "One of them looked rather like you—he was in prison for poaching when I last heard of him before I came out to the East."

Tom laughed.

"No relation that I know of, but one can never tell. May I ask your name? It seems rather familiar to refer to you as Aunt Jane as the lady here tells me she calls you."

"Prentis was my name before I changed it to what I'm called now. It was a mistake—Miss Prentis. And what are you doing here? Are you in search of the great secrets?"

"Not me, Miss Prentis. I'm a materialist and a wanderer—that's why I'm here. My friend Oxley is here because he also wants a little quiet wandering and shooting, and also, perhaps, because he's sure I'm mad and require watching. I dream dreams," he added as he pulled out his tobacco-pouch and set to filling his pipe, and Miss Prentis' heart went out to him at the sight. She had not seen a man fill a pipe for more years than she dared to think of.

"So did I once," she said softly. "Dreams are very foolish—stick to facts, young man."

"But what happens if the dreams turn into facts?" asked Tom quite seriously. And he looked at Dhyan as he spoke. Dhyan was sitting on the sunlit stonework, most emphatically fact, a warm flesh-and-blood fact, very essence of that illusion, sex.

“Make sure of the facts and then get on with life again—life as it is meant to be lived—work and play and not too much time wasted in thought,” replied Miss Prentis. “How did you come here if you’re not seeking knowledge?”

Tom explained briefly, without too many of his dreams, and finishing with an account of his interview with the gelong, Rinpoche.

“I wonder what the plan is,” said Sityana thoughtfully. “I wonder very much indeed. Have you seen the Master?”

“I have,” replied Tom. “Could you, without breaking any oaths or anything in that line, tell me who he is? I’m interested.”

Miss Prentis looked round to see if anyone was in earshot. No one, however, was to be seen anywhere except the lungma pas in the fields beyond.

“He’s white, that I can tell you. He also speaks English—or used to. He’s probably madder than most of us have ever been. He’s here because he really does believe in his own theories, and he has certainly many powers, which, thank God, most men and women are not allowed to get. That’s all I can tell you. And how long do you propose to stop here—if, that is, they let you go away again?”

“Do you think anybody is going to stop two of us, not counting two Indian soldiers, all armed, going home again when we want to?” asked Tom.

“They can block the tunnel; they have strange powers over the ice,” said she. But there was a sudden note of hope in her voice.

“Then we can find other ways,” said Tom.

And Miss Prentis’ heart leapt at the air of cheerful nonchalance. She had not met this kind of barbarian for a very long time. He and his friend would obviously find a way, if a way was wanted.

“Are you telling the truth?” she asked. “Will you swear?”

“No,” said Tom. “But I’ll give you my word of honour on the point. When we want to, we’re going home again, and anybody who thinks he’s going to stop us will get hurt. Why do you ask?”

“Because, perhaps, others might want to go with you. I might, or possibly Dhyan might. Or both. What would you do then?”

“We could lend you a tent,” said Tom. “We’ve got one big one. Are you serious? What’s to stop you going if you want to?”

“Everything—most of all, Dhyan. If I go, Dhyan must come, and the Master would never let her go. And there are bad men here who would stop her. You’d have to fight. I know it’s wrong to kill, but you might have to. But I’m getting lower down again; I’d rather kill people myself than let some things happen.”

“So would I,” said Tom cheerfully. “Much rather. Certainly, if it is a question of killing anyone who wants to stop a couple of Englishwomen going back out of this whenever they want to, I should be quite prepared to do a lot of killing; not that it amuses me to kill anything much—not even birds to eat, although I often do.”

“Dhyan doesn’t understand it all yet,” said Miss Prentis.

“Yes, I do,” remarked Dhyan calmly. “I understand quite well.” She touched the old hilt of the dagger in her girdle. “I haven’t got any past lives, and I don’t believe men and women are at all the same things in any way whatever. If a wolf attacks a lungma dog, the dog bites back. I have a longer tooth and a better brain than a dog. I understand quite well. There’s nothing to be afraid of for me, and if ever I want to go, I go—perhaps by the old road.”

“And die of starvation or cold or worse before you ever got anywhere near civilisation,” thought Tom, only he didn’t say it aloud.

“Isn’t everyone here free to do what they like?” was what he asked.

“Free in a way, since no one can get out without help from the lungma pa, and even then they couldn’t get past Kungma without it being known. And how would women get on beyond?” replied Miss Prentis.

“Wouldn’t Rinpoche help?” asked Tom, sitting up straight and wondering if Miss Prentis really meant all she said. Who was the Master, anyway, and what was one certain Englishwoman and another who looked and talked like one, for all that she implied that she had been born here, doing in this place? Tom foresaw complications, but complications of a kind that appealed to him. It would be rather fun rescuing people who wanted to escape, especially someone like Dhyan, who would look still nicer if she were properly dressed. “Wouldn’t Rinpoche help?”

“He wouldn’t dare,” replied Miss Prentis. “Anyway, I couldn’t talk to him about it. And there are others. The Master would certainly prevent harm happening to us, though he would never let Dhyan go, or me either, now. But he’s only a man, and men die. And he’s very, very old now—yet he

seems no older than when I first came here, and that is thirty years and more. It might be that others would like him to die."

Tom whistled.

"Can I come and see you, Miss Prentis? I'd like to talk with you a bit and bring my friend. You can trust him. Oxley is a purer materialist than I am. He roars with laughter if anyone talks about reincarnation or transmigration."

"He's quite wrong," said Miss Prentis, rising. "It's a logical idea, and, although I've followed a lot of things I don't believe now, I do believe that. I'll send for you later on, and we can talk. It's good to talk one's own language instead of having to speak in the other one, which may be utterly beautiful so long as it deals with abstract things, but it is no use for life. It's got no proper words for marriage or child-bearing or for what they call illusions of that sort," she finished inconsequentially as she and Dhyan began the ascent to the building beyond them.

CHAPTER XIII SWAMI ANANDA

Swami Ananda sat in his cell meditating. His meditation at that hour was as correct as was his cross-legged posture and his drooping right hand—as correct as were the simple appointments of his plainly furnished cell. His gaze was fixed firmly upon the wall opposite, which was adorned with a fresco of the Mother of Vision. Had anyone with expert knowledge examined the picture carefully, they might have observed certain slight differences between this fresco and the paintings and images elsewhere. To a very sensitive mind the picture might possibly have given a slight but inexplicable feeling of distaste or fear, but it would have been hard to understand this or to explain why, for the woman was just as womanly as elsewhere. It might, perhaps, have been the mouth.

His meditations, however, were anything but what they ought to have been if he were really seeking the great light or if he were truly following the law of that most kindly and beautiful of faiths, the teaching of Gautama, whom we of to-day speak of as Buddha.

His meditations—if indeed, one could call them such—dealt with matters far older, and might agree with a faith whose suitable images would be quite other than that of the Mother of Vision, and whose rites and ceremonies would inevitably be performed at night in smoke-grimed temples, well away from the sunlight. Perhaps, however, it is not quite fair to call them meditations, since men of many types indulge in such thoughts without dignifying them with the high-sounding title of meditations, and he was in reality merely thinking.

The cause of his thoughts was primarily the most inopportune arrival into the glacier-valley of certain men belonging to the races and faiths he most hated and detested in the world—to wit, two Englishmen, two Pathans, and a Punjabi Mussulman. The first two represented a race which had, to a large extent, ousted him and his breed from the power and prestige which had always been theirs.

The Pathans and the Punjabi represented that large portion of India which, except for the presence of the detested British, would cut the throats of Ananda and his kind and consider they had done a service to God in so doing. He did not quite know which he hated most.

Ananda was not an ignorant fanatic—far from it. He was well educated and had taken his degree in an English University, but in his case, far from bringing about that camaraderie between the best type of British and Indian youth which one hopes for, the result had been the reverse. But then, of course, Ananda did not represent the best, or even the good type of Indian youth; he merely represented brain. Probably his hatred took its real root from the day when a red-headed north of Ireland youth had thrashed him soundly for certain dealings with an attractive-looking damsel who served the counter in a local tobacconist's shop in the English University town which Ananda—then called Tilok Nath—had graced for a few years.

That such as these should have found their way here at all was bad enough; the few white folk he wanted were of quite different type—those who would form pliant and ignorant tools for his purposes—men who had no fair claim to the title which was theirs by physical accident, and women whose balance was lacking.

But that these strangers should have arrived at this particular juncture was altogether most dangerous, and the main trend of Ananda's thoughts was as to how they might be got rid of as quickly as possible. It could be no question of their merely going away; they must disappear and never return to their own kind. If they did, then, sooner or later, others, having heard of this valley, would come and the game be up.

Therefore he sat pondering deeply, his firmly-cut, fleshy features, rather sensual mouth, and brown eyes utterly impassive. Here, in the secrecy of his cell, his forehead was marked with the caste mark of his cult which, however, he did not wear outside for the present. Later, if all went well, he would doubtless be able to do so.

The matter was of urgency; something must be done before a fortnight was out, or else the plans which he had been maturing for so long would come to naught. In less than a fortnight Bakhtiyan, *alias* Tarzi, was due to arrive with the consignment of arms and explosives which were so badly wanted by certain of Ananda's countrymen far to the south on the Mother's service. It was, in a sense, a mother that Ananda, who, outside the valley, usually called himself Dhyanand, visualised whenever he looked at the picture of the Mother of Vision; but, nevertheless, she was not the same and her real name was different—an obscene deity with blood-stained lips—that was Ananda's real vision.

Of course, Tarzi was really a Muhammedan—although he posed as something else here, but it really did not matter what your tool was so that it

served your purpose; once that purpose was served you threw the tool away —or, if it happened to be a dangerous one, you broke it. Ananda had long ago decided the exact crevasse in the glacier into which Bakhtiyan would slide when the job was finished. But the question now was, would he be able to dispose as easily of these newcomers?

Lastly, of course, there were Sityana and Dhyan. Dhyan herself alone would probably cause trouble with these newcomers. She became more beautiful day after day, and now there had come comparatively youthful men of her own race. Moreover, Ananda had long ago found out that Dhyan had the more normal mentality of Englishwomen of her class, and that he could not play upon her as he did upon other types. And the thing that Dhyanand looked upon as the crowning stroke to his work was the day when, all else being achieved, he could lay hands on Dhyan without let or hindrance.

Sityana was, however, still more dangerous because she knew him better, as she had had good cause to do in the past. Moreover, she had undergone that extraordinary change of feelings which had rather nonplussed Ananda, despite his inherited skill in dealing with women of many types. Instead of becoming more pliant, she had crystallised into an old-fashioned Englishwoman with all that type's instinctive distrust of people of his mentality. That she would escape and take Dhyan if she possibly could he well knew, but he had laughed at the idea in the past owing to the impossibility of its fulfilment so long as the Master lived. The Master was marked to die, of course—that was part of the plan—but now Sityana would have the opportunity of speaking with these strangers. Ananda thought of that long-ago day in England and the red-headed youth, and shuddered a little inwardly at the thought of what would recur—only this was not England with policemen. This time he would not merely be very sore for many days; he would most certainly be sent to join Tarzi in some unpleasant fashion. Then his natural pride reasserted itself; his knowledge that his brain was far ahead of any brain he had ever met among the mlecchas, came to the fore, and he bent his thoughts once more to thinking out the neatest method of ensuring their quick and speedy dissolution.

He sat there for over two hours, practically motionless and thinking deeply. Had anyone entered his cell they would have said that the Swami was absorbed in the important task of his daily meditation by which he was fast attaining a position in the place second only to that of Rinpoche—Rinpoche whom Ananda hated, since the two men stood at opposite poles in

every way. Ananda knew Rinpoche, the Thibetan, to be like so many of Ananda's own compatriots of Hindu faith—the faith which, in its finer aspects, has much in common with Buddhism—honestly and whole-heartedly in search of the light which may make the world a better and happier place for man, may free him from the sorrow which, to their minds, seems inseparable from life as it has always been lived by him.

Someone did enter at last, but Ananda did not alter his pose until the door had closed softly and the man spoke. Then only did the Swami look up.

"It is as you feared, Swami," said the newcomer, a man not unlike Ananda in many ways—a Hindu of the south—a follower of Ananda's, but with none of the latter's intellectual powers; a lower type in every way except for certain tastes which, though probably cruder, could hardly have been described as lower.

"I saw them returning only just now, Sityana and Dhyan, and with them came the one they call Carathas—the one who speaks Thibetan—walking with the dog. Certainly they must have talked."

"Had you no opportunity of watching more closely, Sita Ram, upon the hill?"

"None—I could not follow them there. Moreover, Dhyan must have gone very early, for when I came out to watch the bridge, Sityana was already there."

"Watch better in future and bring news at once. It may be that we shall have to act earlier than I thought. Is there yet news of Bakhtiyan?"

"As yet not. Basant will send us word when aught is known—at night, over the old road. They will come after the full moon, perhaps ten days from now."

Ananda made a gesture of dismissal and the man left him, after which the Swami noiselessly bolted the door and, moving the rugs upon the floor, presently opened a hidden recess by sliding a cunningly designed trap revealing a small cavity. He examined the contents with care and seemed pleased at them; the faint, metallic tinkle was music to his ears at the moment.

Sita Ram set forth to watch as unobtrusively as possible, a task comparatively simple since the brass-masked sentry had now been removed. Unfortunately his luck was out, for later, in worming himself along the eaves, hoping to overhear some of the strangers' talk—he knew English fairly—he dropped six feet into the small courtyard opening from the suite

occupied by Carruthers' party. The Airedale, who had been sitting patiently in the outermost of the little rooms, watching Makhmud boiling up the food for his midday meal, dashed out at the noise, and the immediate disturbance brought Carruthers in haste to inquire what the uproar was.

He found Makhmud endeavouring to restrain an extremely excited Tosh and apostrophising in violent abuse a rather shaken and tattered figure backed into a corner—one of the monks, or whatever the men of the place were, judging from his clothing, which was badly torn in two places, showing his thigh from which blood oozed from unmistakable toothmarks.

Carruthers tried Thibetan in vain; the stranger replied fluently in the unknown language, and shook his head as Carruthers continued.

"Try him with Hindi, sahib," said Makhmud, returning from shutting Tosh indoors. "I think I heard him say something in Hindi when the dog ran out."

That, however, was equally useless; blank incomprehension was stamped on the man's face, and presently he made signs that he had been up above and had fallen—further signs followed whose meaning might be that he was examining the roof, which required repairs.

There being nothing further to get out of him, Carruthers took him through the small suite and ushered him out at the main door, and then returned to Makhmud, whom he found in the courtyard looking up at the roof. Oxley had gone out during the time Carruthers was up the hill and had, so far, not returned.

"It is strange," said Makhmud reflectively. "Why should anyone wish to climb on the roof? He did not look like a mistri who might be repairing it. Moreover, it is not damaged in any way; it is strong like all this house. Also I am certain that he spoke in Hindi when the dog attacked him—he called out as though in fear. By his face also he is an Indian, a man of the south. Possibly he thought all were out and hoped to steal something. It will be well to have the dog loose at night in this place."

With that he returned to his cooking operations, talking the while to the watching Tosh, as was his habit, although, as a follower of the Prophet, he should have considered dogs as most untouchable animals. But the Northern Indian—the Pathan and Punjabi perhaps least of all—does not seem to extend this prohibition very far, and certainly not at all to English dogs. Makhmud and Spin Gul and, in a less degree, Nawab, treated the dog as very much a younger brother, and the Airedale, who would cheerfully bite

most people, replied with a degree of adoration only one whit less than that which he gave to his masters. Tosh lay there, crocodile fashion, watching the operations and wagging his tail at the guttural Pashtu comments and remarks which, from time to time, Makhmud flung in his direction as he prepared the food—the chupattis for himself and the other men, the bowl of stewed rice and onions with a small handful of such dried condiments as the Eastern loves, and a steaming dekshi of rice and some sheep's bones for the dog.

Carruthers, in the farther room, also thought that the matter was strange. He would have taken no notice of it, but for Aunt Jane's conversation of the morning which, for the first time, had raised doubts in his mind. But now he was a little inclined to be suspicious of things. He wished Oxley would return and tell him something more about the place which hitherto he had not had time to examine closely.

He came at last—highly conversational. It seemed that he had wandered about with Aziz and Nawab in the hopes that they would be able to interpret for him, but no one seemed to understand Aziz' Thibetan, which, repeated in Hindustani, was rendered by Nawab into the most fragmentary English for Oxley.

"They all talk this weird language," said Carruthers. "I don't know what it is, but I have a feeling that it is in some way connected with Sanscrit, of which I once knew a tiny smattering. The wild and woolly men don't seem to come inside much—they apparently live in the houses down by the fields. All the people we saw last night are different and might be anything. Some look like Indians; the majority are obviously Thibetans or Ladakhis; some very few might be Europeans."

"I saw two women who, I think, are Europeans," remarked Oxley. "Frosty-faced, angular things, who looked at me and the men as though we were rather a bad smell. Inner circle they were, I fancy; the sort of thing you might meet at a séance. I expect we struck a jarring note in the ether or had sulphurous aura sticking out of us. Hobnailed boots and beards probably don't square with their ideas of perfect humanity—they want oily-faced, squint-eyed buck priests. We saw two of them just as we were coming back, and they were much more like what I used to know in India than anything else I've seen. They also looked upon us as unpleasant odours. One of them limped, and had evidently been in trouble. I'm going to watch for them; the bigger one might easily have been Ross's No. 12."

"I wonder if the limping one was my visitor of this morning," said Carruthers, telling the story.

"Looks like it," replied Oxley. "He seemed very suspicious when we passed him. His clothes were torn a bit, too, and most of the people we saw were neat and clean—not like your lama friends you introduced me to on the road up. I think we'd better watch the dog carefully. We don't want him eating poisoned meat. And what have you got to report, Tom, after your streak of dawn wanderings?" he continued.

Tom reported, and John Oxley listened with interest that deepened visibly as Carruthers continued. Unfortunately, Tom was so occupied with Dhyan and Aunt Jane that he forgot to mention the old road Dhyan had talked of.

"The plot thickens," said Oxley at last. "Beautiful damsel in distress, maiden aunt of Jane Austen type in the middle of nowhere. Why couldn't you let on about this before instead of talking rot about dreams and mirrors? Where are they?"

"I don't know. Miss Prentis is going to send for us later on."

"You are a boob—why didn't you escort them to their rooms in this desirable, central-heated hotel? Or, better still, ask them to come and have a decent meal of bully-beef? Miss Prentis has probably forgotten what English food tastes like. Does the maiden aunt really think anyone is going to stop us leaving here when we want to?" he queried reflectively, considering the smoke of his cigarette. "They could, of course, make things uncomfortable, although, so far, I've seen no guns."

"Dhyan—the girl—talked of one gun, anyway, and seemed familiar with them," replied Carruthers. "She seemed dissatisfied because I had no ironmongery tied round my middle."

"She's been reading Wild West novels," said Oxley. "And I shouldn't be surprised if the bald-headed joss puts on wireless movies in the off hours when the rest of the packet aren't on the chapel stunt. He's probably got a trusted agent in America disguised as a scene-shifter at Hollywood, with a pocket transmitter. I wonder if she knows all about the great Charles and Rudolf, or if she's familiar with our Mary and Doug."

An hour later a discreet knock at the door was followed by the entrance of an unmistakable Buddhist hill-woman, complete even to the little cap, braided hair, and shell bracelets, an old woman, as such women age, well over forty, who handed them a folded piece of coarse paper—envelopes evidently were non-existent. It was addressed in a fine, angular writing to "Tom Carruthers, Esq.," and the contents were very formal in their request

that Mr. Carruthers and his friend would come to tea with the writer that afternoon, in her rooms at four o'clock, at a little before which hour the bearer, Choksid, would be waiting for them at the end of the corridor.

"My sacred aunt!" said Oxley. "That writing and language make me homesick for Bournemouth. I've got a trio of them there, perfect specimens, with two cats and a parrot. I wonder if there are any cats here? We'd better not take the dog. To think of things like this among the wild and woolly mountains! I shall have to put on a tie and a coat."

"And I," announced Carruthers, "am going to shave."

Oxley looked upon him with suspicion after that—suspicion that endured and deepened when, at four o'clock, most punctually, Choksid, beaming upon them, ushered the pair in through the metal door which formed the portal of Sityana's rooms. Choksid, like Sityana, built up her life on Dhyan; she, moreover, considered that it was time, greatly over-time, that Dhyan was married in proper fashion to one of her own breed. None such existed in this valley where Choksid had first come with an alien baby, whose lips had taken the place of those of the little one who had died after a few days' life.

Now here had appeared two sahibs of the proper kind such as Choksid had known in her youth—rough-faced, loud-speaking, heavy-booted men, who had burly followers and a large dog, and gave orders that other folk obeyed with speed. This was proper and as it should be, and, feeling that life was really getting better, Choksid hurried into the kitchen to see that the water was properly boiling and the teapot—a handsome thing of silver and copper—was ready for use.

About the same time, Ananda and Sita Ram were sitting in the former's room, pondering over three pieces of closely written paper—evidently frequently and carefully folded by the creases upon them. They were written in Hindustani, in English script, the medium which served for men whose languages and scripts were all different.

"They were hidden in the usual place," said Sita Ram, "so it is clear that the pass is now open for men. Nor had they been there long, not more than two days, for there was rain three nights ago, and the paper has not been wetted. Basant found them last night, but was unable to return before because he saw Dhyan upon the tower this morning, and with her one of the strangers, and so could not pass. It will be after the full moon, then?"

“After the full moon,” assented Ananda. “Ten days from now. It were well that the work be completed before Bakhtiyan arrives, so that all be in order here. Then, with his arrival, we can deal with the strangers. And then”—Ananda’s mouth took an ugly turn—“we can wring the old hen’s neck and take the chicken. I will make that a ceremony for the rest—it will be the night of illumination for them, and they shall understand fully that the new age is about to dawn.”

“But, meantime, what about the strangers and their cursed dog?” asked Sita Ram feelingly. Those bites throbbed.

“They must be watched, but less clumsily than to-day. This evening I will speak with the Master. I must find out why he has called them—he cannot suspect anything. But perhaps he is getting over old and coming back to his first thoughts. Maybe he even desires that Dhyan should be escorted back to her own country, and for that reason has contrived to bring these men hither. That, of course, must be delayed at all costs until the arrival of Bakhtiyan, whose help we shall require in that matter. We have few arms at present, and they have their food cooked by their own servants.”

A little later Ananda—*alias* Dhyanand, and half a dozen more names—having washed the caste mark again from his brow, adjusted his flowing robes and went out to see the man they called the Master. His heavy, tall figure was imposing as he swung down the passage with soft, noiseless step.

CHAPTER XIV RAMA

Aunt Jane looked benignly upon her guests across the big copper teapot, whose silver spout was fashioned in the shape of an elephant's head and trunk. Forty and more years ago this would have been the height of her ambition, to preside at her own tea-table—a really respectable table, heavy mahogany for choice—pouring tea from a highly ornamented silver teapot into dainty china cups. The cups they had to-day were real china, but they were handleless, and the saucers were of silver. There were, moreover, no cakes of the type Aunt Jane remembered, only a few mildly sweetened home-made biscuits and some thin, whole-meal cakes. She feared rather on this head, because probably the visitors had better things with them, despite the fact of being travellers. Fare was plain in the valley, and such things as jam and icing-sugar unknown. Aunt Jane had a little, very little, sugar brought to her from Nubra by Rinpoche, who had sent for it to Panamik, and she had dispensed it royally; moreover, Choksid had made some butter that was not too bad.

The guests she had pictured forty years ago would, of course, have been clothed quite differently, with fancy waistcoats and ties, abundance of starch and hair-oil, waxed moustaches and stiff garments, instead of wearing rough shooting-coats, most indecent and attenuated trouserings upon their nether limbs, showing scratched and sunburnt knees and even expanses of hirsute thighs quite unsuitable to the eyes of maiden—indeed, of any—ladies of manufacturing towns of the late eighties.

Their speech, also, was somewhat other than she had been accustomed to hear in the years of long ago—more slangy and larded with strange phrases, which, upon occasion, Aunt Jane found some little difficulty in understanding.

But these things did not matter; what did matter was that they exhaled a certain aroma of home, a feeling of being among her own folk once more, among entirely wholesome and animal male men whose thoughts would run on simple and primitive lines, who expected a woman to be a woman and a man to be a man—something that worked in office or factory and made money, or became a soldier or a sailor and did not make money, but in either case, eventually married and begot children and brought up the children in exactly the same way as they brought up the small dogs, with the aid of a stick, impressing upon the male children a certain time-honoured code,

sprung from where none of them would be able to explain, of "what a fellow could do" and "what a fellow could not do." They would, at times—weddings, funerals, annual festivals, and the like—put on more than usually uncomfortable clothes and march stiffly in rear of their women-folk to some place of worship, where, with much consideration of their trouser-knees and silk hats, they would offer homage to their Creator after their fashion, spending the time of the sermon in looking at their watches, but they would never be guilty of any such thing as meditations.

The people Aunt Jane was visualising were, of course, the fathers and uncles of the visitors, but the type was obviously continuing in essence, and Aunt Jane expanded in their atmosphere as she offered them her Chinese brick tea and plied them with her whole-meal cakes.

But she was inwardly sad as she looked at Dhyan talking briskly with Oxley, whose fund of conversation was unceasing in the presence of the opposite sex, and because Dhyan was wearing a loose, silk robe of semi-Oriental cut when, in Aunt Jane's opinion, she ought to have been smartly dressed with leg-of-mutton sleeves, a tight waist and sweeping, frilly skirt that would, at most, reveal a well-arched instep in a high-heeled shoe. Her throat was bare, moreover, instead of being properly fastened up in a high, whaleboned collar, from which might depend various lacy excrescences, while her hair, in place of being well drawn back to display a noble forehead and massed in a lump behind, was braided low about her head with ornaments which Aunt Jane was sure the visitors would find barbaric. And Dhyan had refused to wear the large, cameo brooch which Aunt Jane had forced upon her, the one surviving relic of Miss Prentis' original jewellery, which had somehow escaped being jettisoned when she had cast behind her the inanities of her early life and, with new-fledged wings, set out to follow those wonderful men who preached such a beautiful doctrine of illumination, teaching a faith where woman was no more to be trammelled by the foolish conventions of the past, but, on glorious pinions, to soar high above such minor illusions as sex.

Nevertheless, the sadness was only passing, and she forgot about it presently as she talked to Carruthers, who was tactful with women and gave no sign of any thoughts he might have with regard to her or Dhyan's costume or the setting of the tea-table, nor even noticed, apparently, the plainness of the room, whose sole adornments were the rugs upon the floor, the silk hangings on the walls, and a little bowl of tiny mountain wild flowers gathered that day by Dhyan. It must seem very plain and bare, of course, to these men, and Aunt Jane wished she had a befitting room to

receive them in, one whose walls would be hung with myriad water-colours and photographs, and whose mantelpiece and many odd-shaped tables would be crowded till they could hold no more with various china, *faience*, and gilt rococo ornaments and bric-à-brac, such as her visitors were presumably accustomed to, for undoubtedly they were of her own class—what people in Jane Prentis' day used to refer to as "ladies and gentlemen."

However, all went well; the visitors enjoyed their tea and said so, each taking several of the tiny cups, and if they did subsequently smoke well-used pipes—perhaps this was a new custom in England in the presence of ladies—they first asked permission in an altogether pleasant way. So when Carruthers turned the conversation to other things than mere banalities, Aunt Jane felt, as she told him a little more about the place in which he found himself, that presently she could really open her heart to this man.

"The guards? They have no real use; they are all of them the more recently initiated. But the teachers keep them there; they take it in turns, possibly because they lend an air of mystery to the ceremonies and impress the novices. No, they are not soldiers."

"And how many people are there altogether, Miss Prentis?" asked Carruthers.

"About a hundred, perhaps; sometimes less, but never more. That, of course, does not include the lungma pa, the men who live outside and work; they are very rough, of course, just hill-men who have always lived here; there might be a couple of hundred of them, including the women and children. They have nothing to do with this place—the inside part, I mean."

"And you say that the Master really believes it all?"

"Yes, Mr. Carruthers—all of it. And most of the people here believe in him; even the half-dozen or so Europeans and Americans, they believe in him too, believe his theories about the future destruction of the present civilised races of the world and that the people here are to be the teachers of a great new race which will fill the earth. It is not that the race will start here, but that these folk will go out into the parts of the world which will not be destroyed when the ice comes down, and will form other circles of teachers, who will guide the new race until it becomes civilised in the perfect fashion. But I don't know where those parts are; they know I don't believe in any of it now, so they won't tell me anything, and Dhyan will have nothing to do with it at all. They do have secrets, and some of them have got great powers, and I don't think that such powers are good for

ordinary people who may be bad and use them wrongly. The great mirror is quite real—I am sure it is not a trick—you can see real things in it."

"Dhyan won't have anything to do with it?" said Carruthers, looking across to the other end of the room where, talking to Oxley, the girl was playing with the Airedale, which she had asked might be brought when they had arrived without Tosh. She was maintaining an animated discussion as to the proper way in which one should handle puppies.

"No, thank God!" said Aunt Jane, looking over at Dhyan with her faded blue eyes. "She won't. She ought to be got away from here. Do you believe in devils, Mr. Carruthers? There are one or two here, I think—only the Master won't see it. He was a good man, I think, only now he's so old and a little mad. Of course, nearly all of us must have been mad, or we wouldn't have come here—at least, not the white people. They're worse than the others, I think, and no help at all. I never see them now, and I keep Dhyan away from them."

She was interrupted at this point by Choksid's appearance with a small metal plate of home-made sweetmeats, to the making of which had gone Aunt Jane's last half-pound of sugar. Aunt Jane dispensed them with an air as though they had come straight from Fuller's, and Oxley made a mental note to send over one of the tins of chocolates which he knew were in the store-boxes.

When Choksid left, Miss Prentis turned to Tom, and her whole anxious soul was in her old face as she said, low:

"Mr. Carruthers, get us away from here—back to England. I've got money there—quite a lot it used to be—and we can repay you anything it costs. Only get us away." And her old hands trembled. "Or get Dhyan out, anyway. It doesn't matter about me; I can stop here. I'd trust Dhyan to you two, although I ought not to let her go alone with two strange gentlemen on a long journey. Get her away soon!"

"Would she come with us, Miss Prentis?" Carruthers laid his hand on Aunt Jane's agitated fingers. "We'd take you both, of course. But will Dhyan come?"

"There's nothing here to keep her, except, perhaps, the Master. He's fond of her in his way, and has always been kind to her, and she likes him. She might stay for him, but for nothing else. You see, there is something between them, though I don't really know what; either she's a relation of his or of someone he loved. He brought her here when she was a baby only two or

three months old, with Choksid as her foster-mother. Her mother had been here before my time; I believe she was very beautiful. And then, it seems, she ran away from here, and I don't know what happened, but a long time afterwards the Master went on a journey and then came back with Dhyan, and round Dhyan's neck was the jewelled necklace, the one she's wearing now, with the looped cross, that her mother had worn. It is very, very old, and there is no other like it. So I know she must have been Dhyan's mother. And the things that came with the baby—a cloak and some linen—were English, I'm sure, and the blanket she was wrapped in at night was marked, too, with an English name—Finlayson. But I don't know any more."

Then she glanced at Carruthers' face.

"Do you know anything of that name?" she asked.

"Something, perhaps; but I thought it was only a ghost-story—something imagined or dreamed. It was in a house which had once belonged to a man called Finlayson who had died years before—he and his wife and a baby." He gave her the outline of the story. "I remember that they said that the woman had come from somewhere in Central Asia, but I didn't understand she was white." He looked at Dhyan and the jewelled chain and gold cross which showed against the silk of her gown. "A most extraordinary thing, if it were true."

"But why not?" said Aunt Jane simply. "Why not? If it had not been for that perhaps you would not be here now, and, you see, there is something for you to do. I think you must have been sent here on purpose, and your dream or vision, or whatever it was, was one of the signs to show you the way. I think now that perhaps Dhyan will be safe presently, and then I do not mind any more what happens to me. I have been afraid of late because I am getting old. And Ananda is a fiend."

"Who is Ananda?" asked Carruthers.

Aunt Jane told him quite simply who and what Ananda was, and Carruthers looked at her wonderingly, poor soul. He could not go and blow the Swami's brains out merely to pass the afternoon; they were, in a sense, guests here, and there were other considerations. But he hoped that perhaps something might happen one day that would give him a few quiet minutes with Ananda—preferably on the edge of a precipice or on a heavily crevassed glacier.

"And I am sure he plots something now, some new devilry. Not only for Dhyan; it is something besides that. He did not come back here for her, I

think, though he may have. There is something else. He can do nothing to us while you are here, I think, but presently——"

"We shall keep an eye on the gentleman; don't you worry, Miss Prentis. We shall have to wait a little; we have no transport here, you know; the men who brought our things were your lungma pas, and we cannot even talk to them. We shall have to think out a way, especially as you think Rinpoche would not help."

"That would depend upon the Master; he would never disobey the Master, though Rinpoche is a good man and kind and is fond of Dhyan and of me, although he thinks I am throwing away the light. But that is my business, he says; it is nothing to do with him if I will not see the great peace. He is a Buddhist really, at heart, and Buddhism was kind and never persecuted. If I am anything now, I am a Buddhist, perhaps. If the Master agreed, Rinpoche would certainly help gladly and the lungma pa obey him. And, you see, most of them love Dhyan, who can talk to them and helps their women and babies when they are ill."

Then, feeling that she had neglected her other guest, she turned her attention to Oxley and became plain Aunt Jane once more—the old lady who was entertaining young men, as she looked upon them from her standpoint, after some thirty-five years of enforced abstention from even the sight of anything on such a low plane of being. They left with regret when the evening wore late—late for the life they led there—to return to their rooms at the farther end of the building.

"Jane Austen!" said Oxley. "I'm homesick for my auntcestral mansion in Bournemouth. The girl is good, cheerful value too. I give Aunt Jane a good ticket for bringing her up like that."

"I think the ticket belongs to Dhyan for bringing up Aunt Jane," remarked Carruthers, with possibly more truth than he really knew.

Then he told Oxley what Aunt Jane had said about Dhyan's birth and parents. Oxley looked at him. Tom had wild streaks of imagination, but he did not lie. Aunt Jane had, therefore, certainly told him the story he now repeated, and it baffled Oxley.

"Perhaps you were right, after all," he said at last, "and Ross and Sanderson were wrong. Perhaps Waldenstein's theory of the photographic plate is right. God knows! Anyway, there it is, and we've got a job of work on hand. I hope Ananda interferes and gives us an opportunity to deal with him. There's plenty of oil here, anyway, and even if boiling oil isn't

practicable, there's a nice cold hell in the glacier outside. He's probably the man I saw, and I'll take a bet he's No. 12 masquerading under a new name."

But Carruthers was not listening to the last remarks. He knew now where he had seen the Master before; he could link up the colourless old face seen against its background of crimson hangings above the high throne with the room in the deserted bungalow where he was now more certain than ever he had stood for a long time one night and watched the picture, image, vision, whatever it was, of the drama that had once been played out there. He knew now who had been the old man that had entered and taken away the new-born baby. Obviously he had loved the dead woman whom Carruthers had seen, but of their relationship he could form no idea. But it was proof of yet another definite link joining him with Dhyan, whom he had dreamed of so often—Dhyan who seemed infinitely more beautiful than she had been even in dream. And with Aunt Jane's pitiful story about Ananda he knew now why he had been sent here and why he had brought Oxley and the men in the next room. They would all be wanted—they, and others too—for the journey back into Nubra.

Then they sat down to discuss it all seriously and to make some kind of a plan, and agreed that the first essential was an interview with the Master; several interviews, in fact, since it would be better if he could be treated as a friend than as an enemy.

At the same time as they were sitting there talking over the afternoon, and Aunt Jane and Dhyan were talking of their late visitors, and Choksid was thinking which would be the most suitable for Dhyan, since the foolish manners of these folks forced them to marry only one man instead of marrying two or three good-looking brothers, as Choksid's folk did, in a room at the opposite end of the building sat a small, dark man engaged in a peculiar form of physical exercise.

The room was a very plainly furnished cell—severely plain, indeed—a low, hard bed, a few small felt mats on the floor, a low wooden table some nine inches high, on which were drinking-cups and eating-bowls, and certain frescoes on the walls.

His form of exercise consisted in repeatedly striking with his open left hand at a very ragged and coarse rolled-up blanket, which was tattered far more than even the worst of coolie blankets. He struck it methodically and systematically, and each time that the flat of his left hand met the bundle he dragged sideways with a sweeping motion that made the gold rings on his fingers flash in the light of the oil-fed flame in the stone niche above him. It

was noticeable that the dragging motion of the open hand was simultaneous with a tearing, ripping sound from the blanket.

Then he ceased, drew back his hand, and looked at it, and to anyone who had been there the reason of the ripping noise would have been apparent, since the four gold rings were joined inside his hand by a heavy bar of metal, the whole being uncommonly like an English knuckle-duster. The reason for striking with the open hand instead of the closed fist was, however, now obvious, since, instead of being a smooth bar, this one was garnished with four wicked-looking steel blades, small and hook-shaped, with inward-turning points, the longest of them being nearly an inch and a quarter long, the others slightly shorter. It was, in fact, very like the natural weapon upon which it had been modelled—a tiger's claws—and its purpose was much the same.

Rama—that was the small man's name—looked at the waghnuk with quiet but intense satisfaction as, with a piece of rag, he polished up one of the blades which was somewhat duller than the rest. It was the only weapon of his own which he had, and, in view of his avowed profession of an earnest seeker after the great light, he ought to have had none at all. Once he had also owned a nice modern automatic pistol, but an accident had deprived him of that; it would have led to awkward questions as to who he was and what he was doing, and it had had to be jettisoned. Since that day Rama had concentrated on perfecting his use of this ancient weapon of his race, the weapon with which his national hero, Shivaji, had slain the leader of the Muhammedans when first he laid the foundation of the Mahratta power. Moreover, the waghnuk would kill a little more slowly than a pistol, leaving time for him to make a little speech which he had drawn up long ago.

Some day that weapon was going to be used to real purpose, and that day, he hoped, was drawing very near. It would be the day of life for him, and what should happen after that he neither knew nor cared.

He was a small, sturdily-built man—somewhat dark of skin, though his features were well cut, and he was evidently of good birth; there was a fineness about wrist and ankle which is not, as a rule, to be remarked in the wrists and ankles of those who do heavy manual labour all day and whose ancestors have done the same.

He contemplated the weapon again, and then, finally wrapping it in a silk cloth, stowed it carefully away in the belt he wore next to his skin. Then he turned his mind in another direction—to the strangers who had just

arrived here in this valley, where, for two years, he had been training for the opportunity of fulfilling the task he considered lay bound upon him. He sat there quietly thinking, racking his memory to recall something out of the past, and sometimes his lips moved as do those of a person who is trying to bring back a name. His face twisted a little in the process, for there was a great scar that ran from chin to cheek-bone, which had distorted the left corner of his mouth, and a transverse gash had dropped his left eyebrow somewhat and slightly closed the lid. At last he rose up and, in his bare feet, went quietly along the dark passages until he came to the one in which the newcomers were lodged, and here he waited, listening. They had a dog of a kind that was likely to take violent exception to strangers. However, everything was still, while under their door he could see a thin gleam of light, and as he drew nearer he heard the muffled sound of voices. He edged up most carefully to the door, where he crouched noiselessly. They were both of them there talking in English, and Rama listened for some while. They were discussing some plan which interested him, and he was anxious to find out exactly how much they knew about the place and the people around.

Ananda also was deep in a consideration of ways and means and projects, talking with his follower, Sita Ram. They were discussing who should be acting as guard on the Master's room on a certain night and had just decided that it should be Rama, the little Mahratta. Ananda held a post which might be best described as novice-master in the quaint semi-monastery and the allotment of certain offices and duties was in his hands. There were other matters also which the Master had committed to his charge, one of them being the care of the great treasure which lay hidden in certain portions of the building, a treasure of unbelievable age and size.

"He is not too intelligent," remarked Sita Ram. "I have sounded him very carefully, and he is whole-heartedly with us. As you know, he broods a great deal about the wrong that the English did him, and, from the way that he spoke this morning, it seems that possibly he thinks he has recognised his particular enemy in one of these two men. In any case he would rejoice at an opportunity to strike at any member of the foul race which I think he hates as much as we do."

"It is good," said Ananda. "Let him be appointed for that night. But do not tell him more than is necessary; let him think it is merely a question of imprisoning Rinpoche and the Master. And explain that whether or not either of the Englishmen be his enemy, he is to do nothing until he gets the

order. He knows some little English, and may, therefore, well be set to spy upon them as you suggested to him."

CHAPTER XV THE MASTER'S STORY

He whom they called the Master lay upon the low bed in his room on the topmost floor of the great building to which he had come so many years before. The room was better lit than many in the place, and the shafts of sunlight fell upon the rich rugs and hangings of crimson silk and gold embroidery, the painted silk banners and the gold images on lacquered stands, while through the window showed the great panorama of ice and snow-clad mountains, sharp-cut against the cloudless blue sky.

But the Master had no thought for these things as he lay there with closed eyes, his face even whiter than usual and drawn with weakness, the nose craggier than ever in contrast to the sunken, blue-shadowed eyes, and the colourless lips but little darker, though bluer, than the ivory skin of the old face. He was cold, it seemed, despite the sunshine that poured into the room, for a fur was drawn up over him. Every now and then he moved restlessly, and even that slight exertion seemed to affect the rather shallow, rapid breathing.

The gelong Rinpoche, sitting beside, looked anxiously into his face from time to time, and once turned back the fur coverlet to feel the thin, old wrist, where it was sometimes hard to find the thready and irregular pulse. Rinpoche feared greatly for the Master, who had been getting strangely feeble these late weeks, and who seemed suddenly to be going downhill, he who, despite his great age, which no one really knew, had seemed so intensely vital as though he were, indeed, destined to live for centuries.

Presently the old eyes opened a little and looked somewhat vacantly round the room; then greater consciousness returned, and he turned his gaze to Rinpoche, and it seemed that his strength was returning slightly. Rinpoche signalled to a man in the further corner, who came bearing a silver tray, on which was a phial of light yellow liquid. Rinpoche bent down and raised the Master's head a little, then helped him to drink a few drops of the fluid. The effect was rapid—a shade of colour suffused the old face, the eyes brightened, the breath came slower, and presently the old man was able to sit up, propped by his cushions. But the voice was still painfully weak, although, by degrees, it strengthened a little, and Rinpoche still feared; he knew that the precious medicine was fast losing its power, its effect becoming daily more transitory.

"I have been thinking again, Rinpoche—dreaming, too. I dream of the Mother and of the past and also of the future. Show me the Eye of Vision; I would see how much was truth and how much fantasy."

Rinpoche crossed the room to a lacquered cabinet, which he opened, revealing a small statue of the Mother of Vision, from whose hands he took a mirror almost identical with that which Carruthers had found. He placed it in the old man's wasted fingers and sat down again by his side, looking into the mirror with him. The Master gazed quietly for a long time. Then he spoke:

"You see—there it is. It is clear that it is intended that they should go. I know not why. Maybe there is a task for them that even we know not of, though it seems strange and contrary to what I had hoped. But I grow old, Rinpoche—I stay not long now, and I would obey—I who have mostly made others obey, I also would pass doing faithfully what is laid upon me. It may be that the time is not yet—I shall certainly not see it—you also, I think, will rejoin me before it comes—youth perhaps has somewhat yet to do to complete the work—something that will be shown to them. But it is clear. Send, then, for Caratahs—him who speaks with you and who came first to Kungma. I would talk with him while I still have strength; maybe it will not last long."

Then, as Rinpoche rose, the old man sank back again into the cushions, his eyes still fixed upon the mirror. Presently they closed, and it seemed that he slept.

Rinpoche himself went to fetch Carruthers. For several days he had sought to bring Tom, who, he knew, was anxious to meet the Master again, but sometimes the Master's state had prevented it, sometimes the Master himself had forbidden him. Now that the Master had assented to his repeated request that he would talk again with the strangers, Rinpoche wasted no time but went himself.

He found Carruthers in their room; Oxley was out. Carruthers had himself only just returned, and was sitting with a book which he was not, apparently, reading. Actually, Carruthers was thinking of Dhyan, whom he had only just left; they had been exploring the great valley behind the monastery where Dhyan went to gather the little rock-plants in which she delighted so greatly—the only flowers she knew—tiny little blossoms of red and yellow and mauve, scentless and fragile, but still flowers.

Most men would have found Dhyan unspeakably boring to talk with, for she had never seen a theatre or played any game, or read anything but one or

two antiquated romances which Aunt Jane owned, and life as it is lived by the civilised world was, to a great extent, a closed book to her. But none of that mattered to Tom Carruthers, who really cared very little for such things. In the past he had been notably successful at games, but that, however, was an incident to him; he played games to keep fit, and accidentally it had so happened that he played them better than most people. Provided that he was able to find hills to climb and a horse to sit, he cared nothing if he never saw any form of game again. But a girl who could talk to him of mountains and wild flowers, of sunset and storm, as though these were all living entities, part indeed of the life she shared with them, who could control animals in a way that seemed purely magical, who had next to nothing of all that the average woman asks of life, and yet found life something quite enthrallingly wonderful; all this appealed to Carruthers, appealed more and more each day. As men count time, he had known Dhyan for little more than a week, but then he had dreamed of her for more years than he could really remember, and it seemed that those dreams had been reciprocal.

As yet Carruthers had got no further with the plans for their return, but somehow or other he and Oxley would manage the business, and with them would go, either with the Master's leave or without it, Aunt Jane and Dhyan. And after that—well, he did not think he would wander for a while; Dhyan would have so much to learn, though she would learn quickly, of course; of that he was certain.

A tap at the door and some words in Thibetan drew his thoughts from the pleasant path they had been following, and he opened the door to find Rinpoche standing there. They had seen little of the gelong the last few days; he had been much with the Master, and Carruthers was disquieted at the very grave expression with which Rinpoche greeted him as he explained the reason of his visit.

"I'll come now," said Carruthers. "I'll just tell one of the men where I'm going so that Oxley will know when he returns."

The two Pathans were out, but Nawab was there, and to him Tom explained where he was going, warning him to admit no one until Oxley came back. Ananda had not, so far, shown the slightest sign of hostility, but Aunt Jane was insistent there was something afoot, and they ought to be careful.

Then he accompanied Rinpoche along the corridor, up the narrow stairs, and so on to the upper storey, where the Master's room lay, a room which Carruthers had never yet entered, and outside whose crimson doorway a

brass-masked sentry stood motionless with the heavy bronze-hilted sword, which, like several of the weapons here, were puzzles to him, in spite of his knowledge of metal-work of various periods. Neither work nor shape fitted with anything he had ever met before, and, though he had examined some of them closely, he could arrive at no idea of their place of manufacture nor their age. The only logical conclusion seemed that they belonged to this strange building, which, according to Rinpoche, was tens of thousands of years old, and that, on the face of it, was quite absurd and impossible.

Carruthers was struck by the feeble appearance of the Master, whom they found apparently asleep, lying with closed eyes upon the bed. He was clearly very ill, and his great age was even more evident now than it had been when they had seen him first in the room where he received those whom he chose to see, or in the chapel on the night of the Initiation ceremony. He was very, very old, and it seemed to-day that he was not likely to live very long. Yet, when he opened his eyes and, with Rinpoche's aid, lifted himself a little to let the attendant pack the cushions up higher, Carruthers was not so sure—there seemed still some store of vitality, some hidden strength in the old face, a certain power in the sunken eyes that looked into his.

Carruthers, in Thibetan, expressed his regret that the Master was not well, but instead of being answered in the same language, to his surprise, the old man replied in English. Carruthers had understood that he never spoke save in the strange tongue that was used in the place, or sometimes in Thibetan.

"I had thought never to speak English again," said the old man, "never to use any speech save the tongues which I learnt here so many long years ago. But I wish to speak to you direct now, without any interpreter, to explain, if I may, why you are here, for you have not really come of yourself, though you may think you have, as I did when I first set out from India eighty years ago —younger, doubtless, than you are now, though to me there seems no difference between thirty or forty or fifty. Fenwick I was called then, and, as I learned from you, my name is not yet forgotten among my kin—even so far removed as you."

"Seeing that I have heard of you so often from my mother—your cousin's granddaughter—I should hardly have forgotten. So you are Great-uncle Steven Fenwick who disappeared!"

Carruthers thought of the one picture he had seen at home, a rough painting by a Chinaman who, apparently, made a living out of such portraits

in Madras in those far-off days when Daguerre was first showing as a scientific wonder his method of making pictures by silver bromide on copper and so laid the foundations of many a fortune. There certainly was some resemblance with what he remembered of the portrait; the prominent nose and the heavy eyebrows were there.

"I suppose she would be George's granddaughter—he married young and stayed at home, though he was older than me," said the Master. "So you must be George's great-grandson. It is strange as men see things, though to me little seems strange now, only designed from long ago. It is fitting that you who are of my own family should come here at the end of this chapter. Yes, I am Steven Fenwick—or used to be—something like you, one who followed dreams, though with but little or no knowledge in those days, when to see a hill was sorrow until I had climbed it and learnt what lay on the other side, climbed it as uncomprehendingly as a dog who must dash through a hole in the fence, not knowing what he seeks, merely using his physical powers. And thus I came into Nubra in search of I knew not what, seeking merely the long road, the unknown, perhaps beyond the fabled places which I had heard of in travellers' tales, Samarkand and Bokhara and the cities of Central Asia.

"None knew the road then; only the caravans came and went from the unknown into the known. And I came from the known into the unknown, but could not be content with following the beaten roads, but must take the less known ones, wandering, wandering. Thus, in time, I came into these hills that you can see through yonder window, because men said that once a road ran here; indeed, one man told me he had followed it and that there was wealth to be gained. I, being young and foolish, also sought wealth, though of a truth I sought romance more than wealth, and methinks, perhaps, that is a little less empty and foolish thing to seek than wealth, though both are vain.

"But he died, and the rest fled, and I was almost alone. Even then I would not turn back, but pushed onwards with my one follower and such animals as were left us, over the snow and the ice until, at last, we stood on yonder wall, looking down into this valley. And then we descended, leaving the animals that we could not bring, carrying only such little food and arms as we could lift, with a rug or two for the nights.

"Then came the snow and the storm and the darkness, and after that I was quite alone, for that last man also died, lost in some hole in the ice. I struggled on until my powers were almost gone, and then fell. With my last remaining strength I dug a small hole in the drifted snow in the lee of a rock,

wrapped myself in my cloak, and waited for death. I thought that death had come when consciousness went, and when later I opened my eyes to sunshine again, although I could not move, I thought indeed I had died and that the beings who stood about me could not be men.

"Men, however, they were, rough-clothed men who were chafing my hands and feet back to life, though several of the toes were dead and later came off; men who poured some form of spirit into my mouth until I coughed my way back to sense and life, but men with whom I could not speak, who understood nothing I could say. One with them seemed in authority, and presently, under his orders, they carried me here, to this building in which he lived.

"For a long while I lay sick of a strange fever, doubtless brought on by my exertions and the privations we had suffered, and thought many times to die. But presently I got better, but with no desire to wander more for the moment. And then it was that I came to know him whom they called the Master here, a man who, to my eyes, seemed strange, well-nigh as old then as I am now. Of what race he was I never learnt, save that I think he was a European and that at first he spoke with me in French, which I had learnt, having once been taken prisoner at sea by the French.

"He told me that he had come here in his youth, having gained certain knowledge and seeking more, and that if I remained he would teach me many secrets. Thus, having no desire to travel—my feet were still of little use—I remained, and by degrees he opened my eyes and taught me the knowledge which he had, of man's past and of the future, of the laws which rule the world made by the great power of which we know nothing save only what we learn from its unchangeable laws. Thus did I find the first beams of the light.

"He taught me also much of the past—of the vast age of this world of ours, and of man's life upon it; of the lands and people which have now disappeared so that no trace remains save only in such a city as this and certain others, of which he told me and which yet stand unoccupied waiting for due time. Told me also how, through the ages, the garnered knowledge of men had been kept in safe hands and passed on from teacher to teacher so that it might not be lost; taught me the secret of the ice and of the light. These things I have taught also to Rinpoche, who will replace me when I am called away, and who will carry on my task, aided by Ananda and those whom, following my predecessor's custom, I have called from lands far off. But on these things I will not dwell, since I know that you would scarce

believe, being blinded by material matters. I wish not to weary myself too greatly, either, and will speak of simpler matters within your understanding.

"It is of Dhyan that I would speak; of Dhyan and of Sityana, whose name was once Jane Prentis—a foolish woman, unable to see beyond this short life, but kind of heart and devoted to Dhyan. Sityana, in truth, is fitted for nothing but earthly motherhood, though, perhaps, for a time she sought higher things; sought foolishly matters which were not for her, though once, in my blindness, I thought they were for all.

"Something of Dhyan, I know, is known to you; more, perchance, you have divined. Something you have seen in the Eye of Vision; that I know, having, indeed, allowed certain things to be revealed to you in dream and mirror. But all you do not know, and it is well that you should know it now.

"Among the few who came here from far off was a certain Russian who had escaped from Siberia, bringing with him his wife and a girl, his daughter, the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, whose name was Alexia. He also knew something of the truth of things—a great thinker and what those in power called a revolutionary. He and his wife died before long, worn out by the life they had suffered in Siberia and in their wanderings after escaping, but the girl lived, growing more and more beautiful each day. And I who thought that love had no meaning for me, whose mind was bent on higher things than that, learnt that I had not yet become as should he whose thoughts are set on true knowledge.

"Alexia and I were much together, for there were but one or two others with whom she could talk at all. And then we loved."

The old man stopped for a space, apparently thinking over that far-away past that still, it seemed, could hold such great sweetness.

"We loved. For a time I thought of nothing else, yet, strangely, I did not desire to leave here; I wished still to remain, but with Alexia. Moreover, I was now head; the Master's mantle had descended upon me, and, though no such thing as marriage was thought of here, yet there was nothing against it, so we became man and wife. Then later Alexia gave me a daughter, whom we called Myrrha—our only child. Alas! her mother died when Myrrha was still a child, and then my thoughts went back wholly to all that I had learnt, though from thence, as, indeed, ever since, it has seemed to me that love has a place, that love may be more than we think, that it also is a law beyond the things of time.

“But, in my foolishness, I thought that Alexia’s daughter would grow up in the same ideas as those about her, not remembering that she was woman. Day by day in early womanhood I should have seen it, understood when she asked me to take her away into another life, a simpler life. Like Dhyan now, she was more at home among the lungma pa, with their little cares, their women, their sick children, and their babies—happier if she was feeding motherless puppies with a bowl of milk and a twisted rag than when she was listening to the knowledge I sought to give her, but for which she seemed to care nothing at all.

“And then, in the end, she left us—left us alone—escaping with certain lungma pas, who almost worshipped her; not by the hidden road, but through the mountains, almost, it seems, by the very road I came. She went when I was away—sometimes I had to make journeys—so that I might know nothing until she was beyond reach of recall. How she faced the road I know not; indeed, I mourned her dead—she and those men with her—dead, unless, perchance, she fell in with some caravan on the passes. But that would mean that doubtless she was now sold into slavery somewhere among the Central Asian Khans, for, though not so beautiful as her mother, still she was very fair.

“I did all that might be done, sending in search everywhere, but neither of her, nor of the woman and two men who had gone with her, did I ever hear any news.

“But, several years later, I learnt by the powers I hold, which up till then had taught me nothing of that which I wished so much to learn, that she was alive and happy, but that life for her would not be long. And so I set out in search, for I wished to see her before she died.

“It was a long journey, and many times I was in doubt, even I who guard the secret of the Mirror of Vision. But always I trusted, and, in the end, I came to the place where she was. And I knew, even as I made my way up the steep hill-path, that I would not have speech with her, nor with the man who had found her and, loving her, had saved her from the fate that might have been hers, taking her to be his wife. That I knew before even I reached the doors of the lamp-lit house whence all had fled owing to fear of the cholera which raged in those parts. There I found my daughter—dead—and dead also the Englishman who had saved and married her. But their child was there—a babe of only a few hours old, and the babe I took, the babe who is now Dhyan, and, descending the hill, saw, going up, men and a woman carrying tools for the burial.

"We travelled all that night and all the next day, for I desired to return here speedily, and I did not wish to meet any who should ask questions which might cause me to be delayed or even prevent my return. I have power in many places, and many who know me not will obey my orders by virtue of the mysteries I guard, those even who have never seen me and never will see me nor know who I am. So the way was easy for me to travel unnoticed. Moreover, I was able to secure a foster-mother for the babe, a hill-woman whose husband and child had died a few days before, and who was willing to come with us, having in her youth, for a short while, served in an Englishman's house, so that she knew something of European children. Choksid has remained here ever since, and I do not think has any wish to be anywhere except where Dhyan is.

"Wiser now, I gave Dhyan into Sityana's charge—a woman of her own race, the only woman here to whom I would really trust her, and the result you have seen. I have tried to teach Dhyan, who does not know her relationship to me, but, like her mother, it is vain. She has no wish for knowledge other than what the world calls knowledge, the more material things of life.

"This I have long seen clearly, and, though I have wished to keep her with me, desiring to have the past alive before my eyes, since Dhyan in face and form grows daily more and more like her grandmother, though with her mother's character, still from time to time I have considered what must happen to her eventually. Now that I draw near to the opening of the door which men call death, I would be sure that she will not remain here, a caged bird who, sooner or later, will fly, and fly to misfortune.

"Your coming was meant for this, that you should take her and Sityana —I cannot speak of her by her real name, since I have called her Sityana so long—back to the country I have not seen for over ninety years. There she will grow up among her own folk; now, indeed, the more so since you are here, my own distant kin, and your mother will surely be good to her, even if Sityana's friends are now no more.

"I have decided, therefore, to ask you to take them back when you leave us, taking with you also a little gold, of which we have stores such as you would never dream of, sufficient for Dhyan's needs in England, so that she may never lack money during her life. Men might say I was not wise to entrust to strangers a girl of Dhyan's beauty and the wealth which I shall give you for her, but I know that you are indeed what you say, and that you will fulfil the trust I ask of you. I have tested you for long with visions and dreams."

The old man lay back, evidently tired out by his talking; indeed, for the last part of it Carruthers had had to bend low to catch his words. He closed his eyes, and his breath came quickly as the colour faded again from his face. Presently he rallied a little and opened his eyes.

"Go now. I will send for you again—perhaps to-morrow, when I may be stronger."

Carruthers left him to return to their rooms, his head somewhat in a whirl from the old man's story, which was strange beyond anything he had imagined might happen. He had always looked upon Steven Fenwick as dead long ago; the old man must be a hundred and thirty at least. He found that Oxley had returned and was finishing lunch, but he ate little himself as he told John all he had heard.

Shortly after his departure, in response to his summons, Ananda entered the Master's room, where Rinpoche was anxiously bending over the old man.

"The medicine fails to serve now, Ananda," said the gelong, looking up. "Hast not some other drug which might serve better? At first this did good, it seemed, but now he grows hourly more feeble."

The Swami bent down to feel the pulse, and his impassive face showed no sign as he stood there. Then he pushed the wasted arm back and drew up the fur again.

"Feeble indeed he is, but I do not fear yet. This is but a temporary weakness. I will prepare another medicine and bring it myself. He needs sleep, much sleep, for he is old and recovers more slowly than would thou or I. Stay with him till I return, but do not give him any more of this medicine; it is one of those which, if taken too long, ceases to help; may, indeed, tend to weaken the patient."

Ananda returned to his rooms later by rather a roundabout way, grateful for the medical knowledge which he had learned in the country he so hated. He had shown more than average ability in his studies there, and on to what he had learned he had grafted a great deal of knowledge peculiar to India, not all of it wholesome. He opened a wooden box which stood in the corner and, taking out certain bottles, prepared a phial of medicine, or, rather, of drugs, which he put upon one side. Then he tapped several times upon the wall.

A moment later the door opened and Sita Ram appeared.

"You called, Swami?" he said, looking at the phial and the open drug-chest.

"Yes. All goes well—faster than I thought. But I must act still quicker now. It seems that the Carathas was with him this morning; Rama was on guard and signed to me. He, of course, knows naught of this part." Ananda indicated the medicines. "Undoubtedly it is as I thought; I watched Carathas' return, myself unseen, and he was deep in thought. I listened, moreover, at their door later; it was safe, for they were eating—they are always eating—and I heard them speak of the Master and of Dhyan and of gold. We must act more speedily, therefore, and I think it will be to-night, so that all must be in readiness. Warn Basant and the others to be ready. The Master will be very ill—dying—this evening, and he will surely send for Sityana and Dhyan; indeed, if he does not, I will, but so that they think it is at his order. And for the Englishmen likewise. The rest is easy—you know the plan. Now I will take the Master his medicine."

Ananda emphasised the last word, but quite calmly. He had no particular hate for the Master other than that inseparable from the fact that the old man was English. He merely happened to be in the path and therefore must be brushed aside, and the brush Ananda had thought out long ago.

He picked up the small phial, threw his outer robe over his shoulder and left the room. Sita Ram, staying a minute to close the medicine-chest, followed him, but then turned in the opposite direction. He had some work to do which must be done quickly.

All that afternoon Rinpoche watched anxiously, scarcely leaving the old man. The new medicine certainly seemed to make him sleep at first, but the breathing seemed even more laboured, while the pulse had become more irregular. Rinpoche knew little of medicine, but he had learned something about pulses from Ananda upon an occasion of sickness. And he did not feel at all happy, so that when presently the Master woke, late in the evening, and complained of severe pain—a new symptom—Rinpoche grew still more anxious and sent again for the Swami. This time Dhyanand's face did display some feeling.

"I fear, Rinpoche—I fear I was mistaken. It is grave now—he is very ill—I fear there is danger."

The old man, tossing in pain on the couch, listened to his words. Then he collected his strength and asked quietly if Ananda thought he was going to die. The Swami, in his best bedside manner, said the usual conventional things that are so easy to understand, and although he spoke of hope, a

passing spasm and the like, neither Rinpoche nor the Master were deceived. Ananda would have been very annoyed if they had been.

"Send for Sityana and Dhyan, Rinpoche," murmured the Master. "I would see them for a while. Also for Carathas and the other man, Ox-la. I would speak with both of them together."

Rinpoche himself fetched them, first the two women and then the men.

"I fear he dies even now," said Rinpoche as they neared the Master's room.

That he was dying was painfully clear; moreover, he was now in great pain and could hardly speak. But he gathered sufficient strength to explain to them in broken sentences what he wished, to give a brief order to Rinpoche as to the steps to be taken with regard to Dhyan, money, men, and all necessary help. Then another spasm seized him, and he was still and silent for a while. Presently his face cleared, and he asked Rinpoche for the mirror, which the gelong put into the cold fingers. The old man gazed into it, and Carruthers and Oxley behind him could see the surface of the mirror, and what they saw, or thought they saw there, held them very silent. For, hard as John Oxley might try to reason it away, his eyes insisted that pictures did come and go in that strange, green mirror, though to him they were blurred and indistinct. To Carruthers it seemed that it was Dhyan whom he saw there, Dhyan who was kneeling on the other side of the bed holding the thin, old hand of the man who had been always kind to her, though she could not follow the path he wanted. And yet somehow the vision in the mirror was not quite Dhyan; there was some slight difference that Carruthers could not altogether understand.

But the old man appeared to find whatever he saw as he gazed into the transparent surface entirely satisfactory. Then, for an instant, he raised himself, apparently full of some strange strength.

"Alexia!" he said in English, clearly and distinctly. "Alexia—I know—I come."

And fell back upon his pillows, and it seemed that there were tears in his eyes.

Swami Ananda went softly out of the room, shutting the door behind him, as the others realised that the Master had left them.

CHAPTER XVI TARZI ARRIVES

"He is dead," said Rinpoche, after searching in vain for heart-beat or pulse or faint breath, and then standing up again.

"Does Dhyan know who he was?" Oxley asked quietly of Carruthers, as Aunt Jane knelt down to straighten out the Master upon his couch.

Carruthers told Dhyan something of what the dead man had related to him, but the fact of the relationship did not seem to make any great difference to her; all she could think of was the kindness which the old man had shown her in the past and the sorrow that she felt now at his death—a sorrow tempered by the feeling that new life was opening out before her.

"To-morrow," said Rinpoche, "I shall have to call all together to tell them that the Master has gone from us and to make arrangements to lay him with those who have filled his place before, whose earthly bodies are hidden in the ice, where his also will be laid. We will go now and sleep, for it is late; at least you, doubtless, will sleep. I myself will remain here for a while. First, however, I will tell the guard that no one is to be admitted into the Master's presence until the morning, except Ananda, when he returns. Doubtless he went to bring something to help, but his trouble is wasted; no drug can avail any more."

"The door's stuck," remarked Oxley as they reached it; he had gone forward to open it for the women. "Jammed hard!" he said, wrestling with the heavy fastening. He pulled harder, but nothing moved; then he tried to shake it, but it was heavy metal and shifted not at all. Rinpoche came over and tried the inner fastening, but the door seemed to be secured on the outside. The gelong struck it several times, and then called aloud to the guard who should be outside. No answer, however, came, and Rinpoche turned to the others, mystified.

"It is strange; it seems as though it was fastened on the further side; and the guard is not there, either, or, at least, he does not come."

He called again, but still there was no answer. Oxley, feeling distinctly anxious at this, combined with Ananda's departure, moved to the window and pulled aside a hanging which was drawn over it to keep out the night wind. The heavy shutter was in place, and, although the inner fastenings were loose, it also seemed secured on the outside. John thought deeply as he came back to where the two men were trying still to shake the door open.

“We are locked in,” he said. “Aunt Jane was right about friend Ananda. He probably bolted the door on the outside when he slipped out just now. I think we’ve discovered Ross’s No. 12 all right.”

“Well, Makhmud’s not here, and if we don’t come back before long, he’ll come along to see what’s doing. I wish I’d had the sense to pack a gun, though; we could have smashed the fastenings with that and then found Ananda or Dhyanand,” said Carruthers, after a final effort to open the metal door.

“The light’s going out, too,” added Oxley, looking up at the cornice where the mysterious flames were burning low and flickering strangely. Lower still they burned, and then, for the first time, Carruthers felt a catch in his throat, a slight choking sensation, that came and went suddenly.

The light was very dim now and a slight, sickly odour began to permeate the room.

“Have another go at the door, quick!” said Oxley. “There’s something dirty doing. All together now.”

The three men flung themselves against the heavy door several times and then stopped, as nothing moved. Both Oxley and Carruthers felt strangely weak, both had the choking feeling in their throats, and their hearts pounded in a way that was altogether abnormal, despite the altitude at which they were. A sense of constriction about their chests followed the moment they stopped, and they could see that the others felt it, too. Aunt Jane was panting with her hand to her side, and although the room was cool, drops of sweat showed on the gelong’s face in the faint blue light of the dying flames.

Then the light went altogether and the room was entirely in darkness, for the window shutters fitted well, being very truly set, like all the other work in the building. Carruthers felt the strange weakness gaining on him as he tried to find Dhyan in the darkness, in response to her cry which had followed a soft thud:

“Aunt Jane! Aunt Jane! What is it?”

He found her presently, groping his way in the dark, on her knees on the floor, feeling Aunt Jane’s damp, cold face. She had evidently fainted, Carruthers realised, as he, too, knelt down, relieved to feel a little throb at Aunt Jane’s wrist, but difficult to discern since his own hands were throbbing in response to the violent beating of his heart.

“What is it, Tom?” asked Dhyan. “My knees are all weak, and I can’t stand properly. And my heart is jumping about.”

She clung to him for support, breathing fast, and together they stood up.

"Come along, Tom!" called Oxley's voice hoarsely. "Let's have another go at the blasted door before we're too weak. Rinpoche's not much good now."

Carruthers left Dhyan and went back to the door, feeling that his legs were no longer his own; his ears were drumming, and his toes tingling and turning numb. He reached the door, panting violently, and then with the other two flung himself against it with such force as remained. Somebody slipped down, and Carruthers tripped over the gelong's senseless form. He felt about him in the darkness to find Oxley pressed against the door.

"Keep quiet—there's someone there," whispered John. Then he beat upon the door and shouted, but no answer came. In the silence that followed they heard footsteps retreating slowly down the passage.

"No go—we're done!" panted Oxley, and, clinging to the wall, worked his way round to where the window was. Picking up a low table, he drove it against the shutter three times, but the heavy leaf held, although it gaped a little so that a breath of fresh night air came in that revived him for an instant, and he smote heavily again. Then the rushing sound in his ears increased, his heart beat as though it would smash his ribs, then suddenly slowed and seemed to stop. He rocked giddily on his feet and crumpled up and sank to the floor.

Carruthers heard him fall, saw the chink of moonlight, and conceived the idea of getting Dhyan over to the window where he might prop her up against the crack. Thus she might come through, and together the two made their way towards the gleam.

"We die—I think——" gasped Dhyan, clinging to him. "Don't let go of me—Tom—will you?—whatever happens."

"Never, dearest," said Tom, as he stopped for an instant; he was practically carrying her now.

The window was only a few feet away, and yet it seemed as if heavy stones were tied to his ankles as he put forth his last ounce of strength to get there. Then, just as Oxley had done, he collapsed with the effort, feeling as though someone had tied a string round his heart and was twisting it.

"Dhyan! Dhyan!" he gasped. But Dhyan was beyond his hearing now, as he tried to reach her damp, cold face, and then lost it in a darkness that blotted out even the little splash of moonlight, a darkness that crept over his

mind as well as his eyes as he sank down into a gulf of black shadows that swirled and closed about him.

An hour before the Master died, three men stood on the col by Dhyan's watch-tower in the moonlight; the waning moon had just risen. All three were in Turki dress and on foot, which was unusual. The leader, a short, sturdily-built man, looked down the pathway before him, which, though steep, was easy compared with the ascent they had just finished. Then he looked back into the distance where, far off, he thought he could make out a faint gleam of fire, or, it might be, a light, or it might even be a star just rising on the skyline of the distant hill.

"There it is, Akbar," he said, pointing downward to the moonlit expanse of flat ground far below. "In this light you cannot see the lungma pa huts and the building itself is hidden. We will go straight on, for it is better that ye two come by night until we know if Dhyanand has all ready. The fool thinks, of course, that we serve him, and that when he has got the secret of the gold we will take payment for the arms and depart again."

The man laughed heartily, as at a good jest, and the other two echoed his laugh.

"Thank God for fools, Tarzi Beg," said Akbar, a short, bearded man of Tarzi's own village. "They provide all that honest men need. But for the present it is we who are the fools; never shall Dhyanand have met a greater fool than me, unless perchance it be Tor Bez here, until such time as his plan is completed. Let him clear the field and we can then garner the crop."

"So," said the third man, Tor Bez—a Pathan, brother to Yusuf, who, with Ahmad, had been watching the Nubra route from Leh and had not yet had time to rejoin. He grinned as he patted the rolled girdle wherein reposed an automatic pistol which had served him well on several occasions, both in his own country and elsewhere. He preferred his rifle, but, for the moment, he had abandoned that excellent weapon, to get which he had successfully killed a sentry in Kohat and escaped with his prize, despite the fact of the rifle having been chained to the man's wrist. But the heavy, triangular Pathan knife had made short work of the business, and Tor Bez had kept the chain to tie up his large dog with later. "So, and this is the gate of the old road?"

"Yes," said Tarzi. "It is very secret, and all they who dwell yonder do not know of it, not even the Feringhis. There are a few such in this place, half a

dozen, men and women, but all save one are sheep, silly sheep, who believe the blasphemous things that they talk here, even more blasphemous than their own religion which they have distorted out of what Isa, son of Miriam —God's mercy be upon him!—tried to teach among the Jews who slew him."

"And the one?" asked Akbar.

"A woman, and one whom Dhyanand thinks will be his; wherein he is wrong. I shall take her, and she shall profess the Kalima and dwell in my house. My wife is old and harsh-tongued, beside. Moreover, I would savour something new."

"And the other women?" queried Akbar, with interest.

"Thou shalt have thy pick if thou wishest, Akbar," said Tarzi, with a coarse laugh. "But thou wilt not desire them; they are ill-favoured—and are here because no man would have them to wife, and having no proper cares of woman's life their heads become even more foolish and they seek what they call mysteries. I lived among them and saw their foolishness, and laughed when they spoke of me as one of the wise ones of earth and heaven. But I was of a truth wise and talked after their fashion, foolishness from which may the Prophet—peace be upon him!—preserve me. But it was necessary; I ate with idolaters and the like for a space. But when this business is finished and the gold is ours, then will all be well. Perchance I will go by the Russian route to Mecca and become a hajji. The Russ also worship foolishness at present, but presently they will be finished, for they and the English will tear each other's throats out, and then the faithful will arise and take their proper place and cleanse the world. Meantime, we hold with the Russ; it is well to support the weaker of two enemies, that he may become strong enough to deal with him that is stronger, so that thereafter, both being weakened, one may deal with them."

The three started on down the steep path and, an hour later, were entering the great gate which stood open night and day, but at night there was no sentry. Tarzi Beg, who, as Bakhtiyan, seeker after the light, had lived there three years, knew that at this hour all would be still, the inmates all in their cells, even those who by day moved outside; some, of course, remained in meditation for days on end. As he had expected, they made their way to Dhyanand's cell without meeting anyone.

He knocked at the door and got no answer, found the door fastened, and wondered. Then suddenly he saw Dhyanand hurrying down the passage, holding a little lamp. Tarzi hailed him quietly.

“Tarzi Beg!” exclaimed Dhyanand. “This is well. You are two days before your time, and we have need of you. Many unforeseen things have happened suddenly, and I have had to act more quickly than I intended. Is all the caravan here?”

Dhyanand unlocked the door and led them in, Akbar and Tor Bez looking curiously round the strange room in which they found themselves.

“Not yet, the snow was too heavy. In two days they should be able to cross the last ridge and reach here. I came on ahead with these so as to make any arrangements that might be required. But tell me, what has gone amiss?”

Tarzi kicked off the outer shoe part of his long, leather boots and sat down.

Dhyanand explained at some length the arrival of the Englishmen and their followers, his discovery that the Master was arranging to send Dhyan away with certain gold, and his consequent and subsequent death.

“Not that the amount they might take with the girl would matter,” said Dhyanand. “But the news would certainly be spread abroad and others come to know in time, and then we could no longer use this place. For the present it will be necessary to keep it entirely secret.”

“Even so, Dhyanand,” agreed Tarzi. The two spoke in Hindustani so that the others could follow, instead of in the old tongue which, like Dhyanand, Tarzi had learnt during his stay in the City of Vision. “And what to do now? Doubtless we can fall upon these strangers easily, but that means great disturbance. They are certain to be well armed, and might give some trouble before we finished with them.”

“There is no need to arrange anything,” said Dhyanand, “except to dispose of them. I have trapped the birds myself. I rendered the two of them senseless, and presently we will go and bind them, as well as Rinpoche, whom also I trapped with them. The Sepoys they brought and the servants are all asleep, I imagine; anyway, their door is secured, and presently we can deal with them, too. Since Sityana and Dhyan were with the other two when the Master died, I left them also there; they are all senseless by now. I listened at the door, and there is no more noise. I feared once that they might break open the window, but it was strong, and presently they weakened, and I heard them fall. I am grateful for the knowledge which I was able to learn in their country.”

“It is good,” said Tarzi with admiration. Dhyanand appeared to have plenty of resource, which fact must be noted later. “And now?”

“And now—we will make sure of the other trap—the one you know of. Are these safe?”

This time Dhyanand spoke in the other language, and Tarzi nodded.

“Then let them remain here for the present. None would enter save Sita Ram, and we will find him waiting for us by the other room.”

Tarzi was thinking hard as he followed Dhyanand along the passages. Things were moving fairly quickly, and it might also be necessary for him to act somewhat sooner. However, the first thing was to dispose of these obnoxious white men. He wished there had been time for Ahmad and Yusuf to rejoin from Nubra.

They turned into a side corridor near Carruthers’ rooms, which Dhyanand pointed out to Tarzi, the location drawing an understanding grin from the Turki, and entered a small room whose door Dhyanand unlocked; the lock had evidently been oiled, for it moved very silently. The room was bare and unoccupied, and the walls were plain. Dhyanand signalled silence to Tarzi, and then moved something upon the wall, whereby a little concealed trap slipped back revealing certain levers. There was no point in concealing this particular secret which Dhyanand had discovered long ago—he knew that Tarzi also knew of it.

He drew the levers towards him and a slight rasping sound followed, succeeded by a series of heavy thuds, as though things were falling next door, a man’s cry, a dog’s sudden, sharp yelp, and then the grating sound again. After that there were faint muffled sounds which presently died away.

Dhyanand and Tarzi smiled at each other as Dhyanand slipped back the trap concealing the levers, and the two left the little room, which Dhyanand locked carefully behind him before they returned to his quarters, where Akbar and Tor Bez were waiting for them.

The four of them, taking now also Sita Ram, who had been watching the corridor beyond Carruthers’ door, went up the stairs to the Master’s rooms, where two brass-masked sentries stood silent in the passage outside the great, metal doors.

“All is still quiet, Basant?” asked Dhyanand of the first sentry.

“Nothing has moved at all,” replied the man.

“Then take Rama and open the windows.”

The two men moved away and, shortly after, the party outside the door heard the noise of the window shutters of the room inside being swung back,

and presently the two sentries returned.

"Open the flame doors now, Basant," said Ananda, and as the second sentry went away the others withdrew to the end of the passage. A moment later there was a faint, dull, roaring sound inside the rooms, and a current of hot air poured out through the lower part of the door. The noise continued for some ten minutes and then ceased, and, shortly after, Basant returned. He picked up a lamp that stood in a corner, lit it from a light obtained from a piece of tow on the end of a rod which he reached up to the oil flame burning on the cornice above the door, the only light in the long corridor, a light that burned night and day.

Then he and Dhyanand drew the heavy fastening of the great doors, swung them open and pushed the lamp into the room. The flame remained steady, and Basant pointed out this to Ananda as proof that the hot air had driven out the fumes. The room, though somewhat unpleasantly hot, was now safe, and calling to the others to follow him, Ananda entered, Basant going out for a couple of minutes and returning with an armful of ropes—strong, thin cords.

Akbar and Tor Bez, who did not know exactly what had happened, looked round them with interest at the scene revealed in the dim lamplight.

Close to the door, so that they almost tripped over it in entering, lay the body of the gelong, Rinpoche, and a little further away was Sityana, both on their backs. Further across the room, towards the window, lay Dhyan and Carruthers, close together, their hands touching. Under the window Oxley lay upon his face, his arm outstretched towards the shattered table he had used. On the opposite side, on the low bed, strangely still and calm in contrast to the huddled attitudes of the remainder, lay the Master, looking up with sunken eyes at the painted ceiling of the room.

"A good haul," remarked Tarzi, looking round.

"Are they all dead?" asked Tor Bez.

Killing he believed in, but this was something new and strange. The Pathan would have preferred to do the work with a knife; there was pleasure in thrusting and hacking into warm flesh and watching the red blood flow. This seemed a poor way to take one's pleasure.

"Not yet," said Tarzi. "Most of them will be presently, though. Thou canst sharpen thy blade, Tor Bez," he added with a grin that showed his broken teeth.

Dhyanand examined each of them in turn carefully and satisfied himself that they were all alive, but that none of them seemed likely to come to for some little while. Then he turned to Tarzi.

"It were well to deal with the men first. Will you and the others bind them?"

Tor Bez and Akbar took ropes from Basant and presently all five were at work, trussing up the senseless forms of the three men.

"There is no need to bind the women here," said Dhyanand. "Their little cage is safe enough. Now, Tarzi, thou knowest the place for the men. Will you lead the way thither? Basant will go with you, and the four of you can carry them between you. You will meet no one, for I went along the passage and secured the doors. Take the two white men first, and then send back for Rinpoche."

They picked up Carruthers and Oxley unceremoniously, and, with dragging arms and hanging heads, carried them away down the passage while Ananda, left temporarily alone, sat and contemplated the unconscious Dhyan. During that process he looked exactly what he was. Ten minutes afterwards Basant and Tor Bez returned for Rinpoche.

Still later, Tarzi and Akbar came back for Sita Ram, and looked inquiringly at the women. Dhyanand gazed round the room, settled the Master's bed a little more to his liking, went to the lacquer cabinet and took out a bottle of some scent, which he sprinkled about the floor, and then himself picked up Dhyan, signing to the others to follow him with Aunt Jane's senseless form. For the moment their own rooms would serve, and thither he went, Tarzi walking along with him.

"There is no need for your man," said Dhyanand, looking round. "You and Sita Ram can carry the old hen."

"I hurt my arm somewhat the other day," explained Tarzi, "and found it painful to carry that long white man just now. Akbar had better come, for Sita Ram is not strong enough to carry that by himself."

Tarzi was not going to follow Dhyanand without someone else handy; moreover, for reasons of his own, he wanted his men to know where the women were kept—that knowledge might be useful later.

"Their woman Choksid will be waiting perhaps," said Dhyanand. "She can look after them when they wake in an hour or two; they will be feeble and ill at first. Later I will talk with them myself. In the meantime we will

take away any weapons with which they might hurt themselves or anyone else. That is the door; it should be open."

Open it was, and they entered, the noise of their coming awakening Choksid, who was sleeping quietly in a corner, waiting for her mistresses to return. She gave a gasp at the sight of Dhyan huddled like a sack in Swami Ananda's arms. The Brahmin dumped his burden unceremoniously upon the floor and, seizing Choksid, held his hand over her mouth. There was no necessity for unseemly noise, and her scream was muffled at once.

Choksid struggled violently, but she was small and old, and Ananda held her without any trouble. He stooped down and pulled the gold-hilted dagger from Dhyan's girdle and pricked Choksid under the breast. Choksid took the hint and stayed still.

"Thy mistresses will require a little attention when presently they wake. Look to them, then. Later I will return and talk with them and with thee. As thou knowest, there is no one in this part of the building, but I do not wish noise. If there is any screaming, I will come sooner and kill thee—but not too quickly—and I will also kill Sityana. Tell her that when she wakes, and be sure to tell Dhyan also, so that they may not waste their strength; they will want it later, and so wilt thou. I have had all the windows closed from the outside, so there is no need to try to open them. The door I shall close from the outside and take the inner key. If, when I return, I find anything piled against the door so that I have to force it, I shall be angry. Lastly, tell thy mistress, Dhyan, that she need not worry about the white men or their servants; I have disposed of them all, including the dog."

Dhyanand let Choksid go, and she reeled away from him, gasping. He had a hug like a bear, for he was tall and most powerfully built. To Choksid he looked at this moment exactly like the God of Hell, whose picture she had seen so often in her own country. She said nothing; there was nothing to say at the moment.

Dhyanand and Sita Ram ransacked the rooms for anything that might be used as a weapon; there was nothing much, except Choksid's kitchen implements, and those they took with them.

"Dawn will be here in about two hours," said Dhyanand to Tarzi, as they left the women's rooms, locking and barring the door behind them. "Meantime, doubtless you are ready for food; you have travelled far and are probably tired and would sleep a while. It were best that you, and certainly your two men, keep out of sight for the present. Presently the brethren will assemble for the sunrise ceremony, which I shall conduct. I shall say that the

Master is ill, and that we will spend to-day in silence and seclusion, and that none will leave their cells after they have finished the morning ceremony until to-morrow evening, when we will hold the initiation ceremony for the new brethren and sisters." Dhyanand grinned a little. "They may require a little persuasion when they learn what the ceremony is; but, as you know, they are, all of them, sheep, or mostly so."

Two hours later, as the first rays of the still hidden sun were throwing a radiance into the sky above the mountains, Swami Ananda, as Dhyanand had once more become, stood in his priestly robes, an imposing figure, watching the brethren gathering in the still darkened temple where, presently, the first rays of the sun would pass through the high window and fall on the shrine of the Mother of Vision.

CHAPTER XVII KRISHNA RAO

The first gleam of dawn was paling the sky through the open window when Carruthers slowly opened his eyes to returning consciousness, with a dull, heavy head and a sensation of sickness. He lay still for a few minutes, endeavouring to remember where he was and what had happened. As his head grew a little clearer, he tried to sit up and found that he could not; then realised that his hands were fastened in some way to something behind him.

Then memory returned, some recollection of that last struggle, and he tried to call to Dhyan and to the others with a dry throat and a tongue which seemed three sizes too large. No answer, however, came in response to his cries, and he lay still again, slowly gathering strength. He discovered that his legs also were roped together, but presently he realised that he was free to roll to either side, and that he could wriggle backwards, whereby the strain on his hands was released, so that presently, with considerable difficulty, he was able to sit up, and found that his hands were secured by a short rope to a ring at the base of the wall.

Near him lay Oxley, fastened in the same fashion, while opposite, upon his back, breathing stertorously, lay Rinpoche, also with bound arms and legs. The room they were in was unfamiliar to him; it was a small, bare room, with two doors and one window, which stood open. The larger door was heavily barred, but the fastenings on the smaller one were not secured. Of the two women there was no sign to be seen. Close to the wall stood a bowl of water, which presently Carruthers, by straining hard at the cords, was just able to reach, and, lying on his face, he plunged his head into it to drink dog fashion. His tongue seemed to shrink a little and his dry throat to get less sore and painful after a few mouthfuls of the water. He drank again and the sickness began to pass off, so that shortly he was able to wriggle himself up and sit with his back propped against the wall and think things over for a while. It was no use making a noise, that was clear. They were prisoners—fairly trapped—and shouting would be merely waste of breath and strength. He wondered what had happened to Makhmud and the other men. Doubtless, they also had been caught—probably smoked, or gassed, or whatever had been done to himself and the others.

Presently Oxley began to move restlessly, his eyes opened, and, in the growing light, Carruthers could see him struggling to sit up.

“Take it gently, John—no good struggling. We’re all tied up. Lie still a bit and then wriggle over this way; there’s some water here. I think you can reach it.”

It took Oxley, however, some time to come round, and more time to writhe his way to the bowl, which at first he could not reach until Carruthers managed to push it towards him with his feet. The people who had tied them up had arranged that each was out of reach of his companions; men have gnawed through each other’s bonds before now.

“Five-love to Ananda in the second set, having won the first,” said Carruthers, with a somewhat sickly grin. “I wonder what his next move will be, and what exactly he wants? Rinpoche is for it, too, anyway, so he’s obviously on our side. I wonder if they got the men as well? They’re the only hope.”

Oxley, somewhat recovered now, was pantingly trying to twist himself round so as to bite at the cords securing him to the wall, but, writhe as he might, he could not quite get his teeth down to the short ropes. He was certain that if only he could do that he would be able, in time, to bite through them and so reach Carruthers, who might be able to free his wrists for him with his teeth. But his efforts only made him realise that he was very weak still, and, though strength was coming back, neither heart nor lungs had yet properly recovered.

Rinpoche took still longer to come to; it must have been a good hour later that the gelong began slowly to recover consciousness, and two hours before he came round sufficiently to talk much. He had no great light to throw on the situation; doubtless the Swami intended some evil to them, but what it might be, he could not say. They would know presently, though, because the room they were in was in the same passage as Ananda’s, and the little door on their right led through a short passage in the thickness of the wall to the Swami’s cell. Thereafter Rinpoche philosophically closed his eyes and dozed again until more of his strength should come back.

They learnt a little more, later in the morning, when they heard footsteps outside the small door and bolts being drawn. The door opened and Ananda appeared, followed by Sita Ram, in whom Carruthers recognised the man that the Airedale had assaulted, and wished that Tosh were here now. Then he wondered what had happened to Tosh, and promised himself that if ever he got loose he would set the dog on Ananda before he blew the oily gentleman’s brains out or let Makhmud cut his throat.

“Good-morning, gentlemen,” remarked Ananda, looking round benignly and speaking in well-nigh perfect English. “I see you have recovered sufficiently to sit up, for which I am glad. You will be able to understand better what I have to say. Rinpoche appears a little somnolent, though, but as he does not know English, that does not matter; I can explain later to him. However, he had better be awake for the present.” He walked over to the gelong and flung the remains of the bowl of water over the old man’s shaven head and struck him twice across the face. “That’s better; he can listen now, even if he doesn’t understand.”

The Swami sat down quietly in the middle of the room, facing the other three, on a rug that Sita Ram spread for him.

“Englishmen have a most remarkable way of obtruding themselves where they are not wanted, and you two seem to be no exception,” continued Ananda blandly. “However, this is the last time you particular ones will intrude anywhere.”

“What do you propose to do about it—you foul——?”

Carruthers used a Hindi word of rather unpleasant import, which he hoped would sting Ananda somewhat. It referred to the dealings between the class of being to which he obviously belonged and certain unfortunate Hindu widows who are not allowed to remarry. The Swami, however, took it smilingly.

“Just that,” he remarked. “There will be plenty of widows in India before many years—what you in your poisonous conceit describe as white women—they will not, as a rule, be killed when the rest of you are dealt with, provided they have reasonable looks. That, however, is by the way. I take it your politely worded question refers to yourselves. But first you would doubtless like to know that your men are safe. They fell some short way through the sliding floor of your rooms, but should not be much damaged, and are now safely imprisoned in the vaults below. Later my good friend Tarzi and his men will do the necessary; I understand they prefer to work with a knife; clumsy and messy, I think, but that is a matter of personal taste. You, Oxley, will join your men later in the day and be dealt with in the same manner. Later on we will arrange to give you a funeral in the glacier, along with the body of the late lamented Master, which is the custom here. A passage leads from the vaults to the glacier down which you will be carried, passing on your way the entry to the place where the treasure is kept, of which the late Master told you. It is old, that treasure, and of great extent, and will be most useful to us. There are yet certain details I want to know

which I have not had the opportunity of learning, and Rinpoche here will be able to enlighten me shortly, with Basant's aid.

"Basant, a follower of mine, is really an artist in the methods of eliciting information from people who are, for any reason, slow of speech, and has that rare gift of knowing instinctively how far to go without, in the first place, rendering the subject unconscious, or, secondly, damaging him sufficiently to cause death before one has elicited all one wants. An admirable man! He is making his preparations now, and, later in the day, we will arrange for Rinpoche's interrogation. When our gelong friend has enlightened me on the secrets I still require, I will send him to join Oxley and Co. in the ice, which really makes a most imposing cemetery.

"As regards you, Carruthers, your future will not be quite understandable unless you realise what I am doing here, so I had better explain that a little. I will make it as brief as I can. I heard about your coming, and it occurred to me that probably you might suspect something. From your conversations, which I and my friends, by various means, have been able to listen to, I realised that you must at some time have been in touch with the police, since you appear to have heard my name, Tilok Nath. There is no need, therefore, to enlighten you on that part.

"For the rest, you, I am sure, will realise what an excellent centre this place will make for an intensive campaign to remove all foreign elements from India. We have a back door towards the areas where the Soviet system flourishes, an avenue whereby to get in such arms and literature as we require. The first consignment is already on the way, thanks to Tarzi's careful arrangements. The large quantity of gold here gives me the sinews of war, which I need. The store seems to be almost uncountable, and I shall no longer have to arrange for the rather primitive political dacoities we have been forced to in the past to obtain money in India.

"The secluded position of the place will make it also a most useful training establishment, where our members from India can study without disturbance, and this is important. It is a mistake to think that men can achieve ends worth having if they are purely material. Man, of himself, can do little. Religious, or rather spiritual, instruction is of the first importance. Once I have weeded out the useless folk here, I shall establish the real old worship of the powers who do control the world, the rites which elsewhere have had to be carried on in secret, thanks to you and your like and to the multitudes of Muhammedans and Hindus who are obsessed with squeamish ideas of what they call pity, mercy, clean morality, and suchlike childish terms.

"The first ceremony will take place shortly, and I am reserving you for that, Carruthers; you will make an offering that should be entirely acceptable to the real power whose image will take the place of this etherealised and senseless conception which Rinpoche and his like call the Mother of Vision. I think, possibly, that in carrying out this ceremony I shall only be doing something that was done here before, because, revolutionary as it may seem to your ideas of science, I think these people are right with regard to the age of this place. It was undoubtedly here before the ice ages. The rise and fall of races, birth, growth, and death of worlds and universes, is quite in accordance with the teaching of our sacred books, which you so often insult by puerile criticism. And the gold that was accumulated in those long-dead ages will serve now to restore India to its proper life, where there will be no parrot talk of democracy, but where the priest of my cult will take his proper place as ruler, answerable to none save the hidden power he serves, free to give life or death as and when he chooses.

"As possibly you know, Carruthers, I and my like hold firmly the essential belief in duality of all things. The Ceremonies must show forth both sides of physical life. I am fortunate, therefore, in having Dhyan here, who is beautiful enough to lend a great deal to the opening ceremony. She represents life, as you will represent death. I will enact the part of the power who controls both. She will require a certain amount of preliminary instruction, and that I myself will give her, beginning this evening. She will be a little difficult, possibly; women of her type are at first, until one breaks them in, but thereafter I have confidence in her abilities for the future. She will remain an attendant in the shrine for some time, I hope, and herself learn to be an instructress to other women who come later.

"I must now go and visit the ladies and inquire after their health. Is there anything I can do further for you before I go?"

"No, there is nothing further, you—— ."

Carruthers thanked his youthful years and gift of languages for a certain knowledge of Indian epithets. This last particular one stung; he had spoken in Hindustani on purpose, and Ananda lost something of his bland manner as he smote the speaker across the mouth. He recovered his pleasant smile, however, when he saw the blood trickling from the cut lips, which, nevertheless, were still able to accord him the words of dismissal proper to the most menial of servants. In the circumstances there was not much for Carruthers to say, but, feeble as he still was and helpless as he felt, it gave him a certain pleasure to be able to insult the man opposite. He would

shortly be dead, but possibly he might get a chance of leaving his mark on Ananda's heavy, sensual face before it was over.

"It's no good losing one's temper," remarked Tom, after Dhyanand and Sita Ram had gone, the latter grinning evilly as he went, and making significant gestures at Rinpoche, whom he seemed to dislike. "The swine's got the whip-hand now, and unless we can do something soon we're for it. It's Dhyan worries me most—the thought of her and that——"

He stopped and spat out a mouthful of blood, for his bruised lips were bleeding rather freely where they had been cut on his teeth.

Oxley also, who had strong racial ideas about white women and things like Ananda, was extremely anxious about Dhyan's fate as he strained to reach at the cords. Presently he gave that up and took to trying to fray those about his hands against a slight projection in the stonework behind him, and, after a long hour's work, was rejoiced to discover that he had practically cut through one strand of the rope. There were five strands in it, and, provided he did not get cramp, by nightfall he might free his hands, and thereafter all would be easy. At least he would guarantee to kill Dhyanand with his bare hands and his teeth; he was sure of that. His horizon, at present, was limited to the ecstasy he would feel if only he could make them meet in Dhyanand's throat.

He had to stop work presently when a brass-masked guard—presumably Basant, of whom the Swami had spoken—brought in a mess of food on two earthenware platters, which he put on the floor near the prisoners and left again silently. They came to the conclusion that it might be risked; probably Ananda had no desire to poison them; he seemed to have more objectionable fates in store for them.

Ananda had, meantime, paid his promised visit to Dhyan and Sityana. He had been obliged to force the door, and was consequently annoyed, and had flogged Choksid with a whip borrowed from Tarzi, who had helped him with the door, but who, for some reason, had not entered the room with him and Sita Ram.

Sityana, coming to the rescue, had had to be knocked down, and, hitting her head against a low table, had taken no further part in the proceedings. Dhyan, however, had been a real danger, for the girl had provided herself with a crude dagger, apparently made out of a piece of sheep's leg-bone found in the kitchen, which she had somehow pointed, either with her teeth or by rubbing it on a stone. She had meant business, as the jagged tear in Dhyanand's shoulder indicated. Fortunately he had been able to seize her in

time, before she could strike again, and Sita Ram came to his assistance. The two of them bound her to the bed and then tied up the hands of the other two women. After that Dhyanand relieved his feelings by finishing his flogging of Choksid, explaining to Dhyan that she was too nice looking to be treated in the same way until he'd done with her. When her looks had gone, like Sityana's or Choksid's, if, indeed, Choksid had ever had any, she might come to it.

"I shall begin your education to-night," he remarked presently to Dhyan, when he had flung Choksid into a corner. "You will have a lot to learn to be in time for the ceremony, and, since you are so obstinate, I shall have to give you medicine. You may as well take it quietly, because it will hurt you a lot if I have to feed it forcibly, which I shall do. You will not be obstinate after that; it is the secret drug of the powers I worship for their women servants, and after it you will be more ready to learn, and there should be no more trouble. For the present you had better stop tied up. Later, if you behave, I'll think about releasing you. This evening I will arrange for your friend, Carruthers, to be present; we can prop him in a corner where he can see comfortably, and if you don't do what you're told, Basant will practise his persuasions on Carruthers until you do."

With that he left the women, and Dhyan, sick with fear, heard him barring the door again, and then heard his and Sita Ram's footsteps receding down the passage. So long as she could keep her sense she might have a slight chance, and she could fight, but if he drugged her . . . And then evidently Tom was to be used too; they would torture him to make her comply. Dhyan fought at her bonds, which, as a matter of fact, had not been over well tied, so that eventually she managed to free herself, rearranged her dishevelled clothing, and released the other two. Then she looked round hopelessly; the windows were firmly barred, and there was nothing left with which to make any form of weapon, however crude. Dhyan began to despair as she and Sityana did their best to dress the great weals on Choksid's back and shoulders.

Late in the afternoon Dhyanand returned to visit the other prisoners, whom he found still in the same position as when he had left them. Oxley kept himself propped well against the wall to conceal his hands; there were now only two strands left in the cord about his wrists, but he was getting very tired, and his shoulders ached cruelly with the continued strain. There were times when the pain had stopped him working, and, for the moment, he was glad of the Swami's reappearance, which put a forcible stop upon his

labours and would give him a little rest—rest that he dared not take so long as he had a chance of working.

"I hope you have recovered now after your rest and your meal, which doubtless you found welcome." Dhyanand smiled down upon them. "I advise a little sleep for you, Carruthers, at the moment. You will have to be awake later in the evening, when Dhyan is coming to have her first lesson in her new rôle, and you would like to be present. She has been a little obstinate, I regret to say, and I shall have to give her a quieting draught. I trust she will be reasonable, but, should she not, I'm afraid I shall have to call on Basant to try a few little experiments on you; that is often a way of bringing women to their senses if they happen to be fond of a man. I gather that you and Dhyan are mutually affected by the peculiar sentimentality which your race describes as love, so probably the work will be easy, and I hope Basant will not have to do much; I would prefer to offer you to the Mother more or less unblemished."

Dhyanand smiled very evilly at the last words and at the memory of his interview with the women. He wished he had also flogged Aunt Jane and taken much more time over the business. Flogging people, especially women, gave him a great feeling of exhilaration that whetted passions still further.

"I see you have nothing to say; you are evidently the strong, silent man that your female writers delight in. Possibly you will be less silent later with Basant. And now I must break up this little party of friends. Sita Ram and Rama will take Rinpoche to my room, and we will have a little preliminary catechism. Basant is getting his tools ready and should be here almost immediately."

Ananda called through the passage, and two guards in the brass masks arrived, whom he addressed, the taller as Sita Ram and the shorter as Rama. He indicated the gelong, and the two men unfastened the rope which bound him to the wall and then dragged him by the feet through the passage, his head bumping on the floor. A little later the shorter man returned. The door swung to behind him, and Ananda, who had been making a few more polished remarks to Carruthers on the subject of human sacrifices and the methods and ritual adopted, turned to Rama, telling him to free Oxley from the pillar and drag him into the next room and then, with Sita Ram, to take him along to where the men were. The Swami stepped towards the door to open it again, but, to his surprise, Rama stepped before him and slammed the fastening into place, at the same moment tearing his brass mask from his

face. Oxley heard Carruthers give a gasp of surprise and then saw him openly fighting with his bonds.

"What are you doing, Rama?" asked Ananda angrily. "Open that door and do as I told you."

"Not yet, Swami—or, rather, Tilok Nath, sometimes called Dhyanand. That door does not open until you are dead. Also my name is not Rama, but Krishna Rao, whom you may remember before I got these scars."

The Brahman stepped back quickly, fumbling at his waist, but Krishna had leapt upon him, binding the man's arms to his sides with his right arm and simultaneously striking him twice low down with the flat of his left hand, a dragging blow. The blow was followed by the sound of ripping cloth, as it had been in Krishna's cell at practice, but this time there was something else—the scream of a man in agony, as Ananda tried to seize Krishna's hand. But the Mahratta was too quick for him. With his right hand Krishna snatched the arm with which the Swami had tried to draw a small pistol, striking across the back of the hand with the waghnuk, ripping the tendons so that the pistol fell from the powerless fingers on to the floor. Krishna put his foot on it and then struck the Swami with both hands, clenched right fist in the man's face and sweeping tear from the eyes down with his claw-garnished left. Ananda swayed for a moment, screaming and clutching at his waist, where the blood oozed from the ripped garments. He screamed again for help to his men next door, and then crumpled slowly to the floor in agony.

There was a rush of feet and a hammering against the door as Oxley, putting out all his strength, burst the last two strands of the rope, and, freeing his hands, with numbed fingers set to undo the rope about his ankles. There seemed to be a chance now; possibly this little man who was making an artistic mess of Dhyanand might be a friend. Krishna, after a glance to see if the door were safe still, was bending over Dhyanand, letting drop occasional words whenever it seemed that Dhyanand could hear him. He evidently had something important to say, and he said it incisively. Carruthers had stopped his efforts to get free and was listening. Oxley, praying that the door would hold, had just got his ankles free and with rather powerless legs was getting to his feet. Krishna turned an instant to look and kicked over the pistol, saying in perfect English to Carruthers:

"Just in time, Major; keep the ring if anyone gets in before I've done this business."

Carruthers was still trying to remember where he had seen the man before, as Oxley undid the knots about his wrists. Then, as his feet were being freed, he remembered Krishna Rao, whom he had known first in India and then in the war, a most excellent little fellow with very sporting instincts. But what on earth was he doing here?

There was silence at the door now, and then the sound of someone dragging something heavy. This was followed by renewed hammering. Krishna looked back over his shoulder again at the rather fragile fastening. Carruthers stood in front of it with the little automatic pistol. Dhyanand tried to get up and screamed again. Thereupon Krishna, who had finished what he had to say, forced him down, pushed his chin back, and struck just once, as neatly as any panther, far more neatly than a tiger could have done, struck across the big bull-throat, ripping artery and vein together. Dhyanand gasped, trembled, and lay still. Krishna wiped hand and dagger on the late Swami's clothing and straightened up.

The banging on the door recommenced, and, from the noise, there were now several people there. The door still held, but it might go at any moment, and there was only the pistol and the waghnuk between the three of them, and Krishna knew that Tarzi's men had all got pistols, at least, and that they might have brought other arms as well.

CHAPTER XVIII MAKHMUD

On the previous night Makhmud had closed the door after Rinpoche had come to fetch his masters to visit the head of the monastery—the Skushok, as Makhmud always called him; he presumed that that was what he must be, since all the big monasteries Makhmud knew were ruled over by Skushoks. Then he had retired to sleep; he was a light sleeper, and, moreover, there was the dog, Tosh, who would certainly wake him when the sahibs returned.

Tosh did wake him, growling quietly, some time during the night. Makhmud sat up and turned up the lamp, thinking that the Airedale had heard Carruthers and Oxley at the door. Then he realised that he could hear no voices, and, wondering what had disturbed the dog, stood up. Perhaps there were thieves outside; Carruthers had warned the men to be careful. But as he stood up something grated under his feet, and the floor trembled. Spin Gul sat up quickly in bed and looked round, and that was the last thing Makhmud saw. Next moment the floor gave under his feet, the lamp fell over and went out, and Makhmud shot downwards into darkness. He landed more or less on his feet on a hard floor and then toppled over. All round him came a rain of heavy articles, boxes and bales and men, that hit the floor with thuds of varying degree, and sometimes with grunts and yells; once with a sharp yelp. The last must obviously be Tosh, thought Makhmud, as he felt himself over and moved his arms and legs to be sure that no bones were broken, that the various pains were due to nothing worse than bruises. Then, over his head, he heard the grating sounds once more and ducked instinctively, waiting for the roof to come down on him. It was certainly a bad earthquake.

However, nothing happened; there was a brief silence, and then various groans and startled exclamations mingled with shrill barks from Tosh, and presently something moved up to him in the darkness, a tremulous, wet, warm muzzle was thrust into his hand, and he smelt the strong smell of the big dog as it crept closer to him, still trembling with excitement. Makhmud called to the others by name, and the groaning on his left ceased as Nawab stopped protesting that he was dead, and sat up at the sound of the Pathan's voice.

"Is that you, Makhmud? What place of devils is this?"

"I know not," replied Makhmud. "But we are still alive. Are you hurt?"

“I have been hit everywhere, brother, but I do not think any bones are broken.”

A torrent of Ladakhi exclamations in the far corner stopped as Aziz called over to know who was there. Then the voice went on to explain that he was feeling Spin Gul, who seemed to be senseless, but breathing.

Remained, therefore, Ghulam Kadir, and Makhmud presently located him also, a rather twisted heap with a heavy yakhdan lying across his chest, and, judging by the feel, his right foot was facing exactly the opposite way to which a foot should normally point; evidently he was somewhat badly hurt.

“Maybe it is an earthquake,” remarked Makhmud, “but how could it be that since nothing else has fallen save this room? There was no other noise, either, except here.”

“There was a noise of ten thousand devils when I woke,” grumbled Nawab. Then suddenly a splash of yellow light illuminated his unshaven face, for he had just managed to find a box of matches in his pocket. A moment later he had recovered a hurricane lamp from the débris, and, though its globe was broken and the whole thing was streaming with oil, he presently got it alight and held it up.

“That was no earthquake, O Makhmud!” he remarked, pointing up at the roof, which was in place again. “See, you, it is a trap; they loosened something and the floor fell down like the lid of a box, and thereafter they shut it again. May they roast in hell with their lecherous women and their father, the devil!”

“Look you to Ghulam Kadir while I see to Spin Gul,” said Makhmud, after gazing up at the ceiling in the dim lamplight. “You are right, though; there is something toward. See you those iron bars and hinges?”

He walked over to Spin Gul and found his cousin just opening his eyes vacantly. Makhmud felt over his head and, though there were various cuts, the bone seemed all good, and there was clearly no serious damage.

“Art all right, O Spin Gul?” he asked anxiously. “Move thy hands and feet.”

Spin Gul moved them, one by one, then all together. Then he sat up slowly, held his head, and look around.

“It is good,” said Makhmud. “There is work to do. We are caught in a trap—like the Indians catch elephants. Go find the guns quickly.”

He went back to the other end of the room, where Aziz and Nawab were bending over Ghulam Kadir. They had pulled the yakhdan off him and straightened out his leg.

"It is bad," said Aziz. "The bones are broken. Moreover, he is senseless, and there is blood on his head."

"Presently we will tie him up. For the moment leave him, and go get out all the guns and put them together. Take you each a shot-gun and cartridges and give the rifles to me and Spin Gul. Also, Nawab, see if there is another lamp which may burn; it is dark as the pit. I will take this lamp and see what may be here. Perchance there is a door."

Makhmud explored round the smooth walls. At the further end was what looked like a stone door, upon which he could make no impression. At last, mostly hidden by some flour-sacks which had fallen in front of it, he came upon a low, metal door, which he tried but found securely fastened. He examined it carefully, however, and, by the rivets upon it, came to the conclusion that it was fastened outside by rods at top and bottom, in much the same way as the other metal doors he had seen here in this strange building. He thought over it and decided that, even if all four of them were to work, it would not be possible to force it with the two pick-axes used as crow-bars.

He left the door and explored all round again, and was relieved to find no holes anywhere through which they might be shot.

The others had extricated the guns by now, undamaged, thanks to having been in their cases. Makhmud, therefore, set to work in the chaos to look for a certain, small yakhdan which contained tools. Makhmud was a handy man, and there was nothing he could not do with tools, albeit the work, on occasion, was somewhat rough and ready. He argued that whoever had contrived this business must know that they had arms, and that they were not all likely to be killed in the fall, which was only some eight or nine feet. Probably, therefore, the plan was to starve them out presently, unless, of course, they wanted to kill them quickly. They might run in oil and light it, but that, of course, would involve destroying everything else, and Makhmud's somewhat Scotch temperament could not conceive anyone doing anything so senseless as that, the more so as there was no question of a blood feud or of personal hatred. Somebody wanted either to rob them or to get rid of them, and in those circumstances nobody would waste the beautiful rifles and guns and other treasure the sahibs had and which were in his keeping.

He concluded, therefore, that he had every chance of being able to work in peace for the next few hours, and when he had found his beloved toolbox he opened another yakhdan and, taking out the camp medicine-chest, dressed Kadir's leg as well as he could. For the Ladakhi's head he could, of course, do nothing, except bandage the external cuts, which seemed only slight, though the man was still unconscious.

Thereafter, setting Nawab to listen at the door and to report the least sound outside in case anyone should come to the door, he detailed Spin Gul to watch the roof above and give warning of any noise heard or light seen, and then got out his tools.

He drilled steadily for over three hours; slow work, for the metal was tough, and, since he had but few drills, he dared not let any of the others help him—a metal drill smashes so easily in unpractised hands. At last, however, when, with cramped hands and shoulders, he stopped for a rest, he was able to contemplate with satisfaction eight fair-sized holes at what he considered the vital points of the door, holes big enough to admit a hacksaw blade. When the eight holes were joined in pairs of fours by saw-cuts and the squares of metal they enclosed pushed out, he figured that the strength of the door would be gone. It took several hours to do that, and it was nearing midday—Nawab's watch was still going all right—before the last saw-cut was finished and the square pieces of metal could be driven outward. Thereafter the door sagged, held only in place by the now loose-hanging bolts on the outside.

Makhmud marshalled his forces, and, with some difficulty, they forced the door open sufficiently to allow Nawab, the smallest and thinnest, to wriggle through, and, from the farther side, he was able to file away the loop of the padlock. The rest was easy, and presently Makhmud stood in a narrow, stone-walled passage which sloped upwards to his left. Taking Spin Gul with him, he explored it cautiously with the lantern. There seemed to be no side-passages or doors, but at last they heard faint noises in front, as though people were talking. Makhmud turned the light down to its lowest glimmer, and left it with Spin Gul, himself moving cautiously ahead to where, in the darkness, he could make out a pin-point or two of light. Groping his way forward, he presently came up against the flat, cold surface of another metal door, on whose other side he could now hear voices quite distinctly. He could, moreover, see a little through three holes in the metal, small holes which, however, if he got his eye close enough to them, gave a view of most of the room beyond the door.

None of the men sitting in there were known to him, although, at first, he thought one who looked like a Pathan was Yusuf, whom he had met in Leh. The Turkis were unfamiliar, but he thought he had seen the big man who looked like a Hindu somewhere in the place. Presently they went out, and, as the room now seemed deserted, Makhmud took the opportunity to see if the door could be opened, but found that it was strongly secured on the other side. After a while the big man came back again with another like himself; Makhmud thought it was the monk whom the dog had bitten when he fell into the courtyard, but he could not be sure of that. Then they went through a door on the opposite side of the room, and, presently, he could hear them talking to someone in what, presumably, was another room beyond, and it seemed to Makhmud that the indistinctly heard words sounded like English. When, however, they came back a little later, Makhmud had no doubts, for the two talked in Hindi, and he could follow it sufficiently to understand that the sahibs must be prisoners in the room beyond, and that the two memsahibs—the white women whom the sahibs had found here—seemed also to be prisoners somewhere else. He further gathered that the big man proposed to bring one of the women to this room that same evening. If so, that might give him an opportunity. Then the two went out again, and he heard the outer door being fastened.

He left Spin Gul to watch, and, going back himself, got a mouthful of food and considered whether he might risk attacking the door into the room he had seen. Finally he dismissed that project as too risky for the moment; later he might get a chance; certainly if, as he hoped might be the case, the room was unoccupied at night. For the present they would be ready, watching the door, and if anyone opened it they would overpower them and then be able to reach the sahibs. The passage was about a hundred and fifty feet long, and, since there were no side entrances, no one could get behind them. For safety's sake, he had Ghulam Kadir moved out of the vault into the passage, where he could not be reached if anyone came and opened a trap-door in the floor, and told Aziz Muhammed to stay with him. Nawab he set there, too, with a shot-gun, in case the roof of the vault opened from above. Then he rejoined Spin Gul, and they took it in turns to watch.

It was very late in the evening when the big man came back into the room beyond the metal door, and with him two men in the strange clothes worn by the guards. All three presently disappeared into the next room, and Makhmud, who was now watching, heard the sound of voices and again was certain that they talked English. He could not talk it himself, of course, but he knew perfectly well when he heard it spoken. Then there was the sound of something heavy being dragged along, and the two brass-masked men

reappeared, pulling the trussed-up body of Rinpoche. Makhmud recognised the old gelong, whom at first he thought dead until they let go his feet and Makhmud could see him moving his head. One of the men went back and Makhmud heard the door at the further end close. Then the other door of the room opened and a strange man came in, bearing some metal instruments which he showed to the old gelong with a diabolical leer. He stepped outside and returned again in a moment with a small brazier of glowing charcoal, which he set down in a corner.

The brass-masked man said something to him, at which both of them laughed, and then the strange man came over towards the door where Makhmud stood. Makhmud touched Spin Gul to warn him—they had worked their plan out before—and stepped back a little as he heard the man undoing the fastenings. The next instant the door swung open and Makhmud flung himself out on to the man, pinioning his arms to his sides. A second later Spin Gul drove the butt of his rifle against the man's temple, and Makhmud stepped clear of the limp body and rushed the other man in the mask, who, taken by surprise, had stood still a minute ere he looked round for the heavy sword which he had laid down on entering the room. But Makhmud was now between him and it, and there was no mistaking the look in the Pathan's face as he leapt forward, Spin Gul close behind him with his finger on the trigger of his rifle in case of trouble, although they did not want to shoot until forced to, for fear of attracting attention too soon.

Sita Ram did the only thing possible—he sprang back into the passage leading to the room next door, only to find the door barred and Dhyanand screaming on the other side. He beat frantically for an instant against the metal and then, before he could turn, was in a heap on the floor with Makhmud's wiry fingers twisted round his throat. Sita Ram struggled gamely, but Makhmud was sitting across him, offering no hold, and his thumbs seemed to be piercing into Sita Ram's throat. Sita Ram banged his feet violently against the metal of the door until he began to lose consciousness, and Makhmud dragged him backwards out of the passage, where Spin Gul stood, covering the door in case anyone should come to the rescue.

"Hit—O Spin Gul!" grunted Makhmud. "Hit—just behind the eye!"

Spin Gul slipped his safety-catch, crashed the brass heel of his rifle-butt on to the temple that Makhmud obligingly turned over for him, and swung his weapon up again, pushing forward the safety-catch as he did so.

Makhmud loosed his grip, dashed across the room to swing the outer door fastening into place, caught up his rifle from Nawab, who had come up the passage at the noise, pointed to the gelong, telling Nawab to cut him free, and then entered the passage and beat violently on the door. He did not want to speak yet, until he knew who was on the farther side. They might escape by some other entrance, taking the sahibs with them, if they had not already killed them.

Then he heard voices, and someone came to the door and spoke in the strange language. Makhmud looked round in doubt; then bethought him of Rinpoche, and beckoned the old man to join him, making signs that he should speak.

"What is it?" asked the gelong.

"Rama speaking," came the answer.

It was an *impasse*. Makhmud felt certain that the moment the people inside realised that he was here, they would not open. On the farther side Carruthers stood at the door with Krishna and Oxley behind him, determined that if the door was forced they would fall on the men as they came in and try to overpower them by surprise. Oxley had possessed himself of the two platters, intending to smash them in the first man's face, and Krishna had his waghnuk cocked ready.

There was silence and whispering on both sides. Then, suddenly, there was a rush from the passage, loud barking and a scuffle as a dog scratched madly at the door, barking, not a war bark, but a greeting. It was a give-away, thought Makhmud, as he pulled the dog back and abused him heartily in guttural Pashtu, Tosh wagging his tail with pleasure at having got free from Aziz, and now found his master, who, he knew, was on the other side of that door—he could smell him.

Carruthers knew that bark, and he was certain that the men must have got free, for nothing in the world could sound like Makhmud's endearing Pashtu abuse. He swung the door open and came up against the point of a rifle, with Makhmud's finger crooked round the trigger, while, over Makhmud's shoulder, Spin Gul's muzzle wavered a fraction of a second and came to rest on his face. Somewhere in the background a wildly excited Airedale struggled with Nawab, who was trying to restrain him.

The Pathans lowered their rifles in surprise; they had expected a hostile reception on the farther side of the door and to discover the sahibs trussed up in the same way as Rinpoche had been. Yet here they were, free, in company

with a strange, dark man, whose clothes were spattered with blood. For a moment Makhmud had a dreadful doubt that he and Spin Gul might have attacked the wrong men—but that could hardly be; there had been no mistaking Basant's intentions, Basant with his implements and his very evil leer at Rinpoche.

Then they entered the room and saw the body of Dhyanand on the floor and the cut ropes, and thereafter began to understand. Makhmud hurriedly explained to Carruthers what had happened and where the two Ladakhis were, and then, leaving their rifles, he and Spin Gul hurried back to bring up Ghulam Kadir. One never knew whether some of the evilly disposed might not reopen the swinging floor through which they had been precipitated and start some new devilment. For the moment it was better to keep all together.

Carruthers' first thought, now that he was free and armed again, was for the women, whom Krishna said were in their rooms. They had better hurry along there and make sure of their safety. And then, as they tried to open the door, they realised that there were other enemies still at large.

"That must be Tarzi's work," said Krishna, as he helped the others in their unavailing efforts to force the door, which was securely barred on the outside. "He has two other men with him as well."

"Are any of the other people in the place in this scheme?" asked Carruthers, as he stopped his efforts.

Makhmud, who had returned with Spin Gul carrying the badly hurt Ghulam Kadir, who was now conscious, had disappeared once more down the passage in search of his tools, with which he hoped to break open this door, as he had done the small one of the vault.

"I don't think there can be," said Krishna. "I did not know much of Ananda's plot until after the Master died. I have been trying to find out what he was working for, talking continuously of my hate for all Europeans, but he told me no secrets till just towards the end, after you had been locked in the room with the Master. I saw then that the only thing to do was to let it go on until I could get Tilok Nath by myself, with the others out of the way. Also, my first business was with him; we had a private matter to settle, a debt which has now been paid. Of the people here, over a hundred are Ladakhis or Thibetans, monks and some nuns, and they would not be in it. They live largely in seclusion, and, I think, really believe that they are attaining great merit in meditation and study. There are some Cingalese Buddhists and two or three Burmans, and they, I think, would not have known about the plot. Then there are, perhaps, a dozen Indians of all sorts,

including myself and these two. One or two of them might be implicated—but I have never seen them much with Ananda. There are half a dozen Europeans or Americans—four women and two men; two of the women you know; the other two and the two men are, I think, quite mad, and the men altogether useless, either to Dhyanand or to help us. And then there are the lungma pa, who are only savages and would certainly not know anything."

Krishna turned to Rinpoche and spoke in the strange language, and Rinpoche nodded as though in agreement.

"He thinks the same," continued Krishna. "Probably Ananda has kept them out of the way in their cells; some of them would not have left them in any case, being in seclusion. It would be easy for him to order the rest to spend two or three days in solitary meditation; it is one of the customs here, which the Master used to order from time to time. The only people who are likely to hurt Dhyan or Sityana would be Tarzi and his men. But there is no reason why they should; they are probably asleep now, waiting for orders from Ananda. If only we can get out we can catch them in their rooms, and they will almost certainly fight. If they do, we can kill them, for I know Tarzi is in this, and in some other plot, too, of Tilok Nath's."

Makhmud was now busy at the slow work of drilling the door. Carruthers had remembered the Alpine ropes and sent Spin Gul to find them. With those they could probably get through the window and down the cliff-face, and then back into the building.

However, neither ropes nor tools were needed; the latter would have been of little use, anyway, for the door was strong and the drills badly blunted by now. Makhmud, on his knees working at the metal, suddenly stopped and signalled silence. The others ceased talking, and Makhmud listened with his ear against the central crack of the door.

"There is someone coming, sahibs," he whispered. "One man, I think."

Carruthers joined him, and heard footsteps outside, called Krishna over, and told him to attract the passer's attention. Krishna would be safe in speaking, whoever it might be; it would not do for Rinpoche to talk until they knew who was there.

Krishna shook the door and called, and a rather quavery, old voice answered from outside.

"Open the door," said Krishna. "The fastening has stuck outside."

He spoke in the strange tongue, and the person outside replied, evidently in some surprise. They heard the fastenings being moved, and presently the

door swung open and an old, bald-headed, wrinkled monk peered in at them. In the corridor glimmered the tiny oil lamp he had been carrying. He blinked at them like a surprised owl.

"No need to do anything," said Rinpoche to Carruthers. "It is Mémé Anchuk, whose duty it is to go round sometimes during the night and see to the lights in the chapel."

Carruthers had no interest in Mémé Anchuk. With a few hurried words to Oxley, he beckoned to Makhmud and Spin Gul, and the three of them hurried away in the direction of the rooms occupied by Aunt Jane and Dhyan.

The door was fastened outside, and, as they undid the fastenings, Carruthers called aloud to the women and was very disquieted at getting no reply. Then he opened the door and looked in. The room was in great disorder: there was a pile of furniture near the door, as though they had made an effort to erect a barricade, while, lying on the low bed which had served as a sofa on the day of Aunt Jane's tea-party, were some loose ropes and some scattered clothes. Of the three women there was no sign whatever.

CHAPTER XIX TARZI SCORES

Tarzi was getting somewhat anxious as the evening wore on and he received no news from Dhyanand, whom he did not greatly trust. He had realised now that Dhyanand was even more capable and clever than he had ever before suspected. It behoved Tarzi, therefore, to be watchful. As night came, and there was still no news, he took Akbar with him—he was not going to be alone with Dhyanand more than he could help—and the two of them set out for Dhyanand's rooms. Halfway along the passage they were startled by a scream from the direction of the room in which they knew the prisoners were confined. They hurried on down the passage, and when they reached the door, Tarzi peeped in through a small hole in the metal. He imagined that Dhyanand must have begun his interrogation of Rinpoche; the Brahmin had definitely said it would take place after darkness had fallen and the rest of the inmates finally retired to their cells for the night.

The scene that met his eyes, however, was quite different from what he expected, for he realised at once that the writhing figure on the floor was not Rinpoche, but Dhyanand, and that the Mahratta Rama, whom he knew and rather despised as clod-headed, madder than most here, was standing over Dhyanand with hate in every line of his face. Moreover, he seemed to be threatening the wounded man with some weapon concealed in his hand. Then, by twisting his head, Tarzi could see beyond the pair that Oxley was free and was busily engaged in releasing Carruthers. The small door leading into Dhyanand's rooms was shut and, from the noise, somebody was beating on it. Then he saw Rama turn round and speak a few words to Carruthers, whom, by now, Oxley had freed and was undoing the ropes about his legs, then turn back, seize Dhyanand's head and, so far as Tarzi could make out, quietly cut his throat.

Tarzi's first thought was to use his pistol, but he gave up that idea, since the moment he got the muzzle of his automatic into the hole he could no longer see anything at all. It would be useless to fire blindly into the room, and he knew that the door was fastened inside as well as outside. He drew back quietly, signalled to Akbar to keep quiet, and, with drawn pistol, hurried along the corridor to the door of Dhyanand's room and tried to enter, only to find that also barred on the inner side. He listened intently and heard the sounds of a struggle going on in there, and recognised Rinpoche's voice. Noiselessly he slipped down the heavy bar which could be used to secure the room from the outside when the occupant left it, and the two men ran

back to the door of the further room, where Tarzi looked through the hole again. Undoubtedly some form of treachery was afoot, because Oxley was standing up, stretching his arms and talking to Rama in English, while, by twisting his head to the utmost, Tarzi could just make out the corner of the room and see that the door now stood open and that Carruthers was there with a pistol, talking to two men who were entering, Rinpoche being the first. Then the other man came into view, a Pathan with a rifle.

Tarzi slipped down and thought hard. Both doors were now barred on the outside, so those inside could not get out into the passage. The windows faced out over the cliff, a long, steep drop, very difficult to manœuvre even with ropes. From Dhyanand's room a passage led down to the vault where the servants and Sepoys had been imprisoned, and Dhyanand had the keys. Somehow or other the Sepoys had managed to free themselves—probably with Rama's help. They were now a stronger and better-armed party than his. By barring Dhyanand's door Tarzi had, however, certainly secured invaluable delay; it would take them a long time to get out of that, though doubtless they would presently find a way. Certainly by morning, even though no one else dwelt in that passage, someone would come there, hear them, and open the door.

Tarzi knew that the rest of his own party could not possibly arrive for another two days. Moreover, unfortunately, he had given them strict orders not to pass the watch-tower until he returned to meet them. He had intended to bring in his party of a score of well-armed men as inconspicuously as possible, telling Dhyanand that they were the drivers of his caravan.

By morning, at latest, the whole party inside would be free, and even if Dhyanand had not told them anything, Rama would certainly have spoken, and they would make short work of himself and his two companions. Moreover, they would be prepared for the arrival of the others, and it would be difficult to force the road by the tower in the face of two or three rifles.

The only thing was to get out of it quick, rejoin his party, and bring them along as soon as he could. If he could take Dhyan with him, then in the first place he would have a hostage, and secondly, he would ensure the white men not going away. If he did not, they might despatch the women straight back to Kungma in safe charge, and then wait for him, or they might all go and report their discoveries. He might be able to force the road and blot out the strangers, but he would lose Dhyan, and he particularly wanted Dhyan, although the gold was a bigger matter. What it meant was that with Dhyan he might get the gold and Dhyan, or possibly only Dhyan; without her he would certainly get neither.

He thought quickly and then, after seeing that the fastenings to Dhyanand's door were well secured, he and Akbar ran back to their room and picked up Tor Bez. Tarzi sent him and Akbar off with certain orders, and hurried along the dark, silent corridors to the women's apartments. There he became most diplomatic. He made no attempt to force the door; he knocked very gently and continuously, and he called, not Dhyan, but Sityana.

She came eventually; Dhyan, still weaponless, was standing at the side of the door with a stool, with which she had some wild idea of felling Ananda and perhaps breaking his skull.

"Who is it?" asked Sityana in a somewhat shaky voice.

"A friend of the white men," said Tarzi. "I want to help you escape from Ananda. I didn't know that he was a devil. He has killed Rinpoche and is beginning to torture the smaller white man to kill him. He has got Carathas —the tall man—locked up in another room, and I have sent my two men to get him out through the window, when he will meet us at the gate. I have friends in the hills, and we can reach them in two days if we go at once. Then you and Carathas can come back with me, and we will settle with Ananda and see if we can save the others. We can't do anything now because Ananda has got the guns of Carathas' party."

He heard the women whispering together inside, and knocked again.

"I know you don't believe me, Sityana, but I'm telling the truth. If I came here from Ananda to bring Dhyan to him—which is, perhaps, what you think—I would have forced the door. You know Ananda took off the inner fastenings when he first brought you here from the Master's room. He will be coming soon, because he said he would take Dhyan to-night. If you're not quick you will certainly be caught by him."

"I don't trust him," whispered Aunt Jane to Dhyan. "It's some trick."

Dhyan put down her stool and thought for a minute.

"It may be, Aunt Jane; but why? He can force the door easily if he wants to; there's no one near here to hear the noise. We've got no weapon, so nobody could be afraid of coming in. I'd sooner risk anybody than Ananda."

Tarzi knocked again insistently, and Dhyan bent her head to the crack to hear better.

"Be quick, Sityana. I believe I heard a noise up the passage. If you don't come, I shall have to go. Ananda will suspect if he finds me here. I have a knife; it's the only thing I've got; I left my gun with my people out in the

hills. If you open the door a little, I'll push it in so that you can see I'm telling the truth."

Dhyan, whose fingers itched for the comfort of a knife-hilt, eased back the furniture they had piled against the door, opened it a fraction, and then snatched up her stool again. But there was no rush; a man's arm in a wadded sleeve came in, holding a naked knife, which Dhyan seized.

"Now be quick! You must come at once. Bring warm cloaks, and hurry. I hear doors opening somewhere. Ananda and the others will be coming."

The women opened the door; Choksid gathered up some clothing, and they slipped out and found that, as he had given them to understand, the man was alone. In the darkness Sityana did not recognise Bakhtiyan, the name under which she knew Tarzi. He closed the door after them, secured the fastenings, and then, signalling silence, led them down the passage with quick steps. They followed him without a sound, Dhyan clutching her knife ready for use if there was any sign of treachery, but Tarzi went on unconsciously, busily watching for any sign of movement and occasionally stopping the women while he looked round corners, and then waving them on again.

And so they came, in the moonlight, to the great gate, where Tarzi bid them crouch in the shadows while he explored. He was back in a couple of minutes, to whisper that all was clear, and they hurried through the archway out on to the open ground beyond, where they halted.

"They should be here by now," said Tarzi, looking round. "Perhaps they're hiding behind those big rocks there. I told them to be careful when they saw anyone coming out and not show themselves until they were sure who we were."

He signed the others on and went forward to the big rocks, and, as he approached, it seemed that a man's head showed in the shadow at one side.

"Carathas Sahib!" called Tarzi, and the head moved and another came into sight.

They reached the rocks, and as they did so Dhyan was suddenly blinded by a cloak that dropped over her head, and, though she struck swiftly with the knife, the blow checked in mid-air as Tarzi seized her wrist.

"Caught, little bird," he grunted in Turki, as he held her struggling, while Akbar and Tor Bez, who had leapt on the other two, bound their hands and gagged them. That done, they came over to him and bound Dhyan's behind

her back, forcing the knife from her grip, and secured the cloak over her head with a cord.

"Walk quickly," said Tarzi, pricking Dhyan's back gently with the knife-point. "Very quickly, because we've a long way to go yet."

"Do we bring this?" asked Tor Bez, looking with distaste at Choksid's dumpy figure. "Why not cut its throat here?"

"And leave a signpost for those who follow? Fool!" remarked Tarzi. "Keep it moving fast and follow me. If either of them try to stop, use the knife, but gently. Once over the other side, there are plenty of holes in the ice if they don't want to come, and they won't be found there."

He repeated the last words in the language of the valley, so that Sityana and Choksid should hear. Then he urged them on up the steep path leading to the tower.

A little way behind the party, but unseen by them, followed a lungma pa shepherd, a rough man with thatch-head, the same who had led Carruthers' party up from Kungma. He had been looking for two lost sheep and had seen the party in the light of the newly risen moon, and he had thought it somewhat strange. Then he had heard their voices as he stood hidden behind a rock, and recognised Dhyan. A moment later he had seen the two men leap out from the rock and the women seized and bound.

He was a very rough man, and he respected nothing particular, except the wind and snow devils. He practically worshipped Dhyan, however, who, to his eyes, was a goddess, and who had many times come to his house when his wife and his child were ill and shown him kindness such as he had never received from anyone else. His rather slow brain comprehended that there was trouble, and therefore he decided to follow, though he was one man against three and his only weapon an axe. But somewhere higher up the hill should be his brother, who had been sent there by one of the lamas to watch for some men coming by the old road, and his brother owned an ancient sword. One obeyed the lamas because they had powers, but if they meant ill to Dhyan, that was another matter.

Kuhna gripped his axe tight and followed, always keeping just out of sight in the shadows of the rocks. He calculated that they must stop at the top of the pass to get their breath before the difficult descent on the other side. That might give him a chance.

They did halt at the top, and Kuhna crept nearer as he saw that his brother was there and speaking with them. But he was not prepared for what

followed, when his brother backed suddenly away and drew the sword he carried, as though to defend himself, or else to attack. Next minute one of the men whipped out a pistol, and, simultaneously with the report, Kuhna saw his brother fall. There was a coarse laugh as the man with the pistol bent over the twitching figure on the moonlit ground, and then, picking up a heavy boulder, dropped it neatly on his head.

Kuhna argued that caution was needed with such folk, and followed at a slightly greater distance. Presently, doubtless, the white men with guns would follow, and he would be able to help them and also to avenge his brother. He paused an instant by the body of his brother, then silently followed over the crest, down over the moonlit snow, keeping as far as possible in such patches of shadow as he could find. Better accustomed to the hills at night than were the party in front, he could keep just in sight of them without being seen, while his ragged, faded garments showed less than did the dark clothes of the Pathans and the two Turkis. Kuhna intended to go as far as he could and find out where the rest of the party must be, because he was certain they must be going to meet others. No men could set out into that tangle of hills beyond, which Kuhna knew—he was an adventurous soul—to be quite uninhabited, unless they had men waiting for them with food and animals.

Presently the party slowed down and seemed to be in some difficulty, as they made their way across the creviced ice of the glacier. The lungma pa approached as near as he considered safe, and then halted. He could not quite see what they were doing; possibly one of the women could not keep up. After a while the party moved on again, and Kuhna followed, and it seemed to him that, instead of six people, there were now only five, which was strange. When he reached the trodden snow where they had made their halt, he looked around him. It was a nasty place with many crevasses, and the party might have had difficulty in picking their way over. Looking again at the snow in the brilliant moonlight, it seemed to Kuhna that something had been dragged over the snow, and, following the trail, he found it ended abruptly at the lip of a deep crevasse. Lying down, he wriggled cautiously to the edge, and when his eyes got accustomed to the dim light, made out, some feet below him, what appeared to be a dark bundle wedged at a point where the ice-walls narrowed suddenly. He watched it for a moment and then saw that the bundle moved a little and seemed to make faint noises. Kuhna came to the conclusion that his first thought had been correct; one or other of the women had not been able to walk fast enough.

He sat up and considered. The ice-walls were firm, and the cold of the night would make them firmer. The crevasse was some six feet wide at the top at this point and narrowed downward. At the point where the woman hung it was not much more than a foot wide, though to either side it was considerably broader and of great depth. He could see nothing but darkness as he looked down. He came to the conclusion that it might be done, provided that he could get a foot on either ice-wall, at a point three to four feet below him. Unless he could get the woman out, she would certainly be frozen dead by morning if she remained there. If, however, she struggled, she might easily slip from the projecting ice that held her, and then she would disappear altogether. As yet he could not make out which of them it was, but he called down quietly to her to lie still and not move, and he was evidently understood at the third time of speaking, for the movements ceased.

Reaching down at the full length of his arm, he managed with his axe to cut a niche on the near side, nearly four feet below him. Then he stood up, went back a few paces, took a run and a flying leap, and landed safely on his feet on the farther side, flinging himself forward on his face as he landed. He then proceeded to cut a similar niche on the opposite face.

The really dangerous part followed; he had to let himself down into the crevasse and trust to getting his feet into the two niches. He slipped over the edge and slid slowly down, and his right foot caught in the niche on the near side. For an instant he thought the other had missed, then felt it hold. From there he was able to cut two more niches, somewhat lower, and lower himself without difficulty to a point where, by reaching down between his feet, he could catch hold of the ropes with which the woman, who lay face downwards, was bound. Slowly he pulled her up and saw that it was Sityana. He was a very powerfully built man, and was able to support her with one arm while he pulled himself up to the higher niches, from where he could raise her above his head and push her on to the solid ice beyond the crevasses. Then, drawing the axe from his belt, where he had placed it for the descent, with infinite care he cut another step above him and, with the aid of the axe, hauled himself out of the crevasse. He freed Sityana from the rope that bound her, and shook her into consciousness. Sityana sat up and looked around wildly, then recognised Kuhna. She knew the lungma pa speech, and was able to talk sufficiently to explain what had happened.

“Doubtless others will come presently,” said Kuhna. “And later I will return. Meantime, I go forward again to follow the Lady Dhyan, who must be helped.”

A few minutes later Aunt Jane lost sight of him as he faded into the moonlit distance. She forced herself to move about a while, to restore her circulation, although she felt terribly tired and ill after the hurried ascent to the tower and the journey down and across the glacier. Anyway, there was at least one friend in search of Dhyan, though, by himself, he would have no chance and, like the poor man at the tower, would presently be killed. All the same, Aunt Jane envied him for not being a useless old woman who would shortly die without having done anything to help. She was sure she was going to die soon; the pain in her chest was very bad now; she found it difficult to breathe, and she was deadly cold and longed to make a hole in the snow and lie down to sleep, though she knew that that would certainly be the end.

Somehow she kept awake, moving a little from time to time, though the exertion was torture to her. Then suddenly—Kuhna must have been gone several hours now—she saw men coming over the ice towards her, coming, too, from the direction of the tower, and she stood up tremblingly and called in a thin, wavering voice. The excitement was too much for her, and the next thing she remembered was somebody pouring stinging spirit down her throat —Aunt Jane had forgotten what brandy tasted like—while somebody else was rubbing her hands, and a third man was wrapping a coat about her.

Then, in the moonlight, she recognised Carruthers, and understood that he was asking urgent questions.

"Somewhere in front," she panted. "She and Choksid and three strange men. There's a friend, too—a lungma pa called Kuhna—who's gone on; he came here in time to get me out of the ice."

She stopped for breath and looked round at the others, Oxley and the two soldiers who had come with them, and Rama—she wondered what Rama was doing there—she did not trust him—a nasty, dark-faced man whom she had seen with Ananda. But probably he was a prisoner being made to show the way. There was also a monk—probably one from Kungma—with four more lungma pa, whose faces she recognised. Since Dhyan insisted on cultivating the lungma pa, Aunt Jane had had to follow suit, so that she knew most of them now—they and their women and the babies, the dirty little babies who, nevertheless, appealed intensely to Aunt Jane's maternal feelings; she had often tried to wash them, much to their mothers' terror. Every sensible person knows that if you wash a child you remove the covering of grease and dirt which Nature provides to keep out the killing winds from the snow. Aunt Jane had never succeeded in washing more than

a few square inches of face; that was not so vital, and the mothers compromised.

They had guns, too, and Aunt Jane, who had now entirely reverted to the primitive British woman, rejoiced in the sight of healthy barbarians with guns, who had no squeamish ideas about the sacredness of life, the indivisible thread which bound man and beast together on the wheel of cause and effect. They would kill men just as cheerfully as they killed animals, if need be. Dhyan was the need, and Aunt Jane knew there would be killing, and felt better for the thought. Thus disappeared the last, little atom of Sityana, and Jane Prentis, whose grandfather had blown a highwayman's brains out with his own hand and his own clumsy flint-lock pistol, and whose grandmother's grandfather had been a man of blood and iron in the '45, came out into the open, naked and unashamed, a female creature imbued with only one passion, that of protecting her young, quite ready to use her teeth and her nails if she could only get a chance. If anyone had asked her to explain the phenomenon, she would have said quite simply that she had been converted and found regeneration.

But nobody did ask her; there was much too much to do. Once Aunt Jane had told them her story, since she could not go with them, they put her in charge of the Kungma lama and a lungma pa to take back to the City of Vision, and themselves went on over the glacier, following the clearly marked trail in the dawn light. They went carefully, once the sun came up, for presumably they would be expected, and the others on the lookout for them. They had, therefore, to take precautions, both because they had no desire to get surprised, and because they wanted to effect a surprise themselves.

When Carruthers had found the women's rooms empty, he had raced back to Dhyanand's cell, and Krishna had taken them to the room occupied by Tarzi, only to find it deserted. Then Carruthers had recalled his dream of the tower, and without waiting to make further search in the great building, they had set out in pursuit, stopping only to collect some food and to pick up four of the lungma pa shepherds, who, Rinpoche had said, possessed guns. They were two antiquated muzzle-loaders, but everything helped, and the men were said to know the farther valleys; their summer grazing-grounds lay across the glaciers, and their presence might save time later.

They had left Aziz Muhammed and Nawab with the shot-guns to help Rinpoche, should there be any more followers of Ananda in the city. Aziz could talk to Rinpoche, and when the latter had taken stock of his flock in

daylight, he would send another party of lungma pa after them in case they needed help coming back.

Carruthers had led the way straight up towards the tower, led fast, too, too fast for that altitude, for he was burning with impatience to get on. It was all just as in his dream—he came to the tower, and there was the dead man with his head beaten in, the blood, and, glinting in the brilliant moonlight, the spent shell of a pistol cartridge. On the snow on the farther side he could see the tracks leading downwards, fresh tracks of a small party, and, lying on the snow, a wisp of cloth with the embroidered looped cross upon it.

The finding of Aunt Jane had given them more information, of course, and their one desire now was to catch up with Tarzi, before he could join hands with the party of unknown strength, which was waiting for him somewhere in the hills. What Tarzi would do then, they did not know, whether he would hurry on northwards by the secret passes of this old road into Central Asia, or whether he might be intending to return to the city in force, hoping to kill the strangers and take possession of the place in order to loot the hidden wealth there, they had no means of guessing.

Midday saw them on the top of the next divide, a steep climb up a shaly slope, scattered with great boulders and infinite numbers of loosely balanced rocks, which so easily twisted under their feet. From the farther side they had looked down a very steep slope of frozen snow, facing north, and another glacier, beyond which, however, lay a long stretch of flattish ground, one of the grazing-grounds used by the lungma pa in late summer after the snow had cleared from the two nearer passes.

And on the farther side of the glaciers, with their glasses, they could make out several black dots and a dark clump of what must be animals and men. Before them the trail lay clear to sight, leading down the steep slope.

They went downward again, as fast as they could move, and at the bottom were hidden by lower under features, through which they followed a winding watercourse that, in time, brought them to the glacier, and there they halted for a while. If what they had seen was Tarzi's party, they could only be a little over a mile from there, and would surely be on the lookout. They were discussing the best method of proceeding onward when Kuhna appeared; he had been watching, and had seen Carruthers and Oxley, with their party, coming down the hillside. He sauntered in nonchalantly, recognised Krishna and spoke to him, the other three lungma pa with them gathering round to hear what he had to say.

"He says," Krishna Rao translated, "that there are about twenty men with about forty animals. Tarzi and his two men, with Dhyan and Choksid, are there, too; they got here about four hours ago. All the animals were out grazing when they arrived, and since then they have been collecting them, but they do not look as if they were going to move yet. There are men watching now on their side of the ice, and if anyone tries to cross here, they will be seen. As far as he can see, there are about twelve or fourteen men who have guns. But Kuhna knows another way of crossing the glacier, higher up, which is not in view of their camp; it is rather difficult, and not used by the shepherds, as the ice is broken. From there one would be able to get much closer to the camp, close enough to see who they are and what they do."

"We'll go along there at once," said Carruthers brusquely, and, ten minutes later, they were following Kuhna along the moraine trough on the left bank of the glacier, whose swelling curve hid them from anyone on the farther side. They went about a mile and a half, and then the ascent became steeper, and Kuhna led them out of the trough and they hugged the foot of the hill. Then he turned on to the ice, and, following him, they realised that their view down-stream was cut off by the curve of the ice, and they crossed and dropped into the moraine trough on the opposite side, having seen no signs of the other party.

"They are below us now," said Krishna, after speaking to Kuhna. "About a mile and some way lower. Kuhna says we should halt here, and he will go and see what is happening; they have no men on this side; they probably think we will be following their tracks all the time."

Carruthers insisted on going with Kuhna to reconnoitre so as to be able to make up some plan of attack at the same time. Oxley and Krishna and the rest settled down under the lee of a small hillock, on which they posted a well-hidden sentry to give notice of any movement that he might see. They were glad enough of a rest and a little food; they had crossed two passes and two glaciers in the last twelve hours, and none of the three had had practically any sleep for sixty hours. Oxley, moreover, was only just beginning to be acclimatised to the high altitude, and his gassing had left him very weak, although the effects had worn off remarkably quickly. What he wanted more than anything was sleep, and the moment he had swallowed some food and a drink, he fell asleep without a word.

Carruthers, tired as he was, could not have stopped. He must get forward and find Dhyan, and he followed the tireless Kuhna. But now he was no longer able to dash ahead, as he had done on the Giant's Stairway; he could

only stumble along behind the lungma pa and try to keep his wits about him sufficiently to keep under cover.

In front of them, slightly to the right, rose a steep rock hill with cliff-like sides, rising, perhaps, eight hundred feet above the ground around, though dwarfed by the higher slopes to its north. To south of this rock-tooth was a low, gentle hill, a couple of hundred feet above the glacier. Kuhna pointed it out, indicating caution, and Carruthers presumed there must be a sentry on it, so behaved accordingly.

Presently Kuhna led northward along a watercourse, and so brought Carruthers round to the precipitous foot of the great rock-tooth, whose base they skirted for a long half-mile. They circled the cliff, and then, in Kuhna's wake, Carruthers crept up a gentle rise into the cover of a great boulder, where he was glad to lie a while and rest. Then, pulling himself together, he looked over the crest and saw below him Tarzi's party, some six hundred yards away. With the glasses he could see them clearly; there appeared to be about sixteen men and forty ponies. Farther away were a few scattered ponies, some donkeys, and a couple of men.

The party was engaged in cooking food, and all their gear was stacked, so that they evidently had no intention of moving on that evening, and, since moonrise was not till after two in the morning, they could not move before that hour. Under a large rock Carruthers could see a woman standing up, whom he judged to be Choksid. Another person was sitting in the shadow of the rock, and he guessed that must be Dhyan. Near them two men were lying on some rugs. The four of them were at least forty yards away from the nearest of the main group round the fires.

Carruthers considered the situation. Everything pointed to their being stationary until morning. Beyond the camp, on rising ground which divided the flattish expanse of coarse grass from the glacier-valley, he could see two men, presumably lookouts. It seemed to Carruthers that there would be a possibility of determined men making their way in darkness to the col between the rock-tooth and the lower hill south, on which Kuhna had evidently seen a sentry, judging by his caution on the approach. If that sentry could be killed quietly, then the same men could crawl down to the rock and deal with the two men—probably Tarzi and one of his friends—while the women escaped over the col.

If, at the same time, demonstration were made from this side and the animals stampeded, the surprise of being fired into from the opposite side, from which they would naturally expect any rescue-party, would probably

cause the camp to break up in disorder, men hurrying west from the firing to the low hill on the farther side of the camp.

To attack in daylight was obviously futile, considering the disparity of numbers. The enemy appeared to have a certain number of rifles, and would be best taken by surprise in the dark, where pistols would be as good, if not better. Carruthers' party had two rifles and two revolvers of their own and the automatic pistol taken from Ananda, while the lungma pas' two ancient muzzle-loaders would serve to add to the noise. Carruthers, however, did not think these last two firearms were likely to hit anyone, unless they happened to be touching it. The third lungma pa had a bow, a good-looking weapon, which was probably worth more than the guns.

He closed his glasses at last, piled up two little heaps of stones, showed them to Kuhna, and then signed that they would go back. An hour later he reached the little hill, on whose farther slope he found Oxley and Krishna fast asleep, and flung himself down, utterly dead-beat.

CHAPTER XX THE END OF TARZI

Presently Carruthers raised himself and reached over to the food which they had brought, and, after he had eaten something, felt a little stronger. Then he roused Krishna and Oxley and explained what he had seen, and began to outline his plan. The others, who had already slept for a couple of hours, were somewhat fresher, but then, on the other hand, they had not the same driving force as Tom, who, after years of dreams, had at last found Dhyan, and now saw her snatched from him.

Briefly, the plan of attack was as follows: Oxley and Krishna, with the two rifles, were to follow the line that Carruthers had taken that afternoon, go round the foot of the rock hill and, guided by Kuhna, take up their position on the rise whence Carruthers had looked down on the camp and where he had built the two small piles of stones. With them would go the two lungma pa with the ancient guns.

Carruthers, with the two Pathans, all three armed with pistols, and accompanied by the third lungma pa, with the bow, would then proceed to the lower hill under cover of darkness, timing their arrival to get there shortly before moonrise. Their business would be, firstly, to account for the single sentry, and then to creep down and free the women, and, if necessary, deal with any enemy close by. That done, they would fall back on to the col and open fire, which was to be the signal for Oxley's party to shoot rapidly into the camp from the east side, thus tending to make the enemy disperse westward.

Thereafter, Oxley's party would run back round the hill as fast as possible and rejoin the remainder, and the whole would then retire on to the edge of the glacier, crossing as soon as it was safe. If the enemy broke at once, Oxley and his people might be able to come straight across the edge of the camping-ground, instead of making the long détour round the foot of the hill.

Everybody had their parts carefully explained to them, and the necessary changes made among those who had the arms. It was dark by the time they had finished discussing, and they arranged a watch in turns, and thus everyone was able to get a little greatly needed sleep.

For the first time now Carruthers was able to find a few moments to talk to Krishna, whom he had recognised almost as soon as the little man tore off

his mask.

"How on earth did you come here, Krishna Rao?" he asked. "You were quite the last person I ever expected to meet in this part of the world. You always said that directly after the war you were going back to Bombay to get busy with that big scheme of yours and make a large fortune."

"So I was, Major." Carruthers had been a temporary major when Krishna knew him. "Actually I got back just before the war ended, owing to a bullet I stopped. But I didn't go into that business because I found everything broken up at home, thanks to that devil, Tilok Nath. My father was dead—poison, as we learnt later—my mother was nearly mad, and my brother, who was crocked early in the war, was a complete invalid and dying. And then there had been something worse which he told me about before he died." Krishna stopped for a minute before he went on. "He made me promise, before he died, that I would find Tilok Nath and kill him, since no one else could find him, and I promised. My brother's wife made me promise, too, since they said I was the only man left in the family and that Tilok Nath must be destroyed, if it cost us everything. And we're not vindictive people as a rule, not like your Pathans, for instance. But there are some things. . . . So I set out to find Tilok Nath, and as he seemed to be disguising himself as a holy man, I did the same. I wandered up and down India until I got on his tracks, and I followed. I had to become a first-class revolutionary, and a lot of other things beside, before I really got into his circle. But when I did, he had gone again, but I was able to follow him up here, and here I've been, waiting for the chance. Now I've done with him I shall go home again and take over things and become respectable once more, and I shall have a lot to tell my young cousin, the policeman, that will interest him. And what are you doing? I never thought I'd see you here. I thought I recognised you the first evening in the chapel, and I lay outside your door next night, listening. But I couldn't speak to you for fear of giving myself away. It seems a long time since we grovelled in the mud in the Ypres salient and waited for the next shell. You used to try sometimes to find out what the educated Indian thought of India, and what Gandhi calls the Satanic Government, which presently, if all goes well, I'm going to join myself, as an independent free-lance, to strafe both sides with a general bias in favour of upholding law and order." Krishna smiled a little—the first time Carruthers had seen him smile in the last twenty-four hours. "Only I suppose I mustn't talk of my doings here; they'd upset people. Well, as it's my turn to take first watch, you'd better go to sleep."

Carruthers looked at the little man with as much wonder as he was capable of at the moment, and then dropped off into a broken doze, which, however, restored him a little, so that when the time came for them to get ready he felt a little less worn out than he had been. Not that that meant much, but he felt he might now account for somebody, as he sat watching Oxley and Krishna, with their party, disappear in the shadows. Ten minutes later, followed by the two Pathans, he was moving cautiously towards the low rise which showed faintly against the starlit sky. Behind him the sky was beginning to pale slightly with the coming of the moon.

They located the sentry presently on the top of the col. He was not as alert as he might have been, and Tarzi, who was not a soldier, had made the mistake of not putting a second man on. Makhmud contrived to be within three feet of the man before he knew anything about it, and then some little noise disturbed him and he sat up. He looked round in a puzzled way to where the still unseen moon was just beginning to throw silver lights on the mountains beyond, and next minute he was writhing in Makhmud's grasp, biting fiercely at the hand over his mouth. There was no time to waste over squeamishness, and Spin Gul finished him neatly with Carruthers' big skinning-knife.

Below them, not more than about a hundred yards away, was the big rock where the women ought to be, beyond which some dying embers still flickered occasionally, showing where Tarzi—Carruthers presumed it was Tarzi—and his companions were sleeping.

Leaving Spin Gul and the lungma pa on the col, Makhmud and Carruthers crawled down the slope to the rock. This was the most ticklish part of the work, for there might be others there beside the women. Fortune, however, was with them, and as Carruthers, stalking as he had never stalked before, reached the two forms under the lee of the rock, he saw that the women were alone, saw also that they were fastened by ropes to pegs driven into the ground. They were both asleep, but only lightly, for Dhyan sat straight up as he whispered her name, laying his hand on her face.

"It's me—Tom," he whispered, as he cut the ropes. "Don't move yet, but tell me how many men there are sleeping over there." He pointed to the shadows a few yards away by the glowing embers.

"Only two," she whispered. "One is Bakhtiyan, who caught us, and I don't know the other."

Makhmud had by this time freed Choksid, and they waited for a minute or two for the women to rub their arms and legs, for they were numbed by

the ropes, and very cold. Meanwhile, Carruthers decided that his method of giving the signal to Oxley would be for him to crawl up and shoot the two sleeping men, while Makhmud led the women back. He would catch them up himself without any trouble.

That would have done the business neatly and removed the leader of the opposition. Unfortunately, just as he had explained the scheme, one of the men by the dying fire sat up; the moon had just risen, throwing its light over the camping-ground. He turned and saw the women standing up, and two men with them, and he kicked his companion, seized up his pistol, and shouted. Carruthers' hurried shot only grazed his arm. Makhmud, however, was a better shot and cooler. The other man sat up just in time to get Makhmud's bullet square in the back of his head, and he lay down again spasmodically.

Then, seizing the women's arms, Carruthers and Makhmud ran, and, as they ran, from the rise opposite came yellow splashes of light, and bullets buzzed about behind them from the covering-party. Followed a minute of wild pandemonium as the sleeping men woke and seized their arms; three, however, did not wake to any useful purpose, and a fourth arose only in time to be bowled over. The rest scattered away from their fires, round which the bullets whined, and the animals, one or two of whom had been hit, panicked and broke away in all directions.

Carruthers, who had pulled up on the crest of the col, where Spin Gul, Makhmud, and the women were waiting for him, thought it was all over. Then, in the moonlight, he became aware of a rush of men in their direction —half a dozen men who fired as they came, shooting wildly. Beyond them occasional spurts of flame could be seen on the farther side of the camp, marking where the enemy were beginning to recover themselves and shoot back at the opposite ridge.

They pushed the women behind boulders and turned to meet the rush.

They dropped two before the remainder reached them, and, next moment, Carruthers was deafened by the crash of a pistol that a man discharged a few inches from his face, somehow missing him, and the two of them rolled on the ground together. Carruthers came up on top, blew the man's brains out, and got to his feet just in time to let drive at another who was aiming at Makhmud a couple of yards off.

Makhmud and Spin Gul, with sound instinct, had planted themselves behind rocks and waited until the rush was close on them. They had accounted temporarily for two apiece, and when they stood out into the open

again, the field was more or less clear. Neither of them were going to miss at three and four feet in fair moonlight.

"It is good, sahib," remarked Makhmud with a grin, his teeth showing in the moonlight. "Moreover, we have now three rifles and ammunition, for certainly three of them had guns."

He moved away, and, a moment later, Carruthers heard him grunting as a badly wounded Turkistani tried to prevent the Pathan from taking his rifle, and was stunned for his pains.

Nothing more came over their side, and the firing slackened a bit. There were four rifles retrieved, three of them good, modern Russian weapons, and another automatic pistol from the man Carruthers had killed. They expended some of the rifle ammunition in shooting at the flashes on the hill across the camping-ground, where the remainder of Tarzi's party seemed to have taken cover. All the six men who rushed the col had been accounted for; three were dead, and three sufficiently badly wounded to take no further interest in the proceedings.

Carruthers felt sure that the first burst of fire into the sleeping camp must have accounted for some, and if there had to be another fight in daylight the odds would be about even now, thanks to the rifles they had got.

Half an hour later Kuhna appeared out of the darkness, and behind him came Oxley's party, Oxley himself with his arm tied up where a chance bullet had grazed it. He was quite content with himself and with Krishna.

"I'm certain we got at least half a dozen," said he. "We didn't sit on top of your hill, but crawled down in front and let them have it at less than two hundred. They all bolted back over the other side, and then we heard a lot of firing over here and got alarmed until we guessed what had happened, and that you must have got some of their rifles. Did they rush you here?"

Carruthers explained. Dhyan, standing next to him with wide eyes, felt that these folk really were the kind of men Aunt Jane had told her of, quite unlike the only other white men she had seen before. But the presence of Krishna puzzled her until Carruthers explained who he was and what had happened to Ananda.

"Tarzi's accounted for," remarked Krishna. "Here he is, with his head blown in."

"He damned nearly got me first," said Tom, for the man Krishna was examining was the one who had tumbled over him and knocked him down.

None of the other men there were known to Krishna; they all seemed to be strangers, and no one could talk with the wounded.

"Do we go home now?" asked Oxley. "Or do we wait for daylight?"

"Wait for daylight and clean up, I think," said Carruthers. "We're as strong as they are now, and as well armed. We'd better make sure of their not coming back to repeat the game."

But daylight saw the low hill opposite to them deserted, and on the snow slope beyond them were five slow-moving figures, whose steps they expedited with some long shots, one of which found a home, and a man rolled slowly down the snow, to lie still at the bottom.

"They will certainly die," remarked Kuhna, who with his companions had been stripping the enemy. Their clothes were very, very valuable in his eyes and in those of his fellow-lungma pa, and he had had no compunction about knocking in the heads of two of them with his axe. Had they not killed his brother? he had remarked when Oxley, who happened to see what he was doing, remonstrated just as Kuhna was about to kill the third of the wounded men in the same way. Oxley managed, however, to save that one.

"They will certainly die, for they have lost their animals, and the snow is coming. See how the clouds come up. The Master will have sent the snow to help."

It was true. The clouds were banking up heavily and the peaks beginning to be lost in white flurries of mist and sleet.

"We, too, may die unless we go back now," he added, and the other lungma pa backed his words.

There was nothing further to be done. They carried the remaining man of Tarzi's party down to the camping-ground, where were three others, also wounded, and four dead men. They had not the heart to do what the lungma pas wanted, and kill them all, so as to save future trouble. Possibly the men might live through the storm and might be rescued later. They smashed such arms as they could not take and piled the boxes and loads into a heap and set fire to them all, except for some food and blankets for the wounded.

Then, as the first flakes of snow began to fall, tired as they were, they set back on their return journey, for the snow on the heights was setting in heavily, and there was little cover to be got. The first glacier presented no difficulty, as they could now use the lower, easier way, but the ascent in front tried them sorely, and the descent on the farther side to the second glacier was even more difficult, since they had to do it in the teeth of the

wind. They reached the glacier below, more or less frozen, and they looked at the whirling, white storm about them with little hope of getting over.

Oxley was for stopping and waiting until the snow cleared, but Kuhna was against it. He said the storm would last for two days at least, and they would all be dead by that time. He knew the glacier well, and said he could find his way by the big boulders which littered it, if they all kept close together.

They followed him closely; indeed, the snow was now so heavy that they could not see more than a couple of yards ahead at times, and Kuhna's leading was the most wonderful thing that Carruthers had ever seen in all his long years of mountaineering. Unfailingly, just as they seemed to be lost in the white haze, some big rock would loom up, and Kuhna would stop, get his direction, and lead off again, seemingly by the very track they had made in coming, which, however, by now was buried in the new-fallen snow, until at last they reached the farther side, slipped over the sloping edge of the ice, and stood at the foot of the rock slope, at whose top, as they knew, was the tower where Carruthers had first met Dhyan. They set off up the slope slowly and painfully, ice-coated now from head to foot, since the snow froze on them as it fell, and there were times when Carruthers thought he would never reach the crest. Dhyan seemed to be bearing it better than he did; possibly long residence up there had inured her to the height. Oxley could only manage the last few hundred yards with the aid of lungma pas, but Krishna plodded on valiantly, quite unaided. His wandering life these late years seemed to have turned him into steel and whipcord.

At last above them the rock-gendarmes loomed out of the snow flurries, and then they saw the tower. Another minute, and they were hailed by friendly voices, a party of lungma pas, led by one of the lamas they had met at Kungma, whom Rinpoche had sent up with food and blankets to meet them. There was a fire in the tower and hot tea, and they thawed themselves for a little before they stumbled on down the last weary stage into the snow-hidden City of Vision, where Rinpoche stood at the gateway, awaiting them with the news that Sityana had arrived, very worn out and ill, but that he hoped she would presently recover. Dhyan and Choksid went off to look after her, and the remainder were glad to seek the warmth of the new rooms which Rinpoche had got ready for them, and where Nawab and Aziz had brought all their things.

Rinpoche anticipated no further trouble. Three doubtful characters among the inmates he had had locked up; otherwise the place was quite peaceful. There would be no further danger from the north for some time,

even if the rest of Tarzi's party did escape, which Rinpoche doubted, since their animals were all scattered, and, without animals, they could not hope to reach safety. Later in the summer the lungma pa shepherds reported finding the bodies of three more, so that very few, if any, could have escaped the snow.

Once they knew that there was no more danger, Oxley and Carruthers realised that they were completely at the end of their strength. Oxley has a vague recollection of drinking some hot soup and being put to bed by Nawab and Aziz; Carruthers frankly did not remember anything at all, save that what seemed years later he woke with a pleasant glow of warmth all over him, saw in the flickering light of a fire Nawab stirring something in a saucepan, with Tosh sitting beside him, turned over and slept again—slept twelve hours without moving, according to Nawab's watch, for he had forgotten to wind his own.

CHAPTER XXI THE END

It was a long month later that Carruthers and Dhyan came down from the watch-tower, where they had been to have their final look at the vast mountain landscape which had been so much to Dhyan all her life; the view that she always connected with Tom, the landscape where she had sat and dreamed of him, and into which she herself had gone out, thinking that she would never see him again. And now, instead of that, down below in the City of Vision, she knew that the men were already packing up their things for the long journey homeward, that the lungma pa, who had been her friends ever since she could remember, were making ready their little bags of food for the road, and that the old workman who had somehow drifted there from Ladakh was putting the finishing touches to the litter they had had made to carry Aunt Jane, who, although she had recovered eventually from those two terrible nights, would probably never walk very far again.

In a couple of days' time they would be on their way through the mysterious tunnel of ice, of which she had heard, passing the carvings made by those prehistoric folk whom Rinpoche declared had lived here long before the great glaciers had come, when this valley was a fertile spot, rich with forest and flower and upland meadow, such as Tom had told her they would see presently when they reached Kashmir on their way back to the new life which awaited them, the life which was her heritage, and to which she would come knowing nothing, only secure in his love.

She would be rich, too, this girl who knew and cared nothing about money. She alone, perhaps, had seen nothing wonderful about the chamber into which Rinpoche had taken them, heaped with bars of yellow metal, piled with wonderful works of art, golden statues of gods and goddesses whose very names were unknown, sparkling with flash of coloured jewels—a very treasure-house of kings. But kings, again, were creatures of whom Dhyan knew nothing. The only royalty that she cared about were princesses, for it seemed that she was one—Tom had told her so—told her that and lots of other things which were much more important than dusty heaps of yellow metal. Only Oxley had taken it seriously, and busied himself over making up coolies' loads neatly disguised; he did not want questions asked on their return. Rinpoche had been anxious that the City of Vision should not be disturbed, and, since he had shown them the way thither, it was only fair that his wishes should be respected. The queer old gelong intended that the City of Vision should continue as it had been, but he said that it would be a long

time before he brought any other people into it. Those who were there now, and whom he could trust, would continue for the present to serve the Mother.

Tom and Dhyan met Oxley on their way down. He had been exploring; it was the sole thing he did nowadays, generally in company with Krishna, for whom he had taken a liking, and since Tom was for ever occupied with Dhyan, more dreamy than ever, it was refreshing to talk to the keen-brained little Mahratta and argue with him over various matters. Krishna really believed in quite a lot of things that Oxley thought nonsense, but it was not so easy to dispose of him as it had been to dispose of Tom. Krishna could argue better; he had the real Indian gift of splitting hairs in debate. He was perfectly convinced that most of what Rinpoche said was correct; he really believed that Rinpoche did remember his past lives and saw nothing peculiar in anybody giving up the world and becoming a saddhu in search of truth. It was all quite natural to Krishna.

Moreover, he laughed at Oxley's incessant efforts to find out the secret of the mirror—the concealed wireless installation—laughed at him as heartily as John had jeered at Tom. There was nothing to find out; the mirror did show things, Krishna knew that. It was a mysterious power, in the sense that you could not express it in terms of micro farads or other electrical jargon, but who was John Oxley to say that there must be some purely material basis? And when they finally left the City of Vision, John Oxley was still at exactly the same point in his researches as he had been when first they set out from Kungma, or from Leh, or even from England for that matter.

"Found the wireless plant?" called Tom, as he and Dhyan reached Oxley and a somewhat limping Ghulam Kadir and Tosh registered friendship. Tosh was a little bored of late with these walks; Master and the female creature whom Tosh had worshipped completely from the beginning were becoming stupid, and of late had not devoted the proper amount of attention that people ought to devote to large, clumsy Airedale dogs who happen to have adopted them.

"No," said John. If seemed to be the standard greeting nowadays, and he was getting hardened. "But Krishna says he's found out how they joined the stonework of those buildings, which he insists are really relics of pre-glacial periods. For an educated man with a lot of sense and a first-class engineering degree, his superstition in some matters is appalling. But he really thinks he's got the secret at last, and I gather he's going to become the contractor for the next Houses of Parliament or something."

At the bottom of the track, sitting in the sun on the bridge over the torrent, they found Aunt Jane and Choksid, escorted by Kuhna and some other lungma pa, a rather frail and tremulous Aunt Jane, also taking her last view of the old road. Aunt Jane had altered her desires in life now, and there was one absorbing vision which had replaced all the others. She desired to occupy the front bench, in really suitable clothes—though what the poor old lady thought suitable would have created some sensation had she appeared in them in the third decade of the twentieth century, but Tom's mother could be trusted to see to that—at Dhyan's wedding in a really, truly English church. She also hoped to attend a christening in the same church a year or so later. If she could achieve that vision, then she did not mind what happened afterwards.

That night, at Rinpoche's request, they attended the evening ceremony in the chapel, to look their last on the image of the Mother of Vision, a solemn ceremony that suffered nothing from Oxley's badly concealed efforts to find out whether he could possibly trace the secret installation which alone would account for the pictures the others saw, and which he himself was forced to admit now did really appear in the mirror upon occasion.

And then, two days later, they were once more passing through the tunnel with the strange carvings, accompanied again by Rinpoche, who had announced his intention of taking them as far as Kungma—the Jewel-Gate of Vision—and, from the head of the Giant's Stairway, looked back for the last time upon the hidden valley and the great, far off building which, apparently, had been there since time, as we reckon it, began.

To Dhyan and Tom, looking back, it stood for the monument of old Steven Fenwick, who, like them, had dreamed dreams, and who was kin to them both, and who had loved and suffered and died in that mountain-locked valley. They also had loved, and suffered just a little, just enough to make them appreciate all the more what they had gained and what the future would hold. Then, after one last look, they turned and followed the others down the ice-steps which had been made easier by the work of a party of lungma pa sent on ahead the day before, and with whom were some of the rough-clothed women and the dirty babies whom Dhyan had loved, come to say "good-bye" to the Lady Dhyan who, to them, was the nearest thing to a spiritual power they had ever known.

And so into the tunnel, in the smoky glare of the torches, on over the hidden ice, past the great temple all lit up with torches showing the carvings of man and beast, of man much as he is now, striving against beasts whose very bones are hardly found to-day.

“Perhaps it’s all an allegory,” said John Oxley, as he stood and looked again at the pictures in stone, “just to show that men are really always much the same, whatever happens. And Rinpoche and his pals have added a whole lot of frills on top and overdone it. But it’s wicked to think of the waste of keeping an invention like his form of television hidden in a God-forsaken place like this.”

Then, sadly and thoughtfully, for his practical mind revolted at this criminal hiding of five-hundred candle-power lights under bushels when they might be floated as preference stock, he led on again in the wake of Aunt Jane’s rocking litter and caught up Krishna, where the little, dark man, muffled up in a shapeless coat, was busy thinking out engineering plans of gigantic bridges, built with what he proposed to call the Krishna Rao Invisible Impervious Jointing.

The only people who came out of it all quite unperturbed were Makhmud and Spin Gul, who swaggered merrily along, gazing at the carvings and passing remarks upon the foolishness of *bhut khanas* and idols generally.

“Nevertheless, that crocodile is well done,” said Makhmud, pointing to what could only have been an ichthyosaurus. “The elephant, however, is not so good”—he indicated a mammoth—“their tusks do not curl like that, nor do they have hair. I know, for I have shot them with Sanderson Sahib. But these must be old pictures, and doubtless they did not know as much as we do; quite old pictures, perhaps as old as the times of the Badshahs, nearly three hundred years ago that would be, from what the books say about Akbar Badshah and those of his house who ruled in Delhi before the sahibs came.”

Spin Gul looked critically at the pictures.

“Belike they are older than that. Maybe they are of the time of Sikandar, who was before the Emperors. One of the men has a helmet which is like to a picture that Finnis Sahib showed me of Alexander; a very old photograph he said it was.”

Then they went on again, and the light of the torches died out after them, and the tunnel was left in silence and darkness, except for the whisper of the little streams of water that burrowed in the old green ice which, Rinpoche said, had once been a river where a forgotten folk had brought their dead in boats, tens of thousands of years before he became a monk in Taxila, in the century when the Saxons were landing on the Sussex coast.

Perhaps the men in the carvings smiled as they listened, and whispered that things do not change at all; that the tall man and the beautiful girl who had passed were only different in their clothing and in the speech they used, and in every other way were quite the same as the men who made the carvings and the girls to whom those men had made love, when the world was younger—smiled, and said that as it had been, so it would always be.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Page numbers have been removed due to a non-page layout.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

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[The end of *Mirror of Dreams* by Martin Louis Alan Gompertz (as Ganpat)]