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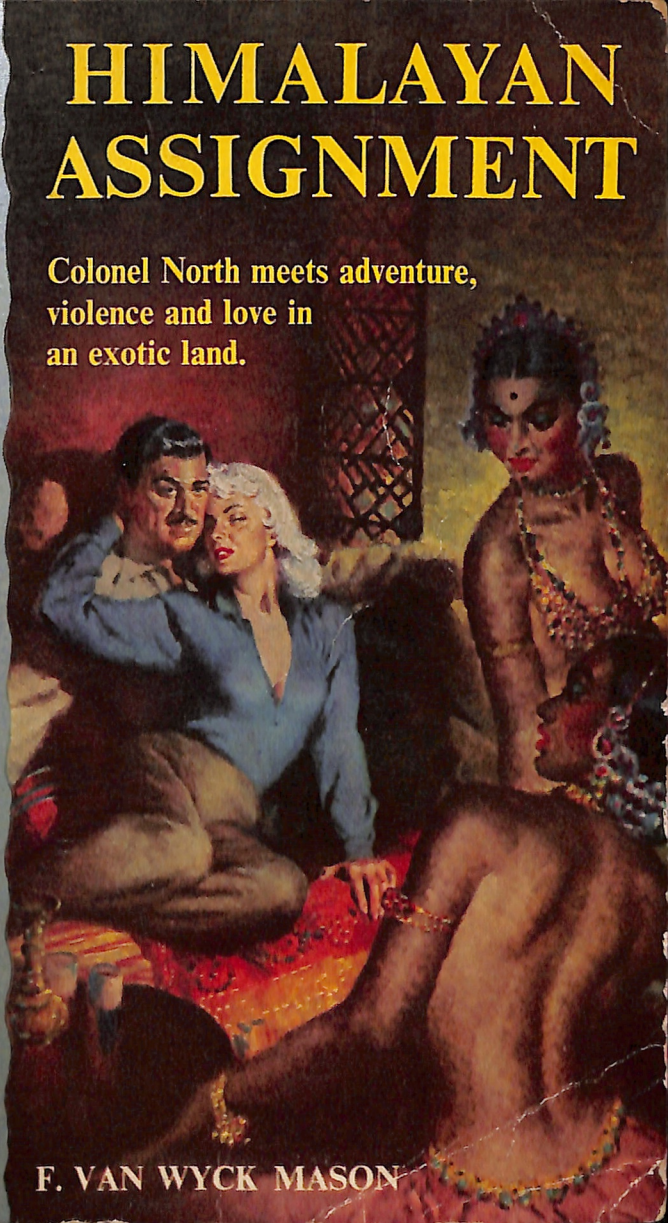

F. VAN WYCK MASON

POCKET BOOKS INC.

HE TRADED LOVE FOR SECRET INFORMATION

"Colonel North lay indolent, comfortably sprawled on the wide settee, studying Atossa's handsome head. Atossa was frankly surveying him over her cigarette, just as if she never before had seen him. . . . 'Please do not be so fearful of me,' she begged. 'I like you. I think I like you very much. You can have no idea how pleased I was when you invited me to dine tonight.'

'It's nothing,' North said. 'You see, I. . . .' He got no further, for suddenly she laughed softly and, slipping a hand around his neck, pulled down his dark head and raised her mouth to meet his. . . ."

Part of Colonel North's job in Jang was to get information. And he knew from experience that there are more ways than one to get it. . . .

Himalayan Assignment is the story of Hugh North's dangerous mission to keep peace in the world. It's a superb tale of adventure, violence and love that takes place against a setting as breathtaking and colorful as Shangri-La.

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HIMALAYAN ASSIGNMENT

A Colonel North Novel

by F. VAN WYCK MASON

POCKET BOOKS, INC.
New York

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HIMALAYAN ASSIGNMENT

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FOR JOHN ALAN MAXWELL

SPLENDID ARTIST AND

FINEST FRIEND

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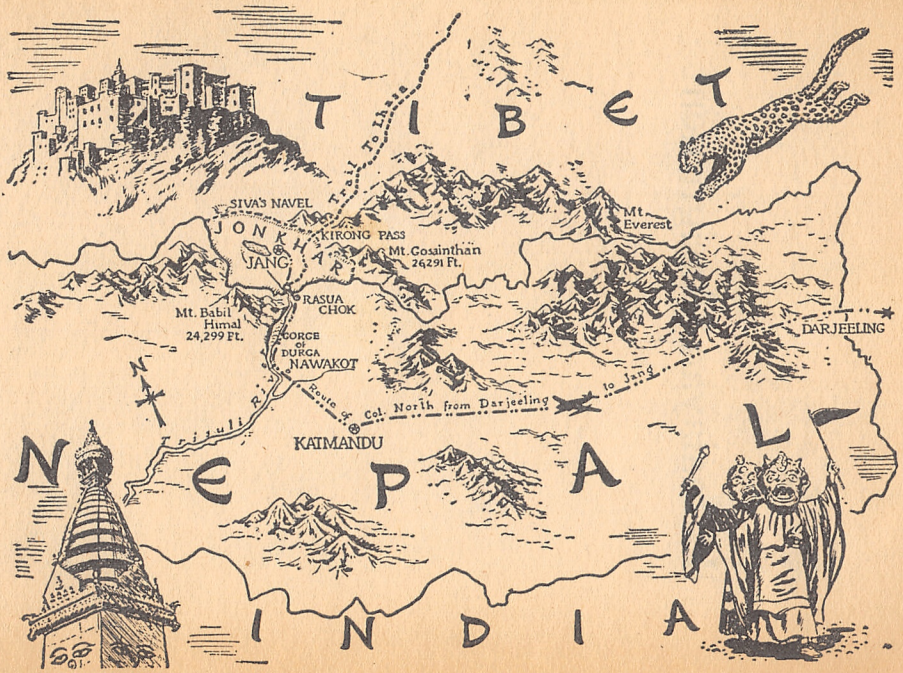
Himalayan Assignment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Trail to Lhasa
SIVA'S NAVEL
JONKHA
JANG
KIRONG PASS
Mt. Gosainthan
26291 Ft.
Mt. Everest
RASUA CHOK
Mt. Babil Himal
24,299 Ft.
GORGE OF DURGA
NAWAKOT
DARJEELING
Route of Col. North from Darjeeling to Jang
Trisuli R.
KATMANDU
NEPAL
INDIA

1. The Gorge of Durga

Yielding readily to gentle pressure on its bit, Colonel Hugh North's Mongolian pony halted and stood panting rhythmically with thick, gray-brown coat rippling under a sudden cold wind beating southward between the almost vertical black-brown walls of the gorge.

North sighed and eased feet out of bronze shovel stirrups in order to flex the muscles of legs so long that his boots barely cleared this narrow track's rocky bed. He found it far from disagreeable to sit this chunky little beast and feel his body buffeted by winds which were no longer hot, humid and reeking of jungles.

A brief flash of light attracted the rider's attention to that profound chasm which opened a scant two feet to the left of his pony's hoofs. He soon identified the cause of that fugitive gleam. A golden eagle was riding an updraft out of the abyss and planing steadily towards his position. How tiny seemed the great bird between those rock walls which alternately brightened and paled because of the sun's passage between breathtaking, snowy peaks soaring tens of thousands of feet into a sky of stainless blue.

Perhaps a quarter of a mile below the *trang*, or rock-cut trail, upon which Hugh North found himself, the Trisuli River hurled itself in thundering, lacy-white rage against jagged boulders, sharp ridges and over huge rockfalls which, in futile stubbornness, attempted to bar the stream's progress down to the lush valley of Katmandu. Eventually this icy blue torrent

would expend itself as a foul and sluggish stream upon the heat-tortured plains of Bengal.

"Wonder if I've brought along enough warm clothing?" North massaged a fly-bitten ear. "Hope to God this Delahanty *hombre* knows his business."

Absently the Intelligence Officer then eased a 38-55 Marlin rifle slung in a scabbard beneath his left knee and, hampered by a saddle uncomfortably narrow for even his lean loins, gazed backwards and down to watch ex-Sergeant Delahanty, USAAF, a tough and slightly shorter physical replica of himself, lash mechanically at his pony's angular rump. A few yards in the outfitter's rear climbed the *mukhiya* or headman of the bearers. To North it remained amazing that these bandy-legged, strangely Japanese-appearing Sherpa porters could manage so well on so steep and treacherous track as this.

By now he had come to know all eight of the odoriferous, shaggy and often lazy bearers by sight as well as by name. Tall *dokos*—large pack baskets—bobbed high and flashed above ragged turbans of blue, black or brown, as, step by step, these human pack animals slogged upwards. Apparently they paid not the slightest heed to the proximity of a chasm yawning so close that a stumble would inevitably prove fatal.

Presently North straightened, swung aquiline, wind-reddened features about to consider with deep-set eyes the rock slopes ahead. Here the Gorge of Durga widened suddenly into a steep little valley dominated by bold crags, knobs and little waterfalls that leaped in silvery haste downwards to blend into the Trisuli River. Closer at hand appeared still another of those numberless sharp bends leading up to Rasua Chok, that customs post on the frontier between Nepal and Tibet.

Aware that his pony was still blowing hard, the Intelligence Officer lingered, watching the beast's steamy breath being whirled away down the gorge.

Through what a wide assortment of terrain this *trang* must lead, starting as it did just above the lush valley of Katmandu, then heading upwards, through the Gorge of Durga, into the loftiest ranges of the Himalayas and on through the Kirong-la

into Tibet. Eventually this route was reported to terminate in Lhasa the Golden, Red-dominated capital of the recently fugitive Dalai Lama.

During recent centuries how many pilgrims, adventurers and merchants had traveled this dangerous and comfortless route? Surely the nearness of this breath-taking chasm must have chilled even the hardiest wayfarers between Nepal, South China and remote Tibet. The prospect of venturing ever higher into the frigid fastnesses must have appalled ambassadors northbound from such lordly rulers as Baber, Ali-ud-din and Akbar the Great, those warrior kings whose Moslem hordes had vanquished even the virile and bellicose Rajput rajahs. Was it significant that not even the ferocious Mongols of Aljai Timur had failed to subdue this small but fiercely independent mountain kingdom of Nepal?

Hugh North winced under an icy blast that drew tears over cheekbones as high as those of any Sioux Indian. How curious to reflect that even in this year of nineteen hundred and fifty-one the white men who had viewed this awe-inspiring pass might well be listed on a normal complement of fingers and toes.

On entering this canyon, less colorful but comparable in depth to that of the Colorado River, he had been intrigued, then sobered by noting quantities of human bones in almost every nullah, cave or declivity.

So frequent were these grisly evidences of misfortune above the miserable and wind-blown hamlet of Timuray that neither he nor his outfitter, Ad Delahanty, now paid them the least attention.

Eyes narrowed against a slant of sunlight suddenly lancing through clouds clustered about the peaks soaring majestically on all sides, Hugh North peered up the *trang* but still caught no glimpse of Subadar Ganesh Thopa, a Gurkha lieutenant politely but firmly assigned to his expedition by the Nepalese War Office.

At first North had resented this attaché's presence, being sus-

picious that more was known in Katmandu concerning his mission in Nepal than the high brass of G-2 suspected.

Recently he had revised his attitude towards that tough, good-natured little officer whose knowledge of these forbidding mountain ranges was proving to be all but invaluable. It was from the Subadar that he ascertained that a majority of these pitiful human remains were those of pilgrims traveling from Tibet and China in an attempt to win eternal bliss by worshiping before a monolith long ago raised by King Asoka at Rummindei to mark the birthplace of Gautama Buddha. Generally aged, poor and diseased, the majority of these voyagers fell victim to the long and dangerous route down into Nepal.

North noted a slight movement among some laurel bushes high on the opposite wall of the gorge. It had been so nearly imperceptible that none save a trained observer would have seen it. Damn! He was an instant late in lifting slim, ten-power field glasses slung ready about his neck. Had yonder brief motion among the crags ahead been caused by a bird, some animal —or a man? Dispelled in an instant was a lethargy induced by an unaccustomed altitude and five days of arduous climbing.

Dismounting, the Intelligence Officer steadied his back against an overhanging rock, regardless of icy water trickling down its face. Yard by yard he scanned those shrub-dotted, gray-brown rock heights ahead. Had some such furtive movement preceded Major Charles Opdyck's murder? The Intelligence report had said nothing beyond the fact that, nearly a month ago, a rifle suddenly had cracked to send his predecessor spinning down into just such a chasm as yawned to North's left.

During long service with G-2, General Staff Corps, U.S.A., Hugh North on occasion had found himself embarked upon critical assignments in remote parts of the world yet already he foresaw that this mission into the semi-independent State of Jonkhar promised to rank among the most hazardous.

The Intelligence Officer was pleased to discover that, thanks to this halt, an insistent ringing in his eardrums was subsiding; also that his respiration was becoming easier. After all, a man

cannot expect to reach an altitude of thirteen thousand feet without experiencing uncomfortable reactions.

To the best of his observation no cause for precautions existed, yet, gripped by apprehension, the gaunt American slowly lowered his field glasses, then raised eyes to admire the dazzling effect of midafternoon sunlight upon glaciers and snow fields whitening such sublime peaks as those of Mount Babil Himal and other giants composing the Shanlagiri massif.

His gaze flickered back to the *trang,* for around a jagged escarpment a mounted gray-brown figure had ridden into view. He sensed that Subadar Thopa also must have noticed that covert movement since the Gurkha wasn't just sitting his pony in comfort. His head, clearly visible in an enormous Australian-type campaign hat, kept craning itself upwards.

Gripped by a rising uneasiness, North followed the distant rider's progress along the narrow *trang* towards a point where it curved far out of blue-black shadows towards the brilliantly sunlit opposite wall of the gorge.

A few paces to the rear of the Gurkha officer's stumpy-legged pony, he noted Havildar Kali Yuga, Thopa's sturdy Khu orderly, tramping along with his big Enfield rifle unslung and ready. Yuga alone might prepare the Subadar's meals since Delahanty's Sherpa porters belonged to a caste too inferior to permit their preparing food for a noble Thakuri.

Supremely alert, North watched the attaché halt, produce field glasses and intently examine the wild array of crags and ledges ahead before turning in his saddle and waving forward the balance of the party.

"Good lad!" North nodded to himself. "Maybe friend Thopa *is* playing on my team after all." No, he had not in the least relished having the Nepalese authorities attach an unknown officer to this little expedition as a *quid pro quo* for permission to travel into Jonkhar and possibly Tibet.

While gathering reins of crudely plaited and untanned leather, North noted that Delahanty and his straggling column of bearers had toiled to within a quarter mile of his present position, so he relayed the Gurkha's reassuring signal. Even as

his mount lowered its blunt and fuzzy head and started upward along the rock-littered *trang,* North for a second time scanned the innocent-appearing mountainside opposite.

Of course Major Opdyck just *might* have fallen victim to the greed of some Limbu mountaineer hopeful of salvaging boots, clothing and a possibly still useful rifle. Thopa and Delahanty both had credited such an explanation. However, the fact remained that it was the one and only Intelligence Officer accompanying Dr. Arunah Keith's expedition who had been shot.

The pony grunted and shook its head in angry protest when North drove iron-rimmed heels hard into its ribs, but nevertheless it quickened its upward progress.

It came as a relief to discover that not only was he able, without risk of dizziness, to peer into the chasm and survey the Trisuli's wild progress, but also that he had gained confidence in his mount. No longer did he break into a cold sweat when, as often occurred, the little beast set down splintery and unshod hoofs on the very rim of the abyss.

Was it a trick of the altitude that his mind became so readily detached? Right now he could, dispassionately, view himself as a tiny gray-green figure, penetrating ever higher towards those shining, breath-taking mountains known as the Abode of the Gods. Yonder indeed rode a modern Don Quixote departing on a forlorn hope. Did any possibility exist of halting the southward surge of those Red hordes even now concentrating in Tibet to accomplish, next spring, that long-unrealized dream of the Czars—the conquest of India? Hardly.

North recalled himself to actualities with the realization that this short October day was so far advanced that camp must soon be made.

As previously, tonight his green nylon prospector's tent probably would be pitched in a small ravine where fragrant cedars, junipers and giant rhododendrons found earth and created a measure of shelter from winds screeching down the Gorge of Durga. Undoubtedly they also would rest among the remains of dead campfires and scattered human bones well-gnawed by foxes and jackals. Probably they would camp alone. Thus far

the little column had encountered less than a dozen pilgrims. The chief danger to them and to his own small expedition was the possibility of a premature autumn storm.

"In October, Bahadur Colonel, severe blizzards break with little warning," had stated Kali Yuga, the most expert mountaineer in the party. "One moment the sky is smiling and blue, yet within five minutes one may become blinded by terrible whirlwinds of snow and ice particles. The Limbu tribesmen hereabouts believe these sudden storms to be the breath of offended *bhuts* or mountain devils."

Again a covert movement drew North's attention, this time to a clump of junipers sprouting amid a pattern of crevices and crisscrossing the opposite mountainside like wrinkles in an old man's face. North's tall and wiry figure stiffened in the saddle, but even before he could dismount a lithe figure armed with a rifle emerged boldly upon a ledge high above the *trang*. In this crystalline atmosphere the apparition was clearly to be seen but was dwarfed by distance.

After jerking the Marlin from its scabbard the Intelligence Officer lifted his field glasses in time to watch the stranger smoothly shoulder his piece and take aim. For a miserable instant North feared that the Unknown's target must be Subadar Thopa but as quickly he perceived his error. The upward tilt to that distant rifle barrel precluded such a possibility. The true target he located on an outcrop hundreds of feet higher than the stranger's ledge. There, most effectively silhouetted against the aching blueness of the sky, stood a lordly bharal or Himalayan blue sheep.

Through his lenses North watched the animal—its attention apparently was fixed upon the Subadar and his orderly—commence a leisurely ascent of that jagged, gray-brown crag across the valley.

By focusing his glasses North could tell that the rifleman was wearing a short-skirted coat of some silver-gray fur that bore spots something like a leopard's. A visorless *chapka* of the same pelt sat snugly upon but did not conceal a tangle of shoulder-

long, ice-white hair. Because the stranger was sighting, his features effectively remained concealed behind the rifle stock.

"A damned pluperfect shot—if he makes it," North muttered. "That ram's on the move and nearly a third of a mile away."

North watched the stranger's head press tighter against the rubber-cupped rear aperture of a telescopic sight and, ever so clearly, he saw the white-haired marksman's shoulder shudder under the recoil. A split second later a flat, spiteful *crack!* came echoing down. Instantly he lifted his glasses in time to see the bharal make two spasmodic leaps before it collapsed to lie with one horn actually projecting over the rim of that lofty, wind-swept ledge.

"Pretty, pretty, pretty!" North breathed and through his glasses received an impression of the distant marksman arising easily from his kneeling position to stand peering downwards—not on Thopa, who must have been much closer, *but upon himself!* For perhaps twenty seconds the distant, fur-clad figure lingered there, gilded by the late afternoon sun and gently rocked to increasingly violent gusts of wind. Then, with the suddenness of a magician's trick, the lichen-grayed ledge was unoccupied save for wildly threshing juniper bushes.

In grim silence North restored his rifle to its boot.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he reflected unhappily. "A Bisley or Camp Lejeune champion couldn't better that one."

When North again trained his glasses upon the fallen bharal he experienced further misgivings; by no possible chance could that marksman across the valley have hoped to secure his trophy! Yonder crag was utterly inaccessible to even the most experienced of mountain climbers. Why, then, had he in the silver-gray coat killed that blue sheep? As a warning demonstration? Hardly. The killer of Charles Opdyck had not granted his victim even the slightest of admonitions.

Deeply perplexed at discovering no logical explanation, North urged his pony up the *trang* until it trotted into a small, more or less level area at the mouth of a ravine in which junipers, dwarf pines and massive rhododendrons squirmed and

tossed although, as usual, the wind was slackening towards sundown.

Subadar Thopa and his orderly, Kali Yuga, already had unsaddled and the latter was ranging about in search of some promising spot upon which to pitch the party's only tent—a slight affair of green nylon.

North came upon the Gurkha attaché squatting among some rhododendrons and through field glass making a detailed survey of the gorge. At that moment the sinking sun rapidly was tinting gulches, ravines and crevasses a rich purple while daubing rock faces with glaring, irregular patches of scarlet and imperial yellow. Here and there the lowering sun outlined in fiery hues the profiles of sky-high escarpments, knobs and ridges.

Once more aware of that annoying singing in his ears, North dismounted, pulled his rifle from its boot and then strode over to hunker down beside the Gurkha.

"You witnessed that remarkable demonstration of marksmanship?"

"Yes, Bahadur Colonel." The Subadar's flat, green-bronze and definitely Mongolian countenance swung about and his oblique eyes of vitreous black came to rest on the tall American. Thopa's teeth flashed suddenly into a wide grin which was slightly distorted by a deep scar slanting across chin to mouth corner.

"As your Honor says, that was a most impressive exhibition."

"Wonder who the devil he is and what's his game?" North grunted while unbuckling the heavy leather bandolier of rifle ammunition he had worn slung over his left shoulder.

A deep chuckle escaped the Subadar and under his slender black mustache appeared a broad smile. "It would appear, Bahadur Colonel, that you lacked sufficient opportunity to view this stranger."

"Correct. He was a long way off—too far for me to tell much about him."

"Him?" Chuckling, the bandy-legged little officer put away his field glass. "That marksman across the valley was a memsahib, and a young one, for all that her hair was the color of

yonder cascade. Moreover, her features were the color of—this." Thopa tapped the light brown leather holster of an automatic he wore strapped to the right of his kukri.

2. The Frontier

With nightfall the wind subsided, permitting sparks from twin campfires to spiral vertically among pine branches laced into so dense a pattern that the sheen of only a few stars could penetrate it. About these fires Delahanty's eight leather-faced porters squatted on their heels, using fingers to shovel rice and lentils into their eager mouths from small wooden bowls they habitually carried slung to their belts.

The rhododendron wood burned brightly and revealed in dull red tones the Sherpa porters' high cheekbones, fat-lidded eyes and heavy brows receding under greasy black manes that dangled low over their foreheads. Rank-smelling as foxes, these bearers could not readily repose themselves tonight. Their gaze kept flickering about like that of wild beasts over a kill.

Conversing in guttural Khaskura—that ever-useful *lingua franca* of Nepal—they swilled tea, scratched lice and belched until, presently, three of them commenced to throw knucklebones on tattered tarpaulin while their fellows either lit bamboo-stemmed pipes or commenced mechanically to revolve small brass prayer wheels. Obviously they feared the *bhuts* or devils inhabiting this particular valley.

Beside a smaller fire, Colonel Hugh North squatted on his bedroll and applied himself to a stewed Swiss Army ration composed of compressed peas and dried beef. Topped off with a few blocks of bitter chocolate and some water biscuits, the meal wasn't bad at all. The interlude would have been still more enjoyable, however, had he been able to rid himself of a persist-

ent uneasiness which nagged at his peace of mind with the insistence of a shrewish wife.

Across the campfire Subadar Thopa squatted comfortably on his heels, consuming food fetched by his high-caste orderly and audibly consuming a porridge composed of dried fish, rice and millet. This he washed down with draughts of pungent yak-butter tea.

To North's left, Delahanty had finished his stew and now sat with wide, khaki-clad shoulders propped against a wicker carrying basket. As usual, the outfitter had wolfed his supper and a half consumed cigarette kept dangling between his lips. Seen thus in his battle jacket, woolen trousers and a knitted service cap tilted rakishly to one side, this freckle-faced fellow suggested thousands of GIs such as North had seen lounging about bivouacs in Europe, Africa and Asia.

Heaving a comfortable sigh, North caught up a brand with which to light his one cheroot for the day. He found himself yearning for someone with whom he might think aloud and unreservedly. Too bad big, rawboned Ad Delahanty couldn't quite fill the bill. Almost every European in Darjeeling had known him to be a former United States Army Air Force master sergeant dishonorably discharged for desertion.

Delahanty, of course, claimed he really hadn't intended to desert, but had lost his head sufficiently to go AWOL over the time limit with the flighty, red-haired young wife of a civil servant in Bombay. What had happened to terminate this costly little romance, Delahanty never had explained, but, not daring to return home, he had set himself up, quite successfully, in the business of outfitting hunting and mountaineering expeditions.

When unoccupied with duties the ex-flier often would lose his cocky, boyish manner and appear somber of mien as if bitter with himself. One fact loomed large in Delahanty's favor: before agreeing to accompany North's small but hand-picked expedition, he had mentioned the matter of his disgrace and had made no effort to excuse it.

Hugh North smoothed strong black hair showing a touch of gray above the ears and by the wavering firelight surveyed his

companion; considered a re-estimate. The main question was, had that blot on Delahanty's record been unique? Intelligent, and physically powerful in a limber sort of way, this snub-nosed young Middle Westerner could prove invaluable if the going became as rough as he was beginning to suspect it would.

"Achcha!" Thopa grunted satisfaction, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, then, producing a tin cigarette container, strolled over to squat beside North. As usual, the little officer was grinning, and North understood why the cheerfulness of Gurkhas is proverbial.

"Perhaps your Honor tonight will hear the ghosts of that lost Chinese army howl in the Gorge of Durga," the Gurkha observed in perfect though curiously inflected English.

"Lost Chinese army?"

The Subadar scaled his big campaign hat over to the tent and ran fingers through recently cropped black hair before he elaborated.

"In the year 1792 K'ien Lung, an ambitious Emperor of China, sent a great army across Tibet with orders to conquer Nepal—my country. His troops proved very courageous, for although losing many men on the way, they fought their way over the Himalayas until they won through Kirong-la or, as you would call it, the Kirong Pass.

"It is this same Pass which, the Merciful Gautama willing" —Thopa expelled a great lungful of smoke, then spat—"we shall enter very soon. Not far away, a bridge once traversed this gorge, but we Gurkhas defended it so well that the Chinese could not fight their way across it even though Fu-kang'an, the Emperor's General, in his rage, ordered cannons fired into the rear ranks of his own troops and so slew them by the hundreds.

"Eventually, when this bridge was heavy with the invaders, we cut the supports and let them fall into the chasm, and when the remaining Chinese attempted to retreat they were overwhelmed by such a storm as I spoke of yesterday and were utterly destroyed." He drew another long puff at his cigarette. "That is why this gorge bears the name of Durga, Goddess of Victory."

While Thopa's orderly cleaned cooking utensils and food bowls among the shadows, the three men stared into the coals and smoked in silence until Delahanty raised a quizzical sandy brow. "Say, Subadar, are you positive that was, sure enough, a *dame* over on the other side?"

"Beyond a doubt, and although she was not old, her hair held the radiance of pure, well-polished silver."

North pitched a twig onto the coals, watched it blaze up, then queried, "What do you make of her presence—and that little demonstration this afternoon?"

Thopa spat meditatively into the embers, rubbed his scarred chin. "On that subject I have been pondering, Bahadur Colonel. This memsahib and her party—obviously she has companions, since a woman cannot travel alone so high among this range—are encamped on the far side of the gorge."

"Why?" Delahanty interjected.

"Because for many miles above and below this part of the gorge there is no crossing point. What is of more importance," the Gurkha continued while his small, almost femininely delicate fingers caressed the polished black wood handle of his kukri, "is the fact that this memsahib and her companion cannot lawfully be in Nepal. In Katmandu I ascertained that at this time only two foreign expeditions are authorized to travel within this Kingdom: yours and that led by your esteemed fellow countryman, Dr. Keith."

A gust of chilly wind beat down the ravine, stirring the tops of giant rhododendrons, and brought with it the querulous, high-pitched barking of a fox on the hunt.

North nodded. "Shouldn't wonder." He turned again to the dark-faced Gurkha. "Since our sharpshooting girl friend is illegally in Nepal, can nothing be done—to, er—discourage further object lessons?"

Thopa wound a bright scarlet scarf higher about his short neck, then said, "At the next village I will speak with the *mukhiya,* their headman. He will then make certain signals which even you may not perceive. Tomorrow, or the day following, it would not be surprising if we hear rifle fire to the westward.

In Nepal, we are true to our guests but we do not encourage uninvited visitors."

"Could I say, friend Thopa, that I'm coming to admire your local customs?" North commented grimly. That curious demonstration of marksmanship had been conducted so self-confidently, so arrogantly, that the Intelligence Officer's uneasiness was chilling him more than a sudden wind commencing to boom among the jagged, snow-armored peaks towering so high above the gorge.

"Where," he asked of himself, "on the way up from Darjeeling did we meet a Red agent? Was he a begging red-hat lama? Some villager or that beggar who ran whining so long beside my stirrup?"

"The memsahib with the silver hair; is it your wish that she, too, should be slain?" North perceived that the chunky little attaché was laughing quietly.

North, stretching, smiled across the flames. "Only if she is ugly."

Thopa's laughter rang through the glen, caused the porters to swing shaggy heads in surprise. "Then she shall live. That memsahib was beautiful, to European eyes at least.'"

It was North's turn to laugh. "Come again! At that range even you couldn't possibly have made out her features."

"Perhaps not," Thopa admitted, extending small brown hands to the heat, "but her figure, Bahadur Colonel, was a reincarnation of the lovely Nourmahal; she whose ineffable beauty once graced the palace of the great Shah Jehan. Therefore, I will order the *mukhiya* to spare her—if indeed his Limbu tribesmen succeed in coming up with her party, and they may not, for whoever commands her expedition indeed must know these mountains uncommonly well. Few natives have survived to attain this Gorge of Durga from the westwards."

After relighting his cheroot North settled himself more comfortably against a saddlebag. "I wish you'd enlarge on the State of Jonkhar. I got only a superficial briefing in Katmandu and I'd appreciate your filling in the background regarding politics, religion and customs." He hesitated, then added in an under-

tone, "By the way, Subadar, have you any objection to Delahanty Sahib's listening in?"

The Gurkha's oblique black eyes flickered momentarily sidewise. "So long as the white hunter enjoys your Honor's confidence——"

At North's invitation, Delahanty came closer, patently flattered over being beckoned into conference.

The orderly meanwhile lugged forward a half dozen rhododendron branches and tossed them onto the coals. Immediately myriad sparks soared up to whirl like short-lived fireflies among the treetops.

"Delahanty Sahib knows little or nothing concerning the principality we are heading for," North remarked, aquiline features glowing copper-red by the rising flames, "so suppose, Subadar Thopa, that you start from the beginning?"

Before commencing, the Gurkha pulled from a duffle bag a well-worn military greatcoat of that type affectionately known as a "British warm" and struggled into it. He then cast a quick glance about the encampment to reassure himself that their three ponies, picketed among some thick cedars, were placidly munching forage from baskets placed before them. Their coats and manes were so thick and their legs so short that to North they suggested gigantic kittens. As for the porters, they now were either gambling or drowsing contentedly about their fire.

Higher up in the ravine some jackals, scenting food, became bolder, until they skulked about the underbrush not fifty yards away and their hungry whines could be distinguished above the dull roar of the Trisuli nearly three thousand feet below. Like embodied coals their eyes glowed two-by-two, two-by-two among dense thickets of ilex, juniper and birch.

"You must know, my friends," commenced the Subadar, "that the semi-independent State of Jonkhar occupies a long and rather narrow valley known as the Vale of Jonkhar which runs west-east in general and, because of a comparatively low altitude, its climate is suitable and its soil sufficiently fertile to produce an excellent grain crop despite the great peaks ringing it in."

"How big is Jonkhar?" Delahanty inquired.

The Gurkha deliberated, placed a cigarette between his lips and left it to dangle there unlit. "Jonkhar is reported to be nearly seventy miles in length and about ten miles in width. The Sri Rajah's subjects for the most part are fierce and unruly Kirantis, Lepchas and Limbus, mountaineers who follow a most degraded form of the Hindu religion.

"In the Vale of Jonkhar lies Jang, the Sri Rajah's capital and the only sizable town to be found in his principality. It is populated by Nepalese, Sunwars and Gurungs who are Buddhists and much more civilized. Nevertheless they remain a proud, quarrelsome and war-like people."

Delahanty's golden, crew-cut hair glistened to his nod. "I've heard tell them Limbus really are mighty handy with a rifle or a kukri. Say, Subadar, these guys—are they really independent?"

"After the Chinese Emperor's troops had been defeated and destroyed in the manner I have described, a treaty was drawn between Nepal and the Celestial Empire—Tibet was then part of China—which created Jonkhar as a—a—what do you call it, Bahadur Colonel?"

"A buffer state?"

"Exactly." The Gurkha fiddled briefly with a wide silver and turquoise bracelet decorating his left wrist. "So, under the law, Jonkhar is subject to the Crown of Nepal, while *also* enjoying the protection of the Dalai Lama of Lhasa in Tibet. The Sri Rajah's connections with Nepal are stronger, however, because of a considerable traffic in black salt, barley, rice and furs passing over the Kirong-la."

Like an invisible hand, the chill wind snatched a puff of smoke away from Thopa's thin lips. Adopting the singsong voice of a professional storyteller, the attaché continued: "Thus this buffer State of Jonkhar came into being. The present Sri Rajah is called Matbar Nana Jang."

"Nana!" North straightened suddenly and his shadow, magnified against the tent wall, suggested a sable giant's surprise. "Could he be any connection of the infamous Nana Sahib who

during the Great Mutiny broke his word and massacred the English women and children at Cawnpore?"

Astonishment manifested itself on the Subadar's flat, bronze-hued features. "Evidently, Bahadur Colonel, you know of Nana Sahib, the Tiger of Cawnpore. It is unfortunate that you guess correctly: the present Sri Rajah is a direct descendant of that accursed oath breaker.

"Once the British Raj had succeeded in suppressing the Mutiny—with the aid of my people—this Nana Sahib took refuge in Nepal but was not permitted long to dwell there, for we love well the British. Accordingly this accursed one fled to Jonkhar where, being strong and still very wealthy, he at length usurped the throne. You will understand, therefore, why the present Sri Rajah of Jonkhar is unlikely to welcome us into his Principality."

"How does he get that way?" Delahanty protested. "We ain't Limeys, not by one hell of a sight! Why, most folks back home ain't ever even heard tell of Nepal, let alone this one-horse precinct called Jonkhar!"

"I also know," coldly observed the Subadar, "that many tribes in Asia are not aware that the United States of America exists."

North shot Delahanty a warning look. "Suppose we let the Subadar go on with his story."

"Sorry Skipper. Just thought I'd ask."

The Gurkha tugged a thin, drooping mustache and smiled again. "Delahanty Sahib's comment was only natural. Now, concerning politics. In Katmandu it has been reliably reported that the Sri Rajah Matbar has been giving ear to some treacherous lamas who assisted the Red Chinese to overrun Tibet. They have appeared as emissaries from the High Lama of Tsang, a treacherous dog who rebelled against his lord, the Dalai Lama." Thopa bent forward, nostrils flaring excitedly in the flat plane of this features. "What is foreseen and feared in Katmandu is that these godless conquerors of Tibet intend to gain control of the Kirong-la!"

Delahanty could not restrain his curiosity. "What's so all-fired important about the Kirong Pass?"

Deep concern was manifested in the Gurkha's manner. "The Kirong-la rises to only ninety-one hundred feet above the sea, and also is the one pass across the Himalayas capable of being widened enough to permit the passage of wheeled vehicles."

"Not a pretty prospect, is it?" North's deep voice interjected. "Why hasn't the Sri Rajah taken action already? If Matbar Nana Jang really rules in Jonkhar, why hasn't he thrown in with the Chinese Reds?"

"The Sri Rajah already would have concluded a treaty favorable to the Reds were it not for his Dewan, or Prime Minister, who in turn is influenced by the Senior Rani, Dil Kusha. A pretty name," Thopa added. "It means 'Heart's Happiness.' "

"A lovely name, indeed," North agreed, then squirmed about once more to stare fixedly across the abyss—he still retained hopes that sparks, smoke or the glow of a campfire might indicate the whereabouts of that ominous expedition across the valley. Nothing, however, was to be seen save the faint reflected light of countless stars upon smooth rock faces and the delicate sheen they wrought on snow fields glimmering miles high above the Gorge of Durga.

"It is said," the small, solid figure in soiled khaki continued from his position beside the paling fire, "that this Dil Kusha exercises a strong influence upon her Lord. There are two reasons why he heeds her. She is his Senior Queen and mother to the Heir Apparent, who is still very young; also the Rani Dil Kusha is closely related to the ruling rajahs of Sikkim and Bhutan, two other semi-independent states lying to the eastward of Mount Everest and Katchinjunga."

North's "Down East" ancestry asserted itself in that silently he slipped out a sheath knife and commenced aimlessly to whittle shavings from a twig—a sure sign that he was concentrating hard on the speaker's every word.

"Also you must know, Bahadur Colonel," the Gurkha continued, "that in the Sri Rajah's palace at Jang dwells also a Junior Queen. Her name we are informed, and with reason,

is Bul Badena, which means 'Beautiful Rose Body.' By all reports she is beautiful and supremely voluptuous. Also she is determined that her son, and not the child of Dil Kusha, in time shall succeed to the throne of Jonkhar. Our agent at the Court of Matbar Nana Jang reports that this Bul Badena subtly feeds her lord's ambition to extend his frontiers and supports the arguments advanced by those pro-Red lamas of whom I have spoken and bespeaks contempt for the Anglo-American Powers."

"She is Indian?" Delahanty suddenly propped himself up on an elbow, wide awake for all that he had lain back as if drowsing.

"No, Sahib. Bul Badena is said to be the daughter of a white Russian adventurer and a princess among the Buriat Mongols. Unlike the Rani Dil Kusha, who was educated in Delhi and has met many British and even some Americans during the Second Great War, this Bul Badena has had no experience with either, and so never learned respect for the might of America and the terrible power of the Royal Air Force."

"Sounds like a dumb cluck to me," Delahanty observed. He had let his pipe go out and now made efforts to rekindle it from a brand. "Five years back," said he between puffs, "the old Tenth Air could have blown a burg as big as Darjeeling to hell and gone in just one strike."

"No doubt." Scarred chin picked out in firelight, Thopa held up three slim fingers. "We now have mentioned three of the six principal forces to be reckoned with, if ever we reach the City of Jang."

"There must be someone," North observed gravely, "who is backing Bul Badena—she could scarcely intrigue alone."

"Your reasoning is the substance and the shadow of truth, Bahadur Colonel. Her supporter is Bijai Lakshi, the general in command of the Army of Jonkhar. By repute this Bijai is shrewd, merciless and is the Rani Bul Badena's devoted admirer.

"Another who conspires with the Junior Rani is said to be

Prince Timrud Jagai Jang, the Sri Rajah's younger half-brother."

"Names and numbers of all the players," Delahanty commented, "quite a line-up."

"There are others I should know about?"

The attaché's round, black stubble-covered head inclined. "To be sure. The foremost of them is the Dewan, or Prime Minister, a crafty old man, whom our informant says sides with Dil Kusha.

"Long years ago this Vikram Girvan, the Dewan, held a commission in the Indian Army and during the First Great War he served as a major in Skinner's Horse Regiment, my regiment," Thopa amplified in simple pride. "The Dewan is of the Brahman caste and, like myself, a member of the noble Thakuri clan."

"If you ask me," Delahanty drawled, tossing aside his brand and producing a windproof lighter, "I'll lay my bet on this General Bijai and Miss Rose Body for 1952. The combination of a pin-up and a fighting man is hard to beat, 'specially if the Sri Rajah is already half sold on playing footie with Mao Tse-tung's Reds."

The Intelligence Officer's strongly modeled and wind-darkened features contracted until a ruddy glare from the coals made him more than ever resemble an American Indian.

"Hope you lose, Delahanty," said he. "Because it's to beat out Bul Badena, Bijai and the Red lamas that I hired you and your outfit."

The tinkle of a cascade tumbling down the depths of the ravine sounded suddenly clear. Moodily, Delahanty picked up a faggot which had rolled free of the fire and tossed it back.

"I catch," the outfitter grunted softly. "Say, Colonel, you sure took me in with your yarn in Darjeeling about signing on as professional hunter for Doc Keith's scientific expedition. I suppose that would be your cover story, as the cloak-and-dagger boys call it?"

North smiled thinly. "Yes, that's what they would call it."

"Say, Colonel, is Doc Keith really on the up-and-up as a big bird and bug collector?"

"Absolutely," came Hugh North's quiet assurance. "His is strictly a non-political scientific expedition. Dr. Keith I believe was, and remains, unaware of why the unfortunate Major Opdyck offered to be his big-game shooter."

The Gurkha's head suddenly swung about. Somewhere across the valley a Himalayan black bear suddenly had commenced an eerie howling. Responding to a reaction as old as Man, Thopa mechanically tossed another root onto the fire.

"Keith never knew the truth," continued North, resettling his long-limbed figure, "but certain other people weren't deceived. They knew that Opdyck was, in fact, an American Army Intelligence Officer and therefore ordered him murdered."

"Say!" Delahanty burst out. "Is that a fact?"

"It is," came the succinct rejoinder and he treated the outfitter's unshaven, heavily freckled features to a penetrating glance. "Incidentally, if we maintain our present speed of travel how soon can I figure on coming up with Dr. Keith?"

"No telling, sir. All depends how much time he's taking out to collect specimens."

"Let us attempt to overtake his party before it reaches the frontier between Nepal and Jonkhar," urged the Subadar.

"Why so?" North demanded quickly.

"It seems, Bahadur Colonel, that Dr. Keith and his companions unfortunately failed to obtain those *lamyiks* or special passports which authorize us to enter the Sri Rajah's domains."

"But," objected the ex-flier, "they've got Nepalese visas for sure, and didn't you say just now that that bush-league State is part of Nepal?"

"Jonkhar is not a part, Sahib, but a *protectorate* of my country," the Gurkha explained. "Legally, a Nepalese visa is valid for Jonkhar, but in point of fact——" He shrugged. "Well, we shall see."

"Oh, oh!" grunted the yellow-haired outfitter. "That don't sound so good. Say, Colonel, back in Darjeeling when they was fitting out, I heard palaver about the Doc's taking along

a gal secretary and some other scientist who talks with a Heinie accent."

"That's quite correct," North informed. "The lady in question is a Mrs. Cutler, an expert botanist. Your chap with the foreign accent was formerly Professor of Mammalogy at the University of Pilsen."

"Pilsen? That's in Czechoslovakia, ain't it—where the beer comes from?"

"Correct. If there were only four whites in the Doc's party, then he sure likes to travel in style. Heard tell he took along thirty-five or forty bearers."

Delahanty stretched thoughtfully, rubbed his crew-cut hair. "Doc Keith can't be moving so fast. In these altitudes he must have bought yaks for pack animals, and even on the flat a loaded yak can't do better than eight-ten miles a day."

"That's good," North yawned. "The sooner we come up with Keith's expedition the happier I'll be."

"Well, gents, I'm for the sack." Delahanty heaved himself to his feet, but before retiring went to inspect the backs and legs of his ponies. After exchanging a rude jest with his porters, most of whom already had rolled up in black yak's-wool blankets, the ex-flier disappeared into a juniper thicket.

North remained seated, watching the pallid, rose-gray throb of dying embers. Thopa arose in cat-like silence. "One observes, Bahadur Colonel, that you still are wondering why that troublesome memsahib across the gorge only slew a bharal when, much more easily, she could have slain you, me, or any one of our number."

North smiled. "Guilty, your Honor; but I haven't made much progress. As it is, I intend to sneak out of camp before dawn. You will have the tallest of the guides wear my peaked cap, field coat, and put him aboard my pony. I need to have a showdown with our lady sharpshooter *muy pronto.*"

"Muy pronto?" Thopa's irregular but very white teeth glimmered through the darkness. "Do you speak Russian?"

"No, Spanish. Means 'in a big hurry.' Of course the silver-haired memsahib knows that she and her party are illegal trav-

elers in Nepal and that tomorrow you'll likely send the local tribesmen after her scalp."

"Scalp?"

"Excuse, it's an American expression originated during our more civilized days."

The Subadar blinked, peered out over the abyss. "She and her companions are either very brave or extremely foolhardy." He stood up, saluted. *"Huzoor,* Bahadur Colonel. May your sleep remain untroubled." After saluting smartly the attaché strode off towards the tent, a small, soldierly figure moving with a certain feline grace.

Long after Hugh North had crawled into his sleeping bag, he lay staring out through the tent flaps and watching stars creep slowly by beyond a row of lofty peaks. Strange that he should remain so wide awake despite an overpowering fatigue engendered of high altitude and long exertion. It came to him as a shock that only since quitting Darjeeling had recollections of Jingles Lawson's darkly warm and piquant features ceased to intrude themselves into his thoughts at least a dozen times a day.

How curious a happenchance that both of the women with whom he had fallen in love should have become lost to him.

First there had been laughing, red-haired and snowy-skinned Vanessa Byrne, that courageous Irish girl over whose subtle opposition he barely had prevailed long ago in Washington. She last had been heard of in Rumania as an agent for the French Chambre Noire—after that nothing, ever. Fresher by far in his memory lingered the vivacious personality of Jingles Lawson who had been so clever, so courageous, so infinitely tender.

All too readily he could visualize, as he lay feeling the sleeping bag begin to warm, the stark cleanliness of that military hospital on the outskirts of Istanbul, the private room rendered fragrant as a hothouse because of the banks of flowers sent by Robert College, the American and British Embassies, as well as from a grateful Turkish Government. Even more numerous

had been floral encouragements from United States Air Force units on duty in the Near East.

All had seemed to go so well and Jingles on the verge of complete recovery from the dreaded Iranian flu, when, all in an hour, the virus had struck anew and so effectively that his fiancée swiftly had drifted away into that realm where no intrigue and hatred exists; where eternal peace prevails.

During these two years elapsing since Haïdi Lawson had been laid to rest in the American cemetery near Robert College —that same institution in which Jingles had received her early education—his anguish, all the more profound for remaining unspoken, had diminished only very gradually.

3. Across the Abyss

To Hugh North it seemed as if dawn would never brighten sufficiently to permit his departure upon his mission up the *trang*. Undoubtedly daylight was being delayed by the presence of thick layers of cold mists which, at great altitudes, can in a short while coat rock surfaces with an almost imperceptible but extremely treacherous skim of ice known as *verglas* in Switzerland. To have ventured out into this gloom with the gorge yawning hungrily a few feet away would have been sheerest folly.

Although Delahanty and the Subadar also had arisen, no fire as yet glowed before the tent and their teeth chattered in the raw wind while, like three embodied *bhuts*, they fumbled by sense of touch to assemble the necessary equipment.

"I'll take off in a few minutes now," North observed, briskly swinging his arms. "Seems a trifle lighter. Now tell me again, Subadar, how I can recognize the entrance to that game trail."

"Perhaps half a mile up this gorge," the Gurkha explained softly, "the main track takes a very sharp turn to your right

followed at once by an equally sharp swing to the left. At that point, you must be most careful of your footing. The *trang* grows so narrow there that a pack beast finds trouble in passing."

"In other words, the course of the *trang* describes something like a letter 'M'?"

"Exactly. On the far side of this 'M,' " continued the Gurkha from among the shadows, "you should come upon a very twisted dead cedar tree. This game trail you seek lies directly beyond it." Thopa clucked softly. "You are a well-called Bahadur—the brave, Colonel. I should not like to attempt so difficult a climb under the conditions you will find up the gorge."

"Do you think the sun will show, come dawn?"

"It should," Delahanty put in. "The glass ain't fallen. But you can't never be sure among mountains like these. Got your chocolate? Your canteen's full? Climbing's dry work at twelve thousand feet."

Had Hugh North previously entertained an accurate conception of the difficulties he was encountering, he would have set out just the same, but in not quite the same confident manner in which he started groping and scrambling along the *trang* with rifle slung between shoulders and binoculars case slatting over his left hip.

Try as he would, he could not bring himself to ignore the imminence of the chasm, three thousand feet deep at this point. The waters in it hissed and growled like some vast predatory beast about to seize its prey.

The *verglas,* that skim of ice Delahanty had predicted, was proving his most terrifying hazard. Time and again the hobnails on his boots slipped and grated treacherously over some rounded stone or sent him lurching dangerously. Twice his gloved hand gripped a projecting knob just in time to check a sickening skid to the left. Daylight, however, began to increase.

North's objective was a certain flat-topped pinnacle described by Thopa as towering nearly five hundred feet above the *trang* and dominating the whole valley at that point. Mist

rising from what must be a considerable waterfall came shifting up from one of the narrowest sectors thus far encountered in the Gorge of Durga. When, to his infinite relief, he located the game trail, it proved narrow, treacherous and so very steep that, in this rarefied atmosphere, his heart labored furiously and the blood roared so loudly in his ears that he yearned to pause; to delay, however, at this moment was impossible. His plan hinged upon gaining the pinnacle before the dawn mists commenced to lift.

A rising and bitterly cold wind commenced to tear at him with icy claws and a stray lock of jet hair whipped about his eyes like a tiny knout. Despite the chill, sweat poured from beneath North's peaked Alpine cap rather similar to those worn by German troops during World War II, and the drag of the rifle and its cased telescopic sight was like that of bar lead.

Wheezing, gasping and more than a little dizzy, the Intelligence Officer struggled upwards and was on the point of pausing when the game path abruptly ceased to mount at so precipitous an angle and presently he was able, trembling violently, to crawl out upon a little, wind-swept flat space. He lay collapsed a considerable time, buffeted by icy mists, fighting vertigo and trying to slow the furious hammering of his heart.

Far below, Subadar Thopa, Delahanty and the porters must now be openly stirring, kindling fires and loading their *doko* baskets.

A sudden qualm shook him. Was this really the pinnacle Thopa had intended? Even so, did it in reality dominate the likeliest sniper's post this side of the frontier fort at Rasua Chok? Dazedly he reassured himself that the attaché must have known what he was talking about.

Even if he were occupying the correct pinnacle what assurance was there that that extraordinary, silver-haired sharpshooter actually would appear?

All at once the sky brightened enough so that North seemed to be sprawled upon a rocky magic carpet that was flying through a ghost world of rushing gray, pink and yellow clouds.

"Time to get cracking," he advised himself and, after rolling

over onto his side, slipped the telescopic sight's support into position above the barrel of his 38–55 Marlin. To unstrap with well-numbed fingers a stiff leather hood protecting the Marlin's front sight proved unexpectedly difficult. Next he undertook tentative adjustments to the wind gauge's setting and finally checked the adjustment of his sling strap.

Never had Hugh North felt more infinitesimal and insignificant than sprawled there on a tiny rock platform towering nearly four thousand feet above the raging Trisuli.

Glancing upwards through an eddy of swirling, rose-colored mists, he was astonished to notice that a row of icy, fire-tipped peaks had emerged above the fog and mist which now had begun to recede like a vast, slate-hued tide.

The loftiest of those massive white daggers stabbing at the sky he guessed to be Mount Babil Himal which, according to Delahanty, towered some 24,300 feet above sea level. Charmed and utterly fascinated, the gaunt, black-haired figure lay still, watching sunlight commence to gild a series of glaciers veining the brown, northeastern face of Mount Babil Himal. Wildly prodigal of color, the new sun then sketched a wide band of throbbing red-gold across less lofty glaciers and snow fields.

Only with difficulty was Hugh North able to order his imagination back to duty and consideration of his present problems. Still flat on his belly and fearful of the wind's force, North wriggled over to the very lip of his ice-coated platform where, well concealed among broken rocks, he peered over and commenced a thorough reconnaissance.

Even while he was uncasing his field glasses the dawn vapors commenced to evaporate in magical rapidity, disclosing a breath-taking view of the chasm, of a waterfall spilling a ragged bridal veil over a ledge and raising gossamer tendrils of spume.

No doubt now but that he had come to the correct vantage point for, both above and below this bend in the Gorge of Durga, rock walls rose so sheer that, so far as he could tell, not even the hardiest rifleman could have found a post, save directly opposite the pinnacle upon which he lay. Over yonder,

a gulley smothered beneath a growth of cedars and stunted underbrush debouched upon a shallow ledge to create an ideal sniper's post.

Through his glasses North conducted a minute survey of that outcrop opposite to his position and estimated its elevation as approximately two hundred and fifty yards less than his own pinnacle. Immediately his respect for the Gurkha attaché soared; so far as G–2, or MI–5, the very excellent British Intelligence, were aware, no map existed describing this, or any other, approach to supremely strategic Kirong Pass.

Although no part of a military engineer, North nonetheless could appreciate the possibility, thus far at least, of blasting and widening the *trang* until it became capable of conveying wheeled traffic across the Himalayas.

Abruptly aware of a burning thirst, the Intelligence Officer took a deep draught from his water bottle, then directed the binoculars to his left. He found it possible to survey not only a generous length of that game trail by which he had ascended but also nearly a third of a mile southwards.

Thus far no one had appeared upon the *trang*. It remained tenantless save for an occasional scattering of bones. The only motion visible was that of bleached and fraying prayer flags left by pilgrims journeying down to Nepal and the holy places there.

Um. At this elevation would he be able to hear the bells attached to the ponies' halters? He had wished to dispose of them as unnecessarily advertising his expedition's presence, but Ad Delahanty had insisted that such warning was necessary to alert a party traveling in the opposite direction.

Should two such groups chance to meet on many stretches of this continually widening and narrowing track, the outfitter had insisted, then either disaster or bloody conflict must ensue, it being quite impossible for the two sets of pack animals either to turn about or to pass each other.

As the sunrise brightened it created rich, bluish-purple hues among a majestic array of rock chimneys and convex flutings directly across the chasm.

By now his arteries had steadied down and he had begun to shiver because of chilly sweat soaking into his light woolen underwear. He removed his cap and took precautions that no part of his body might become silhouetted for the benefit of an observer below him on the west face of the gorge.

Thus far, no living thing had appeared within the field of his glasses beyond a covey of feeding tragopans—mountain pheasants of a gorgeous blood-red color—and a pair of ravens. These last, however, commanded his instant attention. The great, sable birds had commenced to fly in tight, excited circles, all the while rasping raucous challenges at some enemy invisible to the occupant of that dizzying sniper's post.

"Wonder what's upsetting them?" North breathed. "Some fox or a marten, shouldn't won——" He stiffened expectantly, but relaxed when, through his field glasses, he made out Subadar Thopa, easily recognizable in greenish-brown khaki, riding slowly into sight.

The Gurkha sat hunched forward in his high, Tibetan saddle and apparently was devoting full attention to his mount's precarious footing. Next appeared Kali Yuga, the orderly, clambering upwards with the aid of staff. He was carrying his Enfield slung, and was straining against the breast straps of a knapsack riding high on his shoulders. Following at a distance of a hundred yards was a long-limbed rider in a tightly belted American officer's trench coat and wearing a gray peaked cap.

"Good boy, Thopa," North grinned. "He's even got that porter rigged out in my bandolier and map case." A disconcerting possibility presented itself. Would that white-haired female think to count his bearers and wonder over the disappearance of one of them during the night? Certainly he himself would have taken note of so glaring a discrepancy.

While the ravens continued to wheel and scale through rainbow-hued vapors rising from the falls, a slow-moving file of bearers, tiny at this distance, appeared on the *trang.* In the lead as usual stumped the *mukhiya,* hunched under a well-packed *doko* carry basket with his faded turban bobbing to each stride.

North redirected his field glasses upon the shelf opposite just in time to observe a slight threshing among some stunted junipers. By God! They were *moving against the wind!* At once he shrank back to knuckle wind-created tears from his eyes, then, very slowly, he reoccupied his natural loophole and steadied the field glasses against fingers held tight against his brow.

His heart leaped like a well-hooked trout when, suddenly, he glimpsed beneath a stunted cedar a patch of that curiously dappled silver-gray fur. Smoothly, easily, the identical figure he had beheld the preceding afternoon squirmed into sight. Still concealed from observation by the men on the *trang,* the stranger for a while remained on hands and knees gasping heavily.

At a glance North knew that Thopa had not been mistaken. Yonder sniper was a woman whose hair shone a gleaming bluish-white, not at all like the lifeless white of advanced age. He watched her, still fighting for breath, wriggle out upon a ledge and exercise care not to damage her rifle.

North remained utterly motionless. Now, if ever, an experienced stalker would take time to survey the terrain opposite and immediately above. The stranger did just that. He caught the glimmer of her features peering up through colorless wisps of scud which kept whirling up from the waterfall. Once she had flattened again, the Intelligence Officer inched slowly forward and raised his head until he could get a clear view.

He was astonished to learn how comparatively close his nemesis appeared. Now he was easily able to decide that beneath a jacket of what must be clouded leopard fur she was wearing gray ski trousers tucked into heavy blue woolen socks and that her small mountaineer's boots undoubtedly were of Swiss manufacture. For some reason she had abandoned her *chapka* and was allowing her silvery mane to whip free in the breeze.

Settling back on her heels, the stranger then pulled off her jacket, revealing a heavy ribbed green sweater and a broad

belt hung with minor items of equipment. Pulses quickening, the Intelligence Officer watched her prop her rifle—its telescopic sight already was in place—against the rock wall behind her before crawling forward to consider the file of men toiling upwards across the abyss. Unknown to her, a hoary old blue marmot appeared on a ledge just above and sat up on its haunches the better to survey that lithe, silver-haired figure just below.

Rapidly North recalculated his range as approximately three hundred yards. He grunted his annoyance. Aside from strong puffs of wind and fine spray sifting up from the falls, the chief difficulty concerning the shot he must attempt lay in his target's inferior elevation. Long years ago he had learned at West Point that one of the most difficult of shots is at an object lying well below the firing point.

Crawfishing out of sight, North rolled over onto his back, then forced stiff fingers painstakingly to readjust the Marlin's sights. Satisfied at last, he slipped his sling into place, braced his long legs well apart and then eased the rifle's muzzle just over the rim.

A slight tremor born of tension, and also possibly the altitude, disturbed his usual steadiness. Nevertheless he could, through his telescopic sight, see the woman in sharp detail. She looked to be youngish as she lay on the very lip of the shelf using a pocket telescope to scrutinize the strung-out line of riders and bearers some two hundred yards below her.

Oblivious to the furious play of wind in her hair, she now was devoting full attention to men now sheltering their faces against fine scud swirling from the waterfalls. The marmot remained quite motionless on his little ledge.

In order to steady himself, North drew a series of deep breaths before shoving the Marlin's stock into position. By now he knew that he could kill his would-be assassin with relative ease. His front sight came to rest on that point of her green-sweatered shoulder where it merged with her neck. Gradually, he brought the cross hairs into line and slipped his forefinger through the trigger guard before he slowly withdrew it.

"Damn!" he muttered. "I just can't. Yesterday she could have plugged me like a clay pipe in a gallery—and didn't." And again he wondered why hadn't she killed him as callously as, most likely, she had slain poor Charlie Opdyck? Yet he didn't dare leave her free further to harass and delay him.

Suddenly he found a solution, grinned and traversed his sights until he could make out the brown stock and wickedly slender barrel of what appeared to be a Mannlicher .305. It presented by no means an easy mark even if wind gusts were not deflecting his rifle barrel with exasperating irregularity. By a sudden increase of light flooding into the chasm he deduced that the sun was about to clear some distant peak.

Once more his forefinger crept through the trigger guard until its tip came to rest against wood on the grip's far side.

Evenly, he squeezed, exerting pressure with his whole right hand until the piece cracked and its recoil jolted his shoulder. Oddly enough, he glimpsed the marmot gray-blue flash out of sight as, not delaying an instant, he levered another cartridge into the breech and resighted. Had he missed he must without compunction cut down that silver-haired woman below; the import of this mission was far too critical to admit any further extension of mercy.

Through his telescopic sight he watched the girl retreating from the rim at reptilian speed.

"By God," he whispered, "a ricochet must have hit her."

Then he noted that the stranger was raising her head a few inches in order to stare incredulously upon the splintered stock of her rifle. Because the Mannlicher had been hurled a good yard from its original position, its telescopic sight, too, appeared to be damaged. Infinitely relieved, he then watched his quarry assume a kneeling position with silver-white hair streaming free for all the world like a flag of surrender involuntarily exposed. Through tendrils of mist now taking on rainbow hues in the direct sunlight he saw the girl peer up at his pinnacle until she located his position.

"Here's a little object lesson for you, too, Baby," he chuckled and, rising to a kneeling position, brought his front sight to

bear between graceful twin mounds swelling beneath her heavy green sweater.

Because he caught the flash of eyes widening whitely amid creamy-brown features and saw her squarish mouth flatten convulsively, he guessed that she had seen his rifle muzzle all right and had become aware that, if he so determined, she was about to die.

So they remained a long instant staring at each other across the gorge until, moved by a quixotic impulse, Hugh North heaved himself to his feet and, raising the rifle in one hand, swept off his knitted gray cap and managed as elegant a bow as a man might attempt on a wind-swept pinnacle at the edge of a half-mile drop.

Then an incredible reaction took place. She ran both hands through the short silver gonfalon created by her hair, then ran them slowly over her body down to her belt and ended by blowing him a kiss.

North's chilled, red-brown features relaxed and a wide grin appeared beneath his close-clipped black mustache. But when her hand crept out as if to retrieve the damaged rifle, he raised his own weapon and sharply motioned her to quit the ledge. Far from complying, the girl lingered, staring up at him, then, in deliberate disobedience to his arm signals, started for the broken Mannlicher.

"Damn you for a crazy baggage!" he rasped. Dropping on one knee, he sent a bullet hissing scant inches wide of her head just as she caught up her rifle. She froze and this time when he indicated the gorge she tossed her Mannlicher into the abyss.

Snatching up her curious silver-blue fur jacket, she then spun about and spat vigorously in his direction before disappearing from sight.

4. Frontier Post

Situated at an elevation of nearly seven thousand feet, the fort, or *dzong*, on the hither side of the Jonkhar-Nepalese border, although very old, managed to remain a singularly unimpressive edifice. Set upon a treeless hill where the canyon ended and became a steep valley, the fort's crenelated walls of roughly dressed brown stone and its massive square watchtower effectively dominated the *trang* at that point where it emerged from the Gorge of Durga and started northwards into Jonkhar, towards the Kirong-la and ultimately to Tibet.

Clustered just inside the *dzong's* chipped and weather-beaten gate was ranged a row of single-story stone barracks. Upon their straw-thatched roofs, well anchored with stone, grew melon and pumpkin vines. Parallel to another wall of the compound stood a pair of *powas*, or government-owned rest houses, and a ramshackle stable.

When North's pony stumped heavily under a rusty, medieval-appearing portcullis and between the valves of a massive, iron-bound gate, it was to discover Subadar Thopa deep in conversation with an officer of the Royal Nepalese Frontier Guards.

Apparently the latter belonged to the Gurung tribe, for he stood considerably taller than the attaché. He wore a dark, kilt-like gray *putuka* and a neat tunic of greenish khaki the lustrous brass buttons and ornaments of which would have earned approval from a British sergeant-major. For headgear this officer, like Thopa, affected an Australian-type campaign hat, the brim of which was looped up smartly on its right side. An incongruous note, however, was struck by the wearing of heavy,

turquoise-studded silver bracelets and a triple necklace of well-polished scarlet stones.

Once North and Delahanty had reined in their shaggy little mounts the major summoned a sergeant who promptly called to attention a squad of short but fierce-looking turbaned sepoys. At a glance North became aware that while the uniforms of these privates were all of khaki, they were dissimilar in many details. Without exception, however, their webbing field equipment was spotless, all ammunition bandoliers were polished and their big Enfield rifles glistened dully with oil. Invariably, the handle of a kukri—that trenchant, leaf-shaped blade which is the traditional weapon of Nepal—projected above a varicolored sash supporting a kilt of dull red, brown or gray.

Forcibly, Hugh North again was struck with the fact that these mountaineers suggested crack Japanese troops to an amazing degree. Often scarred, uniformly quick-eyed and compact, they presented a soldierly aspect despite a generous display of bracelets, silver charm boxes, and an occasional gold and turquoise earring.

Rather stiffly Hugh North dismounted and, while unbuckling various items of equipment from his saddle, listened attentively for all that he could understand little. Delahanty, however, possessed a smattering of Nepali and presently muttered:

"Sounds like the Subadar's tryin' to pump his Nibs about whether he's heard about that white-haired dish and her outfit across the valley."

Actually, both parties now were on the Trisuli's west bank for, during the morning, North's little column had traversed the gorge on a swaying bridge so rickety and primitive that while leading his pony across he had felt his breath halt in his throat an embarrassing number of times.

The Subadar came striding over to present his compatriot, a Major Fatch Samut. Once the two white men had shaken hands with him the Border Control Officer called his men to attention and barked a series of commands which sent them trotting over towards their barracks grinning, prancing and patting their kukris very like schoolboys accorded an unexpected holiday.

Very soon the sepoys reappeared carrying climbing equipment, light packs and yak-skin pouches of barley flour in addition to their rifles and ammunition.

"Presently they depart to seek out that silver-haired mem-sahib and her people—if the villagers have missed finding them," Thopa explained, his flat, bronze-hued features wreathed in smiles. "She will soon appear as a prisoner—or not at all."

Scarcely had the pursuers trotted off towards the west than Delahanty's porters trudged into the courtyard and, grunting satisfaction, unshouldered their pack baskets. Soon they commenced to exchange cheerful, age-old jokes and insults with sepoys off duty.

During an interval in which Delahanty supervised disposal of packs, ponies and porters, North rubbed his eyes, used a thumb to smear sunburn grease over lips chapped by wind and cracked by the brief but intense autumn sunlight. Meanwhile he conducted a quick survey of the immediate vicinity.

Far below and clearly to be seen from the lichen-encrusted walls of the *dzong* was the confluence of the Chanpu and Luhkola rivers; here, amid a furious flurry of yellow-white rapids, these two streams united to create the turbulent Trisuli. Turning, the Intelligence Officer directed his gaze along that rock-strewn track leading toward the Kirong Pass. He noted that not far beyond Rasua Chok the road commenced to climb precipitously towards the north-northeast until it lost itself behind towering, brown-black cliffs dwarfed in turn by a distant and very lofty ridge of snow-covered peaks; these hurled themselves skywards like a line of titanic tropical reefs spouting under the lash of a typhoon.

North was recalled to more imminent considerations by the return of Subadar Thopa and the post commandant. It was disturbing to notice a polite but scarcely cordial expression decking Major Samut's definitely Mongolian-appearing countenance.

"Bahadur Colonel," Thopa translated, "will you and Delahanty Sahib be pleased to accompany me?"

On his way to Major Samut's office in the long, low Customs House, North was intrigued to note many faded and frayed yellow or white prayer flags, of both cloth and paper, fluttering from any crack or crevice that offered. They had been placed there, Thopa explained, by superstitious pilgrims in the hope that their waving might waft appeals for protection up the valley to mollify the demons and gods lurking in the Kirong-la.

"Your *lamyik,* Colonel, sir, and yours." Turning, Major Samut held out his hand to Delahanty.

"Does anything appear to be out of order?" came North's tense inquiry.

"I fear so," Thopa admitted, anxiously rubbing his scarred chin. "This stupid Gurung evidently will not willingly clear us into Jonkhar."

"Please inform him that your Minister for War himself endorsed our visas in Katmandu," North directed. "You might also remind him that Jonkhar is a Nepalese protectorate."

Delahanty looked most unhappy, stared sullenly about this dingy and ill-smelling office decorated only by rack on rack of rifles, pistols and yataghans.

Thopa then addressed his compatriot in rapid Nepali and argued to such good effect that, at length, Major Samut's shoulder ornaments flashed to a resigned shrug and he reached for a writing brush and inkpot. He then proceeded to surcharge all three visas with several lines of fine, angular characters. Silently and not at all graciously, he indicated a point for North's signature.

North hesitated. "What's this he's asking me to sign? Years ago I gave up tacking my John Hancock onto anything I don't understand."

The attaché grinned wolfishly. "It is nothing more than an affidavit absolving the Royal Nepalese Government of responsibility in the event of unpleasant happenings in Jonkhar."

Despite rapidly rising misgivings, North endorsed the disclaimer, then while an orderly brought in a samovar and tea bowls of heavy blue china, the Intelligence Officer made inquiry

concerning Dr. Keith's party. Immediately Major Samut's fat-lidded jet eyes revealed anger. Gesticulating violently at the track leading up to Jonkhar, Samut broke into a crackling torrent of Nepali.

"Dr. Keith and his companions possessed no special visas such as yours and that of Delahanty Sahib, but he insisted that his Nepalese visa was valid also in Jonkhar. Despite this officer's urgent warning, he insisted on continuing up the Kirong-la. That was a week ago."

Major Samut lifted his bowl and swilled deep draughts of yak-butter tea.

Thopa translated: "Pilgrims have reported that Dr. Keith has met with trouble among his bearers. They dread the *bhuts* of the pass even more than the barbarous Jonkharis."

Delahanty's straw-hued hair glistened in sunset light beating through a grimy and heavily barred window. "Yeh. I've always heard the Jonkharis are bad medicine—likely to murder any traveler with money or a decent rifle."

The further North conducted his inquiry the less reassured he became, especially when Major Samut insisted, through a mouthful of almond bread, that the Keith party had departed with insufficient food supplies, tired pack animals and semi-mutinous bearers.

After a while, Hugh North inquired very casually whether the major had noticed of late any unusual types among such travelers and pilgrims as had cleared at the *dzong*. The Gurkha major deliberated, belched politely, then tugged at the few strands of hair composing a drooping mustache. Yes, he had observed that an increasing number of Chinese pilgrims had felt moved to seek merit by visiting Rummindei, the birthplace of Buddha.

Had any Europeans appeared headed southward?

The major looked his surprise. "Europeans? No. It has never been the practice of His Majesty, our gracious King Tribhuvana, nor of his Prime Minister Mohun Shumshere, whom Varuna preserve, to permit any save religious folk and a few merchants access to the Tibetan border."

"By what route then," North demanded smoothly, "did this silver-haired white woman violate your frontier?"

A sibilant oath escaped Major Samut and he glowered at a distant snowy peak.

"This memsahib evidently succeeded in crossing from Tibet to the west of here; probably through the Thapli-la, although that is a most perilous pass and seldom used."

A thin smile curved Thopa's mouth. "Only the most experienced mountaineers would dare attempt it so late in the year. Somehow, one imagines that the memsahib need not concern herself about a return crossing."

The post commandant's gaze sought North's lean, red-brown countenance and he stared deep into the Intelligence Officer's clear, deep-set, gray-blue eyes. "Please heed what I say, Bahadur Colonel, when I warn that *under no circumstances* must you linger in Jonkhar, if indeed you are permitted to enter, longer than ten days or a fortnight at the most. At any time from then on will commence blizzards which can close the Kirong-la all winter. To be caught upon the track itself would surely mean death. In these mountains a storm can arise as quickly as one can close the breech of his rifle. You have encountered so few pilgrims because the season is so far advanced."

Evincing a minimum of cordiality, Major Samut then suggested that North's party occupy the principal *powa,* a bleak, primitive edifice which already proved to be sheltering several species of guests distinguished by voracious appetites and never less than six legs.

"Since the Jonkharis probably will turn you back, it is best that you proceed to the border in the morning; to pitch camp in Jonkhar after nightfall and with no provision for defense is dangerous." The Gurkha non-commissioned officer in charge of the *powa* then continued, "Those despoilers of truth and descendants of dogs will look with hunger upon your rifles and equipment."

Only with reluctance did Hugh North resign himself to this inevitable delay; his misgivings concerning Dr. Arunah Keith's

expedition were magnifying themselves. Come what might, he must come up with the scientist and so appear in Jonkhar in the rôle of Dr. Keith's collector of fauna.

Shortly before Major Samut picked up his now cold brass *huqua*—water pipe—and quitted the guest house, Thopa inquired softly, "And what reason, my esteemed friend, did Dr. Keith advance for entering Jonkhar?"

The major's pink palms parted expressively. "Surely for the maddest of all reasons. He must, he declared, discover the migratory habits and the resting grounds of—of—a bird!"

"What bird?" North demanded, tall and gaunt in the candlelight.

"I do not know, Sahib, but it is written down here." The Gurkha thrust forward a scrap of paper on which was written, "I seek the migration route of the Himalayan woodcock, otherwise *Scolopax rusticola rusticola,* which is believed to breed and summer above ten thousand feet altitude."

North tugged at his short black mustache. "*Scolopax rusticola rusticola,* eh? Ever seen one, Delahanty?"

The outfitter looked up from sewing a button onto his windbreaker and grinned. "Not outside of an applejack jug."

"Um. Presume I'll be expected to wing a few before Keith will consent to turn back. By the way, Major, where is the Jonkhari frontier post?"

"About five miles up the valley in a miserable village called Kojarnoth."

5. Jonkhar

Groans arose from the Sherpa porters when, early the next morning, they learned that they were not to lay over for a day at Rasua Chok. Grumbling loudly, they persuaded their *mukhiya* to scrawl especially potent prayers upon trian-

gular bits of paper which they impaled upon twigs or sent drifting up the pass on a fretful southerly breeze. Next they methodically cast stones in the direction of Kojarnoth.

"What the hell?" demanded Delahanty. "Are they trying out for the Minor Leagues?"

Thopa looked annoyed. "No, Sahib, they cast stones before them to frighten off the demons they believe to be awaiting us above. They take it that we shall not reach Kojarnoth at dawn when the *bhuts* are still sleeping."

After Major Sumat's gloomy predictions it came as a pleasant, if puzzling, surprise that the Jonkhari customs officers in Kojarnoth proved to be not only polite but almost amiable. At first glance it was evident that, in no uncertain terms, this semi-independent mountain realm reflected the Rajput descent of its ruler. Here in Kojarnoth turbans largely supplanted round Gurkha caps and the frontier guard wore gaudy but distinctly shabby uniforms, similar to those to be seen guarding palaces in Bengal.

The wayside shrines looked less Buddhist, more Hindu, and were dedicated to Vishnu, Shiva and Varuna, rather than to the Gautama. Certainly these Jonkhari troops were darker, hairier and noticeably taller than their Nepalese counterparts at Rasua Chok. The captain in command proved to be a lean, smallpox-pitted individual distinguished by a huge black beard and fiercely flaring mustaches. Nevertheless, he appeared to be hospitality personified.

Yes, he had cleared the Keith expedition and by consequence the scientists had paused to collect specimens in the valley at a point scarcely fifteen miles ahead. During the morning a skinny-legged and very ragged government runner panted into the *dzong* and promptly disappeared into the captain's office. Presently the Jonkhari commandant appeared to announce that, by latest information, Keith Sahib's party was moving again, apparently headed for the Vale of Jonkhar.

For all the commandant's cordiality, North sensed tension beneath his courteous words and a certain air of detachment as

if his mind was occupied with matters not at hand. Might it not be wise, the post commander suggested, for the Bahadur Colonel to come up with his friends before entering the barren heights above the Vale? Robbers there had been reported as becoming increasingly bold.

Teeth flashing amid his sable beard, the Jonkhari suggested that a party as small as the Bahadur Colonel's would offer prime temptation. In order that the two expeditions might become more quickly united he, Captain Lallah Singh, was attempting to find ponies to mount the bearers.

Long after he had retired to a lumpy cot in the Sri Rajah's *powa,* Hugh North lay mulling over certain indigestible aspects of his immediate problem. Captain Singh's reception had proved totally foreign to that which he had anticipated. Wherefore? Why had the Jonkhari Frontier Control Officer been so eager to expedite a union of the two parties?

By next morning Hugh North had explored every possibility but had arrived no closer to a solution as, moodily, he led his brief column ever higher among snowy mountains which were rearing above their somber timber lines like so many crustaceans escaping an outgrown carapace.

What manner of man might be this Dr. Arunah Keith? And for that matter, what about Professor Malchek? And Mrs. Cutler, the lady botanist from Boston? About the ornithologist, the Intelligence Officer had heard little more than the fact that Keith had accompanied Roy Chapman Andrews on two expeditions into the Gobi Desert, and that he ranked high among the world's ornithologists for having rediscovered the several supposedly extinct birds—among them the mountain quail of Afghanistan. During the Second World War, Arunah Keith's intimate experience with conditions in Outer Mongolia and Sinkiang had proved invaluable to the United States Army Air Force.

"Surely Keith must know what he's up to," North decided. "He's no fogbound scientist; *Scolopax rusticola rusticola* must indeed be one of the extra *rara avis.*"

Concerning Carl Anton Malchek, North knew little save that

he was Czech and for having earned an impressive number of degrees had been appointed Associate Professor of Mammalogy at the University of Pilsen. Subsequent to Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia, Malchek had been reported as arrested, tortured and condemned to the living death of Buchenwald concentration camp. Oddly enough, American captors of that grisly place had discovered no record of a prisoner named Carl Anton Malchek; but then, North reminded himself, Keith's associate, like so many others, might have suffered under an alias.

Although the walls enclosing this valley did not rise by any means as sheer as those in the Gorge of Durga, the track crawled sharply upwards through a rock-littered narrow canyon the upper slopes of which were dark with a heavy growth of pine, ilex and cedar.

The ponies now began really to climb, expelling their breath in explosive white jets and jerking blunt, furry heads violently downwards. In this valley the many strange and brilliant varieties of birds proved to be surprisingly tame. Thopa recognized a few species and pointed out the red-billed magpie, the Sikkim jay which was of a lovely fawn color slashed in blue. The Sim Kukra, or laughing thrush, sang in almost every copse while coveys of chukars whirring into sudden flight set North and Delahanty wishing they had time to bag a few—but there wasn't.

The brief column entered, and quickly left behind, the straw-thatched village of Takli, a miserable collection of stone two-story huts the ground floors of which invariably were employed as folds for sheep, goats or yaks. The stench penetrating into the human quarters on the second floor must have defied description. A solitary and very filthy red-hat lama, attending a *chaitya* or Buddhist roadside shrine, and snarling watchdogs chained to every doorpost were the only visible witnesses to the party's passage.

On the morning of their second day in Jonkhar, North's column was cheered to discover recent evidences of Dr. Keith's party. In a dense magnolia and birch grove they frightened a foraging pack of jackals away from recent campfires, some yak

bones, a broken pack cinch, bits of soiled rag and even a strip of Kleenex bearing brilliant scarlet lipstick smears.

Gradually the aspect of Jonkhar grew increasingly untamed and primitive. Here in the Takli Valley—it soon would end at the outlet of the great Kirong-la—the country proved wild indeed and numbers of tiny, glacier-fed cataracts, tumbling in lacy purity through gray-green forests struggling up to the timber line, increased with every mile traveled.

Gradually the white towers, battlements and peaks composing the Ganesh Himal Range of the High Himalayas began crowding closer. At dawn of their third day in Jonkhar the porters chattered in sudden fright, dropped their *dokos* and came bounding up to join the four armed men. Presently everyone saw the bear, a huge black-and-yellow beast plodding along a ridge and feeding on berry bushes.

In some astonishment, North inquired, "Why did our Sherpas act scared silly just now? Most bears will run a mile to avoid a man."

"Not these," Delahanty informed. "These mountain species often stalk, kill and eat natives—no wonder they're deathly afraid of 'em."

It was midmorning of the next day when North and Thopa, riding point as usual, came upon the first pilgrim encountered in days. Wearing an indescribably ragged brown cloak, grimy linen pantaloons and a mangy fur cap, he crouched barefooted beside the road, hugging a wooden begging bowl and apparently lost in meditation.

Thopa reined in and called a greeting while North narrowly surveyed this dingy, unkempt individual who wore his hair so long that it dangled in a greasy bang low over his eyes—much like an English sheep dog.

"It is late in the year, O Holy Brother," called Thopa, "to cross the Kirong-la. You must possess courage matching your endurance to have won through."

The wanderer gave no indication of having understood or of even having heard the Gurkha's remark; he only kept revolving a prayer wheel—a brass cylinder mounted on a spindle and mo-

tivated by the centrifugal force set up by a short length of chain attached to its side.

"Can't you make him talk?" North queried, thankful for an excuse to dismount. "Maybe he doesn't understand Nepali or Khaskha; or is he deaf?"

Various porters then were invited to try their luck but none could obtain an intelligible reply; the gnome-like creature merely continued to squat on knobby bare heels mumbling to himself, only a foot or two removed from the edge of a particularly steep section of track. At this point it overhung a ravine several hundred feet deep. With a paw-like hand he commenced to finger a Buddhist rosary. His robes of dull red proved to be disgustingly foul, while lice were visible exploring the rabbit's-fur-cap perched atop a shaggy mass of blue-black hair.

Puzzled, North strode over to ascertain whether this pilgrim really was deaf and saw that he owned only the meagerest of traveling equipment: a yak's-hair blanket, a wooden begging bowl and a battered brass case designed to contain chopsticks lay among the pebbles beside him.

"Poor bastard looks all in," Delahanty observed. "His feet are swollen real bad."

Thopa smiled. "Perhaps, but the most difficult of this holy man's journey lies behind him."

North bent low to peer into the pilgrim's jet, expressionless eyes and so became aware that they tilted faintly upwards at their outer corners.

"Om mani padme hum! Hail to the Jewel in the heart of the lily." Only the eternal Buddhist prayer issued from behind the veiling tangle of hair and the dented brass prayer wheel maintained its smooth whirring. The Sherpa porters meanwhile occupied themselves in readjusting loads borne by a string of pack ponies lent by Captain Lallah Singh as a courtesy of His Highness Matbar Nana Jang, Sri Rajah of Jonkhar.

North drew Thopa to one side. "Tell me, have you noticed anything out-of-the-way about this chap?"

The little Gurkha's eyes narrowed. "Why? What makes you think there might be?"

"Look him over carefully, please," North insisted, then suddenly stooped to stroke the pilgrim's shoulder-long mane of blue-black hair.

"Lend me thy rosary, O Holy One," Thopa invited, "that I may offer a prayer for the safe completion of thy most meritorious journey."

When the traveler merely continued to drone *"Om mani padme hum"* the Subadar angrily snatched away the rosary, then ran the worn brown beads rapidly between his fingers. While he did so the Intelligence Officer watched, decided that every tenth bead appeared to be slightly larger than the rest.

When Thopa had finished counting he stepped swiftly back and snatched out his leaf-bladed kukri, but in an even swifter move, the pilgrim hurled himself at North like a charging tackle. Certainly the Intelligence Officer would have been knocked off the trail and into the boulder-studded ravine had not Delahanty's foot shot out to unbalance the other's rush. Thrown off-stride, the pilgrim consequently dealt North's wiry figure only a glancing blow while his own impetus carried him over the edge of the track.

A single shrill scream escaped the lama, then his body leaped, rolled and bounded violently down the slope like that of some demented acrobat. Arms and legs flying, the red-clad figure vanished, but he must have died before covering half the distance to a glacial torrent rushing along the valley's floor.

"Well, I'll be goddamned!" Delahanty burst out. "That was mighty fast work."

"Not by me," North corrected grimly. "Thanks, pal." He could have said much more, but didn't, only cast the ex-flier a look of profound gratitude.

"Say, Colonel, what the hell made you suspect our pal wasn't kosher?"

"Almost at once I noticed that the hair covering his forehead seemed to be of two distinct textures: one quite fine, the other coarse as yak hair. So far, I've never yet seen a man's hair grow like that." He turned to the Gurkha. "And you, my friend, what gave you cause for suspicion?"

"On a Buddhist rosary, Bahadur Colonel, are threaded one hundred and twenty beads, which correspond to the one hundred and twenty verses of the *Iti Vuttaka,*" Thopa said, slipping his kukri back into position over his stomach. "His beads numbered only one hundred."

"Well, I'll be goddamned." Delahanty produced a strip of chewing gum and commenced stripping off the foil. Bright blue eyes intense, he said, "While we're playin' questions and answers, why should Dirty Dick have tried to knock you off just now?"

"That," North replied, "is what we'll try to find out before going on."

Once a pair of porters together with their *mukhiya* had been dispatched to the rocky floor of the ravine, North picked up the prayer wheel and handed it to Thopa. "Maybe since his rosary was phoney you can find something off-color about this."

The Subadar uttered a soft, clicking grunt. "You are quite right, Bahadur Colonel! This wheel is much too heavy."

Quickly Thopa unscrewed a brass knob capping that spindle about which the prayer wheel revolved. Once the brass cylinder's lid had been removed North whistled softly, for neatly packed within the six-inch drum was a small bottle and possibly twenty little scrolls of India paper secured by lengths of yellow silk thread. Also concealed was a small but magnificently tooled sextant!

Investigation further revealed that the chopstick box had been fitted with a false bottom in which reposed hidden an excellent prismatic compass complete with azimuth finder, a fine lettering pen and two vials, one of waterproof India ink and another of mercury.

Lost in lively speculation, North eyed this curious collection of surveying instruments. "Looks as if somebody is interested in making a survey of the Kirong-la."

"But what purpose can this mercury serve?"

"I catch it," Delahanty announced. "This phoney hobo could make an artificial horizon by pouring the mercury into his begging bowl. Correct?"

"Correct. Entirely correct."

"But what beats me is where that phoney rosary comes in?"

To this the Gurkha supplied an answer. "It may seem unlikely that anyone could be so persistent, but I think this engineering spy used the rosary to count his strides. Every tenth stride there would be a larger bead which would make it easier for him to remember his count. It was thus that, in 1904, certain British secret agents sent into Tibet made possible the success of Colonel Younghusband's expedition to Lhasa."

Presently the bearers reappeared, fetching from the ravine various articles which had accompanied the pseudo-pilgrim to his doom. There was a wig, crudely fashioned of black yak's hair, the agent's freshly bloodstained red-brown robe, his verminous rabbit-fur cap and a modern P-38 automatic pistol.

"Please pack these things very carefully," North instructed Delahanty. While speaking, he loosened a yellow silk thread constricting one of those minute rolls of India paper. "Well, I'm damned!"

"What the hell are those hen tracks?" demanded Delahanty, peering over the Intelligence Officer's shoulder. "Sanskrit?"

"No, not Sanskrit," came the troubled reply. "They're some dialect of Chinese."

"And in what part of China are such characters understood?" Thopa queried.

"If only you or I knew," sighed Colonel Hugh North.

6. Brown Cloud

At the cost of a precious hour's delay in overtaking the Keith expedition, Hugh North himself descended the ravine minutely to examine the false pilgrim's body.

"He was an Oriental, all right," North observed while easing

the hideously battered brown head back upon pebbles at the water's edge. "But not necessarily a Chinese."

"Perhaps this spy was a Khalka from Inner Mongolia or an Orda?" suggested the Subadar. He commenced to wash bloodied hands in the icy current. "One is regretful we could not induce him to speak."

The Intelligence Officer frowned, then sighed. "One of our biggest handicaps in bucking the Soviets is that their Union and satellite states include so many races."

Thoughtfully North cast the dead man a final appraising glance, then undertook a laborious climb back to that point where Delahanty and his porters sat smoking and casting apprehensive glances up the section of trail which soon they must traverse.

According to the Subadar, the road to Jang soon must enter a narrow defile at the upper end of which the track forked. One route led to the all-important Kirong Pass and a series of great forts built there by the Sri Rajahs of Jonkhar. The other and left-hand fork eventually should end in the City of Jang.

During the middle of the day North's expedition rode into a high valley shaded by conifers and carpeted by grassy meadows flecked with autumn flowers. Here several varieties of deer and mountain sheep such as nahoor and argali could be detected feeding or watering in lordly disdain of the pack train jingling its way across still another icy little stream.

Towards four of the afternoon the valley commenced to narrow and become constrained between steep, boulder-studded bluffs which faded back to blend with wind-swept foothills. These in turn recoiled upon jagged peaks denuded of growth and showing up sharp against the snow- and glacier-whitened mountains of the Ganesh Himal.

Delahanty came riding up to the head of the column, wearing a thoughtful look while shifting on his pony's high-peaked saddle.

"Say, Boss, I been tryin' to figure out why old Mattress Face at the border was so ready to hurry us along, but I can't."

"Nor can I," North admitted. "Besides, he lied to us. Keith's

party isn't more than half a day's march ahead of us. Notice those yak droppings a while back?"

"Still looks pretty sure we're not gonna catch up to the Doc this side of that little pass Thopa spoke of. Too bad we lost so much time over Dirty Dick back there. All the same, I ain't saying that the time wasn't well spent. How many more surveyor-spies do you suppose the Chinese Commies have sent over from Tibet into this neck o' the woods?"

"No telling, but it's a good bet they've done plenty of quiet infiltrating," North replied, running a wary eye up a very steep slope seeming to overhang the trail. It rose as an irregular series of pinnacles, pillars and outcrops; many of them were grotesque in shape.

"I'll bet they'll be——" The words became lost in a deep, booming roar from up the pass. To North it sounded like a major explosion of some sort.

"What the hell's that?" Delahanty snapped while Thopa and North reined in and watched a great column of curious, brownish smoke rise, billowing and swirling, out of the canyon and then eddy hundreds of yards high into the sky. The thunderous rumbling sound increased until the ground trembled.

"An earthquake," cried the ex-flier. "They have lots of 'em in the Himalayas."

Lesser rumblings followed during which that odd-colored brown cloud curled upwards until a slant of wind whirled it upwards to dissipate among the foothills.

"You are mistaken, Sahib. That was a rockslide," came the Subadar's explanation.

"Are slides usual this time of year?" North's straight black brows merged and, dubiously, he fingered a jaw that was powerful without being stubborn. "I thought they generally occur in the spring when frost leaves the ground."

"That is so," admitted the Gurkha. "But prolonged rains also can undermine ledges and so start slides. Let us hope the defile is not completely choked."

Delahanty looked his amazement. "Say, is that possible?"

"It is entirely possible."

Scarcely a mile further up this winding little canyon the travelers came upon first evidences of the slide in guise of heavy, red-brown dust coating grass, rocks and ground. Small boulders lay scattered upon the track with increasing frequency. Still further along a fallen rock had dammed the stream until it flowed almost on a level with the track itself. Roaring protests, the mountain stream, now discolored to a deep red by rock dust and dirt, hurled itself in a soiled fury over these new obstacles.

On rounding a turn the awed and apprehensive riders beheld the main slide as a vast ramp of jagged boulders, slabs and huge, angular sections of strata. A thin brownish haze still lingered over the barrier thus dropped. Very quickly it became evident that even for a pedestrian it would prove difficult to surmount this wild jumble of fallen spires, columns and crags.

"We can't get a pony acrost that mess till some sort of a trail's been leveled off," Delahanty announced. "And it'd take two weeks' work to make only a beginning."

North considered the rockslide with great care, then nodded. "I guess we'll all travel shanks' mare from here in. Delahanty, detail your weakest porter to herd these ponies back to the Jonkhari Customs Station. Wouldn't do to let Captain Singh feel we would be careless with the Sri Rajah's property."

Then followed an interval to permit carry baskets to be unstrapped and reslung and various haversacks, bandoliers, ammunition cases and other impedimenta transferred to human shoulders. Once the Sherpa selected for the task had driven his charges off down the valley, North led his party out upon the loose stones and treacherous shale constituting this chaotic, devastating barrier. Here the porters, long accustomed to such difficult terrain, had the best of it. The three leaders kept slipping, stumbling and skidding over the piled-up débris.

"It'll take months to clear this trail," Delahanty panted as, sweat-bathed, the white men paused for breath. "Still, maybe it's all to the good. Ain't going to be no Red column getting by till next year." His features, sunburned despite a thick application of cream, glistened to his grin. "Now what, Colonel? Come

that slide ten minutes later and we'd have been cat's meat. Good thing Dirty Dick held us up after all, eh?"

"You bet." North left off studying the mountainside through his field glasses and swung them up the pass.

Presently his jaw tightened and his breath came in with a small hiss.

"What's up, Boss?"

"Something like a patch of yellow cloth is lying on the slide up ahead."

Thopa, ranging ahead, also must have noted the garment for, lightly as a bharal, he bounded forward but took the precaution of leaving his orderly standing with head tilted upwards and rifle ready. North found the attaché crouched over a mangled brown hand hanging limp from between two jagged rocks. Here and there, bits of equipment such as canteens, a broken *doko* and an unwound, green cotton turban lay like flotsam brought in on this monstrous flood of rock.

A sour taste invaded North's mouth when even a cursory examination disclosed more splashes of blood and parts of bodies mashed into pulp beneath tons of stone.

"I fear," the Subadar observed presently, his jet, slanting eyes restlessly probing the high slopes, "that we shall not join Dr. Keith after all."

This appeared to be no less than the truth. Certainly no living thing could have survived the crushing weight of these thousands of tons of rock. It came, therefore, as a small miracle that as they were nearing the barrier's far side, a voice was heard calling from above—and in English!

Guided by a series of muffled shouts, the Gurkha and North scrambled up the talus until they arrived, gasping, at the foot of a promontory rising boldly from the débris.

North knelt, pushed aside a layer of small stones and, peering through a gap between two huge boulders, glimpsed a dirty, yellow-bearded face out of which peered dazed and white-ringed eyes. Apparently the survivor had found refuge under the overhang of a powerful ledge but had become completely hemmed in.

"Can—get us out?"

"Yes. Shouldn't take long."

"It—better not," a woman's voice cut in. "Damned cramped in here."

"Shouldn't wonder," North agreed. "Any of you hurt?"

"Our *mukhiya's* got—broken arm," the man's voice replied. It quivered like an overstrained cable.

"You're Keith, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Who's that in there with you?"

"Mrs. Cutler and our *mukhiya.* Is—is Dr. Malchek all right?"

"I'm afraid there's nobody left alive but you," North informed while levering at the rock.

For once the Sherpa porters roused themselves from their habitual lethargy and, shouting all the while to scare away the *bhuts* who had perpetrated this disaster, prised, heaved and gradually created a passage through which it was possible to pull the injured *mukhiya.*

"Next," North called, reaching into the aperture in which rock-dust vapor still eddied. "Grab my hand. Easy does it."

"Omit the dramatics, whoever you are," Mrs. Cutler's voice advised. "I—get out—'self."

Through the aperture appeared the dust-sprinkled, short bobbed head of a young woman. That she was somewhat stupefied was apparent in that her bright blue eyes held a blank quality and could not seem to focus themselves.

"Others all—killed?" Her voice sounded frozen and toneless.

"I am afraid so."

"Afraid? Don't you know?"

In impatient sympathy the Intelligence Officer surveyed this dusty young woman in dark green ski pants, a wrinkled gray sweater and a tattered bush coat. Her figure looked muscular and, although she stood slightly over medium height, her shoulders were a trifle wider and her legs longer than usual. In a numbed gesture she dabbed at a shallow cut along her right

cheek while watching Delahanty and North tug Arunah Keith out of the cavity.

"You look a sight, Doctor," she commented, then fumbled in her breast pocket for what turned out to be a dusty and well-crushed packet of cigarettes. "I guess the others have had it, all right. Here today and gone today," she muttered, then, swaying slightly, went over to seat herself on a flat stone. She sat there with fingers absently brushing rock dust from short, light brown hair, holding the unlighted cigarette between her lips and staring blankly down the talus slope under which her companions lay buried.

The third survivor North instantly recognized to be Arunah Keith, lanky, gray-eyed and wearing a short, yellow-brown beard. Judging by his scant, gray-blond hair and deepening wrinkles, he must be approaching fifty. Apparently he was one of those luckless persons who never tan successfully, only scorch, for the bridge of his long, straight nose, the line of his cheekbones and his forehead all glowed a raw scarlet.

"Thank you," he mumbled and stood rubbing hard at the back of his neck. Like Mrs. Cutler, he, too, seemed still somewhat dazed and unable to concentrate and only blankly regarded Thopa's efforts to bandage the *mukhiya's* lacerated arm.

"Thank you for saving us," he said at length. "Are you—— Forgive my not having introduced myself before. I am Arunah Keith—just barely so, it seems," he added with a faint smile.

"I am Hugh North—the man they sent to replace Charles Opdyck." He flashed a curiously winning smile at this dusty, bedraggled figure standing so forlornly on the hillside. "Expecting me?"

"Oh, yes. But—I—I——" He passed a quivering hand over his eyes. "I'm afraid I'm still a trifle confused—— You're convinced Professor Malchek cannot have survived?"

"Quite," North assured. "The only person left besides you and your companions is a young bearer, but he is unconscious and about to die—Delahanty says his whole chest was crushed."

"Oh, God! Then there are only three left of thirty-three!" He turned away, dust-streaked red face working convulsively. "Poor Carl." He stumped over to pat the young woman's shoulder as she sat immobile and silent to one side.

Presently Dr. Keith returned, inquired anxiously, "Have you seen anything of my specimens? Some must have survived. They were packed in very strong cases—they're the results of six months' difficult research."

No more than the clothes he and Mrs. Cutler wore had been preserved, North informed; everything else was buried beneath tons of rock.

Bitterly the ornithologist lamented the loss of hundreds of expertly cured specimens, scientific notes and costly equipment.

A further and very serious loss, considering the situation, was the destruction of the expedition's firearms.

"I think," North observed when, that night, the rescued and rescuers sat about a larger than usual campfire, "that the moment has come to break out a wee bot' brought along to celebrate a high moment or to cheer a low one."

Jenny Cutler, engulfed in Delahanty's best shooting jacket, said in her clear Bostonian voice, "It's about time. The lot of us *could* do with some cheer."

North produced a flask-shaped bottle of Monnet cognac and while stripping the lead foil from about its stopper cast a quick look about. He felt a trifle reassured since Kali Yuga, the Subadar's orderly, swathed in a sheepskin coat, occupied a lofty lookout position to the north of the encampment. Meanwhile in the opposite direction Ad Delahanty was crouching in an ilex thicket with rifle ready.

Although no mention had been made of the fact, everyone was aware that their party stood little chance of beating off any attack by bandits. After all, even the combined parties included but twelve men and a woman armed with seven rifles and a brace of shotguns. Moreover, the food supply was inadequate to conduct a long retreat afoot, nor did tents, blankets or cloth-

ing exist with which to equip the survivors of that curiously unseasonable rockslide.

While decanting his cognac into a minute metal cup North became aware that, for the first time, Delahanty's Sherpas neither gamed nor sang, only huddled about their fire revolving prayer wheels and directing sullen or apprehensive glances towards the surrounding heights.

Dr. Keith, tallest of the white men, stared miserably into the fire, obviously quite overwhelmed by the abrupt loss of his expedition. Behind steel-rimmed spectacles his small, gray eyes kept filling, his fists clenched and unclenched themselves at irregular intervals. Protecting his nearly bald scalp was a spare cap of Delahanty's, one of those knitted khaki affairs designed to be worn under a steel helmet.

Although Keith had not yet removed the dust from his face and hands, Mrs. Cutler had made efforts to improve her appearance by washing in an icy brook and then combing out her soft brown hair—an easy matter since she wore it cut almost boyishly short. She had even applied a touch of crimson to a wide yet definitely attractive mouth.

It came abruptly to Hugh North that, previously, he had beheld the botanist's calm, deeply tanned and patrician countenance. London? New York? Rome? Or possibly Istanbul? Try as he would to remember, the proper backdrop somehow proved unwilling to fall into place.

" 'Tis a pity," said he while pouring her drink, "that the best toast for this occasion seems to be 'better luck from now on.' "

To his surprise there was a chill in her bright blue eyes. "How trite! I think we damned well should drink to a decent reception in Jang."

His color mounted but he was at pains to remain pleasant. "It's as you wish. Do you anticipate unpleasantness there?"

"During this bloody trip I have listened to all kinds of rumors about Jonkhar. Few of them made Jang sound attractive. I expect I'll be almost the first white woman to lay eyes on the place."

"That is certain," Dr. Keith observed. "I daresay that we are

certainly the first Americans ever to enter the Vale of Jonkhar. I only hope," he added with a mirthless little laugh, "that we shall also be the first Americans to leave it."

Arunah Keith accepted the little aluminum cup, lifted it to his bearded lips and sipped slowly. "Do you know, Colonel, I find that to so completely revise my plans is proving more difficult than I had anticipated?"

"I shouldn't wonder," North returned. "Under the circumstances, shall you attempt to go on collecting?"

"Why, of course," came the instant reply. "Jenny, how about you?"

"Don't be stupid. I didn't come all the way out here to return empty-handed."

"I didn't think you would." Heavily, Keith turned back to North. "I would not deem this year's expedition to be a complete failure if you were able to secure for me a specimen of the fabulous clouded leopard. In Nepal proper the species is undoubtedly extinct. However, I have heard reports to the effect that a few still exist among the mountains lying to the north of Jang." Enthusiasm entered his voice, lent it the first touch of life since the disaster.

"And don't forget dear old *Scolopax rusticola!*" snapped Jenny. "You certainly must prove your migration theories, Arunah."

Back on the rockslide some jackals must have scented bodies and carcasses under the talus, for now they caused this whole shadow-ruled valley to resound with their eerie wails.

North put away the flask and reseated himself. "Tell me, Doctor, is it true that none of you obtained special *lamyiks* to enter Jonkhar?"

"The Foreign Minister of Nepal gave us *carte blanche* to visit any part of the kingdom we wished," Keith stated, nervously fingering his beard. "Since Jonkhar definitely is a dependency of the Crown of Nepal, isn't it logical to assume that a visa issued in Katmandu is sufficient?"

"It's a protectorate—not a dependency," North corrected softly.

For the first time Subadar Thopa entered the conversation. "Keith Sahib, you would have had no trouble in obtaining a special visa such as is carried by Colonel North. Why did you not provide yourself with one?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, when we were back in Katmandu," the Cutler girl sharply interjected, "how were we to have any idea that Arunah's, Dr. Keith's, research on that bloody Himalayan woodcock would lead us this far north? Surely even you can understand how such changes of plan come about?"

"Yes, Memsahib." The Gurkha nodded solemnly, flat features glowing bronze-red in the firelight. "But one is not so sure that the Sri Rajah and his Dewan will see likewise."

"I'm certain we'll meet with no trouble," Dr. Keith declared, but his tone lacked conviction. "Even the Dalai Lama of Tibet has admitted that no country, not even his on the roof of the world, can any longer remain isolated."

North's gaze shifted to Jenny Cutler's piquant and rather shiny features. "I presume you have lost all your botanical specimens?"

"Almost all," she admitted. "Fortunately I was carrying my sketch book when that goddamn avalanche struck." As if explaining to a small boy, she continued. "You see, botanical specimens are extremely difficult to preserve and transport, so I have invariably made detailed drawings of such rare plants as the *Rosaceae*, especially the *Cotoneaster frigida* and the *Photinia integrifolia.*" He caught the gleam of suddenly lifted eyes. "I am almost sure that I've discovered three hitherto unknown varieties. But what the hell? You wouldn't understand, and care less."

"Correct, if you want it that way." Hugh North fought back a growing dislike of this patronizing female for all that she was far from unattractive sitting yonder with fingers laced over patched and muddied knees.

7. Shadows in the Night

So many years had passed since Hugh North had stood sentry-go that he had quite forgotten how difficult it is to remain on the alert when one is bone-weary, chilled and existing in unaccustomed altitudes. Gradually becoming experienced in such matters, he judged that this night's encampment—their fourth in Jonkhar—must lie at approximately seven thousand feet.

Cold commenced inexorably to creep over that high tableland upon which the little column had debouched and began to penetrate North's eiderdown-tufted jerkin, chiefly because he deemed it wiser to remain motionless, blended among the weird scattering of monoliths outcroppings and miniature buttes characterizing this barren plateau, rather than to keep on the move.

From his post he noted that both campfires had dwindled to mounds of rose-gray embers. All the same, life was abroad on this dismal plateau. The occasional yapping of a fox, the hooting of an owl or the shrill piping of a night bird added themselves to the rustle of some large animal passing through a laurel thicket. He kept ears sharply attuned for possible menace.

To keep himself awake he reviewed the matter of that false pilgrim—Dirty Dick, as Delahanty had dubbed him. What implications were to be drawn from his presence on the approaches to Kirong-la? Such proof of the enemy's forehandedness certainly looked ominous.

Fervently, North again lamented his complete inability to read Chinese in any form. What a pity that the first reconnaissance plane was not due for another week. Undoubtedly ex-

perts with the U. S. Military Mission in New Delhi could, and would, draw conclusions of critical importance from entries so neatly painted upon those minute ribbons of India paper.

"They'll argue," he told himself, "that as usual, Uncle Joe is getting the jump on us. Wonder just how they got wise to Opdyck's real mission with the Keith party? No telling. Might have been some porter or the keeper of a *powa.*"

By listening hard he distinguished the sound of Thopa going up to relieve the ex-flier. High up on the black hillside behind them sounded a sudden crashing noise. When it was not repeated he resumed his ruminations.

"Why didn't that cotton-topped baby pot me just as she did poor old Charlie? Could have. I must have made a prettier target than that confounded bharal. Ergo, *somebody* must have restrained her. Who and why? Does she have any connections with Dirty Dick? Only thing I'm pretty sure of is that she's been sent by Uncle Joe's boys. Hers is the most interesting face I have seen in a long time," he told himself. "Wonder what she looks like close to. By God, the way she blew that kiss and then spat at me!"

Silently he put down his rifle, then flailed his arms until his heartbeat quickened. Damn, how black it was on this tableland despite the starlight; black as the inside of a witch's cat.

He resumed his self-communing. "Now, my lad, comes the big question. Is Cotton-Top working out of Jonkhar, or has she infiltrated from Tibet? Um. If she's been sent out from Jonkhar, it means our Red chums must be in solid with the Sri Rajah."

A rare sense of futility, of hopelessness gripped him. After all, what could he accomplish alone, unaccredited and lacking money or the promise of quick support? Armed with only guile and arguments which might not prove in the least effective or likely of fulfillment, what chance did he stand of winning over an ignorant and brutal autocrat reared in bitter hatred and mistrust of all English-speaking persons?

Yet, despite everything, the Kirong Pass *must not* be left open to loose Soviet or Red Chinese armies upon Nepal and

India! How could the Indian Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, otherwise so clear-sighted, have come to be persuaded that the Red Tiger would hesitate at rending and ravishing India at the first propitious moment?

Only one telling argument lay at his disposal. The callous abandonment by Moscow of the North Koreans and their Manchurian Red allies in their hour of defeat must be played up to the fullest.

He started to the faint but distinctive *clank* of metal against stone somewhere off to the westward. Stooping, he pressed an ear to the ground of clammy clay and detected a very faint series of impacts. These gradually became more audible and concise until he became convinced that a sizable body of men under arms was in the act of encircling the camp.

Moving with the greatest of caution not to dislodge any of the loose stones strewn on the bare clay, North picked a course among the outcrops back to the fire. He was not in the least surprised to find Thopa already in and alerting Ad Delahanty. Kali Yuga was slipping on a bandolier of cartridges and taking care to rouse Keith and Jenny Cutler in complete silence. Only a minimum of sound attended distribution of the seven rifles.

Jenny Cutler's hair and lips brushed North's ear. "I can handle a shotgun. Got any buckshot?"

"About two dozen rounds. Remember to fire low."

"Tell us what we are to do," Dr. Keith whispered.

After gesturing for silence North listened intently, then motioned his companions to put their heads together.

"We'll fan out to a distance of about fifty yards and make a loose circle around the campfire," came the Intelligence Officer's calm undertones. "You'll take up positions behind the best available protection. Don't anybody talk or move or shoot till you hear Thopa's or my whistle. But when the signal comes, everybody shoot low and keep on shooting, even if you see nothing, for five or six rounds. Understand?"

Gradually noises made by the expedition in seeking their posts subsided. Barely discernible on North's right was a porter who crouched behind a boulder fondling his kukri and other-

wise readying himself for action. His left-hand neighbor proved to be Dr. Keith's *mukhiya* holding a pistol in his undamaged hand.

Minutes dragged by and gave the illusion of stretching into hours when a raw night wind commenced to bite stronger than ever. North guessed he hadn't felt as cold since that time he and Jingles had fled for their lives towards the Turkish border across a series of snow-covered Bulgarian fields.

Jingles! As he crouched, teeth clenched to restrain their chattering, he re-experienced a bitter longing once again to hear her gay, rich voice and peer into the sweet depths of those glorious blue-gray eyes.

What might that handsome and efficient but hard swearing and acting Mrs. Cutler be thinking at this moment? No telling, of course.

Everything, he foresaw, depended upon the leadership and tactics adopted by the Jonkharis now so skillfully converging upon the camp. Properly handled, seven repeating rifles and a brace of shotguns should serve as a powerful deterrent.

Should they be allowed the initiative, North suddenly perceived, these mountaineers were of a breed which, once a rush got under way, would suffer heavy casualties before retiring. Born to the law of the kukri and the rifle and inhabiting a wild and lonely land where violent death was commonplace, these descendants of the barbaric Sunwar and Limbu tribes held death in no particular awe, or so the *mukhiya* steadfastly had maintained.

While jerking a few more cartridges out of his bandolier he made a further and hasty estimate of the situation. The more he considered, the stronger grew his conviction that regular Jonkhari troops would not be sent to exterminate even the most unwelcome expedition in this fashion, not unless they wished their bloody deed to be kept secret. No, if Matbar Nana Jang had decided to have massacred what he held to be the illegal invaders of his realm, he would take pleasure in publicizing his object lesson far and wide.

He found it infuriating not to know more concerning the Sri

Rajah of Jonkhar, especially since, like an evil undertone, the name "Nana" stung his memory; Nana Sahib stained by the bloody treachery of Cawnpore; Nana, ignorant, bitter enemy of any who spoke English.

Br-r-r. Despite everything North could do, his teeth commenced to chatter softly and he wondered how Dr. Keith and Mrs. Cutler, neither of them very warmly clad, might be faring.

Again, and this time not very far away, sounded the soft rasp of steel over rock. The unseen raiders must now be so close that they could orient themselves by the faint ash-rose glow from the nearly extinct campfires. A glance at his wrist watch informed him that, incredibly, two hours must have passed since those first stealthy sounds. Dawn ought to manifest itself within half an hour, and daybreak traditionally would be the time to expect a sudden onslaught by attackers expecting to find weary travelers still drowsing in blankets or sleeping bags.

In coarse woolen mittens he wriggled stiffened fingers to limber them for the violent action in store and again pondered Jenny Cutler's thoughts at the moment. Was she yearning to be back in her affluent, sedate residence on Boston's Louisburg Square? What sequence of events had terminated in her crouching in frigid darkness atop a bleak Himalayan plateau? Or was she reflecting upon the amazing incredible conduct of her former husband? Dr. Keith in a quiet aside had asserted that Leverett Cutler, after serving nearly two years as bomber pilot in the ETO, had found himself so captivated by the lively cooperation of a lusty blonde Latvian refugee that he had, in an epoch-making phone call, quoted Ben Franklin's famous remark concerning his wife's "dutiful complacency" and had bluntly demanded an immediate divorce. Imagine a member of the Sewing Circle being deserted for the daughter of a common police court magistrate!

Gingerly North extended long limbs to ease a cramp threatening to disable his left calf. Covert noises now emanated from a clump of dimly seen boulders to his left and in front of the wounded *mukhiya*. Although he strained his vision, nothing was to be seen among that shadowy tangle of rock. There might

be fifteen, fifty or a hundred dark-faced, shaggy, fur- and rag-clad men out yonder.

When a faint luminosity grayed the eastward faces of peaks soaring almost overhead it seemed, the Intelligence Officer scrambled to a kneeling position, drew a deep breath and made his army officer's whistle fairly scream three winged, sibilant blasts, then his deep voice shouted, "Fire at will! Cut the bastards down!"

He set an example by leveling his 38-55 at that clump of rocks and, working the Marlin's lever smoothly, distributed five unsighted shots—it remained far too dark to aim with any accuracy—at the terrain before him.

In this pre-dawn silence the staccato racket raised by seven rifles and two shotguns proved to be amazingly impressive. Hampered by chilled fingers, he crammed fresh cartridges into the magazine and prayed his companions would not become so excited as completely to empty their magazines before taking time to reload. As it was, the whole plateau echoed and re-echoed to the spiteful, flat report of rifles and the deeper-toned and less succinct *bang!* raised by shotguns.

Had his gamble paid off? He should, in a few moments, be able to learn whether he had wasted the precious supply of ammunition in merely postponing ultimate capture or massacre, or had succeeded in frightening away the enemy. Certainly they must have been thoroughly disconcerted at finding their intended victims not only on the alert but ready to put up a desperate resistance.

Might not the bandit leader—it was bandits he had to cope with, North decided—consider the cost of an attack against a prepared enemy too risky? North, after feeding a second set of cold and slippery brass cartridges into the Marlin, listened, heard the voices of others.

He bellowed, "Cease fire! But stand ready. If anyone advances, drop him!"

The next few moments were spent in almost stunning stillness, crouched amid silvery-gray, shifting ground vapors. Perhaps because North's ears still were ringing from that spiteful

cracking of rifles he failed to identify any of those subdued noises which previously they had noticed.

Minutes dragged by while the snow-crowned Ganesh Himal mountains to the westward assumed first a lovely pale pink, then the range took on more brilliant rose hues until, all at once, the loftiest of those distant peaks flamed golden-scarlet.

Of the encircling force no trace remained beyond two or three telltale splashes of blood to prove that the whole affair had not been a nightmarish figment of the imagination.

8. The Vale

Beside the weed-covered ruins of a small hilltop fort which once had guarded the summit of a low pass leading westward, the little expedition halted and gazed down the fabled Vale of Jonkhar. A vista at once amazing and imposing curved away towards the distant barrier presented by steep, heavily wooded hills.

"Thalassa!" cried Dr. Arunah Keith. "I wonder how many other white men have ever beheld this scene?"

Grimy, sunburnt and anxious, North and his companions beheld a broad valley checkered by small fields and pastures; patches of woodland, brilliant in their autumnal foliage, stretching on, mile after mile, between naked ramparts of frowning blue-gray cliffs. The brilliant early morning sun clearly revealed scattered dwellings lining a fast river which rushed along the valley's floor.

Jenny Cutler found the scene vividly reminiscent of numerous valleys among the Lepontine Alps. Here, as there, rounded foothills carpeted by pasture land surged up to lesser mountains through hardwood forests towards increasingly thick dark green ranks of blue-green conifers. Above these escarpments, ridges and shoulders of naked slate-blue rock thrust themselves to-

wards the dazzling blue of the sky until they became smothered beneath fog-veiled glaciers and snow fields whitening the loftier peaks.

As from a high-flying plane, they could follow the course of crude, ochre-brown-colored roads crisscrossing the valley or straggling off in a westerly direction and gradually converging to some point behind what appeared to be a titanic landslide.

Near at hand small fields, scarcely an acre in area, suggested a vast green, black and dull brown quilt flung over the valley floor. Further away a scattering of low stone dwellings surprisingly similar to Scottish crofters' cottages converged, while in the middle distance a tall and slender white tower topped by bulging cupola dominated some sort of a rectangular edifice immediately beneath it.

Nowhere did this long valley, revealed to the least detail by the crisp, clear mountain air, actually lie level; everywhere bare stone knolls, ridges and deep hollows created an uneven terrain.

Coursing through almost the exact center of the valley rushed an angry river, appearing and reappearing through dense stands of cedar, larch and hardwoods. There should be some notable trout in it, North surmised. Appearing like alabaster miniatures were several *chortens* and *chaityas,* the Hindu architecture of which seemed at incongruous variance with pagoda-like structures interspacing them.

Not far away, a large herd of yaks, brown, black and white, browsed on a mountain meadow under the surveillance of a youth clad in the raggedest imaginable coat of quilted cotton. In other pastures further away big flocks of goats and sheep dotted the mountainside.

North was studying a group of woodcutters through his field glasses when suddenly Delahanty called, "Say, Colonel, better break out some ammo while I collect the bearers. Looks like we're gonna have company."

"Good God!" Keith cried. "There must be a hundred of them!"

There were easily that many riders, North decided, galloping

out of the spruce thicket in which they had concealed themselves.

"Everybody stand steady," snapped the Intelligence Officer. "They'll ride us under, no matter what we do."

"Since they're riding in formation," Jenny Cutler observed, "aren't they likely to be disciplined troops?"

For a fact, despite their headlong gait, this column of horsemen continued riding in a column of twos bent low over the necks of their short-legged Tibetan ponies.

At a distance of two hundred yards a shrill bugle call caused the column to deploy and race out to surround the motionless strangers.

"I believe you are correct, Jenny," Dr. Keith commented. "Those are troops."

North's deep-set, gray-blue eyes had assumed a certain steely quality. "No matter what happens, don't offer to fight. Subadar Thopa, you and I will advance to meet their commander. Delahanty, try to calm your porters; silly idiots look as if they're ready to bolt—as if that would help them any."

He strode forward with rifle slung and open hand lifted, a straight, soldierly figure despite travel-stained garments and the presence of a dark, three days' beard.

Relieved that the command group had pulled up to a jolting canter and then to a trot, he halted, said in an undertone, "Perhaps it would be wiser for you to advance and parley. I'd not understand what they've to say."

The little Gurkha licked his lips, nodded, mechanically loosened his kukri in its sheath and then marched straight towards a varicolored group riding up under a triangular red-gold standard and raising shifting pillars of reddish dust.

Less than a hundred yards short of that point where North stood pretending to clean the lenses of field glasses slatting over a bandolier bisecting his chest, the Jonkhari commander ordered his men to halt. He then rode leisurely forward and, in no great hurry, returned the Subadar's stiff salute.

Hugh North gladly would have surrendered a year of his life to have understood something of the conversation which en-

sued. All he could deduce was that the attaché, looking smaller than ever under his big, turned-up campaign hat, successfully was maintaining his dignity and even appeared to patronize the tall, red and yellow turbaned officer. Presently the latter accorded Thopa the courtesy of dismounting to continue their parley.

Still standing stiffly erect, Thopa produced his *lamyik*, then tapped it emphatically several times with a slim brown forefinger. To the Intelligence Officer's immense relief the cavalry officer at length deigned to accept the Gurkha's passport and stood reading with his mount's bridle rein looped over one arm.

A glance over North's shoulder revealed the porters squatting fearfully about Delahanty's towering figure, Dr. Keith peering shortsightedly at a squad of savage-appearing horsemen who seemed impatient to charge in and cut down the accursed *pilingis*—foreigners. As for the Cutler girl, she had seated herself on a flat stone and, outwardly unconcerned, was exploring her pockets for cigarettes.

Presently the Jonkhari's turbaned head shook slowly, indicative of doubt, but after a moment's further parley, Thopa about-faced and, in company with the officer, came marching back to that point where North waited, impassive of expression and ramrod straight. There wasn't the least doubt that a very critical moment was at hand.

The Jonkhari officer affected enormous mustaches which flared like a buffalo's horns away from a lean and wolfish countenance. His grayish woolen uniform was well cut but much worn and patched at the elbows. A striped turban was wound about a peaked cap of green felt. Slung between his shoulders the Jonkhari carried a snub-barreled machine rifle of undoubted Russian origin in addition to the large Webley pistol he wore strapped over a wide, dark green sash.

Subadar Thopa, still stiffly correct, made the introduction in Hindustani. "Colonel North, this is Major Ram Dass."

Would the Jonkhari salute first, as became a subordinate officer? Fixing the other with a level regard, North had to wait a long moment before the major's shoulders went back

and he whipped up his hand, palm outwards in the British style of salute.

"Major Dass wishes to learn why we have dared to enter the Sri Rajah's domain uninvited and without proper authority," the attaché explained in English. "I have explained to this Hindu son of a pig that our *lamyiks* grant us permission to visit Jonkhar, but he will not honor even our special visas.

"As for Dr. Keith and the memsahib, who possess nothing more than permission to travel in Nepal, he regards their presence as entirely illegal. The fact that we have discharged firearms in a hostile manner in the Sri Rajah's realm is an even greater offense."

"Of course you explained that undoubtedly we were being stalked by bandits and that such action was taken in self-defense?"

"Of course. But nonetheless this great pig-worshiping blockhead has placed us all under arrest." The Gurkha's black eyes snapped angrily. It was very evident that he deeply resented this cavalier treatment from an officer of a supposedly protected state. "I have, however, refused to surrender our arms unless they are taken by force."

"That's good. Well, what will be done with us?"

"Major Ram Dass says he will escort us to Jang for trial."

Once the porters and their masters had reshouldered their burdens, Major Dass' hawk-faced, contemptuous-appearing troopers formed up to fall in both before and behind that short and leg-weary column composing the remains of Keith's expedition and North's party.

"Ask Major Dass," North directed while slinging his rifle, "whether the memsahib cannot be furnished a mount."

The answer proved to be a baleful stare and a cold refusal. Their welcome into Jonkhar was failing even basic courtesy by a long shot. Damn Keith, anyhow, for having over-rationalized his passport problems!

Presently the variegated column encountered a rock-studded dirt road by which it descended almost precipitously into the Vale of Jonkhar.

To North it proved at once puzzling and a relief that the Sri Rajah's dark-faced, green-turbaned cavalrymen made no effort to disarm their captives—certainly they could have done so in a twinkle. All the same, the porters looked their profound anxiety.

"I tried to find a mount for you," North told Mrs. Cutler as she trudged along at his side. "But Major Dass hasn't yet fallen for your charms."

Her brown features raised themselves, glanced up into North's gaunt features, then contracted as if in perplexity.

"Ah, to hell with him," snapped Jenny Cutler, looking very small but efficient swinging along beside North with his shotgun slung to one shoulder and wearing his Alpine cap pushed onto the back of her light brown head. "These shoes are holding out and besides my fanny still aches from those goddamned little Mongolian saddles we were using."

Delahanty, of all the whites, appeared to be the most concerned. He kept glowering at the black-bearded outriders until they spat viciously in his direction. It was evident that he yearned to put up a fight.

Presently they came to the first roadside village, a miserable collection of rough-hewn stone huts the thatched roofs of which had been secured by logs and stones. Upon these moldering roofs pumpkin vines still thrived, produced their golden fruit safely above the range of foraging sheep and horses. Chained to curiously carved gateposts, huge, shaggy mastiffs bared their fangs, yammered and lunged at the plodding prisoners and their escort; these last snatched long whips from their saddlebows and expertly lashed the dogs into yowling retreat.

Quickly, curious crowds formed but for the most part proved content only to stare solemnly. Some few men in faded turbans or wide-eared caps and black, sheepskin coats waved their overlong sleeves and moonfaced women appeared wearing odd headdresses which suggested a blue cobra head slipping forward between two fan-like projections of black fur. Noisiest

and most excited were swarms of dirty children protected only by smocks of miscellaneous rags.

Dr. Keith alone viewed the situation with some degree of satisfaction and devoted attention to various types of villagers, to their dwellings ranged close to the manure-splashed main street.

"I say, North, have you noticed the local architecture? It's a most original blend of Indian and Tibetan styles."

Gangs of boys followed the column quite a distance towards the next settlement accompanied by swarms of gaunt, shrilly yapping curs which annoyed the cavalry ponies no end; they stared as if half fearful that these pale-skinned folk might be *bhuts*. What chiefly impressed Hugh North was the fact that, almost without exception, the older youths and men carried arms of some sort—generally a brace of daggers or a very obsolete rifle or musket.

Soon it appeared that no village closely resembled its neighbor either as to costume or race. Apparently Gurkha influences were strong in the next settlement; the women universally wore red skirts topped by a sort of bolero of black felt and had knotted white shawls over their heads. A curious effect was rendered by the fact that these garishly bejeweled females carried the bulk of their private belongings in shawls bound above their abdomens, thus suggesting a universal pregnancy.

"My God, what frights!" observed Jenny Cutler through a cloud of cigarette smoke. "You could hire the prettiest to haunt a house."

As the track wound further down into the valley, well-worked barley fields advanced closer to the road, skirting graceful groves of birch, maple and larch.

"Look below that hill to our left, Bahadur Colonel." Unobtrusively Thopa came sidling up. "Do you see? There is a detachment of what looks like troops descending rapidly."

To North's surprise Dr. Keith added, "I've been watching them for some time, and by the bye, three other such parties appear to be descending from the opposite side of the Vale. What can this mean?"

"Say," Delahanty suggested, "maybe we've butted in on a mobilization of some sort. Hey?"

"Could be," Jenny admitted. "They are always fighting each other, it seems."

Steadily, North's perplexity increased when still more parties of armed men wearing bits and pieces of uniform arrived to travel the main road. They sat their saddles in truculent and sinewy grace. For the most part their beak-like noses, thin lips and heavy beards proclaimed Rajput ancestry. Not a few carried hooded hawks, swaying and balancing, on heavy leather gauntlets. These rode along under outlandish standards ornamented with a varying number of yak and fox tails.

Many had decorated the muzzles of ancient Mausers and Lebels with flags of blue, yellow or red. Others wore yellow Tibetan boots which curled up at the toe, round furry hats and heavy brown chadis—blanket capes of yak wool. Still others revealed a strong Chinese influence by wearing long-skirted, quilted dull red or orange coats the sleeves of which dangled so low as to conceal the rider's hands. Wide belts ornamented with silver supported sabers, tulwars and yataghans in addition to pistols and other warlike equipment.

"A most interesting concentration of types," came Arunah Keith's absorbed comment. "Thus far I believe I have identified Sunwars, Sikkimese, Tibetans and Limbus. Those Chinese-looking chaps in the furry hats are Lepchas, and I am fairly certain that this new detachment riding the yaks yonder are Kachars."

Further up this broad and evidently very fertile valley appeared, in battalion strength, a mob of the wildest-appearing human beings North could recall ever having beheld. Frequently displaying scars, or missing fingers, eyes or hands, they suggested a detachment from the Golden Horde of Genghis Khan.

Trotting up under slender lances brave with scarlet pennons, they wore greasy blue-black hair plaited in pigtails similar to those of old-time Chinese. Not a few carried round shields adorned by fearsome dragon heads, but invariably such medi-

eval armament was supplemented by a rifle and cartridge belts crossed over dull red coats of quilted cotton.

As an incongruous note the next troops to appear were Gurung expatriates who rode under a triangular silver and green banner and carried wickedly modern sub-machine guns. Clearly such a heterogeneous collection of firearms could nowhere else be duplicated.

Of the Subadar, marching impassively along through ever-increasing clouds of dust, North demanded, "Have you guessed yet why these troops are concentrating? Is a war brewing?"

The Gurkha shot his tall companion a quick sidewise glance. "No. It is only that we have had the misfortune of arriving in Jonkhar at a most dangerous moment."

"Why so?"

"Because, Bahadur Colonel, on the morrow will be celebrated the rites of Durga Puja."

"But why is that not in our favor?"

Absently the Gurkha flicked sweat from his deeply scarred chin. "Sacrifices will be made in honor of the Goddess of Victory. These savages will get very drunk and puff up until no stranger is safe—let alone *pilingi* prisoners like ourselves."

"A jolly prospect! What's your guess as to our chances?" came the Intelligence Officer's calm query.

"Your Honor's guess is equal with mine," returned the diminutive attaché. "Personally, I shall be much surprised if all, or any, of us quit this valley alive."

9. Citadel

Not until late afternoon did North and his companions, to all intents prisoners despite the fact that they had retained their weapons, tramp wearily around a hillock rising boldly from the valley floor and behold Jang, the capital city,

which lay some mile and a half distant, flatteringly revealed by the slanting rays of afternoon as a picturesque jumble of structures. Painted white for the most part, there yet were buildings of pink, green and saffron yellow.

"Well, I'm damned!" Delahanty grunted his astonishment. "Looks kind of like a suburb of Los Angeles."

"Seems picturesque from here," North agreed after swallowing a gulp of tepid water from his canteen, "but two will get you ten we'll meet with some four-cornered stinks when we get there."

"All the same, Jang *is* pretty," observed Jenny Cutler. "Wonder what that big gray building is, the one higher than all the rest?"

Her step, North noticed, was by no means springy any longer and a coating of yellowish dust had powdered her strongly modeled features and upturned nose.

Over the dull trampling of the escort's ponies Arunah Keith called, "Notice how the Hindu-Tibetan blend persists? There is a perfect *chaitya*—a shrine to the Hindu God, Ganesh, and over there's a very handsome Buddhist *chorten*—must have been built to house the ashes of a saint or some very important man."

He indicated a white-painted stone structure which was set amid a grove of shiny-leaved deodars and suggested nothing more than an enormous wedding cake with its pointed dome glowing golden-pink in the late sunlight and topped by a huge, red-handled potato-masher-like ornament.

During a brief pause made to permit the cavalry men to water their dusty little mounts at one of countless icy streams traversing the Vale, North trained his glasses on the distant city. He recognized the huge, gray building mentioned by the Cutler girl as a fortress. With towering gray spires and ramparts gilded by the afternoon sun, this citadel crowned a monolith of jagged and naked gray rock which rose boldly from the valley's floor. To North it was reminiscent of nothing so much as one of those powerful castles like the Krak des

Chevaliers built by the Crusaders in the Holy Land to defend Christendom.

The distant citadel's most impressive features were high, blank walls seeming to soar above the flat roofs of the town. Just visible above the loftiest buttresses showed the triple-tiered and pagoda-like red roof of what undoubtedly must be a very large edifice. At either end of this roof stood two tall, slim towers topped by onion-like protuberances.

Beyond Jang a series of heavily wooded ridges or rock marched and countermarched beyond a large lake which mirrored a number of snow-capped peaks rising in breath-taking perfection.

Here and there low domes or elaborately carved spires argued the existence of temples and public buildings. When the column drew near it became evident that Jang could not have been built to plan. Its streets circled, angled and climbed helter-skelter up a series of slopes from the floor of the valley right up to the battlements and cliffs upon which they stood.

"I say, Jenny, what would you estimate the population to be?" Keith inquired.

"Around twenty thousand," the Cutler girl replied wearily, "with probably less than five bathrooms and no inside plumbing."

News of these travelers' arrival from the outside world must have gone on ahead, North realized, for everywhere the now crudely cobbled and filthy road was lined by a curious and often hostile crowd. Sedate, white-turbaned old men wearing long gray beards, ash-streaked *saddhus*—Hindu priests—in filthy robes, red-hat and yellow-robe lamas were jostled by increasing numbers of savage, slant-eyed fighting men and, most numerous of all, round-eyed children and hundreds of miserable and mangy mongrel curs.

Presently North became aware that Jang was encircled by a long, low wall. Apparently built a hundred years earlier, it might once have afforded the inhabitants complete protection. For that matter, it still would constitute a powerful barrier to an enemy lacking modern artillery or air power.

On the outskirts of Jang smoke rose in blue spirals above numerous encampments—doubtless those of tribesmen and troops congregating to celebrate the rites of Durga Puja. Everywhere temporary shelters were going up round black felt tents, lean-tos of yak skin, a few weather-beaten canvas marquees of European design and even crude wooden huts.

"Well, here goes nothing," Jenny Cutler sighed as, at long last, they approached a tall gateway all but choked by a mass of curious, dark-faced humanity.

"You said it, Sister," Delahanty grunted nervously, fingering his rifle sling. "We may go in, but do we ever come out? I'd give a purty to look ahead and see what their idea of entertainment is going to be."

Jenny Cutler pitched away her cigarette butt in exaggerated nonchalance. "The Sri Rajah won't dare play rough. He just needs to be reminded what a few air bombs could do to this jerry-built town."

North smiled bleakly. "If news about what happened to us ever got out."

"Okay, Boss, let's suck up the old gut and go in swinging." Delahanty shouted an order for his porters to close up, then fell back with Kali Yuga to guard the rear. North presently heard them cursing the guards for riding too close.

"To hell with 'em," drawled Jenny Cutler, produced a compact and, as well as she might while clumping along, retinted cleanly delineated lips. "I've never been afraid of anyone who didn't wash."

The streets of Jang, as North had anticipated, proved dark, very narrow and labyrinthine. The hoofs of the escort's ponies squelched over streets rendered slippery by mire, garbage and excrement of all sorts. The houses, generally of at least three stories, leaned so closely together that roof beam ends and heavily latticed balconies almost converged. The ground floor of these dwellings, frequently of plaster-covered brick, boasted crude colonnades of logs set more or less upright at the very edge of the street. A few of these once had been elaborately

carved but had become sadly chipped and battered by the passage of generations.

Muddy holes littered with fruit rinds rendered the streets' surface so uneven that Keith continually had to steady the Cutler girl.

Riding now in single file, the escorting troopers brutally slashed with their whips at such townsfolk as were tardy in clearing a passage. The guards and their prisoners climbed steadily up a tortuous, canyon-like street apparently leading towards that grim, gray citadel dominating the city. Everywhere dark brown faces appeared to stare in white-eyed curiosity from the curb, balconies, windows or from behind beautifully and very intricately carved wooden screens. Every so often a shrine, originally of pure white but splashed by muck and defiled by dogs, appeared in the center of a thoroughfare.

Jang must exist at a fairly high altitude; North was panting when he and his equally winded companions were conducted through a bazaar district in which noisy business was being transacted under a series of low arcades.

"This is worse than O'Farrell Street in San Francisco," gasped Jenny, "and no cable cars."

The climb through the gathering dusk became so severe that even Delahanty's sinewy Sherpas were hard put to keep pace with the escort.

At the end of twenty minutes the column debouched from the clustering and malodorous houses onto a fairly broad and well-cobbled road shaded by cedars but winding steeply, inexorably up the monolith. Bathed in sweat and supporting the girl, North raised his eyes and, to his intense relief, beheld a tall gateway yawning at the end of a causeway perhaps two hundred yards in length.

Once the whole company had gained the causeway, Major Ram Dass slapped dust from his uniform, then ordered his men to form fours.

North's eyes roved continually, noted how a flight of belated kites were beating heavily away to their roosts in a dead forest graying the mountainside. Crows and rooks, however, still

circled the battlements and filled the early evening sky with raucous outcries.

Now nothing could be seen either of the pagoda-like red roof or of those twin towers North had noticed while marching down the Vale.

"It will be instructive to ascertain the nature of the architecture up yonder. What a truly remarkable view," commented Dr. Keith.

Slowly the procession resumed its progress up a very narrow highway which zigzagged up towards a lofty and intricately carved gateway. Above it loomed a series of loopholes. If these were utilized by machine gunners, North perceived, certain annihilation would overtake attackers attempting to storm up the causeway.

What fate awaited them beyond that wind-worn arch decorated with the battered figures of gods and men? North's fingertips commenced to tingle as always when in the grip of a dominating tension. During his march through the valley it had become abundantly apparent why the control of Jonkhar constituted a prize of inestimable strategic value.

Should His Highness Matbar Nana Jang decide to deny passage through the Kirong-la it would require an almost prohibitively costly effort to fight through those lofty mountains to the eastward. Certainly, from what he had observed of the Jonkharis, such rugged mountaineers must prove a terrifically tough nut to crack. This would be especially true since planes, tanks and field artillery are less effective when employed in such an extremely mountainous region.

Hoofs passing beneath the gate arch resounded hollowly, then North and his companions entered a short and very dark passage beneath a barbican, but soon twilight shone before them and they tramped into a wide, flagstoned courtyard perhaps five acres in area.

On progressing further, North observed to his left the whitewashed façade of a palace, the front of which was supported by a series of pointed arches. Nor did it escape his attention that to either side of the gateway were mounted two modern

heavy Browning machine guns, each served by a quartet of impassive, leather-faced sepoys.

Once the entire column had debouched into the compound the troopers wheeled into line, dismounted smartly and stood to horse while Major Ram Dass walked his mount over to a small group of officers collected atop a flight of wide steps leading to a lofty central arch. A crowd composed of soldiers off duty, palace servants, grooms, sweepers and the like swiftly collected.

Sitting bolt upright in his saddle, the Jonkhari major waited until from the palace emerged a rotund figure clad in white and wearing a small overseas cap of silver and scarlet. This personage, evidently a man well along in years, walked with the aid of a tall, gilded wand.

Major Ram Dass saluted, dismounted, and then, following a brief conference with the fat old man, he issued a succession of orders which caused his troopers to remount and disappear through the gateway. North, his companions and their porters remained, a small, dirty and dog-tired island of humanity in the center of the great compound.

The dignitary who came waddling up must have been nearing sixty and possessed a truly imposing number of chins rising in tiers above an enormous belly and pudding-like breasts. His eyes, black behind gold-rimmed square spectacles, were alert and lively, however.

"Who is leader among you?" demanded this dignitary in clear, clipped English.

"Greetings, O Your Excellency," promptly replied the Subadar and bowed politely. "Allow me to present the celebrated Dr. Arunah Keith who is known with great honor and respect both in Europe and in America for his scientific achievements."

A powerful stimulant to North's fading confidence was the salaam which preceded the palace officer's announcement that he was Vikram Girvan, Chamberlain—otherwise Dewan—to the Sri Rajah.

To North's intense surprise he then continued, "His Exalted Highness, the Sri Rajah, Matbar Nana Jang, bids you wel-

come to his city. Quarters have been provided for you in the principal guest house." He bowed in Mrs. Cutler's direction. "Does the gracious Memsahib care to withdraw to the Rani's *zenana,* or has she, perchance, a husband among you?"

Arunah Keith's reaction was so prompt that that habitually deliberate individual must have been anticipating just such a question. "She will stay with us. She is married to the tall gentleman to my right." He bowed slightly in North's direction.

Delahanty just managed to strangle a snort of astonishment, while North, had he not been long schooled in the arts of dissimulation, must have blurted out an emphatic denial. All in an instant, however, he understood Keith's underlying purpose: it would never do to allow Jenny Cutler to become separated from the rest of the expedition.

As for Jenny Cutler, her tanned features flamed beneath the road grime masking her features as she muttered, "And they talk about shotgun weddings! Wait until I get my hands on you, Arunah Keith!"

10. Domestic Bliss

Once the last white-clad servant had salaamed and slippered out, leaving North's luggage, including his saddlebags, in the center of a large, pink-walled room, Jenny Cutler expressed her views on the situation with a stream of profanity so inspired that an old-time cavalry sergeant might have listened to advantage.

"Of all the stinking, underhanded tricks!" she burst out, hands clenched and features working. "Just wait till I catch that old bastard Keith alone! How dare he humiliate me by passing me off as the wife of a—a"—she whirled, crimson, but

still not unappealing in her rage—"domineering, smug, self-satisfied, broken-down Army officer."

Grinning tautly, Hugh North sank onto his heels above his luggage and glanced upwards. "Mind if I suggest a supplement to your all-too-flattering summation? You have been forced upon a busy, short-tempered and wildly unromantic guy who is about to dust the seat of your unladylike britches if you don't cut short this nonsense."

Lithe body a-quiver, Jenny glowered at him. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I?"

"Just you lay one finger on me——"

"Keep this up and you'll end by smarting all over your southern exposure. If you think for one moment that I enjoy the prospect of sharing a bedroom with you, you needn't flatter yourself to that extent."

He stalked over, straight black brows almost merged in an exasperated expression he seldom permitted himself. "Now let's get this straight right from the start. I'm not the least bit interested in the curious type of soured, would-be-tough female you represent, nor have I ever enjoyed knocking chips off anybody's shoulder."

His voice was compelling, yet not devoid of understanding. "I've no idea and care less what's gone wrong with your private life, but I don't intend to be made to pay for your mistakes; so let's shake." Advancing, he offered a lean brown hand. "Let's make the best of a damned awkward situation."

Jenny stared a moment, then, ignoring his extended hand, stalked over to stare out of a latticed window.

"I don't blame you for becoming upset," said he, commencing to unpack a duffel bag. "You're dead tired and you've been through a terrible lot during the last forty-eight hours."

"Shut up! I want none of your goddam sympathy," Jenny snapped over a greenish-gray shoulder. Jerkily, she then plucked out a crumpled pack of cigarettes.

In three long strides he crossed the room, grabbed her by the shoulders, spun her about. "All right, then *be* a cross-grained

little bitch. But get this: from now on in public you're going to act the part of a dutiful and moderately affectionate wife."

"Let go of me, you goddam tin soldier. I'll hate your bloody guts till I die!"

"I'd hate to get rough, my dear," North warned in a deceptively mild tone, "but you'd better learn right now who's bossing *this* family. You tried to boss Leverett Cutler and he ran out on you."

"Leverett was disoriented by the war," she blazed. "Furthermore, you can keep your long and snotty nose out of my affairs!"

"Unfortunately, your affairs are now also mine, to a certain extent." He released her shoulders but, retaining a firm policeman's grip on her upper arm, steered her over to a bench upholstered in gray and pink silk.

"Now sit down and get a hold of yourself——"

"Damned if I will! I——"

He grinned through the blue-black stubble darkening his jaw. "Do you know, right now I believe I'd rather enjoy spanking your undoubtedly shapely aristocratic and blue-blooded bottom?"

"You certainly are a past master in the art of bullying!" she snapped. "All right, get on with what you have to say. I'll listen."

"Just now I've recalled at last where I've seen you. During 1944 you worked under Colonel Coughlin on the Asiatic Desk at OSS."

"What if I did? I've been out of OSS for years."

"But not long enough to forget the necessity of capable intelligence work in times like the present."

A measure of the young woman's hostility evaporated. "I guess I'd better not try slapping you, so you can let go my wrist. Besides, I want to smoke. What's back of that last sapient observation you made?"

While lighting her cigarette he said, "I'm not sure that they've gotten so modern in Jonkhar as to use microphones and I haven't had the opportunity of looking. As I'm ag'in' running

unnecessary risks, let's go to yonder window and see if there's a balcony."

There was a balcony which afforded a breath-taking view of towering peaks and of a long lake at that moment reflecting the birth of a new moon.

"I know I'm taking a long chance in confiding in you, Jenny, but I'm going to because I must." His long, strongly featured visage was so close that his breath vapors flicked by her eyes as he inquired, "Did Dr. Keith know that Major Opdyck was assigned to him by MI–8 of G–2?"

The surprised white rings which appeared about her pupils were answer enough. "Charles Opdyck? Good God, no!"

"Yes. But somebody else did know; that was why poor Charlie was murdered.'"

Jenny's profile appeared in silhouette as she turned away, murmured, "So that was the way of it! Charles was a gentleman even though he made a damn' poor imitation of a mammalogist."

The tautness of her attitude increased when he slipped an arm about her waist and spoke with lips brushing her ear. At once he became aware that she certainly stood in need of a shampoo, not to mention a bath, but then, he reflected, he was no lily-scented Adonis himself.

"I don't know what's going to happen to us," he spoke in rapid and succinct undertones, "but it may happen so fast that I'm about to gamble that your sense of patriotism will outweigh your evident dislike of me."

"Where does the patriotism come in?"

"Don't be a fool! You must be realizing that I've been detailed to replace Opdyck, a fact of which certain playful Reds seem only too well aware. In fact, my dear, in the Gorge of Durga two attempts were made to spare you the unpleasantness of my company."

"Never mind the unpleasantness," Jenny muttered, drawing hard on her cigarette. "You can count on me, of course, but make no passes, understand?"

"How you *do* flatter yourself!" he sighed. "Now listen carefully. Here's the main problem."

In brief sentences the Intelligence Officer described the almost insuperable difficulties besetting his task of winning the Sri Rajah towards co-operation with the West. Even longer he dwelt upon the crucial importance of success.

"Of course it hasn't helped a bit," he continued, "that Prime Minister Nehru has been doing some fuzzy thinking recently. How could so intelligent a diplomat imagine that he could make a *bona fide* deal with Moscow and the Chinese Reds?"

Jenny stared fixedly out over the moonlit Vale of Jonkhar but saw nothing of lights twinkling redly in villages and farms, nor of the shimmer of stars or waves on the lake.

"How are you going to approach this problem?"

"Much too early to say," he replied. "I know desperately little about the situation here and will have to feel my way as much as I'm allowed. The only friends I might have, according to Subadar Thopa, are the Dewan, or Grand Vizier, who met us in the courtyard and the Sri Rajah's paramount queen, Dil Kusha. It stand to reason, therefore, that I must get next to the Dewan at the first opportunity."

"And who's captain of the opposing team?" demanded the Cutler girl.

"So far as I've been told, the Sri Rajah's Junior Queen, a spritely lass hight Bul Badena, otherwise Miss Rose Body.

"Now," said he, stepping aside and indicating the long window through which they had entered the balcony, "if this guest house is anything like its prototypes in India, certain bright black eyes will be watching and ears listening through some of that beautifully carved woodwork which, as you may have noticed, covers two of our walls."

Jenny peered about, nodded on perceiving that indeed a pair of the room's walls were adorned by a series of intricately carved and gilded cedarwood lattices.

"Now, Colonel, what do you want of me?" Quite seriously she raised a pointed, dust-streaked face. She smiled faintly.

"Signals over. I suppose I'd better start calling you Hugh, and sweet-talkin' you, as the Southern gals say?"

"Enough so that you don't choke. And now, for the benefit of possible watchers, let's see if you know anything about kissing."

"No!" she gasped. "No! Don't touch me." Nonetheless he swept Jenny into his arms and bent her into an embrace that a Hollywood director might have viewed with satisfaction.

"Stop, you lecherous swine," she whispered fiercely. "Besides, that damned beard of yours is rasping my chin."

"That'll soon be fixed."

As if to set a seal on North's precaution, a rapping commenced at the apartment's door. Still flushed, Jenny mechanically dabbed at her boyishly short hair, then sped over to answer, slim, gray-trousered legs fairly flashing.

"Come in. Please come in!" she almost begged.

Watching her, North decided, "Whoever soured my bride on men certainly did one Grade-A, 24-karat job!"

The caller turned out to be an aged woman bearing what appeared to be an armful of native female clothing. She knelt, gray head bent, and offered them to Jenny in silence.

Jenny signaled the servant to deposit her burden on a magnificent Chinese chest of elaborately painted pigskin. Once the old woman had departed, Jenny inspected a supply of curious undergarments and some silk and gossamer saris of a fascinating variety of colors.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with these?"

North's patience for the first time wore thin. "Wear them. What the devil do you suppose?" he snapped. "Do you speak Hindustani?"

"I can get by. Suppose we rate a bath in this gaudy bridal chamber?"

"Probably the servants will fetch a tub if you holler loud enough; they generally do. I'm leaving for a brief heart-to-heart with Arunah Keith," said he heavily.

In the doorway he paused, looked back over his shoulder with one eyebrow elevated. "I suppose you think you look

cute in a sari, but don't go getting ideas that you're any Morgiana, Salome or any other seductive dame known to literature. You'll look more like a Wellesley junior at a fancy-dress ball."

Jenny actually stamped a heavily booted foot. "Get to hell out of here! And don't come back for an hour. You great ache in the ass!"

Whistling "Jenny made her mind up," and feeling inexpressibly fatigued, he started down a stone cloister towards Dr. Keith's quarters.

By the light of torches that commenced to glow and smoke with ineffectual fierceness he recognized Delahanty coming up from the courtyard.

"How are you making out?"

"Been checking on my porters," he explained, easing a heavy musette bag to the stone flooring. "Poor bastards are scared stiff, but so far they're all right." A wide grin spread over his freckled features. "How's your batting average, Boss?"

North employed a brief but expressive Anglo-Saxon word.

Delahanty stared. "Christ, Colonel, *you* should act sour? Wish to God I'd such a nice package of groceries shoved onto my shelf!"

"Stow it, Delahanty." North's voice was edged. "I wish to God you were denning up with that she-wildcat in my place."

The ex-flier's smile faded. "So she really *is* ornery? 'Make just one pass, Bub, and I'll snap your spine.' Come to think of it, Boss, back in Mo-line I knew a lady wrassler once. She'd the same kind of a look."

More seriously the outfitter continued, while using a khaki rag to wipe road dust from his features, "You get your rifle and some ammo into your quarters okay?"

"For a miracle. What about Subadar Thopa's and the other shooting irons?"

"Nobody seems to want 'em. Say, Boss, there's a fine, large pow-wow cooking down in the town. Hear it?"

"No. Our—er, my quarters face west."

The off-key wailing of many horns and bagpipes and the squeak of Chinese fiddles whining in minor keys barely could

be distinguished over the thump and thunder of many drums and the clashing of cymbals.

"Skipper, I just can't dope this out at all, at all," continued the ex-flier, peering down at a guard relief tramping by below the colonnade. "Why did they give that purple carpet routine at the frontier, then slip us the bum's rush all the way up the valley, and now the Big Wheels get all chummy again? How come?"

"I've been wondering over that, too. Especially that glad-handing we got at the border," North admitted. "Meanwhile keep your eyes peeled and the more you can hang around with garrison and the palace people the better. I need to know a heap more about local politics than I do."

"Okay, Boss, can do. Me for the showers. I'm sure creakin' with dirt. Thank God I've got a change in my duffle," nodded Delahanty and, retrieving his gear, he clumped off along a balcony that ran all the way across the big *powa's* façade.

North, on entering Dr. Arunah Keith's apartment, found that lanky scientist seated at a window overlooking the parade ground and smoking moodily. Because his baggage had been buried beneath the rockslide, only a haversack of borrowed clothing and North's spare rifle supplemented the chamber's normal furnishings; a room typically Indian with its bed of matting, handsome Kashmir wall rugs, divan and low table. Of course hassocks had replaced chairs.

Of the glossy animal pelts strewn about a floor of well-polished cedarwood the most impressive was a superb Siberian tiger's skin. The customary tawny and black stripes in this case appeared to have been frosted because of long, silky-fine white overhairs.

The room was illumined by a big Nepalese brass hanging lamp reinforced by the glow of a native light burning before a gilded bronze image of Vishnu.

Although fatigue and discouragement expressed themselves in every line of Arunah Keith's sunburned features, he forced an uncertain smile as he heaved himself to his feet.

"I fully expect you to knock me down," said he, blinking

behind steel-rimmed spectacles, "but what I did down in the courtyard was the result of an instinctive decision—which now I am not sure was wise."

Looking very tall and weather-beaten as he entered, North closed the door behind him and then suggested, "Don't be absurd, Doctor; I just didn't think as fast as you. Suppose we speak in Spanish? I've a definite fondness for that language."

His eyes traveled in silent warning over the same handsomely carved grillwork similar to that paneling in the quarters he shared with Jenny. Keith smiled faintly when the softest imaginable scraping sound came from behind the wall to his right, indicating that someone had been disconcerted by this sudden switch of language.

North spoke in swift, staccato Castilian. "Before we go any further, Doctor, I want you to answer me one question. *Were* you aware that Major Charles Opdyck had been attached to your expedition by the MI–8 Branch of Intelligence?"

Keith's conical, sparsely covered head inclined and behind the lenses his pale gray eyes hardened. "Colonel, forty-eight hours previous to my departure from Darjeeling, I had no knowledge of Major Opdyck's existence. However, a special courier from our embassy in New Delhi explained the vital necessity of Major Opdyck's joining my expedition.

"I will admit I was reluctant. After all, I am a scientist, and," he drew hard on an old-fashioned bulldog pipe, made small bubbling noises, "I still believe that science and international intrigue make, er—uneasy bedfellows." A low chuckle escaped him. "Dear me, I seem to have selected a most unfortunate term to express my meaning."

North's sun-darkened and Indian-like features relaxed. "You certainly have, my dear Doctor, because there is only one bed in the chamber we occupy and I'm not enough of a Sir Galahad to sleep on the floor. However, I imagine you know that Mrs. Cutler is more than capable of looking out for herself." Sighing his profound fatigue, Hugh North sank cross-legged onto a huge circular hassock of brilliant green leather. "Incidentally, to employ an inelegant phrase, exactly just what *is* biting Jenny?"

The scientist sucked hard on his pipe, fingered his short yellow beard and stared at the floor. "Only because you have been forced to live on intimate terms with her will I speak out. I detest gossip as such. She was born Jenny Shaw, of a very old, bluestocking Boston family. Jenny was brought up to think and do all the proper things and was educated at Miss Porter's School and Wellesley, class of '40, I believe.

"Just before we entered the war she met and fell in love with what I deduce must have been the thoroughly charming black sheep son of a fine, old New Hampshire family. At the time he was chief test pilot for a large aircraft manufacturing concern in the Middle West. Despite her family's violent, and evidently well-founded, objections Jenny eloped and suddenly found herself inhabiting a world further removed from Louisburg Square than Kamchatka or—well, here, I suppose.

"Apparently as a bride she placed implicit trust in this Leverett Cutler and struggled to adapt herself to a society largely composed of shady speculators in aviation stocks, fliers-of-fortune, barnstorm aviators and probably a few really outstanding pilots. In any event, Jenny must have decided that her cue was to forget about Boston, drink as hard and talk as the worst of them.

"After Pearl Harbor, Cutler, always playing a showy role, refused to wait for a commission in our own Army so went over to join the RAF." Keith tapped his pipe ashes into a heavy Chinese cloisonné bowl, made it ring softly. "I gather he did a good job, too, both as a combat pilot and in forgetting about his wife."

The strident screech of ram-horn trumpets being blown below the ramparts penetrated a brief silence.

"In other words," North amplified, "Cutler formed—er—new connections?"

"Exactly. With a Latvian woman. Of course Captain Cutler's conduct wasn't by any means unique, but most of the others in that situation returned to hearth and home when the fighting stopped.

"When her husband went overseas, Jenny promptly took a

job with OSS. I happen to know that she was literally besieged by admirers throughout the war." Keith smiled thinly at the dark-haired figure with the deep-set eyes. "But, as she herself has said, no one got into her—er, unmentionables."

North was aware that festival noises in Jang were growing louder as he heard Keith saying, "During the last year of the war his letters came few and far between. She'd heard nothing from her much-decorated husband for three months and was distracted through worry when he suddenly telephoned from England to say that he had fallen in love with a Latvian refugee in London, that he was sorry but he didn't love Jenny any more, and would Jenny mind trotting out to Idaho like a good girl to get a divorce?"

Keith spread large, rather short-fingered brown hands. "Perhaps you can imagine the effect of that act upon a well-bred, fundamentally conventional girl who, although tossing aside her family's traditions, had kept to the straight and narrow despite terrific temptation which I doubt could have improved Jenny's opinion of our sex."

"Some of this I have heard," North murmured thoughtfully. "They made quite a fuss in the newspapers at the time of the divorce. By the bye, is she really an expert botanist?"

Keith's balding head inclined promptly. "One of the best, and most methodical—very like her father, who is a director of Harvard's famous Arnold Arboretum." He sighed, removed his glasses and commenced wearily to polish them. "I am so glad Jenny was able at least to preserve that sketch book. I—I have lost everything, half a year's work and nearly a hundred thousand dollars' outlay."

North's gray-blue eyes fixed his companion with a look of deep compassion. "If I can get permission to dig into the rock-slide, do you suppose they'd find any of your specimens worth keeping?"

"It is most unlikely, I fear," Keith admitted after a momentary deliberation. "The packing cases must have been smashed and the bird skins would have rotted. You see, Colonel, my specimens are cured dry to begin with and, as you know, it

rains or hails every few hours, so I fancy we needn't bother about them. But some of my notebooks and drawings may have survived."

He arose, poured water from a carafe of iridescent glass. Over the rim of a china cup his eyes suddenly fixed themselves upon North's high-cheekboned features as in Spanish he said, "I wonder if you have realized that that murderous rockslide was induced?"

The Intelligence Officer's dark head inclined. "I was coming to that. Did you hear a small explosion just before the slide commenced?"

"I couldn't be sure. My recollections remain pretty confused about that slide," Keith admitted apologetically. "Why were you suspicious?"

"Because of that explosion and the fact that the frontier guards made every effort to expedite our travel in order that we come up to you before you entered that defile where the slide took place. The Frontier Guard's Office even furnished ponies for our bearers."

"And why didn't you catch up?"

North's firm but good-natured mouth tightened beneath his short black mustache.

"Because of an unforeseen but most intriguing delay. It concerns a pilgrim who wasn't a pilgrim at all, but a highly trained Red. Do you know, Doctor, in more ways than one, that uncovering of Dirty Dick, as Delahanty calls him, may prove singularly significant. At any rate, the incident delayed us barely long enough. Um. Wonder who dreamed up that slide?"

A discreet knocking at the door preceded the appearance of a Hindu servant wearing a yellow turban and a dark red livery. Bowing profoundly, he begged to inform the Sahibs that a repast soon would be served in the guest-house dining room.

11. The Dewan

Colonel Hugh North felt better after hasty ablutions performed in a spacious bathing chamber equipped with a steaming tub and three body servants all embarrassingly eager to soap, scrub and dry him. He felt better still once he had scraped away a dark stubble blurring the outline of his jaw. What sheer luxury it was to don fresh shorts and a clean, gray flannel shirt.

The meal proved abundant to the point of satiety even to folk as hungry as the new arrivals. Melons, fried yak's liver, curried fish and lamb, squash, and lastly ancient duck eggs prepared in the Chinese fashion, composed the bulk of the menu, but these were followed by nuts, sweetmeats and an assortment of unidentifiable candied fruits. All in all, the repast eloquently reflected that peculiar blend of Hindu, Chinese and Tibetan cultures from which Jonkhar had been fused.

Once Delahanty's stomach sagged comfortably against his khaki-colored webbing belt, he cracked a series of semi-salacious GI jokes which finally drew smiles to Jenny Cutler's piquant and forceful brown features.

For some reason, and to North's disappointed surprise, she had decided against donning a sari, but had improvised a costume consisting of a blouse contrived from a native silk undergarment tucked into her own brown wool ski trousers. The botanist, however, appeared remarkably refreshed, with lipstick and her hair and features cleansed of rock and road dust.

The meal on the whole, however, was consumed in silence, for of Subadar Thopa and his orderly there was, to North's lively apprehension, no trace, nor did either of the *mukhiyas* report for orders.

The party sat about a knee-high table upon firm cushions which raised them about a foot above the floor while an apparently endless succession of servants fetched in and removed the various courses until, finally, they placed before each guest a towel and a bowl of steaming water with which they might cleanse lips and fingers, no trace of European tableware having been in evidence.

Meanwhile in the city, whitely sprawled below the ramparts, celebrations in honor of Durga Puja were becoming steadily noisier and more discordant. North and Delahanty exchanged uneasy glances when shots fired as a *feu de joie* snapped like a string of gigantic firecrackers.

Large brass braziers set in diagonally opposite corners glowed redly and lent to the tapestry- and rug-hung chamber a comfortable warmth. No electric lights were in evidence, only brass oil lamps of antique design which, in burning, gave off a sweetish, musky odor.

The guests' common room proved to be similarly heated and illuminated but, in addition, there were numerous hassocks and low tables inlaid with mother-of-pearl and, to one side, a wide, fur-covered divan capable of accommodating at least four people.

"I say, Hugh, how are you fixed for cigarettes?"

North started, then smiled broadly at Jenny's first use of his Christian name. "I've about a carton left. If we ration them there should be enough to last out."

Delahanty belched softly, again eased the webbing belt supporting his khaki breeches. "Last us overnight, or how long?"

Keith shrugged, strolled over to inspect a chessboard of ebony and mother-of-pearl. "As the French say, *'qui vivra, verra?'* "

"I don't know about you lords of the Earth but personally I am keen on the 'vivra' part," Jenny remarked, picking a bit of tobacco off the end of her cigarette.

A ringing sound of heavy boots advancing along the stone-floored balcony outside preluded the appearance of a tall officer in a garish yellow uniform. Like Major Ram Dass, he wore his

bushy black beard parted down its exact center in the Sikh fashion, but his mustaches had grown so long that, being forbidden by religion to cut them, he had had to loop their oiled and scented ends over his ears.

Smartly he saluted, then, with jet eyes fixed straight before him, he demanded in halting English, "Which is the Colonel North? He is come with me." The Jonkhari remained expressionless, for all the world like some dark-visaged automaton.

Watching the Intelligence Officer get to his feet, Delahanty looked grave. "Take it easy, Colonel," he urged, "don't let these Wogs rattle you." North flicked a gray splash of cigarette ash from his shirt front, then blew Jenny a kiss.

"Don't worry, darling. I'll be back soon, but if I'm late, for heaven's sake keep my side of the bed clear. *Hasta luego amigos.*"

"Vaya con Dios," murmured Arunah Keith.

"You can say that again!" earnestly added the outfitter.

Jenny Cutler, flushed and obviously annoyed, arose, crossed to the chess table and commenced to examine the ivory white and scarlet pieces ready ranged upon it, so did not notice two sepoys standing guard outside the common-room door.

When North appeared the guards presented carbines and attempted to emulate their superior's wooden and expressionless manner. Their ocher-hued uniforms, however, were patched and greasy about the collar; moreover, North decided that their buttons could have been better burnished.

Upon the great drill square, North noted a throng of household troops off duty, palace servants and a good many townsfolk. These danced curious wild steps and flourished occasional swords or daggers; others joined bursts of singing emanating from large barracks to the left of the main gate. Lights glowed in most of the windows.

Following his guide over to the Sri Rajah's palace, North noticed that this building was of three stories but was not as large as he had at first estimated. In fact, the palace was almost

modest in proportion, while its two flanking towers could not be over ninety feet high.

Their route followed a long cloister which proved to connect the guest quarters with a side entrance to the palace.

The guide knocked with a gauntleted hand, whereupon a door clamped by massive bands of wrought iron creaked open to release a flood of yellow-red light and the distinctive odor of sandalwood and the animal-oil lamps in which it was burned. The guard officer saluted and pointed inside but did not himself enter.

As was his custom during tense moments, Hugh North inhaled deeply while crossing the threshold and saw enough to decide that, thus far, the Sri Rajah's residence did not by any means approach the sumptuous, if generally tasteless, magnificence visible in such palaces as he had visited when tiger hunting in Kumaon, in Bengal or Kashmir.

To his inexpressible relief he glimpsed the short and stocky figure of Subadar Thopa waiting down the hall before an inner doorway. A very faint shake of the head and the expression on his flat, bronze-hued countenance warned North to make no comment.

"His Excellency, the Bahadur Colonel North!" the attaché announced as North entered a small apartment at one end of which a low divan covered with gold-striped green damask reposed upon a dais. Two striking figures, lamas in dull red robes and wearing Greek helmet-like yellow hats, were standing to the right of this dais. A hawk-featured individual in a gold-laced, dark blue uniform stood attentively to the left of the divan.

He who immediately captured North's attention was the Dewan. In the bulging but close-fitting black coat and white trousers of a high-caste Brahman and wearing a small round white cap to conceal his baldness, the Grand Vizier sat cross-legged on the divan. To the alert and anxious Intelligence Officer it appeared that some disease had deprived Vikram Girvan of every trace of hair in that he lacked any sign of brows or eyelashes.

His eyes proved quite the most compelling North had beheld in a long time; of a deep amber hue, they glowed in feline intensity.

Immobile and impassive, seen by the reddish glow cast by four ornate hanging lamps, for all his Brahman attire he suggested the extraordinarily lifelike image of some Buddhist idol.

Seeming taller than his true height, Hugh North's rather gaunt features adopted what he hoped to be a pleasant, but reserved, expression as he remained motionless before the divan. Somehow, it proved absurdly reassuring to know that his shirt was clean and that he had shaved.

Long instants dragged by while the Dewan's dark eyes probed into the Intelligence Officer's steel-gray ones, nor did North remove his gaze from the Dewan's plump and shiny countenance.

At length the Dewan gestured with infinite grace towards a hassock of panther skin upon which North seated himself. Imperiously, the Dewan then beckoned forward Subadar Thopa. When he halted at North's side the Sri Rajah's principal counselor spoke in a low rather monotonous tone, but his words proved shock enough.

"Why, Bahadur Colonel, have you come to Jonkhar? Was not the fate of the unfortunate Major Opdyck warning enough?"

"I felt confident, Your Excellency, that I should be more fortunate as hunter for the expedition."

Never shifting his gaze from North's lean features, he posed another question in English so perfect that, until he recalled the Dewan's early service with His Britannic Majesty's Indian Army, he could scarcely credit his hearing. "In that case, why do Dr. Keith and your wife lack these special *lamyiks* which you and your companions have obtained? Did you not all intend to visit dominions of my Master?"

North thought hard and fast; smoothly he replied, "I had no idea that Dr. Keith, and my wife also, lacked extra formal permission." He shrugged slightly. "She has assured me that last July Dr. Keith was solemnly informed in Katmandu that Jon-

khar, being a State protected by the Crown of Nepal, is included by the over-all visa for travel in Nepal. I also was so informed, but was advised that it would simplify matters to secure the additional entry permit."

While talking, he studied the heavily creased, old ivory-tinted features of the two lamas and was conscious of undergoing a keen if covert inspection by them. Could either understand English?

One was so elderly as to appear ancient and a very pure Southern Chinese type. His eyes were very fat-lidded and sleepy-looking and he was wearing long, white and sparse rat-tail mustaches dangling limp from either corner of his mouth. His robes, in the rich lamplight, glowed a deep orange-red.

The other lama must have been nearly sixty and still so physically powerful that North wondered whether his physical nature was not still battling for dominance over his spiritual existence. Were these faces, which suggested having been carved out of frozen butter, those of Tashi, the renegade pro-Red Chinese Abbot, and his fellow traitor, Sakya?

"Why did you in the first place permit your wife," North looked for a hint of a "double-take" on the Gurkha's part, but failed to detect one, "to depart on an expedition without you?"

"Please reassure His Excellency," North invited Thopa, "that I realize how odd some of our marriage customs must appear to a Jonkhari. Explain, for instance that in America the husband and his wife may pursue entirely separate careers; that the wife may not choose to wear a wedding ring or to take her husband's name." Silently, he added, "May the name of Lucy Stone be praised and magnified forever!"

At this piece of intelligence, translated into Hindustani by Thopa, the two old lamas exchanged startled and incredulous glances; he in the glittering uniform donned a sneering smile. North was convinced that fat old Vikram Girvan wasn't buying any part of this specious explanation, for all that he inclined his hairless head several times, exactly like one of those porcelain dolls such as old-time tea trade sea captains used to fetch back from China.

North deemed the moment propitious to add, "Unfortunately my wife's passport became lost in that"—he hesitated a perceptible moment and directed his gaze on the Dewan—"terrible accident which befell Dr. Keith's party."

Again the Dewan immeasurably startled North by demanding in his stilted, careful English, "Has it occurred to you, Bahadur Colonel, that so disastrous a rockslide might not have been precipitated by purely natural causes?"

North had no intention of answering truthfully before the lamas and that hawk-faced officer. "You astound me, Your Excellency. It was believed by all of us that if the slide were not entirely caused by recent rains, then some malicious *bhut* precipitated the catastrophe."

Thopa could not suppress the ghost of a smile at North's dexterous evasion.

Wrinkled features still expressionless, the elder of the lamas bent briefly to mutter into the Dewan's ear.

"His Reverence the Abbot wishes to learn about reactions in Nepal consequent to the Red invasion of his country." Noting the Intelligence Officer's obvious hesitation, he smiled thinly, then added, "These two holy men are not hostile, but are emissaries from the court of the exiled Dalai Lama now taking refuge in Bhutan."

Question followed question for nearly half an hour before the Dewan bowed to the yellow-hat lamas and politely indicated their dismissal. Also he dismissed that big, showily garbed officer who evidently had been present solely in the capacity of a bodyguard.

For some reason the Dewan then abandoned English and addressed Thopa in some obscure dialect and in such low tones that the little attaché had to bend well over the divan. Subadar Thopa's expression indeed was not a happy one when he straightened up. What followed proved to be the query North had dreaded.

"His Excellency wishes to know, Bahadur Colonel, whether you bring assurances from the rulers of your great country beyond the Black Water that prompt and material support will be

furnished on the remote possibility that His Highness, the Sri Rajah, might elect to support the Dalai Lama against the rebellious abbots and their Red allies?"

North found himself thus in the most delicate of positions. Should he, in view of Vikram Girvan's recent remarks, cling to his rôle of expert hunter and pretend ignorance of his true mission for a while longer? If he did, North foresaw that he ran every chance of alienating a potential and powerful ally. On the other hand, if the Dewan were playing a subtle game and was not genuinely friendly, such an admission would be tantamount to signing not only his own death warrant but that of his friends. Also the West would have lost all hope of denying the Kirong-la to Red hordes sweeping south from Tibet.

He became conscious of a huge emerald winking to the abstracted tap-tap of the gross figure's forefinger against his knee, of Subadar Thopa squinting anxiously at him.

What the devil *should he say?* Um. The Dewan's dismissal of those yellow-hat lamas had seemed to indicate a certain want of confidence in the Dalai Lama's cause.

"I presume," he commenced, "that His Highness, the Sri Rajah, is fully alive to the dangers of Communism?" He then adopted tactics long proved effective by posing a question of his own. "Excellency, my answer to your question has much to do with the presence in these parts of an unauthorized expedition including at least one European.

"Subadar Thopa, pray be good enough to inform this Honorable Gentleman concerning that female in the clouded leopard coat. Perhaps he knows who might be accompanying her."

"Eh? What is this? *Another* European expedition?" For the first time the Dewan's manner betrayed open and profound agitation and he commenced firing a series of quick questions at the Gurkha attaché. At the success of his diversion North relaxed, listened subconsciously to the ever-increasing boom of gongs beaten in the town below and less complacently to the rattling reports of firearms.

He hoped against hope, while listening to this distant and ominous pandemonium, that Thopa would not mention the

matter of Dirty Dick, the pseudo-pilgrim, and the data concealed in his prayer wheel. So obvious an ace-in-the-hole should be reserved—at least until he obtained some inkling or even a partial translation of the pseudo-pilgrim's Chinese ideographs.

Presently the Intelligence Officer felt sure that not only had the Dewan been previously uninformed concerning a second European expedition, but that he was highly alarmed both by its presence and its attempt on North's party.

"His Excellency," Thopa translated, "is so grateful for this information that he will offer prayers of thanksgiving to Varuna the Most Holy."

The Dewan's serious concern at this sudden interjection of an unexpected element in the affairs of Jonkhar expressed itself in a swift conclusion of the interview. Apparently he wished to retire for some swift and private calculations which well might terminate in his taking immediate action.

"May your sleep be peaceful and profound, Bahadur Colonel. I do not know when we shall meet again," he added, his eyes suddenly gone opaque. The Dewan then bowed several times while shaking hands with himself in the Chinese fashion and spoke a few words to the Subadar.

"His Excellency wishes to inform that if there is any object or service that you or your wife may require"—Thopa never batted an eye as he mentioned Jenny Cutler—"you have only to strike on a small silver gong to be found upon the clothes chest."

"He can detail me a good Chinese interpreter in a damned big hurry," was what North wanted to say. How exasperating it was not to be able to analyze the false pilgrim's notes!

Hugh North's mood was not devoid of elation while following Thopa along a corridor in which tall and silent sepoys stood guard with sub-machine guns slung and ready.

Once they had emerged into that now familiar cloister leading back to the guest house, Thopa burst into chuckles—being Gurkha, he could extract amusement from almost any situation.

"One now observes why the Bahadur Colonel's cleverness is

so highly valued among his countrymen. Not only does he thwart the Dewan's intent and deny him information, but also he diverts attention to the other quarry." Thopa's teeth glinted through the gloom. "Alas, my friend, that you now go to share the den of a tigress. Ho! I am a brave man but rather would I sleep in a ruin haunted by hamadryads than masquerade as the lord of Cutler Memsahib. Good night, Bahadur Colonel!" He saluted sharply and, still grinning, the chunky little figure strode off with heels ringing against the smooth stone paving of the cloister.

12. Durga Puja

Sounds of distant gunfire wrenched Hugh North from the profound slumber of near-exhaustion, left him taut and sitting bolt upright. But what he heard he recognized as regular volleys of small-arms fire—it could not be either mortar or machine-gun fire, nor yet could an air bombardment be under way.

Smiling a trifle foolishly, he settled back and so became aware that, to his right, the boyish, light brown head of Jenny Cutler remained immobile against the pale rose texture of their single, enormous, and incredibly soft pillow. While studying the sleeping girl he pushed crisp black hair veined with silver into a semblance of order, then, running a hand over his chin, was astonished to find it so smooth. Only after a long moment of sleep-drugged reflection did he recall having shaved the evening before.

Without moving or turning her head, Jenny inquired, "Well, Sweet Prince Machiavel, and how did you make out?"

He sat straighter and viewed with approval certain captivating contours visible beneath the sheets. "Harken, my pet. Until you pretend to bestow some mark of wifely affection upon me,

I'll not tell you a syllable. Why not get it through your head—which right now looks like a badly made bed—that since this masquerade must continue, you might as well do a more convincing job; else you'll have had all this disagreeable nonsense for nothing."

"How beastly logical you are," Jenny complained, rolling onto her shoulder blades. "How's your breath?"

"Don't know. How's yours?"

Jenny counterfeited acquiescence, stretched enough to cause pert, muscular-appearing breasts to lift, attractively pink and firm, under one of those unidentifiable gossamer native garments, then leaned languidly over to plant a brief, thoroughly dispassionate kiss on his cheek. "And does it please my Lord and Master to awaken?"

North manufactured a truly magnificent and insultingly bored yawn.

"Enough to tell you, damn your pretty eyes, that I take it damned unsporting of you to wear your ski pants in bed. Don't ever dare do that again."

"I—I was cold."

"Horse feathers! Why do you, you leather-faced baggage, persist in imagining yourself to be prime male-bait?"

A quiver eloquent of outrage shook Jenny's side of the enormously wide bed. "If you'd as many passes, fancy and otherwise, made at your pants as I had in 'Q' Building, you'd be gun-shy, too."

Gently, but as irresistable as wire cable, the Intelligence Officer's arm encircled Jenny's shoulders, drew her inexorably close.

"Stop struggling, you contrary little bitch, and listen carefully, because you've a job and an important one. Today I want you to try to cozy up to Dil Kusha, the Number One Rani, and try to learn the lay of the land in the Sri Rajah's *zenana*."

Jenny sighed, knuckled eyes still heavy-lidded and pink. "Lay of the land, eh? Want her phone number? You soldiers are all alike."

"By God, you *have* got a gutter mind if ever I've seen one!"

growled North. "But then I shouldn't kick, should I? A gutter's public property."

The small head snapped about and she reared up on an elbow, bright blue eyes ablaze. "How dare you make a crack like that?"

"Oh, shut up!" he snapped, features dark against the headboard of white satin. "Since you embittered, frigid females don't understand kindness, I'm not going to show you any." His hand descended and anchored a slender, tawny wrist. "All that I want of you is that you quit imagining things and get efficient about your part in this business.

"Now listen. I want you to discover who in the palace influences whom; who the gals on our side may be. Back in Katmandu, I was warned to watch out for the Junior Queen around here, a babe called Bul Badena. Sorry, but that's the only pointer I can give you."

North reached out, picked up a pack of cigarettes. "Have one?" he suggested. "Why not relax? It's a really fine morning in spite of the thunderclouds in your expression."

In silence she accepted a light and sat up, arms clasped about knees under the covers. To a sudden thud-thudding and a blare of horns in the distance, Jenny cast her bedfellow a quizzical glance.

"Guess people down in Jang are getting warmed up to celebrate the rites of Durga Puja."

"Durga Puja?"

"Otherwise the Goddess Kali."

Jenny pursed lips thoughtfully, ran fingers through her boyishly short hair. Thanks to recent ablutions, it had turned so light as to display occasional golden tints.

"M-mm. Not so good. Kali is the principal Hindu deity specializing in victory, death and destruction." Sighing, she settled back onto the pink silk pillow. "Any word of whether the local gentry are going to try digging out our specimens and poor Carl Malchek's body?"

Before making reply North stretched until his shoulders crackled and the muscles of his chest rippled. "Nothing was

said about it last night," he told her, slipping his legs out from under covers of fine white wool, "but I've an idea somebody's going to get particular hell over the matter of that rockslide."

One of Jenny's slender, wide-winged brows arched itself.

"On account of those murdering bastards didn't do a tidy job on us, or because that goddam slide got started at all?"

" 'Time will tell,' as the monkey said when he hid limburger in Grandpa's clock. And now, my little chickadee, suppose we rouse out of this plush connubial sack and get ready for breakfast like a blissfully wedded pair of North Americans?" He hesitated. "You want first crack at the washstand while I go spear a seal?"

"No. You'll want to go first and slime up the washbasin. Leverett always did. Meanwhile I'll see what I can do about this fright wig of a hair-do."

While North commenced to sort out his shaving kit he murmured quietly, "By the bye, when you visit the loo, take along your *lamyik* and tear it into such tiny shreds that it can't possibly be reassembled. What are our conveniences like?"

"It's just a shed, like ye olde Chic Sale but built out over the battlements *à la Château de Blois*. It's too damned well ventilated. Who said this isn't a man's world?" Jenny hesitated. "You're convinced it's necessary to destroy my passport?"

"Yes. It's as necessary as your heading for the loo."

"In that case," she reddened, replied with a stiff smile, "you may consider my passport as destroyed."

Thanks to sparkling October sunshine, the invigorating quality of the atmosphere, breakfast proved to be the most cheery repast the company had enjoyed in some time, for recollections of the appalling death of Professor Malchek and Keith's company still were exerting a sobering effect.

Only Dr. Keith continued subdued and lost in gloomy abstraction. Apparently the total loss of so many irreplaceable specimens, won through a heavy expenditure of money, time and energy, must be weighing heavily upon the ornithologist's spirit.

To North's great cheer, Subadar Thopa, smiling and good-

natured as ever, appeared to rejoin their company. It was a sharp relief, moreover, to note that the little Gurkha's greenish-bronze-hued features betrayed no immediate anxiety.

"Matters progress better than I had dared to hope, Bahadur Colonel, for the Dewan has invited us to witness the Dashera Ritual of the rites of Durga Puja." He hesitated, a strip of melon poised between his fingers. "One does not anticipate that the Memsahib will enjoy certain elements of the ritual, but for her not to attend would offer a possible affront—one which we cannot afford."

"What is this ritual of Dashera?"

From a bowl of paper-thin Chinese porcelain the Gurkha gulped a mouthful of yak-butter tea before making reply. "The Dashera Ritual was imported into Jonkhar from my country. What customs may have grown up here I do not know, but in Nepal they are to bless His Highness' battle flags. Once a year, on the feast of Durga Puja, the colors of the Sri Rajah's regiments are assembled. Yesterday we saw some of them arriving in the Vale. You are privileged indeed," he continued, smiling, "to witness this ceremony. Very few Europeans have been so honored."

"I take it, then, that the Sri Rajah has decided to be friendly?" Dr. Keith demanded while dipping into a plate of duck eggs shirred in curry.

A shake of the Subadar's round, black stubble-covered head was emphatic. "No, Sahib, you should not assume so much. General Bijai Lakshi, Commander-in-Chief of the Jonkhari Army, has only just returned to Jang this morning and is escorting certain emissaries from the Red Chinese invaders of Tibet."

Presently Delahanty murmured something about repacking his gear and disappeared, but returned almost immediately with consternation written broad across his wind-burned, red and freckled features.

"You said a mouthful, mister," he told the Subadar, "when you allowed it was too damned early to figure on our using the welcome mat for keeps."

"What's gone wrong?" North demanded tensely.

"Not much!" snapped the ex-flier. "While we've been eating here somebody has cleaned us out of ammunition, excepting a single cartridge for each piece!"

"A subtle maneuver, to say the least," Keith observed, eyes narrowed behind the glittering lenses. "Now we cannot truthfully claim that we have been disarmed."

"Those sneaky sons-of-bitches are in for a surprise," declared Jenny Cutler softly. "I've got six pretty little buckshot cartridges tucked away where not even our distinguished colleague, Colonel North, could find them."

A swift smile appeared beneath the Intelligence Officer's freshly clipped black mustache. "Farsightedness seems to run in the North family, because I've managed to hang onto seven rounds myself."

"It is a bad sign," Thopa stated seriously. "It is a dangerous implication, this removal of our ammunition."

Not until ten of the morning did it become unmistakably evident that preparations for the Dashera Ritual were getting under way. By tens and hundreds, the multicolored and polyglot populace of Jang appeared, climbing that narrow causeway leading to the citadel's main gate. Already sepoys of the Princely Guard, smart in sage-green tunics and gray kilts, had formed up in a double rank about that wide series of steps which led up to the principal entrance of Matbar Nana Jang's green and white palace.

For the benefit of the *pilingi* rattan armchairs already had been ranged along the second-floor balcony of the guest house. More and more spectators came crowding into the courtyard until three sides of the square were jam-packed by a wide assortment of tribesmen.

Under a blazing autumn sun which picked out every detail of costume and drew countless flashes from jewelry and weapons the brilliantly costumed crowd suggested a vast kaleidoscope perpetually in motion.

Thopa pointed out Magar girls in saffron and red robes, their Mongoloid faces half concealed by gay scarves of yellow, blue or green; Lepcha women fairly staggering under the weight of

ponderous brass, copper and occasionally gold bracelets, bangles and necklaces; there were also Limbus, wild, shaggy folk wearing fur and feather headdresses decked with turquoise and hats of yak skin; tall, black-bearded Hindus in knee-length white coats, pantaloons and *pagris*—turbans—of all colors.

A large crowd immediately gathered below the guest-house balcony and stood staring, gaping and craning their necks, especially when Jenny Cutler, spruce and handsome and with her short, brown-gold hair agleam in the sun, appeared to join Keith, Delahanty and Hugh North. Her aloof expression accorded ill with Thopa's broad grin and North's quiet half-smile.

The drumming, however, was nerve-tingling in that a wide variety of drums was employed, ranging from the resounding deep bass of kettledrums to shallow-voiced and feverish-sounding hand drums. Steadily more units appeared, each flaunting a banner decorated with garlands and wreaths. These flags presented the weirdest imaginable variety of standards; one was composed of four white yak tails slung to a crossbar before a square of green cloth; another was a stuffed hawk perched on a tuft of scarlet horsehair; still others were of damask and cloth of gold cut into triangles, or swallow-tailed; foxtails, the mask of a leopard, the golden effigy of a bear, all served as standards.

Very few of these shaggy, rawhide-complexioned soldiers were clad in anything approaching uniform.

Gradually North and his companions commenced to recognize certain of the tribes they had seen on the road to Jang the previous day: hawk-faced and arrogant-appearing Lepchas in huge, round bearskin hats and many cartridge belts; swaggering Sunwars and Kachars, barbaric in crimson robes, conical yellow caps and sporting ear and nose rings.

What puzzled North was the fact that each company, platoon or battalion was leading alone three or more sleek goats and fat sheep.

Coolly, dispassionately, Jenny surveyed the passing animals, noting how garlands of autumn flowers or bits of varicolored ribbon had been hung about their necks or secured to their

horns. Bucking and protesting, they were hauled relentlessly along.

"Say," called Delahanty over the din, "they sure got even GIs beat on mascots."

Gradually troops filled the *maidan,* or parade ground, until solid banks of humanity stretched back in tight masses against the walls and buildings and only a small area before the palace was left clear. Into this men from the various units dragged forward a heavy post equipped with a broad leather strap and mounted on a low platform smothered under ropes of blossoms.

Curiosity at length prevailed over Jenny's reserve. "What in the world are those posts for?"

"I do not think the Memsahib will be pleased to learn," predicted the Subadar. "To a woman it is indeed a ghastly——" The Gurkha's voice was drowned out in the deafening roar of four brass howitzers fired simultaneously at the far end of the *maidan.* Apparently the Sri Rajah was about to appear.

"Huzoor! Huzoor!" screamed the crowd. *"Ho! Jai ram,* Sirdar!" shouted the troops. Drums thundered and boomed until North's head swam.

Simultaneously, a flash of gold and brilliant green shone beneath the arcade of the palace's principal entrance preluding the appearance of a large figure clad in scarlet-striped white trousers and a tunic of emerald green flashing with huge, jeweled decorations, massive epaulettes and aiguillettes. An enormous scimitar, the scabbard of which was a-sparkle with diamonds, swung to Matbar Nana Jang's belt as he strode out upon a dais carpeted in green and gold.

Further enhancing the Sri Rajah's height was his state headdress, a gem-encrusted cloth-of-gold affair topped by a slender clump of honey-hued plumes from the *Paradisea apoda* bird of paradise.

To the right of Matbar Nana Jang, but two steps to the rear, waddled the Dewan's portly figure, while occupying a corresponding position to the left was a squat, big-bellied individual adorned in a turquoise-blue uniform resplendent with decora-

tions and gold lace. Like sable bayonets two huge mustachios projected from his swarthy face.

To North's unspoken query, Thopa informed, "He in the blue is Bijai Lakshi, the Commander-in-Chief."

Unfortunately it was too far to permit North's careful observation of him who had only just returned to Jang.

Following the Sri Rajah appeared the two yellow-hat lamas, then the Nepalese and Sikkimese ministers and various courtiers. But that which seized and held North's attention was the arrival of two red-hat lamas in company with a pair of tall figures wearing simple khaki uniforms and peaked caps adorned by big, five-pointed red stars!

Jenny's hand suddenly closed on North's arm. "See them? And, by God, those Commie bastards are being seated among the diplomats. Doesn't look good, does it?"

"No. I'll bet dollars to doughnuts those red-hat lamas are our traitorous pals Tashi and Sakya."

"Huzoor! Huzoor!" roared troops and populace until windows along the gallery rattled in their frames. No doubt was left but that the Sri Rajah was a popular ruler.

"If, Bahadur Colonel, you will cast a glance at that little gallery set above the main entrance," Thopa whispered, "you will behold the two Ranees."

Because of distance the Intelligence Officer was unable to tell much concerning the two queens save that both were short and slender but one was much darker-complexioned than the other.

North's attention was recalled to the ceremony about to take place because the Commander-in-Chief descended the dais and stalked out to the very center of the *maidan* and bellowed a brief command, which caused at least two thousand rifles to swing skywards.

On the command of execution, the ranked sepoys commenced to fire into the air in rapid and wave-like succession.

Once this formal *feu de joie* had ceased to reverberate among the surrounding hills, the *crack-snap!* of closing bolt actions rattled loud as castanets above the tinkle of ejected cartridge

cases, then the troops stood at ease; a few of the less-well-disciplined sank comfortably onto their heels.

The portal reverberated to the shivering clash of cymbals and wild braying of rams'-horn trumpets and into the sunlight appeared a group of women clad in saris, Tibetan and Chinese gowns so varied and brilliant as to suggest a congress of butterflies.

"Those memsahibs are the wives of chiefs and nobles," Thopa explained.

Slowly advancing in stately fashion, the women created a carpet of bright blossoms before a small palanquin hung with cloth of gold and carried on the shoulders of eight brawny sepoys.

"Kali!" roared the crowd. "All honor to Kali, Goddess of Victory and Death!"

"There a golden statue of the Goddess rides within," explained the attaché. "The Rani Dil Kusha's sister is she who walks shaded by that red umbrella and holding a silver cord attached to the palanquin."

Squarely before the Sri Rajah's dais the sepoys, streaming sweat and panting visibly, set down Kali's portable temple amid screams and shouts of enthusiasm; long-haired and dreadfully emaciated *saddhus* drew back ruby-hued curtains to disclose a representation of the hideous goddess Kali wrought in pure gold.

Once the Senior Rani's sister had occupied her place among onlookers of princely rank another group of ladies appeared, the foremost bearing a golden basin smothered under a profusion of flowers. Immediately in her wake walked six pairs of women each carrying over her shoulder a furled parasol of scarlet and gold.

"I'll be damned," Keith muttered, "what's this? They're wearing neither saris nor veils."

When the procession passed close the outlines of buttocks and breasts were plainly discernible beneath the sheath-like gowns of yellow silk. Delahanty uttered a wolf whistle. "Say,

ain't *they* the sassy-lookin' babes? Why have they all got their hair cut in bangs and looped up over their ears?"

The Gurkha treated Delahanty to an angry glance. "Do not speak so. It is the custom."

"I've never before seen anything to approach this for color," Jenny murmured, eyes roving over the crowd. "If only I still had my water colors! Look, Hugh! Will you look at those gorgeous silver tiaras? They're so delicate they look like cobwebs."

Seen against the gray-brown masonry enclosing the courtyard, the jewelry, the infinite variety of costumes, uniforms and banners, suggested a casket of gems stirred by a golden rod.

Bells tinkled loudly a moment, then a Brahman high priest advanced, chanting all the while, to stand under a silver and blue parasol held by an acolyte opposite to the royal group. To a brazen flourish of bugles the standard-bearer of each unit advanced to plant his flagstaff in sockets let into the side of the flower-decked posts already placed in front of each organization. Immediately in front of the Europeans, Sunwar troops gripped the flower-decked lead of a huge ram and began to drag forward the strongly reluctant animal.

The Subadar leaned across to North. "Warn the Memsahib to keep eyes on her hands."

Jenny overheard, angrily shook her head. "I can take anything you can."

The bagpipes shrilled and screamed louder then.

While the strap was being adjusted to secure the victim to the post, the beast, in terror, strained away, stretching its neck and bleating out its fear. Sunlight flashed on the leaf-shaped blade of the officer's kukri. Sunwars immediately below the guests raised a terrific shout.

"Ho! Hut! Hut!"

He wielding the kukri brought it hissing downwards. The decapitated ram's body staggered crazily backwards, squirting blood through severed arteries far out over the stone pavement, then collapsed.

Deafening shouts reverberated to the tower tops as the officer

picked up the head, the eyes of which still rolled, and flung it at the feet of the Brahman high priest.

Delahanty swallowed hard, grunted, "That boy sure is handy with his cutlery. I'd hate to have him make a pass at me with his kukri."

North stole a look at Jenny. She was sitting bolt upright, her nostrils pinched and knuckle-white hands clenched over the knees of her ski pants. On noting his apprehensive glance she managed a brittle laugh and in taut accents said, "As the Red Queen remarked, 'Off with their heads!' "

Once the ram's shuddering carcass had quieted and had drained some of its blood into a bright brass basin it was dragged to one side, but not before a wild-eyed he-goat, offered by an adjoining unit, had suffered a like fate.

Louder and still louder sounded the clamor of the crowd—a savage, elemental ululation so expressive of primordial lust that it set hairs to squirming on the back of North's neck.

Subadar Thopa shrugged. "Pah! This is a childish affair. It takes a *man* with a single stroke to sever the head of a full-grown bullock." He grinned a peculiarly savage grin, one North had not previously seen him wear. "Last year I decapitated two buffaloes before my company and received two white *pagris* from the hands of the Panchh Sirkar himself. Anyone's kukri can lop off the head of a sheep or a goat."

All over the *maidan* sacrifices were taking place and the pile of bloodied heads which lay before the shrine of Kali grew steadily higher. Steaming rivulets of blood commenced to converge and, as the slaughter progressed, the illusion grew that a vast shiny carpet of scarlet was being unrolled to cover the courtyard.

Before long, the distinctive, sickish-sweet stench of hot blood commenced to pervade the atmosphere, but with no apparent effect upon the female spectators.

All the while the Brahman priest chanted appropriate verses from Hindu sacred books while staring at a marigold, that flower indispensable for any religious ceremony.

Jenny Cutler had paled under her tan but kept her seat,

smoking and surveying the scene, outwardly aloof, yet with evident interest. It was useless to attempt conversation over the continual blare of trumpets, the clashing of cymbals and the keening of bagpipes. In addition the great square resounded to the intermittent discharge of firearms and salutes fired haphazardly by cannoneers serving four small brass field guns mounted on the parapet.

For nearly an hour the slaughter continued, until a shoulder-high mound of dripping and glassy-eyed heads grew before the Goddess of Victory's small golden effigy. Never, thought North, had he beheld a more repulsive idol than that of Kali, hideous, with four arms, a necklace of skulls and a girdle of human hands—not even in Mexico or Guatemala.

When at length the last frantic sacrificial victim had spilt its life-blood into the great brass bowl, the Commander-in-Chief heaved his azure-hued figure to its feet and, accompanied by the Brahman high priest, followed a pair of young nobles charged with transporting the basin over to the colors of a near-by company.

Never had the multitude howled louder than when the color havildar plucked his flagstaff from its socket and brought it to the horizontal. To a frantic clamor of applause General Bijai Lakshi then dipped pudgy hands into the blood and pressed a sanguinary hand-print upon both sides of the banner.

Deliberately and with great dignity, the Commander-in-Chief moved on to the next ensign and there repeated the ceremony.

When all the ensigns thus had been honored the Sri Rajah arose from his gilded chair, gravely saluted the figure of Kali and re-entered his palace amid deafening volleys of musketry and the impassioned applause of his subjects.

13. The Sri Rajah

After sundown a comparative quiet descended upon the citadel but down in Jang the noises of revelry were moving towards a strident crescendo. Even in the guest house the din sounded ominous.

"There's no doubt," Jenny observed while retucking her shirt tails, "that our stuff's been gone over, and by experts! Not that I've anything much left for them to paw."

Jaw line tight, Hugh North completed his inspection of a grayed and grease-spotted musette bag. "Well, among other things, they've snagged my diary; not that it contained anything of value; also those damned clumsy swine have just about wrecked my fountain pen, testing its bladder for God knows what." Worriedly he ran fingers through his crisp black hair. "Wonder why they weren't puzzled over the presence of a Buddhist rosary and prayer wheel in my luggage?"

"Have they disturbed it?"

"No. Apparently not." He didn't add that those tiny enigmatic rolls of notes prepared by Dirty Dick long since had become secreted amid fragrant pipe tobacco at the bottom of a leopard-skin pouch which never left his person.

"Now how the hell is a gal supposed to wear these?" Jenny demanded, holding up an oddly cut pair of drawers discovered in the depths of a handsomely lacquered Chinese chest.

Certain tense lines vanished from North's tanned features. "They cross over and tie in front—or did, when Mother was a girl. They're just old-fashioned split bottoms."

"I think they're nasty—they'd be draughty, anyway."

"But practical," North grinned. "They're still the rage among peasants in Eastern Europe."

"Only things I recognize in this oriental hope chest are stockings and what might be a nightgown. There's nary a slip, a girdle, a bra or a pair of panties in the carload."

"If the women here get on without 'em, a smart cookie out of OSS ought to be able to make-do."

"If you've never sampled the sweet fresh air of hell you've my permission to go try." Then she added, "I have been invited to take coffee with Her Serene Highness, the Rani Dil Kusha." Crouching on the solid heels of her field boots before the red, black and gold lacquer chest, she looked suddenly quite small. "Is there any particular fact you want to know?"

North mused while fixing unseeing eyes upon a row of lofty white peaks becoming highlighted by the rich, vermilion hues of sunset. "Yes. I want to learn who promoted that rockslide which so nearly removed you from this vale of tears. Also, my dear——"

"I'm not 'your dear'!" she snapped in crisp Back Bay accents. "You needn't get familiar just because we occupy the same bed."

North smiled, unabashed, over his shoulder. "Sorry. The endearment was merely a manner of speech. Then there's something which I can't explain, no matter how I try to reason it out."

"What? The great Hugh North really can't turn up a ready explanation? I'm shocked and disillusioned."

"You're also several other things which I'm too polite to mention," he pointed out equably. "Now cut out the comedy and listen. Back there in the Gorge of Durga, a certain silver-haired dame was detailed to knock me off."

Jenny looked up quickly, pointed features alert. "Do you figure that she might have murdered poor Charles Opdyck? Our *mukhiya* was positive we were being continually spied on after we left Nawakot." Her nether lip tucked itself between small, slightly uneven teeth. "But how could this platinum-haired doxy have learned that you were being sent up as replacement?"

"The only logical explanation is that they must have a short-wave radio along. Again, how could those playful Johnnies who started that rockslide have been alerted in time? Tell me, did the late Professor Malchek ever go off for a couple of days hunting interesting mammals on his own?"

"Why, how did you know?"

"Did he?"

"Yes, but no more than the rest of us. We all took brief side trips to cover our specialties better."

"Oh, I was just wondering if ever he was gone an unusually long time?"

"Come to think of it," the girl admitted ruefully, "he did. Once, when we had our base camp in the Garha Valley. Carl declared he'd got lost and so had to spend a couple of nights out. He could have, too, as that's pretty wild country. Arunah and I were very worried."

"I see," said he slowly. "Now there are some other things I wish you'd try to find out. Exactly what are Dil Kusha's relations with her co-Rani, Bul Badena? I have been told there's little love lost between 'em—one of the disadvantages of polygamy, I suppose. Then note, if you can, the paramount queen's reactions to an account of rockslide. Also, how does she feel about the arrival of those Chinese Reds we saw at the festival with their red-hat lama friends?"

Her always composed features especially devoid of expression, Jenny arose bearing an armful of colorful native garments. "I'll try, but I make no guarantees. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to try to get hold of Thopa," North told her; "the man's invaluable. Wish to God he was working full time for me instead of for the Maharajadhiraj."

Jenny crossed the room, lithe figure faithfully duplicated by lamplight in a tall mirror let into the opposite wall among a series of magnificent Indian tapestries. "I've always thought the King of Nepal is called the Panchh Sirkar?"

"So he is. He has dozens of titles, I presume." North smiled. "How's your lipstick holding out?"

For answer Jenny displayed a tiny bright crumb protruding

beyond its brass case. "Of course," she explained bitterly, "I *would* hang onto this one to the last smear and so lose three full ones for the benefit of the rocks and rills."

"Looks like perhaps you'll have to make do with that." He indicated a small alabaster jar capped with Chinese jadework. From its side protruded the ivory handle of a little brush.

"What with splashing that heavy stuff on, I'd look like a Scollay Square debutante," she objected. "Still, maybe I'll rehearse tomorrow." She began pulling on her quilted jacket. "Try not to miss me too much, will you, dear?"

"I'll try not to pine away," North assured her. "And suppose you try to remember how you looked before you started living on a straight diet of sour pickles."

She flushed, but only treated him to an icy stare before stepping out into the corridor.

"Boy, oh boy! What have I done to deserve this?" North grunted, then went over to inspect his rifle. Recalling a certain narrow escape in Indo-China, he disassembled the piece with great attention and made doubly sure that its mechanism had not been tampered with. Then, from between the socks folded down outside his heavy climbing boots, he removed half a dozen slim brass cartridges, stood undecided.

All the while he was thinking, "I must get an audience with the Sri Rajah and make my play before those Red Charlies go into Comrade Fratkin Schmul's routine. Supreme boldness, my boy, is a dangerous course, but it looks like the only answer."

He concealed his cartridges at the bottom of a lovely porcelain bowl supporting a miniature cedar tree, then fingered his tobacco pouch to make certain that it still contained its precious contents, and, whistling softly, started down that now familiar cloister leading to the palace.

Despite all his years of experience, North felt his nerves growing taut. There was nothing whatever, no fear of diplomatic consequences or reprisals, to deter Matbar Nana Jang from ordering his summary execution should that despot decide to rid himself of an uninvited and certainly embarrassing caller.

To North's surprise, no guard was on duty at the palace's

western entrance. Possibly the sepoy had succumbed to the temptation of watching a gambling game in progress on the *maidan* not far away.

In any case, the Intelligence Officer entered and followed a hallway in which he met no one but a white-clad house servant who cast him a questioning look before salaaming profoundly. North found no difficulty in locating the Dewan's quarters, which proved to be unoccupied.

Only with difficulty was he able to resist the temptation of initiating swift researches into a chest overflowing with papers. Instead he crossed over to the dais previously occupied by Vikram Girvan and struck the small silver gong before it.

A very fat, shaven-headed *babu,* or secretary, appeared, to cast the lean American a look of horror-stricken astonishment. "W-what does y-your Honor require?" he stammered in Hindustani.

"I must see your master immediately."

"But, Sirdar, that is q-quite impossible. His Excellency is conferring with His Highness, the Sri Rajah, and must not be d-disturbed."

The line of Hugh North's jaw hardened. "Nevertheless you will show me to the Dewan at once."

"Oh, Sirdar, I could be flayed alive for such boldness."

"*Hut!* Lead me to him!"

The secretary's soft brown eyes goggled like those of an angry Pekinese once the Intelligence man's fist closed, vise-like, upon his wrist. Having once started riding the tiger, there could for North remain no choice but to pursue his possibly suicidal impulse to its conclusion.

"Get going, I don't want to have to get rough," he warned and, by way of persuasion, tightened his grip on the other's flabby forearm until the *babu* emitted a squeak of pain. "Is His Highness at present in this wing of the palace?"

"Yes, Sirdar," quavered the fat little man. "*Ai-e-e!* You force us both to our deaths!"

"Be quiet, you chattering ape! In what room do they confer?"

"Directly above us," quavered the *babu*. "*Ai-e-e!* I beg you to have mercy on this lowly one who is the father of many small children."

"Then it's time you knocked off, not up," commented North in sardonic humor. "Let's go, and don't try alarming any guards. Understand?" For emphasis he dug the sharp end of a metal-jacketed cartridge into the fellow's plump side, who, deeming it to be a knife point, commenced to tremble violently.

The festival now raging in courtyard and town must indeed be proving an irresistible diversion for in all the dim, resounding corridors of the palace's west wing the intruders encountered only one sepoy of the Royal Bodyguard on guard and he was nodding from having consumed too many holiday chupattis.

After climbing a wide flight of handsomely carved and highly polished wooden stairs the *babu* halted and rolled popeyes in an excess of fright.

"They are in there, Sirdar. I implore your Honor to permit my departure that I may prepare for death."

The instant North released his grip the secretary darted off down the corridor at a speed surprising in one of his obesity. His white mantle fairly billowed to his flight.

What would be the Sri Rajah's reaction to this impending intrusion? Not for nothing was this heir of the tigerish Nana Sahib reported to loathe anyone speaking the English tongue. North hesitated. For all that, there now could be no turning back.

As his knuckles impacted against a cedarwood door intricately carved in the Nepalese style an unfamiliar electric current seemed to pass through him. Seldom before had he felt so alone and so uncertain. Twice, three times, he rapped, firmly but not loudly, then drew a slow breath and stood waiting.

For a moment silence reigned beyond the portal, then he recognized the Dewan's voice inquiring something in Jonkhari.

North drew a deep breath. "It is I, Colonel North," he stated. "I have come to speak with your master, the Sri Rajah."

Had he exploded a grenade against those exquisite door panels, results could not have been more tumultuous, for a roar like that of an angry bull sounded from within and in an instant the door crashed back and the gigantic figure of the Sri Rajah burst out, bawling for the guards and flourishing a naked kukri.

Although North had intended to bow or salute, he deemed it safer to stand stock-still. Any movement on his part might cause that glittering, leaf-shaped blade to come sweeping down with all of Matbar Nana Jang's enormous strength behind it. Down the corridor came pelting a brace of guards, their submachine guns leveled.

"Dog of an Englishman! How came you here?" Matbar Nana Jang growled in Hindustani, his brilliant and unusually large black eyes flashing. His full sable beard, parted down its exact middle in the manner of Charles Evans Hughes, quivered in outrage. In a long-skirted coat of bright yellow silk the Sri Rajah looked taller than his actual six feet two.

"It was necessary that I converse with Your Highness, and since I received no invitation to present my respects, I was forced to come in search of you."

On the Dewan's plump brown features was stamped an expression of lively apprehension mingled with downright terror.

"But—but the guards, Bahadur Colonel? Why did they let you pass?" demanded the Dewan.

"I met none to challenge me, either above or below stairs!"

"Siva smite those neglectful pigs!" Awful to behold was the rage which then overwhelmed the Sri Rajah. He shouted a string of commands which fetched squads of green-uniformed sepoys racing from all directions. Immediately the two delinquent guards who had arrived first were disarmed and dragged away, wailing and screeching for mercy. More officers and men ran up, added their voices to the turmoil, attempting to exonerate themselves.

Below a vivid green turban decorated by a huge diamond brooch the Sri Rajah's eyes glittered like that of a hamadryad about to strike. "How dare you, dog of an Englishman, thrust

yourself upon us?" Matbar growled at this tall Intelligence Officer in the stained shooting coat.

North's very imperfect knowledge of Hindustani prompted him to make reply in French, then in Spanish. He would employ English only as a last resort.

The Sri Rajah shook his head, imperiously waved forward the Dewan, who, still gray-faced and trembling, obeyed, then addressed a havildar who dashed off presently to return with Subadar Thopa, still struggling into his bush jacket. He must have been sleeping when the summons came; his slanting eyes looked heavy-lidded.

Suddenly out on the *maidan* sounded a staccato volley, from which North deduced that the negligent guards had been made swiftly to pay for their laxity.

The breath halted in Hugh North's throat. In so towering a rage, the Sri Rajah impulsively might decide to make a clean sweep of troublesome persons. With his naked kukri the Jonkhari indicated the Intelligence Officer.

"Search that man!"

None too gently, North's person was explored and revealed nothing more lethal than a single cartridge.

To Thopa, North called, "Kindly remind His Highness that had I wished to harm him he would not be living at this moment."

The little Gurkha's expression hardened. "I cannot say such a thing. He would have us instantly shot."

"Do as I say!" North's tone, compelling as a pointed pistol, prompted the little attaché to comply.

For a moment it seemed as if summary execution was in store, but suddenly the Sri Rajah's mahogany-hued features relaxed and he threw back his narrow head and laughed. But there was no merriment in his risibility—only a macabre hilarity. He then addressed Thopa in rapid Nepalese and slipped his kukri back into its gem-encrusted sheath of gold.

"His Highness has observed that none but a madman or a fool would have undertaken the risks that you have." The

Gurkha smiled thinly. "His Highness says he does not hold you a fool."

Matbar Nana Jang snapped orders to his visibly terrified staff, then re-entered the council room and beckoned in North and Thopa.

"Since you have dared seek the tiger in his den," announced he coldly, "we are pleased to grant you audience." The huge figure in yellow and green then stalked across the room and sank cross-legged upon a settee and picked up a mouthpiece of the tall, silver *huqua* he must have been smoking when interrupted.

The Dewan looked his inexpressible relief at this turn in events; in fact, his shiny, rotund features broke into a timid smile when he waddled over to take post behind his master.

"You have His Highness' permission to speak," Thopa announced.

Forcing a dispassionate manner he was far from feeling, North began, "First off, Your Highness will please understand that I am *not* an Englishman. Although the British and the Americans speak the same language, they are two entirely distinct peoples, separated by three thousand miles of ocean."

"Then why have you dared to enter our State?" Slowly, the Sri Rajah's left hand fingered the part in his black beard while his right hand, through either accident or design, rested upon the hilt of his kukri.

"I came to Jonkhar," North announced, choosing his words with care, "for two purposes. First, to shoot certain kinds of birds and animals for a collection being made by my friend, Dr. Keith." He hesitated so long that the Rajah prompted.

"And your second reason?"

"To attempt to safeguard the independence of Jonkhar, Your Highness."

The Dewan's flabby jaw sagged in astonishment and Matbar's muscular body stiffened and his eyes took on a baleful gleam.

"*Roko!*" he snarled. "Do you dare to imply that the Sri Rajah is unable to defend his domain?"

Gravely, Hugh North surveyed the big, glittering figure before him. "No, Your Highness. You would quickly defeat an enemy attacking boldly from without."

"What, then, is your meaning?"

"To defeat the soft-speaking, godless and perfidious scum who already have entered Jonkhar is another matter. At this very moment they are at work, plotting your death and the destruction of your kingdom."

"Yours are the words of a madman!" the Rajah observed while color further darkened his face. "Take care you do not try our patience too far."

"I will run that risk, Your Highness, if I can convince you that the shrewdest and most merciless of conquerors are at this moment plotting to overrun your country."

The Sri Rajah vented a snorting laugh. "And whom does your imagination suspect?"

That his Gurkha attaché was translating both accurately and with tact was North's profound hope as he replied, "Those same rulers who, under the guise of friendship, invaded the dominions of the Dalai Lama and forced him into flight and exile."

"The Dalai is a stupid youth, surrounded by corrupt courtiers," grunted Matbar Nana Jang.

"And who corrupted those courtiers? Shall I say, or does Your Highness already know, that these men are emissaries of Mao Tsetung?"

"That is not so!" countered the Sri Rajah. "It is well known the Dalai Lama was preparing to surrender his authority to the British."

That nothing could be further from the truth, North was well aware, but he judged it ill-advised to argue the point at present.

Matbar Nana Jang caught up the *huqua's* stem, set the water to bubbling and cooling smoke which presently he expelled in a single great puff. "For generations my ancestors have feared attack from no foreign country saving only the accursed British Raj."

"But if Your Highness will choose to remember, the British Raj no longer exists in India," North quickly pointed out. "Because of that fact your domain stands in ever graver danger."

Like dusky jewels the Sri Rajah's eyes shone.

"Would you have me believe that the States of Pakistan and Hindustan offer a greater threat to our realm? Bah! They are so divided that, even now, they crouch to leap at each other's throats."

Elated that this dark giant had so surely fallen into his verbal snare, North lost no time.

"It is that very weakness in India, Your Highness, which drives the Chinese Soviets to secure a military road into Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal. This present infiltration of Tibet is but a first step towards that ancient goal of the Russian Czars and Chinese Emperors—the treasures of India and Burma."

The scene was memorable. Under the mellow light of many silver ceiling lamps, brass salvers, tiger-skin rugs and the head of a magnificent leopard gave off rich hues. No less did it lend luster to the divan's scarlet silk covering, to the Sri Rajah's canary-yellow coat and his emerald-green turban. The walls fairly glowed with the splendor of fine Chinese rugs and Bengalese tapestries.

A large Siamese cat adorned by a silver and turquoise collar appeared from among the shadows, leaped fearlessly up onto the divan and, in aloof dignity, composed itself beside the Sri Rajah's knee. There the creature sprawled, staring unblinkingly at the wind-burned American from pale green, almond-shaped eyes.

"That is not the story we have heard from other sources," objected Matbar Nana Jang. "The new rulers of China declare themselves determined to drive the last vestiges of White power from Asia. Is it not true that they, like us, are Asiatics?"

Absently his powerful bronze fingers commenced to toy with the cat's chin. "Further they promise us many fine and modern weapons and wheel-borne trade with all the countries of the East. Already they have made us many rich gifts."

At the black-bearded Princeling's next words, North's heart

surged and sank. "Today their emissaries have appeared to negotiate a compact of perpetual peace and amity." The fierce dark eyes lit, suggested those of a gerfalcon such as North had seen while hawking among the Berbers of North Africa. "Also they promise me new lands and a share of the spoils of Tibet." He laughed a harsh, grating and contemptuous laugh. "What better does the Panchh Sirkar of America have to offer?"

A sickening suspicion invaded North's being. Could this black-bearded giant's negotiations with the Reds *already* have entered into a final phase? Instantly a poignant question presented itself. Was it to Chinese or to Russian Reds that the Sri Rajah had been listening?

A hopeful idea germinated, commenced to flourish in the Intelligence Officer's mind. Was it sensible to believe that that silver-haired huntress and her party could be the envoys *from Red China?* Possibly. Many pitiful White Russian exiles still existed within Manchuria and Shanghai. He needed time to think, opportunity to weigh impressions and to evaluate certain deductions.

Following a long-established practice on finding himself backed into an awkward position, North assumed the initiative.

"Is it indeed the practice of Your Highness' government to attack inoffensive travelers within your borders even before learning whether they are properly authorized to visit your domains?"

Emeralds and rubies created rich, transitory flashes to a curt sidewise motion of Matbar Nana Jang's broad brown hand.

"You had no authorization!" he growled.

"But at the moment a certain slide was precipitated, no examination could have been reported in Jang." This was a distinct gamble on North's part: the frontier officials *might* have had time to report diplomatic deficiencies in Keith's credentials. All the same, he doubted sincerely whether that murderous and all-but-successful onslaught could have been arranged impromptu.

More than ever resembling an animated bronze Buddha, the

Dewan appeared somewhat reassured when the lean American pressed his point.

"Do I correctly assume, Your Highness, that this unprovoked assault and a later night attack on my expedition actually were undertaken *without* Your Highness' knowledge and consent?"

Apparently flicked on the raw, the Sri Rajah scowled and his heavy brows merged themselves into a single ominous line. Apparently he had not ordered the annihilation of Keith's party. The diamond brooch on Matbar's turban glittered to a swift lateral movement, then he entered into a rapid conversation with the Dewan, employing some local dialect which not even Thopa understood. Resuming Hindustani, the Sri Rajah snapped and for the first time applied an honorific title to his guest. "You are correct, Bahadur Colonel; to our mortification and to the sorrow of those who took so much upon themselves, those attacks were delivered lacking our knowledge or consent. But," he added sharply, "that does not mean that we condone your unauthorized invasion of my territory."

A malevolent smile hardened his thin lips and he turned to the Dewan. "Perhaps it would not be wise for the *pilingi* to hear of these embarrassing occurrences? While we consider the question, Bahadur Colonel, we grant you liberty to move about within my citadel. Accompanied by our guards, you may also visit our City of Jang." Loudly he thrice clapped his hands. "You have our permission to depart."

Nothing more could be done, North perceived, other than to withdraw and pray that those little seeds of doubt concerning the fate of rulers who attempted to deal with the Soviets might burgeon. At least the expedition's situation was no worse off than it was an hour earlier.

He arose, looked steadily into the Sri Rajah's swarthy features an instant and then executed a smart salute. This courtesy proved to be a grave error.

"So? You are still a soldier, no scientist, and, no doubt, a British agent!"

"I just now responded to force of habit alone, Your High-

ness," North explained quickly. "Having long been an American officer, I was only paying my respects to authority."

Still the damage had been done; he was aware of that while marching out of the audience chamber. Nor was it in the least reassuring to discover waiting in the corridor, and probably able to have overheard all that was said, a group of officers, among them the squat figure of Bijai Lakshi, the Sri Rajah's Commander-in-Chief. He was frowning, as were several other officers of the royal household, fierce, eagle-featured fellows with a look of wild winds and high mountains about them.

But that which chiefly captured the Intelligence Officer's attention were two Chinese in smart gray uniforms. One of them wore the Order of the Red Banner and, set squarely above the visor of these callers' caps, glowed the red, five-pointed star of Communism.

14. The Baroness Atossa

Under the cover of a wretchedly played game of chess with Arunah Keith, North recapitulated his interview with the Sri Rajah. Jenny Cutler's bright blue eyes widened in incredulity.

"Do you mean to tell us that without permission of any sort you marched into the palace and found your way to the Dewan's council room?"

The Intelligence Officer frowned at both her interruption and her tone. He was growing more than a little fed up with this aloof young woman and her patronizing airs. "That's what I said, I believe."

"But didn't you know that you could have been skinned alive for so much as entering the palace unbidden?" she gasped.

North treated her to a bleakly impatient look. "I hardly ex-

pected to find welcome mats or purple carpets laid out for me."

"Well, I'll be damned and double-damned!" Jenny cried and the expression on her pointed brown features underwent a curious transformation. "You've certainly got plenty of what it takes for this kind of a jaunt."

"Come on, Colonel, it's your move," reminded Keith in Spanish—all three were speaking that language. "We're supposed to make this look convincing."

That they were under constant surveillance proved wearing to the prisoner-guests.

"There's one thing I am trying to understand," continued the Intelligence Officer, looking sidewise at Jenny, who seemed considerably refreshed and surprisingly at home in a handsome yellow and blue silk sari. Her feet appeared smaller shod as they were in blue kid slippers with pointed, upturned toes. "Then I'll want a detailed account of your interview with the Rani, my darling little helpmeet."

" 'Darling helpmeet,' my fanny. Lay off the sweet talk, will you?"

"With pleasure. And while I think of it, don't let the servants snitch your traveling gear, even to clean it."

"Why? My clothes creak with dirt."

"We may have to try getting out of here in one hell of a big hurry."

The scientist's wiry red hand crept out and shoved a lovely ivory rook carved to resemble a *dzong's* tower over the ebony and mother-of-pearl chessboard. "You were about to inquire?"

"About your companion, the late Professor Carl Anton Malchek."

Keith's heavy, yellowish brows contracted. "You surely don't think that——"

"I suspect nothing," North promptly interrupted. "It's simply that I need to know more about his background—and your estimate of him."

"He was born in the Czechish city of Pilsen, where his father was a noted chemist. Carl was sent to French primary schools and German secondary schools. Eventually he won a

Ph. D., *summa cum laude,* from the Swiss University of Berne where he was a member of the Corps Jurassia. I have been informed that his thesis on the subspecies *Silvarctos Thebetanus,* of Western Tibet, was brilliant."

"What then?" Mechanically, North countered the rook's move with his king of red-dyed ivory.

"When Hitler's invasion took place Carl was teaching, an Associate Professor of Biology at the University of Pilsen. Unable to escape, he went underground together with other liberal members of the faculty."

"Your move, Arunah," Jenny prompted. "There's someone behind the screen."

"Let's talk French," North suggested. "Please go on."

"All through the war Carl led a company of partisans in the Hutzulian mountains."

"Did his particular partisan group profess any Marxist sympathies?"

"No!" came the instant response. "He has often assured me that they adhered only to republican principles. I am inclined to credit that," Keith continued, "because, immediately that the Reds murdered Jan Masaryk's republic, Carl Malchek was imprisoned by the Reds. Just as he had been when captured by the Nazis. Your move."

Again the wonderfully carved ivory pieces traced brief patterns across the chessboard.

"How long was he imprisoned?" North inquired. "Try to tell me exactly."

"Sorry, Colonel. I am not sure about that. All I know is that about two years ago he escaped—he would never tell me how, said it would endanger others still behind the Iron Curtain. In any case, Carl managed to reach Chicago, where I was doing the preliminary planning for this expedition. When I inquired among my colleagues for someone familiar with the fauna of the Himalayas and who spoke some of the native dialects, they suggested Professor Malchek."

"As a mammalogist he was tops, but he wasn't so hot at languages," Jenny interpolated.

"Probably that was because he had done his researches among the mountains further west," Keith explained.

"I see," North muttered. "Did nothing, no matter how negligible, occur during the course of your researches in Nepal that might lead you to suspect he was anything more or less than he claimed to be?"

Dr. Keith's pale gray eyes flashed behind their spectacles.

"Nothing! Carl continually inveighed against the Chinese Reds and their recent brutal and utterly shameless invasion of Tibet."

As if struck by a sudden thought, North checked his next chess move, hesitated, and then completed it.

"You must have been completely satisfied with Malchek's credentials?"

"Oh, yes," came Keith's assured reply. "I couldn't afford to take chances, so I had the State Department vouch for Malchek! He was so delighted over the discovery of the rare clouded leopard at twenty thousand feet elevation. The species, you know, are considered to be extinct in Nepal. He intended to hunt them in the western ranges of Jonkhar."

Keith raised fine, sad eyes. "Do you imagine that we might be able to recover *any* of my equipment and specimens?"

Jenny, from her seat on a red hassock embroidered in silver, cried impulsively, "If only you could guess, Hugh, how hard we worked, how often we risked our lives to collect those specimens. What a sensation there'd have been next spring in New York and Chicago!"

"It's damned hard lines to have a lot of planning and hard work go for nothing," agreed the dark-haired Intelligence Officer. "I've had my share of disappointments—plenty of them."

The Cutler girl's gaze seemed less hostile when it sought his ruddy, high-cheekboned features. "You appear to have experienced a good bit of everything."

"Except act as husband to a human she-wildcat," he chuckled. "And now will you tell about your interview with the Rani Dil Kusha?"

Lips compressed, Jenny Cutler arose from the circular leath-

er cushion, crossed the common room to select a pair of very long brown cigarettes from a green-blue malachite box and, in silence, passed one to Arunah Keith.

"Thanks for the service," North drawled. "Nothing like spoiling your husband, is there?"

She flushed. "You're not paralyzed, are you?"

"No."

"Besides, wildcats don't pass ciragettes," she reminded coolly through a first puff.

"I presume not. I don't want one, anyhow. I'm going to smoke a pipe." Digging into his pouch, he felt infinitely reassured on feeling those precious little scrolls of paper secure. Somehow he felt that as evidence they would someday prove worth many times their weight in platinum.

"The Rani Dil Kusha," Jenny commenced, "is about thirty-five, I'd say, and one of the handsomest women I have ever beheld, for all her tasteless jewelry, henna and that silly big diamond she wears in one nostril."

"What did you learn?"

"Very little," Jenny admitted lamely. "The Rani managed to ask most of the questions in spite of all I could do without running the risk of antagonizing her."

"What about, principally?"

In resettling herself on the cushion the Cutler girl apparently had forgotten the sari's unaccustomedly sheer substance for promptly it fell into curves and, as pressure was applied to the fabric, it traced a gracious line from ankle to thigh. Also it more than hinted at the contours of a firm and well-developed bosom. Despite his preoccupation North found time again to wonder how any man could have so callously abandoned this lovely young woman.

"Chiefly, the Rani seemed interested to hear about what had happened to poor Charlie Opdyck."

North's level black brows climbed a trifle. "So Dil Kusha *already* knew about his death?"

"Why, yes. I hadn't thought of that. How do you suppose she knew?"

"Ask me another, and get on with your yarn."

"Then she asked about conditions in Nepal; how much the recent revolution there had affected the country." A small girl's mischievous smile came to curve Jenny's lips, darkly brilliant against her tan. "Chiefly, she seemed to be interested in you, my dear, gallant Colonel North." She shrugged and turned away. "I suppose having all the girls sigh and stare is old hat to you."

"Not quite all," he grinned. "We've a living refutation of that rule right here. Try to remember whether she made any inquiry concerning Carl Malchek."

"Why, yes, as a matter of fact, she did," Jenny admitted in some surprise. "The Rani seemed anxious to learn where he had joined our expedition and when. The old girl couldn't seem to believe Carl had come all the way from America with us.

"She seemed cordial enough and inquired whether anything could be done either for you, my loving spouse, or me," Jenny continued, flicking ashes into an alabaster bowl. "She even invited me to stay in the *zenana* with her if I would be more comfortable."

"It's a wonder you didn't take her up," North drawled. "Couldn't you, with your OSS training, learn anything about palace politics?"

"No. And don't glower at me so!"

Keith sighed. "I'm so sorry you two don't get on better. I know it's my fault and that I took an unpardonable liberty, but I felt that our party must at all costs remain in close contact."

"Close contact and how!" Jenny complained bitterly. "I was hoping that Hugh at least would snore so that I could throw things at him, but, damn him, he doesn't. He—he's utterly infuriating!"

"Please accept my apologies, both of you," Keith arose agitatedly. "I—I must go speak with Delahanty—excuse me, please."

"I regret," North observed to a handsome Chinese dragon carved out of mutton-fat jade, "to warn a certain young woman

once more that this churlish behavior is intolerable. I'd hate to be forced into teaching her good sportsmanship on the seat of her pants."

Jenny's blue eyes sparkled. "Bah! Big talk. I dare you——"

"Keep on the way you're going, my girl, and I'll show you. Can't you see that you're putting on a bum act at a critical moment? I won't stand for it, not with our necks already halfway in the garrote."

Jenny sprang up to an accompanying swirl of her sari. "I'll say and do just what I damn' well please——" She got no further, for down on the *maidan* sounded a hoarse, impatient braying of bugles, then the dry rattle of snare drums and the trample of many feet on the run.

In an instant Jenny darted out of the common room. North, his apprehensions mounting, followed his companion out onto the balcony overlooking the courtyard where, a moment later, they were joined by Keith, Delahanty and Subadar Thopa.

A vivid, picturesque and wholly unforgettable drama became enacted below on the broad, flagstone parade ground now revealed by dozens of torches flaring into orange-gold brilliance. From the barracks opposite the guest quarters were running sepoys who detoured the bodies and blood pools of two executed guards; otherwise they paid these crumpled corpses not the least attention.

"What in the world?" Keith demanded once the drums stopped beating a long roll.

Delahanty's freckled forehead wrinkled itself. "Looks like they must be expectin' a rich uncle or somebody. See? A honor guard is bein' formed up."

Quickly North perceived that most of the torchbearers were posting themselves just inside that great black gap marking the citadel's main gate. By threes and fours, and then by the half dozen, windows in the palace lost their opaque aspect and commenced to glow with light. Whiffs of the pleasantly resinous but pungent smoke given off by torches below were carried by a cool wind up to the guests' gallery and began to sting at the

onlookers' eyes until Jenny uttered profane comments on the subject and complained of the chill.

North had just time to slip back into their room to fetch a trench coat and drop it over Jenny's strong shoulders before the din on the *maidan* reached a crescendo.

"What's that they're yelling?" North demanded of Thopa, standing tense and alert beside him.

"They cheer Prince Timrud, the Sri Rajah's younger half-brother."

"What about this chap? Where does he fit?"

"His Highness' full name is Timrud Jagai Jang," the little Gurkha informed. "As his given name suggests, his mother was a Tatar— a concubine fetched from Inner Mongolia."

"This guy sounds popular like a shower of whisky at a longshoremen's clambake," Delahanty commented, fingers drumming on the balcony's stone rail.

And indeed North detected a certain spontaneous ring to a series of discordant cheers which had not characterized plaudits raised that morning in honor of the Sri Rajah.

"The new arrivals are about to appear," predicted the Subadar over an impressive thundering of kettledrums.

By gripping the cold stone railing with both hands, North was able to lean far out over the balcony and so glimpsed the outline of a mounted figure. He was returning salutes right and left. An instant later the throbbing, orange-gold glow of the assembled torches revealed three more figures riding out of the gloom created by the great arch of the gate.

Louder wailed the horn trumpets and the whole *maidan* throbbed in an infernal smoky glare.

Suddenly Jenny cried out, "You can dust my panties in Filene's window if there isn't a woman among them, and a white woman at that!"

"Nonsense, Jenny, you must be mistaken," Keith protested, but North exchanged swift glances with Delahanty and the Subadar. All three were entertaining more than a premonition as to this female's identity.

When the new arrivals rode past a guard of honor drawn up

in double rank on the *maidan*, North could see that, beyond a doubt, the second rider was she whom he had last seen spitting at him across the Gorge of Durga.

"What in hell can she be doing here?" he wondered.

A moment later the Intelligence Officer suffered a much greater surprise. He stared downwards with the intensity of a defendant watching a jury bringing in a life-or-death verdict.

"It can't be!" he muttered in a low, strained voice. *"It simply can't be."*

"Can't be what?" Jenny queried, fingers closing gently on his forearm.

Delahanty interrupted. "Say, Colonel, will you take a gander at that *hombre* on the right? Now ain't *he* a tough-looking cookie?"

North's dark and narrow head inclined sharply. "Correct; and I can tell you Sam Steel's even tougher than he looks."

"You know him?" Jenny demanded, her pointed features faintly outlined by the torchlight.

"I'll say I do!" Hugh North grunted while recalling certain vivid and unpleasant events in Shanghai and Malaya. There returned to his mind's eye visions of lovely and voluptuous Ruby Braunfeld, that "Coaster" with whom he eventually had shared the horrors of a Chinese torture chamber, and of that exquisitely petite Eurasian, Madé Sayu.

The procession, which now suggested a minor Roman triumph, passed the guest house near enough to leave no doubt that it was indeed General Sam Steel, riding straight-backed as of yore. His battered, brutal head was turning from side to side, but decked with a pair of dark goggles—for all the world like some third-rate Hollywood actress in search of publicity. Steel's slash of a mouth, North noted, was set in its habitual, truculent grin.

Accustomed as he was to unpleasant surprises, the Intelligence Officer felt that here was one which broke all records. He was interested, moreover, to note while the new arrivals were dismounting that they seemed to possess little more baggage than had his own party.

Upon examination he decided that the third stranger was no bargain, either. Extremely round-shouldered, he could not even approximate General Steel's six foot one, but looked powerful in the shoulders and legs. Revealed by the torchlight were the snub nose, flat facial planes and small, ice-blue eyes of a typical White Russian.

"The local team seems really to be slipping our pals a great big hand," Delahanty commented. "Nothing like the halfway bums' rush we got."

An explanation for this disparity in the two receptions undoubtedly lay in the presence of Prince Timrud. North found it interesting, however, to note that only a trio of guard officers emerged from the Sri Rajah's palace to escort the newcomers over to the *powa.*

Softly, Hugh North commenced to hum, " 'Ours *is* a Happy Little Home.' "

Said Jenny softly, "Now there's a striking-looking female! Have you ever seen anybody move so—so"—she fumbled for a simile—"like a leopard?"

"Like a clouded leopard, perhaps?" North suggested on noticing that this silver-haired woman was wearing that same *chapka* he had first glimpsed nearly a week earlier.

Feet scraped upon and trampled the battered stone staircase leading up to the guest-house gallery. Keith looked uncertain.

"Don't you think it would be tactful if we retired?"

Firmly North shook his head. "No. We have every reason to be here and it would look odd if natural curiosity wasn't being indulged."

At the gallery's entrance torches flickered, revealing the brown-turbaned heads of a pair of sepoys and, a stride or two in their wake, the markedly handsome if Mongoloid features of Prince Timrud. He climbed the last few steps, then paused, arrogantly surveying the knot of guests already installed. A tall havildar immediately hurried up, keys jingling, and rapidly unlocked a series of apartments adjoining those occupied by Dr. Keith's party.

A sharp tingling manifested itself in North's fingertips when

General Sam Steel's bullet-head, protected by a round, black fur cap, became visible. The soldier-of-fortune paused, evidently waiting for his companions, and eased the webbing belt which supported a heavy Colt automatic over his right thigh. How typical that he should so critically survey his surroundings!

Suddenly Steel turned on his heel and came striding along the gallery, scarred hand extended. "Damned if it ain't the old Maestro himself."

North accepted the adventurer's hand. "Hello, Sam. How's tricks? Beats all how some bastards seem to cheat the firing squad forever and a day."

The two men remained thus a long instant staring at one another, not without a certain mutual respect. They were nearly of equal height but Hugh North was the lighter built and his hair dark where the other's shone sandy-red by the flickering torches.

Jenny was surprised to sense more than a passing resemblance; it lay probably more in their bearing and bodily structure than in their features, for all that they were both gray-eyed and had strong, sharply chiseled features. There the similarity ended, for Sam Steel's nose had been broken and an L-shaped purplish scar bisected his left brow.

Meditatively, North passed a hand over his chin. "Looks like it must be you I should thank that your white-haired Annie Oakley didn't drill me back there in the gorge?"

"Yep, I expect that's about the size of it," admitted the soldier-of-fortune, unsmiling. When abruptly he pulled off his dark glasses North saw that the lids of both eyes were badly swollen, discharging and heavily granulated. "When the time comes for you to get knocked off, Sonny Boy, I have promised myself the pleasure."

"Part of your service, eh?" North observed, watching other members of Steel's party come tramping up onto the long, stone-floored gallery.

"You did me in the eye mighty cute back in '33 and again in '37," growled the sinewy figure in gray climbing clothes.

"But this time Ma Steel's boy is going to pick up the marbles when the game's over."

Decidedly mixed emotions were swaying North's intended course of action. General Sam Steel—he had won that grade in Manchuria during the Tuchun Wars—he knew to be an utterly conscienceless and often brutal mercenary officer; treachery, bribery, murder, falsehood and torture, all were ready weapons in his arsenal. Conversely, Sam always had proved himself scrupulously faithful to the interests of his employer.

While Steel was replacing his sunglasses North said, "Since we're about to become neighbors, perhaps I'd better introduce you to Dr. Keith."

"Howdy, Doc. How's the old taxidermist?" He waved a careless greeting, then caught sight of Jenny. His vice-scarred features lit. "Say, North, who's your dish in the sari?" Steel swung forward. "Um. Cute as a bug's ear and sweet as a spoonful of alfalfa honey. Who's she cozy with?"

Dr. Keith blinked unhappily. "Jenny is our botanist and sometimes acts as my secretary."

A grating laugh escaped the big mercenary. "Oh, so? Case of 'Lie down, I want to dictate'?"

"Keep your third-rate wisecracks to yourself," Jenny snapped. "You've the looks of a wild boar with the manners of a rutting hyena."

"Honeybun, you sure do paint a pretty picture of me." Steel seemed highly amused but turned his back on her. "Say, North, what's your rank these days?"

"Oh, eventually I got to be made a chicken colonel during the last war."

"Hell, with your brains and record those turd-heads in the Pentagon ought to have made you a B.G. years ago!" Steel's pale, scarred head swung over his shoulder. "Hey, Atossa! Shake your butt on over here. You, too, Lee—his real handle is Leonid," the adventurer explained, "but I call him Lee. It's shorter, sounds more civilized."

Hugh North was fully aware that this shaven-headed fellow

called Leonid should have commanded his first attention yet so utterly bizarre of appearance and fascinating of manner was the young woman striding over to Sam's side that, for the life of him, the Intelligence Officer could not tear his eyes away.

"This here's Atossa." Steel grinned like a winter wolf at North's obvious interest. "She's a real, live Estonian baroness, too."

Clad in a heavy, bright-blue sweater, dark green skiing trousers, Alpine boots and that unforgettable jacket of clouded leopard fur, she stood perhaps five feet ten inches but so perfectly proportioned that one hardly noticed her exceptional stature.

With mock dignity Steel announced in guttural German, *"Ich habe die Ehre, Die Hochwohlgeboren Baronin* Atossa Frederika Matala!"

Baroness Atossa's facial structure suggested to Jenny a rather sharp "V," dominated by heavy, long black brows, sweeping slightly upwards across a high, smooth forehead. Her eyes were large, strongly lashed in black and of the very lightest blue imaginable; her nose was both straight and short while her mouth formed a miniature scarlet triangle supremely harmonious within the larger "V" created by her features as a whole.

Concerning her figure, Delahanty gaped in open admiration. He could tell little, however, so full were her ski trousers, so ponderous were her climbing shoes and so thick the new arrival's blue, turtle-neck sweater.

That which chiefly was attracting his admiration was the Baroness Matala's even and quite unblemished creamy, brown-tan complexion.

To North the effect of her tawny complexion by contrast with her prematurely white hair—which she wore in a rough, pageboy bob—and huge, pale blue eyes proved both as fascinating as it was unique.

The Baroness Matala suddenly broke into a rich, throaty laugh.

"I believe, *Monsieur le Colonel* North, that you owe me the

price of one fine Mannlicher-Schoenhauer sporting rifle?" she observed in careful, French-inflected accents.

Even, but slightly prominent, teeth glinted in the torchlight when the Baroness offered her hand, and an audible sniff sounded from Jenny's direction when North accepted it.

"I'm afraid you didn't leave me much choice," he stated evenly. "Perhaps you were too tender-hearted that first time."

"*Non!* There is nothing tender-hearted about me," announced this remarkable young woman's rich accents.

"Hear! Hear!" murmured Jenny in the background.

"I wanted to shoot you, very neatly through the heart, and I would have, had not *Monsieur le Général,*" she nodded at Steel, "denied me that pleasure." The white of her eyes became suddenly more noticeable in the tan expanse of her face. "And what, *mon Colonel,* held you back from shooting me, as you so easily could have? You had no Sam Steel to forbid you."

"You laid off me, so I laid off you," North smiled. "Let's say that we're back again at scratch?"

By the time North turned his attention to the third member of Sam Steel's party he was following Prince Timrud's short but powerful jodhpur-clad figure into a farther division of the guest house.

Unexpectedly, Arunah Keith observed, "You don't seem to have brought along much luggage, General."

"Naw. Lost most of it. A party of Lepcha mountaineers and then some Gurkha frontier guards shagged us hell-for-leather out of Nepal and into Jonkhar." A peculiarly nefarious expression curved Steel's thin lips. "Couldn't be my old pal Hugh North sicked 'em onto us, eh?"

"I'd nothing to do with sending out either party," North lied equably.

"Come around for a drink after a while," invited the soldier-of-fortune. "Believe it or not, I've a slug or two of Scotch left, and say, be sure and bring along Miss Honeybun."

"Mrs. North to you," Jenny corrected instantly. "Hasn't Hugh told you we're married?"

Sam Steel's jaw sagged an incredulous instant, then he broke

into such guffaws that the torchbearers started and Atossa Matala spun about with eyes narrowed.

"North *married?* Well, may I be dipped in piss! Haw! Haw! Haw! Say, you ain't kiddin', are you?"

"Jenny certainly is not and, incidentally, suppose you clean up your language while she's around," North snapped; silently he cursed Arunah Keith and his bright ideas.

"Okay, okay. Say, when did she run the brand on you?"

"We were married just before Dr. Keith left Delhi. You'll admit she's a cute dish, eh?" Seized by a devilish impulse, North suddenly swept Jenny off balance and into his arms. He kissed her so soundly that she was unable to resist.

"Ah-h, lay off," Steel grunted. "Sure, you've got yourself a real hot dish, but you two sure have picked a lulu of a time and place for your honeymoon."

Sam grunted, slapped Atossa Matala on the rear. "C'mon, Baby, or our pal the Prince will be gettin' annoyed." Swinging off down the corridor, he disappeared into a golden rectangle of light marking the doorway to his quarters.

"What extraordinary people," absently murmured Keith. "What say, Colonel, shall we resume our chess?"

"Why not? Let Jenny set up the board, will you? I'll join you in a minute."

Dr. Keith disappeared but, to his surprise, Jenny lingered on the gallery, attempting to rearrange the hood of her sari.

"Do you always k-kiss like that?" She inquired in low, slightly tremulous accents.

"Hell, no. I needed to make our lie seem convincing."

"Oh, *you!*" Angrily she whirled about and would have sped indoors had not North grabbed her wrist.

"Stand close," he warned. "Pretend to be admiring the view."

"W-what is it?"

"See those two men in the courtyard just below?"

"Yes. What about them?"

"They've been watching us for some time."

"They're the Red Chinese officers who attended the ceremony this morning."

"Think back, please," softly urged the Intelligence Officer. "Didn't the Rani make any mention of them?"

Trembling perhaps because of the chill, Jenny pressed closer to North's tall figure. "Yes. Dil Kusha said they come from the staff of General Liu Po-chang. The tall one is Colonel Han Chi-tsang."

Briefly, North considered his companion's pert profile. "That's a considerable memory you've got. I don't suppose you heard their names more than once?"

She smiled faintly in the starlight. "Only once. Still, I'm sure that's what Dil Kusha called them."

"How long have they been here?"

"I don't know for sure, but I gather it's been several days." She glanced up. "Why?"

In no great hurry, North replied, "I'm attempting to substantiate certain theories. Well, we'll soon see if I'm right. I've an idea events are about to take place in one big hurry."

15. Reconnoiterings

Sleepily Hugh North considered Jenny's small recumbent figure outlined under blankets of the softest cashmere. She was lying on her side, a position unconsciously accentuating the intriguing contours sweeping up to her shoulder from ankle and thigh. Against a pale green silken pillow slip the golden tones of her crisply short hair were unusually pronounced in the lucent morning sunlight.

While making preparations to shave the Intelligence Officer inspected his image as reflected by a circular mirror of highly polished copper. "Two nights in the same bed," he mused, "and we've yet to exchange so much as a pat on the hand. Now,

my lad, how many people do you think would believe that?"

Thanks to the invigorating quality of this sparkling mountain air he felt considerably refreshed; more capable of coping with the exceedingly complex problems immediately at hand. Of course it wasn't reassuring to reflect upon His Highness Matbar Nana Jang's parting words. Just what might that absolute, and definitely barbaric, potentate deem to be a satisfactory solution to the encumbrance of certain embarrassing guests?

Again, what were the Sri Rajah's reactions likely to be concerning the arrival of Sam Steel's party? Um. Was he likely to feel pleased that his half-brother should have practically escorted three *more* Europeans to his capital?

As he commenced to rub a dab of brushless shaving soap on his face he found himself anticipating the inevitable conversation with that squat and muscular young Russian Steel had called Leonid Gornoff.

Just what might be the Russian's reactions were someone, ever so casually, to describe the unhappy fate of Carl Anton Malchek?

A sigh from the bed drew his attention to Jenny. She had turned on her back and, still sound asleep, lay flat, unaware that one firm, pearly and pink-tipped breast treacherously had been disclosed by a yellow silk nightgown sizes too large for her. She stirred, smiled a little and writhed comfortably once or twice beneath the bedclothes.

Poor Jenny Cutler! To be wearing women's garments again, even Oriental ones, seemed to be doing her self-assurance not one bit of good. Was it possible that her field gear constituted a sort of mental and emotional carapace?

Certainly, since she had put aside masculine garments, a certain modification of her suspicious antagonism had become evident.

He had barely completed shaving when a faint scratching sounded at his door.

His bare feet made no sound as he approached the portal and, bracing his shoulder against its frame, opened it just

wide enough to glimpse Subadar Thopa. His bronze face seemed impassive as ever, but excitement sparkled in the depths of his oblique black eyes.

He beckoned imperatively, so North stepped out onto the gallery and set his teeth against the bite of a stiff and frigid breeze beating down from the glaciers and snow fields encircling the Vale of Jonkhar. The chill proved a poignant reminder that autumn fast was advancing, that almost any day now might commence a succession of blizzards which effectively would seal the Kirong, and all other Himalayan passes for that matter, during the next six months. Flying, too, would become hazardous.

He found that the Subadar was standing inconspicuously against the gallery's inner wall.

"*Huzoor,* Bahadur Colonel," he whispered. "I have just spoken with one of several messengers it was arranged to have meet me here."

"Late news flashes," thought North. "Wonder why the little devil never has mentioned this before?" Prearranged messengers, eh? Evidently Ganesh Thopa was more than a mere attaché to an American's expedition and must be here to protect the interests of Nepal.

"He assures me that the Red Chinese invaders of Tibet," murmured the Gurkha, "are this moment dispatching reconnaissance groups along certain approaches to the Kirong-la." The little officer's beady, jet eyes fairly glittered in his excitement. "They intend to prepare for an assault next spring—if that becomes necessary."

"So they're that far advanced in their campaign?"

"Yes. However, His Excellency, the Prime Minister of my country, has heard of this and has ordered a troop concentration at Rasua Chok."

Thopa put his mouth close to the Intelligence Officer's ear but he hardly more than breathed his next words. "Their general has orders to advance through Jonkhar if the Red Chinese move towards the Kirong-la."

"You are sure of this?"

The Subadar's almond-shaped eyes hardened. "We Gurkhas are a poor people, Bahadur Colonel, and cannot afford unnecessary maneuvers."

Thopa gathered a brown yak's-hair cloak closer about him and spoke urgently. "Bahadur Colonel, we live in a grave danger. It has been reported that Colonel Han, the Chinese Red officer, has suggested that our whole party be——" He hesitated, grinned. "How do you say it, liquefied?"

"Liquidated. Have these Chinese Reds any retinue?"

The Gurkha's nearly round head shook slowly. "No, but they do not lack for support. Among the Sri Rajah's troops there are many Tibetans who stand ready to execute Colonel Han's orders."

"Are there enough infiltrated Reds to bring off a palace *coup* successfully?"

"It is thought so." The two men lurking on the wind-swept and icy gallery watched the passage of two sepoys in dark green turbans and wearing scarlet sashes under their ammunition belts. They seemed to have been freshly aroused from slumber.

"What have you learned concerning the white-haired woman and her companions?" North demanded. One of the relief had disappeared up the *maidan*.

"It is certain that their party was assailed by Major Samut's detachment from Rasua Chok. A skirmish at long range took place in which some of this so-called General Steel's men were killed before they abandoned much of their equipment and fled into Jonkhar. Certainly this mercenary's surviving bearers cannot be numerous."

"Why weren't they brought along to Jonkhar, just as our servants were?"

"Vishnu, Mother of all Wisdom, alone knows," the Gurkha returned. He scowled. "Bahadur Colonel, last evening Kali Yuga heard evil news concerning our Sherpas. Two of them, our *mukhiya* and another, were taken apart and questioned."

"Tortured, do you mean?"

"Mildly so, according to my orderly."

North's cheekbones suddenly became extra prominent. "By whose orders?"

"On orders from Bijai Lakshi, the Commander-in-Chief."

"Poor devils; they couldn't have told anything of use, even if they would." Hugh North considered an immediate protest to the Sri Rajah, but dismissed it as futile and dangerous.

The Gurkha held up a detaining hand when North, shivering under the keen wind, started to withdraw into his room. "Last night at third cockcrow certain evil persons would have stolen my rifle had I not concealed it beneath my blankets, but they were easily frightened away."

"Have you seen Delahanty Sahib this morning?"

"Not yet, Bahadur Colonel. During the night I heard several shots. I think that we must move fast, you and I, or we shall be lost." He paused, holding his collarless neckband together over his throat. "Tell me, Bahadur Colonel, how do you think the Chinese Reds regard this wild boar of an American and——"

"Hold on. Steel isn't any longer an American," North corrected. "He's sold his allegiance a dozen times and so forfeited American nationality a long while back."

"Is such a course deemed honorable among your countrymen?"

"I'll say not! It's quite——" North broke off, for suddenly the door to Ad Delahanty's room swung open and he came hurrying out in his shirt sleeves.

"Say, either of you fellers get visitors last night?"

"Thopa did. Why?"

"Tell you, but c'mon into my room. It's colder than a well digger's butt out here." The outfitter pulled on a ragged tan jersey, then said, "When I started bunk fatigue last night, I left old Emmeline—my Springfield—with her breech open—saves a split second if you're loadin' in a hurry."

"Even with one bullet?" North queried in sardonic humor.

"Even with one bullet," Delahanty growled. "I sure figure to knock off at least one Gook before cashin' in my chips. I don't like the way these mahogany-faced sonsofbitches been lookin' at us."

"Nor do I. What happened to your rifle?"

"Well, like I said, I left Emmy with her action open, but so help me God, when I checked her this morning the breech was closed and when I took a squint down the bore damned if some playful joker hadn't stuffed a bit of rag in there." The ex-flier's ruddy, freckled features contracted. "Ain't no fun in picking a bolt out o' yer forehead, is there?"

"Hardly. What about your other cartridges?"

"All okay."

Softly, Thopa inquired, "Sahib, did you hear shooting during the night?"

"Naw. Me, I sleep like I was slugged, 'specially up so high in the mountains. Say, Skipper," he fixed upon North a slightly bloodshot blue eye, "what's cookin' about us?"

"Can't say. But we'll soon learn or I miss my guess," replied the Intelligence Officer.

"Maybe we better dream up good news of some kind account of poor old Doc Keith acts like a chicken with the roup. He's sure all busted up over losin' his outfit and specimens."

"Yes, he's taking it harder now than at first," North agreed.

Delahanty said, "Say, Skipper, as I was turning in, know what? I remembered seein' that tall Chinese officer before. I ain't certain-sure, but I could almost swear 'twas him I saw order that God-awful massacre at Kweiyang. His Commies wiped out the whole population—and with frills. Mebbe you know what happens when Chinks gets to knockin' off people fancy-like? I still get nightmares."

"Yes, I know," was North's grim rejoinder, "I got a partial treatment in Shanghai once. Well, I'm off to make sure some joker hasn't tampered with my rifle."

"Yeh," Delahanty's head inclined. "Better strip down her action and make sure them jokers ain't cut no springs or pins."

At breakfast North secured his first opportunity to make a covert appraisal of that Russian known as Leonid Gornoff. He was so round-shouldered as to appear hunchbacked but his build was powerful all the same. His were very dark gray eyes which squinted frequently behind old-fashioned pince-nez.

From his narrow chin sprouted a tuft of sandy-colored hair and his weak mustache was of a similar hue. Most of the Russian's scalp was quite hairless, revealing with dreadful clarity a long, lavender-tinted scar slanting across it. It was, North mused, just such a scar as a Cossack saber might cause in descending squarely.

It proved no surprise to North that Gornoff spoke English, not well and not badly either, but with a marked German accent. By contrast, the Baroness Atossa's English betrayed French constructions and inflections.

Really delicious melon, goat kidneys, almond bread and eggs cooked in various fashions were served by a quartet of white-clad servants. For drinks the guests were offered their choice of yak-butter tea or very sweet coffee boiled into syrup consistency.

"Iss beautiful view, no?" queried Gornoff, waving his well-laden fork at a wide window. "Better yet than Herr Hitler had at Berchtesgaden." His gesture drew attention to the fact that his left hand lacked its two lesser fingers. In the morning sunlight his blotched, slightly yellowish complexion assumed an almost golden tone, while the liberal sprinkling of liver patches mottling his cheeks just below each eye appeared amber.

"It is indeed a lovely sight," Jenny agreed cheerfully. Looking refreshed and lacking many of those weary lines which had aged her features, she looked surprisingly young. She apparently had washed and repaired her khaki shirt and had resumed her gray-green ski pants. "What do you think, Arunah?"

Keith nodded but hardly glanced up from his plate; he seemed to have withdrawn even further into himself. There could be no doubt he was being far from philosophic about the loss of Dr. Malchek and of his specimens.

"Ve haff hear of your misfortune," Gornoff observed, over Steel's loud *slurp-slurping* of his coffee. "Are you all here, or is maybe somevun in hospital?"

Although Gornoff endeavored to speak casually, North nonetheless detected anxiety in his tone.

"We lost our mammalogist," Jenny supplied while smearing

dark honey on her bread. "You can have no idea how terrible that rockslide was. Imagine seeing thousands of tons of rocks leaping down a hillside at you. Death struck so very suddenly —with so much beauty all about, it was incongruous."

Her gaze wandered to that wide window opposite the foot of the table. It was easy to grasp her meaning. A dazzling sun revealed a row of lofty peaks and lanced their jagged summits with gold. Snow fields up yonder took on faint rose tints that faded even as one watched.

"Say, Doc, did you know there's a lake back o' this burg?" Delahanty tried to distract Arunah Keith. "It's might pretty and looks just long enough to accommodate a——"

"—To make for good aquaplaning," North hurriedly interjected. For good and sufficient reasons the last thing he wanted was to have the conversation diverted to airplanes. "Sam, have you ever seen twin waterfalls like those? D'you notice that they break three times at precisely the same level?"

Those seated at the breakfast table followed his gaze and saw that from stratum to stratum two similar waterfalls tumbled lacily down towards the forest line and created misty, silver-gold clouds when they crashed upon sharp rocks far below.

"So what?" grunted Steel, spearing yet another kidney. "So it looks like free champagne?"

North grinned, helped himself to a second slice of melon. "You must have enjoyed some mighty fine scenery, Baroness, on your side of the Gorge."

"But of course." She smiled over a spoonful of shirred egg. "One observed also some interesting fauna there." One of her dark brows rose a quizzical half inch and her enormous, pale blue eyes fixed themselves on North's bronzed features. "Perhaps it would be amusing to go shooting there, no? But this time, together."

Dr. Keith suddenly pulled off his spectacles and looked about. "I wonder whether there is a chance in the world of salvaging any of my equipment and specimens? Besides, I feel we ought to try to find Professor Malchek's body."

Something like a faint electric current seemed to bridge the

table. General Steel and the Russian attempted complete unconcern and failed by a wide margin.

Atossa, however, appeared genuinely interested, her large blue eyes curious in those cream-tinted features.

"Then your associate is beyond a doubt dead?"

North's omelette seemed to require special attention and he said nothing.

"Beyond doubt," Jenny assured her vis-à-vis. "Just as I jumped for shelter under a ledge I thought I saw a big rock knock him down. He struggled up but then the main slide was on us." She paused, bit her lip an instant. "It was awful, indescribably awful, the roaring of the slide, the screams of those poor porters and the yaks lumbering about until they were cut down."

Sam Steel passed a hand over his brutal yet curiously commanding countenance. His eyes seemed quite as inflamed as ever behind the heavy snow glasses he wore. "Say, Doc, I hear you been ramming around the Himalayas quite some time."

"Yes," admitted the scientist. "But heretofore I have explored much further to the west—almost among the Kashmiri ranges."

Steel's next words took North entirely by surprise and further disarranged certain earnest calculations.

"Did you ever before hear of rockslides before frost really gets going?"

"Occasionally." Keith tugged thoughtfully at his spare yellow beard. "Of course, General, water from a stream descending along a new course from a glacier can undermine a ledge to such a degree that said ledge gives way, thus precipitating a rockslide."

A quick look at Gornoff told North that the Russian must be thinking hard—and not along particularly pleasant lines, either, judging by the colorless downward curve formed by his lips.

With his napkin Dr. Keith dabbed at his mouth, inquired mildly, "Did any of you happen to be acquainted with Professor Malchek?"

Steel shook his head; Gornoff blinked behind his pince-nez and smiled thinly.

Baroness Atossa said, "But of course; the name of Carl Anton Malchek was familiar to every expert on Central Asia. Was it not he who prepared that famous treatise on the genus *Paguma grayi?*"

"Come again, miss?" Delahanty invited.

"The Himalayan civet cat, monsieur." Returning her attention to North, she smiled, looked at him steadily in the eyes. "Often I have heard my father speak of this Carl Malchek."

"Your father?" Jenny prompted gently. Despite herself, she felt an inexplicable interest in this gracefully powerful young woman. Long since she had surveyed the baroness to the least critical detail—and with feminine thoroughness.

Although betraying much hard usage, this silver-haired girl's field clothes were well cut and expensive, of the best material. This morning she had donned a dusty rose pull-over sweater over which, as an incongruous note, she had slung a brief necklace of sapphires and white gold.

"Must be about thirty," Jenny decided, "and there's no use denying that her title's probably genuine. Lordy! What eyelashes and brows—and what beautiful hands, if she'd take any care of them. Bet her skin's like glacé kid where the sun hasn't been at it."

Delahanty, too, was conducting an estimate—along different lines, his interest being almost completely confined to admiration of Atossa's torso and powerfully modeled bosom as revealed by her cashmere jersey.

"Some knockers! If she's wearing a damn' thing under that sweater I'll surely fly the Atlantic on five gallons of gas," he was reflecting. "Keerist, and the way she handles those eyes! Damn' shame she's got her ears pierced."

The baroness' narrow waist he perceived to be confined by a broad belt of russet leather and secured a full, rather short kilt-like skirt of beige whipcord. She had, he was aware, the trick at conclusion of any remark of summoning to her full, carmine-tinted lips, a brief, purely mechanical smile.

Leonid Gornoff belched unashamedly, pushed back his chair and lit an enormously long cigarette. "Herr Doktor, do you think that His Highness, the Sri Rajah, vill consent to a search for your friend's body?"

"I hope so," Keith replied abstractedly. "Mrs. Cut—Mrs. North's specimens, as well as Professor Malchek's invaluable collections, should be salvaged, if there is any hope of success. But I fear he will not," continued the ornithologist, heaving himself to his feet. "After all, we are here only on sufferance."

"A shame," Gornoff commented. "Our *lamyiks* are good for Tibet and ve think for Jonkhar, too. But not Nepal—ve find that out, eh, Sam?"

"And how!"

Steel's eyes, North guessed, must really be causing him great discomfort. His trouble probably was a severe case of snow blindness complicated by one of the horrible eye infections so prevalent in Central Asia.

As the morning meal drew to a close, wave on wave of heavy gray clouds appeared to smother the row of ice-capped peaks hemming in Jonkhar from the east.

"One will see many blizzards up there," predicted Atossa through a haze of cigarette smoke. "Let us hope that our host will not detain us long; the autumn is already dangerously advanced."

Delahanty joined her at the window after enjoying a momentary inspection of her silhouette. "I wouldn't mind spending the winter here, miss—if I had you for company. Now the last time I got snowbound was in the Sawtooth Range of Idaho. Me and——" He launched into a story calculated to reveal him as no small part of a fine fellow.

North meanwhile was asking of himself, "Why has Steel's—or is it Gornoff's—party entered Jonkhar with inadequate *lamyiks?* Was it simply that Major Samut's Gurkhas chased them out of Nepal in such a big hurry as to completely alter their plans?"

Further reflection on the subject suggested that it had been, and still was, Gornoff's mission to prevent the Western Powers

from presenting their case before the Sri Rajah. If so, then Steel's desire personally to thwart an enemy of long standing, and so finally beat him at his own game, was a dangerous piece of self-indulgence.

Some fairly acrid exchanges must have taken place between Gornoff and Steel, always provided that the Russian was aware that his quarry could so easily have been picked off in the Gorge of Durga. Further, he estimated that any entente between Sam Steel and Atossa Matala must be firmer than the latter's understanding with Leonid Gornoff. His ruminations were terminated by the sound of feet advancing in military cadence along the gallery.

When everyone turned to face the door North was at once surprised and relieved to detect a visible uneasiness on the part of Steel and his companions. So? Just why should Prince Timrud's friends exhibit apprehension? What a really curious state of affairs.

An officer of the bodyguard appeared, saluted, then addressed the oddly assorted company in Hindustani. Rapidly he explained, to everyone's astonishment, that the Sri Rajah was contemplating a game drive in honor of certain princely friends and of his guests! There would be bear, sambur, jackals aplenty, a few panthers and all manner of big game as well as enormous quantities of wild fowl to be shot, he assured his listeners.

In order to properly conduct this hunt, the Tibetan-appearing officer explained, His Excellency the Dewan requested that the Sri Rajah's male guests attend a tea ceremony to be given this same day. Smartly, the officer then clicked his heels, about-faced and departed.

"Well, I'll be damned," remarked Jenny. "Now isn't that a new twist? Ought to be fun."

Surprisingly enough, the invitation aroused anything but pleasurable anticipation among the other guests and Sam Steel quite succinctly characterized the general impression: "Hope you *hombres* got your life insurance paid up."

"Why," queried Dr. Keith, "do you say that?"

"Funny how damn' many accidents can happen on a shikari

like that. You know, guys getting plugged instead of game. Happen you've a bulletproof vest, North, take my advice and wear it." He grinned mockingly. "Better still, keep your Honeybun alongside, everybody will be too busy givin' her the eye to shoot at you. And you," he leered at Atossa, "are going to stick closer to Papa than a mustard plaster."

She drew herself up, smiling mirthlessly. "Do you think it wise to tempt me so far, *mon cher Général?*"

16. Colonel Han Chi-tsang

As he started across the *maidan* in the direction of the Prime Minister's quarters Colonel Hugh North found it highly significant that, of all the strangers in Jang, only the two Red Chinese emissaries had not been given accommodations in the guest house. Did not this fact indicate that the representatives of Mao Tse-tung already were enjoying special consideration from the Sri Rajah? Whether or not they attended this tea-drinking certainly should prove instructive.

To Delahanty, striding along beside him over flagstones yet splotched with gore from the Kali ceremony, he directed, "I want you to keep your mouth shut, no matter what happens. I'll watch that slippery swine Steel and I want you to keep a careful eye on Comrade Gornoff. *Entiende?*"

"*Seguro, Señor Coronel,*" grinned the outfitter. "But it'd be a damned sight easier assignment if he was that platinum-finished number. Keerist! Is that Mamma well stacked! Did you notice the super-duper lung warts?"

"Not being blind as a bat," North laughed, "I did. Allee samee, Ad," he employed the other's nickname for the first

time, "better not start getting ideas in that direction. She's quite not your brand of catnip."

"Yeh. Guess you got something there, Skipper. I just can't figure that dame," Delahanty admitted, "or where the Sam Hill she figures in this deal. Think she's shackin' up with that sore-eyed hard guy?"

"Somehow I don't figure it that way, even though my pal Steel's always been mighty handy around the lace pantie department. It beats all," commented the Intelligence Officer, "how Sam, with a face like the breaking up of a hard winter, can back so many hard-to-get wenches right into the etching room."

"Sez you, Boss," Delahanty chuckled. "As if it did you any harm to look like Ronald Colman's big brother! Boy! I saw the way the baroness looked at you when you went out from breakfast. Jee-sas! She had you peeled down to a skivvy shirt and that West Point ring you wear."

"Ad, I fear your imagination exceeds your powers of observation by ten lengths."

The pair fell silent on approaching a big wooden door adorned by a magnificently carved pair of peafowl. Lounging about on a flight of steps leading to the Dewan's quarters were a number of native chieftains.

Uniformly dark of feature, wiry of limb and arrogant of manner, they were representative of a dozen tribes and at least three races—but, all in all, they suggested as tough a collection of fighting men as Hugh North had ever beheld. Among them Mongoloid features were predominant although bronze-brown Nepalese faces and lean, dark Aryan countenances of Rajput origin were not uncommon.

The headgear was varied in extreme—everything from Gurkha pillbox caps worn on the side of the head, to round, fur-trimmed hats of brown felt, to Tibetan caps with wing-like ear flaps, was to be noticed among the more numerous turbans of many colors and windings. Many of these hawk-featured warriors wore long gold and beaded earrings which dangled nearly as low as their lank and greasy black hair. Among neat Hindu coats moved gorgeous Chinese gowns and quilted Ti-

betan robes the sleeves of which were so long as to conceal the wearer's hands.

Almost without exception these stalwarts wore side arms, and carried kukris, Cossack-like daggers or short swords thrust through wide, brassbound belts. Two or three of the chiefs wore wristlets of heavy leather strapped over their left forearm, suggesting that they intended to go falconing once tea-drinking was over with. Further supporting this supposition was the presence of several pairs of savage Afghan hounds, which shaggy creatures whined and snapped and circulated at the end of rawhide leashes.

"Oh, oh!" warned Delahanty in an undertone. "Here come the Charlie boys."

How significant was it that conversation about the entrance faltered, then faded away into silence when, marching erect as if on parade, the two Red Chinese officers swung up the steps? Neither man looked right nor left but advanced with lips set in definitely supercilious grins.

There could be no mistaking Colonel Han: the Chinese, in his gray-tan uniform piped in scarlet, was thin as any bean pole but possessed of wide shoulders which tapered down to a boyishly narrow waist and hips. One hand he used to steady the swinging of a Walther automatic pistol strapped to an old-fashioned Sam Browne belt.

Alone among the onlookers, Hugh North diverted his gaze to the flat, pock-marked countenance of Leonid Gornoff and found it devoid of expression, but behind his pince-nez the near-hunchback's little gray eyes fairly glowed under some reaction incapable of analysis. Slowly color was welling up from the tuft of hair on his jaw and staining his yellowish features.

As for Sam Steel, he lingered on the top step with head thrown back and arms held aggressively akimbo. The expression on his battered features yielded nothing to either Chinese in the matter of contemptuous arrogance.

Hugh North's amazement therefore could not have been greater than when Colonel Han, on being confronted by the mercenary, halted, saluted smartly and then jerked a deep bow,

an example copied by his companion. In no great hurry Sam Steel acknowledged the salutes, then he and Colonel Han conversed briefly in a Chinese dialect of which North could understand nothing at all.

The two Chinese Communists were approaching early middle age and had a grim, efficient air about them such as North had never identified with Chinese officers observed during the Tuchun Wars of the mid-1930s.

Undoubtedly these officers must be products of the so-called Heroic March of the Red Chinese from Fukien to Shensi. Delahanty passed a remark in Cantonese to Major Wong, the shorter and stouter of the two. Apparently Ad Delahanty's long service as an armorer for the Flying Tigers, and subsequent duty with the USAAF in India, had not been entirely devoid of linguistic accomplishments.

"Um," North mused. "Am I batty—or have pal Delahanty and Major Wong met somewhere previously? Come to think of it, this morning he mentioned that scarecrow, Colonel Han, in connection with the atrocities at Kweiyang. What does this add up to, if anything?"

At that moment the Dewan's handsome cedarwood doors were opened and a gray-haired servitor begged the guests to enter.

17. The Ladies

Jenny Cutler sat with needle poised, her unseeing gaze fixed upon the October aspect of that valley which stretched away beyond the disorderly scattering of grass or tile roofs sprawled below the battlements. Out yonder, the hardwoods were losing the brilliant red and yellow autumnal tints displayed by them a week earlier.

All in all, the view from her window was really a rather spec-

tacular one. One could see at least ten miles down the Vale and today she could make out the most minute details of those wild, white-topped crags and jagged ranges hedging in the Sri Rajah's domain.

For a fifth time she regarded Hugh North's frayed and grease-stained battle jacket lying across a settee, and a button dangling perilously from it at the end of a couple of threads. Should she? No, she'd be damned and double-damned if she would! Of all the infuriating, politely dominant males that she had ever encountered—and she'd met her fair share—Hugh North won the Croix de Guerre with palms and stars!

How did he get this way? Jenny bit gently at her lower lip. Wasn't she reasonably well-formed and otherwise attractive? Hundreds of men had told her so—also a few women. Wasn't she well-educated, well-bred and pleasant? She checked herself. No, in all honesty, she hadn't been pleasant of late—anything but. Oh, damn Lev Cutler, anyhow!

Did any husband have the right to give a sometimes dictatorial, but always loving, faithful spouse the humiliating dismissal he had inflicted upon her? What was wrong with her nowadays? Probably a combination of shattered self-confidence, abased pride—and a too-well-suppressed yearning to be loved and directed. Angrily, she hurled the battle jacket across the room. Had she succeeded in becoming an impersonal lady botanist, so tough and independent that she no longer was desirable?

Something definitely was wrong about her. Imagine it! For two whole nights she had occupied the same bed with this tall, dark character. Even when she had given up wearing those childishly inspired ski pants to bed and had tried to be pleasanter—why, he hadn't even so much as touched her hand.

Maybe he, too, had suffered some crushing sorrow? Come to think of it, Arunah Keith had mentioned something about North's having once been engaged to a girl who had perished tragically. Still, this wasn't a satisfactory explanation—and she knew it.

Hugh North was much too vital, too responsive, too full of

humor and warm sympathy to exist cold and mummified within—like a certain Jenny Cutler. Had she really embalmed her heart in bitterness? In growing dismay she re-examined her attitude towards life during these three years just past.

"When it comes to kidding yourself, my dear Jenny," she concluded, "you're an M.A., Ph.D., and *Magna Cum Laude!*"

Before she quite realized what she was doing she had crossed the room and retrieved North's battle jacket.

"Damn!" she murmured, slipping on a thimble. "It's probably not the least use in the world, but here we go again!"

How absurd that she should keep on remembering that masterly if flagrantly phoney kiss Hugh had given her on the gallery. "Had to put on a good act, you know." She could still hear his faintly mocking inflection as she recalled Kipling's "Story of the Gadsbys" and Mrs. Gadsby's comment that "A kiss without a mustache is like eating an egg without salt."

She selected a length of brown silk from that sewing basket which mysteriously had appeared and, of all things, found herself humming "Jenny made her mind up," that song which Hugh North hummed with irritating frequency. Of course she had suffered teasing over it ever since Gertrude Lawrence's memorable performance in *Lady in the Dark.*

What might be transpiring at the tea-drinking? Conjectures on the subject ended when a brisk rap sounded at the door. To her "Come in!" the Baroness Atossa appeared, yet lingered, her tall and supple figure framed in the doorway. Her lips were parted in that lovely but mechanical smile of hers.

"Is it permitted that I enter? One is not sure whether one is welcome, Madame North, but one hopes so. *Mon Dieu!* What it means to meet another white woman in this lost land!"

Quite deliberately Jenny finished securing the button before she forced a stiff little smile. "By all means come in. It will be pleasant for me to visit, too."

Not the least hint of wariness or hostility marked the Estonian's manner as, still smiling pleasantly, she strode, rather than walked, into Jenny's room. She moved, thought Jenny, like a trained athlete or someone hardened by long exposure to the

out-of-doors. There was no feminine softness about the Baroness Atossa Matala whatsoever, yet somehow she seemed devoid of masculine mannerisms as she seated herself on a circular leather cushion and offered a rather crushed package of Russian cigarettes.

"Probably you prefer your American brands, but of these I have a plenty and they are at least preferable to a *huqua*. You will try these, please?" She smiled charmingly and passed over the packet. Jenny was so nonplussed she had accepted the gift before realizing she had done so.

"You will excuse me? In private I prefer a cheroot," said she, producing a pigskin case adorned with a generous coronet. From it she selected a slim, dark-brown cigar.

"Ha!" She drew a deep breath. "This is better, no? The men have all gone off to talk about that game drive."

"I am surprised," Jenny murmured a little wickedly, "that you weren't included. I have been told that you're a famous shot."

A cloudlet of blue-gray vapor escaped Atossa's rather sharp nostrils. "Yes," she admitted, "I am excellent shot. Twice at Monte Carlo I win the *Tir aux Pigeons pour Dames* and three times in Cairo. As for wing shooting——" Airily, she waved her cheroot. *"Pouf!* That is for impulsive people or faint hearts. Heavy rifles and big game at long range, that is my passion. But enough of me. Tell me, Madame North, do you shoot?"

"I must be the faint-heart type," Jenny laughed. Cigarette dangling from her lips, she was working on a second button of the battle jacket, noticed subconsciously the points from which embroidered cloth eagles evidently had been snipped away. "I hate to kill anything with a family life—but I *can* when necessary."

"You prefer wing shooting, eh?"

"Yes, I used to love to go black-duck shooting with Pete and Liz Blodgett down on Martha's Vineyard."

"Is that difficult? The black duck I have never shot."

"Difficult is the word, and right now it's getting practically

impossible." Jenny smiled mechanically. "You see, back in America we have learned gentlemen in Washington who write game laws so that we can't shoot when the black ducks are about; that's generally either dawn or twilight."

"Game laws?" Atossa hiked up one knee and locked long, cream-colored fingers about it. "They sound sill-ee. Where I was brought up no such stupidities were permitted."

"Lucky you!" Jenny observed and found herself unwillingly captivated by the curious aspect of a smooth, tawny skin, huge, pale blue eyes and shoulder-length, ice-blue hair.

"She's a handsome wench, all right," thought the Cutler girl. "Looks like a throwback to the Vikings and there's just about as much weakness to her as you'd find about a vault of chrome steel."

"And where did you spend your childhood?" she suggested, stitching busily. "In Russia?"

"No!" The answer was instant and emphatic. Atossa straightened so suddenly that the ash of her cheroot created a gray splash on the yellow Chinese rug. "I am Balt. My family is from Matala in Estonia."

"Then you must be Russian," Jenny insisted, and not without purpose. "Isn't Estonia a part of the Soviet Union?"

"You do not understand." Swiftly defiance faded from Atossa's expression and a weary look supplanted it. "But in a way, you are correct. Our poor Baltic States are so little and weak they have belonged to some other nation most of the time."

"Guess I'm pretty dull but I hadn't realized there's so much hunting in Estonia," Jenny continued, needle dipping and darting like a swallow over a dusky New England millpond.

"You have never heard of the famous explorer Sigismund Hapsolu Matala?"

"Sorry, Baroness, guess I was too busy studying the *Euphorbiacise* and *Carifoliaceal* for my M.A."

"Comment?" The dark brows shot up. "You are a scientist?"

"In a small way. After all, I didn't come along with Dr. Keith's expedition just to curry yaks."

Over the graying tip of her cheroot Atossa fixed her smaller

companion with a level regard. "Pardon, please. No one has told me. Then surely you have heard of Sven Hedin, the celebrated Swedish explorer of Central Asia?"

Deftly, Jenny bit off the thread, smoothed the battle jacket and placed it with exaggerated tenderness on the great double bed.

"Naturally. So has every subscriber to *National Geographic.*"

Atossa chuckled, arose and selected a morsel from a platter of sugared dates. "And just what does Madame recall concerning this Sven Hedin?"

"Not much, I am afraid, except that he was the first European to penetrate Tibet from the West. Also that he explored parts of Asia lost for centuries to Western history."

"That is so." The gleaming, silvery head inclined vigorously. "Perhaps then you will be interested to learn that my Papa accompanied Dr. Hedin on his journey into Chinese Turkestan in 1906 and later into Tibet. I accompanied Papa on several journeys before the Second Great War because in me he would have the son I should have been."

She frowned, shrugged a little and went over to stare out of the window. "Would you believe that I can shoot from the match its head at fifty yards? I also am reputed the only woman ever to kill the clouded leopard." She reseated herself and thrust long legs out before her.

Quite without an air of boasting she added, "To hunt the clouded leopard, which seldom lives below four thousand meters, much endurance is required, also strong muscles and mountaineering skill, big lungs." She drew a big breath that lifted and parted muscular, swelling breasts. What a good thing it was, Jenny thought, that Hugh North at the moment was partaking of the Dewan's hospitality.

"One does not believe, Madame North, more than very few Europeans have ever seen, let alone killed, the *Felis nebulosa* —— You see?" She winked. "I also speak the Latin."

"Congratulations," murmured Jenny while demurely repairing the broken shoulder strap of a blue nylon chemise. "How

many European women do you imagine have ever seen an *Ochna pumila?"*

"Pumila? That is a sub-breed of panther, *hein?"*

"No, no, only a flower, but a rather pretty one. It flourishes at fifteen thousand feet."

"Nom de Dieu! You climb great mountains just for a flower?"

Jenny's expression was sweetness incarnate. "I guess so; rather than to kill something."

Atossa looked genuinely puzzled. "But, madame, what is so wrong about killing? You kill a flower, I a leopard or an ibex. Is it not the law of Nature—kill or be killed?" A somber expression erased the Estonian's artificial smile. "One has seen enough to know that this is truth.

"You are to me a great mystery, Madame North. Are all American women so—careless of an attractive husband?"

To her supreme annoyance Jenny felt color heating her cheeks, experienced a sharp resentment; said she in her frostiest Beacon Hill voice, "Where I was brought up, Baroness, well-bred persons are not given to public displays of emotion—either of affection or of anger."

"You continue to amaze me," Atossa confessed, nibbling at a sugared date. "Do not married women wear *bagues d'alliance* —wedding rings—in America?"

"Some do, Baroness, some don't. I notice that you are not wearing yours."

The remark, delivered at random, proved surprisingly effective. Atossa Matala surged to her feet, stood towering over the undaunted figure of the American girl. "Where did you hear I —I——" She broke off, returned to the window.

"You seemed so interested in husbands I just thought I'd inquire. Do I assume correctly that you *have* been married?"

Outlined against a sky of stainless blue, Atossa's tall figure remained rigid. "Yes," she replied softly and without turning her glistening head, "for only one single day."

The sewing settled onto Jenny's lap. She supposed she should

have expressed regret but she didn't; instead she heard her voice inquiring, "What happened?"

"Mannfred was killed, murdered in 1940—the day after our marriage." Atossa's voice was low and taut with hatred.

"Oh, I'm so sorry—it must have been horrible." She thought of Leverett Cutler. "Still, you may have been spared a lot of grief. Who did it?"

"Is that important? My husband was killed and so my whole life changed—also that of my people."

"Were the Nazis or the Russians responsible?"

When a violent shake of the head was her only answer Jenny arose and struck the little silver gong by her bedside.

"So long as the gentlemen are being entertained, I suppose we may as well have tea, too."

Atossa turned, her expression stony, but shiny paths left by a pair of tears paralleled the length of her thin, slightly upturned nose.

"Forgive me." Her vivid lips formed a quick smile. "Yes. Tea would be a very fine thing." She relit her cheroot before asking quite casually, "That rock avalanche—had you no warning at all?"

"None. One minute we were just riding along, the next great stones and boulders commenced leaping down the hillside at us."

"What did you do to save yourselves, you and Dr. Keith?"

"It's hard to remember exactly," Jenny confessed while quite unnecessarily running a comb through her short, yellow-brown hair. "I'd always imagined that I could think quickly and act logically in a crisis, but all I recall was yelling at Professor Malchek to drop his paraphernalia and run, and Dr. Keith grabbing my wrist and dragging me under an overhanging ledge that saved our lives. Unfortunately, Professor Malchek tried to untie his saddlebags and so was crushed."

"Poor Anton! Always, stubbornness was one of his——" Atossa broke off, selected another sugared date, then, with a pointed pink tongue, commenced licking the resultant stickiness

from her fingers. "It must have been a terrifying experience," she continued smoothly.

Jenny, however, regarded her companion with renewed interest. Anton? Surely no one of her party had mentioned the professor's second given name?—unless Hugh North might have talked with Atossa without her knowledge.

Sweetly sympathetic was her manner as she remarked, "Mr. Delahanty said that you also lost your equipment. Did you really?"

"That is so," returned the Estonian girl dispassionately. "We fought a running skirmish all the way to the Jonkhari border. We would not have been driven so fast if Sam, General Steel, were not suffering from bad eyes."

"You mean he really can't shoot a rifle?"

"Not at long range. His eyelids are so swollen they press against the eyeballs and so distort his vision. That is the truth," she added as if to herself.

"That's too bad," Jenny murmured. "I suppose he will go on the shoot?"

Atossa's creamy features took on a thoughtful aspect. "But of course. Comrade Gornoff will insist upon it—as a matter of prestige if for no other reason.

"And you? Surely you will not refuse so unusual an opportunity?" Her voice filled, rang with sudden enthusiasm.

"I suppose I won't—Hugh is such a keen sportsman."

The tea arrived and Jenny went to clear a low table set before her settee.

"Tell me," Atossa asked, "are you invited to dine with Bul Badena—the Sri Rajah's second queen? She sent me some saris. I suppose they must be beautiful, but to me—*pouf!* They are so—so hopelessly *femelle.*"

"I see what you mean," Jenny agreed. "When I wear a sari I always feel as if I'm expected to sing the 'Kashmiri Love Song,' then do the Dance of the Seven Veils."

"For climbing, saris are not good, except, perhaps, onto a divan?"

Jenny smiled sweetly. "My husband is very partial to native

costumes. What about Sam Steel? I'll bet he goes for saris like a tramp for a handout?"

The Estonian girl's bright lips parted in a wintry smile. "So far as I am concerned *le bon Général* Steel is a capable officer, one of the last great *condottiere*—and no more."

"Sure, sure," chuckled Jenny and busied herself with the tea things. Silently she added, "And so does a duck lay square eggs."

18. Salvage

Once the Sri Rajah's head *shikar*—hunter—a red-bearded and one-eyed Lepcha wearing the scars of a leopard's claws on cheek and forearm, had finished a detailed description of the country in which the forthcoming drive would take place, and the manner in which it would be conducted, the assemblage broke up.

Tea indeed was served, but also *jani*, a strong beer, and *raksi*—that fiery liquor peculiar to the Himalayas. Soon the Dewan's hunting hall was hung with many fine skins and heads—resounded to half a dozen dialects—grew blue with cheroot smoke and reeked of musk, sweaty wool and pungent human body odors.

Absently, Keith remarked how surprising it was that these prospects of a great shikari prompted a suspension of feuds and rivalries.

Officers, princelings and sub-chieftains, many of whom customarily glowered or spoke coldly to one another, thawed under the raksi's warming influence and found an unaccustomed tolerance in their hearts. General Sam Steel, for instance, was roaring with laughter and pounding bandy-legged, hook-nosed Sunwar petty chiefs on their quilted shoulders, his dark sun-

glasses lending a slightly macabre, skull-like look to his battered features.

A pair of wild-looking Gurungs wearing necklaces of gold-mounted bear claws were grinning diffidently and Ad Delahanty still was chatting with Major Wong. Even saturnine Colonel Han appeared animated while conversing with Bijai Lakshi, the Commander-in-Chief, and Dr. Keith.

Only reluctantly did this befurred, well-armed and malodorous assemblage commence to move towards sunlight, fresh air and the sports they had been anticipating.

"Smells like a fox den, no?" North found Gornoff squinting amiably up at him. "But soch a hunt it vill be! Today five hundred beaters are riding to the vest end of this Vale." The round-shouldered fellow's enthusiasm appeared entirely genuine and his gray eyes fairly shone.

"You of shooting are fond, Colonel North? But of course!" He grinned. *"Mein Freund,* the General Steel, says you are fine shooter—one of the best in America."

"Sam always did exaggerate to beat hell," laughed North. "Besides, he's no slouch himself with rifle or shotgun." Seized by a sudden inspiration, he inquired, "By the bye, Tovarisch, do you enjoy playing poker?"

The Russian's slate-hued eyes blinked two or three times, then irregular and pointed teeth appeared in a crooked grin. *"Gewiss, Herr Oberst.* Did you know, or did you guess, that that is my favorite card game?"

"Easy guesswork—most Russians are mad for gambling," smiled the Intelligence Officer. "I'll leave you to round up Steel later this afternoon and I'll shanghai Delahanty and maybe Dr. Keith."

The Russian patted North's arm. "I am all impatience. Thank you, Tovarisch Colonel." Laughing a trifle too heartily, he turned away.

An ugly little havildar wearing a bright red and yellow turban plucked at North's sleeve, muttered, "Quietly, this way, please, Bahadur Colonel."

What the hell was this? His wonderment grew when the

havildar led him up to a set of hangings behind which he slipped with the dexterity of a fish entering a weed bed. They then followed a short and gloomy passage ending in a nail-studded door quite capable of resisting a deal of assault. This the little N.C.O. unlocked and gently pushed open, then led into a small, musty-smelling apartment lit by a single animal-fat lamp which burned so poorly that Hugh North only with difficulty could discern a sizable heap of mud-stained bags, broken boxes, lengths of harness, baggage panniers, pieces of saddles, and what appeared to be a stack of badly smashed rifles. Heaped helter-skelter in a corner lay a disordered pile of garments and blankets.

That which immediately captured North's attention was a badly cracked, brassbound chest such as might fit conveniently upon a pack animal. His heart gave a mighty surge when he read boldly stenciled in black upon it the inscription, "A. Keith, M.D., New York, U.S.A."! By God, at least a good proportion of Arunah Keith's precious specimens had survived, after all.

Quietly, the havildar kindled a small torch at the lamp, and when it flared, smoky amber-gold, he pointed at the salvage and said softly, "His Excellency the Dewan say, 'Please to search among papers.' He speak you later."

Without a moment's hesitation, the Intelligence Officer knelt before a pile of loose-leaf, water-spoiled notebooks and hurriedly leafed through the nearest. Thanks to the use of India ink a great majority of the drawings and notes had not run and were therefore easily legible. Most of the notebooks were filled with Keith's angular, nearly indecipherable script; the information precisely set forth. There were others completed in Jenny's legible, unoriginal writing—hers was typically smart finishing-school style.

But that which he sought the most earnestly he could not find. Sweating over the débris, he came across but a single pair of sketch books bearing the late Professor Malchek's name. What could have happened to the rest of his notes? Surely,

during Keith's three months in the field, the Czech must have accomplished more than this?

"This is all that was recovered?" he demanded.

"Yes, Bahadur Colonel." The fellow's dark features loomed closer. "It was your humble servant who conducted the search."

"On whose command?"

"His Excellency, Vikram Girvan, Sirdar. All else lies beyond the reach of man lacking much gunpowder."

Desperately, North continued to search by a wavering, uncertain glare created by lamp and torch now filling this lightless chamber with strata of resinous, eye-stinging smoke. The only thing North came across that challenged his inspection was a box of shotgun shells which, when lifted, appeared to be uncommonly light.

"Please raise the lid of that broken case," North directed. When the havildar sprang to obey, he managed to stuff a double handful of those suspicious shells into the ample side pockets of his bush coat and was leafing through one of Jenny's notebooks when the officer had finished pulling the broken wood far enough apart to disclose a sodden, varicolored mass of bird skins.

In the torchlight the havildar's dark eyes glistened as brightly black as onyx. "Sirdar, His Excellency the Dewan directs that you will keep this knowledge as a close secret and tell *no one* else about the recovery of these things. Also he ordered your humble servant to say that soon many things will happen."

Both to allow himself the opportunity of weighing implications arising from the Dewan's salvage operations and to catch a breath of fresh air, North struck off along the citadel's lofty, time-worn battlements.

In genuine curiosity he examined the numerous cannon mounted at various embrasures. Some were British but had been obsolete for generations, others were Chinese, bronze muzzle-loaders beautifully chased about breeching and boss. There were also a few Persian and Turkish cannon that had been already ancient when Nana Sahib was drenching Cawnpore in British blood. The only useful pieces to be seen were

a battery of Nepalese mountain guns and they were of World War I design.

How pleasant it was thus to saunter along and survey that long lake which had attracted Delahanty's interest. Um. The Intelligence Officer even selected a suitable hillside upon which someday soon he might display a set of panels for the benefit of a certain airplane which *should* come looking for him in another three days, weather permitting.

He ruminated while watching ragged formations of crows circle and settle upon a ruined tower near the lake's edge.

Why had the Dewan enabled him to examine the rescued equipment? Especially since that astute individual must be aware that none of North's own possessions were involved. Did Vikram Girvan, also, wish to learn more concerning the rôle played by Carl Anton Malchek?

"What sheer bad luck," North reflected, "that those saddlebags of Malchek's weren't found. Since he died trying to save 'em, there must have been something pretty hot inside.

"Won't Keith be tickled, though, when I can tell him his notes and some of his specimens have been saved?" Standing there on the parapet with the wind smartly whipping wavy, dark hair about his forehead, he smiled. "His tail feathers certainly have been pretty low."

He halted, watched a sentry pulling up his sheepskin mantle against a chill wind which had commenced, as usual towards sunset, to whistle down from those glaciers and ice fields so many thousands of feet above. The sepoy's salute was smart and precise before he about-faced and recommenced to walk his post.

"Jenny will be tickled, too, over that salvaging operation. There's an odd, mixed-up female," he told himself. "Wonder what she's made of that kiss I gave her before Sam and the Baroness? Well, taught her a sharp lesson. Um. And it wasn't exactly bad fun, either."

He swung along a little further, watched a pack of shaggy dogs shepherding a large flock of sheep down a country road.

"Your main considerations, my lad," he warned himself,

"are to figure on how fast those Red Chinese laddies are prepared to move; also, where do Gornoff, Steel and their girl friend fit into the picture? At the Dewan's this afternoon when Gornoff came face-to-face with Colonel Han, he stared right through him. Play-acting? Or what?"

He lingered on the summit of a dizzily tall flanking tower and followed the progress of a party of cavalry along a thread of a road winding westward. H-umm. It would be instructive to know which of these foreigners might be responsible for the presence of Dirty Dick and his outsize prayer wheel. If *only* he were able to read Chinese! Certainly he soon must locate a trustworthy person who could translate those slender rolls of paper secreted in his tobacco pouch.

Absently hands slipped to his side pockets and tested the dozen-odd twelve-gauge shotgun shells he had abstracted from the salvage.

"At least two facts stand fairly clear," he assured himself. "Gornoff and Company enjoy the support of Prince Timrud, while the Commander-in-Chief is cozy with the Charlie boys. This being so, just where does the Sri Rajah fit? Maybe he *hasn't* finally made up his mind? Pray God he hasn't!"

Still fingering those suspiciously light, dull red shotgun shells, North made his way towards the officers' quarters where, after being received in military courtesy, he was escorted to a room where Subadar Thopa sat playing *tum* with several compatriots enrolled in the Sri Rajah's army.

The little man jumped up, beaming and hurriedly pulling on his tunic.

"Of course, Bahadur Colonel, I attended the tea-drinking and would like to speak with you about it."

Once in Thopa's quarters, a small room equipped only with a charcoal brazier, a low settle, a table and two stools, said he simply:

"I am glad you sought me, my friend. Much have I learned in the last few hours." The further he talked, the more his conversation confirmed North's recent thinking.

"This mission from the Chinese Soviet has made a deep im-

pression upon the Sri Rajah," the Gurkha explained while squatting on his heels and preparing to kindle a tall brass and enamel *huqua* for their mutual enjoyment.

The Intelligence Officer arranged his long frame as comfortably as he might on one of the wooden stools and prepared to listen.

"Not only have these emissaries of General Liu Po-chang—Who is this general, Bahadur Colonel?"

"General Liu is one of dear Lieutenant-colonel Andriev's star pupils," North explained. "For your further information, Andriev is a most interesting, if unadmirable, character first noticed around Harbin, Manchuria, prior to World War II; next, he bobbed up in Peiping on V-J day. He has without doubt become Chief of Soviet espionage services in China and the Far East."

"This Andriev—does his first loyalty lie with Moscow or with Mao Tse-tung?"

"If I could be definite on the subject," North admitted, "I'd be a lot happier. This Leonid Gornoff we've got on our hands I'm pretty sure is under Malinkoff, who operates directly from the Kremlin. But please go on. What does Colonel Han offer the Sri Rajah?"

The water pipe glowed and bubbled sleepily to the deep breath Subadar Thopa inhaled before replying, "Bar gold and many precious stones." Thopa's smile widened as he passed over the *huqua's* mouthpiece. "The Soviets have learned what everyone knows, that the Princes of India can resist economic and military bribes, but never big rubies, diamonds, emeralds or imperial jade."

Acrid smoke stung at North's tongue and his lips quivered. Why anyone ever should have fashioned a mouthpiece out of a malodorous metal like brass was beyond his understanding.

"Yes, I know. What else?"

The Gurkha leaned well forward and spoke in a tense undertone. "The Red Chinese are offering to create a single, powerful buffer state out of Jonkhar, Sikkim and Bhutan. If Matbar Nana Jang agrees to open the Kirong-la to the Army of Liu

Po-chang, he will then be enthroned as Sri Sri Maharajah of what is to be called Jonkharabad."

A low whistle escaped North. "Tempting bait, all right. This new state will enjoy extensive Soviet protection, I presume?"

"Of course." The Gurkha's teeth glinted in the dim light of a mutton-fat lamp. "He is to permit no foreigners, save Russians, into Jonkharabad. As a further inducement, the Sri Rajah's army will be furnished with modern arms and munitions of all types, especially guns for mountain fighting. Colonel Han also offers to construct a modern airfield on that plain we saw below the City of Jang."

A silver and turquoise bracelet flashed on the Subadar's wrist. "Moreover, Matbar Nana Jang is to pay no tribute and, in fact, will receive a cash subsidy. Is not the bait as tempting as a tethered goat to a leopard? From all this you can understand, Bahadur Colonel, how important is control over the Kirong-la?"

"And in exchange?"

"The Sri Rajah has only to agree to the construction of a wheel traffic route across the Kirong-la and to permit Chinese troops to fortify and garrison both approaches."

Fine perspiration commenced to spring out on North's high, well-tanned forehead. "In such an event, what position will Nepal take?"

"Katmandu will protest through diplomatic channels," the Gurkha predicted. "That will accomplish nothing. I suspect then that the Panchh Sirkar will exercise his right of sovereignty over Jonkhar and order his armies to guard the pass."

"How much do you think your forces can accomplish against the communized Tibetans and Red Chinese?" North demanded tensely.

"If an invasion is delayed until the late spring, we can stop them." His mouth formed a smile of savage anticipation.

"I wonder?" was the Intelligence Officer's silent comment while casting a troubled glance at the brazier glowing sleepily in a far corner. Aloud he said, "The Red Chinese must have learned a great deal about mountain fighting in Korea. Also

they will have developed new tactics and weapons. I wonder whether either your government or those of Pakistan and India appreciate the true extent of their peril."

"Probably not," Thopa admitted. "For that reason the Sri Rajah must be persuaded not to heed the treacherous promises of these Chinese barbarians."

A brief silence descended upon Subadar Thopa's quarters, endured until North passed over the *huqua's* stem and inquired thoughtfully, "Now about this game drive—would we be mistaken in taking extreme precautions when it begins?"

Like a mechanical toy fashioned of bronze, the Gurkha nodded three times. "Your words, Bahadur Colonel, are the shadow and the substance of wisdom. Somewhere, I know not how, Kali Yuga has learned that a decision has been reached to assassinate our party one by one. These deaths are always to appear accidental."

"You're convinced Kali Yuga's source is reliable?"

"As surely as you and I sit here," came the grim assurance. "We have been marked for death, every one of us."

19. Poker Faces

Collected in the *powa's* huge common room a group of guests sat eating sherbet or sipping *raksi* and coffee. Apparently the Sri Rajah was attempting to cater to a variety of tastes, for a small cask of native wine nestled invitingly amid a big Chinese bronze urn packed with snow.

Sam Steel gulped a small tumbler of *raksi,* then wiped his lips on the back of a big, bronzed, tattooed hand bearing the faded blue of a tiger's head.

"Say, North," he drawled. "I hear tell we are likely to get

some damn' pretty shooting. Prince Timrud claims the upper end of this valley is swarming with game."

"With what, for instance?"

"Bear, I reckon, panthers, and maybe some leopard cats; also plenty of musk deer, sambur and wild yaks."

From a lounge in a far corner, Arunah Keith raised an objection. "I regret to contradict, General, but I believe that the sambur is not to be found at this elevation."

Behind the dark lenses, Steel's inflamed eyes narrowed and his scarred brow contracted.

"Listen, Doc, for every sambur you've seen, I'll bet I've shot a dozen. I've seen sambur in this valley."

"Maybe," North interposed equably, "the Sri Rajah has had them imported. I'm told native princes are given to exchanging various kinds of game."

"Of course, that may be the explanation." Nervously Keith reset his spectacles and, rising, glanced at a wrist watch.

"Explain it any way you like—what I saw up the valley was sambur." Steel refilled his silver cup with *raksi*. "Say, Doc, what's bitin' you? You been gloomin' 'round like a pallbearer."

Keith's rawboned frame stiffened and his short beard thrust itself aggressively outwards. "The reason for my depressed state I would hardly expect you to comprehend, my dear General, since it has nothing to do with battle, murder or sudden death."

Steel stared a moment, then his blond, bristle-covered head tilted backwards as he emitted a harsh roar of laughter. "Listen to Sunday School Willie! Say, Doc, where's your stovepipe hat with the crepe band around it?" He leaned forward, elbows on knees. "What inspired that particular crack?"

"I happened to be in Honan in 1932 and know that you ordered a wholesale massacre of Wu P'ei-fu's surrendered troops."

"Were you, now?" The soldier-of-fortune's voice was harsh as the rasp of steel on stone. "Of course you didn't know that Fu's men would have scragged us the minute they realized how few we were. Lay off, Doc, and stick to stuffing your

goddam birds." Grinning, he turned to North. "You tell him where, Colonel."

"Ah-h, lay off." Delahanty looked up from the game of draughts he was playing with Thopa and directed a belligerent stare at the mercenary.

"Sez you?" Sam Steel's blunt jaw thrust itself forward.

"Sez I," growled Delahanty, half rising. "If you want——"

"Please, let's not have unpleasantness," begged Keith, "especially since we all stand in considerable danger." Color welled into his weather-mottled cheeks; he glanced again at his watch and started for the door.

"And vhere are you going, Herr Doktor?" Gornoff demanded pleasantly enough, squinting over his pince-nez.

"Apparently I am to dine with His Excellency, Bijai Lakshi, the Commander-in-Chief."

Despite Steel's dark glasses, North caught a quick narrowing of his eyes and made mental note of Gornoff's abruptly blank expression.

"I am sure you haff good time," the Russian called. "General Lakshi is good host."

"How do you know?" came North's instant query.

"Oh, perhaps by vhat the Amerikaners call 'hearsay evidence.' "

North arose and followed the gangling scientist out onto the gallery. Already a half-moon had commenced to pencil in silver the ornate designs of certain capitals, cornices and the pagoda-like roof of the royal palace.

"Please listen attentively, Doctor," North urged in a rapid undertone. "Right now you must give me your word of honor not to repeat, or to infer possession of, news which should make you very happy."

Keith's sandy brows climbed a startled half inch. "You have my word."

"The bulk of your notes and specimens has been recovered!"

Keith's haggard features lighted. "Good God, man, you don't know what this means! Are you sure?"

"I saw them myself, not two hours ago."

"Oh, North! North!" The scientist flung an ecstatic arm about North's shoulders and fairly hugged him. "Are they badly damaged? When shall I be able to see them?"

"I don't know," replied the Intelligence Officer, casting a searching glance about the moon-silvered *maidan*. "Remember, you must give no hint of this knowledge."

"But—but why weren't Jenny and I informed?" Keith's bewilderment was complete.

"I can't answer that," came the brisk reply and North's deep-set eyes bored intently through the half-light. "One more thing. Please try to feel out this Bijai Lakshi's attitude concerning Steel's party, as well as towards our own. Our lives may depend upon it."

"I will do my best, rest assured."

Puzzled lines creased North's forehead. "Have you any idea why the Commander-in-Chief suddenly invited you to dine? He hasn't been overly cordial thus far."

Keith shook his head. "Can't imagine. I wonder what of my collection remains undamaged? I had some rare examples of the species *Upipidae* and *Motacillidae*, and pray God nothing has happened to those specimens of *Acanthoptila nepalensis*."

Keith's short beard fairly quivered with excitement. "You see, I believe I have discovered a distinct new species of babbler. I would like to designate it as *Acanthoptila keithensis*—if it proves to have been hitherto unrecognized."

"I'm sure it will be." North patted his friend on the shoulder. "Now for a very serious warning—remain on your guard every moment."

"How? Why?"

"Because," he replied softly, "I've learned, on excellent authority that all of us stand in mortal danger of assassination."

"You are convinced of that?" The speed with which Dr. Keith's dejection faded was astonishing. Suddenly he became transformed once more into a crisp, self-confident leader among men.

"Yes."

"Then I will be careful. Never doubt it for an instant. Our collection *must* be brought back to America."

"You'll see, them Charlie boys will find some excuse to turn up," Ad Delahanty predicted. "You can't keep a Chink away from a poker game no more than a tomcat out of a catnip bed. Dunno about this Han character, but Wong was one of the cooniest stud players we had in Changsha back when Chennault's Flying Tigers, Chiang's crowd and the Reds all were fighting Japs."

He sighed. "Them was the good old days, Boss. Easy discipline, good pay and plenty of China dolls. We were good fighters, too, for hired hands—best since that bunch of Yank volunteer fliers which fought in World War I. Damn! Can't remember what they called the outfit."

"The Lafayette Escadrille?" North suggested.

"Yep, that's it. Bet there never has been a finer bunch of fliers and hell-raisers put together than the Tigers."

Sam Steel grinned. "You're nuts. You should have seen some of the crack foreign outfits I commanded for Chang Tso-lin back in '31-'32. I had Krauts, Spaniards, French and a lot of Yanks and Limeys. They really could make things burn when they ate and got paid regular."

Sure enough, Colonel Han and Major Wong presently appeared, as agreeable and polite as could be. Was there any objection to their taking a hand?

"So long's your cash holds out, it's okay by me," Steel grunted.

"And you, Colonel North?" Colonel Han's large buckteeth showed for the first time in a smile.

"I've no objection at all."

The ensuing poker game proved lively to say the least. Sam Steel played as one might have expected—reckless, in a bold, almost headlong fashion, which for a while won him rows on rows of counters. These Chinese chips, North decided, were among the loveliest imaginable. Perhaps three inches in length, they were of ivory, ebony and mother-of-pearl and beautifully

engraved with conventionalized ants, bees, butterflies and dragonflies, which indicated their value.

"Say," Delahanty demanded, "aren't these the nuts? They're handy and can't roll off the table like civilized chips."

Neither of the ladies felt disposed to sit in on the game; Jenny pleaded a headache and Baroness Atossa the necessity of writing up a journal. North would have given much to learn in what language her entries would be made—no less the subject matter.

To have collected a more cosmopolitan group than this company gathered about a Chinese teak gaming table would have approached the impossible, decided the Intelligence Officer. There was Ad, freckled, wide of features and quite young-appearing with his hair crew-cut; Gornoff, hunched over the cards with scarred scalp shining bright. Sam Steel sat slouched on his hassock chewing the stump of a big cigar and, because of his dark glasses, much resembling an enormous nocturnal lemur. His long and narrow jaw kept clamping down with the slow precision of an ore crusher.

Colonel Han wore an ultramarine house coat, richly adorned with fighting dragons done in gold thread. He remained as imperturbable of expression as a bronze Buddha. Major Wong, who was shorter and less severe of expression than his companion, affected a short-sleeved jersey of gray wool, leather wrist supports and red striped breeches.

North played cautiously for over an hour, gauging the tactics of his various opponents. Sensing an essential weakness in Steel's game, he permitted himself to be caught early in an outrageous—and expensive—bluff which more than paid off a dozen hands.

While Delahanty was shuffling, Colonel Han looked across the table at Gornoff and demanded in singsong Hindustani, "Did you, Tovarisch, chance to encounter many pilgrims during your travels?"

Gornoff selected and thrust forward a pair of counters as a bet. "I open, two mohars."

"No. We met no travelers, none at all." He grinned de-

risively at North. "We followed one of the highest and least-used *trangs*."

"We did," Delahanty remarked, whereupon North could cheerfully have shot him on the spot. "Funny-lookin' sort of guy."

"I'll draw three." North's foot impacted sharply on the exflier's instep. Delahanty manfully, but only lamely, recovered himself.

"Gimme two—— Naw, he wasn't no monk, just a poor old gink tryin' to get over into Nepal before winter."

Bright and opaque as circles of obsidian were the pupils the two Chinese trained on Delahanty. Gornoff drew two cards, muttered sympathetically, "Ach, that poor old man. Did you speak vith him?"

Flushed to his ear tips, the outfitter shook his not unhandsome yellow head. "Naw. He didn't speak no language any of us understand."

"Wish we'd had your friend the Baroness along," laughed North. "I hear she speaks dozens of dialects."

Steel jerked a nod. "Yep. She can find her way around most anywheres. Her Dad must have lugged her into some mighty queer places."

"And where, my friend," Major Wong inquired while selecting two bee and one butterfly counters, "did you encounter this—pilgrim?"

"Don't rightly remember. I'll raise you three mohars!" Delahanty flung his bet clattering on the polished teak.

"Ah, don't try that 'can't remember' crap," Steel insisted. "Was it this side o' the border or in Nepal?"

"Say, mister——"

"It was in Nepal, Sam," North supplied smoothly. "And you, Ad, keep your pants on. Raise you three, Wong, and lay you a side bet of ten rupees I take the General this time."

"Like hell. Here's five, right back at you." The mercenary's tattooed fist dropped the necessary ivory counters. Steel then addressed himself to Colonel Han. "Reckon you'll be starting

home any day now, eh? You wouldn't want to get weathered in among those high passes, would you?"

Beneath the dark blue felt of his gown Han's narrow shoulders lifted in an indifferent shrug. "I find the atmosphere so pleasant and hospitable in Jonkhar that I am in no hurry to depart."

Gornoff's mangled hand pushed forward some more counters. "I call." He stared across the table and smiled bleakly. "Take a vord of advice, Colonel, from one who knows these mountains most well." His tone took on an ominous emphasis. "You and Major Wong vill be vise to leave Jonkhar at the first opportunity."

"Indeed?" A contraction of Colonel Han's thin lips exposed once more his large and yellow front teeth. "Your concern is flattering, almost touching. Yet, if I may be permitted to say so, it is *you* and your companions who really have reason to make a swift departure. Surely you are very solicitous, Colonel. I wonder why?"

North listened hard; memorized every word of this interchange. It was as precious to him as rubies and fine gold.

The Chinese's long, tobacco-stained fingers fanned his cards and he made a reply North would not have dared to contemplate. "Surely you would not risk disappointing Comrade Malinkoff? How deeply he would deplore failing to receive a report of your—scientific discoveries in Jonkhar and Nepal."

Malinkoff! There it was. Gornoff and Steel *were* operating out of Moscow, with Atossa furnishing the language skills and knowhow.

In the lounge, though, the atmosphere remained of a supremely critical nature. The play progressed. North won that hand and lost the next, then won the third, having teased Wong and Steel into raising four times against a three-card draw.

The moment, he judged, had become opportune for a little indirect questioning on his own. "Say, Sam, whatever became of that fascinating Polish Jew who used to cadge along the Bund in Shanghai?" he inquired in a casual tone.

"Who'd you mean? Always was a heap stumble-bums cruising 'round there."

"I mean the one with the charming name of Fratkin Schmul."

"Maybe it ain't the same guy." Delahanty volunteered unexpectedly, "but I remember the name, account of we thought it was funny. 'How's yer Schmul today?' and all that. Well, this *hombre* opened a photo studio in Shanghai right after V-J day and did a big business photographing service personnel—had some floozies drummin' up trade among the brass hats. Lately, I heard tell he's moved his business to Canton."

"Is our American friend correct, Colonel Han?" Gornoff inquired, quite dexterously riffling the cards despite his handicap.

"It may be so," stolidly replied the Chinese. "I do not know him."

"Fratkin Schmul! Say, now ain't that a hell of a name?" Steel drawled, resettling his dark glasses. "Keerist! Sounds like part of a vaudeville team. What's about him, North?"

The Intelligence Officer thought furiously an instant and sensed a golden opportunity. "You could say he's an actor, but he's no comedian, unless there's something humorous about being head of Mao Tse-tung's espionage service for all Red China."

Major Wong flushed, Colonel Han remained expressionless, but Steel and Gornoff acted tense and preoccupied after a lightning exchange of glances.

"Your cut, Ad," North reminded. "Let's get on with the game."

While the play progressed North kept an ear attuned to catch the sound of Keith's return. Desperately, he needed to consult with him. Presently he was rewarded by hearing footsteps heavily descending the gallery; uncertain, too, as if Keith had had too much. When he heard what undoubtedly must be Keith's door close he felt more than a little relieved. From the uncertainty of his gait, he judged that that eminent scientist certainly had enjoyed Bijai Lakshi's repast and liquors.

When at length the game came to an end, North queried, "How're your eyes coming along, Sam?"

"They're better, but still sore as hell. It's some damned infection I must have picked up in Tibet; place is stiff with eye trouble."

"Better try to get fixed up before the game drive." He stared straight into his old enemy's battered visage. "Something warns me, Sam, that we'll all need to look alive when that shindig comes off."

"Yeah. And I hear say the bush is mighty heavy in the upper valley; likewise that Tibetan bears are meaner than a Filipino *juramentado*."

20. Open Window

When Hugh North regained his quarters it was to find Jenny Cutler sitting up in bed and attempting to complete a series of entries in the one notebook she had preserved. How tiny she looked in that huge, silk-draped bed. But it could scarcely be called a bed since it lacked legs and rested on the floor. The splashing of a little fountain which belatedly had commenced to play at the far end of the room sounded infinitely sleepy and soothing.

Her peach nightgown, North noted, was most becoming when seen against those pale green sheets; also, it was somewhat less transparent than the previous one.

"Sorry to be so late," he said, carefully bolting the door behind him.

"Oh, that's quite all right. I've been keeping busy." To his astonishment her bright lips formed a quick smile. "Hope you won."

"In more ways than one, my dear," he replied, unknotting a khaki necktie. "I not only made a few mohars but, also I

picked up some very interesting pointers. No, nothing definite, just enough to give me a lead along certain theories."

It was then that he noticed his battle jacket and scarf neatly arranged on a chair. Quietly he crossed, picked up the garment, smiled, but made no comment on viewing the replaced buttons. He only stood stock-still looking across the room at her. From the wide bed she studied him in equal silence. If only it were possible to forget the appalling pressure of events, to ignore the shadow of death lying so all but imperceptibly across the guest house.

Jenny must have again washed her golden-brown hair and this time had trimmed it into a neat and most effective boyish bob. Although traces of red-brown wind burn stained her piquant features, most of those weary and aging lines had departed.

"Surprised?" she queried.

"Really, my dear, you could knock me over with a crowbar," he admitted while nodding at the jacket. "I hadn't expected such tender, loving care."

She dropped notebook and pencil onto the floor. "I'm glad you're pleased, Hugh. I hope you'll believe that I'm not always quite so bitchy as I've been these last few days."

"Nor am I usually so unsympathetic."

A trifle wearily North seated himself on the bed's side. "Of course we've both been under a strain," said he, folding the battle jacket. "I—well, I've had a pretty rugged time of it for nearly two years. Lost my fiancée, you know."

Jenny's fingers brushed his, moved on. "Yes. Arunah told me. What happened to you was tragic yet dignified and—and —memorable, I expect. What happened to me was neither. Can you imagine what it means to be known as a—a—discarded wife?" Her hand crept back towards his, joined it in slowly kneading the weather-stained battle jacket. "It's so terribly humiliating to find oneself unwanted."

"It must be, Jenny. Please believe I do understand. I——" He broke off as her slender bronzed arms extended themselves towards him.

"Hold me, Hugh," she begged piteously, and her features crumpled. "Please, please, hold me just a little while, until I don't feel quite so utterly, goddamned alone, despised, and—and—frightened."

His arms in gray-blue cashmere encircled her until some of his own aloneness and uncertainty had become assuaged. Then he kissed her tight-shut eyes and stood up.

"Better?"

"Better," she replied, smiling and settling back against the mound of Nile-green pillows. "That was sweet——"

"Sweet for me, too," he admitted. "D'you know, Jenny, it's a hell of a bore trying to play the resourceful, dependable rôle year after year. No one guesses how often a man in a job like mine gets scared and confused. How often he guesses wrong."

"I suppose not." She smiled uncertainly. "It must be a lonesome kind of a life. I—I'm glad you told me that—very."

"I have some good news for you."

"I could use some, Hugh. What is it?" In reaching for a cigarette Jenny's gown fell forward, afforded a fleeting glimpse of a softly rounded throat and bosom that caused his fingers to tighten about the battle jacket.

Reminding himself that listeners might be posted behind the grilles, he employed French to describe the recovery of Keith's equipment.

Her eyes widened delightedly. "Did you notice two oak cases marked with red and blue stripes?"

"Yes," said he, "but I'd no chance to examine them."

Softly she clapped her hands. "They contain his prize specimens. This *is* marvelous! Poor Arunah's been so sunk ever since we got here." She noticed his lack of response. "What's wrong?" A worried "V" appeared between her slim and graciously arched brows.

"He has yet to get them safely into Nepal," North reminded. "Incidentally, I think the eavesdroppers are back on the job—so let's go into our happy-family act.

"So, *ma chère,* re-enter Jenny North's lord and master." Seating himself on the bed beside her, he settled back and felt

her head on his shoulder; the soft warmth of her was sufficiently close that they might speak in undertones. "Thopa warned me this afternoon that we will not be allowed to leave this valley alive—any of us."

"Late news flashes," she said as she raised her mouth from his chest. "Now, for the watching audience, let's have another of those publicity kisses. . . . M-m," she murmured presently. "Practice improves you. Who is after our scalps?"

"Can't find out as yet. Nor can I tell when or how the opposition will try to wind our clocks." He kissed her shoulder, then blew a lock of her hair over her forehead. "If they decide on poison, there's little we can do except stick to fruits, unseasoned dishes and drink only water out of our pet fountain."

"Have you any plan for making a getaway?"

He deliberated mentioning the plane but decided against doing so. After all, the pontoon plane was not due for another three days. "Not so far. Thopa is our only hope. He knows the situation. I have an idea our best chance for a breakaway will come during the hunt. You'll come along, of course."

"I see." Gently, her warm, spice-scented and firmly yielding figure stirred in his embrace, then she slipped an arm about his neck and kissed him deliberately full on the lips.

He seized the opportunity of whispering, "Good going, my pet. Now listen—if anything should happen to me, take my tobacco pouch to the Dewan. I believe it contains evidence which might save you."

"Evidence?" Jenny commenced to tremble ever so gently.

"Some documents we found on a pretended pilgrim. Damn' things are in Chinese, so I can't read them, nor can Thopa. So far, our situation has not warranted my risking translation from anyone in Jang."

With seeming irrelevance, he demanded, "How much did Professor Malchek use the shotgun?" He settled his dark head sharply outlined against the pillows.

"Why, a fair amount almost every day. As a mammalogist, he was forever shooting marmots, mice, chipmunks, rabbits and rodents of all sorts."

"Then he'd every reason to bring along a good supply of shotgun shells. Did he make copious notes?"

"No. I noticed that. Why?"

"Hardly any papers in Malchek's handwriting were among the salvage, but I found a box of shells with his name written on it. They were uncommonly light. I haven't yet found opportunity to examine them and I don't dare attempt it now, but come tomorrow morning, I'll have learned what's in them besides powder and bird shot."

While speaking he commenced to unbutton his shirt. "Better blow out the lamp," he advised, "I'm getting set to seek our quote, connubial couch, unquote."

"You go to hell," she said. "Lev and I were married long enough so I've got over the maidenly modesty act."

Fatigue which he had hitherto never suspected suddenly seized him. It felt mighty fine to feel his skin caressed by the smooth coolness of the silken sheets. He had blown out the lamp and was punching his pillow into a satisfactory shape when, hesitantly, Jenny's fingers crept into his.

"I need a courage transfusion," she whispered. "I'm really scared over this being semi-imprisoned, our ammunition stolen and all these people waiting for a chance to knock us off."

"If any knocking off becomes necessary, my dear, we can do some on our own account."

They remained still for several moments, then Jenny sighed. "Hugh, would you please kiss me good night? I—I think I'll sleep better."

How long Hugh North remained asleep he had no notion, but he roused promptly when loud voices, excited voices, sounded on the guest-house gallery. Many feet, some booted, raced up to swell the tumult.

Jenny, too awoke and commenced gently to quiver, but her voice remained perfectly calm. "Oh, Hugh! What's the matter? Have they come to kill us?"

"I don't think so. Sounds as if this ruckus has to do with Dr. Keith."

He slipped into his trench coat, thrust feet into rawhide sandals and ran out to find a knot of guards collected outside Dr. Keith's door. A moment later Sam Steel, his jaw set and inflamed eyes questing in all directions, appeared from the opposite direction.

"What the hell is it, North?" he rasped. "Can't a guy get even half a night's sleep?"

"Damned if I know. Let's see." In Hindustani he ordered the havildar in command to stand aside.

Boldly, he then thrust his way into the entrance, glimpsed a pair of black-bearded officers posed uncertainly in the center of Dr. Keith's room. The loose ends of their turbans fluttered in a strong wind beating through an open window; one that looked out upon the cliffs below the ramparts.

Of Dr. Keith there was no trace.

21. One Down —Three to Go

An inquest conducted by no lesser personages than Prince Timrud and the Commander-in-Chief was held in the guest-house lounge, but it was only after considerable insistence that Hugh North and Subadar Thopa were permitted to view the body.

In strained silence they watched a jemadar remove that blanket which concealed Keith's oddly contorted remains.

Despite his long experience with violent death, a chill current flowed the length of North's back when he gazed into those battered, putty-hued features he had last beheld alight with pleasure.

North quickly made an examination despite angry protests from the jemadar. "Please notice," he invited the attaché in rapid English, "that Dr. Keith's body is fully clothed, although

a sentry reported it was four o'clock of the morning when he saw him jump. At the same time I've found nothing whatever in his pockets. Now watch carefully, because I'm going to open the cadaver's eyes and will have to do it quickly."

Before the guard could divine his intention, North bent, swiftly raised the nearest eyelid and peered into the glassy grayness of Keith's left eye. The pupil was so distended that its iris was only a slim circlet.

"Roko!" snarled the jemadar, menacing North with his carbine. "Do not defile the dead!"

Obediently North stepped back. "Notice anything, Thopa?"

Thopa sighed softly. "The eye was like that of an opium eater. Even the darkest of nights could not so greatly dilate the black."

"Precisely," North agreed as they quitted the death chamber. "What drug might have been administered?"

"You are familiar with the action of the datura seed, Bahadur Colonel?"

North nodded and his mind flashed far back over the years. He saw himself as a young captain, the guest of a certain very rich man on Long Island. In photographic detail he could recall the sight of Roy Delaney's body slumped over the desk, a knife hilt protruding at a deadly angle from between his shoulder blades, and the curious aspect of his eyes. It was then that he first had become aware that datura seed, consumed in sufficient quantity, left a victim completely conscious, but bereft of will power or the ability to move.

Towards the close of this, the most original inquest North had ever attended, the Commander-in-Chief tugged briefly at his magnificent, carefully combed, curled and scented beard.

"Bahadur Colonel," he said, "please convey to your memsahib the profound regrets of His Highness, the Sri Rajah, that this tragedy should have taken place. I have given orders that the washers shall prepare the suicide's remains in any fashion demanded by your religion."

North stared fixedly into General Bijai Lakshi's beady black

eyes. "Your pardon, Excellency, but I am not yet convinced that Dr. Keith committed suicide."

"How could it have been otherwise?" smoothly demanded the Commander-in-Chief. "Captain Bhopal, please report what you found."

"As Officer of the Guard, I received a report that a sepoy on duty on the west battlements had seen someone fall or jump from a window of the *powa,*" stated a burly officer wearing a well-patched military cloak. "When I arrived the door here was bolted on the inside. Once we had forced our way inside we found no one nor any sign of a struggle."

"The old guy's been lower than a snake's ass account of losing all them specimens," agreed Steel, chewing nervously on the butt of a cold cheroot. "Ain't that so? He hardly ever spoke, let alone laughed."

"It's quite true that Dr. Keith hasn't been in good spirits," the Intelligence Officer evaded. "But then none of us have had reason to be cheerful."

"Depression, then, was his motive, no?" Bijai Lakshi's green and gold striped turban swung towards that far corner where sat the Baroness Atossa, silent, her large blue eyes wide and intent.

"Exactly, when dining at my residence last evening he several times mentioned distress that all his work had been lost," blandly informed the General. "No, there can be no doubt but that the Doctor Sahib committed suicide."

North started to contradict, to assure these predatory, dark-faced officers that Arunah Keith really hadn't been depressed on the last night of his existence; quite the contrary. But he recalled his promise to the Dewan which, for good and sufficient reasons, he already had violated to encourage Keith and Jenny Cutler.

Presently the inquest adjourned and the various participants returned to quarters. Hardly had they entered Delahanty's room to partake of a glass of much-needed *raksi* than the ex-flier burst out, "Cripes, Boss, why did you let that fat sonofa-

bitch get away with such a verdict? Why didn't you tell him we know Keith was murdered?"

"Murdered!" gasped Jenny, convulsively pressing rigid fingers over her lips.

"I kept quiet because it wouldn't have done the least good to go on protesting."

"You were right, Hugh," Jenny muttered in a small, toneless voice. "They really do intend to murder us all. Oh God, isn't this awful?"

"Sure is," growled Delahanty. "Just waitin' for our turn to get knocked off. How do you suppose it was done?"

"Simple enough," North replied thoughtfully. "Undoubtedly that datura was administered while he was at dinner."

"With Bijai Lakshi?" Thopa amplified. "That son of a pig. I should like to meet him alone on the battlements some night." Gently, the little Gurkha patted his kukri.

"It wasn't necessarily the General," North objected. "That's the hell of it. Anybody could have ordered the doctoring of poor Keith's food. You know how many servants work about a princely kitchen?"

"Yeah. Whole platoons of 'em," Delahanty admitted. "But, like Thopa here, I'd sure admire a chance to lay into whoever done it. The Doc was a nice old guy."

North placed a hand on Jenny's quivering, khaki-colored shoulder, patted it gently. "To answer your question more completely, I suspect that, after we had retired, a couple of men slipped into Keith's room. Probably, because of his drugged condition, it wasn't even locked. Very likely they found him wherever he had first seated himself on regaining his room."

The girl stared upwards in wonderment. "How would you know that?"

A faint smile appeared beneath the Intelligence Officer's short black mustache. "You needn't be so impressed. I once had intimate experience with datura and its effects—on Long Island, of all places.

"Probably the poor devil was quite conscious when the assassins arrived, yet such is the effect of datura that he could

neither cry out nor struggle even when the killers carried him over to the window to throw him out."

"Why'd they rob him?" Delahanty demanded angrily. "Hell, even his wrist watch was a cheap nickel job."

"Probably they were told to hunt for evidences of espionage."

"Oh, dear! Poor Mrs. Keith!" Jenny muttered. "Oh, Hugh, to think that that brilliant mind of his is lost to science forever."

Thopa sighed, seated himself on the edge of the outfitter's couch. "Well, my friends, the first of us has been eliminated."

"I wonder who'll be next?" came Jenny's taut voice.

Delahanty ground a fist into the palm of its mate.

"Yeah. Case of one down—three to go, ain't it?" His jaw went out and he stared belligerently about. "Know what? I sure aim to take along a couple of these murderin' bastards before I cash in."

22. At the Sign of the Green Star

This night promised to be the coldest yet, decided Colonel North as, accompanied by the Baroness Atossa Frederika Matala, he set off down that long and ill-paved causeway connecting the citadel with the City of Jang.

Somewhere, high in the chill, blue-black heavens, a gaggle of geese must be migrating towards the warm delta of the Ganges. Their cries, discordant, but pulse-quickening to a gunner, sounded faint as if let in by some pinhole among the stars.

"Do you mind?" Without awaiting her companion's reply Atossa thrust an arm through his. "This footing is so poor."

"Yes. It's wretched, all right; probably on purpose."

"You have saved my reason, *Monsieur le Colonel,*" she said.

"The confinement of that Citadel was no longer to be endured."

When North glanced upwards, trying to see the geese, the moonlight briefly picked out his bold, cleanly chiseled profile.

"Should be some dandy duck and goose shooting to be had around here."

"There is," came her prompt assurance. "As our party entered Jonkhar from the south, we passed through a region in which exist marshes and quite a few small ponds and lakes."

Her tread rang loudly on the paving stones; while she was not wearing her massive, square-toed and hobnailed climbing boots, her footgear was sturdy to say the least.

"*Merci!*" She had stumbled on a particularly irregular cobblestone so violently that she had to clutch his arm, and her shoulder, swathed in the famous coat of clouded leopard skin, impacted against his battle jacket.

He laughed softly as, gradually, the lights of the town, the incessant howling of dogs and other noises arose to meet them. "And so far we've had nothing to drink. God help us on the way home."

Her shoulder-length hair, now combed into a neat, pageboy bob, glistened like new snow under the moonlight when she smiled up at him. "You were most gallant to rescue me, *mon Colonel.* Besides, I was weary of being mentally undressed by General Steel and your *ami* Delahanty." She chuckled. "In fact, I feared to catch cold from being so long in the nude."

A few yards to their rear tramped a pair of guards assigned ostensibly for their protection. Fierce, Tibetan-appearing fellows they were, whose masses of shaggy black hair dangled in four heavy plaits from beneath European-type army caps. Although armed to the teeth, they, too, must be anticipating a foray into town; they kept grinning and chattering while striding along with rifles slung to their shoulders.

"I hadn't realized you were so tall," suddenly commented the Intelligence Officer. "Aren't you several inches above the average?"

"Not in Estonia. Besides, I am not really so long! Always I appear long in breeches. Do you think I was wise to wear

breeches?" Her teeth appeared in a teasing smile. "Are you disappointed that it is only a half-woman who accompanies you?"

"If we were headed for anywhere but Jang," he laughed, "why, I'd—I'd——"

"Make me to take them off, perhaps?"

"Perhaps. But not with our cheering section of sepoys in the background."

Halfway down the causeway Atossa halted. "Do you mind pausing a few moments? It is so beautiful a night, and I am sure the town will not prove so attractive as it appears from here."

She unknotted the headkerchief she had worn, peasant fashion, and released that amazing hair to flow freely in the crisp night wind. It sparkled like skillfully worked platinum in modeling the shape of her head.

From the causeway they could see many conical domes marking various Buddhist shrines. Although fashioned of whitewashed mud bricks, by moonlight they suggested alabaster and marble. Incongruously at odds were the pagoda-type architecture of various public buildings and the temples.

North surveyed the blue, black and silver scene long enough to form an irrevocable impression, then turned and quite frankly studied his companion.

"As a boy I used often to read about legendary Artemis, the Silver," said he, leaning against the causeway's weather-worn parapet. "This is the first time I have ever seen her in the flesh."

Atossa whirled about, looked up at him. By the moonlight her lips appeared black rather than red as they curved into a spontaneous and for once genuine smile. "Artemis? Why do you call me so?" she demanded in her deep, slightly throaty voice. "Who was this Artemis? Perhaps I do not like being called by another woman's name."

"Perhaps you would prefer to be called by the Roman name of Diana?"

"But why?" She seemed puzzled, but far from displeased.

"Are you not a huntress?" he suggested pleasantly. "And so fair to behold that, like poor Actaeon, in the legend, many men

would permit themselves to be torn by hounds as a penalty for glimpsing your beauty."

Uncertain of his mood, Atossa stared an instant, then laughed. "Ah, yes, I remember now the story. You are quite safe, Colonel. My watchdogs are only two sepoys, and after all, you have never seen me, like Diana, in the *tout ensemble*. But I think you would enjoy seeing me so," she added mockingly. "I have not the bad figure—or so I have been told."

"I'll buy that," he laughed, "shooting breeches or no shooting breeches. I expect you'd send bullets rather than hounds after me if I were as indiscreet as Actaeon."

Her laughter, deep and rich, rose over the whisper of a coldly stimulating breeze. *"Quel miracle!"* she cried, tilting her face towards the star-strewn heavens. "Who would have imagined that in this savage state of Jonkhar I would encounter a gentleman at once amusing, commanding and clever, *enfin, un vrai seigneur."* Her wide shoulders lifted to a gentle sigh. "And to think that but for Sam Steel, I would have shot you."

"Through the heart, I hope?"

The dark lips curled enticingly. "At that range, it would have been difficult. Probably I would have shot you through the head."

Still staring over the moonlit vista of Jang and the mountain-rimmed Vale of Jang, North slowly shook his head.

"Damned unsporting. Besides, you wouldn't have hurt me."

"Not hurt you?"

"We Norths are a notably hardheaded family." He took her hand, noted the several slim bracelets upon it. "So you *do* possess female instincts?"

Her large eyes slowly raised themselves, their whites very noticeable amidst the pale bronze of her complexion.

"Why, *mon Colonel,* have you omitted to mention that *you* could easily have shot *me* anywhere you pleased—head, heart or pantaloons?"

His grin was as infectious as that of a small boy.

"You were a sitting dove, and in my league we make it a rule to 'take 'em on the rise.' "

She broke into a brief peal of deep-toned merriment. *"Nom de Dieu!* How long can it be since I have heard that so wonderful English jest?"

She did not remove her hand from his and abruptly he was conscious of her intent inspection.

"Tell me," she invited softly, "why do you pretend that that woman is your wife?"

"It's very simple, because she is my wife."

Several silvery tresses streamed free as Atossa threw back her head and expressed her patent disbelief; she laughed softly awhile. "And Sam Steel told me you are a most famous Intelligence Officer!"

"What makes you so sure she isn't my wife?"

"Somehow I do not think that so clever a woman would look so *distrait,* so dissatisfied and so unsure of herself if she really were married to you. But please do not worry, *mon ami,* Messieurs Gornoff and Steel will never hear of my suspicion."

A mischievous expression created unsuspected and definitely attractive little depressions beyond the corners of her mouth. "Tell me, is she much of a bedmate? Or just another of those take-all and give-nothing American girls?"

In the moonlight, North's color heightened. Damn! He must get out of this somehow. "Naik!" He beckoned one of the guards.

"Yes, Bahadur Colonel?"

"The Memsahib and I seek amusement. Is there a tavern in the city where the food and entertainment is good and where a pair of brave sepoys may amuse themselves at my expense?"

The sepoy hesitated, suspicion written sharp on his dark features.

"Has this unworthy soldier the Sirdar's word that there will be no attempt at treachery or escape?"

"You have my sacred pledge that we will not attempt to escape or otherwise bring trouble upon you and your comrade."

"Huzoor! Then it shall be as you say, Bahadur Colonel." The sepoy held out a hand. When North took it in both of his the

Jonkhari placed his other hand on top. No more binding an agreement could be reached in the length of the land.

"One moment, your Honor." The sepoy strode back to his companion and conferred briefly. Some small slight bickering ensued.

"They dispute which establishment will give them the larger *lagniappe,*" Atossa remarked, doing up a series of frogs securing her silvery fur coat. "You are indeed remarkable, *mon Colonel,* to have so completely won their confidence."

"While we are on the subject of confidence," North smiled, "shall we drop formality? Agreeable?"

"But of course, Hugh, *mon ami.*" She slipped her arm through his. "Let us enjoy this evening and forget that, someday soon, you may have to kill me, or I, you."

North bowed slightly. "If we must kill one another, I can think of much pleasanter ways than shooting. Can't you?"

"Yes, *mon ami.* If we are allowed the opportunity, let us explore the subject."

North presently was glad of their two guards. Jang apparently still was host to masses of wild and generally drunken tribesmen in town for the Kali ceremony.

Where the sepoys led, boots ringing arrogantly, ill-painted old houses leaned ever closer together and the streets grew darker and more malodorous. The minor whining of flutes and the discordant scrape of Chinese fiddles escaped from behind many a cedar grille and a sagging shutter. There escaped also smells of hot grease, roasting lamb and kid, of garlic, bay leaves and saffron.

Dogs sniffed and yapped at the heels of the passers-by. Drunken figures in furs, dark wool or soiled white felt lay slumped and mumbling in doorways. The eaves of houses oddly resembling Swiss chalets projected so far out as to eclipse the ever-brightening moonlight.

Again and again the middle of a thoroughfare was blocked by some shrine, leaving scant room for traffic. The weird blend of Chinese and Indian architectural influences became ever more intriguing.

Down the street they were following sounded yells, strident voices and a quick trampling of feet. Lacking any desire to become embroiled in a brawl, North was prompted to suggest a side street, but Atossa shook her gleaming head.

"No," she cried. "Down there are blades flashing. Nothing to me is more beautiful than a fight with swords."

By the wavering light of torches, two squat Lepcha mountaineers in ankle-long coats cursed, circled and leaped, then slashed at each other with straight and terribly sharp three-foot Chinese swords.

A raucous and well-inebriated audience kept shouting encouragements as the antagonists, sure-footed on their boot soles of felt, lunged, swung, and then sprang back.

Atossa watched in breathless delight. She remained silent at first, but then, carried away, she commenced to call out encouragements in some guttural dialect. Great eyes ablaze, she elbowed her way to the inner circle of spectators, who stared, grinned and finally made place for her.

North devoted his attention to his companion, noticed the quick heave of her breast, the tight clenching of her fists—a modern Valkyrie if ever he was to behold one.

One of the duelists took a cut on his cheek, a light wound, caused by the very end of his antagonist's round-ended blade, but it was enough to send rivulets of blood—they looked black by the moonlight—spurting down the fellow's neck.

Atossa screamed satisfaction at the Lepcha's swift recovery and powerful counter-slash. Her expression could not have been more primitive; at once sensuous and savage. One of the antagonists slipped, staggered off balance.

"Chardo!" yelled the crowd.

"Achcha!" screamed Atossa.

The wounded mountaineer's blade whirred silver-blue and, in a lightning cut, severed his enemy's sword arm at its elbow. Spraying gore from severed arteries, the luckless wretch screeched and stood, stupidly staring at his fallen sword and still quivering forearm.

"What a clumsy lout," Atossa sighed, turning on her heel.

"He deserves to lose." Again she took possession of North's arm. "And now, *mon ami,* where do we eat? *Je crève de faim.*"

Amazement and curiosity, tinged by faint disgust, described North's reactions. God above! The fact that a human being had just taken what in all probability would prove a mortal wound apparently affected her no more than the outcome of a badminton game. He was learning, but needed to find out much more, concerning the Baroness Atossa Frederika Matala.

After descending winding, lightless and refuse-strewn streets in which women's voices called softly from behind beautifully carved shutters, the larger sepoy giggled and indicated an aperture in one of the blinds.

"Look, Sirdar." Through it, suggestive of a pallid snake, a bare arm was slipping with sinuous ease. Despite the wretched light North could see that the exposed hand was slender, beautifully formed and adorned by a multitude of rings. Once the arm had appeared all the way to its shoulder, the fingers rippled several times, then the index pointed upwards and inwards. Meanwhile other pale arms appeared through adjacent shutters and voices sang urgent invitations in Chinese, Tibetan, Hindustani and Jonkhari.

Atossa, her previous exhilaration fading, viewed the writhing arms in contemptuous amusement and tugged at her companion's sleeve.

"*Mais non, mon preux chevalier,* my arm is prettier than any of theirs. You shall see and tell me so—if I choose."

Their guide presently led them into a very small square distinguished by a monument topped by a graceful bronze peacock and lined by several larger than usual whitewashed buildings.

"*Achcha!* Here is Tavern of the Green Star," said the sepoy, grinning. He slung his rifle and started forward, speaking over his shoulder. "In there fine food, music; also the loveliest of nautch girls, very clean, very washed, very pale skins."

"Sounds like a Chinatown tour barker in Times Square," North remarked. "Well, Atossa, let's see for ourselves."

A ponderous, unpainted wooden door, reinforced by heavy iron bands and supported upon massive hinges of wrought iron,

loomed beyond a tiny lamp. This the sepoy commenced to kick, all the while shouting, *"Kohai!"* At length a series of bolts *clack-clopped* and a shaft of yellow light sprang out to betray how very foul was the mire before the Green Star.

"Chardo. Let's go," North suggested.

"By all means," Atossa nodded, smoothed some stray locks into place. "Your pronunciation is poor, *mon ami.* It should be pronounced *'shardhu.'* "

A moment later the four new patrons found themselves in an arched passageway with the reek of cooking, spices and pungent, sickish-sweet incense strong in their nostrils.

"Jai ram," greeted the proprietor. Enormously fat, he was wearing a faded scarlet and gold skullcap, an immense, food-spotted shirt of canary yellow above blue linen *suruwals.* A broad sash of brilliant green did nothing to distract attention from the dimensions of a truly monumental belly.

Small black eyes peered from beneath hammock-like rolls of fat cascading down the tavernkeeper's cheeks. His expression, however, was both speculative and bland as he paused with little finger digging into a hairy ear from which dangled a turquoise and silver earring at least eight inches in length.

North started to address him in Hindustani, but Atossa broke into the local dialect with a fluency which set the publican to goggling. Not only did Atossa prove sure of her linguistic ability but also of what she desired by way of entertainment.

Washing plump, saddle-colored hands with imperceptible soap and invisible water, the innkeeper conducted his guests to a chamber of moderate proportions decorated by several decidedly moth-eaten Chinese wall rugs and a number of really handsome Kashmiri shawls. Screens of intricately carved ebony and mother-of-pearl guarded the entrance. Dingy, printed brown-and-white cotton hangings disguised the probable location of any windows that might have existed.

This very low-ceilinged apartment's only furniture consisted of a wide settee upholstered in jade-green leather and cluttered by a mound of bright cushions of all shapes and sizes. Four

hanging lamps of Nepalese brassware dangled over a low teakwood table set before the settee and created a subdued amber radiance. In the air, comfortably warm but stale-smelling, lingered a faint suggestion of musky incense.

The two guards, having saluted, began to unbutton their tunics as they betook themselves to a public eating place, apparently secure in a sublime faith that their charges would honor their word.

It proved to be a weird but delicious repast that Atossa ordered after a prolonged and unintelligible conference with the jelly-bellied proprietor. In rapid succession appeared *wonton,* a Chinese ravioli-like preparation, partridges stuffed with chestnuts, sautéed yak's liver, ragout of hare and finally pickled dormice; for vegetables the servants fetched in golden squash, bowls of lentils, a very pungent variety of spinach and onions cooked in four different fashions.

Fruits, nuts and peaches preserved in honey were brought in by smiling, sloe-eyed boys wearing clean white robes and *pagris;* they affected slender silver bracelets and their long hair was carefully braided, oiled and perfumed.

While the gaunt Intelligence Officer and his companion were consuming the last of their feast, the patron rapped discreetly before entering, then bowed low before North. The suggestion he offered set Atossa to laughing so hard that her *raksi* spilled from a battered silver goblet and she lay back against the cushions, her supple figure shaking in merriment.

Faintly nettled, North rinsed his mouth from a bowl of spiced water offered by one of the boys and listened to a rapid interchange between the long-legged figure at his side and that mountainous apparition hovering above the table. At length Atossa used the heel of her hand to brush moisture from her eyes.

"What's the gag?"

"Our friend, guide and philosopher, out of the goodness of his heart, suggests for you a decoction of rhinoceros-horn filings."

North tugged at his close-clipped black mustache, looked puzzled. "That's a new one."

"The decoction of rhino horn is very precious," Atossa explained, giggling like a schoolgirl. "Together with black salt such horn scrapings are deemed the most potent of all aphrodisiacs."

Hugh North flushed, squirmed sidewise on the settee, then burst out laughing. "Tell the patron he's even a bigger fool than he appears. Do I look as if I need priming?"

Atossa wrinkled a slightly snub nose at him over her *raksi.* "Who knows but that this fat boar of a patron is right? Alas, *mon ami,* you do not suggest the impulsive, would-be lover."

North muttered something about, "Don't kid yourself," poured more *raksi* and settled comfortably back on the wide settee. "What we need, my dear, are a few less boy waiters and a covey of nautch dancers."

"Can do." Atossa treated him to an amused regard. Through her cigarette smoke she murmured, "That for which my lord wishes he has but to mention."

"Easy on!" North grinned, plumping the cushions about him and settling back cross-legged. "We've got witnesses."

Gorged with sugared ginger, syrupy sweet coffee, and torpid after their monumental meal, the two watched a quartet of musicians shuffle in. They were terribly thin, in rags and very timid of manner—as became members of the lowly Damais tribe. Two carried oval drums, the third a lute and the fourth a flute.

Tucking her feet under her, Atossa curled up beside North on the settee. "Me, I adore the oriental music for all that most Europeans can't bear it. And you?"

"Chinese music to me still sounds like twenty cat fights. Can't say as I go hog-wild over it, but it no longer bothers me."

North settled himself comfortably back among the cushions and gazed about with renewed interest at vermilion-painted roof beams and the gleaming cedarwood paneling of this low-roofed chamber.

"One is comfortable here, no?" Atossa demanded. By a gen-

erous three buttons she eased her blue jaeger shirt at its throat, disclosing the top of an old-fashioned cotton chemise and the start of a notable *val.*

"Shades of Arabian Nights," North smiled when the musicians sank on their heels and commenced to play a *sorato*—an Indian fairy tale which had been old a thousand years before this night. The lute player, a youth of about nineteen, sang verse after verse, in a clear, soprano voice.

His lute tinkled and the flute wailed while the musicians' shadows mocked their motions against the hangings. In a warm golden glow created by the ceiling lamps Atossa seemed lovelier, more feminine, than North ever before had seen her. Her complexion now appeared positively tawny by contrast to her hair.

To North she seemed much younger and guileless because her habitual wary expression had vanished—thanks perhaps to several generous measures of *raksi.*

Yes, Atossa Matala presented a pulse-quickening picture as she lay sprawled indolently on the settee with great eyes half closed and one foot swaying in time with the music. Because of the clumsy field oxfords she was wearing, the effect was a trifle grotesque.

Just before the dancers made their appearance—they were preluded by the tinkle of tiny bells fixed to their wrists and ankles—North did a little fast thinking, then turned to Atossa and murmured a tender Chinese couplet acquired, poll-parrot fashion, years earlier in Hong Kong.

Without raising heavily fringed eyelids or evincing the least surprise, the Estonian replied in kind, but employed Mandarin Chinese rather than the Manchurian dialect. Um. So Atossa spoke Chinese? Next question. Could she also read that language? Comparatively few foreigners could read, by comparison to those who spoke. Um. He reckoned he'd better undertake further research before initiating a move upon which hinged the fate of his whole assignment.

The three dancers proved Indian rather than Tibetan, and might have been fourteen years of age. However, they proved

to be passably graceful—just about what one might find in some provincial capital of Bengal. Their eyes had been rendered enormous by a reckless use of kohl, rouge flamed on their cheeks and the crimson caste marks painted on their chins and foreheads identified them as Dotis, members of a courtesan tribe.

All in all, they suggested overgrown puppets—an impression further enhanced by henna-painted soles, palms and fingertips. Each wore a turquoise or ruby in her nostril and lavish quantities of cheap jewelry. Little brass bells attached to their wrists and ankles jingled rhythmically to their slow and unashamedly erotic posturings.

Through a series of dances they disrobed until all that remained to cover their nudity was their jewelry and brief kilts of some shimmering gold material, but their faces might have been masks for all the expression registered upon them.

The only dance which would have aroused the interest of an Occidental night-club habitué was one in which the girls fastened little mirrors to their big toes and tiny cymbals to thumb and forefinger, then writhed in quickened tempo to a weird tune that proved subtly provocative.

"Shades of Little Egypt," North commented into the depths of his wine cup. "What say? Shall we pay them off?"

"A good idea," she agreed lazily, "and let's send the musicians to play behind those screens. I grow jealous over that flutist, he stares so tenderly upon you."

23. The Ideographs

The music, when played beyond the ebony screens, sounded far less strident and dissonant than before, and whatever incense the dancers had sprinkled into a big brass censer proved a distinct improvement on the innkeeper's offering.

North lay indolent, comfortably sprawled on the wide settee studying Atossa's remarkably handsome head. Atossa quite frankly was surveying him over her cigarette, just as if she never before had seen him.

She observed presently, "You are a most surprising man. I did not know that you spoke Chinese."

"Cross off that element of surprise. I don't speak Chinese except enough to get from one bar to the next, or to a railroad station." He smiled. "I hate to tell you how much I wish I did."

"So? And why?"

He patted her smooth, light brown hand, fervently hoped that the abundance of food and *raksi* might have blunted this lovely antagonist's perceptions. Of course that wasn't likely; those cold brains in the Kremlin never would have sent an undependable so far, or on so delicate a mission.

"And why would you like to understand Chinese?" she persisted, pulling out the now-familiar cheroot case.

"In order to read the poems of Lao-tse in the original," he smiled. "Tell me, *chérie,* just how many languages and dialects do you speak?"

She exhaled a precise smoke ring, slumped lower upon the glowing mound of cushions, and perhaps unconsciously emphasized certain fascinating contours of her breast.

"Eighteen, and I do not number sub-dialects. Yes, I am sure

I speak at least so many." She added in genuine modesty, "I have what is known as the genius for language. Of course many primitive languages are so easy to learn. For example, most Central Asian tongues have only limited vocabularies and are greatly similar."

She shrugged a little, poked a silver curl back from her smooth, beige-tinted forehead. "Please, *mon ami,* you are not to imagine that Atossa is clever, for she is not. It is her father, the great explorer, who was clever."

It was then that Hugh North yearned more passionately than ever for access to certain voluminous notes in the possession of the Central Intelligence Agency. "Please tell me as much about your father as you care to."

Deliberately, Atossa poured still another china cup of *raksi* and directed a dazzling smile at him.

"Gladly. Papa had a very great soul and was the greatest man I will ever know. Kings, premiers, artists, and even the wildest of savages, all understood and loved him. He must have inherited a Viking's love for travel and adventure."

Her freshly tinted lips parted in a fugitive smile. "After all, Estonia is not distant from Scandinavia, no?" Negligently, Atossa flicked the ash from her cheroot. "When the Czar, Nicholas II, heard of Papa's explorations he expressed the desire to learn more concerning certain approaches, hitherto unconsidered, into India. The Imperial War Office made to him large sums available, but Papa still was debating acceptance when Mamma was killed in a sleighing accident—that was in 1913—only a few months after I was born."

North roused up on one elbow. "You were born in 1913!"

She smiled uncertainly. "Do I not look my age?"

"Not by fifteen years!" he cried.

"Nonetheless that is the fact. *Merci.* For some years I hardly ever saw my father," Atossa resumed. "Always it seemed to me that our gloomy old château at Matala was without light until Papa would return, bringing me the most beautiful gifts from far away.

"I was fifteen when first he took me along on an expedition

into Mongolia. He was astonished how readily I learned to converse with all manner of guides and tribesmen. Luckily, riding and shooting also came naturally."

The supple, blue-shirted figure shifted and relaxed, considerably closer to North. *"Mon ami,* so far you have not yet seen what I can do with a rifle. That bharal? *Pouf!* It was an easy shot."

"When you make that demonstration I'd just as soon you used somebody else as a target."

"Please do not be so fearful of me," she begged. "I like you. I think I like you very much indeed. You can have no idea how pleased I was when you invited me to dine tonight."

"De nada. You see, I——" He got no further, for suddenly she laughed softly and, slipping a hand around his neck, pulled down his dark head and raised her mouth to meet his.

Not in many a blue moon had Hugh North experienced so memorable a caress; her lips at once were so tender—and avid.

"Voilà!" she sighed, then surrendered to a brief burst of breathless merriment.

"What's so damn' funny?" he inquired, straightening.

"I was thinking of how angry would be *le bon Général* Steel, if he could have been watching." Suddenly she broke off, as if recalling something which had escaped her memory. "Tell me, *mon cher,* what is your true opinion about the so sad death of *Monsieur le Docteur* Keith?"

To give himself time, North rolled over onto his side and pulled out a pipe. "Why, I suppose the inquest gave a sound verdict; being in a very depressed frame of mind, the poor fellow committed suicide."

Atossa studied her companion, nibbling softly on her underlip. Her faintly slanting eyes momentarily narrowed. "I wish I could be sure that you are not lying. Because, of course, Dr. Keith did not kill himself. I know."

"You say you *know?"* he queried over the tinkling music. "How?"

"I could not sleep and was awake, and when I heard stealthy footsteps along the gallery I opened my door only a little and

looked out. Two men in dark cloaks were standing before the door of Docteur Keith."

"Did they have a key?"

"I do not think so. They talked in low voices and went in almost at once."

"They spoke in what language?" came North's instant query. "That is most important."

"I could not hear well enough to be sure," Atossa replied, leaving North to furiously wonder whether she were speaking the truth.

"Thinking perhaps to hear better, I ran to my window and so saw them push Docteur Keith out."

"Was he struggling?"

"No." The great blue eyes rounded themselves. "But he was not like an unconscious person."

"Did he make any outcry?"

"None that I heard. Have you an idea who might have sent those assassins?"

"No more than you. Why didn't you mention this at the inquest?"

"There were reasons," said she, dropping her gaze.

"Have you spoken to Leonid Gornoff of this?"

A note of curious restraint entered Atossa's manner. "He does not confide in me; why should I confide in him?"

"Yes, why?" North's smile was entirely genuine. So? Perhaps unsuspected vistas were about to open up amid this menacing tangle of affairs? That silence is a most effective questioner North had discovered long since, so he merely fished out his tobacco pouch and commenced to load the pipe.

"Bah! That Gornoff!" Disgust sketched harsh lines about Atossa's mouth, not quite so sharply outlined now because of the *raksi* and smudged lipstick. "A pig from the petty bourgeoisie for all that he holds so high a place in the MVD!"

That this strange young woman undoubtedly possessed tigerish qualities North had known ever since she had spat at him in the Gorge, but the emotion at present freezing her features described hatred beyond adequate expression.

"What a fate!" she snapped, flinging away the cheroot's butt, "condemned to a team with a lowborn pig of a commissar and a lascivious, murdering brute of a *condottiere!* Imagine it! They have been my only companions during four months!"

"Funny, I'd always thought of Steel as a pretty rough customer but not such a bad fellow under it all," North objected smoothly. There was no doubt now that, at long last, those Homeric drafts of *raksi* were having more effect—but not much.

"Then you do not know him!" burst out the Estonian. "He is unnecessarily cruel—like an officer of the old Gestapo or the commandant of a Siberian slave camp." Great eyes aglow in the rich lamplight, she turned, breasts perfectly outlined and rising rapidly under the thin chemise exposed by her half-unbuttoned shirt.

"While crossing the plateau of Khark we fought a heavy skirmish with some tribesmen. Steel's men captured a few of the poor, stupid brutes. Do you know what your 'not bad fellow' did? With his own pistol he shot each man first in the kneecap and then in the stomach, so that they screamed and screamed for death."

North's powerful jaw stiffened. "Was he trying to get information?"

Atossa shrugged. "They had nothing to tell. They were just stupid bandits, but the strongest of them was a full day dying. The man is a monster, a true devotee to Sadism!"

Studiously casual, North queried, "But why should Steel have been detailed to accompany you?"

"Because, after all, he is a most competent officer." Atossa sighed. "I was astonished to learn that *le Général's* knowledge of the country, and especially of the Tibetan tribes, is profound. Also," she stole a quick sidewise glance at North's long, lean figure comfortably slumped among the cushions, "he has been selected to discover the most practical military route to——"

She broke off and colored slightly. "But he does not know that I know about that! *Mon Dieu!* Here am I chattering away

like a parakeet and so much I want to learn about you, *mon cher.*" Her fingers crept up to play with unruly black locks that kept falling over his forehead. "You are, of course, an Intelligence Officer?"

"I was."

"Was? Is that why you were ordered to come up with the late-lamented Dr. Keith?" Her laughter rippled loud enough to drown out the music still playing softly outside. "You are sure it was not to sleep again with your devoted wife? I have been told that Americans are such devoted husbands. What will you tell Madame North, by the bye, when we return?"

"Stock answer Number One," he grinned. "I've been sitting up with a sick friend. Now please look sick, so as not to make a complete liar out of me."

No sooner had he spoken than Atossa gave a strangled gasp and collapsed suddenly, half on and half off the sofa. Her eyes rolled horribly, then fixed themselves between half-closed lids. Then her mouth sagged slowly open until saliva escaped in a realistic counterfeit of a newly dead person.

He arose to his feet. How very long her body looked in those riding breeches and coarse stockings! "You do appear sick—almost beyond hope."

He picked up her limp wrist and tested her pulse. "Mmmm. I must prescribe something to stimulate the heart action." Bending swiftly, he kissed her full on her loose, half-parted lips. Instantly her arms flew up to encircle his shoulders.

"Ah, *mon cœur.* That was worth dying for," she breathed. "Was I not convincing? No, Hugh, please lie still a little beside me and let us pretend we have just met in London or Stockholm or New York. Let us just become simply Atossa and Hugh—not enemies engaged in fighting a terrible secret war."

Tirelessly, the music played on and on and a pattern of subtle noises from the depths of the tavern became audible because of the near-perfect silence in the private salon. The lamps commenced to burn so low that their flames created ruby lights through bowls of crimson glass.

For Hugh North the ensuing moments proved iridescent,

rich and lovely beyond analysis. It was easy enough, he found, to lower mental venetian blinds and so temporarily escape that tension under which he had been existing for many weeks.

The sweet warmth of Atossa's body, the incense—stale though it was—the music and the *raksi* all blended into an exquisite pattern. Her ardor he found fundamentally avid rather than tender, demanding rather than yielding.

"My dear," North murmured after a while, "you must have been unhappy a very long while. Is it because you are working for that malformed brute named Gornoff?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you do it?"

She hesitated a long moment while refastening some buttons. "Because, perhaps like *le bon Général* Steel, I have become one who lives from day to day and hour to hour—*enfin,* a creature lacking a fixed purpose in life."

He was careful not to look at her. "I wonder if you really have lost interest in permanent, worth-while values?"

"I have no interest except in having enough to eat, shooting and traveling. I am too much coward to suicide," came her reply in an odd, off-key tone. "After what was done to me in 1939 during the recapture of Estonia, nothing matters."

Her eyes, again a few inches removed from his, rolled up to regard the dull red roof beams. "To me it does not matter if Atossa dies during the next half hour, the next day or the next year. I simply live as life directs."

"You mean you honestly don't care for whom you work?"

"Not in the least, so long as I remain free to travel in strange far places."

"Money?"

"Pouf! I ask only enough to buy fine firearms and the best of equipment."

He chose his next words with care and so was annoyed because a snarling dog fight broke out beneath one of the well-concealed windows.

"Tell me, *ma chère,* have you truly lost all desire to wear beautiful clothes again? The right of moving freely where you

wish and when? Surely you can't enjoy forever peering over your shoulder, speaking guardedly, fearing every dawn may find the secret police hammering at your door?"

She stirred restlessly, then sat up and commenced mechanically to button her blue woolen shirt. "So many years have passed since such things were, I have forgotten what they can mean."

At that moment North determined to risk a supreme, a possibly fatal and catastrophic gamble. "I wish you'd try to remember those values I've just mentioned."

"Why?"

"Perhaps to help save many millions of souls from suffering the same kind of spiritual death and damnation you have experienced."

Atossa's squarish mouth quivered and she stared intently into his level, gray-blue eyes. "I—I do not know. Perhaps I—I do not dare." She hesitated, eyes narrowing themselves. "There is something I can do to advance the success of your mission?"

He merely nodded and, as he pulled out his tobacco pouch, thought, "Well, here it goes; neck or nothing!"

Extracting one of the paper rolls discovered in Dirty Dick's prayer wheel, he offered it and noticed, with some self-contempt, that his fingers were trembling the least bit. How odd to consider what might result from his disclosure of this tiny scroll of India paper: war or peace, the fate of all Southern and Eastern Asia, and the future of its peoples.

Head cocked to one side, Atossa narrowly considered the tiny cylinder and the thread of yellow silk securing it.

"I wonder whether the Baron Matala would have hesitated over such a question?"

Atossa raised stricken eyes, then that harsh, mechanical smile of hers reappeared as, deftly, she jerked undone the silk.

She arose and held the two-foot strip of paper up to the wavering flame of a lamp. Much like a heavy artilleryman anticipating the discharge of his piece, North watched the Estonian's eyes travel up and down, following that delicate pattern of ideo-

graphs. She could read Chinese, all right! Her lips moved ever so slightly, then her eyes widened.

"Where did you find this, *mon ami?*"

"That I will tell you," the Intelligence Officer promised, "once you have faithfully and truthfully translated that Chinese to me."

"To me the meaning of this is not clear at all," she announced. "What is written here is a description of some *trang* or path, together with many measurements and notations of elevations and angles. Beyond a doubt this is the work of a military engineer.

" 'Kathoi'? Now where have I heard that name?" She was not asking a question, merely thinking aloud. "But yes," she burst out. "Kathoi is a village on one of the approaches to the Kirong-la! One wonders why so much trouble would be taken? There are so many passes into India."

"Evidently Atossa isn't in on the high-level planning," North silently assured himself. "Or else she's putting on a damned convincing act. Um-m. If she isn't, she's along with Steel and Gornoff solely on account of her knowledge of local languages —and her marksmanship."

"I have answered you," she reminded. "Now tell me how you came by this."

"It was found on a man masquerading as a pilgrim. He died on the Kirong Pass."

"You killed him?" The query was entirely matter-of-fact.

"No. He killed himself, and that's the truth. Is there anything to indicate his name? His mission?"

She shook her silvery head. "There are other strips like this one?"

"A few," he admitted. "Tell me—is it your opinion that what I have here is part of a survey such as a military engineer might run?"

"It would seem so." She arose, reached for her clouded leopard jacket. "With this I am not concerned. I know only that our expedition must quit Jonkhar within a very few days. Other-

wise we shall have to remain here until spring. Shall you leave, too?"

Carefully, he replaced the scroll in his pouch. "At the first possible moment, *chérie*. If we are allowed to leave. Dr. Keith was only the first of us to die."

Her newly regained veneer cracked and she flung herself suddenly into his arms. "You must leave, *mon ami!* Beware of this Sam Steel. For some reason I do not understand, he hates you, and, what is worse, he envies your abilities. To prevail over you here in Jonkhar has become almost a mania with him."

24. Professor Malchek's Shells

Although Hugh North had never been married, the first words he heard on awakening would be familiar to husbands since the dawn of time. "When did you come in last night?"

Jenny was brushing her teeth in foaming thoroughness. She looked a little like a mad dog, North thought.

"Late enough. Playing pool with the boys at the corner beer parlor."

"Humm. What kind of boys wear lipstick?"

North groaned, buried an aching head among pillows smelling of sandalwood. "God, oh, God!"

"What happened? Probably, as Dwight Fiske used to say, 'it's none of my damned business.' Of course, it really isn't my business. I know that." Present in her tone was a trace of wistfulness he found to be appealing.

North took up a little mallet and struck their bedside gong.

"As a once-married woman, Jenny," he sighed, "you should

be aware that coroners thrive on ladies who ask leading questions before breakfast."

"Sorry," she murmured, "but I was awfully worried over you." Surprisingly, her eyes commenced to fill with tears. "Oh-h, Hugh, I know I'm a great goose, but when it got to be one o'clock, and you weren't here, I—I—oh, dear, I remembered what happened to poor Arunah and imagined all kinds of horrible things."

Incredulous, he blinked at her. "Do you mean to say that you actually lost sleep over *me?*"

Face buried between her palms, Jenny nodded. "After Dr. Keith's death, is it so strange? No, Hugh, when you—er—came in I was still wide awake. I've never had a baby but I guess I was feeling something like a mother whose child has run away from home and then comes back. She's angry and—unbearably relieved."

More or less in silence they breakfasted together. It was not until he commenced to shave that North commenced to speak in rapid Spanish.

"I found out something I needed to know; among other things, that our lovely Baroness is only Gornoff's hired hand, along with my old pal Steel. Somehow, I don't think she likes her boss and the crowd he works for worth a bent kopek."

"I suppose she wrung your heart with an account of how her husband was killed the day after their marriage?"

"What! No, she didn't."

A taut smile curved Jenny's lips as she commenced to select garments for the day. "Really? Perhaps she wanted to try the 'You're the first' approach?"

"Oh, no she didn't. Not by a jugful. In fact—well, never mind."

"But I *do* mind, damn you," Jenny pursued stonily. "Have you decided to trust her?"

"Either Atossa's one of the most finished actresses I've ever come across or she's really anxious to break away from Gornoff and Sam Steel." Thoughtfully, he fingered his dark, un-

shaven chin, then looked up abruptly. "I think I will trust her. As things stand, I guess I've no choice."

In the act of stepping into a sturdy, uninspired pair of cotton shorts which North recently had christened her "iron pants," Jenny hesitated. "What do you mean, 'as things stand'?"

"I decided to show her one of several documents Delahanty and I took off of that phony pilgrim in the lower Kirong Pass."

"Good God! Hugh, you didn't!" Jenny whirled, bright blue eyes hot with indignation. "How could you have been so gullible? Do you mean to tell me that you've let that—that—snow leopard get around you like a picket fence?"

Dark red welled into Hugh North's high-cheekboned features.

"At the risk of sounding like a cad, my dear, I might state that I am not devoid of experience with charming and clever representatives of your ever-mystifying sex." He reached out and poured himself a brass cup of water. "First and last I've known several dames who could give Sister Atossa a long lead and still win."

"I still say you're nuts. Me, I wouldn't trust that platinum-topped bitch with a single red-hot penny," Jenny declared with such conviction that doubts commenced to stir deep in his being.

"However," said she, bending to adjust her brassière, "if my bright, international husband really believes she's the McCoy, I'll play along until we get out of this gilded bear trap." She noticed that he had swung out of bed and was pulling on a seedy trench coat which doubled as a wrapper. "Now what are you up to?"

"Quiet," he reminded. "Come over here to the window and screen me while I take a look at some very odd cartridges I found in a box marked with Malchek's name. If there's anybody at the spy hole, I don't want them to see."

Ignoring their vista of the Vale, of pine-darkened hills and of majestically soaring mountains, North used the pick on his jackknife to pry the wad from one of those suspiciously light

cartridges. Sure enough, where bird shot should have reposed he found a tight roll of tracing paper.

"*Gruss Gott!* This one's written in German," he muttered, then scanned it with swift care.

"What is it about?" Jenny demanded while pretending to inspect one of North's faded khaki shirts.

"Nothing important, oh, no!" he murmured. "It's only a very detailed engineering description of the route you followed up from the Valley of Katmandu. It lists the fords and bridges; the kinds of timber available; the altitudes at various critical points along various tracks and trails, and even suggests the best sites for emplacing of anti-aircraft batteries."

A perplexed "V" appeared between Jenny's light brown, wing-wide brows. "But he was a mammalogist, a fine one, with a world-great reputation."

"Of course. However, Carl Anton Malchek was also a well-trained military engineer." He resealed the shotgun shell. "—If this means a damned thing."

Lips compressed, she stared out at the breath-taking scenery for quite a while. At length she sighed, faced him. Gravely she said, "I guess we were taken in. Well, what are you going to do?"

"Do? Don't know yet. Got to think. This stuff is dynamite—could blow us all to hell, or save us. All depends how it's used," North replied intently, but in low tones. "Here we have indisputable proof that Moscow has sent several, not one, secret agents into Jonkhar, all bent on military espionage and strategic reconnaissance—a most flagrant contravention of international law."

"Several?" Jenny's brows climbed once more. "Are you implying that Malchek was Gornoff's man?"

While pretending affection by drawing her close, he whispered, "What else is there to think? Else why would Malchek somehow communicate with Steel's party and instruct him to nail Major Opdyck? And if it hadn't been for Sam's ambition to prove that he *can* outsmart yours truly, why, I'd be just as dead as Charlie Opdyck this minute."

Within the circle of his arms Jenny quivered a little, murmured, "I'll bet that deformed swine Gornoff would be burnt up if he knew Steel ordered Atossa to pass up a sure chance of murdering you.

"Do you think that false pilgrim was another of Gornoff's boys?"

"I'm not so sure—maybe so, maybe not. Anyway, I've learned that Atossa doesn't enjoy Gornoff's confidence, which is a damned good thing."

"Says you," was Jenny's bitter comment. "How long is it going to take for Gornoff to add two and two, once your girl friend files her report?"

"She won't file one," North snapped, wishing that he felt really convinced on the matter.

A swift weighing revealed that of the remaining cartridges four more were packed with data of the most incriminating variety, such as estimates of which tribes were most likely to accept Soviet missions; a description of routes; the position of various frontier forts; the elevation of possible supply-line routes.

"There's one thing I can't dope out for the life of me," Jenny said in French while laying away a voluminous, green silk gauze nightdress. "If Pal Leonid and his team are Soviet agents, where do those Charlie boys, Han and Wong, and the lamas Tashi and Sakya fit into the frame? Thought they're playing on the Red side, too."

"So they are," North explained over the monotonous tinkle of their little fountain. "I've been doing a deal of pondering on that score. It's a cinch Br'er Gornoff wasn't a bit happy on finding our frozen-faced Red Chinese friends already on deck and riding an inside track with the C-in-C.

"From what I've observed, the arrival of these Charlie boys, as you call 'em, is an unexpected element and their barging in like this has upset Comrade Gornoff's calculations, which, heretofore, had been complicated only by us.

"It's my guess," continued the dark-haired Intelligence Officer, carefully replacing the shotgun shells in his shooting

jacket, "that Mao Tse-tung's Red Chinese just might figure on beating Joe Stalin's boys to the draw, and so gobble India before the Muscovite team can get rolling.

"Hand me that sweater, will you, my pet?" When she came to his side he spoke quietly, rapidly. "Unless I've completely missed my guess, Gornoff and Co. are taking orders direct from Comrade Malinkoff in the Kremlin while the Chinese operate under guidance from that *hombre* with the fascinating name of Fratkin Schmul. He in turn takes *his* orders from Mao himself in Peking. All of which presents a very pretty picture. Doesn't it?"

"Call it a picture puzzle, Hugh." Jenny neatly folded away the gray turtle-neck sweater. "What's next?"

"I must, I simply must, get another interview with the Dewan, but thus far it hasn't been possible," he assured her, his cheekbones more prominent than usual. "Subadar Thopa has warned me that the C-in-C is watching him like a hawk, and has posted hand-picked guards at every important point.

"Of course, if the Dewan were to demand my presence, a meeting couldn't be prevented except by force, and I don't judge General Bijai Lakshi is ready to use that just yet."

He slipped an arm about her and was surprised that for once her body failed to stiffen and start to pull free. "Now, my lovely little tax exemption, it's important that you call on Dil Kusha and make her understand how damned essential it is that the Dewan and I have a little heart-to-heart. *Entiende?*"

She lifted her face and, despite its serious expression, there was a touch of deviltry about her mouth. "Okay, my big, bronzed breadwinner. Bet you I get to see the Rani within an hour."

He chucked her under the chin, kissed her lips lightly, and said, "It will simplify matters a great deal if you win your bet."

25. A Banquet for the Hunters

By ten of the evening the state dining hall of His Highness, Matbar Nana Jang might have doubled as a motion-picture set depicting a hunting banquet in the days of Akbar the Great, of Timurlane, or of Shah Bahram, that celebrated hunter of wild beasts.

The guests, dark-faced captains, chieftains and *mukhiyas* representing almost every tribe in Jonkhar were on hand. Occupying leopard- and tiger-skin covered hassocks, they helped themselves with their fingers from steaming salvers and bowls passed by servants wearing spotless white *pagris, suruwals* and *chambandis*. Upon a series of low settees squatted towering Tibetan types, leather-faced Kachar headmen, eagle-eyed Gurungs, and Sunwars and Limbus as lean and hungry-looking as wolves.

The company suggested what they were—petty rulers of a mountain land largely unchanged since the Middle Ages. For the most part their gala costumes looked poor, stained and threadbare. Despite the glow of many braziers not a few of the visitors had disdained to put aside fur capes and coats, with the result that soon the atmosphere resembled that of the "large animal" house at a zoo.

Because of caste restrictions, the Hindus ate apart and only certain selected foods. Among them North glimpsed Thopa, squatted on his heels and dining with various compatriots. Politely, he licked his fingers before reaching for another partridge from a pile before him. Delicately browned, they formed a ring imprisoning a mound of saffron rice.

The Sri Rajah, taller by half a head than his half-brother Prince Timrud, who stalked along beside him, the Dewan and General Bijai Lakshi, all were present. Outwardly affable these powerful personages circulated among the guests, joining in on a jest here, draining a horn there.

The ruler of Jonkhar and his brother indeed presented a memorable picture in tight, long-skirted coats of iridescent green silk shot with gold, and scarlet *suruwals*.

Huge gems kindled multicolored fires in their turbans, about their necks, waists and on their fingers, while lustrous, tear-shaped pearls dangled from their small, flat ears. Each of the pair wore dress scimitars lavishly studded by emeralds, rubies and diamonds. Matbar's neatly parted beard fairly glistened with perfumed oil, and had been combed to flare sharply out from his jaws. Royal caste marks shone a brilliant vermilion against his dark brown skin.

Further to regale the guests were singers and tellers of tales, men who recited the great deeds performed by Matbar in the hunting field. Also there were sword dancers, savage, ill-smelling fellows from the western part of the State. Presently, to a wild booming of gongs, appeared a troupe of devil dancers from Tibet. They wore glittering robes and horrific or beautifully grotesque masks, and capered about clashing cymbals and directing terrifying threats of the Winter Gods lest they spoil the great game drive.

Towards the end of the banquet a quartet of wrestlers appeared. Huge and stupid-looking, they wrestled in the Chinese fashion by attempting each to lift the other from the floor by means of belts equipped with handholds. Bets flew and the horns of *jani*—a powerful native ale—were drained with increased rapidity.

Even the Sri Rajah's state dining hall was not large enough comfortably to accommodate so many guests, and the air, rank with tobacco, sweat and spiced foods, grew stifling. Long since, the back of Colonel Hugh North's shirt had become stuck by perspiration to his shoulder blades and ribs.

Although he twice signaled Thopa to approach, that worthy

responded only by an imperceptible shake of his bullet-shaped head and moved off among the throng.

He located Delahanty at last, noted his flushed features and slightly unsteady movements. "For God's sake," North advised, "go easy on this local panther milk. I tried *raksi* last night and believe me, it can melt a stone bull."

"Okay, Boss," grinned the outfitter, mopping streaming, freckle-splotched features. "Don't you worry none. I know just how much I can hold."

"Remember what happened to Keith," warned the Intelligence Officer in an undertone. "Somebody might be planning to provoke you into a fight and stab you. This is an A-1 chance."

"Sure, sure, Boss. I'll be careful——"

Ignoring North's strict injunctions that he, Delahanty and Thopa should remain close together, the ex-flier went swaggering over to where Colonel Han and Major Wong, very stiff in neat, greenish khaki uniforms, sat smoking thick, bamboo-stemmed pipes and laughing in high falsetto tones over some tale spun by a hunchbacked jester.

"Hi, Charlie!" North overheard Delahanty bellowing. "No tickee, no shirtee! How's every little thing in the laundry business?"

"Oh, my God!" groaned North and got ready to intervene, but to his surprise Wong only grinned and indicated an empty seat. The ex-flier slapped Colonel Han on the back and commenced to converse in pidgin English.

The belated arrival of some guests distracted North's attention. They proved to be Lepchas, short, shaggy, and very bowlegged-looking in black yak's-hair kilts and round hats made of civet skins. Silver earrings flashed when the little men advanced to bow low before their ruler.

By now the strident, sibilant babble of voices had grown deafening, reverberating among the smoke-mellowed skulls and antlers of sambur, ibex, jharal, bharal and nahoor showing dimly through the ever-increasing smoke. Already two fights had broken out, to be as swiftly quelled by green-uniformed

princely guards posted at close intervals all about the banquet hall. Fortunately, all guests on arrival had been required to leave weapons behind, so only empty sheaths, scabbards and holsters were in evidence.

Platters of desserts now arrived, among them sugared rose leaves, apricots preserved in wild bees' honey, crystallized ginger and countless sweetmeats. Finally the servants fetched in small bowls of steaming, clove-scented water with which the guests rinsed out their mouths, then spat the water into ewers held ready for that purpose.

"God damn it to hell! I didn't desert!" The furious shout sent darts of apprehension winging through North's consciousness and he jumped up just in time to see Delahanty, purple-faced, slap Major Wong's face. The blow landed with a *crack!* like that of a small pistol exploding and tipped Wong's head 'way over. All the same, the Chinese grappled and, employing judo, sent Delahanty crashing to the floor before a pair of guards who immediately pounced upon the struggling American.

"You yellow sonofabitch!" Delahanty screeched. "I'll fix yer mucking clock!" Hair over eyes, shirt ripped, the ex-flier struggled furiously, but so many guards closed in that he was hauled out, shrieking threats and obscenities.

"Good God!" silently groaned the Intelligence Officer. "This on top of everything else."

Then a dreadful realization presented itself that Delahanty had just afforded the enemy precisely the opportunity they needed further to deplete Keith's party. How easy it would be to report that the prisoner had assaulted a guard, who had been forced to shoot or stab in self-defense. In that event there wasn't a thing he could do to prevent Delahanty's murder, North was deciding, when all at once he found himself face to face with the Dewan.

"*Huzoor,* Bahadur Colonel," greeted the chamberlain. "I trust you find amusement here?"

"Who could not? The Sri Rajah has outdone himself." Then,

in an undertone, North added, "Your Excellency, I *must* have a private audience at the first possible instant."

Vikram Girvan's plump features lost their bland smile, and from the corner of his eye North watched Prince Timrud's tall, crimson-turbaned figure move toward them.

Hurriedly the Dewan muttered, "Until after the hunt what you ask is impossible. Through your wife I will send word when a proper moment is at hand." In a louder voice he said, "There is much betting, Bahadur Colonel, over whether you and the silver-haired Memsahib can outshoot Prince Timrud and His Highness. They are, of course, the finest shots of Jonkhar."

"I am so sure of it that I wouldn't think of competing with your master and his brother."

North hoped never to behold crueler, more predatory eyes than those of His Highness, Prince Timrud Jagai Jang. At the moment they looked slightly bloodshot, but glittered, glassy-black, like those of some deadly reptile.

"We have heard much concerning the marksmanship of our guests," said he. "I personally shall see to it that you and the Memsahib Matala are assigned posts which will permit the fullest exercise of your skill."

"Your Highness is the substance and shadow of generosity," North returned smoothly. "I should prefer, however, to witness your own skill."

"No. Wagers, great wagers, have been placed. You will shoot. It is most unfortunate," Prince Timrud continued, "that your fellow countryman, General Steel, probably will be unable to participate because of his sick eyes."

The line of North's jaw hardened but he spoke evenly. "Your Highness, General Steel ceased to be an American citizen many years ago. I'd be pleased if you'll remember that. I have no idea what nationality he claims at the moment, but I agree it's a pity his eyesight is impaired. He used to be a very excellent rifle and machine-gun shot when he was campaigning for Chiang against the Reds during the late forties."

"*Against* the Reds!" Timrud ejaculated, his jet eyes narrowed. "You are sure, Bahadur Colonel?"

"Positive. During thirty years General Steel always has worked for the boss who could pay him most. He's fought in Central and South America, in the Near East and all over China and Mongolia. I thought you knew his story."

Prince Timrud directed a glance at that settee upon which Sam Steel lay sprawled with brutal, sandy-hued head tilted back in the act of gulping from a silver goblet. Although well along in his middle fifties, the soldier-of-fortune appeared quite as savage, powerful and tough as any other in this wild assemblage.

Quite abruptly, the Prince excused himself and mingled with the guests. North saw why.

The Sri Rajah was drawing near, towering over the two bodyguards at his elbows. He inclined his glittering cloth-of-gold turbaned head in unexpectedly friendly fashion and gravely inquired whether the Bahadur Colonel and his mem-sahib were comfortable.

North said "yes," then seized the opportunity to deplore Delahanty's recent behavior—an apology which was scarcely necessary since liquor-heated fights were breaking out all over the banquet hall.

"Our guests will ride forth tomorrow afternoon and make camp on the hunting ground," the Sri Rajah announced. "If, because of the wagering, you wish to practice in the morning, an orderly will conduct you to my guards' rifle range. I believe you will find many other guests at practice there."

"Thank you. I haven't fired a shot in some days."

Prince Timrud reappeared, bowed slightly. "Most Princely Brother, I, personally, shall see that the Bahadur Colonel and his companions have the opportunity of practicing by themselves."

26. Grand Battue

Much to Hugh North's surprise and puzzlement, Prince Timrud proved to be as good as his word. Moreover, as a further mystifying step, all of the Keith party's ammunition unobtrusively had reappeared in their quarters. The morning was raw and low clouds scudded by, driven before a biting, northerly wind. Small snowstorms could be seen raging about even the lower mountaintops. Of their giant brothers nothing was to be seen at all.

A havildar conducted North and Delahanty, the latter red-eyed and morosely apologetic, to a crude rifle range situated on the Citadel's northern battlements. Here, butts composed of small bales of low-grade yak's wool stood ranged with crude targets already secured to them. The havildar designated a butt to each American.

Delahanty promptly sprawled out upon a frayed reed mat and adjusted his sling strap. After his Springfield had cracked, it became evident that whatever grief his hangover might be costing him, it certainly had not interfered with his shooting eye. At the end of a half hour's practice, North's Marlin 38–55 Special never had seemed more reassuringly accurate.

"Service, I calls it," Delahanty grinned when bearers picked up rifles and the bandoliers. "Say, Boss, you sure ripped hell out of that bull's-eye."

"You didn't do so badly yourself."

Other guests must have been immediately expected, for even while the two Americans were quitting their firing platforms a party of sepoys hurried away the well-riddled butts and re-

placed them at once—a fact which did not escape North's attention.

During the morning the inhabitants of the guest house viewed a small army of retainers, cooks, body servants, beaters, grooms and huntsmen setting out for the camp site some fifteen miles distant in the western end of the Vale.

Obviously relishing this release from routine, they were sounding hunting horns, beating little drums or simply cheering. Many lugged antique muzzle-loaders, even flintlocks; to the barrels had been attached gay yellow, red and green pennons. Among them trotted packs of shaggy, savage-looking hunting dogs. Straining and snarling to get at one another, they frequently tripped their handlers with their leashes.

Most of Jang turned out, excited and noisy, to watch the retinue depart; it wasn't every day that a princely battue got under way. Skinny, brown-faced, in incredibly patched and ragged garments, the populace waved paper flags and conical caps while escorting the convoy out that winding road which crawled away to the northwest.

"Well," North commented, "if we don't have rare sport, it certainly won't be for lack of manpower."

He then addressed his companions with grim emphasis. "Remember now, Delahanty, Mrs. North, Thopa, you and I must stay together from the time we leave till we return. Nothing must be allowed to separate us, especially during the drive." His voice became crisp, that of a commanding officer. "Jenny, I want you and Thopa to keep a sharp lookout to our left. Delahanty, you'll watch our right and I'll look ahead. Understand? If anyone seems about to take a pot shot at us, make sure, then for God's sake shoot first."

To Delahanty he gave further admonition. "Now don't go jumping the gun. You're too impulsive for your own good."

"Yessir, I'll be careful. You think someone's going to try knocking us off?"

"Isn't it a golden opportunity?" came the grim query. "Wish to God we could beg off this drive—but we can't."

It was an amazingly varied, colorful and noisy cavalcade

which, shortly after midday, commenced to ride down the Citadel's causeway. Already well on their way were innumerable pack ponies, grunting under all manner of tents, cooking appliances, bedding and other paraphernalia.

Moonfaced Tibetan-like huntsmen in ragged uniforms restrained couples of huge, fierce hounds much resembling rough-coated mastiffs. Lean, hungry-looking Sunwars trotted along, supporting from a shoulder harness a wooden hoop upon which perched and swayed hooded falcons, gerfalcons and little merlins.

The various chieftains, nobles and *mukhiyas* rode their chunky little horses in high spirits, their full cloaks, gaudy turbans and fur hats, their varicolored banners and pennons weaving a garish, restless pattern under a sky which, in its steely tints, still retained a threat of impending bad weather.

"Looks like this clambake's goin' to make an Indian outbreak seem tame." General Sam Steel came cantering over on a pony so diminutive that the mercenary's feet almost touched the ground on either side.

He bowed politely enough to Jenny. She was riding easily beside North and looking boyish in breeches, cap and windbreaker. "Howdy, Mrs. North, ma'am. Hope you got your shootin' eye in. Ought to be some hunt!"

"Thank you. Are your eyes still bothering you?"

"Yep. Won't be able to handle a rifle—can't see the sights good enough," confessed the soldier-of-fortune mournfully. "But I'll try some wing shooting."

The Baroness Atossa Matala trotted up sitting a handsome golden bay pony, her silvery hair jouncing gently. She was again wearing her clouded leopard coat and hat. While passing North she looked him full in the eyes, smiled a slow wide smile, then nodded pleasantly to Jenny and trotted on to join Leonid Gornoff.

The round-shouldered Russian looked acutely unhappy in a high-peaked Mongolian saddle several sizes short of accommodating his ample stern. On his beak of a nose rode pince-nez, for the moment secured by a length of twine. The fellow's

dark gray eyes were shining like those of a nocturnal animal and, beneath a carefully counterfeited calm, North could read sharp excitement. This was especially noticeable when the two Red Chinese went jolting by in company with round-bellied General Bijai Lakshi.

To North it proved significant that both Chinese carried handsome English-made sporting rifles of heavy caliber slung to their slim shoulders. Obviously, such weapons could only have come from the Sri Rajah's own gun collection—in itself significant, perhaps? Otherwise the followers of Mao Tse-tung wore cased field glasses and water bottles in addition to bandoliers of ammunition slanting across their uniform tunics.

Both appeared to be in high good humor and greeted North and his party with friendly waves. Major Wong grinned and accepted Delahanty's awkward apologies.

On the edge of town the cavalcade was joined by a party of Lepchas riding wide-horned and shaggy saddle yaks. Under a cloud of dust, and with an escort of snapping curs, the straggling column skirted the northern fringe of Jang and beneath a lowering sky set off up the gloomy, woods-dotted Vale of Jonkhar.

"Hunting must have been very like this during the Middle Ages," Jenny remarked after an hour's ride. She had relaxed in her saddle and was puffing at one of Atossa's long-stemmed cigarettes.

She indicated a gaunt Sunwar riding by with a hawk balancing on a heavy leather gauntlet. Three necklaces of golden chain slatting on his narrow chest glistened bravely, while mother-of-pearl patterns set into the stock of a very modern magazine rifle afforded another bizarre touch. At this Sunwar noble's knee ran barefooted attendants who, with difficulty, were restraining the eagerness of four huge black dogs.

North grinned, passed over a canteen of beer. "Wish to God we could enjoy this from a cheering section. Have you got our various pals spotted?"

"Yes. The Charlie boys are riding behind us with the Commander-in-Chief."

"Seen the Dewan anywhere?"

"No. Guess he's too fat to ride." Jenny's bright blue eyes narrowed a little and as she returned the canteen she inquired, "Did Dil Kusha speak to him? She promised to."

North's dark head inclined beneath his peaked Alpine cap. "Yes, but I can't get to him until this drive is over. Forbade me in so many words, damn the luck."

"You are worried, aren't you—dear?" She hesitated an imperceptible instant before adding the endearment. "Do you think they're going to try to kill us?"

"I'm afraid so," he admitted. "I was just wondering how many of us will come riding back this way. How's your courage?"

She treated him to a warm, encouraging smile. "Never better. Did you know, there's something damned reassuring about you?"

"Thanks." He reached over, patted her small, firm shoulder. "If they make a better brand of gal I don't want to hear about it. I'm fairly certain that we've little to fear until the game drive actually begins, but, allee-samee, watch what you eat and drink. Thopa has brought us a haversack of untampered grub."

"I wouldn't feel so uneasy," she admitted, tossing the cigarette butt into a muddy puddle, "if it weren't for that hard-faced bastard Steel—and his platinum-plated gun moll."

"Maybe it isn't Sam we'll have to watch out for so much as the Commies."

She looked surprised at that. "You mean the Charlie boys?"

"Yes," North replied seriously. "Those *hombres* have been acting entirely too animated and good-natured to be safe. Don't forget I've had considerable experience with their breed of cat."

Towards sundown the hunters reached a wide meadow hemmed in by tall firs and spruces and divided by a swift and icy little stream. Here tents of black yak's wool loomed as low, stygian tripods among irregular rows of weather-beaten canvas shelters. Picket lines for the tethering of mounts already stretched between giant evergreens, and tied to them, the

ponies of retainers squealed and kicked with all that viciousness peculiar to a picketed horse.

"Hope you brought along some long-handled panties," North remarked, stooping to enter the low tent indicated by a *syce*—groom—from the princely bodyguard. "Reckon it'll be colder than Christian charity with a deficit tonight."

"Why, no—just my 'iron pants,' as you call 'em. I haven't any others and won't have until my baggage is given me." She giggled. "I've a pair of gay and giddy britches you'll drool over—dunno why I ever brought 'em along, only they're nylon and so light they don't count."

"Okay, little Glamour Pants," North grinned. "I'll see you get your stuff as soon as I talk with the Dewan."

Their circular shelter proved to consist of a canvas-like covering stretched over wooden frames suggestive of a huge inverted bowl; it was so low, however, that not even Jenny Cutler could stand upright. Perforce they both crouched on spruce-tip beds covered with fur rugs. Acrid smoke filled the interior when North, in hopes of warming their quarters, kindled a fire ready laid in the center of the earth floor. Soon they both were coughing and cursing, for billows of acrid smoke filled the shelter. Only by accident did any of it escape through a hole in the shelter's top.

Thopa came in, smiling as usual. "I will readjust the wind flap, but it is well to remember that the air is clear near the ground. You must stay flat as much as possible."

Drums thudded, fifes screeched and bursts of wild and eerie singing commenced to sound in various directions. Near the horse lines the *syces* were capering in a weird dance about a huge bonfire.

Presently Delahanty scratched at the canvas and scrambled through the circular doorway. "Suppose they rout us out at some ungodly hour. What'll we do?"

"If matters proceed as normal, we will be awakened an hour before dawn," Thopa predicted. Squatted on his heels before the fire, the Gurkha looked leaner and darker than ever. His

kukri's handle, projecting from his sash, was entirely accessible. He thrust forward the haversack of safe food.

Delahanty absently tried the bolt of his Springfield; it created a sleepy *click-clack* sound. "Boss, you checked the ammo they returned? Mine's okay."

"It hasn't been monkeyed with."

"Okay, then, but I can't say as I hanker for this waitin' around for the ax to drop. Got any plan of action?"

"Tonight we will all sleep in here, taking turns on watch. That's about all we can do."

"And come morning?" Jenny inquired while dividing a pot of cold lentils and slices of kid.

For some moments the Intelligence Officer made no reply, only stared at the coals and rubbed his chin.

"If things get tough, our only hope is to keep together and on my signal make a break into the deep woods, then we'll try to get out of this country by a trail Thopa has heard of. Of course we won't be even halfway outfitted, but maybe we'll win through.'"

"We will," Delahanty grunted. "I'm getting kinda fed up with this secondhand Shangri-la. Jesus! What I'd give to hear taxi horns blowing and lower a slug of honest bourbon whisky. This damn' *raksi* puts fur mittens on my teeth.

27. The Great Killing

A day which would remain forever fixed in Colonel Hugh North's memory dawned late, due to the fact that fog and dense gray-white clouds hung low over the encampment. In fact, the hunters were aroused and about for at least an hour before the first streaks of light

penetrated the lowering atmosphere. Long since, the beaters had departed on their duties.

It had grown so cold that Jenny's teeth chattered as she fumblingly laced her boots. The guests—there must have been forty to fifty of them—spoke in subdued tones, dogs were muzzled and no fires were lit lest an unlucky slant of wind might carry an alarm in that direction from which the game was expected to be driven.

Under guidance from the chief *shikar*—or huntsman—the various groups of guests were arranged in the order that they would occupy on a line of butts and hides located further up the valley.

Nothing could have pleased North more, at first, than to discover that he and his party had been allotted adjacent posts and so formed a compact unit. Later he wondered why this had been done. Was someone calculating that it would be simpler to massacre the party as a group than piecemeal?

Around six of the morning the guns set forth with rifles slung and ammunition belts slatting softly, and accompanied by almost twice their number of huntsmen, guides and bearers. A strong detachment of bodyguards, North noted, never separated themselves from the Sri Rajah's person by more than a few feet.

Matbar Nana Jang and his half-brother both appeared to be in the highest of spirits and, side by side, strode along at a pace which kept their escorts and gunbearers hurrying to keep up. About the time the chief *shikar* was deploying the first parties of hunters to left and right a few flurries of wet snow fell, but melted immediately.

Jenny, Delahanty and Thopa, reinforced by Kali Yuga the orderly, formed a compact group about Hugh North's tall and wiry figure and awaited a signal to break away from the column clambering over fallen trees and through dripping thickets of ilex and rhododendron.

The Gurkha's slant eyes were fairly snapping. "We shall soon enjoy magnificent shooting, Bahadur Colonel, but it will be very different from that which you have done on the Terai

or in Bengal. Do you see? The foreigners are being given the very choicest posts in the center of the line."

A havildar of the Sri Rajah's guard and a one-eyed Sunwar huntsman who resembled an aged hawk apparently had been detailed to advise and see to the correct posting of North's party. Behind these two impassive functionaries a dozen-odd bearers and skinners stood about, awaiting assignment of duties.

When politely, but firmly, North declined the services of a loader, Jenny and Delahanty took the hint and did likewise.

By now the Sri Rajah's *shikar* had fanned out to occupy a line of blinds drawn all the way across a small, steep-walled valley. In this remote valley flourished a dense tangle of underbrush, evergreens and hardwoods interspaced by small meadows and stretches of open ground. Here the trees grew thicker.

To his great satisfaction North was able to place Delahanty on the extreme right of their sector; Thopa with Kali Yuga as his loader on the left, with Jenny and himself in the middle. His admiration for his pseudo-wife was soaring. She seemed so entirely self-possessed and encouragingly adept in the manipulation of Dr. Keith's short-barreled Marlin 30–30.

"Shoot 'em in the pants," Steel called out in passing, "the coat and vest are mine!" He lifted in salute a big double-barreled shotgun, from which North deduced that his eyesight, *apparently,* had not sufficiently improved to permit his use of a rifle. He might not have existed for all the attention Atossa paid him. She simply strode by with the long, loose-kneed stride of a veteran hunter, carrying her rifle in the crook of her arm. She had never looked handsomer, North thought, than in those slate-blue skiing breeches and cap, a yellow sweater and a well-fitting bush coat. A belt heavy with cartridges was buckled about her slender waist.

Soon it became evident that his own party occupied butts to the left of the center, with the two Red Chinese next on their right. Gornoff's party was moving on towards a series of hides still further to the right. Apparently the Sri Rajah and

Prince Timrud intended to do their shooting in the next posts beyond.

For the most part the blinds were situated amid heavy underbush behind a space hacked clear by the beaters and spaced roughly seventy-five yards apart.

"I'll be watching you, dear," Jenny said when the moment came for her to occupy her place. "And, no matter what happens—I—well—it's been fun knowing you." To his utter amazement, she suddenly threw both arms about his neck and kissed him hard on the mouth, then hurried into her blind oblivious to the grins of bearers and skinners.

The firing of a small fieldpiece announced that all the hunters were in position and ready. So far away and so much higher up that it sounded like a toy, sounded an answering gun, its report reverberating heavily through the shifting mists and thinning snow. Fainter still sounded an insistent, long-drawn wail of horns, the clashing of cymbals and the *thud-thud* of drums carried by the beaters.

For some moments North occupied himself in hacking several loopholes through the branches and composing his hide. Next he studied the forest for avenues and directions from which the game might be expected to appear and selected markers to indicate range. Of course this shooting would be entirely over open sights, but it was helpful to know first how much time he had in which to shoot.

A careful glance over his shoulder told him that the bearers and skinners prudently had taken to the trees and that only the one-eyed *shikar* and the havildar remained on the ground. The former carried a ponderous muzzle-loader with a bore so huge that it could have blown a buffalo in two; the latter—and the fact caused North no little uneasiness—was armed with a Nepalese version of a modern Enfield rifle.

By craning his neck the Intelligence Officer found that he could just glimpse Jenny's green-gray ski cap through the evergreens. But of either Delahanty or Thopa he could see nothing at all.

This, he decided, was indeed an advantageous point for the

sport in hand. The tangle before him—it couldn't properly be called a jungle because here was none of the bamboo or elephant grass such as one would find at a lower altitude—had been cleared away for a distance of some fifty yards before his hide. The one-eyed *shikar* and his companion had climbed onto the bole of a big, overturned maple lying some fifty yards behind the blind. They sat silent and alert with weapons lying across their knees. Sensibly, they were not disposed to face the rush of a wounded and infuriated bear or panther.

An hour dragged by amid a silence abnormal even in a deep forest. Only the sibilant splash of an invisible waterfall and the occasional cough of some hunter broke the stillness. All there was to do was to listen to the gradual approach of the beaters.

To North's satisfaction the light improved and the tickling, sticky snow ceased falling. To alert himself he again checked the adjustment of his Rocky Mountain sights and repeatedly threw the Marlin to his shoulder, sighting at various objects in his field of fire. He needed to become accustomed to the background.

Above him, a big, orange-bellied black squirrel suddenly appeared and set up a shrill scolding. The first intimation that the beaters must be advancing more rapidly came in the increasing numbers of excited birds, such as Sikkim jays, gay in fawn-colored plumage splashed with brilliant blue; swift and erratic-flying speckled wood pigeons; innumerable thrushes and cuckoos also commenced fluttering agitatedly from limb to limb and cocking bright, inquisitive eyes at the long line of motionless figures waiting with ready rifles.

Next a brace of woodcock and glorious scarlet satyr tragopan flickered by among the trees. North half expected to hear Sam Steel's big shotgun commence to boom, but soon concluded that that individual had been warned to wait until shooting should become general.

All the same, the Intelligence Officer maintained a wary look towards his rear. Once the shooting started it would be very easy indeed for either the havildar or the *shikar* to shoot him in the back and cry "Accident! Accident!" There was

nothing for it but to remain eternally vigilant, and never completely to empty his rifle's magazine.

More birds came flashing by, among them parrotbills and a covey of monal pheasants, handsome, dark blue birds with orange necks. They were crying *weep-weep! weep-weep!* in their fright.

The shooting commenced when a heavy rifle cracked somewhere up on the mountainside to North's left and set staccato echoes flying back and forth. Immediately the previous silence ended, gunners called to each other, establishing their position, dogs clamored and the multitudes of ragged retainers perched in nearby trees commenced to chatter excitedly—just like so many monkeys.

Since the men behind him still were sitting with rifles on their laps, North devoted his attention to a series of lanes leading into the cleared space before him. How was Jenny faring? There was one damned fine girl, now that she'd quit wearing a chip on her shoulder—steady, quiet and intelligent. He hoped that a *shikar* had been designated to protect her against the rush of a wounded animal.

More small birds, such a babblers, warblers and partridges, came whirring by as the clanging of gongs and the eldritch screech of hunting horns swelled louder. For the first time the distant voices of the beaters chanting, "Hup-hoo! Hup-hoo!" became recognizable.

Somewhere, off to the left, another rifle cracked once—twice. Then followed the shrill, womanish screaming of a wounded panther which set hairs to lifting on the back of North's neck.

Delahanty yelled, "Watch out, Boss! Something big's going your way!" North saw the branches thresh and snap just before a magnificent sambur buck bounded into view. A rifle fired near by caused the beast to gather still more speed and race towards North's hide with the swiftness of a thoroughbred.

Smoothly, North brought the rifle to his shoulder and its sights in line with his vision—at that moment fixed upon the

juncture of the buck's neck and left shoulder. He wasn't in the least aware of the Marlin's recoil but, over the beast's crashing fall, heard bearers and skinners yelling, *"Huzoor, Huzoor,* Sahib!"

As he fed a fresh cartridge into the Marlin's magazine he glanced over his shoulder and saw that the havildar and his one-eyed companion had arisen and were handling their weapons but peering intently into the forest—not at his blind.

Now shooting had become general. A half-grown rib-faced deer appeared slinking along, close to earth. It saw North and wheeled, but he disdained to shoot, so the deer shot by amid disappointed shouts from the bearers—to them a head was a head in the total bag count.

Now the whole valley resounded to irregular volleys of rifle fire. Another sambur and a nahoor ram were the next victims of North's marksmanship. Lord! He forgot his anxiety in a steadily mounting excitement.

"Watch out, Sahib!" boomed the *shikar's* deep voice. "Bears and panthers soon come." He was right. From the tail of his eye, North spotted a big male panther bounding sinuously through the trees towards Thopa's position.

Unable to get a fair shot, he fired instead at a huge black boar—too hurriedly, it seemed, for the pig scrambled back onto its feet and, clattering eight-inch tusks, charged with tufted tail standing straight up like a defiant guidon. Bristles rising erect on the boar's withers, lent the illusion of half again magnifying its size.

Taking more careful aim this time, North fired and the pig slewed in a crazy half circle, then fell and kicked furiously amid the pine needles and fallen leaves. Reloading, he recognized the deep, distinctive *boom!* of Steel's shotgun being fired again and again.

That so large an animal could have moved as quickly and silently seemed incredible, but an enormous Himalayan black bear was halfway across the clearing and charging straight at his hide before North was aware of the beast's presence. He whipped up his Marlin but waited for the snarling creature

to advance in a straight line. Although the bear was halfway across the clearing, North still hadn't obtained a fair sight of his favorite target—the left shoulder.

"Shoot, Sahib! Shoot!" the beaters and *shikaris* were imploring. At a range of twenty yards, North gave up and swiftly shifted aim to the bear's forehead. When he fired, the great carnivore uttered a furious scream, wavered an instant, then charged on with blood spurting from a furrow plowed across the top of its skull.

In a frantic hurry North pumped the Marlin's lever as he ran backwards out of his blind. Then, as the great beast crashed into the branches and necessarily was slowed, North fired again and this time found its heart, for the bear lurched two jerky strides onwards before collapsing like a fur rug hastily dropped.

While cramming fresh cartridges into the magazine, North viewed the carcass with no particular satisfaction but experienced a sense of elation. Big-game hunting, since a good many years, had not been particularly enjoyable to him.

Subconsciously he noted how thin tendrils of steam had begun to rise from blood that commenced to fill little depressions around the dead animal.

A big, rib-faced deer came bounding into sight, and when the *shikaris* yelled for him to shoot, North fired before stepping back into his blind. Obviously, the bearers had made book on his prowess. Presently he dropped two more deer, another, but smaller boar, and a magnificent pair of panthers.

Subconsciously he listened for Delahanty's deep shouts, Thopa's thin yells of triumph and the report of Jenny's 30-30. Steel must have run out of twelve-gauge shells, for he stopped shooting although tragopans, woodcock and doves a-plenty came hurtling by.

Excited shouts were resounding all up and down the line of butts and once a man cried out in mortal fear or pain, and then was still. Another bear, an old she, began paralleling the line of guns in search of a gap through which to lead a pair of half-grown cubs. He must have been wrong about Steel's ammunition, North decided, on recognizing the shotgun's report.

It went off twice in rapid succession as a dart of woodcock flickered by.

By now he was glad that the drive was nearly over—the horns, drums and cymbals now were sounding less than a quarter of a mile away. North was viewing the death throes of another boar he had shot when he heard Delahanty shout something, then rifles cracked once, twice.

Instantly North darted out of his blind, crashing through junipers and rhododendrons masking the ex-aviator's blind from his own.

"*Roko!* Halt! Halt there, Sahib!" bellowed his havildar. North chanced getting shot at, and plunged on.

When he reached Delahanty's clearing he experienced a sensation similar to that one experiences when an elevator drops too rapidly. Delahanty's khaki-clad figure was lying on its face; his Springfield lay just beyond the reach of fingers that were digging, clawing spasmodically into the mold on the forest floor.

Perhaps thirty yards away a sepoy, his weapon also abandoned, had fallen onto hands and knees and was coughing, arching his back like a frightened cat. All at once a great gush of bright arterial blood spurted from his mouth and sprayed the autumn foliage. Then he collapsed.

North, aware that his havildar was cursing, fighting his way through the tangle, bent over Delahanty, who proved to be barely conscious. The central location of a hole in the red-sodden front of his khaki battle jacket warned that the outfitter could not live for more than a few instants.

Half expecting to be shot at, the Intelligence Officer propped the former flier's close-cropped head on his knee. Shots still were ringing along the line of butts—apparently few knew what had chanced.

"For God's sake, Ad, try to tell me what happened," he begged.

Delahanty's eyelids rolled back as if by a tremendous effort. "Damn' sepoy shot—me before I—plugged him. Yelled that —I murdered—killed—kill——"

"Killed *who?*" North implored, but the outfitter's eyes rolled back in his head as the last spark of life departed from his body.

Meanwhile, snow commenced to fall once more as the drive drew to a close. Now only scattered shots were being fired, but the exultant whooping of skinners and bearers swelled ever louder as they dropped from their perches and commenced to collect the quarry.

By a series of rapid deductions North decided that, for some reason, Delahanty must have deserted his blind and had moved a good distance over to his right and so into an area near the next hide.

Who had been posted on Delahanty's right? The havildar, livid with rage and screaming orders, now was drawing near, but North sprang up and ran towards the next butt. Around it was milling a throng of wildly excited shikaris, sepoys and bearers. At that moment North remembered that this particular hide had been occupied by the two Red Chinese.

Waves of sickening apprehension engulfed him as, ignoring threats and brandished rifles, he forced his way to the center of the crowd. Colonel Han and Major Wong's lean bodies lay crumpled almost side by side. Wong was stone dead, shot through the base of his neck, but Han still breathed in the stertorous fashion of an unconscious man.

Then ensued a storm of conflicting impressions. North wrenched himself from the grasp of a stalwart sepoy and swiftly knelt beside Wong's body. Quickly, but expertly, he examined a jagged groove cutting across the base of the dead man's neck. In the wound he thought he glimpsed a few of what appeared to be minute black threads.

The wound suffered by Colonel Han was truly a ghastly affair; the area of mashed flesh was at least four inches across. So far as North could tell, the bullet must still be in him, for no exit hole was to be seen.

He hardly realized it when Jenny forced herself, white-faced, to his side.

"Oh, Hugh, Hugh, what's happened?" When she clung to him he promptly flung a protective arm about her.

"I don't know, yet. They got Delahanty."

Even while speaking he pressed his tobacco pouch surreptitiously into the side pocket of her shooting coat. Tumult reigned as men came dashing up from all sides.

The Commander-in-Chief was the first important person to arrive; his beady black eyes were hard as agates when he commenced to roar orders. Next Prince Timrud appeared through the whirling snow, taut of carriage and carrying a double-barreled express rifle at the ready; then Sam Steel with lips drawn into an ugly slash and blinking alertly behind his smoked glasses.

"Seize that man!" General Bijai Lakshi leveled a plump finger at North. In a flash a quartet of sepoys was upon him, wrenched him away from Jenny. He made no attempt to resist, but the confusion grew until the Sri Rajah arrived and shouted some command which caused an instant quiet.

"What has chanced?" Matbar Nana Jang demanded in breathless but commanding accents. A sepoy then declared that he had seen Delahanty Sahib reconnoitering a thicket near the Chinese officers' blind, but had thought him to be in pursuit of wounded game. Then had followed two shots.

The Sri Rajah tugged at his beard. Had the sepoy actually seen Delahanty Sahib fire?

No, the soldier replied steadily, but his companion must have, for he had run forward with rifle raised and calling upon the *pilingi* to surrender. When the American had not obeyed, the second sepoy had fired, and the *pilingi* had returned the fire an instant later.

Prince Timrud turned glowering on North. "And you—why did you leave your post?"

"I heard my friend call out and——"

"Bah! Amid all the shooting? You lie in your teeth."

Recognizing the futility of argument at the moment, North held his tongue, but found it hard to contain himself when Gornoff suggested smoothly, "There is little doubt that these

Yankee imperialists have seized an excellent opportunity to murder my good comrades Han and Wong."

"How can you be so sure, Gornoff Sahib?" snapped the Sri Rajah. He seemed genuinely bewildered.

Gornoff began to wave his hands, to shout. "Because General Steel and me, ve saw that murder! Your gunman sneaked up during loud shootings and killed my poor comrades."

Steel grinned at North, hatless, disarmed and pinioned. "Tough lines, Bub. Reckon you've finally overplayed your hand. Keep at this game long enough and the misfire happens sometimes—like for me, that time in Shanghai."

His big, tattoed hands tightened on the grip of the shotgun. "That was your round—and again in Singapore. This one's mine, though. Eh, Ducks?" He grinned at Atossa smiling her mechanical smile on the edge of the snow-flecked crowd.

"Shut up, you goddam renegade!" shrilled Jenny. "You'll never be fit to wipe his boots."

"Balls," laughed Steel. "Better warn yer boy friend that accidents sometimes happen in prisons 'round here, and the chow ain't so hot either."

"Be still! All of you," ordered Matbar Nana Jang. "Secure the prisoner."

Rawhide thongs were brought to lash North's wrists painfully tight. Things were happening so fast that, for once, the Intelligence Officer felt a little dazed. He was only conscious of Jenny cursing and fighting like a leopardess, of Atossa standing on the outskirts of the crowd with that inscrutable smile still stamped on her cream-brown features.

Jenny suddenly broke free and confronted the Sri Rajah. "Are you going to stand there, you big ape, and let my—my husband get arrested for a crime he knows nothing about?" Luckily, she spoke in English.

"Stow it, Sister," cut in Steel with a wolfish grin. "North knows all about it. He wanted them Chinks knocked off, the worst way!"

"What is being said?" shouted the Sri Rajah in Hindustani. Apparently Jenny's outburst must have made some impression,

otherwise the Sri Rajah would not have turned stiffly to North. "Have you anything to say?" he demanded.

The prisoner thrust his way forward, looked the towering ruler in the eye. "Only two things, Your Highness. First, I ask you all to observe the nature of the wounds which killed these men. Second. Please to have the bullets extracted with utmost care."

Bijai Lakshi, thunder-browed and gone a queer greenish bronze under his dark skin, summoned the Sri Rajah's physician.

"Is there hope for him who still breathes?"

"No, Excellency. See? Half of the back is torn away." Still shaking his head, the surgeon then fumbled in a bag of instruments for a probe. Mouth gone dry, and as near to desperation as ever he had been, North watched as the physician's cordovan-hued fingers grew bright with blood, then, amid a sighing gasp from the onlookers, he straightened holding up a dripping, pointed cylinder of metal.

Meanwhile Jenny breathed, "Hugh! Delahanty really didn't?"

"I'm pretty sure he didn't. Question is, will I be allowed to prove it?"

A burly havildar produced Delahanty's rifle and, removing a cartridge from its magazine, held it up for inspection.

"Oh, no! No!" gasped Jenny, for although the death missile had become slightly misshapen, everyone could recognize a similarity of shape. The construction was identical.

"Ah-h, you murdering dogs. We have you now," thundered the Commander-in-Chief. "See, Your Highness, these two bullets are exactly alike."

At that moment Subadar Thopa intervened for the first time. Said he stoutly, "It is impossible, Your Highness, to be absolutely certain which rifle fired those shots without making examination of every weapon of this caliber. I notice several. That carried by the white-haired memsahib, and your princely brother, to name only two."

Fervently, North blessed the stalwart little Nepalese.

"Sure, sure, the 30.06 is a popular caliber." Steel grinned his enjoyment of North's predicament; agreed a shade too readily. "Okay, Yer Highness. Have them slugs checked at your arsenal. You wouldn't want to tag the wrong fellow, would you, now?"

As guards hauled him away with Jenny sobbing a few paces behind him and Thopa supremely unnoticeable in the background, North's narrow dark head swung right, noted the presence of a clump of ilex and juniper some forty yards behind the blind in which Colonel Han and Major Wong had been slain. In rising interest, he noted that this clump of foliage was so dense that even the highly excited hunters skirted around it rather than plunge into the tangle.

28. The Prison

Autumn must rapidly be advancing, decided Hugh North, if the keenness of the breeze beating through a tiny, glassless window set high above his reach were any indication. For two days now he had existed in shivering misery and growing hunger. His cell, perhaps ten by six feet in area, was quite unheated, and illuminated during only those brief periods of daylight when the sun was high. It was destitute of furniture save for a rough cot consisting of thongs stretched across a wooden frame and supporting a pair of filthy sheepskin blankets.

When a pock-marked major of the Sri Rajah's bodyguard clanked in during the first day of North's imprisonment he had read from a scroll of paper that one Hugh North, a foreigner from the Kingdom of North America, was charged with illegal entry into Jonkhar, with military espionage, and with having plotted and encompassed the murder of two dignitaries from a friendly Power.

The prisoner's queries elicited only a surly assurance that

examination of the bullet removed from Colonel Han's back, and another, fired from Delahanty Sahib's Springfield, bore identical grooving, or marks.

Without much hope of success, North then had demanded an interview with the Dewan, stating that he was prepared conclusively to prove that Delahanty Sahib had not, in fact *could not,* have been guilty of the murders. If the Bahadur Major kindly would transmit this information into the ear of His Excellency Vikram Girvan, he would be well repaid. The major, a grizzled old fellow lacking part of one ear and with his face puckered into a leering expression as the result of a tulwar slash, had stared, then grunted, "Although this surely must be but subterfuge, I will weigh the propriety of your request. Who other than Delahanty Sahib could have slain those Chinese?"

In deadly earnest North had promised, "I can and will prove who really did the murders."

"Who, then?" growled the veteran.

"Surely, Bahadur Major, you can understand why I must refuse to answer until I am able to have the guilty person brought so promptly for questioning that they will be unable to suppress certain evidence."

And so matters had lain for two days. Now he was undergoing additional mental torment because, not an hour ago, he had thought to catch the faint droning of a plane's motor. Would that be the float plane coming to look for the panels he had promised to display?

No telling, because, somehow, he had lost count of days. On the other hand, it might well be some Red plane on reconnaissance or en route to carry off Gornoff, Steel and Atossa, their mission having been successfully completed.

At that possibility a sense of despair, never experienced until now, racked North's soul. Tough old Sam Steel had been quite right. If one stayed in this game of international intrigue long enough a man was bound, eventually, to come a disastrous cropper. And what a monumental cropper he had come!

In agony he pictured hordes of Chinese and Tibetan engineers and slave prisoners toiling to widen, grade and bridge the

Kirong-la; then, next summer, the passage of crack Red divisions into Nepal on their way to India, that age-old goal for Russian Imperialists.

Savagely, he directed his thoughts back to present considerations.

What could have become of Jenny? What action might Gornoff and his party have taken? Most torturing of all was the near certainty that Leonid Gornoff, now bereft of opponents, had succeeded in blandishing and flattering the Sri Rajah into taking that fatal first step towards eventual enslavement—an alliance with Soviet Russia.

Yes, by God, it looked as if Sam Steel had done him in at last. Through bitter experience he knew Sam was as full of tricks and vicious as an old wolverine. Certainly he'd been more than clever in eliminating two sets of enemies by a single *tour de force*. How that scarred reprobate must be chuckling!

For hours there was nothing to do but to crouch, listening to jackdaws and carrion crows caw and bicker, to squat shivering on his cot. Blankly he regarded the uneven stone floor; its flagstones had assumed a dull polish caused by the restless pacing of wretches who had never even heard of a writ of *habeas corpus*.

The more North considered his prospects, the less prepossessing they appeared. In all probability the Sri Rajah would avoid risking an avowed execution and would simply allow his prisoner to die from cold and hunger. North's never well-filled belt had come in three notches already. Since he was allowed but a single small gourd of water a day, none of that precious fluid could be diverted to washing, a fact which annoyed him out of all proportion.

As nearly as he could decide, he was being held in a small military prison located behind the Sri Rajah's arsenal.

But what of Jenny? In all probability she, too, was being held prisoner. Certainly the savage Prince of Jonkhar would never allow her opportunity to tell her story to the outside world. Most likely her fate would be to die of poison adminis-

tered through food, or again, she might be stripped nude and doomed to perish of pneumonia in some icy apartment.

Never during his long career had Hugh North felt so utterly helpless. The only string remaining to the lyre of Hope was the presumed existence of Ganesh Thopa—intelligent and able Subadar Thopa. But what assurance was there that he had not long since been politely, but firmly, escorted to the frontier?

Heaving a deep sigh, North arose and commenced to pace back and forth, back and forth, in an attempt to stir his circulation to greater activity. After he had executed a few simple calisthenics he felt so exhausted that he sank, panting, and presently drowsed. When he awoke the high little window was admitting the light of a few stars but also the glare of a torch was beating redly through a grilled wicket set into his cell's door of massive cedar.

North recognized Thopa's voice speaking low and very hurriedly.

"Bahadur Colonel!" The Gurkha's flat features revealed themselves at the barred peephole.

"Yes. What's up?"

"There is little time, Bahadur Colonel, so listen carefully," whispered the attaché. "Following orders, I leave for the border of Nepal, together with your bearers, tomorrow morning."

The Gurkha's scarred features took on a savage expression. "But it is not intended that any of us shall reach the frontier alive."

"Obviously. What are you going to do?"

"I will desert the porters under cover of darkness—they are doomed in any case—and take Kali Yuga and our *mukhiya;* he believes he can find a little-known but dangerous track across the Singhalela range of mountains. Of course if a storm comes ——" He grimaced.

North's mind worked like the pistons of a speeding locomotive.

Clinging to the bars, the Intelligence Officer whispered, "Friend Thopa, you must change your plan enough to travel the shortest possible distance tomorrow down the Vale. Pitch

camp *as near to Jang* as you can, lighting three watch fires in a close row."

Puzzlement was in Thopa's eyes, but he nodded. "Shall do."

"Has the Russian and his friends departed?"

"No, but they leave early tomorrow, full of triumph," Thopa reported bitterly.

In an agony of suspense, North continued, "If I can, I will join you at your camp. Have essential equipment ready for just you and for me—and ponies!"

The Gurkha's oblique eyes commenced to glitter. "You would slay the treacherous Russians?"

"I would enjoy an excuse. However, I want to bring them back and prove to the Sri Rajah who killed those Chinese, and what sort of people he's been dealing with. Has any announcement of a treaty been made?"

"Nothing yet has been publicly stated, but it is known that the Sri Rajah has agreed——" Footsteps pattered down the corridor and a frightened voice called, "Come, quickly, quickly! No more time."

North, having recalled a curious custom in certain Indian prisons, decided on a wild gamble. "I will escape—never doubt it. Now, go immediately to Mrs. Cutler. Tell her to insist that she be granted the wife's privilege of visiting her husband a brief while. Now this is most important—warn her to wear her iron pants."

The Gurkha's eyes flew wide open. "*Suruwals* of iron?"

"Yes. And her girdle!"

"For the love of Varuna, come at once," hissed the jailer. "The new guard approaches."

In an instant the light disappeared and feet slippered away down the corridor as lightly as dried leaves scurrying over a forest's floor.

29. The Iron Pants

Not until late in the afternoon of that same day on which Subadar Thopa, Atossa, Sam Steel and Leonid Gornoff had quitted Jang in opposite directions did footsteps finally ring in the prison corridor. A pair of green-coated sepoys appeared and used a ponderous, antique key with which to unlock the cell.

When the door swung inwards North resisted the all but overpowering temptation to look for Jenny and instead stole a glance at the massive ironbound portal. By the time Jenny was rushing in with arms eagerly extended he had learned that no bolts secured the door although the lock looked discouragingly powerful.

"Oh, my darling, my husband!" Jenny crushed her body to him. "Are you all right? Have they hurt you?"

"You may have half an hour together, Sahib," announced one of the sepoys, placing a lantern on the floor. Then the door banged shut and North found Jenny's lips quivering against his.

Here was a Jenny such as he had never beheld. She must have been given her baggage since she was wearing a simple but effective blue cotton dress and high-heeled slippers.

"I'm a bit hungry," he admitted. "Otherwise okay. How about you?"

"I—I'm not badly treated—but I'm not allowed out of our room and—and—— Oh, I'm all right. Don't be afraid for me.

"Oh, Hugh," she almost sobbed, "it's so splendid to find you unharmed. Arunah once told me what can happen in Indian prisons."

"I'm still in one piece," he soothed, "and I intend to stay that

way even if I do look like a cyclone in a haystack. But you, my dear. Are you *sure* you're all right?"

"Yes," she said, "I'm really quite decently treated. I—I suppose Dil Kusha is responsible. She sent me some things of mine. I'd no idea so much of our baggage had been salvaged."

"Some surprises are bound to be pleasant—law of averages, you know."

Jenny had calmed amazingly, sounded once more the practical, efficient person he had first met. As they stood there in the musty, gelid gloom of the cell the sensation of fearful aloneness in a far land became overpowering. Grimly, he fought it down. "How about a seat on my overstuffed bed of ease?"

"If you don't mind, I'd rather stand." Her arms tightened about him. "And be closer to you. Oh, Hugh, I have been so horribly worried over you."

"You might spare a little concern for yourself," he advised. "After all, I can't think of any valid reason why Matbar Nana Jang should allow either of us to return to India—now that he's teamed up with the Commies."

"Oh, Hugh, he *hasn't?*"

"I'm afraid he has—there's every indication—so Thopa told me. Of course he reached you, else you wouldn't be here."

"Yes, bless his tough, cocky little heart. But I'm sure he misunderstood something you told him."

"What?"

"He said that you said if I were to visit you, I was to wear a girdle and—and my 'iron pants,' as you called 'em."

"That's right."

"You're the damnedest man. Why should I wear those ugly cotton things?"

"You're wearing 'em?" he demanded breathlessly.

"Sure, although now I've some much prettier ones."

"Good girl!" He chuckled for the first time and patted her soundly on an area protected by the garment in question. "Take 'em off, will you?"

"Hugh! At a time like this do you really——" Waves of color bright enough to be noticeable even in the primitive

lantern's uncertain light came surging up from the white piqué collar of her blue dress.

"Yes. Hurry, we haven't much time."

"Sure you aren't delirious?"

"No. I need 'em for an idea I've in mind. Sorry, everything I have on is wool, and my shorts are nylon, so they won't do." He stepped aside and regarded the door as, hesitantly, she plucked up skirt and slip and commenced to fumble but then let them fall again.

"Are you serious about this?"

"Yes. And while you're about it, my pet," said he in a soft undertone, "I'll also need some garter catches off your girdle —a pair will do."

"What! What was that?"

"I said—garter catches."

"All right, but what in hell *are* you driving at?"

Briefly he described his intent.

"So," he concluded, "I'll be obliged if you'll sacrifice those bleak-looking panties of yours." He grinned through the dark, four-day bristles furring his chin. "Hope you can keep your seams straight minus those supporters. Now suppose you get busy; those jokers may come back any time."

"Kiss me first," she cried, surging, warm and fresh-smelling, into his arms. "Oh, Hugh! How *can* you be so damned silly and carefree? Don't you realize we're living on borrowed time?"

"They claim a death's-head grins," he retorted. "So it's only fair to laugh back, isn't it? Now *will* you start that strip tease or must I take 'em off for you?"

While she was complying he kept on talking in a rapid undertone. "Tonight I want you to beg sanctuary in the zenana of Dil Kusha. I believe she'll shelter you. If all goes well, hell's going to break loose when I'm found gone. Certain people just might take it into their heads that you have done exactly what you are doing—namely, to connive at my escape.

"No, I'm not kidding," he added soberly. "When an angry Oriental decides to extract information from a suspect they know lots of tricks—which aren't exactly gentle."

"All right," said she quietly. "Is there anything else?"

"You still have my tobacco pouch and Malchek's shotgun shells?"

In the act of unhooking the garter supports she stiffened. "Why, no! Didn't you send word to Atossa telling me to give them to her?"

"God, no!" Mentally he reeled and drew a deep, whistling breath.

"Shouldn't I have given them to her?" Jenny's voice quivered.

"I never sent Atossa such a message! When did she ask for the things?"

"Just after we got back from that hateful hunt." She ran to his side, gripped his hand. "Please, Hugh! I—I can't stand your looking so terribly crushed! Obviously I made a mistake."

"You weren't wrong," came his strained reply, "but *I* was! That Baltic bitch surely put it over on me; she and Sam have taken me like Grant took Richmond!"

A reverberating ringing of boots along the corridor warned that the visiting period was at an end. Like any distracted husband, North was hugging Jenny and smoothing her clothing back into position when a pair of jet eyes appeared at the peephole.

"God knows what's about to happen," North whispered. "But, Jenny, whatever chances, I want you to know that I think you're——" He got no further because, fiercely, her lips pressed themselves against his and silenced them.

"You *must* get away, Hugh," she breathed. "Oh-h, damn it, I love you so terribly——"

The lock clicked softly; to North's satisfaction it sounded well oiled.

"Come, Memsahib—time." The two jailers literally had to haul Jenny Cutler out into the corridor.

30. Evasion

To unravel and pick apart a garment manufactured from fine cotton without the aid of an edged instrument, and without causing the snarling sound caused by a violent ripping, is no easy matter—especially in near darkness. Hugh North's fingers were sore and his nails had begun to ache long before the end of an hour's shredding.

By sense of touch he could tell that the pile of coarse fluff formed between his feet had reached impressive proportions. Through experience, he realized, however, that, as in fashioning a spruce-tip bed, what seems like enough is never even half sufficient.

He worked on until little save buttons and some extra tough segments remained to identify Jenny's "iron pants." He knew he'd better get going in a big hurry. Twilight must have faded easily three hours ago, or was it four? No. That bugle call which summoned the various reliefs had been sounding when he'd set to work. Since then it had been blown only once; as in most armies, Jonkhari sentries stood duty two hours on and four off.

When he felt the pile of lint to be a foot high, he fumbled for those strong metal garter catches from Jenny's girdle. They were precious, indeed, since every bit of metal, even his belt buckle, had been removed from his person on entering prison. As he had hoped, the metal proved tough but reluctantly flexible. Accordingly his weary fingers were sorer still by the time he had succeeded in twisting the lengths of metal into a satisfactory shape, roughly that of a greatly elongated capital Z.

His present guard's relief, he long since had ascertained, should appear at nine, so, to be on the safe side, he would

have to delay his operations until the new sentries became bored and inattentive.

Ages seemed to elapse before he heard the bugles sound, field boots reverberate at the end of the corridor and the relief repeat his special orders for the day. That he might not hurry himself, the prisoner seated himself and counted by tens to a thousand; an extremely difficult task because of ever-mounting anxiety and impatience.

At last he picked up a handkerchief full of lint, crossed to the cell's door and, exercising great care, commenced to feed bits of shredded fabric into its keyhole. Every now and then he used his Z-shaped wire to force and pack down the shreddings.

A hideous doubt seized him at the end of twenty minutes when the lock continued to consume lint at a fearsome rate. Had he enough? When, finally, his probe had packed the soft stuff until no more could be introduced, North drew a mouthful of water from his gourd and, much like a Chinese laundryman spraying a shirt, squirted it into the lock. All the while he prayed feverishly that the cotton fibers would swell evenly.

"Damn!" Evidently he hadn't used enough, and there remained only a handful. Despite the clammy atmosphere, perspiration broke out on his brow while he utilized the catch to force more material into the big keyhole.

Time was rushing by on dark, relentless pinions. He calculated that he must, if ever he were going to, succeed in raising the lock tumblers before the next relief appeared or he couldn't possibly find the Subadar's camp in time to execute his plan. Weak from hunger and thirsty, too, thanks to a painful conservation of precious water, he found it difficult to marshal his thoughts into useful order.

It became difficult to squirt the water efficiently because the packing now had to be thrust upwards against tumblers beyond the reach of his short wire strip. Whereas most standard American and European lock designs were entirely familiar to him, North had no notion of what pattern an oriental locksmith might dream up.

While working patiently he pictured Thopa down on the plain of Jonkhar, waiting and watching. What about Jenny? He prayed that she'd found sanctuary with Dil Kusha. His fingers grew numb through the effort of forcing the material upwards. Suddenly his breath halted in his throat. Beneath a generous crack below his cell's door, a light was showing! That would be the turnkey making his rounds.

A sense of panic gripped him. If any of the stuffing had fallen out into the corridor, he was done for. More possibly, some shreds might be sticking out of the keyhole far enough to be noticed. While the lantern light grew brighter beneath the door, dipping to the carrier's step, the trembling prisoner swallowed hard on nothing, shut his eyes and braced himself to hear the turnkey's first guttural exclamation. Just outside the fellow halted for an eternal instant, apparently listening; then muttered something under his breath—and retreated!

Weak with relief, the Intelligence Officer waited a long five minutes before recommencing his assault on the lock. Now, surely, the cotton fabric must be swelling, expanding?

Presently, to his inexpressible joy, he heard the faintest imaginable *click*. By recent observation of his jailer's key, he knew that its blade had three teeth, indicating that as many tumblers must be elevated before the lock would open. Panting and as dry of throat as if at the end of a hard run, North probed gently until a second, sleepy little *cluck* rewarded him.

Evidently a special effort was required to locate and apply pressure beneath that last tumbler. Just then the exposed end of the garter support cut the ball of his thumb and rendered the wire slippery—which didn't help at all. Finally, he thought to hear a faint noise, suggestive of moving mechanism, gave a strong upward thrust and broke his probe.

It was almost too much. In furious rebellion at the vagaries of Fate, he gripped the door handle. To his amazement, the hinges raised a small squeak as the door commenced to swing outwards.

"I've done it! By God, it worked," he whispered and remained trembling there on his knees a long moment, oblivious

to a cold wind rushing down from that microscopic window so far overhead. The next thing he knew, he was unlacing his boots in a tearing hurry and trying to estimate the passage of time. How long since the last relief had taken place? He had no idea.

The cold of the flagstones struck through his stockinged feet while he knotted the shoelaces and slung them about his neck.

"Here goes nothing," he thought and inched the door just far enough open to permit the passage of his lean figure. Then he reclosed it. No point in unduly drawing the turnkey's attention.

The corridor itself was jet—but towards an intersection at its far end shone a faint glow. Towards this North sped as silently as an owl in flight. He must, he guessed, present a frightening sight, hollow-eyed and with a four-day beard darkening his sunken cheeks.

Briefly he debated using the heel of his shoe as a club, but decided against it. A quick, chopping blow with the side of his hand on the jailer's neck just below an ear should prove as effective as it had on sundry previous occasions.

A ticklish moment came when he had to peer around the corner, quite possibly right into a jailer's face. His luck held because the warder was sitting slumped on a stool with back turned, occupied in polishing a bit of equipment. His rifle stood leaning against the wall beside him.

There being no point in weighing consequences if his assault failed, North at once sprang out and brought the side of his right hand down with desperate force. Not even so much as a grunt followed that shattering blow upon the Jonkhari's carotid artery. He only slumped sidewise, loosely like a bag of laundry.

North snatched up the rifle barely in time to prevent a possibly disastrous clatter. In very short order, he had dragged his inert victim back into his cell. It wouldn't do to risk the observation, by some overzealous guard, of a certain exchange of clothing.

31. Night Wind

Noisily, the Sherpa porters expressed resentment over Subadar Thopa's insistence that three small campfires be maintained when everyone knew that a single blaze, or two at the most, would suffice. Their ill temper was the greater because at sundown a keen wind had commenced to howl from the mountains, lashing the trees and raising clouds of dust so fine that eventually they were forced to bind cloths around nose and mouth. Also the gale caused the fires to burn out faster.

To the late Delahanty Sahib's *mukhiya* and to Kali Yuga Ganesh Thopa was giving detailed instructions. "You will lead this party on with daylight until you come to the village. There you will report to the *mukhiya* that I mysteriously have vanished."

Jutting from between bedraggled ear flaps tied under his chin, the Sherpa's leathery brown features tightened in the firelight.

"*Bolda sa!* Subadar, it shall be done. Your servant also will report the straying of two ponies."

In the distance the lights of a hamlet finally blinked into darkness.

"Kali blast such weather!" grumbled one of the porters dispatched to test the halter knots of ponies which for once were standing quietly with heads low and rumps turned into the wind.

The hours dragged by. Sleepless, Subadar Thopa had watched and kept up the fires, for the *mukhiya* and the porters had rolled themselves into their blankets and were snoring uneasily.

When, at some point along the road to Jang, farm dogs commenced to bark an alarm Thopa roused and, tightening a shaggy yak-skin coat tight about him, ran an eye over a small mound of equipment beside him. Yonder lay the Bahadur Colonel's own rifle and a bandolier of ammunition, together with an Alpine cap, fur jacket and further essentials such as food and blankets. Two of the largest and strongest ponies waited drowsing, but already saddled and with feed bags lashed across their saddle cantles.

Although the Gurkha vainly had racked his brain to imagine how the American might manage to escape, oddly enough, he had never been in the least doubtful that he would.

He strained his ears over the screeching of the strong wind in a nearby pine grove. "This will mean rain and then snow, much snow," he told himself. Arms locked about shins, he then stared at the three campfires. If the tall *pilingi* were to appear at all, it must be soon, since he had managed to leave Jang not over four miles behind.

So much more dust came sifting through the encampment that Thopa was prompted to wind rags about the actions of North's Marlin and his own carbine.

"A fine watch you keep, Thopa." The Gurkha started and wheeled, kukri flashing, but slid it back into its sheath as from an ilex thicket stepped Hugh North. He was gasping for breath and appeared ludicrous in a clumsily bound turban and a sepoy uniform sizes too small for him.

"Praise Varuna, the All-Merciful!" Thopa cried in a rare display of emotion and flung both arms about this gaunt, wild-appearing figure. Then he ran over to kick Kali Yuga into wakefulness. "Stir yourself, misbegotten child of a baboon; the Bahadur Colonel has arrived." He cast North an inquiring glance. "You wish to eat?"

"Good God, yes. I'm starving," he panted and, dropping onto a blanket roll, commenced to struggle out of his disguise. Dark patches of sweat showed on the Intelligence Officer's shirt and glistened at his throat. He certainly would have liked to learn the elapsed time for his run from the outskirts of Jang.

"Tell me, when did the Russian and his group pull out? Late, I hope."

"No, Bahadur Colonel. He is long on his way. The Russian departed at daybreak, escorted by a troop of Prince Timrud's own bodyguard." The tip of Thopa's tongue emerged and licked his thin lips in the manner of a hungry dog. "Your friend Steel saw me and made a mock of us both.

"Soon I trust that he will laugh again—under the tickle of this blade," and the Gurkha gently stroked the kukri tucked into his wide, dark blue woolen sash.

"I hope! I hope!" North growled, struggling into his own ski pants, woolen underwear and the cashmere sweater he always wore next to his skin in cold weather. Next he donned that same battle jacket over which Jenny had deliberated. By sheer force of habit he combed his tangled black hair into a semblance of order before gulping a brass bowlful of curried kid and rice.

Between swallows, he listened attentively to the sum of Subadar Thopa's information.

"This much is certain, Bahadur Colonel. Because of the late season the Russian and his people are speeding to rejoin their caravan which awaits them on the Tibetan side of the Jonkhari frontier."

"How distant are his porters and equipment?"

Thopa shrugged. "I know only that if they follow the track on which they departed it will require two days for them to cross into Tibet."

North wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "Then we'd better get going, because we'll have to circle Jang and get well upcountry before daybreak. You don't suppose Timrud's men will escort them all the way to the border?"

"There is only one way to find out, Bahadur Colonel," commented the attaché.

Because of his recent inactivity North's energy, restored by a full belly and a long pull of *raksi,* welled strongly within him. After bidding Kali Yuga and the headmen farewell and repeating instructions to report Thopa's desertion, they swung

aboard their ponies. It was significant that even before the riders had become lost to sight Kali Yuga and the *mukhiyas* returned into their sleeping bags.

Under frigid blasts from a gale which continued to gain force, North pulled down the flaps of his Alpine cap and turned up the collar of a coarse black bearskin jacket.

It proved to be so dark, so utterly lightless on the road that the two riders were forced to rely upon compass bearings and the sure-footedness of their ponies. On and on they traveled, trotting whenever such speed was possible. When a scattering of lights indicated the location of Jang off to their left, North circled, giving Matbar Nana Jang's capital a generous berth.

There were, Thopa pointed out over the booming of the wind, quite a few lights glowing in the Citadel, so of course North's escape must have been uncovered. Meanwhile that worthy prayed that not until daylight would searchers discover that rope which, secured to a machicolation in the south battlements, had permitted his descent to a precarious footing below the ramparts.

Shortly before dawn the weather grew so blustery and the sky so dark that they were forced continually to watch the illuminated dials of their compasses in order to maintain their northwesterly course.

Hunched over in his saddle, North cursed the short if sturdy legs of all Mongolian ponies, as well as their relatively slow rate of progress. Thanks to a day's head start, guides, and fair weather, Atossa and her companions undoubtedly must have covered a considerable distance.

Buffeted by the howling wind and feeling terribly hungry once again, North, in bitter honesty, admitted the completeness of Sam Steel's long-deferred victory. Undoubtedly it had been he, rather than Gornoff, who had schemed to eliminate both rival contingents by a single stroke.

Atossa! Despite the freezing wind, he flushed. Not in many, many a blue moon had his judgment gone so far astray. He found he could visualize her in the Tavern of the Green Star sprawled indolently on that memorable, cushion-littered settee

looking steadily up at him from beneath her heavily lashed eyelids.

It occurred to him to ponder whether, in the light of subsequent events, she had accurately translated that scroll he had so injudiciously shown her—and which now was in her possession.

Without warning the pony snorted and stopped dead before the trunk of a freshly fallen tree. Effectively the yak path they had been following was barred. Followed a painful detour among loose rocks, led by Thopa, who could see surprisingly well despite the gloom. The Gurkha's prediction concerning the weather thus far had proved to be distressingly accurate.

Dawn, long belated by dense clouds and mists, found the two riders following a winding track which, halfway up the steep north slope of the Vale itself, paralleled that same road they had followed out to the shooting grounds five days earlier.

The rain commenced as hardly more than a heavy mist such as one encounters so often in Scotland, but gradually increased until it beat into the riders' faces with the force of spray from a therapeutic hose. Above and below the two miserable horsemen conifers squirmed and writhed under the blast like victims under torment, small branches sailed past and wet dead leaves from half-stripped hardwoods continually plastered their faces.

When, at nine in the morning, they pulled up in the shelter of a dense deodar copse, Thopa managed a chilled grin although his scar had turned a livid purple. "Higher up it will be even pleasanter, eh, Bahadur Colonel?"

"Hope to God this rain lets up," North grunted while shaking water, dog-like, from his sodden fur jacket. He eased his pony's girth and lifted off the saddle, heavy with attached equipment, but left the sheepskin pad in place. It wouldn't do to chill his weary beast's steaming loins. Obviously it would be futile to take the time necessary for building a fire, so they breakfasted on barley bread and cold meat.

Presently sleet began to fall, sleet that stung faces and hands like multiple invisible needles. Stubbornly, North tried to dwell

on the one encouraging aspect of this wretched weather. Pursuit must prove difficult in the extreme. Only a few moments was required to erase all trace of their passage, and not even hardy mountaineer villagers would venture out-of-doors save to perform some inescapable chore.

At the end of half an hour they resaddled, taking care to give their saddle pads a final backward twitch in order to smooth the ponies' back hairs and thus avoid irritation which might develop saddle sores.

The sleet now was driving so pitilessly that North and Thopa pulled mufflers up to a level with their eyes and depressed the brim of their caps. As the track climbed steadily higher, the wind grew proportionately more cutting and the sleet froze on North's bearskin jacket, on the pony's mane and coat until that tough little beast looked more like a gray than a black.

Sure-footed as they were, the ponies now occasionally slipped on ice-coated boulders studding this trail. The pursuers' misery increased with the frequent necessity of crossing, at considerable risk, a series of streams plunging down into the Vale. Several of these immersed the riders up to their knees and left their boots full of icy water. Visibility became reduced a matter of fifty or a hundred yards.

Gradually the shaggy little mounts slowed their gait, remained unresponsive to lashing from birch branches and only snorted when heels were driven viciously into their ribs.

Twice the riders encountered miserable, goatskin-clad shepherds driving their ice-flecked charges to lower ground. The herders gave no greeting or paid any attention even when their savage-appearing guardian dogs set up a frantic clamor.

Under furious clouds of flying sleet, rocks, shrubs and trees gradually assumed icy coats and North would have given much to rein into the shelter of a heavy spruce forest, but the thought of Sam Steel, Gornoff and Atossa riding steadily out of reach permitted no relief.

Not until a darkening sky and the treacherous nature of the terrain ahead rendered further progress hazardous, if not suicidal, did the pursuers finally pull up in the relatively sheltered

heart of a cedar grove. Here, in the lee of a long-uprooted forest giant, they dismounted silently, stiffly, like old, old men, and set about making camp.

Thopa remained cheerful as only a Gurkha can under adverse circumstances, and mocked North's patient attention to the well-being of their mounts. He even laughed aloud because the Intelligence Officer insisted on rubbing the saddle place and legs of these shaggy equines.

By the time Hugh North had completed his ministrations, Thopa had employed his kukri to cut fir boughs for beds and had rigged a canvas fly in the lee of roots which, choked by dirt, created a solid protection against the blast. Already little icicles had formed along edges of the fly away from a roaring fire.

The miracle of tea, quickly brewed and consumed scalding hot, transformed the two. In practiced fashion Thopa produced a small iron kettle, filled it at a brook, then shook barley and rice into it. Meanwhile North unfastened from the saddles the two yak-skin robes they would use for bedding.

They made no pretense of keeping guard in such weather—there was little chance of discovery, for all that the Sri Rajah and his Commander-in-Chief must be raging and organizing the most thorough pursuit imaginable. The ponies were too exhausted to do more than crowd close under a towering cedar and munch at grain brought along for their sustenance.

32. The Navel of Siva

The density of snowfall diminished considerably during the early morning, but enough still fell to veil mountains and valley and freeze onto Hugh North's brows and short, dark mustache. It was fortunate that,

not long after camp had been broken, they encountered another herder driving sheep down from some high meadows.

Although his three wolfish dogs rushed snarling at the riders, the shepherd, a bowlegged little man wearing a conical hood pulled low over snow-powdered jet hair, gave no sign of having noticed the two horsemen reining back to permit the passage of his long-eared, fat-tailed charges. Lacking these creatures' spoor and droppings for guidance, it would have proved difficult to follow the trail's devious course.

Precipitously the trail mounted, further exposing the pursuers to a truly glacial wind. Not in years had the Intelligence Officer felt half so benumbed. Fortune made a tentative gesture in their direction when, near midmorning, the snow ceased and the clouds lifted as rapidly as a theater's curtain. Until then, North had no idea that they had reached such impressive heights.

Far below lay the rugged Vale of Jonkhar, stretching away towards the east and those colossal mountains guarding the Kirong-la. White, brown and dark patches indicated the existence of fields and woods lying to either side of that great river which longitudinally bisected Matbar Nana Jang's domains. This snow apparently had fallen chiefly among the foothills and upper slopes.

Now that it was easy to follow this sheep-trampled trail, Thopa for the first time unslung his field glasses. North followed suit and, for a space, the two dismounted and studied the terrain both ahead and behind them, despite a blinding dazzle from abruptly sunlit snow fields.

Looming perhaps five miles ahead lay a series of lofty gray-brown peaks forming an impossible barrier, save for a single deep notch. Certainly the Russian and his companions *must* pass through this depression?

With the patience of experienced campaigners, the pursuers studied the mountain slopes ahead and probed as best they might the thickets of wind-twisted trees struggling up towards the timber line. Their only reward for this detailed scrutiny was a glimpse of a herd of gohrals, placidly feeding on a high,

wind-scoured plateau, and, far below them, a bear drinking at a stream. Of human habitation, there was no trace in the terrain ahead.

To North's bitter disappointment neither did they detect any sign of a traveled track, nor of an ant-like party toiling upwards towards the notch.

"Damn!" he growled. "You don't suppose we can have overtaken them?"

"No, Bahadur Colonel," Thopa grinned, rubbing frozen snow from his brows. "They have traveled along the valley road which is easy. No, I fear our enemies are well into that notch we see. It is called the Navel of Siva."

Yearning that they might enjoy the camouflage afforded by white garments or sheets, North remounted, and for nearly two hours the ponies struggled upwards until the weary pursuers could see a great crag which, like the prow of a battle cruiser, split the notch down its center.

Egress from the Vale, it became evident, must be possible through either of two routes, for distinct trails were visible winding up towards the snow line—one to either side of this jagged promontory.

"Which trace do you suppose that bastard Gornoff is following?" Again the Intelligence Officer found reason to bless the attaché's foresight and ability, although his knowledge in no way resolved what was about to become a critical question.

The Gurkha shrugged, narrowed eyes against the increased snow light. "That is not easy to say. Steel Sahib may have selected the track to the westward, which I am told is somewhat easier. Again, he may be using a shorter, but very difficult path."

North, aware that his eyes were beginning to smart under the glare, donned snow glasses. What a majestic, desolate panorama lay before them: bare brown ridges, soaring rock walls, jagged ridges and gleaming ribbons of glaciers. "It must have been like this when the world first took shape," he thought.

Small snowstorms still were scurrying about nearby moun-

taintops, and clouds completely obscured the towering majesty of 26,300-foot Gosainthan and 24,300-foot Babil Himal. How infinitesimal these hoary-headed peaks made a man feel, how insignificant his ambitions, defeats and victories.

It seemed to North somehow grotesque that soon the ultimate fate of many millions of unsuspecting human beings was about to be decided on this remote, implausible stage on the Roof of the World! On the outcome of decisions and actions taken by a small handful of people within the next few hours might depend the fate of a subcontinent.

By now the trail was becoming steadily more difficult and the ponies had to labor hard for breath; even the riders gasped in this rarefied atmosphere like freshly landed fish. Gradually the sky's blueness intensified itself and the sun created a glory among the high, gleaming Himalayas that defied human description. Now that the wind had dropped, only the snuffling respiration of the weary ponies and the creaking of saddle leather impinged on the ear.

Shortly they arrived at the foot of that cruiser's bow of a tower. No further procrastination was possible; they must decide on which route up the Navel of Siva they would follow.

According to Thopa's information the two trails converged again, but only very high up, just short of the summit of this exceedingly treacherous pass into Tibet. Which trail should they take? Once on the way there could be no turning back or all hope of overtaking Steel would be lost. It was as critical a decision as Hugh North had ever been faced with, for at the base of the salient they found that last night's storm had erased even the faintest evidence indicative of the course elected by the enemy.

Again a sharp doubt entered North's mind that Gornoff *et Cie.* actually were ahead. After all, he and the Gurkha had ridden almighty hard and long.

"Well, Bahadur Colonel, what trail do we take?" The little Gurkha was jumping up and down like a squat, dark-faced jumping jack in attempting to quicken circulation in his legs.

"If they got this far by yesterday afternoon," the Intelligence

Officer reasoned aloud, "they naturally would have picked the route giving them the most protection from an easterly storm such as we had yesterday."

"In other words," Thopa's white-flecked head swung to the left, "you think that, to escape the storm, those sons of pariah dogs followed the longer, but more sheltered route?"

The American briefly massaged craggy, badly wind-burned features. "What do you think?"

"For them to select the sheltered but longer west trail would be natural," Thopa agreed, then his jet eyes swung upwards, regarding the start of a steep, tortuous, snow-choked trail. He hesitated, grinned uncertainly. "How far we can take these ponies, I do not know."

North said tensely, "I reckon we can get them at least as far as that blizzard-haired wench and her playmates take theirs."

Neither of the men commented on the obvious fact that since Gornoff's party had passed—if, indeed, they had—several additional inches of snow and ice must have choked this breath-taking route.

In silence they goaded their unwilling ponies up that trail which hugged the western side of that great dividing promontory and found the footing simply wretched. Within a hundred yards North's pony slipped twice and all but skidded into a chasm at least five thousand feet deep. Accordingly both men dismounted at the first point where the trail widened enough to permit doing so.

North's pony became mutinous, snorted, rolled its eyes and planted its forelegs when he tugged on the bit. The terrified beast continued to balk until Thopa dealt it a vicious jab with his kukri. Only then was the perilous ascent resumed.

At the end of two hours' painful progress the afternoon sky's color deepened with distressing speed and found the two men and their beasts inching along an icy shelf which under normal conditions would have been difficult enough but, thanks to the ice storm, now was treacherous beyond belief.

Great gulps of thin and frigid air were being pumped into North's lungs but, because this atmosphere contained so little

oxygen, his supply of energy decreased inexorably. Sweat trickled in sticky, clammy currents down his back to dampen his buttocks and even the backs of his legs.

There was nothing to do but keep on, for to turn a pony about on this narrow track was quite impossible. So difficult became their progress that they were forced to rest every hundred yards or so.

"Dear Lord, please let us find some kind of a cave or overhang before dark," North prayed.

Catastrophe overtook them on a very narrow stretch of trail. Without an instant's warning, North's pony slipped on an icy boulder, floundered, then struggled backwards and thrust hoofs packed with snow and wildly flailing legs among those of its fellow.

One instant the track was a tangle of struggling beasts, the next, Thopa and North were staring across an empty space. They stood pressed so flat against the icy wall to their right that they failed to hear, let alone behold the impact of their mounts among the stone spears and crags below.

North swallowed once, then reslung his rifle, nodded to Thopa and, without a word, commenced to work his way further up that murderously slippery path. No need to comment that in a trice he and the Gurkha had become bereft of food, camping equipment and ammunition other than that which they carried belted about them.

Resolutely, Hugh North kept his eyes to the right and before him; never once did he risk peering into that blue-black monstrous maw, gaping as if greedy to swallow him, too. The wind rose with each passing moment and grew colder still, buffeting his body and whistling around arching corners.

At the end of another half hour's climb violet deep purple shadows rapidly were smothering the last rays of sunset. Thopa warned that they must halt at the very first point wide enough to admit their moving about a little. Before morning they must have to have room in which to exercise. Several planets had appeared in a violet-black sky before the benumbed climbers came upon a little gulley just big enough to accommodate them.

Although they long since had clambered above the timber line, a few stunted juniper bushes cowered among the rocks.

A quick inventory revealed that for food between them they possessed only a small hard knob of dried goat, a half block of bitter chocolate and that little silver flask of brandy which Hugh North invariably carried in the field. True, they still were wearing fur jackets equipped with parka-like hoods, but their legs were far from adequately protected.

At the sight of flames rising from a microscopic fire kindled with juniper twigs they managed to smile and even to joke about the comforts of their icy nest, but their effort was a transparent one. In a very short while the fuel supply must become exhausted and they would remain exposed heatless on this wind-swept ledge.

"Suppose we eat all we've got and keep our strength," North suggested. "Either we come up with them tomorrow or——" Beneath his frost-rimmed bearskin coat the Intelligence Officer's shoulders rose in a graphic shrug. Thopa nodded.

Both of them were aware that while the ascent of a perilous height is difficult, to descend it is doubly hazardous. Lacking ice axes, crampons, rappel ropes, *pitons* and karabiners, an attempt at retreat would be tantamount to suicide.

For nearly three hours the inadequate fire lent at least a cheering aspect, although its heat was so insignificant that it did not even melt powdered ice between the hobnails on their climbers' boots.

"Everything depends on how far ahead of us they are," North observed to the sputtering flames.

Thopa's eyes peered out from the breath-silvered parka hood like those of a denned fox. "And whether the rocks will permit us to approach Gornoff Sahib's people unseen."

Once the last flame had winked out and no fuel remained they decided to thrust their vulnerable feet and legs up beneath one another's coats, but soon the position caused them such agonies from cramp that they were forced to sit up once more.

Aware of a stabbing ache in his feet, North tried sitting

cross-legged, found some relief and remained thus staring up at the myriad unfamiliar stars now shedding a delicate blue-white radiance on the soaring peaks and snow fields all about.

In attempting to ignore the wind's persistent bite, he let his mind run back over the years. Of course there was Jingles, dark eyes laughing at him over cocktails at the Splendide in Istanbul.

Over her shoulder peered a succession of faces—faces he would never forget. For instance, that of Stag Melhorn, an enemy second only to Sam Steel in his vicious ability, then there was the long and ruddy countenance of his life-long friend and frequent collaborator, Bruce Kilgour, now a major general on the British General Staff.

Faces looming further back in the procession were those of Xenia Morel, the luckless opera singer, the lovely Eurasian features of Madé Sayu and the fanatic mask of Basil Urbaniev who, long years ago, had caused him so much trouble in Singapore.

"Well, my lad, it's been a pretty full life you've led," North told himself. "Now wouldn't it be damned silly if it were to end on a damned icy ledge in the middle of nowhere?"

He roused enough to recross legs growing numb.

Thopa, he could tell by the shimmering starlight, had huddled up like a treed bear cub. His breath vapors barely showed at all. What could that stalwart little man be thinking of? His home at the northern end of the great valley of Katmandu? Or of past battles? He must have fought in plenty if all those faded campaign ribbons on his best tunic meant a thing. And they did. Among them was the British Military Cross.

Shivering violently, North worked his fingers in their bear-fur mittens. Then, against his better judgment, he glanced at his wrist watch. God above! It was only eleven o'clock. Presently a half-moon lifted itself above a distant mountain range and afforded him entertainment in imagining outlandish figures among the rock faces across the stygian abyss yawning not a yard beyond his feet.

Somehow he must have fallen into a doze, for his next conscious realization was that of Ganesh pounding his shoulder

blades. "It is growing colder," the Gurkha warned. "We must move about or we shall freeze."

Like dancers gone insane they swung their arms, kicked up their heels, did *gazotsky* steps. Then they pummeled each other in a grotesque boxing match in which North had to be careful not to knock his much lighter partner off balance. Thus they managed to restore their circulation, but all too soon the inexorable frost commenced again to work up under their fur coats. Later they stood among the gray ashes of their fire and for a little while were comforted by a faint warmth lingering in the rocks.

When around four o'clock of the morning the temperature sank to something like fifteen below zero, Fahrenheit, North fumbled in a back pocket, took out his brandy flask. "We'll take a little slug every half hour," he announced and passed it over to his companion.

At six it was still dark and the brandy all gone. The air, moreover, now was so bitter that each breath had to be drawn through a muffler. By now the moon had sailed almost directly overhead.

"Must be something like this on the moon," North said through chattering teeth. "Cold, lifeless, and full of shadows."

His alarm soared when the Gurkha did not make immediate response and so he repeated his query louder. "Wake up! We've got to keep talking and moving.

"Say, maybe there's light enough to start on? Even if we move only a few yards at a time, at least we won't freeze—which surely we must if we stay here."

Slinging their rifles tight between their shoulders, they started on, sometimes wriggling on their stomachs around or over some particularly slippery obstacle.

It came as something of a miracle, as some unattainable hope, when a certain milky quality tempered the cruel brilliance of the night sky. The two pursuers, oddly contrasted as to proportions, moved jerkily, like marionettes or complicated machinery long denied lubrication. They had suffered, endured, and still looked on Death. Certainly the fingers of North's right

hand were numbed out of obedience and an area on Ganesh Thopa's scarred cheek remained stubbornly unresponsive to rubbing with snow.

A first faint penciling of gold was picking out the eastern profile of a pinnacle rising infinitely straight upwards when the Intelligence Officer, mumbling stupidly and traveling on hands and knees, negotiated a particularly treacherous shoulder. The haggard, hollow-eyed human halted, commenced to cackle in relief. Ahead the rim of this ravenous chasm curved sharply away left and disclosed a wide snow field!

Once they had reached this comparative security the two could only summon stiff grins and beat each other slowly between the shoulders. Of course it wasn't any warmer here on this little plateau and the wind was much stronger, but still it meant everything to have traversed that murderously narrow thread of a trail.

Once they had danced themselves into something like a normal state of activity they noticed that, a short distance ahead, a weird jungle of fallen rocks promised a measure of protection from the wind and the tops of a few sparse shrubs lifted above the silver armor encasing this unimportant shoulder of a glacier.

33. All Down

In the shelter of a shallow ice cave Subadar Thopa turned his hooded head. "Hear that?"

"No. What was it? An icefall?"

"No. I heard something—it was like horses neighing."

North started at his snow-mantled companion and decided that the Gurkha was far from being out of his head. "I heard nothing, but let's go on—I'm getting stiff again." Rousing him-

self, he picked up his rifle and followed Thopa under the fringe of icicles masking their refuge.

As cautiously as if on patrol, the Subadar picked a course through a crazy, Stonehenge-like jumble of rocks tumbled by the frost of ten thousand winters from peaks frowning still dizzily high above.

All at once the attaché's mittened hand swept backwards in a sharp, arresting gesture. When he turned, his bronzed features, curiously misshapen by the cold, expressed a savage satisfaction.

Through a tiny intersection between two massive slabs of stone North was able to discern, not seventy-five yards distant, five snow-dusted ponies tethered in the lee of a towering heap of jagged black rocks.

Beyond them he recognized the inverted "V" outline of a tent rising from the floor of a deep gulley.

Five ponies! Did this mean that two of Gornoff's guides had come down from Tibet into the Navel of Siva in order to rendezvous with their employer? It seemed quite possible. On the other hand, those spare mounts might be serving as pack ponies. Fervently North hoped so.

He passed a mittened hand over the ragged black stubble covering, and protecting, his chin. "We'll wait until they rouse," he whispered. "We'll let whoever comes out first move as far as he will from the tent, then get the drop on him. Then we'll order the rest out with their hands up."

"Is good, Bahadur," grunted the little officer. "They have been careless and shall pay for it."

One pony, hungrier than the rest, neighed and commenced to paw the snow. Ages seemed to elapse before the pursuers, crouching behind a rock less than seventy yards from that small and weather-stained tent's entrance, noticed pieces of wind-driven snow drift from the tent roof. A hand appeared, jerked at the tie cords. Whose? That of an unknown, Atossa, Gornoff or Sam Steel?

To secure firm footing the watchers settled themselves deeper in the snow and cuddled the cold wood of their rifle stocks to

their cheeks. Not yet did they slip off their mittens—and they weren't going to until the moment they were ready to shoot.

The first to appear was the malformed figure of Leonid Gornoff. He was yawning heavily, stretching and unalert in his thick sweater although a pistol was belted about his middle.

Boots crunching on the frozen snow, he tramped towards the picket line and, after relieving himself, he went over to inspect the nearest pony. Not until the Russian's back was turned did North pull off his right glove and level his sights. Gornoff stood less than fifty yards away—so close that he could see the Russian's chin jutting over the gray of his turtle-neck sweater.

"Raise your hands!" North called and almost fired because Gornoff instead whirled about, emitting a startled yelp.

"Up!" North insisted sharply. "Up! Now order your dear comrades to come out of that tent! Warn 'em to come out unarmed and with their hands up. Go on! Tell them!"

The Russian, his pock-marked features gone lead-colored, stared, then shouted over his shoulder. His rimless pince-nez up here looked too incongruous to be real. "Come out! Come out, Tovarischi, else they murder me!"

To North's intense surprise, no obedient activity ensued beyond a violent stirring of the tent's nearest wall.

"Listen, Gornoff. I'm going to count five so loudly that those within the tent must hear, and if your pals aren't out of there by then, you're one dead duck," North warned. "One——" Amazing how thin his voice sounded in this rarefied atmosphere! "Two——"

"Chardo," chuckled Thopa, leveling his rifle at the tent's handstained entrance.

"Three——"

"Come out!" Gornoff screamed. "I order you——"

"Four!" Still no figures appeared. Gornoff ducked, at the same time clawed at the pistol holstered over his right hip.

Quite unemotionally, North leveled on at the base of Leonid Gornoff's neck and knocked him spinning crazily across the snow, finally to trip and lie like a drunk in a gutter. The ponies reared, then stared, white-eyed.

Subconsciously, North was aware of other shots and to his horror saw the Subadar fling arms on high, reel sidewise and drop his rifle. Frantically he tugged at the ejector lever of his Marlin but it refused to operate, and, in a fraction of a second, he realized that its action wouldn't budge. Grease, however suitable for use in the warm valley, had frozen hard as cheese during the night.

When a bullet whined past him, Hugh North gave one spasmodic leap, then sagged forward onto his face, at the same time churning the snow with his feet. Thopa lay quite motionless a few yards away.

As he calculated, his simulated death throes gave him opportunity to snatch his hunting knife from its sheath. He heard Steel running and spouting obscenities all the while.

"Is he dead?" was Atossa's breathless query.

"Yep. I plugged the son-of-a-bitch, center line," Steel exulted. "It's been years I've been waitin' for this. Wonder how the hell he got loose?"

Prone, North heard the creaking impact of boot soles on snow. That he could not look up was a vast disadvantage, but even so he selected the correct instant to surge to his feet and catch Steel with his rifle's muzzle pointing upwards.

North launched a kick any star punter could admire, and sent the soldier-of-fortune's rifle flying. Although taken by surprise, Sam Steel recovered with deadly efficiency. Lunging forward, he grabbed North's knife hand and at the same time tried to knee the dark-haired figure.

North managed to turn enough to catch the thrust on his thigh, then completed his turn and tried to throw Steel over his head—judo fashion. Whether he would have succeeded, North never learned, for just as he braced for the heave, a rifle cracked very close at hand and Sam Steel uttered a single hoarse shout of agony. Then strength deserted the mercenary's straining muscles and he went lax.

Instantly North whirled, ducked low and dove for the black blur of a figure poised not three yards away. His next impression was that of his head butting against someone's body. Then

he saw stars from the blow he caught on the back of his head.

Confusedly, he groped upwards until his hands converged upon his antagonist's throat, then he clamped down in frenzied force. Although he and his enemy rolled back and forth over the soft snow, he hung on until his brain cleared and he realized that he was choking the life out of Atossa Frederika Matala. She was so far gone that her blue eyes were bulging from their sockets and her features had taken on a purple-red color.

Aware that she could not recover consciousness for some minutes, he staggered to his feet and retrieved his rifle. In his disordered mind he had the impression of being gigantic—the others all lay so flat. Only he and five badly frightened ponies remained standing.

Subadar Thopa lay with blood from a wound in his head creeping out over the snow. Leonid Gornoff had collapsed onto his side—minus his eyeglasses at last. Of Sam Steel only his booted legs showed, because he had slumped into a snow-filled crevice. Finally there was Atossa, panting and still purple-faced at his feet. There was no one in the tent.

34. Advance into Disaster

Colonel Hugh North was trying to foresee his next moves, to think clearly and to make no mistakes. He found himself in one of the loneliest and most forbidding areas on the Earth's surface but momentarily secure since there must be food and shelter to spare in Gornoff's camp.

Methodically he bound the semi-conscious Estonian's hands behind her, put hobbles to her ankles and bade her to follow when, as gently as possible, he carried Thopa into the tent. Here it was warm because a large primus stove was hissing con-

tentedly, just as if two, or possibly three, men had not died since it had been lit.

"Hugh!" croaked Atossa. "Listen—me."

He crossed to stand over her, fists clenched and with a steely glint in his sunken gray-blue eyes.

"Shut up, you treacherous bitch! One more word out of you till I tell you to talk and I'll close your mouth so you won't even be able to whisper!"

Eyes filling, she settled back on some sleeping bags, all the while swallowing painfully. Those bluish-red marks about her throat must be causing her considerable pain but he paid no attention. The condition of Ganesh Thopa was his immediate concern.

He found the Gurkha to be breathing heavily but strongly when, using infinite care, he examined a fast-bleeding gash on his head's right side. The bullet—God knew who had fired it—had failed by a slim fraction of an inch to fracture Thopa's skull but had plowed through his scalp, causing an ugly and sanguinary wound. Under normal conditions, it would be painful but far from critical.

"Have you medical supplies?"

When Atossa simply glowered from congested blue eyes, he kicked her bottom soundly.

"Speak up! Where's your first-aid kit?"

"In—blue canvas bag," she gasped.

North used scissors quickly to snip away gore-matted hair surrounding the wound and then liberally applied iodine, the sting of which caused the unconscious man to groan softly and writhe.

Next North set about arranging compresses over the hurt. It was about three inches long. At length Thopa's dark head wore bandages which, while not expertly applied, nonetheless were efficient. After wrapping the Gurkha well, he placed him on the pile of sleeping bags.

"Please—I can——" Atossa started to speak but fell silent before the savagery of his look when he bent, jerked undone the rope hobbling her ankles.

"All right. Outside, you, where I can keep an eye on you."

A curious and not unpleasant reaction seized him at thus brutalizing this handsome female.

"Why take me outside?" she demanded hoarsely. "My hands are tied, and tightly, too."

"You might take it into your head to kick over the primus. There isn't much your deviltry can't dream up."

She choked, slowly revolved her head. "Strange words from the man whose life I have just saved."

"Louder and funnier! You winged Sam by mistake and you'll never get me to believe different."

He made Atossa stand, blinking and half blinded by the brilliant sunlight and dazzling snow, while he retrieved her rifle and those of her companions. These he tossed into a crevasse after making certain that Thopa's weapon and his own were undamaged. While handling his Marlin he indulged in severe self-condemnation. Imagine having forgotten about the tendency of grease to freeze at high altitudes. He was lucky indeed to be still alive.

"My hands are cold," Atossa protested presently. "Will you not loosen these cords a little?"

"Thanks to you, mine were colder still last night. Now you stay where I tell you and don't move. I'd like nothing better than just an excuse to——"

"—Ravage me and then throw me into a chasm?" Her chin went up and, long legs braced apart, she stared fixedly at him through a tangle of silvery hair fallen over her forehead.

"That's not a bad idea," he growled. "Maybe I will, later, when I'm not so tired. I've always wondered what it'd be like to indulge in a spot of rape."

Methodically he then explored Gornoff's pockets, loading their contents into a musette bag.

"If you seek your tobacco pouch you will not find it there," Atossa predicted.

"How d'you know?"

"I never gave it—him."

North employed General McAuliffe's expletive. It turned

out, however, that in this respect his prisoner was telling the truth. He discovered the little leopard-skin bag concealed in a box containing certain intimate feminine supplies. Germinating doubts increased when he located Carl Anton Malchek's box of shells packed in her ammunition case.

"Please, Hugh, I am so very hungry. I—I feel weak." In gray-green ski trousers, well-fitted, heavy-ribbed light blue sweater and quilted brown jerkin, she looked anything but weak. There were brownish half-moons beneath her eyes, however, and she had skinned her chin during their tussle.

A gaunt, wild-appearing figure bearing a vivid red smear of frostbite on one cheek, he came to stand where Atossa sat propped against the bedrolls and peered steadily into her wind-browned features.

Possibly there *might* be a grain of truth in her recent contentions?

"I'm going to untie your hands long enough for you to cook something for us," he announced. "Meanwhile, you can give me your version of what's happened."

Although alert to any sudden *démarche* on Atossa's part, he cast a sidewise glance at Thopa, small, wiry figure stretched out beneath a pair of fur blankets. To his relief the Gurkha was breathing more evenly and showing unmistakable indications of returning consciousness.

Not until he seated himself to take Ganesh Thopa's pulse and watched his prisoner reheat a kettle of stew did he realize how very close to exhaustion he was. All the same he kept the Marlin cocked and ready across his knees. Surprisingly, he found himself able to think more evenly, more dispassionately.

Sighed Atossa, ladling steaming broth into her mouth, "Did you know that your hands are terribly strong? For me to swallow is most difficult."

"You're not a gentle playmate yourself," he mumbled through a mouthful of stew. "Why did you say that you saved my life?"

"Was it not Sam Steel who died and not you?"

With his boot he shoved a tin of water biscuits in her direc-

tion. "Oh, for God's sake, why not admit you were trying to kill me and only knocked off Sam by accident?"

Atossa stared, then vented a harsh laugh. "You insult me, *mon ami.* Do you imagine *I* could have shot the wrong man at such a range?"

He didn't reply immediately to that, merely held his Marlin close to the primus. Never in this world would he forget the agony of that moment when he found its action frozen.

At length she threw aside her aluminum bowl and drew out a long cigarette. "You are not so very clever after all, *mon Colonel,*" she observed. "When you were sent to prison did I not preserve your records for you? And that despite that silly woman you were sleeping with. She was most difficult, too, before she would give me the pouch and shotgun shells."

A mocking gleam shone in Atossa's clear blue eyes. "I presume it is of no interest, but that little fool has fallen madly in love with you."

A muffled groan from Thopa drew their attention in time to see him dazzedly open his eyes. A sip of vodka from a nearly empty bottle sent color flowing back into his dark cheeks.

"I—not dead," he grinned feebly. "The Thakris—my tribe—damn' hard to kill."

"Hell, no, you'll still hang for piracy at eighty," laughed North.

It was astounding how rapidly the Gurkha's abundant vitality restored him.

"Please, can I give him some soup?" Atossa begged, and gave the Intelligence Officer an impatient frown. "What must I do to prove that you have nothing to fear from me?"

"Tell me why you were leaving Jonkhar with my secrets."

"I had every intention of escaping from those two, but they gave me no opportunity." She flushed. "Steel learned about our —evening in Jang and, despite my every protestation, he remained suspicious."

"Very well," said he. "Fix up Thopa with some food and, by the bye, don't go making any play for his rifle. It's unloaded and I have all the cartridges."

When he had swallowed a cupful of stew, Thopa demanded wonderingly, "How is it that we still live?"

"After I killed Gornoff—Steel apparently shot through the tent entrance and creased you while our charming guest here was taking a pot shot at yours truly."

Even as he spoke doubt reoccurred; that so expert a marksman as Atossa Matala could have missed, without intending to, somehow didn't make sense. He must have presented the world's easiest target standing there and wrenching at his Marlin's ejector lever. Obviously Atossa had followed this train of thought, for she smiled, then looked away quickly, as if to say, "You see? I have not been lying."

Still carrying his rifle, North tramped outdoors but put it down in order to saddle one of the ponies and rig a line to it. He threw a hitch about one of Steel's booted feet in order to pull the corpse out of that crevice into which it had slid.

Already partially frozen, the long, snow-covered body emerged only jerkily and amid cloudlets of powdery flakes. The scene formed a curious pattern; there was a furry little pony tugging and puffing at a black line made fast to the soldier-of-fortune's ankle and North in turn tugging at the pony's bridle. Atossa, to one side, was feeding the other animals—a wooden expression on her bruised features.

At length Steel's body appeared, lay on a wind-swept stretch of rock, and North found himself looking down into Steel's vacant, battered, faded-looking face with surprisingly mixed emotions.

The Intelligence Officer decided to ransack the dead man's pockets and even test the linings of his various garments. It proved almost as profitable a performance as the search of Gornoff—two fat notebooks filled with cipher, an excellent map of Jonkhar indicating possible landing fields and gun emplacements, were among the spoils. Perhaps the legendary heroes of Trojan wars had experienced the same sensations on viewing the bloodied corpse of some fallen, but strong, able and crafty enemy?

Oddly enough, he could recall with graphic clarity the first

time he had ever seen Sam Steel. He was lashing aside coolies with a riding crop on his way to board a Yangtze river steamer. That had been back in 1932. What a fantastic career he had had! Cruel, capable, and yet loyal to his salt, Sam Steel must indeed have been among the last of those great European adventurers who had fought in the Tuchun Wars. And now he lay here, his little, red-rimmed gray eyes staring fixedly at the sun and with a great lump of rose-colored snow clotting his chest.

"Poor old devil," North muttered, then shivered on reflecting how easily it might have been he who was lying there.

Frowning, he employed the pony again to haul Steel's corpse to the lip of a crevasse in the glacier. Awkwardly he pushed the two bodies over the edge to become entombed for centuries to come in the glacier's heart.

35. Return at Midnight

The town of Jang appeared to be all but lifeless, for only here and there did rays of light escape shutters to sketch bright rectangles and ruler marks over a light fall of snow. While it kindly disguised inevitable heaps of garbage the snow was not yet deep enough to muffle the tread of some fifty horses. Accordingly, various late-retiring inhabitants appeared at their doors and peered out to note the hurried passage of a column of cavalry. The troopers were silent and sat their saddles like men who had ridden hard and far without rest.

Riding beside North in the center of the column, Atossa abruptly threw back the hood of her now familiar clouded leopard jacket, and, fishing into North's side pocket, produced his flask.

"Recognize that?" She jerked her head towards the en-

trance to the "Green Star" and the peacock-ornamented pillar before it. *"Mon ami,* take a *soupçon* of this, and I'll give you a mohar for your thoughts."

The Intelligence Officer straightened and dug knuckles into eyes which felt as if they had been salted and then dipped into hot grease. Gratefully, he swallowed a mouthful of vodka, then passed his flask over to Thopa. The Gurkha's stamina was proving nothing short of miraculous.

"Doesn't it seem incredible that we were in there less than a week ago?"

Atossa tilted back her pallid head and took a deep swallow. "So much has happened, *hein?"*

"That's a monumental piece of understatement," North smiled wearily. "I wonder what's on the cards for us when we reach the Citadel?"

She shrugged and kicked forward her mount. "Almost anything unpleasant. *Cela va sans le dire."*

With this the Intelligence Officer agreed seriously, but he said nothing. If he had been wrong concerning the true character of Atossa Frederika Matala everything, all his efforts and with them the hopes of the West, would go for nothing.

Suppose this *emigrée* woman were suddenly to depose that one Colonel Hugh North had murdered, in cold blood, two important emissaries of a Government with which Jonkhar had entered into a treaty of amity and alliance? Suppose she were to deny the existence of any espionage on the part of Gornoff and Steel? Certainly Prince Timrud's stalwarts could, at any moment, seize and suppress the papers of both those men, together with his own tobacco pouch and Malchek's box of shells. Nobody could ever prove that they ever had existed.

It was proving indeed a unique, and far from agreeable, sensation thus to see his fate resting in the hollow of a most unpredictable female's hand. One consoling thought remained: saving her reassurances to the commander of that search party which had found them near the foot of the Notch, he and Thopa would have been executed on the spot.

Try as he would, North couldn't decide whether Atossa's

conduct on that wind-swept plateau had been implemented by anything save expediency and quick thinking.

What could have happened to Jenny? Was she still sheltering with Dil Kusha? Or had some perfectly explicable, but fatal, accident overtaken her? He raised his eyes to survey the familiar outlines of those ugly twin towers flanking Matbar's palace, then ran them along a series of lofty battlements now softened by a silver-blue patina of moonlight. Up yonder plenty of lights shone, thanks no doubt to the fact that a galloper had been dispatched by the patrol's commanding officer.

Again, how would the Sri Rajah regard his having either killed or seriously injured a prison guard? No telling.

Down in the Vale—it had seemed blissfully warm by comparison with those frigid temperatures in the Navel of Siva—Thopa and he certainly had guessed wrong about Steel's and Gornoff's route. It turned out that they had elected to follow the longer but more sheltered trail to the westward of the dividing cliff, and so had never suffered along that Via Dolorosa traveled by the pursuers.

When he noticed Atossa peering anxiously at him through the halflight, he straightened and managed a smile, although his every bone and muscle ached. Thank God, it shouldn't require much time to learn the fate in store.

The hoofs of the foremost cavalrymen were echoing under the Citadel's gate before he became well aware of it. He drew a deep breath, glanced back over the whitened roofs of Jang, at the wild terrain of the Vale of Jonkhar, then straightened in his saddle and passed beneath that cavernous arch again poignantly suggestive of a hungry leviathan's mouth.

A moment later he and his companions were stiffly dismounting in that same square upon which the rites of Durga Puja had been so memorably celebrated. Out of the palace hurried a handful of dark figures, long cloaks flying. Among the foremost of these strode Prince Timrud, towering above his fellow officers; also present was the Dewan; he almost trotted, despite his great weight.

Prince Timrud halted before Atossa and rasped in guttural Hindustani. "Why have you brought these murdering dogs back alive?"

"Because I am confident His Highness, the Sri Rajah himself, wishes to pass judgment upon them," she replied with an enigmatic smile. "No doubt he will administer justice according to the best traditions of Jonkhar."

Everywhere lights were springing into existence. Perhaps one of them might be illuminating Jenny's room? Thopa, stumping along at North's right, suddenly groped for the Intelligence Officer's hand.

Said he simply, "Come what may, Bahadur Colonel, we may take satisfaction that we have done our duty."

36. Matbar Nana Jang Decides

In what must have been the Palace of Jonkhar's War Room not more than a dozen persons stood ranged in various attitudes of anxiety, confidence and fear before a divan upholstered in dark red leather. Above this settee tulwars, daggars, kukris and yataghans by the dozen had been affixed in a glittering panoply about a circular shield of brass. To either side of this was arranged a fantastic display of ancient weapons ranging from battle-axes and pikes to gold-mounted, muzzle-loading muskets.

Directly beneath the panoply Matbar Nana Jang sat cross-legged and supporting an ivory-handled scimitar on his lap. Behind the big, black-bearded potentate stood two hulking bodyguards carrying unsheathed sabers. Immediately before the dais lay a round Chinese rug of dark blue ornamented by a circle of yellow embroidery in its center.

Although the War Room was not large, many maps, crude affairs for the most part, were hung to its oak-paneled walls. Painted on the wall directly opposite the Sri Rajah was a large fresco depicting the Vale of Jonkhar. Some artist of more than ordinary skill with uncommon accuracy had indicated the State's principal natural aspects.

Tired as he was, Hugh North found no difficulty in identifying the Kirong-la and that secondary pass over which Gornoff, Steel and Atossa had traveled to dispute his attempts to join Arunah Keith. Less readily recognizable was Siva's Navel and that dizzying track upon which he and Subadar Thopa had so nearly perished.

The three prisoners—it seemed that they were considered to be such—were ordered forward to stand, empty-handed, before the Sri Rajah—as widely assorted a trio as could have been imagined. First, the bronzed, flat-faced Gurkha, by far the shortest of the three, his head still crowned by bandages which at one point revealed a dull red stain. Clad in his blood-stained fur jacket, patched khaki shirt and breeches, he stood in military erectness with scarred chin slightly raised as if he were demanding impartial and just treatment.

A full head taller stood Baroness Atossa Frederika Matala. Never had the aristocratic cast of her handsome features appeared more pronounced, although from heavy climbing boots to disheveled silver-blue hair she suggested fatigue incarnate.

Her light tan features seemed darker than ever due to the scouring the wind had given them in addition to stinging sleet and snow. In those gray-green ski trousers of hers she seemed preternaturally long-legged and lithe. Her powerful fingers kept picking at panther-skin mittens slung by a tape about her neck and once, quite mechanically, she used them futilely to comb her wild-flying tresses.

North stood tallest of the three, his black, wavy hair wildly tousled and with the gray patches above his ears showing up sharper than usual. His long, American Indian-like features, too, had darkened through exposure and for once his mustache was ragged and his jaw concealed beneath a thick black stub-

ble. Over one arm he carried that bearskin jacket which undoubtedly had preserved his life and stood at ease before the dais of authority.

Along the wall to the Sri Rajah's right was ranged a double rank of dignitaries—among the most powerful personalities in Jonkhar. Aside from officers of the Royal Bodyguard, North recognized the Royal Surgeon, the hawk-faced chief *shikar* and paunchy General Bijai Lakshi, wearing an openly malevolent expression.

A little to one side, Prince Timrud's powerful form towered above the Dewan's rotund figure. After surveying the prisoners a long while the Sri Rajah suddenly leveled a forefinger at the Commander-in-Chief and barked:

"Foremost of my Fighting Men, you will state the charges, fairly and without prejudice."

Into the glow cast by two huge Nepalese brass lamps suspended by chains above the dais waddled Bijai Lakshi, twirling his buffalo-horn-shaped mustachios. Thrice he salaamed to that dark-visaged and broad-shouldered figure sitting with ramrod erectness upon the divan of leather. Turning, he then stabbed an accusing finger first in North's direction, then at Ganesh Thopa.

"Oh, mighty Prince and valiant Lord of Jonkhar, I charge these foreigners with high crimes and misdemeanors committed against the peace and dignity of your realm. They have entered Your Highness' domain without proper authority, they have violated your hospitality and have slain your honored guests."

North diverted his attention to the Dewan and deduced that the old man was deeply alarmed.

"I charge," continued General Bijai Lakshi, "that this American brutally has murdered one of Your Highness' subjects—a jailer in the performance of his duties. Further I charge this *pilingi* with illegal escape and criminal espionage and therefore demand his immediate execution!"

As the Commander-in-Chief salaamed once more and stepped back, North experienced a sharp tingling at the base of his scalp.

"And you?" The Sri Rajah directed a sharp glance at his half-brother.

"I charge this *pilingi,*" shouted Timrud Jagai Jang, "with responsibility for murders of our friends and guests, Colonel Han and Major Wong. I further charge him with the violent abduction and intimidation of the gracious memsahib now in his company. Princely Brother, it is only just that this Nepalese spy, as the *pilingi's* confederate and fellow criminal, shall die with him."

Again the Sri Rajah's penetrating jet eyes surveyed the prisoners. "Let the American advance two paces," he directed, "and speak first."

The hobnails of North's boots grated over the stone flooring until muted by the circular rug. He found himself looking into the Sri Rajah's aquiline features at a range of not over five feet.

"Have I your permission to speak?"

Matbar Nana Jang fondled the jeweled scimitar on his lap. "In our land even the vilest of worms is granted opportunity to speak in defense."

"Your Highness, may I answer the charges one by one?"

"You may."

In halting Hindustani helped out by Subadar Thopa, North reminded his grim-faced listener of the special Nepalese *lamyiks,* averred hotly that he had not come to spy but only to propound the West's arguments in favor of continued independence for the States of South and Central Asia.

"Now as to the murders of Colonel Han and Major Wong," North's voice rang out, filled the War Room like the clangor of a gong, "I respectfully submit that they *could not have been shot by my subordinate,* the unfortunate Delahanty Sahib, who, on the other hand, was wantonly murdered by a sepoy of Prince Timrud's guards."

"Bah!" exploded the Commander-in-Chief. "Tests have been made which proved to the satisfaction of His Highness that the murdering bullets could only have come from the weapon carried by Delahanty Sahib."

As was his habit during supremely critical moments, Hugh

North delayed long enough to draw a deep breath. "Your Excellency," said he blandly, "I do not deny that said bullets were discharged by a rifle belonging to my unhappy friend, nor that they were fired by my subordinate!"

A murmur of excitement rippled about the weapon-hung chamber. A diamond on the Sri Rajah's scimitar winked brilliantly as he leaned far forward.

"Then you admit that your henchman slew the emissaries of a friendly nation in a cowardly and treacherous fashion?"

"I admit nothing of the sort," came the instant retort. "As to whether those Red Chinese were representatives of a friendly nation is a point I shall be delighted to dispute later." He could feel, rather than see, Atossa's great, bright blue eyes widening, regarding him in wild incredulity.

"What I maintain, Your Highness, is the indisputable fact that when those bullets were fired, *for a second time*, and killed the Chinese Reds, they did not issue from Delahanty Sahib's Springfield!"

The single-strand necklace of pearls on the Sri Rajah's breast swayed as again he leaned forward.

"The *second* time?" he rasped. "Have you indeed gone mad?"

"By no means," came the level response. "I speak only the truth, as you may perhaps read on the faces of my principal accusers."

"From what weapon, then, were they discharged?"

Like a consummate actor the Intelligence Officer delayed his response until the Sri Rajah was about to speak. "From a shotgun carried by the happily late and unlamented General Sam Steel."

Then indeed did a hubbub break out to be quelled only by an angry bellow from the Sri Rajah.

"You talk in mad riddles," shouted Matbar Nana Jang. "Do not dare to try my patience with such nonsense! Even the stupidest peasant in Jonkhar knows that a shotgun cannot fire cartridges made for a rifle."

"Your Highness, as usual, is quite right," came the Ameri-

can's polite agreement. "But is it not possible for a rifle *bullet* to be fired from a shotgun?"

Heavy brows merged themselves just below the Sri Rajah's khaki and green turban. "In what manner?"

Haggard features tense, the Intelligence Officer riveted his gaze on Matbar's eyes.

"One has merely to remove the small shot from a shotgun shell and substitute a rifle bullet within. It can be immobilized by several convenient means, such as tallow, wax, clay, or even hard-packed fiber. If Your Highness doubts this, I would be delighted to make a demonstration, preferably with a shotgun belonging to your noble brother, Prince Timrud!"

"Why allow this charlatan longer to insult your intelligence, my Brother?" The Prince's lean cheeks were scarlet as an angry turkey cock's wattles.

Swift as a dagger thrust was the look cast by the Sri Rajah at his half-brother.

Not hazarding his advantage by an instant, North continued, "When His Highness Prince Timrud so kindly offered to assist Delahanty Sahib and me with target practice before the hunt, I was flattered, deeply so. But also I wondered why, as butts, we were each one given a bale of wool to fire at; bales which were removed as soon as we had finished firing."

"By Varuna, Krishna and Kali! This *pilingi* talks the rankest nonsense!" snapped Prince Timrud, but on Bijai Lakshi's plump and oily features had appeared a look of uncertainty, if not of suspicion.

North addressed a scarred and bowlegged major he had seen at the rifle range. "Is Jonkhar so wealthy that it is customary to use wool bales for target practice?"

"No, Sahib. Generally we employ paper attached to wooden frame and placed before a claybank."

"Then I wondered whether it was as a special honor that we were invited to ruin two valuable bales of wool?" North's long, strong nose and high cheekbones glinted in the lamplight as he swung to confront the *Hakim*—that surgeon who had probed for the bullet. "Have you ever in your experience seen high-

powered rifle bullets inflict such gaping inlet wounds as those which slew the two Chinese?"

Granting the *Hakim* no opportunity to reply, the hollow-eyed prisoner whirled on Prince Timrud. "Your Highness is reported to be a famous sportsman. Please tell these gentlemen what kind of a hole is caused by a high-powered rifle bullet at its point of entry?"

Every man in the room, North knew, was well aware of what the answer must be. From the tail of his eye he could see turbaned heads tilting together, hands being raised to muffle whispers.

"A small round hole," snapped Prince Timrud, his eyes glittering with rage. "In leaving the body, however——"

"Ah, I was coming to that." North smiled evenly, was suddenly aware of Atossa's perfume over the moist odors of gun oil, wool and fur. "Do you not find it significant neither bullet, although fired at close range from a 30.06 Springfield rifle, escaped at all? And surely they must have, had they *been fired by a rifle!* No. Those bullets found in Colonel Han and Major Wong were fired from a shotgun, the low velocity of which caused the bullets to tumble in their flight, to keyhole, we say in my country."

"*Mon Dieu, il est magnifique*—he is magnificent," murmured Atossa.

There could be no doubt that consternation was genuine, that all the onlookers were deeply impressed, especially Bijai Lakshi. The manner in which he now regarded Prince Timrud was anything but amiable.

"Your Highness!" When Atossa raised a muscular brown hand for permission to speak, apprehensions dug like icy knives into North's heart. What was this astounding woman about to say?

She stepped forward with coat flung back over her elbows—it was growing fairly stifling in the War Room—and everyone could see the abnormally rapid lift of her breasts despite the heavy, round-necked sweater.

"*Monsieur le Colonel* has been very astute, no? But he has

not yet proved *whose* shotgun did the firing. Were not many of your bearers and *shikaris* so armed?"

"She speaks truth," burst out Prince Timrud. "This crafty American may well have paid one of his bearers to accomplish these cowardly murders. To me it seems the more likely in view of the fact he knows exactly how the killing was done."

Again the Sri Rajah had to roar a command for silence while North stared bitterly at the supple, mechanically smiling figure to his left.

"I can, however," Atossa continued, letting her coat drop and deliberately folding her arms, "remove any doubt as to who killed the Chinese."

The Sri Rajah's neatly parted sable beard quivered in outrage. "Then why, accursed female, have you kept silence so long?"

"Because I knew I would be killed if I spoke."

"By whom?"

"Either by the Russian or by General Steel."

Prince Timrud ceased glowering at North; surprising, and far from pleasing, revelations must be crowding in upon his imagination.

"Speak on!" commanded Matbar Nana Jang, his fingers working over the scimitar's ivory guard. "None shall harm you."

"When I noticed General Steel leaving his blind," the Estonian said in clear carrying accents, "I believed him in pursuit of some wounded bird and thought no more of it, but when I heard two shotgun reports, well beyond his hide, which"—she directed her gaze at the head *shikar*—"you will recall was between mine and that of those Red spies who met a well-deserved end."

Then, indeed, did the explosion take place. Prince Timrud's hand flew to the handle of his kukri. Bijai Lakshi, roaring "Traitor!" surged forward, tugging at the grip of his sword.

Barely in time were bodyguards able to interpose themselves and force the two apart, scowling and hissing threats.

"Silence!" thundered the ruler of Jonkhar, then turned on

Atossa. "Red spies? Do you say that these guests of General Bijai Lakshi were Red spies?"

"Yes," Atossa said. "Officers and red-hat lamas alike!"

"Bring nearer this woman!"

"They were spies," declared Atossa Matala in fluent Hindustani. Her wildly flowing pale hair looked gilded by the lamps. "At the request of *Monsieur le Colonel* North, I translated in part," she smiled fleetingly, "a document he discovered upon the body of one of General Liu Po-chang's and Fratkin Schmul's most trusted agents."

North cast his companion a grateful glance, then said, "I suggest, Your Highness, that you permit Subadar Thopa to describe how we came into possession of *these.*" While speaking he fetched out his leopard-skin tobacco pouch and offered the eleven little cylinders on the palm of his hand.

"Because they were written in Chinese," explained the Intelligence Officer, "I was quite unable to read them. Perhaps you would care to have an interpreter translate a sample for your benefit?"

The air steadily was growing worse in this weapon-hung chamber, what with the perspiration of so many bodies and the heat of the oil lamps, but no one did anything about it.

That the ruler of Jonkhar was as desperately confused as he was astounded appeared evident.

Atossa cut in, brilliant blue eyes seeming larger than ever in her handsome, pale brown features. "What is within those cylinders is an excellent estimate of military engineering problems likely to be met with by troops invading Jonkhar from the northeast—*which means Red Tibet!*"

She smiled her automatic smile. "The specimen given to me by Colonel North for translation was addressed to the attention of Colonel Han and Liu Po-chang himself, with all the usual honorific phrases. What this spy of theirs had obtained was the most detailed information concerning elevations, gradients and geological data in the vicinity of the Kirong-la."

At a curt gesture from the Sri Rajah, she fell silent.

"You, General, were entirely ignorant of this matter?" Mat-

bar flung at his Commander-in-Chief. Bijai Lakshi's gaze shifted, but then he commenced to shout out his innocence. He declared himself horrified at the memsahib's revelations. Of course he had entertained never a suspicion that his friends, Han and Wong, were other than important visitors on friendly mission to Jonkhar. But the more the Commander-in-Chief expostulated, the less weight his arguments carried.

Prince Timrud commenced to show irregular white teeth in a distinctly savage grin; his satisfaction must have attained a peak when, quite abruptly, the Sri Rajah beckoned forward the Colonel of his Guard.

"General Bijai Lakshi is under arrest. Escort him to his quarters. You will see that he does not quit them until you receive orders from me."

To the Commander-in-Chief, now burbling in acute distress, he growled, "You have our permission to withdraw."

Once that corpulent officer had salaamed and withdrawn, trembling and ashen beneath his dark skin, the Sri Rajah once more confronted the trio of prisoners. The silence of deep expectation settled over the now unbearably hot War Room.

"What else have you to say, Bahadur Colonel?" His use of an honorific title was not lost upon North.

"I request, Your Highness, that my wife be summoned." He held his breath, fearful that some harm past recall had been done Jenny.

"Let the memsahib be fetched at once," ordered the Sri Rajah, straight-backed, severe and aloof on his divan.

"If Your Highness also will send for an oilcloth-covered package in my saddlebag containing notebooks that once belonged to those who perished on the Navel of Siva, and an ammunition case marked with the Baroness Atossa's name, you will find evidence of considerable importance; evidence which may prompt you to reconsider," he emphasized the word, "certain agreements I believe to have been concluded between yourself and the late Comrade Gornoff."

Then, indeed, did excitement invade the War Room, and Prince Timrud lost his confident smile.

"While we are awaiting arrival of the evidence," North suggested equably, "I suggest"—he took a long chance—"that you permit the Baroness Atossa to speak. Perhaps she will describe the true nature of a mission into Jonkhar ordered by Colonel Andriev, Chief of the Kremlin's Central Asiatic Division."

Promptly, Prince Timrud broke into furious expostulations. These three were a pack of liars, he maintained, seeking nothing more than to arouse dissension within the State, whereas Comrade Gornoff and General Steel had conducted themselves in a manner above reproach.

"Including the murder of the two Chinese?" Thopa spoke for almost the first time.

"Silence, you Nepalese pig!"

The Gurkha was on him in a flash, and again the bodyguards had to intervene.

"For that," Timrud snarled, "you shall surely die!"

More turmoil ensued, much to North's distress. This was the only moment the attaché had caused him so much as an instant's embarrassment; he knew how deeply he was indebted to that stalwart little officer.

"Peace, my Brother, and be silent!" Matbar Nana Jang was at great pains to remain calm. "The Memsahib may speak."

It was then that Atossa electrified even North by a minute description of Gornoff's instructions, of his astute survey of the political situation in Jonkhar. Further, she dwelt on Sam Steel's expert appreciation and analysis of military problems presented in the conquest of Jonkhar.

In detail she then explained how cleverly Leonid Gornoff had excited Prince Timrud's cupidity with promises of sovereignty over a huge vassal state which would owe subservience, not to Red China, *but to Moscow!*

Again and again Prince Timrud attempted to interrupt, until at length the Sri Rajah, in a shout of rage, ordered his half-brother conducted to the guardhouse.

His was the face of a sadly disillusioned man when a cursory examination of Gornoff's and Steel's papers, together with Professor Malchek's cartridges, revealed that, beyond a doubt,

the Red Chinese had not been alone in planning an invasion of Jonkhar.

While the Dewan hovered in the background, his uneasiness rapidly dissipating, Atossa explained how Carl Anton Malchek had been expected to contact Gornoff in Jang with priceless information concerning the southern approaches to the Kirong Pass. That rockslide had been indeed a serious blow to the Russian.

"And what of that rockslide?" demanded Matbar Nana Jang. "You do not believe that it was caused by natural forces alone?"

"Your Highness," Thopa replied, "I believe that a skillful interrogation of the Commander-in-Chief——"

"Former Commander-in-Chief," corrected the Sri Rajah, grimly.

"—Will reveal that he knows who launched the rockslide, just as Prince Timrud may well explain an unsuccessful attack on our camp on the night of our arrival in the Vale." He grinned, wiped streams of sweat from his scarred features.

"Neither wished our expedition to reach your capital. Both were jealous of each other, as well."

It was then that Jenny appeared, pale, anxious, and obviously just aroused from her bed. Protected only by a cape flung over her nightdress and wearing heavy brogans on bare feet, she paused on the threshold, overshadowed by two stalwart sepoys.

"Hello, darling," she greeted in her clear, Bostonian accents. "I was wondering just when you'd turn up." Then she hurried over to him and raised her face for a brief kiss.

North suggested that the Dewan be permitted to question Jenny concerning the conduct of the late Professor Malchek. She complied and, though ignorant concerning what had just transpired in the War Room, she described how it had been Professor Malchek's habit to disappear for a certain number of hours each day with his favorite shotgun. As often as not the scientist had returned empty-handed, which was surprising in that he was considered to be an excellent shot.

Before she had spoken long it became evident that the Sri Rajah understood the truth of North's contentions. He sat meditatively stroking his glossy, divided beard.

"With shame we must admit that we appear to have been betrayed, deceived and misled," he said finally in deep tones to the Dewan. To the silent courtiers he added, "Herewith we consider abrogated any, and all, agreements entered into with the masters of the spy, Gornoff."

He turned to North and Thopa, standing gray with fatigue before him. "Should we decide to permit fortification of our northeastern frontier by these nations you call 'the Democracies,' how soon might we expect the arrival of supplies, airships, modern artillery and, above all, men?"

Thopa answered, declaring that Nepal stood ready to send at once sufficient troops, expert in mountain warfare, to forestall early moves attempted by the Red masters of Tibet.

North, while miserably unable to make promises of immediate assistance, nonetheless managed to convey conviction that should the ruler of Jonkhar present a firm front against Red aggression, then the varied might of the United Nations would sustain him. Tactfully, he forebore mentioning the fact that India and Nepal, rather than Jonkhar, would be the main objective in a Red attack.

The Dewan's plump countenance now was one great smile. Purred he, "If Your Highness permits, may I suggest that further discussions of these problems be postponed until morning? Certainly our friends must be fatigued beyond description."

A long minute the Sri Rajah remained immobile, his somber, savage features quite expressionless.

"When one more matter is explained, you will have our permission to depart," said he at length. He cast a glance in the direction of Atossa, at the moment retrieving her clouded leopard coat from the floor. "We do not yet comprehend, Memsahib, why you have thus turned against your former companions. Surely now you can never return to your country?"

To his last hour Hugh North never would forget the way

Atossa stepped up to the crimson divan and drew her body to its magnificent full stature.

"Your Highness has Jonkhar; all here present possess honor, friends and, above all, a country to be loved; all save me. Subadar Thopa has a homeland honored wherever fighting men are found. These two Americans are citizens of a great and free nation."

She was breathing quite rapidly. "Therefore none of you can understand what it means to exist in slavery, to see about you only Godlessness, wickedness and a brutality seldom unsurpassed in all the sad history of Man.

"For many years now one has seen the truth vilified and all religion crucified. Can you guess what it means to exist in perpetual terror? To have to grovel before corrupt and cynical masters?"

She stared about the War Room, fixed all those dark Caucasian and bronze-hued Mongolian faces with a dreadful, hopeless look.

"Believe me, death is better than to exist in a world of hatred; to live in a land where love is a timid flower sprouting only to die beneath the heel of Suspicion and Hate.

"Perhaps it is for this moment that I have continued to live since the Soviets ravaged and murdered the little Republic of Estonia. What now will become of me I do not know. Certainly the MVD will not rest until I have died for what I have revealed to you."

Her taut posture relaxed as, smiling faintly, she turned to Hugh North's tall figure. *"Mon ami,* think of Atossa Matala what you will, but I shall never forget that, in your hour of desperate need, you trusted me."

She spun about and hurried from the War Room, the hobnails of her climbing boots *click-clacking* briskly over the gleaming floor.

37. Flight Southward

By hundreds the colorful and varied population of Jang gathered along the frost-rimmed shores of that lake lying west of the Citadel. Not since the Second World War, when a lost and storm-tossed B-17 bomber had crashed on a nearby mountain, had the inhabitants beheld an aircraft at anything like close range.

When a second plane in search of Colonel North had appeared from Darjeeling it circled over Jonkhar until its pilot spotted a panel design consisting of an orange square within a triangle exposed upon a high hillside. Since that moment there had been little peace or quiet in either palace or city.

Their baggage reduced to essentials, Hugh North and Jenny Cutler stood on a sandspit watching the float plane twice fly the length of the lake.

"Good and careful lad, that," North commented. "He's making sure there are no snags or drifting logs to be calculated on."

Together with a majority of his court and no less than a battalion of guards, the Sri Rajah, garbed in a magnificent leopard-skin coat, stood upon shell ice at the water's edge surveying the scene in frank curiosity.

A low murmur of excitement arose from the dark-faced throng when the float plane leveled off and skimmed the surface, twin engines roaring mightily. Children along the shore danced up and down in excitement, gray beards in *chapkas* and turbans gaped, and veiled women giggled nervously. Under cover of this activity the Dewan sidled up and put into North's hand a long cylinder of dark green leather.

"It was not until early this morning," he muttered apologeti-

cally, "that I was able to persuade His Highness to place his personal seal upon the agreements."

The old man's Buddhistic expression relaxed visibly and he patted North's arm. "You can have but little idea, Bahadur Colonel, of how hard we labored to bring this," he tapped the scroll, "about, the Rani Dil Kusha and I."

"I shall always lament my inability personally to thank the Rani for her extraordinary courtesy and courage in befriending my—my wife," North replied earnestly.

To North's astonishment, the Dewan solemnly winked, then murmured, "You are among the most fortunate of men, Bahadur Colonel, to enjoy such a—a bedfellow."

"Am I not?" For the life of him North couldn't restrain a furious blush from welling above the collar of his black fur coat.

Now that the float plane had settled amid feathery clouds of spray and had commenced taxiing to the driftwood-littered stretch of sandy beach, the Sri Rajah and his new Commander-in-Chief, glittering figures though they were, could not hold back and hurried, curious as small boys, to the water's edge.

Seen beside Atossa Frederika Matala, Jenny Cutler's trim figure appeared almost diminutive.

She hugged North's arm. "I never thought I'd be so damn' glad to see the British flag!" she cried, pointing to a Union Jack painted upon the float plane now droning steadily inshore through sheets of flying spray.

"Somehow, Hugh, I can't believe that this plane's real." She lifted piquant, wind-reddened features. "Do you suppose next spring that the Sri Rajah really will send out poor Arunah's specimens and mine?"

"I've the Dewan's promise that they will be shipped—it's possible that the Baroness may even shoot a few new species to round out your collection." The Estonian strode up, silvery mane uncovered and whipping free in the sharp breeze.

"I wish you were coming with us," Jenny said suddenly, and in earnest.

"I wish it were possible, madame, but it will be not unpleas-

ant here in Jonkhar." Atossa's squarish mouth formed a warm, genuine smile. "His Highness has promised that I may shoot wherever I wish—even in the Kirong-la. As you know," she slapped North's shoulder and grinned, "to hunt is the principal pleasure of my life. Oh, I shall be quite happy here until the spring."

"And then?" North queried.

The clouded leopard coat lifted to Atossa's shrug.

"*Voyons.* When the passes are open I shall travel southward, possibly into Indo-China. I foresee that, by then, the situation in Saigon will afford me ready employment. Are not the largest tigers in the world to be found in Cambodia? Also that terrible wild buffalo—the seladang?" She nodded to herself. "Yes, I think if you wish to find me you must look in Cambodia."

Excited cheers arose from the crowd when, skillfully, the pilot guided his plane shorewards until its floats grated over the shell ice and sand. The pilot, a blond young fellow, cut his engine, then slid open a window and yelled in Hindustani for lines to be made fast, then he and his navigator clambered stiffly out. Obviously he had no difficulty in recognizing North since he made right for him.

"Robert Kneische reporting, sir, and this is my navigator, Mark Beebe. I hope you are prepared to take off at once, sir. We shall be bucking head winds all the way to the Singhalela Hills."

It was fortunate, North realized, that Kneische and Beebe should look spruce and neat in their blue commercial pilot uniforms as, hurriedly, the new arrivals were presented to Matbar Nana Jang and his entourage. For all the excitement they exhibited, Kneische and his navigator might daily have been picking up passengers in the remote white vastness of the Himalayas.

At the end of a very few moments, the rifles and small bags of the passengers had been stowed in the luggage compartment amid the curious stares of the multitude, some of whom even waded out into the glacial water for a closer look.

Solemnly, the Sri Rajah offered his liberally ringed hand.

"We will keep our word, Bahadur Colonel, but we expect the Nepalese troops to appear with all speed. Not long ago our commandant in the forts of Kirong-la reports there has been much activity along the Tibetan entrance to the Pass."

Jenny waved to the dark-faced throng on the shore, then permitted herself to be assisted into the fuselage by the frankly admiring glances of the two Englishmen. When North meanwhile turned to Atossa, she extended both hands and looked earnestly, almost yearningly, into his deep-set gray-blue eyes.

"Do you know, *mon ami?* I am so glad that your friend Sam Steel forbade me to shoot you that first day." A hesitant smile parted those full, dark red lips. "Come to Cambodia next spring and let us make a great hunt, one that will be talked of for years."

"I'll bet it would!" North grinned. In unaccustomed diffidence, he hesitated. "It's as useless for me to try to express my gratitude for your help as it is to tell you how deeply I admire your courage and wit. I can only hope that you find some steadfast purpose in life."

"I have," she declared softly. "What remains of my life I shall dedicate to the defeat of those Red butchers who everywhere are attempting to destroy freedom and religion."

Suddenly she surged forward and, flinging arms about his neck, pressed her trembling body to him. *"Je t'aime, mon brave, mon coeur!"* she breathed. "And my love for you shall endure until I cease to breathe. *Adieu.*"

Cheers arose and the bodyguard fired an impromptu salute when the float plane commenced to drift off shore; the clamor became lost in the sudden roar of the engines. The cheers persisted until long after the aircraft had lifted its dripping pontoons clear of the surface and had droned away over the Citadel towards the Gorge of Durga and the troubled world to the south.

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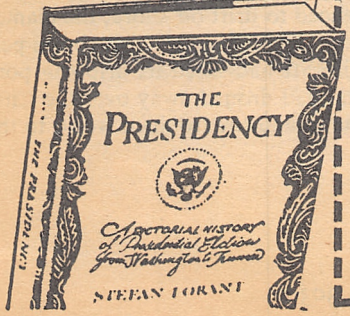

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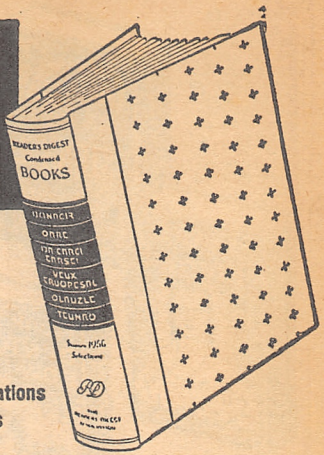

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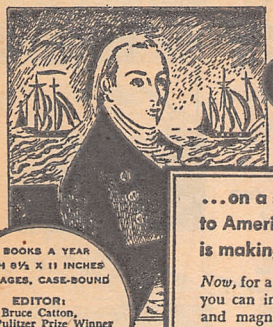

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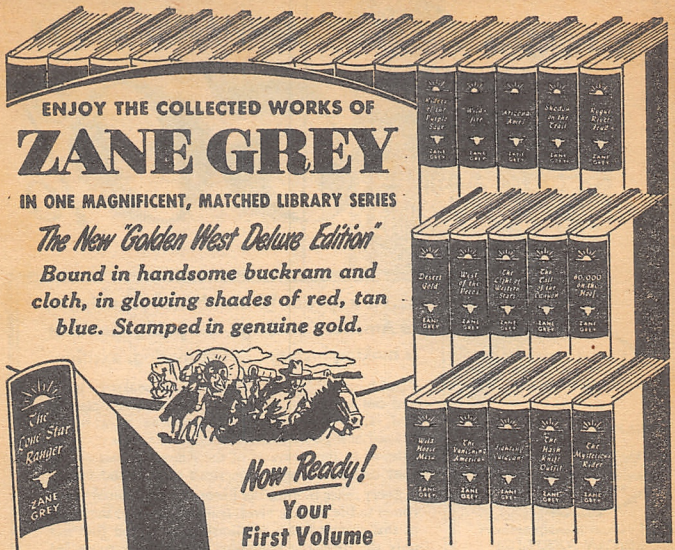

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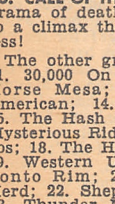

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