JADOO

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by

JOHN A. KEEL

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This book was written for Lite who lived part of it and suffered all of it.

Contents

JADOO

Impossible?

Blood rained over Hangchow, China, early one evening in the fourteenth century. And with the blood dismembered hands, legs, and arms came plummeting out of the sallow sky into the beautiful gardens of the Great Khan.

It was a festival time and the golden domes and turrets of the Khan's palace were masked with light and shaking with the echo of laughter, music and firecrackers. Swarms of nobles, notables and fierce chieftains from outlying districts strolled through the corridors and courtyards, stopping to watch ragged fire-eaters, jugglers and dancers going through their paces.

The blood went almost unnoticed until a dark, rawly severed head dropped down and rolled to a stop at the feet of one of the Khan's honored guests, the famous traveler Sheikh Abu Abdullah Mohammed, a bushily bearded man with a slight twinkle of mischief in his dark Arab eyes.

In his native Tangiers he was a man of wealth and affluence though he didn't amount to much as an historical figure. In fact, history might have forgotten him altogether if he hadn't wandered away from North Africa early in the fourteenth century to explore the then little known regions to the east of the Red Sea.

When he stared down at that hacked off head in Hangchow, the Sheikh became the first of a long line of travelers to witness the strangest of all the strange things in the Orient. His record of what happened that night in the Khan's palace set off a wave of wonder and controversy which has extended into our own time.

This is what he reported: At the height of the party one of the Khan's jugglers produced a long rope with a wooden ball attached to one end. He threw it into the air and it shot upward until it was almost out of sight where, to the Sheikh's amazement, it dangled without visible support.

Then the juggler ordered one of his younger assistants to climb it. The boy looked at the end swaying high in the sky, grimaced and refused. The juggler shouted at him. Still he refused. Then the juggler whipped out a sharp, curved *kukri* and threatened him with it. Reluctantly the boy gave in and started up.

As he climbed he shouted down insults, and his master fumed and stomped and snarled back at him. Gradually he became a mere speck overhead and his voice was an inaudible murmur.

Then the juggler shouted for him to come down again. There was a long wait. Nothing happened. He shouted again. Still nothing.

Enraged by the boy's disobedience, the juggler took his knife in his teeth and climbed up the rope after him. There was the sound of a struggle and screams. The blood started to rain down.

A naked hand dropped out of the sky, then a foot, then a leg and more bloody parts, and finally the boy's head. This bounced in front of the open-mouthed Sheikh who winced but stood fast to witness the smash finish.

The juggler came down the rope, smeared with blood, and gathered up the raw chunks of his assistant. Gingerly he wiped the gore off them and laid them out on the ground in what was roughly their original shape.

Then he gave the mangled corpse a sharp kick and *suddenly it writhed to life! The boy stood up alive and whole again!*

Later Sheikh Abu immortalized this demonstration in his book of travels: *Ibn Battuta.*

Since then his report has been bolstered with further eyewitness accounts of the trick by numerous soldiers, statesmen, and explorers. Yet the late Howard Thurston, and many other modern magicians, have searched through the Far East for it without success.

Some historians claim the Sheikh was just a magnificent liar and that his spectacular tale has been expanded by other liars through the years. But distinguished and highly reputable men such as Dr. William Beebe, the famous naturalist, and Maxim Gorki, the cynical Russian novelist, have come out of India with accounts of having seen the trick themselves. And other historians have turned to carefully authenticated records. They point out that the trick has been seen many times in many places by thousands of people.

Sheikh Abu was merely one of the first to witness it, puzzle over it, and write about it.

Two centuries after Ibn Batuta startled Western minds, a ragged troup of Bengali jugglers appeared at the palace of the Emperor Jehangir and offered to show him wonders the like of which he'd never even imagined. Bored and skeptical, the old Emperor agreed to hold a party so they could entertain, wryly adding that they'd better be good or they would leave the palace carrying their heads under their arms.

Their demonstration was not only good; it was unforgettable! Later the very impressed Emperor devoted a whole chapter of his autobiography to their performance, carefully detailing the twenty-eight miracles they displayed before his assembled court.

Leading the list was a trick that later became one of the standard mysteries of the East, the great tree trick.

The hollow-eyed leader of the troupe declared he could plant a seed of any tree named and make it grow into full blossom within a matter of minutes. A haughty noble named Khaun-e-Jahaun suggested they try to produce a mulberry tree. The troupe quickly spread out and each juggler dug a small hole in the ground, dropped in a seed, and covered it with a cloth. Then their leader launched into a long unintelligible recital of magic words. When the cloths were

removed tiny green sprouts were seen poking up through the soil! They were re-covered and a few minutes later a row of small mulberry trees in full blossom, two cubits high (about 40 inches), were standing in the courtyard!

One scorching summer day during this same era, in the middle of the seventeenth century, a gang of workmen were listlessly digging a drainage ditch outside the city of Amritsar, on the fringe of the Himalayas near the border of Punjab, when they stumbled onto a hidden, shallow tomb cut out of a layer of brittle shale. It contained the remarkably well-preserved body of a young bearded *sadhu,* swathed in a faded orange miter and sitting in the customary cross-legged yoga burial position.

From the dust and debris around him it looked as if he'd been buried undisturbed for years. The superstitious workers were at first inclined to leave him there, reseal the tomb, and detour the ditch around it. But there was something eerie and magnetic about the *sadhu's* appearance that persuaded them to carry his body to the surface instead. And in doing so they unwittingly helped launch another of India's most fascinating mysteries.

For as soon as the sun's rays struck the *sadhu,* breath rattled in his throat and he began to stir! Within a few minutes he was wobbling to his feet while the surprised workmen prostrated themselves, awed and trembling. Within a month half of northern India was bowing and salaaming before this strange man who had risen from the dead. His name was Ramaswamy and he claimed he had been buried in that tomb for one hundred years!

No one disputed or challenged him. The famous *guru* scholar and historian, Arjun Singh, made a special pilgrimage to Amritsar to question him for hours about the events of the century before. Ramaswamy seemed to have complete and intimate knowledge of that period and Singh came away very impressed. His report helped the *sadhu* gain a large and profitable following which supported him for the rest of his life.

Ramaswamy was one of the first to claim the power of hibernation, of being able to suspend all the living processes of his body for an

extended period of time. Many fakirs followed in his wake, and some of them died attempting the feat.

His most spectacular, and most successful, follower was an odd man named Haridas who appeared for a few brief years early in the 1800's, not far from the site of the *sadhu's* success two centuries earlier. Haridas was a short, gentle little fellow with a soft, almost effeminate face, and hard, calculating eyes. A government minister named Raja Dhyan Singh discovered him and watched him being buried in the mountain village of Jammu. And, four months later, watched him being dug up again.

"On the day of his burial," Raja reported, "Haridas ordered his beard to be shaved. And after his exhumation his chin was as smooth as on the day of his internment."

Haridas repeated the feat in Jesrota, and in Amritsar. Then tales of his weird talent reached the Maharajah of Lahore, an educated and skeptical man, who ordered the fakir to his palace for a carefully controlled experiment in the presence of several English doctors, a distinguished French general named Ventura, and Colonel Sir C. M. Wade.

The *Calcutta Medical Journal* of 1835 carried the full story of the fakir's fantastic preparations for this performance. Examining doctors discovered Haridas had cut away the muscles under his tongue so he could swing it all the way back and completely seal his throat. For several days before his internment he flushed out his bowels, took baths in hot water up to his armpits, and lived on a diet of yogurt and milk.

On the day of his burial he swallowed, in front of all the officials, a piece of linen about thirty yards long, and pulled it up again, supposedly to clean out any foreign matter left in his stomach.

Finally he sat in a cross-legged position, sealed his ears and nostrils with wax plugs, closed his throat with his loosened tongue, folded his arms, and went into a trance.

"Our examination showed his pulse had stopped. He was physically dead!" one of the physicians wrote.

His body was wrapped in linen and placed in a large chest which was heavily padlocked and sealed with the Maharajah's personal

seal. The chest was buried in a garden outside of Lahore, and barley was sown on the ground above it. Then a wall was built around the place and guards were stationed there twenty-four hours a day.

Forty days later the officials and doctors gathered again. The chest was dug up and opened, and the fakir was found cold and stiff but in the same exact position as when he was buried.

The doctors pulled his tongue back, unplugged his nose and ears, and breathed into his mouth. His whole body was massaged for several minutes before he started breathing again. Within an hour he was back to normal.

The impressed Maharajah gave him a handful of diamonds and precious stones. Citizens of Lahore feted him and hundreds of natives followed him everywhere. He discarded his mountain rags for robes of the softest silk and velvet slippers.

Later he underwent similar tests in Calcutta and other cities. He might have attained world fame except for one sad fact. He took a strong interest in matters of the flesh. After he had deprived several of his lady followers of their highly valued virginity, the government looked at the stack of complaints mounting against him and banished him back to the mountains. He was never heard of again.

Toward the close of the nineteenth century more and more Western journalists and travelers plunged into the unknown green subcontinent of India, returning with lavish accounts of miracle men and bizarre fakirs who seemed to be able to defy all the laws of nature and reason. One of the types who impressed the foreign visitors the most were the human pincushions, the holy men who stabbed needles and knives into their flesh presumably in penance for their sins.

When vaudeville became America's number one source of entertainment, a number of human pincushions appeared on the nation's stages, some of them claiming they learned to make themselves immune to pain after visits to the mysterious East.

One of the most successful of these was a dark-eyed, mustachioed young man named Edward Gibson. While spectators fainted in droves he poked miniature swords through his cheeks and throat, and allowed steel pins to be thrust into him almost anywhere on his

body. He even attempted a crucifixion on the stage, but after one spike had been driven through his hand the audience howled in sick protest and the demonstration was stopped.

Did Gibson and his contemporaries in India possess some secret for eliminating pain? Human pincushions are a rarity in the West today, but they still abound in the Orient, from Persia to Penang. Their grisly feats are still one of the authentic mysteries of the East.

Akin to the pincushions' self-torture are the claims of the *lamas* of the Himalayas, to be able to conquer heat and cold and pain mentally.

In 1930 one Captain Henniker of the British Royal Engineers was fighting his way through a freezing snowstorm near the summit of a 17,000-foot pass in Ladakh when his party suddenly met a nude lama sitting in the snow saying his prayers. He was making a pilgrimage to the high places for "the good of his soul." The temperature was below zero at the time. Yet the lama showed no signs of discomfort.

A similar incident, but with very different overtones, occurred during the 1952 Swiss expedition to Mount Everest. While climbing through a heavy mist on the frigid Khumbu glacier, high above the last inhabited spot and far above the regions where any form of life can be found, the climbers ran into a swarm of dark human shapes going in the opposite direction. It happened so quickly and the fog was so thick that none of them got a good look at the creatures. Shortly afterwards they found a number of footprints heading in the direction from which they had just come. These footprints were much larger than a man's and very different from ape or bear tracks.

They could only assume uneasily that they'd just met a group of the mysterious animals known as "Abominable Snowmen"! What is an "Abominable Snowman"? There are many learned theories but no white man has photographed one, or even seen one close up.

Finally, the late Robert Ripley, creator of "Believe It Or Not" and a very shrewd observer, found something straight out of a Superman comic strip on one of his periodic jaunts through India. He found a fakir with X-ray eyes!

The fakir willingly demonstrated before groups of skeptical doctors and reporters. In carefully controlled tests they placed chunks of bread dough over both his eyes, wrapped his head with yards of cloth, and even covered his face with an opaque hood. Still he could see well enough to identify objects held in front of him, and he was even able to drive an automobile through crowded streets!

Several other fakirs have cropped up since then claiming the same talent. Today a number of Indian holy men and magicians are earning a living by peering through bread dough, cotton padding, layers of sand, and even sheets of solid metal.

Medical men say X-ray sight is impossible, but they can't explain the performances and experiments of these Indian wizards.

Even though your mind is conditioned to accept the daily miracles of color television, supersonic flight, and atomic fission, you may tend to dismiss the preceding cases as impossible. But they are all carefully authenticated. All of these things have happened and are still happening today!

This is not a book of fiction. It is a book about magic and the "Impossible."

For the "Impossible" belongs to the magicians, the odd men who have earned their living by defying the laws of reason and the laws of the physical universe; who have given depth to fantasy and reality to legend. Men like Merlin, Cagliostro, and Houdini. Men like the *gali-gali* of Egypt, the *sannyasin* and fakirs of India, the lamas of Tibet.

This is their story. The story of the "Impossible"—and how it's done.

Chapter One

City of Snakes

I am a professional cliff-hanger.

Peddling adventure is my business, and at times it's a mighty lean one. But the leaness is part of it. Going hungry and thirsty in weird places that aren't even marked on the map is part of it. So is getting chased by inhospitable tigers and being bitten by impolite snakes. My merchandise is the stuff dreams are made of, from sleepless nights in torrid jungles to bone-freezing days climbing isolated peaks in the Himalayas.

For the past few years I've earned a crazy kind of living this way, by teetering on precipices in Tibet, and wrestling with crocodiles in the Upper Nile, then going off to some quiet corner to write about my escapades.

My specialty is magic, the "forbidden arts." My favorite hunting grounds are the back hills of Africa and the savage plains of India. My story sources are witch doctors, fakirs, lama sorcerers, and men who claim they can kill you with a hypnotic glance, or cure your troubles by donning a grotesque mask and shaking a gourd over your head.

Jadoo is my stock in trade.

"*Jadoo!*" A whispered word that can open forbidden doors or close the lids of coffins. *Jadoo,* a word and an art from the jungles and the secret places. It may have little meaning to the cynical moderns of New York, Paris, and London, but it's a terrifying word when spoken among the millions of people who are still uncursed by television, alarm clocks, and ulcers from worrying about the money they're never going to make.

Notes about this *jadoo,* about the black world's darkest secrets, have been piling up in my battered old suitcases and perhaps this is as good a time as any to put them all down in tangible form, to write a history of the dying age of mystery, magic and superstition; an age being smothered to death by civilized skepticism.

Today there are few corners of the world left where the wheezing rattle of automobiles and the monotonous drone of radios have not brought some form of enlightenment, and crushed ancient practices and superstitions. Those few corners are my bailiwick. Those "backward" places still haunted by *jadoo* have provided me with the material for my magazine stories. They are the corners this book is about.

Long before I'd heard of the word *jadoo* I was wandering into them. One of the first of such places I visited was a fantastic, obscure spot in Egypt where I met the man who initiated me into some of the secrets of snake-charming and who was, perhaps, remotely responsible for some of the messes I got into later. His name was Abdul Ati Tolba, and he earned a thin livelihood catching cobras with his bare hands. Although he is almost totally unknown, even in Egypt, he is the most prominent citizen of the strange corner known as the "City of Snakes."

It lies seven kilometers from the towering spectacle of the pyramids of Giza, on the sea of desert that washes around Cairo, where a thin artery of muddy water cuts its way along a narrow, sandy valley. This is an irrigation canal, a thread of life from the Nile River, giving scrubs of tough grass and skinny palm trees a chance to exist.

Unwrapping itself past a high shapeless mound of mud and stone,

once the pyramid of some now forgotten pharaoh, it weaves down into a knot of small mud huts baked pure white by the North African sun.

Four thousand people are somehow squeezed into that knot, spending their simple lives in the warped dirt streets, washing themselves in the dark canal, and when their misery is over, being buried among the tombs of old kings on the desert.

Millions more live in similar villages in similar valleys throughout Egypt, but this village has one thing to distinguish it from the others.

It has a reputation for being "The City of Snakes."

Among its inhabitants are ten families who carry on one of Egypt's oldest and strangest professions.

They are the hunters of reptiles.

Every morning they take up their sticks and their bags and go out into the desert. If luck is with them they may catch a lizard or a cobra or a poisonous spider to bring them a few piastres from doctors, hospitals and zoos. Sometimes hotel owners around Cairo and farmers in the more lush Nile valley hire them to get rid of unwelcome snakes and deadly, crawling scorpions. They call their village Abu Rawash.

Within the past few years thirty citizens of Abu Rawash have died from cobra bites; but this isn't surprising. Death is no stranger to the snake hunters. Men are the intruders in the desert. Often, when they dare to defy its laws, it kills them.

The desert is like the ocean. Underneath its calm surface a thousand dramas are taking place. The jungle law is the desert law. Wild things, from tiny insects to great lizards, are battling there, seeking each other out, struggling for survival.

Some men, the men who have intruded the longest, become a part of this ocean. They've learned its secrets and handed the knowledge down from father to son. Such men live in Abu Rawash. Their bare, broken huts are filled with snakes and lizards and scorpions as proof of their mastery. And their cemeteries testify they have not mastered it completely.

Whenever they go out into the desert they are bold, but they are

afraid too. They know the desert will never really submit. They know someday it will kill them, too.

Abdul Ati Tolba is such a man, with all his ancestors' knowledge and bravery and fears.

"I brought a cobra home once," Abdul told me at our first meeting, his bright brown eyes gleaming. "I left it in a bag in the yard. During the night my wife's mother came to me with a great fear. She had heard much noise in the yard and was afraid the cobra had escaped. I went out and found the bag empty. The snake was trapped somewhere in the walls of my garden. There was no moon that night but I could hear it and I knew I had to recapture it before it managed to get away into the streets of the village. It made much noise, hissing and throwing its heavy body around. It was easy to find but very hard to catch in the dark. It took me almost two hours to get it back into its bag."

He paused thoughtfully for a moment.

"Since then I never bring cobras into Abu Rawash. If you want one we must go out and find it."

Up until this time I'd never seen a wild cobra in its natural habitat. Legends of snakes had been filling my ears and mind ever since I first arrived in Cairo, but I hadn't been able to find a single authentic snake charmer. Civilization is taking hold of the fabulous old city and the strange arts of the past are fast disappearing. Soon only the flexible shell of memory will remain.

I wanted a cobra. Or rather, I wanted to go out on a cobra hunt to make movies of the snakes in action and to gather authentic information for a magazine article. With my 16 mm. movie camera I was trying to film the old Egypt, the lost Egypt, the Egypt that tourists never see.

Getting such pictures wasn't easy. When the Egyptian Ministry of National Guidance, the propaganda ministry, issued me an official press card they asked me to sign a statement swearing I'd submit all my films to them for approval before shipping them out of the country. They wanted to make sure I wouldn't try to dramatize the poverty

and sordidness still remaining in Egypt. And they were decidedly suspicious of me because I showed more interest in the weirder aspects of Egypt than in the modern buildings, railroads and dams they were so proud of.

To keep an eye on my unusual activities, they had assigned a tall young man with a wistful mustache to trail me everywhere I went. He never interfered with me but he shadowed me in the best "B" picture tradition. Soon we were playing a kind of game, with me giving him the slip whenever I could. On this particular day I'd taken a tired old taxi out of the city and across the desert and my "spy" had lost the scent.

Now I was sitting in Abdul's house in Abu Rawash, a simple one-room affair with two small glassless windows, a bare straw mat on the floor, a few earthen jugs in one corner, and a small oil lamp, the single means of light, on a window ledge. In this room, not more than fifteen feet square, five people lived, loved and slept.

Abdul was a thin affable good-looking Arab about thirty years old, dressed in a clean white turban and a long tattletale gray *galibeah*. Quick to smile and show his finely formed teeth, he had a personality that projected; he would have made an excellent movie star. Together with his brother Ramadan, a quiet dusky man in a tan robe, he carried on the old family business of reptile hunting.

A few weeks earlier the American Consulate in Cairo had hired them to clean up the snakes on the grounds of the Embassy. The Press Attache there, a giant bundle of energy named Dan Philip Oleksiw, knowing of my futile search for snake charmers, sent them to me.

At that time I had a bachelor apartment in a swank residential district on the island of Zamalek in the middle of the Nile. One afternoon the two natives paid me an unexpected visit. Before I knew what was going on, they had opened their bags, and my living room was filled with writhing snakes. Abdul's gay sincerity impressed me as much as his skill in handling the reptiles. So I made a date to visit them in Abu Rawash.

Before I left Egypt I went to the City of Snakes several times.

Abdul and his brother launched me on my snake-chasing career and taught me much of their useful desert lore.

Westerners call Abdul a snaker charmer but he really isn't. He hunts snakes without the aid of "magic" talismans. He isn't immune to their bites, as many charmers profess to be. Though he often sells his catches to hospitals he doesn't believe in anti-venin. He doesn't even have any home remedies. The people of Abu Rawash accept a bite with typical Arabic fatalism and rarely try to save themselves.

"When I was a small boy my father came to me with a cobra bite on his finger," Abdul told me as we sat in his hut that first day. "I had to take my ax and cut it off. He lived."

Today Abdul's son is learning the secrets of the world that throbs under the sand. He is only about eight years old but he accompanied us to the desert on the morning his father, his uncle, and I went out to catch a cobra.

The sun was still low in the sky when we entered the valley of the cobras, a wide, shallow basin a few miles south of Abu Rawash. Low mounds of tough grass were scattered like islands across the sand and in the distance the high cones of the pyramids mirrored the sun.

Abdul, his son, and Ramadan walked a few paces ahead of my wary taxi driver and me. The two brothers carried no equipment except their large snake bags and a couple of short-handled hoes.

They walked slowly, widely separated, their eyes studying the blank sands. I couldn't see anything except stark emptiness and the spoor of a few small animals here and there. Abdul and Ramadan saw much more.

"Here!" Abdul cried, pointing to a small, almost invisible mark in the sand. "Here is a white rat . . . a female with babies." He looked at me. "Do you want to see them?"

There was no hole. Just a few tiny indentations. I was skeptical. I'm always skeptical until I see things with my own eyes.

"Yes . . . let's see it."

Two hoes went to work throwing back sand.

"She fill in hole behind her so snakes can't get in," Abdul explained.

Suddenly he plunged his arm into the hole, searching with his bare fingers.

"Won't she bite?" I asked.

"Sometimes . . . ah . . . here!" He pulled a large white rat out, passed it to his brother, and dipped back into the hole, coming up again with a nest of three tiny, newborn animals.

"We keep these to feed my snakes," he said. He took the squirming mother rat firmly in one hand, forced her mouth open with his thumb and broke off her sharp teeth on the blade of his hoe. She went limp, blood trickling out of her mouth.

"So she can't chew out of bag," he explained.

The search continued. A cool breeze was coming in from far-off in the Nile valley. The desert was quiet and tense, and I started thinking nervously of what would happen if a big cobra suddenly bobbed up in front of me, when Abdul's son exclaimed:

"Look! Big snake!"

I nearly dropped my camera.

He was gesturing at some wavy lines in the sand. Abdul and Ramadan studied them.

"No cobra," Abdul declared disappointedly. "But is very big snake. We catch."

He took off across the desert, following the nearly invisible track, a wide series of S-shaped marks which ended in a little tuft of grass. Abdul poked around cautiously.

"Not poisonous," he announced, starting to cut into the little hill with his hoe. There was a flurry of sudden action. Abdul leaped back. Ramadan lunged forward, stooped and grabbed in one lightning movement. When he stood erect again he held a five-foot-long reptile, shivering and striking at the air.

Abdul held open his bag and his brother dropped the snake in.

Then, as we walked on, Abdul's son shouted again.

"Big snake!"

Ramadan looked at the spoor and turned to his brother. The marks looked the same to me as the other ones.

"Haje!" Ramadan grunted.

Cobra! Excitement welled up in all of us.

Abdul moved ahead, very slowly this time. He respected the death in the cobra's mouth. I wound the motor of my camera and followed the two men. My driver held back, watching from a safe distance.

Abdul suddenly stopped, staring at a blank spot. He'd found a brown rat, he said.

"Leave it there!" I ordered, thinking of the one with bleeding gums already in the bag. "Let's get the cobra."

We went slowly forward, carefully circling every clump of grass. Once Ramadan stopped. I froze, expecting a cobra to flash up.

"Here is *baoudy,*" he observed, kicking up dirt with his hoe. Then he buried his hands in the sand and felt around until he produced a large speckled lizard.

"Baoudy." He smiled a broken-toothed smile. Deliberately he dropped it back into the sand. It vanished instantly, like a fish hitting water. He dipped in and dragged it out again, tossing it into a small bag and putting that into the snake bag.

We took up the cobra's trail again. It knitted its way to a cluster of rocks. Here Abdul halted.

"There!" he whispered, pointing toward a black crevice. I couldn't see anything.

Ramadan tapped the rocks with his hoe. A low hiss came out of the crevice. Nervously I started my camera.

Abdul and his son went behind the rocks. Ramadan tapped the crevice again. The hiss grew louder, more menacing, like a slow leak in a tire. Abdul struck the rocks from his position.

Then suddenly six feet of dirty brown reptile exploded out of the hole, heading straight for Ramadan's face! He stumbled backwards and the cobra shot into a compact coil, its hooded head jutting up in the air, weaving, waiting for the native to come into range again.

Abdul hit his hoe on the stone behind it. It wheeled and lashed out at him. Then Ramadan moved toward it. It spun back and struck at him. Abdul's son got into the act, moving in from one side. The snake darted out at him.

That was their technique. The three of them surrounded the snake, distracting it, making it strike at them, literally worrying it into sub-

mission. Instead of grabbing for it straightaway, as I later saw the charmers of India do, they tried to tire it out first.

But a big maddened cobra has plenty of energy to draw on. It doesn't tire easily. Sometimes it takes five or six hours to wear one down to the point where it can be grabbed and stuffed into a bag. Sometimes the snake hunters tire first and have to retreat. We'd picked an especially mean cobra. Its strikes seemed to gain momentum and once it came within inches of the gingerly moving boy. Then it suddenly flashed between the two brothers and skittered across the warm rocks. Abdul scrambled after it, and I circled it, throwing caution to the winds in hope of getting a shot of it coming head-on.

Suddenly Ramadan gave a cry of alarm.

"Watch!"

I heard an ominous hissing. It came from directly behind me! Whirling, I dropped my viewfinder from my eye and my legs turned to stone.

About four feet away, on a rock level with my chest, another cobra was coiled and lacing back, his beady, hypnotic eyes nailed to me! I was looking straight into its wide open mouth!

Abdul shouted something. His son came racing up and slammed the rock with his hoe. The snake spun away from me in the direction of the sound and slid off onto the crust. Expelling my breath in relief, I moved away.

The first cobra had turned again and was mincing toward Ramadan. Abdul and the boy were performing a weird ballet with my big snake while my driver was off at a safe distance, jumping up and down, shouting inane advice.

With a sudden lunge, Abdul caught hold of my attacker and plunged it into the bag his son held out. Then Ramadan had his snake by the neck and was holding it spitting and trembling in the air.

It was all over.

Did I catch the final action with my camera? No. I was changing film and my nervous hands dropped the reel. Everything was done by the time I got my camera together again. Abdul was naturally reluctant to let the snakes go and do it again.

We decided to call it a day. Ramadan tossed the bag of snakes over his shoulder, as nonchalantly as if it were a sack of potatoes, and led the way back to Abu Rawash.

There would be other days, I thought, and other cobras.

There were, too.

Western civilization is now stomping across the Egyptian deserts, leaving great footprints of stone and steel. Probably someday an enterprising company will bring in an oil well in the valley of the cobras. And someday soda fountains and movie theaters may sprout up in the streets of Abu Rawash. It will all be in the name of progress and the poor natives will be glad to see it happen. I'll be glad, too. Glad, but perhaps also a little wistful.

Despite the encroachment of civilization, some of the old and strange facets of Egyptian life can still be found by those who care to search for them. Abu Rawash is just one example. The native quarter of Cairo, the sinister *Muski,* still hides some unusual people practicing lost and forbidden arts left over from another, darker age.

Among those shadow-swollen, unchanging back streets I discovered a little man who manufactured mummies to sell to unscrupulous dealers and unknowing collectors. And there, also, I found a secret cult known as the "Way of Rafai," whose members carried out gruesome rites, inflicting pain on themselves, driving steel needles through their flesh, and eating snakes *alive!*

After my visits with Abdul, the snake eaters attracted me more than anything else, so I set out to get myself initiated into this mysterious "Way of Rafai."

Chapter Two

A Dreamer With Insomnia

According to a widely accepted legend, hidden somewhere in a temple in India there is a library of ancient books which list the names of every person who has ever lived on this planet, and everyone who will ever live here, giving a complete history of their individual lives from birth to death. The big catch is that these books are supposed to be written in archaic Sanskrit and can only be interpreted by a handful of learned scholars.

If such a library really exists (I wasn't able to find it, or proof of it), somewhere under the Ks it must list all of the details of my search into the world of *Jadoo,* from my investigation of the "Way of Rafai" in Egypt to my study of *Hantu-Hantu* in Singapore. And it must explain, more simply and sensibly than I can, the motives that impelled me to give up the security of a glamorous job in Europe and go roaming around the globe.

Certainly there doesn't seem to be anything in my family background that could have turned me into a writer and a globetrotter.

My father, Harry Eli Kiehle, was a small-time orchestra leader and crooner in the little city of Hornell, New York; a lean, quiet,

brooding, darkly handsome man who played mostly in nite-clubs and bars. When his big break came with a name band passing through, he flunked the audition because he couldn't read music well enough. But he's gifted with a searching mind and a flair for being able to do almost anything. He has studied and mastered everything from piano tuning to taxidermy. He has been a machinist, a farmer, a second-hand dealer, a shopkeeper, a song writer, and he can play four or five different musical instruments competently.

My mother's nature was exactly opposite to his. While he was sober and introverted, she was a lively, pretty girl with a strong sense of humor and a talent for mixing with people.

They met and married during the roaring twenties. My birth, on March 25, 1930, coincided with the beginning of the great depression, a grim time when orchestra leaders who couldn't read music were not very much in demand.

Their marriage soon went flat because of their contrasting personalities and the hardships of the depression. After their divorce I went to live with my grandparents on Cedar Street, down by the railroad tracks, in Hornell. My grandfather was an air brake inspector on the Erie Railroad and was about the only member of the family who was steadily employed during the depression. Eventually both of my parents remarried; my mother to a farmer, and my father to a schoolteacher.

Magic is associated with my very earliest memories. As far back as I can remember I was always doing tricks, organizing neighborhood magic shows, and trying to live up to the nickname my schoolmates had tagged me with: "Houdini." Though Houdini had died four years before I was born, I read everything I could find about him. While other kids were worshiping cowboys and pilots, I set the great magician up as my idol.

In the second grade I wowed the gang by tossing a ring into the river that ran alongside the Lincoln Grammar School and making it reappear magically on my finger. I did this with great success until I exhausted my supply of wire rings.

Often I was called upon to put a magic spell around a new clubhouse or freshly dug cave, to protect them from unwelcome outsiders.

Usually I would just scatter corn around them, break an egg over the threshold and recite magical incantations thought up on the spur of the moment.

I was a puny kid, the kind nobody ever wanted on their team, and at one point, when I was eight, I hired a tough kid from the other side of the tracks to act as my bodyguard for two cents a week.

Those bright days on Cedar Street with my grandparents were suddenly cut short when I was ten. Then I joined my mother and her new husband on a farm five miles outside of the village of Perry, New York.

In summer there were fields to be hoed, hay to be drawn, fences to be mended, animals to be taken care of; rituals I carried out reluctantly while my mind wandered past the horizon. After the happy days of Hornell the farm was a lonely place. My only companion was a lively spaniel named Tippy.

But I also had my dreams, hatched while I lay in the quiet hayloft on rainy days, listening to the drumming on the roof, studying the thumbworn pages of cheap paper-covered books on magic, hypnotism, ventriloquism, and the so-called "Black Arts."

There I thought of distant India and its fakirs; men who could float in the air, who could be buried alive for years, who could plant a seed and make it grow into a fruitbearing tree before your eyes. And I dreamed of one day seeing these miracles myself.

I had other dreams too; dreams of far-off places, strange cities in the middle of forbidding deserts, old tombs hidden deep in Egypt, weird secret monasteries high in the Himalayas. All the wild, adventurous dreams of all boys chained to farms and cities and common lives.

But, unlike most, I grew up to realize them all.

At school I read my way through a whole set of frayed encyclopedias, dawdling with delight over the pages about the Egyptian pyramids and the old temples of India. And I was beginning to write. Perry High School didn't have a newspaper of its own so I borrowed a local minister's mimeograph and launched a sheet called "The Jester," featuring a column of comment titled: "A Moron Speaks."

When I was fourteen Dick Comfort, the witty young editor of the local weekly, the *Perry Herald,* hired me to write a column of comment and humor titled: "Scraping the Keel" for two dollars a week. (By this time I'd changed my name from Alva John Kiehle to John A. Keel, partly because my stepfather's name was Kiley and people were always calling me "Kile" or "Keely.")

The moment I picked up a copy of the *Herald* and saw, for the first time, my name and words in cold black print my life took on a new purpose and meaning. Here was a world in which I fitted. I haunted the *Herald* print shop, learning to read proofs, to make up forms, to set type, to do the thousand and one jobs involved in getting out a newspaper.

I also started sending out poems and stories to magazines in New York and rented, for one dollar a week, a little office over a barber shop in Perry. Soon the walls were papered with rejection slips. Then one wonderful day I received a thin envelope from the now defunct *Hobo News* containing a check for a little essay. Five whole dollars! At fifteen I was a selling writer.

Magic was forgotten now. I was going to be a writer.

Aside from my newspaper, I had no real interest in school. The Perry Public Library was my university. I would develop an interest in a subject and read every book I could find on it. I worked my way through electronics and radio, chemistry, physics, aviation, submarines, botany, meteorology, biology, psychology, and, of course, journalism.

I have no pleasant memories of my school years. I remember only books and cold evenings alone with the typewriter. Being far removed from the town I was unable to take part in any activities or go to any parties. I never did any of the things teenagers are supposed to do. I never went on a date with a girl. But I really didn't miss these things. I busied myself with my paper, my column, my writing, and my dreams.

Finally, during one especially severe snowstorm in my sixteenth year, I paused in an old shed two miles outside of Perry, gasping and shivering with the cold, and I suddenly thought: "This sort

of thing was okay for Abe Lincoln. But do you want to become president?"

I quit school and spent the next year shoveling manure (I think I've shoveled more manure than any other writer in the business . . . and that's saying a lot!) and writing magazine pieces, several of which I sold to small publications.

Soon after my seventeenth birthday, my dog, Tippy, old and blind now, died and my boyhood was suddenly gone. It seemed to me that writing was a much better way of earning a living than farming, even though my mother painted vivid images of writers starving in garrets. She and my stepfather were both working hard to keep the farm going and they were impatient with my literary aspirations. But I wanted to get away. Like all teenagers, I was eager to plunge into the adult world and mold my dreams into reality. And it seemed there was only one place where I could really become a writer: New York City.

So on a hot summer day in 1947 I packed a few things into a cardboard box and walked downstairs, a queasy feeling in my stomach. My mother looked at me, startled.

"Aren't you going out to the hay field today?" she asked.

"No. I'm going away," I said simply.

She thought I was joking and she stood on the porch looking puzzled and worried as I started off down the road, but apparently she was confident I would change my mind, or that I was just going to Hornell.

It was four years before I saw her again. And then only for a brief two week period before I went into the army.

It took two days to hitch-hike the four hundred miles to New York. I spent the first night under a tree beside a little stream in Pennsylvania. The next afternoon I landed in the big city; a tall, scrawny, unsophisticated farmboy dressed in high farm shoes and torn trousers. My first move was to head for Greenwich Village, famed quarter of poets, crackpots and wild-eyed geniuses.

After surviving the usual period of starvation and setback, I be-

came the unpaid editor of a poetry magazine and slowly I gained a toehold on the writing business, churning out such intriguing hack articles as: "ARE YOU A REPRESSED SEX FIEND?" and "WILL SEX BECOME OBSOLETE?" before I managed to land steady assignments writing continuity for comic books. My specialty was true confession type stories for the love comics then in vogue. Four years of struggle and starvation were beginning to pay off, though the two novels I wrote before my twentieth birthday collected only rejection slips.

Then the Korean war broke out and I was drafted.

The army shipped me to the Cold War arena of Western Germany and put me to work pounding a typewriter for the *American Forces Network,* an extensive radio network for the "entertainment and education" of U.S. troops in Europe. Quartered in a picturesque castle a few miles outside of bomb-blasted Frankfurt, I labored grinding out military soap operas and dreaming up programs like a Halloween broadcast from historic Frankenstein castle, home of the famed monster.

We took three announcers up the hazardous trail to the dismal old castle atop a wooded mountain overlooking the Rhine, handed them special portable microphones, told them the monster was supposed to return every hundred years in search of his slayer *—and that *this* was *the* night, then turned them loose in the dark. They were sincerely frightened and by the time our manufactured monster came striding out of the mist they had conveyed their fear to listeners all over Europe.

To the network's astonishment, the program had the same effect as Orson Welles' Invasion from Mars broadcast a dozen years earlier. People bolted their doors in panic throughout the Rhine valley. The MPs sent half a dozen patrol cars up to the mountain to

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1 There really was a Frankenstein monster in the 13th century. It was killed by one of the barons of Frankenstein "who received a fatal wound in the knee" during the fight. When Mary Shelley, wife of the poet Percy B. Shelley, heard the story centuries later she used it as the basis of her classic novel of man's inhumanity to monsters, "Frankenstein."

investigate with drawn guns. Thousands of frightened letters and phone calls poured into all the AFN stations, many from as far away as England. (The London Daily Express called long distance at 1 A.M. to find out what was going on.)

This success was instrumental in leading the network officials to offer me a civilian job after my army stint was finished. I became chief of the continuity department and spent the next year roaming around the continent, collecting a nice salary while doing special documentary programs out of Paris, Berlin, Rome and a thousand places in between.

In October, 1953 I headed a "special events" team to Egypt to write and produce a Halloween program from the innermost chambers of the great pyramid of Giza, hoping to equal the success of the '52 Frankenstein broadcast. We flew 5,000 miles to Cairo in the bucket seats of MATS, and worked around the clock gathering material and setting up our equipment in the tombs. In one hectic night I sat up on a hotel balcony overlooking the Nile and wrote an hour long dramatic script centered around the Sphinx and the pyramids. Then, because we were short of actors (there were only five of us), I took one of the lead roles myself, crawling through the narrow tunnels of the pyramid with a mike in my hand.

It was a great experience and it was my undoing.

The Middle East fascinated me with its atmosphere of mystery and antiquity. After we'd returned to Frankfurt I began remembering all my childhood dreams of the strange cities beyond the horizon. I began dabbling in magic again. My feet started to itch. Every night I poured over maps while images of shining cities and lost tombs and temples danced in my mind. My old hungers returned. I was still a dreamer with insomnia.

Besides, I was getting bored with bleak, rainy Frankfurt and worn out from the constant race with the second hand of the clock. It was fun working in radio but I didn't want to make a career of it. I wanted to see my name in print again. My job at AFN was becoming more and more bogged down with futile paper work. I wanted to write and nothing else. I wanted to return to Egypt and linger in its tombs. I wanted to go around the world, to see India and get a first-

hand look at the celebrated feats of the fakirs, to explore the Himalayas, to investigate the fire-walkers of the Pacific islands. I had seen most of Europe and had developed a taste for travel. Now I decided to use AFN as a springboard into the Orient.

Since my only hope for earning a living on such a venture was by writing magazine articles about what I did and saw, I started writing stories again and engaged an agent in New York to handle the headaches of peddling my words—the hardest part of the writing business. A few small sales encouraged me and I'd gained considerable self-confidence from my success at AFN.

Finally I handed in my resignation, sold my sports car, shipped most of my clothes back to Perry, closed up my apartment in Frankfurt, collected the money I'd managed to save, and bought a ticket to Cairo.

My trip wasn't carefully planned. I had no itinerary, no time limitations. I wasn't a scientist going on a specific mission. I wasn't even a reporter looking for a specific story. The whole world was suddenly my beat. I was going to write my way around the world. Beyond that, I had no idea where this new path would lead me or how many years it would take.

At twenty-four I was abandoning, perhaps foolishly, a successful career to embark on an uncertain adventure, with only a vague notion of what I was going to do or how I was going to do it.

Chapter Three

Wizard of Cairo

New York, with its murders, muggings, street beatings, and undercurrent of sexual violence, is by far the most dangerous city on earth. I lived there for four years and can't forget the night three muggers attacked me with tire chains wrapped around their hands on well-lighted Eighth Avenue, or the time a cold razor was pressed against my throat in a darkened doorway in Harlem while gloved fingers probed for my pathetically empty wallet.

Around the world, in cities with notoriously bad reputations like Cairo, Baghdad, Calcutta, and Singapore, I seldom faced anything resembling the fear and danger of Manhattan's Central Park at three in the morning.

Violence did present itself in Cairo on a few occasions during my six months' stay there, but only because I often dealt with the rougher elements in my pursuit of unique story material.

My contacts with shady characters came easy. Soon after I'd moved into Zamalek in the fall of 1954, word circulated quickly throughout the city that there was an eccentric American writer on the island who was looking for bizarre people. Gradually my apartment be-

came a club for a crazy assortment of freaks, *Gali-Gali* men, snake charmers, misplaced writers and poets, and plump belly dancers who were jobless after King Farouk had been booted out of Egypt.

All of them, or nearly all, were dishonest and tried to swindle me, steal from me, or take advantage of me in some way. A few of them succeeded, but not before I'd milked a story or two out of them.

Of course they weren't *all* bad. There was Abdul Ati Tolba and there was the mysterious Sheikh Shemes. He turned up one day to try to interest me in his incredible "powers." He said he was immune to pain and later he proved it. Through him I learned about the "Way of Rafai." But he and Abdul were, alas, rare exceptions. Most of my visitors were unscrupulous fakes.

There were pickpockets who wanted to sell me their life stories and dragomen anxious to guide me to "secret" places where, I suppose, they planned to dent my head and relieve me of my wallet. There were broken-down prostitutes who wanted to be my "girl friend," and broken-down ex-newspapermen who thought I might help them get to the States where they were sure they could earn their fortunes by exposing the troubles of the Middle East.

One man claimed the power to hypnotize chickens. Another one, a wizened little Egyptian with only one working eye, claimed to be a prophet and predicted a world war in the year 2024. Egyptian students would call on me, drink my beer, eat anything lying around, and then steal pens and objects off my desk.

But the grimmest episode of all occurred after two "retired hasheesh smugglers" came around one morning for very vague reasons. Both had dark evasive eyes and were dressed in dirty *galibeahs*. The pupil of the left eye of one of them was strangely split, but then one person in every six in Cairo suffers from blindness or eye trouble of some sort. Syphilis is a popular disease there, second only to the common cold. The other had a lump under his sash that was obviously a revolver.

My policy was to tolerate and befriend everyone. It usually paid off. So I didn't say anything when they wandered through my three rooms in the usual impolite Egyptian manner, picking up and ex-

amining things and prying into drawers like inquisitive children. I'd become used to such behavior. I'd also learned to lock up everything of any value.

"We'll take you to a hasheesh den sometime," they finally declared and departed.

A few nights later the man with the split pupil paid me another visit, alone this time, and roamed aimlessly through the apartment while I tried to finish up an article I wanted to mail to New York the next day. He talked idly about giving me the low-down on dope smuggling "someday."

"It's a complex business," he explained. "I'll come back when you are not so busy."

After he was gone I found the lock on my kitchen door had been unlatched. It worried me a little.

That night a lonely mosquito invaded my bedroom for a feast and kept me awake. About 2 A.M. I heard footsteps stealthily coming up the narrow service stairs in the back and someone tried the kitchen door . . . which I'd locked again.

Slipping out of bed, I groped in the dark for my only weapon, a German-made tear gas pistol, and crept cautiously into the kitchen. Through the frosted glass in the door I could see three shadows on the back porch, apparently having a conference over the lock, trying to decide whether to break in or not.

I surmised, of course, that they were my friends, the "smugglers."

Finally they made their decision and I could hear a lock pick scratching against metal. Suddenly the lock clicked and the door very slowly squeaked open.

Heart pounding, I hugged the shadows, thinking about the revolver I knew one of the smugglers had been carrying. A black blur slid through the door. Then another. The third man, whoever he was, remained outside. I raised my pistol tensely, knowing that for the tear gas to be effective I would have to wait until they were well inside the kitchen.

A flashlight flicked on and I braced myself. But a voice uttered a hoarse whisper and it went out again.

Probably they'd been planning to slit my throat while I was sleeping. Although surprise was on my side, how I wished my pistol fired bullets instead of gas!

The first man moved silently across the tile floor. I held my breath and waited until he was a few feet from me, so close I could have reached out and touched him.

Then I squeezed the trigger and a blast of tear gas smashed into his face with a loud bang. There was a cry of surprise and alarm and I fired again. Both men scrambled to the door, howling and choking. The room filled with stinging gas.

I went after them and fired a third cartridge. All three men dashed down the stairs. Blinded and gasping from the gas, I ran out onto the porch, fumbled with a half-filled garbage can, and rolled it down the stairs behind them. It hit them like a bowling ball and they lunged and tumbled two flights to the ground. Then, cursing and blubbering with fear, they took off into the darkness.

I never saw the two "smugglers" again, but my apartment was filled with the clinging gas for days afterward and I had to sleep on the living room balcony for a week. The mosquitoes had a fine time.

Among my callers in Zamalek was a shabby, well-educated Egyptian with a sorrowful face and eyes like the empty sockets of a skull. His talent was the utterly useless ability to stare at the bright Egyptian sun for hours on end without hurting his eyes! He claimed he could draw energy from the sun. Very seriously he demonstrated this for me and I, very seriously, took mock notes and paid him a few piastres. (Egyptian currency is in pounds. One pound was then worth about $2.80. There were 100 piastres to the pound and 10 milliemes to the piastre. Nearly everything in the native quarter is priced in milliemes. Many Egyptians earn less than six pounds a year!)

A quick, facile wit, the sun watcher spoke three languages. But he was a bum. He hadn't been able to find a job, any kind of a job, in seven years, and he led the hand-to-mouth existence of bums the world over. He used to come up to my place late in the evening when

he was desperate and hungry. And I would feed him and listen to him talk about Egypt.

Sometimes he would ask to sleep on my balcony, overlooking the Nile and the white domes and minarets of Cairo. In the morning he would have my breakfast ready when I got up. I would slip him a few piastres and he would vanish into the city again for days or weeks. He was one of the few Egyptians I could trust.

"I used to be a good Muslim," he told me once. "I always said my prayers three times a day. After I lost my job with the government I went right on praying. For six years I prayed. But nothing happened. Things only got worse. I don't pray any more."

Thousands of people die in the Middle and Far East every year in a posture of prayer, starved to death. Yet their religions are the brightest spot in their tragic lives.

Around the corner from my Zamalek apartment was the famous Egyptian Army Officers' Club where Colonel Nasser and General Naguib plotted the *coup d'etat* which successfully overthrew the Farouk regime in 1952.

I was continually reminded of that revolution because of my spy. Sometimes he would stand in front of my house for days. Sometimes I wouldn't see him at all for a week or two. But whenever I took a trip out of Cairo he was always aboard the train or bus, serving as a constant reminder that I was living in a dictatorship where my every move was watched.

Intrigue, police, and spies were everywhere in Cairo. It was a real cloak-and-dagger city. Once in a while, when I attempted to take an interesting picture in some isolated part of the *Muski,* a bearded little member of the secret police would pop up suddenly from nowhere and shake his head menacingly. One of my films was seized once and I never got it back. But my own personal spy never interfered with me in any way. Perhaps he was assigned to "protect" me, or just report on my movements and let others do the interfering.

In spite of these inconveniences, I developed a healthy respect bordering on admiration for the young officers of the ruling military

junta. They were busily destroying the old Egypt, the Egypt I came to know and love, but they were replacing it with a modern state. Gone were the rich royalists and the greedy monarch who spent millions of desperately needed pounds to build plush palaces for himself. (Egypt is speckled with Farouk's lavish palaces, built amidst unbelievable poverty.) What fertile land there is in Egypt has been taken away from the wealthy few and divided among the poor farmers and *fellaheen*. The Egyptian officers seemed to be rapidly lifting their country out of its ancient chaos and misery.

Their obvious sincerity impressed me. It also filled me with an urgency to explore old Cairo before it was completely washed away by progress. I haunted the native quarter and visited hundreds of strange people who were already in the process of abandoning their dark age practices and their old ways of life. In a few years they will all be gone and Egypt will be as humdrum as the placid countries of Europe.

One of the strangest of these people and, I hope, one of the last who will turn away from the past, is the incredible Sheikh Shemes.

Sheikh Shemes, the first man I ever saw who could eat a snake alive, professes to be a man of faith. His strange powers, he says, are the result of secret prayers and mystical incantations.

He had visited me in Zamalek to invite me to a private demonstration in his home, promising me some unusual pictures.

To reach his house I had to follow intricate paths weaving through the teeming street bazaars into the ancient, crowded Darb El Ahmer district. He lived near the Citadel, the huge Muslim mosque made from slabs of granite and alabaster taken from the side of the great pyramid.

At frequent intervals a wailing voice from somewhere among the mosque's frail towers would call the faithful to prayer. It was an eerie sound, like the cry of a man falling into a bottomless chasm. It swept aside all the other noises in the area—the camel snorts, the tired exclamations of the street peddlers, and the shouts of children hidden away in mud huts.

The Sheikh's house was old and broken, with shuttered windows

and time-stained walls. When I plunged from the bright sun into the gloomy blackness of the place my nostrils were hit with the sickening odor of hasheesh. A small barefoot boy in striped pajamas (which he wore day and night) ushered me into a bare windowless room furnished only with a thick, worn carpet. He motioned to me to sit down and disappeared through a door.

After a moment he reappeared with a smoky oil lamp, closely followed by Sheikh Shemes.

There is nothing dramatic about the Sheikh. He's not a showman like the *Gali-Gali* magicians. A stoical man of stolid medium height, he was dressed in the usual *galibeah* with a tight white *boab's* cap on his head. His eyes were penetrating, but in the swarming streets his appearance would command little attention.

"I usually only eat snakes during certain times of the year," he explained. "At religious festivals and on special occasions, such as the birthdays of great Sheikhs. When I'm eating snakes during the festivals I can eat little else. Sometimes I eat as many as ten large snakes in a two-week period."

I put my camera up on its tripod and rigged my flash attachment. At this early stage of my world trip I was well equipped with cameras, lenses, filters—the works. But as I progressed and bumped into financial obstacles I was forced to sell it all, item by item.

Shemes' technique for snake-eating was simple. He pulled a reptile of a common, nonpoisonous variety out of a bag and coiled it around his hand. It was about three feet long, its head darting back and forth, its thin tongue flickering in the air.

Suddenly he popped the ugly skull into his mouth, clamping his sharp teeth down on it. I could hear the sickening crunch of bones!

Gripping the snake firmly in both hands, he twisted it, wrenching off its head, chewing it up and swallowing it!

Blood oozed between his lips. He stared at the ceiling and gnawed at the headless, squirming thing in his hands.

Finally only the narrow, pointed tail flapped between his lips . . . then it was gone. There was no trick to it. The Sheikh really ate the snake alive. All it takes is strong teeth and a stronger stomach.

His bizarre dinner finished, the Sheikh sat still for a long moment, immersed in thought or prayer. Then he wiped his lips and clapped his hands.

His son came into the room carrying a big box. From it the Sheikh lifted a long steel barb, needle sharp at one end, widening out to about an inch in diameter at the other end, and culminating in a large heavy weight inlaid with ivory. I examined it closely. It was solid, not gimmicked in any way.

"My father . . ." he began ". . . used to drive a sword through his stomach without pain. But I've never attempted that."

With a flourish, he raised the needle to his lips, thrusting the sharp point into his mouth. Tossing his head back, he gave the weighted end a quick tap and *the point went right through his cheek!*

Carefully, he forced it further in until about one inch of steel was penetrating the side of his face!

I looked him over thoroughly. There was no blood. He opened his mouth and I could see the needle going through the red flesh inside his cheek. When he pulled the steel out there was only a very small perforation left in his cheek. It didn't bleed. His expression showed no pain.

As a further demonstration, he thrust the point through one eyelid and even offered to do it through his tongue. But I'd had enough. I was very impressed.

"Don't you feel any pain at all?" I asked.

"No. While I do this I say words . . . holy words . . . to myself. They protect me from pain."

"Will you teach me the words?" I asked enthusiastically.

He shook his head soberly.

For the time being I had to accept that explanation. Months afterwards, in India, I encountered some "human pincushions" and learned how to do this trick myself, using long hatpins—without "holy words."

Sheikh Shemes received fifty piastres from me for posing for the pictures. We had a long talk over little cups of thick *saleb,* Turkish coffee, during which I complained about how few real "mysteries" I'd been able to find in Cairo. He started talking about the "Way of

Rafai" and the miracles its members could perform. Before I left him that day he'd promised to take me to one of their secret meetings.

Numb with wonder and anticipation, I battled my way back to Zamalek through the trains of camels and screeching donkeys and swirling crowds of veiled women and robed men.

Out on the Eastern Desert, beyond Cairo's imposing, forbidden Citadel, there lies a range of dirty hills laced with deep caverns and topped with crumbling old temples and tombs. Civilization, with its highways, railroads, and irrigation canals, has bypassed this place. And for good reason.

This is the land of the old men; the bearded Jews ostracized by Arab society, the witch doctors and sorcerers and *Gali-Gali* men run out of the city by the law or their own lawless elements. Above all, this is the land of Rafai, where the followers of the "Way of Rafai" gather every so often to practice their strange rituals.

One bleak, moonless night in October of 1954, I sat among these bearded old men around a line of low fires and sputtering lanterns against a backdrop of chipped columns and broken temple walls. Some of the men were gulping at cups of *arak,* a potent drink made from fermented dates. Others were calmly drawing on the long, flexible stems of *hobbly-bobblies,* their water pipes. They could easily have been a gathering of camel drivers relaxing after a day's work. But they weren't. They were some of the most unusual men in Egypt.

As soon as I'd been introduced, an old Sheikh, with a billowing white beard, named Sheikh Abdul Mohammed (John Smith in English), motioned to me to sit beside him. A place of honor, I learned later. They accepted me into their midst amiably, all except one tall, very dignified character with burning, angry eyes and a scraggly beard. He sat on the rim of the crowd and glared at me through most of the proceedings.

"Ignore him," Sheikh Shemes whispered when he saw me looking at him. "He doesn't like foreigners. The British . . . they . . ." his voice drifted off meaningfully.

What I witnessed that night seemed to be staged especially for my benefit and when I was called on to "perform," to prove and justify my presence there, I discovered I'd never known a more appreciative audience.

There were no weird religious rites or pagan ceremonies to the god of evil. Even now I'm not exactly certain what the "Way of Rafai" stands for. It seems to be an Arab lodge following the Rafai sect of Islam, admitting only those men who can do something outside the realm of normality, with emphasis on snakes and snake-charming.

Few of them spoke English, and my Arabic at that time was confined to a few stock phrases such as, *"Emshee!"* ("Go away!"), the first word every traveler in Egypt learns. And *"Allah yahanen aleik!"* ("May God give you pity!"), usually used as a polite brush-off for persistent beggars. But *jadoo,* like love, has a language of its own, and the men of Rafai speak it eloquently.

Snakes were everywhere that night. When the old Sheikh beside me opened the meeting, he held a long reptile in his hands and muttered a prayer in Arabic while everyone repeated some of the phrases after him. Then the evening's "entertainment" began.

First a middle-aged man from Maadi produced a hissing cobra and tossed it into the open center of the gathering. It coiled and made vicious lightning strikes in all directions. He danced around it for a few minutes, just out of reach of its fangs, and then suddenly stopped stock still. The snake froze too and stared at him, waiting for him to come into range. Wrinkling his brows, he stared at it in concentration and muttered some incantation over and over. Slowly the snake's hood relaxed and its head sagged to the ground.

The native pulled a large leather talisman from a necklace around his throat, a wide pouchlike affair, and dropped it over the head of the outstretched cobra. Then he started dancing again, moving in very close to the snake. It remained absolutely motionless, apparently hypnotized. The charmer was barefooted and his legs made an inviting target.

I started to applaud and everyone looked at me silently. Some smiled, but the scraggly bearded man sneered airily.

Whisking away the talisman, the charmer brought the snake back to life. It reared up, throwing a long, eerie shadow across the sand. He grabbed it quickly and shoved it back into his bag.

Similar demonstrations followed, each a little more baffling than before, each performer casting glances at me to see if I was impressed. I was.

One old man threw a four-foot-long snake on the ground and when it started to crawl away he shouted, *"Andak!"* ("Stop!"). And it stopped! Another command made it turn and crawl back into its bag.

Then scraggly beard came forward with a long stick in his hands, his eyes watching me closely. He stood in front of me with a slight smirk on his face and held the stick rigidly toward me. I reached automatically, thinking he wanted me to take it. But he pulled it back sharply, went into a little shuffling dance, then suddenly threw it on the ground. Instantly it changed into an enraged cobra, rearing up and coming straight at me!

I was startled and slid back, alarmed. Some of the old men chuckled. Scraggly beard contorted his face into a grin that was almost a grimace.

As the hissing, flat head weaved toward me, the Sheikh beside me scooped it up and handed it back. Scraggly beard returned to his place in the circle, obviously very pleased with himself.

When members of the Rafai called on me afterward at Zamalek they explained how this stick trick was done. It's the same trick Moses used to impress the Pharaoh. The snake is known as the *naje haje,* and by pressing a nerve on the back of its head the charmer paralyzes it completely, making it rigid. The shock of being thrown on the ground restores it to its normal, repulsive self.

After I'd recovered from this trick, a plump little man, clean-shaven in contrast to the others, stepped into the flickering ring of light, flourished a long, thin-bladed knife and suddenly stabbed it completely through his throat! He did it for me again in Zamalek a few days later. The wound didn't bleed and I couldn't find any evidence of trickery.

This performance robbed Sheikh Shemes of some thunder when

he walked forward to repeat his feat with the steel needles, described earlier. It didn't matter too much because the whole gathering had seen these wonders before. There was a lot of rude whispering and shuffling around during the different demonstrations, reminding me a little of the candlelit poetry soirées I used to attend back in Greenwich Village where the poets waited impatiently for their chance to recite their own masterpieces.

Then suddenly everyone quieted down. All eyes turned to me. The old man next to me smiled and patted my arm. My turn had come! I was expected to perform some feat to qualify myself for this mystic circle.

Fortunately, I'd anticipated something like this so I'd brought along a favorite trick of mine, one that's included in every child's magic set. Now it seemed pitifully inadequate and I was almost ashamed to try it.

The silence grew expectantly. Nervously I struggled to my feet with my back to the temple wall, fumbled for a moment, then produced four billiard balls from the air and made them vanish.

The silence continued for a moment and then everyone started applauding. It was the first applause of the evening. They kept it up until the old Sheikh nudged me to do it again.

There's an old magician's rule never to do the same trick twice before the same audience because the second time they know what to expect and might catch on. But I had no choice. I repeated it with variations until I'd exhausted by limited repertoire of manipulations. Then I was sworn into the "Way of Rafai" amidst a wild, frenzied chanting, in a bizarre ceremony, the details of which I've vowed to keep secret. When it was all over the meeting degenerated into a brawl. Some men grabbed sticks—not *naje hajes*—and did the Sudanese Dance, a sort of male belly dance. Others got down to serious drinking and gossiping. I was surrounded by an intent group, all wanting to know the secret of the ball trick. I didn't tell them because I knew it would disappoint them. Good tricks have disappointing secrets and this one was simply a matter of practice and manipulation.

By two o'clock in the morning most of the old wizards had drifted

away and the fires were going out. Before they started staggering across the desert to their huts and homes I made appointments with several of them and invited them to a little *jadoo* party in Zamalek. I tried also to befriend scraggly beard but he wasn't having any.

The old Sheikh walked back to Cairo with me, over those hills, and through the solemn Qaitbai cemetery with its mud mausoleums and round-domed tombs. On the horizon behind us the early streaks of dawn were appearing, and ahead of us Cairo was coming alive with the chant of morning prayers from the minarets of the mosques and the lonely howls of donkeys. The world seemed touched with antiquity and mysticism.

When I returned to Zamalek and passed by the big embassies, the exclusive sports clubs, and the swank foreign grocery stores, I found my spy sitting haggard and drawn on a curb across from my house. The moment he saw me he stood up, rubbed the eyes of his lean brown face, and started thumbing through an Arabic newspaper.

I walked toward him with a smile, intending to invite him up for a cup of coffee. But he crumpled his paper and hurried down the street. In all the time I was in Egypt I was never able to get within speaking distance of him.

Chapter Four

The Mummy Dealer of the Muski

A camel sat on me shortly after I settled in Egypt to launch my career as a cliff-hanging free-lance writer.

It all began uneventfully enough. I'd decided to spend a day on the desert exploring some old tombs and pyramids (there are more than ninety pyramids in Egypt), so I hired a pudgy, cheerful dragoman named Ahmed. We took off across the desert on two snorting, mischievous camels, carrying water and a box lunch from the Mena House Hotel, the big hotel nestled among the palm trees a few hundred yards from the Giza pyramids.

Nothing wrong with that. Thousands of tourists make similar treks every year without mishap.

Camels, I quickly discovered, are not the docile, reliable "ships of the desert" they've been made out to be. They have mean, nasty tempers and a talent for long-distance spitting which they use on anyone who displeases them.

The animal I chose had all the personality of a Walt Disney character, with a deep frown and a set of big yellow teeth which he bared with disdain when he looked at me. He moved with a

shambling, broken gait and had a habit of stopping every once in awhile to shudder violently and look back to see if I was still there.

In addition, I'd picked a dragoman who was sunstroke prone, probably the only one of his kind in Egypt! After an ordeal of a ride across several miles of hot empty sand, during which he'd spoken very little, he suddenly wilted and fell off his mount. His camel, fortunately, knew something was amiss and stopped. But my miserable beast kept plodding resolutely along while I jerked at the reins and shouted commands in several languages. Finally, he looked back at me with an annoyed expression, wrinkled his thick lips and puckered to spit. I swatted him angrily with my sun helmet and he halted indignantly.

Now my problem was how to get off and get back to where Ahmed was sprawled motionless on the sand. I didn't know how to make a camel kneel so I had to jump for it. I landed on one knee and rolled.

By the time I'd struggled to my feet my camel had bolted toward the horizon, taking our lunch and canteen with him. I was stranded in the middle of nowhere with a sick Arab, no food or water, and one camel I didn't know how to handle.

Anxiously I hurried back to Ahmed and tried to revive him. I was afraid he'd had a heart attack. But after a moment he moaned, looked up at me and said something in Arabic. In a few minutes he was feeling a little better, and I was able to make his camel kneel by pleading, tugging and cursing. I hauled him up over the saddle and he managed to sit there and smile down weakly at me.

Leading the camel, I started off, back the way we'd come. When we'd gone a few yards there was a snort behind us and my animal came trotting up, not wanting to be left behind.

I chased him around in circles for several minutes before I caught his reins and forced him to kneel. He glared at me sullenly but responded to my old army vocabulary. After climbing aboard I ordered him to rise . . . or else! He looked back at me with great distaste, an evil gleam in his eye as if to say, "I'll fix you!"

Then suddenly he sat up on his haunches and rolled on his side, pinning my leg underneath!

Luckily the soft sand gave and I wasn't crushed, although at first I thought my leg was broken. Later it turned black and blue and hurt a great deal. But I was more angry than injured and held on frantically, trying to talk the wretched creature into rolling back and getting to his feet.

He finally did, but he took his time about it. Then he started galloping wildly after Ahmed's mount which was ambling on toward the distant Mena House.

Whatever ailed Ahmed was cleared up by the time we reached the hotel. He was a little shaky and weak, but I think I was in worse shape. I walked with a limp for some time after that. Even now, when the weather is cold, the hurt returns and I remember that afternoon on the Egyptian desert and think about how those pyramids have influenced my life and health.

I was walking through the *Muski* one afternoon shortly after the camel incident, to meet the only man in modern Egypt who earns a living by operating a black market in mummies, when I happened to stumble onto an Egyptian funeral.

It came at me first as a sound unwinding out of the mesh of noise in the native quarter, the eerie cackle of a woman wailing hysterically, followed by the cries of several other high-pitched voices. Then separating out of the dust, the camels, the donkeys, and the swarms of hurrying Arabs, came a cluster of black-gowned Muslim women. All of them were making frantic theatrical mourning noises as a solemn, silent group of men marched along the crowded street holding aloft a crude wooden coffin with an old red *tarbush* resting emptily on top of it.

I watched the grim procession as it moved slowly down the street, gathering up running children and wailing women as a corpse always gathers vultures. And I thought how unusual it was that in this city bursting at the seams with life, I so rarely found the visitation of death.

Once in awhile a streetcar, traveling with sickening speed through the teeming streets, would slice off an unlucky chunk of humanity; I'd seen a few gruesome accidents. And now and then I came upon

one of the great temporary funeral tents erected in the middle of a block to accommodate friends of some influential corpse. But generally death pads catlike through the back alleys of Cairo, keeping his presence well hidden.

It had taken me weeks to discover the name of the mummy dealer, to obtain a confidential letter of introduction from a wealthy collector of relics and antiquities, and to ferret out his hidden workshop. I timed my visit to him during one of those lapses when my spy hadn't shown up for several days.

The mummy dealer was a nervous little Egyptian dressed in a soiled gray *galibeah,* with a cheap *tarbush* perched on his head. He studied my letter, then surveyed my suspiciously.

"You interested in *antica?*" he asked, tilting his head appraisingly like a sly squirrel.

We were standing in the doorway of his hut. Some putrid odor was pouring out, mixed with heavy incense. He looked up and down the busy street cautiously, then with a slight nod of his pointed head, motioned me inside.

The room facing the street was filled with stone fragments, chipped statues of ancient Egyptian gods, heaps of old beads and scarabs, and other odds and ends from the nation's glorious past. I glanced at a small alabaster figurine. Even in the dim light I could see the clumsy chisel marks of the sculptor.

The shopkeeper, sensing I recognized it as a forgery, shifted his feet like a shy cowboy in a Hollywood imitation of life.

"You like nice scarabs?" he began. "Three thousand years old."

I pushed the porcelain beetles aside and pointed to the letter in his hand.

"Doesn't that say I'm interested in mummies?"

He swallowed hard.

"You keep this very secret?" he whined. "Tell no one my name or where you found me?"

"All very secret," I agreed.

"Mummies in back," he mumbled.

I followed him into a narrow corridor that led into a small back room. The smell was terrible, like all the sewers in Egypt were

emptying into that house. He was burning plenty of incense, trying to kill it, but it only made things worse.

With nervous fingers he lit a small oil lamp. Slowly, as my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I could see several colorful mummy cases leaning against the dank walls.

"Real mummy cases from tombs. Four thousand years old," he whispered.

Then he launched into what was obviously a carefully memorized sales talk, pointing out the fine workmanship, the delicate carvings, and the beautifully painted hieroglyphics. They were authentic, all right.

I carefully creaked open the lid of one. It was empty.

"My friends said you had *mummies* for sale." I looked at him expectantly.

"Mummies are very expensive," he said softly.

"How much?"

"Five hundred pounds," he announced, watching for my reaction.

I whistled and frowned.

"That's 1,500 dollars!"

"It is difficult . . . I take many chances . . ." He shrugged apologetically.

Actually it was cheap for a real mummy. Too cheap, I thought.

"Let's see one."

He led me into the corridor again, past a doorway where a wrinkled female face bobbed momentarily, then disappeared. The smell was getting stronger. We came to a narrow flight of stairs leading downwards.

I followed him into a basement. The odor was now almost overwhelming. There, in the flickering glow of his lamp, I saw a terrifying sight.

Seven old half-decayed coffins were scattered about the floor or leaning against the walls. And every one of them contained a withered brown mass of bones and leathery flesh loosely wrapped in moldy linen. They looked like rigid ghosts, ready to step out of their cases. Each one fifteen hundred dollars worth of ancient death.

I examined one closely. The shopkeeper seemed to have the jitters.

"Can you get these things through Customs?" I asked, looking up. He was sulking in a corner of the basement, by a big wooden door.

"It is done often," he said.

"Who buys these?"

Fresh suspicion quivered behind his uneven gaze.

"Collectors. Dealers. Many are resold in Europe and America."

I knew a few wealthy eccentrics who collected such things, but I didn't think there could be a very heavy traffic in old mummified bodies.

Suddenly another thought hit me coldly. *This mummy didn't smell!* It was a little musty, perhaps, but that wretched stink wasn't coming from the mummies! What I was smelling were fresh corpses!

"My God!" My voice must have been a shrill whisper. "This is a fake, like those statues upstairs!"

The Egyptian narrowed his eyes and glared at me warily. My friend had just told me he sold mummies. Not that he made them!

"You . . ." I choked out, "you *make* these mummies here, don't you?"

I moved toward him, toward the closed door, fascinated with horror.

"Please . . ." there was an alarmed quiver in his voice, ". . . these are genuine mummies . . . from Saqqara!"

"They haven't dug up any mummies there in years!"

Now I knew why he was so nervous. Bootlegging relics is a serious crime in Egypt. *But manufacturing mummies!* That must be punishable with life imprisonment, or maybe even death.

"Look," I said reassuringly, "I don't care if you boil babies. Your secret is safe with me. *But what's behind this door?*"

"Nothing!" he blurted, standing spread-eagled in front of it.

I gave him a quick shove and slid the heavy bolt, throwing the door open.

That smell burst out like a shotgun blast. A gasoline lamp hung from the low ceiling, filling the room with a blaze of light. A large

vat sat in the center. And standing over it, a huge, muscular Egyptian stared at me in surprise. With a fierce, ugly look he came at me slowly, hunched like a wrestler. I glanced hopefully toward the little shopkeeper. He stepped forward, speaking a few words in Arabic in a hushed, disturbed voice. The big man stopped, studying me defiantly.

"Here . . . here is where we prepare . . . the . . . the mummies," the shopkeeper confessed worriedly. "You tell no one?"

"No . . . I won't tell anyone," I promised. Then I talked smoothly, trying to win his confidence and get the inside story of his weird business. Finally, in hesitant, broken English, he answered my questions, hoping, I suppose, to satisfy my curiosity so I would go away. Later, with further research in the library of Cairo's American University, I pieced together these facts about mummy-making.

Four hundred years ago you could buy "Egyptian Mummy" in any Apothecary. It was a coveted cure-all during the Middle Ages. Ground-up bodies hauled out of Egyptian crypts were considered good for everything from a hangnail to a knife wound. For this reason hundreds of priceless tombs were rifled by profit-hungry merchants, and undoubtedly many records and relics of immense historical value were stolen or destroyed. Eventually the heavy traffic in mummies exhausted the supply, so the merchants had to start manufacturing more.

Getting fresh bodies from jails and hospitals, they filled them with bitumen, wrapped them tightly with cheap cloth, and put them out in the hot desert sun for short periods. The resultant mummies, when ground up, easily passed for the real thing.

Since most of them were made from corpses that had died from the worst kinds of diseases, their medicinal value was questionable. In the end, the Egyptian government slapped a very heavy tax on the sale of the grotesque merchandise and the once flourishing market died out.

But not completely. Mummies are still smuggled out of Egypt to China and India where they are still used for medicine. And they are still sold to collectors of strange curios. That is where my friend came in.

But he didn't waste his time using the genuine method of mummification; that took a lot of work and preparation. Here is how the ancients did it.

First, the ancient undertakers rammed an iron hook up the corpse's nose, pulling his brains out through his nostrils. Then a man known as a "scribe" made a mark on the left side of the body, preparing the way for a gentleman identified as the "ripper-up." He was accompanied by a group of young assistants. After he'd sliced the corpse along the mark, they had to throw stones at him, cursing him for injuring a human body, a grave offense in ancient Egypt. Lastly, the embalmer, a man of high social position, stepped forward, thrust his hand into the cut, and pulled out everything he could get hold of, excepting the heart and the lungs.

The body was then filled with myrrh and other perfumes before being lowered into a vat of natrium. After soaking for 70 days, it was pulled out, washed, perfumed some more, smeared with gum (which the Egyptians used instead of glue), and swathed completely in bandages. Then it was placed in a wooden case, in the shape of a man, and stood upright in the burial chamber or locked away in a heavy granite sarcophagus. Often the inner organs were also chemically treated and placed in jars or small sarcophagi which were interred with the mummy.

Eventually, the corpse turned into a form which might be compared with coal, highly inflammable but capable of lasting forever.

Honey was also used by the Egyptians for mummification. Alexander the Great was preserved in it. Not too long ago a party of Egyptians were digging near the pyramids when they uncovered a large tightly sealed jar of honey. Since Egyptians always seem to be hungry, they sat down and dug into it with their fingers. Presently one of them complained he'd found a hair. Then they discovered more hairs, finally pulling out the body of a small child which had been buried centuries before!

The very poor were mummified in a cheap solution of salt and bitumen. Even the rankest amateur Egyptologist can spot a salted mummy; its skin is like paper, the features of its face are gone, and the bones are brittle and extremely white.

My friend in the *Muski* was using some crude, foul-smelling liquid that sped up the drying process. He had inherited the formula from his father. Even this ghastly trade was a family affair, pursued by each succeeding generation.

His big Arab accomplice gruffly showed me their particular mummification technique while I battled nausea. The terrible odor was searing my lungs and lashing at the walls of my stomach.

Tossed in a cruel pile in a corner of the room, several stiff brown bodies lay waiting their turn in the vat. Flies clustered over them like animated ink blots.

"First we cut them open," the Arab, with a craftsman's pride, explained. "Then we pull out their insides. . . ." He pointed toward a pile of red and white innards against one wall.

"We stuff them, just as the ancients did, and put them in this . . ." he patted the vat lovingly, "for a few weeks. After we take them out, we wrap them in old, treated linen and bury them in the desert to ripen for a few more weeks. . . ."

Suddenly I felt sick. I leaned against the wall and pulled my handkerchief out of my coat pocket. My Egyptian press card popped out too and fell on the floor. It was a little green folder with the name of a government ministry written in Arabic on the cover. The big native stooped and picked it up. A violent oath rolled from his lips. The shopkeeper looked at it and terror crossed his face.

It took me a moment to realize what was happening. Suddenly my feet were dangling as the Arab lifted me by the collar, thrusting his vicious face into mine.

"I'm not a government agent!" I exclaimed. "I'm a journalist! That's a press card!"

He dropped me and I stumbled backwards, falling against something hard and cold. The bodies.

I staggered to my feet, conscious that the big man was coming at me.

For one desperate moment I tried to gather my strength. I sucked in my breath and raised my hands defensively.

The Arab seemed eight feet tall. My arms were weak, my stomach heaving, and my throat and nostrils burning. I shoved one fist for-

ward and it hit something as solid as a brick wall. Then I saw the native pull his arm back and make a sudden movement. There was a moment of savage pain . . . then the terrible smell went away.

An army of ants wearing GI shoes seemed to be marching through my head, going in one ear and coming out the other. My first thought on regaining consciousness was, "I'm still alive!"

Then came the anxious question in the back of my mind: "How do they get the bodies? Is this the way?"

Overhead the gasoline lantern sizzled. It was turned down, almost out. Flies were crawling over my face. Blood had been trickling from my bruised lips. One of my hands was stretched out, resting on a hard, cold body.

Suddenly, like a giant *djinn,* the big Arab was looking down at me from an incredible height. His fierce face was clouded with concern.

"You hit me, *effendi!*" a thunderous voice said. "You hit me!"

"You hit *me!*" I groaned.

The shopkeeper faded out of the mist around the corners of my vision. His frightened face came very close to mine.

"Are you all right?" he asked anxiously. "Ahmed hurt you!"

A pair of strong hands lifted me to my feet.

The room was swimming in a pale green fog. The little man was apologizing frantically in three languages. Everything was going to be all right.

"The bodies . . . where do you get the bodies?" I asked the one great question on my mind.

"We buy them. Dig them up." He read my thoughts. "No! We do not kill! We are not murderers!"

They helped me up the stairs and poured a cup of *saleb* down my throat. Away from that stink I was beginning to feel better.

Over and over the shopkeeper begged me to keep silent about what I'd seen. I nodded halfheartedly. True to the old newspaper tradition, I always try to protect the sources of my copy, but I knew that someday I would have to write about all this.

As my brain cleared, I could understand why they were afraid of me—the influential American who could ruin their business and put

them in jail. Apparently the idea of making a mummy out of *me* had been rejected, but I'm sure they thought of it.

Finally I felt strong enough to leave. After one last whiff of that mummy stink wafting up from the cellar, I staggered into the street.

A rattling, forlorn taxi with one door hanging off passed by. I jumped in and it sputtered, coughed and squeaked through the crowds. As I rode slowly toward Zamalek I pictured the little mummy maker and the big Arab doing their prayers reverently beside their bubbling cauldron, asking Allah to protect them from the American journalist who knew too much.

Creeping change grips the *Muski* now. Modern machine tools whir in narrow alleys which once knew only the patient scraping of chisels and the whine of saws wielded by skilled handcraftsmen. The notorious "Fishmarket" where dark-eyed prostitutes once plied their trade is now just a memory. In the dozens of old and colorful mosques priests no longer climb the steep, weary, spiraling stairs to the peaks of the minarets five times a day to call the faithful to prayer. Today they sit before a microphone in a plush carpeted room, and their voices ring out across the city from strategically placed loudspeakers.

Furtive dragomen no longer sidle up to strangers and whisper, "Hey, meester . . . want see feelthy belly dance?" And trusting tourists, traveling with such dragomen, no longer turn up in the Nile with a curved dagger deep in their backs and their watches and wallets gone.

Active, watchful "Tourist Police" have rounded up the beggars and put them in rehabilitation homes. Shopkeepers have been forced to put fair price tags on their goods, thus ending the practice of "bargaining"; a practice in which the tourist always came out second-best. Gone are the pornographic postcard peddlers, the con artists, and the illegal dragomen. A new respectability has come to what used to be a crooked and dangerous city.

The biggest menace I found remaining in the streets of Cairo were the gangs of shoeshine boys who operate in brilliantly organized teams. They hang around dimly lighted street corners and

when a tourist passes by one of them surreptitiously spatters his shoes with oil. Further down the street another boy stops him and tsks, tsks: "Look at shoes! All dirty. You need shine."

Before the bewildered victim can protest, the boy has set up his box and is in business. Another boy materializes out of nowhere and the shoeshiner hands him a coin.

"Go buy benzine," he orders.

The boy dashes off, returning a couple of minutes later with an old polish can filled with some clear liquid, probably water. After the shoeshiner cleans the oil off his victim's shoes, he tries to clean his wallet as well.

"Ten piastres for benzine," he demands. "And eight piastres for special shine."

The normal price for a shoeshine is two piastres. If the tourist complains or refuses to pay, the boy will uncork a bottle of polish and threaten to spill it over his clothes, while the rest of the gang moves in menacingly. This is a trick they learned during the war and used against nattily dressed Allied officers who were reluctant to get into a street scene with a lowly shoeshine boy. Most tourists pay up.

And woe to the newcomer who hauls out a fistful of change. The boy will slap his hand and the coins will go flying. The other boys grab them up in a mad scramble and disappear into the night.

Aside from these vicious urchins, the only other people who really prey on the modern tourist are the well-dressed young Egyptians who hover around the mosques and popular sight-seeing spots. Usually they are employees of the government, working by day to earn ten or fifteen pounds a month, and supplementing their incomes in the afternoon and evenings by pouncing on unescorted tourists and offering to get them into "forbidden" mosques. For this service they charge whatever they think their victim might be willing to pay . . . from fifty piastres to two pounds. The tourist can enter the same mosques alone for about five piastres.

Any visitor can roam the *Muski's* darkest streets without danger today. I've often prowled its most forbidding alleys late at night without running into trouble. In the quarter called *"Bulaq,"* west of the *Muski,* I've gone alone to hasheesh dens, passing through un-

lighted narrow streets, climbing dark and treacherous stairs, entering little rooms filled with sickish-sweet purple smoke where dazed men sat or lay stretched out puffing on *hobbly-bobblies* and long clay pipes filled with the drug. For five piastres I tried the stuff myself. It made me a little drunk, but that was all.

Despite Cairo's progress into the future, the *Muski* still retains some of its old color and atmosphere. It's a fascinating labyrinth, writhing outwards toward the desert, away from the modern stores and buildings of the European sector, expanding into a web of small, packed streets and alleys filled with dark archways and quiet little courts. It's divided into many overlapping sections, with separate streets for hardware and clothing stores, glassware and leather shops, and spoiled smelling butcher stalls where flies feast in swarms on exposed cuts of unappetizing meats.

Peddlers of all kinds trudge back and forth along this web, hawking lemonade from great brass pitchers on their backs, or selling fruits from huge wooden crates balanced on their heads. For those with a toothache, there is a man in a bloodstained apron who will pull it on the spot for ten piastres; without anaesthesia, of course. For those who need a shave, there are roving barbers carrying long rusty razors in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. In addition, there are roving locksmiths, carpenters, and tailors who will make you a new *galibeah* in minutes. Most Egyptian men can only afford about one *galibeah* a year (price $1.50 to $3.00) so the tailors don't do a very brisk business.

In this web you see the stormy-eyed native women in their black *abahs,* veiled to the eyes, doing their day's shopping, studying men aloofly, and carrying their frequently pregnant bellies proudly. In the little cafés you find their men sitting over cups of *saleb* or cocoanut shells filled with milky looking beer, puffing meditatively on *hobbly-bobblies* which they rent by the hour, and playing little games with cards and checkers. Women aren't allowed in the cafés. Female life must center completely around the home.

The whole section vibrates with life and color and smells, from the stink of those butcher shops to the sweet, intoxicating odors of the dim alleys where spices are sold. The popular notion that there

are fabulous bargains to be had in the native bazaars of Oriental cities is far from true, especially here. Customarily the shops and stalls deal in the cheapest kind of bric-a-brac, poorly made, or imported and therefore very expensive.

This was Cairo, 1954, before the uproar over Egypt's seizure of the Suez Canal. A city where rich men and beggars alike doffed their shoes and knelt side by side on their prayer carpets, mumbling phrases of the *Koran,* the Muslim bible; dreaming of one day making the long, hard pilgrimage to Mecca in Arabia, where they might reserve a place in heaven for themselves and their families by walking seven times around the Kaaba, a small square temple containing a sacred black stone. After such a pilgrimage they have the right to be addressed by the title of *Hajji,* an honor bordering on knighthood.

Muslims spend at least a half hour in prayer each day. Stopping whatever they are doing, wherever they happen to be, they spread their little carpets and bow to the east. I've had to wait many times in banks and post offices while the clerks did their prayers behind the counters.

All of this religion lends a special atmosphere to the city and gives the people a certain mystical air, an air that blends well with the natural mystery and antiquity of Cairo.

Because of their religious hopes, Egyptians are a singing people in spite of their poverty and misery. Peddlers have a song on their lips as they go their rounds. Old ladies hum as they knit their way through the crazy traffic in the streets. Children bellow wild Arabic songs while they play.

Even the eerie call of the *Gali-Gali* men is like a song.

"Gali-Gali . . . Gallllllli . . . Gallllllli!" They chant as they maneuver their way among the tables in the cafes and cabarets. Give them an encouraging nod and they will squat at your feet, digging into their wonderful bags for "miracles such as you never see before."

There aren't many of these men left. Civilization is drowning the old interest in "miracles" as such. To the simple natives this is an

age of miracles . . . of machines that fly through the air, of telephones, of motion pictures. Magic tricks and *jadoo* have become unimpressive in comparison to these things. So the *Gali-Gali* men who once had large, devoted followings now have to struggle on *baksheesh* and whatever they can steal from their customers in the cafés. They are notoriously dishonest and can swipe your wrist watch while shaking hands, or extract your wallet without your knowledge during their confusing performances. And sadly, in a desperate effort to keep up with the changing times, they have abandoned many of the marvelous secrets of their ancestors and stocked up with cheap apparatus from mail-order magic shops in London and New York.

I think I met all the *Gali-Gali* men in Cairo, and the best of them was a hunchbacked little man named Hanafik. The majority of his tricks centered around borrowed money. He was good at making it disappear, but slow at reproducing it. His favorite illusion was the old "Chinese" linking rings trick, in which several solid, separate rings are apparently linked together after a series of manipulations. His best *"Gali-Gali"* trick was a grisly thing done with a live pigeon. He would hack off its head with a butcher knife and then restore it. This was done simply by tucking the bird's head under its wing temporarily and then flourishing the severed head of a less lucky pigeon.

If you are ever in Egypt and meet up with a *Gali-Gali* man who borrows a coin or bill from you and makes it vanish, you can get it back by demanding that he unwind his turban. Usually, while going through their manipulations, they frequently rearrange their turbans and their long hair, secretly planting palmed coins, bills, balls, etc. there. Their heads are a catchall for vanished objects, like the "servantes," the shelves hidden in the backs of tables used by western magicians.

Sheikh Abdul Mohammed, whom I met at that "Way of Rafai" meeting, turned out to be one of the most astonishing wonder-workers of all. But he didn't try to make money with his talents. He even refused the piastres I offered him after he gave an incredible performance in my apartment one morning. He hadn't shown up at

my little *jadoo* party for the Rafai and I had forgotten about him. Then one day just as I was about to leave for a walk—it was my practice to prowl Cairo in the mornings and evenings and spend the hot afternoons over my typewriter—he appeared at my door.

After we exchanged *sayeedas* and the usual Arabic formalities, he sat cross-legged on my living room floor, his burning eyes studying me silently for a moment. Then he said:

"You have eight pounds, twenty-five piastres in your right-hand pants pocket, with an extra pound hidden in your watch pocket for emergencies."

He was right!

Long ago, in Brooklyn, I'd known a phony "Fortuneteller and Spirit Medium" who was a clever psychologist and could size up a person with incredible accuracy from his appearance and could sometimes guess closely how much money he was carrying. But the Sheikh couldn't have had any idea of whether I, a supposedly "rich" American, was carrying two, or two hundred pounds. How did he know, then, the exact amount? He refused to say.

After we'd talked for a few minutes he rose slowly to his feet and pointed a bony finger under my chair.

"Look!"

I looked and jumped up. A small deadly desert viper was coiled under my feet.

The old man stepped forward, mumbling some weird words while the snake uncoiled slowly and slid out onto the carpet. He stooped to pick it up and it recoiled swiftly and lashed out with its fangs.

Anger flared in the old man's eyes. He took a step backwards and held one thin hand over the snake's head. Its whole body quivered. The swaying head with the dripping fangs lowered slowly to the carpet. It trembled once more and lay very still. It was dead!

What killed it? He didn't touch it. It didn't act as if it were drugged or poisoned. I examined it and there were no marks on it. Of course, the Sheikh must have brought it into the apartment with him. There were no snakes like it in Zamalek, and certainly there weren't any in my third floor apartment. Again, the Sheikh refused to offer any explanation.

Later this amazing white-bearded old man gave me an address in the *Muski* and asked me to call on him, promising to show me even more fantastic feats. A few days afterward I went looking for the place but the houses weren't numbered and I spent a vain, frustrating evening searching for it. I asked dozens of people where I could find Sheikh Abdul Mohammed, the *Gali-Gali* man, and they either shrugged or directed me to Abdul the shoemaker, or Abdul the merchant.

Chapter Five

Broke in Bagdad

By late fall, 1954, my savings were almost gone and my new stories were selling sluggishly. I had spent three years writing terse dialogue for radio and it was hard for me to readjust to the adjective-ridden style of the men's magazines, my major market. Besides, the few editors who had accepted my work in my pre-army days were gone or had forgotten me. I was almost back in the same position as when I first left home in 1947.

Almost, but not quite. The intervening years had taught me a lot about writing, research, interviewing, and working under pressure. My intentions and my future were a little vague when I left Germany, but now a pattern was evolving. Magic was again my prime interest and most of my articles were concerned with the magicians of Egypt, spiced with my cliff-hanging experiences. When I looked at the rapid changes around me in Cairo, I realized I might be one of the last people privileged to pry into the world of Oriental mystery before it was wiped away altogether. This realization helped me to define my "mission" more clearly.

One evening I was interviewing a wan, tired old man in the *Muski* who used hypnotism for medicinal purposes, helping people to forget their pain and misery, when he happened to mention a strange new exciting word.

Jadoo!

"What's that?" I asked.

"A Hindu word," he explained. "It means black magic. It's related to voodoo * and hoodoo. Surely you've heard of those?"

He didn't give me enough material for a story, but he did give me a focal point for my search which was just beginning. *Jadoo.* It was a password throughout the Orient, wherever interest in magic and the supernatural still ran high.

Followed diligently by my bored spy, I pursued *jadoo* five hundred miles down the Nile River to the drowsy little town of Luxor, a few miles from the famous "Valley of the Kings" where the tomb of King Tutankhamen was unearthed in the roaring twenties. This was the same King Tut whose gold encased mummy is supposed to have leveled a curse on the British archaeologists who opened his grave. One of them, Lord Carnarvon, whose money financed the expedition, died suddenly a few days after the coffin was brought to the surface, and several of the others died violently later on.

In Luxor my spy was greeted by friends and disappeared. I wandered alone through the great deserted temples of the past and sniffed around the hieroglyphically decorated halls of the ancient tombs. A long ride by donkey took me to the "Valley of the Kings" where Tut's tomb is now just a hole in the ground illuminated by electric lights.

There I also met Egypt's most renowned snake charmer, Hajji Mohammed Ali, who had been one of King Farouk's favorite entertainers and who boasted of having performed for Churchill, Montgomery, and "the head man of America," General Eisenhower.

He is a man of many affectations. He walks with a tall, proud,

* Voodoo was born on the island of Zanzibar, off the east coast of Africa, and was probably greatly influenced by the *jadoo* practices of India.

regal stride and carries a white silk umbrella to shield himself from the sun. Because of an eye affliction he wears thick-lensed tinted glasses. The pockets of the clothes under his long white robe (Arabs wear many garments under their *galibeahs*) bulge with newspaper clippings about his feats, written in many languages.

In the torrid heat of winter, Luxor seemed less like the "jewel of the Nile valley" and more like an integral part of the dead, sand-encrusted ruins around it. Its dirty streets, with their open stalls and sleepwalking natives, were a miniature *Muski,* dominated by the great papyrus columns (so named because they are shaped like papyrus plants) of the ageless temple of Amenhotep III. It was there, in that eerie old temple, and in the nearby temples of Karnak, beyond the broad avenue of sphinxes, that I went on a snake hunt with Hajji Mohammed Ali.

His only equipment consisted of a stick and a large basket covered with a tight cloth to make it lightproof. Ordinarily a snake will not strike into the dark at something it can't see or sense. The Hajji led me slowly among the tall columns and ten-foot-high statues, rattling off a series of holy words, memorized from the *Koran,* in a low, montonous drone. He claimed he could lure snakes out of their holes in this way and bend them to his will. But as he walked he kept his eyes on the ground, obviously searching for something. When at last he spotted a tiny, almost invisible, S-shaped marking in the sands, he stopped dramatically and wrinkled his nose.

"I smell a snake!" he declared. "Now I will call it forth."

Unleashing another babble of Arabic words, he probed cautiously around a promising crevice with his stick. Suddenly an agitated reptile of a common harmless variety shot out of the crevice and he grabbed it up.

"See, it answered my call!" he beamed, holding it carelessly. With a quick movement it swung its head around and sank its teeth into his forearm, drawing blood.

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "Look! It tries to bite me! This is a deadly poisonous snake. If it bit anyone else it would kill them. But it can't hurt me!"

He spit in its eyes and it let go. Its mouth left a little crescent of bloody teeth marks. A poisonous snake leaves only two black holes—fang marks.

Later I found that all snake charmers allow themselves to be bitten by a harmless snake or a "shaven" (defanged) cobra in a tourist's presence, hoping to win concern and a larger tip. It usually works.

And when the tourist gets back home he usually forgets the details of how the charmer handled the snakes and comes up with a story like this: "This guy walked through the temples chanting some secret magic words until he smelled a snake . . . yeah, *smelled* it! Then he said some more words and it came right up out of its hole, answering him, and he grabbed it. He actually grabbed this deadly snake! And suddenly it bit him, but it didn't hurt him at all because he's immune to snakebites!"

That's how some of the legends of the mysteries of the East are born.

But how do they end?

Usually those who live by snakes die by snakes. The Hajji's teacher and uncle is an outstanding example. He was a magnetic, bearded little man named Sheikh Moussa who gained world fame during the twenties and was reputedly the greatest snake charmer of modern times. Books were written about him. He was supposed to be impervious to snakebites. Then one day in 1939 a cobra bit him in the finger as he was reaching into its hole. He tried to find a razor to cut the finger off with, but failed. All the words in the Koran couldn't save him.

Hajji Mohammed Ali then stepped in and when people came to Luxor seeking Sheikh Moussa he met them and built his own reputation. Tourists are usually so anxious to have "adventures," to see something "mysterious," that they are willing to believe him and see only what he wants them to see.

The Hajji unwittingly gave me the answer to one of the feats I'd witnessed at the "Way of Rafai" meeting. He caught a large snake and stretched it out on a stone to "hypnotize" it. He covered its head with a leather talisman and made magic passes at it. The snake had been very lively but now it was very still. And I suddenly realized

that when a snake's head is covered, it will remain still and wait for the darkness to lift. Later I experimented with this and proved it to my own satisfaction.

After the Hajji captured a snake he would toss it into his basket. At the conclusion of our snake hunt he added a single scorpion. The basket shuddered for a moment and then was still. All snake charmers, from Sid Ifni to Singapore, believe it's bad luck to kill a snake. So they either let them starve to death or they introduce a scorpion among them. These poisonous insects rarely lose a fight, even with a cobra.

From Luxor I traveled farther south to Aswan and beyond it to the rarely visited temples of the Upper Nile with my reluctant spy still at my heels. There, after a night sleeping in the bottom of a native *felookia,* I contracted a bad case of "Gippy tummy," dysentery, from eating native foods nourished by the filthy Nile. I ran a high fever, lost all my strength, and had to cut short a trip into the Sudan.

Wearily I returned to Aswan, climbed aboard a dusty, uncomfortable train, and rode a thousand painful miles across the desert back to Cairo.

This trip ate up my remaining funds, and my agent's letters were not very hopeful. It took from three to six months for each of my stories to sell, and I had wasted much of my early days in Egypt writing about the constantly changing political scene and about the more obvious and mundane aspects of Egyptian life. The rejection of these pieces taught me to concentrate on *jadoo* and cliff-hanging.

I felt I'd exhausted all the story possibilities in Egypt. I had to get away, to find new vistas and gain a fresh perspective. India was my next logical goal but thousands of miles of sand and water separated me from it. The boat fare was far more than I could afford; in fact, I was stone-broke. I spent a week sitting around my apartment, living on ham sandwiches and coffee, nursing my stomach, hoping some sale would come in to rescue me.

Fortunately my agent, realizing my position, came through with a hundred dollar advance. He was sure something of mine would sell,

even though I was rapidly losing the confidence I'd gained at AFN.

With the money in my pocket and a big meal from Groppi's restaurant under my belt, I dug out my maps and started searching for some cheap route to India. I decided to attempt the journey overland across the appallingly vast and empty stretches of the Middle Eastern deserts.

A ticket from Alexandria to Beirut, Lebanon, was only $25 third class. From there I could get a cheap bus to Damascus, Syria. And from Damascus, if luck was with me, I thought I might be able to attach myself to a camel caravan crossing the 1,000 mile route to fabled Baghdad. And from there—well, it would be up to fate.

I threw a few things into a suitcase, taking only what I could comfortably carry myself. All of my books, papers, and souvenirs had to be abandoned. I couldn't afford to ship them to the States. I didn't even tell my landlord I was leaving. I left my pajamas on the rumpled bed. I wouldn't need fancy pajamas where I was going. The Egyptian phase of my life was finished.

None of my Cairo friends knew I was leaving. I was too depressed to make the rounds and say good-by. But when I left I wasn't completely alone. At the docks in Alexandria a single man in a baggy suit was standing off by himself, his eyes searching the crowd—my spy.

I wanted to go over, shake his hand, and apologize for all the wild goose chases I had led him on. But I was afraid he would run, as he had always done before. So, instead, I spent a few precious piastres for a carton of *Hollywood* cigarettes, the Egyptian brand I had noticed he smoked. I gave them to a porter and pointed him out. He looked surprised and embarrassed when the porter handed him the package. Then he broke into an uneasy smile and waved shyly to me as I climbed the gangplank. It made me feel a little better.

He stood there alone, a somewhat forlorn figure on the bustling docks, as the ship cast off and slid away toward the Mediterranean.

On the ship to Beirut there was a dark young man, obviously of Arabic stock, with a narrow mustache and eyes tinged with worry and nostalgia, who didn't mix with the gregarious Arab and Oriental

passengers but preferred to sit gloomily by himself in the lounge. He was dressed in clean, expensive tweeds with an American cut, and his shoes were brand-new, also American.

Something, perhaps it was mutual loneliness, drew us together. I learned he was a newspaper editor from Iraq who had just spent a year in the United States on an exchange program. At the finish of that year he had been faced with a hard decision. Should he remain in America, where he had made many friends and found a new life, or should he return to his own primitive country?

He decided to go back, taking with him his shiny new American car.

When he—I'll call him Sayed although that's not his real name—heard my plans he frowned.

"I don't think you'll ever be able to find a caravan going to Baghdad," he said. "Even if you did, it would take twenty or thirty days to make the trip. Why don't you join me instead? I'm driving my car there. It shouldn't take more than a couple of days."

So we teamed up.

While Sayed spent a few days with relatives in Beirut, I checked into the cheapest hotel available. Beirut is an exotic little city on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean, sporting, among other things, an American-style frozen custard stand. Its architecture is plainly French-inspired, with magnificent old villas looking out to sea and ornate iron-work balconies rimming its intricate alleys.

I spent most of my time there scurrying around lining up the necessary visas and documents for the trek across the desert. Here I suffered a severe financial jolt.

Our drive would take us over the northern tip of Trans-Jordan, a tiny desert kingdom, and the transient visa through Jordan set me back ten desperately needed dollars. The Syrian and Iraqi visas weren't quite so expensive, but they hurt too.

They claim there's a road between Damascus and Baghdad, but all I saw was a series of holes, ruts and obstacles resembling a Detroit auto proving grounds, stretched between innumerable "check points" manned by legal bandits who charged exorbitant fees for their "stamps and services."

Sayed's relatives furnished us with a big fried chicken and an elaborate lunch basket for the trip. We expected it would take us about one day to cross the thousand miles between the two cities. We didn't reckon with those legal bandits.

Nor did I realize what the gas and oil would cost when I agreed to share the expenses. Gasoline was 80¢ a gallon and our tank held fifteen. Each time we filled up I was dragged much closer to complete poverty. My Beirut hotel bill was much higher than I'd expected, and all those visas had cleaned me out. I reluctantly sold my precious still camera for a fraction of what it was worth before I could leave Beirut.

Both of us were in gloomy spirits when we started out and we got gloomier as we hit new snags and obstacles.

After crossing a placid range of mountains from Lebanon into Syria, our car was seized by a mob of Customs officials in Damascus and we were forced to stay the night there, adding a hotel bill to our expenses.

Damascus, which boasts of being the oldest city in the world, is quite modern now and is the only place in the Middle East where you can buy fresh buttered popcorn, as big a treat to me as the frozen custard of Beirut.

A small circus was stranded in the city, unable to afford trucks and transportation to Lebanon. I talked to the downhearted circus people, but was in no condition to cheer them up. I knew just how they felt.

The next morning we spent three hours in a vast pentagonlike building, trotting from office to office, buying expensive stamps for our sheaf of papers. Finally, after filling our gas tank, we got underway.

At the border of Trans-Jordan we were stopped for another two or three hours for more "stamps and services." Jordan was less civilized than Syria, and we rode out of the fertile green Syrian valley into bleak desert country, rarely passing a tent or sign of life. At another check point we had to stop for more gas. I considered looking under the car to see if there was a leak in the tank.

"I thought they grew gas out here," I protested meekly. "It should be ten cents a gallon."

Sayed just chuckled fiendishly.

He was a sober young man with a pseudo-intellectual pose, common among the better educated classes of the Middle East and the Orient. A college diploma and a smattering of learning automatically elevates them to the status of "intellectual." They also develop a pseudo-sophistication based on the aloof mannerisms of British officials who ruled over them for so long. They cultivate the disdainful sneer, and a harsh, critical attitude toward the lowly masses.

Sayed was afflicted with all these traits, and now that he had lived in America and had traveled through Europe, he was an unspeakable snob. But his unnatural attitudes gave his conversation a tinge of unconscious humor. He was irritated and puzzled when I laughed at his wry, bitter "I'm so civilized" asides.

We didn't hit it off too well. We were both wrestling with our own problems and worrying about our own futures. After a few difficult bursts of conversation, I settled down to reading a paperback novel I'd brought along; an appropriate book titled *The End of My Life,* by Vance Bourjailly.

It took us only three hours to pass through barren Jordan. I figure my look at that empty desert, including the cost of gas and the visa, set me back $5.00 an hour.

The road was as lumpy as army mashed potatoes, but there was little traffic and we made good time until we reached the border check point. There, a fierce looking soldier wearing a faded khaki shirt and no pants shoved an antique rifle into our faces and soaked us $1.50 for his "services." He also sold us some gasoline which he poured out of a rusty tin can.

Then we entered the great Syrian-Iraqi desert. The road started getting rougher and Sayed observed, "We must be getting closer to Iraq. We have lousy roads."

Scientists and theologists insist the Garden of Eden was originally located in this area. It certainly has changed! I expected to find rolling sand dunes and peaceful tent villages. Maybe the sand is there,

but it's invisible, buried beneath an endless ocean of black rocks—burned like charcoal by the relentless sun—the size of ostrich eggs, which stretch as far as you can see. Walking on such a desert is impossible; it's like walking on a carpet of marbles. The rare camel caravans have to follow the roads that have been pushed through.

At long intervals we passed herds of flea-bitten sheep trying to eke out a living on the sparse, dry grass that grows up between the rocks in some places. Once we passed a gang of slow moving natives apparently trying to dig new holes in the road. Occasionally we would see a group of camels tiptoeing along the edge of the road, or we would pass the black tents of a tribe of hardy nomads. A few years ago desert bandits ruled these regions, and terrorized travelers, but now patrols of soldiers have cut down their activities. In any case, I was thankful I hadn't tried to carry out my original plan.

Then it was night and we could see nothing. The "road" grew worse by the mile, developing some totally unnecessary hairpin curves. Once we found ourselves splashing through the middle of a mysterious lake.

Finally, we reached the Iraqi frontier and a place called Rutbah which featured a water well, a gasoline pump, and a "resthouse," a place with beds where weary travelers could scratch away until daybreak. Sayed and I decided to drive all night instead of stopping there. We shelled out for more stamps and services, refilled our bottomless gas tank, and continued on. I was beginning to understand how Iraq makes $300,000,000 a year from oil, but I don't see why they don't spend something on road improvement.

The track—it wasn't a "road" any more—became impossible. We drove for several bumpy miles before we realized that we'd run off it altogether. I got out of the car and with a flashlight searched for nearly an hour before I found it again and guided Sayed back to it.

"Yep," he muttered, "this is Iraq, all right!"

The Tigris River had flooded the entire lowlands the year before and no effort had been made to repair what was left of the track. It had become a series of ditches, a rutted roller coaster. It took several hours of bouncing and cursing to travel a few miles. By the time we reached the village of Fëlluja we were both worn out.

In this part of the world travelers must check with the officials in every town. In Felluja we aroused a couple of fat grumpy army officers from their sleep—in revenge, they charged us $3.50.

The track straightened out in the last few miles and Sayed was able to bear down on the accelerator. Baghdad was now somewhere close ahead in the darkness. We were both exhausted and short-tempered. Sailing ahead through the night, our goal almost within reach, we suddenly heard a noise like one of the tires blowing. Then, BANG, another one. I looked back and saw a soldier standing in the middle of the road shooting at us! We had missed his check point.

Sayed stopped and the soldier ran up, his rifle poised, to give us a long-winded lecture for overlooking his all-important position, and to extract his booty for "services." We paid for the wasted bullets, thanked him for his bad aim, and wearily continued.

A few minutes later a foul smell began seeping into the car. It reminded me of the mummy maker's basement in Cairo.

"What's that stink?" I asked.

"Stink? I don't smell anything," Sayed said, inhaling deeply.

But there was definitely an evil smell in the air. It got worse.

"You sure?" I sniffed. "Is there a glue factory around here?"

Sayed took another whiff.

"Oh, that!" he laughed. "That's Baghdad!"

We were there.

We parted without remorse, having gained no spirit of comradeship from our adventure together. We knew we would never see each other again; we didn't want to.

Aware of my dire financial straits, Sayed dropped me off at a cheap Arabic hotel on Al Mustansir Street, a narrow dingy alley at the edge of the great labyrinth of the Baghdad bazaar along the banks of the Tigris. It was the river I'd smelled, wide and thick with mud and sewage. It has often flowed red with blood from the countless wars fought in the city during the past two thousand years. They call it "The City of Peace" but no one knows exactly why. It has a violent history and is filled with violent people, as I quickly found out.

After beating on the big wooden hotel doors for a few minutes, an unctuous man in a greasy *galibeah* opened up. Sayed, with a strange sly gleam in his tired eyes, gave a satisfied nod and drove off. I was alone in Baghdad. What's more, I was practically broke; I had less than five dollars. Eight years earlier I'd landed in New York with only 75¢ but I'd survived. I could do it again, I thought, even though Baghdad isn't nearly so hospitable. I was too tired to think much about the situation.

Passing through a strange hall lit with dim, colored lights, the Arab led me up a narrow flight of stairs to a little room that smelled of cheap perfume and incense, and contained a bed, a chair and a sink. The plumbing was next door—a hole in the floor.

Exhausted and suffering with a throbbing headache, I collapsed on the bed with all my clothes on and was just beginning to drift off to sleep when there was a knock on the door. I dragged myself to open it and was startled to find a sleepy-eyed Arab girl dressed in a gaudy bathrobe standing there.

"Me speak English," she said.

"This is a fine time to tell me. What do you want?" I demanded.

She stepped into the room and began to undo her robe.

"Now wait a minute . . ." I began, snapping out of my stupor.

"You no like?" she pouted.

"I like fine, but I'm tired. Suppose you come back some other time?"

I shoved her out the door and dropped onto the bed again. You never know what to expect in these cheap hotels. I was too tired to wonder about it.

Again I started to sleep. And again there was a gentle knock on the door. Another girl paraded in, sleepy like the first, a little fatter. She said something in Arabic and threw off her robe. A whole series of strange tattoos were etched over her body!

"What's going on here?" I protested, trying not to stare.

She said something about *farsha* . . . bed. I nodded. Yes, I wanted to go to bed. She bounced onto it. No . . . no . . . alone, I tried to explain. She frowned, puzzled. I put the robe over her plump shoulders and threw her out.

Once more I lay down, this time taking off my clothes first, feeling very annoyed. Once more there was a knock on the door. I tried to ignore it but it was repeated, louder and firmer.

Angrily, I jerked it open. In walked the Arab, followed by three more young Iraqi females.

"Which you like?" he asked with grave concern.

I sat down weakly on the bed. The truth was beginning to dawn.

"I like them all," I groaned. "All very nice. But I'm tired. I want to sleep. Get out. GET OUT!"

Sayed, the dirty dog, had dumped me in the first hotel he'd come across. An Arab brothel!

Near noon the next day I was awakened by a shrill female scream in the hall outside my room. Leaping into my pants, I charged out the door, straight into a tight-lipped young Arab holding a long *khanjer* covered with blood. At his feet lay a young girl in a thin silk slip with her throat cut deftly from ear to ear!

Automatically I tensed myself for a battle with a maniacal killer. He glared at me sullenly and the knife fell from his hands. Girls in various stages of undress were popping up all down the hall. Most of them just let out a cry of shock and terror when they saw the body and disappeared again. Arab men, in both European and native dress, came down the corridor and gathered around the boy . . . for that's all he was. None of them touched him or seemed appalled by his crime. Instead, they offered him their sympathy!

The girl was his sister!

She had brought disgrace to his family by joining a brothel. In Baghdad this is justifiable grounds for homicide. Similarly, if a man discovers his bride has come to his bed with a previously ruptured hymen he may, and it often happens, kill her without fear of reprisal by the law. Virginity is highly prized in the Arab world. But the women themselves are treated as some kind of animal. They stay at home behind closed doors while their husbands sit in the cafés and movie houses. Their lives are singularly drab and lonely. They have little contact with the outside world.

The Arab desk clerk came up the stairs, tsk-tsked over the body, and turned to me meaningfully.

"Police will come," he said laconically.

Taking the hint, I went back into my room and locked the door. I certainly didn't want to get involved with the Baghdad cops on my first day in the city, particularly in my embarrassing financial position. Most of that day I paced my room, nervous and hungry, wondering what to do next, listening to the sounds of the police prowling around the corridors, and the body being carried away.

Fortunately, the police didn't bother to interview the hotel "guests." There was no need to. The young man readily confessed. It was an open and shut case of justifiable homicide. Probably he got off with a one or two year sentence.

Once my nerves had settled, I decided on a definite course of action. First, I would move out of that "hotel." Second, I would send off letters to my family and my agent back in the States, outlining my predicament. I'd seen my mother only once, for a brief two-week period, during the last eight years, and I knew the family farm wasn't a very profitable enterprise so I couldn't really expect any help from that quarter. And now that my writing had stopped, my agent certainly wouldn't advance me any more money. I had to find new resources.

Thirdly, I would go to the American Consulate for advice and possibly a job. I had an F.B.I. clearance, and my former position at AFN was good background. The Consulate might be able to come up with something.

Finally, I would try to sell my 16 mm. movie camera and all its expensive accessories.

When things had quieted down in the hotel, I paid my bill. It wasn't much because I hadn't fully utilized the "facilities" there. Then I moved down the street to another cheap, more legitimate Arab hostelry called the Trocadero. A noisy, happy place where Shaikhs (in Iraq they object to being called Sheikhs) from all the small villages stayed when they were in town for a fling. "Europeans" rarely stopped there. The genial brothers who ran it treated me royally and extended credit without question. It became my

headquarters whenever I was in Baghdad. But I had to take my meals outside.

Eating was a problem for me in Baghdad. "Gippy Tummy" had weakened my stomach and I had to be careful what I put into it. There were very few European-style restaurants and those few were dirty, fly-ridden places favored by bearded Shaikhs with big *khanjers* stuck in their sashes, and colorful Kurds from the north, dressed in balloon pants and pointed shoes that turned up at the toes. They sat around the spotted table linen, picking their noses and spitting on the floor while mobs of starving urchins gathered outside on the sidewalk waiting for generous customers to throw them a crust of bread or a chunk of greasy mutton.

In those places a mutton "steak" with vegetables and bread cost a little over 100 fils (about 30¢). I was able to stretch my remaining capital by eating only once a day.

Worry brought with it insomnia, and I took to prowling the city late at night. At first I always carried my gas pistol but I soon realized it was unnecessary. The only people who molested me were Arab pimps trying to lure me off to the red-light district; the most modern section of Baghdad, where the brothels occupied split-level houses and were easily identified by the big metal hearts in the ironwork of their impressive gates.

On one of my nocturnal sojourns I discovered a little *kebab* joint that was open all night; a hole in the wall just off *Rashid* Street, Baghdad's main drag, and around the corner from King Faisal Square. Its walls were decorated with yellowing pictures of old kings and generals, and religious slogans in Arabic. The alleyway leading to it was littered with garbage, which residents in the buildings around it dumped out of their windows at random; and sinister figures stood in the darkened doorways surveying each passer-by.

There, for about fifty fils, I could get a meal of several pieces of *kebab,* mutton cooked on spits over an open fire, together with a large slice of paper-thin bread and a glass of *chi* (sweet tea). When the *kebab* was rolled up in the bread, which had a strong wheat flavor, it tasted very much like a good old American hamburger.

Several times when I stopped in the tiny native tea shops on the

shadowy side streets, the proprietors filled me with *chi* but refused to accept my money. They seemed flattered that I, a fancy-dressed foreigner, honored their humble stalls. And they reaffirmed what I discovered again and again on my trip—that people the world over are a pretty decent lot.

The American Consulate wasn't quite so honored. They offered sympathy but no substantial help. Because so many ex-GIs have been stranded around the world and come beating on their Consulates' doors, the American government has adopted a very tough policy toward its citizens overseas. They'll give help only if you're completely impoverished and can prove you have no friends, family, or other possible sources of assistance. Once they are absolutely certain you're starving and unable to help yourself, they take away your passport, lend you fifty dollars, and arrange third-class passage back to the States for you. It's unlikely you'll ever be able to get another passport.

There were no jobs to be had in Baghdad; no way to make a dinar ($2.80). My typewriter collected dust in my hotel room. A few times I shoved a piece of paper into it, but a blank sheet of paper is a frightening, disheartening thing to a would-be writer. I always slapped the cover shut with the paper still blank.

After visiting half a dozen camera stalls and shops, I finally sold my movie outfit for a paltry eight dinars. There are 1,000 fils to one dinar. My hotel room was 500 fils a day; my meals were another 100-200 fils a day. The eight dinars wouldn't last long. I had no idea what I would do when they were gone.

Baghdad has a terrible climate, unbearably hot in the summer and fiercely cold in the winter. I remember one bleak, frigid afternoon in February when I was sitting on a rough wooden bench in one of the city's "first-class" cinemas (admission 50 fils), trying to "escape" in a fifteen-year-old American film, when the picture suddenly went out of focus. I thought I'd been hit by some kind of desert blindness. I rubbed my eyes and it got worse. Finally I stumbled over the Arab legs stretched in the aisle and fumbled my way to the exit.

Outside I discovered what was wrong. A sandstorm was in prog-

ress, settling a cloud of dust and debris over the golden domes and slender minarets, and creeping into the theater to lay a haze over the screen.

Resolutely, I whipped up the collar of my thin nylon raincoat and hurried along the nearly deserted street to the Trocadero. The whole world was cold, drab, gritty, and out of focus to me that day.

Back in the unheated hotel, I sat at my favorite table in the bar, reading or trying to read while I absently manipulated some coins. Since I didn't smoke, I picked up the nervous habit of juggling small objects, vanishing balls and coins, and manipulating cards while I talk or think. I do these little tricks unconsciously, effortlessly.

That day, after I'd been sitting in the bar vanishing a coin and plucking it out of my elbow, I slowly became aware of a tall, robed man watching me, his jaws agape. He was a young Arab of about 35, with a mustache and big rolling eyes that reminded me of comedian Jerry Colonna.

He smiled sheepishly, and I motioned for him to sit down.

"You magician?" he asked. He spoke fragmentary English in a deep, commanding voice.

"No . . . newspaperman." I made typing gestures. He understood.

"Me *Shaikh,*" he said proudly. "Shaikh Abdullah Haj."

That's how our conversation began. Before it ended, he'd invited me to visit him in the "most beautiful world. More beautiful than Baghdad."

"You come . . ." he declared, ". . . we give you good horse, a big house, virgins."

Here was the answer to my problem! Temporarily, at least. I tried not to appear too eager. I did a series of coin tricks for him, while I casually mentioned all the work I had to do in Baghdad.

"No stories here," he sneered, bug-eyed. "Good story up there."

"Up there" was his village, a remote spot beyond Shaikh Addi. While I was pretending to mull this over, we were joined by a cultured old gentleman, a doctor who had spent his youth in India, was retired, and loafed most of his afternoons away in the Trocadero over a glass of *arak.*

"You ought to go," the doctor said shrewdly. "It'll be better than mooning away here in Baghdad. And you should get a good story out it."

"What's up there?" I asked cautiously.

"Well, there's Shaikh Addi, Tel Keef, and Ahn Sefni, the three holy cities of the Yezidis. Not many foreigners get a chance to see them."

"Yes, you come . . ." the Shaikh repeated. "We give you house, horse, girls."

I didn't have much choice. I could sit in Baghdad and starve or I could go off and live with his desert tribe. I agreed to go.

Then the mystery began. Those desert villages weren't marked on my big *National Geographic* map, and when I looked on the official Iraqi map I was startled to see the whole area was not only blank, but was curtly labeled: Forbidden to Foreigners.

What was I getting into?

"You'll find out," the doctor replied cryptically when I asked.

A local Arab newsman, who sometimes dropped into the hotel bar, took me aside that evening.

"Hear you're going north into Yezidi territory," he said.

I nodded. "Looks like a good story."

"Take my advice . . ." he whispered, "don't go."

"Why not?" I demanded. "What in hell is up there anyway?"

"That's just it."

"What's just it?"

He smiled blandly.

"You should forget the whole business."

The next day I packed my bags and stored them with the hotel, along with my typewriter. Then I started going through some books about Iraq given to me by the Press Ministry. Suddenly I came across one short, curt sentence in a folder about the "People of Iraq." It explained everything.

"About thirty thousand Yezidis," it said, "and an even smaller number of Turcomans, Sabeans, Shebeks, and Lurs complete the picture. The Yezidis in the hills north of Mosul have an obscure

religious formula centered around the propitiation of the principle of evil."

That was all. It was enough.

". . . *the propitiation of the principle of evil.*"

I had accepted an invitation to spend two weeks with a tribe of Devil-worshippers!

Chapter Six

Invitation From the Devil

From Baghdad the Shaikh and I traveled four hundred miles northward on an unexpectedly comfortable train to Mosul, a gigantic, sprawling city of sagging mud huts, intricate little one-way streets, and minarets so old they tilt dangerously toward the ground in the manner of the tower of Pisa. I was dressed in a warm *zebun,* a long homespun robe furnished by the Shaikh, and all I carried was a brief case crammed with odd pieces of magical apparatus and a notebook.

A few miles farther north, on a huge mound overlooking the Tigris valley, are the ruins of the ancient walled city of Ninevah, one of man's earliest attempts at communal living, now just a haunted shell inhabited by lizards and vultures. Beyond it, far beyond it, deep in the "cradle of civilization," was our destination, the secret holy cities of the Yezidi tribe.

The Yezidis have a reputation for being cold and inhospitable to outsiders. They live in a world of armed suspicion and the deserts around their villages are dominated by fierce bandits. Foreign oil men traveling through the area are usually accompanied by heavily

armed police guards. But the Shaikh told me repeatedly not to worry.

"We are a peaceful people," he said.

At the Mosul bazaar we boarded an old bus rigged with close-spaced wooden benches. Dozens—it seemed like hundreds—of Shaikhs and fellahs, all bristling with rifles, pistols, knives, and even swords, squeezed aboard, jostling for positions on the narrow seats. Most of them ignored me because of my native dress, but a few glared as if to say: "What are you doing here?" They may have been annoyed because I'd managed to grab a choice seat by a glassless window. The pressure was so great I was leaning halfway out during most of the trip over the desert.

The other passengers greeted Shaikh Abdullah with varying degrees of warmth. They all had considerable pride and behaved like a bunch of colonels in front of a general, trying to make a good impression and gain promotion. Yet beneath the rigid haughtiness of the faces I could detect a playful, alert twinkle. They were men of distinction in their communities, and the fact that they could afford passage on this wonderful magic chariot was an indication of their wealth and stature. Lesser natives had to travel the desert on mules or camels or on foot.

"Very modern bus," Shaikh Abdullah said proudly. "You like?"

"Terrific!" I managed to grunt. "Just like the subways in New York."

He seemed pleased with the reply.

When it seemed the bus would start bursting like an overblown balloon, there was a grinding of gears followed by a sharp jolt. Then we rolled through the teeming streets with our horn going full blast. Once outside the city, the "road" quickly disappeared and we ran along a vague desert track among low gray hills sprinkled with scrubs of desert grass, straight into that blank spot on the map.

It was blank for good reason. There was nothing there. Or almost nothing. Just a few impermanent little mud-brick villages where we stopped briefly to discharge passengers a few at a time. Overhead the sky was dark and the air was stinging cold through my

zebuh. For a few minutes it even tried to rain a little but the stringy black clouds weren't juicy enough.

Now and then we would sail past a mysterious, giant mound.

"What are those?" I asked.

"*Tells.* Very old," the Shaikh explained.

They were the remnants of ancient cities, covered over now with sand. The archaeological wealth of this area is still largely untapped. It would take years of work and millions of dollars to unearth all these *tells* and learn the secrets about early man hidden in them.

Eventually a scattering of huts and tents appeared on the horizon and the Shaikh nudged me.

"Ahn Sefni," he announced.

This sorrowful little cluster was the first of the holy cities, considered by thousands of tribesmen from Meshed to Aleppo to be one of the "most beautiful places on earth." To me it looked like all the other villages; drab, dirty and dead. We barreled through it in a cloud of dust and headed into the deepening shadows of the rugged area to the east, rolling between high crags and stony convulsions of terrain freckled with bushes and the withered remains of wild flowers.

"I wish I could have looked over Ahn Sefni," I said.

"There is time later." My host smiled. "Here, yesterday is tomorrow and tomorrow is always."

While I was trying to figure that out, we bounced into Shaikh Addi, capital of the Yezidis.

Shaikh Addi was a loose little village tossed helter-skelter across rocky valleys and ravines and set off with twin temples, white and prominent against the drab background. Their fluted spires were like inverted ice-cream cones thrust boldly up against the gray sky. Around them were several small tombs, also topped with pointed, fluted steeples instead of the round, low domes you customarily see on Arab tombs.

Though it was hardly a paradise, Shaikh Addi seemed to be much cleaner and much more picturesque than the other towns we had

passed through. Half the population had turned out to welcome the bus. Its weekly arrival was a big event, and now most of the people had gathered around me, listening to me speak my strange language to Shaikh Abdullah and eavesdropping as he introduced me to various prominent men in the tribe. Some of them were grotesquely ugly, with hard, desert-worn faces and unkempt beards. Yezidis believe God gave man a beard to distinguish him from woman so their custom forbids shaving. But they all managed to give me a warm smile as they shook my hand western style.

"We good people," the Shaikh said. "You like it here?"

"It's much nicer than Baghdad," I said. In a way it was. Already I felt I belonged, that I was among friends.

He translated this and the smiles grew wider. Then he started telling them what a great magician I was and the women and children in the crowd moved back, noticeably awed. Determined not to let him down, I fished in the pockets under my *zebun* and palmed some pieces of hard candy. When he finished his build-up, I walked among the children, plucking candy out of tiny ears, noses, and elbows. The response was wonderful. From that moment on I was a Pied Piper, trailed by mobs of fascinated kids wherever I went.

The "big house" Abdullah promised me turned out to be a small mud hut, very clean but very empty except for a sleeping mat, a water pitcher, and an incongruous "European-style" chair of ancient vintage. Abdullah was very proud of that chair, and during the big feast held in my honor that night he insisted I sit in it while everyone else sat around on the floor. When I entertained the Shaikhs with some magic tricks I used it for a table and that pleased Abdullah very much. Maybe he thought some of the magic would rub off and he would have the only "magic chair" in Iraq.

The feast was held in Abdullah's big one-room house, a couple of miles over the hills beyond Shaikh Addi, amid all kinds of cheap tapestries, colored blankets, and clay pottery. It was a fancy house by Yezidi standards; a house that was lived in; a happy house by any standards. Abdullah's wife was a slim good-looking woman whose proudest possession was a nylon blouse he had bought for her in

Baghdad. She kept her distance when I was around yet she exuded a shy air of friendliness. When she looked at her husband, love and adoration flickered in her long-lashed eyes.

Guests for the feast arrived at sundown from all over the area. Tall shaikhs, shorts shaikhs, old men and young, all wearing their gaudiest finery and carrying their Sunday-go-to-devil-worshiping *khanjers* and swords. The fare was limited in variety, but not in quantity. There was roasted chicken, a great slab of scorched mutton, a mountain of boiled rice, dates, bitter tasting local fruits, eggs broken raw onto slabs of bread, and endless cups of *chi.* Everybody ate with his fingers and wiped his mouth on his sleeves. Abdullah produced a rusty European-style fork from somewhere and presented it to me. All the guests surveyed the mounds of food hungrily, but waited respectfully to see how I would use this strange implement.

With a gesture, I vanished it up my sleeve and dug in with my hands. After a short, stunned silence, they all laughed and the party got underway.

When the food was gone and the air filled with satisfied belches (their etiquette demands a hearty belch to show you approved of the dinner), the older Shaikhs rose one by one to welcome me with long-winded speeches in their language, a perverted form of Arabic. About all I understood was their hope that I would tell the world what peaceful people they really are. They stressed this point carefully.

At the end of the speeches, I stood up and gave my performance, turning a handkerchief into an egg, producing and vanishing billiard balls, and doing all my other simple pocket tricks. They watched with quiet wonder and begged me to start all over again when I'd finished.

Later when I went outside for a breath of air, I was surprised to find all the women and children of the village gathered in the cold, glumly listening to the laughter of the party.

I went back and asked Abdullah for a lantern.

"Do you object if I show my magic to your women?" I asked.

The idea obviously wasn't popular with the men. Yezidi women don't wear veils and enjoy more freedom than other Arab females,

but they still have their "place." This party was not one of them. But the Shaikhs, afraid of offending me, finally gave their consent, and trooped outside to watch me go through my tricks a third time.

At last I vanished my tiny plastic wand and showed my empty hands. All my magic was gone. They understood and the crowd broke up, the women and children trudging over the hills to their huts while the men returned for another round of *arak* and conversation.

It was early morning before the party ended and Abdullah escorted me to my "big house." Four good-looking teen-aged Yezidi girls were waiting there—the promised virgins.

"They serve you," Abdullah explained, casting his eyes at the floor, "but better you do not touch."

In other words, they'd better still be virgins when I left! He gave them some sharp orders and they fussed with the blanket on my sleeping mat. He smiled, shook my hand, and went out. The Yezidis believed that handshaking was a proper western custom, and all day long every day during my life among them I was pumping outstretched hands.

The girls crowded around me, attempting to undo my *zebun* and disrobe me. They acted so hurt when I pushed them away that I wearily let them peel me down to my shirt, then I shook hands gravely with them and dismissed them.

I slept more contentedly that night than I had in weeks.

Shaikh Abdullah was a gracious host, supplying everything I needed. Food, clothing, a horse for transportation. But a subtle change had come over him from the instant we arrived in the village. The laughing, gay, good-natured Abdullah of Baghdad turned into a sternly judicious Shaikh, a tribal leader who took no nonsense from anyone, who expected to be catered to and bowed before, but who treated the everyday problems of his people with serious, good judgment. It was the pose they expected of him; a role he enjoyed playing to the hilt.

He was always charming and gracious to me, however, except where one thing was concerned. He refused to discuss the Yezidi religion. And when I tried to pry around the temples and tombs, his

friendly followers gravely advised me to be less inquisitive. Their religion was taboo. Even when I tried to draw the children out by asking them simple questions about it in my broken Arabic, they turned away, grimly silent.

Gradually, bit by bit, I did manage to pick up fragments of information about their customs and beliefs. The first thing I learned was that spitting on the ground was strictly forbidden. One of my virgins warned me of this on my first morning there. As soon as I got up each morning my quartet of shapely servants rushed into the hut and gave it a thorough scrubbing from ceiling to floor. It must have been the cleanest hut in all Iraq. On that first morning my mouth tasted like a leper's sock and when I stepped outside I cleared my throat.

Instantly the four girls halted their frenzied scrubbing and glared at me in fear and shock. Then the oldest, a dark-eyed beauty of about seventeen, told me in a soft gentle whisper that spitting might offend the Devil who lived under the ground.

Before long I discovered that was the basis of the Yezidi religion: Fear. They were afraid of the Devil and didn't want to anger him. They knew about God and believed in Him. But they reasoned that God is good and therefore harmless. It's the Devil they worried about. They refuse to eat lettuce or radishes because those plants are supposed to have turned away the Devil when he was trying to hide from God. And they never wear blue because it's considered the divine color.

Despite their vicious appearance and their reputation for violence, the Yezidis seemed to be, as they claimed, a very peaceful people. They have to be. They are a minority group, surrounded by fanatical Muslims and Catholics. They lead a pastoral life, farming their rough land, tending their herds, and remaining pretty much to themselves.

The Yezidi priests, in order to maintain their hold over the people, forbid education. It's a crime to learn to read and write! And it's absolutely forbidden for any common Yezidi to learn a language other than his own.

Shaikh Abdullah was a rare bird in the tribe. He could speak some

English and had traveled to the distant city of Baghdad, a place that seemed as faraway and as wondrous as the moon to a common tribesman. He was a tradesman of sorts, selling tea and little civilized bric-a-brac like mirrors to the surrounding villages. He was regarded as one of the richest men around, and one of the wisest.

Occasionally a Yezidi manages to break tradition and escape to the outside world. They still talk about the Yezidi princess who fell in love with a passing Arab merchant three years ago and ran away with him. The tribe immediately held a council and sent a delegation after her, not to bring her back but to murder her and her husband!

They followed the lovers into Saudi Arabia—one of the most dangerous and hostile countries in the world—and were never heard from again. No doubt their Muslim brothers butchered them. Devil worshipers are not exactly welcome outside their own isolated territories. The brave little princess is supposed to be living somewhere near Medina.

The Prince of the Yezidis lives in Shaikh Addi surrounded by peacocks, the colorful symbol of their religion. While I was there he was away visiting tribes along the Persian border. He was described to me as a young man of medium height with a very powerful personality. Twice a year, in spring and fall, he holds elaborate ceremonies in Shaikh Addi to offer appeasement to old man Satan. During the rest of the year the numerous segments of the tribe follow their religion in their own way. Each segment has its own Shaikh, its own rites, and its own secrets. That is why there is no living authority on Yezidi tribal customs. A man would have to live for years with each branch and sect before he could learn enough about them. So far no outsider has bothered.

Missionaries penetrate the area now and then but they are not made welcome. Anyone who goes there intending to educate the people or spread the doctrine of God is merely risking his life and wasting his time. The Yezidis are happy. They have their faith and their land. They want only to be left alone.

I left them alone. I roamed the hills and villages, doing my tricks for the children, shaking hands with the Shaikhs, digging up scraps of information here and there, talking with the farmers and herds-

men, probing sometimes into the sandy *tells* for hunks of pottery nearly as old as Man himself. Everywhere I was treated with courtesy, curiosity, and extreme friendliness. My problem faded away in a haze of contentment. I spent my twenty-fifth birthday there among the Yezidis. It was one of the quietest, most pleasant birthdays of my life.

One afternoon, after I had tried repeatedly, vainly, to get permission to enter one of the peaked temples of Shaikh Addi, I was trying to pry more facts from Abdullah about the religion when he suddenly said, "I cannot tell you. That is forbidden. I will *show* you."

He had decided to take a great risk and smuggle me into a secret ceremony taking place that night in a temple ruled by another Shaikh. How and why he had arrived at this decision I'll never know. Perhaps my patience had impressed him and he'd decided to reward me.

Anyway, that evening we started out for the forbidden temple. It was nestled between bare, rocky hills a few miles north of Shaikh Addi. There was something comfortingly peaceful about its cool stone exterior. It certainly didn't look like the gateway to Hell.

In the dim light of early evening I could distinguish strange snakelike symbols carved in the marble around the doorway. There was no sign of life anywhere about and the only sound was the quiet trickle of water.

I started to speak, but the Shaikh put his finger to his lips. From there on, absolute silence was the rule.

Pushing open the heavy door, he stepped carefully over the threshold. It was considered bad luck to step *on* the threshold. I followed him into the gloomy black interior of the temple. The floor was soft, damp earth and the ceiling was out of sight in the darkness overhead. Three or four lonely oil lamps hanging down from the roof supplied the only light. Their thin, flickering wicks were blinking eyes in the darkness. Around the walls were a few alcoves covered with old tattered drapes. The place was steeped in silence and mystery.

Pushing one of the drapes aside, the Shaikh revealed a flight of stone steps leading downwards. As we descended the sound of the water grew louder. At the bottom a single oil lamp was glowing. Its naked light showed a long narrow chamber with a stream of water flowing through it. For some reason, which the Yezidis themselves can't explain, they always build their temples over a river or a stream. Baptism may once have played an important part in their worship.

Very few foreign travelers have ever seen this mysterious water and, as the Shaikh motioned for me to step into the stream, I tried to survey the place as much as possible. There wasn't much to see. No idols or religious objects or baptismal vats. It was just a flooded basement cut out of the rock.

The water was extremely cold against my bare feet and the stream wound into a tunnel so low we had to stoop over. Soon we'd left the light behind and were groping ahead in complete, chilling darkness.

After a couple of minutes of this the tunnel began to get noticeably warmer. Suddenly we emerged into a larger tunnel, stepping out of the water onto a narrow path. But it was still completely dark.

Now, as we walked forward, the sound of water receded and the heat grew more intense. It didn't take much imagination to think we were going straight into Hell itself.

Then Abdullah stopped.

"Wait here . . ." he whispered, "then follow. Sit not near me."

He vanished toward a faint eerie glow visible at the far end. I waited a couple of minutes, then cautiously felt my way after him.

Finally I came out into a large cavern filled with a fantastic spectacle. About thirty or forty Yezidi men were squatting along the walls, facing several pits ablaze with roaring fires. Oddly, there was little or no smoke. The fires must have been burning natural gases. In the crimson light and dancing shadows the men looked bizarre and unworldly. Their weird wide turbans and fierce beards contributed to the hot atmosphere of secrecy and mystery.

It was Dante's inferno brought to life!

I squatted in a vacant spot between two furry-faced Shaikhs and waited breathlessly for the ceremonies, whatever they were, to begin. My turban was pulled down as far as possible and I hunkered my

face into my robes, fearing detection, trying not to think about what these men might do to me if my presence were discovered.

After a few minutes of silence and waiting, an old priest dressed in colorful ceremonial robes made his appearance from the far end of the cave. He strode past the fires and planted his feet solidly in the center of the Yezidi circle. In one hand he carried a small peacock, in the other he held a long *khanjer.*

He stood silently sniffing the air for a moment, as though something unwholesome had entered his temple. Then he carefully scrutinized each face in the gathering. When he came to mine, he stopped!

Breaking into a cold sweat, I drew my sparsely bearded chin deeper into the folds of my *zebun,* praying the shadows would hide my pale skin. But he wasn't fooled. He lifted his arm slowly and pointed at me with his knife. All eyes turned angrily toward me. I swallowed hard and my brain raced. I was caught!

Not a word was spoken. The whole horrifying drama was acted out in pantomime. He just stood there pointing me out while the others glowered and fingered the blades in their sashes. There wasn't much I could do except brazen it out and hope Shaikh Abdullah would help me if they got violent.

I sat stock still until the priest took a step toward me and muttered something softly in Arabic. It sounded like *"Rooh!"* ("Go!"). Slowly I rose to my feet and gathered myself together to rush for the exit.

Most of the men in the cave knew me or at least had seen me around. I relied hopefully on their friendliness and respect. Two or three jumped to their feet, watching me silently, their hands on the handles of their *khanjers,* waiting for some signal from the others.

Still there was not a sound except the low roar of the fires. I stepped out of the circle and backed slowly toward the tunnel. Not a man moved. Reaching the gaping black mouth, I hurriedly turned and felt my way out of that place. No one followed me, but I could feel all those angry eyes digging into me until my feet were back in the trickle of water.

A few minutes later I was outside again, breathing heavily against

the icy night air. Somewhere, deep in the cave under that secret temple, the men of the Yezidi tribe were resuming their secret rites. Rites that may never be seen by any white man. At least not by me.

Tribesmen, who had been my friends before, cooled toward me after that incident. The story whipped like a hurricane through the Iraqi hills, stirring indignation in the peaceful villages. Some men went out of their way to avoid me on my daily walks, while their women stared at me suspiciously from the distance.

"Maybe I'd better go back to Baghdad," I finally said to Abdullah.

"Stay. This storm will pass," he advised politely, but his Jerry Colonna face was tightly sober when he said it. "The men in the temple were angry. But they like you. They will forget. It was bad for me to ask you to take such risk."

I wasn't especially anxious to return to Baghdad and face my problems again, so I stayed.

My virgins came each morning to scrub the hut, brought me tea in the afternoon, and disrobed me in the evening. Children still trailed me and howled with delight over my tricks. Far-off Shaikhs still rode in to shake my hand and watch me perform one of my now legendary feats of magic. But much of the fun and friendliness was gone.

Then one of the visiting Shaikhs invited me to spend a night at his camp some miles out on the desert, near the ancient Assyrian ruins of Tepe Gawra. I accepted, thinking a day away from Shaikh Addi might speed up the forgetting of the temple incident. Instead, it hurled me into a new and much more serious situation.

My new host, Shaikh Hamed Sayed Al-Hussein, was a bellows-chested Arab with sharp eyes set above a black cloud of beard. A leader of men in the hard tradition of the desert, he was a proud man who took his ragged little tribe back and forth across the inhospitable northern desert, trading with villagers and nomads, and doing a bit of smuggling on the side. His camp consisted of a dozen frayed black tents of homespun wool, a line of irritable camels, and a handful of well cared for horses.

After we had made the long horseback ride to the camp, some

of his men moved out of their tent and turned it over to me, despite my protests. The Shaikh lent me his own beautiful Persian carpet to sleep on. The arrival of a tall pale American in native dress created a stir in the women's tent and wherever I went in the camp I could feel curious female eyes watching me.

That night, the meal consisted of dried mutton, beans, and sheep eyes. The eyes were a great delicacy bestowed on me as an honor. I gulped them down like grapes. They were slimy and a little bitter. Afterward, I entertained the men with my tricks, the women did a simple dance for me and sang a frenzied desert song, then we gathered around a fire for a bull session.

"Bullets and guns are for soldiers, bandits and cowards," the Shaikh declared when the conversation swung to weapons. "This is for men!"

He pulled out his *khanjer* and slammed its point into the sand in front of my folded legs. I jerked instinctively and he laughed.

"Bullets are never sure. They might miss . . . or they might only wound. But once a man gets his insides wrapped around a *khanjer*. . . ."

He made a sound like a man gurgling away his life while his hard eyes fixed me with a warning glare.

"This . . . is the true weapon of Ali Baba!"

I chuckled at the name and he studied me seriously.

"You know of Ali Baba?"

"Of course. He was the leader of the forty thieves who hid in forty jars and. . . ."

"Bah . . ." he spat. "That is the Ali Baba of the children's stories. I speak of the real Ali Baba. He who rides the desert on the wings of storm. He who has personally killed an army with his *khanjer*. He who will one day rule all of Iraq. Perhaps all of the world!"

He talked then of the revolution of the late 1940's when the Kurds in the north decided to form their own state and break away from Iraq, and how he helped smuggle arms and supplies over the Persian border from the Soviet Union. After the landscape had been shot up and a lot of throats had been cut, the Iraqi army whipped the revo-

lutionists but a handful of Kurds never surrendered. They went underground to prepare for another revolt.

There were forty-one of them altogether. When no new revolt was immediately forthcoming, they had to find other ways to keep alive. They chose to pick up a fast dinar by raiding caravans and lonely vehicles traveling the more isolated northern routes. Their leader was a merciless outcast who soon won the title of "Ali Baba" because he had forty men under him.

Gradually his men were killed or dispersed and he wandered southward to enlist new bandits and gather strength for a new revolution. Even at that moment he was supposed to be near Baghdad, recruiting among the millions of impoverished natives who are owned body and soul by a handful of wealthy Shaikhs.

"They fear the name Ali Baba in Baghdad now," the Shaikh said. "But one day they will speak it with reverence."

That night I went to sleep with the name on my mind, determined to look into his story further. It was very cold in the big empty tent. I nearly froze.

Satan played a nasty trick on me the next morning when I went to the Shaikh's tent for a breakfast of *chi,* bread and raw eggs. As I was returning I saw a young Yezidi slip out of my tent and disappear among the lounging camels. Thinking he might have stolen something, though there wasn't much to steal, I rushed through the flap and stopped short.

A girl was kneeling on the sleeping carpet, hurriedly arranging her clothing! She couldn't have been more than fourteen years old, with the usual prominent Iraqi nose, full sensual lips, and soft dark eyes. Those eyes looked up at me, surprised and ashamed. Then she flashed past me into the sun.

Apparently the two of them had waited until they'd seen me leave for the Shaikh's tent, then they'd held a quick tryst, hoping no one would catch them.

After she left, I was gathering up my brief case of tricks when suddenly a tall ugly man with glowing eyes appeared at the flap. Without a word, he whipped out his *khanjer* and came at me! With equal

suddenness, other men appeared behind him and grabbed him while he burst into a stream of profanity.

The Shaikh, hearing the disturbance, strode into the tent, tossed me a quick, reassuring smile, and spoke to the ugly man. My own Arabic was too limited to follow the fast, angry dialogue closely but I understood I was being accused of the worst crime of all.

"He says he saw his wife leave your tent," the Shaikh said, turning accusing eyes toward me.

I tried to tell my side of the story but my Arabic failed me. The quick-witted Shaikh managed to grasp what I was saying though.

"I believe you," he said at last. "But you had better leave as quickly as possible. I will stay here and make sure he doesn't try to overtake you."

Another look at the big enraged husband convinced me of the wisdom of a fast departure. These people live by the rule of the *khanjer* and *khanjer* fighting was an art I knew nothing about.

So I left, fast and unheroically, laying the whip to my horse until I was well away from Tepe Gawra's sullen, charred mound of antiquity.

Now I had a moral stain to my blighting reputation. This, coupled with the temple incident, meant my welcome among the Yezidis was worn out. Word of such things travels fast through those remote hills. It was time to "git." And, as if to add impetus to my leaving, the Devil performed a final master stroke.

Immediately after returning to Shaikh Addi, I suffered a savage attack of dysentery, probably an aftereffect of that aged mutton and sheep's eyes. A high fever and weakness struck me, my bowels ran amuck.

Shaikh Abdullah and my virgins hovered over me, very concerned.

"It's time for me to leave, Shaikh," I groaned. He agreed glumly. Fortunately, the desert "bus" was due to make the run to Mosul the next morning. I was too sick for a farewell feast. No one would probably have attended it anyhow.

Only a few adults came to see me off, but nearly all the children were loyally on hand. I gave away what candy I had left, did a simple

trick with four coins to impress the people with their magic qualities, then gave them to my four sad-faced, still virgin, virgins. To the Shaikh I gave a silk scarf from Naples which he had admired. And I carried out his last strange request.

He handed me his bone-handled *khanjer* and asked me to carve something, anything, on that chair in my hut. When I'd finished he gave me the sheath, too. He wanted me to keep it. I still have it.

His last words were: "When you write of us, tell the world we are a peaceful people. The desert is hard, but we are harder. We ask only that the government leave us alone. Satan will take care of us."

Then I was cramped into the little bus, riding out of that blank spot on the map. Though I was torn with sorrow, fever, dysentery, and a new sense of loneliness, I chuckled a little when I thought of some future traveler penetrating into that exotic, unknown land only to find an old wooden chair with the words *"Keel sat here, 1955"* carved on the bottom.

Baghdad and the meager comforts of the Trocadero seemed ultramodern to me when I got back. It was like coming home after years away.

Two letters were waiting for me at the Thomas Cook office; one was a worried letter from my mother. She couldn't help me and the knowledge of my plight must have been a torment for her. My hardheadedness and lust for far-off places have given her too many sleepless nights.

And there was a long cheerful message from my agent, enclosing two hundred dollars. With the money in my pocket, I felt more cheerful. Battling to overcome my illness, I sat for hours staring at a blank sheet of paper in the typewriter—hours, then days—typing out a few worthless words, tearing them up and starting over. It was bitter cold in the little hotel room and I kept a hot water bottle on my lap to warm my hands.

Slowly, patiently, I succeeded in writing a word, then a sentence, then a paragraph. Finally I had finished an article about Beirut's red-light district. It was very bad, but it was a start. My world was coming alive again.

Another American had checked into the Trocadero while I was away among the Yezidis, a travel writer named Jack Shepperd, a broad-shouldered, graying, easy-going man in the hard-cussing, hard-living tradition of professional adventurers. He had several published books to his credit and was working on a new one titled *Harvest of the Wind.*

After I had licked my dysentery and my slump, we teamed up together and roamed Baghdad, looking for "material" and adventure and finding plenty of both.

It was a wonderful city, provided you didn't have to live there forever. Its dusty streets were filled with shiny new American cars, meterless taxicabs, braying donkeys, fuming camels, and old men who earned their living carrying huge packages on their backs. They were the cheapest means of transporting goods from the train station to the shops and warehouses, and their strength was incredible. We even saw one toothless old fellow treading through the crowded streets carrying the upper part of a grand piano!

Then there were the women. Not exactly the storied beauties of the Arabian Nights, but beautiful enough. Unfortunately, there is a mosquito in Iraq which leaves a big scar the first time it bites (you're immune after the first bite), and most of the women and men of Baghdad have this scar across their faces. *Abahs* and the traditional veils are going out of fashion now, and tight-fitting, modern dresses are replacing the old black gowns. Prostitutes still use the veil on the street, but only to prevent their past customers from recognizing them.

Life in Cairo had prepared me somewhat for more primitive Baghdad, but still, every time I stepped out of the hotel, I felt as if I had stepped onto some preposterous movie set. Great mosques, covered with beautiful blue ceramics, towered over everything, and the smelly Tigris was always alive with peculiar round-shaped boats and decrepit Arab *dhows.*

Jack and I caused a near riot when, during a Muslim festival, we tried to take pictures of the colorful crowds around the impressive Kadhimain Mosque in the northern part of the city. It has four high minarets and two great domes, all lavishly coated with gold leaf, and

its ceramic façade is inlaid with silver. It's easily the most beautiful mosque in the world. Cairo's Citadel doesn't begin to rival it.

A hostile, fist-shaking mob gathered around us as soon as Jack had set up his camera. Gathering up his equipment, we prepared for a hasty retreat when a sinister-looking character in pointed, turned-up shoes appeared and rushed us away.

"I show you good, safe place to take pictures," he said.

He led us to a neighboring rooftop overlooking the celebrating crowds where we could peer down into the walls of the mosque itself. It was an unforgettable sight, usually forbidden to foreigners; thousands of barefooted Baghdadians in all kinds of native dress going through their prayers.

After Jack had taken all the pictures he wanted, I turned and asked the native how much he wanted for showing us this rooftop. He looked us over and said, "Five dinars."

Almost $15! But we quickly haggled him down to 100 fils.

A few days later Jack left for Damascus and I never saw him again, though we still correspond. Some months afterwards he had a land-sand yacht built to his specifications by an American firm, and sailed blithely across the Sahara desert in Africa!

Alone again in Baghdad, I started to probe into the story of the mysterious desert bandit, Ali Baba. No one in Baghdad seemed to have heard of him. But through a stroke of unnatural luck, I finally tracked him down.

A group of Kurdish tribesmen from the north checked into the hotel one day, amidst an undercurrent of excitement. They were on some secret mission and soon after their arrival things began to happen.

Four girls in a bordello were found with their throats cut and one of the two-bit gangsters around the place blamed Ali Baba's roughneck associates. Then one of the Kurds admitted privately that he'd unwittingly guided the alleged murderers to the house for a whingding. He knew of Ali Baba and had some connection with him. I pumped him and bribed him until he introduced me to a Shaikh who led me to one of Ali Baba's "recruiters." More bribing and hard talking persuaded him to approach the bandit, who was living a few

miles outside of Baghdad, for an interview. Surprisingly, Ali Baba consented.

So it happened that one dark Saturday night I entered a small hut on the Iraqi desert and met the revolutionist who is supposed to have killed 150 men personally.

Chapter Seven

Hellship to Bombay

A solitary candle fought a losing battle with the darkness while I studied the long, hairy fingers stretched on the rough wooden table in the little circle of pale light. They caressed an ancient but well oiled .38.

"Did you ever play Russian Roulette, Mr. American?" a thickly accented voice asked, rolling out of the blackness like a thunderclap.

I shook my head and looked around nervously. A short Arab stood by the door of the hut. He was only a shadow but I could tell his hand was toying with the handle of the long, curved *khanjer* in his belt.

The hairy fingers picked up the pistol and thrust a cartridge into a chamber of the cylinder.

"Life has been dull lately. It's an interesting way to pass the time," the voice continued as the cylinder spun. "It's not a coward's game."

The hammer clicked all the way back.

"Would you like to play?" The voice was quietly ominous. It was

more of a command than a question. I could feel the sweat coming out on my forehead. Satan, I thought as I nodded halfheartedly, stay away from me now!

"I first," the voice said. The pistol was lifted up out of the candle's glow. The room was so quiet the man's breath sounded like a leaky iron lung. I put my hands on the edge of the table. I could see the outline of the gun against his temple.

The hammer snapped home with a sharp, empty click.

Slowly the pistol was lowered back into the light. The cylinder whirred again.

There was a movement behind me. I knew I had a choice. Play the game at five to one odds. Or refuse and put myself at the wrath and improbable mercy of the bandits.

I took the pistol. The handle was warm and I saw the hairy fingers trembling slightly.

He had been afraid, too! The knowledge comforted me a little. I raised the pistol to my head and felt the cold barrel touch my temple. Funny, in that last moment I didn't think. My life didn't pass before my eyes or anything. I just clenched my teeth and pulled the trigger.

The hammer snapped emptily.

I dropped the pistol on the table, intensely relieved. The bandit's hairy hand pressed mine. The guard gave my shoulder a friendly squeeze and resumed his post by the door. Ali Baba produced a box of cigarettes from his robes and offered me one.

"No smoke?" he asked, surprised when I waved them away. "Even after a game of roulette?"

He stuck one in his mouth and lowered his face to the burning candle. It was a face scarred by many battles and burned by the heat of countless days on the desert. An angry mop of black beard clouded over fifty per cent of it. A filthy white turban came down to his bushy eyebrows. His eyes were worn and deep, not without humor, but not without fear either.

"How often do you play this?" I asked, motioning toward the pistol.

He laughed.

"Not too often. Mostly with . . . guests." Then he added, "I never lose."

"And your 'guests'?"

"Sometimes they are unlucky," he shrugged. "Sometimes they refuse to play."

"What happens then?"

"The desert is a big place. It is easy to get lost."

He rose to his feet.

"But you did not come all the way here to discuss . . . sports. Come. We must be away from here before dawn. I will show you my camp and answer your questions there."

We rode until sunup. Once we stopped and looked back at the polished jewels of Baghdad glittering on the desert. It was a beautiful sight in the morning mist of the Tigris.

Ali Baba gazed at the city for a long moment.

"Someday . . ." he began reflectively, "someday that city will be mine."

I searched his scarred face and he smiled.

"It is called the 'City of Peace,' you know. But there has been no peace there for a thousand years. I shall lead its *final* war!"

Then he turned away and we rode on.

In the chill hours of morning the three of us approached the camp, a familiar cluster of horses and black tents. In the background, atop a high hill, a tower of mud and brick surveyed the plains.

"What's that?" I asked.

"That?" He looked unseeingly at the tower. "It is only the *ziggurat* . . . you call it the 'Tower of Babel.' Beyond it is what remains of Babylon."

"You picked a great place for your camp," I declared.

"I like to be where I can remember our greater, better past." He gestured at the broad plains, "Here there is greatness everywhere."

A dozen armed, weary-looking Arabs welcomed us and examined me suspiciously. Ali Baba introduced me in a burst of profane Arabic

and we settled in one of the tents for a breakfast of sour cream, bread, coffee and dates. There didn't seem to be any women around, a fact which surprised me.

"Women talk too much and ride too slowly," he explained.

While we ate, he rattled on about his philosophy of life, sidestepping my questions adroitly. Though he was a savage bandit, he was no fool. He'd picked up English during the war, he said, and many other things besides. There was a Soviet-trained "General" in the north now trying to organize the Kurds for another revolt, he went on, but the people waited for Ali Baba to lead them.

When we'd finished eating he emitted a bellow that must have shattered windows in Baghdad. Several of his men jumped up and disappeared into another tent.

"I have something to show you," he said.

The men returned, dragging two bruised and miserable Kurds tightly bound with thick ropes.

"Two days ago," he explained, "our camp had visitors, some communists from the north. They wanted me to join them. When I refused, they tried to kill me. It was very unfortunate for them that they failed. Only these two remain."

The two wretched men were on their knees, their faces twisted with fear.

"Aren't you a communist?" I asked.

His jaw dropped.

"Me! A communist!" He roared with laughter. "Of course not! Who told you that? Do they call me a communist in Baghdad?"

"Well, you seem to favor taking the land away from the Shaikhs and giving it to the *fellaheen.* That smacks of communism."

"Bah!" he snapped. "I favor giving milk to helpless babies, too. The communists are trying to win my people but I'm not blind. They want our oil, not our friendship."

He threw a contemptuous glance at the two Kurds.

"Look at them! They are cowards! They know they're going to die. They're been begging for their lives for two days. I hate cowards."

He grinned at me fiendishly.

"There are ways and ways to kill cowards. I have not decided about these two. They have not had water or food for two days. I think they worry now that I may not kill them quickly. And they're right. They shall die slowly. Very, very slowly."

They looked at me hopefully but I knew it would be dangerous and futile for me to try to intervene.

"What about roulette?" I suggested cautiously.

"No. That is too quick and they are too cowardly. No, I shall think of something a little worse."

He pointed at several dark blobs circling in the sky. The Kurds saw them, too.

"Vultures. They always seem to know when a feast is being prepared for them." He laughed long with an almost insane cackle.

The vultures were still hungry when I left the camp that afternoon. The Kurds had been left in the sun all day and were crying helplessly for *mai* (water). The bandits just sneered at them and kicked them.

As I mounted my horse, Ali Baba shook my hand. "I trust you not to speak of me in Baghdad. Write what you will, but keep my secrets. I like you. You are young and not yet poisoned with the bitterness of life. When I am sitting on the throne in Baghdad I hope you will come back. I will slit a fat Shaikh's throat and give you his palace. You can run all the newspapers in Iraq."

I told him I'd make a point of it, and then, accompanied by the guard from the hut, I rode back to Baghdad, away from Babylon, away from the most dangerous man in Iraq.

After mailing the Ali Baba interview and a piece about the Yezidis, there was not much left for me to do in Baghdad. There were no magicians or *jadoo* there and living conditions were not very comfortable. I decided it was time to shake the dust of Iraq from my feet and continue on to India and the Far East.

Early in April, 1955, I arrived in the port of Basrah, original home of Sinbad the Sailor. I briefly considered taking a wild trip by Arab *dhow* through the Persian Gulf, but gave it up in favor of a

second-class passage on an Indian cargo ship, a choice that proved to be as adventurous as any *dhow* voyage.

Baghdad had been vibrating with a big festival when I left. Colored lights decked the streets. Radios from teashops and cafés wailed eerie Arab songs. The streets were crowded late into the night. Basrah, in contrast, was big but sleepy; colorful but dull. A city without real hotels or restaurants, only Arab flea nests and dysentery diners. An empty, lonely city.

It made me eager to get on the boat and leave Iraq, to meet new people, make new friends, and re-enter the world of *jadoo*. When I stepped aboard the S.S. *Zofari* there was an air of excitement, blended with the smell of incense, live sheep, and human perspiration. Its clean bulkheads throbbed with life and yet, to my amazement, it seemed to be deserted!

When the red-turbaned porters led me to my cabin on the second-class deck the passageways were empty and most of the other cabins stood open, unoccupied. Except for a solitary, listless little Indian who stood by the lavatory (his job was to clean the bathtubs after they'd been used, not exactly the busiest job on an Indian ship), I was alone. The *Zofari* was a ghost ship.

My cabin was clean, well furnished, and air-conditioned; better than many first-class cabins I've seen. As soon as I had locked up my luggage I went out onto the deck, uneasily wondering where all the noise and smells were coming from. One look over the rail provided the answer.

Below, spread out from bow to stern and cramped into the boat's bulging holds, were 2,000 shouting, battling, wildly jubilant Indians, Arabs, and Pakistanis. They'd paid the equivalent of $30 for the privilege of traveling 1,500 miles on the deck, together with all their livestock and baggage. Officially they were "religious pilgrims" on their way home from a trek to the forbidden holy cities of Arabia and Iraq. Actually they were smugglers, all of them, from the children to the withered old ladies!

Eventually eleven other second-class passengers turned up before

we sailed. They were mostly petty officials of the Indian Foreign Service going home on leave or moving to new assignments in the little Shaikhdoms along the Gulf. There was no one in first-class.

Subir, a chubby, fat-jowled man returning from two years with the Indian Embassy in Baghdad, quickly nailed me down to argue politics. All the way to India I was on the defensive, trying to explain and justify America's foreign policy in the Far East. When Subir and I weren't arguing politics, we wandered through the fascinating lower decks, meeting and talking with the smugglers, who cooked their simple meals on tiny kerosene stoves and slept on the hard steel springs of the closely packed bunks, or on mats on the deck itself.

There was no privacy but some families hung sheets over their bunks. Men and women, strangers to each other, slept side by side, carefully observing the strict Oriental moral codes. They were a vivid cross section of the Far East. Men in beards, turbans, *boab* caps, *galibeahs,* Chinese robes, loincloths, silk balloon pants, curled up shoes, *babooshes,* bare feet, every conceivable kind of costume. The women wore tight harem costumes, long black Muslim *abahs,* filmy saris, delicately brocaded gowns, veils, and sometimes, while bathing, just their dark bare skin. There were plump Muslim girls from Iraq with scarred faces, and thin, fragile, beautiful Indian girls sitting alone in little groups; they were forbidden to speak to men. There were even a few ostracized Jews with black skull caps, stringy beards, and spare, haunted faces.

Smuggling is the major industry of the Persian Gulf and these people were experts at it, making "religious pilgrimages" five or six times a year to stock up on gold, pearls, radios, cameras, nylon shirts, and anything else that could be sold for a profit in Pakistan, India, and that smugglers' paradise, tiny Portuguese Goa.

They were allowed to go ashore with everything they wore duty-free. So the women and children were loaded down with strings of radio tubes, belts of solid gold, five or six watches on each arm, and cameras in their brassieres and underwear. All their fingers and toes were banded with more gold. Gold was cheap in Iraq and costly in India.

Since religious pilgrims enjoy not only some immunity from Customs, but reduced fares and many other advantages, they all posed as pilgrims. Out of the two thousand, there may have been two dozen genuine pilgrims and even they were loaded with as much loot as they could carry.

Although they were dressed in rags, most of them were carrying five or ten contraband-packed trunks. Some of the wealthier men were accompanied by two or three jewel and gold bedecked wives and innumerable children so loaded down they clanked when they walked. While I rode in posh comfort and ate fat steaks, there were men below decks, living in revolting squalor and dining on boiled rice, who could have bought the ship and me along with it.

With such a conglomeration of people it was only natural that there should be conflicts, jealousies, robberies and violence on a long voyage. Every morning the conversation at the second-class breakfast table went like this:

"Who got murdered last night?"

"You know that skinny smuggler from Goa? The one with three ugly old wives and one young, beautiful one? Up in the forward hold?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Well, someone slit his throat about two o'clock this morning."

Or. . . .

"Say, Subir, did you meet that Sikh with the scar on his forehead? The one who's been selling nylon shirts for four rupees each?"

"I was talking with him yesterday. Something happen to him?"

"He's not around today. There's a rumor he was pushed overboard."

So it went. And so we went, out across the Persian Gulf, stopping along the way at obscure little Shaikhdoms and ports to pick up more smugglers who swarmed aboard from flimsy little rowboats and *dhows.*

Subir was an entertaining companion when he wasn't trying to vent his confused political views. He spoke the cockeyed brand of English that's now in fashion among the better classes in India. He puffed his cigarettes nervously by holding them in one end of his

clenched fist and sucking through the other end; a habit that's now universal in his country, thanks to a popular Indian movie comedian.

"We are going very slow, isn't it," he would say.

Abracadabra has gone out of fashion and *Oil* is the magic word in the Persian Gulf today. Discovery of the thick black gold up and down the coastline is breathing new life into the barren Arabic countries and villages.

One of the places most affected by the rapidly rising oil derricks is a little speck on the map called Kuwait. A few short years ago it was just a sandy, sleepy little port utilized by the pearl divers in the shark-ridden Gulf. The bulk of the world's pearls used to come from this area, but today the wealth of the sea has been abandoned for the easier wealth pouring up out of the ground.

As the *Zofari* struggled into Kuwait's little harbor I could make out a big wooden cross mounted on a rocky crag overlooking the Gulf. When we drew closer I was startled to see a man hanging from it.

"What's that?" I asked Subir. "It looks like somebody has been crucified!"

"They have," he explained blandly. "Probably a murderer. They put him there as a warning to new arrivals. You must be knowing they still crucify people here. They're primitive people, isn't it?"

Kuwait was a place I had to see. While we anchored I climbed into an Arab *dhow* which took me ashore for five rupees.

Ruled by an oil-rich Shaikh, Abdullah Salim Al Subah, the "country" consists of one ersatz town riding the crest of a boom that may not last. Kuwait is made up of mottled old huts and shaky new buildings that seem to have been thrown up overnight. Nothing can grow there; all the necessities must be imported. Drinking water sells for four rupees a gallon (one rupee is worth about 21¢ and contains 16 annas). Prices for everything are sky-high. A one-room hut rents for 400 rupees—about $85—a month. It has only one climate —unbearably hot. Many of the simplest shacks are air-conditioned with American-made equipment.

Like neighboring Arabia, it is a land where the law of "an eye for

an eye, a tooth for a tooth" prevails. Thieves have their hands cut off. Men who seduce other men's wives lose a more personal part. If you run down someone accidentally with your car, you forfeit your own life.

Shaikhs, who used to live by robbing each other and raiding desert caravans, now drive along the cluttered streets in Cadillacs and Thunderbirds. One even owns a gold-plated Rolls-Royce. Yet they still wear their old robes and turbans and go about bristling with swords, knives, pistols and rifles. I even saw one hulking Arab climb out of an air-conditioned Pontiac with a light machine gun slung across his back!

On a teeming Kuwait street a slender Indian in a tight-shouldered "European" suit stopped me and flourished a handful of pearls, offering to sell them for a suspiciously low price. Since I was watching my purse strings, I turned him down and later kicked myself.

It didn't take long to look Kuwait over and when I returned to the harbor I received a bad shock. The boatman who had brought me ashore for five rupees now asked fifty rupees to take me back. Enraged, I priced the other boatmen. They all wanted fifty rupees!

Angrily I pulled off my shoes and tied them around my belt.

"I'll swim it before I'll pay ten dollars to go three hundred yards!" I declared.

"Sahib . . ." the boatman said gently, touching my arm. "Look!"

A black spot was moving through the green water between the shore and the *Zofari.* A shark!

I paid the fifty rupees.

Inching our way along the Gulf, we passed *dhows* filled with near-naked natives, slaves on their way to market. Slavery is still a big business here and the Shaikhs buy and sell human beings like cattle. The boats filled with newly kidnaped "merchandise" from Persia and Iraq maintain regular schedules, along with the fleets of triangular-sailed smuggling vessels that ply up and down the coast. Their presence has made piracy a very profitable occupation and *dhows* filled with cutthroats lurk in hot little alcoves from one end of the Gulf to the other.

If I had tried to carry out my idea of sailing the Gulf in a *dhow* I probably would have reached India with a badly damaged skin . . . if at all.

The *Zofari* stopped all along the coast at places that aren't on the map, and places that shouldn't be. Bahrein, Bandar 'Abass, Sharja—desolate holes crawling with smugglers who poured aboard to barter with our deck passengers. I definitely felt left out because I had nothing to sell or exchange.

Once a shriveled little man with a great jewel-inlaid sword in his sash came on board and I pointed the cheap little camera I'd bought before leaving Baghdad at him. Instantly a big Arab jumped between us, his hand on his *khanjer*. I motioned him to get out of the way.

"Don't," Subir whispered. "That man is a prince. They don't like to have their picture taken."

Later I struggled through the mobs overrunning the second-class deck and went to my cabin. As I opened my door I saw a long brown arm reaching through the open porthole, fumbling around on my bunk where my portable typewriter, which I'd neglected to lock up, was lying. In a single leap I crossed the cabin, caught the arm by the wrist, wrenched it back and gave it a very sharp twist. There was a howl of pain outside and a very surprised face peered in. Still twisting with one hand, I rammed my other fist through the porthole, scoring a direct hit and skinning my knuckles on a set of yellow teeth. Then I let go and ran outside, but the would-be thief was swallowed up in the crowds.

That was the only time during the trip when I, myself, had any trouble. But there were several people on the lower decks who had to be carried ashore at their destinations, their bodies sprinkled with bullet and knife wounds. And there were three or four who never reached shore; they just "disappeared" in the middle of the night along the way.

Subir and I spent a day in Karachi, Pakistan, a city that shows a mixture of Arabian and Far Eastern influences. There I rode for the first time in a pedicab, the modern counterpart of the old rickshaws. They are bicycles with a little carriage in the back. The driver peddles

his way through the maze of traffic instead of running on foot as in former days. There are even a few motor-powered rickshaws now. Civilization is catching up everywhere.

Karachi gave me a teasing taste of what was to come—the crowds, the heat, the Oriental atmosphere. I liked it. Soon I came to love it as much as I'd loved Cairo.

Two days later Subir and the other five remaining second-class passengers were standing with me on the deck of the S.S. *Zofari,* looking across the harbor at a modern city with a big granite arch in the foreground.

"Well, we are just now getting off," Subir said. "Do you like it?"

"That arch reminds me of Washington Square in Greenwich Village."

"Where?"

"Greenwich Village. New York."

"You are a long many miles from New York now," he smiled.

A long, long many miles. I was in Bombay.

Chapter Eight

The Snake Pit

Bombay welcomed me by staging a bloody "language riot" the evening the S.S. *Zofari* docked. India is severely split over a complex language issue. Three hundred tongues are spoken there, and the government in Delhi has been trying to divide the country into sections according to the predominant language. In Bombay the *Marathas* and the *Gujaratis,* two rival language groups, were unhappy over the plan and displayed their objections by cracking each other's skulls in the streets.

At the docks I said good-by to Subir and the others and we went our separate ways. I took a midget Austin taxi through the rock-throwing, shouting mobs of torch-carrying students in European dress and natives in humble turbans and loincloths. We collected a lot of angry glares but no one charged the cab. By the next morning everything was quiet again. The newspapers didn't mention the riots at all. They were leaving well enough alone. The issue lay dormant until a few weeks later when another government pronouncement from Delhi set off more skull-cracking. By then I was deep in the jungles, hunting tigers and *jadoo.*

India promised to be an exciting country, even though Bombay

was at first sight disappointing. It was a contrasting, contradictory, confusing city, much more modern than I'd expected. A welcome change from primitive Baghdad, it was adorned with sleek apartment houses, air-conditioned movie theaters, and lavish soda fountains.

Prohibition is in effect throughout most of India and, unlike America's "great experiment" of the twenties, it seems to work! I couldn't find a sign of a speak-easy anywhere. Life for the thirsty centers around the snack bars and ice-cream parlors, some of which even support dance orchestras. The smaller places are all equipped with juke boxes playing the latest American records. I was amused to find that an American song called "Hajji Baba" was then the number one tune.

I moved into a modest hotel, the Sea Green, on the plush, ultra-modern Marine Drive, overlooking the wide, beautiful harbor. My only plan was to write my way across the subcontinent from Bombay to Calcutta, investigating *jadoo,* fakirs, and native legends as I went. The only people on my "must meet" list were Tenzing Norgay, the Sherpa native who had climbed to the summit of Everest with Edmund Hillary in 1953, and P. C. Sorcar, the most celebrated magician in India. Subir called him "the greatest magician in the complete world."

I'd also made a list of the things I wanted to investigate. Top of the list was India's strange two-headed snake. Subir swore he had seen many of them. Then there were the Indian rope trick, X-ray vision, the snake charmers, the yogis, the fakirs, the holy men, the lamas, the secret temples: all promising fodder for my typewriter.

For example, in recent years X-ray vision seems to have become an optical disease among the Indian wonder-workers. Several fakirs have traveled around the world, earning a good living with this one trick alone. I saw a fakir perform it in a U.S.O. show in Germany and I'd wondered about it ever since. Was it a fake? Or was it a genuine gift? I was determined to find out.

Basically the effect is this: the performer's eyes are first covered with gobs of bread dough. Sometimes metal foil or a thin sheet of metal is placed over that, then yards of gauze bandage are wrapped

around his head, and finally a velvet bag, which has been carefully examined by the spectators and found to be absolutely opaque, is lowered over the whole mess and tied around his throat. There is no chance he might be able to glance downward . . . or see at all in any direction. These preparations are carefully supervised by doctors and members of the audience.

Still, the performer *can* see! He copies words written on a blackboard. He identifies objects held up by the audience. One fakir has even driven a motor scooter through the mad traffic of Paris while blinded in this fashion.

If only one fakir had turned up who could do this feat, I might have written it off as an unusual natural talent. But because there were several running around looking through bread dough and sheet metal, I naturally concluded there must be some trick to it. Some secret I could learn myself.

There were numerous other intriguing fakirs' feats that deserved study, like the business of being buried alive for long periods. Then, of course, there was snake-charming. *Samp-wallahs* abound in India and I wanted to learn their secrets.

First, I remained in my hotel room for a couple of days, writing two stories that never sold anywhere; then I dipped into the bright, noisy world of Bombay, not expecting to find much *jadoo,* but discovering plenty under its polished surface.

In the big native bazaar, on one of my early exploratory ramblings, I came upon a crowd gathered around a mystical looking old fellow with barely enough skin to cover his jutting bones. He was going through a series of gyrations similar to what you see "India rubber men" do in circuses back home.

It was an interesting but not an exceptionally unusual performance until he came to his capper, after which he passed his begging bowl among the spectators. For this capper, he took a short harmless green snake out of a bag in front of his knobby, crossed legs and *inserted it up one of his nostrils! It disappeared in a flash inside of his head.* A moment later he pulled it out of his mouth!

I gave him a rupee to do it again and took half a roll of pictures of the process. There was no trick to it. It's a common yogi feat.

There's a clear channel between the nose and the mouth. Anyone can do it if they practice first with a piece of string to learn to keep from vomiting . . . and from swallowing the snake.

Unfortunately, the pictures came out underexposed and poorly focused. My cheap little Baghdad camera gave me many such disappointments and I never could afford to buy a better one in India.

In the office of the United States Information Service a young official told me: "If you want to make money in this country, all you have to do is take off your shoes and walk through the villages posing as a saint."

There are a lot of self-styled "Saints" in India. The superstitious natives pick up new cults and wild-eyed leaders as American teenagers pick up new fads and singers. One of the most prominent of these was a bearded old sage named Vinoba Bhave, a humble and sincere man who created the concept of Bhoodan ("land through love"). He walked across India begging wealthy landowners to give an acre or two to the poor. The landowners usually yielded to his pleas and passed out their most useless, swamp-ridden tracts to him. The natives feasted him, followed him, and elevated him to saint-hood.

"Bhave," one official in Delhi said, "doesn't solve poverty, he merely distributes it."

Legends are built around such men, though, and lead to distorted stories of their "powers." Hundreds of shrewd fakirs and holy men hit the jackpot simply by announcing they are an incarnate god. I wasted a lot of time tracking down famous *sadhus,* cult leaders, and holy men whose only real power was the power of pursuasion. It was the unknown, secretive hermits in the jungles and mountains who produced the real mysteries of India.

It's still the custom for genuine ascetics and sincere holy men to go off into the jungles by themselves to spend years as hermits, meditating, concentrating, and trying to master the full powers of their minds and frail bodies. They are not yogis. They practice strange arts far out of reach of the common yogi. Some of these men have tuned their brains so sharply they can pick up the thoughts of

others. Some of them may even be able to "hitchhike" on the minds of distant people and thus see events taking place hundreds of miles from their bodies.

Before you begin to scoff at this, read the following statement from *Newsweek* magazine, dated October 15, 1956:

> "Fantastic as it sounds, a serious psychological-research project being conducted for the Joint Chiefs of Staff is a study of the possible use of extrasensory perception. Those in on it are looking into the possibilities of using ESP not only to read the minds of Soviet leaders but to influence their thinking by long-range thought control."

Normally, we use only a fraction of our brain cells, enjoying only a fraction of our real thinking potential. It's very possible these hermit *sannyasin,* sitting for years alone in jungle and mountain caves, can break through the barriers of the subconscious and achieve the ultimate in thinking power. Sightless ants are definitely known to have some silent way of communicating with each other, probably a low form of mental telepathy. If ants can do it, why can't men?

True *sannyasin* do not try to set themselves up as "living gods." They don't try to cash in on their talents and they rarely "perform" for anyone. They don't try to collect followers, or encourage local natives to support them, although most of them live by humble begging and by teaching. Unhappily, these sincere religious men are now diminishing in number. Few young men today are willing to spend years sitting alone in some cold cave, trying to activate their brains.

In the jungles of India and in the mountains along the border of Tibet, I later met a number of these men. They were all old, quiet, modest and remarkable. Some of them were obvious crackpots and fanatics, but most of them were authentic. Unlike the more celebrated "living gods" who thrive on publicity, these genuine *sannyasin* are virtually inaccessible and can be met only by accident.

Through that U.S.I.S. official I met Bhushan Rao, a charming young reporter for the *Times of India.* When I talked to him about

my interest in *jadoo* and snakes, he suggested I pay a visit to the Haffkine Inoculation Institute which maintains a snake farm to supply the venom necessary for making antivenin.

The Institute is a big, imposing hospital building in the northern section of town, surrounded by green parks which hemmed out the dirty tenements and crowded streets of the native quarter. In a gleaming laboratory, amidst gurgling retorts and venom-filled test tubes, I was greeted by the head of the snake research section, Dr. Radhakrishna Rao, no relation to Bhushan, a studiously sober little man in an immaculate white gown who obviously considered my visit a nuisance and an intrusion. But my enthusiasm for snakes registered and in a few minutes he was proudly taking me on a grand tour.

Antivenin is made by injecting diluted venom into horses, gradually increasing the dosage until the animals become immune to the poison; that is, until their blood builds up enough antibodies to neutralize it. Then small quantities of this blood are removed and the clotted portions are separated. Which remains is bottled and becomes antivenin.

The job of "milking" the venom from the snakes falls on one employee of the Institute, a cheerful native with no medical training. He grabs the snakes just behind the head and directs their jaws to a glass with a piece of tissue paper stretched over the top. The snakes bite into the tissue and the amber poison drips from their fangs into the glass. He happily performed this chore for me with a large viper in the laboratory.

Then we went outside to visit the snake pits.

They were several large concrete basins surrounded by shallow moats. The snakes were kept in earthenware jars covered over with metal boxes. I followed the Doctor down a flimsy bamboo ladder and stood by while he slid the boxes aside and poked into the jars with a long stick. The disturbed cobras hissed loudly and came rearing out like uncoiling springs.

In a moment we were completely surrounded by a weaving ballet of deadly reptiles. The Doctor didn't show the least sign of concern

but when one eight-foot monster brushed against me I jumped nervously.

"They won't bother us." He laughed. "They're only interested in trying to escape."

He was right. Without exception they were all trying to find a way out of the pit. Some of them were swimming gracefully through the moat, trying to scale the high walls. A few others inflated their hoods and studied us curiously, without alarm.

The average cobra is not aggressive. It's more interested in getting away from a man than in striking. The Doctor said if a cobra in the bush senses the approach of a man, it will flee. Yet the natives, for all their jungle lore, still believe a cobra will go out of its way to chase them. They also believe a cobra's bite is one hundred per cent fatal within ten or fifteen minutes.

And because they believe this, it is true. The power of suggestion, and not the dosage of poison, causes most snakebite deaths. In Bombay state alone, about 1,000 fatal cases are reported each year, mostly the result of shock. Probably another five hundred go unreported. Multiply this fiftyfold and you have a rough idea of how many snake victims there are annually in all of India!

While we were in that snake pit, Dr. Rao gave me another vital clue into the secrets of snake-charming. A big cobra was gyrating around me and I was looking directly into its fang-filled face when suddenly I had to sneeze. Afraid I might startle the snake, I turned away and tried to fight off the impulse. I didn't succeed. Anxiously, I stepped backwards, expecting the snake to be alarmed into striking. But it didn't move.

"Don't be worried," the Doctor said patiently. "It didn't hear you. Cobras are deaf; stone-deaf."

"Deaf!" This was the first time I'd ever heard of this!

"They have only an auditory nerve in their bodies to pick up vibrations from the ground. They can't hear sound vibrations transmitted by the air."

"Then how can they hear the flute music of the charmers?"

"They can't," he grinned.

Strangely, I had never learned that in Egypt. It explained why Abdul and his brother beat with their sticks on the rocks sheltering the snakes. It made me wonder how those men from the "Way of Rafai" could make a snake stop dead still with a spoken command. I never did find out the answer to that.

One at a time, the Doctor poked the cobras back into their jars and covered them over again. After leaving him I began to search for a snake charmer to test my new-found knowledge, intending to experiment with the flute blowing myself.

A few blocks from the Haffkine Institute there was a sign inviting one and all upstairs to have their fortunes told by: "SWAMI MURTHI, THE WORLD RENOWNED ASTROLOGER." Accepting the invitation, I entered a smelly old building, climbed a creaky flight of stairs, and knocked on the Swami's door.

A slender young woman with a chunk of cheap jewelry stuck in a hole in her nose admitted me into a dark, dreary set of rooms sparsely furnished and decorated with yellowing astrological charts.

After a few minutes the swami presented himself. He was a fat, middle-aged man, badly in need of a shave, dressed in a pair of dirty duck-twill trousers, with a sloppy turban twisted around his head. He was visibly delighted to see he had a "rich foreigner" on the hook.

"You are expecting a telegram or letter," he sagely announced, after looking me over.

This was an old gag. Every traveler is expecting to find mail waiting for him, or on the way. But I pretended to be amazed. He smiled, pleased with his success.

"I see you are a well educated man and you have come a long way on an important mission."

Just plain flattery. He was wrong on both counts, but I continued to act impressed and soon he was giving me his full routine. I would live a long life and die quickly without pain. I was also destined to become very prosperous.

Gradually I worked our conversation around to the mysteries of

the East, snake-charming, magic, *jadoo,* and—finally—the X-ray eyes feat.

"I can teach *you* to see without your eyes!" he promised, leaning forward in his chair, his eyes gleaming. "It is very simple."

His price was twenty rupees. Five bucks! Well, I thought, if he's really got the secret it might be worth it. I passed him the money and he whispered confidentially in my ear.

"You must sit in a darkened room for half-an-hour each day with your eyes closed, concentrating on seeing with your mind. Within a month you will be able to see even though your eyes are blindfolded!"

There, I thought, goes five dollars out the window!

Thanking him for this precious knowledge, I kicked myself down the stairs. Later I was astonished to find that even the most sophisticated people in India believe this dark room nonsense. I was still a long way from the real secret.

Sidewalk fortunetellers and mind readers abound in India, preying largely on tourists by hovering around the better hotels and restaurants. They all follow the same general routine and dispense the same prophecies. You are about to receive mail. You will live to a ripe old age and die painlessly. You will get rich.

The prophecies of these sidewalk wizards are as worthless as their mind reading. They just judge you from the way you're dressed, your accent, etc., and govern themselves accordingly.

The better mind readers and fortunetellers maintain flourishing offices. They advertise widely, with handbills passed out in the street, and big immodest ads in the newspapers, offering to solve all your problems and forecast the future for five or ten rupees a sitting. Clever psychologists, they depend more on their wits and less on *jadoo* than their customers believe. They are supported chiefly by the educated government workers, the self-styled "intellectuals" who still cling contradictorily to the ancient superstitions and beliefs.

Astrology has an immense following in India, again largely supported by the "intellectuals" who pour over charts and try to

figure out how the next eclipse of the moon is going to affect their lives. Prime Minister Nehru, a short-tempered agnostic, constantly berates such practices but doesn't seem able to do much about them.

Snake-charming was a more exact science to me than astrology. The day after my visit to the snake pits I began my new experiments with cobras in earnest. In the Cooperage, Bombay's principal park, a strip of green running through the heart of the city, I found Khuda Bakh, a young *samp-wallah,* who was willing to let me practice snake-charming with his cobra.

Besides snakes, he had a mongoose, the furry, ratlike animal which is the cobra's deadliest enemy. Over my protests, he turned a cobra and the mongoose loose together. The snake didn't have a chance. Moving with lightning swiftness, the mongoose caught it behind its head and killed it. It was a pretty uneven fight.*

"You pay for cobra!" Bakh demanded.

"But I told you I didn't want to see them fight," I complained.

"You pay," he insisted. That dead snake cost me ten rupees. In other cities, other charmers later tried to pull this same stunt on me. But one blow to the wallet is enough to bring wisdom. Poverty was making me a terrible cheap skate.

Khuda Bakh kept his star cobra in the usual flat basket. Before opening it, he tapped on its side. The vibrations alerted the snake. When the cover was removed it reared up instantly, swaying and weaving, trying to get its master into fang range. Then Bakh leaned forward and started playing his flute, which sounded like a leaky bagpipe, and the snake danced back and forth, apparently in time with the music.

But if it couldn't hear, I wondered, why was it "dancing?" There was only one way to find out.

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* It is commonly believed in India that the mongoose makes itself immune to cobra venom by eating a plant called *mimosa octandra.* I was told that when a cobra succeeds in biting a mongoose, the animal immediately goes off, finds one of these plants and eats it as an antidote. There is absolutely no medical proof of this. The mongoose is not immune. I saw one killed by a cobra near Nagpur.

Another popular notion is that some snake charmers smear themselves with *mimosa octandra* herb before performing. Again, I never came across this, and was even unable to obtain a sample of this plant.

Taking the flute away from the charmer, I sat cross-legged in front of the basket. The snake eyed me distastefully and jerked its head back. It was shaven but even so it was an ugly, formidable thing to have sitting three feet in front of your face.

Nervously I began to play, just blowing hard and fingering the holes aimlessly. The cobra was charmed! Swaying back and forth, it seemed to enjoy the concert. Then I stopped blowing and didn't make any sound at all. Still it danced!

It wasn't paying any attention to the music. Its eyes were fixed on my hands which I was waving back and forth in imitation of Bakh. The instant I stopped moving, it lunged forward! Luckily, I was quicker.

While I was conducting this experiment a large crowd of passers-by gathered to watch. I handed one of them my camera to take some pictures. When I was finished, Bakh entertained the cobra again and was deliberately careless. He stopped moving his hands and the snake buried its fangless jaws into his thumb. So I not only had to pay for the other cobra's slaughter, I had to tip the charmer extra for posing with a cobra hanging from his hand.

The next time I saw Bhushan Rao I showed him the picture of me "charming" the cobra. He seized it with a whoop.

"Can we print this?" he asked.

Naturally I agreed, and the next Sunday the *Times of India* carried the photo in a big two-column spread on its society page under the caption: YANK SNAKE CHARMER, together with a story about my weird career. Since the *Times* is India's biggest and most widely circulated paper, I became suddenly famous overnight.

Strangers approached me to discuss my experiences. Fortunetellers and *jadoo-wallahs* were respectfully silent and refused to try their cheap tricks on me. They thought I was one of them. For the rest of my trip that picture haunted me. On trains and in obscure villages people would study me with a glint of recognition and ask, "Aren't you that American snake charmer who was in the *Times?*"

That publicity just about ruined my search in Bombay. I turned my face eastward toward the real India, the old India, the India of sleepily revolving fans, of throbbing drums, of grass huts, and

cigarettes twenty-five for three cents. My first destination was Poona, the legendary city of numerous anti-British uprisings. From there I planned to move on to Hyderabad, deep in central India.

A newsman in Poona gave me a tip about a "cult of *jadoo*-practicing *sadhus*" who had set up shop a few miles north of a place called Kirkee in the heat-rusted bush country of Bombay state; a place of rough huts, raw plains, and blotches of hard jungle.

It sounded like material for a magazine story, but a long, rugged hike proved the cult was just three ragged unholy holy men swindling the local natives with cheap fortunetelling gimmicks.

There are eight million of these *sadhus* in India. Worthless men, most of them, purporting to pursue some obscure phase of the Hindu religion, organized into weird cults, practicing everything from homosexuality to cannibalism. The only thing they all seem to have in common is a mutual abhorrence of work. They wear ragged orange robes and wander across the country, carrying only the symbol of their profession, a three-pointed trident, and a begging bowl. They live mostly by begging from the pious natives and by terrifying them with *jadoo*.

After an unprofitable afternoon with the three priestly hoboes of Kirkee, I was tired and disgusted, and needed a place to spend the night before going back to Poona.

My guide, a tall slim *shikari* named Bakh, went on ahead to find the nearest *dak* bungalow, one of the jungle huts maintained by the government for hunters and inspecting officials, and to tell the *chowkidar,* its caretaker, I was coming.

I trudged slowly on alone, following the trail Bakh had taken. The jungle was brown with thirst and deep with quiet. Funny how things are always so quiet when there's trouble on the way.

Suddenly there was a movement in front of me and a cobra, which must have been sunning itself in the warm dust of the open trail, flashed up, lacing back, hissing and spitting and trying to stare me down with its rag-doll eyes!

It wasn't very big, not more than six feet long, which is practically a midget in that country. But its flat head was all mouth and its mouth was all fangs and those fangs meant business.

I was surprised, to put it mildly, but I'd had enough experience with snakes to overcome the initial shock. Besides, I had a little weapon in my pocket which I thought was sure-fire protection. It was a small twist of root from an *aristolochia* plant. I'd bought it from a native *samp-wallah* a couple of weeks before. Time and again I'd seen it work against captive cobras, driving them back and making them deflate their hoods. For some peculiar reason they seemed to be afraid of the brown spirals of wood; the natives placed a lot of stock in the root's potency.

So instead of scrambling out of the snake's way—normally a cobra won't attack if you freeze or retreat—I held my ground and waved the root. That was my mistake; an almost fatal one.

The cobra stabbed forward and I didn't move quite fast enough. It was like getting slugged in the knee with a sledge hammer. I hit the dirt with a sharp, hot pain driving into my leg.

The cobra had me and he wasn't going to let go! He started chewing, digging his fangs in deeper!

The air shot out of my lungs. I had a sickening moment of terror, but I fought it down and grabbed the snake just behind the head. Its jaws were like iron and I knew if I pulled it away by force the curved fangs would rip a fat chunk out of my leg. Shock and loss of blood would do the rest!

Tightening my hands around the cold hood—it wasn't slimy like you might imagine—I crushed the air out of it while spitting into the staring eyes.

Slowly the jaws relaxed and I eased the fangs out of my flesh.

The cobra kept lashing and whipping at me long after I'd beaten its skull in with a rock.

Twisting my belt around my calf, I tried to force out as much of the poison as I could. There were a couple of small cavities in my teeth so I didn't want to chance sucking on the wound. A drop of that poison on the nerve of a tooth would spell almost instant death.

Back in Bombay the Haffkine Innoculation Institute had given me some antivenin but it was in my pack which Bakh had carried on ahead. Without it I couldn't expect to live more than an hour or two. The tourniquet wasn't much help since the poison goes directly into

the nerve tissues and general blood stream. My only hope was to keep my self-control and wait for Bakh to come back and find me.

The bite started to swell and the sharp, stinging pain grew. I felt weak and propped myself against a tree. Overhead I could see the clean blue river of sky flowing above the brown and green mat of jungle growth. I fully expected to die lying there looking at that sky.

But death didn't come. Bakh did. He came leisurely strolling back about twenty minutes later. His big Indian grin crumbled when he saw the dead snake and the raw, red hole in my leg. I sent him running off to get the serum. I'm sure he thought I was doomed.

So did I. My nerves were shot but the real danger signs hadn't begun. My leg didn't go numb. I still had control of my eyes and lips. There was no creeping paralysis.

Forty-five minutes after I was bitten I was injecting the antivenin. I knew by then my luck was running good. I hadn't received a lethal dose. The snake must have used most of its poison on some small animal earlier in the day.

Bakh and the *chowkidar* helped me to the bungalow and I spent the next three days sick and feverish. But I finally walked out of those jungles on my own two feet and I'd learned a valuable lesson—not to trust all the sure-fire techniques I had picked up from the charmers of Egypt and India.

Above all, I'd learned not to trust the "magic" *Aristolochia* plant.

After a short rest in Poona, I limped aboard a train for Hyderabad, and the heart of India. It was a long, dusty, hot, slow ride over the plains and through the jungles but it was worth it. In Hyderabad, I learned the secret of the fabulous Indian rope trick.

Chapter Nine

That Rope Trick

Since Britain gave India back to the Indians in 1947, the Hindus have confiscated the wealth of the Muslims and Muslim Hyderabad has become a haunted arena of crumbling palaces and decaying mansions. Today it is the site of a strange battle between the people and their Grand Nizam, an odd, eccentric little ghost of a man bitterly fighting to retain what is left of his fortune, his kingdom, and his inherited dignity.

Weighing in at a scant 95 pounds, his exalted highness is just five feet two inches tall, delicately boned and squint-eyed. At 71 there still operates behind his bushy gray mustache and thin steel-rimmed glasses a peculiarly individual brain filled with fierce pride and pathetic nostalgia.

Once he was the richest man in the world, worth well over two billion dollars and lord of all that his dozen-plus palaces surveyed. He used to give away diamonds as tips and gold bars were strewn carelessly in his courtyard like kindling wood.

But today he is down to his last 200 million and struggling to find comfort in his four remaining hovels, sweeping buildings of

marble and gold, and his sparsely populated *zananas,* once the largest harem in existence. As one Englishman phrased it: "Never before has one so little had so much!"

In 1955, rats the size of alley cats got into the musty Jack Benny-style vaults of his sprawling Chaumhalla palace and gnawed their way through several rotted trunks bulging with eight million dollars worth of Indian currency. When he asked the Indian government to replace the ruined notes, treasury officials dared to turn him down. Losing eight million dollars hurt more than just the Nizam's purse; back in the old days the government never had the audacity to refuse him anything.

Yes, hard times have really come to him, and to all of India's other Nizams and Maharajahs. Even his once loyal subjects are howling for his jewel-bedecked scalp. They claim he has over 300 women salted away somewhere, and they've started a court inquiry to find out why he can't be satisfied with the regulation four brides like everybody else.

He insists he's following Muslim law with only four full-fledged wives and a mere sixteen concubines. But the people point to the disappearance of dozens of young beauties from the city's streets. They allege that whenever the Nizam spots a likely evening's entertainment, he has his flunkies gather her up and deposit her in his *zananas.*

"Of course, he pays off the girls' families for their loss," a local newsman told me. "And life in the Nizam's plush *zananas* can hardly be called a fate worse than death. The girls are probably better off, much better off, than if they'd married some poor native outside."

When I arrived in Hyderabad, I put up at the lavish new Ritz Hotel, which has been converted from one of the Nizam's palaces. A room there, with bath and the rare luxury of hot water around the clock, plus three meals of excellent Italian cuisine, cost less than $5.00 a day. It was one of the best hotels in all of India.

Jadoo hovered over Hyderabad constantly. It was a city of mosques

and great domed temples, where women collected the dung from the sacred cows roaming in the streets, worked it with their hands into little patties, and dried them in the sun to use later as fuel. On the outskirts of the city there was a little straw hut where the *jadoo* concentrated. Government officials had closed it because it was supposed to be haunted by what we call a *poltergeist,* a playful ghost who throws things, sets fire to clothing, shifts furniture around, and so on.

I spent a night in it, sitting up on a straw mat, waiting for the ghost to appear. It never did. But the next morning a lot of curious natives gathered outside to hear my report, and among them was an old yogi who performed one of the most extraordinary feats I have ever seen.

He sat cross-legged in front of me, reached a wrinkled hand up to one of his eyes, dug his fingers into the socket, and pulled the eye out until it was hanging on his cheek, supported by the raw red muscles and purple nerves!

There was no trick to it. Since childhood he'd worked on that eye, gradually loosening it. By the time he'd reached adulthood the nerves and muscles were stretched and numb . . . and the eye was totally blind. He earned a living with this grisly trick, sitting in the market places with his eye hanging out and flies clustering around it.

Later I went back and tried to find him again, but he was gone.

A fellow I met at the hotel named Akbar, a bronze, muscular man with a cheerful, angular face, took me on a tour of the city and showed me the beautiful old mansions with their vast, empty ballrooms and their sad memories of the better days.

Through him I met many interesting people including the magician Vindar. Akbar shared the common belief that the X-ray eyes feat was learned by sitting in a darkened room, but Vindar knew better.

He was established in a garret reached by a quivering flight of back stairs. Outside hung his shingle: PROFESSOR MUKTAR: *Palmistry and Magic.* We made our way up the stairs and entered a dirty alcove facing a door labeled *Mistry Room.* Presently it opened and a

tall, very thin man with a tragic, gaunt face and black-rimmed, hollow eyes emerged. Unfortunately he recognized me immediately from the newspaper pictures so he dropped all hocus-pocus and pretense.

He wasn't really Muktar, he said. Muktar was a friend who was away "on business." He was just helping out. He was the Great Vindar.

We went into the *Mistry Room,* a cluttered place containing a bookshelf laden with odd shaped bottles, a melted candle, and a chipped human skull. The walls were decorated with old magic show posters and pictures of beckoning devils. A small table and a chair sat in the center.

One of the posters listed Muktar's "powers" and the things he offered for sale. Among them was a curious item. For five rupees he peddled a "magic pill" which, if administered to a dying man, would grant him ten extra minutes of life so he could arrange his will and last minute details.

"May I see one of those pills?" I asked.

Vindar's face clouded with shame. "I don't have any just now."

Switching the subject to *jadoo,* I mentioned I hoped to meet up with Sorcar, the man with the X-ray eyes, and Vindar smiled excitedly.

"I can teach you the secret," he announced.

"How much?"

He considered for a moment.

"1,000 rupees."

"It's not sitting in a dark room for a month, is it?"

"No . . . you can learn it in two hours."

"Then can I ride a bicycle blindfolded through the streets?"

"Easily," he beamed. "Wait. I show you."

He called his small son from some back room and had him stretch out on the floor and place two apples over his eyes. Then I filled Vindar's eyes with sand and wrapped a colored cloth around his head. He picked up a sharp knife, staggered blindly over to the boy, and after a few false starts, speared both apples!

When I removed the blindfold, the hollows of his eyes were still filled with sand.

"I will teach you this for a thousand rupees," he repeated, brushing the sand away.

We bickered for several minutes. When he seemed to be weakening to my offer of a much lower price his wife, a scrawny, shrewish woman, appeared. It was 1,000 rupees or nothing, she stated firmly. Since I didn't have a thousand rupees, ($210) I had to leave without the secret. But at least I'd found out definitely there was a secret—that it was just a trick, not a gift.

Hyderabad has a twin city, Secunderabad. A small river separates the two. In Secunderabad there is a large club, originally built by the English colonists and now supported by the social elite of the two cities. A dour Englishman, the Elsa Maxwell of Hyderabad, was in charge of it. If he banned an Indian from the club it meant social disgrace. He wielded this power frequently, with sober delight.

I had a short uncomfortable interview with him, in the company of an Indian army colonel. He looked down the long nose of his ruddy English face, frowning at my baggy, patched-up linen suit, and addressed me in tones usually reserved for menials who have come to scrub the floor. But he did tell me some intriguing things.

There was, he said, an old *sannyasin* living on the outskirts of Secunderabad who had unique talents as a healer. The Englishman had a sister who was quite sick back in England and he visited this man for advice. The *sannyasin* went into a kind of trance, his bearded chin lowered against his bony chest and, after a half hour of silence, jerked his head up to announce he had communicated with the sister and all would be well.

A few days later the Englishman received a letter from her, relating a remarkable experience. She had been eating in a London restaurant with a friend when suddenly she felt very strange, aware of the presence of some invisible being. When the sensation passed she was surprised to find her tiredness and illness completely gone. This had occurred on the very night her brother was sitting with the *sannyasin!*

The Englishman swore his story was true. Obviously he was a believer in the lore, mystery and *jadoo* of India, but I have no reason to think he made up the tale to entertain me.

The faith healer was well known in the twin cities, curing hosts of natives daily, without charge, using only water which he blessed with some potent prayer. When the sick called on him, he wouldn't even look up from his meditations but would just wave toward the bottles of holy water in the corner of his hut.

The next day, it was a bright, cloudless morning, quite cool. I set out to find this man, following the rather sketchy directions given to me by the Englishman at the club. I walked for several hours but couldn't find his hut. The natives I asked along the way had all heard of the *sannyasin* but they all gave conflicting directions. I knocked at several shacks but none was the right one.

Finally, around one o'clock in the afternoon, I reached the summit of a high hill where there was a little white-domed structure containing benches for Sunday climbers who wanted to rest and view the glistening temples and palaces of the city spread out below.

An old man was sitting there, staring off into the blue sky. He ignored me as I sat down near him. He was dressed in a *dhoti,* one of the typical shapeless gauze gowns, with a clean little cap on his head. His hair was long, and a short gray beard jutted from his chin. I didn't pay much attention to him and, after catching my breath and resting for a few minutes, I started to leave.

"*Shree* Keel." Suddenly he spoke my name. Startled, I turned back.

"You know me?" I thought he must have recognized me from those newspaper stories.

"You are well known," he said in a soft, well modulated voice tinged with a British accent. "May I talk with you?"

I sat down and as a conversation opener I asked him about the *sannyasin.*

"You are far-off," he said flatly. "His hut is among the hills on the other side of the city."

He went on to tell me several remarkable things. He described the contents of a cable I'd received from my agent earlier in the week.

Speaking in a casual, sincere, conversational way he told me what I had been thinking about while sitting there, and he even gave me advice about a story I had worked on the night before. A story that wasn't going well.

I was astounded. I pressed him for some explanation but he offered none. He parried my questions with more puzzling remarks about my past, detailing things which had never been published in Indian papers and which I'd never discussed with anyone in India, yet he didn't try to act mysterious or mystical. He wasn't trying to impress me. He was just having a friendly conversation. His name, he said, was Vadramakrishna, and he was "interested in the unusual" the same as I.

Finally he focused his eyes on me and remarked, "You don't believe in the Indian rope trick, do you? You're a skeptic and must see things with your own eyes; this is your blind spot. Let me tell you, you have great inner resources which you have not yet discovered. When, at last, they are revealed to you, you will learn to see . . . and you will find all you seek."

Excitedly, I leaned forward.

"Have *you* seen the rope trick?" I asked, fascinated.

He smiled slightly, his eyes twinkling.

"I have *performed* it," he said simply. "I can show you how it's done. You have earned the answer."

During the minutes that followed he quietly sketched the secret in the sandy dirt with his stick and patiently answered my awed and enthusiastic questions. He had done the trick in his younger days, he said, but it was a false illusion and he no longer dealt with falsities. Now few people knew the secret. Few performed it. It was dying, just as the old world of *jadoo* was dying.

"I have been waiting for you for a long time," he said cryptically, as I hastily scribbled the details in my notebook. "I'm glad we've finally met."

"Waiting? But how . . ." I began.

"Skepticism is so blinding," he interrupted. "Teach yourself to be curious, not skeptical. You will learn more because you will see more. You thought the rope trick was impossible. Now you know

you can do it yourself. There are so many things that seem impossible to us . . . but if you reach for your untapped resources, if you think with all your brain, you will find the answers. And more besides."

He rose to his feet, supporting himself with his heavy stick.

"Where can I find you again?" I asked eagerly. "Can I walk you home?"

Again that soft, patient smile.

"You have found me once. That is enough. I live far from here and it is better for me to go alone."

He put his palms together in the customary Indian salute.

"Good-by, *Shree* Keel. Good luck. Remember what I've told you. But when you write of this . . . be careful. Half the world is blinded by skepticism."

Dazed, I watched him make his way down the side of the hill. I had the secret to the Great Indian Rope Trick! A secret so simple I could never have figured it out by myself. That simplicity is its greatest strength.

It *had* to be simple. Remember, it was first performed hundreds of years ago when magicians had few mechanical devices and had to rely on crude, easy to obtain materials. They also had to depend a great deal on what is known as "misdirection"—the business of diverting the audience's attention, making them watch the left hand while the right hand does the dirty work. Fortunately, audiences in those days were far less skeptical, less educated and easier to deceive than they are today. They believed that the magician possessed special magic powers and didn't look for a trick or a secret in the things he did.

Thanks to this gullibility, a blinding legend grew up around the rope trick. It is supposed to be a lost secret, a miracle performed by the ancient *jadoo* artists. The theory has even been advanced that it was done by only one especially clever fakir centuries ago, and that it hasn't been seen since.

Such theories are bunk. The trick hasn't been seen often in recent years for a variety of good, sound reasons. First, climbing the rope is dangerous and a feat for accomplished jugglers. Jugglers are diminishing in modern India. Second, the risk of detection is very

great. If any reader of this book saw it with his own eyes, he would probably realize how it's done immediately. Third, the secret has always been jealously guarded and few know of it.

This secret does not lie in the ground or in the rope, but in the air. Wires hold the rope up. In ancient times magicians used a length of thin, strong line made from black hairs woven together. Remember, this trick was introduced when "invisible" wires, now a standard magician's gimmick, were completely unknown. And it was always performed at dusk, at the conclusion of the jugglers' performance, because the hair ropes weren't totally invisible.

But, you reason, the trick was performed in open fields, not under trees or other possible supports for the invisible ropes. How was this possible?

The terrain of India is the answer. The rope trick was usually done in mountainous regions or hilly areas, never in desert country. The site of the performance was always in a valley between two hills or two rocky knolls.

The invisible wire was stretched from the summit of one hill, across the valley, to the summit of the other hill. With higher hills in the distant background, even ordinary wire is invisible. (Observe telephone lines strung along the countryside. They seem to disappear when there are trees in the background, and are most visible against the open sky.) With the added advantage of dusk or darkness, there is little chance the wire could be seen *because it's human nature to think the rope's support must be vertical, not horizontal!*

This horizontal suspension wire is the key factor to the secret. There is a simple explanation, too, for those cases where the boy is reported to have climbed into the sky until he disappeared from view, and the rope fell emptily to the ground. Torches or lanterns on the ground made the spectators night-blind when they looked up into the dark sky. The boy merely climbed up out of range of the lights and traveled hand over hand over the wire.

How did they get the rope up to the suspension wire?

A thinner rope or thread dangled over it, with one end trailing to a concealed spot where an assistant could pull it. A small hook was on the other end and hung near the magician. The rope itself was

unprepared except for a wooden ball on the end. This had two purposes. It gave the end weight so it could be thrown upward, and the holes in it held the hooks used in the trick.

These were almost all the preparations necessary. The magician would begin his show toward sunset, situating his audience ten yards or so back from the spot where he intended to do the trick. Thus they would get a view of the general background; those hills which helped conceal the suspension wire.

At the beginning of the trick, he would toss the weighted end upwards and it would fall back, inert. This failure would be repeated several times, relaxing the spectators, boring them just enough so they wouldn't see him when he deftly connected the ascension wire to one of the holes in the ball. Then his assistant would jerk the thread and the rope would begin to rise on the final throw. By this time it would be fairly dark, the magician's chatter and repeated failures would have lulled the audience, and the stage would be set for the great illusion.

To the casual observers, it looked as if the rope were suddenly climbing into the empty sky without support. Because darkness exaggerates and confuses distances, the rope seemed to be two or three hundred feet in the air, even out of sight, when actually it was only fifty or sixty feet up. This illusion staggered the spectators' senses even more.

After the rope reached the suspension wire, the magician called his young apprentice forward and ordered him to climb. The apprentice was always young and very small, so the thin ascension wire could bear his weight.

He would act hesitant and the fakir would argue with him, even threaten him. Finally he would start to climb, hurling back violent abuse.

Once he reached the top, he pulled a hook from his pocket and fastened the ball more securely to the suspension wire.

It was then ready for the last spectacular bit of showmanship. The magician would shout up to him and he would answer with insults.

Apparently enraged, the fakir clutched a big, wicked looking knife in his teeth and would start up the swaying, bouncing rope.

When he reached the boy they would grapple and curse and seem to have a whale of a fight.

The illusion of height, the darkness, the audience's night blindness, and the boy's small size served to conceal what was really going on. Besides, the audience was so enthralled by this time they didn't know what they were really seeing.

While struggling with the boy, the magician pulled from various sections of his clothing the parts of a freshly butchered animal (usually a large monkey) wrapped in cloth similar to what the boy was wearing. He would drop these, one at a time, while the boy screamed in simulated agony.

Suddenly the cries would stop. A head wrapped in a turban would strike the ground and bounce bloodily. Assistants hurried around, collecting the hacked up pieces, creating a fuss while putting the remains in a large basket. ("Where's his other arm, Babu?") The spectators would be misdirected for a moment.

But a moment is all the boy needed to climb inside the baggy clothing of the magician, slipping his arms and legs into a special harness which the latter wore.

Then, with the boy pressed flat against his body and well concealed, the magician descended.

Back on the ground again, he looked sadly into the basket—while his tiny apprentice slipped out of his robes and hid behind it. Then, grabbing the rope, the magician would shake it until it fell to the ground, misdirecting the spectators while the boy climbed into the basket.

Or the basket might be omitted entirely. The magician's assistants might collect the bloody pieces and, after the magician is back on the ground, cluster in a group around him, appearing to be carefully arranging the parts on the dirt, giving the boy a chance to slip away from the fakir and stretch out in the dim light. The assistants would slip the parts into their own robes, then step back while the magician gave the boy a kick and he sprang to life.

A variation of the rope trick was sometimes presented in villages and palaces by setting up oily bonfires beforehand to create a smoke

screen overhead. Then the fakir's assistants would push a long pole across the street or courtyard from one roof or tower to another. When the rope was thrown up into the smoke, one of them would catch it and tie it to the pole. Then the boy would climb up, untie the rope, and tightrope his way to the rooftop.

These are, essentially, the secrets of the Great Indian Rope Trick. Later, I came across some other methods for achieving the same effect. But they were all imitations of the real thing.

Now that I had the basic secret of the trick in my hands I was suddenly faced with a new and perplexing problem: what to do with it? So much had already been written about it, and so many western magicians, stopping over in India on three-week jaunts around the world, had "searched" for it without success, that most people had marked it down as a legend, an impossibility. I had to find some convincing way to present my discovery. I had to prove that this *was* the secret.

The only obvious way to do this was to actually perform the trick myself, preferably before a crowd of newsmen or high officials. Since the risk of discovery was great, and since I was a writer, not a polished stage performer, such a demonstration seemed hazardous and impractical. But I was glumly aware that without it, any story I might write about the trick would be received with great skepticism in the editorial sanctums of New York.

I needed time to ponder this and plan my next move. But time costs money and I was running short of that again. I was out of touch with my agent, and I had to stretch my few remaining rupees until I reached some city where I could settle long enough to resume mail connections.

My friend Akbar helped solve this problem.

"Why don't you go into the bush and live in a *dak* bungalow until you work it out?" he suggested.

He took me to the Department of Forestry in Hyderabad, where I met an engaging young Indian named Hafiz Pasha who had just purchased a hunting license and was preparing to go on a *shikar* (tiger hunt) in the jungles to the north. He immediately invited me to be his guest for two weeks.

Hafiz was the son of a once-wealthy Muslim family in the jungle village of Nirmal; a blackskinned, kindhearted youth, college educated but filled with humility and humanity. He was a member of the courageous old *shikari* school of hunting. Sitting on a comfortable *machin* in a treetop was not for him. He often stripped to a loincloth and waded into the jungles barefooted after game.

Throwing my typewriter and luggage into his temperamental Model T Ford, we set out for the bush country, accompanied only by a slender, happy man identified as his "servant and cook."

After a long, harrowing ride up over a two-thousand-foot mountain and along enmeshed, dusty, deep-rutted jungle roads, we arrived at his "hunting block" and set up housekeeping in a comfortable *dak* bungalow.

Rental of these bungalows is only one rupee a day. They've been built all over India and even far into Tibet. They are cozy, high ceilinged buildings furnished with a table, a couple of chairs, a fireplace, a kerosene lantern for light, and one or two beds of laced canvas. They also have a bathroom containing a useful piece of crockery and a drainage board on which you stand while the *chowkidar* pours a shower of water over you from a big brass pitcher.

Customarily the bungalows must be reserved in advance, and in central India they are almost exclusively for the use of hunters and inspecting officials. Few tourists stray that way.

India is a bargain basement for hunters, and the whole business of going on *shikar* is highly organized. The jungle is divided into "blocks," each one many miles square and rich with all kinds of game, and each has one or more *dak* bungalows. A hunting license costs a mere forty rupees for the season and includes the use of the huts. This permits you to bag a tiger, plus a wide variety of smaller animals. Tiger hunting in India can be cheaper than a deer stalk in the Catskills back home.

We worked our way slowly northward, from bungalow to bungalow, Hafiz shooting a few small animals, while I pecked out a few small words. We tracked a tiger through the bush for three days, Hafiz slinking through the jungle in his bare feet like some animal himself, while I plodded along behind him armed only with my

ridiculous gas pistol and a notebook. But tigers are cagey beasts and this one got away.

Most of my time was spent away from the typewriter, doing magic tricks in the little villages, doling out aspirin—the only medicine I had with me—to sick natives, and gathering facts about jungle *jadoo.*

These central Indian villages are very similar to the more isolated regions of Africa. The people live in crude grass huts and wear a minimum of clothing. The caste system, though officially outlawed, still prevails, and people in one village often refuse to have anything to do with a neighboring village a mile away because they consider themselves to be of a higher caste.

Superstition and *jadoo* are still rife there. When a man-eater rampages through an area, the people set up tiger idols and worship them, hoping their reverence will win the sympathy of the animal and persuade it to leave them alone. Their gullibility makes them easy prey for wandering *sadhus,* who occasionally take over their villages and establish themselves as "living gods," demanding homage, wealth, and the choicest local women.

Virgins in these villages wear bells around their ankles. After they marry these are replaced with silver bracelets. They marry young, right after puberty, and both the bride and groom wear veils for one month after the wedding, presumably to hide their blushes.

Hafiz was a delightful host, what with his vast fund of jungle lore and his incredible courage, but he treated me with annoying respect. I was a "great white man" and he refused to share the bungalows with me or eat with me. And when he heard my typewriter clicking, he shooed away natives who had walked for miles to see some of my magic. These things disturbed me very much but the natives had been disciplined by the rare visits of the British "white father" to handle white men with fear and awe. All of my democratic upbringing and attitudes couldn't bridge this gap.

We did a great deal of hunting at night, driving through the jungle in the old Ford, searching the bush in an unsportsmanlike way with a powerful floodlight. Hafiz shot a couple of *sambar* (deer) in this way. Then, during one of our nocturnal sojourns, we unknowingly passed out of our block. A zealous native game warden

spotted us; the next day he called on us to revoke Hafiz's license for poaching.

"It is just as well," Hafiz said sadly. "I'm getting hungry."

"Hungry?" I was surprised.

"I haven't eaten in two days."

"But why? You've been giving me plenty of rice and eggs. . . ." Then I suddenly realized why he hadn't been eating with me. "You mean you haven't got enough food for yourself?"

He admitted he was shamefully broke. He didn't even have enough to buy gasoline for the car. It embarrassed him very much to tell me. Since he owned the only car for miles around, and since he was equipped with expensive high-powered rifles, I had assumed he was rich. Feeling very ashamed of myself I gave him some money, paid the rent on the *dak* bungalow, and tipped his "servant and cook." Since we could no longer hunt, I decided to keep going north to Nagpur and then to Delhi, the capital of India.

When I boarded a dirty little bus to Monchrial, a distant village on the railroad line to Nagpur, there were tears in Hafiz's eyes.

"I love you like a brother," he said. "It will be my wish all my life to meet you again."

Nagpur is an undistinguished jungle town—an immense jumble of dirty buildings fringed with mud huts, and narrow streets crowded with pedicabs, rickshaws, and thin, colorfully dressed women with their arms covered with cheap bracelets and tiny jeweled ornaments piercing their noses. Every young girl has holes punched in her ears and nose and pieces of thread looped through them until the wounds heal. Newly married girls in the villages sometimes wear a big symbolic ring through their noses.

My room at the Mount Hotel, Nagpur's best, cost me twenty sorely needed rupees daily but boasted of a crude air-conditioning system consisting of a fan blowing air through a trickling water arrangement. Even with that, it was unbearably hot in the city, and I had a hard time concentrating on my typewriter and my article about the rope trick.

After a couple of days there, I managed to land a reservation in

a *dak* bungalow about twenty-five miles outside the city so I fled back to the cool, quiet jungle to finish up the article and make plans for my invasion of Delhi where I'd decided to attempt a rope trick demonstration, hoping the attending publicity would help my agent peddle the story for a good price. It was there that I won the dubious distinction of becoming one of the few men ever to be bitten by *a cobra with a beard!*

One morning I was hunched over my portable on the veranda of the bungalow while a flock of playful *bundar* (monkeys) gathered around the clearing and behaved like critics, throwing fruit at me, when a local *shikari,* also named Hafiz, came to see me. He was accompanied by a tall, angular man dressed in a dirty loincloth smeared with dried bloodstains, and a sweat-stained turban.

"Sahib . . . this Muktar . . . bravest *shikari* in all India," Hafiz began. In India everyone is the greatest or the bravest or the finest something. "He wants to show you cobra with beard."

I'd already heard of this snake and had been hoping to come across it. It had attained considerable local fame and some of the more superstitious people had even taken to worshiping it, thinking it was some god in disguise. Muktar said it was in the possession of a snake charmer a short distance away, and for a little *baksheesh* he would guide me to it.

I locked up my typewriter, and we started away through the bush. There was a tiger lurking somewhere in the vicinity, I'd heard him talking to himself at night, plus a wide variety of other game, but somehow it didn't seem like a real jungle to me that day. It was more like the woods back on the farm in upstate New York.

We came to a wide clearing, circled a *tank* (a waterhole), and walked toward a cluster of straw huts with thatched roofs. I'd seen a thousand similar villages but this village had seldom seen a skinny, awkward giant white man before. All activity stopped. Children gaped. Women dashed into their huts to change into their best *saris.* The men of the village surrounded me and their chief, a pot-bellied man with a magnificent mustache, dragged his rope-laced cot from his hut for me to sit on.

Muktar fetched the famous snake charmer, a crafty old character with red betel juice dripping off his chin. He approached beaming happily, carrying a flat basket and a gourd flute.

Crouching in front of me, he picked up his flute, stuck it between his lips and hit a couple of eerie notes. Then he tapped the basket with his finger and a low, menacing hiss came out. He blew another sour note and jerked away the cover. A long slice of green unwound upwards.

A massive hood expanded and it hissed and swayed in apparent rhythm with the melody the charmer was playing. Once it lashed out with its open mouth but the old man was quicker.

The villagers, who must have seen this many times before, stood in fascination.

The remarkable thing was not the snake's ear for music, but the thick crop of long black hairs growing out of both sides of its flat head. This cobra had a real, honest-to-goodness beard! A set of unearthly sideburns!

I leaned forward for a closer look. The hairs were real enough and didn't seem to be glued or fastened in any way.

Suddenly I reached out and grabbed it just below the hood. With a loud gasp, the crowd staggered back. Hafiz jumped and I gave him a reassuring smile, locking my fingers around the quivering throat and lifting the snake up out of its basket. The charmer stopped playing and glared at me with indignation. I was crabbing his act.

Bringing the hissing face close to my own I could smell its foul breath. Obviously it was fangless but the villagers believed it still had its full share of dangerous dentures. It added to their breathless suspense.

I examined it as closely as possible. Those hairs were really growing out of its skin!

Turning it sideways, I reached to grab it just behind the head with my free hand. All eight feet of it squirmed and shuddered and it twisted suddenly to sink its powerful jaws into my approaching hand, digging its needle-sharp teeth into me! It was like catching my hand between meshing gears.

The natives panicked. They thought I was finished. If it had bitten one of them they probably would have dropped dead from shock and fright.

Pain jolted up my arm. I winced and spit into the snake's eyes. Finally, with the help of the now gloating, clucking, charmer, I worked it loose .An ugly semicircle of blood was left on my hand.

The old man pretended great concern and I let him "treat" it by rubbing it with a magic talisman made from a piece of clay. Naturally he got credit from the natives for saving my life. Later, though, the wound became infected and gave me a bad time.

After the snake was returned to its basket, the charmer offered to sell it to me for fifty rupees (about $10 . . . a fortune in that locale). I was tempted but I was still suspicious. Snakes just don't grow hairs. Their skins aren't equipped for it. Besides, I'd noticed the snake's hairs were the same color and texture as the charmer's. A simple trick was probably behind the whole thing.

"Tell him I'll give him ten rupees for the secret of how the hair is grown," I told Hafiz.

Hafiz translated this and the old man protested.

"He say he found snake with hairs in bush in secret place. Snake hairs real."

At that moment the women of the village came out to perform a dance in my honor. I turned away from the old man to watch them and let him think my offer over.

They walked in a circle, bowed to each other and jumped up and down. I applauded enthusiastically and they took a long encore.

The snake charmer got nervous. The thought of losing an easy ten rupees finally broke him down. He nudged Hafiz and led us behind a hut. After he'd made Hafiz promise to keep his secret, I passed him the ten rupees and he told me how to make a cobra grow a beard.

Cobras, he showed me, have a small empty space on either side of their head under the skin behind the poison glands. By making slits over these spaces, long hairs can be inserted. The skin quickly grows back, grafting them in place. Detection is impossible. But, he admitted shamefacedly, the treated snakes only live for a few weeks.

Back at the bungalow I dressed my hand and returned to my rope trick problem. I was writing a six thousand word article about it, giving the full secret and complete details of my encounter with Vadramakrishna. As it neared completion I realized, more than ever, that a demonstration would be essential to its sale. I also realized that I probably couldn't afford to set it up myself. I would have to find some backer in Delhi to help me finance the arrangements. Gloomily I visualized myself walking into the offices of potential backers and announcing: "I'm going to do the Indian Rope Trick. Will you help me?"

This, combined with my throbbing hand, kept me awake late that night.

The next morning I was awakened by the soft roll of drums in the village close to the bungalow. A wandering band of jugglers and *jadoo-wallahs* had arrived. They were begging their way to Nagpur, traipsing from village to village, just as their ancestors had done for centuries before them.

They had set up their meager equipment in a jungle clearing near the village. There were ten or fifteen people in the troupe—several women, four or five children, a number of muscular men, and a proud, straight-backed *jadoo* artist about forty years old. He was their leader, and his reddened, bloodshot eyes surveyed his poor, ragged audience like a Carnegie Hall impresario.

They did a tightrope act and some good juggling. One of the men balanced a long pole on his forehead, and a boy climbed up over his shoulders and did a handstand on the end of it. Then the *jadoo-wallah* took over.

He displayed a large empty straw basket and ordered one of the boys to climb into it. The boy argued reluctantly with him for a moment, until he was swatted. When the boy was in place, the magician tossed a large piece of torn canvas over the top of the basket and picked up a long rusty sword. One of the women in the troupe, sitting on the edge of the circle of spectators, started wailing and carrying on.

He glowered at her dramatically for a moment, then shouted to the boy. The boy answered and whatever he said seemed to enrage

the man. With a curse, he shoved the sword through the canvas, drawing it out dripping with blood. The woman screamed and cried. He told her to shut up and thrust the sword in again and again. The canvas turned red with blood.

The villagers were transfixed with wide-eyed horror, but I thought I was just seeing a trick that is a common feature of American carnival side shows. I was wrong. The finish was totally unexpected.

After a number of bloody sword thrusts, the *jadoo-wallah* whipped away the canvas and a gasp rose from the audience. The basket was empty! The boy was gone, vanished in full view of the spectators who had formed a circle around the performer.

Suddenly there was a shout from the edge of the clearing and there, sitting on a high limb, was the boy.

It baffled me completely. But like all good tricks, it had a simple secret.

The boy had never really been in the basket for more than a second. He had slipped out under cover of the canvas as soon as the magician moved to put it over the top. He'd hidden in the magician's robe and answered him from there. Then, when the magician walked across the circle to take the sword up, his assistants surrounded him briefly and the boy was able to slip under the woman's robes. While the magician shoved the sword into the basket (it had a sponge full of red fluid in the handle), the woman screamed and moaned, finally covering her eyes and pushing her way through the crowd as if she couldn't bear to watch the slaughter any longer. The moment she was clear, the boy darted from her robes and ran to the edge of the clearing.*

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* A much simpler version of this trick, which I saw at bazaars and festivals throughout India, is done with a large basket, narrow at the mouth but spreading out to a wide bulge toward the bottom. After the boy climbs into it, he twists himself into a doughnut shape in the bulge. The sword is plunged through the canvas over the top into the empty center of the basket while the boy screams in mock pain. Finally the magician tilts the basket so the spectators can look into the narrow opening. It appears to be empty because the boy is pressed tightly around the bulge. He either reappears in the basket after the magician says some magic words, or he waits until the audience is misdirected elsewhere, then he makes his getaway and reappears later in a treetop.

If I'd had the money, I would have paid transportation costs for the whole troupe to Delhi. But I barely had enough rupees left to pay my own way. So I had to watch them pack up and fade away down the dusty jungle road to oblivion, to wander through the little villages doing their fine tricks for a few annas. There aren't many troupes like that left in India. Their life is hard and it takes years to perfect their skills.

I took the Delhi Express at Nagpur because I was in no hurry. If I had been in a hurry I would have walked. Indian trains are unbelievably slow and uncomfortable. You're sealed off in your own private compartment with no access to the rest of the train. Two or three rough benches supply the sitting and sleeping space. A few screened windows and three electric fans, which usually don't work, provide the air-conditioning. At the end of the compartment there is a small cubicle with ancient, dirty fixtures which pass for plumbing. The toilet is usually the standard Oriental type, a hole in the floor with two porcelain footrests.

I was alone in the compartment until the train stopped at a little jungle station a few miles outside of Nagpur, and someone rattled my door. I unlocked it and two masked natives scrambled in.

Dangerous *dacoits,* jungle bandits who board first-class cars to rob passengers and slice throats indiscriminately, are common throughout India. Friends had warned me to watch out for them when traveling alone. So I was alarmed by these new arrivals. The train started to pull out of the station before I could look around for help. Anyway, the platform was empty.

Pulling the door shut nervously, I tensed myself and turned to face the pair. They didn't seem to be paying much attention to me. When I got a closer look at them I was relieved to see that what I first thought were masks were really just flat swathes of dirty bandages across their faces under their eyes. They sat cross-legged on the floor with sheepish, hangdog expressions.

Neither of them had a nose and they were traveling in a first-class compartment to hide their shame. Three weeks earlier they had been kidnapped by a band of *dacoits* and held for ransom. When it wasn't forthcoming, the bandits followed a time-dishonored practice

and chopped off their noses, then turned them loose. They were on their way to Delhi to seek the help of government doctors in getting some kind of new nose. It is a terrible, humiliating thing to be noseless in India.

Like a legless man going to the electric chair, the train crawled reluctantly through the jungles, past straw villages filled with dark naked children, and up over red clay hills into the night.

Late the next morning, triumphant at last, it clanked to an indecisive stop in Delhi. The two noseless natives slipped out and vanished into the crowd, their tattered robes pulled up over their sad condition, while coolies swarmed aboard to fight and curse over my meager luggage. A big coolie flexed his impressive muscles, picked up my heaviest suitcase and carefully balanced it on the head of a man half his size. Then he grabbed my smallest bag and led me through the station to a taxi. Delhi seemed like a big, naked, bustling, sophisticated town, one that had seen many free-lance writers and magicians and kept a boot polished to kick them with.

It is not easy to get people anywhere to believe you can do the Indian Rope Trick. It's especially not easy to convince the people of Delhi. For years they've been exposed to stories and legends about the trick. A British magicians' club, the *Magic Circle,* once offered $25,000 to any fakir who could perform it. There were never any takers. Other magicians "searched" for it by placing inconspicuous advertisements in a few English-language newspapers, which the fakirs naturally couldn't read. From time to time, numerous self-styled "experts" on magical matters have issued learned statements on why the trick is an utter impossibility.

Because of all this skepticism, I had a tough time finding anyone who was willing to supply the folding chairs, costumes, proper setting, and other things I needed.

However, here and there, I did find some compassionate listeners. Ram Singh, the brilliant associate editor of an Indian intellectual magazine called *Thought,* gave me a boost when he told how he had once witnessed the trick himself. Writer J. Vijayatunga, a clever and talented man who had grown up with *Panditji* (Nehru) and who

had, years ago, lived in Greenwich Village, gave me much moral support. So did a few other Indian writers and newsmen. But their endorsement and encouragement were mere whispers in a city filled with laughter and scorn.

I visited diplomats, foreign correspondents, wealthy impresarios, and local clubs, getting the brush-off everywhere. Meanwhile my agent sent me money, cables, and encouragement from editors. My articles were finding a ready market now. But he agreed I would need to demonstrate the rope trick before he could sell the story.

Finally I gave up the search for a sponsor and decided, instead, to hold a press conference and perform just part of the trick, hoping the resultant publicity would induce some club or company to back a full-scale demonstration. I sent out letters to all the papers and foreign news bureaus concentrated in New Delhi, inviting their representatives to my hotel on the afternoon of May 25, 1955. Meanwhile the servants around the place started making bets with each other on whether or not I would succeed in doing even part of the trick.

I bought a long rope and Vijayatunga found an intelligent boy to act as my assistant. There was a golf course across from the hotel containing a grove of trees and a picturesque old temple. It was an ideal spot for the demonstration. We rigged a network of black threads across the clearing in such a way that the rope would rise up about fifty feet, towering over the trees in the background. No boy would climb it but I thought it would make a convincing demonstration anyway.

The day of the press conference was sunny and cloudless. Perfect picture-taking weather. Before it began, the boy took his station in the crumbling old temple where he was to operate the strings.

About fifty reporters showed up—a few Britishers, no Americans, the rest Indians—solemn, businesslike men who seemed fascinated by my story. Many of them carried expensive cameras. One of the Britishers even had a tape recorder. The hotel served tea and cakes while I talked about my search for *jadoo* and answered questions. I passed the rope around for inspection, and finally we all marched out to the golf course for the big event.

Then an incredible thing happened.

The bright sky suddenly clouded over, a high wind rose, and a monsoon cloudburst crashed around us. We had to flee back to the hotel and wait for it to subside. What made it so strange was that all the time I was in Delhi the weather was perfect! This was the first and last storm during my entire stay in the city!

In a few minutes it was all over. I was afraid the wind and storm might have affected my setup so I tried to call the whole thing off. But the reporters were impatient now and I would have lost face if I hadn't gone through with it.

Fearfully, I led them back to the clearing. I was right. The threads were tangled in the bushes and a furtive glance told me my assistant had fled from his hidden spot in the leaky tomb. It was a horrible moment.

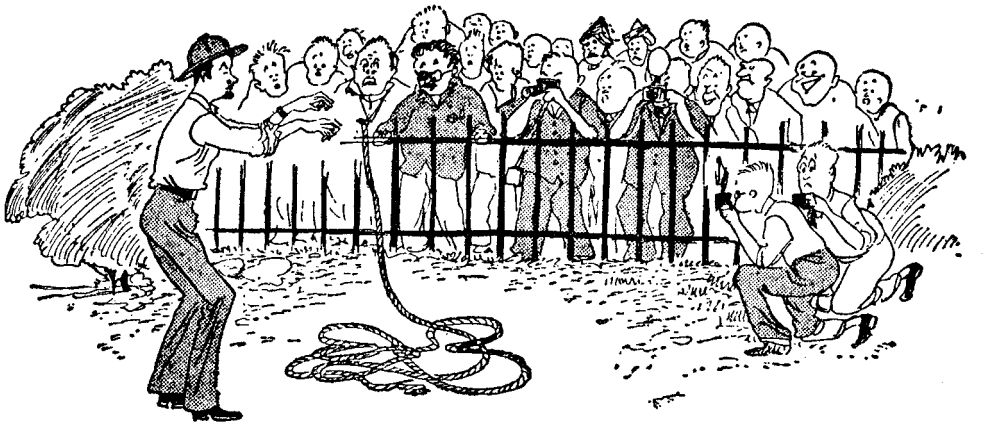
Doubting looks appeared on the reporters' faces. I was distraught and nervous, but I grimly went ahead and tried to show them something, anything. It was a blunder and I made a terrible mess of things. Exactly what happened is recounted in the newspaper clippings reproduced in this chapter.

By fumbling around with the tangled thread, I managed to get the rope about four feet off the ground while everyone snickered. After my miserable efforts, the British correspondents threw me a contemptuous sneer and drove off, but several of the Indian newsmen remained behind to talk with me. They were genuinely concerned and sorry. One of them asked gently if I objected if he wrote the affair up just as it happened. I nodded glumly and the next day his paper, *The Statesman,* carried a cartoon of me on page three, along with a fairly accurate story. They were all very kind and fair. Their friendliness and concern helped soothe the embarrassment and pain a little. If this fiasco had been enacted in New York, the papers there would have torn me to pieces.

They gave me another reason for liking India and its people.

My truant assistant showed up, shamefaced, just before I left Delhi. He'd gotten soaked to the skin during the storm and had finally fled for cover. Before he could sneak back, I was in the clearing with the reporters.

THE STATESMAN, 26 MAY, 1955.



THE ROPE TRICK A LA KEEL

THE INDIAN EXPRESS

American's Attempt To Do Rope Trick

By Our Staff Reporter

NEW DELHI, Wednesday.—Mr. John A. Keel, an American author and journalist, today gave a demonstration of the Indian rope trick on the grounds near the Ambassador Hotel.

Mr. Keel had been for long fascinated by the Indian rope trick and it was near Hyderabad that he learnt the art from a young South Indian.

Twenty-five-year-old Mr. Keel's performance could not be called flawless and it was apparent that he had not achieved considerable skill in it.

No attempt is, however, being made here to speak disparagingly of Mr. Keel's capabilities and there can be no doubt that he will in course of time, be able to perform this trick which now seems to be eluding his mastery.

THE TIMES OF INDIA

Rope-Trick Bid By American

PARTIAL SUCCESS

A tense gathering of about 50 people, including a number of pressmen, saw in New Delhi on Wednesday a 25-year-old American journalist, Mr. John Keel, try and fail to do the Indian rope trick.

In a corner of the Golf Green, a mile from India Gate, Mr. Keel, who is no magician, attempted to make a 20-foot long, half-inch thick cotton rope rear up to its full height. However, the rope stood to a height of only about four feet after it had lain curled up like a snake for several minutes.

Mr. Keel said he was not satisfied with the performance. The failure, he said, was due to the slackness of his assistant and some fault in equipment.

He added that he had engaged a Delhi magician, Babu, to perform the rope trick on Thursday.

Mr. Keel went inside, examined the place and selected a spot for the performance of the trick between a ruined tomb and some bushes. He then asked the spectators to turn round while he made manipulations with the rope. Press photographers now trained their cameras on the curled-up rope but it failed to get up. Muttering that his assistant had gone to sleep, Mr. Keel then walked into the tomb and a few minutes later the rope began to rise slowly but stopped after reaching a height of about four feet.

Mr. Keel, who has been in India for only six weeks, said he learnt the secret of the rope trick from an old man in Hyderabad without any fee.—P.T.I.

Two articles and a cartoon that appeared in Indian newspapers after Keel's unsuccessful demonstration of the rope trick.

When I went to Thomas Cook's to pick up my mail the next day, the clerk said loudly, "Yes, *Mr. Keel,* we have some letters for you, *Mr. Keel. John A. Keel,* is that right?"

All the other clerks looked up and grinned. I was a celebrity, a man who'd made a noose for himself out of a piece of Indian rope.

People stopped me on the street and in restaurants. Wasn't I John A. Keel, the American who tried to do the rope trick? Then they would stand with eager smiles, waiting for me to tell the story of the whole business.

But my Indian friends stuck by me while my few American and British acquaintances turned their backs. Indian magazines and news papers editorialized over the incident. One daily ran a big political cartoon showing John Foster Dulles, U.S. Secretary of State, squatting in a clearing surrounded by photographers while Krishna Menon, an Indian diplomat, manipulated a rope labeled "Peace in the Far East." The caption read: *"An Indian Teaches an American the Rope Trick."*

I was out of money again and no new magazine sales came in to rescue me. The hotel presented me with a whopping bill the very next day, including the cost of the tea and cakes which they'd originally agreed to "take care of." My pockets were as empty as those of the servants who had bet on me. My visa was nearly expired and it would be hard to get a renewal, especially after all this unfavorable publicity. The situation was very grim.

One person, a dirty, shifty-eyed little native named Babu, might have saved my noseless face. The day before the press conference I was riding past the beautiful old Red Fort in a taxi when I suddenly saw him performing a version of the rope trick in broad daylight on the wide, green clearing before the Jama Masjid mosque.

A Muslim festival was in progress and the place was swarming with people. Jugglers, lemonade hawkers, medicine peddlers sitting on tiger skins with human skulls and bottles of sickly colored liquids before them, all were bidding for annas with harsh, discordant voices and gongs and drums. Muslim children rode with their veiled mothers on a tiny ferris wheel turned by hand by a husky native.

And a large, open-mouthed mob watched Babu perform his magic in a grassless space.

There he and his troupe had rigged a simple platform about six feet square, with a low, patched-up canvas backdrop sticking up behind it. He passed an eight or ten feet long rope to the spectators for examination, then dropped it into a small empty basket. Picking up a gourd flute, he began to play, and as his eerie music drifted over the crowd, the rope slowly rose up from the basket like an uncertain snake. Soon it was towering above the canvas backdrop, six or seven feet in the air.

In the bright sunlight there was no possibility of wires or threads. The rope appeared to be very rigid.

When it stopped ascending, a small boy stepped onto the stage and slipped into a long red hood that covered him from head to feet. Then he went up the rope hand over hand while Babu launched into a long spiel. After the boy reached the top, Babu turned and clapped his hands three times. On the third clap the hood fell emptily to the platform. The boy reappeared a moment later from far behind the crowd.

The rope slowly recoiled into the basket and Babu offered it for another examination. The basket was still empty.

Actually this version was very crude and I saw through it immediately. Later Babu confirmed my suspicions . . . for twenty-five rupees.

The basket had a small hole in it, corresponding to a hole in the platform. Underneath there was a deep pit where an assistant was hiding with a long bamboo pole covered over with hemp. After Babu coiled the unprepared rope and dropped it into the basket, the assistant slowly thrust the pole up through the holes.

While he held it in place, the boy stepped onto the platform and put on his hood . . . which had a collapsible wire frame inside it. He climbed up the pole, and secured the hood to it with a hook near the top.

Babu then went into his misdirecting spiel, holding the attention of the audience while the boy unbuttoned the back of the hood and

scrambled over the backdrop. Then Babu clapped his hands, pulled a thread collapsing the frame, and the hood clattered emptily to the platform.

Crude though it was, it fooled the native spectators, and they went away thinking they had witnessed the genuine rope trick. Their tales of the experience probably added to the native legends about the trick.

That same afternoon I sat on Babu's bed of nails and learned another secret of India. The nails were very sharp, each about four inches long, mounted close together on a board two feet square. Babu used it for another spectacular trick. He bared himself from the waist up, stretched out on the ground, and the board was placed on his chest and stomach, nails downward. A large stone was put on top of it, then one of his assistants smashed it with a sledge hammer without hurting him.

When I tried sitting cross-legged on those nails, at Babu's invitation, I found though they were very sharp, they were so close together my weight was evenly distributed over them and they didn't puncture my trousers or me. It was like sitting on a pile of gravel. Uncomfortable but not painful.

This simple principle saved Babu from injury, and the stone absorbed all the shock of the hammer blows.

Enthusiastically, I asked Babu how much he wanted to set up his equipment near my hotel and repeat his rope trick. We agreed on fifty rupees. If I could have introduced him to the reporters the next day and showed them his version of the trick I might have been saved. But I refused to give him the money in advance and he disappeared, along with his troupe. When I went back to the Red Fort two days later, the whole festival had packed up and gone. He is probably still performing for annas somewhere in the Delhi area.

When he failed to keep his appointment with me, and when all those news stories appeared, I decided it was time to clear out of Delhi and head toward Calcutta. I'd been hearing a lot about Sorcar and his wonders, and I'd also been reading intriguing newspaper stories about fresh incidents involving the mysterious *Yeti,* the "Abominable Snowman," who walks through the Himalayas. I was

hoping to visit those mountains to interview Tenzing Norgay and the lama monasteries ,so I added the *Yeti* to the things I wanted to investigate. Calcutta was the logical jumping-off-place to Darjeeling and the Himalayan foothills.

Before I could go anywhere, I first had to try to extend my visa. In a cluttered little government office in old Delhi I presented my case and pleaded with a young Indian to grant me an extension.

"It is impossible," he grunted. "You must be knowing such visas can't be extended."

Then he glanced at the name on the calling card I'd handed him and his face lit up.

"You are the American who does the rope trick?"

Here we go again, I thought, nodding miserably.

"One moment," he said, gathering up my passport and stepping into the covered porch that ran along the edge of the building.

Suddenly there was a bellow of deep, booming laughter in another office. The young man reappeared.

"Follow me please."

He took me into a narrow, dimly lighted room where a huge man with sparkling eyes sat with his feet on the desk. He jumped up and shook my hand.

"You are the American who does the rope trick?" he asked, grinning.

He picked up my card from his desk—calling cards are much in vogue in India—read it over again, sat down with a crash, and rocked with mirth.

I had a hundred of these cards printed up for two rupees bearing the legend:

JOHN A. KEEL

Not an authority on anything.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" he cried. "You're the first American I've ever met who wasn't an 'expert' on something!"

This was a man with a sense of humor. I began to see hope for an extension.

"Tell me about the rope trick," he ordered, leaning back, his eyes twinkling.

I embarked on a long-winded, detailed description of the press conference, using plenty of gestures, grimaces, wry asides, omitting nothing. Bob Hope would have been jealous of me that morning. By the time I had finished I was sweating, and the official was practically rolling on the floor, holding his sides, tears in his eyes.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" he exclaimed when he caught hold of himself. "Let me tell you . . . I think you do this world more good than all your atom bomb makers in America."

It was a backhanded compliment but I was in no position to argue. He picked up his pen.

"We don't usually extend these . . . but yours is a special case. A very special case."

I left his office with a two-month extension stamped in my passport, feeling more lighthearted than I had in days. To my added relief, that afternoon a check from my agent arrived, solving my financial problem. It put me back in a writing mood and I turned out a couple of new articles before grabbing one of those terrible Indian trains for Banaras.

Chapter Ten

Buried Alive

My search for the legendary two-headed snake came to an end in *Banaras,* India's holiest city, a place of ancient temples and smoldering funeral *ghats,* on the banks of the sacred Ganges river. It was the hot, dull season and I was the only guest in the Hotel de Paris, the cheaper of the city's two hotels. I was sitting in my room, writing and resting from the Delhi ordeal, trying to milk a comforting breeze from the torpid fan in the ceiling, when a tourist guide called on me. I'd talked with him earlier and asked him to round up some local magicians for me.

"Well, sahib," he beamed, dropping uninvited into chair, "I have found a wonderful *jadoo-wallah* for you. For a mere hundred rupees he will show you two hours of miracles. He will take a marked five rupee note, burn it, and restore it as good as new. He will. . . ."

"Whoa . . ." I sighed. "That's not what I'm looking for. I want to see jugglers, fakirs, snake charmers, like Ripley used to write about."

Robert Ripley was famous and beloved throughout India. He must have been a kind, charming man, and a big tipper.

"Oh." The guide, a small, cherubic-faced man, looked sober for a moment and then brightened. "Have you ever seen a *do-moo-samp,* a two-headed snake?"

"That's more like it. I've heard of them. Do you know where I can find one?" I asked.

"I can lead you to the most marvelous snake charmer in all of India. He has many *do-moo-samps.* For only twenty rupees I will take you to him."

"Won't five rupees do?"

"Sahib," he looked sad. "This is the hot season. Business is very bad. I am blessed with a wife and five daughters. They eat much."

We settled on ten rupees and took a couple of pedicabs over the Panchkosi, the Pilgrims' Way, which looped among thirty-six miles of holy temples, to a particularly poor and crowded quarter of the city. There, in a broken-down little hut filled with gaping children and livestock, he introduced me to an old snake charmer who happily hauled out his baskets and flute and put his cobras through their paces. Since he knew I was most eager to see the two-headed snake, he saved it cunningly for last.

Finally he hauled out a little burlap bag, opened it slowly, carefully; reached in and removed the strangest reptile I had ever seen. It was a short black snake with odd cellulose-textured skin, heavy and wrinkled. Instead of having a tapering tail, it was blunt at both ends. No eyes were visible but both rounded tips had faint mouth-like lines. It was limp, almost lifeless.

"This snake," the charmer explained, "has two heads. It uses one for six months of the year, then goes backward and uses the other."

I examined it closely. It really seemed to have two heads—or no head at all. Here, I thought, was one legend soundly based on biological fact.

"Do you have any others?" I asked.

He produced three more, all of them eyeless, but with the same curious mouths at each end.

"I would like to buy one of these," I announced.

The charmer looked startled and held a hurried conference in some dialect with my guide.

"He says these snakes are very rare and he can not sell," my guide said.

This made me a little suspicious. Maybe it was a fake after all.

"I thought business was bad," I said. "Can't you use some extra money?"

"Sahib," the charmer groaned. "This snake will bring you bad luck."

I idly opened a cobra basket and absently wiggled my finger in the snake's face. It rose up and danced back and forth. The guide looked flabbergasted and the charmer looked very uncomfortable. Then I noticed an egg in the bottom of the basket, cobras are fond of sucking eggs, and it gave me an idea. I pulled out my handkerchief, pretended to blow my nose, and then turned it into an egg.

"Sahib, you are a *jadoo-wallah!*" The charmer was astonished.

"That's why I want a *do-moo-samp,*" I said casually. "I'll give you five rupees."

He held another conference with my guide, probably to decide on a proper commission, and I got my two-headed snake for ten rupees.

Back at the hotel I stretched it out, killed it, and dissected it. A very close examination with my pocket magnifying glass revealed, finally, two tiny yellow elliptical eyes just above the mouth at one end. The other end actually had no mouth, eyes or brain. It was really just a blunt tail. The snake charmer had apparently cut a shallow slit in it which, when healed over, left a faint mouth-shaped scar. India's celebrated two-headed snake, like so many of its other wonders, had a simple, natural, disappointing explanation.

In Egypt I had quickly learned that paid guides are generally more of a nuisance than a help. They are usually filled with misinformation, and have no misgivings about making up tales to fill in the gaps in their knowledge. So I've found it more profitable to wander by myself through the old cities, carefully avoiding the usual tourist traps. This paid off in Banaras particularly.

There, along the banks of the muddy Ganges, great crowds of pilgrims, beggars, and lepers gather to wash off their sins (and

diseases) in the holy water while shouting mobs of yogis, fakirs, snake charmers and *jadoo* artists vie for *baksheesh.* A guide would have hustled me past a lot of these interesting people to deliver me into the hands of fakirs who would have split my *baksheesh* with him. So I roamed the city alone and there, by the Ganges, I discovered the secret of walking on water and I learned, at last, the secret of the human pincushions.

The young man who revealed the latter to me was squatting in front of an old temple near a foul-smelling funeral pyre, thrusting long steel needles through his cheeks, with other pins and needles poking into his shoulders, chest and legs, while his eyes rolled vacantly toward the sky. Most incredible of all, he had a tiny, sharp, three-pronged trident thrust up through his tongue! There was no blood visible around any of his numerous wounds and he didn't seem to be in any pain. The pilgrims swept past him with hardly more than a glance.

The usual explanation offered to tourists is that these human pincushions are holy men who are deliberately inflicting pain on themselves to pay for their sins. Some of them are supposed to be inspired by the belief that if they suffer in this fashion for a certain number of years they will achieve the state known as "Godhead," when they will reach direct kinship with their gods and become living gods themselves.

This young fakir seemed to be in a trancelike state and he didn't appear to notice me until I dropped a one rupee coin into his bowl with a flourish. Then his eyes flickered. It was probably the most money he'd seen since the last festival season. I sat down beside him and tried to talk to him. At first he ignored me, but when I mentioned I would pay him for an interview, he snapped to life. Glancing around to make sure he had an audience—a few ragged pilgrims had stopped to stare, but I think they were looking at me, not him—he reached up and dramatically pulled the pins from his cheeks. Then he turned his back and removed the trident from his tongue.

I took him aside and tried to bribe the secret out of him, for by turning his back he had convinced me there *was* a trick to it. But he insisted he'd learned his art deep in the jungles from a great holy

man, and that he accomplished it by numbing his body with secret holy words.

"If you can teach me the words so I can do it myself, you can have this," I said, pulling out a crisp ten rupee note.

He hesitated for a moment, then led me into the temple where we could be alone. It was dark and cool there, with an atmosphere created by cheap incense and a couple of thin candles flickering in front of a multiarmed statue. A Buddhist priest stepped out of the shadows, but the fakir gave him a nod and he rustled out into the sun.

When we were alone he gave me a lot of mystical Mumbo Jumbo, tongue-twisting words to repeat to myself, "secret" prayers to recite before and after the trick, etc., but I didn't believe any of it. It didn't make sense. Sheikh Shemes back in Egypt couldn't possibly have known these Hindu catch phrases. All this business about holy words was just a cover up. As I listened skeptically to his instructions, the *real* secret was beginning to dawn on me. It was, as usual, so simple I'd never thought of it before.

The fakir said that, after preparing myself with the holy words, I should feel around the inside of my cheek with my tongue until I found a spot between the muscles. The point of the needle is then placed in the mouth against that point and a sharp blow on the opposite end will drive the steel through the cheek.

I examined his needles carefully. They were just ordinary hatpins with artificial pearls on the blunt end. They'd seen a lot of use and were dark and slightly bent. Then I asked to see the trident. He handed it over reluctantly. It was a long needle about six inches long. The trident head with the three sharp points was removable. The fakir first drove the needle through his tongue, then he slipped the head over it. The result was a gruesome and startling effect.

"*Das rupees,*" he said, holding his hand out impatiently.

"Just a moment," I frowned. "We agreed you wouldn't get the money until I could do the trick myself."

"As you like," he shrugged, passing me all of his needles.

Nervously, wondering if I wasn't crazy to attempt it, I held two of them over a candle, hoping to sterilize them a little. Then we were

ready to act out what might be described as a dramatic farce. He rattled off his holy words while I carefully parroted them, strongly aware of the incense and the odd rays of dusty sunlight dripping in the door of the temple. I didn't think the holy words at all. I thought, instead, of what I should do if my theory were wrong. I wondered how far it was to the nearest doctor's office, while I moved my tongue against my cheek and found what seemed to a soft spot between two lumps of muscle. Then I carefully placed the point of one of the hatpins in my mouth. It pricked and I winced.

"The holy words," he said softly, "think of the holy words."

I braced myself and slammed the palm of my hand against the round end of the pin. There was a flash of pain as it went into my cheek and another pain as it came out the other side. *Then there was no pain at all. I had an inch of steel sticking through the side of my face and I didn't feel it at all!* The insertion had been no more painful than a bad shave or a doctor's hypodermic.

"See," the fakir grinned triumphantly, "the holy words protect you."

When I drew the pin out again the wound didn't bleed and the puncture was hardly discernible. The next morning it was gone entirely.

The "holy" words were nonsense, of course. Later, when I recited them for an Indian friend, he broke into laughter.

"Those are Bengali swear words!" he said.

The real secret of the human pincushions which I learned that day, and later experimented with in many ways, boils down to this:

There are many parts of the human body which can be pierced with thin, sharp needles without any pain. *Anyone* can stick pins painlessly into their thighs, through their eyelids, or through their cheeks just as the fakirs of India and Sheikh Shemes of Egypt do.

There is a brief moment of pain when the needles first break the skin, but once inside they can't be felt at all. You must be careful, though, to insert them only into flesh, not into veins or muscles. Needles can also be shoved completely through the throat—if you know the right places. And through the tongue.

The pins should be sterilized carefully beforehand and should be

driven in quickly. And removed quickly. This is not recommended as a party trick for the risk of infection is great and if you slip you might cause serious damage.

The secret of walking on water is just as simple . . . and just as disappointing. I saw an elderly fakir demonstrate it on a narrow tributary in the northern part of Banaras while his followers gaped with respect and admiration. He stood first on the bank on one side and delivered a long speech about his powers and his claims to godhood. Then he threw off his bright purple robe and, dressed only in a loincloth, stepped to the water's edge. I started to turn away, thinking he was only going for a dip in the holy waters, when I heard the crowd gasp.

The old man had stepped into the water, which was perhaps six or eight feet deep, but he didn't sink! Instead he walked blithely across the surface in his bare feet, moving slowly, with great majesty. The moment he reached the other side the crowd gave an excited whoop and plunged in after him, swimming across while he went into another long speech.

I went over the bank carefully searching for some clue as to how he did it but I couldn't find any sign of trickery. Several hours later I managed to get him aside long enough to wave some money under his nose and ask for the secret, but he haughtily replied that it was a "power" and he wasn't even going to discuss it with the likes of me. But I told him where I was staying in case he might change his mind later.

He did. The very next afternoon he appeared at the hotel, followed by a mob of ragged natives, and joined me alone in my room over a cup of tea. He needed money for his "cause" (they all have causes), he said. I told him I was willing to contribute if he would tell me more about his powers. After an hour of wandering preliminaries and mystical discussion, during which I taught him several bits of sleight of hand which I thought he might find useful, he finally passed along his secret. It was hardly worth the ten rupees it cost me.

He had just stretched a thick rope across the stream, a few inches under the surface of the muddy water. It was all a tightrope act! As

soon as he was across, a hidden assistant lowered the rope to the river bottom.

Legends are born from such tricks. The legend that intrigued me the most in Banaras was the celebrated yogi feat of being buried alive. All across India I had heard stories of men who had performed it, and I'd dug into many musty libraries to learn its history. There were supposed to be several holy men in Banaras who could do it, so naturally I tried to ferret them out. Again I succeeded, and again I was a little disappointed.

In the beginning of this book I detailed the strange cases of the *sadhu* of Amritsar, who claimed to have been buried for a hundred years, and the yogi Haridas, who baffled doctors and maharajahs in the nineteenth century. Even though India is filled with tales about men who presumably equaled Haridas' performances, there is no solid record of any of them. Fakirs who tried the stunt afterwards were just imitators and they devised all kinds of tricks to do it. If Haridas and the *sadhu* used a trick, their secret died with them.

More sincere holy men attempted the feat without trickery, and when they were dug up they were really dead; their bodies half consumed by insects and worms. These fatalities reached such a peak that in 1955 the Delhi government officially outlawed living burials.

While in India I learned three basic ways to perform this feat; ways which are used by holy men who want to impress their followers.

The first, and simplest, employs a coffin with a false bottom. The fakir climbs into it in a temple, surrounded by members of his family and trusted followers who are in on the secret. The lid is nailed down amidst great ceremony and then the coffin is hauled outside to the burial grounds. During this transference his assistants crowd around it so that it is practically hidden from view and the fakir has ample opportunity to escape through the false bottom, dressed in a robe and turban identical to those worn by his aides. He mingles briefly with them until he can slip away unnoticed. The coffin is buried in a prominent place and the fakir goes into hiding for as long as a year.

When it's dug up again, the process is reversed. While it is being carried back to the temple to be opened, the fakir slips back into it.

Back in the twenties a self-styled Egyptian Hajji named Rahman Bey made a pile of money touring the world's vaudeville circuits with a living burial routine and he probably made use of the second basic method.

Bey was a tall, imposing man who walked and talked with Oriental majesty and chain-smoked little pink cigarettes. He would lie in a coffin, go into a "self-hypnotic trance," stop his pulse, and he buried for from a few minutes to a few days, depending on where he was and how closely his performance was controlled.

After scoring a sensation in the Middle East, he went on to Europe and America where the press received him with some skepticism, suggesting he fed air into his coffin in some trick way and that his "self-hypnosis" was a lot of nonsense.

Stinging from their sneers, he decided to prove his powers once and for all by having his coffin lowered into the Hudson river where no air could possibly reach him. He stayed under for a scant nineteen minutes, even though there is enough air in a normal coffin to last from fifteen to twenty-five minutes.

Harry Houdini, the American magician, a master at the art of breath control thanks to his many spectacular underwater escapes, saw a chance to expose the fakir and grab some headlines for himself.

He had a watertight metal casket constructed at a cost of $2,000, and was lowered in it to the bottom of the swimming pool of the Hotel Shelton in New York. By carefully rationing his breath, he managed to stay under for a record one hour and thirty minutes before signaling to be brought up. He was tired and groggy after the demonstration but revived himself by exercising violently while incredulous doctors and reporters looked on.*

* Houdini died of acute appendicitis a few months later while on tour. His body was shipped back to New York in the metal coffin. It was the only object among his gear from which he had never tried to escape.

The disgraced Arab fakir quietly folded his coffin and stole back to the Middle East, where he earned a good living for years afterwards with a fortunetelling routine. His customers would write out whatever questions they wanted answered, fold the paper and hold it tightly in their own hands (Bey never touched it), while he concentrated. After a few minutes he would ask them to unfold it and they would find the answers written on it. No one has ever been able to figure out how he did that one!

For his longer burials, Rahman Bey probably used method number two, which utilizes a tunnel, dug from the grave to some distant point. A thin wall of dirt is left between the grave and the passage. The coffin has a sliding panel through which the fakir can easily force his way.

Haridas may have used this tunnel method, too. It would have explained how he survived in spite of the wall and the guards around his grave in Lahore. But the medical record raises some doubt about this.

One thing is certain, there is no fakir left in India who would be willing to cut his tongue as Haridas did, or who could swallow thirty yards of linen to clean out his stomach. Such feats already belong to history.

The few fakirs who still try this now illegal burial stunt no longer use coffins. They just lay on rough boards and let the dirt be shoveled down on top of them. Their "trances" are phony. Anyone can be buried alive for a short period in this manner. But it's not much fun to lie in a filled-in grave, waiting for the worms to get you!

I know, because I tried it.

While following the Pilgrims' Way around Banaras, I found a misty-eyed ascetic who initiated me into the whole ghoulish business. He was sitting cross-legged in front of the Golden Temple of Vishwanath, in Panchganges. A short, scrawny, long-haired, scraggly bearded man with a proud, disdainful air, he purported to be a yogi and proved his control of his body by stopping his pulse at will.

A handful of protective, worshipful disciples squatted at his feet, absorbing his every word, watching me jealously. I knew he was a

phony the instant his eyes glinted when he saw my thin roll of rupee notes. True ascetics aren't interested in earthly things like money.

Yes, he said eagerly, he had been buried alive on several occasions, and would do it again if I would contribute to his "cause."

Would he teach *me* how to survive a burial?

No. It was a holy gift, rewarded after years of piety and suffering.

Suggestively I thumbed through my money. Maybe there was some short cut?

His eyes glued to the bills, he slowly shook his head. No, it was too dangerous.

The crisp bills rippled.

Well . . . perhaps he could teach me the rudiments, he finally said thoughtfully.

He led me away from his followers into the temple to a small alcove where he where he confided his "secrets" in spurts of broken English and illiterate Hindi.

It was largely the same routine the human pincushion had given me. Say special holy words; make the mind as blank as possible; hold your breath until you're purple in the face. Breath control was an important feature. Drink no water for several hours before the burial . . . a practical piece of advice. Finally, stop your pulse until your arm goes numb, then allow the circulation to resume slowly.

How was this done? Through special magic words and concentration, of course. But it helps if you put a small stone up under your armpit. By pressing down on it, the flow of blood to the wrist is cut off and the pulse stops. (You can try this with a paperweight, a cigarette lighter, or any other small hard object lying around.)

Also, you should put your hands over your ears so bugs can't crawl in, and you should breathe, when necessary, through the nose only.

But how could you breathe under all that dirt?

He smiled. For another ten rupees he would show me. He would have two graves dug and we could undergo the experiment together. It sounded like an experiment worth undertaking . . . even if it was against the law. How many professional cliff-hangers have ever really been buried alive?

Thus it was that as soon as it grew dark, Govindaswamy (that was his name) and I climbed a hill overlooking the city where two shallow graves were waiting for us. (I paid another ten rupees to the gravediggers.) I was accompanied by a couple of curious English tourists and a young Indian named Ranjit Singh. The fakir had four or five of his hollow-cheeked, sullen-eyed followers with him.

That night became a sweat-soaked nightmare. After a last look at the glow of the *ghats* burning in the distance, I spread myself on a plank in one of the graves and Govindaswamy lay down in the other one.

"When you are ready . . ." Ranjit handed me the end of a piece of string, "pull this and we will dig you up."

Another plank was lowered over me and I was encompassed in hot darkness. A couple of wooden wedges at either end of the grave kept the plank from crushing me.

I sucked in a lungful of dusty air as dirt rattled down onto the upper plank. Within a minute I was completely alone in a black, silent world measuring six feet long and less than two feet high. The temperature shot up and I was sorry I hadn't doffed some of my clothes. Govindaswamy was wearing only a loincloth.

The grave was about three and a half feet deep, the customary depth for such burials. And the soil was loose and porous. *The fakirs always pick a spot where they're sure some air will be able to seep through.* That is the real secret.

Even so, when I expelled my first breath I got a noseful of dirt and started choking. For a second I almost panicked, but I fought it down and sweated it out.

Time stood still down there. The silence was overpowering. All kinds of stark, lurid images passed through my mind. Suppose those sullen followers of the fakir overpowered my friends and left me there? Suppose a snake or a scorpion should decide to bed down with me? Suppose I should suffocate before they could dig me out again?

But I didn't have too much difficulty breathing. The air was hot and dirty but it was breathable when I rationed my breaths. I soon adjusted to the frightening, lonely, cramped sensation of being buried alive, but several times my nerves tingled as if things were

creeping over me. I thought about all those fakirs who had been eaten by worms, and was very uncomfortable. I had to scratch but couldn't move in any direction. The upper plank was wedged tightly against me.

Hours seemed to pass. The air became so hot and stale I could no longer seem to breathe, though I kept assuring myself that plenty of air was leaking down from above. Finally I had enough and I pulled the string. Or I tried to pull it. It was stuck fast in the dirt and wouldn't move! I yanked on it. Still it wouldn't budge.

Then I really started to worry. For what seemed like several minutes I dragged helplessly on that string, getting hotter and more breathless all the time, and beginning to feel a little nauseated.

Just as I was about to use up my last breath with a shout, there was the sound of a shovel scraping into the dirt overhead. A moment later a wave of cool air washed over me. I had been buried alive for thirty minutes.

Govindaswamy stayed down for another thirty minutes. He couldn't let me show him up. His followers displayed new respect for me. They were convinced their master had taught me the "power."

After Banaras, I came across only one other fakir who used the living burial trick. He was a carnival performer in Cooch Behar and employed the same shallow grave-plank method. This is the easiest and cheapest, the one generally seen at festivals and in the tiny traveling shows put on by itinerant jugglers. There's no one of Haridas' stature left in modern India. And the new law is quickly shoveling a permanent grave for the living burial artists.

I was lucky to have found Govindaswamy, and even luckier in having been able to test the trick myself.

Banaras also yielded a number of nail-sitters and ancient holy men who burdened themselves with chains or stood holding one arm over their head until it was permanently fixed there, withered and useless, while they waited for "Godhead." In the meantime they lived by begging.

There were a few clever snake charmers in their midst and one of them, a nondescript old man begging along the Ganges, per-

formed an inexplicable feat that puzzled me for a long time.

He led me into the nearby hills to show me how he captured and "shaved" cobras. After several futile hours he spotted a hole, squatted to one side of it and began to play his gourd flute. I watched closely, a little impatient, knowing a deaf cobra couldn't be expected to answer his call.

To my surprise, after about ten minutes, a snake did poke its head out slowly, moving warily into the open, then inflating its hood and rearing to strike!

The triumphant charmer tossed his flute aside and grabbed up his short, heavy stick. He slapped the cobra on the side of the head, pinning it to the ground. It was fully fanged, its yellow poison staining the ground.

Taking a small iron rod, the charmer forced open the reptile's mouth, pressing outwards against the fangs, tearing them out. The cobra struggled furiously, blood and venom pouring from its mouth. The charmer grabbed up the cobra and put it into his bag.

Convinced there was some trick, I tried unsuccessfully to bribe him. He swore the music did the work and since I'd seen it with my own eyes, I had to accept that unlikely explanation.

When I discussed the incident later with a crowd of magicians in Calcutta, one of them came up with a fairly plausible idea of how it could have been done.

The snake, he said, had been planted there beforehand, possibly weeks earlier. The charmer visited the hole daily, drummed his feet on the ground, left a bowl of milk near it, and went away. After a few days of this the snake's reflexes became conditioned to the fact that the sound of feet drumming overhead meant a meal was being placed there for it. When the sounds stopped, it would come out to eat.

When the charmer led me to the hole, he drummed with his toes, apparently in time with the music he was playing. Then he stopped drumming and the snake popped out!

It's the only possible explanation. The charmer did sit to one side of the hole where the snake wasn't apt to see him at first. He did

caution me not to move around while he was playing. Certainly the snake couldn't have been charmed or affected by the music.

That was my last real contact with snake charmers in India. When I left Banaras, I left one phase of the world of *jadoo* behind. With fewer rupees in my pockets and more scribbled notations in my notebooks, I rode across the hot plains to Calcutta in a tiny boxcar-like second-class compartment cramped with forty natives, and their luggage, in space meant for only sixteen passengers. It was another long, hot, rugged trip.

Banaras was the end of one journey. The next one, the best one, began in the riotous, overcrowded, colorful city of Calcutta.

Chapter Eleven

From Calcutta to Shangri-La

Calcutta is a raw, naked cancer of a city, poisoning the muddy vein of the Hooghly river with its sewage. Chinese influences begin to appear there and lend a special air to it. There is a large Chinese quarter and innumerable Chinese restaurants, a few of which have "American Chop Suey" on their menus. Old-fashioned rickshaws, instead of the swifter pedicabs, are still in wide use, in spite of Nehru's constant admonishments that pulling rickshaws is an undignified job and men shouldn't do the work of horses. Four million people are compressed into this city, encouraging filth, poverty and famine. Thousands of them are homeless and sleep every night on the sidewalks and in the black alleys while the best shelter is taken over by the sacred cows.

Cholera was on the rampage the week I arrived, claiming 150 new victims daily. The newspapers, many of which are Communist controlled, hid a box score of the disease among their back pages. Hardly anyone was concerned with the epidemic. It was just one of those things, springing from the decayed, neglected water and sewage system, striking hard in the crowded slum districts. When I tried

to take a shower in my hotel after the long train ride from Banaras, only thick muddy slime came out of the pipes. Drinking water had to be filtered and boiled.

There are only a few hotels in this huge city. I checked into the cheapest, the Continental on the main street, the Chowringhee. My room was a big, barren, high-ceilinged affair with a long-bladed electric fan to stir the tepid air. The door faced a long narrow balcony overlooking the narrow streets leading to the Calcutta bazaar.

The monsoon season was just beginning, and the days were cloudy, wet, and very humid. The nights were unbearably hot. I slept with the door open and only a curtain drawn over it. There was a real danger that one of the sinister characters in the streets below might scale the balcony and sneak into the room, so I always kept my little gas pistol beside me.

One evening a porter knocked on my doorsill, accompanied by a short, smiling Indian in a crisp white *dhoti.*

"You are Mr. Keel?" he asked. "I am P. C. Sorcar."

I'd called his home a few times but he'd been off to Bombay, and had just returned.

Sorcar was a polite, gracious, unimpressive little man, considered by many to be India's greatest magician. He has twice won the coveted *Sphinx* award, the "Nobel Prize of Magic" issued yearly by the International Brotherhood of Magicians. At first, as we talked in my room, he chose his words carefully. He'd toured the world with his big stage show, *Mysteries of India,* one of the most elaborate productions of its kind, and he was accustomed to dealing with the press. For the first few minutes our conversation smacked of a press conference. He related little anecdotes about himself, diplomatically hedged over my more pointed questions, boasted of being the "seventh son of a seventh son in a family of magicians," and treated me generally as a reporter. He didn't lower the barriers until I succeeded in persuading him that I was a student of magic.

Then he took me to his home, a modern house on a crooked little back street, and we had a long discussion about Oriental magic. He is probably the world's number one authority. His home was divided

into two sections. One was his family's living quarters; the other was his office, workshop, and storage rooms for all his bulky stage apparatus. He proudly showed me his huge library of magic books. He had many of the books I'd read as a boy, and when I mentioned certain tricks I'd once read about, but couldn't remember the sources, he was able to instantly pick out the right book and turn to the right page. It was an amazing feat of memory.

Sitting in his office, surrounded by theatrical posters, files, and heaps of magical equipment, we nibbled on tongue-scorching Bengali "sweets" while I probed into his books and his mind. Like all magicians, he was a cynical and skeptical man.

His show is one of the three largest in the world, employing dozens of assistants. But nearly all of his illusions are borrowed from the West. He makes an automobile disappear from the stage. He saws a girl in half with a buzz saw. And he does the usual assortment of handkerchief, card, and flower tricks. Even the designs of some of his posters and souvenir programs are copied from western magicians.

The only truly Indian tricks in his show are the grisly feat of snipping off an assistant's tongue with a pair of surgical scissors . . . and the X-ray eyes.

Far from being the seventh son of a seventh son magician (a claim first made by the European wizard, Kalanag), Sorcar began as a student of mathematics in the University of Calcutta, where he borrowed a page from Houdini by escaping from handcuffs fastened to the railroad tracks in front of an onrushing train. Early in his career he won public notice by performing a version of the rope trick (with a bone-filled rope), but today he flatly declares:

"The rope trick is impossible."

When I detailed the various methods I'd come across, he only snickered.

"Those are rope tricks. But not *the* rope trick!"

He tends to look down upon the basket feats and other tricks of the native *jadoo-wallahs,* preferring to talk about his stage illusions. He was guiltily reticent about the X-ray eyes business. It was one of

his favorite tricks and he didn't want to part with the secret. But he did furnish a clue.

"I'll admit I can see through all the blindfolds," he said. "But most of my vision is directed downwards and limited to about twenty feet."

"Downwards? Even with the hood over your head?" I asked.

He smiled enigmatically and changed the subject.

Sorcar is the President of the *All India Magicians' Club* which meets monthly at his home. Made up mostly of enthusiastic boys, the club hands out literature like this: "Clubs and Associations of Magicians there are, of course, throughout India but we may be permitted to say that this club of ours is unique of its kind in as much as we have at the helm not only a great magician but the greatest of all magicians in the world Mr. SORCAR as our President."

I attended a meeting of the club, with Sorcar presiding, naturally. Everyone sat cross-legged on the floor while the various members demonstrated new tricks they'd just received from England and America; fundamental card tricks, coin tricks and handkerchief effects of the kind you can buy in any American joke and novelty shop.

Sorcar introduced me with a flourish.

"We have with us tonight the American who is known all over the world for his investigation of the rope trick. When he first met me, I asked him how he happened to know of me. . . . I forget exactly what his answer was."

The program was then turned over to me. Sorcar had thus, with a minimum of subtlety, forced me to begin my remarks with:

"Wherever I've traveled in India, looking into Indian magic, I was told that the greatest magician in India was Mr. P. C. Sorcar, so naturally I looked him up when I arrived in Calcutta. . . ."

Everyone applauded and cheered. I made my speech short because I was a little annoyed with the "world's greatest."

However, Sorcar's claims are substantially backed by his skill. He frowns on "little tricks" with cards, etc., but he's very skilled in sleight of hand. Coins and cards disappear and reappear magically when he touches them. His conversation is sprinkled with fascinat-

ing stories of Indian magic, and he has done a great deal to help magic survive in India in this enlightened age. A great magician he is; a *jadoo-wallah* he is not.

Calcutta's real *jadoo-wallahs* perform along the banks of the Hooghly, entertaining passers-by for the usual *baksheesh*. It was while wandering leisurely through the crowds there one hot morning that I finally found the elusive mango tree trick. Once it was part of every *jadoo-wallah's* routine, but in the late nineteenth century it spread to Europe where every western magician was soon doing it on the stage. The secret became well known and the *jadoo-wallahs* finally abandoned it, along with others, in favor of modern card tricks.

Though I knew how it was done, a fakir by the Hooghly performed it so smoothly he almost fooled me. He took a mango seed, about the size of a walnut, and worked it into the dirt. Then he built a tripod of sticks over it and covered it with a dirty cloth. A few minutes later, after doing some other tricks, he lifted the cloth and a green sprout was visibly peeping up through the soil. Within another few minutes it had grown to a tiny sprig. Finally, when he took the cloth away for one last time, it was a small bush about two feet high with three or four orangelike mangoes hanging from it!

This trick is all a matter of fast, clever manipulation. The seed is hollow and contains a rubbery sprout rolled up inside it. The other stages of "growth" are separate plants hidden in the magician's robes. In the process of covering and uncovering the "growing" tree, he deftly switches the plants. It's a hard trick to do well, and that's probably one of the reasons the *jadoo-wallahs* are giving it up. They find it easier to do crude western tricks. (Dozens of *jadoo* men, from Bombay to Calcutta, proudly showed me the old western chestnut of borrowing a bill, sealing it in an envelope, and apparently burning it. They produce it later, unscorched, hoping you'll give it to them as a tip.)

That same morning I stumbled onto a nearly naked *sadhu* in the center of a small crowd, doing the X-ray eyes trick!

He held up a long strip of dirty orange cloth and had some spectators wind it around his head several times, blindfolding his eyes.

Then he produced a black bag and passed it around. After a couple of people tried it on and agreed they couldn't see through it, he tied it over his own head.

Then he copied scratches in the dirt, identified objects held up, and did everything Chandu or Sorcar could do. This was the X-ray eyes in its most primitive form, performed by a wandering monk who claimed it as a religious gift.

After he'd finished and was grimly counting the annas in his bowl, I grabbed him and took him far aside. How much did he want for the secret? It was a holy blessing, he said. I pulled out a roll of rupees. He came down to earth fast.

He had learned it from the gods in a vision, he claimed, and it was worth at least fifty rupees. I told him visions were worth only five rupees where I came from. He decided not to degrade himself by haggling over money. He took the five and in a few rambling sentences of pidgeon English he brought my long search to an end.

The hood, he showed me, had a double lining. The inner lining was opaque. But the outer part was of a material like velvet *which could be seen through* when held close to the eyes. The two linings were not sewn together all the way around the bottom. After the spectators had tried it on to make sure it wasn't transparent, and after the blindfold was in place, the *sadhu* slipped the bag over his head *making sure he was between the inner and outer linings so his eyes faced only the transparent outer cloth.*

But the big question was: how could he see through the blindfold? How could all those other magicians see through sheet metal, bread dough, and lead foil?

The answer was: they couldn't . . . and they didn't!

The lead foil or spectacles-shaped piece of metal was placed over the bridge of the nose, on top of the cotton pads or bread dough. It was physically impossible for them to see through the lead or steel.

Once the black hood was in place over their heads, they raised their hands to their temples, apparently to adjust the hood slightly. But *actually they were boldly pushing upwards (or downwards) on the bandages under the black velvet; boldly pushing the metal or lead up to their foreheads, away from their eyes.* Then they could

see because nothing was obstructing their vision except a few layers of thin gauze (you can see through up to five layers of surgical gauze), and one thickness of loosely woven black cloth.

The rest is showmanship.

In the case of bread dough, it doesn't stick to the face but to the bandages when they're shoved upwards.

When the demonstration is finished, the magician removes the hood himself, and in doing so he quickly pushes the bandages, bread dough, etc., back into place over his eyes.

By using an excess amount of bandages, by swathing the whole head with gauze, some magicians dispense with the hood altogether. In adjusting the bandages, the magician grunts: "Ouch! Be careful, don't make it too tight!" At the same time, putting his hands on the bandages and giving them a quick jerk, he pulls the obstructions away from his eyes. If there are enough bandages over his face, he escapes detection.

Back in my hotel room I experimented with gauze and cotton and tried to figure out Vindar's sand method. This was easier to solve than I'd expected. I knew at the time I'd watched Vindar perform in Hyderabad that his blindfold was not really opaque. Now I realized that when I filled his deep eye sockets with sand he was bent over backwards, supposedly so the sand wouldn't spill out.

After I'd tied the blindfold around his head he stood erect. The sand must have sifted away from his eyes into the hollow formed between the cloth and his cheeks. And when he bent forward over his son to spear the apples, all the sand fell away from his eyes and he could safely open them.

By standing erect again and shaking his head slightly, the sand fell back against his re-closed eyes. When the blindfold was removed it looked as if the sand was undisturbed.

That was the secret of the X-ray eyes!

The little *sadhu* on the banks of the Hooghly didn't know it, but for a few paltry annas daily he was performing a feat which had grossed thousands of dollars for more enterprising men, made the reputation of several Indian magicians, fooled doctors and hard-

boiled newspapermen, and puzzled cautious, skeptical Robert Ripley. It was one of India's genuine "mysteries."

Encouraged by my success with the rope trick and the X-ray eyes, I was anxious now to investigate firsthand the legendary powers of the lamas in the north, hoping to find equally simple explanations for their famous mysteries.

Approval for my Himalayan trek came through at last. The Maharajah of Sikkim had "heard" of me and granted permission for me to stay at his official guest house in Gangtok. All I had to do was find a way of getting there.

Gangtok is less than 300 miles from Lhasa, about as far out of this world as you can go these days. Chinese communists invaded Tibet in 1950 and the worried Indian government has lowered a curtain of red tape over their mountain border regions. Maps of the area have been banned. They are military secrets. Information about Sikkim is hard to find. All I knew was that it was at the foot of Mount Kanchanjanga, third highest peak in the world, and within hiking distance of Everest. I had a cheap pocket compass to show me which way North was, plus a little over two hundred rupees for expenses. On this trip I was going to travel into a region many men dream of but few ever visit: the land of the lamas, of the "Abominable Snowman," of the world's last remaining mysteries.

Storing my belongings in the hotel, I took the northbound train, carrying only my typewriter and a knapsack filled with canned beans and pills for my stomach.

The overcrowded train limped across the dusty Bengal plains to a point on the Ganges river where everyone had to transfer to a big, dirty ferryboat. After six hours of unexplained reverses and stops we navigated the few hundred yards of water to the other side where another invalid train scooped us up and hauled us slowly through the hot Indian night.

In the morning the brown earth turned green and then, jutting five and a half miles into the sky, the peaks of the Himalayas appeared, as breathtaking a sight as the minarets of Baghdad seen

from far out on the desert. Mount Kanchanjanga stood out in an orange glow, reflecting the morning sun. Soon the rolling folds of the foothills blistered up and the peaks vanished in a swirl of mist. But that first view filled me with excitement and awe and anticipation.

Finally we pulled into the little town of Siliguri and I transferred to the miniature mountain railway that squirms up the almost perpendicular mountainside to Darjeeling. Not only is this toy train an engineering miracle, it's also the most comfortable train in India. It has only a dozen or so seats to a car, each one a big, upholstered easy chair facing mammoth windows.

The views were magnificent, even though we were climbing up out of the sunny plains into a monsoon-ridden sky. A magical change was rapidly taking place over everything. The dirty little towns of the plains vanished and clean mountain villages of Chinese and Tibetan design appeared. Even the people changed. The faces in the stations became Mongoloid, with slanted Chinese eyes set over short, stocky bodies dressed in furs and colorful Tibetan clothes. Lamas in orange robes and shaven heads waved at the train.

Massive waterfalls spilled over the mountains, dropping thousands of feet into the lush green valleys with low roars. Majestic white and red monasteries crouched above the jungles on the summits of the high hills, isolated and withdrawn.

For six hours we zigzagged up through the jungles. There were few people in my car, and during the whole trip from Calcutta I didn't meet or speak to anyone except the waiters in the little station restaurants where I grabbed cups of tea, sandwiches, and omelets . . . the only food offered.

Near the end of the trip we ran into a thick bank of fog. It stayed with us for an hour before suddenly parting to reveal a beautiful town of red-tiled roofs and strange temples, built somehow around the upper edge of a 6,000 feet high mountain, surrounded by even higher peaks.

A female coolie, a tiny woman in a long Tibetan robe, pounced on me and grabbed my knapsack the moment the train stopped. I felt

a little odd letting her struggle with my heavy things but male coolies are unheard of there. Men consider it an undignified job.

She led me up sharply inclining streets, too narrow and steep for taxis, to the hotel where I'd made a reservation, the Windamere. It was near the summit of the mountain, with a spectacular view. On the very top of the hill was a Buddhist temple and near it was the hotel's little "Honeymoon Cottage." There, for only forty rupees a day ($10), lucky lovers can awake in the morning to the sight of Everest and Kanchanjanga and all of Darjeeling spread out below their picture windows. That forty rupees includes all meals for two people. They aren't bad meals, either. I promised myself that if I ever married, I would find some way to take my wife to this Shangri-la in the sky.

It was July, but it was snowing in Darjeeling. I sat alone before a roaring fire in the hotel's cozy library, drinking tea after my long journey, watching the cold, wet mist splash around the monasteries on the neighboring peaks. I hadn't expected such a drastic difference in the weather. The only warm clothes I had were an old army sweater, my thin nylon raincoat, and a suit I'd had made back in Calcutta. It was a hand-tailored job in the narrow-shouldered, tight-waisted Indian style and cost me only $8.00 *including* the material. I was very pleased with it, although it looked exactly like an $8.00 suit.

Before the frontiers of the more remote kingdom of Nepal were opened to foreigners, Darjeeling was used as the jumping-off-point of major mountaineering expeditions. It was also a popular resort for vacationing British civil servants. Today its chief industry is tea growing, and the few tourists who still straggle up from the plains below come not to see the splendor of the Himalayas but to visit the home of the humble man who was one of the first two mountaineers ever to reach the summit of mighty Everest.

Chapter Twelve

The Man on Everest

Tenzing Norgay is a Sherpa, born in a tiny mountain village on the frigid Khumbu glacier at the foot of Everest. That mountain has dominated his life, made him famous, given him a touch of greatness, and a touch of tragedy, too.

Today he leads a goldfish-bowl kind of life in a big house in Darjeeling. I interviewed him many times there and felt submerged in his magic personality. He gave me more than a story, for he is more than an ordinary Sherpa *sirdar* guide. He is a great human being.

Before I met him a local official told me: "After he came back from England—where he met the Queen and shared honors with the rest of the Everest party after their successful ascent in 1953—he was completely destitute. So the government of India gave him the house and set up the School of Mountaineering, to make a job for him."

Later Tenzing laughed sadly when he heard this.

"Many people think all this was a gift to me," he said, waving his hand at his mansion. "But I paid for it with my money. Nobody gave me anything."

Soon after the expedition came down from Everest, a group in Nepal passed the hat and collected 36,000 rupees (about $9,000) to buy a home for him in Katmandu, that country's capital. But Tenzing had lived in Darjeeling for twenty years and didn't want to change. He declined the offer. So the group which collected the money pocketed the entire sum.

That's the way his luck ran. He was promised much but received little. When he moved into his new house a furniture company offered to furnish it from top to bottom if he would give them an endorsement. They splashed his name all over India in their advertising but never gave him a stick of furniture. Likewise, a paint company promised to paint the place inside and out if he signed on the dotted line. He signed . . . but ended up by painting it himself.

To reach the Tenzing house I walked along a steep winding road leading toward Tiger Hill, the highest point in Darjeeling. Here, with the pinnacle of Mount Kanchanjanga for a backdrop, the blue and green building clings to a hillside. There is a gate that is never locked and a flight of steps leading up past a stone slab carved with the legend: *Everest—May 29, 1953* and a picture of two crossed ice axes with a coil of rope. There's also a sign warning visitors to watch out for the dogs. You expect to be faced suddenly with a giant Tibetan mastiff. Instead, you are greeted by a tiny bundle of animated fur named "Ghangar" who is more at home chewing on a slipper than on a visitor's leg.

At the top of the steps is a door opening into the basement of the house. This door is seldom locked even though it's the entrance to Tenzing's museum where all his Everest equipment is on display.

The things he wore and used on the famous climb are scattered on tables and hanging from the walls of the narrow room, together with pictures of Mallory, Irvine (two men who disappeared on the mountain), and other Everesters. Bulky nylon parkas, fur-lined boots, knapsacks, crampons, oxygen bottles, lengths of rope, and foil-wrapped packages of rations are on open display where they can be handled by anyone. This museum is always filled with visitors

and there's rarely a member of the family present to watch over things.

"Hill people are honest people," Tenzing explains simply.

What about tourists and foreign visitors, I wondered? Isn't he afraid they might walk off with something? After all, a lot of collectors would pay a fancy price for a pair of spikes which had been worn to the summit of Everest.

Such questions only make him smile and shrug. In two years the only things stolen were some pebbles he'd picked up near the top, and some pencils.

Although his official visitors' hours are from 9 to 10 A.M. on Mondays and Fridays only, he receives people every day at all hours. Usually on the off days, while a flock of tourists are happily pawing over the gear in the museum, a Tenzing cousin will look in to see what's going on. Then he or she will go upstairs to tell Tenzing there are visitors.

A moment later he appears, a thin, smiling man in a crewcut, usually well dressed in rugged corduroy trousers, a sweater, heavy wool sox, and sturdy thick-soled shoes. He's been cheated, betrayed and deceived by so many people, he should be a bitter, suspicious, angry man. But he isn't. He's quick to smile and his smile still has much of the magnetism and vitality you saw in the pictures of him when the Everest expedition first came off the mountain. But today there are more lines around the gleaming eyes, and sometimes those eyes go vacant with tiredness in the middle of a conversation. The features of his face were drawn a little finer that summer in 1955. It was the face of a sick man. His back was still straight, though, and he is tall for a Sherpa . . . standing just under six feet. His thin arms and legs still have the strength of coiled springs.

Some years back he was stricken by malaria, and in 1952 he overexerted himself by going on the two Swiss expeditions within a few months of each other. He was flat on his back in a hospital when Colonel John Hunt called on him to become chief of the Sherpa porters for the 1953 British attempt. The fact that he found the strength and the will to make the grueling trek and climb once more, this time successfully, is vivid proof of his almost superhuman quali-

ties, and basis of the popular native belief that he is an incarnation of Lord Buddha.

He is forty-two years old now (in 1957) and the rigorous demands of Everest have left him suffering with anemia. He's not well, but he's not complaining.

Life has been good to this simple Sherpa boy from a hut high in the Himalayas.

Life has been bad, too.

His sister had just died in 1955, forcing him to postpone his long-planned dream of visiting the United States. Then his wife, Ang Lahmu, became seriously ill. Invitations poured in from Japan, from Europe and America. The world wanted to meet Tenzing Norgay, but the doctors looked at the furrows in his fine face, took his pulse, and solemnly shook their heads. So while Edmund Hillary, the New Zealander who reached the summit with him, and John Hunt, organizer of the expedition, received knighthoods, wrote best-selling books, and went on wide-flung lecture tours, Tenzing has remained behind in Darjeeling.

He greeted me, a total stranger, with an affable grin and kind, polite questions about where I'd come from, etc., and invited me upstairs for a cup of tea even before he learned I was a journalist of sorts. Thus began the first of our many talks together.

He greets everyone with this same sincere friendliness. He likes people. Besides his friendship and sincerity, he has infinite patience, answering the same questions again and again, day after day, carefully explaining to every visitor what each object in the museum is for.

His house is overflowing with photographs and souvenirs of his lifetime in the mountains. Only three or four of the many rooms have been set aside for actual living purposes and those rooms are as crowded as any mountain cabin. All of Tenzing's distant relatives have moved in with him to cash in on his success.

On my later visits we always sat in a small reception room where a Tenzing relative served tea and cakes while we talked. He is a very modest man and doesn't like to talk about himself. He was learning

to speak English, so his most trusted friend, Rabindranath Mitra, usually sat in and translated when the going was difficult. Rabindranath has tact, a good command of English, and a complete knowledge of Tenzing's life and affairs. He even has a pat little introductory speech which goes like this: "Tenzing is an humble, generous man. Many people say Tenzing is Nepalese. Many say he is Indian. But Tenzing is loved by all the peoples of the world. He belongs to *all* the world."

Those are words I'm sure Tenzing would never say himself.

But even through an interpreter, the power, the humility, and the greatness of Tenzing's personality stood out. He is an alert, intelligent man, with a gift for organization, strong leadership qualities, and incredible stamina. He's still awed by the attention he receives; the visits from famous politicians and celebrities, and the newspaper interviews. He likes to tell how, when he and the British reached New Delhi, he was still wearing his simple mountain clothes, and Pandit Nehru took him home and outfitted him with suits from his own wardrobe.

"Nehru is like a father to me," he says. "Just like a father."

A pair of grotesque boots are Tenzing's favorite objects in his museum. They belonged to Raymond Lambert, the great Swiss mountaineer. Lambert lost his toes in the mountain cold so his climbing boots are specially made for toeless feet. In 1952 Tenzing and Lambert nearly reached the top of Everest together and from that experience has sprung a deep and very real affection between the two men. Tenzing's whole face glows when he talks about Lambert. No such comradeship exists between Hillary and Tenzing.

When Tenzing discusses Hillary or Hunt his face becomes grave and he lowers his voice. Even before the 1953 expedition he was a national hero in India, loved by the mountain people for his generosity and humanity. Every little Sherpa boy wanted to grow up to be "a man like Tenzing." After the triumphant expedition returned to Katmandu, Tenzing received most of the attention and glory of the Indian reporters. Indian newspapers were filled with conflicting stories about the adventure. Some even swore Tenzing reached the

top a full six minutes before Hillary and hauled him up with a rope.

The Britishers were justifiably enraged. Hunt blasted Tenzing at a press conference, saying he was no better than an Alpine guide. Hillary announced that Tenzing was ready to drop out until he had gone to the rescue and cleaned out the Sherpa's iced-up oxygen equipment. (This claim still annoys Tenzing. He says they both frequently helped each other in this way.)

Hurt by Hunt and Hillary's acid denunciations, Tenzing made a few foolish statements of his own. A truce was finally reached in the office of the Prime Minister of Nepal when Hillary and Tenzing signed their famous agreement to keep secret who got to the top first. Immediately the Indian press roared with indignation. The British had bought Tenzing off, they cried.

But Tenzing is one man who can't be bought. Finally, in his biography, ably written by James Ramsay Ullman, he admitted Hillary reached the summit first. What difference did it make anyway, he asked? He is tired of all the controversies. He answers all questions truthfully. He has nothing to hide.

Whom can Tenzing really trust? Rabindranath claims he doesn't profit from his friendship, and tries to protect him from the unscrupulous people around him. Tenzing's host of relatives help him with his mountain of correspondence and his visitors. Prime Minister Nehru has given him sage advice. But most of his genuine friends, the mountaineers, live in distant countries. There are few Indians he can really rely upon. His old friends, the humble Sherpa porters, feel ill at ease in his presence now. They treat him with awe and respect. The old spirit of comradeship is gone. Tenzing has become a great man, and the penalties for greatness are severe.

Also, a muddle of unjust rumors have isolated him. Some people believe he sold out to the British. In Darjeeling it is generally assumed that he is a rich man. Actually his income is 700 rupees a month . . . less than $150. Out of this he must support his army of relatives, serve tea and cakes to his endless stream of visitors, pay for his photography, and keep up his big house.

To earn this money he works several days a week as "field instructor" at the mountaineering school, teaching Indian soldiers the

techniques of mountain climbing. He receives, of course, a share of the royalties from his best-selling biography.

But if the school should ever fold up, Tenzing may suddenly be faced with the prospect of returning to his old life, acting as *sirdar* for occasional expeditions and working as a tourist guide during the good season. Now that he looks back on it, that wasn't such a bad life after all.

"Tenzing," I asked one rainy afternoon, "are you really happy now?"

His usual smile vanished. He lowered his eyes.

"Those were good days before," he said slowly.

"Things have changed," Rabindranath interjected.

"Yes . . . things have changed."

"Would you do it again?" I went on. "Now that you know all the difficulties and troubles it would bring, would you climb that mountain again?"

The smile reappeared but the eyes remained thoughtful.

"The mountains are my life," he declared. "I would climb it again if I had to."

He would climb it again because the mountain is there and because he is Tenzing Norgay. He would climb it again because he's still a man of the mountains more than a man of the town. Tenzing belongs to Everest. It's a symbol and an ideal to him, an ideal wrought in fearsome *seracs* and bright blue ice, wearing a thin, dangerous skin of sliding snow. Tenzing Norgay had been on that dangerous skin six times before, had felt it drain his strength and choke his lungs and refuse the caresses of his crampons and ax. When at last it submitted, when he stood for a brief fifteen minutes on the proud summit, Tenzing had also unknowingly ascended to a pinnacle from which he could never climb down again. He was leaving a happy simple world for a world of honors, flattery, conflict and consternation.

For a simple man, this sudden loss of simplicity was the greatest tragedy of all.

One of Tenzing's favorite subjects was the *Yeti*. Like most west-

erners, I believed this animal was just a myth, a mountain legend. But there is an awful fear hanging over those mountains and it is not the fear of a mere legend.

Tenzing has never seen a *Yeti* personally, but he has seen its massive footprints many times around Everest and the Khumbu glacier. His father once met one face to face and managed to escape. Tenzing said his father wasn't a liar or given to making up wild tales. And his description jibes with the reports of other eyewitnesses.

The *Yeti's* footprints were first seen in northern Sikkim by Colonel L. A. Waddell in 1889. Since then they have been sighted by dozens of explorers from one end of the Himalayas to the other, in high, barren regions where no bear, ape or other animal would or could go. Sir John Hunt saw *Yeti* tracks around Kanchanjanga in the late thirties and is a solid *Yeti* fan. So is Ralph Izzard, one of Britain's top journalists, who led a special Snowman-chasing expedition into Nepal in 1954. They didn't catch one, but they did come close and uncovered a lot of new pro-*Yeti* evidence.

These unknown animals are very cunning and elusive. Izzard's group tracked them all over the Khumbu glacier, but they always got away by climbing places where no man could follow; or by outpacing the heavily burdened *sahibs,* gasping in the rarefied air. Perhaps they were lucky to have failed. *Yetis* can be very dangerous when cornered.

In 1949, a Sherpa herdsman named Lakhpa Tensing (not related to Tenzing Norgay) was torn apart by one in the bleak pass of Nangpala, one of the highest passes in the world, far beyond the reach of ordinary animals.

Mountain mothers shut up their misbehaving children by warning that the *Yeti* will get them if they don't watch out. Hill farmers are afraid to work after dark because of this curtain of superstition and fear. They believe that to look at one means death, and the only protection is to cover your eyes and run downhill. The *Yeti's* feet are supposed to be mounted backwards to facilitate mountain climbing and it's clumsy when running downhill.

This odd belief springs from an incident that happened back in

the early 1900's when the English were stretching a telegraph line from Kalimpong to Lhasa. It was a big job and many hillmen were hired to work on it. Some of them were encamped at Chumbithang, three miles from the Jelep-la pass, one of the gateways into Tibet. One evening a dozen workers failed to return. The next morning a squad of British soldiers went out to search for them.

They found, instead, a strange animal hiding under some giant boulders in the approaches to the pass. They shot it and dragged it to the nearest *dak* bungalow. Later Sir Charles Bell, then the British political officer of Sikkim, came and ordered the carcass packed and shipped away, supposedly to England. It was never seen again and there is no trace of it.

An old man in Darjeeling, one Bombahadur Chetri, claims he saw it with his own eyes, and describes it as being ten feet tall, and covered with shaggy hairs two or three inches long. Its gruesome face was hairless, set with a mouthful of sharp yellow fangs and cold red eyes. Its feet were backwards! But this could have been a false impression depending on how the carcass was lying. Its feet could have been handlike, like an ape's, hanging down over the edge of the table.

The dozen missing men were never heard from again.

Tenzing likes to tell about his brother-in-law who was once an assistant to the great Sangay Rimboche, the late Grand Lama of the Rongbuck monastery on the steep approach to Everest. He went with the Grand Lama on his annual treks to meditate in the high, secret holy places on the mountain. During one of these treks another assistant lama found a dead *Yeti* and presented the skin to Sangay Rimboche. It looked like the skin of a young bear, and the Grand Lama used it for years to sit on while meditating. It was probably placed in his *Chorten* after his death.

Many of the mountain lamaseries cherish bits of *Yeti* hair and bones as sacred relics. They think *Yetis* are devils posted around the mountains to guard the gods who supposedly live on the summits. In the fall of 1954, a tribe of head-hunters in Assam reportedly killed and *ate* a creature ten feet high. The bones and furs were carried off to a monastery.

Porters of the 1955 Argentine Himalayan expedition shot and killed one of these animals in Nepal, but hauled it away and cut it up before the scientists in the group could study it. It was also described as ten feet high, covered with reddish fur, and it walked on its hind legs.

At this writing, no white man has yet seen one close, but as more and more travelers and expeditions penetrate those mountains, the chances of someone eventually killing or capturing one are increasing. Until 1955, fewer than 400 foreigners had visited the mountain kingdom of Nepal in all of history. Now its borders have been thrown wide open, two good European hotels are in operation in Katmandu, and the once forbidden mountain glaciers are crawling with American schoolteachers and butterfly collectors. Sooner or later one of them is bound to come up with something conclusive about the *Yeti.*

Aside from Nepal, Sikkim is the place where Abominable Snowmen are most frequently reported. Since Gangtok was my destination, I was looking forward to examining this mystery firsthand. I had no intention of trying to capture one barehanded, but I hoped I might be able to come up with some new evidence, pro or con, that would shed some light on the whole business. All it would take was a little luck.

My plans were altered when I went to the government offices in Darjeeling to pick up my border pass and papers. My reservations in the Gangtok House had suddenly been canceled. I would have to wait.

Why, I demanded?

The officials just shrugged. They didn't know. Those were their orders. I could, if I wished, stay at a *dak* bungalow ten miles outside the city. Ten miles is a long distance in the jungle . . . and Sikkim is mostly jungle. But I had no choice.

The reason for the cancellation became obvious the day I went to say good-by to Tenzing and to thank him for his advice and help in planning my trip. A mob of Americans were in his reception room. When I entered I stood around patiently while they plied him with the usual questions ("How did it feel to stand on top of Everest?").

Then one of them turned to me and stuck out his hand. He was a tall, wide-shouldered man with a charming, boyish smile, a shock of unruly, graying hair, and sensitive, appraising eyes.

"My name is Douglas," he said.

He was William O. Douglas of the U.S. Supreme Court, a globe-trotter in his own right and author of a number of books. He was on his way to Gangtok. My reservation had been scratched to make room for him. I'd been outranked.

But I didn't begrudge him this. Mr. Douglas was a kind, disarmingly simple man. In fact, after he left, Tenzing turned to me with a puzzled expression and asked just who exactly Mr. Douglas was.

"A judge in the U.S. Supreme Court," I answered.

It didn't register.

"He works with President Eisenhower," I tried to explain.

Tenzing's jaw dropped.

"But he's such a nice man. I didn't know he was so important!"

When I left he was still awed. As I walked down the road away from Tiger Hill, Tenzing Norgay, one of the great men of modern India, stood on his balcony and waved to me until I was out of sight.

William O. Douglas and his party headed for Gangtok, so I decided to detour to Kalimpong and wait a few days before crossing into Sikkim. I took a mountain "taxi," a Landrover (British brother of the jeep), past the hillside tea plantations of Darjeeling, down a winding road through the jungles of the Teesta valley, to the last frontier before Tibet, one of the real ends of the earth.

On Saturday mornings, when the strands of fog break over the mountains, trains of donkeys and horses suddenly become visible, snaking their way along the treacherous trails toward the *hat,* the Kalimpong market place. They come from far-off Gyangtse and storied Lhasa, bringing Tibetan musk for the perfumeries of France, yak tails for the wigmakers of Madras, and cardamoms to be traded for cloth, tea and foodstuffs.

Their sallow-faced, fur-wrapped drivers ramble through the Tenth

Mile bazaar, buying mirrors for their women and big curved *kukris* fashioned out of old tin cans and silver coins for themselves. To them, the little village is the epitome of civilization. There they can sit in the hard seats of the newly constructed Kalimpong cinema and watch ten-year-old films. There they can buy stale chocolate bars from England and rubber boots from a distant Shangri-la known as the U.S.A.!

And after their trading and buying is finished, after they've drunk their fill of *pachwai,* after they've visited the grubby little houses of prostitution, then they carefully load up their lethargic animals and start back up the rocky road that winds from India, through Sikkim, up into the Himalayas across Tibet to Lhasa.

The people of Kalimpong talk about Lhasa with easy casualness, the way the people of Albany might talk of New York. The trek between the two places takes under a month. Most of the traders make the trip three or four times a year, fighting blizzards, landslides, robbers, and all the expected and unexpected hazards that wait along this—one of the oldest trade routes in the world. Surprisingly, in 1955, commerce was still free and frequent along this old trail in spite of the communist propaganda banners fluttering in Tibet's capital.

When I arrived in Kalimpong, I stood in the rain in the *hat,* watching the tired mules coming in from that other world, thinking suddenly of the possibility of hitching a ride with one of those trains, sneaking over the borders and traveling in Tibetan clothes to the famous city that is now more forbidden than ever.

On the map, Tibet seems far away and hopelessly isolated, but when you are standing on the edge of the world, looking up into its jaundiced mountain throat, it appears as accessible as Coney Island is to Brooklyn.

But I didn't have the money to bribe my way onto a caravan to Lhasa and back. Besides, at least 100,000 Chinese soldiers were stationed around Lhasa and the risk of discovery would be great. My lanky six feet towered over the short Tibetans and made me as conspicuous as a bear in a nudist colony. The fate of being captured as a "capitalist spy" was not pleasant to contemplate.

So I compromised and settled for a long, wet, hard hike up the mountain ridges to the *dak* bungalow at Kupup, the last bungalow before the Tibetan border, accompanied by a happy woman-chaser nicknamed "Okay." It was a cold, largely uneventful trip along rugged trails built like giant staircases. Heavy mists and rain hid the view most of the time as we went from bungalow to bungalow. Thick black leeches rained down on us from the trees but the only other sign of wildlife we found was a large green python slinking across the trail.

Okay was a determinedly cheerful cuss who spent his evenings pursuing the local girls in the villages around the bungalows. He was especially cheerful when, as we inched higher into the mountains, I was stricken with *la-druk,* altitude sickness. At Kupup, I huddled close to the fire, weak, thirsty, unable to hold down any food, waiting for my body to adjust itself to the height.

Then from Kupup we climbed to Jelep-la, the pass prying apart the mountains some three miles above the bungalow. We reached it after a difficult ascent through biting wind and a furious sheet of rain. It is 14,390 feet above sea level, the gateway to the roof of the world. A desolate gap, marked by a big cairn of stones—every traveler brings up a stone from below to add to it for luck—with howling winds tearing at the old prayer flags hanging from bent poles. The rain spat and eddied around a single telegraph pole that stood out against all the bleakness.

Okay and I walked together to the other side of the pass and took a long look at Tibet itself. Out of the grayness of the sky we could see the peak of Chomolhari, and in the splashing mist far below was the Chumbi valley, the richest valley in Tibet, bright with flowers, rice paddies, and jungle growth. The trail into it dropped almost straight down for 6,000 feet. With my stomach still churning and my head throbbing, I walked down it a few feet just so I could honestly claim I'd set foot in Tibet.

Then we turned and struggled back down to Kupup, beginning the trip back to Kalimpong, fighting with the leeches again as we trudged through the fog and the mountain villages.

Today the Bamboo Curtain has really dropped over those passes. Chinese soldiers guard the trails and travelers aren't able to go to Jelep-la any more. In 1956, the Tibetan lamas formed the *Mimang,* a terrorist society, to drive the Chinese out. In March of that year they began a bloody revolution, slaughtering thousands of Chinese who, in turn, bombed many of the hidden monasteries. Since then the Chinese have tightened the borders and reinforced their occupation troops, making Tibet more forbidden than ever.

For once I was lucky. I was probably one of the last white men to step across the Tibetan border before the Bamboo Curtain fell.

That revolution was already in the making in the summer of 1955. Kalimpong was the Lisbon of the Himalayas, a hotbed of spies and intrigue, crowded with cold-faced Chinese, wary Tibetans, and pale, furtive white men bringing in arms from the outside world to be smuggled on to the *Mimang.* Many of the Lhasa-bound caravans were loaded with boxes labeled TEA, short for TNT!

Kalimpong was the focal point for all this, as well as the main stop on the itinerary of slavers bringing girls into India from Bhutan and Sikkim for the fleshpot of Calcutta.

During my interviews with all these people I gathered a disappointing picture of modern Lhasa. The latest reincarnation of the once all-powerful Dalai Lama, a confused teen-age boy, is now just a puppet to the Communists. The streets around his great Potala Palace are illuminated with flickering electric lights, and rutted deep with the tracks of Chinese tanks coming in over the new road the Reds have built from Lhasa to Peiping.

A few short years ago the Dalai Lama employed a group of "magicians" to control the weather and keep the rain from falling on the holy buildings. Whenever they failed, they were punished by being made to do some useful work, such as road construction. Today a Chinese weather station has replaced them, to guide the MIG fighters that whine on a newly constructed airfield outside the city.

Communist propaganda banners hang everywhere, just as they do

in the East zone of Germany. Bureaucrats and political commissars have infiltrated the proud lamaseries, trying to erase the wonderful old Tibetan superstitions, practices and beliefs.

The Red flag flutters over the roof of the world, bringing with it the perverse society of Socialism and the cold, methodical stamp of civilization.

While in Kalimpong I stayed in the tiny, picturesque Himalayan Hotel on a fogswept hill overlooking the town, operated by a delightful old Englishman named D. MacDonald, who spent his youth as the British trade agent in Yatung and Lhasa. The thirteenth Dalai Lama was his personal friend. Age had stolen his hearing so conversation was difficult. His daughter, who manages the hotel, claims to have had a personal encounter with a *Yeti* when she was a girl. She was walking alone through the jungles around the village, picking flowers, when she suddenly felt hidden eyes watching her and heard an eerie cry like the call of a sea gull. There are no sea gulls in the mountains. It was the cry of a *Yeti;* the most feared sound in the Himalayas!

Later I heard that cry myself, and saw the big naked footprints of the animal in Sikkim. And I came away from those valleys and jungles with a little of the hill people's fear locked in my own heart.

The Himalayan Hotel is civilization's last stronghold, featuring modern plumbing in all of its eight or ten rooms. When I returned from the hard trek to Jelep-la, I gratefully took a hot bath and enjoyed a good five-course meal in the combination dining room and lounge, which is furnished with Tibetan tapestries, devil masks, God boxes, prayer wheels, and pictures of the secluded cities in the Himalayas. A government nurse and a young Japanese, who was translating Tibetan scriptures, were the only other guests.

I lingered there for one more day before taking off for Gangtok, giving Mr. Douglas a chance to clear out. On my last day I walked alone up narrow jungle roads to visit the old monastery of Tirpai and to meet its famous lama oracle.

At the door of the monastery I was greeted by a monk who motioned for me to go back and spin each of the 108 prayer wheels aligned along the edge of the building. These wheels are metal

cylinders mounted on a stick and containing scraps of paper with Tibetan prayers written on them. The belief is that spinning them sends the prayers up to the gods. It is as reasonable as the candle-lighting ritual in our western churches. Most lamas carry a prayer wheel at all times, spending their leisure hours spinning it and chanting over and over: *"Om mani padmi hum."* O, hail the jewel of the lotus.

After taking care of this formality, I stepped into a dark temple decorated with grotesque paintings of gods and hells. The Buddhists have seven hells and seven heavens, for various types of sinners and saints. Several lamps were burning before a large statue of Lord Buddha. It was a peaceful, mystical place.

When I'd reverently examined the idol, the monk took me up a flight of rickety stairs to a room filled with 1,000 statues of Buddha, and served me a cup of sour Tibetan tea. The lamas drink thirty or forty cups of this stuff daily. It's made of tea, soda, and *ghee* (rancid butter).

The lama oracle was an ageless monk with a quiet, unworldly air, living in a hut near the monastery. In his darkened chambers, bedecked with gods and tapestries, he proudly showed me his collection of colorful ceremonial dresses which he wore during religious festivals when he was required to go into a trance and predict the future. His predictions took the form of incoherent sentences which could mean practically anything. My future, he said, would be a mixture of trouble and happiness. This exciting news cost me five rupees.

All lamaseries have one man "trained" as an oracle, just as they have others trained as cooks, dancers and sorcerers.

The quiet visit to Tirpai wound up my "business" in Kalimpong. On the way back to the village I stopped at the *hat* and arranged for a "taxi" to pick me up the next morning and take me to Gangtok. The distance was only thirty miles, the fare only eight rupees. I was surprised to find that these taxis ply the rugged mountain trails all over the Himalayas. Someday, when things quiet down, you will probably be able to take one all the way to Lhasa for a few rupees.

Chapter Thirteen

On the Track of the Abominable Snowman

That heroic little mountain taxi never reached Gangtok. Those thirty miles turned out to be the longest miles I'd ever traveled. And my trip nearly came to an unpleasant climax in those lost jungles, even though death has been outlawed in Sikkim.

A kind of truce between man and nature exists there, broken only occasionally by a sudden man-eater prowling in the jungle-shrouded foothills, or by a ferocious black bear raiding the huts of the natives in the snowy mountains to the north. Everything from tigers and pythons to beetles and butterflies are protected by local religious laws. And any man who kills a sacred cow, accidentally or otherwise, pays with his own life.

Sikkim is a land where orchids sprout wild among the weeds, and loafing tigers yawn in the faces of unarmed travelers. Hidden among the tallest mountains on earth, the country should be a garden of Eden, a safe refuge for men as well as beasts. But it isn't. For strangers it is a land of violence and fear, where thunder rips the bellies of the eternal black clouds and the jungles wait, holding their grim welcoming committees in reserve among the black shadows.

The truce between man and nature remains a one-way proposition. The jungle makes its own laws.

That was the first thing I learned on my Sikkim adventure.

When he pulled up to the hotel in Kalimpong, the taxi driver, a cheerful, swarthy Bhutia, kicked a sleepy-eyed Tibetan out of the front seat and offered it to me. The Tibetan, a short wiry man wearing a floppy, colorfully embroidered felt hat, frowned, and scrambled into the back which was already bulging with a bald, orange-robed lama, half a dozen stocky, fur-wrapped men, and one goggle-eyed boy.

I added my pack to the pile of merchandise and humanity and we took off through the steep streets, spraying geysers of mud in our wake.

The only English the driver knew was "Yes, sir," his stock reply to everything I said. He seemed to glow with pride over the ownership of the car and acted like the captain of a shiny new ship.

The people in the back eyed me with awe and distrust until I turned, pointed at myself and said: "New York." They caught on and each passenger beamingly told where he was from. Most of them were from Sikkim or small Indian border villages. The man with the floppy hat grudgingly admitted he was from Gyangtse. I passed out cigarettes, which I carried for that purpose, to everyone.

As the road swooped down toward the Teesta River, the ride got rougher and the rain thundered against the canvas top. Swirling black water hammered at the bridge at Rongpo, where we stopped at a border check point. A plump, clean-shaven, polite Indian army officer tore off a chunk of my pass, glanced at the natives huddled behind me, and waved us through.

We crossed the swaying bridge and entered Sikkim, the "land of lightning." After a brief stop at a Sikkimese check point, we rolled through a small village and swept up a winding road into the mountains. And our real troubles began.

First we ran into a wall of water gushing down the side of a hill, raging across the road. It looked swift, deep and impassable, but the driver just kicked the accelerator and went skittering through it,

sliding to the edge of the road. I glanced out my side and saw the hillside dropping steeply away. When I looked at the driver he smiled confidently, as relaxed as if he were driving on the Lincoln Highway.

The road grew narrower and steeper, shooting up through thick jungles along the edge of the Teesta. The rain melted into a blanket of fog and closed in on us. We came to a place where a small landslide had almost blocked the road. A dozen workmen, all wearing big trough-shaped straw rain deflectors on their heads, were clawing their way through the debris with primitive tools. They stood back while we slowly crowded past.

One side of the road had fallen away altogether. There was only empty space on one side of us and a steep, bush-covered cliff on the other. The road continued to spiral upward, twisting around the edges of the great hills, climbing steadily toward the mountains hidden in the fog. We passed more landslides and more workmen in big straw rain hats.

Then suddenly there was a loud crack, like a cannon had been set off in the next valley. A low roar sounded above the motor and the rain. The other passengers leaned forward, tense and pale. The driver goosed the motor and we slid forward and sideways up the muddy trail. A big boulder dropped suddenly out of the fog and bounced across in front of us. Then there was another . . . and another. The roar became a thunder. The whole mountain was falling in on us!

Edging over, the driver hugged the cliff wall while more debris crashed down around us. The lama in the back started mumbling a prayer. One of the others, a little man wearing a brand-new pair of hip boots, was muttering to himself too, his hands white from gripping the edge of the seat. A stone hit the canvas top and a support cracked. Another stone slapped into the hood and the driver winced.

Then we shot around a little bend and the stones stopped falling. But noise behind us set the whole road quivering like a tuning fork. A moment later we looped around another curve and I could see backwards along the way we had just come. Tons of mud, dirt and

rocks covered the road. It would take days for the road gangs to clear it away. We were sealed off from the outside world.

Further on we halted in the middle of nowhere and the boy got out of the back with one of the natives. They waved to the driver and started up a small trail leading into the jungle and the fog.

Then we plunged on through the mountains.

The end came without warning as we crept around a tight curve and ran headlong into a giant waterfall lashing down on the road. Automatically the driver gunned the motor and we hurtled into it. The water whipped our rear end halfway around and threw us over to the edge of the road, to the steep precipice that dropped into the valley thousands of feet below!

The Bhutia's confidence vanished as he ground the gears and clawed at the steering wheel. We kept skidding through the roaring water, getting closer to the edge of the flow.

Then one of the rear wheels fell over the side of the cliff! The whole vehicle lurched crazily. The men in the back started crying out in half a dozen different hill dialects. I threw open my door to jump. A sharp, fading scream stopped me. One of the natives, the man in the rubber boots, had jumped out of the back and the water had washed him over the edge instantly!

We all froze in our seats. The Landrover shook and lurched to a sharper angle. Regaining some of his poise, the trembling driver tried to take command. He spoke sharply to the men in the back. They started to move slowly to one side. I fumbled instinctively behind me to get hold of my precious knapsack.

The driver tried to tell me something I couldn't understand. Another native went out the back. Clinging to the side of the car, he fought his way around it and reached safety. I opened my door wide. The driver nodded and slid closer to me. An angry torrent of gray water splashed in. I sucked in my breath and jumped.

It was like hitting a treadmill going in the wrong direction. The water threw me back against the Landrover and I saw the driver jump out. My knapsack dragged me down. I tried to let go but the belt

was caught on my arm. Slamming forward against the wall of water, I felt my strength drain away and my legs go rubbery. Then suddenly pair of hands wrapped around my arm and I was dragged onto solid ground. All the others made it too.

With one final shudder, the lightened vehicle rolled over into space. It seemed like a long, long time before we heard a faint, smothered crash far below.

The driver looked like he'd been kicked in the groin. It would probably take him a lifetime to pay for it, and there would be trouble, lots of trouble, explaining the death of one of his passengers.

The others were more concerned about the black jungles around us. They knew we were in a bad place; *Yeti* territory.

I put my hand on the driver's shoulder. I wanted to say something that would help. Something he could understand. But no words came. He looked at me and his gentle face contorted into a weak smile, with fear and despair closing over his eyes like a shadow. Then the smile crumbled and he started to cry.

Overhead, the lightning laughed in triumph.

Cold fingers of rain stabbed down while the fog slopped over us like a drunk's kiss. Twenty miles of thick undergrowth and muddy, broken trail separated us from Gangtok. We needed a dry place to wait for the weather to let up and figure out our next move. The others had lost all of their belongings but I was lucky. I still had my typewriter and my cans of beans.

The lama, a perpetually frightened man with thick, trembling lips, got his bearings and pointed out a slender gold tower, a *chorten,* peeking over the trees on the summit of a nearby hill. Nervously he led the way up a narrow trail into the bush.

Ugly black leeches dripped down from the foliage overhead, filthy cone-shaped creatures that traveled end over end, sucking our blood until they were as bloated as tennis balls. We couldn't feel them but they secreted a fluid which destroyed the coagulative properties of blood. Their feasting places bled long after they had satiated themselves and dropped off. These leeches are so thick, that hillmen

carry umbrellas to protect themselves. By the time we reached the clearing at the top of the hill my shirt was stained with blood under my nylon coat and blood was even oozing out of the eyelets of my shoes. My companions were more used to the leeches and weren't bothered as badly.

The *chorten* stood in the center of the clearing; a big white stone cube topped with a delicate pagodalike point coated with gold leaf. It marked a site where ancient religious relics were buried. There are similar *chortens* all over the mountains.

Two small thatched shacks were next to it. They were for the use of the tending lamas. Both were locked. Our lama beat on one of them and a frightened voice answered. Chains rattled inside and the flimsy door swung open as a worried looking young lama peered out at us. He motioned for us to enter and chained the door behind us.

The hut was small and damp, furnished only with a couple of water jugs and a straw mat on the floor. We all squeezed together in it, gasping from the climb and the cold. The young lama talked excitedly with the Tibetan and our monk, while the Bhutia driver sat disconsolately in the corner, his back against the wall. I couldn't understand all that was being said, but they used the word *Shukpa* several times. I did know what that meant. *Shukpa* was a Sikkimese word for *Yeti.*

The young lama had heard a *Yeti* that very morning and had locked himself in his shack. This information lowered a blanket of fear over our tragic group, and when the rain eased early that afternoon no one was anxious to step outside with me. Finally, with smiles and coaxing, I got the dour Tibetan and a pudgy Sikkimese merchant to join me for a look around. The others elected to stay behind with the driver, who was plunging deeper into silent despair.

It was still very foggy, but I didn't want to spend a night in that crowded hut. I thought it might be possible to walk to the Martam bungalow before dark. We wandered around the edge of the clearing for a few minutes, unable to see very far in any direction. There was no sign of life in the jungle—no birds, no monkeys—just cold, empty silence.

Then the Tibetan cried out and pointed to some fresh marks in

the mud of a trail leading westwards, wide smears like a man dragging his feet might make.

"*Yeti!*" the Tibetan whispered harshly.

The merchant studied them and nodded in grim agreement. But I wasn't convinced. I started down the trail, motioning for them to follow. They shuddered and shook their heads. I hesitated a second, then cautiously traced the route of the footprints. The fog quickly cut me off from the others, and I was frankly relieved when the tracks turned off the trail and vanished onto the matted jungle floor. Uneasily, I turned back to the *chorten.*

The merchant and Tibetan managed to understand my plan for going to Martam, and they decided it would be better to join me than to sit in the lama's shack waiting for the *Yeti* to make an unwelcome appearance.

I wrote, in English, an account of the accident and gave it to the driver in case he might need some kind of testimony from me later. Then we left him sitting gloomily there with the others while we started back down to the road to Gangtok.

We walked through the mud and fog until night closed in. Our progress was very slow because of the frequent landslides and waterfalls spilling across the road. We failed to reach Martam, but we did come to a little hut by the road, a kind of roadside restaurant run by a jovial little Sikkimese woman surrounded by howling children. Its one dreary room contained a big wooden table, some benches, a dozen brass goblets, and a few nondescript living utensils. She made a meager living by offering *pachwai,* a brackish brew of fermented rice, to weary travelers. In a good week she probably had three or four customers. There was no sign of a husband around the place.

After a dinner of boiled rice, I entertained the group with some sleight of hand, and then tried to type a few notes. But the dim light and open-mouthed children made it impossible. The Tibetan took a great interest in my typewriter and I let him peck out a couple of lines. For the first time during the trip, he actually seemed pleased about something. He carefully folded the gibberish he'd typed and

put it in his pocket. I didn't realize how impressed he really was, though, until we had all stretched out for the night.

I slept on the table, a bed of honor, with my lumpy knapsack for a pillow and my typewriter on the floor nearby. It was very cold and my mind was alive with a thousand confused thoughts and plans so I couldn't sleep.

About 2 A.M. I heard someone stirring in the darkness and the sound of something being slid across the floor. I sat up abruptly. The Tibetan was standing in the doorway with something under his arm. My typewriter! He saw me move and stepped quickly out into the night. I jumped up and went after him.

A thin fog was hugging the ground and the Tibetan was just a black shadow running through it. I chased him for half a mile along the road until he dropped the typewriter in a ditch. I saw and heard it fall and stopped. The case was a little battered but the machine was still in working order. The Tibetan's boots scuffled through the mud far up the road. He was still running. There wasn't much sense in following him. I started back toward the hut and never saw him again.

Fog still sheathed the hill in the morning. It took a lot of complicated sign language to explain the sudden disappearance of the Tibetan. And when I tried to give the woman five rupees she refused it. Maybe the merchant had already paid her.

He and I started out early and walked for hours along the soupy trail, spiraling for miles until we stood only a few hundred yards away from the hut on the other side of the valley. After skirting more landslides and flooding mountain streams, we saw a neat little red-roofed bungalow perched on a bare knoll overlooking the broad valley. It was the government rest house at Martam.

According to the sign in front of it, it was approximately thirteen miles south of Gangtok. It was tightly locked up and we had to stand on the porch for a half hour bellowing for the *chowkidar*. Finally he appeared from a grass-roofed hut higher up on the hillside. Within a few minutes he had a warm fire going and we were heating water for instant coffee.

I was worn out from lack of sleep, and coming down with a cold. The sudden change from the hot plains of India to the cold, thin atmosphere of the Himalayas was raising havoc with my system. I decided to rest up in the bungalow for a day before continuing on to Gangtok.

The merchant and I shared a can of beans and then he shook my hand and said good-by. Through sign language I tried to persuade him to stay and travel with me the next day. But his mind was made up. He was anxious to get home.

Sadly I watched him head through the fog back to the road. Then he was gone and I was alone again. I pecked out a few pages of notes about the events of the day before, then dropped onto the laced cot and slept.

Thirteen miles may not seem like much, but in the Himalayas it is as far as some men travel in a lifetime. And the thirteen miles between Martam and Gangtok are an obstacle course strewn with sudden hazards and unpleasant surprises.

A good night's sleep helped me forget some of the troubles of the previous two days and I started out the next morning feeling fresh and strong. It was raining lightly and the fog was only a tendril of vapor in the lower valleys.

Walking briskly up through the hills and bush, I finally reached an open space where I could look out on the valley again. There, on the other side, almost within spitting distance, was Martam! I wasn't getting any place at all!

I had a new companion now. A shaggy little dog who'd appeared scratching at the door of the bungalow. I fed him some canned sausages, rubbed his ears, and let him sleep before the fire. Now he trotted along at my heels, carrying his head proudly, showing me the sights, disappearing frequently into the bush to chase hidden monkeys. They were watching me, following me in the trees. Now and then I passed oxcarts moving slowly in the opposite direction. Their drivers always waved and smiled and asked me questions I couldn't understand, probably about the condition of the road be-

hind me. I tried to tell them it was in bad shape but they continued on anyway.

After covering four or five miles I came to a huge, fresh landslide which had smashed the road into the deep ravine below. It was absolutely impassable. Further back I'd passed a trail cutting up into the jungle with a lot of footprints around it. Thinking it might be a detour, I returned to it, took a compass reading, and started up it, the dog racing on ahead, trying to guide me.

The path inclined sharply upward. My lungs began to ache and burn and I had to rest every few minutes. The tight web of jungle closed in. I was filled with disturbing fears that I might get lost or might be attacked by some wild animal. The *Yeti* stories were fresh in my mind.

Once a small animal jumped in front of me; a puppy with a pig's face and a long tail. It was gone in an instant and I stumbled on, picking disgustedly at the fat leeches, thinking of how many unclassified animals must be lurking in the forests of Sikkim, Bhutan, and Nepal.

The trail leveled off and dipped downward again. According to my compass I was still heading in the right direction even as I descended into the thickening fog. My dog disappeared at this point. Several minutes later he barked once far behind me. That was the last I saw or heard of him.

Then I was climbing another hill, my lungs groping for air again, my heart jumping against the walls of my chest. Giant spiders skittered across in front of me several times, spiders the size of lobsters, covered partly with coarse hair, and a shiny, hard shell on their backs. Their webs, shimmering with moisture, looked big enough to trap a small bird.

On the summit of the hill there was a small *chorten* and a shack with an old lama sitting in front twirling a prayer wheel idly. He looked at me in surprise.

"Gangtok?" I asked, pointing at the trail. He frowned dumbly, shrugged and went on with his prayers. I rested, then continued on.

In a valley I found a big tree with a lot of wide, unidentifiable

footprints around it. They could have been made by the Tibetan, the merchant . . . or a *Yeti.* Further up the trail I found more of them and they gave me a shock. One was the clear imprint of a broad, naked foot; a foot too big to be a man's. I'd seen bear and ape spoor on the trek to Jelep-la and this looked like neither. But I wasn't positive. And I wasn't ready to accept the *Yeti* legend completely.

Twice more I came upon similar prints and I developed the uneasy sensation that I was being watched. I tried to reassure myself that it was my imagination and kept moving, worrying about getting lost. The only map I had was one I'd traced from a very old chart back at the hotel in Darjeeling. Luckily, my compass proved to be reasonably accurate.

Finally I broke out of the jungle, back onto the narrow road to Gangtok. At least, I hoped it was the right road. The fog was lifting and the sun was forcing its way through gaps in the dark monsoon clouds. A gang of roadworkers were loafing in a ditch and when I came into sight they struck poses of pretended labor. I grinned at them and they grinned back, examining me with wonder and disbelief. I was a mess. I had a three days' growth of whiskers in addition to my undernourished goatee and mustache. My clothes were torn and flaked with mud and dried blood from one end to the other. The pack on my back was soaking wet, hanging almost between my legs. I felt like a soldier just returning from battle.

Still not absolutely sure I was heading in the right direction, I rounded a bend, half expecting the Martam bungalow to pop up on the horizon. Instead, I faced a low hill with a massive white *chorten* on its summit, the high golden pagoda glistening in the sun.

Beyond it, I passed houses that looked almost like houses should look, and tiers of rice paddies banking far into the valleys. Little brown children with slanted eyes ran along the roads, gaping at me. Women in bright flannel robes peeked out of windows and doors. In the background the mighty white head of Mount Kanchanjanga shot up above the clouds, over a world breaking out in rhododendrons, bell flowers, and breath-takingly beautiful orchids.

The road dipped down and up again, up toward a high green mountain crowned with a huge red-roofed monastery surrounded by a

group of smaller, equally colorful buildings, curled and glowing like dragons sleeping in the sun. It was the palace of the Maharajah of Sikkim. Below it, scattered around the hill, were other houses and temples and squat huts, linked by ribbons of road alive with people in eccentric Oriental dress, swarming with jeeps and trucks.

Gangtok at last!

This was a carefree, happy city; a city of friendliness and laughter. Beautiful girls sat along the edge of the road, breaking rocks into gravel with little hammers while they joked among themselves and smiled seductively at me. Mountain women enjoy much more freedom than the delicate females of the plains. Polyandry is practiced wdiely in Tibet and northern Sikkim. Although thousands of men enter monasteries and never marry, they still outnumber the women. So when a woman marries a man she is also automatically married to all his brothers. A confusing situation for the children.

As I walked into the city, men ripping into the mysterious innards of their trucks and jeeps stopped to wave at me and stroke their smooth chins with greasy hands, making fun of my ragged beard. A bright young lama hurried up to me and asked me questions I couldn't understand. He motioned for me to follow and led me to the bazaar, to a wide open stall that was a bank. There a grinning, friendly, English-speaking banker invited me into a comfortable back room and plied me with tea and British biscuits (thin, dry, tasteless wafers). I told him I was looking for the guest house and he instructed a clerk to guide me to it.

The main roads of this little known "city" form a semicircle around the 7,000-foot mountain. One branch twists into the bazaar, cluttered with dirty stalls, open-fronted shops, and sidewalk peddlers (though there are no sidewalks). The other loops past the hospital building built by the British, to a surprisingly modern school further down in the valley, then it swings up to the very pinnacle of the mountain where it becomes a strand of asphalt leading to a picturesque arch, the entrance to the grounds of the Maharajah's palace.

The government guest houses are located on the hillside just below

the palace. There were three of them in a neat row, crowded with Indian officials. Luckily, one of them had a vacancy (my "reservation" didn't mean a thing), a large cold room containing three laced cots, two chairs, and a long table, lighted by a solitary electric bulb hanging from the ceiling, and long, high windows facing the valleys and mountains. My *chowkidar* (there were several) spoke some English and was well initiated in the art of warming canned beans.

When I signed the guest book I noted the entry: "William O. Douglas & Party" dated a few days before. Mr. Douglas had been there and gone. My timing was improving.

Following an ice-cold bath and a shave, I went to the palace to present my credentials and a letter of introduction from Mr. MacDonald to Tsen Tashi, the Maharajah's secretary and chief administrative officer.

The broad, green, well-cared for palace grounds were divided by several large buildings. The Maharajah's living quarters were in a modern mansion. Behind it was a big monastery with sleek black and gold walls. Behind that were the smaller administration buildings where Tashi worked.

He was a small, round-faced man with a worried expression and a slow, questioning smile. His office was piled high with books and papers and old *National Geographic* magazines. At first he was very cordial.

He is an expert photographer and several of his pictures of Tibet and Sikkim have been published in *Life* magazine. When he saw my pathetic little camera he began to cool. Certainly a big-shot American journalist should be better equipped than that! He'd never heard of the magazines I wrote for, and when I tried to question him about the local religions, the *Yeti,* and the lamas, he clammed up and his friendliness vanished. He couldn't, or wouldn't, even tell me the population of Sikkim or the conditions on the routes to the various monasteries.

By the time our interview was finished, a wall of indifference had sprung up around him. He took my border pass and stamped it: NOT FOR TRAVEL BEYOND GANGTOK.

As it turned out, the restriction on my pass didn't mean anything anyway. The Sikkim government couldn't hope to control all those mountains and jungles and keep unwanted foreigners out. I could go anywhere I pleased.

I looked the town over the next morning, visiting *chortens* and temples, wandering through the stalls and shops on the main street. They sold Tibetan prayer scarves, felt hats knocked out of shape and covered with hand embroidery, heavy boots made out of canvas and felt with thick rope soles, *kukris,* bolts of garishly colored cloth, bottles of *pachwai* and local liquors, mirrors, needles, and other little knickknacks. The grocery shops offered a few canned vegetables and boxes of British biscuits. There were several stalls selling nothing but those biscuits, so essential to morning and afternoon teatime.

Since that hazardous road from Kalimpong was the only line of communication with the outside world, jeeps, landrovers, and station wagons of prewar vintage were numerous. So were mules, horses, and ox-drawn wagons.

Above the bazaar a steep footpath led up to a big government building where sleepy little men in generals' uniforms lounged on the porches watching the handsome, tiny women tiptoeing down the hills to do their shopping with big baskets on their backs, suspended from cloth bands around their foreheads. A branch of this path linked with the road to the palace. Another branch joined a very old cobblestone trail that snaked around the mountain. It was in an impassable state of neglect, filled with holes and big sharp-edged stones turned on their sides so that it resembled a strip of giant sandpaper.

Back at the guest house I asked my *chowkidar* where it led.

"Tibet," he answered. "Old Lhasa road."

That afternoon I was trying to knock out some words when a messenger arrived with a note from the palace inviting me to have tea with the Maharajah.

Sikkim has a reasonably Democratic government, run by a small parliament of elected officials and men appointed by the Maharajah. He doesn't have the power he once had, and he has delegated most of his remaining responsibilities to his two young sons. Both have

good western educations and have introduced decent schools and medical facilities into the little country. Unlike the corruption-ridden lands of the Middle East, Sikkim is moving gracefully toward modernization while still retaining its own customs and exotic atmosphere. Electric power has been installed in Gangtok, and a primitive telephone system is now in operation, using army-type telephones which must be cranked before the receiver is picked up.

On the day of my appointment I walked up the hill to the palace just as a big black Rolls-Royce swooped out of the gates and headed down the mountainside. Natives along the road bowed low as it flashed by. In the back seat sat an old man in dark glasses, bundled in heavy robes. The Maharajah himself. My appointment turned out to be with one of his sons, *H.H. the Maharaj Kumar, P. T. Namgyal.*

A secretary took me around to the back of the palace. He led me through a high empty corridor to an enormous reception room furnished largely with modern overstuffed chairs, sofas, fine teakwood tables and cabinets inlaid with gold and ivory, huge vases of jade and ancient porcelain, and magnificent silken Tibetan tapestries on the walls.

Beforehand I had asked if there were any special formalities I should observe. "Just act natural," I was told.

After I had removed my raincoat and handed it to a servant, the young Maharaj entered. He was an alert man of about thirty, with a handsome, expressive face, dressed in a robe with trousers peeking out underneath and a shirt with a stiff Mandarin collar standing up around his neck. He shook my hand warmly and motioned for me to sit down as a servant brought in a tray of tea and biscuits.

There was no pomp or pretense about him.

"So you're the man who does the Indian rope trick?" he began, settling beside me on the sofa. He knew every detail of my fateful Delhi demonstration and had read everything published about me in the Indian papers. By getting me to talk about the trick, he put me at ease.

We chatted together for an hour. He was an extremely sincere and well-informed man and discussed knowingly the political situation in Egypt and Europe. He explained articulately Sikkim, its problems,

its government, and its people, and he sprayed the conversation with little anecdotes about the *Yeti* and the lamas, although he refused to say whether he believed in the *Yeti* himself.

"There are lamas who can do wonderful things," he said. "But they rarely perform before anyone. The only lama magicians we see here in Gangtok are fakes who are trying to make money from the superstitions of the people."

It was a charming, pleasant hour. When I left he walked with me to the door and gestured at Kanchanjanga.

"Our people believe the gods live there on the summit. A few months ago a British expedition succeeded in climbing it but we had to make them promise not to set foot on the very top, lest they anger the gods . . . and the lamas. They didn't."

He shook my hand again.

"I hope you find what you're looking for here, Mr. Keel," he declared. "Thank you for this interesting talk."

When I crossed the Lhasa road on the way back to the guest house I stopped and looked at it disappearing into the mist and mountains. I knew I had two alternatives. I could either head back to Kalimpong or I could try to plunge deeper into Sikkim. I decided on the latter. This was one road I had to explore.

I bought some more beans, sausages and a box of biscuits, packed my knapsack, and early the next morning I started out alone over the crumbling cobblestones, out of Gangtok, through the wet fog.

Chapter Fourteen

Mystery on the Roof of the World

This was the road to Oz, with a hundred wonderful wizards (and a couple of wicked witches) waiting at the end of it in places even more incredible than the Emerald City. A road peopled with dark, mysterious lamas and bright, happy, beautiful women instead of tin woodmen, brainless scarecrows, and cowardly lions. A road lifting up over orchid-laden hills, weaving through thick jungles, spanning swirling rivers spiked by the monsoons, with isolated temples decaying by the wayside next to fantastically weird paintings spattered on the sheer bald cliffs—paintings of ugly demons designed to frighten off any evil spirits which might be heading toward Gangtok.

It was a beautiful place to die.

Every few minutes I had to rest my stinging lungs and when I sat beside that road I thought about dying because in a place like that you feel closer to death, yet you are somehow closer to life, too. You are suspended somewhere between Heaven and Earth, where reality is a dream and dreams are a reality.

The road shot upward, above Gangtok, past abandoned shacks and *chortens,* joining the modern road in some places, then looping away

over its own rugged course, detouring around a guarded check point, up past the dingy stone building that was the Gangtok jail, on into northern Sikkim, on to the secret monasteries, on to Lhasa.

I chuckled as I remembered what my *chowkidar* in Gangtok had told me that morning when I asked about finding a guide.

"Guide? You need no guide. Sikkim very safe. Very easy to find way. To reach lamaseries just follow old road. Very simple."

While I sat on a rock by that road, gasping from a long, hard morning of climbing, a wisp of low hanging cloud drifted off, and I saw one of those lamaseries, a somber red-roofed pimple, just above me. Its wizened face surveyed the Himalayas for a brief moment, then the clouds closed in again. I stood up, sucked in a lungful of the thin air, and started up the few remaining yards. Overhead the deep gray skies growled with a threat of rain. Lightning, Sikkim's trade-mark, snapped across the horizon.

A path lined with prayer scarves led up to the lamasery from the road. Halfway down it a very short, emaciated monk was standing, waiting for me. He wore a bright orange robe and there was a big smile on his pock-marked face. He seemed to have been expecting me. I thought he must have sighted me when I was down below.

As I approached I clasped my hands together in the usual Indian greeting. He nooded, grabbed my hand and shook it enthusiastically western style. He was a deaf mute and didn't make a sound as he led me up toward the worn old building with the corners of its tile roof curling up like dragons' tongues.

Hundreds of unbathed men had been living inside the lamasery for centuries and each succeeding generation had added a little more to the filth and squalor. The smell was overwhelming, thanks to the crude sewer system; a shallow trough running along the edges of the corridors.

The place seemed deserted when we entered. Then I heard a dry, sick cough coming from far inside. As we walked along the dank, black halls we passed numerous cells and could hear low voices mumbling the eternal prayer: *"Om mani padmi hum."*

We turned a corner and started down a wide hallway lined with grotesque relics. Ancient weapons leaned against the wall and rusty

tridents, such as the *sadhus* carry, lay in the dust. Along one side was a shallow shelf lined with yellow bowls, some of which still had bits of green, moldy food in them. The lamas ate out of them on special occasions.

They were the upper parts of human skulls!

The whole place reeked with dreary decay. It was hard to think of it as a place of devotion and worship.

Finally we came to a low, narrow door. My guide opened it, motioned for me to enter, then pulled back into the shadows. I found myself in a large room with incense smoldering on a low altar in front of a statue of Buddha. The walls were draped with sheets of frayed old silk covered with religious symbols.

An elderly lama wearing a tight skullcap stood by a small window. He looked at me with deep, sad eyes, and his wrinkled face slowly contorted into a smile. He raised one hand like a red Indian saying "How?"

"Welcome. We have been expecting you," he said in strained English, gesturing for me to sit down.

Astonished, I squatted on a cushion on the cold, hard floor.

"Are you the Grand Lama here?" I asked.

He shook his head slowly, and sat down cross-legged on a low bench covered with a pale red cushion.

"The Grand Lama died again last year."

"Again?"

"We are waiting for him to be reincarnated. Sometimes it takes a few years. Meanwhile, I am the chief lama."

"I'm an American . . ." I began. "I'm traveling to Thangu, looking for. . . ."

"I know," he said softly, smiling. "You are a journalist, believing we lamas are mere counterparts to the fakirs in the plains below."

I gulped in amazement and fumbled automatically with my camera.

"How. . . . Have you heard of me from Gangtok?"

"We rarely hear from Gangtok." He looked at my camera. "The light here is much too dim for pictures."

I put the camera away.

The door opened and several other old lamas trooped in silently and sat around the room, their faces expressionless.

"Do you have an oracle or a sorcerer here who can perform some of the wonders I've heard about . . . ?"

"You are not seeking 'wonders.' You seek answers. We have none for you here. We believe in the wonders of the human spirit, in *tantrism*. But in the north there is a great lama who can do strange things. I myself have sat at his feet and seen him float in the air. He would like to meet you, I'm sure."

"Where in the north?"

"You must find him your own way, I'm afraid. . . ."

A young lama came in with cups of bitter tea.

"What's this lama's name?"

"He is known as Nyang-Pas. Most of his life he spends alone in the mountains. He will be hard to find."

I entered the name in my notebook, asked a few questions that drew unsatisfactory answers, then shifted the subject.

"You say you were expecting me. How?"

The old lama smiled and rose.

"Come, I'll show you."

I followed him out into the corridor, with the other lamas behind me, to a small room where several men sat in meditation, some spinning prayer wheels, others with their eyes closed and heads bowed.

"These men are in constant contact with the outside world," the lama explained. "They have mastered *linga sharrira.* They can project their minds to other places."

He tapped one of them lightly on the shoulder and asked him a question in Sikkimese. The lama blinked open his eyes and gave a long, detailed answer.

"He says he has been in the northern village of Lachen. The sun is shining and a house is on fire. The whole village is fighting to put it out."

I noted this in my pad. This was something I might be able to check on later. I did. It was true! There had been a fire that week!

"Can you teach me the principles of *linga sharrira?*" I asked eagerly.

"It would take too long. You must master the simpler steps first. These men have studied and concentrated for years."

In nearly all the lamaseries I subsequently visited I found at least one lama who was practicing telepathy or *linga sharrira.* The lamas were willing to discuss their practices with me, but language difficulties narrowed the scope of my findings considerably.

Actual trickery, sleight of hand, is unknown to the lamas. Nearly all of their wonders center around the mastery of the mind and its untapped powers. Before this begins to read like one of those ads in a cheap magazine about "You can learn the wisdom of the ancients!" let me add that much of their *tantrism* is ineffectual. Superstitious bunk. Autosuggestion, what we call "self-hypnosis," plays a big role in their techniques. They battle hunger and cold by telling themselves they have feasted or that they're warm. They have strong visual imaginations. When they make their lonely treks through the snows to the holy places high in the mountains wearing only loincloths, they don't freeze because they concentrate on fire and warmth. Their minds are so sharply keyed that their bodies warm themselves on these mental images.

Hypnotism is virtually unknown in India and the Himalayas. I was always on the lookout for a native hypnotist but never succeeded in finding one. The once popular theory that the rope trick is done by mass hypnosis is scientifically impossible. You can't hypnotize someone against his will, without his knowing it. And if you could do tricks with hypnotism, why stop at the rope trick? You could make whole buildings seem to disappear!

A certain Colonel Bernard, once the Commissioner of Police in Calcutta, is supposed to have taken a picture of the rope trick, and when the film was developed it showed the rope inert at the fakir's feet, with the boy squatting beside it. I went through a lot of trouble trying to check that story but I could never find anyone in Calcutta who had even seen the picture. A hypnotist who could do tricks in this way would certainly become world famous. Thus far none have emerged.

However, since the lamas spend so much time meditating and

digging in the recesses of their minds, self-hypnosis is a logical discovery. Western hypnotists can make their subjects believe they are being burned, and even cause their skins to blister. So it's not illogical to assume the lamas can hypnotize themselves into thinking they're warm or well fed.

I spent the night in a tiny, cold monk's cell. The next morning, in a large room smelling of incense and decorated with gruesome devil-chasing paintings, I had breakfast with the elder lamas. Two cups of sour tea and a mush made of barley. They discussed the *Yeti* unenthusiastically, passing on some intriguing information. There were, they said, two kinds of these animals. The large ones, ranging from five to twelve feet in height, were known as *Yilmus* or *Meteys*. These were the kind found in the vicinity of Kanchanjanga. And the small ones, the size of a half-grown child, were called *Chumis* or *Chuteys*. They lived further north. *Yilmus* had been sighted frequently around the mountain and south of Gangtok, where I had first come upon the mysterious tracks. So I decided to break away from the Lhasa trail and head westward.

The old lama assigned the deaf mute to guide me further along my route. It was raining gently and foggy, as always. The Lhasa road disintegrated entirely after a few more miles and we turned off onto a narrow westbound trail heading in the direction of Kanchanjanga.

Presently we emerged from a thick forest on the edge of a barren valley thinly vegetated with strange dark flowers growing up through the rocks. My guide took one look at it and motioned we should detour around its perimeter. He seemed afraid of that empty valley and his fear made me so curious I started into it alone. He caught up with me after a few yards, grabbed my arm, and pointed to one of the flowers growing next to the path. It was shaped like a monk's hood, big and hollow, with a tough stem digging into the bare rocks.

Unable to understand what he was trying to say, I picked it and started to smell it. He jerked it out of my hands and stomped on it. Suddenly I realized what was wrong.

Those flowers were nightshade, the poisonous plant whose scent

can be fatal! The whole valley was filled with them. We were probably already breathing the dangerous pollen.

We made a hasty retreat out of that valley of death and looped around it while I thought about the poisoned poppy field that put Dorothy and her companions to sleep on the road to Oz. All I needed was a wicked witch to complete the picture. She turned up soon enough, for *dhamis,* witches, are as thick as leeches in those hidden valleys.

My mute guide left me at a little lamasery above the village of Dikchu, about fifteen miles beyond Gangtok. I spent only an hour there. It was a drab place consisting of a small temple surrounded by shacks where the lamas lived and worked. The head lama spoke no English and it took him only a few minutes to show me around. After a cup of tea with the lamas, I continued on my way down into the little village. There I had a dinner of *tukpa,* a kind of noodle soup, in a little stall, and performed a few tricks for the curious crowd gathered around me. I made a big impression and several of the natives held a conference, came to a decision, and led me through the village to a little shack. In front of it was a human skull filled with dirt with a little plant growing in it.

"Dhami!" An old man tried to explain, pointing first at the skull and then at a worried looking young native who stared at the plant in terror.

The door of the hut was locked but I understood there was a witch living inside. They wanted me to meet her. I beat on the door but there was no answer. All of these villages have a *dhami,* a female witch doctor who dispenses love potions, chases evil spirits and, sometimes, levels a few curses of her own. Most of them shied away from me. But I learned enough about them to realize they had no real tricks, merely relying on ignorance, superstition, and the widespread beliefs in good and evil spirits.

While I banged on the door the worried young man kept his eyes fixed on that skull. I was picking up enough of their language to figure out the gist of what they were trying to tell me.

The *dhami* had put a curse on the youth. When the plant in the skull withered and died, he would die too! It was purely the power

of suggestion. The young man watched the plant daily with growing fear, sick with worry, unable to eat. When it started to die he would probably fret to death.

Turning away from the door, I pulled my tiny plastic wand from my pocket and made a couple of "magical" passes over the skull. Then I picked it up with a dramatic flourish, wrenched the plant out by the roots, and ground it under my boots.

The young man turned pale and rocked back on his feet while everyone gasped with alarm. But he didn't drop dead. After a stunned moment, he realized he was all right and broke into a grateful grin. Then the awed, excited crowd became very still.

The door was creeping open and a dark face was peeking out!

Jamming my foot into the opening, I threw my shoulder against it and forced my way into the hut. It was one small room with a crude table in the center. Shelves along the walls were sagging with bottles filled with murky liquids. Assorted yak tails, rhino horns, and the implements of witchcraft were scattered all over. The witch herself cowered in a dark corner, studying me with wide, frightened eyes.

Somehow I had expected an old hag with a wart on her nose. But this was no hag! It was a lovely girl, not older than twenty-five. Her glossy black hair was drawn back and tied in a tight knot. Her face had a waxen beauty, with thick, well-formed lips and dark eyes.

As I stood there awkwardly I became almost embarrassed, feeling like an intruder. I managed to stifle a smile and assume a hard, menacing look, stepping over to her while palming the wooden egg I used for a handkerchief trick. The silent crowd pressed around the doorway, watching the whole comic scene breathlessly.

I made some clucking sounds, trying to tell them the witch was an old hen. Then I produced the egg from her knot of hair. She cried and ran to another corner, trembling and sobbing. The crowd burst into laughter, laughter that must have stung deep into her.

Feeling a little sorry now for what I'd done, I stepped outside and shut the door behind me. The witch of Dikchu was disgraced forever.

It was late afternoon before I got started again. Two dozen

villagers walked with me to the next lamasery and gave me a big build-up to the head lama. I had to perform my tricks for the lamas, there were about thirty of them, in a long narrow room filled with smiling Buddhas and frowning devils. Then I joined them for supper—more tea and mush—and spent the night there. The next morning I continued westward on the road to Kanchanjanga, deeper and deeper into the roof of the world.

Every hill in Sikkim is crowned with a lamasery, a nunnery or a hermitage of some sort. I couldn't possibly visit them all, so I selected the biggest and most colorful ones on my route, and tried not to linger in the little villages. This was difficult because the people were very friendly and hospitable when they realized I wasn't a prying missionary out to reform them, or a pompous government official, swollen with self-importance, expecting to be treated like a royal personage.

Before long news of my approach ranged far ahead of me and I was often greeted by whole villages and mobs of monks, many of whom had never seen a tall, bony, pale white man before. It didn't seem unusual that I should be roaming the border of Tibet alone. In fact, it was that other world outside the Himalayas that seemed isolated and remote now, like a place I'd once dreamed about. I was so busy keeping notes, taking pictures, entertaining natives with sleight of hand and being entertained by them, that I rarely had any sense of isolation or danger. Usually friendly lamas accompanied me from place to place, treating me with such humility and sincerity it was often hard to keep from developing a little of the "great man" pose I hated so much.

Life in the monasteries was monotonous and dull and dirty, and when I stumbled occasionally onto *dak* bungalows they were like first-class hotels to me. Homosexuality was rampant in the lamaseries, and I frequently saw Buddhist nuns nursing babies. The majority of the lamas were withered, emaciated men with cold, conspiring faces. Frequent smallpox epidemics had left most of them with pitted cheeks. Their religion seemed to be a means for survival, rather than an excuse.

In many of the villages sick natives came to me for treatment although about all I could do was hand out aspirin tablets. Once I lanced the pus-swollen jaw of a poor woman with a badly ulcerated tooth. All I had to work with was a common sewing needle. The swelling went down and her pain was temporarily relieved. If I had had a pair of pliers I would have tried to pull the tooth, but such tools were unknown there.

The village *dhamis* usually avoided me, as did the few wandering lama "sorcerers" who cashed in on the celebrated mysteries of *tantrism* by delivering forceful lectures claiming they could do supernatural things. They never demonstrated, but the natives believed them . . . and supported them, hoping to be favored with a miracle or two.

The name Nyang-Pas was well known but few people had ever seen him and none knew where he was. Likewise, everyone was filled with tales about the *Yeti* but only a handful claimed to have ever seen one.

One thing was quickly apparent. These hill people were both honest and intelligent. They quickly grasped what I tried to say with sign language and my meager vocabulary of Sikkimese. They never lied to me or tried to cheat me. The poorest among them were anxious to share their last bit of barley or rice with me. Their oldest and wisest men traveled for miles through the jungle to meet me and try to help me in my search for the great lama and the *Yeti.*

In some of the monasteries I found learned men who spoke English or German or even Finnish. At one I was shown a very old Victrola and spent an evening listening to scratchy records from the 1920's. Often the lamas told me they knew I was coming through telepathy. And sometimes when I was walking along the trails alone I had the uneasy sensation of being watched, of having hidden eyes scratch at the back of my neck. This, I decided, was the result of one of three things: My imagination was at work, a *Yeti* or some other animal was following me, or a *linga sharrira* was keeping a mental eye on my progress. In the jungles of Africa or Central India I would have laughed at the last two explanations. But in Sikkim they seemed very plausible.

Everyone kept telling me I was in *Yeti* territory, that I would certainly see one. But the only tracks I came across were bear or ape spoor. Then one night I heard the *Yeti's* sea-gullish cry, found its tracks, and chased it over some of the most rugged terrain on the face of the earth.

It began at the picturesque monastery of Dubdi in the northwest of Sikkim, a beautiful, peaceful place near a quiet little lake on the summit of a hill covered with fir trees. The lamas had given me a bare little monk's cell for the night and I was sitting there trying to finish up some notes before going to bed. The cry came drifting across the Yuk-Sam plateau on the low, icy wind sweeping down from the frosty head of Mount Kanchanjanga, only a few miles away.

At first I thought it was just a bird and didn't pay much attention to it. Then a flurry of activity sounded in the dark, smelly corridor and the old high lama of Dubdi, a wizened, baggy-eyed little man, appeared in my doorway.

"You hear?" he asked excitedly.

"Hear? It was just a bird, wasn't it?"

"No bird. *Shukpa!*"

Two lamas carrying a long ceremonial trumpet rushed past. I jumped to my feet and grabbed my flashlight as they set up a deep, booming moan outside and prayer drums started thudding in the nearby temple to frighten the *Yeti* away. Swarms of lamas and nuns from the neighboring convent were pouring into the temple to pray, their pockmarked faces grimly set with consternation and fear.

The high lama followed me worriedly outside. Black clouds were dragging tendrils of lightning across the shadowy peaks, and giant weeping cypresses laid a curtain of darkness across the plateau. The lamas stared at me. From the temple came the low mumble of many voices and the rattling click of prayer wheels.

For a moment I stood in the emptiness indecisively, not knowing in which direction to start searching. It was too dark and the trails were too treacherous to try to go out there alone. Reluctantly I turned back toward the doorway. The old lama looked relieved and went on to the temple.

The trumpets moaned at regular intervals for the rest of the night and in the morning, when I resolved to go looking for whatever had made the sound, the black clouds had turned gray and a thin, damp fog had settled.

As I hauled on my heavy pack and got ready to start for the base of Kanchanjanga, some twenty-five miles away, the high lama appointed a young monk named Norbhu to guide me. He was a lively, perpetually smiling boy with a mouthful of horsy yellow teeth.

Leaving Dubdi, we proceeded through dense, quiet forests, past a great white *chorten* about fifty feet high, the biggest one I had seen in Sikkim. Now and then we came to clearings where we could see the spectacular blue and silver backdrop of the mountains. Rising above the fog, I kept my eyes open for any *Yeti* footprints. Norbhu guessed what I was looking for and always tried to hurry me on when I stopped to examine some spoor along the trail. He didn't want to tangle with any *Yeti.*

However, he did lead me to a lonely hermit's cell carved out of a big rock where a ragged old lama proudly showed me a skull about the size of a human's and a piece of gray fur. He assured me they were parts of a dead *Yeti* and refused to sell them at any price.

Later, in other monasteries, I was shown other bits of fur and bone, supposedly from a *Yeti.* At one I was shown a wrinkled piece of brown flesh drawn over a stick. This lamasery, which the lamas called Kat-su-pari, was in a state of uproar when we arrived.

Two monks claimed they had spotted a *Yeti* earlier in the day. It was apparently on its way to Kanchanjanga on some mysterious errand. I talked with the men who had seen it. They were both middle-aged, intelligent, and sincere. One of the elder lamas spoke a little German and translated for me.

They said the *Yeti* was moving up the trail on the other side of the lake, traveling on all fours like a bear. But they were positive it was no bear. It was a dark brown and had an ugly red face.

Over Norbhu's worried protests, I had them show me the trail. There were several tracks in the mud leading off through the woods westward. Accompanied by several lamas, I took off after them. My only plan was to take pictures of it, if possible, and then make a fast

retreat. If I could become the first white man to see and to photograph an Abominable Snowman, my wallet's thin days would be over. From the widening gaps in the smeared spoor I knew the animal was on the run and wasn't likely to try to ambush us. The lamas had probably worried it.

Darkness moved in quickly. There were no signs of the *Yeti* ahead. Only gloomy black forest and great stumps of stone. The lamas turned back, and Norbhu pleaded with me to go with them. When I refused he wearily decided to stick with me. We came upon a *chorten* and spent the night in the deserted shack next to it. Shortly after we settled, and Norbhu had rigged a makeshift lock on the door, it started to thunder and rain heavily.

Then, in the middle of that night, I heard the *Yeti's* cry for the second time! It came from very close by, loud and shrill . . . and terrifying.

Norbhu sat numb with panic, while I tried to analyze the sound and figure out its direction. It faded slowly away until there was nothing but the sound of the rain on the thatched roof. In my notebook I scribbled: "July 29, 1955. 3:35 A.M. Sound of *Yeti* in darkness. Exact position unknown. Roughly, lat. 28°, long. 88°, about 20° N. Kat-su-pari. Distance unknown. Weather: Thunderstorm, heavy rain. Sound like a bird very near, short chirps with slight warble. Similar to monkey chatter but higher pitched and less defined."

In the morning it was still raining. We were both tired, having slept very little. But after a breakfast of tea and biscuits we were off again, Norbhu still protesting.

The rain had washed away most of the tracks. The trees were thinning out and the hills were becoming steep, rocky cliffs. By noon it looked as if we had lost the *Yeti* . . . or he had lost us.

Then suddenly we came across a level clearing caked with mud and covered with broad, water-filled footprints. The animal had walked in circles there, and maybe slept.

As I moved up the trail, Norbhu shouted at me and pointed to another trail leading northward. There was spoor on both trails!

There must have been *two Yetis*. They'd met in the clearing, looked each other over, and then followed separate paths.

It didn't take me long to decide which to pursue. The westward track headed for the barren glaciers of Kanchanjanga. I wasn't equipped to do any serious mountain climbing. A few more miles westward and I would have to turn back anyway. The northward trail, on the other hand, led along the edge of the mountain basin, back toward the jungles and hospitable monasteries and villages.

So we turned north.

The tracks were clear and spaced at a leisurely pace. Whether this was the same animal we had followed up from Dubdi, I couldn't tell. But it was definitely not an ape or a bear, and the prints were much too big to have been made by a barefooted man.

By early evening we were back in a thick forest. The only living thing we'd seen, aside from those bloodthirsty leeches, was a catlike animal watching us from a tree. Then suddenly, from somewhere in front of us, there was a sharp animal scream; brief, filled with tearing pain. Norbhu jumped a foot. Then there was only silence and the drip of water on the leaves overhead.

A little further on a group of natives appeared and led us to their village on the brink of a narrow river. They'd heard the scream, too. It was a panther, they said. A dying panther. Something about this terrible sound in the normally peaceful jungles had caused them to come out to investigate. They had found a bloody spot surrounded by *Yeti* tracks! They were rushing back to their village when they bumped into us.

Could a *Yeti* kill a panther, I asked?

It was one of the few things that could.

Norbhu turned back to Dubdi, and I proceeded alone. The trail was easy to follow; too easy. The *Yeti* was more agile and faster than a plodding white man. True to what the lamas had told me repeatedly, the *Yeti* was picking the easiest route to wherever it was going, avoiding more difficult jungle areas, picking the shallowest spots in rivers, etc. Sometimes it seemed as if I were right on top of him. Other times I seemed to have no chance of finding it.

I found villages and lamaseries in a state of alert and fear after having heard or seen my prey. All the descriptions ran the same. It was three or four feet taller than myself, covered with brown hair, with a hairless red face and a head that sloped up to a slight point.

At a monastery above Changthang, the lamas were beating drums and blowing trumpets when I arrived. They'd seen the *Yeti* only a few hours before, running along the trail I was following. I lingered there awhile because they had an interesting oracle who was supposed to be able to summon up ghosts and do strange things. He put on a special demonstration for me in a little temple dimly lighted with oil lamps. About fifty lamas gathered and sat twirling prayer wheels while he went into a trance in front of a huge Buddha. He sat cross-legged, his mouth open, his head thrown back, his eyes closed, mumbling incoherent phrases over and over.

After fifteen or twenty minutes of this, things started to happen. The flame of one of the lamps wavered and went out as if a wind had blown it. Something thumped loudly on the roof overhead, then a small stool in a corner of the temple started to move slowly across the floor toward me. It came within a foot of me and then slowly circled around me. I passed my hands all around it. There didn't seem to be any threads or mechanisms of any kind. It was just a plain three-legged stool. It moved on to another corner and stopped. Later I examined it carefully but couldn't find any sign of trickery.

I was sitting well away from the others, yet I suddenly felt someone tug on the edge of my raincoat, pulling so hard he, or it, almost dragged me over the floor. Then it stopped and the oracle collapsed forward.

There was no explanation for these things. I thought I knew all the tricks of the phony western Mediums, but this demonstration stymied me. The oracle was a quiet, uncommunicative young man and didn't furnish me with a single clue.

Following the hot and cold *Yeti* trail, I arrived at last in the northern village of Lachen, 8,800 feet above sea level, where the natives grabbed me excitedly and led me through the tortuous passes to a marsh. A *Yeti* . . . my *Yeti,* no doubt . . . had been seen there

by a group of children that very morning. The place was crawling with spoor. As I stood looking down at them an eerie screech drifted down from the jutting rocks nearby. The effect on the natives was electric. They were stunned and frightened; only my presence kept them from running. They watched me with alarmed curiosity, wondering what I was going to do.

I was wondering, too.

Cautiously I moved forward, staggering up an inclined path strewn with giant boulders. Finally I emerged onto the edge of a sweeping cavity filled with water, where broken trees and decayed bushes poked up like skeletons.

That was where I saw it!

Maybe it wasn't a *Yeti.* I wasn't close enough to be absolutely sure. But *something* was out there, across the lake. Something big, breath-takingly big, and brown, and moving swiftly, splashing through the shallow, icy waters toward a pile of boulders. As it neared them, another brown blur moved out to meet it and together they disappeared beyond the debris of a landfall.

The natives saw it too. They were as excited as I was. Was it a bear, I asked? They shook their heads. Was it an ape? They shook their heads again. Then they started to draw back toward Lachen, begging me to come with them.

But I wanted a closer look. That was it, pure and simple. After coming all this way I wasn't going to turn back without trying to get one.

Hesitant, I stood alone there on that windswept, ghostlike basin, then I steeled myself, circled it and headed cautiously up through the rocks and landfalls. In a few minutes I came to a narrow channel in the cliffs. At the far end I could see a small, protected alcove. The *Yetis'* lair?

With growing apprehension, I approached it, expecting a furry monster to spring at me from behind the rocks any instant. There were no longer any wind sounds; just the scraping of my boots on the hard rock, and the rasping wheeze of my breath.

Suddenly the high-pitched *Yeti* chirp sounded again and I froze.

It was coming not from the alcove, but from the cliffs overhead. The *Yetis* were up there somewhere, watching me, jeering me!

I hugged the side of the channel and looked up. High above me there was a quick movement. A flash of brown against the gray sky. Then only stillness and haunted emptiness.

The *Yetis* must have climbed straight up the sheer face of the cliffs; something no bear or ape could do easily.

Now the fear I had seen and heard in those mountains was coiling around me. A desolate sense of defeat came over me. I knew I couldn't climb those cliffs. I knew I couldn't get near those clever, evasive animals alone, unarmed. I stood there tensely for a long time, watching and waiting, aware of hidden eyes glued to me. Then I slowly backed out of that channel.

That was as close as I ever got to the Abominable Snowmen.

The next day I hiked around the lake again, to the north trail to Thangu, the last stop before Tibet, 12,800 feet above sea level, where there's one final *dak* bungalow on a cold, dreary peak dominated by the greater mountains of the mysterious land of the lamas.

Past the 10,000 feet level I suffered from *la-druk* and when I discovered, up beyond those cliffs, some naked challenging *Yeti* prints, I just didn't care any more. When I got back to Lachen I had an attack of dysentery and all of my pills didn't help. My cold and *la-druk* had weakened me and the dysentery was the finishing touch. I ran a fever and was too weak to walk, or write, or even think.

That hike through the mountains had been exciting but painfully arduous. In less than two weeks I had gone from one end of Oz to the other. I had seen the peaceful valleys and the turbulent mountains. I had studied the mysteries of the lamas, the enigma of the *Yeti,* and I had written a couple of good stories around my experiences. But I still hadn't met the wizard of Oz, Nyang-Pas. My encounter with him was still before me, the climax to the adventure.

In Lachen, I managed to hire a sway-backed old horse and its owner to take me back over the shortest possible route to Gangtok. Every inch of the way was agony, racked with fever, hunger and

cold. I looked apathetically at the still unexplored monasteries on the hills, and tried to smile and be polite to the natives who flocked around me in the villages. But nothing was the same. My bolt was shot.

That return trip was only a hazy nightmare until I reached the *dak* bungalow at Singhik, less than twenty miles from Gangtok. While I was resting and suffering there, sitting with my head cradled wearily in my arms, thinking of the big steak I intended to polish off in Firpo's when I reached Calcutta, a timid little lama knocked at the door.

"*Shree* Keel, you have been seeking me?" he said in perfect English.

"Who are you?" I asked blearily, surprised. He was about five feet tall, dressed in a thick woolen robe with a hood pulled over his head, almost covering his wrinkled, pocked face.

"I am Nyang-Pas."

I snapped out of my lethargy and jumped up.

"I'll say I've been seeking you! How did you find me?"

"It was easy. Your trail is wide." He smiled. He acted very shy, almost embarrassed; the mark of a man who spends most of his life alone.

I asked him to sit down in a chair but he preferred to squat cross-legged on the floor.

"I'm not used to chairs," he explained.

"I have been watching your progress . . ." he continued.

"How? Through *linga sharrira?*" I asked.

He smiled again.

"I see you have learned something here."

I offered him a cup of instant coffee. He took one sip, shuddered, and gulped the whole thing down like a glass of bad whisky.

During the next hour we talked about Sikkim and the lamaseries and Tibet. He said he was originally from Tibet, and now spent his life alone in the hills of Bhutan and Sikkim, searching for the "right ways."

"They tell me you're a great *Siddha,*" I said at last.

He wrinkled his brows and looked down at the floor.

"No . . . no, I am just a simple lama. What you mean is that I'm a magician. I am not. I only practice the teachings of my religion."

I described the mysterious seance at Changthang, and my experiences with the telepathic lamas.

"Those are primitive things," he said with disdain. "Our teachings go beyond such crude things."

"Can you show me something . . . teach me something. . . ."

"It would take you a lifetime of solitude . . . but perhaps. . . ." He scrutinized me thoughtfully. "Perhaps I can introduce you to the principles. . . ."

He struggled to his feet, pressed one hand on the top of his stick, a heavy branch about four feet long, frowned a little with effort, and then *slowly lifted his legs up off the floor until he was sitting cross-legged in the air!*

There was nothing behind him or under him. His sole support was his stick, which he seemed to use to keep his balance. I was astounded.

"Can you teach me this?" I asked hopefully.

"No . . . it is not something you can learn overnight. It is a matter of will."

He conducted the rest of our conversation sitting there in empty space.

"But there are other things . . . basic things . . . for example . . . think of an object . . . some common thing you might find here in Sikkim. Try to clear your mind of all other thoughts and concentrate on that one object."

I thought of a tree. He gazed deep into my eyes and smiled.

"That is too easy. You're thinking of a tree. Try something difficult."

Astonished, I silently focused my mind on a pair of felt Tibetan boots.

"Now you are thinking of a pair of boots," he declared.

"But how . . ." I began. "Can you teach me to do *that?*"

"No. I can't teach you. You must learn it for yourself with prac-

tice. After you've mastered it you can go on to more difficult things and perhaps one day become a *linga sharrira.*"

His instructions were as simple as the nonsense the fakirs of Banaras had given me, but in this case they worked! First, he said, I had to cleanse my mind of all thoughts and concentrate entirely on my subject. If the subject is a reasonably intelligent person, able to visualize strongly the object he is thinking of, an image of that object would pop into my mind. In most cases I would see several different objects but I should seize upon the first one. It was as uncomplicated as that.

(After I left Sikkim, I made it a policy to try this on everyone I met. For a long time it was sheer guesswork and I was always wrong. But recently I've been getting surprising results. Unfortunately, however, few people are good subjects. They are unable to concentrate properly, they don't take the experiment seriously, or they are so skeptical they have a mental block which prevents them from projecting a thought. Disciplined people with a higher education, such as doctors, military men, and newspapermen, are impossible subjects. Sensitive people like actors, artists, and poets, people with strong visual imaginations, make the best subjects.)

The object must be *visualized.* Words can't be intercepted by a novice telepath. And disciplined people tend to think more in words than in images. They might think: "A purple cow wearing a green brassiere." It is impossible for a novice to pick up such a thought. But if they merely visualize a cow in their minds, the novice might be able to catch it.

According to Nyang-Pas, the technique for *linga sharrira* is equally simple. You just need to relax completely, concentrating on a road you know well. Follow that road mentally, visualizing every detail, until you reach a point where your personal knowledge ends. Then try to continue beyond that point. If the experiment succeeds, and it probably won't, you can see things, places, and people beyond the scope of your knowledge, and events happening at the moment of the experiment.

This takes a very high form of concentration, separating mental

vision from the body, and though there are authenticated cases of it in the West (where it is known as projection of an etheric double), it remains primarily a mystery of the lamas.

Their other mysteries aren't so readily explainable. Some lamas, called *lung-gumpas,* practice the art of traveling with the speed of wind. Others are supposed to be able to create objects, animals, and ghosts (*tulpas*) through concentration. This is probably another form of autosuggestion. The lama concentrates, telling himself he is going to produce the image of a god, say, and after awhile he believes he actually sees one.

One lama told me the way to vanish into thin air is to make the mind a complete blank. (If this is true, then I know several people who should have disappeared long ago.) He didn't say how to reappear.

These were the chief things Nyang-pas and I talked about. He convinced me that there are many powers and mysteries of the mind which we skeptical westerners will never be able to penetrate or utilize.

When he climbed down from his perch in space he wished me luck, gave me advice about my health, and promised me good fortune. I begged him to stay with me, to accompany me to Gangtok, but he said:

"It's too big a place for me. I am a solitary man, *Shree* Keel."

He walked to the door.

"I hope I have answered some of your questions. And I hope you will never stop asking questions."

"Is there any way I can find you again . . . if I come back?" I asked.

"If you come back, *I* will find *you.*"

Those were his last words. He turned and started off through the fog, the orchids, and the heaps of bare rocks. A cold wind swept over me and sent me back to the blazing fireplace. We'd talked for about two hours. God only knows how far he had traveled to spend those two hours with me.

The next day I was in Dikchu. The day after that I was in Gang-

tok again, where I immediately landed a seat on a mail truck back to Kalimpong. The road was reopened but it was a rough four-hour ride. Within a week I was back in Calcutta, mailing my stories, eating steaks, and making a fast recovery.

In another week I was out of India. The land of fakirs and *jadoo* and Oz was behind me. I was crossing 1,500 miles of water to Singapore.

Chapter Fifteen

Stay Out of Singapore

India had welcomed me with a riot in Bombay, and now in Calcutta it was saying good-by with another one; waving me off with a brandished fist and a hurled rock. This time the dockworkers were making the fuss, striking for more rice in their bowls. They were gathered along the waterfront in great shouting mobs, spitting at the taxicabs that struggled through their picket lines to the "go downs."

My ship was a hulking cargo vessel bound for Rangoon, Singapore, and Hong Kong, crowded with wealthy Chinese and Indians. Once more I was the only "European" on board, sharing a cabin with two young Indian officials on their way to a post on the island of Sumatra. One of them was married and his wife and child were aboard, traveling in a separate cabin. His wife was a very attractive girl who made a habit of entering our cabin without knocking, frequently catching me in my ragged, travel-worn underwear. The other official was a sensitive boy in his early twenties leaving India for the first time. He cried himself to sleep every night.

To add to my enjoyment of the trip, the food was terrible. Boiled vegetables and bloody roast beef that tasted like filet-of-saddle day in and day out. I contracted food poisoning on the second day just as we ran into a severe storm that even made the Indian crew seasick. I stayed in my cabin and lived on tea and biscuits until we reached Rangoon, Burma.

Except for the riot at the docks, my exit from India was quiet. No one came to see me off. No one knew I was going. The Himalayan trek had knocked several pounds off my weight, pounds I couldn't afford to lose, and given me a touch of virus. My health, which was never too good, was completely shot. I suffered from chronic headaches. My stomach was more tender than ever. I was in grim shape but expected to recuperate in Singapore before starting out on the long island-hopping journey across the Pacific to America and home.

We docked for four days in Rangoon harbor. I stayed ashore most of the time, exploring the fringes of Burma, and trying to find a decent meal in Rangoon's few restaurants. It was a city where men wore colored skirts and women smoked cigars. A dirty, primitive city, dominated by magnificent gold-coated pagodas, together with huge statues of demons and gods and Buddhas. An electric traffic light was newly installed in the main intersection of the town and people lined the streets to watch it in operation, while police in white sun helmets patiently tried to explain the meaning of the red and green lights to the pedicab drivers and bicyclists.

In the park near the 326-feet-high Shwedagon pagoda (where four hairs from the sacred head of Lord Buddha are supposed to be buried) I stumbled onto a gruesome demonstration by a beautiful young female snake charmer. She turned a twelve foot, unshaven cobra loose in the grass, sat down in front of it and carefully hitched her way toward it. It reared up, hissing and watching her coldly. She carefully brought her head forward, while everyone held their breath, and pressed her lips against the snake's mouth for a long kiss.

This snake-kissing is an art confined exclusively to Burma. It is practiced by pretty young girls who take a two-year course in the

"School for Snake Charmers" at the village of Nagale. Once they have learned it they make a good living, albeit a short one.

They begin their training with nonpoisonous reptiles, learning to overcome their natural abhorrence of snakes by holding them firmly and kissing them firmly on the mouth. Then they graduate to old, shaven cobras; sitting in front of the upraised bodies, studying the habits and reactions of the snakes.

Finally they buy a deadly, unshaven cobra and train with it until they have developed finesse. About five per cent of the girls who enter this stage of training are fatally bitten before they finish their two years. The luckier survivors average another five years.

A week after seeing this spectacular feat, I had my last contact with snakes in the Chor Soo Kong Temple at Sungei Kluang on the island of Penang, off the northwest coast of Malaya. This strange little temple was built in 1850 as a sanctuary for reptiles by a cult of snake worshipers. It is still the haven of a couple of big, sleepy pythons, several grass snakes, bamboo snakes and venomous vipers. But the air is so thick with sickish smoke from burning joss sticks and incense that the reptiles lay drugged, coiled around the beams in the roof, the candles on the altar, and the picture frames along the walls.

Penang was my introduction to the real Far East; where crafty Chinese merchants dominate trade and run all the shops; where tiny, streamlined women scurry through the narrow streets in tight-fitting silk pajamas; where gongs vibrate in dark temples, and the Communists conspire in back alleys.

Communist guerrillas in the Malayan jungles were waging a bitter war with the British, and the situation was balanced on the narrow edge of crisis. British planters always carried side arms, and casualties on both sides were high. I hoped to travel through those jungles and spend some time on one of those plantations, gathering material about the situation. But the English had other plans for me. They were trying to tell the world the crisis was over, the guerrillas defeated. They didn't want anyone prying around, especially anyone like me.

I was an "adventurer," and that's a dirty word in British colonies. I had no "visible" means of support and, as usual, I arrived in Singapore broke. I had arranged for my agent to cable money ahead to be waiting for me, and I arrived with less than $5 in my pocket. No visa was required, but I did need permission from the authorities to stay in Malaya. And special permission to enter the jungles. Neither was forthcoming.

The moment I landed my passport was seized by officials who looked into my flat wallet, frowned through my frayed clippings, sized up my pale, haggard, shabby appearance and declared tersely:

"Mr. Keel, you are an undesirable alien. We'll give you three days to get out of Malaya."

"But I'm not a pauper," I protested. "I've got a good income. There's money waiting for me right now at the American Express Office."

"Well, if you can come to the Immigration Office this afternoon with one thousand dollars (Malayan money, Straits dollars, worth about $300 U.S.), we'll give back your passport."

Before even looking for a hotel I dashed to the American Express. There were some letters there . . . but no money. Something was wrong. My agent never failed. I was heading into trouble!

The day I arrived in Singapore, an old Chinese was sitting in a café, playing mah-jong with friends, when a black car pulled up, three men got out, walked up to him, and stabbed him to death. A Chinese terrorist society was at work. And a Communist-inspired strike was gathering force, crippling the city. It was not a good place to be broke in.

I spent my last $5 on taxis, anxiously searching the city for a cheap hotel. Everything was full-up and alarmingly expensive. Finally I had to settle in the Hotel de l'Europe, a beautiful, first-class hostelry in a palm tree setting, where a single room with bath and all meals was $18 per day! But the food was excellent, and the comforts were welcome after my trials in India and on the boat.

Still confident, I went to the Immigration Office, taking with me

my agent's latest letter announcing a sale to one of the biggest, slickest magazines in the men's field, plus sales of several other stories. All of them had brought very good prices.

He said he had cabled $500 and thought it would be waiting for me when I arrived.

A tall, sedate Englishman with a sunburned bald spot studied the letter and shook his head skeptically.

"Are you sure you didn't write this letter yourself?" he asked with a piercing glance. "If your stories are selling so well why are you penniless?"

"A miscalculation is all," I said, embarrassed. "The money will probably get here tomorrow."

He shook his head again and took me into a big air-cooled office where another official thumbed doubtfully through my papers and the letter.

"I don't believe you," he said flatly. "But we'll give you another week before we take action."

Action! What kind of action, I wondered nervously?

That night at the hotel I enjoyed an excellent dinner of cordon bleu, asparagus, and ice cream. The best meal I had had in a long time. I was living in luxury, but being broke, the only thing I could do was sit around the hotel and jab my typewriter in the teeth. And wait.

The money didn't come the next day. Nor the next. Nor the next. I went to the American Consulate. After much deliberation, they lent me exactly enough money to send off a desperate cable to New York.

Then the Immigration officials called me in again. My agent had answered me by cable, saying the money had been sent days before. I showed them the message but they were still skeptical.

"It should have arrived by now. If you don't get it by the end of the week, we'll have to put you on the first boat back to India."

"But I can't get another Indian visa for a year. They won't let me land!"

"Then you'll just have to sail back and forth until you can figure something out. Our regulations are very strict. We can't let you

stay here," they declared unsympathetically, picking up the phone to call my hotel.

"Did you know one of your guests, Mr. John A. Keel, is penniless?"

When I returned sheepishly the hotel manager called me into his office and looked through my clippings and papers without compassion.

"I'm afraid you don't have anything here that really proves you have a definite source of income, Mr. Keel. I'll let you stay a few more days . . . but I must ask you not to sign any more chits. You can have just your room and breakfast."

Fortunately the breakfasts were very elaborate. I could survive on that one meal alone until things straightened out.

Or so I thought!

All of the employees of all the hotels joined the general strike. The hotel stopped serving meals altogether. All I could get for breakfast was a cup of coffee, a bowl of corn flakes, and fruit. I had to live on that for the next week.

Completely shattered, I walked miles every day to the American Express office. The money didn't come. I knew that a couple of years earlier a poor man had been stranded on a ferryboat between Macao and Hong Kong when the authorities refused to let him off at either end. He spent a year riding back and forth until a South American government came to his rescue and granted him a temporary visa. I was facing the same desperation. I could picture myself riding back and forth forever between Singapore and Calcutta, shoveling coal on some broken-down freighter to earn my keep!

I couldn't write. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't even read. The American Consulate lent me money for one more cable, but they treated me with growing suspicion. Ironically, another letter from my agent announced $400 worth of further sales.

Still there was no sign of the money.

The Immigration people called again.

"We're arranging your deportation for Saturday," they announced bluntly.

The end was near.

Late Friday afternoon a messenger arrived from the American Express. The money had come! Some character in their New York office had sent it to Hong Kong by mistake. It had been waiting there until my worried agent had sent out a tracer. I was saved by the skin of my teeth . . . about the only skin I had left.

Jubilantly I marched into the Immigration office and threw fifteen hundred Straits dollars on the desk. The officials weren't impressed.

"This won't last you very long," they sneered. "You have to pay your hotel bill, and a ticket to anywhere in the Orient must be covered by a ticket all the way back to the United States. You can't visit any of the islands unless you have through fare and, speaking for the British possessions, we don't think you will be very well received."

"But I can get more money," I cried. "I'm solvent. Everything is all right."

The bald man tore up the deportation order.

"You'll find it's very hard to get a berth on any ship out of here. You might be able to book on something going back to Europe, but I doubt if you'll be able to go on across the Pacific. In any case, you'd better send for more money right away. We'll let you stay for one more week."

I rushed off another cable asking for $500 more and then I went to Prince's, one of Singapore's best restaurants not affected by the strike, and stashed away an enormous plate of spaghetti and two thick steaks. My hotel bill was nearly six hundred Malayan dollars.

While waiting for more money I explored Singapore. It was rich with story material. Piracy was still a big business in the China Straits, and along the harbor I dug up fascinating bits of information about the mysterious Madame Wong who rules a huge pirate fleet. Granted a little time, I was sure I could ferret her out and get an intriguing story.

The Communist strike had stunned the city. Nearly all the shops and businesses were affected. Pickets paraded through the streets carrying comical banners depicting cobras with their mouths stuffed with bills being trampled by the workers. "DOWN WITH THE FILTHY CAPITALIST DIRTY SNAKE BOSSES!" they proclaimed. The

hotel workers were striking for an increase of 25 Straits dollars a month. Their minimum wage at that time was only 75 Straits dollars.

Chinese secret societies added their terror and bloodshed to the atmosphere of danger, trouble and excitement. The city was alive with tension, the clamor of Chinese dialects, the clash of gongs, and eerie music of cymbals and sticks beaten together.

I visited a number of Chinese fortunetellers and tried to look into Chinese magic. But the only magicians I found were members of the International Brotherhood of Magicians, busy stealing ideas from the west and engaging in petty feuds with each other.

When the next $500 arrived I went back to the Immigration Office and asked for permission to stay and permission to visit northern Malaya. The bald man turned down the corners of his mouth, excused himself and disappeared into the air-conditioned office.

A few minutes later he came back with a newspaper under his arm, his broad English face inscrutable.

"Mr. Keel, we've discussed your case carefully," he began. "Since you are an . . . er . . . adventurer . . . and not soundly connected with any publication . . . we feel you present a certain risk. If anything should happen to you here, there's no one who could be responsible for you."

He looked over the newspaper. It was opened to the shipping page.

"We will return your passport on one condition. There is a Danish cargo ship sailing for Italy tomorrow morning. The fare is S.$1,400. We've called their agent here. There is a berth available. I strongly recommend that you take it."

"But I've hardly begun here!" I exclaimed. "Can't you give me a few more weeks . . . even if you won't let me into the jungles?"

"The ship sails tomorrow morning," he repeated coldly. "Be on it!"

And so, early the next morning I found myself standing on the deck of a battered freighter, unhappily surveying the banana peels, the rust spots, the wads of discarded paper, the swarms of copra

bugs humming over the holds, and the muddle of Chinese faces tugging on ropes and shouting in singsong voices.

I had realized most of my dreams, and now new dreams were springing up to take their place. I would have liked to have remained in the Far East longer, to have jumped from island to island across the Pacific, but the idea of settling in some apartment in Paris or Rome, or some *casa* in Spain, was just as appealing. I had more than sufficient material to keep my typewriter busy for a long time to come. My trip had been hard, but it was also fruitful. And somewhere along the way I had achieved my main goal. I had become a working writer.

In a way, this forced return to Europe was a fresh opportunity. Although I had covered twenty thousand miles since leaving that castle in Germany, there were still many places I had not yet seen. There was Africa and the seldom visited city of Timbuktu on the Niger River. I wanted to go there. There was the legendary village of Yho, training grounds for witch doctors, on the Ivory Coast. I wanted to go there. And there was South America, with the mysterious *ju-ju* practices of the head-hunters up the Amazon. And the island of Zanzibar, home of voodoo, and Haiti, and Central America with its vampire bats and haunted Aztec ruins. Someday I would go to all those places and see all those things and write about them.

While I was dreaming, a little man in a rumpled white uniform came along the deck and stopped beside me.

"You are the passenger?" he asked.

"What do you mean *the* passenger? Am I alone?"

"There are two others," the man said. "I am the captain."

His eyes twinkled as he looked distastefully at the littered deck.

"I don't like this ship," he announced bluntly. A startling thing for a captain to say to a passenger about to embark on a seven thousand mile voyage!

Just then the first officer came up and said something in Danish. The little captain shrugged and turned to me apologetically.

"It's the engines again. Always trouble!"

The two men hurried away, muttering in Danish. I laughed and turned back to the rail. Singapore was a white blob on the shore line

now, green with palms, gold with temples, spewing out and sucking in slow moving junks and sampans. After awhile the engines started spasmodically, and the captain came puffing back.

"You are a yournalist?" he asked, wiping his face.

"In a way. . . ."

"That's the life! Do what you want. Go where you want. No ship to worry about."

"I'm worrying about this one!"

He laughed.

"Don't worry. It is a little old, maybe. Last week it was the rudder. This week it's the engines. But it hasn't gone down yet."

He hurried away again.

Singapore and the world of *jadoo* slowly faded into the wide blue sea.

Something told me my adventure was just beginning.