

## CHAPTER 5

I COULD NEITHER RUN NOR SCREAM. EVEN WHEN the huge creature lumbered towards me I remained rooted to the spot. Because my head was swimming I raised my hand to steady myself against the door. As I did so the creature stopped instantly, mouth open, breathing hard. He was close to me now, towering above me. Only then did my thoughts gather themselves and it came to me that this might be the yeti creature Uncle Sung had described to me. He was gigantic and was covered in red hair from head to toe. Only the centre of the face was hairless. The skin was wrinkled and black. His nose was flat and turned up so that the nostrils were scarcely more than two holes in his face, and the chin receded almost formless into his neck. His forehead was vast and prominent and overhung the face in a permanent frown. But under the thick red eyebrows the eyes that looked back down

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as time passed I began to believe that Uncle Sung might not ever come back and that I would be left to die here on my own. The wind got up again whipping the world outside into a raging blizzard. The hut shook so violently that I thought the roof would lift off at any moment. I knew that Uncle Sung could not travel in such weather. No man could.

I piled the fire high again and drank more hot water, not because I was thirsty, more to banish the desperate loneliness and fear that welled inside me. Certainly the crackle and heat of the fire was some comfort. But sleep was the only real way to forget and I slept in snatches all through that day and into the night. I spent my waking hours keeping a futile watch at the window for any sign of Uncle Sung's return. The end of the blizzard brought a welcome silence but no hope. There was no movement outside. The fresh snow had covered all footprints and tracks. It was as if neither Uncle Sung nor the yeti had ever been here.

Once in the half light of dawn I fancied I saw a shadowy figure stalking through the snow in the distance. It might have been a wolf, a bear or perhaps

at me were searching and intelligent. They were wide with fear or anger – I could not tell which.

Keeping an arm's length away he circled around me towards the open door. He stood for a moment examining me, his head slightly on one side before turning and ducking under the door. It took me some time to come to my senses. I slammed the door shut after him and ran to the window. The yeti, and I was now quite sure that that was what he was, was bounding away through the snow on all fours. Beyond the barn he stopped, and turned and stood up again. For just a moment he looked at me, and then he was gone and I was alone again. Curiously enough after such a terrifying encounter I can remember that I was sad to see him go. There was no sense of relief that danger was passed, just a feeling that I had somehow wasted an opportunity. Worst of all was the knowledge that I was alone again in this desolate place with only my hunger for company. I felt oppressed by the new emptiness around me.

How much I longed now for Uncle Sung to return and for the food I knew he would bring with him. But

a yeti. Whatever it was I welcomed it, for it was some sign that I was not the only thing left alive in this white wasteland. I was quite beyond being frightened of anything by now.

The next day was the longest I ever knew. I busied myself trying to drive some feeling into my ankles and feet, stamping up and down the hut, but that tired me quickly, and my feet stayed frozen despite all my efforts. To pass the time I began to build a lifesize effigy of my yeti in the ash that was piled in front of the fire. I tried it again and again until I felt it was a fair representation of the creature I had seen. By the time I had finished the ash yeti was stretched out like a giant grey gingerbread man right across the room in front of the fire. I found two black stones for his eyes, a stick for his mouth, and it was done. And still Uncle Sung did not come. I waited by the window all afternoon and watched the sun slip behind the mountain peaks and the shadow of night creep across the snow towards me. He did not come and he did not come. He would never come.

That night I curled up in front of the fire and tried to

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rock myself to sleep. I was sure by now that Uncle Sung had either been taken by the wolves or that he had lost his way in the mountains or been caught out in the blizzard and had perished with the cold. I knew for certain that Uncle Sung was dead and when I cried it was for him and for me because I knew there could be no hope now for either of us. It was the end.

I slipped in and out of turbulent and terrifying nightmares and was no longer conscious of the passing of time or of cold or of hunger. Lin, Uncle Sung, the lama and a pack of ravenous golden wolves peopled these nightmares and recurrent in all of them was my yeti – ‘Red’ I called him – who saved us all time and time again. I had been fending off the wolves with my staff and I was about to be torn apart when Red came bounding across the snow and drove them off. I was not at all surprised at this for he had done it often enough before – he always seemed to arrive just in time. He was bending over me asking if I was hurt when I noticed he was not alone. There were two of them peering into my face. Then they began to sniff and lick me from head to toe, and I didn’t much care

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that is what I presumed the white hair indicated – reached out slowly and touched me on my hair. I had not realised until then how extraordinarily long their arms were. The hand was leathery on the inside and black, and the thumb was as long as the other fingers. I shrank back but the arm seemed to stretch out after me like elastic. The touch on my face was smooth and leathery. His eyes looked into mine and there was a gentleness that calmed me at once. He arranged his lips carefully, and then he spoke, ‘Leelee,’ he said, first to me and then to Red. ‘Leelee,’ and then both of them together. ‘Leelee,’ their voices high with excitement. ‘Leelee! Leelee! Leelee!’ It seemed a sound I could imitate, and so I talked back to them and ventured a smile. ‘Leelee,’ I said, surprised at the strength in my own voice. Smiles wreathed their faces, revealing jagged, discoloured teeth. It was then that Red noticed my ash effigy. For some moments they considered it seriously together and then broke into peals of screeching laughter, piling more and more ash on the stomach to make it fatter. Before I knew it Red had lifted me off my feet and was hugging me so tight that

for that. The feel of their hot breath on my ear tickled me and I pushed them away and sat up, dreading as I did so the abandonment of my dreams and the return to the reality of my living nightmare. But it was no dream.

The two yetis sat back on their haunches in front of me and studied me closely. The first I recognised at once as the yeti I had come to know as Red in my dreams, but the second was clearly older. He was white about the head and beard. The skin of his face was darker, more heavily creased and more deeply etched with wrinkles. He seemed only to have one ear, though it was difficult to tell through the hair. His eyes glinted gold in the fire. They were talking to each other, or perhaps it was to me, for they never took their eyes off me. It was hardly a language as we know it, more a sequence of curious moans and whimpers, but nonetheless formed and deliberately intoned. It was not the insane hysterical chattering of a monkey that I was listening to, but considered speech, however unintelligible it might have been to me.

I looked from one to the other. The older yeti – for

I had to struggle for breath. To fight against such strength would not have been possible anyway, but there seemed little reason to struggle against them because these were hugs of affection. They passed me from one to the other like a precious doll. It was as if they had to hug me to believe I was real. Satisfied at last that I was, they squatted down before the fire to warm themselves, looking across at me from time to time and uttering whimpers of delight. It was a few moments later before I realised they were not just warming themselves. There was a sudden sweet smell of roasting meat. Crouched over the fire the two yetis turned and prodded the hunk of meat that lay buried in the bed of red ashes. By the smell I supposed it to be mutton, but I did not care what it was. It seemed an eternity before they rolled it out onto the floor, wrenched it apart and offered it to me. ‘Voo,’ said the elder yeti or ‘One Ear’ as I now thought of him. ‘Voo. Voo.’ And we sat together in front of the fire silent over our meal.

I devoured mine like a mad creature, licking my fingers until the last taste of meat was gone. No matter

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that it was burned on the outside and raw on the inside, no matter that I ate so fast I nearly choked. My gorging was watched with delight by the two yetis who imitated me licking my fingers. 'Leelee,' they cried. 'Leelee!' And they set to hugging me all over again. So I thought little of it when some time later One Ear picked me up again. I braced myself as he hugged me, but then he dumped me on Red's back, and before I knew it I was outside the door, a rush of cold wind on my face and One Ear was bounding ahead on all fours through the snow.

As Red followed I clung on round his neck and gripped his sides with my knees. Twice in those first few yards I came off and tumbled into the snow. He laughed and waited for me to clamber on again before setting off after One Ear, springing almost immediately into a run. I curled my fingers into his hair, laid myself along the back of his neck and hung on like a leech. I had had a horse bolt under me once before and this was a similar experience, but after the first few minutes it was not so alarming since I felt Red wanted me to stay on. As my confidence grew I

relaxed, and the flow and the rhythm of his legs under me became easier to anticipate and to ride. Until then I had been so busy trying not to fall off that I had not even thought about where they were taking me or why, and even now I was not that concerned about it. I only knew that they had found me and fed me, that they had greeted me like some long lost friend. I was elated perhaps by the speed at which we travelled, faster than any horse I had ever ridden, but more I think because I knew that my ordeal by hunger was at last over.

Every few minutes they would stop and I noticed they always slowed down together and came to a halt precisely at the same moment, seemingly without any signal or word passing between them. One Ear would rear up onto his back legs and lift his nose into the wind, while beneath me I could feel Red's body taut with concentration. For a few moments they would listen and watch, still as statues; and then the rocking journey would begin again. We climbed all that day, speeding effortlessly through the snow. The valley bottoms were hidden now under the clouds, and by that evening we had only the dark blue of the sky

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above us. We were, it seemed, travelling on top of the world, and the yetis kept up this relentless pace, stopping less frequently now. My hands and fingers were so numb by this time that only the failing strength of my arms kept me from sliding off. My legs were quite useless below the knees. I had nothing to grip with. Red seemed to sense this for from time to time he would stop and a great arm would reach out from under me and arrange me so that my balance was restored.

As dark came on we had left the peaks above us and were making a slow and difficult descent across rock-strewn glaciers. Crevasses and chasms that looked impassable we leapt with consummate ease. Then we were in amongst sparse pine trees that clung impossibly to the mountainside and as the last of the light vanished we were swallowed quite suddenly by a dense forest that shut out the last of the day.

We stopped and I let myself down gently for I could not feel my feet as they touched the ground. There was a hurried hushed conversation between One Ear and Red and then to my astonishment I saw One Ear climb

high into the tree beside us and swing away through the canopy of the trees until I could see him no more. I thought for one terrible moment as Red picked me up that we would follow him, but instead, with Red clasping me to his chest with one arm and my legs wrapped around him, we moved slowly through the undergrowth. It was the most painful part of the journey. Twigs and branches tore at me so that to protect myself I buried my face in Red's chest and closed my eyes.

It was some hours later when at last he stopped and set me down on my feet. I could see we were in a small clearing. There was the smell of wood smoke in the air and excited whispers from somewhere ahead of us in the darkness. Red led me along a path beside a black cliff face and then I saw a flickering glow emerging from the cliff some distance away. 'Leelee!' Red called out beside me. 'Leelee!' And then One Ear was there in front of us, his face lit up. He held out his hand, and so with Red on one side and One Ear on the other I was led in through the mouth of the cave. The strong light dazzled me at first. I could make out many figures,

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perhaps a dozen or more running towards us. A great fire in the centre revealed a vast cavern which seemed to stretch back into the cliff as far as the eye could see. I felt myself hoisted suddenly up onto Red's shoulders as the crowd of yetis rushed towards us. 'Leelee!' they chanted. 'Leelee!' And every one of them it seemed wanted to touch some part of me. My hands and knees were squeezed and patted, my fingers prised apart, examined and smelt. I could see that many of them had tears in their eyes.

Each one of them was different. There were a few with tawny, rust coloured hair, but none were the colour of 'Red'. Many had a greyer coat. It was clear at once that there were several old ones amongst them for they were white around the face like One Ear – and it was in particular these older yetis that seemed overcome, almost ecstatic at my arrival. I felt famous. I felt adored. The young yetis, some of them even smaller than me, were plucked from their mothers and held up to touch me, but most of these were terrified and screamed to be put down, much it seemed to everyone else's amusement.

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The seat of the stool beneath me was solid enough but I felt the legs were loose. It wobbled precariously. I could see no other piece of furniture in the cave and was wondering how it came to be there when Red approached me holding in his hands a small painted tin. There were faces on the outside of it, faces I thought I recognised but could not identify. A sudden silence fell on the cave. They were waiting for me to do something. I could think of nothing else but to reach down and take the box that he seemed to be offering to me. I put it down on my knees. There was writing on it. 'E.A.' in large letters, and then 'Coronation King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. One Shilling'. I opened it. It was empty, except for an old photograph, a knife with a bone handle and a briar pipe.

'Leelee!' they cried. 'Leelee! Leelee!' I smiled at them and held up the tin. This appeared to be the proper response for the cheering broke out again. Looking around me I saw only one of them was not ecstatically happy. 'Little Red', as I called him, stood by his father and looked straight into my eyes. It was a look of naked hatred.

Then I noticed one young yeti who had fallen in beside us and was walking with us now, his hand in Red's. He was looking up at me, but his was no adoring look. Instead there was a cold glare in his eyes that forced me to turn away. He was almost the same colour as Red and I thought of them at once as father and son. They were too alike to be otherwise. One Ear stood on a rock in the centre of the cave, his back to the fire, and made a speech, not a word of which I could understand of course, save the word that I took by now to be the name by which they knew me, 'Leelee'. He kept pointing to a crudely fashioned, four-legged stool beside him on the rock. A chorus of raucous shrieking heralded a ceremony that I can only describe as a kind of coronation.

Almost solemnly One Ear took my hand and helped me up onto the rock. He led me towards the stool. It was clear I was expected to sit. As I did so a thunderous cheer went up. I thought then of the lama's 'mo', that I should one day soon be a king, 'king of the cloud forests', and I wished that Uncle Sung could be with me to witness it.

## 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