

THE SHERPA AND THE SNOWMAN

*Charles
Stonor*



DOES the "Snowman" exist—an ape-like creature dwelling in the unexplored fastnesses of the Himalayas—or is he only a myth? Here the author describes a quest which began in the foothills of Nepal and led to the lower slopes of Everest. After five months of wandering in the vast alpine stretches on the roof of the world he and his companions had to return without any demonstrative proof, but with enough indirect evidence to convince them that the *yeti* is no myth and that one day he will be found to be a very remarkable man-like ape of a type thought to have died out thousands of years before the dawn of history.

Apart from the search for the "snowman," the narrative investigates every aspect of life in this the highest habitable region of the earth's surface, the flora and fauna of the little-known alpine zone below the snow line, the unexpected birds and beasts to be met with in the Great Himalayan Range, the little Buddhist communities perched high up among the crags, and above all the Sherpas themselves—that stalwart people chiefly known to us so far for their gallant assistance in climbing expeditions—their yak-herding, their happy family life, and the way they cope with the bleak austerity of their lot.

The book is lavishly illustrated with the author's own photographs.

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When the first signs of spring appear the Sherpas move out to their grazing grounds, camping for the night among the rocks

THE SHERPA AND THE SNOWMAN

By
CHARLES STONOR

With a Foreword by
BRIGADIER SIR JOHN HUNT, C.B.E., D.S.O.

LONDON
HOLLIS & CARTER

Made and printed in Great Britain by
William Clowes and Sons, Limited, London and Beccles, for
Hollis and Carter Limited
25 Ashley Place, London, S.W.1

First published 1955

To
Sherman and Jeanne

Foreword

I AM glad to have the opportunity to add my testimony to this book about Sherpas and Snowmen, because I believe in them both, though in different ways. In four expeditions and many wanderings through the Himalayas over a period of more than twenty years, I have had Sherpas as my companions. I have seen them enduring—even grinning—under dire duress in a blizzard, on steep and hazardous ground, gasping for breath at high altitude. I have also seen them relaxed in the bosom of their families, and lit up by the spirit of celebration. My feeling about the Sherpa folk is best expressed by saying that there is no one whom I would sooner have with me in a tough spot, there is no one with whom I have felt more at home than those fine companions of mine—Tensing : Angtharkay : Pasang Dawa Lama : Pasang Kikuli : Dawa Thondup : Palden : Da Tenzing : Da Namgyal : Ang Nyima and many others. They are the salt of the earth.

And I believe in the Yeti. I have seen his tracks, heard his yelping call, listened to first-hand experiences of reputable local people, similar to those which you will read about in this book. Indeed, why should he not exist? I said as much to Ralph Izzard of the *Daily Mail*, when I was travelling by air towards Kathmandu—and Everest—in 1953. I further said that I thought it high time that a scientific expedition took the field with the specific mission of throwing more light on the subject. It is possible that this chance remark may have had something to do with the setting up of the expedition of which Mr. Stonor was a member. That they did not sight a Yeti is scarcely surprising. That evidence will be produced sooner or later, sufficient to convince the doubters, is beyond doubt.

JOHN HUNT

Camberley

19th February 1955

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Acknowledgements

ABOVE all, and in equal measure, my thanks are due to the enterprise and generosity of the *Daily Mail*, who made our expedition possible, and to the Sherpa people as a whole, whose good-neighbourliness kept it going in the field. In terms of personalities, I am equally grateful in the same sense to Mr. Leonard Curtis, Foreign Editor of the *Daily Mail*, whose unstinted support and encouragement from London kept up our morale through many a difficult patch, and to my Sherpa sirdar, Gyalchen of Namche, whose honest, hard work was of greater value than he would either realise or admit.

Direct help and moral support were given by many in Kathmandu: especially The Hon. The Prime Minister, H.E. The Indian Ambassador, H.E. General Kayser Sham Sher Jung Bahadur Rana, and Mr. David Hay-Neave of the British Embassy.

We had a staunch and unbiased friend in the late Professor Wood Jones, F.R.S., F.R.C.S. Since my return to England I have had much good advice and practical help from Dr. Osman Hill (Prosecutor to the Zoological Society of London) and from the Rev. Gervase Mathew, O.P. Among my fellow members of the "*Daily Mail* Himalayan Expedition" I am particularly indebted to Mr. Ralph Izzard. Thanks are also due to the *Daily Mail* for permission to use the photographs I took during the expedition, and to quote from Ralph Izzard's Dispatches.

C. S.

CHAPTER 1

A Himalayan Mystery

WE should be dull dogs indeed were the subject of mountains to strike no chord of interest or arouse in us no feelings of enthusiasm. All the great natural wonders of the world's surface cast, each in its own way, a magnetic spell of attraction over mankind, throwing out their own individual challenges to come to grips with the elements of which they are made: challenges which have proved overwhelming for all sorts and conditions of men, who have found it ever imperative to meet them in the working out of their appointed destinies. Some peoples have groped their way to wrest a living from the great forests, or found an outlet for their spirit of adventure by seeking out their teeming wild life. Others have won a livelihood, or found satisfaction, in battling with the glare and parchedness of the deserts; others by exploiting the resources of the oceans, and fighting through the fury of the elements to chart their furthest boundaries.

But of all the series of natural phenomena that have dared us to brave their dangers and explore their secrets, surely the greatest spell-binders have been the mighty ranges of mountains, which throw out a two-fold challenge, either to obtain a permanent foothold and carve out a niche among them, or to come to grips with them by the more fleeting way of yielding to the lure of the unknown and indulging the spirit of adventure for its own sake alone. The aesthetic appeal of their natural beauty, the limitless variation of their scenery, the unending contrasts of conditions, from hot, steamy valleys and forested slopes, leading up to the incomparable grandeur of the snow-capped peaks—all these have struck a responsive chord in men of every race. For the explorer, the seeker of adventure, mountains hold an inexhaustible diversity

of riches, something to appeal to every imaginable interest. The conquest of peaks, the finding of new and lovely plants, the simple pleasure of climbing for its own sake, the strange birds and beasts, sport, the directly aesthetic appeal, the manners of the races who dwell among them: each of these interests has been an irresistible attraction to men of every generation in turn.

Of all the great mountain masses, none has called forth such response to their challenge or offered such marvellous treasures to those who will come and get them as the stupendous chain of the Himalayas. As mountains go they are—so the geologists tell us—of no great age, a very few million years at the most; not a startling figure in these days, when astronomical figures are normal in every aspect of our lives, but enough to surpass our understanding. The people who live there, the birds and beasts, have all a remarkable fascination, for they have flowed in unceasingly, possibly for almost as long as man has lived on the face of the earth, up the valleys, over the passes, from every point of the compass: from the east through China; from the Asiatic steppes to the north; from India to the south; and through Europe and Asia Minor to the west.

Of late years, the great peaks have so monopolised our attention that other aspects of the Himalayas have receded into the background. Expedition after expedition has gone out, often paid its toll in disaster, but accomplished feats of bravery that have stirred the world and inspired others to ever greater achievements. So it is that the very name of the Himalayas, for our generation, signifies the region of snow-capped peaks and glaciers.

This is the story of a different venture. It tells of no deeds of heroism, of no risks undergone or climbs attempted. It is the story of an attempt to probe a little into the obscurity of the less spectacular fastnesses, to try and glimpse how mankind has come to grips with life and faced the task of wresting a livelihood on the roof of the world. It tries, above all, to tell of an attempt to solve a baffling mystery.

For half a century curious rumours have been trickling back from the highest Himalayas concerning a strange and hitherto

unknown beast living in the remote crags of the alpine region. The crop of rumours has varied from the frankly ludicrous to some which sounded perfectly reasonable and circumstantial. Some reports have told of giant, man-like creatures that attack human beings; others of monsters taking over abandoned tents of an Everest expedition; of grotesque beasts walking backwards and prowling round ice-bound camps at night. An army officer, according to one report, encountered a hairy man leaning on a bow. A creature twelve feet tall and clothed in shaggy hair wreaked such havoc in Sikkim among employees of the Posts and Telegraph Department that a firing-squad of troops had to be called out to liquidate it. To see a Snowman was to die. If you met one it was easy to escape by bombarding it with stones, which it adroitly caught in its hands till it was too cluttered up with missiles to retaliate! So far there was nothing to take seriously, a fairy-tale no different from hundreds of others current all over the world. On going a little deeper, it soon became obvious to me that none of these fantastic tales could be traced to any definite source or amounted to more than flights of fancy, inspired and fostered by journalistic zeal, for they all seemed to be gleaned at third hand, from some vague and very uncertain source. But there were other accounts which were by no means so absurd or so unreasonable. More important still, explorers and mountaineers, with knowledge of the Himalayas based on years of experience, were coming round to the view that there was *something* at the back of this tangled web of stories.

From the Kingdom of Nepal to the little State of Bhutan, every Tibetan, Sherpa, Sikkimese, and Bhutanese was known to have a firm belief in the existence of some such man-like creature. A number of Europeans had snippets of evidence and had found, or been shown certain tracks in the snow which did not quite tally with those of any known animal.

In 1937 Sir John Hunt was in Eastern Nepal and climbed the Zemu gap on its north side. At a height of nineteen thousand feet he came on two lines of tracks so human in form that he assumed at first someone had been over before him, though it was proved beyond doubt that nobody could have been in the

area at the time. Again, in 1951 Mr. Eric Shipton came on a set of fresh tracks in the Everest region which he could not reconcile with bear footprints; they were unanimously dubbed Snowman tracks by the Sherpa guide and porters who were with him.

A striking account of how a *Yeti*—as the unknown beast was called by the Sherpas—was seen at the monastery of Thyangboche near Everest was retailed by the monks to members of the victorious Everest expedition. The tale was told so simply and graphically as to make a deep impression on them. During the depths of the winter of 1951, a Yeti had come down from the higher ranges and was seen by a group of monks as it plodded about in the snow. They were too scared to investigate it closely, and turned out in force, banging drums and cymbals and blowing on conch shells, until it disappeared among the nearby rhododendron bushes.

A Greek explorer, Mr. A. N. Tombazi, was camping not far from the Zemu gap in 1925. His porters called him from his tent to see something they were sure was a Yeti. He recorded the incident thus in his book, *An account of a Photographic Expedition to the Southern Slopes of Kianchenjunga* :

“Intense glare prevented me from seeing anything for the first few seconds; but I soon spotted the object referred to, two or three hundred yards away down the valley. Unquestionably the figure in outline was exactly upright, and stooping occasionally to uproot some dwarf rhododendrons. It showed dark against the snow, and wore no clothing. Within the next minute or so it had moved into some thick scrub and disappeared. I examined the footprints, which were similar in shape to those of a man, but only six or seven inches long. Marks of five toes and instep were clear, but trace of heel indistinct.

“The prints were undoubtedly those of a biped. From enquiries I gathered that no man had gone in this direction since the beginning of the year. The coolies naturally trotted out fantastic legends of demons, snowmen. Without in the least believing these delicious fairy-tales, notwithstanding the plausible yarns told by natives, I am at a loss to express any



The centre of Patan includes many lovely temples



In Kathmandu, Mahakala sprawls hugely over a slab of stone,
human heads clutched in his hand

definite opinion. I can only reiterate with certainty that the silhouette of the mysterious being was identical with the outline of a human figure."

Mr. Tombazi's was a strange tale, the more so as he was completely unbiased, if not a cynical witness, who had clearly no axe to grind and no cause to advocate. Quite possibly the distortion often brought about by the glare from the snow might have caused both Mr. Tombazi and his porters to be deceived as to what they saw. They could hardly have been deceived over the shape of the footprints left behind in the snow.

In April 1952 a Swiss expedition was on a reconnaissance of the lower slopes of Everest and encountered sets of fresh tracks in the Khumbu glacier, which they were at great pains to examine and analyse. These seem to have been not unlike those of a bear; but judging from their published reports there seems to have been some doubt as to what they really were.

A strange but unconfirmed story has been told of two Norwegians, Mr. Thorberg and Mr. Frostis, again from the region of the Zemu pass into eastern Nepal. Here, in 1948, they and their party followed up a double set of man-like tracks in the snow and actually came to grips with the beasts responsible, which they courageously tried to lasso. They were in consequence attacked. One of the party was knocked down and mauled, and while the rest were attending to him both the animals got away. All were in agreement that they had encountered two large apes.

Let us admit at the outset that owing to the romantic appeal of their country of origin, and the element of mystery in their background, some of the accounts put on record (those I have quoted are by no means complete), may have been unconsciously embroidered here and there. But the unprejudiced mind is left with a sneaking feeling that if only the evidence could be sorted out and analysed there would be found wrapped in the tangle of rumours a hard core of truth.

A single stroke of the pen had greatly added to the confusion of ideas. In parts of Tibet, the name given to the unknown beast is *Metoh Kangmi*, and a retired business man, living in Darjeeling,

had hit on the quaint but accurate translation of the Tibetan word: "Abominable Snowman". By the simple weapon of ridicule the poor creature was banished to the realms of fantasy and reduced to the level of the music-hall stage. But was its name really so absurd? Long ages ago reports came back to the Ancient World that there was a strange, hairy creature, living in the forests of Africa, called by the natives Gorilla or Hairy Savage. The possibility of such a beast being real was too fantastic and its existence was discredited. To the Borneans their Great Ape is known as Orang-Outan, the Wild Man of the Jungle. And, in the same way, the Tibetan name *Metoh Kangmi* tries to do no more than sum up a repellent man-like creature whose home lies in the higher, snowy ranges of the Himalayas.

Now it is not in the nature of discoveries, whether great or small, to be made spontaneously, or to materialise without a long pregnancy and drawn-out birth pangs, accompanied, from some odd twist in human nature, by disparagement from just those sources who might have been expected to give the greatest measure of encouragement and sympathy, and to show the most enthusiasm.

Thus, nearly one hundred years ago there was dug up in Germany the skull of a primitive type of Man. Science was then loath to admit that such beings had ever existed. Leading authorities tumbled over each other in their attempts to prove it nonsense. It was a freak, it came near the skull of a modern Irishman, it had belonged to a Russian Cossack from the Napoleonic Wars, and so on. Closer to our own times, the brilliant finds by Dr. Broom of Ape-Men's skeletons in South Africa called down derision on his head from his colleagues, who brushed the whole matter aside with the hypothesis of a chimpanzee.

The case of the Snowman is no exception to the rule. When an expedition to investigate it was first mooted the natural reaction was to seek advice from the experts, to turn to professional mammalogists and authorities on the life of the Himalayas; this on the artless assumption that their qualified enthusiasm would strengthen our morale, and their unbiased judgement aid our analysis. Far from it. We did little more than call down on our

heads a storm of ridicule, prejudice, shocked disapproval, and incredulity.

"I am not interested in this Snowman business" was the automatic (and lasting) reaction of a mammalogist. "It is impossible; impossible I tell you", sums up the attitude of an authority on the Himalayas. "The Snowman is *of course* based on the Red Bear. And in any case nothing you see can be taken seriously, because everyone goes a little mad and starts 'seeing things' once they get over twelve thousand feet." Thus spoke a prominent Zoologist.

Solemn warnings were issued against putting our trust in Sherpas, summarised by the all-embracing formula beloved of sticklers for accuracy: "Do remember that a Native (*sic*) will always tell you what he thinks will please you and what you want him to say."

An exhibition had been set up, not so very long back, in a Scientific Institution, to prove that the unknown beast from the higher Himalayas was in reality based on the common Langur Monkey of the mountain forests, which, it was supposed, wandered up every now and again into the alpine country above the forest, when the superstitious minds of Sherpas and Tibetans had endowed it with new qualities. Yet, others had identified it as a Bear. . . . A Bear and a Monkey! Could any two Himalayan animals be less easily confused—the great Red Bear and the small Langur Monkey? A third school of thought had swept everything aside into the realms of folklore and fantasy, and declined to entertain any alternative theory. Might it not be that expert opinion was being a trifle premature and (dare one whisper it) *unscientific*, to give three such diverse and dogmatic pronouncements on what was to simple folk a body of vague evidence, adding up to no more than a general impression?

Some said it was a horse
Others they said nay,
While others said it was a house
With the chimney-pot blown away.

To do ourselves justice, we had no intention of letting our very tepid reception from the learned world damp our enthusiasm. Nor did it. Indeed it put us on our mettle all the more. Besides, we had friendly interest and sympathetic support from explorers of the first calibre; an open-minded and loyal friend came forward in the late Professor Wood Jones, F.R.S., F.R.C.S., widely known as an anatomist and anthropologist, who declared himself as puzzled by the problem as anyone.

Those of us who were interested in going out to see what we could discover for ourselves in the field met together to build up the case for a full-scale expedition. Finally the editorial office of the *Daily Mail* gave way to our entreaties, and agreed to back an expedition—a gesture which none of us who enjoyed this generous support ever had the smallest reason to regret. As the days went by public interest in the venture grew steadily. Once it was announced in the press, suggestions and offers of help came pouring in. A learned don wrote to implore that the poor Snowman should be treated with “good manners and consideration”. A famous promoter of entertainments offered a staggering sum for one brought back alive. A film company was avid to import glamour into the make-up of the expedition and send a team of producers and camera-men.

Odd shreds of information continued to come in. An expedition to Nepal that had started out from Bombay reported they had been shown the scalp of a Snowman, preserved in a small monastery not far from Mt. Everest. The same party was also told that one was actually in captivity at Shigatse in Tibet, where it had been seen by Sherpas passing through on trading expeditions.

All was going quietly and steadily ahead when Fate took a minor hand in the game. News arrived that a scientific organisation in Switzerland was planning a similar expedition, due to arrive in the Himalayas only a week or two after ourselves. Our own choice of area had been limited by time, the porter problem, and the closure of so much of Asia to the western world, to the Everest region of Nepal. So it was for the Swiss. Here was something to whet our appetites for the chase still further; and

an even greater spur than the forces of opposition against us. Quiet preparations were pushed on in the background; plans of campaign were hurried on, and crystallised into as thorough a search of the Sherpa country of Nepal as time and local conditions would allow. Nor, in their wisdom, did our backers restrict the party to a search for the Snowman. It was a wonderful and enthralling prospect to be on the brink of a trip to one of the less known regions in the Himalayas, and to try and clear up a mystery into the bargain. But it was decided also to make a general survey of as many aspects as possible of the life in the high alpine country immediately below the permanent snow-line. Force of circumstances, the seasons, a tight budget, and so on have invariably restricted expeditions to this region to thinking in terms of a single objective—climbing, surveying, geologising, plant collecting and so on—with all else entirely subsidiary. There was, so it seemed to us, great scope for a generalised party, to try and build up an all-round picture of life on the roof of the world.

I skimmed the pages of encyclopedias in vain for the name Sherpa. Nothing seemed to be on record anywhere, except that they were a race of people who had earned the affection and the respect of all previous expeditions by their loyalty and toughness. There were a hundred other subjects to study: the birds and beasts, and how they organise their lives at great altitudes; the plants of the topmost, alpine zone, and the wonderful rhododendron flora.

The team, as finally selected, was of nine members:

Ralph Izzard: senior Foreign Correspondent of the *Daily Mail*.

Gerald Russell: American naturalist-traveller.

Tom Stobart: Photographer to the Everest Expedition.

Charles Stonor: Biologist and Anthropologist.

Biswamoy Biswas: Zoologist on the Survey of India.

William Edgar: Doctor to the Expedition.

John Jackson: Climber.

Stanley Jeeves } Photographers: assistants to Tom Stobart.
Charles Lagus }

Greatly to my own satisfaction I was chosen as advance party;

to push on ahead with all speed and get a footing on the scene of our future operations.

So it came about that on 2 December 1953 I arrived in Calcutta. The strains and headaches of permits, passports and equipment faded into a blurred memory, and only a few hours after a final briefing in London I found myself taking an evening stroll through the main streets of the huge, untidy, straggling city; stepping over the innumerable sleeping shapes wrapped in tattered cloths, a few square yards of pavement the only home they would ever know, a public tap their bathing place, and with no certainty of life beyond the next meal. But, for all their total lack of possessions, they seemingly enjoyed a measure of contentment, bred, not of hopeless, crushed resignation, but of the wisdom that takes every day as it comes and leaves tomorrow to take care of itself.

The vignettes so typical of the life of a modernised city of the East—all the fleeting casual impressions that go far to build up a fair picture of the whole—flashed by me: the swarming beggars, bus-loads of passengers arriving from the airport, the clanging overcrowded tramcars, Sikh taxi-drivers, little shops open all night, the inevitable British business-man dropping in for a drink on his way home from the golf-course, bullocks holding up the traffic, the smell of the bazaar, the perspiring Tibetans down to trade in the cool weather.

My last-minute shopping was done, and a passage booked on the early morning plane for Kathmandu, when all my plans were thrown into the melting-pot. A meeting with a member of the Himalayan Club produced the information that there were so many climbing expeditions planned for the year that it was most unlikely any professional porters would be forthcoming from Darjeeling. No porters meant no expedition. So the following day found me, not en route for Nepal, but crawling in a taxi up seven thousand feet through the jungle to Darjeeling. As the road curled round the last ridge there flashed into view between the pine trees, the white mass of Kanchenjunga far distant in the haze, beyond endless green valleys and forest-clad ranges, on the border of Nepal: an inspiring sight, to me particularly; for

whatever frustrations might lie ahead I was at least near enough not to be turned back now.

The first task was to make contact with Tensing Norkay and see what could be done about the permanent porters. We needed a round dozen of these Sherpas, who live in Darjeeling and are trained as professional servants and porters for expeditions. Tensing was gone away to Kalimpong for a day or two but he would be back next day: a not unwelcome hold-up, giving time to wander round and explore the town. Like so many hill stations created by the British out of nothing, Darjeeling is a perpetual mushroom growth, with all its dependencies and satellites of drifting, shifting population: Bengalis, Sherpas, Tibetans, Sikkimese, Nepalese, bearded Sikhs, turbaned Kashmiris, retired officials, sellers of imitation Tibetan jewellery, tea-garden coolies, bazaar riff-raff. When the British first reached Darjeeling, well over a century ago, it was a forest-clad ridge with a scattering of tribal hamlets: the homes of an ancient little tribe named Lepchas. They are a Mongolian people, primitive denizens of the mountain forests, where they lived by hunting, gathering jungle food, and growing a few crops. In all probability they are as ancient a race as any we have knowledge of in the Himalayas (such a tribe survives further east in their primitive state to this day). Dim ages back they must have had the hills of Sikkim to themselves, until they came under the sway of Tibet and were converted to Buddhism. Later the Nepalese started to push in from the west; then came the British from the south, and the Lepchas were progressively reduced and rent asunder by the pulls of these several cultures.

Friendly little people, slit-eyed and yellow-complexioned, many of them work as servants in Darjeeling itself. So that it seemed a good idea to try to get in touch with them, in case they might have a few scraps of information on the object of our quest. Contact was soon made with a few individuals. Did they they ever hear the tales, so often repeated by Tibetans, that there are strange, ape-like creatures in the Himalayas?

They knew of some such creature very well. Their ancestors

had handed down a tradition of it, which they believed in firmly. They could repeat its outlines :

“Long ago there was a beast in our mountains, known to our forefathers as the *Thloh-Mung*, meaning in our language Mountain Savage. Its cunning and ferocity were so great as to be a match for anyone who encountered it. It could always outwit our Lepcha hunters, with their bows and arrows. The *Thloh-Mung* was said to live alone, or with a very few of its kind; and it went sometimes on the ground, and sometimes in the trees. It was only found in the higher mountains of our country. Although it was made very like a man, it was covered with long, dark hair, and was more intelligent than a monkey, as well as being larger. The people became more in number, the forests and wild country less; and the *Thloh-Mung* disappeared. But many people say they are still to be found in the mountains of Nepal, away to the west, where the Sherpa people call them *Yeti*.”

One man declared quite positively that he knew them to exist. Some years ago, when he was working as a servant, his master took him down to Calcutta, where he had seen just such a creature in the Zoological Gardens. A few simple questions brought it out that he was speaking of an Orang-Outan.

This was no more than an ancient tradition, and not very much to go on. At best it was a straw in the wind; but an encouraging start. It was difficult to think of such a story growing out of nothing, or without some vague background of truth.

Once Tensing was back from Kalimpong there was no time to be lost in making contact with him. Next morning I went round to his house, to be given a warm welcome, in keeping with his unspoilt charm, which the glamour of spectacular success seemed to have left unaffected. He was only too ready to help in any way possible, and left no doubt as to his own belief in the reality of the Yeti (he was emphatic that there are two kinds)—as substantial to him as the summit of Everest. He had spent much of his

boyhood herding yaks in the heart of the Sherpa country, working for friends of his family at a shilling a month and his food. There on his solitary vigils he had more than once heard its call and seen its footprints in the snow, even though he had never actually set eyes on one. Now was the time of year to go and look for it: for the smaller kind comes lower and nearer the villages in the winter season. Our chances of finding one were summed up as slender, but by no means hopeless.

Tensing's co-operation was immediate and practical. Somehow or other a team of porters would be got together, ready to meet me next morning; a good sirdar would be in charge, and the party would be in Nepal by the time the main expedition caught up. So was the crisis of the day solved.

Business over, Mrs. Tensing and her two step-daughters dispensed coffee while I admired his trophies plastered over the walls, which included signed portraits of the rulers of three countries, medals, decorations, and trophies from every continent of the world. A pleasant-faced Tibetan came in to join us. He proved to be Lobsang Samten, elder brother to the Dalai Lama. Poor man, he had done his best to fit in with the Chinese regime in Lhasa: until the perpetual spying and dogging of his every footstep had become more than he could bear. One night he had flitted, ending up as a refugee in the more liberal atmosphere of India. It was at least good to learn that his younger brother was being well-treated, and left unmolested by the Chinese conquerors.

True to his word, Tensing had the Sherpa backbone to the expedition lined up outside his house: a happy, feckless gathering. Their arrangements completed, I started back again down the long road to the air-strip and to Calcutta.

Two hours' flight from Calcutta to the parched aridity of Patna, a change of planes and a short wait, then I was crossing over the immense grasslands and forests fringing the southern border of the kingdom, and dividing it off from India; over the birth-place of Buddha, hidden in a small clearing in the forest; over the game-preserves of the ruling family of Nepal, one of the last hideouts of the Indian Rhinoceros; until we climbed sharply to cross the first foothills of the Himalayas.

CHAPTER 2

The Great Valley of Nepal and its Cities

IN the far distant past a swampy lake of some three hundred square miles in area, locked away in the outer ranges of the Himalayas, was released by earthquakes and its waters began to drain off and find their way to the south down to the plains of Bihar. It left behind a great, flat expanse of well-watered soil, the rich, fertile deposits carried down over the ages by a thousand mountain streams. Men of the Stone Age in all probability plied their primitive craft on the waters of the lake, snared its wildfowl, and caught its fish: their smoothed stone tools, now and then picked up by the Nepalese of today, are witness of their presence.

As the water drained out—perhaps so fast that its fall could be watched—stretches of soft alluvial mud became exposed and lay ready for any who could work it. This paradise for cultivators cannot long have escaped the eye of people who had acquired the art of growing grain by irrigation. And we can think of tribes on the wander, seeking out somewhere to settle down and find respite from the hard, exacting taskmaster of the Himalayas, trickling into the Great Valley from north, south, east, and west; multiplying in the easy, fever-free mountain climate, with food in plenty; conquering each other and being conquered; finding above all their home and the manner of life they could build up tolerable, and free enough from want to allow them rein for their inborn skills and cultural bents, without the crippling restraint of fear of starvation.

Peoples found their way in over the great backbone of the Himalayas, through the passes from Tibet, along the ranges from both sides, and across the fringing mountains to the south from India. They brought with them the cultures of their own homes, the skills and crafts inborn and inherited in their various stocks,

their own religious beliefs and philosophies, each adding its own quota of ingredients to the stock-pot wherein was brewing the rudiments of a civilisation.

Look at a map, and you will see what kind of a history the Great Valley of Nepal must have had, shut off as it was, locked away in the hills, welcoming newcomers not as transient passengers moving off again in due course over the mountains, but absorbing them into itself, giving them all they needed in the riches it had to offer. And it was these three elements, the abundance of good things in the earth, the fever-free moderate climate, and the nature of the peoples who came to live in it, that made up the setting in which could grow and evolve the wonderful civilisation of the Great Valley.

How old the civilisation of Nepal may be, none can say. That it goes back to roots far beyond our own is certain. Historians tell us it was well established when Buddha himself visited the valley between two and three thousand years ago. In the world of ancient India it was a centre of learning, art and religion, its people being converted to Buddhism long before Tibet, their flair for the material arts known and appreciated for many centuries as far away as Peking. The geography has made for migration into the valley by slow, painful stages through fever-ridden rain forest, and cruel mountain passes. Although links of trade and ties of culture have been maintained unceasingly with the outside world, the hall-mark of Nepalese civilisation remains largely one of isolation, with its narrowing limitations, but more precious compensating advantages of liberty for the people to work out and develop their own talents in terms of themselves, free from outside interference and distractions.

Who are the Nepalese? Who are these peoples whose racial stocks have combined and blended to evolve the wonderful culture of the Great Valley, who have multiplied to teem, seven million strong, over mountains and valley alike?

The plain truth is that not a great deal is known of them. By historical tradition the valley was developed and given its stamp by the Newars, a most ancient race, presumably Mongolian, although vague links with southern India are claimed for them.

It has been the amazing flair for the material arts of the Newars and their inborn ingenuity as husbandmen that have made the towns so abundantly rich in treasures of stone, metal and wood. They are almost certainly the solid foundation on which Nepal anciently rested, the people who first exploited the Great Valley, whose skilled hands developed the system of agriculture to the pitch of efficiency needed, not only for the support of a large population, but to provide the vital surplus to make other activities possible.

It was the Newars who for hundreds or even thousands of years ruled the valley and its surrounding mountains, and were divided into three petty kingdoms in the towns of Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhatgaon: busy, progressive, religious, and bellicose one with another.

Away in the mountains there live other peoples, some of them well known by name—but whose ways of life and customs are still infinitely obscure; the Rais, the Gurungs, the Nagars, the Kirantis, the Tamangs, the Khumbus, the Sherpas, most of the same ultimate Mongolian stock as the Tibetans and the Chinese. And besides them there are others, small primitive groups of whom next to nothing has been recorded, who are not even a name to the outside world, but remain tucked away in the distant valleys.

Among the neighbours of the Newar Kings were a small but able stock, an Aryan people, driven out in the Middle Ages by the onslaught of Mohammedanism from Rajputana in North-West India. These had sought refuge in the mountains of Nepal, west of the Great Valley, and built up their own tiny Hindu State of Gurkha. Many generations later, in the eighteenth century of our era, something fanned to a burning flame the smouldering embers of their long dormant warlike spirit, and the Gurkhas started edging their way to the east so as to challenge the dominion of the Newars. A series of ding-dong battles followed, till they had made themselves masters of the Great Valley and all that lay beyond it, changing after an endless continuity the whole fabric of the country and unifying it into a Kingdom of their own devising, wherein the two great families of Sah and Rana

respectively supplied the hereditary Monarchs and filled the great offices of the State, a system that has broken down only in very recent years.

My own smattering of knowledge on the country's history, the wonderful heritage preserved in its cities, my many pleasant memories of the Nepalese, both as soldiers and simple peasants living down in India, the aura of romance and mystery surrounding every aspect of their history, and their richly earned fame as fighting men—all these flashed through my mind. Small wonder that I was eager to arrive and find myself at last in this fairy-tale land.

What an anti-climax awaited me as the plane slewed round to taxi in front of the airport buildings! A hot dusty, air-strip, a few temporary sheds, grubby small boys—nothing in any way different from a hundred other new aerodromes anywhere in the East.

This is one of the great drawbacks to air travel: it creates such bad first impressions. Air ports are of necessity sited in the belt outside the edges of cities; that deadly dull no-man's-land, neither town, nor country, nor suburb.

My time in the great valley was deplorably short, and even these few days were crammed morning to night. Formal calls to be paid on the Prime Minister, on the Embassies and on the Indian Military Mission; frenzied last-minute shopping; cables to be sent to London; a dozen porters to be arranged for my journey up to the Sherpa country. But by pruning off an hour here and there, and stealing an afternoon to myself, the briefest glimpse of the Valley was possible, and of the three cities of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhatgaon.

The hotel I was putting up in, a former palace of a Prime Minister, was on the outskirts of Patan, of all towns in Nepal richest in its cultural inheritance. To get to it I walked across an open dusty plain, where modern Nepal was to the fore and a party of Army recruits were being put through their paces, marching and counter-marching with all the intensity of effort and the virility that is the stamp of every Gurkha soldier. Then abruptly I was back in the remote past of the city's early civilisation:

a bulging, tapering dome of solid, white-painted brick loomed up, a shrine put up by Emperor Asoka, traditional founder of the town, and one of the greatest men of the ancient world, although barely a name to us ignoramuses of the West. Two hundred and fifty years before the birth of Christ he made his way in state up to the Valley, even then a centre of civilisation, and took it nominally into his Empire. And so into the streets of the little town, set compactly amid the rice fields; its houses high, close-packed, and as everywhere in the valley built of a mellow, good-weathering reddish brick. Its streets were narrow, and intersected by innumerable lanes and alley ways, impressive in rather the same way as the old quarters of Edinburgh. One looked in from the street, through open doors and archways, into great square quadrangles surrounded by dwelling-houses with a look of tenements about them. And everywhere there were temples and shrines, stone figures, and carvings, in an incredible prodigality; little shrines at the corner of every street, guarded by stone demons, and beautifully ornate pagodas and temples, their courtyards opening unexpectedly out of the dingiest lanes.

A kindly soul, seeing my tourist's enthusiasm for his home, beckoned me down an uninvitingly dark alley, where an open sewer flowed its sluggish way among the cobble stones, and the tall houses nearly met overhead, and where it would have been hardly surprising, as I peered up above, had a casement been flung open with a warning cry of *gardiloo*. We passed from the odoriferous gloom, through a doorway, and suddenly into the open precincts of a small pagoda-style temple, encrusted completely with sheets of shimmering copper-gilt, dazzlingly bright in contrast to its surroundings. I dawdled on through the streets, stopping every few paces to admire a shrine, a superb wood carving, a window latticed with the finest tracery in wood, or an intricate plaque over a doorway.

For the Newars, although they have in the main linked their flair for art with their deeply religious temperament, have found in their wood-carving a more secular outlet for their talent. Beams, struts, casements, panels over doorways, friezes on temple

walls—everywhere the architecture was enchantingly enlivened with the detailed and imaginative art of the craftsmen, doing away with shadows, picking out the beams and the lines of the woodwork. Most beautiful of all are the carved screens of window casements, many of them quite exquisite in the symmetry of their patterns. Often they are in the form of a peacock, its head looking out from the centre, and around it a tangential pattern of curves, simple diamonds, or squares. As striking, and carved with the greatest wealth of detail, are the panels, or tympanums over so many doors, with figures of gods and goddesses, birds, beasts, and demons from Hindu mythology, each immensely pleasing in its lines.

The centre of Patan is an open square, in which are the former Royal Palace, and several fine temples. In the fleeting impression I was able to take away of it, there stands out especially a bewitching view of a street lined with pagodas, leading away from the square, and backed in the far distance by the gleaming white of the mountains.

These towns of Nepal owe much of their beauty to a wonderful blend of styles; for the architects and craftsmen have never been afraid to borrow: the pagoda from China, the stupa domes from India, all enhanced by their own precious gift of originality. Anciently, before the Gurkha conquest, Patan ranked first among the three little Kingdoms of the Valley, with its own royal house of Newar stock; it also held an unrivalled place as a centre of Buddhist culture and learning; not only unrivalled in Nepal but known and respected in far away China, as it was, so much nearer, in India. There flourished no fewer than fifteen great seats of Buddhist learning, smaller institutions without number, and a multitudinous population of monks and students and scholars. To all this the material survivals of today give testimony. The great open spaces and quadrangles were once surrounded by their cells and places of study, and the shrines and temples are the surviving expression of such piety. Perhaps, indeed, Patan could boast of being the greatest centre of Buddhist culture in the East. Yet for all its charms, what is left today is no more than the shell. The Buddhist centres may have been on the wane from internal

reasons; but Patan was still a power in the world of the eighteenth century, when the Gurkhas, militant in their Hinduism as in all else, broke into it, sacking, slaughtering, looting and destroying. They hacked down and desecrated the shrines, and removed the best of the works of art. From this disaster Patan never recovered. The royal house was no more and the government was removed to Kathmandu. Its people still number more than twenty thousand, and are by religion largely Buddhists, but with a strange intermixture of Hinduism that has so much intrigued the learned.

Perhaps the Newar craftsman will never get back his real vigour. The main incentive has gone this past century and a half. A great link in the chain of continuity is snapped. But their genius is only slumbering and subdued, far indeed from death. As I made my way through the streets, the tap of the metal-smith's hammer and the wheeze of his bellows sounded from many little shops and houses. It was captivating to look in through an open shop front and watch a silversmith crouched in his corner, beating out finely chased cups or blowing up his little fire of highest-grade charcoal with the crudest and most primitive bellows imaginable: a bag of goat-skin with a nozzle at one end, the other open, with a wooden handle on either side. The same form of bellows is found all over Tibet and must be as old as the art of working metal. The average Newar craftsman keeps it for choice—though some use a type identical with our own—and perhaps its slowness is more efficient in regulating the temperature with precision.

Quite as fascinating to watch was the modelling by the simple process of *cire perdue*—"lost wax"—by which the Newars make the small metal figures and temple vessels. It is a process perfectly efficient, and as old as civilisation. First the object is modelled by making an exact replica of wax. This is coated firmly in clay with a hole left at one end, and then baked hard in the fire. The melted wax is absorbed into the clay or poured out, and the space it leaves is replaced by molten metal poured in to take its place. A little filing and polishing up, and the figure, or whatever it may be, is finished.

Peace and quiet, tinged with the sadness of vanished greatness is the keynote of Patan; all the more poignant in that it was no



The Newar craftsmen have created many beautiful memorial figures to their past rulers. Prince Bhupatindra looks serenely down on the buildings he set up in the city of Bhatgaon



Thousands of years of hard work and skill have built up a wonderful system of irrigated terraces throughout the mountains of
Nepal

mushroom growth but can boast of roots going back so far into history.

A few miles down the road and you come to Kathmandu, the capital, a long city, traditionally of the shape of a sword, of possibly sixty thousand people or more, and a place of very different atmosphere. Every one of its many streets I found swarming with people. Here were rows and rows of little dark shops, half a street selling nothing but pots and pans; a row of tiny booths piled high with sacred ornaments of brass, another block given over to spices, chillies, and so on. There was an overall air of bustling vitality, very much the essence of a living capital. In Kathmandu the wonderful wood-carving runs riot, even more than in Patan, in an artistic jumble: exotic friezes round temples, casements, chiselled pillars and beams. There are temples in plenty, tucked away for the most part behind the streets. Kathmandu is a stronghold of Hinduism, and its harsher carvings and bedaubed idols come as a mild jar after the gentler, tranquil art of Patan.

In the centre of the city Mahakala, God of Destruction, sprawls hugely across a great slab of stone, grimly symbolic of destruction, with human heads clutched by their hair. To his image were once offered, so it is said, human sacrifices. Old Hanuman the Monkey God stands nearby under a state umbrella, his graven image hewn out of a massive rock, daubed with vermilion, and wrapped from dawn to dusk in a cloak. Near here, too, are the palace precincts, where the two images must have seen plottings, counter-plottings without number, and the terrible massacres which have left an indelible mark on the chequered history of their home.

Kathmandu, like Patan, has known catastrophe, and that in our own times, when a great earthquake laid it waste in 1932, hurling down temples, and wrecking whole streets. Much of it was rebuilt on modern European lines, with wide streets, ferro-concrete houses and shops—symbols of a policy of modernisation that is kept up to the present day. So much has been written of Kathmandu as the centre of a country where western influences have been rigidly kept out, that the size and extent of its

westernisation came as a surprise—particularly the macadam roads, public lighting by electricity, and abundant taxis.

Time was when the ruling family of the Ranas, with all its ramifications, had pagoda-form palaces in the heart of the city. All that was changed when the great Maharajah Jang Bahadur visited Queen Victoria's England and brought back with him a tremendous enthusiasm for our practical way of life. This bore fruit in the building of countless palaces each grander and more ambitious than the last, which succeeded admirably in capturing the ponderous luxury of Bayswater and Belgravia as our plutocratic grandparents had newly created it.

My hotel on the outskirts of Patan had been, as I said, a Prime Minister's Palace. A huge white building with two square courtyards, it was approached by a carriage-drive edged unwelcomingly with a row of rustic seats fashioned in cement, which led up to a porticoed front door. It must have been once a glorious treasure-house of much that would have gladdened the hearts of the Forsytes. Though a great deal had been removed, traces of its vanished splendour remained: in the entrance hall a pair of stuffed leopards in mortal combat; two wreaths of artificial bay-leaves adorned the walls, nowadays flanking the fuse-box for the electric light; a glass dome covered some bright-hued South American birds; a dish of wax fruits stood on a sideboard, blending with imitation lilies, red plush sofas, and immense chandeliers.

But for originality the palm must go to a great palace, a building of really fine proportions, now used as a state hall for Government receptions and official functions. Out of its long, multi-chandeliered drawing-room opens a small room of full-length distorting mirrors, where tired or bored guests and functionaries can slip away for a few minutes' relaxation.

To make one's way home from the streets of Patan, their pattern of life unchanged these few thousand years, into the respectable pomp of the palaces, was to plunge into an utterly different world, cutting right across the ancient civilisation. The Gurkhas are a people of many admirable qualities, but by failing to use, or even understand the creative genius of the Newars they

had humbled, they missed a great opportunity. With all their upsurge of vigour, their ability and impulse to expand, there is no knowing what fresh inspiration they might have given to the culture of the people they had subjected to their rule.

One afternoon I hired a jeep-taxi and drove jerkily out for an hour, to visit a country palace of a late Maharajah, bumping along between endless rice fields, where men and women were everywhere at work, churning up the grey soil with the heavy-bladed hoes peculiar to the valley, and getting it ready for a winter sowing of corn. We passed through villages and hamlets of substantial houses, their steadings very European in their layout, with midden heaps, scratching chickens, and straying calves. Here and there I even saw scarecrows set up in the fields. Some were well-fashioned figures with an old hat jammed on the head, but others were no more than wisps of rice-straw, twisted to the symbolic shape of a human being with arms outstretched. Such a scarecrow could hardly have any practical use; and very possibly they are really symbols of the spirit of the grain crops, meant to protect and stand guard rather than drive off pests, and in their own way a mild expression of the creative spark of their makers.

The country palace has been taken over by the American Jesuit Fathers as a non-denominational boarding-school. They are the first missionaries to be allowed back into the country since their predecessors were expelled by the Gurkhas nearly two centuries ago. The boarding-school system is proving a great success already. As I was shown round the class-rooms it struck me, in these surroundings, as a little incongruous to see written up on the blackboards of the senior English class, Christmas greetings to "Long John Silver, Squire Trelawny, Dr. Livesey, and Ben Gunn".

On the way home I was thumbed for a lift by a family plodding along towards Kathmandu. Everyone squeezed in, flowing out over the sides of the jeep. The mother, who had got in beside me, handed me her baby to hold while she settled herself more comfortably, and as she did so she took off a shawl that covered

the child's face, when I found myself unwillingly clutching an advanced case of smallpox! Horrifying enough if it happened at home, but somehow not altogether unnatural here. There was no help for it, anyhow, but to hang on to the child and brave out the situation. Providentially the bumping of the jeep woke it up, and it started to howl; so the family, who were not much perturbed by the dreadful illness, thought it best to get out and walk, leaving me to keep my fingers crossed and hope for the effectiveness of my vaccination.

Nowadays the palaces and estates of the Rana family are so spread out as to link up Patan and Kathmandu. But seven miles or so south-east lies the town of Bhatgaon, third of the old Newar capitals. It is a compact, triangular place, ornate and adorned almost as lavishly as Patan, but not nearly so much knocked about. For it was a Hindu stronghold, and as such had been spared sacking by the Gurkha conquerors. I was able to fit in one fleeting visit; picking my way through the narrow, winding streets of brick and wooden houses, decorated and enriched everywhere with carved lattice screens and overhanging balconies, the doorways crowned with heavy plaques of gods and devils. By slow stages I reached the main square of the town, a place of the greatest beauty, perhaps the loveliest setting in all Nepal. Temples and shrines were scattered around the rambling, open space, its ground covered with flagged pavement. I was particularly struck by the impressive design of the steep flights of steps leading into some of the temples, and flanked with rows of stone statues, clear-cut in their style and portraying strangely garbed men and women, horses, rhinos, and some of the weird denizens of the unseen world.

Near the centre of the main square of Bhatgaon there kneels on a tall stone pillar a superb figure of burnished gold: the effigy of the great Prince Bhupatindra Mall, who ruled two hundred and fifty years ago. Aloof from the material world below, he looks down on the palace that was his creation, with its famous golden door, gorgeously ornamented and dazzling bright in the sun. Among all the achievements of the Newar artists and craftsmen, I saw nothing more satisfying to the eye than these shining gilt

memorial effigies, isolated on pillars, that they so delighted in setting up to honour the great among their dead.

Add to these artistic wonders the unique valley, ringed about with hills, and the tremendous sweep of the snows, merging distantly into the fresh blue of the winter sky; add an easy-going kind-hearted population genuinely glad to see you, and you find it hard indeed to tear yourself away. From those in authority and the well-to-do I had much and open hospitality; even happier to treasure were all the casual and friendly encounters with the ordinary simple folk of towns and villages, and the eager welcome they gave me to their valley.

A remarkable people the Nepalese. When we tot up their advantages as a race, the stocks and cultures that have gone to their making, the talents that have evolved, the links with other civilisations and philosophies, the fertility of their land, the fair ease of their climate, we find all the ingredients for the founding and development of a great civilisation, comparable to any the world has ever seen.

Perhaps the Gurkhas missed the chance when they brought in such an infusion of turbulent new blood and gifts so different from those of the people they had conquered. Perhaps Nepal will one day achieve a great place in history and rule the Himalayas from end to end, as she was bidding fair to do when her expansion was cut short by those of our own race.

It would have been so easy to lose sight of what I was there for, to find some excuse to forget the Snowman and his home, and to linger on in the Valley. The few days I had spent there had been just enough to whet my appetite for more. There were the two great centres of Buddhist worship, Swayambunath and Bodnath, where pilgrims find their way even now from as far distant as Ceylon, the effigy of the god Narain, which reclines half-submerged under water, and many many more of the (literally) thousands of shrines, temples and palaces; all had to be pushed into the background in the hope that one day in the future there would be the chance to visit them, perhaps also the chance to see something of the way of life that the people of this little kingdom, cradled in the richly fertile soil of the Valley, had built up for

themselves. There was the amazingly intricate pattern of their social life, the endless sub-divisions into castes—numbering seventy or so among the Newars alone—with the close-linked system of hereditary trades. There were the great religious festivals and processions, some of a ritual to be seen nowhere else in the Hindu or Buddhist world, and so little studied or understood by the West.

Of course I asked, here there and everywhere, about the Snowman. I asked diffidently, because I half-expected to be laughed at as a crank. Not a bit of it. I very soon found that the creature was taken quite seriously; somewhere in the region of the long line of snows, far beyond the valley, it was taken for granted that there dwelt an ape-like, man-like creature the *Banmanche*. More than that nobody could tell. There was a refreshing disapproval of any attempt to molest it, or try and turn it into a sporting animal: otherwise there was sympathetic interest and a barrage of good wishes from all sides.

My eve-of-departure preparations were complete; fourteen porters from the professional corps in Kathmandu lined themselves up in the bazaar. And on the morning of 17 December 1953 all was ready to set out on the fortnight-long trek to the country of the Sherpas.

CHAPTER 3

On the Road to the Snow Mountains

MY little party left Kathmandu by midday, and for some two hours we bumped out over the rough dusty road by jeep and lorry, through Bhatgaon again, with its wonderful shrines, and past the golden door, today subdued by overcast thunder clouds. The road between swarmed with a teeming throng of people going in both directions for their marketing, many laden with brand-new earthenware pots and jars, fresh fashioned from the claypits and ovens beside the road, piled high in bullock-carts, or balanced on their heads, and enormous jars, large enough to hide the forty thieves, suspended from yokes, joggling and swinging as their owners trotted along. Others were driving in flocks of goats, carrying baskets of chillies, gourds, and other vegetables. A gleeful throng, who waved cheerfully as the cortège rattled past and smothered them with dust.

The big village of Banepa, on the edge of the flat valley, marked the end of the motor road, and after much sorting and re-dividing of the porters' loads we were ready to begin the march to Namche Bazaar. An hour's gentle climb up a pack road and we were over the hill and cut off from sight or sound of the valley. The excitements and tearing rush of the past few weeks were gone in a twinkling and might have been, for all I knew or cared, a dim memory from fifty years back; nothing mattered any more except to push on to the Sherpa country and our quarry. Life was starting afresh, and we wound on through unexpectedly barren country, bare red earth with scattered scrub forest, and but little shade for the perspiring traveller. I fell in with a well-to-do Nepali merchant on his way home to his village: he was much interested in the victorious climb of Everest and—a nice instance of how valuable such things can be

for happy international relations—told me how enthusiastic he and his villagers had been. He could even tell of exploits of individual members of the team.

Undulating down into a small open valley it was a joy to see among the rice-fields the familiar Indian paddy bird—the retiring little heron that lives its solitary life among the growing rice and has the most amazing trick of appearing and vanishing of any bird I know: a conspicuous, nearly white bird gets up suddenly at ones feet, flaps clumsily a short way, and flops down to vanish as abruptly as it appeared. The paddy heron is endowed with a most ingenious reversible colour pattern of drab olive-brown and white, showing all the white when on the wing, and nothing but the brown as it descends and shuts up like an umbrella.

There was a small hamlet on the far side of this valley, and as I reached it I happened to notice a prominent stone slab, man-made and set up on its edge. I asked a man clearing out a ditch nearby what it was there for. A little taken aback at being asked such a stupid and self-evident a question, he gave the reply for which I had hardly dared hope: "Put up for the gods of course." Here was a small stroke of luck the first day out, and a pointer as to how grossly ignorant is the outside world of the life and culture of these people. For one of the great puzzles of archaeologists and ethnologists is to explain, or even try to understand, the odd streak that urges peoples all over the world, our own remote forebears among them, to put up large slabs and pillars of stone for a thousand and one reasons linked with religion; but it is quite uncommon, and so all the more interesting, to find people who even to this day keep up these megalithic customs. My hedger and ditcher was just starting to explain more about it, when we were interrupted by a family party passing by, clad in their best, and with heavy gold earrings and ankle bangles. They were off to perform some sacrifice at Banepa temple, ambling noisily along, the luckless goats, victims to be sacrificed, trailing behind, cropping as they went and blissfully unconscious that this was to be their last meal.

Towards dusk we settled in comfortably for the night on the

edge of a hamlet under the welcoming shade of some huge banyan trees. And very agreeable it was to fall asleep under the stars among all the familiar silhouettes of the Indian countryside, the blurred outlines of the banyans, and the great round cabbage shapes of the mangoes.

A fairly prompt start—one never gets away in good time the first morning out—and an easy march along narrow paths winding down through small, bumpy ridges led to the slow descent down to a sizeable village called Dolaghat, on the edge of the Sun Kosi, a broad powerful river, only two thousand feet above sea-level—a considerable drop from the Great Valley. It had a slightly depressing effect, to have gone so far down at this stage of the journey. Moreover my fisherman's instinct was frustrated by a series of the most gorgeous rapids and long deep pools, a perfect place for mahseer if ever there was one, never fished with rod and line, and as far as I could see never likely to be.

However, by way of compensation a party of Sherpas arrived from the opposite direction; the first I had met apart from the de-tribalised folk of Darjeeling. They were padding down in their Tibetan-style felt and woollen knee boots to Kathmandu, loaded with coarse sheep's-wool blankets; amiable people with whom friendly contact was soon established. Following the example of the Everest expedition, we pitched camp on a seemingly pleasant stretch of sandy beach by the river's edge. It was not, as it happened, the happiest of sites for, stopping to rest while camp was being made, I found myself sitting uncomfortably over a split human skull, with other bones jutting out of the sand. As it afterwards transpired, the place was a dumping ground—I use the word advisedly—for corpses of unfortunates who had died of contagious diseases.

A trickle of villagers, simple Hindu people, came in to ask for medicines; most of them, as far as my crude amateur diagnosis could tell, were suffering from malaria; but one family carried in a teen-age boy, his head encrusted with the most terrible suppurating sores that I had ever seen. I gave out such sulphur drugs

as could be spared and sent his father post-haste into Kathmandu with a letter for the hospital.*

One way and another the evening passed in a flash, and as I was finishing supper by firelight a group of Tibetans from the far interior of their country arrived to camp near us. We exchanged greetings, and one of them, a man of some education, remarked that he was newly from Shigatse. Had he seen the Snowman reported in our English papers as being in captivity there? No: there was not a Snowman there; but he himself had seen a smaller creature altogether, too thin and small for a Snowman, but like it, going on two legs, with a loud hooting call; people were flocking to see it. His account very quickly added up to a gibbon, doubtless brought from the jungles of Burma. Even though another story was thus exploded, it was interesting to hear it said quite by chance that the gibbon looked rather like the Snowman, but was definitely not the same animal. We naturally got on to politics and the invasion of my friend's country. In his own village two Chinese officials had turned up one day, and straight-away commandeered large supplies of grain, for which they paid a fair price with the large silver crown pieces of their own country. A deal of propaganda was being put about among the peasants—based on the general poverty—that the meaning of Communism was fair shares for all; but, he ended rather wistfully, "so far it has meant only short commons for all".

Before starting out in the morning I showed these Tibetan people a large photograph of an Orang-Outan, producing it suddenly and without warning, to see if it would have any effect. It was immediately recognised as coming very near a *Mihrgohrr* (as they pronounced it) and might actually be one; though they could not be sure as nobody present had seen one, and knew its appearance from hearsay only.

It was a brilliant morning, and while having breakfast I much enjoyed watching a rich medley of river birds. Two great Himalayan kingfishers, as large as jackdaws and softly pied with grey and black, flitted jerkily up and down the river, several

* It was agreeable, months later, to find that the child had completely recovered.

parties of cormorants passed overhead, to English eyes strangely out of place on a mountain river; some red-wattled lapwings, the Himalayan equivalent of our own plover, settled down to feed on a spit of shingle. In habit they resemble our own bird, but with a contrasting mixture of brown, black and white in their plumage, and an eerie whistling cry, often heard on moonlit nights. Best of all was a pair of wall creepers, that mysterious bird, common nowhere, but appearing unexpectedly everywhere, from the Swiss Alps to China: one can travel for weeks or months in the mountains and never sight one, until of a sudden a bird like a giant butterfly, with a beautiful colour harmony of soft grey and crimson, flaps across from a rock-face.

It was a pleasant beginning to a long, wearisome climb from the river-bed, up through a series of thickly populated ranges dotted everywhere with scattered groups of houses, most of them solidly built of mud, wood, and crude brick; but their surroundings were filthily dirty, even by Himalayan standards, perhaps because there is no sanitation whatever, and no pigs—so valuable as village scavengers in more primitive areas.

Many of us are accustomed to think of the Himalayas—at least up to the upper limit of the tree-line at twelve or fourteen thousand feet—as thickly forested. But for vast areas of Nepal that is utterly wrong: beyond odd clumps of trees left for shade and firewood, the whole countryside is completely and totally deforested. In the arid winter season, that alternates so much more sharply with the summer rains than in our own climate, the predominating effect is one of bare, red-brown earth; not so very different from what one sees over thousands of square miles in the hotter parts of peninsular India. The patient labour of a growing population has stripped the mountains bare over thousands of years. But if the Great Valley had been impressive from the intensity and the efficiency of its cultivation, the dogged perseverance of untold generations of hill Nepalis, for all their easy-going temperament, was shown in the immense system whereby on every range, from crest to valley, each slope is cut and worked into step upon step of terraces, sweeping round the natural contours to perfection, curving and winding and wholly

satisfying to the eye. Except for the effects of wind in dry weather the system must be almost totally proof against soil erosion, and in its way is quite comparable with any great feat of engineering in our own modern world. The hill peoples of Nepal have from time immemorial known how to make terraces to conserve their soil and irrigate the land for their rice and corn crops, and it is this that has made possible the solid civilisation of Nepal, both in the Great Valley as much as the hills; for without terracing the valley would ages ago have been made uninhabitable by the floods, and very likely gone back to swamp and lake.

The apparent wildness of the outer Himalayas, when seen from a distance, is an illusion; they are really thickly populated; and everything has to yield to the three great necessities of life,—food, firewood, and somewhere to live. And in spite of the lack of forest the scenery is very lovely, range after range lined with terraced red earth, sprinkled with green, and fading away in a haze of soft blue towards the horizon. We passed through villages all day, each house with its little patch of sugar cane, a few scarlet-flowered pomegranate bushes, lime- and lemon-trees, bananas and patches of flowers. There was plenty of company on the road; every half mile or so we were sure to meet a party coming down to trade, or overtake other travellers, who always gave us a happy wave or a friendly greeting.

That afternoon's camp was at eight thousand feet, so we had climbed at least five thousand feet during the day, ending up on a high, bleak ridge, and pitching our tents in an area of barren stony ground. What a change from the half-tropical camp of last night! In one stretch we had reached temperate, cold conditions, with plants such as clematis and cotoneaster that we grow in our own gardens, and a frost at night. The area was thinly populated, with one small village of sour-looking inhabitants, reputedly petty brigands, and avoided by my porters who insisted on posting a sentry over the camp in case they should come and loot us in the night. Most likely they were throw-outs from the more prosperous areas, for it was difficult to think of anyone living here for choice.

Dawn found us soon astir, watched from a safe distance by a lone jackal slinking among the rocks. We went for some distance through a more attractive stretch of lightly forested country—evidently too cold for rice growing—an exhilarating morning's march among stunted oaks and spiny bushes of barberry, whence I got the first glimpse, since leaving Kathmandu, of snow-clad peaks in the distance. Then we made a long twisting descent to a pretty village named Risenkhu, its two hundred white and brown houses dotted among the terraces, some of which were being ploughed with water buffaloes for sowing the winter barley. I was glad to see a sprinkling of houses with carved lattice-windows and beams: a measure of how very deep-rooted in this people are their artistic impulses. It is one thing to see a magnificent living tradition of art in Kathmandu, and quite another to find it carried on as a village craft in the back of beyond.

The people of Risenkhu are all Tamangs, and therefore Buddhists. There was a neat little temple perched on the edge of the village, well built of stone, with square white walls and an open space in front of it where we were invited by some villagers to make camp. It had been finished only nine years ago, to replace a much older one fallen into decay, and it was a source of wonderment that such a remote little village should have the means and the organisation needed to put up a building so fine and so solidly built. As far as I could gather from the crowd, who were fast collecting to watch the tents being pitched, it was built partly with local funds, and partly with money sent all the way down from Lhasa, several weeks journey at the least. There was a priest in charge of it, with two or three assistants. Although only a local peasant from the village, he had been sent in his youth to study in Lhasa at the Buddhist University for no less than twelve years: a very striking proof of how deep-seated and thorough is the religious organisation of Buddhist civilisation.

Very soon after I arrived people came streaming in for medicine. They suffered from goitre, toothache, malaria, stomach-ache, dysentery, old age, rheumatism and short-sightedness, and each and all sought a magic cure. However, one in every three

was a case either of dysentery or malaria, so it was possible to do a little to aid them.

I asked some of my patients if they knew of a beast called the *Banmanche*. They all knew it by repute, as a man-like creature, covered with hair. There was a vague tradition that many many generations back, "perhaps thirty, perhaps seventy; nobody knows", it lived in the mountains not so very far from their own village, but died out or went away when people became more numerous, although it was believed to exist to this day far to the north in the Sherpa country. This was no more than the smallest shred of traditional memory, and once again I brought out my photographs of Bears and Apes. It was agreed that the Orang-Outan came nearest to it; but there was some dispute as to whether the *Banmanche* was really a spirit or an animal of flesh and blood.

"How could I show you a photograph of a spirit?"

"That's easily explained. Sahibs are cunning enough to do anything."

It was a fine, star-lit evening, and I had my camp-bed set up in the shelter of a little roofed-in verandah running along the front of the temple. The door was locked, but I could see through a lattice window into the dim-lit interior, its walls covered with gaily painted frescoes—blue, red, gold, and black—of all manner of demons, of birds, and beasts both real and mythical, and saints and heroes of the Tibetan calendar, softly lit up by a row of flickering butter lamps which dimly illuminated the volumes of Scripture, the gilt images of the shrine and all the implements of worship. Someone was making merry in the village, perhaps for a wedding, and the sound of drums and cymbals accompanying the singing, came wafted through the clear night air.

I was dropping off to sleep, dreamily watching the flickering shadows bring to life the frescoed demons and glimmering brass idols, when a junior priest came up from his home and went silently into the temple, standing before the shrine to chant for some minutes in a low voice, beating slow and muffled on the drum the while, stealing out again as silently as he had come, and village and temple settled down for the night; altogether the

most tranquil day I had spent since leaving England and how great a contrast to the bleak unwelcome of last night's camp.

An uneventful march followed: ups and downs through rough country, thinly inhabited, to a high camp near a small hamlet. From there on the country opens out to a wide area of more gentle slopes; a hospitable region, intensively cultivated; tier upon tier of wonderfully cut-out narrow terraces taking in every available square yard, and with a fairly thick population, living in the same well-built steadings, two storied, with the cows and buffaloes sheltering below, and surrounded by maize and barley stacks. The former are often neatly built into long rectangular panels, carefully arranged to give the most air and sunlight possible, to ripen off the grain on the cobs. The staple foods all over the Nepal mountains are maize, rice, wheat and barley. One crop of maize is grown in the summer on special fields, but the terraces are double-cropped; first with rice for the summer, when they are flooded by elaborate, intricate systems of water channels cunningly contoured far up into the mountains; then, after the rice harvest is in, there is a general ploughing-up and cleaning, and winter corn is sown. In general the level of cultural and everyday life within these outer ranges of the Nepal Himalayas is pretty much the same as in a peasant community of Europe. The particular stretch of country I was passing through at this time was populated by Chetris and other Hindu groups. At least they are nominally Hindu; although I suspect that once you get clear of the towns of the Great Valley there is but little real Hindusim, and that the mountain Nepalis have kept a vast deal of their ancient primitive religion, based eventually on the worship of spirits of rocks and streams, the natural forces of wind, rain and thunder, and overlarded, largely for fashion's sake, with the trappings of Hinduism, the names of Hindu gods slipping in to take the place of the old tribal spirits. Here and there were little shrines, all with a decidedly primitive look. One curious sacred place was a little paved enclosure, with steps leading up to it, and, inside, groups of upright stones, among which was planted the iron trident of conventional Hinduism, and a great mass of

hundreds of tiny tridents—the votive offerings of generations of local worshippers.

We camped on the summit of a steep ridge, outside a large village, under the shade of three magnificent banyan trees, and while the porters were getting the camp ready I lay down on the ground and idly watched the teeming life in the great spreading branches with my field glasses. Wild life in this area, so drastically altered by man, is scarce. So far there had been little to catch one's eye. But these great trees were literally teeming with life: squirrels, little green and red barbets, scarlet minivets, flycatchers, a small woodpecker, golden orioles, sun birds and others besides. A very wonderful tree the banyan, worthy of a saga all its own, and together with its near relative the pipal, possessing a place of great importance in the life of the East, from the Himalayas right down to South India. A giant fig-tree, it gives invaluable shade for man, beasts and birds, since its tough, leathery leaves are never shed. It is also a main source of food for many birds, for its little figs, inedible to us, are eaten by pigeons, barbets, mynahs, and a host of others as well. Also, in its cool damp branches, there is a breeding ground for a thousand insect forms to support the hordes of insectivorous birds, fork-tailed drongos, sun birds, and their kin. Perhaps the real secret of the banyan is its amazing capacity to put up with absolutely anything: sprouting just as happily out of the rubble of a ruin, or from arid, rocky ground, as in fertile country. Droughts, gales, floods, all leave it unperturbed. So that it is in a true sense an oasis in the deforested and the naturally barren countries of the East. One scarcely ever sees the little birds stir from the darker recesses of a clump, and it may even be that some of their bird and squirrel population are born and breed and live and die in the same all-enveloping home.

So it is small wonder that the banyan is sacred. Holy men make their home in the great hollows between its roots and turn it into a temple. Go to the Naga Hills, and you find banyans were once set apart to suspend the heads of slaughtered enemies from the branches: among some tribes of the wild Himalayas the dark foliage hides evil and venomous spirits, so that it is dangerous even to pluck a leaf.



Little, self-contained steadings with their stacks of golden maize cobs are a feature of much of the country above Kathmandu



Junbesi, the centre of the Solu country, is set in a gentle valley
of lush green slopes

Most of the village came strolling out to inspect the little camp under their banyans: a friendly if rather truculent lot, and I soon noticed that my porters were not very happy with them and for some reason avoided their company. Their off-hand manner was even more apparent when medicine was demanded as a right. One young blood even disturbed my siesta to jog my elbow and ask for an elixir to banish his adolescent pimples. Fortunately the remedy was ready to hand: carbolic soap and hot water, to be drunk on the spot.

Here, as in other places we had passed along the road, women were sitting outside their houses weaving. They used a simple but very practical little loom, labelled by anthropologists "Indonesian": one end is fastened to a post or a tree stump, and the other, by a sling, goes round the body of the weaver; a compact and simple device, known throughout South-East Asia, but slow, and hard work, as there is no flying shuttle. It came as a surprise to find these Nepali women with a traditional knowledge of weaving, for they grow no cotton of their own, but make their cloth entirely out of yarn bought at Kathmandu from Bombay merchants and traded up to their villages. Very possibly at no distant time they made their thread from nettle fibre (as the most primitive Himalayan peoples do to this day) and simply replaced the fibre by factory-made cotton. For hill peasants such as these, with very few means of raising money, the buying of cotton, whether thread or cloth, is an expensive business; hence the tatterdemalion appearance of the Nepali peasant sometimes so adversely commented on by travellers. The people are far from decadent or lacking in self-respect; with no home products, it is only very rarely they can afford to buy new clothes.

It struck me forcibly this evening as I was going off to sleep how absolute a silence descends over everything once darkness has fallen: a gossip round the dying embers, a little singing to the tap of a hand-drum—otherwise, since they have no lamps, there is simply nothing to do but go to bed.

Christmas Eve dawned next morning bright and clear; I was faced with the longest march up to date, starting with a long climb down to the Bhote Kosi river, where I made a mental note

of some interesting looking orchids on the trees for collection on the way home whenever that might be. Crossing by an impressive chain-bridge slung across the river, we entered a little belt of surprisingly tropical, almost steamy forest in the narrow valley, and so up a long drag bordered by cactus hedges to a small settlement perched on a sharp ridge, where we all flopped down thankfully to rest during the heat of the day beneath another welcoming banyan, a usual halting-place for travellers. Here too was an inn in the form of an open shed where a brisk trade was done in thick acid beer, brewed from the local grains, and ladled out in great quantities from small tubs. Surely the simplest and most archaic public house in the world, and much as we may imagine our own to have started long centuries ago.

While we were waiting our turn to be served, a caravan of Tibetans arrived en route for Kathmandu. The leader, a prosperous merchant by name Pasang Nima came, so he told me, from a large village called Dwingrr, not many days' journey north from the Sherpa country and the Nepal border.

Why was I going up into the mountains? I told him, to try and find an animal called the Yeti, about which many of us in Europe were wondering. Did he think it existed? Certainly it did: and what was more, Pasang Nima himself had seen one only last September or October, when he and others had gone up to a locally sacred place to keep a religious festival. While they were there, some of their number came in late in the morning with the news that they had seen a Yeti. A few hours later Pasang and some of his friends went to the place to see if they could set eyes on it. The area was flat and sparingly covered with rhododendron bushes, and when they got there the Yeti was sighted two or three hundred yards away. It was the first that Pasang Nima had seen, and he described it as the size and build of a small man. Its head was covered with long hair, as was the middle part of the body and the thighs. The face and chest did not look to be so hairy, and the hair on its legs below the knees was short.

The colour he described as "both dark and light", and the chest looked to be reddish. The Yeti was walking on two legs,

nearly as upright as a man, but kept bending down to grub in the ground, he thought for roots. He and his companions watched it for some time, and he was quite emphatic that it never went on all fours. After a time it saw the watchers, and ran off into the undergrowth, still on two legs, but with a sidling gait (which he imitated), giving a loud high-pitched cry heard by all who had been watching it.

Did he think it was a flesh-and-blood animal, or had he seen a spirit? Pasang replied: "How could it have been a spirit? We went across after it had gone and saw its footprints in the soft ground."

So there it was, and I give the story for what it may be worth. The villagers and other members of his party were standing round while he was telling it, and I asked some of them afterwards what they thought. The opinion was that my friend had been telling the truth, and one of the Tibetans with him chipped in to say that he also had seen the same beast a few years ago near his own village.

In these highly cultivated ranges there was a fair amount of agricultural work going on; many people ploughing with cattle and buffaloes, manœuvring skilfully to get round the narrow ends of the terraces, and some were scattering the barley seed on the fresh-turned earth. We were in rather late, and made a snug little camp on a narrow terrace, moving on from there to celebrate Christmas Day by a long march ending up at the very interesting village of Toshe. It was a large, busy centre by comparison with the scattered hamlets I had been through all the past week, with streets, a line or two of shops, temples, and even a newly-founded school. It came into being because of iron ore found in quantities a day's journey into the hills, which has long been crudely mined and brought down for smelting. It is not mined by the local population, for any sort of metal work is tabu for religious reasons to most of the peoples of Nepal. Some elements only, such as the Newars, may have contact with it. Such systems of tabus are met with here and there throughout the world, among the most primitive of races, as well as in more advanced peoples such as the Nepalese, and they go back very possibly to the time when man first learnt the use of metal.

The iron workings were used to advantage by the ruling Rana family a century or more ago, who turned Toshe into an armaments factory, installing water-operated machinery from Scandinavia to make crude muskets, cannons and bullets, and employing blacksmiths nearby to smelt the iron ore. To do this they planted a community of Newars from near Kathmandu, whose descendants populate Toshe today.

The factory has long fallen into disuse and the machinery rusted away; the smiths have turned their swords into ploughshares and nowadays make hoes and simple tools; also two kinds of Tibetan-style padlocks, totally different from our own. The larger kind has an elaborate mechanism quite beyond me, but the smaller is such as we would use to fasten a box, shaped in our own fashion, but the key is simply a screw. Screw it in and the lock opens, unscrew it, and it is made fast.

There must be a round dozen forges in Toshe, as fascinating as blacksmiths' shops all the world over. Pottering through the village, I spent some time in the little dark sheds watching the white-hot ingots hammered into shape. Two or three blacksmiths' mates stood on each side of the anvil, alternately swinging down their great hammers with astonishing speed and rhythm to the wheezing of the bellows, of the same form as our own, but fixed horizontally on the ground and operated by a cord fixed to the lower handle and running over a pulley.

The blacksmiths were all short, stocky men, gnarled and bent double from a lifetime of toil. The working of their forges seems to be very much a family affair, the bellows operated by the girls, and lads of all ages swinging the hammers and beating out the iron. My arrival at a forge was greeted with a grin of welcome, then work went on as usual.

Toshe has several small Hindu temples, attractive for their greater simplicity and homeliness than the ornate shrines of Kathmandu. On the outskirts, near our camp, a standing stone had been set up, very like the one I had seen a day or two before. The swarm of people accompanying me told how a great stone is set up each year at one or other of the most important annual festivals: a joint arrangement of the whole community, who

subscribe to provide a goat or a buffalo, which is duly sacrificed and some of its blood smeared on the stone. From then on it is sacred—venerated almost as an idol—and little offerings of flowers or scraps of food are set before it. This particular stone was said to be sacred to the Hindu elephant god, Ganesh; others are associated with different deities. Most probably it is an ancient tribal custom, grafted on to a smattering of Hindu belief.

We had a snug camping place in a square surrounded by high walls, once part of the precincts of the gun factory. As it was Christmas and the porters had done an excellent job of work, we rested on Boxing Day to let everyone get their clothes washed and to buy one or two goats for a good meal. Before daylight I was awakened by muffled thudding of a score of hammers from the forges, and well before breakfast-time people started coming in for medicine, or to ask me to visit their sick relatives. I was only too glad to do so within my very limited capacity, as it was a chance of making direct contact and seeing inside private houses.

As was to be expected in a stopping-place for travellers, there was much sickness of every description. I was asked into one house to try and help in a very strange case. Only two or three weeks back a boy of about twelve had suddenly fallen ill, stricken down in a day or two after no early symptoms. By the time I saw him he was a most pathetic sight, wasted away to a bundle of skin and bones, hideous from bed-sores and wellnigh paralysed. Although his eyes were open in a fixed stare, he was apparently sightless and showed no flicker of recognition to anybody. Except for making all the while a low gasping, growling noise, frightening to hear, he might have been already dead. Though the child's family could now and again manage to force a little food down his throat, he was as clearly as I have ever seen it, in a state bordering on death. Nobody in the neighbourhood could recall a case like it.*

A party of Sherpas straggled in during the day, bound for Kathmandu, and it was at first heartening to be told they had come from the village of Pangboche, the very place where report

* Extraordinary to relate, he began to get well the day I left and in a week or two was completely recovered.

had it there was a Yeti scalp preserved in the temple. They were friendly enough, and after we had broken the ice of acquaintance asked why I was going up to their country. I gave the usual reply that we had heard many stories of a strange beast called the Yeti, and were going to investigate it for ourselves. I would be very interested in anything they could tell me: the more so as I had heard they even had the scalp of one preserved in their own temple. An innocent enough remark in all truth, but received in stony silence.

“You won’t see it”, was all the reply I could get. Clearly they were offended at something, although why these good people, as a rule so amiable, should of a sudden turn sour and sullen was a small mystery that was not cleared up for some time. However, our meeting served its purpose and was not without use, for knowing the reputation of Sherpas for reliability, I thought it a good opportunity to send back the story of Pasang Nima and his sighting a Yeti, for onward transmission from Kathmandu.

Refreshed by this little break in the journey, we were in good fettle to start again next morning. After a meal of tame pigeons and dried snow trout from the river, we climbed steeply up to some nine thousand feet, through rugged country, very thinly inhabited. We passed several long walls of inscribed stone slabs, the *Mani* Walls so characteristic of the Buddhist Himalayas, which showed that we were entering an entirely new zone: a country of beetling crags, hung from which were gigantic honeycombs, suspended like great brown fungi from overhangs of the cliffs. I also found the first wild flower for many days; an exquisite tiny primrose, amethyst blue with a yellow centre, embedded in the damp moss of rock faces.

At the summit of the day’s climb we crossed a pass to look down on a fine view of grassy, undulating country, sloping gently away in small plateaus, and dotted with substantial white houses: a very different countryside, more pastoral, and but sparsely terraced. We had reached another milestone on the way, and were on the fringe of peoples of the Tibeto-Sherpa type and culture. An hour or two’s walk brought us to a pair of barrel-shaped gleaming white *Chortens*, adorned with the pair of eyes so commonly

painted on Buddhist shrines. They watched us unwinkingly as camp was pitched close at hand, in the compound of a new and still unfinished temple. Here our activities added to a scene of much liveliness: carpenters planing and sawing, and stone-masons putting finishing touches to the walls.

A Tibetan monk chanced to be stopping the night in a house close by and wandered across to pass the time of day. He had come, so he told me, right from Lhasa itself, sent down by his superiors to beg from village to village, collecting funds for building a temple far away on the Tibet-China border at the humble village birthplace of the Dalai Lama. All was reasonably well in Lhasa when he left, except that the Chinese troops quartered in the city and round about were apt to be troublesome to the local people.

He was an affable man, who did not take it amiss when I asked him a little about his own background. He told me how he had followed the ordinary way of entry into one of the great monasteries, having been sent by his parents as a boy to be educated and brought up in the way of life of a monk. His teachers and superiors found in him an aptitude for medicine and had chosen him out for training at the University as a doctor. He seemed to have done well in his profession, for he claimed there were only five medical men of his standard of skill and knowledge in all Lhasa.

He brought out some small leather bags, tied bunched together at the top. Undoing the string he extracted the instruments and medicines of his trade. A pair of finely-made steel forceps, sliding at one side to give a firmer grip, were for pulling out teeth. Two or three scalpels were for bleeding, an operation often performed, as among ourselves, on the forearm, but also by cutting a nick under the tongue, for which there was a special pair of bamboo forceps to hold the tongue up when making the incision.

For rheumatism, as common an affliction up here as with us, there were tiny pellets of fluff, of the consistency of chewed blotting paper, to be put on the joint, then blown away with a puff through a miniature blow-pipe. The pain and stiffness vanished along with it. For the curing of headaches he had a flat

disc on a handle; the disc, pierced with a round hole, was pressed against the forehead, and the hole struck a hard tap with a bent iron rod to drive out the pain.

Not to be outdone, I produced my own medicine box with all the latest sulphur drugs, dressings and so on. He was not impressed. Everything I showed him—sticking plaster for cuts, the newest tablets for pneumonia, dysentery and the rest—was countered by his dipping into a little leather bag, neatly labelled with a brass or bamboo tag, from which he would bring out the appropriate powder concocted of dried herbs. At last I won a short-lived victory when the monk-doctor asked me for something to cure malaria and I was able to flourish a bottle of tablets in his face. In answer to my expression of triumph, he hastily explained that as there was no malaria in Tibet he naturally had no remedy for it; he was merely afraid he might get an infection in the lower valleys of Nepal. Otherwise there was nothing I could have done to improve on his own medicines.

So we parted, wishing each other a happy journey, each convinced (perhaps rightly) of the superiority of our own wares, and on my side with the satisfaction of having contributed, however modestly, towards a temple in one of the remotest corners of the world, and in honour of one of its most romantic figures.

From here, surprisingly, we came back for a short stretch into Hindu country, with the typical brick and earth houses of the week before: the people of the same lean, wiry physique and wholly different in temperament. Although we were in striking distance of the nearest snow-covered mountains, which were today standing out as if at the end of a valley down which we were passing, this particular valley, was heavily cultivated; and there was scrub forest, bordering a stream, every trunk and branch literally festooned with a great variety of tree-growing orchids. Nearly all were resting and flowerless, but some I could recognise from earlier travels in Assam as likely to be of great beauty, and worth earmarking for collection on the homeward journey. Only one was in flower, a glowing vermilion pink, ground-rooting type, and I itched to collect it, as being very probably new to cultivation. The Himalayas are indeed a land

of contrasts: snow mountains towering ahead, orchids by the path and, as a final touch of the bizarre, a little flock of exotically plumaged blossom-headed parrakeets flashed screaming past, silhouetted green against the shining white of the distant snows.

Among the travellers I met during the day were two groups of Sherpas: some from the now famous centre of Namche Bazaar, and others hailing from Pangboche, all on their way down to trade rice from Toshe. There was still the same curious reluctance on the part of the Pangboche people to talk of the Yeti; but one or two from Namche were a little more forthcoming and volunteered the information that of course it was an animal not a man. Though its form was that of a human being, it was covered with hair and had the face of a monkey. The curious little detail was added that the hair on the upper part of the body slants upwards, while below the waist-line it slants down. It lives, they told me, in the higher ranges above their own villages, but comes lower in winter. It is very difficult to see them and our chances of doing so were rated low. The answers given by these Sherpas to my simple direct questions were entirely straightforward; that they had not themselves seen a Yeti was made clear at once with no beating about the bush; nor did they seem to have any enthusiasm for the subject.

The mountains were becoming more and more heavily forested, and correspondingly less populated: a changed landscape from the endless terracing of the warmer ranges. We were given shelter for the night in the courtyard of a Buddhist temple, perched high above a very deep, forest-clad valley. It stood alone, with a group of three or four houses, the sole habitations anywhere near, and with no resident monk or priest to look after it. It was the creation of a local village man, who had achieved some prosperity and had invested his small fortune in building this shrine, handing it on to his son, our host for the night, who lived on the spot and acted as custodian.

The building must have cost its founder the savings of his lifetime: a well-designed and constructed temple, with a side-room housing an eight-foot high prayer-cylinder—a picturesque feature of so many Buddhist shrines—gaily painted, like the

frescoed walls of the temple, in red, gold and blue, and with a small bell so fixed at the top as to ring every time the wheel was revolved. To our modern materialistic eyes it was the work of a crank, or sheer lunacy for a mountain peasant to scatter the thrift of his whole life for such a purpose; but it shows a very pleasing side to the outlook and disposition of these deeply religious people. The gods as he knew them had helped him to wealth: what more fitting return could he show, or how better express his devotion, than by spending his all in their service?

The frescoes and paintings that cover the walls and cylinders of religious buildings all over these regions are a never-ending source of wonderment. They are the products of highly-evolved schools of art, radiating out from the great centres of Lhasa and Shigatse. The epics of Buddhist history, scenes from the life of the Buddha, demons, spirits, allegorical figures, all are portrayed in the gayest harmony of colour, and often with no mean skill. To see them at the centre of this civilisation, in Lhasa or the larger monasteries, is not so unexpected; it is very different to find a high standard of craftsmanship in the remote back of beyond. The explanation is that artists of ability find their way through to these parts, either sent specially from Tibet, or possibly coming round on a roving commission.

The day's march brought us to the highest point of the journey to the Sherpa country. We toiled up and through slopes sheeted with rhododendron thickets to the very top of the tree-line, at twelve thousand feet. This was the fringe of the alpine zone, where the ground was covered with the withered blue flowers of last year's gentians. Having crossed the pass, we plunged down into a long and beautiful valley, clothed at its head in pine, oak and rhododendron forest. A majestic line of beetling, vulture-inhabited crags frowned down on the one side, and a vast forest of dark pines spread away over the sky-line on the other. The countryside, even in this winter season when nothing was in flower and the grass at its yellowest, was very lovely indeed: it was fairly thickly populated, dotted with little white villages, and a lush growth suggested heavy summer rainfall.

CHAPTER 4

Still on the Road to the Snow Mountains

THIS was a wild country, its landscape reminiscent of the European Alps and averaging, in altitude, perhaps nine to eleven thousand feet. The porters were not entirely happy at crossing the pass and kept close together, looking nervously about them. They had good reason to do so, as I afterwards learnt, for away in the depths of the pine forest there lurked a gang of thirty or forty outlaws, living a feckless highwayman existence and swooping down at intervals to loot and murder parties of defenceless travellers. However, all went well and we were left unmolested.

Rice and maize will not flourish here: it is too high and cold, and the important food crops are barley and potatoes. When we reached the fringe of the woodland, we came on some women hard at work preparing the ground for the first potato planting. They were using an ingenious and practical way of tillage, cutting the turf into squares with a sharp spade, standing the spits on end to dry for a few days, then stacking and burning the earth as a fertiliser for the fields. We were entering the country of the Solu people, near kinsmen to the Sherpas; by their own account leading much the same way of life and speaking a similar language.

The valley opened out into grassy country, and on reaching its end we came to a great overhanging boulder, a landmark for miles, carved all over with giant letters which repeated again and again the mystic phrase of Tibet: *Om Mani Padmi Hum*, "The jewel in the heart of the Lotus".

Rounding the corner to make a sharp turn north, we came in sight of a substantial village, by name Junbesi, which was the centre of the Solu country; a place of narrow paved lanes, solidly built stone houses, and with a large and reputedly very ancient

temple. This was fronted by a square stone courtyard, shut off by a great wooden door and walled in by two-storied buildings used as fodder stores and a dwelling for the village priest.

Three or four women were seated on the ground in the courtyard, slicing turnip-sized radishes and spreading them out to dry in the sun. I found these quite good to chew, sweet and with a horse-radish tang. Some mats were covered with what looked to be bluish-coloured breadcrumbs, but were in fact crumbled potatoes mixed with a blue-tinted root I could not identify. These were put out to dry for later storage as an ingredient of the thick gruel so beloved by the Solu people.

Everyone round about gave us a warm welcome, and we were made free of the temple surroundings for the night. My belongings were installed on the verandah outside the living-room of the married priest and his family, who invited me to sit by the fireside in the smoke-ridden gloom. Everything was concentrated, not unnaturally, on keeping the warmth in and the cold out; hence there were no windows; only a smoky flickering fire on a small hearth in one corner.

To judge by the copper pots and pans—the same good assortment as that to be found in an old-fashioned kitchen at home—my hosts were people of substance. A few well-built cupboards and dressers along the walls, one or two benches, and some coarse rugs round the hearth made up the furniture. Everything was enveloped in an acrid smoke and the walls and raftered roof were blackened with years of soot deposit. It was, as I was later to find out, the typical home of a reasonably well-to-do Solu or Sherpa family.

The priest's wife was stirring a pot of gruel, concocted of coarse maize flour and dessicated potato meal, with some kidney beans stirred in, and she broke off at intervals to grind half-roasted maize between two grooved stones, a task which it seemed only polite to take over, while she finished cooking the appetising soup and dished it out.

My arrival caused much excitement among the small boys of the place, as lively and mischievous a bunch as one could wish to meet anywhere. When the first curiosity had abated a little and the

more venturesome spirits had been shooed away, they settled down to a game of Nepalese "cricket" in the courtyard below the temple steps. It was an organised game, but there seemed no limit to the number of players, and no definite sides. The batsman was armed with a flat baton, and the bowler lobbed a sliver of wood. The batsman either returned it full-toss, or flicked it to the field as it hit the ground. If it was caught he was out. If one of the fielders stopped it, he had to lay the bat across his wicket, and one of the fielders would throw the "ball" at it; if it hit the bat he was out. If he made a clean hit and was not caught or stopped, the batsman would run up to where the ball landed, turning his bat over and over to count his score, which was duly notched-up. It was the greatest fun to watch these wild little urchins, taking the game quite seriously. They kept meticulously to the rules, with surprisingly few squabbles, and were strict in taking turns for batting and bowling.

The priest invited me into the centuries old temple with its finely frescoed walls. These housed row upon row of the sacred scriptures, each bound in its wooden covers, and there was the normal paraphernalia of drums and cymbals, butter lamps and painted banners. The whole was dominated by a great gilded Buddha in the middle of the shrine, flanked by demons apparently cut-out by fret-saw. We climbed a ladder to the first floor, where there was an opening in front looking down on the shrine, whence the great gold head of the Buddha rose up at us in a manner that suggested a scene on a stage.

My kindly hosts brought out a charcoal brazier on to the balcony, and the evening went by pleasantly enough, the urchins crowding round and scrambling for cigarettes, or anything else they could lay their grimy paws on. Even the smallest present delighted them, a piece of silver paper from a film-wrapping, or an empty match-box. I brought out my bird and animal books and showed them pictures. Nearly all the birds and beasts of the Himalayas were recognised at once, their call imitated, and the Solu name given. This went for photographs of bears and of langur monkeys, and everyone pointed to the forests round about when they were shown them. I had designed this to lead

up to the sudden production of a picture of an Orang-Outan, which was followed by an immediate and spontaneous chorus of "Yeti, Yeti." I pointed to the country round about. The children shook their heads energetically, and indicated the far distant mountains to the north.

A few questions to the grown-ups produced the information that as far as they knew the Yeti exists, but is only a name to the Solu people, and it would be necessary to go much farther north to see it. Even then, so they had learnt from their Sherpa neighbours, it would be very difficult indeed to come across one.

All had gone off to bed by ten o'clock, when the priest went creaking down the stairs with his son, and across to the temple to chant and beat the drum, and trim the votive lamps. A friendly one-eyed cattle-dog (the only well-disposed member of its breed I ever met), a universal pet of the local children named Tsangdeh, came padding up to the verandah, and flopped down on the boards to keep me company.

On 30 December I could record in my diary that it had been the most congenial day's march since I set out. An easy walk led through rolling, half-downland, half-forested pastoral country, well watered by many pretty little streams cascading down the oak and rhododendron woods, the landscape a blend of sober winter shades of green, with an occasional gleam of colour from the dwarf-growing amethyst primroses.

No great distance out from Junbesi my head porter pointed to a big male langur monkey sitting bolt upright, sunning himself on a lopped oak-tree a little below our path—a very handsome beast in a wicked-looking way, with his long silvery coat and sooty-black face. He sat watching us from only thirty yards, quite contemptuous of all attempts to dislodge him by throwing up pieces of stick. Mindful of the "identification" of the Snowman with the Himalayan langur I stopped a while to try and see others. Before long, one came out of the trees and, as luck would have it, on the ground, walking about feeding in a field of newly sprouting barley. From three hundred yards or more it was quite easy to pick out its main features, even without the aid of a field glass. The clear-cut outline of the silvery-white head framing a

sooty face, the graceful build, the mincing cat-like walk (always on all-fours), and the long tail held aloft—all these features made it one of the most easily recognisable beasts in the Himalayas.

Could the langur really be the source of the weird tale we had come to investigate, as had been laid down by a formidable panel of experts? I was beginning to have serious doubts.

For one thing, did not every report, as well as the habitat assigned to it by all I had so far met on the road, tell of a ground-living creature? This langur was so obviously ill at ease when away from the trees; it was a singularly unimpressive beast on the ground, besides being quite unmistakable.

A slow climb through a straggling settlement known as Ringmah brought us to nine or ten thousand feet, the top of the pass marked by a sizeable heap of stones. By widespread custom every traveller making the topmost point of a wearisome climb picks up a stone and adds it to the pile; either as a thank-offering to the spirits who have helped him up, or as a symbol of throwing off his tiredness as he casts aside the pebble. So, adding our little quota, we started down through rhododendron thickets to come out abruptly upon a superb view: a vast open bowl sloping away in the haze of distance to a river gorge, and still farther off a range of snow-capped mountains. The world of red earth, terraced ranges and rice fields was fading away, becoming a blurred memory like the Rana palaces of Kathmandu.

Half-a-mile down the path we came unexpectedly in sight of a little monastery. Perfectly sited on a flat space, totally isolated and secluded in its setting, it was in the general form of a square surrounding the temple. This being the first Buddhist monastery I had visited, it was in an enthusiastic frame of mind that I strode towards the entrance gate, only to be repulsed by a vicious black mastiff which leapt out, intent on mischief, and had to be held at bay with my iron-shod walking staff. It transpired afterwards that he was much feared in the neighbourhood, and even credited with biting the Leader of the Everest expedition.

There seemed to be nobody about, so I wandered through the cluster of cells to the back, whence there came a sound of hammering. Here I found the whole community of twenty monks

busily engaged in house-building. With sleeves rolled and their red habits tucked up, they were planing, hammering, sawing, and brick-laying—and with no mean skill—to build a fitting house for their Superior.

They looked up when I came in sight, smiled a casual greeting, then went placidly on with their work, quite unperturbed by an unusual type of visitor. The head monk, a kindly-faced elderly man, was pacing up and down, with his hands behind his back, telling his beads. The first superficial impression was the extraordinary similarity of the whole scene to the everyday life of a small community of friars in Latin Europe.

But with an important difference; for among the monks, and in the personal care of the Superior and his deputy, was a small child, no more than five years of age; well dressed, with his hair in pigtails, he was being treated with every mark of affection and indeed respect. In consultation with the spirits and guided by omens, the monks had chosen him out to be the first hereditary abbot of their little monastery.

Many foundations of the Tibetan system of Buddhism, both large and small, have a hereditary abbot who is the reincarnation of his predecessor, chosen when a child, by omens and under divine guidance, either as soon as the one before him is dead, or after an interval which may be short or prolonged. The system finds its highest expression in the Dalai Lama of Lhasa.

The little community here at Tashingtok was a new foundation, a daughter house of the now famous Sherpa monastery of Thyangboche near Mount Everest, and it was founded only seven years ago by one or two senior monks sent down from there for the purpose. Very recently the Lamas had received inspiration—how, I longed to know, but it would have been vulgar bad manners to ask too much—that their monastery was to be honoured by a hereditary abbot, and that they must choose this child, of ordinary Solu peasant parents from a nearby village, to be the first of his line.

A handsome, grave-faced mite, he seemed to know already that his was to be a life set apart from others. And it was moving and not without pathos to see him carried and led around by his



A grave-faced mite, the child Abbot seemed to know already that his was to be a life apart



We made camp in typical Yeti country at fourteen thousand feet,
across the Bhote River from Namche



Scattered about in a patch of snow at fourteen thousand feet were numerous man-like footprints



The first rays
of the risen
sun dispersed
the mist, to
light up the
twin peaks
of Kantega

mentors. However well he was looked after, however affectionate and devoted his monks might be—and genuinely devoted they undoubtedly were—every moment of his life must be dedicated to his calling from now on. Not for him the ordinary joys and fun of childhood, the pranks and rough-and-tumble that little Himalayan boys enjoy as much as any others.

There were several children among the novices: small boys of eleven and twelve years, and from just the same home background as their child abbot—perhaps even related to him—who had left their world for the cloister. But they were still free to be normal imps of mischief, while he was even forbidden any close contact with them at all. Yet his parents, who kept in the closest touch with him, far from lamenting his departure from the home circle, would count themselves proud and lucky that so great an honour should have come to their humble house.

Presently the head monk handed the little boy over to the charge of his deputy and came across to greet me, sending the brother-cellarer (needless to say a rotund Friar Tuck character) to fetch a pot of buttered tea from the monastic kitchen. And very good and reviving it was after the day's exertions. I chanced to take out my field glasses to scan the distant mountains and at once the ice was broken: there was a general downing of tools; a scrimmage of monks all clamouring to look. But first the glasses had to be given for a few moments for the child abbot to look through and play with, which afforded him much grave satisfaction.

Etiquette demanded a formal call on the Superior, so I went down for a clean-up and to supervise the camp arrangements on the fringe of the monastery before going to his parlour. As I walked up later in the afternoon, there was the child seated all by himself, cross-legged on the ground and deep in the study of a large-printed Tibetan nursery book of the Scriptures, chanting gently to himself and tracing out every word with his finger.

The parlour was full of Solu and Sherpa visitors newly arrived from up-country, and the head monk was preoccupied over some business transaction, involving much clinking and counting of silver rupees. However, he welcomed me in to sit beside him and

we exchanged token presents: a scarf of white gauze silk and a small donation for his building fund from my side, returned by a plate of oranges and buttered tea.

What was my business in the country? I had come ahead of a party of Europeans who were anxious to see the Yeti. Whereupon he laughed loud and long (a little too loud to be wholly convincing) and brushed aside the whole venture.

“Of course you won’t see a Yeti.”

“But your own fellow-monks from Thyangboche say they saw one a very few years ago. Why shouldn’t we see one as well?”

He was not at all pleased, and changed the subject abruptly.

“I know nothing of that.”

Clearly I had unwittingly trodden on his toes in some way.

The boy novices came trooping down to the camp after dusk, to sit round the fire—Pemba, Ghirlhu and Penyi—and very sharp-witted youngsters they were. Every item of my equipment was pawed over and commented on; there was much speculation as to whether the beam of my torch did or did not reach to the stars. They told me how they were taken in from surrounding villages when eleven or twelve, and from then on live as members of the community, under a senior monk for schooling (in this case the elderly Superior, who was the most scholarly of the brethren), and very soon become literate. Even from a remote outpost such as this the more promising may eventually be sent to Shigatse or Lhasa for study at the university; the abbot most certainly would when he grew older.

Friendly relations established, I brought out picture-books of birds and beasts, and ended up by flourishing a photograph of an Orang-Outan. This had the same result as at Junbesi—an immediate shout of “Yeti”. While we sat under the brilliant star-lit frosty sky two of the monks came down with enormous eight-foot long *Tsangdoh* trumpets which fold up like a telescope, and made the bivouac hum and vibrate with a whole range of tones, from a deep bass grumble to a pleasing vibratory drone.

Bitter cold woke us before daylight, and the last day of December was ushered in with the most wonderful sunrise it has

ever been my good fortune to see, the sky lit with every shade of emerald green, merging and changing through yellows and orange to scarlet and colours even deeper still. The day did not develop so promisingly. By the time camp was struck the long spell of fine weather, which had favoured us ever since leaving Kathmandu had broken, and the glory of the dawn was replaced by a dull leaden-grey sky, threatening heavy snowstorms further north. We went quickly down from the monastery through a damp, heavily luxuriant forest, its shade sprinkled everywhere with bushes of a very lovely *Daphne* shrub, the leafless twigs clothed in heads of fragrant mauve flowers, and many of the trees festooned exotically with the long strap-leaves of *Cymbidium* orchids. After crossing a raging torrent of sea-blue snow-water, we climbed a long shoulder to find ourselves back in Hindu country, switching over in a twinkling to a different civilisation and a sharply contrasting way of life: the same terraced hill-sides, the same flimsy houses I had thought to have left behind days ago. It was evidently a finger of Hindu life and culture pushed up from the south through the long warm valley of the Arun river.

The infinity of contrasts that involves every aspect of life in the East has always been a subject for comment by travellers. One would have to go far to find a more bizarre and bewildering contrast than this. We had stepped out from a Tibetan monastery, peaceful in this setting of temperate pine and rhododendron forests, the ground white with frost, and entered straight into a nearly sub-tropical valley, a scene of Hindu peasant life and culture, with crops of bananas, oranges, tobacco and maize.

Stopping to rest a few minutes on the mud-floored verandah of a house, I found the family in a state of great bustle and preparation. They were off to escort the son of the house across the valley, where he was to wed a girl from a neighbouring village. All the best clothes were being got out, the ornaments of beaten gold were being given a clean-up, and supplies of fiery arrack made ready to take across for the merry-making. Some of the women were wearing heavy necklaces of silver Indian rupees, more than a hundred years old, portraying Victoria as a young Queen and treasured as heirlooms.

My Tamang caste porters would not fraternise much with these people, who were apparently Kiatris, a caste but lowly regarded, and from whom even humble folk like the Tamangs could not accept so much as a cup of water, let alone sit down to share a meal with them. It was a poor, precipitous place: a series of narrow terraces carved out among the rocks, and the only place where I can recall seeing goats wearing muzzles. Every individual of a herd was equipped with a neatly woven bamboo cage over its face, to keep them from raiding the precious crops.

New Year's Day augured well. For the first time since starting out there was a glimpse of the Great Himalayan Range, and not so very far distant. The ranges immediately overlooking us were now white-capped with their winter blanket of snow.

We were back again in Buddhist country, and a Tibetan atmosphere was making itself apparent, which was enhanced by coming on the first yaks outside a tiny hamlet, where they were grazing with some of their cattle hybrids, the dzum and dzoz. The cow or dzum is a better milk producer than the yak, while the bull dzoz is in great demand as a pack animal. In this same hamlet I also had the chance to watch a local stone-mason at work, chipping out sacred texts with a steel chisel on a flat stone slab, his eyes protected against the flying chips by goggles salvaged from some previous climbing expedition. It was satisfying to watch him work with peculiar speed and faultless precision, shaping the massive Tibetan letters entirely free-hand.

A pile of grey slabs was lying beside him, evidently enough work to keep him occupied for some time. Such craftsmen are seemingly itinerant, plying their hereditary trade and skill from village to village, on commission from pious people wishing to gain spiritual merit by putting up Mani walls and single inscribed stones.

It was refreshing to find wild life again, after a long stretch of comparatively lifeless country. As we wound down through light forest a food-hunting party of mixed birds cruised through the undergrowth, and streamed across the path: two or three kinds of tits and some Himalayan bullfinches, very like our own

and with the same piping call, but the colours show orange-red on the back.

Best of all was a band of laughing thrushes. The mountains are the home of many species of laughing thrush, the bulk of them sober-plumaged, brown, white, and grey, and scientifically not classed as thrushes but babblers. They are mysterious creatures, slinking and sneaking in close-knit bands through the undergrowth; always on the move, appearing from nowhere, vanishing as they came, as if playing a never-ending game of hide-and-seek. Of a sudden one of the party explodes into a gabbling laugh; in a flash all the rest have taken it up and the forest echoes and re-echoes with shrieking merriment, which dies away as abruptly as it begins.

Today we encountered snow for the first time. A few inches were covering the valleys, an anxiety for the porters who were slipping and slithering, being without winter boots. Moreover, early in the afternoon we entered a broad valley, running north and south, which I identified as that of the Dudh Kosi river, which rises up on the Nepal-Tibet boundary, and—an exciting thought—marking the last lap of the journey, for the map showed Namche Bazaar at the head of the valley.

There was a convenient camping place in a small hamlet, where it was a relief to shelter in one of the houses from a bitter driving wind while the porters made camp. It had been an uneventful New Year's Day, but full of small happenings, and it ended with a real stroke of luck. For, as I was sitting down to a curry of tinned fish, a Sherpa arrived in the village from Namche Bazaar and came across to give a civil good-evening. On the first appearance a man of personality and some education, he had been, so he told me, one of Sir John Hunt's sirdars on Everest, and produced his testimonial of good and reliable service. He spoke Hindustani, Nepali, Tibetan, and even a few words of English, as well as his own native Sherpa.

Of all things in the world I wanted a good interpreter and general factotum. Was there any chance of Gyalchen, for such was his name, agreeing to sign on? No: he was en route for Darjeeling to meet his friend Tensing and arrange about a

sirdarship with an expedition in the autumn. After that he was committed to visit his two sisters, who were married to Chinese businessmen in Calcutta. So he could hardly change all his plans at a moment's notice. That seeming to be all there was to say about it, we spent the rest of the evening talking around the fire. As I was saying good-night, Gyalchen waited a little sheepishly on one side.

“If you are really in such need of a sirdar and will give me employment for the whole period of the expedition, I can try to change my plans and come with you.”

He was taken on then and there; we were friends from the start, and never once was there reason to repent of my decision. Seldom has it been my good fortune to work with anyone pleasanter, more loyal, or more trustworthy, whether of my own or any other nationality.

For the next two days we followed up the river bed, halting for the night in a sheltered bowl-shaped area, below battlemented crags, thinly clothed in pines and peopled by ravens and vultures, which came swooping out every now and then as the little party went by below them.

CHAPTER 5

The Sherpas and News of the Yeti

As we made our way up the last climb before Namche Bazaar, at 12,000 ft. I found myself suddenly on the fringe of a new world. Gone were the forests and the green of the valleys, and the scene was transformed into stern alpine country, extending away over a vast, almost incalculable zone above the upper limit of trees. The whole of my journey so far had been leading up to these mighty ranges, and by and large the country had not been so very different from the mountains of Europe, or well-watered landscapes anywhere. All was changed in a flash, to a world of grey, boulder-strewn valleys, bleak ravines and cliffs, dwarf alpine shrubs and rough grassland, hugely proportioned, and overshadowed everywhere by the towering peaks of the Great Himalayan Range.

Calcutta, Darjeeling, Kathmandu, the journey up through Nepal, each and all in their turn had been the only present and positive reality. Now all were merged abruptly together, fading fast into a vague limbo of the past in the face of this new and frighteningly immense mountain world. One gets much the same sensation on waking suddenly from a confused and drawn-out dream into the tangible brightness of a clear winter's morning.

Namche Bazaar is now a household name: inevitably it conjured up a picture of a busy little town, with streets and a shopping centre. It is what happens when a place, however insignificant or obscure, becomes headline news. So that, as we rounded a bend and it came into view, I was brought up with a slight shock to see a cluster of perhaps sixty-five or more white-brown stone houses, set close together around the inside of a bowl scooped out from the mountain-side, and overlooked by peaks towering away into the distance. Such was Namche

Bazaar, the largest settlement of the Sherpa country and, from the trading point of view, its nerve-centre. But for all that it was only a mountain village. As we went across some fields at the bottom of the village, a small boy trotted out to meet us, Gyalchen's son, who had come to welcome us with a wooden bottle of *chang*, the local beer. His mother, he said, would be very glad to lodge me in her own house, unless I preferred to make my own camp.

The offer was accepted with alacrity. Our host's wife greeted us very pleasantly, together with her small daughter, a handsome child of seven or eight, who was nursing a baby sister, the tiniest scrap of humanity I had ever set eyes on, born only a fortnight before and a seven months' child.

The Gyalchens' home was typical of a fairly prosperous Sherpa family. All the houses of these people are laid out on a common plan. The walls are of thick, crudely-hewn stone, held together with mud-mortar, and there is a raftered roof with wood or stone tiles. All who can afford it, and that means a good three-quarters of the population, have a two-storied home. The ground-floor is given over to the livestock—yaks, cattle, sheep and goats—and is normally partitioned off into stalls, sheep pen, fodder-store and so on.

Coming in at the heavy front-door one gropes through the half-dark byre, barely high enough to stand in, to the far right-hand corner, where a wooden staircase leads up to the first floor. A sharp turn to the left, and you come blinking from the darkness into the living room, where the whole household eats, sleeps, gossips, and performs the ordinary chores of the house. The living room is partitioned off from the stairs by a plank wall. To the right, at the head of the steps, there is normally a convenience, below which are mounds of dead leaves, which are cleared out periodically and spread over the fields.

In the homes of well-to-do people, a plank wall commonly divides off a small room, which may be either (as with the Gyalchens) a spare bedroom and household store, or else it may be converted into a private chapel. Shelves, one or more dressers, and cupboards with sliding doors line the walls. Furniture, plank

floors and partitions are all carpentered roughly, but with a high standard of competence. Chairs do not exist, and but for a long window-seat with a bench-table in front of it, there is nowhere to sit except on the floor. In the front wall two or three small windows, with wooden-shutters, let in the light. There is a single fireplace—a square of stone slabs set in the floorboards near one end of the front wall—the smoke from which escapes, more or less, through a chink in the roof.

The acrid wood smoke is the only real discomfort in a Sherpa home. The everlasting fumes, irritating to eyes and lungs alike, add to the dimness of the interior by completely coating both rafters and roof, which gleam blackly with age-long deposits of pure carbon. Smoke fumes are the cause of many eye complaints among the Sherpas, although on the credit side they must be invaluable as a perpetual disinfectant and destroyer of every germ.

The back walls are lined with a great array of pots and pans; little iron cooking-pots and great round water-containers of shining copper, some large enough to bathe in. A few of these are made locally, others are traded in from Tibet or bought in Kathmandu. The number and size of these vessels is an index of wealth and social prestige, so that a rich man's house ordinarily contains more than the family ever dream of using. Of recent years a "new look" has been given to this facet of Sherpa custom by jerry-cans and metal containers distributed by successive expeditions. It has become a magpie-mania to acquire them: he who can line his shelves with expedition left-overs gains thereby a measure of social distinction, however seldom the treasures are put to practical use.

In short, a Sherpa house is a simple, solid, entirely self-respecting peasant home, constructed on a uniform pattern to fit in with its surroundings.

My camp bed was set up in the spare room, where I was made snug and comfortable and rested up for a day or two. I now paid off my porters and engaged a personal servant: a shy, retiring youth of perhaps nineteen, by name Mingma. He hailed from the nearby village of Kumjhung, where his father, Da-Tensing, was a figure of some importance and one of the famous Sherpa

sirdars of the Everest expedition. Shy and retiring Mingma may have been, but for loyalty and ungrudging service he was worth his weight in gold. The prompt teaming-up between him and Gyalchen made my whole task vastly easier.

I had made but casual mention to Gyalchen and the rest concerning the principal purpose of our expedition. I had explained that I was the forerunner of a party coming up to explore the Sherpa country; but, bearing in mind the curious reticence I had so often met with by the way, I had rather glossed over the subject of the Yeti. Moreover Gyalchen had shown a slight but positive reluctance to discuss the subject, and I could not help feeling that, like the others, he was keeping something back. Also, I had an uncomfortable suspicion that the various Namche people who had been drifting in and out of the house since my arrival were eyeing me with some distrust. They were certainly not so friendly as I had been led to expect from the glowing accounts of them brought back by other expeditions.

As Gyalchen had given an excellent first impression of reliability, and we had made friends quickly, I settled to have it out with him. Why this near-surliness, why this shutting up like an oyster whenever the Yeti was mentioned? Surely ours was a harmless enough expedition in all truth?

"We are glad to see *you*," I was told, "because our Sherpa people like the English. But many of us are upset at the thought of your meddling with the Yeti. We have heard how fond your countrymen are of sport, and we do not want it to be hunted down and killed. We Sherpas are Buddhists, and in any case do not kill wild animals: the Yeti is something special, and we are much alarmed at the thought of your interfering with it."

Such was the gist of his reply. He himself was only too willing to work as my sirdar, but he could not possibly connive or help in any way when it came to slaughtering or molesting a Yeti.

I assured my friend that neither I nor anyone else had the slightest wish to molest anything. We in England had heard tales of a strange creature, perhaps a man, perhaps an animal, or perhaps a myth, believed to live in the Sherpa country. We knew of no

such creature in our own country, and were simply here to try to find out what it might be, and to photograph it should we be lucky enough to find one.

A few talks very soon cleared the air, and at last explained the curious attitude of the people on the way up. From then onwards, for word soon went round that our motives were not really sinister, the majority of people were perfectly willing to tell what they knew. I questioned a number of men in Namche, impressing on them that it was quite immaterial to me what they had to say, as long as they told the simple truth. In the first few days of my arrival, the following account was given me of the Yeti, its attributes, and its manner of life. The information, gleaned from several people at different times, tallied very much better than I had hoped or expected, and it was delivered in such simple straightforward terms by all informants that I found it hard to reject.

The Sherpas all take it for granted that the Yeti exists, and that it is a flesh-and-blood animal, not a spirit or demon. To the Tibetans of this region it is known as *TEH* (pronounced Tay), and from this derives the Sherpa name, made up of two words, *YEH*, meaning a rocky place, and *TEH*, the term for this type of animal. So that *YEH-TEH* is the kind or type of *TEH* that lives in a rocky place. Under this general name the Sherpas recognise two kinds:

(1) *Dzu-Teh*. This is the larger of the two, and is looked on as very rare indeed in the Sherpa country, most people denying that it is found there, but common when you cross the geographical barrier of the Great Himalayan Range into Tibet. There it is often seen. The word *Dzu* means that it is connected with livestock; so that the *Dzu-Teh* is the *Teh* that preys on livestock, such as yaks and cattle. It is a large beast and goes on all fours. It is of a reddish-brown colour and has thick, long and shaggy hair. Fairly often seen in captivity in Tibetan towns, it has the same general build as the Himalayan black bear, which is common just below the Sherpa country, but it differs from it in size, in colour, and in habits. It is dangerous and aggressive to human beings.

(2) The *Mih-Teh*. *Mih* means Man, so that *Mih-Teh* is the *Teh* that is linked with Man; precisely why does not seem to be clear. This is the kind of *Yeh-Teh* found in the Sherpa country, and when Sherpas speak of the Yeti (or more accurately the *Yeh-Teh*) they almost invariably mean this beast, so that for their own area *Mih-Teh* and Yeti are really interchangeable terms.

It lives entirely in the huge region of boulder-strewn, bleak alpine country too high for trees, but below the permanent snow-line. Now and again it comes in contact with human beings and is seen or heard near a village. The *Mih-Teh* is about the size of a fourteen-year-old boy, of the same build as a human being and tail-less. It is covered with stiff, reddish-brown and black hair, rather lighter on the chest, and (according to many) with the hair longest about its head and waist. The head is pointed, and the face bare, with a squashed-in nose like a monkey's. Its call is a loud wailing, yelping noise, most frequently heard in the late afternoon or early evening. When it is heard close-to it often makes a chattering noise.

In the cold winter months it comes nearer human habitations, and the Sherpas assume this is because it is driven down by snow and bad weather. It walks normally on two legs, but if it is in a hurry, or when plodding through deep snow, it drops down on all fours. Most people believe it to feed on mouse hares, the little guinea-pig-like rodents very common in the higher ranges; and probably also on other small animals and insects. Very shy and intelligent, it is looked upon with much respect by the Sherpas. They admit they are afraid of it, though, unlike the *Dzu-Teh*, it is never known to attack human beings.

A striking, straightforward account. It seemed very much as if the Sherpas were indeed describing two different beasts. The large *Dzu-Teh* of Tibet was not hard to identify with the red bear of the Himalayas (a near relative of the European brown bear), the more so, as some Namche people had seen them at close quarters in captivity. They were emphatic that it is a bear-like animal, equally emphatic that it virtually never makes its appearance in the Sherpa country. The smaller *Mih-Teh* is very sharply differentiated from the *Dzu-Teh* and is not linked with

a bear. My informants were sure that it is found also across the border in Tibet: and let us not forget that the Nepal-Tibet boundary is a real boundary along much of its length, marked by easier gentler country across the Tibetan side, and could very well be a partial barrier to some animals and not to others.

It was early on in the day to draw any conclusions, or to sort out what I had been told in the light of any theories, old or new. I did not know the Sherpas well enough yet to weigh the reliability of their evidence, nor had I begun to get the feel of the Sherpa country. So I thought this preliminary account had best be pigeon-holed till further information came to hand.

I spent a day or two merely pottering about the village, so as to get adjusted and mentally acclimatised to the atmosphere, and to try and find my feet a little among the Sherpas. Now that Gyalchen, who was evidently a man of some local influence, had spread it about that my mission was after all an innocent one, thus scotching, I hoped, the more sinister rumours, there seemed to be a very real friendliness everywhere. As I walked, or rather clambered, up and down the narrow lanes between the close rows of houses, I was sure of receiving a warm greeting on all hands.

It was pleasant to find the Sherpas entirely free from the "inward dreariness" of centralised civil-service rule, able to regulate and run their own lives with no "supervision" other than vague and reasonable relationships with a District Headquarters, several days' journey away from their country. They pay a small house tax to the Nepal Government, and for this and general liaison work (such as it is), there are shadowy, half-time officials as tax-collectors and police.

For a place so remote, Namche is a cosmopolitan centre, with quite an appreciable population of Tibetans, mostly very poor, and some of them domiciled and inter-married with Sherpas. Others come down to do odd jobs, take such casual labour as they can get from the Sherpas to eke out the winter when rations are short at home, and trek back in the spring across the Nangpa La pass to cultivate their own fields. They are good and skilful craftsmen, much better than the Sherpas, and I often found them

sitting cross-legged in the sunshine stitching clothes, or making woollen knee-boots, the manufacture of which, though they are worn by every living soul in the country, would seem to be a Tibetan monopoly.

Others would be embroidering high-crowned Tibetan hats, or weaving cloth and rugs on Tibetan and Nepali-style looms; some are employed by Sherpas on a piece-work basis, being paid partly in kind, and living and lodging as members of the family.

I spent some time one morning watching fascinated as a Tibetan weaved a handsome red carpet; he worked with incredible speed and dexterity on a small vertical loom, his nimble hands blending a complex pattern of yellow and green with a skill and technique quite past my understanding.

Generally speaking these visiting Tibetans, from the lowest and roughest stratum of their own society, large of frame and boisterous of manner, are good humoured and rather childish, much more casual and happy-go-lucky than the placid Sherpas, who affect to despise them as their hewers of wood and drawers of water. A typical member of their little community often came wandering into the Gyalchens in the evenings, slightly tipsy, and carrying under his arm a small keg of one of the stronger brews of beer, which he repeatedly passed round the family circle, sniggering happily to himself.

The other foreign element in Namche is a little community of metal workers, low caste people of Newar stock who have been settled there for generations, hailing originally, some say, from Kathmandu. They do the metal work for the entire Sherpa country, journeying to Thyangboche monastery and to villages round about, where they settle in for a week or so to carry out such making and mending as is necessary. As in Tibet, metal work is strictly tabu to the Sherpas, on grounds of ancient custom rather than caste. These Newar people supply the need, making with no mean skill anything from chased silver drinking cups to padlocks, copper trumpets, and brass cymbals.

It is probable they have been living among the Sherpas for centuries—one man told me his own family had lived there at least five generations—but they still keep themselves to

themselves, living and dressing as Newars, down to the white trousers and little black caps, a complete contrast to the Sherpas. Although they are welcome in people's houses, they never intermarry or adopt the local customs or manner of life.

On 6 January I took a trip of a few hours up the valley of the Bhote Kosi, running west of Namche, to the village of Thammu; walking for two or three hours along the weaving, undulating path on the north side of the valley. The scenery was most impressive all the way: brown and black ranges towering above us, and the south slopes of the valley opposite clothed in a belt of highest elevation forest, while there arose above it a snow-capped range of some twenty thousand feet.

I was told that this range is totally deserted in autumn and winter, though herdsmen traverse it regularly in the spring and summer. It therefore seemed a good plan to choose this for the scene of my first venture in search of our quarry or its traces. Gyalchen, who accompanied me, pointed out a small side-valley, running up into the crags above, where some years back he himself had heard a Yeti.

The manner of it was this. Several of them were on the way home from a small pasture tucked away in the heart of the mountains, and since dusk was beginning to fall they settled to bivouac for the night. At about eight o'clock, when they were dossed down for the night, there came a loud yelping call, which they at first thought to be made by a human being. The noise came quite near, and they heard it change to a chattering: then a few minutes later it died away in the distance. I suggested cynically that it might have been an owl. No, this was ruled out; because everyone of them had heard the creature kicking down loose rubble as it crossed over a patch of shale. The whole party took it for granted that it was a Yeti.

We passed through a little village called Tamyeh, where it was noticeable that there was a general air of festivity, everyone sitting about in his best clothes. It turned out to be the great annual festival of the New Year or *Losahrr*. The Sherpas keep it in groups; that is to say, three or four neighbouring villages will hold it simultaneously, while another group will celebrate it a

week or two later. It is mainly a village affair; even relatives who live outside the group are not as a rule invited.

Losahrr is a social occasion, although a small religious ceremony starts it off. Perhaps in the far-distant past it was of common origin with the mid-winter festival kept throughout so much of the world and linked with our Christmas and New Year. At any rate it is a happy event, a week of holidaying, when everyone visits and revisits, to feast and tipple mildly in each other's houses.

Several people invited me in for refreshment, and in all the homes I visited I noticed that the walls and beams were smeared and daubed with streaks, hieroglyphics, and crude drawings, done with white rice-paste. This is a universal practice at *Losahrr*, very possibly a form of spiritual disinfectant, its efficacy being due to the almost sacred nature of the grain.

I turned the conversation towards the Yeti,* being careful to explain that there was no question of anything on my part but a spirit of curiosity. Everyone present was quite familiar with the creature and confirmed what I had been told in Namche, namely that there are two kinds recognised, and the smaller of the two is the only one met with in their country. Nearly everybody claimed to see the footprints in the snow now and again and thought it almost an everyday occurrence to hear its call.

It was mentioned casually that a neighbour living a few doors away had actually seen a Yeti two or three years back. One of the children was sent to fetch him. Lakhpa Tensing, as he was called, was a man of about thirty, who had been a yak-herd for the greater part of his life. He agreed at once that he had seen the creature, but he was careful to point out that his had been only a short, chance encounter, and he could not tell me a great deal.

“Three seasons ago, in the month of March, when the snow had melted on the grazing grounds, I went up with my herds to a place called Marlung. I was out with them on a steep pasture one afternoon, and when the time came to go home, I found that a yak had strayed away. So I clambered up into a rocky area above

* I use the term Yeti as referring to the Mih-Teh except where stated otherwise.



There is no more beautiful place in the Sherpa country than Thami, at the end of a valley, and overlooked by beetling ranges. Gondah Monastery is perched up above it (on the extreme right)



On fine
winter days
the Sherpa
women sit
outside in
the pale
sunshine
to brush and
comb their
wool

the pasture to look for it. While I was there I heard a noise which I thought at first to be the yelping of a puppy. Going near, to see what it might be, I came on the guts of a freshly-killed mouse hare, the blood still wet, and strewn on the ground. Looking a little way ahead, thirty paces distant, I saw a beast I recognised as a Yeti sitting upright on a rock.

“It had its back to me, and all I could make out was that it looked the size and shape of a twelve-year-old boy. It was sitting in a man-like position, and had a pointed head. The back was covered with red-brown hair. I was very frightened when I realised it was a Yeti, and crept away out of sight before it knew of my presence.”

I questioned Lakhpa on every detail, but he stuck to his story firmly and would not budge from what he had said. All he had been able to see was a silhouette from behind.

“What were its arms like?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I only saw its back.”

“Could you see its ears?”

“No, I did not see it close enough.”

A simple tale, but it was hard not to be impressed by it.

As we reached the next little cluster of houses, the hamlet of Tsan-Deh, a very old woman hobbling on a stick was pointed out as the mother of Tensing Norkay. She greeted me warmly, and was visibly affected at hearing recent news of him. We were entertained to a meal in her daughter’s house, a stew of half-dried meat and noodles, and it was touching to see the old lady take up a photograph of her famous son and press it to her forehead. Then she retired to a corner, where she began telling her beads and twirling a small prayer cylinder.

The general information on the subject of the Yeti was much the same as had been given in the last village. From now until the end of my stay in the Sherpa country I brought up the subject with practically everyone I met, casual strangers on the road, people whose houses I visited, temporary porters, and so on. As far as might be I made every effort to avoid falling into the trap of asking “leading questions”, but opened always with some such remark as: “I am told you have seen a Yeti. Is this true?” Or:

“I am trying to find out about the Yeti. Can you tell me if there is such an animal in your country?”

Today one man gave a graphic account of what he believed to have been an encounter at very close quarters. A year or two before, he had gone up one spring day to cut wood from the birch-trees across the valley; while he was at work he heard something coming down through the undergrowth from the alpine slopes above the tree-line. He crouched down, with a baton of wood in his hand, till the creature approached to within a few paces. He could see nothing of it in the dense rhododendron thicket except that it was a medium-sized animal, not very dark in colour, and possibly of the build of a man. He was too paralysed with terror to move, and after a few moments of unbearable tension it made off again in the direction whence it had come. A leopard or a bear? No, he did not think so: besides he had distinctly heard it panting in a very human fashion, quite unlike any sound made by either of those animals.

As we found our way home in the late afternoon, someone suggested that I enquire at a rather isolated house where a married couple were living who were said to have sighted a Yeti within the past year. But their little steading looked very shut up and deserted and we found nobody at home except one small boy, who told us his parents had gone down to Toshe to buy rice and would not be home again for a few weeks. Yes, it was quite true they had seen a Yeti, and the child remembered them coming back one day last spring, from the range opposite his home where they had been herb-gathering, and telling how they had encountered one. Not wanting to get the story only at second-hand, I purposely did not question him.

Quite enough information had been gleaned to make me more than anxious to try and get to grips with the problem in the field. There was unlimited choice of areas, and local advice supported my idea of spending a week or so in the range across the Bhote Kosi valley, immediately south-west of Namche. It was only a few hours' journey away, but now absolutely deserted for the winter. Moreover, had I not learnt that my hoped-for quarry had been twice reported from this area in the last two years?

Any day seemed as good as another to start. The weather had been unusually mild in the whole Sherpa country this winter, with snowfalls the lightest within living memory. When I first arrived there was none lying below eighteen or nineteen thousand feet, the normal level of the permanent snow-line during the winter season. The few earlier falls had mostly vanished, leaving the countryside bleakly grey and brown.

So everything was made ready to leave on the morning of 8 January. Three hard-up Sherpas were taken on as temporary porters, and rations packed up for a week. I was fast running out of the meagre stocks I had brought up, so except for cocoa, sugar and powdered milk, we stocked up with Sherpa food: rice, tsamba (half-roasted barley-flour), coarse flour (*ata*), tea, yak-ghée,* half-dried meat, and potatoes. Also, naturally we took a small medicine chest. It had been my intention to bring a hurricane lamp and a supply of paraffin. My friends vetoed this. The Yeti, they said, was very quick to recognise any unusual smell: to take paraffin would be a sure way of driving it off.

The previous evening I spent sitting cosily round the hearth with the Gyalchens, into whose family circle I now had the pleasure of being accepted, and playing with the children and their mongrel Lhasa terrier puppies. Meanwhile, Mrs. Gyalchen and her old mother combed out sheep's wool and simmered honey and tsamba over the fire, to make some lumps of toffee to take with us; breaking off frequently to pass round the tea-kettle, without which no Sherpa gathering is ever complete.

This Tibetan-tea is really a thin soup made of yak butter, salt and brick-tea (imported from China), churned up with water in a tall brass-bound cylinder with a piston-headed handle, and then heated to boiling point. There is always a pot on the hob, and it is often the base of a scratch-up meal, for many people knead tsamba into their tea-cup, stirring in a handful of the dry flour, and kneading it round the edge with the tips of their fingers to make a thick paste. It is not a very appetizing snack to a European palate, but it is satisfying and sustaining. The pure tea without addition of any tsamba is an acquired taste, not at all unpalatable

* Clarified butter.

when one has got used to the rancid tang of the yak-ghee, and very reviving after a long day.

Among the poorer Sherpas who cannot afford rice, as also (we are told) over much of Tibet, this half-roasted barley-flour is a main article of diet. Stir it round with a little water, and you have a meal of brown, soggy dough, ready in a few minutes. Not a tempting breakfast, and unattractive to European stomachs, but the Sherpas pull off great gobbets and gulp down this coarsest of foods with relish. Nowadays a revolution has swept over everyone's feeding habits by the introduction of the potato. Apparently it came within the last eighty years, brought in by people who had seen it grown by Europeans in Darjeeling. The tubers grow to perfection in Sherpa fields; they never seem to get diseased, nor does the stock appear to degenerate. Two types are recognised—probably different varieties introduced at different periods. There are, needless to say, various ways of preparing potatoes for a meal. Most commonly they are simply boiled, but there is also a method of slicing them up and spreading them out to dry in the sun for storage.*

The great deficiencies in Sherpa diet are sugar and greens. The scarcity of greens is apparent only in winter, when all that is available is an unpleasant half-fermented pickle of wild cabbage. But in the summer months, I was told, there are plenty of wild herbs, roots and shoots to make up the deficiency. Sugar is a problem they have so far failed to solve. People who can afford it, or find it, get a little wild honey; otherwise there is nothing at all, unless a few rich people trade tins of sugar right up from Kathmandu. I made a mental note to write home to England for some sugar beet seeds, in case they would grow in this dusty soil. Next to sugar, the ceaseless problem is salt: this confronts everyone in the Himalayas, except the lucky few who have deposits of the precious mineral in their own tracts of the mountains. Men can go without sugar, but not without salt. Hence it is an all-important import in the Sherpa country, and a great many journeyings into Tibet are to buy sacks of salt.

* A proportion of these dehydrated potatoes are traded over the border into Tibet.

For all the crudeness and limitations of their diet, the Sherpas have good health, and do not appear to be ill-nourished. Their teeth seem to be good, but coughs, chest and eye complaints (perhaps tubercular) are common and fostered no doubt by the smoke-ridden living rooms. But, as I have already told, the acrid smoke fumes must be of the greatest value as a disinfectant, to kill off all manner of disease-bearing germs. Perhaps this explains why one so seldom sees septic sores and cuts, normally the curse of peoples without drugs or ointments. The smoke may also play its part in checking epidemics, which might otherwise blot out the whole population. Even while I was in Namche there arrived the scourge of smallpox. Someone brought it first to Junbesi, where twenty or thirty people were rumoured to have died, and from there it found its way to Namche. Sensibly enough, the first victim was isolated in a herdsman's hut outside the village bounds, so the epidemic hardly spread beyond this sufferer's house.

During this last evening the deep drone of big trumpets, and the shrilling of smaller instruments came wafted through the wooden casements on the frosty night air, from a house further up the hill. A party of monks had come over from the nearby Thyangboche monastery to hold a memorial service for a man of Namche who had died on a visit to Darjeeling a few weeks ago. At intervals throughout the night I heard, half-awake, the strains of this monastic music, a booming, tinkling and crashing cacophony.

I was anxious to see something of the ceremony before leaving for the hunt, and early next morning a message came down that the family would be glad if I were to call. It was a well-to-do house, and their extra room at the end had been made into a chapel, frescoed and decorated. Here a party of twelve to fourteen monks were seated round the walls, clad in maroon-coloured habits. Cymbals, the two great *Tsangdoh* trumpets, short *tseling* trumpets, drums and hand-bells boomed, shrilled and clashed, accompanying the rise and fall of the low chanting of the monks.

There came an impressive moment as the music stopped abruptly, and to a dirge-like, muttered chant the dead man's

widow was ushered in, leading her small child, and with her hands pressed together took her stand before the shrine. After touching herself slowly and reverently on forehead, mouth and breast, much as if crossing herself, she prostrated herself again and again on the ground.

Each monk had a tea-cup in front of him, which was constantly replenished by a novice, a youth of thirteen or fourteen; who also did duty as an acolyte, tending the rows of votive lamps that flickered in front of the gilt shrine from time to time, and most indecorously, paring his finger-nails with a pair of clippers.

The close likeness of the ritual of Tibetan Buddhism to Christian usages has been often remarked on by travellers. And rightly so; this little ceremony, the rise and fall of the chanting, nearly akin to the Gregorian Chant, and the measured solemnity of the rite were singularly reminiscent of a requiem in the western world.

The main living room of the house was full of activity, the womenfolk and their neighbours busy churning pots of tea, rolling out noodles, boiling and stirring rice. For the requiem was to go on continuously for three days and nights, during all of which time it was the responsibility of the family to feed the officiating monks, who would also be given a fee of a few rupees for their services.

As we made our way out of Namche village, a pair of Tibetan ravens came down to croak gutturally at us from the house-top. Perhaps an omen, good or bad, for my first Yeti hunt.

CHAPTER 6

A Yeti Reconnaissance

HALF-A-MILE west of Namche, we left the main path to climb down steeply through scattered pines and thin scrub, over the snow-swollen Bhote river. Then two or three hours climb up, through thick wintry forest of birch, pine and rhododendron, brought us to the edge of the alpine country, overlooking a deep ravine at some thirteen thousand feet. It was a dour, boulder-strewn country of scrubby rhododendrons, dwarf willows, mosses, and lichens, at this season utterly lonely and deserted, with traces of little encampments and long-dead fires to show where yak-herds had bivouacked in the warmer months; and above the pastures, in the background, the raw desolation of the crags, never visited by men. My companions were quite positive that for the six months from October to April the areas possible for grazing are left totally deserted. It is a steep climb up, and there is absolutely nothing to go for.

The weather was disappointing. Soon after we reached the open country a wall of dank fog came down, blotting out visibility, so there was no alternative but to make camp. In order to be as inconspicuous as possible it had been decided to avoid using a tent unless forced to do so. So we lay down to sleep on the edge of a steep slope, flattening out a clearing with slabs of stone and brushwood.

Dawn saw the fog dissolving. As it swirled out of the valleys we had glimpses of peaks and ranges, looming up grey and sombrely impressive, an awe-inspiring but lifeless grandeur in the loneliness of our surroundings. Then, as the sun rose behind the great twin peaks of Kangtega, the shining yellow of its first rays spread and flowed over range after range, peak after peak,

lighting up the mountains and bringing them to life in a scene of the most wonderful beauty.

Far away to the east stood out the pyramid of Everest, with its ever-attendant plume of snow, and its neighbours Lhotse and Nuptse; nearer at hand the sugar loaf of Amadablam. Immediately in front of us, across the valley, a jagged range of brown-black rock filled the foreground, while to the north-west there was a fine view of the Bhote Kosi valley, where it turns north to lead through the Nangpala pass into Tibet, and of the massif of Cho-Oyu.

After an early breakfast we started out, boulder-hopping and scrambling along the range at about fourteen thousand feet, negotiating treacherous slopes, and skirting the bases of cliffs. Alas for the brilliant start to the day! After three or four hours going, a blanket of dank fog descended and cut down visibility to yards. A mild snow-storm set in, so there was nothing for it but to pitch the tent under the lee of a giant rock, and while the Sherpas blew up a smoky fire of rhododendron twigs I pottered around nearby.

So far no beast or bird of any description had been seen or heard by anyone, and the drear desolation of our surroundings was such as to make one doubt if any living creature survived here at all. So it was at least a crumb of comfort to pick up a wing feather from a snowcock, the large grey and white game-bird (*Kongmah*, in the Sherpa language), which is spread over so much of the Himalayas. And it was mildly uplifting to morale when I remembered that before leaving England one Himalayan expert had jeered at the very suggestion of snowcock being found in the Everest region.

The fog lasted all night, freezing to the rocks and smearing them with a thin coating of ice. It still held us up in the morning, for it would have been dangerous and pointless to wear ourselves out, groping painfully along with nothing to see, and probably crashing over a cliff edge, or at least breaking a limb. By ten it had lifted enough to allow us to proceed, and we started on towards a low precipitous ridge, negotiable through a gap in the rocks. It was pleasing to find at the base of the cliff the tall dead stalks of

one of the wonderful Himalayan poppies, bearing enough seed to collect: a yellow-flowered species sometimes grown in our own gardens (*Meconopsis regia*). Scraping about in the snow I uncovered the pale green rosettes, their hairy leaves tucked snugly inwards on themselves to wait for the spring before sending up their flower stalks.

To the Sherpas this *Meconopsis* is known as *Tashrr*, and its growing shoots are greatly relished as food, peeled and eaten raw.

We negotiated the pass, to slither a few hundred feet down a long slope, then across a solid-frozen stream-bed and up a cliff face. Here we sheltered for the night in a small cave, evidently a haunt of yak-herds in the summer months.

The day ended in a clear, sharp evening, and as I tucked up in my blankets, looking out over the jagged silhouettes of the surrounding crags, a lone owl came out, swooping and hawking silently round the cliff-face in the frigid moonlight: the first living creature seen for two days, and possibly (there seem to be few records of owls so high up) a species new to science.

It would have been hard to imagine anything wilder or more rugged than this stern country I was trying to explore so superficially. As I afterwards came to learn, it was only typical of the huge area between the forest-line and the snows, totalling thousands of square miles which has been so very much neglected by Himalayan expeditions. It was very clear that any beast of even moderate intelligence could lie hidden in the numberless small ravines, rock-strewn slopes and gulleys. One would pass it by with the greatest of ease, particularly among all the noise and clatter that inevitably goes with moving through alpine country.

There looked to be a promising region cluttered up with broken rock above the camp, so I settled to climb a little higher the following day. A profusion of sage-green, dwarf juniper scrub grew here, covering, raggedly, whole slopes, a favourite feeding-ground and living place for alpine birds. Here it was cheering to see a pair of beautiful scarlet and brown rose finches devouring the berries; also some grosbeaks—heavily-built dull yellow and sooty-coloured finches, they are aptly named, and not unlike our own hawfinch.

We trudged across a fairly flat stretch of heath-like country, irregularly spattered with many patches of snow an inch or two deep. In one of these I came on a medley of very man-like footprints, each one of the form of a rather blunt, stockinged foot, showing no toe-prints, but with the curves of the outline quite clear. The average measurements, taken from several well-preserved marks were:

Length, 10 inches;

Maximum breadth, 5 inches;

Breadth across the heel, 3 inches.

I did not think more than a third—if indeed as much—should be added to their original size to allow for melting. There was a certain amount of blurring, enough to obliterate any toe-marks, and as there had been very little sun for the past three or four days this may well have been their age.

A hundred yards further on was another patch of snow, with a precisely similar set of tracks, but a good deal more blurred. In both places they were facing in several directions, as if the animal had “stood about”, so that it was not possible to guess at the length of its stride, or do more than record a general impression that they were made by a two-legged animal.

One thing at least was quite certain. The prints were not those of a Sherpa. Not only were they wrong (as I tested out with the aid of my porters) for the outline of Tibetan boots, but Sherpa children with feet of this size never wander about in the depths of winter on desolate ridges so far from their homes.

I called up the porters, who looked closely at the tracks, and the opinion was that they were of a Yeti. Although they must have realised that I would have been pleased—and that it would have been saying the right thing—had they positively identified them as such, the Sherpas would not commit themselves with certainty. They merely asserted that the tracks were not those of either a man or a bear, but they were not quite fresh enough for them to be positive they were those of a Yeti. There it was; and scientific honesty required that we should claim no positive identification.

If what the Sherpas had told me in Namche was true, the surrounding country was an excellent Yeti area and seemed to offer just what its reputed habits required. So on we plodded, our spirits revived, in the direction of the remoter crags.

Within half an hour the usual dense pall of freezing fog rolled down on us, visibility was cut down to a few yards, and we were condemned to pitch the tent where we stood, huddle miserably round the fire for the rest of the day and try to keep our hair from getting iced-up. It cleared appreciably towards evening, enough to make it worth while sallying forth for a look round, but I was driven back hurriedly by a squall of icy wind, which took me so suddenly that I was just able to reach camp and crawl into my tent in a state of semi-collapse.

Peering out through the flaps I saw the breath-taking spectacle of the whole Everest range and the galaxy of nearer peaks, lit up flaming rose-red from the rays of the setting sun; the effect very near to a brilliant sunset, with the glistening snow and glaciers and the solid mountains in place of clouds. It was the only time I was ever privileged to see such an effect and it was a memorable sight that more than compensated for the hardship of the moment.

By night the wind was blowing a gale, and we huddled into the tent, all six of us, spending a wretched night trying to keep warm and get a little sleep, when we were not holding down the tent walls. Excellent as the Sherpas are, even the frozen air did not compensate for the dubious pleasure of three porters as tent-fellows who had never washed in their lives, and to whom a change of clothes was an annual event at the most.

By the time dawn came at last, there had been a snow-storm and the gale had more or less blown itself out. At any rate it had dispersed the fog, and we started out to a clear day. The most broken area so far encountered lay ahead, so it seemed best to pitch camp only two hours further on, at the foot of an overhanging cliff, and spend the day probing the rocks and gullies round about.

As we crossed a narrow valley it was satisfying to come on sets of fresh tracks in the previous night's snowfall. Deer, Tibetan foxes, and rows of dots made by mouse hares were all in

evidence, but never sight nor sound of a living animal. I sent the porters on by a short-cut to the camping place, while Gyalchen and I negotiated a more productive-looking route over splintered boulders. When we met up with them again, two men came over in mild excitement: they had chanced on what they were positive were a set of Yeti tracks, made only last night. Before I could scramble across to the spot a sudden gust of wind squalled down the valley, whirling up the loose snow, and nothing was left to see but a line of distorted and unrecognisable smudges. Both porters were positive the fresh prints had looked exactly like those of a small man going barefoot, and with toe-marks quite distinct.

Our rations were running short. So from here I cut down through the fringing belt of woodland back to the Bhote valley and civilisation, coming out a mile or two further on from Thammu village where I had been visiting a week before. We fell in with a party of villagers on the path, and as we walked along with them, they told how several Thammu people had heard the yelping call of a Yeti passing within earshot of the village only three evenings back. They also pointed to a narrow plank bridge, spanning the river, and described how a woman had come down in the morning to draw water and there on the bridge, in a fresh sprinkle of snow had seen Yeti footprints leading away into the crags on the other side.

As I had caught a slight chill one of the porters, who had shown himself a sensible character, was left behind to make further enquiries. Meanwhile the rest of us put on speed to make the comfort of Namche Bazaar. Arriving back before nightfall, we found Mrs. Gyalchen and a party of gossips in the half-light round the fire, busy spinning and brushing out wool, twiddling a primitive wooden spindle—the spinning-wheel appears to be unknown up here.

Perhaps a trifle foolishly, I spread word around that I would give a reward to anyone who could produce satisfactory information on the Yeti and its habits. However, not a soul came forward, either then or later on, to volunteer any spontaneous information. The information I gleaned arose invariably out of a chance remark

let drop in conversation. This reticence, I think, was due as much to shyness as anything else, but it was certainly suggestive that the Sherpas were by no means out to say what would be nice to hear, and not interested in cashing in on the interest I displayed.

One evening a middle-aged man named Nimah, from a village far up the valley, chanced to come into a house where I was calling. He gave a graphic account of an adventure that had befallen him. "On a winter afternoon," he declared, "eight years ago, a party of four of us were coming back from a salt-buying expedition in Tibet. On the last stage of our journey, as so often happens to travellers, we found ourselves later than we had expected, and were forced to stop the night in a deserted herdman's hut a few hours' journey from our home. Dusk fell as we were collecting firewood and drawing water to cook our evening meal. To our surprise we heard what we thought was someone calling out and coming in our direction. The noise came nearer, and we recognised it as the yelping call of a Yeti. All Sherpas are frightened of meeting a Yeti, so we huddled together in the hut and shut ourselves in, scared even to start a fire or to stir outside for the rest of the night. The sound came closer and closer, and we heard it just outside our hut, when it changed to a chattering, as if it was threatening us. None of us had ever seen a Yeti, although we were familiar with the accounts given by other people. Eventually it moved off and the calling died away in the distance. After dawn next morning we went outside and looked in the shallow snow that lay on the ground. Coming close up to the hut, and leading away out of sight, were a set of newly-made tracks of a creature walking on two legs. The marks were very like those of a small naked human foot, the toes clearly outlined, but not quite the same as a man's since they all looked to be the same length."

An eerie tale, told simply and without embroidery. I queried the story at once by suggesting that it had really been a wolf which had gone past howling, and not a Yeti at all.

"But everybody knows wolves," Nimah retorted. "This call was not the same; it was a shorter and less drawn-out wail; and how do you explain the chattering noise? We see wolf

tracks often in winter; these were much too man-like to be confused with them." Try as I would, nothing could shake Nimah or get him to alter his story.

Our porter, who had been left up the valley to make enquiries about the rumoured calling of a few days ago, came in with the news that the story was pretty certainly true. A Yeti had been heard calling below Thammu village in the early evening, and by people from more than one house.

While I was still in Namche, two Tibetans arrived from a remote place called Tharbaleh, three days' journey across the Nepal border. It is not very far from the large monastery of Rongbuk, so well known to us from the earlier Everest expeditions. They had not seen a Yeti themselves, but everyone in the neighbourhood knew of them, and they both gave an account of the two types that tallied remarkably well with that of the Sherpas.

Two or three seasons back some boys of their village were out tending Yaks in the early weeks of the spring; they were surprised to see a small man striding towards them from some distance away. Going nearer to meet him, they found he was no man but a Yeti, a creature covered with dark reddish hair, and with a high pointed head. Too scared to go any closer, they ran away.

It was, so they told me, well known in their neighbourhood how a mountain lake broke its banks a few years ago after unusually heavy rain, and the flood waters hurtling down the mountain-side drowned a Yeti, whose body was afterwards found washed up among the rocks. My informants did not see it, but a number of their friends did, and described it as no larger than a small man, with a pointed head and reddish-brown hair. They were afraid to keep the skin.

The Tibetans confirmed what the Sherpas had volunteered: that the small type of Yeti is not the same as the red bear, which is fairly common in their mountains and a menace to livestock. Its call is familiar to most people, and is now and again heard near the villages. The Tibetans believed that the creature feeds on small animals (presumably mouse hares) living among the

rocks, and in the summer on a large insect—perhaps some type of cricket—that is very common locally. The monks of the seventeen thousand foot monastery of Rongbuk fairly often see them when they come down lower in the winter months.

During this time it was agreeable to see something of the general set-up of the ordinary life of the Sherpas. The efficient bustlers who preside so much over our own destinies today would doubtless call them dull and hum-drum: a little isolated community of peasant folk, living out their simple lives in austerity on the roof of the world, season following season without interruption, and punctuated by no world-shattering events.

In winter, when herding and crops are largely at a standstill, life flows on in a timeless fashion and not very strenuously. There is little to do at home beyond feeding the livestock and huddling them under the house in cold weather; and many go off on trading expeditions, mainly to buy rice and maize. Neither of these will grow in the Sherpa climate, the fields do not produce quite enough grain and potatoes to feed everyone, and in any case rice and maize are their favourite diet. So there is a constant coming and going, up and down to the iron-smelting and trading centre of Toshe and elsewhere to lay in supplies. Some go on their own initiative, to fulfil their own household needs; others as traders and middle-men, taking with them a caravan of poorer people as carriers and porters, and opening temporary grain stores in Namche for the sale of food, and such precious commodities as sugar and cigarettes.*

As I had seen on the journey up, there is a great deal of traffic down the fortnight's journey to Kathmandu: herds of sheep and goats, driven on foot to sell in the bazaar; bundles of coarse woollen rugs and blankets, humped on the backs of both man and beast, and sold to get all manner of household goods, pots and pans, tea-cups and so on, as well as salt and food. Many people go regularly up to Tibet, right through to Lhasa and beyond, to do a brisk trade in livestock and wool, and on pilgrimage to the great monastic centres of Shigatse and Lhasa. Those who have relatives in Darjeeling and Sikkim make the rather awkward

* The Sherpas also grow much buckwheat as a catch-crop in the summer.

fortnight's trip to the east to visit them, and may take a casual job in the hill-station while they are there.

So that for all the remoteness and seeming isolation of their austere country, the Sherpas are anything but a stay-at-home people. Probably there are few families who do not average a jaunt to the outside world at least once every two years: men, women, even the children, all go if they can get the excuse.

Like all of us they grumble and groan at the prospect of having to toil up to Tibet or down to Nepal, but I do not think there is much doubt they thoroughly enjoy the outing. The more so as they have much in their make-up in common with their Tibetan kinsmen, and for that matter with all Himalayan peoples, to whom any sort of a trip or expedition is the breath of life.

This side of the Sherpa life and character is one that is important in trying to assess how much credence to give to their beliefs and statements; what to reject, and what to accept, and how much to explain by the experts' favourite phrase that "a native" will always tell you what you want to know.

It is interesting to speculate how much their way of life has been influenced by the two civilisations on each side of them, with both of which they have so many contacts. The Tibetan element is the stronger, since it is from there they take their culture, their Buddhist religion and, in part, their racial origins. But the Nepalese contacts are far from negligible and have long been an important and positive influence.

Now that many Sherpas go to Darjeeling, and climbing expeditions have started pouring into Nepal, the whole population has been thrown into close fleeting contact with our western civilisation. In some ways not altogether happily, for it is the materialistic side of our way of life that has impinged on them, in the guise of specialised technical equipment and kit. One would give anything to know how they visualise life in Europe on the strength of these sudden invasions of climbing parties, elaborately and weirdly clad, festooned with gadgets, eating out of specially-prepared tins, and fighting their way to the tops of mountains for reasons that are quite beyond their power to comprehend.



The little
monastery
of Gondah
nestles among
the crags
above Thami



A Sherpa yak-herd milks his flock against the background of the Longmoche Kola. The range in the background marks the boundary with Tibet

The Sherpas are spoken of as a tribe. It is not a happy word to apply to them, for it conjures up a picture of a primitive race, slaves of hidebound, tribal custom, with a rigid framework of conventions. They have advanced well beyond that stage to one where the family and the village community are the bed-rock on which their society is built. Now that I had crossed the threshold and got beyond mere mutual courtesy, earlier misunderstandings were cleared up. Friendships were budding, and I was close enough to see something of ordinary, everyday family life. This is a very strong influence, permeating every phase and every section of life. It does so partly, I imagine, because one of the most outstanding virtues of the Sherpa character and disposition is tolerance. Tolerance to each other, to the stranger in their midst, and to the Tibetan and Nepalese neighbour.

Conflicts of will are very seldom apparent, on the surface at any rate. For one thing, after the established usage of the East, everyone knows his place in the family circle, and it would never occur to anyone to speak out of turn or overstep the mark. The cynical might call it a limitation, imposed by generations of cast-iron tradition, and say in fashionable parlance that it is what you would expect to find in the less emancipated peoples of Asia. But it is a system that works; and, as I saw from countless little incidents, it works extremely well. There are few things more testing or more fraying to tempers than living a restricted life, cheek by jowl, with one's neighbours and next-of-kin. The Sherpas have got over its dangers by a very simple means: they have abolished privacy in their homes; in other words, they have cut down social convention and etiquette to the minimum consistent with preserving self-respect and personal decorum.

Very large in the management of everyday affairs loom the women. Not obviously so or by established custom, but by force of personality. Nowhere in the world have I seen so many strong-minded women, resolute and (in a quiet way) managing. In theory the household is run much as it is with us, in that the husband is the head and his womenfolk dependent on him. In practice the lady of the house, who is completely emancipated, has her men precisely where she wants them; and as often as not

she makes no secret of it. Not that they are viragoes; far from it. I was greeted and made welcome with unfailing kindness and warmth by all the wives I came in contact with. It is simply that they are endowed with strong, dominating personalities, in some ways a very good antidote to their easy-going husbands. Nor will they stand any nonsense from their own sex. They can be jealous to a degree: indeed, I more than once heard it said (doubtless malignantly) that Mrs. So-and-So puts poison in the tea of any woman whom her husband so much as looks at.

Sherpa children are never beaten, and it is quite unusual to see two people of any age quarrelling openly or displaying temper. Once only was I witness of a "scene". A small boy had been thwarted in some way by his parents and lay down on the ground literally squirming and gibbering with rage, drumming his heels and biting the dust in a frenzy of hysteria. Nobody took the slightest notice, and left him to it until he had worked the temper out of his system.

There is always something doing in a Sherpa house; a great mixture of minor activities, everything flowing and merging into everything else. Time in our sense hardly exists, since there is always time to do what one wants to, and never any hurry about doing it. No precise time need be fixed for starting a journey, finishing a job of work, or sowing the crops. Everything is fitted in, not exactly in a leisurely way, but in the spirit of *festina lente*, with a due sense of the futility of hustle and bustle.

I soon found that the Gyalchens, typical of the more prosperous families of the neighbourhood, had several irons in the fire, and were involved in a plenitude of activities. The spinning party we had interrupted on the way back from Yeti-hunting went on for several days. My hosts were employing two women, one a widowed sister of Mrs. Gyalchen and the other an impoverished Tibetan, both of whom worked for their keep and a small wage. When they had finished the spinning and combing of the wool, other people would come in to weave and make up the wool into coarse blankets for sale and barter, locally or further afield.

At the same time there was a busy side-line in materials for the wool and flannel knee-boots, worn universally. This, like all

tailoring in the Tibetan region, was a man's job; so that two or three Tibetan casual workers down for the winter were constantly in and out of the house, snipping away with their big scissors, and cutting out yak-hide leather for the soles. So far as I could gather, their piecework was either sold direct or farmed out to be made up by one of the Tibetan tailors in Namche.

Wool was always in great demand, both for weaving and for knitting, at which Sherpa women are extremely adept. Presumably they must have learnt the art from Darjeeling. Jerseys, scarves and caps are all worked up with great speed and competence; their needles click-clack incessantly as the women go about the day's work, or even when they are out carrying loads.

Mrs. Gyalchen worked as hard and as busily as anyone, and coped simultaneously with the incessant care of her infant daughter; rocking her to sleep with frightening violence when she cried. Their sturdy little son, Ang Tsering, I hardly saw from early morning to night. For all his eight years he strode out each morning after breakfast, warmly clad in his leather breeches and wool-lined jerkin, heedless of the weather, to spend the day herding his father's few yaks and cattle. He would reappear, an hour or so before dusk, to drive them in under the house and demand his supper, before huddling up beside the fire in the double-sized blanket he shared with his elder sister.

My few tins of food were fast running out, and I was becoming used to living on the ordinary food eaten by the family. There is *always* something simmering on the fire in a Sherpa house, and any type of food is eaten throughout the day. Boiled rice is the most popular dish, eaten with a little curried meat and gravy, and all who can possibly afford it make it their business to lay in enough bags of rice each autumn to see them through to the following season.

Since their introduction from Darjeeling, a generation or two ago, potatoes rank very high as an article of food. Most households grow their own, and bury them in pits in the ground against the frost. A dish I became fond of, called *Kuhrr*, is made by pounding up boiled potatoes with *tsamba* (or buckwheat flour) and water, and spreading the dough on a very hot grid-iron over

the fire; this cooks it to a thick, rubbery girdle-scone which is served up with a dollop of yak butter and a pinch of salt.

It is a point of honour to offer something to every casual visitor who comes into the house for any reason: a neighbour's boy with a message, the porters carrying in one's luggage. No matter how trivial the occasion, the kettle is always simmering on the hob, the butter-tea churn is brought out and little handleless cups are produced from the dresser. Most people get through dozens of cups of tea every day.

In common with many of their race the Gyalchens were teetotallers, but with no prejudices against alcohol, and my hostess was well-known as a skilful brewer of chang. Visitors were always offered a glass of the acid, milky beer from small tubs kept in one corner of the living room, and she was for ever pressing it on me, refilling my glass, in accordance with Sherpa etiquette, at every sip I took. She could not realise that most of us do not care for a stimulant before breakfast, and it became the normal and embarrassing routine to be woken up soon after daybreak to peer up, heavy with sleep, at Mrs. Gyalchen standing over my bed, brandishing a smoke-blackened kettle of beer in one hand and a brimming tumbler in the other, admonishing me to drink. A major problem was how to dispose of the liquid without giving offence, the more so since she was a lady of great force of character, and very sensitive, who did not take a refusal kindly.

Life flowed on easily and pleasantly in those few days, and it was tempting to settle down at Namche and share indefinitely this way of life I had been welcomed into: getting up, as did everyone else, at leisure, without thought for the day beyond the immediate present, yet finding time for anything that needed to be done; finally, at half-past eight or nine at night, settling down to sleep after a night-cap of tea or chang round the fire.

CHAPTER 7

A Visit to Thami

ONE of the main tasks of the advance party was to find out a good site for the expedition's base camp, either as centrally-placed as possible for operating in the Sherpa country as a whole, or—assuming the Swiss expedition were to materialise—a place from which we could easily cover half the area. A glance at the map showed that the best policy would be to aim either at a centre in some village up the Bhote Kosi valley, to the west of Namche, or else to strike east along the now celebrated area of Thyangboche and the highway towards Everest.

There did not seem to be much in it, but as nothing to speak of had been recorded about the country to the west of Namche, while the other direction was, superficially at least, very much on the map, it would be more fun to strike out in the lesser-known direction.

My Sherpa friends recommended a place called Thami, eight miles up the Bhote Kosi valley and an hour beyond Thammu, where I had met Tensing's mother. So, leaving half the kit in store in the spare room, on 18 January we started out with six porters. The same disappointing weather that had sabotaged my first sortie had gone on for the past week; not unduly cold, but dark and foggy, and with a sprinkle of snow on the ground.

Thami proved to be a high village, perhaps fifteen thousand feet up, sited at the mouth of a side-valley running due west and approached by a short steep climb where the Bhote river made a sharp turn to the north. A very attractive village it was; its forty or fifty stone houses spaced out among the fields, much more widely than those at Namche Bazaar. There was a shallow stream running through it, with small groves of juniper trees, and in the

near background there were steep ranges soaring up nearly sheer to twenty thousand feet.

Gyalchen had plenty of friends in the village, and as soon as we arrived he made for a prosperous-looking house and shouted up to the window to ask lodging for the night. Our arrival was entirely unexpected and there cannot have been more than a tiny handful of white men through Thami at any time, but it was typical of the Sherpa temperament that nobody in the house showed the least surprise or commotion as we trooped in. Within an hour we were all settled down in the living room and were lending a hand in the ordinary routine of the family: the porters, without waiting to be asked, set to work automatically at household chores and odd jobs, fetching water from the stream or giving fodder to the yaks, chopping wood and kneading flour.

Imagine the reactions of a British housewife if a party of ten were to swarm into her house without warning and make themselves at home. One suspects that the Sherpas are people totally free from prejudices or conventions—so much so that it never occurs to them that an unexpected situation is any occasion for flurry, or cannot be taken in their stride as part of the day's work.

The end room of the house was frescoed and contained a shrine (albeit there were legs of yak-meat hung up to dry from the ceiling), which showed that my hosts were people of affluence. They were an attractive family. My hostess, Mrs. Dorjeh, was one of the very few Sherpa women to smoke—a habit looked on as not quite becoming to her sex—though she was careful to explain, when asking for a cigarette, that it was only for medicinal reasons; in fact, to cure a tooth-ache. She had five growing sons, and she had been twice married. Her first husband, having had the misfortune to kill a neighbour in a quarrel, had fled to Tibet where he died and she then married his younger brother.

As we sat round the fire I turned the conversation to the Yeti. Nobody present had seen one, but they not infrequently came on the tracks in winter, and now and then heard its call. A near relative of the family, now away on a trading trip, was known to have seen one at very close quarters a few seasons back. These people were more emphatic than the Namcheans as to its being a

beast to keep clear of, and the Dorjeh family took it so seriously that they said quite openly nobody would dream of going to look for one, or would even dare wander far among the rocks, unless forced to do so when hunting for a strayed yak.

“Is the Yeti so dangerous that it would kill you?”

“No : it is simply that Sherpas always have been scared of them, and we are all brought up to avoid them.”

“You of this village keep many yaks. Do you lose them from the Yeti?”

“No. It does not attack either beasts or men.”

“How about the large Dzu-Teh?”

“We never see them here. They are often seen by people who go to Tibet.”

During the evening a woman came into the house to borrow a cooking-pot. She volunteered the information that three winters before, in a spell of snowy weather, she had gone out from her home to collect some yak fodder. A mile or two from the village she came on a set of freshly-made Yeti tracks, coming down from the hill-side and leading to a small stream. There the creature had stopped, so she thought, to drink, for the tracks led back again into the range above. She was quite sure they were made by something walking on two legs. Each footprint was the size of a man's or rather smaller, with the imprints of the toes distinct.

We stayed the night strewn over the Dorjehs' floor. The house was rather thickly populated and living space congested, so we moved across in the morning to lodge with a neighbour, a Mrs. Danrhepu, who had a smaller family and in whose house I could lodge as long as I wanted in return for a small rent.

All the next few days the weather failed us miserably : a reeking frozen fog condemning us all to sit glumly round. We peered out at intervals through the casement as the curtain lifted, showing the junipers thinly encased in ice, or groped around to people's houses, where we sipped innumerable cups of tea and chang. The sole sign of life was a flock of snow pigeons. Elegantly pied grey and white, and one of the characteristic birds of the higher Himalayas, they are charmingly tame and plentiful in these parts,

where they pick about in the potato fields between the houses and are never molested by man.

One day I stumbled up the valley, plodding over the snow-drifts, slipping and scrambling through the rocks: a very exhausting and altogether profitless exercise which yielded nothing but dreariness and a few musk deer tracks. On our way home Gyalchen made the suggestion that we should look in at a small monastery, by name Gondah, perched high up in the crags and some half-an-hour's climb above the village. Its temple was at the foot of a steep cliff, the twenty little houses of the monks nestling round it wherever there was space flat enough to build. The monks of Gondah are of a simple category, most or all married, and live as a community with their wives and children. It was a romantic-looking place, and I was very much cheered at the prospect of visiting it.

However, sensibly enough, everyone seemed to have gone into hibernation. Every wooden casement was jammed shut, and only footprints in the snow outside showed there was anybody living there. After we had thrown stones at several windows, vainly trying to attract attention, a shutter was jerked open and an incredibly frowny head stuck itself out.

What did we want? "Nothing in particular; we only want to pay a call on you." My arrival did not appear to arouse much enthusiasm, which was rather unflattering to my national self-esteem since I imagined I was the first European to visit the monastery. So we resigned ourselves to trudge rather grumpily back to Thami, unimpressed by an apparently oafish reception. Quite wrongly so, as it turned out later, for when one gets to know them there are few pleasanter people than the monks of Gondah. Their temple is by tradition the oldest in the Sherpa country; it is frescoed from top to bottom with ancient, pale-hued paintings, and hung with silk, painted banners, some of which I judged to be of a very respectable age. Tradition has it that Buddhism was brought to the Sherpas many centuries back by three missionary monks, all brothers, who founded the monastery at Gondah, a temple near Namche, and one further east, near Pangboche. Whether that is true or not, there is no

doubt that Gondah is of great antiquity. And its monks seem to be in effect a hereditary community. All of them marry—either daughters of their fellows, or girls of surrounding villages, and their sons can become monks or not as they choose. They also recruit lads from the neighbourhood who are entered by their parents. The total strength is not more than between thirty and forty, and among them are families who go back from son to father through generation after generation of monks.

As we were making our way down through the snow and sludge on the narrow paths between the houses, it came as a positive shock of surprise to stumble on a magnificent Monaul pheasant scratching about in the snow, for all the world like a barnyard rooster, and very nearly as tame. When one sees these great blue and chestnut, peacock-hued pheasants in aviaries, they have a heavy, vulgar, altogether exotic look, reminiscent of a tropical jungle; the last bird one would expect to find dizzling about in the snow. Seen in his own natural setting he was really superb: a jewel of colour in the fog-ridden greyness of the winter landscape, and a good instance of the universal rule that, against the background into which it was designed to fit, nothing in nature is ever out of harmony.

Loud whistles from the cliff above proclaimed the presence of others of the same breed, and I soon made out a party of Monauls peering down at us, quite unperturbed. They had no cause to be afraid, for the Buddhist tabu against taking life applies very strictly in Himalayan monasteries, and their surroundings are real sanctuaries, where birds and beasts, knowing well their security, get amazingly tame.

It had been a disappointment, not contacting the monks. I had hoped that living up in the back-of-beyond they might have some good information about the Yeti. However, on the way down the hill we fell in with an aged monk, carrying a bundle of firewood, who showed some curiosity about us. According to him, Yetis are fairly often heard calling in winter evenings from the range above the monastery, although he could not recollect that anyone had heard it of late.

Thami was in many ways a more typical Sherpa village than

Namche, in that everything is closer to earth and existence based on pastoral life and agriculture. Everyone lives directly off the land, with very little in the way of trading in other commodities.

There was a big population of yaks, and this was my first close acquaintance with these beasts. Practically everyone had his herd; the better-to-do owned thirty head or more, poorer people half-a-dozen. The strain kept by the Sherpas seems to be a small one; timid, dainty little animals, in some ways toy-like and reminiscent of Shetland ponies: unexpectedly so, because the larger wild yaks that live across in Tibet are reputed to be savage, intolerant brutes that are best avoided.

Untold generations of domestication has turned the yak into one of the most placid and tranquil animals in the service of mankind. It has lost all trace of individuality or personality, even more so than our own highly-bred cattle. For one thing they are dumb, or very nearly so, and make no sound except a grinding noise with their teeth. They give the impression of being empty of emotions and passions: now and again they will make wild rushes at each other, bickering over food, and scrunching their teeth in peevish frenzy; otherwise nothing has the power to upset them.

They seem quite unconscious of cold and do not in the least mind being driven out from under the house in the grim dawn of the bleakest weather. They stay out in the open all day, their shaggy coats encrusted with snow or frozen fog, until it is time to be shut up again for the night, when they step mincingly indoors, giving a little skip as they cross the threshold.

As so often happens with tame animals, the yaks reflect faithfully the tranquil temperament of their masters. In an impersonal way Sherpa yak-herds get attached to their charges, giving each its own name, derived from its colour (for they are by no means always black): one sees them pied, grey, red-brown and white.

They are kept for milk-production, butter-making, breeding, and the sale of calves. Very few are slaughtered for meat, except (nowadays) for sale to exploring expeditions. The calves are mostly driven over the Nangpa pass to be sold in Tibet. They realise a good price, especially now, when the Chinese occupation

has brought on the inflation that goes so often with "liberation". Best of all for profit are the yak and cattle hybrids, the dzum and the dzoz, for each respectively is an improvement on either parent as a pack animal and milk producer. Taking them all round there is something so distinctive and so amiable about the gentle little yaks that I never tired of seeing them about. After a long and exhausting day I found their presence soothing to a jangled temper.

Although I had now been probing about in this very thinly-populated alpine country for over a fortnight, not a wild beast of any kind had shown itself, while the gloom of the weather made me so despondent that I was ready to be convinced that there were in fact none to be seen.

However, 20 January dawned bright, and glimpses of sun lighted up the snow and the icicles on the trees. I made a trip up a side-valley leading west from the village, through an area of dwarf, creeping juniper bushes. Here a set of fresh hoof-marks soon crossed my path, a row of sharp triangles chipped out of the snow. Following it up, I came face to face with a musk deer, standing motionless among the bushes. A pretty mottled brown creature, not quite like any others of its tribe in looks or habits, it lives always above the tree-line, solitary except in the mating season, and—in Tibet at any rate—greatly persecuted for the gland of musk. We looked at each other for a few moments, then the deer whisked round and was off; but not really scared, for it stopped again a hundred yards further on and began scratching in the snow for moss.

The glimmer of sun had thawed the birds to life, and the junipers were a-twitter with flocks of grosbeak finches, and some dull brown and grey thrushes with a chattering call like a fieldfare. My companions pointed out a set of brand-new wolf tracks, the round pad-marks unmistakable, and we traced them for some distance before losing them among the boulders.

It had not taken long to prove that the prints of wolves, deer, and mouse hares were all recognisable with ease in the snow, and if I could learn so fast to know them, how much more so the Sherpa yak-herds, who must know them like the backs of their

hands. The identification of Yeti tracks was taking on a new and more positive significance.

We went over a desolate ridge, strewn with great slippery boulders, and here I flushed a sandy-red Tibetan fox from a hollow, his brush so thick and bushy as to seem too large for his body. Like the musk deer, he was not very alarmed, for he curled up on top of a rock to take stock of us before loping off out of sight.

It was about here, I was told, that two young women, daughters of monastic families at Gondah, claimed to have seen a Yeti only recently; but local opinion advised taking this with a grain of salt: very likely they were only a pair of adolescents who had been "seeing things".

However, the area was well recommended as a hunting-ground, so I moved up for a day or two, to a cluster of graziers' huts, small editions of the permanent houses and deserted till the coming of spring. We camped snugly in a basement, warmed by a fire of yak's dung and juniper twigs, and girded ourselves up for two days' hard work. True to form, the fog set in, enveloping everything in the usual freezing pall, letting up now and then for an hour or so, only to clamp down afterwards with greater intensity.

The one redeeming feature was the presence of numberless snowcock, the bulky, guinea-fowl-sized game-bird that lives, comparable to our own ptarmigan, in these great altitudes, and takes from them its colouring of white and grey. I awoke early one morning to hear a typical game-bird clucking-noise from near the hut. *Kongmah* said everyone, and wanted to sally out and down them with sticks and stones. I put a ban on this until I had seen them. I peered round the door to see eight or ten dumpy shapes pecking about in the half-light. Trying to stalk near I was soon spotted, and the pack made off in disorder, scrambling and racing helter-skelter over the ground, wings all a-flutter, but never heaving their bodies into flight. The Sherpas declare they are too heavy and too lazy to fly uphill, and can only support their weight on the wing when going downhill, or if there is a following wind to help them on.

With visibility cut down to a hundred yards or so, there was nothing for it but to pack up and wend my way home again to Thami. We chose to return by a different route, leading over a ridge at some sixteen thousand feet, in the faint hope of encountering something. But, as my companions rightly pointed out, every beast and bird and Yeti would have gone to ground in such weather, to stay huddled among the rocks until conditions improved. The path took us by a tiny hamlet, with an attractive temple buried in a juniper grove, and ministered to by an aged priest living close by with his wife and family. We surprised him sitting cross-legged in the corner of his room, his grandson on his knee, chanting from the scriptures. With typical Sherpa tranquillity he showed no reaction at the invasion of a pair of be-draggled, snow-sodden strangers, but merely put aside his book and called to his wife to blow up a brazier and make some tea and chang to thaw us out. Bowls of half-fermented, wild-cabbage pickle were handed round; hardly an appetising dainty under such conditions.

The priest had never seen a Yeti himself, but he knew plenty of people who had, including his own mother, who once encountered one at close quarters on the opposite side of the valley to his home. The account she had handed on to him tallied exactly with everything so far heard from other people, and it was significant that she heard it give the yelping call (which the old man imitated) at the moment she saw it.

Of greater and more present interest to me was to hear him remark that only a week or so before several people from down the valley had come to arrange for a small ceremony of appeasement. They had heard a Yeti calling one evening, and were scared of the ill-luck that would almost certainly befall them. He said that people often came to the priests for this, to ward off the possible consequences of having direct or indirect contact with a Yeti. He was emphatic about its being a beast of ill-omen, a harbinger of bad luck, as owls are held to be by country-folk among ourselves. There are innumerable parallel instances in countries of the East.

Not that the Yeti itself is credited with the power to harm or

with any particularly evil intentions; it is just that ill-fortune of one kind or another is expected to follow on the smallest contact with it. The large section of the spirit world concerned with positive evil, always vigilant and waiting its chance to harm human beings, seizes the opportunity given by a bad omen and visits the victim with some affliction—loss of a sheep, an attack of rheumatism or an unlucky trading expedition—the degree of organised severity depending on the seriousness of the happening. People who see or hear a Yeti do not have a ceremony or a series of incantations performed invariably. But it is quite usual, and in the eyes of the more devout held to be definitely advisable.

Now hard cash is a very precious commodity among the Sherpas, and they are nothing if not conscious of its value: twopence saved is very much twopence got. So by no stretch of imagination could I conceive that people who live so much with their feet on the ground—in such close and everyday contact with the life around them—would come regularly to pay fees on account of something which was simply a figment of their imagination. And in this particular instance, it was not a single individual who perhaps had been celebrating too well, but a party of several people had come hot-foot to sacrifice a few precious rupees and appease the vengeful spirits. Dates were rather vague, but as far as I could reckon this contact seemed to tally with the news, already reported to me from Thammu, of a Yeti heard and its tracks discovered a week or two back.

We had been living hard for some weeks and were all due for a modest tuck-in, so I bought a sheep for the servants and porters, and also to have a little something to hand out as presents to my hosts and helpful acquaintances. Normally meat is rather scarce in the winter, unless something dies or is killed accidentally. Those who can afford it buy sides of half-dried, slightly bad meat from Tibet. This may be stewed, or a shred may be cut off to chew raw when anyone feels like it—the one item of Sherpa diet I could never begin to get accustomed to. So a square meal of fresh meat was as much a luxury for myself as for my followers.

Every scrap—meat, skin and intestines—went into the stew-pot; and excellent sausages, made by a local recipe from the

blood mixed with rice, gave me a good breakfast for several mornings to come. We were just sitting down to enjoy the feast, when the house was rocked by a slight earthquake tremor. Straightway everybody clutched at the air, with a muttered chorus of "*Gibboseh—Gibboseh*"—Stop it—STOP IT: a request to the underwater giant who carries the earth on his shoulder to be more careful in shifting the weight of his burden. Even this slight tremor caused mild apprehension, and was a subject of conversation for several days to come. For it was the first time such a thing had happened since twenty years back, when Nepal was shaken from end to end. It was then that the roof of the temple at Thyangboche monastery collapsed on top of the monks, burying the abbot among the debris. Today all was over in a few minutes, and the household settled down to their normal routine.

It was noticeable that here among the Thami people, in comparison with the more cosmopolitan folk of Namche, there was less casual "dropping-in"; except for calling for a definite purpose the family circle rather keep themselves to themselves, knowing everybody around about intimately, but guarding their own unity. During the days I spent with the Danrhepus nobody came in at all. Admittedly they were a peculiarly dull family who kept their social graces well hidden, and the good wife had an intensely irritating mannerism of ceaselessly whispering and muttering to herself the invocation *Om Mani Padme Hum*, telling and re-telling her beads forwards and backwards from dawn to bed-time, driving even her good-natured and long-suffering husband to exasperation.

Friends in the village recommended as a good area to search the ranges to the immediate north, towards the border of Tibet, along the Bhote Kosi valley. So up we went for a few days, along a side valley, to an attractive place known as Longmoche, half a day's journey from Thami. It was a rugged valley, much used by graziers from the spring onwards, but now nearly deserted.

Every valley and flat area in the Sherpa country that gives a modicum of grazing is dotted with clusters of summer grazing houses, in some places full-sized villages, or as often as not a single house or a group of three or four. Fodder for the winter

feed is stored in them, and they are deserted all winter except when their owners come up spasmodically for a day or two, to collect hay when supplies are running short at home, bringing their herd to get the benefit of such wretched pasturage as the lower slopes can produce. This means that for the winter the Sherpa population and their herds are by and large concentrated in the permanent villages, making only these occasional excursions up country.

Every family owns a house and, as a rule, some land in the grazing villages. At the first sign of spring, virtually the whole population pack up their traps and move into the grazing ground for a longer or shorter period, when for weeks on end their permanent homes stay shut up and deserted. Not that there is a general exodus; each household treks up under its own arrangements, and people trickle off over a period of weeks, according as they have many or few yaks and sheep, much land to cultivate, a large or a small family to look after the beasts, and a hundred and one other reasons.

Nor does each village have its summer grazing arrangements organised as a community. People from three or four permanent settlements often own houses and grazing rights in the same summer village; so it is normal to have a different set of next-door neighbours from season to season. No doubt this is one reason why the Sherpas are so inter-knit and close-locked a community. I have never met such people for knowing each other's affairs; anyone can tell you everything about each and every family from end to end of their country.

Many Sherpas, and especially the better-to-do, own land and summer houses in several places, oscillating between one and another as the grazing and state of the crops demand. What it really amounts to is that the grazing and fodder situation is so precarious, and it is so tough a proposition to scratch a living for man and beast, that the economy depends very much on following round the yaks and sheep from pasture to pasture.

This chopping and changing from place to place in the spring and summer, and the unending journeyings out of the country during the winter, constitute a way of life that is anything but



Thyangboche Monastery is one of the most beautifully sited places in the country. The cottages of the monks are grouped round their temple



Sherpa
women are
happy,
friendly
folk; and
full of
character



Losahr, the Sherpa New Year, is celebrated with plenty of good cheer, and everyone vies with his neighbours in dispensing hospitality



Phorche Village
is spread
out over a
large area
at a bend
in the Dudh
river

drab or monotonous. There is always a move up country, or a trip farther afield either in progress or anticipated, so that the outwardly jog-trot life of the Sherpa peasant is far more varied than the casual traveller might suppose.

Their way of life is dictated, no doubt, partly by necessity to come to terms with the severe, exacting alpine world, but one may suspect it to be governed even more from the inherent streak in the Sherpa character which I have remarked on. They are forever itching to be on the move, and on a slender excuse they will wander off for any length of time: a few days, weeks, or even a year or more.

These trips outside their country never seem to affect their balance or outlook. More than once I have been in a Sherpa house when a man has arrived back after a long absence: his immediate family and his friends show no outward or apparent excitement when he walks into his house, dumps down his belongings and starts again exactly where he left off. Departure, absence, return, all are part of the normal rhythm of Sherpa life; farewells and greetings given and taken philosophically, with no outward show of emotion, joyous or lachrymose.

The Sherpa home deserves its name in the real and best sense; but, with the home as a pivot, it would not be far wrong to depict Sherpa life as a ceaseless, restless, leisurely milling around, here, there and everywhere, governed by the two seasonally recurring phases of outside trading in winter, and internal yak-herding in spring and summer.

Very probably a strong element in the ancestral make-up of the people was provided by wandering nomads, pastoral in their economy and sharing the life of their herds, as do tribes of Mongolian origin in the great Asiatic Steppes far beyond the Himalayas. With these we may imagine an inter-mixture of more sedentary blood and a change in their conditions of life. Moreover a nomadic strain in their ancestry would help to account for the banishment of privacy.

However that may be, the fact remains that there is a deep-seated streak in the racial character, which spurs the Sherpas to be always on the move. Another train of thought suggests that

no people without the threefold gifts of adaptability, of toughness that hardly recognises hardships, and of ability for both husbandry and trade, could possibly have survived and come to terms with the grim severity of their surroundings. They are a race who are not only tolerant, tranquil and kind-hearted, but able, adaptable, and above all realistic. Probably their greatest limitation is the lack of any positive, creative spark; hence the absence of any art. The crude, child-like squiggles and splodges of rice paste, daubed on the walls of living rooms at New Year, are the nearest approach I ever saw to even an attempt at artistic expression. The fine frescoes of private chapels and temples, the only touch of man-made colour, do not count: they are the work of Tibetans. And at the present day, they are the work of one particular Tibetan, a domiciled Sherpa, who lives in the big village of Kumjhung above Namche Bazaar, and makes a very good living going round doing frescoes on commission. He was trained for some years in Shigatse before he set up in a professional capacity. Invent, create, design, the Sherpas cannot. It simply is not in their make-up to attempt any originality of self-expression.

As things are today the Sherpas have no organised education. A school was opened in Namche a year or two ago, but owing to the difficulty of finding teachers it went into abeyance. All the same, there are quite a proportion of people who can read and write the Tibetan script, apart from the monks, all of whom are literate. Even when a school is opened and basic education is got under way, it is doubtful if any unexpected talent will come to light in the Sherpa temperament. Were the instinct for creation implanted there it would have found some outlet a long time ago.

It is so very easy, particularly when living among a people, to lose one's sense of proportion about them and to think oneself involved with a nation. Consequently I had to keep reminding myself that the Sherpas have only fourteen or fifteen permanent villages, moderate-sized or small, whose total population cannot amount to more than a very few thousand souls.*

* Strictly speaking they should not be called Sherpas, which is the name of one of the dozen clans into which they are sub-divided. They call themselves *Khumbu*.

CHAPTER 8

Thyangboche, another Yeti Hunt, and the Pangboche "Scalp"

THE Longmoche district proved to be most attractive—a rocky valley, broadening out at its head to a flat marshy area with dwarf rhododendrons and alpine scrub plants. It ended in a glacier which had flowed down to a valley-level and receded back to leave great embankments of grey and brown rubble, churned up by the dingy muddy-coloured ice, and overshadowed by a jagged, snow-capped wall, over twenty thousand feet in height, which marked the boundary of Nepal with Tibet.

It was a curious thought that the ice-curtain shutting off our world from communist China was a bare three miles distant; but it was a very long three miles, for no pass has been found over this reach of the border and the people of the other side, apparently true Tibetans by race, have no near contact with their neighbours on the Nepal side. There is a way round, but it means going back through Thami, and from there some distance west; two or more days' journey in all. And I found that the Sherpas knew and cared but little about their immediate Tibetan neighbours, though they were only a few miles distant as the crow flies.

As we were going up the valley, inevitably through a blanket of mist, a flock of snow partridges hurtled low overhead at breakneck speed, and landed abruptly in the dwarf scrub below the path. They must be one of the highest-living birds in the world, scraping about in the scree for tiny seeds and insects; one meets them well above the top limit of vegetation, heaven knows why, at twenty thousand feet. The Sherpas call them *Teling* and look on them as very foolish, which they doubtless are: they have the habit of sitting extremely tight on the ground until one stumbles over them, when they shoot up nearly vertically, flying for a short distance exceedingly fast, then flopping down to the ground.

Suddenly a skin-clad figure, white with frozen fog, loomed up from nowhere: he was a native of Thami, and had come up with his wife for a week or so to pasture his few yaks in one of the lower, more sheltered grazing grounds, where the beasts could scratch a miserable living from the remnants of dried grasses and alpine plants left over from the previous summer. No, he told us, he had seen or heard nothing of the Yeti this winter, but it was as likely an area as any. He was an odd little gnome of a man, one of two brothers wedded to two sisters, and he vanished wraith-like into the fog, as abruptly as he had come.

Longmoche harboured a flock of a strange and lovely small bird, uncouthly named Hodgsons Grandala: an exquisite turquoise-blue creature, not like any bird I could call to mind. They live in compressed flocks, forever on the move, coming to the ground as one bird, touching down for a few moments, then up again in a hurry as if they had landed on the wrong place, and whirling off in a musically chattering band. The effect of the flock was enchanting, a swirl of blue against the sombre grey rocks and the dazzling white of the more distant peaks. So restless were they, and so perpetually on the move, that it made one wonder how time could be found for food. It was the most unexpected type of bird to see in the bleak winter of the Himalayas, but they are said never to go below the high alpine slopes or down to tree-level. Even the classifying of Hodgsons Grandala is veiled in uncertainty, and the zoologists are at a loss to say whether it is a thrush or a starling.

Choughs were much in evidence today; and the two kinds found in the Himalayas were both about, the red-billed (*Tchong-Moh* to the Sherpas), and the yellow-billed (or *Tchong-Dzum*); clever, happy birds, very characteristic of the Sherpa countryside, much as are rooks among ourselves. The climbing expeditions meet them right up at twenty-six thousand feet and even higher, though what takes them to altitudes that are totally devoid of life it is hard to imagine. I had met them several times already, bustling about in the village fields, prodding in the ground with their long scimitar beaks, and streaming down the valleys in loose flocks on their way to their feeding grounds and back. Both

kinds go together in casual association, but their habits are different; the red-billed do not find their way up so high, or in such large flocks, and they have a jackdaw-like call, as compared with the eerie banshee-piping of their relative.

We ensconced ourselves in a stone hut a mile below the head of the Kola, next door to a middle-aged couple who were pasturing their twenty yaks on the swampy flat. They were friendly and useful people, happy to sell fresh milk every morning: a welcome addition to our fare, although at this lean season the milk had no cream to it. Two days of fine weather gave a chance of sorties into the broken range beyond us, and we cast about to decide which of the many alternative routes to try. It so happened that on the evening of my arrival the yak-herd and his wife came in to share our meal, and told of a line of almost undoubted Yeti tracks they had seen two days back in the melting snow. They pointed out the general direction of the place, so I made a long day's excursion into the deserted broken ranges parallel with Longmoche glacier. Some hours distant from the camp, as we negotiated a juniper-clad rock-face, I was puzzled to come across the entrails of a mouse hare strewn over some rough grass, with enough wisps of fur to make the identification certain. Obviously some beast or bird had made a kill, and had taken away the carcass or eaten it on the spot, leaving behind only the guts. I estimated them a day old, as they were partially dried by the sun but not in the least decomposed.

What known animals were there in the Sherpa country likely to prey on mouse hares? Possibly a leopard, a tiger-cat or a wolf: much more likely a fox or a marten. Doubtless any one of these might have been responsible, even though it seemed unlikely that leopards or wolves would descend to mouse hare-hunting when there was plenty of larger quarry to be got. But who had ever heard of any carnivorous animal killing its prey, disembowelling it, and deliberately throwing aside the entrails? It is normal for carnivores to leave nothing uneaten they can possibly swallow, and it was not easy to reconcile this find with the habits of any carnivorous beast of the Himalayas.

Perhaps a bird of prey was responsible. There are eagles and

hawks of several kinds, as well as a few owls, all of which probably take mouse hares as a major item in their diet. But here again, birds of prey taking their victim from the ground invariably pick it up immediately after the kill and carry it off to eat in a more sheltered and secluded place. Sometimes, it is true, they will eat it where the kill is made, but they inevitably leave behind a considerable mess of plucked fur or feathers to mark the site of the meal; a good deal more than the few wisps of fur I had found. Moreover, as is common knowledge to naturalists, the entrails are customarily pulled out by birds of prey and gobbled down early in the meal.

The assertion of the Sherpas that the Yeti invariably disembowels its prey before eating it had already aroused my curiosity. It was an attribute they could hardly have invented, the more so as it is so far removed from the habits of beasts and birds they are normally in contact with. My initial attitude of mistrustful open-mindedness had already weakened under the universal and soberly-expressed belief in the existence of the Yeti, backed up by the several straightforward accounts of first-hand sightings under a variety of circumstances. Here, though not proof-positive, was at least a shred of material evidence that there must be something unexplained behind their beliefs.

When I got back in the evening the day's happenings were recounted over the camp fire, and the yak-herd was not slow to remind me of the tracks he had seen not very far away from the place of my find. The consensus of opinion was that I had stumbled on a Yeti kill, with the rider added that a good many yak-herds come across them.

Two more days of scrambling about the Longmoche ranges were uneventful, but significant in a negative sense. For I spent a long day from dawn to dusk, weaving in and out of an exciting series of cliffs and whole valleys littered with great, broken boulders (perfect hiding-places for animals of almost any size), stretches of juniper scrub, and rough slopes of pasture, without as much as setting eyes on a living creature of any description. Tracks of mouse hares, their droppings, and those of snowcock and *Tahr* (wild goats) there were in plenty—firm evidence that

the alpine fauna was represented in fair numbers. But so great is the elusiveness of alpine birds and beasts, surpassing perhaps all faunas in their capacity to melt away into their background, and so myriad are the hideouts, that it is wellnigh impossible to get a real picture of the circumstances of their lives without going to see for oneself at first hand. More particularly is this true of the solitary and intelligent members of the fauna. The herds of wild goats are not so wary or so shy of the outside world: their safety is in their numbers. But it was becoming clearer day by day that however intensively one went on combing through the right type of country, it would be an immense stroke of luck to stumble on a Yeti, assuming it to be as scarce, or scattered as everyone believed, and the wariest of beasts into the bargain.

Any silent movement over the rocks in nailed, clattering climbing boots was out of the question. Sound carries well in these mountains, and if, as the Sherpas maintained, the beast, whatever it might be, had a powerful sense of smell (it was becoming clear that the story must be based on *something*), a fortuitous encounter was the only slender hope of success.

On the march back to Thami, going a roundabout way over a knife-edge ridge, I saw my first mouse hare: a dumpy, much be-whiskered creature.* It was sunning itself on a rock, but at the first alarm it skipped down to the safety of its home in a cleft in the rocks. To judge by the tracks and pellet droppings everywhere, the rocks must harbour thousands of these timid creatures, from the upper limit of trees right to eighteen or nineteen thousand feet, where the vegetation stops. In winter the dwellers in the topmost altitudes come down a little lower to avoid the worst of the weather, and one and all stay snug and impregnable among the broken rocks, going torpid and half-hibernating in frosts and blizzards, and pattering out a few feet on warmer days and moonlit nights, to keep alive by nibbling lichens off the stones and browsing on the hard alpine grass.

Very probably the mouse hares are the mainstay of most flesh-eating life in these mountains: foxes, cats, weasels, and (let us

* Among the fine collection of mammals and birds made by Biswas was a species of mouse hare new to science.

hope) the Yeti. All must find them invaluable for sustaining life in the chill inhospitality of their corner of the world. While, on their side, the needs of the mouse hares are so easily satisfied: a safe shelter under the rocks and a little plant life to nibble are all they ask, so that they can survive and support life in greater numbers than their fellow mammals.

Rounding a bend in the course of today's march I surprised a pack of young snowcock: last year's birds, and still smaller and darker than their elders. True to their breed, they were loath to take to flight but scabbled frantically up a rock-face, clucking and fluttering in wild panic, then freezing against the background, as if hoping to escape detection. They forced themselves to a mere semblance of flight when I endeavoured to stalk them with a camera at a few yards' range. Seemingly the young snowcock band together in separate packs as from their first autumn, staying apart from the mature birds until they are of age to breed. The Sherpas appreciate their clumsy stupidity and sometimes when meat is short the Buddhist ban on taking life is relaxed, and they round up a party and down them with stones, or even whack them with lengths of wood.

As we passed along the mountainside we saw spread out chess-board-wise below, on the fringe of the Bhote Kosi valley, a summer grazing village, the deserted stone houses set in a big area of bare fields. Near the route somebody had set up a cairn of stones, marking, so my companions told me, the site of a village burning ground. For the Sherpas, following Tibetan custom, cremate their dead: first come three days of rites over the body in the house, then it is carried up to be burnt and the ashes taken down and thrown into the river. Very small infants are not burnt but thrown immediately into the river.

It had been my plan to spend more time in the Thami area, which had seemed so propitious for the object of our search. But when we arrived back at the Danrhepus, news awaited us—forwarded via Namche through the medium of Mrs. Gyalchen—only recently two yak-herds had heard a Yeti at close quarters over towards the other end of the Sherpa country, somewhere beyond Thyangboche monastery on the high road to Everest. So

plans were changed, and all made ready for an early start next morning.

My host chanced to remark during the evening that he believed some near neighbours had contacted a Yeti; precisely how he could not say. I went round to drink a glass of *chang* with them, and learnt that two youths had been out with their herds last year in much the same area as I was just back from, when they came on the fresh entrails of a mouse hare, on an area of flat, damp ground; suspecting it to have been the victim of a Yeti, they looked around, and found the impression of a pair of man-like feet in the mud close to the animal's remains. They did not feel like following up the marks, or investigating further, but made off with their herd to another part of the pasture.

I was told in Thami, of a queer belief, often repeated in other places, that the feet of the Yeti point backwards. Nobody seemed very definite as to what such a freak attribute really implied, and I could never get any further in the matter. Nor for that matter did anyone who claimed to have seen a Yeti with their own eyes, or to have followed its tracks, ever refer to this in their descriptions and accounts of what they saw.

While we tramped back to Namche next morning, a passer-by on the road brought news of a prowling snow leopard that had raided the village a day or two before, carrying off a herdsman's dog; and only last night it had killed a yak half-a-mile outside. As we neared the village a swirling conglomeration of large birds marked the place: griffon vultures, Lammergeier vultures, ravens, crows, a golden eagle, all circling and planing round, waiting their turn for a share in the unexpected feast; even a party of inquisitive choughs had come to inspect the gathering from the fringe. Normally, in the course of a day one sees no more than a pair or two of birds of prey, soaring past high overhead or swinging over the crags, so that the news of a square meal must have flashed round far and wide to the furthest corners of the mountains.

There was the customary activity in the Gyalchen home. Spinning and combing had progressed to weaving. The living room was cluttered up with two Tibetan-style looms and their

appendages, on which handsome rugs of scarlet wool, with a simple pattern woven in, were being made for later sale in Kathmandu or nearer. This Tibetan loom seemed an efficient and practical machine, with a framework of wood and a flying shuttle; it is used by Sherpas as well as by their employees.

There was time this afternoon to pay a few social calls: among others to my host's cousin—or half-sister, I was not clear which—who was married to the richest man in the community, an all-round trader who had been away for many weeks on business in Shigatse. Hers was a beautifully furnished house, a real Sherpa luxury-home, with rows of great shining copper water-vessels on the shelves—the hall-mark of social prestige—a gaily painted prayer cylinder in one corner of the living-room, which pinged a bell with every revolution; and the end room was an elegantly frescoed chapel, with even a small separate room set apart and decorated for the use of a priest, whenever one came to perform some ceremony. In fact everything was of the very best that Tibetan and Sherpa civilisation could provide, down to real Chinese tea-cups of jade, imported from Lhasa.

It was interesting to see in the chapel a photograph of the young Dalai Lama, taken about a year back and showing him in evident good health. Standing beside him was another young Lama of almost equally high rank, the Tashi Lama from Shigatse. There had been a period of several years when the great monastery and monastic university at Shigatse had been without a head, since none had been found to take the place of the last reincarnated holder of the office. This youth had been nominated by the Chinese Government. According to the reports of Sherpa travellers, the general policy was to treat the monasteries and their officials with every courtesy and show of reasonableness, but to nominate a successor to every important vacancy.

Pinned up on the wall of the priest's room was a Chino-Tibetan weekly periodical. And what a dreary soul-destroying production it was! Well got-up, but with pages of photographs introducing China at work and play to the liberated people of Tibet. Rows of smiling, overalled girls tended machinery, great concrete dams conserved the water, orderly processions of youth marched

behind banners to salute their leaders: all indicative of an excellently organised and regimented industrialism, for which let us give all credit, but how reminiscent, down to the last detail, of corresponding propaganda machines in other totalitarian countries. Obtruded, however innocently (for my friends had put it up only for the pictures) into this setting, where warmth and good-heartedness and the simple human virtues are the keynote of life, it jarred not a little to realise that the giant of materialism was in very fact on the threshold. We may hope that any serious infiltration is not a threat in the foreseeable future; to their own great salvation, the Sherpas are the least politically-conscious people imaginable.

My hostess, whose everyday clothes, bangles and fur-trimmed hat were of a quality most people keep for special occasions, was very much the lady of the house, with a little servant-maid to see to her needs, and a long-haired Lhasa terrier as her constant companion. Among his other activities, her husband is the chief Namche importer of cigarettes: surprisingly enough, English-made and of good quality. They are exported from London to Calcutta; from Calcutta to Kalimpong in Sikkim. From there they are traded up into Tibet, where he buys them in Shigatse, and brings them down to Nepal.

This chapel, with its special priest's room, its shrine, its fittings and its frescoes, was the finest and most elaborate I saw in the Sherpa country. Measured in terms of costs, it must have meant a heavy sacrifice of some thousands of rupees of the family savings. At first sight it is a very unexpected sidelight on the make-up of these inartistic people, whose living-room is in any case none too spacious, to find them spending so much of their hard-earned money on decorated chapels. The more so as they stay empty and unentered for nine-tenths of the time, never used, in fact, except for special ceremonies of death and propitiation when priests and monks are called in. It is almost the rule for clever, able people to sacrifice much of their money to building their own house-chapel. Perhaps it gives a measure of social prestige, or it may be simply a hidebound custom handed on by one generation to the next. I do not think so. The Sherpas are too

genuinely children of reality, with a way of life shorn of all that is not complete necessity; and they are too close to the beginnings of things to be hoodwinked and deluded by cumbersome extravagances of petty social ambition. No: these chapels are built out of the sincere convictions of a deeply religious people. This a paradoxical thought, if we judge the Sherpas through the jaundiced spectacles of our own materialism. But let us remember that to them the tangible and the intangible, the world of solid matter and the world of spiritual values, are separated by only the thinnest of screens.

Some Tibetans arrived in Namche late that afternoon. It so happened that they were from just over the border, across the ice-wall of Longmoche whence we had just come. One man, by name Pinechu, was a business acquaintance of the Gyalchens, so it seemed a good chance to enquire what he knew of the Yeti; the more so since it was very soon established that until today he had no inkling of my presence in the country, let alone what I was there for.

“Do you know of a beast which the Sherpas call Yeti?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Is there only one kind, or are there more?”

“There are two, the Dzu-Teh and the Mih-Teh.”

“What is the Dzu-Teh like?”

“It is hardly ever seen where I come from, but it is very large, and has thick, red fur.”

“Does it walk on two legs?”

“No: it goes on all fours.”

“What is its food?”

“The Dzu-Teh is a great danger to yaks. People say also that it will kill foxes by following up their tracks to where they live in the rocks.”

“Does it make any noise?”

“I do not know.”

“Have you ever seen one?”

“No: but I have seen its footprints in the snow.”

“What is the Mih-Teh like?”

“It is smaller than the Dzu-Teh. It goes on two legs like a man.

It has long hair on the legs and waist, but is said by those who see it to be less hairy on its chest. It is stoutly built."

"What colour is it?"

"The same colour as a *Tahr*."

"What noise does it make?"

Pinechu imitated a mewling-yelping call, in just the same way as all the Sherpas who had up to now given information. He said that he himself had heard it several times during his life.

"What does the Mih-Teh feed on?"

"The small animals living in the rocks."

"Do you know how it catches them?"

"They say it waits among the rocks until one comes out, and the Mih-Teh grabs it, and bangs it on a rock to kill it. Then it pulls out its insides, which it does not eat but throws away."

"Is the Mih-Teh common?"

"Some people say they are fairly often seen. I have never seen one, but my father saw one a few years ago."

"How did that come about?"

"Together with some other men from our village he was out with his yaks; and they were camping for the night in the shelter of some rocks. It was a bright moonlit night, and when everybody was asleep my father woke up suddenly with the feeling that there was someone near the camp. He looked out to see a Mih-Teh crouched on the ground not many yards away, watching them by the light of the moon. For a while he was too frightened to move, but remembering that it was known to avoid any unusual smell, he summoned up courage to push a piece of resinous wood into the dying embers; the smoke and fumes it gave out promptly frightened the beast off. My father hid under his blanket and was too scared to look out again until the next morning, when he told his companions what he had seen."

He told also how, only recently, a man of his village was going on a short journey one winter's day. His son was to go with him, but was delayed for some reason, and came on a little while later. He was hurrying to catch up with his father when it started to snow. Presently the youth thought he saw him trudging on ahead over a small bridge. He put on speed, but as he got nearer he

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saw that it was not his father at all but a Mih-Teh, walking man-like down the path. He was scared to go any closer and hid behind some rocks until it had gone out of sight, having left the path to climb up among the boulders. When he could go on with his journey he saw its footprints, formed as a naked human foot in the fresh-fallen snow.

Admittedly both accounts were at second-hand: but in every detail this account, quite independent in its source from any other I had gleaned, agreed remarkably well with the Sherpa version of their Yeti. And here were fresh details volunteered: that little touch—Pinechu illustrated it by pantomime—of the Yeti banging its prey on the rock to kill it; and the odd belief, true or otherwise, of the Dzu-Teh tracking foxes to their lair.

Could the two sets of descriptions, so closely tallying, be based on a vague myth, or be no more than an invention to please the white man? Why should I be “pleased” to know that Pinechu thought the Yeti disembowelled its prey? Surely it would need a tortuous mind indeed to think up such a thing merely for effect.

On 31 January we set out up the Dudh Kosi valley, to start and reconnoitre the eastern part of the Sherpa country. Three hours' easy walking led along the road to Everest, a well-worn path winding in and out along the grey-brown mountainside, with the torrent of the river far below us. I was watched part of the way by a golden eagle, outlined statuesquely on a tapering pinnacle of rock where he plucked leisurely at the corpse of a snow pigeon.

There was a long pull up of an hour to the Thyangboche ridge, through mixed pine and rhododendron woodland, before we made the frescoed gate-house of the monastery. Many times has Thyangboche been in the news since Everest reconnaissance parties first entered through Nepal; and a very charming little monastery it is. The better part of a hundred years ago the monks of the large Tibetan foundation of Rongbuk were inspired, through omens sent by their guiding spirits, to found a new monastery across the border, in a place of already sacred associations on the flat top of a thirteen thousand foot ridge, raggedly clothed with the highest pine forest.

The first abbot was chosen under heavenly guidance, a few monks came from Rongbuk as the nucleus of the new community. Recruiting of boys and young men from Sherpa villages was got under way, the temple and cells built, and Thyangboche was founded as a flourishing community, independent from the first, but owing a measure of allegiance until this day to its mother house.

In 1932, the year of the great earthquake, one of the ruling Rana family of Nepal chanced to be on a visit to the Sherpa country. His A.D.C. had gone on ahead of him to make arrangements for the reception of the party at the monastery, when of a sudden came the 'quake. The temple collapsed, killing the abbot, several of his monks, the A.D.C. and some sepoys. This major disaster in its tranquil history is still fresh in local memory. The general layout is particularly charming: the square wooden-roofed temple fronted with its courtyard; the compact, self-contained cottages of the monks clustered on two sides of it, and gilded chortens, mani walls, and prayer-wheels scattered over the open grassy space hard by.

To the north-east is a magnificent view, uninterrupted to the huge massif of the Everest range, with the plumed pyramid of the sacred peak clearly outlined, though from fifteen miles distant not conveying any real sense of its vastness. Nearer at hand is the sugar-loaf of Amadablam, most elegant and most aloof of mountains, and the twin summits of Kantega, capped thickly with snow and ice. Taken all in all, it is as peaceful and delightful a place as Rongbuk could have been inspired to choose for its daughter house. For us it was of very special interest, for it was here that the monks told the tale of sighting a Yeti which so impressed the Everest expedition.

We had hoped to lodge with Gyalchen's younger brother, who was a monk of Thyangboche, but he had gone away to Darjeeling on business for the community. So we were put up in the courtyard of a trim little house, two hundred yards outside the group of cells, and the home of his uncle, a man of some means, who was living here in the retirement of his old age. Nearly eighty and of incredible ugliness, he had unlimited kindness of heart and gentleness

of nature, and he was much respected as a great benefactor of the monks. It was too late today for us to pay our respects to the community, and so we sat round the fire before retiring early to bed. About ten o'clock, as everyone was dozing off, there came sounding suddenly on the clear frosty air the yelping, mewling call so often described to me. In one bound we were all out of bed and straining every muscle. Three times it came, quite close at hand, as I listened agog with excitement. Then came disillusionment: the last eldrich shriek was followed by an unmistakably human snigger, and we slumped back to bed in disgust. The boy-novices had been serenading us for a practical joke. Not entirely however was the incident without its significance, for the instinctive reaction of my servants and porters brought home well how automatically this mewling call is linked with the Yeti.

The blaring of a conch-shell from the temple roof—the normal start to the day in a Tibetan monastery—had us early astir, and very soon the drone of subdued chanting, broken by intermittent clash of cymbals and booming of trumpets, came across from the Temple. My arrival had coincided with one of the important annual festivals—that of *Mongdoh*—I could not discover its precise meaning, but it was to last a week and kept the monks hard at it chanting most of the day and well into the night. The community were in semi-retirement during part of this festival, and it was not quite good manners to do other than present my compliments at the temple. As I went in, fourteen or fifteen monks, shrouded against the cold in great cowls of crimson wool lined with sheep's fleece, were seated opposite each other in two rows down the centre, and at the side of the shrine, close to one of two raised thrones that flanked it, was ensconced the acting-superior. The abbot was away in Shigatse, studying at the university for a full seven years. There have been four abbots since *Thyangboche* was founded; the last lived on to a great age, some say over ninety, and his successor, next in line in the reincarnation, is now a youth of nineteen or twenty summers.

Beyond a few friendly nods, and a bob of his head from the superior, nobody took much notice of my entry, and to the rise and fall of the chant I summoned up courage to step timidly

The yak-herding people of Phorche village are real children of the bleak alpine world





We met old Prior Nawang of Thyangboche, stumping along to a funeral. Mrs. Gyalchen is on the right

forward, and placed my conventional offerings, a white scarf of gossamer silk and a few silver rupees, before the vacant throne of the abbot.

Down the winding path from the monastery, through glades of birch-trees and rhododendrons, and a few miles up the Imja valley lay the little village of Pangboche, reputed to house a Yeti scalp. It was here, too, that one had been heard, so rumour had it, since my arrival in the Sherpa country. I made my way there next morning. The grey village looked forlorn and lifeless. All but a handful of the inhabitants were down in Nepal trading, and it took some time to knock anyone up. Eventually an old man, one of the village elders who looked after the temple, was unearthed from somewhere. He showed no pleasure at all at being asked to show the scalp, and put up an immediate smoke-screen to the effect that the key of the temple had been lost and nobody could get inside.

However, with a little persuasion he relented and dived into his house to fetch the lost key. My servants prostrated themselves before the shrine as custom demanded, while I went to lay my wisp of scarf and silver before the images. Then at last the much-talked of scalp was produced from the back of a deep cupboard, where it was kept stored away with the trappings and ornaments for sacred dances.

In the first report I sent home about the scalp I described it as "quite obviously" cut off from the top of the head of some animal, and such I then believed it to be. In shape it was conical, of a diameter to fit as a cap on a man's head, sparsely covered with stiff, bristle-like hairs, foxy-red and black in colour, and very thick in its texture. It was precisely of the form of a scalp. A prominent crest of hairs ran up the front, over the top and down the back; and the lie of the hairs on the back and sides was much the same as that of a man's head. It was known to be of great age, and tradition told of its being got in the time of a saintly monk attached to Pangboche, by name San Dorje, who lived three hundred or more years ago. The scalp is kept always in the temple and is brought out at one festival each year, when it is worn for a sacred dance, the wearer personifying the Yeti. Photographs,

descriptions, and hairs were sent to London, to Dr. Wood Jones, who was able eventually to pronounce beyond all doubt that the object was not a true scalp at all, but fashioned from a piece cut off the shoulder of some unknown beast—certainly not a bear or an ape—and worked into the shape of a cranium while the skin was still fresh and soft. Expert opinion suggested it was made from a pig, except that nowhere in Asia are there known to be pigs of red and black coloration. The diagnosis confirmed the Sherpa tradition of its great age.

Needless to say this verdict was repeated later to the Sherpas when the report reached us from home. They were not impressed. As far as they were concerned the scalp had been handed down through the generations as genuine, and a mere statement of opinion from the other end of the world failed to interest them.

A reasonable explanation for it is not hard to find. Among all peoples throughout the ages, ourselves not excepted, nothing is more frequent than for material objects, linked or closely associated with places or people, to become in course of time identified with them. A contemporary copy of a painting by a great master quite frequently comes to be looked on as his work; something that has touched a relic becomes itself a relic; such instances are common knowledge. And there is no reason to think the scalp to have been a deliberate fake. At some time in the dim past something was required for religious ritual which would represent a Yeti: the genuine article was not forthcoming, so the next best thing was put in its place; as close an imitation as could be devised. It was fashioned, moreover, from the skin of some animal that, today at any rate, is not found in the Sherpa country.

At the time this was all that could be surmised; and there I left it, making a mental note to go more deeply later on into the reason for its presence in a temple. One thing still remains a mystery—from what animal was the pseudo-scalp fashioned? Skilled diagnosis has told us what it is not; further than that nobody has been able to go.

Pangboche was a very well-kept, delicately frescoed temple: and it seemed something of a paradox that these rough-living mountain peasants should have such monuments of cultural

refinement in their midst, so incongruous, one might think, with their lowly state of life. The truth is that the Sherpas are far less barbaric than superficial acquaintance suggests. Of course they are rough-and-ready. So are the circumstances of their lives; indeed, far from being looked on as something separate or apart from their ordinary affairs and everyday lives, the temples are carefully and reverently cared for by village committees of elders who never have difficulty in raising funds for repairs or decoration. The situation is not very different from that of the parish church in an English medieval village.

Pangboche temple is venerated as one of the oldest for many miles around. Long ago, many centuries back, San Dorje, was living over the next range in the village of Phorche. For reasons now forgotten he quarrelled with his people, and was hounded out in fear of his life. He took refuge first of all in the forest where Thyangboche monastery now stands, and where his footprints, and the print of his dogs' food-bowl, can be seen to this day on a rock in the temple porch. Still his people pursued him, and he was again chased away to flee for his life. So, taking one great jump, he flew to Pangboche, where legend says he lived as a hermit for the rest of his life.

The temple is built over the rock on which he was accustomed to sit. A small panel opens under the shrine, through which I was shown the imprint of his body in the stone, just as he had left it on the day of his death. And from San Dorje comes a long line of hereditary, reincarnated priests: at present there is none and the office is vacant. The old priest, twelfth in his line of reincarnation, died some years back, and a sign is still awaited to show that the spirits have chosen his successor.

Pangboche temple houses among its idols one in great local repute as an oracle; I longed to ask about its powers, but reticence on the part of my informants made it clear that it would be overstepping good manners to enquire further.

After a light midday meal of boiled potatoes and yak's milk offered by a friendly house in the village, we plodded homewards to Thyangboche, where a message was waiting that the monks would like me to come and sup with them in the temple. So in I

went, and sat down unobtrusively to one side, while they finished their chanting. The service over, and once the trumpets had boomed their final note, all religion vanished from the temple and the atmosphere was transformed in a moment into that of a friendly club. Happy and jovial, the monks spared no pains to make their guest feel at home. Bowls of yak-curd and rice were put in front of me, and a little dish of stewed and curried mutton, with a flask of white *chang* beer to go with it.

As we ate this excellent meal, the head monk, Nawang, was persuaded to talk much of the Yeti. One of his senior monks joined in to tell how not very long ago he had climbed up to a desolate rocky area, two hours above the monastery, to look for one or two slabs of stone for mending the roof of his house. As he wandered about he came on an open roofless shelter, a nest of twisted, newly-broken juniper branches, interwoven to make a resting place of a size to harbour a man. He had heard tell that the Yeti makes such resting-places, and was convinced he had stumbled on one. The monk was frightened to investigate any further and made his way home as fast as he could.

I remarked that this was the first I had heard from anyone that the Yeti makes such resting-places. At this Prior Nawang interrupted to say that an old man of the neighbourhood, now dead, had once found a lair among desolate rocks: he had known that it belonged to a Yeti because of its very strong and unpleasant smell.

Queries as to there being more than one kind brought the answer that Nawang knew the large Dzu-Teh quite well. He had several times seen them when journeying through Tibet, but did not think they were ever found in the Sherpa country. It was very like the black bear of the Solu country lower down, only larger and with thick reddish fur. It was a great scourge to livestock, and dangerous to men. It is best to keep out of the way if you meet one.

The much smaller Mih-Teh, he told me, is the kind seen in the Sherpa country. It walks upright, and has the habit of always taking the shortest and most direct route when on the move. Nawang himself had twice seen one. The second time was three years ago, when it appeared in cold, snowy weather,

and the monks watched it plodding down towards the monastery. It stopped to sit on a rock and scratch itself and evidently was watching them. They were so frightened that everyone turned out, blowing conch shells and banging drums, to drive it away. At this it jumped off the rock and disappeared.

He added of his own accord that he had given this account to Sir John Hunt when the Everest expedition had halted here in the spring: and it was striking how well it tallied with what I had been told at home.

The monks also told me that it had been seen six years before under similar circumstances. It had come down from the overshadowing crags in a spell of hard weather, and only retired when they set up as much hullabaloo as they could.

They were the first to admit, pointing out the exact place on the ground, that on neither occasion was it seen from very close at hand. But the stories had a real ring of truth about them; the more so as I had been warned that Thyangboche would probably be more reluctant than the laity to divulge anything. The monks are the custodians of the spiritual side of Sherpa life, and therefore all the more vigilant to come down heavily on any outside influence likely to upset the spirit world and endanger the safety of the community in general.

The realistic description of what was believed to be a Yeti's temporary lair was a new link in the slender chain of evidence. It was particularly interesting, both in itself and as bearing out an impression I was fast getting; namely that the beast—if beast there was—had no fixed home, but was a vagrant, perpetually wandering and dossing down for the night in whatever convenient shelter it could find or make for itself—much as do the gorilla and the other great apes. And later questioning of Sherpas elsewhere went to confirm this belief, both as to the creature being a vagrant, and that its temporary shelters have an appalling smell—on the exceedingly rare occasions when anyone stumbles across them.

Of special significance was the information as given by Prior Nawang. He was the only Sherpa so far who could fairly claim to have seen *both* kinds of Yeti; and he made it very clear that as

far as he was concerned they were two quite different animals. His information on the big Dzu-Teh of Tibet seemed to indicate a bear and nothing else.

The day had been productive and fascinating. And there was more to come. Strolling back to my host's cottage in the early evening, I found the porters, who had been given the day off to do as they liked, busy hanging up small model bows around the lodging: an extraordinary thing to do on the face of it, and of course I asked why. Seemingly the crows had been a thorough nuisance all day, swooping down, raiding our stores when anybody's back was turned, and the bows were being hung up as scarecrows, to show the red light of warning. It was a custom all the more interesting in that the Sherpas have forgotten that their people ever used a long-bow at all. Evidently this is a survival, a token reminder of hunting and warring handed on to this day from the dim past. Coming to more modern times, one often sees small boys, and their elders too for that matter, having shooting matches with well-made toy cross-bows; weapons used by Tibetans in some places in pursuit of deer, and possibly against their enemies. This symbolic glimpse into a more bellicose past only helped to emphasise how unusual, if not unique, the Sherpas are today in owning literally no weapons of any kind. As a people they have lost, and lost completely, any martial or aggressive instincts. This must be an influence on life in this region of the greatest importance, and significant when weighing up the pros and cons for the existence of any unknown beast side by side with man.

I found with my host a friend or relative, by name Dakhu, who hailed from Pangboche village. About four seasons back, Dakhu had been up above the village tending his yaks. During the afternoon he found one had gone astray, and as he made his way up into the crags to search for it, he saw about a hundred yards ahead of him, half-hidden by rocks, part of a hairy animal which he naturally took to be his lost yak. He called out to it by name, when the creature suddenly stood up and came slowly towards him on two legs, agitated and seemingly menacing, for it began to pull up tufts of grass with its hands. It was the blackish and

reddish-brown colour of a *Tahr*, fairly long haired, lighter-coloured on the stomach, and of much the same build as a thick-set man. Dakhu had never seen a beast like it before, but he realised it was a Yeti, and having no wish to come to closer quarters,—the more so from its threatening and aggressive manner, and the way it stood its ground—he made his way down as quickly as he could to his herd.

Dakhu mentioned that one of the two herdsman who claimed to have heard a Yeti only recently was in the neighbourhood—adding that it was in the same place as he had had his adventure of a few years back. The youth in question was brought in during this same evening. It seemed that about the same time as I arrived in the Sherpa country, he and his brother had taken out their herd to stop a few days at a pasture where there was a minute amount of winter grazing, and some fodder stored in their herdsman's hut. An hour or so before dusk one evening they both heard a loud yelping call from near the pasture; they compared it to the mewling of a chough, only too loud and full to have been made by any bird. They were scared, for they knew there must be a Yeti in the vicinity, and called in the yaks. They took refuge in their hut as soon as dusk fell, and as the evening drew on the call came nearer, frightening the yaks, which huddled close together. Presently they could hear the creature moving around only a few paces outside their refuge. Before long it sheered off, and early next morning the two yak-herds went out and looked carefully on the ground where they had heard it. There was no snow at the time, but here and there they could make out long-footed prints on the bare earth, such as a man might have left. Neither of them caught a glimpse of the creature: nor had they any wish to.

Both of these were simple, unembroidered accounts, telling of the experiences of humble people with no conceivable axe to grind. The little touch of the Yeti using its hands to pull up grass was particularly intriguing.

I was told this evening of a curious habit attributed to it, of eating quantities of a kind of clay found here and there in the Sherpa country. Nobody could suggest why: but if it should be

true (and it was an odd thing to invent) there would be nothing so very improbable in it. Do not certain tribes in Africa eat clay for bulk and roughage? I was not shown any, but it could well be a type of clay containing some sought-after mineral salt.

Up to date we were lucky in the weather: fine clear days, no snow, and conditions no harder than an average winter in England. And very pleasant it was to lie huddled in one's blankets, warm from the glow of a brazier in the corner of the tiny courtyard, and to doze off under the stars, lighting up the dim outlines of the peaks far above, and dream of coming to grips with our quarry.

Half-awake, in the first light of dawn, I became aware of something moving along the top of the courtyard wall. Taking a closer look, I saw a party of blood pheasants strutting to and fro, peering down in evident curiosity at the sleeping figures below. Blood pheasants are not quite like any of their family—perhaps they are not true pheasants at all—and are coloured a strange transparent grey-green, streaked with black, and with a splotch of vivid crimson round the tail. Everything about them is very reminiscent of a Chinese painting. They live in small bands, lurking and slinking Indian-file through the thicker scrub, even more unwilling to fly than their kinsmen the snowcock. Except for their singular, almost ethereal appearance they are dull creatures, as tame as they are stupid. This particular morning they were quite unmoved when I sat up in bed to watch them.

After this pleasant start to the day we were out early to climb beyond the monastery to the rugged juniper-clad cliffs, where my monk acquaintance had seen his Yeti lair, and whence an individual had twice come down near the monastery. It proved to be an unfriendly, steeply-sloping ridge, falling away on the far side to impressive broken cliffs. Some of the slopes were used for yak pastures, but in the main they were too sheer and difficult for grazing grounds. We had climbed twelve or fifteen hundred feet when the ever attendant demon mist came swirling down, sadly restricting visibility and limiting us to groping uncertainly forward for the greater part of the day. But one thing I did find: what I am almost convinced was the dung of a Yeti. Human in

form, it was composed, as a later rough analysis proved, of fur and bones of mouse hares, mixed with an appreciable quantity of clay. Possibly a wolf was responsible. But wolves are not very common in the area. Moreover they are believed by Sherpas to prey solely on larger wild beasts and on their own herds of livestock, of which there are enough and to spare. So there it was; perhaps the wish was father to the thought, but these droppings were such as the Sherpas had said the Yeti leaves, and the mixture of mouse hare remains and clay was difficult to identify with the habits of any known animal of the region.

For two days we wandered round over this country, seemingly ideal for the Yeti, but without success. Once I flushed a solitary musk deer, and myriads of dots in the patches of snow betrayed the presence of innumerable mouse hares, snug in the shelter of their rocks. On the second day came our only near escape from disaster during the expedition. Gyalchen and I were heaving ourselves over a particularly treacherous knife-edge ridge when he spotted a good short cut: a chimney down which he proposed to slither, through to the opposite slope of the ridge. The prospect was not an inviting one, and I hung back at the mouth, clinging unhappily to some untrustworthy outcrops of loose rock. My companion vanished down out of sight and there came a rumbling crash of falling rock. Peering down I could see the rubble of a small avalanche, gathering force as it emerged from the base of the chimney and hurtled downwards far beneath. There was an awful moment of silence. Then a muffled call from the depths of the rocks: "Let us get out of this: I don't think it's very safe." By clinging on for dear life to a jagged boulder, Gyalchen had just avoided being swept down to certain catastrophe.

We had a wonderful view in the clear air, directly across to the peak of Amadablam with its mighty gothic spire, graceful and majestic in a way all its own, and so far disdainful of all attempts to climb it. The Sherpas maintain that it never will be conquered, and it may well be they are right. Ten miles beyond loomed the great bulk of Everest: and today it came home as never before what a tremendous achievement its ascent has been. Our day of puffing and panting over half-frozen cliffs and rocks, together

with a fairly near escape from disaster, had seemed something to look back on in a modest way. But as we looked across at that huge towering mass, it was brought home most vividly how puny in comparison were our own efforts in the low, safe ranges.

We found our way down to the valley, beyond Pangboche, and walked back through a cluster of pretty little houses which made up a convent of yellow-bonneted Buddhist nuns. They lived, as far as I could gather, under a loose discipline, leading their own individual lives within the group, some perhaps with private means of their own, and keeping their own yaks and cattle.

My servant Mingma had two cousins, sisters, who shared a neat cottage in this community of nuns. Pleasant-faced, homely women, with an air of self-respecting simplicity, they welcomed us in to a meal that happened to be in the making, consisting of pickled cabbage, boiled potatoes and lumps of meat. While one of them dished it up, her sister slipped out round the corner to borrow a beaker of *chang*. I found there, living for the time being in their house, a rather pathetic figure: an elderly Tibetan monk of low degree from Rongbuk. He had come down a year or more back with others of his monastery on some business or other, and the poor man, having gone totally blind, had been left there. The good women had taken him in and cared for him out of their kindness of heart. He sat all day and every day in a sheltered corner of the courtyard telling his beads, apparently quite contented with the terrible monotony of his lot.

Today was the last of the Mongdoh festival at Thyangboche. It also coincided with the start of the more social occasion of New Year or *Losahrr*. We arrived home, tired and jaded, in time to share my host's supper. We sat round the fire to eat a special New Year dish, made only for this festival, and a delicious thick broth into the concocting of which goes practically everything: barley, maize, tsamba, potatoes, beans, and meat, stirred together into a most appetizing luxury brew. I tucked into it with all the more relish as it was unlikely I should ever taste it again.

So it was in a contented frame of mind that we went up for the climax of the Mongdoh ceremonies, held in the paved courtyard in front of the temple. Two juvenile monks came down first to

start things off and, seating themselves in a corner, began booming away on the long, bass trumpets. They were followed by the superior, Nawang, garbed in saffron robes over his madder-dyed habit; he wore a high Phrygian-style hat of fringed yellow wool and carried the book of rubrics to direct the ceremony.

The central focus of the rites was the image. The shape of this varies in Tibetan Buddhism; in this case it took the form of a death's head stuck on a pointed structure. Earlier in the day it had been carried out of the temple and set up in the courtyard. Those monks not taking any active part seated themselves on benches round about; then two of their brethren came out from the main door and pirouetted slowly down the steps. They were gaily clad in flowing robes of blue, red, and yellow Chinese silk, and wore great broad-brimmed hats of black *papier mâché*. Their appearance was also embellished with odds and ends of small ornaments to add to the bizarre effect: notably a pair of pince-nez, and a concave shaving mirror worn round the neck.

As the two bedizened dancers capered and swirled round the courtyard, the rest of the community kept up a low chant. Presently they stood aside while another pair pranced out of the temple, robed in similar fashion but with their heads concealed in grotesque devil masks. Carrying wooden swords, they jumped around in an aggressive sword dance, culminating in a frenzied cutting and chopping at the ground—symbolic of killing and laying an evil spirit involved in the festival. A procession of monks then formed up in rather motley fashion, headed by two standard bearers carrying long-handled banners; while the yellow-hatted Prior Nawang was chanting, and directing the ritual rather vaguely from his book of rubrics, his monks ambled along, exchanging back-chat with their friends on the outskirts of the procession. Just beyond the monastery precincts, everyone stopped. Here a hole had been dug, and there was dropped into it—of all strange objects—the head of a goat. This done with all due ceremony, the earth was filled in, and a small cairn of stones erected over the spot. I was told afterwards that when possible a dog's or a fox's skull should be used (without killing one specially), but, failing this, any four-footed beast will do. It was a strange

little rite, very suggestive of the inclusion into the ceremony of ancient, savage ritual from long ago before Buddhism found its way into the Himalayas.

From there the party, carrying shoulder-high the image, wound its way in the fast-gathering dusk to a pyre of fire branches. They flung it zestfully into the crackling flames, uttering a mighty shout as Mongdoh ended and victory over the forces of evil was complete.

Fleeting visits to the Thyangboche and Gondah monasteries, and personal contacts with monks, had made it possible to build up a picture of life as it goes on in these small and remote religious foundations; for that, in spite of its chance publicity, is all Thyangboche really is. It was striking to find how rigidly and strictly it conformed to the details and practices of orthodox Tibetan monastic life. The closest touch is kept with the mother house of Rongbuk, with the great foundation of Shigatse, and even Lhasa itself. Not only was the abbot away for seven full years of study, but other monks were constantly going backwards and forwards to Tibet on one errand or another; for pilgrimages to the great shrines, trading in the interest of the community, or study at the monastic university. Their errands might keep them away for weeks, for months, or even years. And for all the remoteness, and the partial barrier of a national boundary, life goes on at Thyangboche much as in the mother house; the same daily routine, the same meticulous observance of ritual in all its details and trivialities, the same sacred dances.

By and large the monks live in fair comfort; everyone with his own snug little house of a combined living room and kitchen, neatly arranged, and furnished with benches, rugs, sacred pictures, and arrays of pots and pans. Nowadays there is every imaginable article, useless and practical alike, gleaned from expeditions. The better-to-do and senior officials—for there are differences in wealth among the monks—have a separate little bedroom, in a few cases adorned with religious frescoes like the walls of the temple; and each cottage is completely self-contained, shut off by a strong plank door leading into a minute courtyard. All in all they are very compact, comfortable little hideouts, where the

individual monks seem to live their own lives within the general framework of the community and its organised life.

The community is recruited only from local Sherpa villages. Parents enter their small boys at eleven or twelve; from then on they wear the dull red, madder-dyed habit, take part in all the rites, and are kept generally occupied waiting on their elders, going on errands for them, carrying their gear when they go away, and helping them with the cooking and washing-up. The education of these fledgling monks is looked on as very important. They are entrusted to one or more of the senior Lamas who give them an all-round elementary schooling. Even from here a bright boy is often sent on to Tibet for further studies.

It is true that the monks of Thyangboche are of a grade which may not marry, but there is nothing in their lives to make one feel in any way sorry for them; and it would become us equally ill to ridicule them. It is looked on as a great mark of favour from the spirit world to have a boy accepted for this way of life. His standard of living will be equal to that of the folks at home, who are by no means cut off from their embryo-monk sons and see as much of them as they wish to.

A monk is automatically assured of a good measure of local prestige, particularly if he grows up to be a good-living man, respected alike in the monastery and the neighbourhood.

Trying to take an all-round view of it, one cannot help becoming convinced that the Buddhist monastic life is a genuine calling, and one which helps to fulfil a very real and deep need in the life of the people, intensely and sincerely religious as they are. As among all higher religions, the monks and priests are the go-betweens for the people in general with the spirit world in which they believe so fervently. The representatives of the laity, they interpret the unseen and carry out numberless ceremonies, of greater or less importance, to ward off sickness and other misfortunes, and to counter the bad luck that follows from ill-omens, besides officiating at funerals, memorial services, and so on.

In a very important respect they are a buffer to stave off the perpetual onslaughts of the ill-disposed element that looms so large in the unseen world.

One often meets parties of monks in people's houses, carrying out ceremonies of one kind or another; getting in return their keep for as long as they stay, and also a fee, its amount depending on the importance of the ceremony. The latter goes into the general pool of monastic funds, and is one of the main sources of income for the community. Over and above this there are spontaneous contributions, sometimes almost lavish, from the faithful, especially relatives and friends of the monks, who donate both to their kin and to the institution itself. The monasteries are also self-supporting to quite an extent, and Thyangboche owns a sizeable herd of yaks and cattle, as well as sheep and goats and fields of potatoes and barley.

A very marked feature of monastic life are the perpetual comings and goings. It is doubtful if there is ever a time when the whole community is together. Even if we ignore local outings for the day, to carry out minor ceremonies for the laity, during our stay in the Sherpa country a third or a half of the monks were normally away from Thyangboche. The Himalayan instinct to wander, going back, as I have suggested, to remote nomadic ancestors, is as firmly implanted in the monks as in everyone else.

Between times, when there is no reason or excuse to be away, life is not nearly so monotonous as one might suppose. There is always a festival in progress, or looming up in the near future: periods of semi-seclusion which include a vast deal of chanting from the scriptures, sacred dances and symbolic sacrifice; and in the intervals of more leisurely life, everyone is largely his own master, going here, there and everywhere in the neighbourhood, visiting and being visited by friends and relatives. Typical of the general scheme of things were the few days I first spent there: Mongdoh was in full swing when I arrived, and lasted a week, to be followed by the relaxed jollifications of New Year; then was to begin a major and very intense religious festival, lasting some ten days; and so it would go on throughout the whole year.

Apart from anything else, the monasteries provide a very real outlet for the Sherpas to express their religion. For there is no doubt that, like Tibetans, they are profoundly and sincerely religious people. Dismiss much of their practice and theory as

foolish superstition, but beneath it all there is a hard core of logic, a balanced outlook towards a positive religion, and the monastic institutions are cherished as jewels in their life.

Needless to say, there are racketeers and charlatans among the monks, particularly when it comes to bringing off a business deal, but they are in a minority. Most of them are simple men, half-lettered by the standards of our western style of education. A few, however, especially those who have been sent away for higher education, manage to combine in a positive way an active bustling life—that is, by Himalayan standards—with regular withdrawals into remote cells in the rocks to live a strict life of contemplation. One such was genial old prior Nawang, who, until his rheumatism became too trying for the climb, used to retire into the crags for weeks on end during the spring and summer.

Once a monk always a monk is the rule. But now and again people quit, usually to get married; and although he is by no means outcast or unfrocked, the monk in question cannot go back to live in his own village but must set up his household elsewhere. I had an acquaintance in Namche who had kicked over the traces thus—a hardened old tippler, but quite well thought of locally.

Among ourselves, religious houses are very prone to attract oddities and satellites to their fringes: the same applies here. There was a sprinkling of retired people, like Gyalchen's uncle, and several people come down in the world were kept going as water carriers and wood-cutters, or helpers-out in the kitchen, supported very largely on the genuine charity of the community.

Much as I would have liked to linger in this tranquil, lovely and fascinating place, time was drawing near for the arrival of the main expedition, and I had to be there on the spot to welcome them. Besides, a message had come in from the strong-minded Mrs. Gyalchen that New Year was about to begin in Namche and her husband was needed back: she also sent a warm invitation to myself to join the family circle for the festivities.

CHAPTER 9

The Sherpa New Year

NAMCHE was in a mild flutter: every well-to-do home was turned inside-out with the bustle of preparation for *Losahrr*; all were busy brewing beer, laying in the ingredients for all the special Sherpa dishes, tidying up the house, sorting out the best clothes and ornaments. My hostess was too busy to do more than give us a welcoming wave of the hand and return straightway to the brew-tub, where her excited children hovered around and got in the way, and were shooed off on errands to be rid of them. So much like Christmas Eve at home.

The first day was a quiet family occasion, near relatives and close friends dropping in from early in the morning. Our own day began at daylight, when Mrs. Gyalchen came bustling into the spare room, clinking with her heavy gold bead necklace and bracelets, to set beside my bed a plate of goodies: little honey sweets, and cakes of sugar and barley-flour, together with a brimming glass of the strongest and most evil-smelling *rakshi* spirit. And she stood there, gesturing gaily, till I made at least a pretence of gulping down a mouthful.

Everyone breakfasted off *Moh-Moh*, a luxury dish of neatly made, three-cornered meat patties, cased in dough and taken piping hot out of the stew-pot; an appetising food, but I could not help wishing the yak meat had been a little less pungent.

From eight-o'clock onwards relatives and neighbours came creaking up the stairs for a gossip and a drink. True to Sherpa custom, they neither greeted their hosts nor were greeted in return; they just sat down cross-legged by the fireside, tacitly accepted into the friendliness of the family circle, automatically lending a hand with the lesser chores, or with rocking the baby. Every guest stayed as long as he felt inclined, and needless to say they



On the way up to Matchemo we found a man of Kumjhung Village out in the wilds with his yaks. He had heard a Yeti only a few months ago



Phorchen Da
was an
interesting
and respected
personality.
He had twice
seen a Yeti

were all arrayed in their best: the men and some of their women-folk wore high-crowned Tibetan hats, fur-trimmed and gaudily decorated with silk and gold-thread embroidery. Gay blue scarves, red striped skirts, silk blouses, black and maroon cloaks were the order of the day.

Later in the morning we were invited round for a drink with a neighbour and his family. For them it was not a very joyous New Year. Our host was just returned from a trading expedition down into Nepal, and on the way home he had been waylaid by brigands who had robbed him of the equivalent of two hundred pounds—no small sum in these parts—the profits of a livestock sale. Nothing daunted, he took it philosophically and was determined to enjoy the festival as if nothing had happened. His loss was automatically put down to a visitation of wrath from the other world. By way of propitiation, and to try and enlist help in making good the disaster, a party of monks from the ancient monastery of Gondah up the valley were summoned to perform the appropriate ceremony.

Our arrival coincided with theirs, toiling in single file up to the house, weighed down by the ponderous volumes of scriptures they had humped all the way on their backs, and carrying their cymbals, drums, and trumpets. They were greeted by the family, and a little ceremony was performed at the door: a sprig of dried juniper was burned, probably to drive away the evil spirits and purify the atmosphere by its aromatic smell, and a few burning twigs were crushed into a censer swung by a boy novice. Thereafter there was a general adjournment for rest and refreshment; silver cups of tea and *chang* were dispensed by the women, then the whole party went inside to chant and boom away on the trumpets for the rest of the day, stopping at frequent intervals for talk and refreshment.

Another invitation had come, to a larger party, and with it a special message that I was to be included. We arrived a little late, to find all our fellow guests seated on two rows of benches down the centre of the living room, the women on one side and the men on the other, their ornaments twinkling in the shafts of sunlight and lighting up the everyday humdrumness of a Sherpa

home. There must have been thirty or forty people there. Poorer friends and relations had come as well, nobody forgotten, and they tucked in with a will to the best their hosts could provide. There was *chang* and buttered tea in unlimited quantities, and the womenfolk, clustered round the kitchen end of the room, were bustling backwards and forwards, ladling out steaming bowls of meat stew and noodles, and dishes of boiled rice, the most appreciated fare a Sherpa housewife can offer. The food was eaten, as the special occasion demanded, with bone chopsticks, handled for all the ruggedness of their users with surprising skill and delicacy.

As the party got under way, some of the younger and happier spirits started a song: in a few minutes everybody was chanting happily to the slow swaying rhythm of Sherpa folk-music. One thing led on to another, and before long we were all arm in arm in a half-circle, dancing ponderously with high swinging and shuffling steps. It was a happy carefree party, in the tranquil Sherpa way, many of the men a little unsure on their feet and mildly incoherent. And small wonder, since they had been sipping from earliest morning; but there was no rowdiness, and everyone kept in the best of tempers. By and by some of the guests took their leave to go on to another house; we slipped out with them, and home to relieve a woman who had come in as baby-sitter for the infant. Besides, there was an endless tidying up and preparation to be done, for tomorrow was to be the day of the Gyalchen's own party. Mother-in-law and her widowed daughter had been roped-in to help, and as always happens on such occasions, the male element, however willing, was hopelessly in the way. So we retired into the far end of the living room for the evening, to crouch over a brazier while the women went ahead with their cooking far into the night. More than once I was woken up in the small hours of the morning by the sound of the fire being made up and the rattle of pots and pans.

Guests began trickling in almost from daybreak, and the party, no different from a dozen others, went on all day, friends spasmodically drifting in and out. By the afternoon it had warmed up to a crescendo and singing and dancing were in full swing.

Towards evening the fun quietened down, but the last guest, replete with rice, noodles, and *chang*, was not away much before midnight.

A delightful custom at the festival is for four or five of the younger women to go the round of the male guests, carrying a big (aluminium) wassail bowl of *chang*. They stop in front of each favoured guest, to whom they dole out a mug of the beer, and sing in chorus an improvised song in his honour as they fill and refill his mug, ladling it to the brim every time he takes a sip. To judge by the mirth that greets their chanted sallies, the women have no mean talent for pointed improvisation; possibly it was just as well that my lack of knowledge of the Sherpa language kept me ignorant of the reasons for several bursts of laughter when my turn came to be serenaded.

Such is the essence of *Losahrr*, the New Year festival. A week of social jollification with the added satisfaction of straining one's resources to the uttermost to provide a good spread for the neighbours. It may be also a means of raising social prestige by lavish entertainment, and it certainly leaves something to look back on for the rest of the year. Nobody is left out, poorer friends and relations, who cannot afford to give a party themselves, and who have a very dull standard of living most of the time, come in for a generous share of whatever is going. For social gradings hardly exist among the Sherpas, except to a small extent on the basis of wealth. So far as I could tell, none of the twelve clans think themselves superior to others. But it is almost invariable for a man of a well-to-do household to choose a wife from an equally prosperous family, particularly since the bride's parents have to provide as good a dowry as they can scrape together. This must make for a minor plutocracy. Otherwise there are no hereditary chiefs or headmen of any important standing, but there are those among the Sherpas who are held in special respect as priests, as members of the village council of elders, or as skilful traders. And the system works out admirably for such a small close-knit people.

During these celebrations I was asked again and again about English life in all its aspects, and by the most unexpected people.

One village ancient, reputedly the oldest man in Namche, was most interested to know about our royal family, and how it was that we in England had only a Queen and no King. Our ordinary everyday life, the type of houses we live in, our religion, our standard of wealth, were all the subjects of a barrage of questions.

Needless to say, the conversation came round often to the Yeti, and many jokes were cracked about the misunderstanding that had arisen when news of our expedition first reached the mountains.

“We all thought you had come to slaughter the Yeti, and our one wish was for you to go away again.”

“Suppose we had found it, and had killed or captured one, would you have tried to get rid of us?”

“Yes, we might have; but now we are friends and know you mean no harm, we are glad to see you and welcome all your expedition.”

Most of my earlier information was confirmed, including the story that the Yeti makes temporary “bivouacs” to rest in. I also gleaned a little more. A traditional story, well known to a good number of people, tells how many years ago a man, now dead, had met a Yeti face to face as he rounded the corner of a rock. Both parties stood frozen to the ground, until the man realised it was going to face up to him and not be the first to budge, when he pulled out his knife and brandishing it above his head set up a great shouting and hollering, when the beast slowly edged away out of sight.

An old man told of the skin of a Mih-Teh said to be in a monastery across the border at Shigatse, preserved together with skins of bears, leopards and other animals; he had seen it himself, but would not pronounce positively as to its genuineness.

Most interesting were two curious folk-tales, both of which I later checked with other informants.

“We have a tale that long ago a woman of our people had her little girl kidnapped by the Yetis, who took her off with them, far away into the mountains. For three years she sought her child by every means she could think of; but, try as she would, not a scrap of news did she get. Then one day she found

her, quite by chance. The girl had forgotten how to talk and no longer knew her mother, who was greatly troubled how to reach her. So, as a forlorn hope, she went up into the rocks with the clothes and little playthings the child had used long ago. These she left in a prominent place, near to where the child was living with the Yetis.

“The girl found them, and they brought back memories of her former life. Slowly she became human once more and her speech returned to her. She was living with a male Yeti by whom she had a child; this took after its father and was scarcely human at all. Although she was now longing to return to her own people, she could think of no way to escape. So her mother gave her some strips of fresh yak skin, not yet dry; and with these she stealthily bound his hands and feet as soon as he had gone to sleep: tying them loosely, so that he should feel nothing. By morning the thongs had dried and tightened, and the girl could escape home to her parents, abandoning her yeti-child to its own kith and kin, who lost no time in killing it.”

There was a distinctiveness about this legend, hard to parallel anywhere else; and it is striking how the essence of the tale is the close kinship between Man and Yeti; so close that the girl could become absorbed into the Yetis, and even have a child by them, and then go back and become human once more.

The second tale was quite different.

“Nowadays the Yeti is a scarce animal in our Sherpa country. Time was, many generations back, when it was much commoner and a great nuisance, raiding fields, digging up roots, and plucking the grain. The villagers were reduced to serious straits, and tried every way they could think of to get rid of them. Scares and traps of every sort failed; the Yetis sat high up in the crags above the fields, watching everything and laughing to themselves at the puny efforts of the Sherpas. Then one day someone hit on the idea of putting out jars of the best *chang*. The Yetis came down at night and greedily drank it up. So the next night a strong dose of a poisonous root was put in the beer, and the raiders all died. All their race was extinguished except one female, who was heavily pregnant at the time and could not manage the climb down to the fields. So it

was that the Yetis were not quite exterminated and still survive to this day."

Present at several parties was the ex-monk of Thyangboche, he who had married and settled down in Namche. And he assured me that a man of Pangboche, by name Mingma, had met a Yeti at very close quarters. He was working in his house as a servant for the winter season, to make a little money while his normal trade of herdsman was slack. His master promised to send Mingma down to my quarters, but as he failed to show up I went to his employer's house to meet him. He proved to be a very ordinary and not very intelligent member of society, who related his adventure thus.

In the month of March, four years ago, he was out one day in a high pasture above Pangboche, and heard, as he thought, somebody shouting to him from the rocks above. Knowing there was another herdsman fairly near, he thought it must be he searching for a strayed animal. So he shouted back: "There are no yaks of yours anywhere here." The calling went on, and Mingma realised that it was no man calling, but some animal. Soon it came down towards him, a hairy creature on two legs. He was too frightened to linger, but ran down to his herdsman's hut and barricaded the door. The beast still came on down, and he heard it moving about outside. In most herdsman's huts there is a sizeable chink left in the stones by the door to act as a window. Mingma summoned up courage to peer out, and there was a Yeti in full view, only a few paces distant: a squat, thickset creature, of the size and proportions of a small man, covered with reddish and black hair. The hair was not very long, and looked to be slanting upwards above the waist, and downwards below it; about the feet it was rather longer. The head was high and pointed, with a crest of hair on the top; the face was bare, except for some hair on the sides of the cheeks, brown in colour, "not so flat as a monkey but flatter than a man", and with a squashed-in nose. It had no tail. As Mingma watched it, the Yeti stood slightly stooping, its arms hanging down by its sides; he noticed particularly that the hands looked to be larger and stronger than a

man's. It moved about in front of the hut with long strides, and seeing him peering out, it snarled at him, showing very powerful teeth a good deal stronger than a man's. Overcoming his fear, Mingma went and blew up the fire; and then, taking a burning brand, he flung it through the chink with all his strength, at which the Yeti made off and he did not see it again.

His was a strange story, but I believed it. My informant's attitude was one of mild surprise that I should be so interested in what had been to him no more than a disagreeable experience he would rather not undergo again. He had not come forward to volunteer his story; he asked for no reward. Furthermore, when the main party of the expedition arrived later on, Mingma told it again for the benefit of some of my companions. It did not vary in any detail. It so happened that at this time I had been sent from Europe a tolerable sketch in water colour of what a Yeti might look like—showing it walking man-like through a snowfield. This was handed to Mingma with the comment that it seemed to us well portrayed. He rejected it at once as being too monkey-like, and with too long hair on the arms and feet.

At the time I was questioning him, one of the bystanders came forward to say that a few years back he had glimpsed a Yeti. He and three other men, two of whom are now dead, were on the way home from Tibet; as they approached the grazing village of Taranang in the Bhote Kosi valley late one afternoon they all saw a Yeti, seated on a rock fifty paces below their path. It was a brown and black creature, not so large as a man, and with its head pointed. As soon as it saw them it bounded off the rock and disappeared on all fours.

CHAPTER 10

The Expedition Arrives

THERE was still some doubt as to whether we should be the only expedition in the field, so alternative sites had to be looked for as a base camp. If we were to be restricted by rivals to one end of the Sherpa country, my favourite haunt of Thami would be as good a place as any. Otherwise a good pivot from which to radiate out might well be somewhere at the other end, not too far from Thyangboche. So such preparations as were necessary were put under way to start on 10 February, up the valley of the Dudh whence I was newly returned.

Early on that morning I was awakened by a slight scuffling noise in the room and was charmed to see a little weasel-like creature, pale yellow-brown and white (afterwards identified as a yellow-bellied weasel), nosing and rummaging about among my shaving kit on the window-ledge. It came almost to arm's length, but was quite oblivious of my presence, and sat upright, delighting in its own reflection in the mirror and twisting about to look at itself from every angle. It seems they come often into Sherpa houses and are made welcome for their help in keeping down the rats.

The day's march took us to Phorche village, on a ridge adjacent to Thyangboche and a mile or two to the north of the monastery, around a sharp bend of the Dudh Kosi. It was a distinctive place, spread out over a big area on the flat top of a ridge with steep slopes falling away abruptly on three sides of it. Although the population was small in comparison with Namche, it covered the best part of a square mile, each house standing alone and isolated among its brown, dusty potato and barley fields.

Few things in Sherpa life are more interesting than differences in atmosphere and outlook between village and village. Each of

the fixed settlements, some fourteen in number, has an individuality all its own. Namche Bazaar is the cosmopolitan hub of trade, the nerve centre of all comings and goings to the south: Kumjhung to its north turns out more clever people and monks than anywhere else; Thami is distinctive for its perfect setting and atmosphere of cheerful friendliness. Phorche stood out as a weather-beaten community of yak-herds: for some reason it holds slightly aloof, keeping itself to itself, producing real children of the stern, bleak, mountain world, and sends few of its sons to become monks, or traders, or dwellers in Darjeeling.

Nor do the people of Phorche seem to be very highly blessed with brains, or for that matter with good looks—leather-faced men and squat dumpy women, straight out of a Brueghel painting. It is to be feared they have more than their fair share of cretinism, the curse of so many alpine stocks the world over, and to which the Sherpas are prone. Phorche, more than any other settlement, has among its population a sprinkling of hideous and totally idiot cretins.

People from other villages never seem to have many friends or relatives there, or to be well-informed as to the goings-on of its inhabitants; I, too, found them, by and large, rather more reserved than most people I had met, though every whit as kindly and tolerant.

We were put up in a moderately prosperous home, with an amiable but rather dull family. The husband, a naturalised Tibetan still wearing the blue agate earrings so beloved of his race, had married a Sherpa girl and settled down in the village. Like all his neighbours he had a substantial herd of yaks and sheep: just now, in fact, he was on the point of taking his yaks up the Dudh Kosi valley for a few days of browsing, for supplies of winter fodder were running low at home and the unusually snowless winter had left most of the pastures open.

Above all else Phorche is a real yak village, with yaks of every shade and colour combination of black, white, and reddish brown. Some were pure white, others piebald, sandy, or parti-coloured. For some reason the Sherpas prefer them to be reddish-brown, and oddly enough the ancestral colour of black is the

least valued. Next to reddish-brown, piebald beasts are most popular. A good cow will give up to ten calves in a lifetime, very occasionally producing twins. As in other villages, there were a proportion of small cattle kept for cross-breeding the much-prized dzum and dzoz for sale in Tibet. Sheep likewise abound in Phorche, but nobody keeps chickens. There are plenty in the lower villages, and a fair number in Namche. There they stop; for some unexplained cause they will not flourish, and do not seem to lay eggs above thirteen thousand feet.

Every house had its fields spread spaciouly around it; they were now bare and resting before the spring sowing of barley and potatoes, and each had its deep-dug potato storage-pit. A very attractive sight among the fields was a great flock of hundreds of snow pigeons, twisting and wheeling in a cloud between the houses, and lending a touch of life and colour to this most dead season of the year.

Information about the Yeti was not very forthcoming in Phorche: they were the shyest and most reserved group of people I had met among the Sherpas, and it was difficult on first acquaintance to get from them much information of any kind. I learnt that it was usual to see tracks in winter, and fairly common to hear the yelping call. However, a graphic account was given me by one woman. Two winters back, in the course of a cold spell, a Yeti was heard calling above the village. As always it was in the late afternoon or early evening. A party of several people, herself among them, happened to plod out one morning a mile or so through the snow to a small stretch where it lay thin enough for their yaks to get a few mouthfuls of grazing. On the way out they came on a set of fresh Yeti tracks, in the form of a man's foot, the prints of the toes clearly outlined, but blurred at the sides as if the foot was fringed with hair. The Yeti had been going on two legs, and the villagers were inquisitive enough to follow its tracks some little way. Here and there it had come to rough ground, where there were clear marks of its having dropped on all fours. In one place it had sat down on a flat rock, leaving a broad smudge in the snow; just below this there were imprinted sharply the parallel marks of its two feet, as it had sat

with its legs together, while on each side of the body-depression there was a dent in the snow, caused, as they judged, by its pushing down with its hands to lever up its body.

Could this not have been, I suggested, the track of a human being who had lost the way in the snow? No: because in one place it had apparently caught its foot in a cleft in the rocks, and, in extricating itself had left behind a tuft of strong, bristly hairs, reddish-brown in colour. Their bristliness was specially stressed, and they belonged to no animal normally met with by Sherpa herdspeople: of that they were sure. To keep them could have brought bad luck, so they were left where they had been found.

Who were the people who had come on these tracks? They were yak-herds: part of whose job in life it was to know, and to be able to recognise the tracks of wolves, leopards, and any other animal likely to be dangerous to themselves or their herds. To such people, reasonably intelligent beings most of whose existence was spent in the open, recognition of animal tracks must become second nature.

Phorche was a pleasant place for pottering about, with an enticing view up the steep, narrow Dudh valley right on to the border of Tibet; flanked by jagged, barren ranges of brown and white, and with moss-carpeted birch groves on its outskirts. These were favourite haunts of musk deer, which came in to browse on the moss, and were tamer than I had seen them anywhere else. They were captivating to watch, stepping daintily among the silver tree-trunks in the dappled shadows of the late afternoon sun. Never molested by the Sherpas, they are confiding enough to nibble contentedly at the moss within a stone's throw of the houses. A pair of golden eagles had their home here as well. Their big untidy nests of several years past were on the ledges of an overhanging cliff, and they were living off snow pigeons, as the patches of grey-white feathers strewn over the ground proclaimed.

It was interesting, too, to make acquaintance with the *Tahr* or wild goats. In summer these scatter, so the Sherpas say, far and wide over the mountains wherever there is something to browse on; but as winter draws on they move down to the fringe of the

great range and band together in herds along the milder valleys, the old shaggy-haired males keeping aloof. They are not so very much wilder than the musk deer, and live out their unruffled lives undisturbed among the crags. More than once I could approach near enough to watch them lying chewing the cud in the thin winter sunshine, hardly troubling to keep a look-out, never molested by the Sherpas, and with no enemies but an occasional marauding wolf or snow leopard.

A good provisional site for an expedition base camp was found at the foot of a steep path below Phorche. Then it was time to go back to Namche and await the arrival of the rest. For a few dull days I was laid up with a slight chill and had little else to do than watch from my window the antics of the three ravens who had taken up residence in Namche for the winter.

At last a messenger arrived bringing word that the rest of the party were due next day, 12 February. So down we went to meet them, armed with plenty of the best brew of *chang* to refresh the weary travellers. As we sat waiting on the edge of a bluff below the village, the long crocodile of porters came streaming up the valley bed far below us. For me it meant a new world and a new way of life, and it was with real nostalgia that I realised that the happy privilege of being an accepted member of Sherpa society was due to end this very morning with the setting up of camp life and the influx of our own civilisation.

A few days were spent at the old transit camp of the Everest expedition on the outskirts of Namche. We had to get sorted out, pay off porters and check stores—all the routine drudgeries in fact that fall to every expedition. Then we were ready to get down to work. The south slopes of the Dudh Kosi valley as far up as Thyangboche are clothed in thick forest of the high altitude blend of pine, birch and rhododendron. This is the only real forest, except for the corresponding area along the Bhote Kosi to the other side of Namche, that the Sherpa country contains; and at the fringe of this, sandwiched between the swirling torrent and the pines, we found a little flat stretch of yak pasture suitably removed from human habitation. Here we pitched the camp that was to be our home for some months.

While the new camp was being got ready, a man came wandering in one afternoon. He was pointed out to me as one Ang Tsering, who had encountered a Yeti only last year. I found him to be the man whose house I had visited some weeks back, when he and his wife were away buying rice in Toshe. They had been, both of them, up in the deserted ranges late in the autumn, collecting some medicinal herbs, when they disturbed a Yeti at the edge of the forest-line. It jumped up out of a small hollow only a few yards away from them, and bounded away on all fours over some very rough, rock-strewn country. He was positive it was not a musk deer. Its build and the manner in which it moved were quite different. Besides, when they were on the way home late in the afternoon, they heard the well-known yelping call from quite near, at much the same spot as they had seen the creature earlier in the day.

Such information as had been gleaned about our hoped-for quarry seemed to indicate that it was very scarce, a solitary creature with no fixed abode. Our only chance of coming across it seemed to be to stake all on the hope of a fortuitous meeting and make a series of two- or three-man probings into as many areas as possible. The only alternative was to try the hopeless and laborious task of combing through a whole valley or mountain-side, in case a Yeti might chance to have found its way there.

So Ralph Izzard, Gerald Russell and myself started out up the Dudh Kosi valley which had looked so enticing from Phorche last week. It was untrodden ground for all of us, and we streaked through the village to head due north for an hour or two along the path well-worn by the herdsmen. We passed the night comfortably in an empty cottage and scrambled down in the morning to cross the river. It was a pretty corner of the country, with a chain of water mills for grinding barley-flour built astride a half-frozen stream; a favourite haunt of ethereal blood pheasants and shining green monauls, whistling and slinking in and out of the juniper scrub. Part of our march was among great knotted and twisted birch-trees, real children of the drear valley. As we halted among them beside the river, for a rest and a bite of food, a pair of Himalayan dippers, sooty-brown and lacking the white bib

of our own bird, came flitting downstream and perched and bobbed on the gleaming white, water-smoothed boulders.

We could not but wonder how a water bird could possibly pick up a living, or survive the winter in the bed of a hostile torrent fed entirely by melted snow and ice. In answer to our question, one of the pair dived straight off its rock, and we watched it swimming, or rather flying as dippers do, under the clear grey-green water. We found afterwards that the snow-water, though kept from freezing solid only by the force of the current, harbours its own population of little water bugs and snails, active even in the depths of winter.

The day kept bright and clear, with brilliant sunshine, and we all three of us enjoyed the climb up the west slope of the valley. It was easy going for a short while through light glades of birch, the ground inches deep in snow from the last fall, and the type of cover beloved by musk deer, whose slot-marks criss-crossed everywhere, mingling with two sets of broad round wolf pads, evidently made since last night by a pair of Tibetan wolves. The glade opened into a square of walled pastures, a herdsman's cottage set in the middle; some yaks tied up outside, and a wisp of smoke curling from the roof, showed it to be in use. An amiable, weather-beaten man and his four-year-old son came out to meet us; true to the Sherpa character he was quite unperturbed by such an unexpected invasion. A native of the village of Kumj-hung a few miles north of Namche Bazaar, he turned out to be a vague relation of my servant Mingma, and he welcomed everyone in, to sit by the fire and share a meal of leathery, gritty *Tashrr* pancakes which he was making from potato meal and buckwheat flour.

"What are you here for?" he inquired. "Climbing mountains?"

"We are not climbers. We are trying to see a Yeti: can you give any information about it?"

"In the autumn I was an hour or two farther up the valley with some other people, at Matchemo grazing village. One evening we were going to bed in our hut when we heard a Yeti calling not far away. We stayed huddled indoors and did not go out to try and see it."

Had he ever seen one? Yes, ten or twelve years back he was at the same place with another man. It was during the winter, and soon after a heavy snowfall they both went out to clear a track in the snow, to help their yaks through to a patch of grazing. On the way out they disturbed a Yeti, only a hundred yards ahead of them: a man-shaped creature, covered with hair the colour of a *Tahr*. When it saw them it gave a yelping call and made off into the range above, going the whole time upright on two legs. It did not go very fast, but since it was moving away from them they did not see it in any detail and were not inclined to follow it. Not very long afterwards his companion fell sick and died, and it was generally believed that the ill-omen of seeing a Yeti had brought disaster in its wake. He himself had gone back and lost no time in arranging with a priest friend for an appropriate ceremony to ward off any ill-luck. Our acquaintance claimed that it was quite normal to see Yeti tracks in the snow during cold weather.

Heartened by this transparently sincere recital, we pushed on up the barren, open valley to the deserted grazing settlement of Matchemo, where one of our porters made us free of his yak-hut. Matchemo was at the mouth of a flat valley, biting deep into the long jagged peaks which separated the two parallel north and south valleys of the Bhote Kosi and the Dudh Kosi. The valley ended abruptly in an icicle-clad cliff, to all appearance an admirable hunting-ground.

Even this tiny step further north had brought us into generally bleaker and more rigorous conditions. The Sherpas were right in telling how the *Tahr* are spread over the whole countryside in the summer months, but go down to the fringe of the alpine country in winter to huddle together in herds. Fortunately our hut was well stacked with dry juniper branches, and a blazing fire sent us cosily to sleep.

We moved up in the early morning to the foot of the cliffs at the head of the valley, and bivouacked under the lee of an overhanging rock. Here we split up into three, to nose about as best we could among the great tracts of rock around the cliffs. It was an unproductive day, in the most desolate and dead place so far investigated. But even here there were endless rows of dots in

the snow, where mouse hares had stolen out from their half-buried homes to nibble a few mouthfuls of lichen off the rocks. Stranger still, while I was stumbling and floundering up to sixteen thousand feet, knee-deep in snow, pretty bronze-green moths fluttered past, skimming happily over the snowfields. The roof of the world is indeed richer in life than one would imagine: dippers in the icy torrent, mouse hares up to the limit of vegetation, and now these little moths; all on the go in the depths of winter.

Alas for our hopes! As I ought to have expected by now, a blanket of fog paralysed us later in the day and held us in its grip, condemning everyone to huddle sadly by the fire in a steady fall of thin snow. February 22 dawned bright and sunny. A few hours' sortie raised our spirits but achieved no more than a superb view of the whole Everest massif, fifteen miles away to the east, its huge bulk too great for the eye to comprehend. For some reason Everest does not often show up so impressively as other, and far humbler peaks such as Amadablam and Pumori; but from here, at sixteen thousand, it gave a wonderful and awe-inspiring impression of its grandeur, seeming right on top of our little valley: an excellent instance of the fore-shortening of distance in these mighty ranges of the Himalayas.

Fore-shortening was something I could never begin to understand, let alone get used to. Not only is it true of the high peaks, but it applies nearly as much at short range. Perhaps it is merely the difficulty of adjusting one's sense of proportion to the vastness of everything. Perhaps there enters into it the effects of a rarified atmosphere on eye or brain, or a lack of distinctive landmarks, prominent buildings or woods, to give punctuation to the proportions of the view. It is no uncommon experience to stand craning up at a rock-face, soaring sheer for several thousand feet, and yet to feel there would be nothing impossible in carrying on a conversation with someone standing on the top.

So strong is this impression that it can only be appreciated on the spot by direct experience. It is a baffling feature of high-altitude conditions in the Himalayas, and one which the traveller is constantly experiencing. It may be an element in the



A shepherd of Phorche drives his flock home from the sparse winter grazing

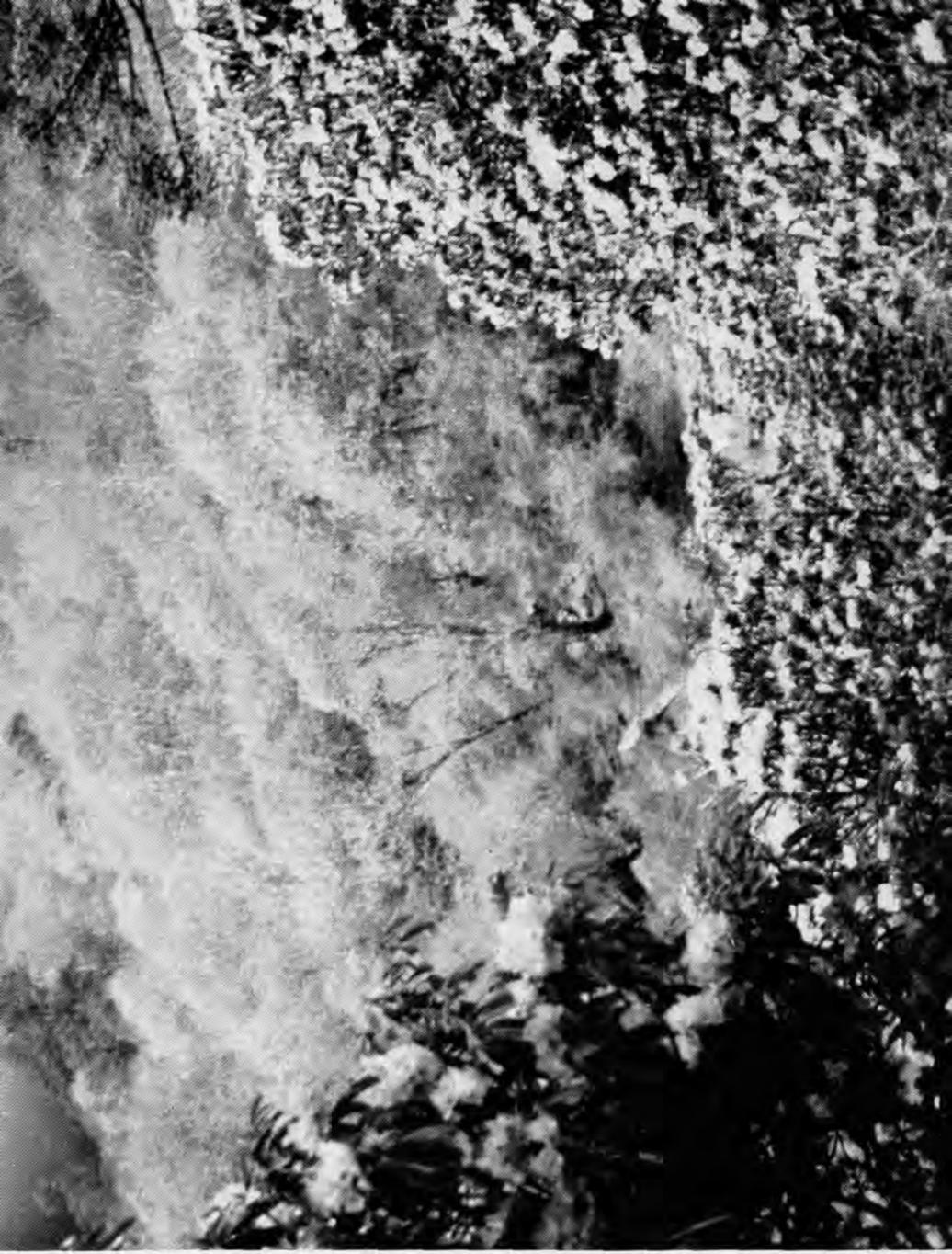


Since the potato was introduced from Darjeeling it has become a most important Sherpa crop. Potatoes are stored in deep pits against the frost



One of the loveliest rhododendrons was a shrubby species with sulphur-yellow bells (*Rhododendron campylocarpum*)

The *rhododendron falconeri* was a wonderful sight. Sheets of crimson against the background of the birch forests



ever-increasing sense of strain that always occurs after a long stay in the great ranges.

Fog and snow came down at night as usual. We dozed intermittently in the dankness, between tinkling crashes of giant icicles snapping off in the wind and shivering to pieces at the foot of the cliffs. Another day of one-man sorties followed; scrambling up chimneys and the treacherous rocks of gullies half-submerged in snow—but with no result, and no sight in fact of anything living. The time had come to start slowly homewards, so we planned to look in at likely places on our way, splitting up as before so as to make wider sweeps. As I was skirting the base of a cliff in the early morning sunshine, through fast-melting snow of last night, a pack of snow partridges gave me an agreeable half hour. Very tame, and equally stupid, they were wending their way up a sheer cliff-face; holding on with beak and claws, flapping their wings violently, and probing, as they heaved themselves up with amazing dexterity, into every smallest crack in the rocks to extract seeds from the shrivelled remains of last summer's alpine plants, and probably insects as well. On the face of it, one would have thought it wellnigh impossible for any sizeable bird to get through a Himalayan winter at the topmost limit of animal and plant life, with seven-tenths of the country submerged in snow for weeks on end. But the snow-partridge wins through, and does not seem to move down to lower altitudes even in the hardest weather. If the sizeable population is anything to judge by, they do not fare too badly. Nor do other birds, for as I was watching these a great shadow swooped past, swerving in for a second against the cliff-face, without a pause in its flight, and a golden eagle sailed away, clutching a still-squawking partridge in its talons. So sure and so sudden had been its attack that the rest of the pack had not time to realise what had happened, to crouch away out of sight, or even look up from their feeding.

Today's sortie was through (potentially) admirable Yeti country: mile after mile of broken, utterly lonely rocky slopes and boulder-filled depressions, virtually never entered by men but, as tracks made clear, with a reasonably large population of living creatures. Snowcock were calling everywhere, mostly paired

off for the breeding season. The daily fog, and a snow blizzard set in, and there was no help for it but to slither down as fast as might be to the smoky snugness of a Matchemo yak-hut. By next morning the snow had deepened and we seemed to be in for a bad spell. Sorties were out of the question, and a dull day by the fire was the only possibility.

These Sherpa herdsmen's huts are substantially built, with thick stone walls and well-tiled roofs. As I found by experiment, even a moderately loud voice outside is often inaudible from within. This is an important point in weighing up the frequent stories of people who claim to have heard a Yeti from inside a hut, for it suggests a loud, full-bodied cry. Misgivings arose that it might be after all nothing more than the howl of a wolf. So we consulted the porters, mainly sturdy yak-herds from Phorche, always on the look-out for wolves menacing their livestock. They were emphatic about it. No: the call of the Yeti was altogether different, not a drawn-out howl, but a clear cry, different from any other beast of the country. They agreed it was not unlike the mewling of a chough, but with much more body to it; besides who ever heard of a chough calling after dark?

And so back to base for a wash and clean-up. Here we rejoined the other parties, who had been working to the east above Thyangboche, but with no more direct success than ourselves. Again we divided, to try a three-pronged drive up the main valleys. My allotted zone was the Bhote Kosi valley west of Namche Bazaar. The day of departure was fine and with a different feel in the air. There were even a number of butterflies on the path. Tortoise-shells, painted ladies, tiny skippers, clouded yellows, blue butterflies—all just like their opposite numbers in Europe, except that (as befitted and reflected the severity of their surrounding), they were a shade duller and greyer tinted. Most, if not all, must have come out from hibernation in sheltered crannies perhaps right up to the very limits of vegetation, and this was another pointer to the conclusion, fast being forced on us, that up to (say) eighteen or nineteen thousand feet the Sherpa winter is by no means so severe as one might suppose; in some seasons but little worse than our own in England.

At long last there were appearing the first traces of spring: and what a joy to see! The weeks gone past had been brimful of interest and excitement; but one could never escape from the atmosphere of suspended animation. The stern, grey-brown, snow-capped ranges, the intermittent blizzards, the pall of freezing fog drifting down the valleys, hiding everything for days on end, suggest inevitability, that the winter-deadness must last for ever, and the warm, pulsating life of the countryside can never come round again. Withered remnants of last season's gentian and rhododendron flowers belie it, but desolation is the only present reality.

So that to come out today and see butterflies, and even occasionally a speck of green where the earliest spring plants were pushing up, was to be on the threshold of a new world.

On the road to Namche, fast becoming a familiar, monotonous plod, old Prior Nawang of Thyangboche fell in with us, stumping along, for all his age and considerable bulk, at no mean speed. He had only a few minutes to spare, lest he should be late for a funeral, and greeted me with a fatherly pat on the shoulder.

"Well, have you seen a Yeti?"

"No, we're still looking for it."

"Don't worry, you'll see it all right if you stay here long enough."

All in our party took off their caps, and bent before him in turn as he laid his hand on their heads in blessing. Even Mrs. Gyalchen's tiny infant daughter was unslung from her mother's back for the touch of his hand.

We halted for the night in Namche, and then pushed on to Thammu where we bought a haunch of meat cut from an unfortunate yak which had fallen down a crevice and broken its back. The transaction was watched with the utmost interest by a raven perched on the roof; leaning forward he snatched at the scraps of meat we threw up at him.

It had been my intention to make one of the yak-grazing villages up the Bhote Kosi valley to the north of Thami; but dusk was upon us, so we called in at a hamlet to beg a night's lodging from the owner of a small house. A good-looking, bearded man

came to the door. His name was Phörchen-Da, seemingly a rather stay-at-home character, but an interesting personality, very religious, and much-respected in the neighbourhood. He was a garrulous person well up in local politics and gossip of the village.

Yes, he knew something of the Yeti. Indeed, he had seen one twice in the course of his life. A good many years back, perhaps twenty, several men were up near Longmoche, repairing a little temple isolated high above the valley. He had wandered off from his fellows, collecting stone; of a sudden they shouted down to him that there was a Yeti in the offing. The rest of the party saw it quite distinctly, but he no more than glimpsed it as it was making off, and could be positive only that it was on two legs, the colour of a musk deer and rather smaller than a man.

His second sighting, nine or ten years ago, had much more to it, and made a very circumstantial tale. Phorchen was up at Namche at the time of the New Year festival; while there, he went out an hour or two distant to a deserted yak pasture at the edge of the Bhote Kosi forest. There had been some bees' nests in the rock-face last summer, and he hoped there might be a little wax left over from the autumn. While he was prodding about in the crevices he chanced to look up, and saw a brown-coloured animal coming down through the trees. Taking it for granted that it was only a musk deer, he took no notice and went on with his work. However it came nearer, and he realised it could be no deer, and must be a Yeti, for it was a two-legged creature. The Yeti had not seen him, half-hidden as he was among the boulders; and Phorchen stopped perfectly still for some time, watching it. It moved about, with a man-like gait, on flat ground between the rocks. It went slowly, mostly on two legs, with the stride of a man, but several times dropping down on all fours to negotiate the more difficult patches of ground. It was the size and build of a youth, hairy, red-brown and black in colour, and he was definite that the chest was a lighter colour, and the hair on the chest appeared to slant upwards. The hair was not very long, and "like a *Tahr*". Its head was high and pointed, and the face "like a monkey's", hairless and brown in colour. Phorchen indicated on the ground

that the Yeti had been rather more than a hundred yards distant from him. Eventually it clambered up to a rock where it crouched in a squatting position. He felt rather scared, so he banged his long knife on a length of wood to frighten it off. The creature looked up at once but did not see him; so he made more clatter, upon which it jumped off the rock and disappeared into the trees, moving quickly on all fours. He volunteered that it bounded along in a style entirely different from a *Tahr* or a deer. My friend had not the smallest doubt that it was a *Mih-Teh*, and thought it best to make his way home. There was snow on the ground at the time, and next morning he went back to the same place in company with a friend to look for its traces. They were like the naked foot of a small man, the toe-prints outlined distinctly.

His account was particularly interesting, in that it was the first I had heard from someone who had watched a Yeti unawares. It was told simply and with obvious sincerity. A few weeks later I chanced to meet him again, and on the excuse of failing to understand certain points I got him to repeat it, which he did almost word for word without embellishment.

The family dwelt in a tiny house; not much bigger than the summer grazing cottages. To add to the congestion indoors, his wife was having a wool-spinning and combing bee, with some of the neighbours and their children helping, and my women porters were soon enveigled in. Floor space was limited, so we slept jammed together sardine-fashion, jumped on at intervals through the night by my host's Lhasa terrier.

His piety was evident in several small shrines placed in odd corners, and I noticed that before going to bed he lit a miniature brazier of aromatic rhododendron leaves, hanging it outside the casement, either as an offering of incense to the spirits, or maybe to purify the night air against evil-intentioned demons, muttering at the same time a suitable invocation.

In this house, packed together as we were, I suffered a minor discomfort, apt to be a recurring irritant the whole time I was at these altitudes. No sooner was I safely off to sleep, snuggled deep into my blankets, than the shortage of oxygen began to tell, and I would wake up in a hideous nightmare, gasping my way out in

terror from under the blankets to gulp down lung-fulls of the smoky, Sherpa-ridden air.

We were quickly away in the morning, following the open, flat valley of the Bhote Kosi towards the Tibetan border, a couple of days distant. The flats had village after village scattered along them, all of typical little solidly-built houses. Towards these the stream of Sherpa spring migration would be wending its way in a few weeks' time. They would be packing their few chattels, closing their permanent homes for the time being, and straggling up en bloc, without fuss or botheration, to these summer quarters at fifteen and sixteen thousand feet. Luckily one of my temporary porters, an amiable character named Ang Norbu, of herculean strength and sterling worth, and the hero of many a climb on Everest, owned a substantial house at Marlung, one of the highest villages and my destination for this sortie.

The stores were being unpacked, and we were moving in when my attention was called to a vast flock of yellow-billed choughs swarming overhead. A thousand or more strong, they were engaged on some spring courtship flight, spread out when first we saw them in a great dark cloud, like a drifting plume of smoke or a swarm of gigantic bees. Each and every bird of the flock, wing-quills spread apart, was dipping and diving, planing and weaving, in and out of the cloud of its fellows, now solitary, now a member of a little group broken away and displaying as a unit. The whole assemblage was sometimes a continuous flock, sometimes splitting up into parties, swarming together to reunite as a rounded whole or to straggle out streamer-wise. Surely this must be one of the most wonderful spring flights among birds. Even the hard-bitten Sherpas were impressed, and stopped to watch as the choughs began to spiral in wide circles, until they soared away in silence, out of sight of the naked eye, at a height of anything between twenty-five and thirty thousand feet.

It has become a commonplace experience of mountaineering expeditions in the Himalayas to meet choughs and other birds at immense altitudes. Apparently the lack of oxygen and the conditions of the atmosphere has no effect on them at all: an extraordinary condition of affairs for which the science of physiology

does not so far give an explanation. To the ordinary outsider, it suggests a remarkable body-mechanism, whereby a quick moving creature such as a bird, all of whose vital processes must act with such infinitely greater speed than our own, can climb to the thinnest atmospheres, where we can barely scrape along with artificial helps, and in a matter of seconds adjusts its every movement to a totally different set of outside stresses and strains.

For once in a way the weather was friendly most of a week; so much so that I suffered badly from sunburn, through foolishly dozing off while sunbathing, and had to lie up for two precious days. There was practically no snow left on the ground and the rockstrewn areas were as accessible as they ever are. The area above Marlung was nearly opposite the Matchemo rocks where we had been last time. Imagination could hardly conceive the incalculably vast area available for the Yeti, or any reasonably intelligent and elusive animal. Here was valley after valley, ridge mounting on ridge, all on the grand scale and practically never penetrated by men. Each and all were honeycombed with superlative hideouts. Nothing could be easier here than to avoid discovery, particularly from an out-of-breath, tired human being, struggling painfully and noisily upwards, clattering over the rocks, infinitely slow in his progress and taking an entire day for the casual investigation of a single square mile.

This particular sortie, no more productive than any other of direct or positive results, brought out as clearly as possible the hugeness of the task we were up against. The magnificent exploits of climbing expeditions have so concentrated our interest on the great peaks above the snow-line that all else is necessarily pushed into the background. One is so very apt to think of the ranges below the permanent snow-line as of purely secondary interest and perhaps rather dull—even if one thinks of them at all. Yet this intermediate, high alpine level, between the tree-line and about twenty thousand feet, far exceeds in area the snow-bound and ice world. All is on so huge a scale, the country as a whole is so dwarfed and dominated by the towering bulk of the great peaks, that sense of proportion is lost and the lower ranges

fade away into near-nothingness. Moreover, one's first impression of the backbone of the Himalayas is one of complete deadness, an impression it is hard to get past. From even a moderate distance the mountains seem no more than huge masses of dead and crumbling rock bitten into by glaciers, distorted, weathered, fragmented into jagged shapes and outlines, and quite unpropitious for supporting life.

One penetrates this and finds a fauna and flora, modest in its size, but successful in the niche it has carved out for itself; hanging on, and mastering its surroundings throughout the desolation of the winter season. For all that, it is far from easy to get this first impression of deadness out of one's mind, even when direct and positive experience has shown it to be wrong. This must have a great deal to do with the stubborn prejudice we were always up against, that it would be impossible for any unknown beast to lurk in such barren and lifeless surroundings.

This sortie up the Bhote Kosi brought home very forcibly how the middle region—to give it a convenient label—really forms the bulk of the terrain above the tree-line. Divide it for the sake of argument into three; the lower valleys from eleven to fourteen thousand feet, this middle region from fifteen to nineteen or twenty thousand feet; and the topmost zone of the snow-capped ranges and peaks, above twenty thousand, and beyond the limits of plant life. Then, there is no doubt but that the middle, intermediate zone covers very much the largest area. The semi-wandering Sherpas straggle over the whole series of valleys, and such of the slopes as can be used for grazing. Their lower and middle zones of activity dovetail to a great degree, as where the yak pastures reach up to seventeen thousand feet on the easier slopes, or the deserted, barren, rocky valleys and ranges bite down into the lower ranges, impassable to herds and never penetrated by man.

Assuming with the Sherpas that this strange animal exists in the middle zone—and on-the-spot investigations had made it abundantly clear that there was absolutely no *theoretical* reason of food supply, climate, or living space against it—then the situation is rather that of two sets of people living in the same house, but

one on the ground floor and the other on the first floor, keeping clear of one another, except for very occasional meetings on a common stairway, and passing as quickly as maybe on their rare and unwished-for encounters. Let us remember, also, that the set of conditions in the Sherpa country and Nepal is without parallel elsewhere in the world, saving only in parts of Tibet next door. Here is this vast terrain, with a minimum of natural enemies for the Yeti, possibly indeed none at all, and sparsely inhabited by a race of men who are not hostile or curious, and above all are without weapons.

Our first effort made and a foot-hold secured, this intermediate region was casting its spell more and more every day. The unexpected looms so large, and in so many ways; trivial adventures like finding a moth fluttering over the snowfields, or an eagle snatching a partridge, the grandeur of the scenery, as individual and, in its own way, as majestic as the snow-peaks. The valleys are littered and strewn with jumbled and tumbled rocks, many the size of a house, but appearing insignificant against the vast proportions of their setting. The sugar-loaf peaks, and the battlement silhouettes of the jagged, serrated ranges, gashed and scooped out by ancient, long-vanished glaciers, are a feast to the eye; the colour effects have their sober satisfaction in harmonies of rich browns, pastel greys and black, flecked and streaked by sheets of blue-green ice-fields flowing down from above. This blending of form and colour is frightening in its rugged severity, and as limitless in what it has to offer as the snow-peaks themselves. Always there was some new valley to explore, just that extra bit more promising than the last, and always something new and exciting over the next ridge.

It would be absurd to compare the hardships of scrambling about in the lower ranges with the endurance demanded of climbers higher up, but a serious brake on one's progress is the shortage of breath that increases every hundred feet after the twelve thousand foot level; even worse is the ever-increasing apathy and sense of strain. I had undergone no real hardships at any time, but by the time of this sortie I had reached a state of such physical and mental staleness that, were a whole family of

Yetis to have appeared, it would have been a positive effort to arouse any interest. Add to this an overwhelming, almost paralysing silence: a silence so intense, and so absolute as to enshroud one in an almost physical sense. I was constantly fighting off the feeling that nothing *could* exist in a setting so totally without animation.

It was in this very place, beyond Marlung, that one of my yak-herd friends had stumbled on a Yeti seated on a rock, with its mouse hare kill close by. Remembered again, and visualised in its real setting, the story took on a new and much greater reality. Trying to picture the scene, I found it hard to imagine what there could have been in the surroundings so to stimulate the imagination of a prosaic yak-herd as to make him the victim of a singularly unromantic hallucination. The Sherpas are an ancient race, long settled in this country, and they themselves form a most real and positive part of the mountain world. They have the inheritance of uncounted generations of yak-herds in their blood; their own individual lives are part and parcel of their setting, lived in the closest imaginable contact with the hard realities of surroundings and climate. Everyday life among them is too tough, too real a problem for them to waste any time over fabricating fabulous animals. Were the Yeti something associated in its appearances with rites of the temple, or conjured up by priests, one could dismiss it out of hand. But a beast that is invariably met by chance in the course of ordinary, everyday life, and one, furthermore, that no one wants to see, is very hard to dismiss without a prolonged investigation.

There is tolerable certainty it must be based on *something*: if not a myth, on some animal unknown to us, or a perverted red bear or langur monkey. But I had proved again and again that the Sherpas are perfectly familiar with both these animals and their habits. If the (Mih-Teh) Yeti is really a bear, we are up against the difficulty that when in Tibet the Sherpas can recognise it, and when they meet it in their own country they cannot. Moreover, they attribute to it a totally different appearance, habits, and see it mainly in the depths of winter, when all good bears in this cold climate should be hibernating. Nor do they recognise it as a

menace to their own abundant livestock, whereas in Tibet it preys relentlessly on yaks.

As for the langur monkey, every Sherpa knows it. They come up regularly into the fringing forests in the summer months, they are unhappy on the ground, they are gregarious, they are (as any traveller will tell you) one of the most conspicuous beasts of the Himalayan forests. If the Yeti be based on the langur, as we are so often told, we have the same situation as with the red bear: the Sherpas can recognise it on the fringe of their country, but as soon as it leaves the forest (which it does nowhere else in its range) and transforms itself into a ground-living beast, its appearance and its known habits change by the wave of a magic wand.

The only major difficulty against accepting the Yeti as an established fact was not so much our failure to meet one—that would have been too great a stroke of luck in a matter of a few weeks—but the fact that no Sherpa ever seemed to see more than one at a time. This was a difficulty they were the first to admit, and they offered the explanation that they believed them to be rare animals, wandering here, there and everywhere over the huge extent of available country in Nepal and Tibet, keeping always clear of men; those they see from time to time are thought to be the more pugnacious individuals or old males. Theirs is a reasonable explanation, but even so it is not completely satisfactory. One might have thought that at rare intervals somebody would stumble on a family party.

The Sherpa country is after all but a small fragment of the Himalayas, either of Nepal or Tibet. Let us not jump to general conclusions on the strength of the information it reveals. For all we know a small total population of Yetis have their main hide-outs tucked away somewhere to the north, east or west, where in spring and summer, when conditions and food supply are easier, they congregate to live a closer and more condensed life. Thence perhaps they sally forth and scatter, stalking over the mountains in ones and twos, when autumn comes round again, when the mouse hares retire to their rockbound seclusion and food in general becomes scarce and hard to find.

CHAPTER 11

Two Disappointments

IT was with some wonderment that I came across a wren during a long day among the rocks at seventeen thousand feet. It was skipping and flitting over scree at the edge of a retreating glacier, the epitome of loneliness, and it was a trifle pathetic to see it so busy at work, gleaning through every cranny for insects; I could only admire its hardiness, and wonder what manner of fare it might be finding.

Biswamoy Biswas came up to join me above Marlung, and after a sojourn of ten arduous days a change seemed indicated. So we made our way back down the valley, a few miles west to the Longmoche kola on the Tibetan border, where earlier I had found the mouse hare entrails. Already the Sherpas were starting to flow up the valley and settle into their grazing settlements. With every day that went by the countryside was coming to life. Every half mile a herdsman was plodding behind his yaks, someone was hurrying back to Thami for stores he had forgotten, or people were shifting from one grazing valley to another. At long last the days were full of sunshine, and the countryside started to throb and pulsate with new life.

We passed through a tranquil, busy scene in the late afternoon sun; smoke curling from the grey roofs, walls and fences being repaired, firewood being gathered and the yaks and sheep driven in for the evening. But the ever-present touch of disharmony was lurking not far off. Only a hundred paces above us on the mountainside, two great Tibetan wolves, almost white in their luxuriant winter coats, bounded out from the rocks and made off, weaving nimbly upwards, where we followed them with our glasses as they leapt at great speed along the skyline. We retraced our steps to send out a warning, and the peace of the evening changed in a

twinkling to scurry and bustle to get the outlying yaks and sheep into the safety of the fold. There seems no limit to the cunning and audacity of these wolves, against which the hapless herdsmen have no weapons at all. They do not go in packs, but in pairs. For all that, they are the worst scourge of the mountains, perhaps the largest race of their kind, and a pair will tackle a yak without hesitation. The whole Sherpa country does not seem to harbour more than a very few pairs, presumably immigrants from Tibet through the Nangpa pass and down the Bhote Kosi. Five years ago the herdsmen managed to kill a male, but his mate was seen heading for Tibet, only to return in a few weeks with another consort. Poor Sherpas; they can only watch the mischief in frustrated rage, while the wolves prowl about quite openly round the village, conspicuously creamy white against the grey rock, and tremendously agile as they leap from boulder to boulder with long springing strides, the very personification of strength and cunning. The numbers can at least be kept down to a minimum by tracking them to their lairs and digging out the cubs every spring. Only two days after I saw them, they made a lightning raid on a herd of sheep belonging to my previous hostess in Thami, racing down at midday right to the fringe of the village, killing seven sheep in a few minutes and bolting off with two lambs, almost before anybody had realised what had happened; not desperate from hunger, but out of sheer bravado.

Sometimes people try and tame the cubs, only to find them turn sour and savage as soon as they become weaned. This particular pair at least settled one question. I had still a slight uneasiness lest they might be the source of the yelping call always attributed to the Yeti, in spite of the vehement assurances of the Sherpas to the contrary. However, one evening we were watching them roam over the mountainside when one of them sat down and gave tongue in a long drawn-out howl: a distinctive cry if ever there was one, and far removed from the mewling-yelp of the Yeti as so often imitated by my Sherpa friends.

Longmoche valley was delightfully enlivened by the arrival of a medley of little rock birds, chats and starts, gay-bibbed and contrastingly coloured in shades of blue, red, buff, white and

black, in the same harmony of colours as our stonechat and wheatear, and bobbing up everywhere on the boulders, newly arrived from the lower valleys for the spring. It had been the joint intention of Biswamoy Biswas and myself to devote a few days to prowling haphazardly round the kola, one of the most congenial pockets of country anywhere, and revisit the place where I had found the mouse hare entrails under such suggestive circumstances the previous month. But it was not to be. Hardly were we settled into a hut when a messenger arrived to say that two herdsmen had heard a Yeti call only a day ago, up the parallel valley to our south and directly beyond Thami. Plans were scrapped in a flash, and soon after dawn next morning we were toiling up to cross straight over the dividing range.

We were blessed with as glorious a day as I can remember, and at seventeen thousand feet we sat down to rest. Spread out to the north and on three sides was an awe-inspiring and stupendous panorama of peaks and ranges, as marvellous a view as anything the Great Himalayan Range has to offer: the impassable ice-wall of the Tibetan boundary a stone's throw away; limitless chains of brown, ragged peaks, the home maybe of Yetis; the solid whiteness of the Cho-Oyu block, towering its full twenty-six thousand feet, and so down the long brown backbone, dividing the Dudh and Bhote Kosi valleys, with Everest and Lhotse in the haze of the background, for once free of the smoking plume of snow; then, far to the south-east, the twin peaks of white-capped Kangtega above Thyangboche, Amadablam, and even a glimpse of Makhalu, goal of this season's expeditions. It was a scene too vast to be grasped by eye or mind, but a salutary lesson that, although so much has been written and said about the Himalayas that we feel on familiar terms with the peaks, we have really done no more than scratch the surface. Its topography, climate, natural history and geology are as little known as those of any region of the earth.

An awkward, unpleasant scramble up a thousand feet of loose slippery rock, above the limits of plant life brought us at last to the knife-edge backbone of the range at nineteen thousand feet. We were tired and a little the worse for bruises, but had the

satisfaction of getting somewhere the Sherpas themselves seemed not to have penetrated. It is their invariable custom, whenever they cross the summit of a long climb, to set up pillars and cairns of small stones; but here we found none, and were not slow to satisfy honour, and supply the deficiency, before slithering hazardously down the long descent to the Thami valley, and the day's objective. It would have been hard to imagine a less inviting place than the rocky waste on top of this ridge (typical of countless small ranges), for any living creature to find its niche. Yet, as we crossed the top I was startled out of my wits by a pair of snow partridge exploding into flight at my feet: a frightening burst of sound in the intense silence all around us. There were also tracks and pellets of mouse hares in plenty, right the way up to eighteen thousand feet: a wretched place to eke out a living, with nothing as far as I could see beyond shreds of lichen to keep life going. Who knows what had driven them up to live so absurdly high? Perhaps over-population, perhaps comparative safety from enemies.

Dusk saw us comfortably settled in at the foot of a rock-face which rose sheer (so the map told us) and practically unbroken for four thousand feet. We had to restrain our impatience to learn the news, for the yak-herds who had sent us the tidings were away down the valley, and would not be back again before next morning. When they came, the two brothers, simple village folk from Thami, told how they were bringing the yaks in for the night at about dusk when one of them heard a sharp mewling cry, made, he was certain, by a Yeti. It came from a big broken moraine a few hundred yards distant. His brother joined him a few minutes later and the two of them heard the call again, loud and repeated. They did not care to go and look for it, and that was all they had to say.

"Why did you take the trouble to let us know?"

"Your sirdar Gyalchen sent word round that you are anxious to be told if anyone sees or hears a Yeti. There happened to be somebody going up towards Longmoche the day before yesterday, so we asked him to pass on the news."

Neither brother asked for any reward. They had handed on the news out of good neighbourliness.

The place in question was a large area of terminal moraine, of crushed grey-white rock, partially blocking the valley for nearly a mile. It was churned up into loose rubble, each of its countless folds and pockets a perfect hiding-place for us to comb. The Yeti could only have been a passer-by, as indeed the Sherpas had already suggested, for there was neither bird nor beast nor anything else to attract it there. There was no snowfield to leave tracks, and nothing, short of its bodily presence, could have given the remotest clue as to what had been in the moraine. Certainly no Sherpa had been there, but something must have and there the matter rested. It was not much to go on, but we liked to think we had come within measurable distance of getting to grips with our quarry.

A sudden change in the weather brought a snow blizzard and a return to near winter. With it arrived a runner from the base camp, bringing welcome letters from home and a note from Ralph Izzard that the story of the scalp at Pangboche had aroused much interest. If humanly possible we must try and get hold of it, on loan or hire if its custodians would not sell it. At all costs we must avoid offending them or treading on their toes. So the kit was hastily got together—and I set out back on the now monotonous march down the Bhote valley, through Namche and so home to Thyangboche.

The dullness of the march was much cheered by coming across some very lovely viburnum trees and bushes in full flower. The species is known to botanists as *Viburnum grandiflorum*, and is much like the sweet-scented *Viburnum fragrans*, nowadays such a favourite winter shrub in our own gardens. Its habit is a small tree, smothered in fragrant heads of soft pink blossom, the size and shape of a golf-ball. For some reason, it is finicky where it will grow; the few miles between Thami and Namche was the only place where I ever saw it. Its beauty is enhanced by the flowers coming out before the leaves open, and the harmony of the shiny-grey twigs and bark with the mass of delicate pink flowers is of the greatest loveliness; a charming relief to the sternness of the setting where it flourishes. The earliest spring iris was starting to fleck the dull, dusty soil with its big, rich violet



The great bowl of the Hongu glacier includes five frozen lakes,
a place of pilgrimage for Gurung tribesmen from the south



Amadablam with its gothic spire: the most proudly aloof of mountains

flowers, pushing up its folded-parasol buds in clumps wherever there was a scrap of open ground between the rocks and on the edge of the paths. The faintly scented flowers last only a day, and they are dwarfs, set an inch or two above ground. Later on in the spring there are so many that the more sunny slopes become splashed with colour. I think it to have been *Iris kumaonensis*, near relation to the *Iris pumila* that rock gardeners delight in.

For the last hour or two we struggled on in thick-falling, soggy snow, which cut down visibility to almost nothing, besides soaking us to the skin. Unexpectedly, fifteen or twenty large birds of prey passed low over us. We watched them circling round near Namche, and they were soon identified as the common pariah kite of India. There is a form of it living in parts of the Himalayas, but somehow it was the last bird I would have expected to appear out of a snowstorm in the Great Himalayan Range. My friends in Namche said they arrive in flocks every year, late in March or early April, ranging up the valleys from somewhere to the south, touching down in the higher ranges, and crossing over to Tibet for the summer, to return again southward in autumn. Nor are they the only birds to migrate to and fro over the hump of the Himalayas. Great flocks of cranes stream across, trumpeting far overhead at the same seasons: also ducks, wild geese, and probably others. A curious migration this, hardly studied, and difficult to understand. One would have thought the kites to be better off, and more amply provided for, staying down in lower Nepal and India. Unless, maybe, they are really a Tibetan stock, hard put to it in winter and forced out, down to the great plains of Bihar and Bengal, to dodge the rigours of the Himalayan climate. At any rate, it was a memorable sight to see the parties of great hawks soaring away over the range. Nor does altitude appear to worry them in the least. They do not seem to stick to the lower, easier passes, but simply take the most direct route, sometimes over a high peak, sometimes via a pass.

The whole strength of the expedition was gathered in the base camp, on the point of ranging out on more sorties as soon as the snow should slacken off. So we compared notes on our exploits of the past two weeks. Ralph Izzard and Gerald Russell had made

a long excursion up the Dudh Kosi valley, in the same region that we had all three of us probed a few weeks back. It was an interesting excursion, as Ralph Izzard described it in his dispatch home to the *Daily Mail*—The following is a summary of his dispatch:

“Among the towering peaks, rugged cliffs, glaciers and ice-falls of the Upper Dudh Kosi valley, Gerald Russell and I have for two consecutive days, been following the tracks of at least two Yetis over a total distance of about eight miles.

“To the best of my knowledge no man has ever yet been able to track a Yeti for such a distance, for such a long time. We first encountered the tracks at about 15,000 ft. proceeding down the valley, but as snow was scanty, and non-existent over large areas at this elevation, we were compelled to try and trace them upwards and back to their source.

“In doing so a fascinating picture unfolded itself of a shy, timid creature which uses man-made paths with the utmost caution; which studiously avoids contact with human beings; which makes immense detours round possibly inhabited cottages; which will hunt in company with a fellow—possibly even with a stranger; and is not above such antics as sliding on its rump down a steep snow slope.

“Although light conditions were unkind I was able to secure photographic evidence of this last manœuvre, which must surely be taken as conclusive proof we are dealing with a quite extraordinary creature, whatever it may be.

“Russell and I began our present sortie on February 28th, choosing the Dudh Kosi valley purely on a ‘hunch’. The first two days were uneventful and brought us to the deserted summer grazing village of Matchemo where Yeti tracks were reported as having been seen some days previously.

“Next morning our party set out up the true right hand bank of the valley, traversing about a thousand feet above the stream. Headed by Sherpa Sirdar Ang Tschering we came up to a shaded slope where snow still lay deeply. Half-way across this slope Ang Tschering suddenly stopped and in some excitement pointed out a single line of tracks running parallel and about 6 ft. lower than our own. These tracks were heading down the valley and we judged them to be about four days old.

“Although somewhat spoiled by melting and wind drift, the majority of the prints showed a clear impression of one big toe and at least three smaller ones. Allowing for enlargement we judged them to be 8 in. to 9 in. long and possibly 4 in. to 5 in. across. The length of the stride could be accurately measured as uniformly 2 ft. 3 in. long. Our general impression was, that although smaller they otherwise corresponded exactly to those photographed by Eric Shipton in 1951, while they appeared to be the same size and outline as those seen by John Jackson and Stanley Jeeves on Khumbu Glacier last week. Both Russell and I have no doubt they were made by a biped.

“Ang Tschering, one of the most seasoned and experienced of all Sherpa sirdars, had no doubt they were made by a Yeti, and this opinion was confirmed by all our Sherpa porters, who included Ang Tillary, a sober elderly man who herds yaks in the Dudh Kosi valley and has had previous experience of Yeti tracks.

“The tracks followed our path to a small plateau which the animals had crossed confidently, but a few feet below the far rim of the plateau there were a confusion of marks, some being of usual size and others smaller.

“At first we thought we were dealing with a parent and child, but we now believe that on approaching the new horizon of the plateau the creature—like any human being in similar circumstances—had dropped on all fours—the smaller indentations being its hands or knuckles and had cautiously raised its head above the plateau to ensure the coast was clear before advancing. . . .

“We were reluctantly coming to the conclusion that we were, after all, tracking a quadruped when, to our relief and encouragement, the tracks suddenly divided round a boulder, leaving the distinct marks of two bipeds walking possibly three yards apart. There was a kink on top of our own snow slope—the kind of almost invisible hazard which sooner or later upsets all skiers—and, although on foot, I stumbled over it and pitched headlong into a snowdrift.

“On picking myself up I was amused to see that two yards to my right the Yeti had suffered an exactly similar fate, but after going head-first into the drift had avoided further

catastrophe by squatting on its backside and tobogganing to the foot of the slope. At the end of its slide it had again risen to its feet and set off with its shambling gait, which seems to be a lurch forward on its toes. . . .”

It was a good effort and an encouragement to us all: the going is a good deal stiffer than one might think when there is so much snow on the ground, with unlimited possibilities of landing with a crash on the slippery, concealed bed of a frozen stream, or of falling into the booby-trap of a roofed-over chimney between the boulders. By the quality of their perseverance, Ralph Izzard and Gerald Russell had added a positive quota to our painfully accumulated store of knowledge.

Two days in the base camp were enough for a general clean-up and re-stocking of the ration boxes. I found it transforming fast into a hotch-potch menagerie of odd beasts and birds. Word had gone round that any living creature would be bought, if brought in unhurt and in good condition. A Panda had come up from the pine forests below, luxuriantly coated and rich red, but as stupid and impersonal as are all its tribe; there was a pen full of snow-cock, and blue monauls and crimson tragopan pheasants were living in reasonable harmony, filling the morning air with a cacophany of throaty clucks and loud whistles. There were also yellow-bellied weasels, a malevolent black-eyed beech marten and a few mouse hares, which we had hoped to take back for introduction as a new pet. but they all died at the smallest excuse. Someone brought in a Himalayan bear cub from below Namche, which lived a few weeks, bad-tempered and capricious, and finally strangling itself by its own chain in a fit of rage during the small hours of the morning.

Sometimes there would meander into our camp an odd tatterdemalion figure, beating loudly on a drum and shouting out a raucous chant to make his presence known as a medicine-man, claiming to cast out evil spirits by his incantations. He seemed to be taken half-seriously, half-tolerantly by the Sherpas, who call those of his profession *Llawa*. Their craft is a hereditary one, passed down from father to son, and it would have been fascinating to study it if one had had more time; the more so because it

must be an age-old survival, nothing to do with Buddhism, but going right back to the days when the Sherpas were primitive animists, basing their religion on worship of nature and natural forces.

There are many such traces of this ancient nature worship left (just as there are among ourselves), some merged and blended into the rites and usages of Buddhism, others still surviving alongside it. Of such must be a little heap of water-rounded stones that is set up in a prominent place in every village, perhaps as a shrine, and sacred to the guardian spirits of the area.

Some Phorcheans wandered into the camp, and from them I learnt the ins and outs of the situation anent the scalp. The temple of Pangboche belongs jointly to that village and to Phorche, who take turn and turn about in its management through a committee of elders. And very jealously do they guard their rights. No meddlesomeness from the monks of Thyangboche is tolerated; nor does either village stand for any bossing on the part of the other in temple affairs. A previous expedition had unwittingly put everybody's backs up by trying to bid for the scalp outright and in a tactless fashion—giving a wrong impression that they thought objects linked with the temple were to be bought and sold as ordinary goods. They had unwittingly hurt the feelings of the whole community, who had already shown their disapproval in the treatment handed out to me when I had made my innocent enquiries about the Yeti.

There were, it seemed, several in the villages who would be willing to part with the scalp in return for a comfortable donation to temple funds: others had stuck their toes in, and were adamant against it. The Sherpas take the affairs of the temple very seriously, and from elementary good manners, if nothing else, their outlook must be respected. Would they loan it to us for a few months against a gift for temple funds, and a guarantee of its return? They would go back and talk it over, suggesting I should go with them up to Phorche to settle the matter once and for all.

A flock of ruddy shelduck, honking far overhead on migration to Tibetan marshes, enlivened the pull up to Phorche. There one of my former porters from the trip up the Dudh Kosi valley

offered me hospitality in his house. I settled in for a few days and found that here, as everywhere else, the long-drawn-out winter stagnation was at an end: a good proportion of families had gone off already up the valley for a spell on the grazing grounds. True to the custom of so many Asiatic peoples, the womenfolk were entrusted with the work of the fields; hoeing and scratching up the dusty earth to get it ready for the spring potato planting and barley sowing, cleaning the seed potatoes and sorting them out from the depths of last autumn's pits.

My host was in trouble. His wife and youngest child were both ill, the wife with a tearing bronchial cough which racked her most of the night, the child dying of a lung complaint, perhaps both of them tubercular. The obvious course of action was to clear off and stop with somebody else, both from consideration for the family and for self-protection: the prospect of living in one room cheek by jowl with two tubercular cases had its unattractive side. But to do so would have given grave offence and be taken to be a spurning of proffered hospitality. There is indeed a wonderful streak of philosophy in the Sherpa temperament. Here was I, a complete outsider from a different civilisation, with totally different ways, invading a one-roomed house, together with my servants, at a time when its mistress was sick and her child probably dying. Could anything have been less convenient? More than that, we had plenty of other places to go: the laws of good-fellowship and good-heartedness forbade any such thing. Nor was this incident at all unusual or out of the common. Take life as it comes to you; undue fuss or bother gets you nowhere. Such is the Sherpa outlook.

Our doctor, Bill Edgar, had been through here a few days before and had treated both the invalids with the latest drugs of medical science. But, to leave no stone unturned, they were sensibly making the best of both worlds and had arranged for a two-day ceremony by priests from the village temple and from nearby Pangboche, who assembled in the house early every morning to carry out day-long chanting and invocation of the scriptures, both to expel the evil spirits and secure the aid of the beneficent. In an interval, when the priests were resting, Gyalchen

called in the committee of elders to deliberate the fate of the scalp. Real village ancients they were, some quavery with age, shrivelled and wrinkled by a lifetime of exposure to one of the roughest climates in the world; but, for all their eighty years or more, they were very far from being senile. I had laid on a running buffet of butter tea and more potent drinks, as well as snacks of food, and retired to a corner to read while they debated for more than an hour. At last Gyalchen came across.

"They are sorry but they cannot let the scalp go under any circumstances."

It was like this. Money did not enter into it, and in itself the object had no value whatsoever—"No more than a cup of tea." Had it not been associated with religion, the scalp would have been ours for the asking. But it had been in the temple, part of its furnishings and equipment for more generations than anyone knew. To take it out, however temporarily, would be a most risky undertaking, sure to offend some of the more powerful spirits, who might well visit their wrath on the whole village by sending a pestilence or destroying their herds. For themselves it did not matter: they were old men and had not long to go, but it simply would not be fair on the rest of the population. No: it must stay where it was. Any of our expedition could see it with pleasure, but from now onwards it was going to be locked away and shown to nobody. There the matter ended: the greatest friendliness on both sides, and one could not but respect the honesty and outspokenness of their attitude. Before the meeting broke up I asked on general grounds, apropos of our quest:

"Do you value the scalp because it comes from a Yeti? Is it sacred on that account?"

The reply was quite emphatic. "No, it is because it is linked with the temple, and plays its part in a sacred dance: otherwise it would have no special value."

There seems no doubt that the Yeti does have some positive significance in the spiritual sense, other than as a beast of ill-omen. I had been told more than once in the past few days: "It is both a beast and a spirit." It was an aspect on which it was difficult to get much information, for the Sherpas have an almost Anglo-Saxon

reticence when it comes to talking of religion. So far as could be gleaned, it is closely linked with a main tutelary or protective spirit of the people, and in a vaguely-defined sense is possibly even a manifestation of it. So that at the annual dance, when the "scalp" is worn, the dancer who wears it is in fact acting the part of a Yeti. Centuries ago, the ancestors of the Sherpas took their piece of fresh-tanned hide and moulded it up into the form of a scalp just for this. Thus, once a year the protecting spirit so closely linked with the Yeti could be personified by a dancer. By age-long and direct association with what it represents, and what it closely imitates, it has come to be identified with it. It was not a very unusual condition of affairs, and one common among all peoples and religions. Nothing is more normal than for ancient objects that have been kept near or touched relics to become themselves raised to the same level of veneration. In this case, the mock scalp was made to look as much like the original as possible, and was made from the skin of some animal not known (at any rate today) in the Sherpa country. Small wonder that its genuineness is taken for granted by modern generations.

The link of the Yeti with the spirits, or even its positive identification with an important member of their world, does not really affect the likelihood of its existence as a creature of flesh and blood. Were not the ibis and the crocodile sacred animals in ancient Egypt? Are not the elephant, the monkey, and the blue antelope of particular significance to Hinduism? All this showed evidence of an uninvestigated and unexplained relationship between the Sherpas and their Yeti, one that was fraught with interests and possibilities if one could only get to the heart of it. On my previous visit I had contacted the old men of Phorche hardly at all. So I put to them the old question: "Does the Yeti really exist, and do you know anything about it?" Of course it existed: three of the elders had seen them in their younger days and pointed to the exact place: one a thousand feet directly above us, two further up the valley; they also mentioned seeing its footprints in the snow and sometimes hearing its cry.

So ended the scalp negotiations. And, as it turned out, no harm was done, for on the way home to the base camp next morning

a mail-runner from Kathmandu met us, bringing the news from London that expert examination of hairs and photographs had exploded the first impression of its genuineness.

To us it was a disappointment and a temporary set-back, but it was at once broadcast among the Sherpas to test their reactions. Nobody was in the least dismayed. "We know the scalp has been at Pangboche since the time of our forefathers. We have had it handed down to us that it came from a Yeti, and we believe it. Who are your friends in England that they can call us mistaken? Besides, those among us who have seen Yetis, all say their head is of this colour and pointed shape." They were perfectly sincere and reasonable. There was no reason why they should have wanted to mislead us, the more so since their initial reluctance to show the object was only surpassed by their unwillingness to part with it.

For all that it was a disappointment. There had seemed a fair chance that the scalp would decide our case one way or another: it so turned out that we were exactly where we started. Its main interest and significance had been to bring to light the near-sacred side of the creature, and its actual representation at a dance by someone wearing a hat made up in the form of its head. We later discovered there were scalps shaped in the same way in other villages, all used for the same purpose and with the same significance. Nor are they objects of wonder or special interest to the local inhabitants. On the contrary, I remembered being told as far back as Darjeeling, by Tensing himself, that he had never heard of the Pangboche specimen, and people from Kumjhung village, where another is kept, assured me they had forgotten its existence until somebody chanced to mention it.

When things go wrong something, however trivial in itself, never fails to turn up and cheer one on, and by way of consolation, looking up from the fallen tree-trunk where I had sat down to read the depressing news I was charmed and heartened to see the first rhododendron blossoms of the spring. The earliest and one of the loveliest of the family was flecking with bright ruby-red the sober grey and silver of the birch-trees. It was one called by botanists *Rhododendron barbatum*, and (so we are told) common all along the eastern Himalayas. I always found it a joy to come upon,

with a beauty that never palled: the bark papery and peeling, with a purple bloom to it, and neatly rounded heads of ruby-scarlet flowers, set against leaves of the clearest green. Only the first buds had opened, but it was fittingly ushering in the wonderful pageant of rhododendrons that was to gladden our hearts for some time to come.

A few days were spent in the base camp, where the forest teemed with signs of the swelling tide of spring. A multitude of little birds came streaming through the evergreens and the birch in an astonishing medley of form and colour: homely bands of tits, not so very different from our own, twittered among the pines. There were olive-green willow wrens, more exotic looking brown and canary-yellow fantail flycatchers, and scarlet minivets, little swifts and house martins (the same bird as our own). One day a drake pochard duck appeared from nowhere and spent some time flying back and forwards; a lost soul seeking desperately for somewhere to land in the torrent. And, most unexpected of all, every day, when we were sitting round the fire in the early evening a solitary woodcock came winging his way over our head—so regularly you could almost set a watch by him—to pitch abruptly into some favourite boggy patch. They were an odd jumble of birds, and it was a fascinating blend and meeting-ground of faunas: the scarlet minivets and the yellow flycatchers from the more exotic element; tits, house martins, swifts, woodcock and crows from the temperate world; the snowcock, partridges and blue grandalas from the highest alpine zone.

Great lammergeier vultures were always in evidence. Among all birds they must have one of the longest wing spans, and one never tired of watching their effortless swinging and floating up and down the valleys, at any and every altitude, often far above the tree-line, outlined grey against the glaciers, solitary or in pairs. Each apparently has its regular daily beat and territory, turning aside no doubt for a treat, such as the finding of a dead yak. Special occasions must be very few and far between, and for most of the time it was a mystery to me what the great birds could have found to exist on. I saw them nearly every day, sometimes planing down low over us, when we were lying down to rest during a

sortie, in the hope we might be dead. But only once in several months did I see a lammergeier land to pick anything up, so presumably they can go long days at a time without food.

The whole style of flight of a lammergeier is strangely reminiscent of an albatross skimming and turning over the waves, and many a time, as one of the great birds came sailing by I was taken back irresistibly, in this least likely of all places in the world, to journeys across the Southern Oceans, with no sound or sight other than the ploughing of the ship through the waves and the companionship of the albatrosses following in its wake.

CHAPTER 12

Rhododendrons, Glaciers and a Hermit

MARCH saw the winter out. Even so, the coming of the spring was a process infinitely slower, more subject to relapses into blizzards wiping out the warm sunny days than in our own climate; but there was a gradual succession of flowers pushing through the half-frozen earth, a slow change of the fields and slopes, from the gaunt drabness of winter to softer greens, and a steady receding of the snows upwards to the more permanent summer line.

Local opinion hardened that we should be lucky indeed were we to come across a Yeti so late in the season, now that an ever vaster region was opening out for it to retreat into. The general belief was that, in common with the rest of the fauna, the mouse hares, the weasels and the foxes, the Yeti moves upwards as the spring weather begins, and its food supply is distributed into places of greater seclusion. Many people are also of the opinion that they may spread out further to the north, and perhaps extend east and west. For it is important to remember, in weighing up all the pros and cons, that our expedition was concerned with only a very few hundred square miles of the possible range: a trivial, almost negligible proportion of the total area of mountain ranges available for it to roam in. Take a glance at a map, and you will see that the Sherpas live in a small proportion of all the Nepal Himalayas. I found them surprisingly ignorant of what goes on to their east and west. Tibet to the north they know well enough, but to their neighbours on either side their attitude is uninterested, not to say parochial. I have heard the suggestion made by intelligent local men that the Yeti can find enough to keep going on in a smaller area from the spring onwards, when there is more food to be got in the shape of large insects and grubs,

and when the mouse hares are more active and easily caught. As the autumn and winter draw on it is forced to roam further and lower. This is no more than conjecture, it is true, but it tallies well with its reputed habits.

The range across the Bhote valley, south-east of Namche, was still free of graziers, and it seemed a good plan to repeat my first sortie of all and go over the same route once again. A small incident occurred in Namche, where we were stopping the night on the way to see friends and hear the local gossip. Late in the afternoon I was pottering back from a social call and called Gyalchen's attention to two men going past the outskirts of the settlement carrying a heavy weight slung between them on a pole.

"Hullo, somebody is dead. One minute while I ask who it can be."

It turned out to be an impoverished Tibetan woman, some years a resident in Namche, where the poor creature had eked out a living by working casually for the better-to-do. I had often met her cleaning wool in people's houses, squatting unobtrusively in the background, getting her keep and a little money. Her corpse was being carried away from the village by two of her countrymen who had been roped-in—not very willingly—for the uncongenial task.

"I suppose the priests are holding a death ceremony for her?"

"Oh no. There are none of her own Tibetan priests here. Besides, who would bother about a funeral for someone like that!"

"Where will they burn her?"

"They won't. Those two men are going to dump her body in a corner among the rocks and leave it."

Seemingly this was a callous, heartless episode, out of keeping with the good-natured, happy temperament I had come to associate with the Sherpas. But was it really so? Funeral rites up here, in common with our own, are the normal task of relatives and close friends; part of the code of social conventions, not concerned so very much with an after-life. Nobody had respected the poor woman in her life, nor had she expected them to. Why then be hypocritical and show a non-existent consideration out

of mere respectability? Namche people pointed out when we were talking about it afterwards that the last thing she would have expected before her death was a ceremonial funeral; nor would she have borne a grudge for not getting one. Of all people in the world the Sherpas live in terms of stark actuality. Never did I see them cruel or heartless to a living being; and to judge them on their lack of respect for a pauper's corpse, when they had shown no roughness to the woman before her death, would be to misunderstand their code of existence and condemn them for lack of sentimentality—a quality altogether foreign to their temperament.

The climb up the range was in amazing contrast to the rigours of nearly three months ago. Its slopes were altogether earlier than around our base camp, and viewed with field glasses as we wound down through the pine-trees to the river bed, the lower ridges opposite showed speckled with crimson and scarlet, the flaming torches of the tree rhododendrons, invested in flowers, standing out, intense in their brightness, against the background of leafless birch forest. Down by the river bed we came on bushes of the exquisite Nepal *Daphne*, the bare twigs covered with fragrant mauve flowers. At lower elevations, all round Junbesi, it is in great demand for paper-making, thanks to its tough hide-like bark: so much so that caravans of porters laden with bales of the rough paper often pass through Namche on their way to Tibet. Agog to see the rhodos at close quarters, I hared up the opposite bank, through a stretch of birch wood, and came out suddenly into an open yak pasture, fringed round with the most gorgeous display of colour imaginable. And what a heart-warming spectacle after the weeks and weeks of hostile greyness! The ruby-scarlet species that had so cheered me round Thyangboche was superb: its great rounded bushes spangled with flower-heads in an orderly galaxy, different in form from most of its kin. Dominant over all were the gnarled, twisted trees of another kind familiar to botanists—*Rhododendron falconeri*—so smothered in blossom that one wondered how and why it does not flower itself to death each year; it showed every imaginable shade of creamy-pink, crimson, and flaming scarlet, lighting up the landscape and bringing it to life in a manner impossible to describe.

Temptation was too strong; the Yeti was pushed into the background, the day's march cut short, and camp pitched without more ado in the midst of this feast of colour. Perhaps it is partly because there is such all-pervading, sombre severity throughout the winter months that the pageant of the rhododendrons comes as the special glory of the Himalayas. But no planned display in a park or garden, however lavishly arranged, could begin to hold a candle to these sheets of colour. In the course of this afternoon, a potter along a short ridge produced bushes of no less than seven species, all growing cheek by jowl. Besides the two already seen, which dominate the early stage of the succession over all the countryside, there were, oddly enough, four kinds which turned out to be rare over the whole country, and two of them I never found again anywhere else. One was a rounded shrub, covered with glowing rose-purple flowers; and, growing entangled in it, quite a different type, very shy flowering, with a few dull crimson blooms tucked away under whorls of large stiff leaves: another nearby had sealing-wax red buds and crushed-strawberry flowers; another was a dwarf, loaded down with vermilion-pink bells. I only wished I had been expert enough to name them. They were a memorable sight, long to cheer "that inner eye", and still further enhanced by thousands of mauve, mop-headed primulas, covering every square yard of the grassy yak pasture and tinting the whole of it mauve. It was an old friend to all us gardeners—the familiar *Primula denticulata*, so common in rock gardens and public parks—its beauty enhanced out of all recognition in its own setting, and particularly delightful as no two plants were the same shade of colour, but ranged from dark purple to nearly white. Those who have seen it in the grassy downs around Junbesi say it covers literally square miles, growing as thick as daisies on a lawn. *Denticulata* must be the most adaptable of all the Himalayan primulas, for it is widespread from end to end of the entire chain, anywhere between four and fourteen thousand feet where there is open, damp ground for it to flourish in.

It was reluctantly that I forced myself on next morning, going up for an hour through rhododendron-splashed forest, before achieving the top of the tree-line and the now familiar open,

alpine Yeti country. A step from the limit of the trees I paused to admire the view, and was enchanted to see a party of the most daintily-built, brilliant, exotically-plumed little birds it has been my good fortune to set eyes on anywhere. Aptly are they named fire-tailed sunbirds; their plumage is an immensely satisfying mixture of deep blue, metallic blue, bright yellow, and fiery red, and their form slender and graceful, with a long tail which gives them their name. They were swarming through a bush of rhododendrons, both males and more sober-clad females, hovering moth-wise in front of the crimson bells to suck the nectar, or clinging to the twigs to crane their scimitar bills round into the flowers. Darting and hovering, they flickered jerkily across from bush to bush, displaying to perfection the harmony of brilliant colours, flashing like gems in the shafts of sunlight streaming through the black overshadowing pines.

What a wonderful vignette in this land of unending contrasts! The dazzling, tropical-plumed birds among the equally splendid flowers, intermingled with the sober spruce-trees; a few drifts of snow still on the ground below, and, in the background, a deep gorge overhung with giant, slowly thawing icicles, breaking off occasionally with a metallic crack that reverberated through the valley as they shattered to fragments on the cliff-ledges below. The sunbirds had evidently arrived to coincide with the blooming of the spring flowers, after a winter spent in the warmer valleys; although goodness knows how they could have found enough insects or flower-nectar to carry them through the cold weather. My Sherpas were also interested to watch them and volunteered that they are found in several places in their country, always keeping to the rhododendrons, building their nests in the thick shelter of their branches about the end of April.

The rest of the week turned out rather dull, and it was only in one place that anything of interest materialised. Floundering through a small, belated snowfield in a sunless ravine, we came on two long lines of tracks. They were much melted and no more than long depressions the size, and roughly the shape of a human foot. But they were made, apparently, by animals going on two legs. The two sets linked up in a large depression in the ground



Makhalu
from the
Barun Pass



The hermit of Dingboche seemed utterly tranquil. His hands were surely symbolic of great strength of personality

where they had met and halted; they then went down to some outcropping rocks, where one had stood aside while its companion had dug down through the snow to get at something—moss, roots, or perhaps a mouse hare—and in the process had scooped out a cylindrical hole, two feet deep, of the regular rounded form a man might dig with his hands. It was difficult to think it could have been done by an animal scrabbling down with its paws, and most certainly not by a deer. None of us, the porters included, wanted to commit himself. And we left it at that, each of us with a sneaking feeling that there had been a Yeti at work some days ago.

We made our way down above my old haunts at Thami village, among birch trees starting palely into leaf, and clumps of the same dwarf, amethyst primrose which I found on the journey up, above Jumbesi. Somebody snicked a birch with his knife and the rising sap came spurting out in a rush: now and then the Sherpas drink it for its slightly sugary taste.

By the time I was back at base, news had arrived of the American expedition bound for Makhalu, away to our east. They were reliably stated to be in position, preparing for their climb, and Sir Edmund Hillary and his New Zealanders were expected any day in the same area. So I decided to launch out in a new direction, over the reputedly difficult country between—whose possibilities for Yeti hunting were untapped—to try and establish contact and compare notes with the scientific members of both parties. Fortunately the sirdar to the American party was Ang Tarkay, co-equal with Tensing as the foremost guide and leader among the Sherpa community. He chanced to drop in at our camp on a few days leave to visit his aged mother, now a pensioner at Thyangboche, and other relatives round about the neighbourhood. He was an amenable man, short, brisk and dapper, whose executive personality made itself felt at the first casual meeting. So it was arranged to meet him a day or two later, up the valley beyond Thyangboche, while my companions were scattered on their own sorties.

The first night out we slept at Pangboche, now greatly depleted and desolate, with two-thirds of the population away at their

grazing villages. A strange thing happened while I was there, at first hard to explain. Not long after daybreak I was lying on the floor, rolled up in my blankets and trying to collect my thoughts, when my eye was caught by a magnificent piece of rock crystal that someone had placed on a low shelf running across the room some few yards from my allotted corner. One often sees crystal in Sherpa homes, but never anything approaching this: an uneven pyramid a foot or more high. I admired it while sipping my early morning cup of tea, and made a mental note to ask my hosts about it later. After I was up and dressed, I went over to take a closer look and found it had disappeared. Presumably it had been shifted elsewhere in the room, so I asked to see it.

“Crystal? We’ve no piece of crystal.”

“Yes you have. I mean that very large lump that someone has just removed from your shelf.”

But certainly not. Nobody had seen it, nor did anyone in the family own such a thing. A look at the shelf proved them right, for it was covered with a thick layer of dust, unbroken where the imprint of the crystal should have been. My friends were looking curiously at me, not concealing their wonderment if I might not be a trifle crazy, and I saw them take Mingma on one side and whisper in his ear. So there the matter ended; still with the conviction on my part that the crystal had been there. A glance out of the window gave the answer at once. Spread out across the valley was an uninterrupted view of the majestic spire of Amadablam, gleaming white with the newly risen sun behind it. The solution was there in a flash. The “crystal” had been of the very form and shape of the summit of Amadablam. Evidently the shafts of sunlight, dust-laden in the dim interior of the house, had penetrated through cracks in the loose stone walls and the closed window shutters: starting from directly behind the mountain peak they had projected, perhaps after the fashion of a *camera obscura*, the image of its summit within the house. Very likely the half darkness, the millions of dust particles inside, and the brilliant clearness of the atmosphere outside, had combined to produce some excessively rare blend of conditions needed to project the image.

Ang Tarkay had still to catch up with us, so there was no hurry and we pattered along up the Imjha Kola valley most of the day, on the high road to Everest, through the lonely emptiness of now deserted Dingboche, whose fields were just starting to show faintly green-tinted from the sprouting barley. Finally we camped at the foot of Amadablam, and gazed in wonder at its superb, ice-encrusted profile, proudly unclimbable for all time.

From here Ang Tarkay led us a slow, steady climb over the ups and downs of the bumpy valley, bull-dozed into a thousand ridges, pits and folds by the churning of long-vanished glaciers. Thence we went into the great cauldron of the Lhotse glacier, where the vast bulk of the Everest range, grey, jagged and terrifying in its immensity, towered up over on the north side of the valley. It was a real relief to look away from it, back down the Imjha Kola, at the gentler lines of Amadablam, and the graceful jumble of lower peaks fading away into the blue distance of the spring day.

At the head of the valley our track turned sharply south, and an hour or two saw us in camp. Hard by, empty tins and the debris of a fire bore the unmistakable stamp of a European bivouac. Ang Tarkay at once knew it for the resting place of Mr. Eric Shipton and Sir Edmund Hillary during their Everest reconnaissance two years back. Here for some inexplicable reason—we were not much more than seventeen thousand feet up—most of us went down suddenly with a mild attack of mountain sickness, the first and only time I was smitten during the expedition. Even the great Ang Tarkay was mildly affected and glad to give out his orders from the seclusion of his blankets. Possibly some special set of weather conditions was the cause of our discomfort; at any rate it had worked itself out by the following morning.

From the camp site we looked back to a wonderful view of Lhotse, looming over us in its entirety, in one breath-taking sweep of fully ten thousand feet; a tremendous sight even in this country of giants. And, scanning the cruel lines of the ravines and ridges, mounting up on a scale too vast for our comprehension, we found it easy to appreciate that it has rejected so summarily all

efforts at making contact with it. For make no mistake about it, mountains have personalities, as positive and as diverse as do ourselves: some friendly, some hostile, some neutral.

Continuing south, we scrambled the better part of two thousand feet up a steep, snow-covered pass, supported here and there by ropes, to a knife-edge ridge at the top whence we could glimpse the cone of Everest, just visible over the intervening range. From there we plunged down into the great amphitheatre of the Hongu glacier. A view of the greatest beauty lay below us. Five white patches marked frozen lakes, the largest a mile long, fringed by a low cliff of shimmering white ice. After stopping a moment to admire them, we clattered over loose slippery rock on the south side of the pass, and so down into the bowl of the glacier.

We wended our way over walls and pits and depressions of loose white rock, pounded and kneaded by the relentless power of the ice-flows to a conglomeration of rubble. Here and there outcrops and deep cracks exposed the dirty-grey ice that everywhere underlay the crust of stone. It was hard to realise, as we moved like sand-hoppers over the rocks, that beneath our every footstep was a great thickness of ice, thinly overlarded with boulders and rubble. As we penetrated further into the bowl we came to formations of bare ice, fashioned into every imaginable shape and size. Some were pyramids, icicles and cones; others solid sheets a mile square, flowing down towards the middle and twisted and fluted into strange shapes. Serried ranks of pillars were fused together, and greatly pleasing in their mass symmetry; some formations white and opaque, others intensely and transparently green or blue, blinding to look at from the dazzling brilliance of their surface.

The whole cauldron was surrounded by a mighty wall of peaks, most of them snow-covered, and rising up to twenty-three thousand feet or more, while the sides of the wall were plastered here and there with ice-cliffs and monstrous icicles. Strangest of all were groups of pyramids of smooth, transparent blue ice, some of them forty feet high, and all with little glazed pools at their base. All around was silence so absolute that the occasional ringing crash from a block of ice breaking loose was terrifying to hear.

It needed little imagination to believe ourselves transported into a crater of the moon. Not a sound or sign of life was there, a complete detachment from the world of living beings, and all that had happened over the past months blotted out in a moment. Yet only a day or two ago I had been ambling happily up the path to *Thyangboche* monastery, enjoying the glory of the flowers and the friendly good-cheer of the monastery.

Our solitude was soon banished. For as the party was settling down in a deep pit to make ourselves as snug as we could among the unwelcoming hardness of the rubble, there echoed from afar off an unmistakably human shout. By and by, we made out an odd troop of ten or twelve figures, stumbling towards us over the glacier, reeling and swaying like drunken men. They proved to be Sherpa porters, taken on temporarily by the Americans to carry up their stores to the foot of *Makhalu* and now paid off. Poor fellows, they were taking a short-cut home and, in crossing a broad snowfield without goggles they were one and all stricken with snow-blindness. Those with long hair had unwound their pigtailed and combed their locks forwards, as a protective screen against the fierce glare of the sun's reflected rays. But some of the men with short hair and cropped heads had gone, temporarily, quite blind and had to be helped along by their friends.

My sympathy and feeling of futility at being unable to help, were soon brushed aside by the Sherpas of my own party, who treated their comrade's discomfiture as a huge joke, and laughed and exchanged witticisms at the expense of the sufferers, long after we had joined forces and settled down for the night. By the morning everyone was better and we went our different ways.

A very long and very tough day followed. First up a broad snowfield at the west end of the glacier bowl, then a two or three hours' climb up the sheer, treacherous face of the *Barun* pass, where we heaved and edged our way upwards, not altogether happily in spite of a swelling chorus of muttered invocations to invoke aid from Above "Om mani padmi hum—Om mani padmi hum—OM MANI PADMI HUM". For all that, disaster was nearly meted out to us by a young and inexperienced porter who panicked at an awkward corner, kicking

wildly out and sending lumps of rock ricocheting and humming on to the waiting throng below. Luckily all had the instinctive good sense to flatten themselves against the cliff-face, so all was well. We gained the top at nearly twenty-one thousand feet, to find ourselves on the fringe of a great region of uniformly snow-covered ice, sloping gently upwards towards the sandy-grey and white pyramid of Makhalu: a satisfactory peak to the eye, in the regularity and symmetry of its lines, and the massive bulk of its general form, but a demon for the climber to pit his wits against. Ang Tarkay prophesied more than once that many seasons would go past before it would be conquered.*

We were all weary after an exacting day's march. But the snowfield was no place for camping, so we struggled forward, on the watch all the while for the narrow cracks in the underlying ice. only a step across that go down to unthinkable depths and are so easily the cause of a broken leg. The broad, featureless expanse of snow terminated at the brink of a steep, excessively slippery climb down. Here my porters struck. They had no special climbing gear, and to carry loads down such a tricky place in their smooth-soled Sherpa boots would be madness, though, if it had been a matter of life and death they would have gone willingly. Besides, the snow was beginning to melt, and with every day that went by the difficult passes were becoming more dangerous. What if we got down but could not get back? Would I *please* abandon my plan of meeting the other parties and start home tomorrow? It was disappointing, but there was no doubt they were right. And back we plodded to a dip in the snow, which gave a faint pretence of shelter from the icy wind, and dossed down for the night. Never did I think to bless a Primus stove as on that evening. It played up wonderfully, spurting its incandescent blue flames at the first strokes of the pump, providing a mug of hot broth for everyone, and warming the air more than we had any right to hope as we huddled together in two diminutive tents. Common sense and hard facts assured me we were as

*Makhalu was climbed by a French expedition in May 1955. They also reported finding footprints near the Barun pass which seemed to be of a bipedal, ape-like animal.

safe on the great mass of ice as if we had been in our own beds at home, but for some reason I kept waking up throughout the night in terror lest a crevasse should open under us and engulf the whole party. My timidity gave the Sherpas a good laugh, and went far to revive their spirits.

Our return over the Barun pass was uneventful except that, most unexpectedly, a pair of water wagtails went dipping overhead on migration, to vanish over the snow in the direction of Makhalu at a height of at least twenty-one thousand feet. We ended the day by the side of the largest of the five frozen lakes, where there was evidence that the bowl of the Hongu glacier is by no means so barren of life as it at first seemed. The Sherpas never come there in ordinary circumstances—there are no passes the yaks can get over—and for them it is a no-man's-land, a buffer between themselves and their neighbours to the east. But there is an easy way in from the south, where the Hongu river has its outlet; and in the summer months Hindu shepherds of the Gurung tribespeople wander right up into the bowl—partly for the meagre grazing offered by the lower flats of the area, and still more, perhaps, to make pilgrimage at the lakes. They are said to hold them in great veneration as a home of spirits. Mute witness to this, we found on the edge of the ice a small bell hung from a stake, and an iron trident pushed into the ground—the two set up as a tiny shrine and symbol of the shepherd's devotion: a touch of vaguely Hindu culture penetrating into an otherwise Buddhist world. Nor was animal life completely absent; there were droppings of both snowcock and mouse hares, and it was charming to hear, early in the morning, the musical honking of a skein of brahminy shelduck as they wheeled high overhead, tinted orange in the pale sunlight, in vain quest of an unfrozen corner on which to land.

I chanced to see two or three porters pointing upwards and discussing something among themselves as we neared the deserted Dingboche village. On enquiry I learnt that for the past five years a much-revered Tibetan hermit had made his home in the crags, well above all human habitation. Gyalchen was anxious, in any case, to consult him on the welfare of his family. Was I too

tired to go up with him? He might be willing to see us, if he was not away meditating in a still more secluded corner of the rocks. With my glasses I could just pick out his cell, perched among the boulders, and, even as I watched it, out he came for a minute to empty out some rubbish and quickly vanish inside. Evidently he was at home, so up we went.

No ordinary herdsman's track lay anywhere near. And for all the hermit could know there was not a soul within an hour's walk of him. I was curious, perhaps rather vulgarly so, to know what he might be doing if we came on him unawares. His cell was shut off by a massive wooden door. I went quietly up to it, and peeped through a chink in the loose wall by the side. There in front of me was a minute, sunbathed courtyard. In the corner of the courtyard sat the hermit himself, cross-legged, wrapped in meditation, and with only his long clever fingers twitching as he told his string of beads: an impressive embodiment of self-contained, aloof detachment. Gyalchen knocked on the door. It creaked back slowly, and our hermit peered round leisurely to see who had come to disturb his peace. No European had ever visited him before, but my appearance seemed to strike no special chord of interest and to arouse even less curiosity.

We were welcomed into the courtyard, where he gestured us to be seated on a strip of rug while he disappeared inside the inner cell to brew some tea. This gave me a chance to look around. His cell proper was built under a huge, projecting rock, walled in on the three open sides, with the courtyard and its surrounding wall abutting immediately on to it; in front a low wall, lined, I was charmed to see, with "window-boxes" of flowers, overhung a steep drop to the boulders below. He had purposely chosen his site where he could have the gratification and inspiration of magnificent views all round. Indeed, the whole layout of this tiny oasis in the general barrenness all round it gave one an awesome sense of detachment from the material environment; in some ways it was like standing on the high bridge of a great ship. In front, space reached out uninterrupted to Amadablam and Tawiche and their satellites, and away down the Imjha valley to the ranges far beyond Thyangboche.

The hermit looked out of his door, with the suspicion of a smile, to ask in his soft, gentle voice if I would rather have something a little stronger than tea. He himself never drank alcohol, but kept a little put by in the sacred interests of hospitality to the more worldly among his visitors. Up to then I had been rather on my best behaviour, and this simple, spontaneous gesture broke the ice.

Hermit hoar in solemn cell,
Wearing out life's evening grey,
Strike thy bosom sage and tell
What is bliss and which the way.
Thus I spoke,
And scarce repressed the starting tear
When the smiling sage replied:
"Come, my lad, and have some beer."

His age I judged to be some sixty years; his slight mannerisms and gestures belonged to an elderly man, but there was no streak of grey in his long black hair, never cut, and worn coiled round and round on top of his head. His face was weathered to mahogany colour—more so even than a local yak-herds—and he wore a short, straggly black beard. His expression radiated calmness, and there was a shrewd, kindly twinkle in his deep-set eyes. Such was the Hermit of Dingboche. His welcome was as casual as it was genuine, for he exuded detachment; not troubling to enquire what might be my errand in the mountains, taking me as he found me and assuming, I am sure, that I took him in the same way.

He was, it transpired, a native of inner Tibet, called many years back to the monastic way of life; since when he had studied long and profoundly in Lhasa, whence he had wandered by slow stages to find his solitary home in the Sherpa country, perhaps temporarily, perhaps finally. Who knows? He leaves his cell once a year at the most, and then very briefly passing through a number of villages, spending a day here and a day there, performing ceremonies and giving oracular advice for the benefit of all and sundry who may be in need of aid and counsel for themselves and their families. For a week or two each month he lives in total

solitude, seeing or speaking to nobody. One part-time servant stays with him, going down to bring up his supplies and cook his meals. He gladly allowed me to look inside his cell, with its low ceiling of solid rock and its sternly simple furnishings: a straw-lined wooden bed, a bench, a set of the sacred scriptures, and a shrine of small idols with votive lamps before them. A few bags of rice and of barley-flour were evidence of the offerings of the faithful, both spontaneous and as payment in kind for advice given and rites carried out on their behalf.

Next to his cell was a diminutive kitchen, well provided with pots and pans, and an eminently practical hearth for cooking. By the standards of this part of the world, everything in the living cell, the kitchen, and the courtyard was kept surprisingly clean and well-dusted. He was held in great esteem as a soothsayer and prophet of what portended for the future welfare of any who chose to consult him. It was understood, though not demanded from the hermit's side, that a fair payment in kind or in coin should be made by any who wished to take advantage of his powers. So Gyalchen laid down a few silver rupees and asked the favour of a prediction on the general state of well-being of himself and his family.

The old man asked him a few direct questions on the affairs and circumstances of his life. He then took out from the folds of his nondescript black habit a small flat tin filled with grains of rice, a few of which he scattered to the spirits with a muttered invocation, in the manner of the Sherpa grace before meals. He extracted from among the rice three bone dice, which he rattled for some moments in his hand, reading off their score several times over. After this, he fetched out a volume of the sacred books and searched through its pages to run down the appropriate passages indicated by the shake of the dice. From what he found there he read off to Gyalchen clear and explicit instructions of ceremonies and ritual offerings that must be carried out if he was to ward off evil and bad health threatening his home.

Did the hermit know anything of the Yeti? He had never seen or heard one, but more than once he had seen footprints round about the vicinity of his cell in snowy weather, which he had

thought to be made by one. Since no such beast was found in his part of Tibet, he could not be sure. So we took our leave; the hermit courteous and amiable as he bade us good-bye, but already settling down once again to his meditations before the door had closed behind us. I was sure that within a matter of minutes he had forgotten our existence.

Call him charlatan and fraud if you will. Personally I could not doubt his sincerity and genuineness. Among ourselves not more than one in a hundred thousand could stand the self-revealing solitude of such an existence, and were he a fraud or an imposter, living by his wits and preying on the gullibility of the Sherpas, it is hard to think he would have dodged detection very long, or have so preserved his sanity as to radiate out, even to a casual visitor, such an air of detached serenity and soothing calmness.

On the climb down we passed another cell, now deserted and empty, but until recently tenanted for the warmer weeks of the summer by Prior Nawang of Thyangboche, who had made it his custom to retire there for a period of solitude and contemplation. By hurrying on, we made Thyangboche monastery before dusk overtook us. Here I was accommodated very comfortably in the bedroom of Gyalchen's monk brother, which was frescoed in red, yellow and blue, and almost lilliputian in its diminutiveness. The two brothers and Mingma had a shake-down in the living-room-kitchen. Looking back I can recall few such total and startling transformations, as to come abruptly back from the frozen deadness of the glaciers and snowfields, or the self-sufficient aloofness of the hermit's cell, to this world of active life and colour. So much so that the spectacle of a glowing scarlet rhododendron bush came as a positive shock, even though it had been an everyday sight in the weeks gone by.

Down the long wind to the base camp the gnarled trees of the variable *falconeri* species were a bold spectacle of beauty and vigour. Sheets of crimson, red and pink were covering acre upon acre of the slopes in the most lavish profusion; lower down, at river level, the dainty sulphur-yellow bells of an elegant, slender-growing species (*Rhododendron campylocarpum*) were dotted here

and there throughout the woodland. In the short week I had been away, the forest had burst into life. Paper-white cherry-trees and butter-yellow barberry bushes fringed the light green and silver of the birch wood, dappled with the yellows, pinks and reds of the rhodos. It was very noticeable how finicky each kind was in choosing its own niche among the vegetation; some abhorring the shade; others, individualists, growing singly or in twos and threes; others, again, in close-packed stands, squeezing out everything around them. And they were equally particular as to altitude; a few ranged up from the level of the river, right through the woodland, and swept across the first few hundred feet of alpine country. There were tiny dwarfs, inches high, which flourished only beyond the top of the tree-line but were not yet in flower. At the other end of the scale from these grew a giant-flowered species (*R. hodgsoni*), a loose-growing tree, pushing up among the twisted and broken tangle of pines at the topmost limit of the woods, and restricted to a very narrow belt, no more than a few hundred feet wide. It was smooth-barked, and carried solid rounded heads of great waxy bell flowers, cerise pink and set in rosettes of leathery leaves some eighteen inches long. I never saw it much below fourteen thousand feet, except where a few trees pushed down to slightly lower levels, intermingling with the birch-trees and largely replacing in its habitat the other red-flowered forms; for the ubiquitous scarlet *R. falconeri* and *R. barbatum* rarely reached as high as this. There were two or three particularly lovely, soft sulphur-yellow shrubs, one with the flowers splodged crimson in the throat, and shade-lovers, tucked in below the birches. And these yellow forms were at the height of their blossoming just as the short-seasoned, early *barbatum* was shedding its scarlet heads.

For the pageant of the rhododendrons, in its brief triumph over six short weeks, is as definite in its order of succession as in the zonation and the preference for varying sets of conditions of individual species. First comes the ruby *barbatum*; as it passes its peak and the gorgeous heads are withering, the more luxuriant and vigorous *falconeri* engulfs the countryside in sheets of scarlet, followed closely and overlapped by a host of others—yellow,

white and pale mauve—until finally the dwarfs of the barren ridges come into their own and carpet the ground with cream and purple.

Nothing would have pleased me more than to stop through the summer, idling about among the galaxy of flowers. Altogether twenty or more rhododendrons were collected, dried, and withered beyond recognition by anyone but the skilled botanists, for whose scientific analysis they were finally freighted home to Kew. There was one species I hoped might be new, a scruffy little bush, but bearing flat-opening flowers, waxy-transparent and rich wine-coloured, each the size of a florin. Luckily there was enough of the dust-sized seed left over from last year to collect for growing at home against the day when its first flowering will tell if it is to be something new to introduce into our gardens.

It came as a homely thrill to hear the voice of the cuckoo sounding through the valleys. Maybe there was a shade of difference in its call from that of our own, but it was to all intents and purposes the same bird. Another cuckoo, the strange brain fever bird, was there too; its wild, tormented cry echoing and re-echoing on moonlit nights through the highest forests. "*Brain fever—Brain Fever—BRAIN FEVER—BRAIN FEVER*"; up and up to a crescendo, until one could hardly bear to wait for the next shriek, when it must surely burst its lungs. Far down below, on the plains of India, the Brain Fever cuckoo is part and parcel of the hot weather and its restless, tortured nights. Here, in a setting and climate totally different, it tunes in equally well with its barbaric, storm-swept surroundings.

But what of the activities of my companions, while I was away on my excursion?

They had conceived the happy thought of adding a little extra gaiety, and returning in some small measure the unbounded hospitality of the local people, by giving a firework party and general beanfeast. For this, Kumjhung was chosen, the big village of clever people. And from the accounts I was given afterwards, it turned out a riotous success. The more so because, in the course of the celebrations one of the party of monks who had trooped over

from Thyangboche for the evening, let it be known that there was a second imitation of a scalp, kept locked away in Kumjhung temple and worn in the very same way for an annual dance. As Ralph Izzard described the occasion in his dispatch home :

“The fact that we had so lavishly entertained the Kumjhung villagers without expecting anything in return—the existence of a second scalp was then unknown to us—apparently impressed them, for the very next morning the Sanghi Lama appeared in the camp.

“After a kipper breakfast he first presented Tom Stobart with a locket containing hair of the Chief Lama of Rongbuk, the parent monastery to the north of Everest, and then disclosed to us the presence of the Kumjhung scalp. He added that if Tom could accompany him to Kumjhung the following day he would intercede to obtain it for us on a short-term loan.

“Next morning Tom and the Lama, a tall gaunt figure with parchment skin and straggling mandarin beard and mustachios, set off for Kumjhung together.

“Tom stated afterwards that the scalp was produced with alacrity. After he had examined it a number of dignitaries donned it and capered about the cloistered forecourt of the Temple. Finally it was lightheartedly clapped on Tom’s own head.

“It was then hinted broadly that if he and myself and the Sanghi Lama would attend a village council meeting on the following day we might hear something to our advantage. We had high hopes of this morning, for Phodorji, one of the friendliest of our Sherpa porters, is himself a member of the Kumjhung council, as is his delightful father, one of the district’s richest landowners. . . .

“When we arrived at the temple, the entire council were already seated on a ten-yard long bench to the right of the temple door.

“In the place of honour at the extreme right sat an exceedingly old lama, wearing a peaked red cap with much dignity. Next to him sat the village headman who remained strangely silent—it was later explained that he was speechless with a heavy hangover acquired during a wedding celebration of the previous evening—and to his right was Phodorji’s father, a

jovial man with a figure like a pear surmounted by a round felt hat. . . . The people foretold dire calamities for the village should the Yeti scalp leave it, and suddenly finding themselves responsible for the good behaviour of the elements during the scalp's temporary absence, the upper two-thirds of the bench visibly wilted.

"The closure was applied by the lowest bencher of all who then announced that 'the people' would cut the noses off the councillors should they agree to the scalp's loan. Although it was emphasised this sally was meant jokingly, it can hardly be said to have caused hearty laughter among the senior members."

Very much the same situation in fact had arisen as I had been confronted with at Phorche, in trying to get a loan of the Pangboche scalp. When I saw this Kumjhung specimen, it was as near as did not matter a duplicate of the other, obviously of great age, and in all likelihood fashioned by the same hand.

CHAPTER 13

The Festival of Gondah

THE mild but persistent stresses and strains of the past few months were beginning to tell on us all and deplete our stores of energy, both mentally and physically. All sense of proportion was becoming lost in the general tiredness: there were times when it would have seemed hardly worth the effort to stir from the camp fire in order to see a whole troop of Yetis. Always there was the involuntary staleness and a creeping lassitude to be fought off—the special bane of all expeditions to high mountains, and a curse for which the thin, rarified air is mainly responsible. However, we were at least fortunate in our health, and generous supplies of every sort of tinned and dried foodstuffs and the small luxuries, which are really necessities under these outlandish ways of life, kept the whole party in the best of condition. Indeed, the only discomfort I personally had to suffer was the irritating loss of stoppings from my teeth, apparently a common mishap at these altitudes, and one fully appreciated by the Sherpas, who kept a close watch on the situation and clamoured avidly for each gold stopping as it was shed.

Spring was now with us in full measure. The days were warm and sunny, and showers of rain became a regular occurrence in the early afternoon of most days. All manner of insects were emerging, bumble-bees, honey-bees, wasps, moths and swallow-tail butterflies; also less welcome harbingers of summer, such as enormous, biting yak-flies and still more pernicious microscopic sand-flies.

At the end of April there came news from up the Bhote valley that the monks of Gondah (above Thami), were shortly going to celebrate *Maniram*, one of the big annual festivals to honour and revere the memory of local saints linked with their monastery.



A monastic retainer ladled out milky beer to all-comers at the May festival of Gondah Monastery



Everybody
was clad
in his
best, and
merry-making
was the
order of the
day at Gondah

There was a warm invitation to any of us who should care to see it. I went on slowly, a few days ahead of the rest, to see if any new tidings about the Yeti had come in to anywhere en route.

The track through and beyond Namche, now monotonously familiar, was already losing its transitory brightness with the fading of the rhodos, their place being taken less colourfully by festoons of white, starry-flowered clematis, everywhere garlanding the bushes and rocks, and clumps of yellow barberry bushes. Looking up, across to the range which had twice been my unfruitful hunting-ground for the Yeti, I saw it bedaubed with shimmering white and palest mauve from acres of light-hued rhodos, spread over the slopes beyond the higher edge of the forest.

I was comfortably lodged in Thami at the trim little house, finished only last week, belonging to the Ang Norbus (my stalwart friend who had done such wonders for climbing expeditions). The place was looking quite lovely. In winter I had found its setting impressive: it was now the gem of the Sherpa country. The late rhodos, the barberries, the clematis were all at their best; even the sober junipers brightened up for the summer with the lighter green of new growth. Above all, the rough, rock-strewn pastures round the village had come to life and blossomed out into natural rock gardens. Thami is a little above the tree-line and its pastures are covered with rhodos and other low shrubs, which grow dwarfed and twisted from exposure to icy winds and the weight of the winter snow. They straggle on among the outcropping rocks and patches of bog with their numerous interlacing streams, and all combine to produce an entrancing rockery that the most expert gardener could not hope to better. Here were stunted bushes of yellow, pink, white and mauve rhodos, and open patches dotted with miniature mounds of emerald green moss; and for the first time I found the real dwarf alpine rhodos, hardly recognisable for members of their family, growing in tufts or covering acres of ground in the manner of a heath; one a bright mauve purple, the other with sparse flowers of creamy yellow, half-hidden in aromatic leaves of sage-green. This last is the most resilient of its kind to the winter cold, and one sees it in

plenty right up to the topmost limits of vegetation. Its agreeably aromatic leaves are dried and ground down by the Sherpas to burn as incense in the shrines. As far as I know it is the only rhodo to be put to economic use. Here and there, early primulas were sending up their tall flower stalks from the rosettes of leaves half-embedded in the swampy grass. There were spasmodic patches of the yellow *sikkimensis*, so beloved of our water gardeners, and in sheltered crannies under the lee of rocks grew a graceful magenta-purple species. Whorls of strong and hairy, grey-green leaves, showed that in a few weeks time the blue poppies would be in flower, and it was regrettable to think we should be gone before they were out.

Most of Thami were scattered up the valleys, gone to Marlung, Longmoche and the other grazing settlements; three-quarters of the houses left empty, deserted and shuttered. But everyone who possibly could was trickling back for the festival, leaving one member of the family behind to look after the flocks, or pooling resources with neighbours. I met plenty of old friends, bearded Phorchen Da who had twice seen a Yeti, my two former hostesses, the emancipated, cigarette-smoking Mrs. Dorje, and Mrs. Danrhepu, forever muttering her beads, the old priest from up the way, who had sheltered me when caught in a blizzard, and many more besides.

The festival had been in progress for nearly two weeks, but up to now it had been the concern of the monks; restricted mainly to chanting and making the ceremonial image, all confined to the privacy of the temple. For the last two days its scope was to be broadened, to become a blend of the religious and the social with the laity included. Very important in the ceremonies were to be a sequence of masked dances, some sacred, others a lighter relief to the more solemn. A great deal of hard work was put in by the community, who were untiring in their efforts to organise the event and arrange every detail so that all should go off without a hitch.

To this end the entire day before was set aside for a rehearsal of the dancing, supervised and practised with all the seriousness of a public ceremony in our own civilisation. One monk in particular,

who acted as an efficient master of ceremonies throughout, was outstanding, both for his stage-management and his agility as a dancer, his every movement performed with a sense of rhythm and grace most gratifying to watch. From ten in the morning until four o'clock in the afternoon the rehearsals went on almost without pause. No masks or costumes were worn, but an astonishing repertoire of dances was gone through, some of them solo, with the dancer twirling and skipping to the music of cymbals and drums. In others, a pair of dancers set to one another. Others were still more complex, figure dances with up to twenty performers, circling, breaking up into pairs, in close likeness to a Scottish reel, setting to one another and ending with each pair pirouetting away across the ground, up the temple steps, to disappear inside. In a sense, the rehearsal was part of the rites, and was more or less private. No outsiders turned up to watch and as soon as it was over the monks processed back into the temple, to start chanting for the rest of the evening.

Next day, from sunrise onwards, an ever-growing stream of family parties started wending their way up the steep path to the monastery. The whole neighbourhood was converging on Gondah, everyone arrayed in their best: the women gay in striped Tibetan skirts, blouses of pale blue silk, great beads of beaten gold and necklaces of semi-precious stones round their necks, all winking and glittering in the morning sun. The better-to-do wore high-crowned hats, embroidered and fur-trimmed like those of the men, and their best pair of boots of red and green flannel and coarse maroon wool. The menfolk were handsome in their Tibetan hats, some in silk shirts and wrapped in cloaks of deep red, brown or black. The rough, weather-beaten characters I had met so often yak-herding were transformed and stood out as the civilised folk they were. Each family was loaded with rice, maize, tsamba, bags of meal, dried meat, and kegs of beer and raw spirit, as offerings and presents for the monastery and to provide for their own material needs during the day.

There were to be no dances till the next day, and the essence of the day's festivities was a demonstration of filial loyalty to the

abbot and his monks, the bringing of gifts and offerings, and the receiving in return a special blessing from the spirits through these their representatives. The flat open space in front of the temple was roofed-over with a great awning of sail-cloth to keep off the sun, and it was soon packed to capacity. The monks, in their best madder-red habits, darted here, there, and everywhere, helping people to find room for the children, greeting friends and relatives (everyone is kith and kin up here), carrying out sacred vessels from the temple, and putting final touches to the preparations for this great day. The whole throng was in the best of spirits, nobody pushing or jostling or standing on imaginary rights; not a discordant note, in fact, to jar the harmony of a supremely happy, good-tempered gathering. Several men came staggering up the path from below, bent double under tubs of chang which they dumped down in a corner of the square, while a humble retainer of the monastery stood by with his ladle to dole out a mug to all-comers.

The arena was flanked by two roofed-in shelters to house a fraction of the spectators, and very soon every square foot of the flat roof had its occupant. It was a memorable and altogether charming scene, perfect in its setting high above the valley, with the range of snow-clad mountains soaring up in the background.

By and by two monks, given the job of policemen to marshal the crowd, started to clear a space in the centre; firmly, but with the greatest good-humour, they squeezed everyone back into a solid jam around the edge, walking up and down in front of the mob with little whips which were never used or intended to be. Two junior monks came out from the temple with a pair of long *tsangdoh* trumpets, and sitting down in a corner began to tune up. Before many minutes, their powerful rumbling boom was echoing round the precincts, a prelude to the ceremony about to start and creating much the same emotional atmosphere as an organ voluntary before a church festival at home. The sound of music came muffled from within the temple; the doors were flung open, and the procession of monks started its slow and stately progress down the steps. First came four standard-bearers with

long narrow flags, covered with sacred inscriptions, who took up their place in a group at one side. Then a booming bass drum, followed by two boy-monks, shrouded in white scarves and blowing shrilly on conch-shells. Senior monks came next, with a clash of cymbals, walking in twos, picturesque in tall curved hats of fringed yellow wool. Then walked two trumpeters whose bright silk trappings proclaimed them monastic officials.

As the procession neared its end, there fell the hush and silence of expectation: the whole gathering stood up and bared their heads, even the women taking off their little three-cornered hats. The two trumpeters came to a halt to one side of the door. They sounded a high-pitched fanfare and the Abbot of Gondah, robed in crimson and yellow, a tall scarlet mitre on his head, was escorted from the temple beneath a colourful silk umbrella and across to his throne. Said to be eighty-five years of age, with a silver-grey beard, he would have been under any circumstances an impressive, patriarchal figure. Today, accompanied by full pomp and ceremony, and clad in his regalia, his appearance was greeted by awe-struck silence, many of the onlookers visibly moved.

His throne was placed on a narrow platform along the temple wall; the monks grouped themselves around, the senior on each side of their venerable abbot, and the others down below. For the rest of the morning, amid sporadic chanting and jangled orchestration, he was handed up various sacred objects, flasks of chang and offerings of food, both token and for practical use. On behalf of the expedition, I stepped forward timorously to put in front of him the customary due of silver coins and white scarf, together with a keg of rakshi spirit to be shared out among the lay-folk. The monks were busy passing round teapots and vessels of holy water, and all present poured a few drops into their hand, touching it on their face and sipping a little. We visitors retired out of the way into seats reserved for us under one of the shelters. Here I found myself sitting beside old Mrs. Tensing Norkay, who was enjoying herself greatly, dandling a small grandchild and exchanging pleasantries with her elderly cronies.

To bring the long rites of the day to a close, the abbot leant forward to bless his people, touching each one on the head with a ceremonial staff. This was the signal for a wild surge forward across the open space below his throne, a good-tempered mobbing, every man, woman and child being determined not to miss their individual blessing; from which we were not sorry to extricate ourselves and make our way down to the village.

There followed next day, after the same solemn entry of abbot and monks, an unending succession of masked dances. One after another, the performers, resplendently clad in costumes of multi-coloured silks, and disguised by great, grotesquely-fashioned and painted masks, came pirouetting down the temple steps to do their turn. And a very fine performance it proved to be; the more so when one called to mind the background of complete remoteness and isolation, not only from the outside world, but from near contact with any large monastery. One might have thought that inevitably the ritual, and indeed the whole organisation, would have become warped and twisted, with all manner of local peculiarities creeping in, if not actually slovenly or disorderly. Not in the least. There was the same punctilious observance of detail and keeping up of standards that I am sure one would have seen in a great monastic foundation in Lhasa. I was told later by some of the monks that they were keenly aware of the dangers of growing moss from too narrow a life; hence they pay regular visits to the big foundation of Rongbuk, ten days' distant, to study, and keep themselves fresh and up to the mark.

The highlight of the day was the dance of the patron deity or guiding spirit of the monastery. A lone figure was ushered with due gravity in procession down the steps from the temple, disguised in a mop-headed mask of gargantuan proportions, chocolate-brown, with a fierce-toothed mouth, and surmounted by white death's heads. He was remarkably arrayed in a robe of exquisite Chinese silk, dull blue in colour and brocaded with gold—seemingly an ancestral treasure of the monastery which had been in its possession for generations. This weird apparition hopped nimbly round for some time to the clang of the cymbals,

then took its seat on a throne set out for it, and accepted symbolic offerings from the master of ceremonies before waltzing away up the steps.

The disappearance of the guiding spirit gave the signal for the performance to take on a lighter-hearted tone. Four hobgoblins in white cotton tights and grinning-idiot masks capered into the arena, calling forth gales of laughter from the delighted audience. They did an excellent comic turn, parodying the more serious dances, and were followed by other masked dancers and an honest-to-goodness clown—made up to look suspiciously like the abbot—who darted in and out of the fringes of the crowd, and around the serious performers, exchanging very verbose back-chat, both with them and with the monks and members of the laity, to the huge enjoyment of all concerned. His gambits were a trifle drawn-out by our standards, but politeness demanded that we should wait for our betters to leave first. It was with mild relief that we saw the procession reform and escort the revered abbot into the dim interior of the temple, where he sat at the head of his monks to receive further offerings from the faithful. A mild-natured, middle-aged monk who attended to him was his son, so we were told, while the efficient master of ceremonies and star dancer proved to be the old man's grandson. Traditionally, our informants told us, the family went back through generations of monks, possibly even to the founding of Gondah itself long centuries ago.

Dusk was upon us, so we left for home, rather too hastily as it turned out, for next morning the sleepy-eyed Sherpas who had stayed to the end, had a happy tale to tell of singing and dancing, kept up until dawn, the senior monks safely away to bed and the religious side well in the background. It was a memorable two days, and it would be hard to imagine a happier blend of a genuinely religious festival, wherein the laity were allowed their full share, with sheer jollification. The feast is a pleasant break in the harshness of everyday life, a getting-together of friends and a means of self-expression through taking part in the rites of the religion that enters so deeply into the lives of these people. It provides a chance for them to let off steam, and to have some fun.

And we outsiders were left with a set of very happy memories, and a sense of privilege at having been allowed to share in such a festival and all that it stood for. No doubt the scene and the pageantry would have been more impressive at a large, important monastery over in Tibet. But there would have been the same difference as between attending at the impersonal grandeur of the Christmas services in a great cathedral, and enjoying the radiant warmth and family intimacy of a country church, with people and clergy, knit together by a thousand ties of kinship, combining as one to put forth all that is best in them. Not only today, but again and again throughout our stay in the Sherpa country, I had the feeling of being transported back into medieval England, with its mingling of harsh reality and colourful pageantry; an atmosphere so far untarnished by the dire slavery of the materialism that has robbed and cheated us of so much that is best in our heritage.

The Gondah festival, celebrated with such warm-hearted merriment was a happy and (let us hope) fitting ending to our expedition. For it was time to pack up, and start the long tramp down to Kathmandu, if we were to avoid the onset of the rains, and get home by mid-summer as we were bound to do.

To try to summarise our findings would be idle and profitless. The expedition had never thought of itself as other than a preface to the achievement of its main objective, or aimed at doing more than find out whether or no there was a good case for believing in the positive existence of the Yeti. Granted, we all *hoped* to come to grips with it at first hand, although it had been clear from the outset that we should be fortunate indeed were we to do so. Otherwise it would have been tracked down long ago, and its identity settled once and for all by explorers and climbers interested in the problem and its solution.

For my own part, I tore myself away from this wonderful country and its admirable people convinced, against my previous judgment, that the Sherpas had made good their case; and that some unknown and highly intelligent form of ape does in fact

During the first day of the festival the Abbot of Gondah, wearing his scarlet mitre, was handed up offerings by the people of the area





Every possible niche was crammed with the faithful at the festival

Clad in
their finest
habit of
madder-dyed
cloth, and
wearing tall
hats of yellow
wool, the
monks of
Gondah
ushered in the
festival with
shrilling of
trumpets and
the clash of
cymbals





The monks of Gondah, flamboyantly arrayed in ceremonial robes of Chinese silk, performed an unending series of dances, to the accompaniment of giant trumpets

maintain a precarious foothold in the alpine zone of the Himalayas. Bipedal, man-like apes once walked many regions of the earth's surface. So much is an established fact of science. Nor is there any good reason to suppose that, given a continuity of favourable conditions some of these creatures could not have survived until our own times. Furthermore, to come nearer home, the science of palaeontology tells us categorically that the region of the Himalayas once harboured its own fauna of anthropoid apes; a fauna that was rich and distinctive in the number of species it included; some of which may well have reached a high level of evolution. Let us remember that the surviving anthropoids, the gorilla, chimpanzee, orang-utan, and gibbon all owe their existence to their ability to hide in the depths of great forests, where they can escape the persecution that would have wiped out such specialised animals under more exacting conditions. There is nothing wildly improbable in supposing that one of the family (admittedly a form which would seem to be higher in the scale of evolution than any now surviving) could maintain itself in the remote fastness of an alpine habitat comparable, in the protection it offers, to the great forests in other regions. There have been no catastrophic changes of climate to wipe out the ancient fauna of these mountains, as the beasts of our own country were obliterated by great sheets of ice. And, most important of all, there is a well-nigh unique lack of potential persecution, aggressive spirit, or competition for food and living space on the part of the human population of the region concerned, and there would seem to be but few, if any, natural enemies.

As strong an argument as any in favour of the existence of the Yeti as a highly evolved ape is the extraordinary degree to which the account of its form and manner of life given by both Sherpas and Tibetans tallies with the reconstruction that palaeontologists have been able to build up of certain bipedal apes of previous epochs. To some of us it seems beyond coincidence that the Sherpas could have *invented* a creature so close to types that are proved to have existed, and which they could not possibly have known of from outside sources. The appearance they describe and the habits they assign to it seem altogether too individual and

too realistic. I can think of no better summary of our formidable body of circumstantial evidence than to abstract the attitude more than once expressed by Sherpas of proved intelligence and integrity; that there is no conceivable reason why they should fabricate a mammal in which they are not particularly interested, which they would rather not encounter, and the reality of which depends not on its mythological associations, but on its status as an animal of flesh and blood.

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GOING WILD

Colin Wyatt

A "bug-hunter", as he describes himself, from the age of seven, the author is anything but a conventional one. Indeed, his main idea, he says, in writing the book, was to prove that one can take an interest in Nature "without being the dry-as-dust professor or the comical collector"; that, and to communicate to the reader some of the incidental pleasures he has himself experienced in the pursuit of his hobby, pleasures that can be enjoyed without any acquaintance with "bugs". For entomology, for him, has simply been his approach to Nature generally, as well as an occasion for world-wide travel and out-of-the-way adventure. What he has enjoyed above all has been to get right away, with tent and sleeping-bag, to—"Lapland in Summer", or the "Forests of New Zealand", to "The New Guinea Jungle", "Papuan Eden" or "The Wilds of Morocco". Such chapter titles as these will entice many who have no interest in the author's special pursuit: all, in fact, who delight, as he does, in wild life and Nature, in living out-of-doors and exploring lands that even to-day are still unfamiliar.

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