

Kathmandu

the novel

*A novel of
Dreamers, Schemers,
Heroes and Holy men*

Book One

by
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CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	i
ONE	1
TWO	3
THREE	12
FOUR	
First Tale:	
<i>Cholo and the Vanishing Lake</i>	
27	
FIVE	57
SIX	68
SEVEN	
Second Tale:	
<i>The Monks, the Caravan Master and the Great Forest</i>	
80	
EIGHT	124
NINE	136
TEN	
Third Tale:	
<i>Narendra and the King of Tibet</i>	
151	
ELEVEN	192
TWELVE	216
THIRTEEN	236
Acknowledgements	259
About the author	260

PROLOGUE

Arum took a deep breath of the mountain air. In the east the sky was lightening and the snowy peaks had begun to glow. It would be dawn in less than an hour. From across the valley came the eerie howl of a jackal. He remained still, allowing his heart rate to slow. His slight build masked a sinewy strength, yet his eyes were what people remembered. Dark and intense. After a moment he pushed his cap to the back of his head and lit a cigarette.

Unscrewing the silencer from his old Walther, he gazed down at the body of Comrade Surya. He was beside a bamboo thicket near the tiny ridge-top village of Risal in the central west of Nepal, and killing the squad leader had been easier than he'd expected.

They'd been on their way to execute a landlord, the sort that had been a popular target for Maoists during the war, little different from all the others killed during those long years. Surya's face was a bloody mess. The bullet had come out through his left eye, leaving a mass of torn flesh, bone fragments and oozing brain tissue. Arum grimaced, drew deep on the cigarette. He hadn't shot anyone so close before. But he had no regrets. Comrade Surya had become a liability, suspecting that Arum might not be who he'd claimed. In the group they knew Arum as Comrade Ram, and Surya had begun to mistrust him, begun to doubt that revolution was his real goal.

Grinding the cigarette under his boot, he continued up the trail to the ridge top. The air was cold. Risal village was a few hundred metres further ahead. The light was growing, but the shadows were deep, providing good cover. He entered the village without a sound and fixed the notice by the water spout. A dog barked as he slipped away and positioned himself behind a rocky knoll some two hundred and fifty metres from the village. The target would soon emerge for his morning ablutions. He breathed easily, his hands steady.

Cocks were sounding the dawn, and Arum smelt the smoke of an early cooking fire. An old man with bowed legs came out of a thatched hut with his son. They set off down the far side of the ridge with a wooden plough. Nothing else moved in the village.

Arum had nothing but contempt for the Maoists and their fanatical offshoots with their half-baked, revolutionary-socialist ideas. Still, he would return to the squad to report that Comrade Surya had died in a shootout with police. And as the loyal lieutenant, he would assume the leadership. The company, Professional Resources, had done well in locating these rogue Maoists, and infiltrating him into Comrade Surya's little cadre two months ago had not been difficult. It was one of three breakaway Maoist groups in this part of the country, mostly made up of men fed up with waiting for integration into the Nepal Army; men who considered the Maoist supremo had betrayed them all by abandoning the revolution, making a peace deal and joining the corrupt political mainstream. As Comrade Ram, Arum had worked himself up to being second in command, the trusted lieutenant. He'd become the complete revolutionary. No one else had his drive or experience. Surya's death would disturb them, but in the circumstances it would be accepted as unavoidable. He smiled and settled down to watch the house, the old hunting rifle at the ready.



The village remained quiet. But now a woman appeared from a house across the trail. She swept her clay porch then hunkered down to winnow wheat. As she tossed the grain into the air, her black hair shimmered in the growing light. In the east the stars had faded into the dawn, while to the north the snow on the massive Dhaulagiri Himal was rimmed with gold.

Now, someone else was moving. Not the target. One of the women from his house, throwing scraps for the chickens that pecked around the compound. A dog set up a mournful howling that was taken up by others in the village. Another woman emerged from a nearby house and stretched, exposing her bare midriff. She yawned and bent to water a line of red flowers in a green wooden box. The two women conversed in strident tones as they went about their chores. A few moments later they went back inside.

Now the village was bathed in golden sunlight. It lit up Arum's rocky knoll, and he shrank into the shadows.

At last. The target, Jhala Bhutta, the richest man in the district. A landlord who by all accounts was not unduly harsh. No matter. To Arum's renegade Maoist dim-wits, all landlords were class enemies. This one was tall, thin and balding. He wore only a pair of plain, cotton pyjama pants. Arum could almost hear his joints creak as he squatted by the water spout to rinse his mouth. After a moment he rose to his feet and blinked at the notice by the water spout. He peered more closely. Then, with a puzzled expression, he turned and stared out at the surrounding hills.

The shot shattered the stillness.

A gaping hole appeared in the landlord's chest. Eyes bulging, he collapsed, blood pumping into the dust.

With the surge of adrenaline, Arum's world slowed abruptly. The village took on the surreal spectacle of a stage performance, the cast choreographed in a macabre ballet. A woman appeared, saw the body and gave a slow shudder, her face twisted in a silent shriek. Another emerged, perhaps the landlord's wife. She staggered, fell to the ground keening, fingers clawing the earth. Other women appeared, faces contorted in noiseless screams. He waited, his attention held by the red flowers, vibrant and motionless in the green box. Then came the screaming. Neighbours took an eternity to appear, and the screams became wailing, choking sobs. Nobody knew what to do. The first men to appear gazed about with fearful eyes and took cover. After an age two armed policemen appeared. They were disoriented.

This was Arum's cue, and his world suddenly snapped back. With calm precision he shot one of them between the eyes, watched him crumple, and waited until the other began wild shooting in his direction.

Working backward off the knoll, he disappeared silently along the trail. An unlucky shot, he would tell the men, had killed Comrade Surya.

Later the villagers found the notice fixed to the stone wall beside the water spout.

ONE

‘When he came to that place, the god cut deep into the rock with his flaming sword. The earth shuddered, Turtle Mountain groaned, and the water began to trickle through. Where he cut became a cleft, then a chasm, and soon the water was gushing out.’ The old man sat back. It was the end of his tale. ‘And when all the water was gone, what remained became our beautiful valley.’

The boy was silent, enthralled. The sounds of the city returned. Tri-shaw bells in the old square below, the murmuring of vegetable sellers on the temple steps, the cries of peddlers, the low murmur of conversation from the men sprawled in the shade two floors below.

He was wide-eyed, trusting, and the old man recalled the thin, ragged youngster huddled in a worn blanket on the steps of the old rest house five years earlier. Who had brought him he never discovered. Just another child refugee from the war-ravaged hills, alone and weak from lack of food. His father was gone, his mother killed either by the Maoists or the military in some ill-fated sweep through their village. The boy remembered only the shooting and the fire, and nothing of his long journey to the city.

The old man had found a place for him and eventually a job, and took pleasure in seeing the boy grow and gain a natural confidence, even a jaunty cheerfulness. He was keen to learn and the old man took an active interest in his education. He told the boy tales and instructed him in the ways of the city; he taught him how to live, what was important and what was not. The boy learned quickly.

He smiled with affection and, almost as a reflex, touched the old stone amulet on the cord around his neck. And as he did, he felt a sudden foreboding. His smile faded. What was it? He sensed it was to do with the boy. A threat of some kind, shadows, and he felt a shiver of fear. For an instant he saw an indistinct figure, unfamiliar, perhaps a foreigner, a man somehow linked to the boy. There was

GERRY VIRTUE

danger. A threat that remained obscure. Then the shadows closed in again.

‘Baba-ji?’ Ashok was watching him. He always paid close attention. ‘Are you all right?’

‘All right? Yes.’ He was never less than honest with the boy. ‘I have a feeling there is trouble coming. You must be careful with the people you meet. Especially foreigners.’

‘Foreigners?’ The boy’s brow puckered. ‘But Baba-ji, I see foreigners every day. It is my job.’

‘I know, I know.’ The old man sighed. ‘Just take care.’

TWO

Pratap Kumar was late getting to the hotel. When Mr Bahadur called him to his office early that morning and gave him the letter to deliver to the Englishman in Room 151 at the Annapurna Hotel, he'd made it clear it was to be delivered right away. But how could Pratap know that on the way, when he called in to see his brother, he would arrive just as Arjun's wife, Lila, came home with their new baby.

It was an occasion of great joy. A son for his brother, making him proud and happy, a nephew for him, and a soul charting its course through a new life. In no time, friends had crowded their tiny rooms, overflowing on to the roof above. There was much laughter. People brought beer, and the family made good rakshi. He'd drunk more than he should, and the time passed quickly. Without eating he became a little overexcited, then sleepy.

He might have had a nap, though he couldn't remember clearly, and when he looked at his watch it was already afternoon, past three o'clock. He didn't know what he'd tell Mr Bahadur, but he had to deliver the letter. The boss wasn't easy to work for, but it was a good job, and he was respected as book-keeper. He hoped Mr Bahadur would not be angry.

'Come in!'

He thought it polite to wait. A man opened the hotel room door. A tall ghora. This must be the Englishman.

'Your letter, sir.'

'Oh.' Andrew Moresham took it absently.

'Yes, sir.' Pratap smiled. 'Thank you, sir.' and he walked off down the corridor.



He'd gone before Andrew opened the letter, addressed simply to: Room 151, Hotel de L'Annapurna.

GERRY VIRTUE

There were two pages, both with a company letterhead:

Professional Resources Pvt Ltd

An address in Bangalore, India. Beside the company name was a logo, a flaming sword inside a shield. The document was headed:

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING KATHMANDU CONTRACT OPERATIONS

Clearly it wasn't for him, but the man was gone, so he glanced through the first page:

'The undersigned agrees to the following procedural matters:
Operations to be set in train by Company personnel following their arrival in Nepal in late July and early August...'

Some sort of business letter. There were another four or five points he didn't take in, and at the bottom was a scrawled set of initials, which looked like 'RB' above the words: for NEPAL DEVELOPMENT GROUP. The second page was a photocopied letter. He glanced through it. Something about 'disturbances', and 'several months disorder'...

It had been sent to the wrong room. He'd drop it back to the front desk. Stuffing it into his jacket pocket, he continued unpacking. When he was done he decided to look around. He'd noticed a coffee shop out front beside the garden. He'd get a feel for the city, see what was on offer. As he passed the reception desk he remembered the letter and handed it to the desk clerk. 'This was delivered to my room by mistake. Don't know who it's for. I guess someone will come ...'

'Yes, sir. Thank you.' With a bored expression, the clerk placed the letter beside him on the desk.

The coffee shop opened on to Durbar Marg, an important city road, and there were as many passers-by and local businessmen as hotel guests. Ordering coffee and a pastry, he picked up an English language paper, The Himalayan Times, and scanned the news items: a piece about the president of the New Nepal; a violent demonstration somewhere; politicians accused of corruption; nine villagers killed

GERRY VIRTUE

when a bus crashed into a ravine. Some fracas involving the Young Communist League and police. Wasn't all that insurgency stuff over? He'd read that the Maoists were part of the government now. He should find out more. Then a headline, 'Buddha Boy Returns. Another Ten Months under Bodhi Tree?' Apparently some long-haired, white clad, seventeen year old had been hailed as a reincarnation of the Buddha as he meditated under a tree at Lumbini, the Buddha's birth-place in the Nepal lowlands. At least it was different from Maoist agitation.

There was a lulling buzz of conversation, and after a time he found he'd dozed off. The coffee shop was hot in the afternoon sun. Maybe he was jet-lagged, or the air-conditioning wasn't working. How long had he been out to it? He paid the bill and returned to his room.

Rounding a corner of the corridor, he saw his door ajar. He'd locked it. Inside was someone with his back to him, going through his things. A tall man, dark hair, solid-build.

'Hey!' He banged open the door. 'What're you doing? This is my room!'

The man turned slowly. He was relaxed, unconcerned. 'Ah, Mr Moresham.' His eyes were ice blue, without expression. 'Come in. Close the door.'

'What the ...?' A hot surge of anger. Andrew strode into the room and grabbed the man's arm. 'What d'you think you're doing? Those are my things!'

His wrist was seized in an iron grip. 'Don't do that, Mr Moresham. Not ever!' The man spoke in a slow drawl, a distinct English accent. 'You've got something of mine. I want it.' His eyes were cold. 'Now!'

'Let go of me!' Andrew was shaken. 'Who the hell are you? Get out of my room!'

The man did not blink. After a moment he relaxed his grip. 'I checked out of here this morning, Mr Moresham.' His voice was brittle, the words clipped. 'But a business letter was delivered after I left. Jamieson's the name, Michael Jamieson.' He extended a hand, which Andrew ignored. 'I realised it had been delivered to you, so I decided to come and get it myself. I knocked and called out, but

GERRY VIRTUE

there was no answer. The door was unlocked so I thought you must have been in the shower.' He wore a pale, lightweight suit, a blue button-down shirt and a conservative, striped tie. With an impatient gesture he ran a hand over sleek, well combed hair. 'Obviously I was mistaken.'

The door was self-locking, and Andrew had the card in his hand. He felt his cheeks flush. 'Bullshit! That door was locked!'

'Apparently not, as you see.'

'I'm not an idiot. You broke into my room! We both know that. Even if you've lost a bloody letter, you don't break into somebody's room! Anyway your letter's at the front desk. I left it there more than an hour ago.'

'Mr Moresham.' Jamieson was suddenly conciliatory. 'We've rather got off on the wrong foot. My fault entirely. Sometimes I'm a bit impulsive. Should have telephoned. I am sorry. A misunderstanding.'

'I don't care how sorry you are, sport! You broke in! You were going through my stuff!' What should he do? Call the police? How do you do that in Kathmandu? Call the manager? The guy wouldn't wait around. And he was well muscled, looked pretty fit. Andrew didn't fancy a punch-up.

'As I said, it was a business letter, delivered by mistake,' Jamieson went on, 'after I'd checked out. It's rather important.'

The guy unsettled him. How did he get in? Anyway, the letter was at the desk ... 'Some Nepalese guy brought a letter, Jamieson. I told you, it's at the front desk.'

'Not good enough, Mr Moresham! I checked the front desk and the girl knows nothing about it. Don't mess me around! Just give it to me and I'll be on my way.'

Why didn't they give it to him? Some sort of stuff-up. But breaking in and going through his things was something else. 'I don't give a shit about your letter, Jamieson. If they didn't give it to you, go sort it out with them. Don't bother me! Now get out of my room, or I'll throw you out!'

Jamieson curled his lip. 'You're not up to it, Mr Moresham.' His eyes were expressionless. 'It's an important letter and I want it. Now!' He stretched out his hand.

GERRY VIRTUE

Andrew bristled and started toward him. He realised he was shaking and stopped. He took a deep breath. 'I told you, Jamieson. I haven't got your fucking letter. So piss off!'

'Mr Moresham,' His eyes were flint hard. 'You could find yourself ... compromised.'

'Is that a threat?'

'Not necessary. You've got confidential documents that don't belong to you. That's theft.' He leaned forward. 'And serious trouble. You're Australian?'

'So?'

'I know Australians are good at sport, Mr Moresham, but in my experience not so good at playing games. Just give it here!'

'Didn't you hear me, mate? I haven't got your letter. And I've had it with you!' He started to push Jamieson in the chest but suddenly found himself on his face on the floor, his arm twisted savagely up his back.

'Now sonny,' Jamieson grated in his ear, 'let's not play little boy games. I'll just have that letter, thanks.' Unable to move, Andrew felt himself expertly searched. 'Well, well.' A sharp intake of breath. 'So where is it?' He stood, allowing Andrew to get up. 'Stealing company documents is serious, Mr Moresham.' He spoke calmly, as though they were at a board meeting. 'And has serious consequences.'

Andrew's breathing was ragged and his heart raced. He was not easily frightened, but this man unnerved him. Suddenly Jamieson seemed to make up his mind. With a contemptuous look, he turned and strode out of the room.

'So does burglary!' Andrew called after him. 'So fuck off!' He slammed the door.

Still shaking, he sat down, trying to make sense of it. Who was this Jamieson? What was the big deal about his letter? Looked like regular business stuff. Yet there was something odd about it. 'Disturbances', and 'months of disorder'. And why hadn't they given it to him at the front desk? He took a deep breath, waited for his heart to slow, scanned the room. Nothing seemed missing, but he was still unsettled. He could use a drink. Ringing room service, he ordered a scotch and ice.

GERRY VIRTUE

A few moments later a waiter placed the whisky on the table and Andrew signed for it. Still shaken, he sipped his drink.



The day had not started well. A scary flight, with sudden, sickening drops as they came in over the mountains from Delhi. An elderly lady shrieking as a briefcase slammed into her shoulder, and a flight attendant sprawling into somebody's lap. Outside the window, furious scudding cloud. And for one frightening moment, the massive side of a mountain. Suddenly he was spooked by old TV reports of crashes on this route. In one, no trace had been found for days, the wreckage eventually discovered high in the mountains north of the valley. No survivors. He'd mumbled a childhood prayer.

On the aisle a few seats ahead was a girl with eyes shut tight, her face deathly pale. She had a beautiful profile. He could almost feel her fear. The image of Cass had rushed to mind. Her face had been pale too. Pale as death. He shuddered. If he'd been sitting next to this girl, would he have taken her arm, held her hand? Given her the support he didn't give Cass?

There were two sudden thuds. He'd been holding his breath. He let it out with a rush. He knew that sound. The landing gear. Maybe they'd make it after all.

He didn't know the flight could be so nerve-racking. Why did he come in the monsoon, when the mountains were hidden in huge banks of cloud? OK, he hadn't really thought about it. But why didn't they fly the plane higher? Those peaks could rip the guts out of a 737.

Then the enveloping whiteness had vanished and the mountain fell away to reveal a sudden vast landscape. Terraces of vivid green sweeping down from the heights into the bowl of an immense valley. Tiny thatch and tile-roofed houses scattered across lush fields, gathered here and there into clusters, small villages, an occasional township. Across it all the sheen of water-filled paddies reaching almost to the outskirts of the city. Then the untidy sprawl of the ancient capital itself.

GERRY VIRTUE

Kathmandu. A magic sight.

‘Christ!’ The English guy beside him had been white, still hunched forward, his body taut against the seatbelt. There was an almost hysterical sense of relief among the passengers. The terror had gone. Later, perhaps they’d remember it as a frightening, fragmented dream. But now relief changed to anticipation. As most passengers began to babble in excitement, a party of Japanese Buddhists prepared for landing with impressive restraint.

‘I’m glad I don’t do that every day.’ As the wheels gripped and the reverse thrust pressed them forward, the Englishman gave an uncertain grin. He wanted to talk, to purge the demons. ‘Are you going to Tibet?’ His speech was quick, nervous. ‘They say it’s the best time.’

‘No, I’m here to work.’

‘Work? Really? What at?’

‘The Asia-Pacific Institute. Know it?’

‘No. Can’t say I do.’

He’d been glad to stretch his legs, to step out across the tarmac. He found himself beside the girl who’d looked so frightened on the plane. She had freckles and amber eyes, hair short with the hint of a gleam of gold. He gave her a quick smile, but she ignored him. He thought of Cass, and the guilt flooded back. Would he ever get past her? Would coming to Nepal help? He’d be doing something useful. It had better work. He’d pinned his hopes on it.

He didn’t miss the corporate world, at least not yet. He’d been a team player, done all the right things. Been in the squad for the City to Surf run every year, and he’d always joined the piss-up afterwards in the company tent on Bondi Beach. And the summer Dragon Boat race on Darling Harbour, puffing, splashing, hooting and blowing with the best of them. For a couple of years he’d even been in the Australian Army Reserve and done his two weeks at Singleton, where he discovered he was good with a rifle and pistol. And though he liked being at home watching a DVD or listening to music, he’d usually go out boozing with the boys, or sweating through some interminable dance party, making it

GERRY VIRTUE

all go better with a line of coke. It was a night like that when he met Cass, a meeting that led to an outcome he wanted to forget.

He hoisted his bag and wheeled it to the customs desk. A bored, round-faced officer waved him on, and he emerged into the glare of early afternoon sunshine.

‘Taxi, sir?’

‘Hotel, sir. Clean. Very nice!’

‘Trekking, sir! Good trekking!’

‘Special price hotel. Very special, sir!’

A throng of small, slight men, serious and persistent, urging, plucking at his sleeve. Tours, hotels, mountain flights, jungle lodges. He was glad he didn’t have to deal with any of it. Where was his contact? The Asia-Pacific guy?



An envelope suddenly slid under the door. He stared. Picked it up. It was the one he’d handed in at the desk, addressed to ‘Room 151’. He opened the door. Nobody. Instead of giving it to Jamieson at the desk, some fool had sent it back to the room. He began to sweat, and sat down again. He took another swig of scotch. After a moment he called the bellboy, giving him two hundred rupees.

‘Did somebody come into my room while I was out?’

‘No, sir. Nobody in your room.’

‘OK. I’d like you to find out who had this room before me.’

He produced another hundred rupees, and the bell-boy ran off, delighted at the easy money.

In the meantime he opened the envelope and read it carefully. The letterhead:

Professional Resources Pvt Ltd

the logo, a UK address, and below that, addresses in Bangalore and Delhi. The name had an odd flavour, although he couldn’t say just what it was. Then the heading: *Kathmandu Contract*. There were names he didn’t recognise, Nepalese. Names of places, towns

GERRY VIRTUE

maybe. A sentence caught his eye: *'Himalayan waters will become increasingly critical.'* What could that possibly mean?

He read the second letter. Addressed to a set of initials, Dear RB, with a scrawled signature over another set, CM. This didn't mean anything, either, but two paragraphs had an odd tone: *'You may expect disturbances from late August onward ...'* and *'... serious disorder ... necessary before and during the family reunion in Kathmandu ...'* and *'...no misjudgments or negligence will be tolerated ...'*

Kathmandu Contract? A contract with serious disorder and a family reunion? What sort of contract was that?

THREE

Kate Wells realised she'd arrived. Flying in, she thought she'd see snow-capped mountains, the world's biggest. That insane flight. Nobody told her monsoon clouds hid all the mountains. And the plane bucking and dropping like a stone. She'd never been so scared. Now here she was at the end of this idiotic flight and she hadn't seen a thing. Like her life, really. Never quite what she expected.

So what do I do now, she thought. Rushing away from London and all that grief was fine, but here I am. Stuck with myself.

But as she stepped down the aircraft steps, it didn't seem to matter. Her spirits lifted, and the draining heaviness was gone. She looked around, alert, absorbing the strange newness of this place she'd run off to. Airport men on the tarmac, smiling, ushering her courteously toward the terminal building. The tall, tousle-haired guy walking beside her flashed a smile. He had a rangy, suntanned look and an easy, loose-limbed walk. Good-looking, but annoyingly self confident. Maybe one of those trekkers. Eddie was like that, so damn cocksure. For a moment she felt the old resentment. She ignored him and walked on.

There was something about the Kathmandu air. Beautifully warm, a touch of moisture. Seductive, sensuous. Whatever it was, she walked down the long colonnade to the immigration hall feeling lighter than she had in years. Almost as if she had come home.

She allowed herself to be propelled into a battered taxi with worn upholstery.

'Nice hotel, madam. You not worry. I take you!' The driver was a short, plump man in a stained white shirt. He had a wide mouth with betel-stained teeth and an anxious face. 'My cousin-brother, madam. Is having nice hotel in Thamel. Very cheap, ve-e-r-r-y nice!'

GERRY VIRTUE

The car moved off shakily but steadied as they gained momentum. 'Is Ganesh Hotel, madam.' Now they were moving he was more confident. 'Very clean also!'

Sounding his horn, the driver inched through streets suddenly crowded and narrow. She'd taken in very little of the long, kaleidoscopic journey when the car came to a stop.

'Here is Thamel, madam!'

This must be the tourist part of Kathmandu. There were westerners everywhere. Mostly young, hearty looking. Trekkers, tourists with cameras, bum-bags and sneakers; some with beards, long hair, beads and torn jeans. Garishly painted shops, signs in English advertising clothes, carpets, jewellery, trekking gear, German bread, beer, Italian food, paintings, films, books and all the comforts of home. Blaring horns, spruiking hawkers. It was barely contained chaos with a weird, off-the-wall flavour.

'Hotel, Madam!'

They were outside a door with the words 'Ganesh Hotel' etched on the glass panel circling a grinning elephant's head. There was a large puddle between the taxi and the door, and the building, like the others on the potholed street, looked makeshift. It went up four floors, a narrow facade of unpainted concrete, partly hidden behind an array of poles supporting an extraordinary tangle of wires and cables. Beside the hotel entrance was another door, gaudily painted, and a line of curtained windows with the legend: 'Shambhala Restaurant - Heavenly Foods'.

A girl in jeans came out with a long-haired, lanky guy wearing a large silver earring. She smiled.

'Hi!' Kate was relieved they were friendly. 'D'you know if this place is OK?'

'The Ganesh?' They grinned. 'It's fine! Ask Rajendra for the special rate. He'll do you a deal for a month or more. Whatever you want.' They went off down the street.

Rajendra was a round, middle-aged Nepalese with a perpetual frown, as though concerned his guests might disappear without paying. Still, he was fatherly and anxious Kate should be happy with her room on the third floor.



A pair of grinning, white skulls stopped Kate in her tracks.

She'd felt the pull of the street, the crowds, the shops, the smells, the slightly crazy atmosphere. She knew she was in the middle of the tourist district, some distance from the old city, the bazaar, the squares, the temples. She felt excited, wanted to drink it all in. All that travelling was worth it after all. Kathmandu just felt right. She unpacked her bags and drifted off down the street, grinning foolishly, self-consciously. She knew she was all lit up, a new girl in town, but didn't care. There were whispered offers of money-changing and hashish. Shopkeepers beamed, bobbed their heads, invited her to inspect carpets, buy jewellery, a T-shirt with Buddha eyes, or book a cheap trek. Even the beggars - crippled, scabrous, deformed or blind - couldn't break the spell. She hadn't enjoyed herself so much in years.

Not since she'd spent five weeks as relief teacher at the Finsbury Park Community Secondary School in London's north-east. She hadn't been looking forward to the posturing girls and testosterone-charged boys, all rolling their eyes, far too cool for school. But to her astonishment, she found she was in charge of eight intellectually disadvantaged youngsters. She didn't know what to expect but found instant rapport and unconditional love. Overwhelmed at first, it became her most treasured teaching experience.

There was one little girl with shining eyes who cuddled her whenever she could. They went on excursions; across London to the Hackney City Farm by bus was the most exciting. But when a boy got off at the wrong stop and vanished, she panicked and called the police. They responded at once and eventually found him wandering through a street market. The sight of the constable, tender and paternal, holding the boy's hand, and the youngster's expression of sheer bliss caused her to melt. At City Farm their faces came alive when they saw the sheep, the piglets and ducks. She had to prevent them from hugging the tiny lambs to death. It was pure joy.

GERRY VIRTUE

But now, a pair of grinning, white-painted skulls stopped her short. The eye and nose sockets were blood red, an effect as unsettling as it was grotesque. They adorned the entrance to a shop.

‘Dance masks.’

A tall man in white shirt and jeans was watching her from the doorway. Although smiling, his gaze had a disconcerting intensity. He was around thirty, with close-cropped hair, a broad forehead, thin aquiline nose, high cheekbones and dark, wide-spaced eyes. His intent regard made her quite self-conscious. There was a blue turquoise in his left ear, and a small, odd-shaped object gleamed gold against his throat. She was unable to meet his smile, his amused interest. She looked away, but despite herself, wanted to talk.

‘From Tibet.’

‘Dance masks? But why skulls?’ She stepped closer and made a pretence of examining them closely.

‘In my country, in the monasteries, the lamas dance as skeletons to remind people that death is never far away. They wear these masks.’

‘In your country? You’re from Tibet?’

‘My family is from Kham. In eastern Tibet. Please come in.’

At once she found herself in a treasure trove, an Aladdin’s cave packed with strange and extraordinary objects. Piled on the floor, stacked on shelves, crammed into glass-fronted cabinets and hanging at all angles from the walls and ceiling. Along one wall a showcase displayed strange jewellery: old rings, bronze necklets, chunky coral and turquoise necklaces, and a variety of antique silver bracelets and pendants. On the other were medieval-looking copper ewers and urns, old carpets, silver-ornamented wooden saddles, drums on poles, Chinese porcelains, finely worked knives, collapsible painted tables, silk embroideries, painted leather trunks and a hundred objects she could not identify.

‘Welcome to my shop.’ He had an engaging smile. ‘Will you take tea, madam? Or Coke, Fanta?’

‘Thank you, tea would be fine.’ Then, ‘This is amazing.’

He stepped outside to order the tea and she gazed around. She knew the London markets and had browsed hundreds of street stalls, but she had never seen such an exotic little shop.

GERRY VIRTUE

'Sugar milk-tea.' he said as a Nepalese boy handed her a short glass of hot milky liquid.

'Thank you, that's lovely.' She sipped the thick, sweet brew. A brown film was forming on the surface. Not quite her normal cup of tea.

'Do you have a card?' he asked

'A card?'

'A name card.'

'No. But I'm Kate.' She held out her hand. 'Kate Wells.'

'Dorji.' He took her hand for only a brief moment. His touch was dry and cool, hers a little sweaty. 'Dorji Dhondup. I keep the names and addresses of all my customers.'

'I probably won't buy anything. I only arrived today and I'm just looking around.'

'Sure. You don't have to buy anything. But I keep a list of what people like, and one day maybe I will find something for you. Then we can do some business.'

'Ah ... If you're from Tibet, do you mind me asking how you speak such good English?'

He laughed, a throaty growl that finished with a chuckle. She decided he was very attractive.

'My father sent me to school in Darjeeling. A Christian school. I learned English there.'

She had a sudden flash of trailing her fingers across his naked chest, tracing patterns on his burnished skin. Startled at the image, she blushed and started talking.

'They must be very good. At that school, I mean. It can't be easy, learning English. At least to start with ... I - I - never had to do it, of course ...' She stopped in confusion. 'Well, being English you know, and... that.' She giggled.

He laughed too, easily, the same growling chuckle.

'Are you here for trekking? Or are you going to Tibet?'

'Tibet? No. I haven't really thought about it, or trekking either ... Do you think I should?'

'Do I think you should what? Go to Tibet, or go trekking?'

She looked up at him. He really was very attractive.

GERRY VIRTUE

'I ... don't know. I was fed up with London. And Kathmandu sounded ... sort of cool. Life was getting ... a bit complicated. And sort of pointless. D'you know what I mean?'

'No. It's hard for us Tibetans to see things that way. Nepal is not our country, and we really don't belong here.' He made a wry face. 'Nepalese people have been very kind, very generous. They tolerate us well enough, but sometimes it is difficult. We can't travel freely, like westerners. And now the tourist business is not so good, too much competition. Everybody claims they're from Tibet, even local people.'

She flushed, felt small. She could come and go as she pleased, wherever she wanted. She never thought about people who couldn't. Nor did she see herself as belonging to a privileged class. Travelling was just fun.

'And we can't go back to Tibet! At least not till the Chinese are gone and it's free again.'



Kate returned to the hotel to eat a solitary meal in the restaurant. She thought about Dorji and the little she knew about Tibet. She knew about the Dalai Lama, of course; he was pretty neat in his maroon robes. And he had that great giggle. But she hadn't thought much about Tibetans, that many of them could never go home. Dorji was cool, too. She'd certainly go back to his shop.

'You like something, madam?'

Kate looked up to see a little boy, nine or ten years old, in a frayed red shirt with yellow flowers. He wore baggy trousers, scuffed trainers, and a winning smile, all white teeth, rumpled black hair, and dark, crinkled eyes.

'You want something - I get!' He wiped her table with a dirty cloth and grinned. 'My name Ashok! I get something?'

He was brash, almost cheeky, with a voice to cut through restaurant chatter.

'OK, Ashok.' She smiled at him. 'I'd like a Coke, please.'

'Sure, madam. One Coke.'

GERRY VIRTUE

He was soon back. 'Just coming in Kathmandu, madam?'

'Yes. Today. I'm staying in the Ganesh Hotel, upstairs.'

'Which room you are?'

'Umm Three eleven, I think.'

'OK. I bring breakfast morning time.'

He had wide, eager eyes, was grubby and threadbare, had an open, friendly face and the cheeky appeal of a street urchin. She was an unapologetic motherer of little boys, and could not resist him.

'Fine. What can I have?'

'Bed-tea, madam. German bread toast, porridge, what you like ...'

'Great. Tea, toast and porridge. That's great. About eight o'clock?'

'Eight o'clock morning time, madam. Room three one one.'

'Good. What time do you start work?'

'Morning time early. I start for six o'clock. madam.'

'When do you finish?'

'Night time. When people finish eating, I clean kitchen, then sleeping.'

'What time is that?'

'Sometimes eleven o'clock if people sitting, sometimes for nine o'clock if no business.'

'And where do you live?'

'I sleeping here.' He pointed to the padded bench beside a long table. 'Very nice. Winter time we have fire, and nicely warm.' There was an iron stove in the centre of the restaurant. 'And madam, I am guide also. Special, for you. I know tourist places for Kathmandu. All places. I show you. I make special price, rickshaw, taxi, everything!'

'How can you be a tourist guide if you work here?'

'Afternoon time, three o'clock, I not work up to six o'clock. And tomorrow not work after breakfast time for all day.' He looked very pleased. 'Tomorrow day off!'

'Do you have many days off?'

'This good job! Every month four days I have!'

Kate laughed. 'OK, Ashok. Tomorrow you can show me Kathmandu. After breakfast show me your special places. We'll have a good time!' She paused. 'What do you charge ... how many rupees?'

GERRY VIRTUE

‘What you like, madam. I show tourist places. I not ask money. What you like, you give ...’

‘I see. OK. Where’ll we go?’

‘We go Durbar Square, Hanuman Dhoka, Black Bhairava, many places. Kumari House also. I take you to meet my friend. He is sadhu. You like him. He lives in Kastha Mandapa. He has many stories for Kathmandu.’

‘Whoa! Hold on, Ashok! Durbar Square, Hanumanu ... what was it? Take it slowly. I don’t know any of these places!’

‘Hanuman Dhoka. Old palace for Kathmandu. You not worry, my madam. I take you.’



The bell-boy was soon back with a name. ‘Is Mister Charles Merrick, sir. He is coming from English.’

Not Jamieson. Strange. The initials C.M. - Charles Merrick. If it was normal business stuff, why the phony name? Who was Charles Merrick? It was no clearer. And those odd-sounding bits? *Family reunion*, and *serious disorder*? What should he do? He rubbed his chin. A walk might clear his head. He’d take a stroll around the city. Maybe that would help.

But taking a stroll was not so simple. As soon as he appeared on the street he was surrounded.

‘Tiger Balm, sir. Buy Tiger Balm!’

‘Kukri knife I have, sir! Very sharp. Buddha also!’

‘Change money! Change dollar! Best rate, sir!’

‘Sahib!’ A tiny, ravaged-looking woman. ‘Baksheesh, sahib! Baksheesh!’

‘*Ganja!* A small boy pulled his sleeve, whispering. ‘Sir! *Ganja!* Best quality!’

Pulling free he made off as fast as he could down the street, the hustlers gradually dropping away. Spotting a bookshop he went inside. Everest Book Service. It had English books. They’d understand him. ‘Hi!’ A young man was drinking tea behind the counter. ‘I’m a bit lost. I’m looking for the main part of town.’

GERRY VIRTUE

'Main part?' The bookseller smiled encouragingly. 'You mean bazaar, sir, or maybe New Road?'

'I don't know. Whatever's close, I guess.'

'OK. Bazaar. Just go straight.' Taking Andrew to the door, he pointed along the street to a busy intersection. 'See that pedestrian bridge? Go over that one. Then you will see main bazaar, Asan Tole. Just go straight.' He smiled again. 'But if you are wanting books or magazines, I have many, many. Take one moment. Just have a look. You like tea?'

'Thanks.' Andrew returned the smile. 'Another time.'

Coming down from the overhead footbridge, he found himself in the old city and, further on, as the road narrowed, in a noisy, crowded square. People were shouting their wares, holding loud conversations, singing, playing the fiddle, hawking, spitting, ringing bells or begging. Devotees at little pagoda shrines rang bells and made offerings while people streamed in and out of converging streets. He dodged cycle-rickshaws, cows and motorcycles, almost tripping over traders haggling with customers on the pavement.

Above it all, ancient wooden buildings with sagging balconies, high, silent, aloof. There was a sweet smell of incense, smoke from cooking fires, the aroma of spices, the stench of ancient drains, all the sultry smells of the subcontinent. And despite the chaos and din, he sensed an underlying harmony.

He stopped to buy a spicy snack. The proprietor, in open-necked shirt and black waistcoat, sat cross-legged amidst his display in what was little more than a deep wardrobe a little above pavement level, one of many.

'I think you have something that belongs to us, Mr Moresham.'

Andrew whirled to find a middle-aged man beside him, apparently addressing the shopkeeper. A small, slight man in snugly fitting jacket and tight, jodhpur-like trousers, the dress of a conservative Nepalese gentleman, set off with a brightly striped cap. One side of his face, however, was blotched and livid, the result of some disfiguring accident, causing his left eye to bulge balefully. He carried a black umbrella, wore gleaming black sandals, and spoke faultless English.

GERRY VIRTUE

Andrew felt a prickling of fear. Here, in the middle of the bazaar, they'd found him. Somebody connected with Merrick, and that letter. He felt a rush of anger. 'Who are you? How ...?'

'All in proper time, Mr Moresham. If you will please come with me ...'

'Come with you?' He stared. 'Do you think I'm crazy! Your boss broke into my room, tried to rough me up. Why would I go anywhere with you? Bugger off or I'll call the police!' He turned to the shopkeeper who was watching the exchange open-mouthed. 'Is there a police-station near here?' He spoke brusquely, hoping to intimidate the man beside him. The shopkeeper stared blankly.

'Our policemen are not so interested in missing letters, Mr Moresham. They are so busy these days with traffic problems, strikes, people marching with banners and Maoist agitation. My employer simply wants to keep his affairs in order, and have his documents returned.'

'Really? Well listen, my friend, tell your boss I don't like threats, I don't like being burgled, and I don't like being pushed around. I haven't got his letter, so you can tell him to shove it!'

The man smiled. With his disfigurement it was a malevolent leer. 'Certainly, sir. But before I do, you should consider my employer's offer ...'

'I'm not interested. Understand?'

'My employer is a very successful businessman. Very prominent in Kathmandu, and in India and overseas countries also. He has a proposal that will very much interest you.'

'Does he now? Well you can tell Mr Jamieson, or whatever he calls himself, that I'm not interested. If he wants to contact me, tell him to make an appointment at the Asia-Pacific Institute.'

'Mr Moresham! Mr Moresham!' The Nepalese raised his hand. 'Please. My employer is not Mr Jamieson. I do not know this gentleman. My employer is Mr Bahadur, Mr Ratna Bahadur. You have his business letter, and he wants it back. He will pay you for your trouble. You have my good word that he means you no harm. You must meet him, listen to his proposal. He is nearby.'

Ratna Bahadur. Not Jamieson, or even Merrick. Andrew thought

quickly. RB. Those scrawled initials at the bottom of the page. Ratna Ba-something? It's all a bit dark and dodgy. The letter was still in his pocket and he wanted nothing to do with that Jamieson - Merrick. The bastard freaked him out. And now there was some other guy. They were all following him around. Why was the letter so important? What was it about? Maybe he should just give it to ... well who? Jamieson, who was apparently Merrick, a guy with killer eyes. Or this Nepalese, or his boss, somebody called Ratna Whatsit. Would they let him alone then? Or was he already compromised, as Merrick had said?

'When you don't know what to do, son,' his dad used to say, 'do bloody nothing!' But the doing nothing option was long gone. He'd tough it out.

'Listen, sport. I've had enough of this. Tell your boss, or Jamieson, whoever he is, to get stuffed!' He turned and walked away.

Apart from a week in Hong Kong a year earlier, Andrew had never been in Asia before, and Hong Kong hadn't prepared him for Kathmandu. But how could anything have prepared him for today?

At Sydney Airport a couple of days ago, his mobile had gone off in his carry-on bag. He'd forgotten about it. His old section head calling about something on a client's file. Jesus! Don't they know I'm finished with all that? That I just don't care? He started to answer, then hurled the phone into a bin. Yes! Three Korean tourists stared at him in astonishment. He grinned back. That felt good.

But then he thought of Cass. Finding her had shattered him, thrown him into a downer that lasted months. He'd dragged himself out of it only when he came across an Asia-Pacific Institute pamphlet. It jogged his memory. Of a man who had fascinated him as a schoolboy. Jim Duncan, that charismatic, flinty medico. A man who brought basic health to people with few medical resources. Inspired by the barefoot doctor program in Mao's China, Duncan had worked with Aboriginal outback communities, stinging successive Australian governments with outspoken criticism of the appalling health conditions they endured. With minimum resources he'd worked miracles. After a stint in Africa, not long before dying from a cancer he barely acknowledged, he established

GERRY VIRTUE

the Asia-Pacific Institute to help people in remote Himalayan villages afflicted with everything from cataract blindness to leprosy.

The corporate world had given Andrew all the money he'd needed, lots of friends and a great lifestyle. But he couldn't do it any more, not now. Not after Cass. Researching everything he could find, he contacted the Institute's Sydney office. And now here he was in Nepal, a volunteer aid worker on his first post. And some sort of fool in the middle of ... of just what exactly?



Ashok was there with breakfast at eight. 'We go for tourist, madam?'

'Great! And thanks for the breakfast, Ashok.'

He grinned, then with a serious expression, 'After Hanuman Dhoka and Durbar Square, we see my friend, OK?'

'Your friend? Who's that?'

'He is guru for me, he is name Sadananda, is sadhu.'

'A guru, eh? And a sadhu? He must be a very holy man. Does he teach you?'

'Sometimes he teacher. But telling stories also. He live in Kasta Mandapa. You like him.'

'A teacher and a story-teller? I'd like to meet him. What stories does he tell?'

'Stories of all gods. And he makes stories about old times also. I like very much the Kathmandu Valley story. You like that one?'

'I don't know, I've never heard it. What's it about?'

'About long, long time before, when Kathmandu Valley was big lake, and the god, he come and he cuts the mountain and all the water go outside.'

'I'd certainly like to hear that.'

After the old royal palace, the house of Kumari, the virgin goddess, the great stone statue of the Black Bhairava, and various temples around Durbar Square, Ashok took her to an imposing three-storied building in classic Nepali style, a broad, rectangular pagoda, each of its three levels roofed with small red-brown tiles.

GERRY VIRTUE

This ancient structure guarded the southern entrance to the famous city square. Surrounded by temples, small shops, and old wooden houses with cantilevered balconies, it was enclosed by a little wooden picket fence.

‘Kastha Mandapa, madam. Ve-r-ry old mandapa. Most old one for Kathmandu.’

People were strolling about, bartering, haggling, eating or just sitting, chatting in its shade.

‘Mandapa? What’s a mandapa?’

‘Is like dharmasala, madam, resting house for the people. Kastha Mandapa is famous one. Kathmandu is getting name from Kastha Mandapa. Is very old. Same time they are building Kastha Mandapa, and making Kathmandu city also. And this rest-house is coming from only one tree.’

‘One tree, Ashok? You’re not serious!’

‘Oh yes, madam. Is true. Kastha Mandapa is making from one tree. One big, big tree.’

They went up the few steps to the ground floor, open to the square on all four sides. In the centre was a small picket fence enclosing a sunken shrine with an old stone statue seated in the lotus position. Covered with vermilion powder, it was highlighted with a vivid yellow stripe and had a necklace of green leaves. Behind it stood a metal trident. Several men lazed in the cool interior of the building. They watched Kate without interest as she and Ashok climbed a steep flight of wooden steps to the next level, a large open wooden floor with a balcony on each side. A sturdy wooden ladder took them from there to the top level.

‘Namaskar, baba-ji, Namaskar!’ Hands together in greeting, Ashok bent and touched the feet of a man sitting cross legged on an old, worn animal skin beside the railings overlooking the square.

‘Namaskar!’ The man greeted them serenely. He was plump, genial-looking, with bristling eyebrows, white stripes on his forehead, and wisps of white hair around a shining pate. Ashok and he exchanged a few words in Nepali. His eyes were clear, almost translucent, and smiling. He was naked except for a loin cloth, and his skin seemed covered with grey ash. He wore a tiny black stone object on a cord

GERRY VIRTUE

around his neck. An iron trident stood upright against a post, a transistor radio hanging from one of its prongs. It was broadcasting a cricket match from somewhere in India.

‘Welcome to Kathmandu, madam. Welcome to this city of ancient legends, home of artists, artisans, merchants and poets. And welcome to our Old Wooden Pavilion, this venerable rest-house that gives our city its name. I am Sadananda. Ashok says you would like to hear one of my stories.’

His fluent English was unexpected, and his voice had an attractive, resonant lilt.

‘Thank you. I’m Kate. Nice to meet you.’ That sounded odd as soon as she said it, but then she had no idea how you greeted a Hindu holy man. He looked older than her father, and a good deal more relaxed.

‘Don’t let my appearance put you off. These days I’m a follower of Lord Siva, especially as he manifests in our great guru, Gorakhnath. Maybe you saw his statue downstairs. But somehow I am also a story-teller for young people like Ashok. I shouldn’t say this, but ...’ he gave a soft chuckle, ‘I enjoy it. I should be performing sadhanas, but it’s more fun telling stories - mostly about magic times long ago. Their parents sometimes come and listen, and then I tell stories about the gods.’

Kate warmed to him, despite his near nakedness and the strange markings on his forehead. That he was also listening to cricket was bizarre.

‘So Kate, why did you come to Nepal? For trekking, for the mountains, for Tibet, to discover yourself, escape the past, help the poor Nepalese? Any of the above?’ He chuckled. ‘Actually, it doesn’t matter why you come. It is enough that you are here. I returned from India many years ago, and now, if I leave, I always come back. And Ashok likes you. Maybe you will stay, too.’

Kate laughed. ‘I suppose I’m getting away from something. But you’re right. It is good to be here. And maybe I’ve fallen for Ashok as well; he’s very sweet.’

‘He is a remarkable young man. I have known him since he came from his village a few years ago. That was a hard time for

GERRY VIRTUE

him. He tells me you would like to hear the Kathmandu Valley story.'

'Ashok said it was about when the place was just a big lake. And then some god came along and cut a hole through the mountains to let the water out.'

'Yes. That is the story. In the Puranas.'

'Puranas? What's that? Some sort of history?'

'Not exactly history. They are more like ancient legends. Tales about gods and heroes and holy men and such. Also such trifles as the creation and destruction of the universe. They're wonderful stories, and there is a legend about nearly everything. The one about the Kathmandu Valley is called the Swayambhu Purana. After Swayambhu, you know, the Buddhist temple on the hill.'

'No. No, I don't.'

'No matter. Get Ashok to take you. There's a beautiful view from the top and it's a very old, very holy place. Anyway, that Purana tells how the Kathmandu Valley was once a huge lake, called Nagavasa, and how the great bodhisattva, Manjusri, came here from Tibet, or possibly China, in ancient times. And when he saw a dazzling light above a jewelled, thousand-petal lotus in the lake, he took his flaming sword and cut a gorge through the hills on the south side of the valley. The water drained away to uncover what is now Swayambhu, the hill where the lotus was growing. And of course, it also gave us this wonderful valley. There's more to it than that, of course, but that's the main part. It's the legend Nepalese people have known since ancient times. And there's nothing like an ancient lake bed to make a place fertile and productive.'

'I see ... But somehow I don't think that's your story. Right?'

'Quite right. After all, why would I tell a story you can read in an old book?' He laughed, then reached up and switched off the cricket. 'Actually, I used to be an engineer in India - in my previous life, you might say. And the Kathmandu Valley really was an ancient lake. I've discovered, or rather Japanese scientists have worked out, that it disappeared around eight or nine thousand years ago. So what happened? How did such a large lake disappear? And how was our beautiful Kathmandu Valley created ...?'

FOUR

The First Tale

Cholo and the Vanishing Lake

Cholo eased himself on to his haunches and dug his toes into the mud. It was difficult to breathe and his wound throbbed. Here by the lake the air was heavy, like a warm, invisible fog. His hair was matted and wet, he was panting, and sweat ran down his face. He waited for his chest to stop heaving. Maybe he should go on. There was a high wooded ridge above the far side of the lake. The air would be cooler there. But he felt safe here beside the water. Although the lakeside was swampy and covered with reeds, he could see well, and the need to rest was overwhelming.

He had finally escaped the dense undergrowth of those interminable forests, their strange animals and hidden dangers. Behind him the slopes were thick forest, but he felt secure here beside the lake. How long since he started into the mountains? It must be two moons. His strength was nearly gone; he could not drive himself any further. The forests across the lake probably led to more of the terrible snow mountains. His guardian spirit had brought him this far. He would find a place where his wound could heal and he could get his strength back, then make an offering to the gods of his distant home. Only then would he think about going on. For now he was just grateful to be out of danger. A light breeze rippled across the lake's surface. He pulled the skins back and allowed the cooler air to play across his shoulders.

But it was hard to relax after the ice and snow of those cruel heights. Only the spirits could endure such desolation. How had he survived? He had prayed for his gods to bring him to safety. Ploughing through chest-deep snow, half-frozen and sick with weariness, he often lost his footing. Only by throwing himself backward, staff outstretched, had he avoided falling into unfathomable depths. And the spirits howled endlessly. The strength they drew from the

GERRY VIRTUE

towering ice gave them evil powers - even the power to snatch away the air itself before he could draw breath. Gasping and wheezing, he thought many times he would die. But the gods heard his prayers.



At first it had been easy enough. When he had been found with Dumla, he had simply fled. Run off into the hills and hidden. He had stayed in caves for days, although he knew that eventually he had to return. He cursed his brother that he was not like other men. In any other family it would have been normal for him to sleep with his brother's wife, to become one of her husbands.

Brothers often took a common wife; it was their custom, and satisfied many needs. It had been that way since ancient times and caused few problems. Possessions were passed down through the mother's line, leaving the family's goods intact. He had heard that in distant lands there were tribes whose men took several wives. It was said the family's possessions went to the first son, and other sons and daughters received nothing. It did not seem likely, but he had heard this. Amongst his people it was normal for one or more brothers to be away for long periods on a hunt, or trading with other clans. And often one brother would remain in camp to maintain the household.

But Brogda, his brother, was not like other men. He was chief of their clan and brutal in his domination. A big man, the strongest of the clan, he never missed an opportunity to assert his authority. He always got his way, usually with bluster, sometimes with violence. He was also jealous. Last winter he had killed a man from another family, believing the man had tried to get into Dumla's sleeping furs whilst he was away.

She was a beautiful woman, his most prized possession. Even so, Cholo had been waiting for the time when he too would become her husband. But it was not to be. Brogda would not share her. 'Get your own wife!' he told him when Cholo brought the matter up for the tenth time. 'Find a wife amongst the Outpeople for all I care, but don't ever touch Dumla. She is mine! She will not belong to any other man, and never to a runt like you!'

GERRY VIRTUE

But one day, when Brogda was out hunting, Cholo could no longer resist her. As she busied herself round the hearth, hunger in him rose like a blazing fire. She liked him, he knew, and he knew also that she believed he would one day be her second husband. Her glances were inviting; maybe she wanted him too. Finally, overwhelmed with desire, he pulled her into his sleeping furs and they made love with great passion.

Sangsar, the sly one, had been slinking about, listening outside. He was always looking for ways to perform some favour for Brogda. He also disliked Cholo, wanting to be the chief's right hand man. So it was that, ignoring custom, he pulled back the flap and marched in with a smirk. 'What a pretty sight!' he leered. 'Brogda will be sorry he missed this!' And kicked Cholo as he lay in the furs. Then turning on his heel he swaggered back outside, hooting and chuckling to himself.

Cholo knew he could no longer stay with the clan, or anywhere amongst their wide-scattered tribe. His brother would either kill him or have him killed. Theirs was the furthest south of any of the clans, and to the north, way beyond their tribe, were the Outpeople. Always enemies, the Outpeople would show no mercy should he fall into their hands. He knew he must go. But where? And would Dumla come with him?

For several days he hid in the caves in the hills, living on strips of dried meat from his hide bag. Where could he go? Skulking around beyond the camp limits, he began to think about the Great Snow Mountains. They were far away, beyond the grazing herds. Sometimes, when they had gone high to hunt, they had seen those distant mountain peaks where the world of men ended. It was said that beyond them the world plunged into an abyss, the place of demons, ghosts and ogres.

But once, long ago, a travelling story-teller had come to their camp, and amongst his stories was a tale of fabulous lands beyond the Great Snow Mountains. Everybody scoffed at the tale, but the story-teller insisted he had learned of it from a man who had returned from there, a man who had journeyed to the rich, fertile lands that lay on the other side. He told of lands where snow never

GERRY VIRTUE

fell, warm lands where fruits grew on all sides. Fruit that could be plucked and eaten all year. And lands where huge herds grazed on lush pastures. Naturally no one believed such a fantastic tale, but it had lodged in his mind, a fascinating nugget that from time to time he would take out and turn over and over. He would dream of another world, mind-boggling, unbelievable and far away, a place where no man could ever go.

But he wondered. Was there any truth to the tale? Did men really live beyond those great peaks, in a land where animals and fruits were plentiful? Was it possible?

Finally, when he realised there was no other choice, he made the fateful decision. Choosing his time, he returned to camp when all the men had gone off hunting in the direction of the rising sun.

Urgently he told Dumla of his plan. Would she come with him, would she share his life, whatever way it went and wherever it led? She drew back in fear. She whispered how Brogda had beaten her senseless when he returned that night. But how could he think of taking her into the mountains where the world ended, into the realm of demons, monsters and spectres? She hid her face in fear. She did love him, but she could not do this, she could not leave the clan. She could not go with him into the world of malevolent spirits ...

Gathering furs and a few stone tools, he packed a bag and slung it over his shoulder. When Dumla saw he was determined, she began to weep. From one of the storage bags she took dried meat and gave it to him. 'If ever he finds you, he will kill you! He has vowed this on your father's name. Go! And go safely!'

Making off quickly, he settled into a loping, ground-eating run. Although he had told Dumla his plans, the chances of anyone discovering his trail were slight. Anyway, who would believe he would make for the Great Snow Mountains.



At first the going was easy. The high rolling plateau was mostly alpine meadow interspersed with deep valleys and small lakes the

GERRY VIRTUE

colour of polished turquoise. After two days he felt safe enough to rest, hidden amongst boulders on one side of a lake. Here, with his sling, he brought down two marmots, cut their flesh into strips with his flint knife, and partly dried them in the warm sun.

He moved now at an easier pace. Every day the mountains rose before him, higher and more formidable. This was summer, and there was an abundance of animals, marmots, wild asses, shaggy oxen, foxes, wolves, bear and a multitude of birds. There was little snow and only one difficult river to cross. This required him to detour toward the setting sun for several days until he found a shallow ford.

Then with growing apprehension he began a steady climb, along a valley which led gradually up to the lowest notch in the vast range of mountains that filled the sky. At first it was easy enough, but then came a long, steep snow slope he had to climb before he could reach this gap. It was a break in the mountains that led ... he had no idea where it led. It terrified him. What if there was no other side to the mountains? What if they simply ended in a vast precipice, plunging into the void of the nether world? That fearsome world of demons and spirits? Yet he would go on.

Now as he climbed through snow to ice, the only signs of life were a few black crows, pecking at things unseen in rocky crevices. Before long, drifts on the ice became deep and difficult, requiring him to test every step with his staff.

Much later he gained a high rocky knoll below the pass and turned to see how far he had come. For such exhausting effort, it seemed only a short distance. Gazing across the far plateau toward his home, he recalled the softness of Dumla, rolling with her in ecstasy in the sleeping furs ...

He could not bear the memory and turned quickly, climbing to the pass without looking back. Here he found snow so deep between two outcrops of rock that he was obliged to follow a precarious route along a ledge. It led to the other side of the mountain.

Only now did he realise the absolute madness of his plan. Instead of the way to a land of abundance, there was nothing but an impenetrable world of towering peaks and rivers of ice. His

GERRY VIRTUE

courage ebbed and he almost turned back. But only death awaited his return, and some wild, irrepressible part of him believed he would find a way.

There was still a spark from the storyteller's tale years ago. But was there a route down that snow-filled valley, along what looked like a river of ice? It led to ... he could not see where, but maybe there was a way.

He persevered and, buffeted by howling winds, crept down into the heart of the icy wilderness. For days he struggled on, often to the limit of his endurance. He lost count of the times his staff found no bottom in the snow, and he had to make an exhausting detour. There was little dried meat left. It would soon be gone. And there were times his mind drifted, floating near the borders of sleep, only to snap awake in a moment of terror on the edge of a precipice.

At other times the tearing winds dropped and the sky cleared. But this brought torment of another kind. The flaring white disc of the sun transformed his surroundings into a blinding, eye-searing glare, piercing his eyes. Dazzled, almost sightless, he floundered helplessly. All he could do was bind fur-strips across his eyes to keep out the deadly brilliance. At the same time he was tormented with thirst. Occasionally he would find dripping icicles. But these were infrequent and never enough. He had enough snow lore not to give in to his parched throat. But at times the agony was such that he could not stop himself forcing handfuls of soothing snow through split, swollen lips. For a few moments the relief was magical. But then, a raging torment returned, and his throat burned with a ferocity he thought would consume him.



He studied the lake again. Catching glimpses of its waters from the high forested ridge, he had stumbled down a steep slope to this wide, sandy beach. Mountains surrounded a vast basin of deep blue water and beaches of white sand. It was a vision of tranquillity, a longed-for sanctuary. After being trapped for weeks on precipitous, forested slopes, where every bush could conceal a wild beast, the