

## CHAPTER 6

MY BED THAT NIGHT WAS NOT UNLIKE THE hospital beds back at the Mission, made as it was of wooden supports but stretched across with skins rather than canvass. Like the yetis around me on the floor of the cave, I slept under a wolfskin rug that tickled my chin. The coronation tin had been taken from me and set on the rock ledge in the wall just above my bed, but it was the photograph inside that troubled me. That photograph was enough to keep me awake for most of the night. The faces that looked out at me had set my mind racing. It was mottled with damp spots, but clearly discernible were the faded brown figures of a mother, a father and a young man – their son I supposed. The parents were elegantly dressed, but in old fashioned clothes, the father with a high, stiff collar and a long jacket and the mother in a tightly waisted, full-length dress that seemed to be gathered up behind her somehow. Her face was obliterated by a damp spot, but the father looked proud and supercilious, his chin held high. It was the young man though that both troubled me and interested me most. He was wearing a strange kind of clerical cassock, not unlike my father's, except that there were buttons down the middle, a low slung belt and white bands on his throat, just like father used to wear at the Mission chapel on Sundays. The bands must have blown up to touch his chin at just the moment the photograph was taken. His face was, I felt, trying not to smile and only just succeeding, and there was something familiar about this face that struck me at once. There could be no doubt at all that there was some

resemblance between this young man and myself – although he looked older than I. Written across the bottom of the photograph in copperplate handwriting were the words: 'With Mama and Papa. C.H.'.

I lay there all night struggling in vain to puzzle out the endless questions that seemed to have no satisfactory answers. That I was known by the yetis in some way was obvious. It could be, I thought, that they were even expecting me. After all they even had a name for me. With the exception of Little Red I was, it seemed, universally loved, indeed I was almost revered by the older ones. It was clear to me that they thought I had been here before. What was quite certain was that someone had been here before me. How else could the coronation tin, the knife, the pipe and the photograph have got here? It was possible they had been stolen of course, but why? And where did the bed and the stool come from? Who did they belong to? And what was the significance of the coronation tin, anyway? The niche in the rock above my bed that housed the box was filled with flowers almost as if it was some kind of shrine. The young man in the photograph was the only positive clue I had. Who he was and why he was important I could not know. All I could assume was that the yetis believed him to be me and me to be him, that I had inherited his position amongst them, that of a king or a priest perhaps.

Such thoughts kept me awake for many hours that night. Beyond the fire I could see the silhouettes of two yetis squatting by the entrance beyond the fire, and from somewhere deep in the blackness of the cave came the occasional bleating of a sheep. I lay in the dark thinking only of Uncle Sung who had brought me so far and through so many dangers,

somewhere deep in the blackness of the cave came the occasional bleating of a sheep. I lay in the dark thinking only of Uncle Sung who had brought me so far and through so many dangers, but try as I did I could not picture the reassuring smile I knew and loved so well – and how I yearned for it now. Instead I could see only his body lying stiff in the snow and the wolves circling. I tried to thrust that terrible nightmare from my mind, but nothing, not even the lama's 'mo' could take its place. I wept silently in an agony of grief and loneliness, biting the sleeve of my coat to stop myself from crying out loud. I had lost the dearest friend I had and I was alone in the world.

The sheep woke me in the morning as the yetis drove them noisily past me towards the mouth of the cave. Some of the smallest yeti children bounded over towards me as I got up and then sat back on their haunches to consider me at a safe distance until they were called away. They scampered off after the sheep, herding them like sheepdogs and looking back at me from time to time over their shoulders. The sheep were proving awkward and obstinate and refused to be driven out of the cave, their leaders baulking and stamping their hooves. They were thickset, short-legged creatures with spindly horns, except for the sturdiest of the flock, a ram I took him to be, who boasted a pair of handsome curled horns which he tossed threateningly at the yeti children as they herded him towards the cave mouth. Panic stricken lambs bolted in and out of the flock bleating for their mothers. There was bedlam in the cave as the last of the wayward sheep was rounded up and driven out, shepherded by an escort of screeching yetis.

Red, One Ear and a few others stayed behind squatting by the fire. As I came over to them One Ear took my arm and hugged me to him. I was offered a place between Little Red and his father. They were scooping milk one-handed from a dip in the rock. This I found very difficult to imitate, but they encouraged me to do so and looked puzzled at my ineptitude. More often than not my hand would arrive empty at my mouth but I was just beginning to master this enough to satisfy my thirst when I felt myself jolted sideways and most of the milk went in my ear or down my neck. When I glanced at Little Red I knew for sure it had been no accident. The yetis were all looking at me, waiting to see what I would do. I felt

it was a kind of challenge that I could not ignore. Little Red leaned forward to scoop his milk. I waited for the right moment and jolted his arm as he raised it to his lips. Little Red lost most of the milk in his beard, and he turned on me his teeth bared. The yetis squealed with delight. Clearly I had done what was expected of me. I thought then he would launch himself at me and leapt to my feet to be ready, but Red grabbed his arm and held him back. Little Red's eyes glared into mine momentarily before he resumed his drinking in sullen silence. I had made an enemy amongst the yetis.

That first day living with the yetis was to tell me much about how they lived. With many of the yetis gone away into the forest, I supposed to shepherd the sheep, those that remained gathered round the fire. There followed a debate to which I listened trying to glean some vestige of meaning, but I failed. There was no apparent leader, but it was clear that when One Ear spoke the others listened attentively. Even more respected, I soon discovered, was the most ancient looking yeti I called 'White Beard', who sat silent by the fire during the debate, a great grey wolfskin wrapped around him. He was entirely covered in white wispy hair, his eyes almost hidden under thick white brows. His silence was commanding. Though he said little, it was immediately apparent to me that his approval was sought for everything – with the yetis it seemed that age was much respected.

The older yetis stayed behind in the cave whilst the young ones dispersed in ones and twos. I thought, indeed I hoped that I might be left behind with One Ear and White Beard, but clearly there was some competition between the yetis as to who should take me with them. That much I could understand. I was still feeling weak from my privations. Though I could feel no pain, I could see my left foot was still swollen and not fit to walk on. I could still feel nothing below my ankles. The frost seemed to have set in my feet and would not leave. In the end it fell to Red to take my hand and lead me out of the cave and of course I could not refuse. They would not understand my excuses and anyway I felt somehow they expected me to want to go. They seemed to assume I knew where I was going and what for.

Outside I was hoisted on to Red's back and with Little Red running or swinging ahead of us through the trees we left the light of the clearing and plunged into the

forest. I had to learn quickly the knack of dodging and ducking under the branches, and I envied the ease with which Little Red flew above us through the trees.

I heard the roar of the river long before I saw it. Little Red was already waiting for us squatting on a boulder above a rushing waterfall that fell into a series of deep green pools. Red lowered me to the ground and took my hand. Little Red sprang from his boulder and ran across to us as we came out of the trees. He pushed me violently to one side and took Red's hand in his, looking up at him lovingly. It was only then that I realised the source of his antipathy towards me. I was never, his eyes warned me, never to come between him and his father if I knew what was good for me. Of all the yetis, Little Red was the only one I felt posed any threat to me, so I determined not to fuel his jealousy and to stay away from Red if it was at all possible. But the damage had been done as I was to find out all too soon.

I thought at first we had stopped at the river only to drink. The two yetis crouched down on all fours on the bank their mouths close to the water, but they made no attempt to drink. In time Little Red moved away from his father and walked up-river where he lay down full length on a flat boulder that hung out over a pool. He had his nose in the water. He had one hand steadying himself on the bank beside him, the other was dangling in the river. There was no violent thrashing of the water, no great excitement as Little Red caught his first fish and threw it casually up in the air beside him to let it gasp to death on the bank. It was a sizeable fish too – Lin would have turned ten cartwheels in celebration of a fish like that. Perhaps Little Red was in a better place than his father for he was catching much more often and they were always bigger. They looked like a species of brown speckled trout. I didn't like watching them die slowly so I took a stone and did the killing much as I used to do with Lin – a sharp tap on the back of the neck was all that was needed to finish them.

Red turned and beckoned me over towards him, urging me to come quietly as I came. He was pointing down into the water, so I let myself down slowly and peered over the edge. The fish seemed almost to be queuing up to be caught in the

shallows below me. Most were too small to bother with but in amongst them was a monster of a fish that swam motionless against the flow of the river. Red took my hand and lowered it gently into the water. With his hand on mine I stroked the fish along the ridge of its back. The other fish seemed to know what might soon happen and vanished one by one. Before I knew it and before the fish knew it Red had it by the tail and it was flying high in the air back on to the grass behind us. I scrambled after it, but it squirmed out of my hands time and again before at last I had a firm grip on it. I was looking around for a stone to kill it with when a shadow fell over me. I looked up. Little Red was standing over me. He bent down, snatched the fish out of my hands and bowled it over my head towards the river. It fell short and lay in the grass flapping feebly.

Everything happened very fast after that. That he was challenging me yet again was obvious to me, and the coward in me which is never very far from the surface told me to ignore it, to turn the other cheek. I got to my feet and turned away from him. The moment I did so I sensed it was the wrong thing to have done. With a snarl he was on my back and I was falling forwards and rolling. I tried to protect my face with my hands but I had no other defence – I could feel the terrible strength of his arms around me. I struggled only to escape, not to fight back. I heard Red cry out and then we were in the sudden cold of the river together and sinking. I felt the water come in my mouth and nose. The grip on my neck faltered and I broke free. I kicked upwards towards the light, choking convulsively and sucking in more water as I fought for breath. Then I was breathing air instead of water and saw that I was only a few yards from the bank. My feet found rock and I was scrambling out of the water and Red was dragging me clear.

On all fours I coughed the river water out of my lungs and fought for my breath. When I looked up Red was gesticulating violently and screeching. I turned in time to see Little Red disappear beneath the surface, a red shadow beneath the water and drifting slowly towards the waterfall at the bottom of the pool. Red kept stepping into the water and coming back out again whining pathetically. I could not understand why he did not go in after his son. I saw Little Red's arms clutching at the air and then I realised that neither of them could swim.

'Leelee!' Red cried, his eyes beseeching. He was pulling at my arm dragging me down towards the river. 'Leelee!' I pulled off my sodden coat and my boots and dived into the river. I had no fear of the water – I had Lin to thank for that – but I felt the cold numbing me and slowing me as I swam. Little Red seemed to move away from me as fast as I could swim, and it was only because he was swept round and round in the eddying water that I managed to reach him before the waterfall took him. I caught him round the neck under the crook of my arm and turned for the bank. He was a dead weight and for a few dreadful moments I felt myself useless against the force of the water. The current was taking us inexorably towards the roar of the waterfall. It must have been the panic in me that gave strength to my tired legs and I kicked furiously for the bank. Red ventured knee-deep into the pool to haul us in and then I was sitting stunned by the cold watching Little Red spluttering face down on the grass beside me.

Red carried his half-conscious son back through the forest and I ran along behind trying to stamp the life back into my legs and feet. Once back in the cave Little Red and I sat side by side covered in wolfskins as the great fire shivered the warmth back into us and gave us feeling again. My feet tingled to life, the first sensation I had had in them for days. The story seemed to spread backwards through the cave bringing everyone running to the fire to hear more. The she-yetis left off milking the sheep and the children raced around the fire shrieking with excitement until White Beard cuffed one of them and they settled down to listen to Red's story again.

The children who just this morning had hardly dared approach me came and squatted by me and patted me and stroked me. Little Red sat silent and sullen throughout all this, hanging his head. At last he was called before White Beard who stood beside me on the speaking rock and who berated him formally in front of everyone. The matter seemed to be over.

There was a meal of fish, honey and milk and then One Ear stood up on the speaking rock and I was invited to sit up beside him on the rickety stool that had become my throne. Red took the coronation tin off its shelf and handed it to me reverently. Then he went and sat down with the others. Everyone was looking up

at me with great expectancy on their faces. They seemed to want me to speak and so I did.

'Leelee!' I said, putting my hand on my chest.

'Leelee!' they echoed.

'Man,' I said – it was all I could say that I thought they might understand.

'Maa,' they cried.

I pointed at them: 'Yeti.'

'Yay, yay, yay,' they chorused. They had done this before, of that I was quite sure. They were all insatiably eager to learn, even the children, but it was the older yetis who seemed to find the words easier to pronounce, almost I felt as if they knew them already and might be teasing me. Whether or not this was true they clearly possessed phenomenal powers of concentration and memory as well as a determined wish to learn. The lesson went on until One Ear called a halt – by that time I had taught them every part of the body I could properly point to and we all left the fire and went away to our beds.

I was halfway into my sleep when a touch on my cheek brought me back out of it. 'Leelee,' said a voice. The dark silhouette could have been almost any of them. I sat up on my elbows. The face turned so that the light from the fire flickered across it. It was Little Red. He reached out and touched my cheek again. 'Leelee,' he said, and then he was gone. My enemy had become my friend.

**Key Vocabulary from Chapter 6 – Can you find the definitions of the words?**

Mottled

Discernible

Obliterated

Supercilious

Cassock

Resemblance

Screeching

Imitate

Vestige

Convulsively

Gesticulating

**Questions based on Chapter 6- Can you answer the questions using the range of skills we have learnt in school?**

1. Who do you think the coronation tin belonged to? Can you explain your reasons?
2. Why does Ashley call one of the Yetis 'one ear'?
3. The author uses the phrase 'gasp to death' to describe Little Red catching his first fish. What was happening to the fish? Why do you think the author chose these words to describe the fish?
4. What do you think the phrase 'to turn the other cheek' might mean?
5. Why do you think the baby yetis patted Ashley?
6. Find a synonym for the word 'tease'.
7. What do you predict will happen in the next chapter? Explain your reasons.

**Challenge: Can you write the first paragraph of the next chapter?**