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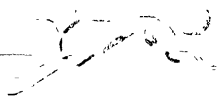


OVER THE MOUNTAIN

Over the Mountain

by

RUTHVEN TODD



ALFRED · A · KNOPF

New York 1939

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FIRST AMERICAN EDITION

FOR MY WIFE

A bear went over the mountain,
A bear went over the mountain,
A bear went over the mountain,
To see what he could see.
And what do you think he saw?
And what do you think he saw?
The other side of the mountain,
The other side of the mountain,
The other side of the mountain,
That is all he saw!

OVER THE MOUNTAIN



Some, so they told me, had gone towards the Peak with large expeditions, well equipped with fine ropes and plentiful stores, and there was Marlin, who was seen by a shepherd alone a few feet below the summit, just before the storm which had been brewing all day broke about him. They told me, the old men who had spent all the days of their youth in prospecting among the foot-hills, that I was going the wrong way about making my attempt. I knew very little of the art of climbing mountains and was merely interested and cu-

rious about what lay on the farther side. The others, my predecessors, they said, had spent months in studying the character of the Peak and in choosing their route towards the summit, while I was rarely seen to do more than glance upward at it.

I was intent on making arrangements to pacify whatever inhabitants there were in the strange country on that side. I filled my pockets with baubles, mirrors, chewing-gum, cheap cigars, and Woolworth toys and brooches. I changed what money I could raise into blank gold plaques or coins, so that I would be able to pay my way should they be, as I thought they would be, normal civilized people.

All my youth had been haunted by the mountain range that rose suddenly in rocky steppes to the west of my home. My old nurse was the widow of a famous guide who had been killed during the first attack on the summit; for it was a peculiarity of the range that the only way to cross it was to climb to the top of the Pale Peak, as all other ways were absolutely impassable, with precipices that overhung, their surfaces as smooth and hard as glass. Report had it that one expedition had gone against the other lower reaches of the range armed with hydraulic drills and all the latest house-wrecking equipment, but that they found it would take them nearly a hundred years to carve a path up the side; the hard surface blunted their drills and broke their specially tempered chisels.

My old nurse told me, with an unfathomed depth of

bitterness in her voice, of the strange attraction that the Peak held for the dwellers in the high plain. Her husband had been a mechanic in a garage, a man whom his employers believed to be capable of great things, until the dreaded mountain-fever caught him and he spent all of each day mooning about it, watching the glacier calving at the base and trying to see through the mists that usually hung about it and gave it its name. Even in the evenings, she told me, he could think of nothing else and drew careful lines and curves on that part of the ordinance survey map which had been left blank by the surveyors and the printers as unmapped and unmappable.

Sometimes he would spend several days wandering on the slope, to return with a stubble on his chin and a mad look in his eyes to add a line or two more to his map or to make notes in the margins of his books about the Peak.

"Some day," he would say when she protested that he was doing nothing and that she was still young and desired him without a mountain round his neck, "some day I'll get there, and then you won't be able to say that I've wasted my time. Until that day I must keep on planning, for I know that there must be a way to the summit. Nothing is impossible, they told me at school, and I'm not going to live day in and day out under the shadow of an unconquered mountain."

His more prosaic friends, or at least men that had been his friends before he took the mountain as his bride and

only friend, would chaff him when he entered the public-house, saying, "Here comes the man who's going to reach the top of the Peak. How far up have you been today, John, and what do you expect to find when you do get to the top? Gold, perhaps, or diamonds?"

But he would take his quick drink in silence and return to his perpetual planning without telling them of his dreams.

Only once were these lethargic ones stirred from their state of apathy. That was when some politician suggested that an attempt to cross the range should be made with aeroplanes. Then there was such a public outcry, for even the least interested of the plain-dwellers had a hidden belief that there was some magic concealed somewhere in the Peak, that the government was forced to explain that the suggestion had never been seriously considered and that, for the future and for all time, no mechanical assault on the summit would be permitted, under penalty of being tried for high treason.

So it was with horror, mixed with respect for the law-breaker who dared to flaunt such an awful threat, that the dwellers in the high plain looked up one Sunday morning to see a small monoplane, painted a gaudy yellow with red wings, heading towards the mists that clustered round the Peak.

The telephone lines were kept busy all that day and companies of police were stationed at all the possible landing-grounds to arrest the criminal when, and if, he

returned. But when evening came and the small plane was seen far off, returning from the west, they noted its erratic flight, dipping and staggering, towards the principal aerodrome, and everyone guessed that something serious was the matter with the pilot.

Just as they thought he was going to crash, however, the pilot apparently managed to pull himself together and made a perfect landing right into the wind.

The police rushed forward, with revolvers drawn to enforce their words, as soon as the plane came to rest, but the pilot made no attempt to climb out and sat on in the cockpit, laughing weakly to himself and playing cat's-cradle with a piece of string which he produced from one of his pockets. The muscles of his face were distorted as if with laughter, and the sounds that came from him certainly sounded like laughter, but when they looked into his eyes, which were as blank as burnished steel, they could see no hint of humour.

The secret police traced him quickly, with their usual efficiency. They found that he was a young man of good family, well known for the recklessness of his daring escapades, a man who drove racing cars, setting up new records, and who had wrestled with a crocodile in a glass tank for a film, who had shot rapids in a rickety canoe and had flown uncharted deserts. All these things he had done for the fun of doing them and the thrill that they gave him. He did not seem to be at all the sort of young man who would go to pieces in the face of any

conceivable horror or danger.

He was examined by a committee of the most eminent psychiatrists and alienists in an effort to find out what he had seen or encountered that was horrible enough to drive him mad, but they had no success. His mind seemed to be completely gone and he replied to their most earnest questions with absolute inanities, saying: "If Charlie's a good boy, can Charlie pick pretty flowers?" and "Trains go puff-puff. Is nice man a puffa-train? He goes puffa-puffa. Charlie wants to play at puffa-trains."

They tried the effects of humouring him, but none of these experiments were attended with any success, except for the candid-camera expert from one of the more sensational daily papers who managed to secure a brilliant snapshot of Sir William Præcox, probably the most famous society psychologist in the world and certainly the leading one in our country, playing horse and crawling round his austere consulting-room on all fours with the refractory young man on his back.

The public excitement that attended the case which followed immediately on the publication of this photograph, with its great question: "Is it damaging to the prestige of a great psychologist to show him playing gee-gees?" tended to swing attention from the young man who was the real cause of all the fuss, and he was shut up in a home along with other incurable mental patients, where he was allowed to play cat's-cradle all day

long and to pick as many heads off flowers as he liked and where he never thought or worried about mountains again. Sir William's practice gained from the publicity which attended the case, even though he was only the winner of one farthing damages, as the idea of his unbending to try to reach the mental level of his patient appealed to the great heart of the public.

However, though he was soon forgotten by the townspeople, who always had plenty of new sensations in their newspapers to keep them occupied, the dwellers in the high plain beneath the Peak thought often of him and of the awful thing they believed he must have seen.

Some, among them my old nurse's husband, were reported to say that he had seen nothing at all and that it was only the continual spiral climbing, with the mist amplifying the sound of his engine so that it dinned always in his ears, that had driven him mad. If they were cornered and told that this was not a sufficient reason, they would say that some of the sheer rock faces were polished as bright as any mirror and so the young man had perhaps seen other planes diving to collide with him, and even when he zoomed upwards these imaginary planes would also zoom up as if intent on killing him. How he had missed crashing they could not say, but they thought that this explanation was sufficient to account for his madness.

The greater number of the dwellers in the high plain, on the other hand, believed that there was some secret

terror hidden in the range, and legends became rife about a great beast that stood roaring on the summit of the Peak, and how it had reached out its vast and shaggy arms to embrace the little plane, so that it was only by superhuman skill and luck that the pilot had been able to avoid it, to return home mindless, but still in possession of his life. These people had no difficulty in finding support for their stories, and when the wind roared and moaned in the gulleys and the glacier calved mournfully during the night, they said it was the great and terrible beast they heard, crying for its prey and tearing the rocks apart in its frenzy.

All of this, it must be understood, was a long time before I knew anything of the Peak beyond the sight of it from my nursery window, appearing and disappearing in the swirling mist.

This was before the properly organized expeditions were thought of and before even solitary men had reached any real height. The first of these expeditions was in all probability the best equipped. The leaders of this expedition were all men who had cut their teeth in the Alps and learned to walk on culverts in the Himalayas. They crowded into the little hotel in the village at the foot of the Peak and their coiled ropes with the coloured strands, their 'ice-axes, boots, and rucksacks lay scattered in the parlour and in the hall.

The climbers used technical words to the few men who had the mountain madness and they engaged these

men as guides. My old nurse's husband, John, was one of these men, but he was not a willing assistant, for his aims on the mountain were selfish and his dreams were not to be shared with others. He joined the company as chief guide only because his wife forced him to, saying that he was a fool to neglect the chance of getting some money which would enable him to give her some of the things she wanted and which would also help him buy the equipment he could never otherwise afford. In addition to this the other men refused to go without him, saying that he knew the Peak as no one else did and it would be folly to attempt an ascent without his experience to help them.

In spite of the good treatment he received, he refused to do more than he was paid for and never mentioned his maps and his papers covered with calculations. He would lead them to the summit if he could, he said to his wife, but he would not waste either their time or his with ideas that he had been chaffed about for so long.

The whole plain could see them climbing, for it was a clear day and the mists were only moving slowly round the very summit of the Peak. The climbers were seen to reach the twenty-one-thousand-foot level, just about where they had intended to camp for the night, when suddenly five figures roped together fell and, turning and jerking, whirled madly down. There were few indeed of the many hundred watchers who realized what they were witnessing until the bodies hit the shale-cov-

cred slope and slid, crushed and mangled, towards the grass-covered incline where the alpine flowers were profuse patches of colour.

There were various explanations of the accident which put an end to that expedition, such as mountain sickness or a rope snapping, but the happening gave strength to the legends of the curse upon the Peak and upon those who dared to try to climb it, and now even the old prospectors would no longer sleep nights upon the lower slopes, but retired from the rocky wilderness to the lush pastures.

Then there was Marlin, who made the last attempt. He arrived at the hotel in the guise of an adventurous tourist who intended to polish up his climbing on the simple parts of the range before going to climb the Alps. He was seen often among the base hills and the low chimneys and this excused his kit with his nailed boots and his stainless ice-axe and his old leather-elbowed tweed jacket, for no one observed the glances that he cast continually at the Peak.

One late afternoon a shepherd, wandering among the sheep that grazed in the long grass about the base, chanced to look up towards the mountain and saw a small figure, like a midge on a window-pane, crawling up the ice-covered slope only several hundred feet from the summit. He sat down on a rounded boulder and lit his pipe and gazed at the tiny figure, idly wondering who it was and whether he would have the sense to

turn back and try to find a sheltered nook somewhere before the storm that was obviously gathering broke about the summit. He guessed, from his knowledge of the local conditions, that the storm would reach the Peak about the time that darkness fell, and he thought that the stranger would need to hurry if he was to get anywhere nearly back by that time, for, surely, no man was foolhardy enough to intend to brave the horrors of the night with a raging storm and the devil of the mountain.

At twilight the shepherd, who had been smoking and dreaming, decided reluctantly that he would need to return to the farm where he lived and he took what he thought was his last look at the climber to see what he was doing. He seemed to be on the top of a sharp needle of rock and snow.

The shepherd turned his back on the Peak and went towards his home, wondering what his wife would give him for tea and thinking that the stranger might be bent on committing suicide but that, anyhow, it was none of his business.

When he reached the safe road that led to his wife and warm fireside, something made him turn to see if he could manage to spot the climber. It was dark and the wind was rising and he could see nothing at all.

Just then, however, the storm broke in all its fury and he saw, in the sudden brightness of the first flash of lightning, the climber clinging to the final step, less

than a hundred feet from the summit itself, and then the clouds and the storm closed round him.

After this there were few among the natives who would venture near the mountain at all, and the old men turned from their prospecting for rubies among the rocks to other and more humdrum occupations. There were no further expeditions, for the government refused to assist climbers with money to glorify their deaths.

I was the son of the vicar of the village of Peaksfoot, the place where all the expeditions had started from, as it was situated between two long spurs of rock about twelve hundred feet high that ran out from the range and framed the only approach to the Peak. My father was an eccentric in the strict sense of the word, so that everyone always said: "Oh, yes, the poor dear vicar is so unworldly, isn't he?" He was celebrated in the district for his curious assortment of hats and for the mixed clothing that he sometimes wore, such as a tail-coat with a pair of plus-fours, but he would most certainly never have dreamed of questioning the existence of his God.

Living so near the range, I soon accepted it as an essential part of my life and at one time it represented for me the equivalent of Christian's journey in *The Pilgrim's Progress* with its fearsome terrors and tracks that looked easy but led only to destruction. My nurse used to tell me about her husband and his death and the Peak became a Vanity Fair where even the strongest-minded and the bravest were beguiled by the mirages that oc-

curred in the swirling yellow mist. When still very young, I used to clamber among the rocks of the two spurs and imagine myself the hero of my country standing at the summit of the Peak.

When I was sent away to school I found that I gained a certain amount of prestige from my accidental association with it and my form master would ask me questions about the district, deferring to me as if to the recognized authority. Sensing the awe in which my comrades held the subject, I, the man who knew all about it, professed to despise the Pale Peak, saying: "The trouble with all the climbers was that none of them knew the district. They came from their Alps and their Himalayas to conquer just another mountain. I always suspect that my old nurse's husband knew a good deal more about the upper heights of the Peak than anyone suspected and far more than he ever wrote down on his map or in his notes. I know he didn't put much there because I've seen them lots of times. I don't think that the climb can really be so difficult, for, after all, Marlin, who was not a well-known climber or even a native of the district, was seen nearly at the top, and he'd have been all right if it hadn't been for that storm. No, it isn't the Peak itself that interests me, but what's on the other side of it. I'm sure that's far more interesting than the mere pimple on the earth's surface that lies between us and that unknown country. That's the thought that I keep uppermost in my mind and I'm going over there one of

these days and take a look at it. After all, I have lived beside the Peak all my life and I've got enough education to banish any fears that my nurse might have put into my head when I was very young and easily impressed. I won't choose such an unlucky day as poor Marlin did and you'll see that I cross right over into that country and come back to tell you all about it. Just you wait and see, and I'll bet you'll be surprised."

I said this so often that I almost came to believe it myself, and instead of wondering about the ascent of the Peak, I speculated solely about the people on the other side of the range.

I asked the meteorological office for information about the probable climate and other aspects of the unknown country and they replied that as far as they knew, and they could see no obvious reason for its being otherwise, the climatic conditions should be very much the same as those of our own country, but they regretted that they had no first-hand information on the subject, as no traveller had as yet been able to penetrate there, though it was probably but a matter of a few years before communication would be established on a regular basis.

The department of geography at the University regretted also that they could give me no information about the habits or the physical appearance of the country. So I spent my holidays in dreaming of myself as an explorer among savages, for I had been assured that that it was morally certain that the inhabitants must be

savages or at least in a low state of culture, for, as far as we knew, they had made no attempts to cross the Peak. This argument, however, appeared to me as I grew older to be fallacious, as I thought that the people in that unknown country would think us also sadly lacking in the arts of civilization, since, with the possible exception of Marlin's effort, none of our attempts to climb the Peak could possibly have been visible from their side of the range.

My father died just after I had passed my seventeenth birthday, leaving me an income of three hundred pounds a year and enough money in trust to pay for the rest of my education. After I had left school I spent the next four years of my life in travelling, much to the undisguised irritation of my uncles and aunts, who thought that I should be starting to learn my way in some profession, for, as they told me, my private means were not sufficient to allow me to live in the style fitted to my station in life. But I did not pay much attention to them, as they had no control over me, my father having appointed none of them his executors.

When I was twenty-one, I decided that it was about time that I put my mind to studying the project that had occupied a corner of it ever since I was a boy, and so I returned to the village of Peaksfoot and stayed in the hotel while I made arrangements for my private expedition. I brought to the village with me a large collection of gewgaws from Woolworth's and what gold I had managed to

raise, and I put the former in the pockets of my jacket and the corners of my rucksack, and the latter I stored in a canvas belt which strapped round my waist and made me feel rather heavy.

Looking at the fripperies I had bought in the sixpenny stores, I could not quite understand why I was taking them with me, unless it was as a slight tribute to convention, for my thought on the subject had gradually convinced me that the inhabitants of that other country would probably be just as intelligent and as highly civilized as we were ourselves and that in such a community my gold was much more likely to act as a passport than were trade bangles and cheap cigars.

Also it occurred to me, rather ironically, considering what I was setting out to do, that these inhabitants might have reached such a state of civilization that they had no curiosity left and were absolutely uninterested in what lay on our side of the Peak. They were probably quite content to go about their own business instead of worrying over the affairs of other people or the conduct of other people's lives. If this was indeed the case, I thought, I should appear a veritable savage, as I was extremely curious about their mode of life though they might not be concerned with mine.

The people I met who lived in the high plain were inclined either to treat my proposed adventure as a special kind of joke, like a remark made to raise a laugh, or else, if they took me seriously, to tell me that I was an exceed-

ingly stupid young fool to presume to attempt what so many good men had failed to do, in spite of their expensive and elaborate equipment and the many years of experience behind them.

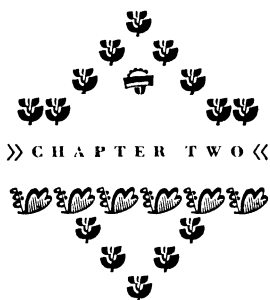
It was in vain that I told these people that I was not setting out to climb the Pale Peak, but was going to cross it to see what lay on the other side. The Peak stood always foremost in their thoughts, and they could not see that there was any difference between having as objective a new country and aiming at the summit of the mountain. They soon made up their minds that I must have been touched by the sun in one of the countries I had visited and that I was therefore no longer quite responsible for either my actions or my statements.

I did not think that I had a great deal to fear from the Peak, as its height was only about twenty-five and a half thousand feet and I had read that the men who attempted to climb Everest found that they could sleep up to a height of about twenty-six thousand feet, though above that the thinness of the atmosphere made sleep an impossibility.

I hoped, however, that I should not suffer from frost-bite, as that would slow me down considerably and would completely upset my schedule, which called for my making my attack on the summit one day and remaining there overnight, sheltered under a buttress not far beneath it which I had noticed one day, when it was clear, with the aid of a pair of powerful binoculars. The next day I

would start early in the morning to descend towards the other country. I bought as much warm clothing as I thought I could possibly need or could manage to carry, and I had an accurate compass strapped to my right wrist to help me in my directions, and an expensive shock- and dust-proof watch, set by the radio time-signals, on the other wrist.

I had decided that I would start my assault on the summit on Midsummer's Day, the 21st of June, as that was the longest day of the year, with very little dark at all, and that not really opaque at any time on both that day and the succeeding one, when I hoped to make my descent.



I spent most of the 20th arranging what little kit I had and in making sure that the nails in the soles of my boots were all fixed as firmly as the soles themselves, and that the leather uppers were as soft and supple as the skin of a newly killed calf and in doing other similar jobs.

At about seven o'clock I went upstairs and slept without any restlessness at all until my alarm clock rattled tinnily at one, when I got out of bed and dressed slowly.

I was not unduly excited; my breathing was as slow and

deep as usual, and my pulse was absolutely regular at eighty-four beats to the minute. As I shaved I noticed that there was perhaps just the suggestion of a tremor in the hand that held the razor, but I thought that that was probably due to the difficulty of managing a delicate job like shaving in the indifferent flickering light of a candle, as otherwise I was in exactly the same state of mind and body as I had been in for the past few weeks when rising to do my exercises and go for a walk towards the Peak.

As I left the room where I had slept, I dropped my ice-axe, one which I had bought in a junk-shop where, according to the proprietor, it had lain undisturbed for several years and was undoubtedly wreckage from one or other of the disastrous expeditions. The landlord of the inn, Robert Cobb, came to the door of his room dressed in blue and red striped pyjamas. He looked at me and saw that I was dressed for my attempt.

"Michael," he said, "you can't go. It's certain death to try to climb the Peak alone. I knew your father well and I've known you since you could walk, and I've a certain amount of affection for you as well as for my memory of him. It isn't pleasant for me to have to see you go out to commit suicide. Stay here with us till you've the time to get up a proper expedition, for it's sheer madness to go up there alone. Remember young Marlin? He stayed here before the mountain got him and I'll bet he wished he was back here, in front of the parlour fire, when he saw the storm coming and knew that it was too late to get

back. Stop now, Michael, before you too find that it's too late and wish in vain that you were back. For God's sake, Michael, stay here and I promise you that I'll do everything I can to help you get up a proper expedition with all the right equipment. Why, even poor Marlin was better fitted out to do his job than you are with your second-hand axe and mixed clothes."

"I'm sorry, Bob," I replied, "but I've told you before that I'm not going to be put off. Anyhow, I'm not out just to climb the Peak. I'm out to see exactly what there is on the other side. Maybe I'll be back soon to show all you stay-at-homes the way over the Peak, or perhaps they'll have engineers in that country who will be able to blast a way through one of the low parts of the range, so don't you be surprised if you see me coming through the rocks in some place that looks impossible just now."

I felt in the pocket of my old tweed jacket and found an old Chinese copper coin with a square hole in the middle of it and gave it to him, saying: "Here's a keepsake for you, Bob. You wait and I'll be back for it some time. Sooner or later."

"The sooner the better," he replied. "If I can't stop you I can't, and that's all there is to it, but remember that you've always got a friend here, in me. Good luck, Michael." He put his hand on my shoulder and I turned and clumped heavily down the stairs.

It was already half light outside and I slung my rucksack loosely over one shoulder and started out across the

pasture-land as the sun began to rise over the horizon behind me, setting its long first rays to gild the feathery heads of the long grasses.

I had no regrets for any of the things I was leaving behind me and I cast no longing backward glances at the vicarage where I had been born after I had passed it, the last house in the straggling village. I merely wondered briefly what my uncle, who had followed my father in the living, would say when he heard that I had gone. I thought he would just say that he had always foretold such an end for such an unsatisfactory young man.

My eyes would not look anywhere now but straight ahead of me at the mountain. I hafted my ice-axe easily in my hand and took long strides across the flat smooth earth towards the rocky slopes. It was fairly easy going at first, though dangerous, as I had to scramble among the loose unsteady rocks and trust to luck as well as to care to make certain that I did not start a slide of these rocks to carry my crushed and bruised body down to the bottom before I had really begun my climb.

I hoped that the weather would remain as fine as it had been for the last ten days, when there had been no rain or wind to speak of. I could see right ahead of me almost to the mist-wrapped summit, but there were banked clouds away to the south of me as well as at the top of the Peak, and the curious morning light appeared to me to be too clear and balmy to allow of any certainty about the weather.

As I clambered upwards it grew colder and colder and I took out of my rucksack a great thick fisherman's woollen jersey, a motorcyclist's leather jacket with a zipper fastener, and a motorist's leather helmet lined with fleece, and I put them on. The climbing was much harder now and the mountain appeared to grow more vertical with every foot I climbed.

I worked upwards in a wide zigzag fashion, for I knew that I had not the skill of Marlin, who was reported, I do not know by whom, to have aimed straight at the summit and never to have deviated more than about a hundred yards this way or that from his self-appointed course.

At about two o'clock in the afternoon, when I was well beyond the perpetual snow line, I paused and forced myself to eat some food. It was curious how little I desired it although I had not eaten much when I rose in the morning. The thinness of the air seemed to have robbed me of my usually healthy appetite and I looked at the food I held in my hand with positive distaste. Eating seemed to me to be one of the less charming habits of mankind and I really could not see that there was much difference between one sort of food and another.

I guessed that I must be at about the same height as the first expedition had reached when the accident occurred. The green grass of the high plains seemed to be miles and miles below me, with patches of bright colour that looked less bright than I knew they were, where the wild flowers bloomed in profusion. Just as I had left the flowers be-

hind me, I had now left the lichens and I looked down towards the rocks below me, remembering the grey and yellow blots they had made on the black and yellow rocks, but I could see no sign of them, even through my binoculars.

I swung the binoculars round and looked down at the pastures, which seemed as smooth and short-napped as a billiard table, and I saw the shapes of cattle and, smaller and white, the flocks of sheep, and farther out I managed to see two men gazing up at the peak (I knew they were looking up from the pink dots of their faces), and I wondered whether they were looking for me and wondering if my body already lay smashed in some deep couloir, for I knew that they would not be able to see me at all against the variegated colours of the rocks.

I thought that it did not seem to be a very difficult climb and mentally patted myself on the back for finding it so easy, when the professionals and the experts had found it almost impossible. It was, I thought, exactly as I had always said; these climbers had looked so long at the Peak that they had made difficulties for themselves. The right way to treat a mountain was just to look upon it as an awkward unfortunate obstacle in your path to something else, and then you would find it quite easy.

These people in the high plain would get a shock when they saw me clear against the snow, mounting higher and higher just as Marlin had done. "Perhaps," I thought, "now that the mist has begun to clear away, I may be able

to reach the summit before sundown and they will look up and see me standing there, high above them and alone." I would show them that they did not know how to set about climbing the Peak.

I put my odds and ends back in my rucksack, fixed it on my back, and pulled on my mittens and a pair of loose fleecy-lined gauntlets. Then, holding my ice-axe ready, I started towards the almost unbroken expanse of snow and ice that stretched for a long way above me.

Although the sun still shone as brightly as ever, I felt there was something rather terrifying in its doing so, as it seemed to give no heat at all, and when I came into the shadow it was so cold that my feet, even through two pairs of thick woollen stockings and the heavy boots, felt numbed and clumsy. However, I decided that I was really rather glad of the sun's cold glare, as that, at least, tried to persuade me that the weather was warm, that I felt the heat of a summer's day, and that the ice below my feet was no inconvenience.

As I got higher, I realized that the weather was not going to continue clear. The mists were beginning to close round me and the bright sky was beginning to cloud over.

I climbed slowly up a couloir without knowing exactly how I did it, slipping backwards several times and only managing to save myself by jamming the head of my ice-axe into the slippery slope so that it braked and stopped me.

It was very cold now and I realized that, in spite of the fact that I was acclimatized to heights by being a dweller in the high plains, I was finding it more and more difficult to breathe regularly. I was tired and I wanted to take a few minutes' rest, but I was afraid that those few minutes might extend and, even if I did get up again, I might have delayed so long that I should be unable to reach the shelter I had chosen for myself.

Several times I had very lucky escapes. Once I trod on a seemingly solid surface of ice and a shudder of the surface made me jump aside, just in time, as a rift opened and a sheet of ice, rocks, and snow slid down the slope and over the edge of a precipice. Then there was soft powdery snow on the surface of the rocks and I had to stumble through it, digging for every foot-hold, often wading up to my knees. This snow was just like granulated sugar and would not form into any hard surface even below my feet so that when I slipped and started to glissade downhill, I was lucky to manage to grip a projecting spur of rock, the only one, I think, near me, and pull myself up short.

My mind was no longer absolutely clear and I kept thinking of the most extraordinary things, expecting to see the St. Bernard Hospice round a buttress or imagining a world made of rice pudding with jelly hills.

I determined that I would take twenty steps each time before I paused. During one of these pauses I suddenly realized that I was not gathering my breath for the next

twenty paces, but wasting it in shouting snatches of bawdy songs and reciting reminiscences of my schooldays, bits of verse such as the one about the boy who bore mid snow and ice that banner with a strange device. "Look here," I told myself, "this won't do at all. Keep your mouth shut, my boy." And I climbed on.

Then it started to snow. At first it was only a matter of a few light flakes and I was only troubled by the necessity of keeping my goggles clear, but as it became heavier I began to think that I should never manage to reach the top of the Pale Peak and remembered Bob's advice to me regarding a proper expedition. But then it occurred to me that if I had had any companions with me, I should have been forced to return by this time out of the sense of responsibility for their lives.

All I had to do, I kept on assuring myself, was to keep on going upwards and I would be sure to reach the summit if I climbed till there was nothing above me except the sky and the snow. After all, it could not be more than a few hundred feet ahead of me now and I was certainly going to get there. I must get there, as that was the only way to cross to the country on the other side of the range.

I stumbled on and on, wasting precious energy in my unskilled use of the ice-axe, swinging it wildly whenever I slipped and trusting to luck that it would bite somewhere in the smooth surface that confronted me.

I no longer thought of the climb as a thing that any child could do, and during the time that I struggled

upwards I learned a healthy respect for the men who had attempted to ascend the Peak before me and especially for Marlin, who had been lost in the waste somewhere ahead of me.

Sheltering on the lee of the arête, I glanced at my compass to see what direction I was travelling in and I was disconcerted to discover that the needle was behaving like a mad thing, swirling to all points and trying to break its way from its metal and glass prison. I then realized that there must be a loadstone somewhere in the Peak and I thought I was lucky that I was not dependent upon the accuracy of my compass for the ascent. I was rather annoyed as I thought that I might find it difficult to find my way about the country I was going to, if the lands at the foot of the Peak happened to be rough and thickly forested.

Of course, I did not think these things nearly as clearly or as quickly as I write them. I am sure that it took me at least half an hour before I had managed to get over the behaviour of my compass and during this period my thoughts were such as would normally have shot through my mind in less than five seconds.

Everything seemed to be muddled and slowed down and I was not able to think quickly when I slipped or came to a difficult place, but merely acted as if by instinct.

The snow was now driving hard against me, stinging my face as if with a cat-o'-nine-tails, and the biting bitter wind was trying to sweep me from the arête where I

plodded upwards, sometimes clinging on with both arms while my feet seemed to float like kites, and each foot that I progressed seemed to take the whole of eternity.

I tore off my goggles with clumsy fingers, as I could not see through them now, for the snow seemed to have frozen into a hard crazed sheet over the lenses. As soon as I had taken them off, my eyelashes became white monstrosities that hung heavily over my bleary eyes, trying hard to pull them down, like rocks overhanging a cliff that need only a touch to start a landslide.

They would not now be able to see me from the plain, I thought, as I stopped and painfully rubbed some of the floury snow hard over my face; that, I had heard, was a good way of preventing frost-bite. I was giggling weakly and talking to myself in disconnected sentences, all about my presumed death and the coffin that would be filled with snow and ice and buried in my place, as was the habit among the plain-dwellers. For when a man was lost on the Peak and his body could not be found, there was an age-old tradition that the elders of the village should go out to the glacier, to the place where it calved into the slow, broad stream that moved across the plateau, taking with them on their shoulders an empty coffin. On their arrival they had to set to work to chip and scrape off enough frozen matter to pack the coffin tight, after which it was buried in the churchyard with the usual religious rites.

I could not see more than a yard in front of me, and

when I climbed to the top of a little limestone tower, I thought I had reached the summit, but when I looked for a place in which to shelter I could find none and then realized that the summit was much larger than the little peak on which I stood.

I scrambled slowly down again and with steps as slow and heavy as the tolling of a bell proceeded upwards. My aim now was no longer to reach the summit of the Pale Peak that night, but merely to find some overhanging sheltered spot where I could lie down and rest and where there might be some chance of escaping death from exposure.

My giggles were blown back at me by the wind and my mumblings were tossed around me like the flakes of snow. I seemed to be a blind man lost in a crowd, none of whom would help him to safety. Suddenly, however, the snow gathering on my shoulders had the friendly feeling of firm hands encouraging me.

I saw faces in the swirling flakes and looked into their eyes and recognized them as people whom I had known well from childhood up. Some of them were making an effort to comfort me and the others were jeering at me. One said: "Keep it up, old man; it's not much farther. Think of the warm lush pastures on the other side"; and another spoke: "You fool, you can't go on. Why don't you rest? What made you think you could climb the Peak alone?"

I heard voices singing behind the curtain of flakes and

marched with my battalion of ghosts upwards, always upwards on the ice-surfaced slope, against the wind and the driven snow.

I was no longer a tired man battling with the elements, but was walking easily to the top of a grassy mound on a sunny day. I heard the cheerful tinkle of the cattle-bells and smelled the freshness of the flowers.

"It's hot today, isn't it?" I remarked to my companions. "Shall we lie down here and rest a bit, or shall we wait till we get to the top? There's a wonderful view from there, you know; you can see across four counties."

I passed the gaunt gibbet, a remnant of former days, and laughed at its incongruity in that sunny place. There was a cool breeze as we neared the top, and I saw a hawk high above me, hovering on tight yet flexible wings as it watched and waited for a movement among the grasses; it began to make its plunge once or twice, but stopped and waited again on its stretched wings. A fat bumble-bee in front of me nosed its lazy drunken way from crane's-bill to meadow-sweet.

The clouds were small and fleecy and I heard a lamb somewhere baaing for its mother, and her deeper mellow answer. However, there seemed to be something wrong. My rucksack was too heavy and I could not manage to light my pipe; it just would not draw, even after I had pulled a long feathery grass through the stem. I was sure that I had somehow got a pebble in my shoe; as yet it had not started to hurt me, but it was away there, irri-

tating the side of my foot. I would need to stop soon and take it out.

Was that an Arran Blue upon that magenta spur of willow-herb? My eyes were slightly blurred and I could not see properly. I would need to ring up the oculist tomorrow morning and make an appointment to have my eyes tested and overhauled, for I could not go about like this. It would be such a nuisance to have to wear glasses like poor old Nick. They were always getting broken and I should not be able to go out in the rain with as much pleasure as formerly, for the glasses would get fogged and I should not be able to see things as clearly as I wanted to. However, it was no use supping trouble with a long spoon. Perhaps it was only a touch of indigestion and I would see again as clearly and sharply as I had ever seen once my bowels were working regularly. I would need to remember to take a vegetable laxative tablet before I went to bed, and probably that would put me all right by the morning.

What was that bird that passed me like a flash? I would practise my eyesight and prove to myself that it was good. What was written on that scrap of paper blown round the gnarled bole of that gorse bush?

I strolled towards it and saw it was a piece of newspaper. The pebble in my shoe was beginning to hurt me and I called out to my companions to wait a moment for me while I took it out. They did not hear me and I did not bother to shout again, thinking that I should soon catch

up with them. The leather lace had run into a tight slippery knot and it took me two or three minutes to undo it and to remove the pebble, a small flint shaped exactly like a fish; a funny game, I thought, to go fishing in your own shoes, but there was no accounting for the tastes of fossil fish.

I was irritated to see the last of my companions turning a curve that took them out of sight. "The bastards," I said. "They haven't noticed I've dropped behind. Damn them, I'll just take my time. I wonder what old news is printed on that bit of paper."

I leaned forward to the gorse bush and unwound the yellowed strip of newsprint. It was dry, and nearly crumbled to bits between my fingers, but the headline was still plain and perfectly legible. It was "The Story of the Pale Peak."

As I straightened up again, the paper in my fingers turned to powdered snow running between my glove tips, and the sun and the green hillside vanished. I was on all fours, with the frozen snow forming a film over my eyes, crawling, crawling. I thought it was the end and that I would continue crawling like this in circles until I fell from the arête to be smashed somewhere on the black and yellow rocks.

Probably I should have felt some panic, but I did not feel much emotion at all as I scooped up a mixture of snow and ice in my clumsy hands and rubbed it over my face until it began to tingle. It did not hurt when I took

my hands down, and I was mildly surprised to notice that the whitened palms of my gloves had fragments of red tinged skin spread on them. I was scarcely more surprised when, adjusting my helmet better, I chipped a small piece off one of my ears. I held it in the sheltered palm of my hand and gazed at it without exactly realizing what it was that lay there. I felt that I would willingly sit where I was for ever and ever while the ice preserved me like a pickle stuck to the rock until some chance avalanche swept me away and broke my stiff and brittle body into countless sharp splinters.

But just then some quirk of the wind blew the snow aside and, facing the blasting gale, I saw ahead of me the summit, only a little way, though it might have been miles and miles, for all I cared. This sight did pull me together to a certain extent, however, for I realized that my only hope was to struggle up to reach the black step that overhung less than sixty feet from the summit. There, it occurred to me, I might be able to rig up some sort of shelter that would protect me from the wind that buffeted me now this way, now that.

I wished, but not very strongly, that I was back beside the hot red fire in the inn parlour with a heavy book open on my knees and my old gnarled cherry-wood pipe sending slow drifts of blue-grey smoke round in the comfortable light of the lamp to the timbered ceiling. As I squatted in the floury powdered snow that blew up all round me, I remembered the grain of the old oak table where my

beer-glass stood, the grain that stood up in low relief from the softer, paler background which had been washed away a little by Mrs. Cobb's lust for cleanliness. I had never before realized the value of these common everyday things. The floorboards under your feet, the sharp crackle of green wood on a fire, and the charm of an old threadbare carpet with wrinkles and one corner turned up where the door hit it whenever it was opened. I did not want much but I did want these ordinary things now, up alone on the Peak with the cold wind drifting the snow about my body.

I must get on, I thought, and moved slowly forward, with each movement of my legs tearing at the muscles of my stomach. I stumbled and staggered uphill, pulling myself on with the ice-axe, which had somehow or other remained in my hand throughout my black-out. I rather doubted whether I had enough strength left to take me to the sheltering bluff, but I was determined that I would not give in until I could crawl no farther towards it. I would not give in till my feet were frozen to the mountainside.

It was funny the way the trees in this part of the world were as stiff and unbending as children's toys. The avenue where I was strolling was crowded with men and women, as artificial as the trees, in fancy dress of the richest sort. Silk breeches were brushed by satin skirts as these puppet figures moved in a minuet to the music by Mozart, played by a quartet of boys with long hair as gold as corn

and cheeks rouged to the colour of poppies.

I looked down as I walked among the throng and I saw that I was not clad in the right clothes for this precious and dainty gathering. My gloves were bloody and all my clothes were torn, and instead of a delicate and slender ebony stick topped with a silver-gilt knob, I carried a scratched and dented ice-axe. I had no idea how I came to be among these people, for though I taxed my brains to the utmost, I could not remember having received or accepted an invitation to a masquerade, though I could just remember having attended one soon after leaving school.

Not one of them appeared to notice me and I might have been an invisible ghost walking among them, for all the effect that my uncouth tattered garments caused. I did not feel like a ghost, however, as I was terribly tired and all my bones and muscles ached.

I was sick at the thought of all these people having plenty while I was cold and hungry. There was a loaded buffet at one side of the avenue, I noticed, heaped with plates full of rare delicacies and bearing bottles in silver buckets full of broken ice, but as I moved slowly towards it some of the dancers swung in between me and it and it vanished. Looking round behind me, I saw it being carried off like a coffin by four footmen in gold and blue livery. I shouted to them that I wanted something to eat, but my shout was only a whisper and they went on faster and faster, and although I ran after them, when I reached

the end of the avenue they had disappeared.

Round the corner I found myself in a formal garden with crazy paving and neatly placed rose-beds. There were no people in this garden and I felt so tired that I decided to make for the summer-house I saw half-hidden by a beech hedge and there lie down.

I was very tired as I walked along the stone paths, noting without interest the sedums and sea-pinks that sprouted in the cracks. It was difficult going, too, for I could not tread on these cracks; if I did I would have killed a nigger and would have to go back to the beginning again, and I knew that I had not enough strength for that.

My legs would scarcely move and the thud of my nailed boots on the paving stones sounded an alien note that was sadly out of place among these carefully arranged surroundings. I was the only untidy thing in that mathematically precise atmosphere.

I knew that I was forbidden to walk on the grass, but that would not have prevented my taking a rest on the short-napped lawn, only, as I thought of resting, I saw the heads of two of the secret police peering out at me from behind box plants clipped into the shapes of peacocks, and I knew that they were only waiting until I lay down. Then they would pounce on me suddenly and arrest me. They would take me away and question me all night and prevent my sleeping.

It was all a great big game of tag and I was "it," abso-

lutely safe as long as I stuck to the path and did not tread on the niggers, but if I forgot myself for one minute, they would jump on me and take me away to jail.

It seemed to take hours to walk across that garden to the archway of copper leaves that led to the summer-house. My whole body burned as if it had been on fire and I wanted to start trying to run towards the summer-house, but I had to force myself to walk carefully because I knew that the secret police were watching me and the terror of their third degree was even stronger than my desire to sleep.

The path seemed to be made of sticky toffee as I drew near to the hut. It clung to my boots so that I found it almost impossible to lift my feet.

Suddenly I noticed that the secret police had left their hiding-places and were closing round me, either trying to rattle me or to get on my blind side. I knew that they wanted me as their victim; they were grieved to see me escaping and had decided to grab me. They were just ready to spring when I cried: "Go away, go away, you can't frame me."

Astonished that I had noticed their manœuvre, tired as I was, they stopped. I made a final spurt and managed to grasp the door-post of the summer-house and cried: "Sanctuary!"

The police shrugged their shoulders, seeing that I had foiled them, and retired, looking very crestfallen, to seek another victim.

I pulled myself upright and entered the hut. A man dressed in the same sort of clothes that I was wearing sat stiffly on a bench in front of the door. His face was the face of a young man, a face that was familiar to me from photographs and from his statue at the foot of the Pale Peak.

“Good God, Marlin,” I cried, “are we both dead and is this hell? What are you doing here?”

His pleasant, tired, lined face did not move, and looking at his frozen eyes, I realized that I had reached the shelter which I sought.



It was bitterly cold and I was clinging to something with both my hands. I could barely move, but I managed, gradually, to focus my strained and bleary eyes and saw then that my dream was not entirely a mirage. I was holding on to the arm of Marlin. Marlin was as stiff and cold as a marble statue.

I laughed and shouted: "Good God, old man, you and I'll have to spend the night together. Let's make ourselves comfortable, at least, before I join you in your

sleep. Poor boy, can't you speak to me? Can't you give me a brief word of welcome? Can't you try to cheer the heart of the new arrival in the chamber of horrors?"

I was safe, my weary mind assured me as I crawled into the deepest recess of the overhanging step, pulling Marlin with me. "I'm sorry, Marlin," I said, "but you won't feel the cold as much as I do and so you'll need to sleep on the outside."

With clumsy fingers I undid the straps of my knapsack and tried to eat some chocolate, though I did not desire any food. I broke each piece in halves and tried to push fragments in between Marlin's cold stiff lips.

"What? Not hungry after so many years?" I asked. "Come now, just take a wee little bite to please Michael. You must keep your strength up, you know."

I was slightly mad by this time, and this meeting with a perfectly preserved corpse in a blizzard appealed to my demented mind. I laughed and chaffed it on its small appetite. I fell over on my side and just managed to pull all the cloth contents of my rucksack around my body and to tuck my feet actually inside the rucksack itself.

I thought that I was dying, but was consoled by the thought that I would certainly have distinguished company in my death, and so I fell asleep with my head pillowed on Marlin's frozen breast, and I slept deeply and well.

My dreams were pleasant—all about the strange country that I was going to visit and the things that I should

see there. I was never troubled by the relentless blizzard which raged outside my sheltered nook.

I should probably have lain there with poor Marlin until I, too, died and was frozen to him like a Siamese twin, a grotesque creature lying on the top of a mountain for the amusement of no men or children; but somewhere above me an avalanche started and the crash and the splutter of stones and chunks of ice awoke me suddenly. I was stiff and cold and felt absolutely hellish as I looked out at the sky and saw that it was fine. The sun's position suggested that it was afternoon or early evening. I had no other way of telling the time, as my expensive, guaranteed shock-proof watch had suffered somewhere and was no longer going, and even if it had been running, I should not have been able to say whether I had been there one night or two.

I still did not want to eat, but I knew that I had to force myself to swallow something and I started to chew more chocolate, longing all the time for a nice sloppy plate of bread and milk or custard.

Looking around me, I saw that I was above the clouds and seemed to be on an island set in a brown-grey sea. The weather did not look any too promising and I decided that I would need to spend another night on the Pale Peak. I set to work, with numbed and clumsy fingers and slow strained movements that made me gasp for breath, to try to make the cranny where I had sheltered into a more comfortable and warmer resting-place.

When I looked at poor Marlin and saw the crumbs of chocolate on his mouth, I wiped his face and was ashamed of my jesting with him on my arrival through the blizzard, and I thought I knew that he was not really dead, he could not be dead.

I decided that I would climb to the summit of the Peak and see what the descent on the other side looked like. It was almost impossible to try to climb the step under which I had sheltered and I had to walk nearly two hundred yards before I found a gully that looked as though it might lead up to the flat summit. It is much easier to write of this walk in search of the way up than it was to accomplish it, with my breath refusing to give me the encouragement I wanted and my legs so disobedient that I often thought that they were no longer attached to me, but had become separate entities, ruled by themselves alone.

I plodded and struggled up the gully, using my ice-axe almost as a guiding rope by holding it as far in front of me as I could and trying to make it bite somewhere so that I could pull myself up to the head and repeat the process. It took me nearly two hours, judging by the sun's movement across the sky, to clamber slowly and painfully up that last sixty feet or so.

When at last I reached the table-top that was the summit of the Pale Peak, I saw the haft of an ice-axe sticking out from a crack in the bare rock and, with some difficulty, disengaged it.

Carved in rough letters on the haft was the name "Marlin" and I was glad with all the emotion that I had left that he had been able to reach the summit before the elements proved too much for him. I wondered whether he, too, had thought that he was wandering in some sunny pleasant place while the whip of the wind tried to lash him from the arête and whether he had climbed the last few feet in a laughing frenzy, like a clockwork doll that laughed when squeezed, to plant his ice-axe on the summit as a final action before he scrambled away through the blizzard to find a place where the wind was not so strong and where the snow did not sting so bitterly.

I felt in my pockets for some time, finding great difficulty in inserting my swollen knuckles into the narrow slots, and pulled out some of my baubles, Woolworth beads and toys, and dropped them into the rift which ran right across the summit, wide in some places and narrow in others. Among these odds and ends was a small mirror, of the sort meant for a lady's hand-bag. I looked at my face in it to see what sort of damage I had done to it by rubbing it with bits of ice and splinters of stone. I could scarcely believe what I saw. Surely this gnarled red and blue object like a mandrill's bottom, crowned with a fringe of black and white speckled hair was not the thing I saw in the mirror each morning when I shaved? Surely these deep-set tired red eyes set in a frame of bruised bone were not mine? I thought that perhaps there was something wrong with the mirror, but running my cracked

finger-tips across the particoloured monstrosity, I was forced to conclude that it was indeed my face. Not the face I had started out with, the smooth unwrinkled face of a boy of twenty-one, but the face of a boxer who had lost many fights and taken a great deal of punishment. I could have cried from sheer self-pity, for I had once been rather proud of my looks, my fine straight nose and clean-cut high cheek-bones, but no tears would come.

I left my ice-axe in the crack in the rock and took Marlin's in my hand, feeling glad that I was carrying the tool of the man who had gone before me through the blizzard. I thought that I would treasure it for the rest of my life, carrying it everywhere with me; and when in crowded drawing-rooms or busy streets a stranger accosted me, saying: "Why do you carry an ice-axe in these surroundings, where there is no need of it?" I would reply: "This, sir, is Marlin's ice-axe. I got it on the summit of the Pale Peak. I slept there one night with him and he kept good watch throughout the blizzard." This would silence them, for Marlin's name was known to the very children playing in the streets. He was a national hero, the man who had gone alone to face the challenge of the Peak, and I thought how much more of a hero he would be when I returned from the other country and told my people how I had found him.

That night as the winds howled and the stray flakes of snow whirled into my shelter, I determined that I would give Marlin his memorial and would bury him in a cairn

on the summit, no matter how far I had to carry the stones to make it.

I slept uneasily and had bad dreams, remembering the beast that legend placed upon the summit. I saw its cave lined with crystals and could not see the animal I feared. All the while I looked around for it, I expected to see a long thin hairy arm shoot suddenly through the snow to claim me as its latest victim.

I was picnicking on the summit with the people whom I had known as a child. My father was saying the long grace in Latin and all my uncles and aunts were waiting to start on the excellent-looking pies and fruits. Only I knew the secret of the meal: that the pies were made of cardboard, cunningly shaped and tinted, and the fruits of toilet soap. I had a premonition that they would never discover the deception, and then the long snaky arm appeared and I was alone upon the summit.

I looked down the slope and saw Marlin struggling upwards, his eyes fixed on the blade of his ice-axe. He came ever so slowly up towards me and I felt the pain in his bones and the weariness in his eyes as he raised them to look at me.

His eyes were as tired as if he had been travelling for days through a sand-storm, and his hand, as he raised it to greet me, was as heavy as lead. He was just going to speak when I saw the thin arm, out of the corner of my eye, and turned to try to fend it off. When I looked back at Marlin, he had vanished and I was alone again with

the scurrying snow and the whistling wind.

I woke early, with my ears singing and a fierce pain in my head, but I remembered my intention and lifted the stiff unyielding body on to my back, inch by inch. It seemed to take me hours to reach the gully and climb it, but at last I got there. To my disappointment, I realized that I should not have sufficient strength to carry up the stones necessary for making a cairn for Marlin and I placed him instead in a wide part of the rift, with my deserted ice-axe above his head.

I felt in my pockets for a bit of paper and discovered that the only piece I had was an old envelope. I split it open and painfully managed to scrawl a few words with a thick blue pencil: "Marlin and I have been here," and I signed it. I then emptied the tobacco from my pouch loose into my pocket, wrapped this document in the pouch, and laid it under Marlin's body. Then I looked down on both sides of the peak, but I could see nothing on account of the clouds.

Up on the summit, however, the sun shone brightly and the day seemed quite warm as I put my knapsack on my back and threw my useless compass into the rift beside Marlin. In spite of all my pains and my feeling of sickness, I felt quite happy and contented, for I knew that I had conquered the Pale Peak and I thought that whatever terrors the unknown land held for me, they could not possibly be any worse than the terrors I had already been through.



The mist was beginning to swirl around me as I started down the slope, hoping that the direction I was going in was the right one and would bring me out exactly opposite the place where I had started my ascent. I remembered being told, or having read or heard, that descending a mountain was just as dangerous as going up it and I went very carefully, testing each step and hold to see that it would bear my weight before I trusted it.

I must have taken a careless step, however, or perhaps the sun was to blame for melting the ice a little, for I heard a deep groan and then a crack as loud as a pistol-shot and I turned to see the whole Peak crashing down on top of me. I tried to jump out of the path of the fall, but my slow brain did not carry the message to my aching legs fast enough to save me and I was thrown down by a shower of rocks and snow. The ground beneath my feet started moving. I was still conscious, but unable to do anything to save myself. I was being carried faster and faster down the hillside and at the same time I was being buried in the snow that was travelling at a greater speed than I was.

Hopelessly, I tried to fix my ice-axe in the moving ground. I was pleased to find that my mind was now working as quickly and clearly as ever, and I realized that I could not hope to stop the slip, as I was on it and a part of it. I hoped that there were no precipices below me and that something would stop the mad rush, and I shouted for help in spite of the fact that I knew there was no one to hear me. I was frightened now and kept seeing myself diving through space to land with a mountain of snow and rocks on top of me. Then a stone or something hit me on the side of the head and I did not worry any more about where I was going. I was dazed and suddenly I passed completely out.

When I recovered my senses I was lying on a jumbled mess of snow and stones, and the leather straps of my

rucksack were eating into my neck. I sat up slowly and moved my head. It hurt severely, but somehow nothing seemed to be broken. I thought that probably I was dead, and certainly when I hit my hand against a stone, I felt nothing although the skin was broken and the thick cold blood oozed sluggishly out of the raw wound.

Then I realized that I was suffering from the intense cold, and that I would not have felt it even if a knife had been driven into the palm of my hand. As I recovered, I knew that I could not be dead, for a hot pain ran fiercely through all my bones. I would need to speed up my descent, for I did not think that I could last much longer, and slushy sleet was falling heavily and melting so that I was soaked right through to my underclothes. I was afraid that I might catch a very bad cold in my weak state and that that might lay me up for a week or two in some cottage or other at the base of the Peak and prevent my making an immediate start on my journeyings in the unknown country.

In spite of all the severe pains running right through my body, I felt rather lightheaded and scatter-brained and had considerable difficulty in managing to concentrate on the job of descending among the slippery rocks, with their glazed thin coat of ice in one place and their water-polished surfaces in another.

Somehow or other Marlin's ice-axe had remained with me throughout my fall and I made good use of it. It was a much better one than the one I had used in the ascent,

better balanced, lighter, and of finer steel, and I now felt that it was a talisman and that nothing harmful could befall me while I carried it. It would guide me, better than any compass could, through the unknown land and it would be my weapon to resist the onslaughts of any savage warlike tribes I encountered there.

I wished that my head would not hurt so much, that it was a little clearer, and that I could remember exactly who I was and why I was trying to enter this foreign country. I found that my memory could not carry me back with any exactness beyond the start of my ascent of the Peak. I could not remember where I originally came from. I only knew that I must go on to explore this unknown land and that I must some day return over the Peak to my own country and its people to tell them what I had found about their strange neighbours.

The path I had chosen for myself was very difficult indeed and I had to crawl down several small moraines, an exceedingly difficult job, as my legs and arms were now sore beyond all endurance and I was terrified the whole time that some small avalanche would crash down one of these moraines and carry me with it to the rocks that lay far below.

A poor ending to my journey, I thought, to successfully climb the Pale Peak, where only one man had been before me, and then to lie among the broken stones more smashed and broken than they.

I lost my sense of direction several times and must have

finally started up towards the summit again, for after descending, as I thought, for hours and hours until I should have been near the base, I suddenly found myself among the snow and mists and had to move with the greatest care to avoid starting another slide, which would presumably have taken me to the bottom of the Peak much faster than I wanted to go. I could not count on my luck holding sufficiently to save me from sudden death again.

“Michael, my boy,” I said to myself, “you’ve had quite enough of slips and avalanches for one day. It’s your job to get to shelter now, before what’s left of you breaks down completely and you don’t give a damn what happens to you. After all, you set out to explore a foreign country, Michael, not to set up any endurance records for wandering lost on the Peak, and it would be a poor end to your adventure story if you got stuck somewhere here and never got within sight of your objective.”

I was pleased to discover that my first name was Michael and that I did know what I wanted to do, but I was rather disconcerted to realize that I had no surname whatever and that I could remember very little about my native land and the people who lived in it. I tried to recall the names of my friends and relations and their faces, thinking that I might obtain a clue from them, but it was a completely useless effort. I could not place anyone in his proper surroundings nor could I remember places in their right perspective. I was as much lost mentally as I

was physically, and that meant that I was very badly lost indeed. Who I was and what had made me decide on my single-handed invasion of a foreign land completely escaped me, though I knew that I must go on and on down the mountainside until I reached that land.

The side of the mountain was as steep as the wall of a house. I picked my way carefully between the crags and the crevasses, not knowing how I escaped falling. Sometimes when I slipped I seemed to be slipping upwards, sliding towards the sky. The sleet was driving against my face and stinging life back into the numbed flesh, but somehow it seemed to get colder as I descended and the sleet turned first to hail and then to snow, spinning and cutting wildly all around me. The ice splashed my hands through my tattered gloves, but I did not feel it, and at times it was all that I could do to hang on to the haft of Marlin's ice-axe. My rucksack seemed to be filled with broken crockery and old iron, and it jolted against my sore and tender back with every step I took.

The road down was just as bad as that up the Peak. I tried to make myself as small as possible as I crawled on the arête, in an attempt to resist the frightful searing, numbing cold that now had overcome me again.

It was curious how suddenly I walked out of the driving blizzard into the soft gentle haze of a seaside village, where the little waves rippled and gurgled on the pebbles of the shore and a tern flew gracefully above me. I could hear the gulls crying, and as I drew near the little pier, I

saw the fishing boats tied up, while the fishermen sat and with nimble fingers cleaned their white and silver catch or baited their lines with hairy lug worms. Some nets were spread on the red granite stones, forming patterns that enmeshed the eye and held it, and the gulls swooped down on the water, trying to catch the bloody guts that were carelessly flicked aside, before they fell into the sea.

One boat only was not anchored to the pier, but was alone in the sea, several miles out. This boat had a single occupant. I wondered who the solitary fisherman was and walked down the steps at the side of the pier and took a firm step on to the water.

I was only mildly surprised to find that I could walk as easily on the sea as I had walked on the rough granite stones that led to it. The sea soothed my tired feet. It was as smooth as the floor of a ballroom and I slid rather than walked upon it. Sometimes I waltzed towards the boat, with my head high and my heart gay, holding the ice-axe as my partner, and at other times I advanced slowly, shyly, sidling as if afraid of the boat's occupant.

Behind me the fishermen had dropped the fish they were cleaning and the hooks they were baiting, and they were now staring in terror at the seeming miracle of a man walking on the surface of the ocean. They were not sure whether I was a devil or a god as they stared at my tattered clothes. Whirling in my waltz, I saw one of them cross himself fervently and then, as I did not vanish or proclaim my identity, fall on his knees. The others fol-

lowed his example. I kept on towards the boat, bobbing and swaying in front of me.

Even the fish looked up at me as I walked above them. I gazed down into the glassy water and saw them darting into the hollow shapes of wrecked ships like prehistoric skeletons and saw the crabs and lobsters feasting on the drowned bodies that were held tied to the sea-bed by strands of many coloured seaweed. For the time being, I was god and lord of everything and I saw the world as small as a golf-ball in my jacket pocket.

The man in the boat had his back turned towards me and was fishing with a single line. I saw him draw it up now and again, but there was never a fish of any kind on it, haddock, cod, or mackerel, nothing but a piece of wood, waterlogged and covered with small white ridged barnacles or a snarl of red or brown seaweed. I shouted as I drew near him, but he said nothing in reply and did not look round.

There was a clear path to his boat ahead of me through the haze and I slipped silently along it towards him. Even when I was within a few feet of his back and he must have heard my panting breath, he did not look round but kept his finger on his line and his head bowed forward towards the sea, as if feeling and looking for the fish that never bit.

I put my hand on his shoulder, surprised at the icy feel of it, and spoke: "Why do you fish so late and alone, my friend? Who are you who send no answering hail

across the waters when I cry out to you?"

He turned and his cold, tired eyes met mine. It was Marlin, whom I had left on the summit of the Pale Peak.

I had somehow or other, under the impression that I was descending, climbed upward to the summit once again and stood in the blinding drive of snow above the rift where I had laid Marlin's body, looking down at his face and the white blanket that would never warm him. He was staring up at me, and the steadiness of his gaze disconcerted me. I tried to shut his cold eyelids, but they were frozen as hard as the agate of his eyes and would not move.

I was frightened when I saw where I was, and thought I was now condemned to wander on the Pale Peak until I fell and the snow and the rocks rolled over me. I was desperate as I took up my compass from its resting-place by Marlin's body and tried to make some sense out of the quivering needle. It occurred to me that as long as it remained steady in one direction, it did not matter what that direction was, as I only had to call that north and set my course accordingly and then, if I stuck to that course, I would be bound to reach the base of the Peak.

I was terribly tired and tempted to lie down in the rift along with Marlin and sleep, and sleep, and sleep, for at least then I would not feel my pains nor would anything worry me. But I fought off this enchanting idea with all the strength of mind that I had left, and I plunged once more down the steep side, which seemed to grow steeper

with every yard I travelled.

I wanted to fling myself flat upon the glass-hard surface and trust to luck to bring me safe from my last glissade to the green pastures that were sure to surround the foot of the Peak. But even in my desperation I had enough sense left to forbid my taking this last mad rush to some precipice or deep crevasse.

It was a strange way to descend a mountain, sliding and slipping for long distances and then only just saving myself from destruction by a fluky use of Marlin's ice-axe; then crawling for hours through the semi-darkness to cover a difficult place, dodging the rocks I loosened and swinging aside as the seemingly secure foot-hold crumbled away into dust beneath my weight. It was absolute hell when my fingers froze to the rocks, for I had lost one of my gloves, and the skin lifted off in great white opaque pieces when I pulled my hand away. The hell lay in the sight of the pieces of flabby skin and rough flesh, not in any pain that I had, for I could now feel absolutely nothing, and when I took a wrong stroke with the ice-axe and cut right through my thick stockings and deep into the fleshy part of my calf, no blood flowed and I felt nothing except the force of my blow.

The wind buffeted me about and I must have been rather like a puppet, stiff-jointed and unsmiling, as I moved slowly down through the rocks and ice.

A curious thing was that several times during this descent I felt that there was someone with me. I tried to

catch a glimpse of my companion, but whenever I looked straight at the spot where I believed him to be, there was no one there. This figure, as far as I could judge from my glimpses, was taller than I and went more easily in the rough, rock-strewn moraine down which I was proceeding.

I think that I wandered in my mind, as, in addition to this figure, which was certainly not a malign influence but kindly and companionable, I saw the wind and the snow take shape to form an evil-looking creature which said: "He has beaten us by getting to the top of the Pale Peak, but we won't let him get away with it. We didn't let Marlin and we won't let him. He's got more cheek than Marlin, too, for he called our castle 'a pimple on the earth's surface' and said he wasn't interested in climbing it. Oh, no, Michael, you won't get off lightly."

I met people walking up the hillside with picnic baskets, covered with clean white napkins, slung on their arms, and with bottles protruding from their hip and jacket pockets, but they would pay no attention to me when I asked them to spare me a drink to refresh me, and when I begged for help, none of them turned and offered me an arm to support me to a place where I could rest. I went down on my knees in their path and begged them with outstretched arms to have pity on me, lost and torn, but they drew aside from me, and one, red of face, bald, and with a white cavalry moustache, hit out at me with his cane when I besought him to give me a helping hand,

saying to the woman in horsy tweeds who walked beside him: "You soon learn how to deal with these chaps out in the East. If you give one of them an anna all the dregs of the bazaar descend on you, claiming your charity as their right. The best way's to treat 'em rough from the start and they'll respect you for it, as they won't do if you are polite to 'em and give 'em what they ask."

The woman laughed and they went on up the hill, over the clean green grass and in among the alpine flowers. I was angry and turned my head with slow and painful movements and spat in the dust where they had walked.

I noticed that my legs had fallen off and that I was moving on bloody jagged stumps that left red stains in the white soft dust of the path. My arms were shrunk to mere sticks, but my hands were as large as feet and were pale brown in colour, with the skin flaking off in pale flat translucent scales. Everything was moving now; the trees walked by themselves, and the flowers gathered in posies, talking gossip. The ground where I was moved and I was suddenly convinced that the world was, as some Eastern sage had declared it to be, after all built only on the back of a giant tortoise.

There was a fight going on between the rocks and the trees, the former throwing themselves at the latter, who retaliated by belabouring their enemies with their branches. The sea was troubled by this movement of the land and sent great waves crashing against the shore

to try to knock the earth senseless, and the wind howled mournfully all round me.

The great hidden deep-sea beasts were riding on the waves, and their electric lights, which shone brighter than the neon signs outside picture-palaces, were stars that shone in the daytime. Their huge gnarled sides rose like mountains from the turbulent ocean and they walked slowly, ever so slowly, towards the shore.

The wind seemed to have dropped a little the next time I was able to take in my surroundings. The hard-driven rain had slowed down to a perpetual drizzle and I was down below the snow, among the loose stones and the glacier-shaped boulders. The mere fact of having managed to get down as far as that cheered me and I tried to whistle through my frost-cracked lips, but could not manage to produce a note. The air was heavier and I filled my lungs with it, grateful for the unfamiliar feeling of solidity and support. I knew that I had a long way to climb down still before me, if this side of the Peak was anything like the other, and it seemed to be very much the same in formation; but I did not mind that, as I knew I was nearly down. "Nearly down," I thought, "nearly down! I've got right across the Peak!"

However, with the return to a lower altitude and the consequent renewal of warmth in the air, all my pains increased until I could hardly believe that I had felt anything at all before. My legs burned as if the marrow in the bones was molten metal, and the pain in my head

seared it as if the top had been removed with a white-hot knife, like the top of a honeycomb. The whole of my body felt as if the skin had been stripped off it with a plumber's blow-lamp, and my eyes felt like lead pellets dropping out of my head. I had to travel on all fours, hanging on to the rocks with both arms while I let my legs down till they found a place to rest, when I repeated the performance. It was dusk as far as I could make out, but it might have been midday, as my eyes were so solid and tired that they could barely focus on things any farther away than the ends of my fingers.

I wondered what the inhabitants of the country where I now was would say to my tattered appearance and what they would be like. I hoped that they would at least be civilized, as I wanted a warm bed and some comfort. A bed with cool white sheets to soothe and yet to warm me seemed to be the most desirable thing in the world. I thought of bed for a long time, travelling mechanically backwards down the mountainside, and I could almost feel the coolness round my burning legs and the comforting weight of blankets above me.

It was a terribly slow journey, with my limbs aching, both in every joint and in the stretches between the joints, and my head spinning and singing like a musical top, but at last, peering painfully through the damp mist, I was able to make out the first spurs of the grass-land only a little way beneath me.

I wanted to slide these few remaining feet, but when I

tried to hurry I sent great chunks of rock bounding down the slope; the flat loose stones slid down in a hail all round me and I was afraid that I might loosen a boulder somewhere above me which might use me as one of its platforms for its skipping, bouncing descent. "There's the green grass, the green grass, the green grass," I croaked through my swollen bloody lips, and I held myself back by sheer strength of will.

The worst bit of my journey was nearly over, I thought, and I looked upwards at the mists and silently cursed the Peak and its blizzards and avalanches. I could hardly believe that I had managed to cross where so many brave and skilful men had failed even to get half-way.

They would think I was dead in the village where I had started and they would not remember me for long, for Marlin was the hero of the Peak, the man who went out alone to certain death, and there could be no encores; no mere follower of his could hope to stand in the same position.

However, I was safe, or at least nearly safe, and he lay alone on the summit with my ice-axe as a mark above his tomb.

The principal thing that worried me now was that I could not remember more about myself than the fact that my name was Michael and that I came from a village on the other side of the Peak, that nameless village where all the mountaineers started their assaults. I thought that probably when I returned home there would be someone

to recognize me and I should then be able to rediscover myself, instead of discovering a strange land. I knew that I had come here to see what this country looked like and that I was the first person in our history to have done so. I hoped that the inhabitants would be civilized and friendly and that they would dress my wounds for me and give me food and a bed.

All the time, while I was thinking about the brief past and the unknown future, I was crawling down the rocky face, and when I next looked down towards my feet, I saw that I was only about three yards from a tuft of thin hard-looking grass. I edged my way towards it inch by inch and tried to grab it in my outstretched hand. I found that my hand was so swollen that I could not close it to grasp the tuft and so I propped myself up against a steady boulder and managed to grasp a few of the longest wisps between both my outstretched arms. Yes, it was real grass that I was holding in my hands, real grass, and I was just beside it, real grass with real sap and not just part of another dream.

I laughed till my face felt as if it would fall to pieces and then I scurried, regardless of the hail of pebbles from above me, towards the first spur that ran up towards the Peak. I tried to dance on the firm turf, but fell forward on my face.

My God, it was cool, and the damp against my face made me feel that I was already lying on the cool pillow of my dreams.

I do not know how long I lay there, but at last I raised my head and then, with the help of Marlin's ice-axe, pulled myself more or less erect and turned my back on the Pale Peak.

Using the ice-axe as a sort of walking-stick or crutch, I stumbled through the rain and the half-darkness, muttering to myself and giggling inanely. Somewhere ahead of me I thought my half-dead and wholly weary eyes could just make out a light and I rocked towards it like a drunken man.

It did not matter that I did not know who I was or where I came from. I was safe and I was sure that no one now would refuse me help. There were bright lights inside my head and it felt as if there was a firework display going off which would split it open at any moment. This made it very difficult for me to concentrate on the real light ahead, for it must be a real light, I told myself, I could not be dreaming again; and if it was a real light, then there were sure to be people of some sort who would be able to help me.

The road across the grass-lands was very long and it seemed to me that the ground was not absolutely steady, for when I swayed one way it swayed the other and helped to set me right. The drizzle had been getting steadily heavier and it was now pouring rain, a sheet of water falling in vertical lines with no wind to drive it at me. I kept on trying to turn my head up so that the rain would

drop upon my battered face and cool it, but my neck was far too stiff. The rain fell only on my forehead and nose and I was only able to catch drips upon my lips with which to try to cool my burning tongue, which lay swollen between my teeth.

It seemed to take hours of time and an eternity of effort before I drew near to the light and saw that it was a light in a house window.

Suddenly I seemed to become the owner of super-human sight. I could see like a hawk and I observed the lace curtains in the windows as clearly as if I had been holding them between my hands, only eighteen inches from my nose. I could make out a potted plant behind the curtains and someone moving about.

The window was getting bigger and bigger and I became frightened and thought that it was going to burst suddenly and I should find myself either miles away, with the window a pin-point of light, or else back on the summit of the mountain. I was just going to knock on the window when I realized that I could not stand the strain of waiting for it to burst, so with slow and stumbling steps I made my way towards the door.

I had to rest, leaning against the door-post, for a few seconds before I was strong enough to lift the ice-axe and let the head of it fall heavily on the panel of the door. Practically asleep on my feet, I heard the turning of a door-handle somewhere inside and then slow footsteps,

» O V E R T H E M O U N T A I N «

one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . . seven, and as the bolt inside began to scrape back, I pulled myself upright.

The door opened and, where I had quite expected to see the face of Marlin, there was the frightened face of a maidservant.

"I've come from the other side of the Peak," I mumbled, and fell forward across the threshold.



>> CHAPTER FIVE <<

The next thing I remember is waking in a bed, a real bed with sheets and blankets, and feeling my face being bathed, with warm water and something that stung. My head was still very sore and my body felt as if it did not belong to me. “How are you now?” a voice asked. “Feeling better? Would you like something to eat?” I made a noise in the affirmative and two strong arms pulled me up in bed and propped me there with pillows. There was a soft light in the room, as the blinds were half down.

Three men stood at the end of the bed and one of them stepped forward and advanced towards me. He was a lean clergyman and his movements were somehow familiar to me, but I supposed that was because there are certain mannerisms common to a great many of the clergy. He laid his hand on my bandaged ones and said: "My son, let us give thanks to Almighty God that He has thought fit to bless your enterprise and bring you through to safety."

He fell on his knees beside the bed and started praying in a peculiarly sheeplike voice while I thought that I owed no thanks to his god for bringing me safely across the Peak, but only to luck and the talisman of Marlin's ice-axe.

The two other men stood uncomfortably at attention with their heads bowed stiffly while the praying was in progress, but they relaxed suddenly when the loud and sonorous "Amen" broke the air like a dinner-gong.

One of them produced a cigarette-case from his pocket, opened it, and presented it to me, forgetting that it would be almost impossible for me to pick out a thin object like a cigarette with my bandaged hands. When he realized this, he was profuse in his apologies and placed one between my lips and lit it for me, with a sudden flame from a lighter at one end of the pencil he held.

"I wonder, sir, if you could answer a few questions for me. I represent the press," he said, flicking a card quickly before my eyes from one waistcoat pocket to another,

"and I am sure that by this time there is not a man, woman, or child in this country who is not waiting to hear something, in your own words, about your climb. Can you begin by telling me your name and some details about your own country?"

"I'm awfully sorry," I replied, "but I got hit on the head by a large bit of the mountain as I was descending and I've been worrying about my name and home country ever since—at least whenever I've been in a condition to worry. I must have got some sort of lost memory, for all I can tell you is that my Christian name's Michael, but I don't know my surname, and that I come from the other side of the Peak."

"Ah!" he murmured. "Hero of climb loses memory during epic feat. Good story, that. Well, now, could you tell me more about your climb and your emotions during it?"

I did not know what to say so I told him a curious mixture of fantasy and truth and he took every word down in shorthand in a large red notebook, muttering as he did so: "Very satisfactory, very satisfactory indeed! One might almost say excellent. Can I use your telephone, Father?" turning to the clergyman, who nodded. He smiled at me, clapped his hat on his head, and rushed from the room.

The third member of the little party stepped forward, picked up one of my grotesque white hands, and looked at me closely. He was a tall man with a sun-tanned face, greying hair, and deep-set eyes.

"Mr. ah—Michael," he said, "I am here on behalf of the National Exploration Society to offer you our heartiest congratulations and to ask whether you will accept honorary membership in the society. We should feel very honoured indeed to include you among our members. Now that we've got over the formalities, do you mind if I ask you a few questions about your climb and ask you not to try and put me off in the way you did that damned reporter? I'd like a few real facts if you don't mind giving them to me. You see, I've got a certain personal interest in the Peak. I led our first expedition against it, a good many years back now, of course. We were unsuccessful and lost several good men, owing to a rope breaking or some other cause which was never satisfactorily explained. I hope you don't think it impertinent of me to ask you to make these facts as full as possible, but the N.E.S. will expect a full account from me when I get back and I don't like to disappoint them."

I was just going to speak when the lean clergyman interrupted: "Excuse me, it was your saying that your name was Michael that reminded me. I had a flighty nephew of that name, Mr. Michael, you know the sort of boy who won't settle down to an honest job, but prefers to knock about the world. Well, he set out to try to climb the Peak the other day—said he wanted to get over to your side. You did not by any chance happen to see anything of the rash boy? I sincerely hope that no ill has befallen him, for his father, my brother, was a very estimable man

indeed, unworldly, but very estimable."

"No," I replied, "I saw nothing of him. The only person I met on the Peak was Marlin and he has been dead for many years. I found his body frozen into marble near the summit and his ice-axe at the summit itself. I buried him at the summit, with my ice-axe as a tombstone, and took his with me."

"Quite right, my son," he said abstractedly, "quite right. I'm afraid that nephew of mine has come to a bad end. Many's the time that I've foretold just such an end for him, but that was merely jesting, in a manner of speaking, and I certainly never wished him such a misfortune as to die unrepentant on the side of a mountain. Now I must leave you, my son—the calls of a country parish, you know. I know that you will get on well with Colonel Roscoe."

He blessed us in an unctuous voice, crossed himself, bowed deeply, and left the room.

I told Colonel Roscoe what I could remember of my climb and descent and he listened carefully to what I said, putting in a pertinent question every now and then and making jottings on the back of an envelope or a bill whenever I said something that seemed to him to be of especial interest. He was particularly interested in what I told him about Marlin and noted everything I said. When I had finished he leaned back in his chair, pulling at his briar pipe.

"God only knows," he remarked, "how you managed

it. By all the rules you should be lying in bits somewhere on the mountainside. You really must have exceptional power of endurance. I can tell you that I would certainly not like to contemplate spending a night up there, even in absolutely fair weather, let alone encounter a blizzard and all your other accidents. Now, I was warned that you were an invalid and if I don't pay attention to that warning the doctor will be after my blood. What you have told me is of the greatest interest, and I sincerely hope, Mr. ah—Michael, that you will soon recover your memory and that then you will be my guest at a N.E.S. dinner and will consent to supply the members with details about your country and your climb. If you want to get hold of me, telephone Grebe 477—that is my club—and I can promise you that I'll be only too glad to do anything I can to help you at any time. Good afternoon, Mr. ah—Michael."

The doctor arrived shortly after, when I had at last had some food, and he put new dressings on my hands, calves, and face. As he was dealing with the last, he laughed. "I'll say you've made a fine mess of yourself coming over the Peak. I can't understand what you see in trying to get as near to death as possible without actually killing yourself. Would you like to take a look at your face, before I do my best to patch it up? Though I'm afraid it'll never be the same face it was before you started mountaineering.

He picked up a hand-glass from the dressing-table and

held it before me. My last hope, that I might just be able to identify myself from my face, vanished. I had never, to my certain knowledge, seen that face anywhere before. At a rough glance it was just so much butcher's meat, but closer inspection showed wrinkles round the haunted-looking eyes, and the nose was bent towards the left cheek. I put one of my clumsy bandaged fingers up to my nose and felt it and it hurt like hell.

"I'm sorry, old man," the doctor said, "I'm doing the best I can for you and I've already straightened it out quite a bit, but you can't expect me to work miracles with a nose that's been broken so badly that it was lying flat on the cheek and then frozen stiff and thawed again. Also, I'm afraid that you've permanently lost a good bit of the lobe of both ears. Even your best friends won't know you, ha ha!"

I did not think it was so peculiarly funny that I should have lost the last clue to my identity and wished that I had not written my announcement of my visit to the summit on the only envelope in my pockets. I remembered writing quite clearly and remembered signing "Michael" something, but I could not visualize that "something" at all, even though I also recollected noting the address typed on the face of the envelope as I split it open. I asked the doctor if he would empty the contents of my pockets on the bed, so that I could rummage through them and see if there was anything there that would provide me with a hint that might reveal my full name.

He brought everything over to my bed and remarked: "There's no name, nor even a maker's name, on any of your clothes. Old Podmore looked through them after he'd got you to bed and given me a call."

I lifted the canvas money-belt and said: "By the way, how much do I owe you for your services?" as I took some of the coins in my hand and chinked them together.

"Oh, no, you don't," he answered. "One good turn deserves another. You're news, you know, and it's the finest advertisement that I could ever have had and one that the Medical Association can't pounce on me about, either. You know, all the articles about you in the papers end like this: 'Dr. Cornell, who is treating the mountaineer, said yesterday evening that his condition was improved and that there was every chance of his regaining consciousness within the next twenty-four hours.' That's the stuff to give the troops. And if you'd like to do me a further good turn when you're better, just drop my name when you're in conversation with the bigwigs at the dinners that'll be given in your honour. Don't push it, you know, but just sort of accidental-like remark that Dr. Cornell was extremely competent when treating you. Thanking you in advance for favours about to be received, that's me."

He picked up his stethoscope and little black bag, tilted his bowler hat at a jaunty angle, and hurried from the room, stopping at the door to say: "See you tomorrow. I must say I'm sorry for you, old chap, for you'll have old

Podmore praying over you all night. This is his house, you know."

I was alone at last and had time to look around the room and think of my situation. I would obviously need to stay where I was until I was strong enough to travel, but I certainly did not intend to become the pet rabbit of all these various conjurors, doing whatever tricks they wanted me to do.

Casting my mind back to see what I could remember about my own country, I found that I could not remember much except that there did not seem to be very much difference in my surroundings there and here. The furniture appeared to be of the same sort and the people seemed to enjoy much about the same level of culture.

If there was any difference at all, it lay in these people themselves. They seemed to be emphasized versions of the sort of people that I could vaguely remember in my country, like caricatures of their types and professions. Everything they said seemed to be slightly in excess. Even Colonel Roscoe, who was the only one I had felt that I could like so far, was too good to be true, too much the retired explorer and the clubman.

They did not appear to be the sort of people who would revive my memories of the people in my own country, who indulged rather in understatement, I thought, trying to recapture their shadowy faces and voices and wishing that one or two of them had been as emphatic as these people were, for then I was sure I should have been

able to remember them. I could not place any of the faces I conjured up, however, and they remained as parts of my unreal past. There was nothing, as far as I was concerned, on my side of the Peak, nothing but an army of ghosts, nameless and faceless, moving in an unreal cardboard landscape where the only real and solid thing was the Pale Peak, towering over them and dominating their lives.

There was no clue at all in the motley contents of my various pockets and my rucksack, only beads and bangles, contraptions for using up old razor blades as knives, tubes of cosmetics, and gay many-coloured handkerchiefs.

The door of the room opened and the Reverend Mr. Podmore came in. He was wearing a white surplice. He lifted his hand in blessing as he stood framed in the doorway, his other hand playing with a small gold crucifix that dangled from a thin platinum chain round his neck. "God be with you, my son," he said, "wherever you go, by land, by sea, by day or by night." He shut the door and came over to the bed. I thought he was going to fall on his knees and start praying again, and was relieved when he seated himself in the low chair.

He looked into my eyes and seemed to be disturbed when I moved them away, for if there is one thing I dislike it is being expected to look a man straight in the eyes while you talk to him, as a sort of proof of your honesty; almost as bad is the firm handgrip as a test of character. I had been spared the latter on account of my

mangled hands. What annoys me particularly about these two habits or superstitions is that I often find myself paying homage to them and staring with an eye like a hawk, unhooded and unblinking, or taking the hand of someone I do not care for as firmly as if it were a hand held out to rescue me from a crevasse into which I had fallen. I must, I suppose, have been brought up to believe these two things to be the touchstone of a gentleman, the honest eye and the hearty handshake, and it is only by fighting against them that I am able to be something of myself.

"My son," said Mr. Podmore, or Father Podmore, as I later found he preferred to be called, "you have had God with you in your fight against the elements. Did you not hear His encouragement in the storm and see His light burning before you like a beacon to lead you to the summit? Up there in the wastes of snow and ice you were alone except for Him. Did you not feel His gentle breath in every gust of wind?"

"No, sir," I replied, "I was in hell and I was not alone, for I had good company to help me crush my fear. One Marlin slept all night beside me and kept the ungentle blast of hell away from my weary bones." I went on to tell him how I had talked to Marlin and how I had tried to feed him fragments of chocolate, jeering at his lack of hunger after so many years.

I think I wanted to hurt this lean yet well-fed priest out of his contentment, to try to make him realize that the

hell where I had been was without a god and with no man except the dead. But I might just as well have sat on the summit of the Peak and ordered it to take me down to the foot like an escalator as have tried to make any impression whatsoever upon him. His fat mind was incapable of imagining the torments of snow, ice, and wind that had eaten slowly right through me. He was so sure of heaven for himself that he had long ceased to think of hell, and his plump mind was full of fields of ripe waving wheat, harp-music, and Stanford in B flat.

He made a gesture of disgust when I described the utter weariness in Marlin's eyes, which had seen things that no eyes were meant to see—eyes that had watched the ice creep up the useless legs and the inert body till the brave heart gave out.

"I know, my son," he said, in a soothing, kindly voice. "No doubt your experience has upset your sense of perspective, and this man Marlin, by the fortuitous accident of his preservation, has become for the moment the most important incident in your struggle. From what the doctor said to me, I believe you to be a young man and you are obviously a man of courage and determination or you could not have climbed the Peak even with God's help, and you surely admit that without His help you would never have come through safely. God was with you, and even if you deny Him with words, you must admit to having received His help in your inmost heart. Why, He even guided you to my door."

I tried to protest against his ordering of my mind for me, but he would take no protest from me, and seeing that his line of approach was not having the expected effect on me, he changed his tactics and became confidentially hearty. He leaned forward and put his hand on my knee before he began again:

"Now, I'm sure that you'll admit that we are both men of the world and that God is a power for right in a world torn by troubles and by stupid discontents. People are no longer contented with their station in life and the ample wages that they are paid. It would be a great gain for the forces of decency and order if you, Mr. Michael, would be willing to tell my parishioners how God helped you in your climb. Just a short informal talk, you know, after the service next Sunday. You needn't say much; just tell them how you climbed and of the encouragement you received from your memories of your early training. Nothing technical, of course; you'll need to keep that for the dinner that the National Exploration Society are giving in your honour. Come, my dear chap, you can't refuse a simple request like that from your host, can you?"

I did not see what I could do, for I was in no fit condition to rise to my feet and leave his house to seek some place where I could sleep, after paying for it, with no conditions attached. I felt tired and I wanted to be left alone, and so I rather weakly acquiesced in his request, thinking that some way out might turn up or that I might

plead a sudden indisposition on Sunday morning.

The next morning Father Podmore woke me, carrying a newspaper. "Look, my son!" he exclaimed. "See what the papers say about you!" I looked at the headlines: "Exclusive interview with Michael, the man from beyond the Peak," and read the first few lines. They said that I was a religious ascetic who had felt God's hand on his shoulder as he climbed. They had distorted my mention of the figure who had walked beside me, which I had incautiously let slip, until they could compare it with the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. I threw the sheet away from me in disgust and said: "Where the bloody hell did they gather this rot? Hardly a word of it's true. I'll need to write and correct the false impression this will give and forbid them to print anything more until I've seen it."

Father Podmore, who had been standing by, looking extremely pleased with himself and fiddling with his crucifix, said: "My son, I thought you would be pleased and, as a matter of fact, I helped the reporter get his story right. Think what wonderful publicity this is. The church is going to be so crowded on Sunday that I have been asked to fit up amplifiers in the churchyard so that the people who can't get into the church itself will still be able to hear you. You noticed that this article says that you will speak from my pulpit after the service on Sunday morning? No? Well it's all here and you surely don't want to disappoint the people. Why, I've heard

that they are going to run cheap excursions from the city, and the bus companies are also arranging tours."

"My God," I thought angrily, "they'll hear me all right. I'll blister their godfearing ears for them by telling them exactly what it was like, and I'll lay it on so thick that it will penetrate properly. The bastards needn't think that they can make me out to be a plaster saint just to satisfy their lust for publicity."

I was aware that Father Podmore was still talking in honeyed conciliatory tones: ". . . So surely you will give the talk as you promised. Don't let me down. If you do, my influence as pastor of this district—an influence which I flatter myself is not slight—will be gone for ever."

"No," I replied shortly, "I won't let you down." I thought that if it was only a matter of Father Podmore's prestige in the district, I should have had no difficulty in refusing to make the speech he wanted, but now that this lie had been spread throughout the country, it would need a personal appearance and denial from me to stamp it out.

Nothing else would do; a letter to the press could quite easily be mislaid in transit, and even if it was delivered and printed, statements could be issued, signed by bishops and other clergy, saying that it was false, presumably forged, and that I was suffering from a nervous breakdown after my ordeal and would be unable to give my projected talk on Sunday.

Father Podmore was down on his knees beside my bed,

praying in his sheeplike voice that I should be brought to realize the infinite mercy of God and that He would follow me wherever I went. I felt as if I were being cursed, or at least bewitched, and crossed my fingers as well as I could with the bandages, to resist this evil and insidious influence.

He rose to his feet and said: "Thank you, my son. I knew that you were the right sort and would not fail me when it came to the test." He turned at the door and raised his hand in blessing before he went out, still fiddling with his silly little crucifix.

I was not troubled by him for the rest of the morning, but I heard his voice, and different ones replying, downstairs several times. When he came in at lunch he was in a very good temper. "I've talked to the reporters for you, my dear boy," he said. "I've told them that you are still rather weak. I don't think I've been the least indiscreet. I merely told them that you would tell your own story from the pulpit on Sunday—the plain unvarnished account of a very brave man."

His way of talking about me in the third person while still addressing me aggravated me as I thought: "You bet it'll be unvarnished, but I wonder what you've said to these bloody reporters. Anyhow, I can't do anything about it now, but I'll be damned if I don't send the balloon up in a big way on Sunday morning. I'll fill it so full of gas and hot air that you'll either have to let go of the ropes or be pulled up with it."

The next day Dr. Cornell allowed me to get up for a little while. Father Podmore showed some sense by going to a wardrobe in my room and producing a suitcase full of clothes, saying: "You had best use these, my son. They belonged to my nephew and I'm afraid that they will not be of any further use to him now. They've been here a long time, but I think they are probably all right. He left them before he started off on one of his mad journeys. The poor fellow won't be able to start on any more of those jaunts now. As I think I told you, he must have started out to climb the Peak much about the same time as you did. It was proof, if proof were wanting, that God looks after His own, for he was a rather godless young rascal and got lost, while you won through. However, may God's mercy follow him, whatever faults he may have had."

He sighed deeply and started pulling clothes out of the suitcase. They fitted me as if they had been made for me and I managed to dress myself slowly in spite of Father Podmore's efforts to assist.

I went downstairs with him and he put me in a chair in his study. I was lucky, for just as he sat down in a chair opposite and began opening his mouth to start lecturing me, there was a knock on the door and a maidservant put her head into the room and made some remark which I was unable to catch. "Ah, my dear boy," he said, "duty calls me, and her calls will not be denied." He got up again and went out, leaving me alone.

I walked round the bookshelves, hobbling painfully, and took down books and read snatches of them before I replaced them—Thomas à Kempis, Sir Thomas Browne, and finally Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, which I took over to my chair and started to browse through, turning the yellowy-brown pages carefully. It was a beautiful old edition and I felt quite contented for a short time, amusing myself by trying to decipher the crabbed Latin and Greek notes which had been made in the margin by some former owner. I forgot the unpleasantness which was in store for me three days ahead and my growing fear that it might prove so simple and attractive to say the things that Father Podmore wanted me to say that I would adopt that easy course and deny myself.

I was still very weak as a result of my journey over the Peak, and my bones felt as if they had been split open and then put together again with the edges overlapping. My hands were rather better, but they still looked exceedingly rough and the skin in great patches was dead and lay in white and blue islands on the palms and finger-tips. The muscles all over my body were as stiff as bamboo rods, but my head had stopped hurting, my eyes were almost normal again, and I suffered no longer from seeing things slightly double as I had at first.

I knew that I should not be able to stay with Father Podmore after Sunday and hoped that I could rely on Colonel Roscoe to find me a comfortable place for the

remainder of my stay in the town.

I was afraid of the things Father Podmore might have said to the newspaper reporters and I remembered that he had not shown me the papers at all that morning. I rang a bell that stood on his desk and asked the maid who answered it if she would bring me any of the newspapers that she could find.

They were full of the same sort of stuff as on the previous day, but it was rather stronger, if anything, stressing the fact that I was a man of obvious breeding and a devout churchman. Not unnaturally, I was very angry at the way in which Father Podmore had treated me, giving me a birth and a piety that I did not remember ever having had and which I certainly did not want now, and I started making notes—clumsily, for my fingers were still unbending. I made two sets of these notes. The first, to show to Father Podmore, were written with my tongue in my cheek, and the others, which I intended for my own use, stressed the godlessness of the Pale Peak and explained that it was both its own god and its own devil.

Father Podmore returned at lunch-time, looking more pleased with himself than ever, and said: "My dear boy, you'll never guess what I've managed to arrange. The Broadcasting Association is going to relay your speech on what I believe is called a 'national hook-up.' This means that your words will penetrate into both the smallest cottages and the largest houses in the country. What a triumph! You have no idea what you are doing for the

forces of law and order. The malcontents will never be able to produce anything like it—the man whose name is on everyone's lips announces publicly that God supported him on his journey through the wilderness and that he could have got nowhere without this help. Just think what that will do! They have lately been saying that all heroes have been malcontents, and now you, the most prominent hero in the land, come forth and declare that you are with God in His fight against discontent and other similar evils. Just think what it will mean!"

He bumbled on and I had great difficulty in restraining myself from throwing the heavy bronze inkwell, with its figure of St. Christopher on the lid, at his smilingly enthusiastic face. He annoyed me in everything he did, from his childish trick of turning his crucifix between his fingers, to his assumption that I would fall in with his plans merely because he happened to be my host, by the accident of my having seen the light in his house.

He was still talking. "My Bishop," he was saying, "is organizing a series of lectures for you to deliver throughout the country. It will sweep like fire through the minds of the people and will result in the biggest religious revival for over two centuries. Next week, if you are fit, the Bishop wishes you to talk in the cathedral at Stortford, at a special service dedicated to the memory of mountaineers and other brave men. He is actually coming over here on Sunday morning to introduce you to the people of this country. Your words will be heard from village

to village and they will be repeated among the people and will have a power that even the Archbishop's words could never exert. Newspaper campaigns by themselves have before now resulted in minor revivals, but no newspaper campaign could have an effect such as this will have. God is good in that He sends us a man like you when we most need him and when the people are waiting for a word."

By this time, I am sure, he had convinced himself that I was hardly an ordinary man at all. He looked upon me as a sort of angel sent by God to help him and his kind, and I should therefore be in perfect agreement with whatever he said about me and perfectly willing to fit in with any scheme he had in mind. He would arrange my life for me and practically dictate what I was to say whenever I spoke; I was to be his puppet, and when he pulled the strings, I was expected to move according to them, not according to my own wishes.

Seeing this, I did not try to argue with him, but contented myself with picking up the bundle of newspapers and saying: "I see these rags are still as full of inaccuracies as ever. I do wish you had let me deal with them myself. I feel that what I would have told them would have made a far more truthful account of what I felt during my climb than these jumbled statements here."

"Oh, you men of action," he replied coyly, "you are all of you far, far too modest. You are better no doubt with an ice-axe than I should be, but you must allow that I am

probably more skilful with the pen than you are or would pretend to be. I have had a great deal of experience in writing—sermons, you know, and articles in the church magazines. If you had dealt with the newspapers yourself you would no doubt have attempted to minimize your achievement, make it appear nothing much out of the ordinary, whereas I, as an onlooker, can see its importance and place it in its proper perspective. I have not let them print anything with which I thought you might disagree. I do hope you noticed that.”

I began: “I hadn’t noticed it,” but stopped, thinking that I might just as well try to argue with a gramophone as with the fat mind of this lean priest. Nothing I could say or do before Sunday would alter the picture of me that he had painted inside his mind. Even if I had said that I did not believe in God or care a damn about His works, Father Podmore would not have thought I meant it and would have treated it as a joke in the worst taste and hurried on lest I should embroider my blasphemous theme.

As far as I could remember, I had never before had any doubts about the existence of some sort of god, even though he had never been of any help or hindrance to me, but now I was sure that god was a vested interest and Father Podmore and his like were the bank cashiers, seeing that no one passed a forged cheque or overdrew his account. They really did not seem to be like even the nastiest bank cashiers, but were more like pawnbrokers.

haggling over some poor tawdry bit of finery, running it between their fingers and calculating how much profit they could make when they sold it, as they were bound to do, for the interest they charged was too high to permit any but the richest to redeem their goods.

I was allowed to walk round the garden the next day and I found it to be exactly the sort of garden that I had expected it to be. Carefully arranged fruit trees were fixed to the mellow brick walls, and ripening peaches and pears hung gold and red among the green. I plucked raspberries from the canes and gooseberries from their prickly bushes and thought that it would be an exceedingly pleasant place if it were not for Father Podmore, who seemed to find God's blessing, and point it out, in everything except the snails, slugs, and other moist or armoured pests. And that, as a matter of fact, was exactly where I, personally, saw something that might pass as the will of God. These creatures seemed to me to be absolutely necessary, in a garden as pleasant as this, apart from any utilitarian point of view. They reminded me of the unpleasant things outside the walls of brick, yellow with time and green with moss, and also showed me how easy it would be to stay and drift in the pleasant drowsy atmosphere.

I was wondering all the time what would happen on Sunday after I had denied all responsibility for the things that had been placed to my account. Perhaps the Bishop would declare that I was an impostor, that the real

Michael had disappeared and that the whole thing was a trick organized by the Reds to try to get a nation-wide hearing, while they kept the real Michael shut up somewhere. Then, however, it occurred to me that Colonel Roscoe, at any rate, did not appear to be the sort of man who would be taken in by the priests, and he knew me and would vouch for my genuineness.

The last two days of the week passed all too quickly, in spite of the interminable bleating of Father Podmore as he prayed and congratulated himself upon the astuteness of his various moves and the skill with which he had won me over to his side, the side of decent godfearing men who wanted a leader.



I was wakened early on Sunday morning by the sound of heavy traffic and the blowing of motor-horns. I crawled from my bed and looked out of the window. The road to the church was jammed with people and motor-coaches, and as far as I could see, from the very edge of the window, there were more, all pressed so tightly together that it looked as though they could never move. "Good God," I thought, "surely all these people have not come to see me." I had expected a crowd, from what Father Podmore had said, but I had never

expected anything like this. I was afraid now that in the face of so many people I would falter and find myself unable to stand in the pulpit and deny the stories that had been spread about concerning me.

I dressed slowly, putting on my canvas money-belt and making sure that the things I wanted to keep were all in the pockets of my suit, as I thought that I might not have time after speaking to collect anything else before leaving. I was tying my shoelaces with difficulty when Father Podmore entered the room. He was smiling as he said: "Bless you, my son. I've just had the largest attendance at early service that I've ever seen in all my life at any church, and the collection has exceeded even my wildest hopes. The church is already full and they've had to send the police down from Gorot to see that the crowds are orderly and do not seize the pews that are generally occupied by my own little flock. You will have a tremendous reception, my dear boy, and I know that you will not disappoint me or your listeners. But we must go now and have some breakfast. Keep up your strength, you know, for you'll need physical strength as well as mental to face that multitude."

He led the way downstairs, playing as ever with his little crucifix, and I followed him, using Marlin's ice-axe as a walking-stick. The grace before breakfast was lengthy and seemed to ask a blessing on everything from the tea-leaves in the tea-pot to the crisp brown edges of the fried eggs and the rind on the bacon, but eventually

Father Podmore sat down and took up his knife and fork. As I ate, I thought of the traditional hearty breakfast of the condemned man and I tried to forget the enormous crowd that waited for me outside.

After breakfast Father Podmore took me into his study and said: "Now, my son, I am sorry to trouble you, but I wonder whether you could give me some rough idea of what you intend to say this morning. Not that I'm afraid of your saying the wrong thing, for I know by now that you are a sensible fellow, but I have probably had more experience of talking to crowds of people than you have, and out of this experience I may be able to give you a few hints on what goes down well and what doesn't."

I gave him the notes which I had drawn up for his benefit and he nodded ponderously as he read them, agreeing whole-heartedly with one thing and altering another so that it fell into line with what he thought I ought to say. I let him make any alterations that he liked without protesting at all and I think he was pleasantly surprised to find me so amenable, for he did not know that I was going to scrap the notes he was working on as soon as he left me, using in their place those which contained merely the bare bones of my story and my disgust at the way in which I had been made out to be something which I had never pretended to be.

At a quarter to eleven the church bells began ringing merrily, calling people to a church where there would be

no room for them, and the Bishop of Stortford drove up in a hearselike car, with the police escorting him and pushing private cars into the hedges and ditches to make room for him.

He was a small round man with a red face and twinkling eyes. "How are you, my dear sir?" he said, taking my battered hand so firmly that I winced. "I expect Podmore here will have put you through your paces all right? That's good. Do you know, Podmore, I've never seen such a gathering in all my life, in all my life, not even, I think I can say without fear of contradiction, at the coronation of our dear Queen herself. Not feeling nervous are you, Mr. Michael? I know it's a bit of an ordeal to have to stand up in front of all these people, but it can't be compared with what you've been through. I wouldn't like to have undertaken to climb the Peak. The very thought of it makes me feel ill."

He drew Father Podmore aside and I heard fragments of their conversation: "Yes, my dear Podmore, I certainly think you were right. You've got hold of a very good thing indeed." "I'll ask him, my lord, if he will carry his ice-axe with him. It will give local colour, which, as you and I both know, is always valuable."

I did not much like having to stand aside while they discussed me as if I were not present, but I consoled myself by thinking that I would be free of them in about a couple of hours and surely I could manage to put up with this feeling of being a butterfly pinned down while two

authorities on lepidoptera discussed it, until the service started.

The Bishop and Father Podmore retired to put on their robes, leaving me to see that I had everything I thought I might need and to worry over the crowds outside and what they would say and do when they heard the truth.

The two of them returned, chatting cheerfully, and I noticed that Father Podmore, for once, seemed to be quite animated as he turned to the Bishop and inquired: "I think that today calls for the use of the tunnel, don't you, my lord?" The Bishop nodded and Father Podmore turned to me. "You know, my dear boy, that my church is built on the site of a very much older one, and so is this vicarage. The two were joined in olden days by a tunnel that runs from a corner of my garden into the vestry of the church. It was preserved by the architect who rebuilt the church as a curiosity which might be of some convenience to the vicar. I myself very rarely make use of it, but I think we will need to today, for the crowds are very thick and we might have some trouble in getting you through, even with the help of the police."

He picked up an expensive-looking nickelled electric torch and we went out. There was a rustic-type hut under a cherry tree in one corner of the garden, and Father Podmore led us towards it, his stiff black skirts rustling as he walked, his white surplice billowing out behind him, and his thin, inquisitive fingers playing with

his little golden crucifix. He drew a small key from his trouser pocket, feeling about under his skirts to reach it, and unlocked the door.

The tunnel was low and had been built of bricks which were now green with damp. The Bishop alone could walk upright in the centre of the passage; Father Podmore and I had to stoop to avoid bumping our heads on the small stalactites that dripped from the arched roof, fed from the mortar-filled cracks between the ancient bricks.

The torch flickered brightly ahead of us. I saw a rat dodge out of the beam and almost envied it its seemingly uncomplicated life. We came out into the bright electric light of the vestry, where several men, wearing black and white robes like those of Father Podmore, were waiting to receive us.

They all shook hands with me, after greeting the Bishop and Father Podmore, and looked curiously at Marlin's axe, but apparently thought that it might be rude to ask questions in church, from such a devout man as myself, and contented themselves with merely staring at it.

I heard an organ in the church, playing Purcell's *Trumpet Voluntary*, and Father Podmore clapped me heartily on the shoulder, so heartily, in fact, that I nearly fell over under the force of the blow. He said: "Well, my dear boy, it's time that I started my service. Are you ready?" We formed a procession of some rough sort and filed slowly through the doors.

I could see nothing at first but countless faces ahead of me and wanted to draw back, but some of the church underlings were behind me and pressed me forward. My eyes came into focus quickly and I noticed and heard some attempt at a demonstration when I appeared. This was quickly suppressed by men dressed in navy-blue serge, each carrying a bowler hat, who seemed to make up nearly a sixth of the crowd.

The Bishop leaned back towards me and smiled. "Plain-clothes men," he whispered. "We didn't want to run any risk of an unpleasant incident. You're very valuable to us, as you must realize by this time."

"You'll find how valuable I am shortly, you bastard," I whispered back in an almost inaudible murmur. He must have thought that he had heard wrong, for he looked puzzled and smiled at me in a rather bewildered way. I smiled back as sweetly as I could, though the smile must have been rather terrifying coming from a face like my ruin.

I thought that perhaps the Bishop had heard more than I had meant him to and that I had been rather rash, for in spite of my smile, which was meant to be reassuring, he looked thoughtful and I noticed him, a minute or two later, saying something to one of the plain-clothes men, who looked closely at me, as if sizing me up.

I sat still, playing with my ice-axe and running my fingers over the rough carving of Marlin's name, while the various voices intoned their sentiments and prayers.

I stood up when the rest stood up and bent down when they knelt. Father Podmore stood up in the pulpit and announced that there would be no sermon that day, as I was to address them at the end of the service.

Then the congregation sang "From Greenland's icy mountains," presumably in my honour, while the collection was taken. After that Father Podmore pronounced the blessing from the pulpit and said: "I will now step aside and allow my friend the Bishop of Stortford, whom you all know, to introduce the man whom you are waiting for."

The little fat Bishop seemed to hop up into the pulpit like a bird and started: "My friends, I will not keep you long, for I know that you have not gathered here to listen to me. I merely wish to say that I have much pleasure in presenting Mr. er—er—Michael to you and hope that you will all listen carefully to what he has to tell you about his wonderful climb and the help that he received from his knowledge that God was with him. Now I hope that you will all realize the value of his statements. Many of us, tied as we are to our humdrum daily jobs, are apt to lose sight of the fact that God's guiding hand is always with us and that He watches over our every movement. Not a sparrow, as you have so often heard, falls to the ground but He knows it. . . ."

I tried to shut my ears to his meandering discourse and looked down at the people in the church. There was not room for another person; men and women were crushed

together in the aisle, and outside, through the open doors, I could see nothing but an endless field of faces, like cabbages.

I thought that I should be flattered at the turn-out to hear me speak and to try to get a glimpse of me, but I realized that it was all part of the racket being run by the Church and its supporters. If no one had turned up willingly they would have filled the whole place with police, instead of merely having one in every six people a detective, and then they would still have been able to announce that there had been a tremendous crowd and scenes of the wildest enthusiasm. And the papers would have supported them in their statements, for the newspaper barons, Lord Hedgedoom and Lord Vole, no doubt believed in the value of the Church as a soothing syrup for the people while they got on with their political games, of which I had caught a whiff while reading their rival sheets in the vicarage, and I did not like the smell of either. It occurred to me that perhaps the whole crowd was in the pay of the Church, but if that was the case, I hoped that there would be at least one man among them to hear my denial and pass it on.

The Bishop was saying: "And now, in conclusion, I will introduce Mr. Michael to you. Mr. Michael." He turned and looked at me and I started and jumped to my feet. Father Podmore pointed towards the pulpit and I approached it, still carrying Marlin's ice-axe. The Bishop came down the steps to meet me and I stood aside and let

him pass, pretending not to notice his outstretched hand, and slowly, one at a time, listening to the thud of my feet on the oak boards, I mounted the steps.

I stood for a moment, leaning on the lectern and looking at the square black microphone that hung a few inches before my face, while I waited for the rustling of stiff dresses and the short bark of various men coughing to stop. Then I started.

"I am here under false pretences," I said, "but it seemed to me that this was the only way for me to correct any misapprehensions that the newspapers may have left in your minds. When I climbed the Pale Peak I was alone, and when I reached the summit I was alone. Anything else that you may have read or heard is an invention of Father Podmore's fertile imagination for his own purposes and is absolutely untrue. There, up in that hell, I met a man who had been dead for years, and I looked into his well-preserved eyes. I saw no god there; nothing but that terror which a man hides even from himself. As I lay there, near the summit, I felt with that man and saw the ice creeping up my own legs to grip my heart. If you desire a god for the Peak, then let that god be the man who died at the summit. That man's name was Marlin, and I swear by his ice-axe which I carry in my hands that no god helped me climb the Pale Peak and I felt no god's encouragement as I came down."

I lifted the ice-axe high so that everyone in the church could see it. I saw the blue-clad police drawing near me

and I felt Father Podmore's hand on my shoulder. Somewhere at the back of the church a man shouted: "That's the stuff to give 'em, mate. Keep it up and don't let them get away with their lies," and then the crack of a revolver shot silenced him, while I scrambled over the edge of the pulpit and dropped on to the tiled floor of the chancel. As I ran towards the vestry, which seemed to be the only way clear, I heard Father Podmore bleating from the pulpit, trying to unsay my words: "Deeply regret Mr. Michael's unfortunate breakdown . . . terrible ordeal . . . not wholly responsible for his actions . . . noticed it recently . . . but did not expect this. . . ."

I reached the vestry door just ahead of the foremost detective and remember wondering dimly why he had not drawn his revolver and shot me as I slammed the door in his face and rammed the flimsy bolt home. I threw the loose chairs that half filled the place in a heap before the door and leaped towards the mouth of the tunnel, pulling its great oak door shut behind me and letting the heavy oak bar drop into its place. Then I stumbled blindly along the narrow corridor, bumping my head on the low roof and scraping my elbows on the walls.

I seemed to travel for miles through the pitch dark with the stagnant water dripping on my face before I ran into a solid surface. I tried the handle, but found that Father Podmore had locked the door after us when we had entered the tunnel, less than an hour and a half before. I did not hesitate, but lifted Marlin's ice-axe and let drive,

as well as I could in the confined space, at the place where I thought the lock was. I heard the wood splinter and took another stroke. The door flew open and I stumbled, dazed, out into the sunlight. It was a second or two before I could see properly. As soon as I was to look around, I saw several dark-clad figures picking their way through the crowded cars. As the leaders entered the garden and shouted to me to stop, I hooked the ice-axe on to the top of the brick wall and swung myself up. Then, as a gesture of bravado, I turned and waved to the approaching police before dropping down on the other side, into a bed of nettles, which stung my unprotected hands.

I saw that a cornfield separated me from a bend in the road and I decided that I had better make for the road, as I would be less obvious in a crowd than in this open country.

I took a few steps through the corn in the direction of the other fields and then cut back along the hard edge towards the road and ran as fast as I could along that dried-earth verge, straining my already overtaxed muscles and wind until I did not know how I was still managing to run.

I scrambled through the hedge and looked back, to see the police scaling the wall with a fruit ladder and letting themselves down slowly on my side. I laughed, though it hurt, when I saw the first of them lose his hold, fall, and roll right through the patch of nettles. I saw him rise, beating the air with his hands and jumping about

while another policeman tried to rub his face with a dock-leaf.

My ruse worked and the plain-clothes men set off in the direction away from me, treading down nearly the whole of that end of the cornfield and stumbling on their urban feet.

Then I thought that they would probably find that I had misled them before long and that the best thing I could do was to put as great a distance as possible between us before that moment of realization. My heart nearly stopped beating when I turned and saw four men looking at me.

However, one of them stepped forward, saying: "It's all right, mate; we'll give you a hand if we can. I heard you up there and had to scoot when my pal got his for cheering you on. Poor bloody fool, he should have known better than to let fly with his cheers when he knew the place was packed with busies. They'll all be down here in a moment, and your only chance is that our passengers arrive first."

He looked up the road and I saw, following his eyes, a crowd of people fighting their way through the packed cars. He moved towards a bus and opened a compartment, obviously intended to hold luggage, in the back of the bus and helped me in, saying: "I'm afraid you'll have a bloody rough journey, but it's the best we can do for you. Here, you'd better have this and you can take a swig if you think the bumping's going to get you down." He

pushed a miniature flask of whisky into my hand and slammed the door down, and I heard him bolting it from the outside.

A few minutes later the bus started to lurch from side to side as the passengers took their seats for the return journey. I heard a woman above me speaking. "I call it disgraceful," she said. "An outburst like that in a church! Don't know what things are coming to! Rank bad taste, I say. What do you think of it?" Another woman replied, and as she spoke, I felt that she must be the sweetest woman in the whole world. "Oh, I don't know. He seemed to be very much in earnest and very sincere. You had only to look at him to see that he was honest and believed what he was saying. My dear Edie, you must make some allowance for other people's opinions. Not that I'd call you narrow-minded, of course."

At that moment the engine of the bus started and I was almost deafened by the clatter, for I found that I was lying just above the back axle. I managed, ever so slowly, to edge my way out of my jacket, which I rolled up and put under my head to protect me from the vibrations. We started to move slowly and I thought that I was going to be shaken to bits by the crashing of gears and the missing of cog-wheels. Suddenly above the rattling, tearing noise I heard the shouted command: "Halt!" and we stopped so suddenly that the engine stalled.

I held my breath, thinking that the police had caught up with me somehow. "We are looking for an escaped

lunatic," a harsh voice said. "Have any of you seen anything of him?" and then there followed a fairly complete description of me. There was a chorus of "No" in reply, and then the angry voice snapped: "All right, proceed!"

The first female voice above me spoke. "You see, I *was* right. They say he was a lunatic. I shouldn't be in the least surprised to hear that he was also an impostor who had never been near the summit of the Peak in all his life."

"I don't care, Edie," her companion replied spiritedly. "He had an honest face, though it was so ugly, and I'm sure that he was *not* an impostor. He couldn't have got that ice-axe if he had been." Then the shindy began again as the driver managed to start the bus and we moved on.

It was a long, slow journey, with the wheels jolting me and the floor-boards bumping against my aching body. I thought I was going to pass out several times and was very grateful for the little flask.

The bus stopped at last and I heard all the various noises of a town—cobbled streets, street-cars banging and rattling, and the shrill shriek of quickly applied brakes. I sighed with relief when I heard the people getting out, and thought I had reached the end of my journey, but the coach moved on again over the cobbles and the street-car lines.

At last we stopped again and I heard footsteps coming round to the back. The compartment door was unbolted

and lifted and I rolled towards the dim light. The driver put his arm round my shoulders and helped me out and then had to hold me up or I should have fallen. He sat me down on an upturned box and rubbed my legs and arms until my blood tingled and gave me pins and needles.

"You're all right now, mate," he said. "My name's Jack Ford and I know what yours is all right. We've been cursing you plenty the last few days and you'll need to come round to the café with me and meet my pals. You'll find that they understand how you got shoved into that pulpit. How're you off for money? I've not got too much, and if you're hungry I'll need to go and borrow a bit."

I opened my belt and took out some of the gold coins. "Christ, man, you can't try to pass these," he said. "They'd be after you like a shot, thinking you'd stolen them. You'd best let me take a couple of them and sell them."

He put a coat round my shoulders and left the garage, as I saw the place was, now that I had time to look around me. There were several buses and taxis standing in it, and the walls were hung with old inner tubes and tools.

When Jack returned, he gave me a lot of loose silver and said: "You'd better take this old coat of mine and that old cap. You won't be so easily recognized then. I expect you could do with a meal?"

We left the garage and walked down a side street to a dingy-looking café. Before it on the pavement stood a

blackboard with the prices of the different dishes of the day scrawled on it. Jack pushed open the door and nodded: "Evening, Toni," to the swarthy man behind the counter, who was polishing some glasses.

We walked over to a group of men sitting round a marble-topped table in a corner, with cups of tea and newspapers scattered over it. They looked up and stopped talking when we reached them and eyed me rather suspiciously. "It's all right," Jack said. "This is Michael. You know who? The chap from the Peak. You've heard about today?"

They nodded and one of them said: "That's the stuff, Jack. We thought the police would have got him by this time. We heard, too, that your side-kick got his. Tough on his wife and kids." They moved over, and we sat down. Jack ordered a steak pudding and peas for me and a tea for himself.

I asked: "What happened after I left the church? I heard old Podmore making some sort of announcement, but didn't stop to listen carefully." They laughed and one of them replied: "Oh, the old sheep kept on mumbling till they cut him off"; then, imitating the voice of a wireless announcer, he went on: "'Owing to a technical hitch, we have been unable to shut off the disturbance which you have just heard. Mr. Michael, the mountaineer, was suddenly overcome by a nervous breakdown, no doubt caused by his recent terrible ordeal, just as he com-

menced speaking. We hope that our listeners will overlook this technical accident which resulted in them hearing the feverish outburst of the troubled mind of a very brave gentleman.' Christ, man, you stung them. No one, of course, believed their denials and they've been having doctors and psychologists on the air ever since trying to explain what was the matter with you and why your unfortunate delusions took the form of a persecution mania, in which you believed that you were being chased by God and Father Podmore. But they can't undo what you've done to them and they'll just need to hope that people will forget it; but there are a lot who won't, and I don't think the papers will let the others forget, for news comes before their duties to the government."

They handled my ice-axe and one of them remarked: "A nice bit of steel this. You couldn't get steel like that now; it all goes into armaments."

After I had finished eating, Jack said: "I guess you'll be tired, Mike? You'd best come along to my digs and sleep the night there. My bed's big enough for the two of us." We went out of the café, paying at the counter, and walked round several corners till we came to a shabby street with very few gas-lamps to show the way down it. Jack took a key from his pocket and opened a door. We walked up a narrow staircase to the attic floor.

Jack's room was mostly occupied by a great box-bed, which hung drunkenly lower at the top far corner, where something had broken, and as he lighted the gas, I noticed

» O V E R T H E M O U N T A I N «

books and pamphlets stacked on shelves and on the floor. I felt very tired and threw off my jacket and trousers and crawled into bed in my shirt. I had hardly laid my head on the pillow before I started to fall asleep.



I dreamed I was walking beside Father Podmore, who was picking snails off ripe peaches that grew on the ground like pineapples. Once or twice he picked a peach as well as a snail, by mistake, and when he did this he threw the peach away and put the snail in his mouth, eating it with evident enjoyment and pointing out the superiority of the slime on a snail over the bloom on a peach. There were dozens of the blue-clad plain-clothes men, all with the same face, sitting on

the wall, which had somehow or other stopped being old brick and become nineteenth-century Gothic with lancet windows, full of glaring red and yellow Munich glass, and flying buttresses, fretted to a state where they were merely ornamental and did not hold anything in place.

The police pointed their fingers at me and put out their tongues, and I was frightened and tried to run away, but one of them was a faster runner than I and was overhauling me at a terrifying rate. I ran down a rabbit's burrow and his head stuck when he tried to follow me. Emboldened by this, I turned back and struck at him with Marlin's ice-axe which went right through him. I realized that he was made of paper and might be very terrifying from the front, which looked like a Japanese kite, but that he was harmless if approached from the side.

In the morning, I asked Jack why, when the plain-clothes men had been pursuing me, they had not fired at me, since they were obviously armed, as one of them had certainly shot the man who shouted.

"Oh, they wouldn't dare," he said. "You're far too much of a public figure, unlike poor Jim. They can say you've had a nervous breakdown all right and try to catch you by guile, but they daren't lay a finger on you in public, for the people mightn't like it. You've become a sort of miracle, and anyhow the government are putting up a show to let the people see how benevolent they are. If you can dodge them for a day or two, you'll find they'll forget all about you. You haven't had your photo taken, have

you? That's fine, then, for you won't be in the portable dossiers they all carry around with them. You see, they don't pay any attention to an incomplete record and it's filed away until some chance allows them to complete it. They are all tied up in red tape and can't do anything till you're in the portable dossier. Once you're there, you're done for all right, for they shoot the people in these dossiers when they see them, no questions asked. The one thing you've got to be glad of is that they're easy to recognize on account of their blue serge clothes. They were issued to them two or three years back and the cops were forbidden to wear anything else. So now no one except a cop wears blue serge and you can tell them a mile off. They've been trying to get permission to wear ordinary clothes, but the contractors have a pull and they won't be allowed to change into ordinary clothes for another seven years, when the contract gives out, and by then they probably won't be in existence. When we come into power we'll abolish a half-wit police force along with a lot of other things."

I stayed in Jack's room all that morning, reading his books and pamphlets, which were mostly political; but in the afternoon I decided that I would try to get in touch with Colonel Roscoe. I put on the heavy grey overcoat with leather-bound cuffs and elbows and pulled the uniform cap well down over my eyes, for I was not altogether sure of Jack's information about the police's orders not to harm me and their shortness of memory and wished to

run no risks of either a bullet in my ribs or a stay in prison or a lunatic asylum.

I left the house and wandered till I found a public telephone booth and dialled the exchange and number that I had been given. A voice replied: "Hullo, this is the Explorers' and United Services Club. Whom do you wish to speak to?" I asked if Colonel Roscoe was in and was told to hang on for a minute.

I heard the voice say: "Boy, go and tell Colonel Roscoe that there is a man on the phone for him. Tell him the call is from a public box and I'm having it traced. I heard the coins drop and that informed me that it was not a private call. Hurry now, you know the Colonel does not like being kept waiting."

It was a long time before I heard the rattle of the phone being lifted and then Colonel Roscoe's voice: "Hullo, hullo, who's there? Who wants to speak to me? Disturbing my afternoon nap."

"I'm sorry, Colonel," I said. "It's Michael. You know, I came over the Peak?"

"Yes, yes, my dear boy, and what can I do for you? You know you made rather a fool of yourself yesterday. I don't agree with old Podmore and his lot, but I always say when in Rome—you know the rest."

"Are the police still after me?" I asked.

"I don't know," he replied thoughtfully, "but, you know, I'm not without a certain amount of influence and I'll pass the word along to the right quarters that you're

not to be molested. I can't help it if they keep you under some sort of observation for a day or two, but I'll see that you don't suffer from any interference. Come along now and have a drink with me. Where are you?"

I looked out of the window of the telephone booth and peered at the soot-smeared plate bearing the street name. "Shillinglaw Grove," I said.

"Ah," he replied. "(Porter, bring me that street map.) Now, let me think. I believe that the best way would be for you to walk straight down the street, turn left at the Swinging Sun, the large pub at the corner, then take the third on the right and walk down past the public library and that'll bring you to the street-car lines and the buses. Let me see, now, I think you'd better take a number 37 bus, bound for the Sword in the Sheath, and ask the conductor to put you down at Dawson Street. You just walk straight up there and you'll come to Jerome Square. The club is on the left and you'll easily recognize it by the big model of the Pale Peak above the portico. Walk straight in and ask for me. What's the time now? Ah, well, I'll expect to see you in about twenty-five minutes to half an hour from now. It shouldn't take any longer."

I went back to Jack's digs and rang the front door-bell, as I had locked myself out, until one of the other lodgers, who was apparently on night duty, opened the door, looking very tired and rather angry at being roused.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "Got locked out by mistake," and I went up the stairs quickly to the attic, remembering that

the club porter had traced my call and hoping that the police would not follow that clue before Colonel Roscoe got in touch with them, for it might make things very awkward for Jack.

I wrote a hurried note to Jack, saying that I was going to see Colonel Roscoe, but that I would get back absolutely as soon as I safely could and that I was terribly grateful for the things he had done for me and for the way he had treated me. I left two of my gold coins in a bit of paper and wrote on it: "Please sell these and give the proceeds to your mate's widow." I laid his coat and cap across the bed and went out, still carrying Marlin's ice-axe.

I peered cautiously up and down the street before I shut the door finally, but I could see none of the navy-blue police and did not think that they had discovered the place where I had been hiding since I had given them the slip.

As I walked through the dingy streets, I noticed that one or two of the loungers looked at me curiously, and some of them, whom I had previously seen in the café, made a gesture with one hand as I passed. Knowing that they were friends of Jack, I copied the gesture, in the same surreptitious manner, in reply.

I sold a few more of my coins at a small dark jeweller's shop, bearing the notice: "Highest Prices Given for Gold, Jewels, and False Teeth." The jeweller did not show the least curiosity about where I had obtained the coins, but just looked at them through a watchmaker's eyeglass,

touched them with a glass rod bearing a drop of acid, and pushed over the money. I felt, as I put it away in my pockets, that I now had enough change to see me through if any accident made it necessary for me to escape again.

On the bus I got into conversation with the conductor and told him who I was. He shook me by the hand, after looking round first to see that there were no detectives on top of the bus with us.

"That's fine," he said. "Just you deny all the balls they put out about you and they won't know what to do next. Try and keep just one hop ahead of them and you'll catch them bending all right." As I dismounted he waved cheerily to me.

At the corner of the square, two blue-clad plain-clothes men fell in, one on each side of me. I think they would have taken my arms, but when I saw them drawing near, I swung the ice-axe at their legs and they kept well out of reach of it.

We walked across to the club door and slowly mounted the steps. The fact that they insisted on keeping in step with me annoyed me, and I changed step abruptly once or twice in an effort to put them off their balance, but they followed suit and not the slightest sign on their heavy dull, puddled-clay faces showed that they were aware that I was mentally fighting against them.

I entered the hall and opened my mouth to say: "My name is Michael and I want to see Colonel Roscoe; he's expecting me," when they spoke first, in chorus, taking

my very words. "His name is Michael," they intoned. "He wants to see Colonel Roscoe, who is expecting him."

The porter, dressed in vivid green livery, led the way along the passage and knocked on a door before opening it. "Mr. Michael to see you, Colonel," he announced. "He says that you are expecting him."

The Colonel got up from behind a large rosewood desk and came forward with outstretched hand to greet me. "Good afternoon, Colonel Roscoe," I began, and my companions also intoned: "Good afternoon, Colonel Roscoe." I was both unnerved and irritated, and waved my hands helplessly at them.

Colonel Roscoe smiled. "It's all right, boys, you can go now," he said, and put his hand in his trouser pocket. "Here's a penny for each of you, and you can go and buy yourselves some sweets."

To my surprise, for I had thought that the Colonel was joking, the two detectives eagerly took the pennies he held out and blushed. Their heavy faces, which seemed to be made of the same sort of clay as flowerpots, split into grotesque grins and they both spoke: "Really and truly is it all for us?" they asked, and the Colonel nodded. "Oo-ee, we'll be able to buy aniseed balls and sherbet suckers. You are kind, dear lovely Colonel Roscoe. We'll promise to be good boys now and you won't never need to stop our Saturday pennies again. Oo-ee, how nice, how kind of sweet Colonel Roscoe!" They looked as though they were going to advance on the Colonel and embrace

him, but he frowned and they went out holding hands and swinging their arms like clockwork dolls.

Colonel Roscoe beckoned me into a leather-covered club armchair. He said: "I expect you could do with a drink before we start talking?" and pressed a bell and ordered two double whiskies from the waiter who popped his head in through a hatch in the wall. He gave me a cigarette and we sat back in silence while we waited for the waiter to reappear with our drinks.

I was glad of the pause, for I wanted to get my ideas straightened out. Colonel Roscoe seemed to me to be altogether too familiar with the plain-clothes men and I thought that I would be unwise if I trusted him too far. I determined that I would tell him my story, but that I would make some alterations so that he would be unable to set his pet detectives on the track of my friends.

Then it occurred to me that the drink he was going to stand me might be drugged and be part of a plan to get me in his power and to take me away to a lunatic asylum somewhere. So when the waiter came in through the door and placed the glasses on the table between us so that one was just at my elbow and the other was so close to Colonel Roscoe that I could not touch it without being obvious, I lifted mine and took the smallest possible sip of it just to show that I had no suspicion; but roll it round my tongue and taste it as I might, I could detect nothing wrong with it.

However, I thought, it was much better to be careful

now than sorry afterwards, and I rose to my feet and started questioning him about the various photographs of mountains that hung on the walls.

He was very courteous and got out of his chair to point out the many points of interest on a huge photograph of Mount Everest, and as he was engrossed in a description of the North Col, I managed, under pretence of moving round behind him to see a detail more thoroughly, to switch the drinks.

I walked round the walls with him, holding the glass that I now knew to be safe and taking minute sips from it. But I was worried because the Colonel had not touched his, and thought that perhaps he had had them both drugged to avoid accidents and would not risk taking a drink himself at all. I lifted the glass I had towards him and said: "Cheerio, Colonel!" and, as if he had been forgetting the duties of a host, he walked over to the table, picked up his glass, and took a good draught.

He was an extremely good host and told me a great many stories about the various photographs and also produced specimens of birds that he had shot while in the Himalaya district and a sketchbook full of the most exquisite drawings of flowers, blue poppies, gentians, cowslips, and rhododendrons, made by a friend of his who was with him on the same expedition. When we had finished our drinks we went back to the leather armchairs and sat down.

"Now," he said, "will you tell me what happened

to you yesterday and how you managed to reach town through the cordon of police which were told to look out for you, as Father Podmore said you had gone mad and might become suicidal? You know how interesting these little details are to a man like myself who is more or less tied down by age and infirmity. It's just these details that enable me to feel that I'm living your adventures with you, so don't leave anything out."

I started and told him the story of my escape in a very garbled manner, only clinging to the main bones of my true story, but clothing them with entirely fictitious flesh, describing my friends all wrong so that they could not be identified, and making the vehicle of my journey a large grey limousine driven by a chauffeur who had hidden me on the floor beside his seat, covered with rugs and picnic baskets. I said that, owing to my being a complete stranger in the town, I had not the slightest idea of the place where I had spent the night, but thought it lay nearer to the street-car lines than Shillinglaw Grove instead of the other way, and that I had spent the whole of the morning in wandering about, as the wife of the man I had stayed with had kicked me out, saying that she was afraid the police might come buzzing round looking for me and she did not want her man to get into trouble.

I think I told my story well and that the imaginary details that I invented as I went along gave it an air of reality, for at the end of my recital Colonel Roscoe leaned back comfortably in his chair and said: "That, my dear

boy, is an excellent and very full account and I have the satisfaction of knowing that you have told me the truth, for—and I know you will excuse us—we took the necessary precaution of having a drug added to your drink that makes it impossible for you to tell anything but the truth. This drug will have no evil after-effects, no hang-over or anything like that; in fact, my dear boy, I very much doubt if you can remember that you were so truthful, once the effects wear off. Not, of course, that I thought you would wilfully tell me any lies, but I know how easy it is to forget one detail and embroider another.”

“Good God,” I thought, “he’s hoist with his own petard all right—hoist so high that he’s almost out of sight. Now’s my chance to find out a few things.” He was leaning back, with his finger-tips placed together, looking at the notes he had made while I spoke, which were scattered on his knee.

“Why,” I said, “did you want to find out the exact truth of my statements? Surely that would not be of very much use to you, for you are an explorer, not a commissioner of police.”

“Well, you see,” he replied, “you’re slightly wrong there. I may not be chief of police, but I am the head of the secret service, and the police are all under me. Naturally, I wouldn’t tell this to everyone I met, but I liked the look of you the first time I saw you and you seemed to be the right sort. Why do the plain-clothes men all wear navy blue? Oh, that was an affair over which I had no con-

trol; it happened before I occupied the position. It was all due to the last head of the secret police being brother to a cloth-manufacturer who persuaded him to provide him with a contract. Owing to this bit of corruption, they all have to wear that bloody serge, which is about as noticeable as a scarlet uniform with gold piping would be. But I've managed, in spite of a great deal of unwarranted departmental interference, to rig up a special branch of my own. Only two hundred members so far, but each of them hand-picked and wearing clothes like yours or mine. How do I know them myself? Ah, that is a secret, but I don't mind telling you, as you are a friend, so long as you promise not to repeat it, for it might be of incalculable value to our enemies. Promise? Cross your heart and cut your throat?"

I nodded and he leaned forward confidentially and tapped me on the knee with a rolled-up bundle of notes. "They all have a blue thread woven into their lapels. Look, I've got it myself." He pulled at the lapel of his jacket and I saw that the smart brown cheviot had a single blue streak running through it, almost invisible except when pointed out.

He lolled back in his chair again and went on: "Now, that's a great secret and you mustn't tell anyone about it. You trust me and I trust you and we'll get along fine together. As for the reason for my men keeping a friendly eye on you, that should be obvious to a man of your intelligence. You see, these people that you have been mix-

ing with are all very dangerous revolutionaries and so, not altogether unnaturally, they're very keen indeed to get you on their side and so make capital out of your popularity. If you happen to run up against any of them again—and I hope for your own sake, my dear boy, that you won't—don't believe a word they tell you. They are only trying to make a cat's-paw out of you. They're persuasive talkers all right with their cries of injustice, sweated labour, and the unequal distribution of wealth, but what would happen if, by some accident, they got power? Why, the whole country would go to pieces in a day or two; they've no experience behind them and, anyhow, they are all out for their own pockets. I don't believe that there's a disinterested man among them. The people would soon find that out, wouldn't be able to protest, and would finally find themselves in a much worse state than even the worst today."

He pressed the button at his elbow and the waiter popped his head through the hatch again and took the order for two more drinks. The Colonel remarked after ordering them: "Don't be frightened of this one, my boy, it'll be all right, just pure whisky and soda-water. I'm so glad, by the way, that you have shown no stupid resentment of my treatment of you. So many people would have been infernally rude, in spite of the fact that they knew that I was just doing my duty. Ah, here are our drinks. Cheerio."

I waited till he had taken a good long pull at his glass

and remarked dryly: "If you don't mind?" as I again changed our glasses. He laughed and replied: "I quite understand your mistrust of any drink I offer you, but this time I really was telling you the truth. All that happens to you with this drink is that you lose a good big mouthful of whisky." He lifted my glass to his lips and drank.

He gave me a good many more details concerning his secret service and told me how the plain-clothes men were chosen. It seems that they were all mentally deficient children, who at school age were removed from their homes and parents and taken into the state barracks. There they were trained to obey orders implicitly and their childlike minds learned to look upon their job as a vast amusing game. They learned to shoot and loved the noise of their revolvers firing and the sight of their victims being blown over backwards by the force of large-calibre bullets. One of the great difficulties apparently was to prevent them from greeting their masters by firing at them, but this inconvenience was surmounted, after a few fatalities, by the masters always going in bullet-proof clothing and heavily punishing any budding policeman who fired at them.

When I asked the Colonel about the incident in the church, he said: "Oh, one of the boys forgot himself. I myself had given strict orders that there was to be no firing, under any circumstances whatever, within a quarter of a mile of the church, and that man disobeyed me.

However, I have dealt with him severely, he will have no jam with his bread at tea-time for three days, his Saturday penny has been suspended for a month, and his supply of revolver cartridges has been taken away from him. This is a number-one punishment and they are all very much afraid of it. I must admit that I myself dislike having to inflict it, but discipline must be preserved. The boys have been rather lax of late and this will act as a good example in deterring them from similar outbursts. By the way, you were pretty lucky, for although I'd given the strictest orders that no one was to harm you in any way, whatever happened, that revolver-shot in the church might have started a hysterical outburst, and several of the plain-clothes men might have done their best to fill you with bullets. Oh, yes, I'd quite expected you to make some sort of protest against your treatment. You see, if I'd been in your position myself, and understanding as little as you did, I'd quite likely have done somewhat the same. You know, I was all in favour of letting you in on what you were doing, but Podmore assured me that he was quite capable of handling you himself and that there was no reason for me to interfere. Sort of looked on you as a gift that the gods had dropped on his doorstep and thought that you were meant to be used in his way without consulting your personal preferences at all. The damned fool didn't see that you were a job for a man of action like myself, not for a slobbering priest. I'd just have put things to you straight, man to man, you know,

and I'm sure that we'd have got on fine. I might even have persuaded you to speak from his pulpit, but not in the way he wanted you to. All the same, to give the devil his due, I can't say that Podimore's an absolute fool. He manages his district well and believes in what he is doing. 'For my God and my country' is his motto. He's one of my men, you know, a district chief."

I said: "If it isn't rude to ask you, Colonel, could you tell me how long it'll be before that blasted drug of yours begins to wear off? I still feel a most uncomfortable and unhealthy desire to tell the truth about everything."

"Oh," he replied, looking at his watch, "I think it should start to go off within the next twenty minutes or so. Depends on a lot of things—health, personal idiosyncrasies, and the amount of mental resistance you put out when you know you've been drugged. If you don't exert any resistance, it wears off quicker than if you do."

I steered the conversation back to the safe channel of mountains and climbing them. After a few minutes his head began to nod and I thought I would take the opportunity of his sleeping to look around his room to see whether there was anything of interest, but as soon as I stopped talking and stretched myself he sat up again.

"Where was I?" he asked. "Oh, yes, now that we understand each other better, I wonder whether you'd do a couple of things for me. If you will, I'll do my best to help you in return by lending you a disguise that will enable you to get past these damned reporters, for I'm

sure they'll be gathered outside the club like wasps round a jam-jar by this time. That's the worst of the rank and file of the secret police. They've got no memories at all worth speaking of and so they blurt out everything they know to anyone they meet, hoping that that person will remind them of it later on when they have to continue their jobs."

I said: "I'll wait till I hear what you want before I'll promise anything at all."

"Wise man," he replied. "That's the way to keep out of trouble. What I wanted you to do for me was to come up to my old school with me tomorrow morning and talk to the boys. Old Boswell, the Head, has got wind of the fact that I know you and has been pestering me to bring you along some morning. Rang me up this afternoon just after I had finished talking to you and asked whether the rumours that you had gone mad and were to be arrested were true. Of course not, I told him, and he said I was to get hold of you at any cost, as he thought you'd be a fine example to the boys. Naturally he won't want you to talk about God or any divine help that you got coming over the Peak. Just a straight-from-the-shoulder talk, you know, telling the boys to live cleanly and play cleanly, and so on, and that what they want is patriotism. You know the sort of stuff. Must have listened to it hundreds of times yourself. Give them the story of your climb and don't say anything much about your feelings during it. The other thing I want you to do for me is not nearly so

hard. I just wondered whether you'd be my guest, the guest of honour, at tomorrow night's dinner of the National Exploration Society. Just a short informal speech needed there, too, but you can at least be more technical, and people may ask you questions. Will you do these two things for me?"

I said that, as far as I knew, there was no reason why I should not, and then rose to my feet, saying: "I think I'd better get along now. I've got to find a place to sleep. Have I still got to take these pie-faced policemen along with me?"

"H'm, yes," he replied, "I'm afraid I can't do anything about them. Government red tape and so forth. But I tell you what, I'm dining with the Prime Minister to-night, a matter of colonial detail, and I'll ask him to lift the watch on you absolutely as soon as he can, which will be pretty soon if you're well behaved. Sorry I can't do anything till I see the P.M."

He rang a bell, hidden among the carved roses on the mantelpiece, and the two detectives bounced into the room, wiping their mouths with the backs of their hands and smearing treacle and jam all over their checks and hair.

"Hullo, boys," said the Colonel. "I want you to look after Mr. Michael for me. Be good boys and you'll get a treat when you come back. If I give you each a nice strong black cigar will you promise to be good boys and not to break any of the rules?"

“Oh yes, dear, sweet Colonel Roscoe,” they chorused. “We’ll be just as good as gold, as good as gold, we promise not to be naughty.”

He gave each of them a trichinopoli cheroot, lit them with a cigarette-lighter on the back of an ebony elephant, and shook my hand, saying: “Till tomorrow morning, then. By the way, I think you had better take this false beard and put it on till you’re out of the square, and shove that ice-axe up under your jacket.”

I hung the side-whiskers of the beard over my ears, and by looking down my squint nose, I saw a growth of coppery wispy hair sprouting on my cheeks and upper lip. We left the room and the two detectives puffed contentedly at their rank cheroots, sending great waves of evil-smelling smoke down the club corridor, which seemed to me to be rather like smoking a churchwarden at a Sunday School, decidedly out of place.



Outside, as the Colonel had predicted, we encountered a vast crowd of newspaper men, both reporters and photographers, and would have had great difficulty in fighting our way through them had not the club porter come out and raised his hand. He shouted: "Colonel Roscoe has asked me to say that he will be out here in a minute to make a statement about Mr. Michael. Stand aside, please, and let the gentlemen pass. You are blocking the sidewalk. Clear out, now!"

This last command was emphasized by my two guards,

who, as if actuated by a common mind, whipped out their revolvers from their armpits and fired at a press-photographer's camera which was standing on its tripod in our path. Through the acrid smoke I saw the camera dissolve into a heap of torn rubber, broken glass, and splintered wood.

Quickly the newspaper men cleared away on both sides and left a path for us. The two detectives paused and started to jump on the tangled wreckage that had been an expensive camera just a moment before. While they were thus engaged I managed to edge a few of my coins out of my belt and pushed them into the hand of the bewildered-looking photographer, who was standing by helplessly while the work of destruction proceeded.

I said, in a low whisper: "Sorry about this. Take these and sell them towards a new camera. Give me your card. Quick, man, before these bloody tecs have finished. I may have a scoop for you."

I tucked the card, which he produced almost automatically, into one of the pockets of my belt and stood silent while my companions finished with their game, which they did by playing "here-we-go-round-the-mulberry-bush" round the mess on the pavement. Then we passed unhindered through the crowd, who did not even look at us curiously.

Once we got into the side streets and I had removed the beard, which was most uncomfortable and very hot, I began looking around to see if I could find any way to get

rid of my guards. I was trying to think of a way of escape when I noticed two more plain-clothes men coming round the far corner towards us. As they drew near, I saw one of them make the surreptitious movement with his half-open hand that I had noticed made earlier in the day by the loungers at the street corners. This gesture was hidden under the pretence of lifting the bowler hat to scratch the head and it told me that I was facing friends. Looking at their faces, as expressionless as those of my guards, I realized that the two false detectives were none other than Jack Ford and a friend of his whom I had met the previous night.

I turned to my companions and said: "Do you know what my friend Colonel Roscoe gave me for you, if you were good boys?"

They shook their heads, but looked expectant, and I went on: "He gave me two pennies for each of you to get an ice cream. Look, there's an ice-cream shop. These two detectives will look after me while you are eating your ice creams, won't you?" I appealed to Jack and his friend and they nodded in unison. I gave the real detectives tuppence each and they went off towards the ice-cream shop, arm-in-arm, chanting: "Dear sweet darling Colonel Roscoe, we do love him so, and if we're not naughty, he'll do us no harm. When we are good we get nice things to eat, jam and ice cream and everything sweet. Oo-oo we love him, he is so, so kind to us. We are good boys."

"For God's sake," I said, "let's find some place where I

can talk to you. I've got some very important news that I must give you at once. I must hurry and be back here before these bastards start looking for me."

Jack and his friend fell in, one on each side of me, and we rounded the corner and arrived at a little café, very similar to the one I had been in the previous night. This time it was Jack's friend who opened the door, nodded: "Evening, Manuel; three teas," to the man behind the counter, and led the way to a group seated round a table in the farthest corner.

We sat down and Jack said: "Christ, that was a bit of a strain, Mike; I didn't think we'd get away with it, but there's no time for explanations now. What have you got to tell us?"

I looked at the coat lapels of all the men who were seated at the table and was relieved to see that none of them included the telltale blue thread in their surfaces, and then I told them the story of my afternoon.

They laughed when I told them how I had managed to switch the drinks so that the Colonel was forced to tell the truth while I was free to tell the lies I wanted to, but they were very serious when I told them about the blue thread and cast meaning glances at one another, their eyes tending to dwell on coat lapels and not on faces. Jack said: "That explains a lot, doesn't it?" and they nodded solemnly. Someone else remarked that I had brought them the most valuable bit of information they had had for years.

I drank my tea while I was talking, and was much surprised to find, on looking at the clock behind the counter, that I had been in the café for more than a quarter of an hour. "I must get back," I exclaimed, "or these damned busies will run along to Roscoe and blow the gaff and I'll be in the soup then."

Jack and his friend rose to their feet, replaced their bowler hats in the central position used by the detectives, and left the café with me. Looking round the corner of the street where I had left my guards, I saw them standing outside the ice-cream shop gazing at the piled sweets in the window. "Scoot," I whispered, "I'll deal with them," and I sauntered up the street, whistling as I looked in the shop windows. I was nearly upon them before they heard me coming. They whipped out their revolvers and whirled round, pointing them straight at the pit of my stomach.

"Hullo, boys," I said, "looking for someone? Put those guns away or I'll tell Colonel Roscoe about you and he won't be pleased. He'll stop your jam, your Saturday pennies, and he won't give you any more sweets or nice big black cigars. Hurry up and put them away and perhaps if you're good boys I won't need to tell the Colonel that you were disobedient."

They hastily pushed their revolvers back under their jackets and fell on their knees on the dirty pavement. "Oh, please don't tell dear Colonel Roscoe," they pleaded in unison. "He'd be so angry and would tell us we were

naughty boys and he might beat us with his little black stick."

As they finished talking they both rubbed their backsides with their hands in a reminiscent manner.

"All right, boys," I said, "I won't tell him this time, if you'll promise to be good. Come on now and I'll stand you some more ice cream myself."

I took them back into the shop and fed them enough ice cream to have made a normal person loathe the sight of it for the rest of his life. I thought this was rather a good idea, partly as by being good to their stomachs I was winning my way into their good graces and partly because I hoped that if they ate enough ice cream with me they might forget that they had had the first one alone and so forget to report my temporary absence to the Colonel. It also appeared to me possible that, although their memories about other things might be very short, they would not easily forget anything to do with jam or sweets.

With one of them on each side of me I walked down the streets until I came to a hotel which seemed to be quiet and clean, and as my detectives seemed to want to go in, I entered and booked a room for the night, paying in advance, as I had no luggage except Marlin's ice-axe. Then I went out again and bought a pair of pyjamas, a pocket razor outfit, and some clean socks and walked on till I came to a large bookshop.

There, while I wandered round the shelves, my guardians stuck to the table where illustrated books for chil-

dren were displayed, crowing over the adventures of Peter Rabbit and Jemima Puddleduck. When I had made my purchases, I returned to them and said: "Can you boys read?"

"Oh, yes, dear Mr. Michael," they replied. "We like reading nice easy books like the ones here, with nice funny pictures, and Colonel Roscoe is very kind to us sometimes and lets us take them out of the public library when we've been very, very good and there are curls in the middle of our foreheads."

I bought them a Beatrix Potter book apiece and, as an additional reminder of my identity, wrote the words: "From Michael" in large letters on the covers. "Oo-ee, Mr. Michael," they chorused, "we do love you; yes, we really do. Nobody before in all our lives ever gave us real books to have all to ourselves. Can we give you a great big hug and a kiss? The Colonel sometimes lets us give him one."

They were on me before I could move and the other customers in the bookshop looked rather surprised to see an extremely ugly man, with a broken nose and frost-bitten ears, being embraced by two detectives who apparently wanted to smother him with kisses.

"That's enough, boys," I managed to gasp, and hit them gently across the shins with the haft of my ice-axe. They disengaged themselves and drew back looking rather hurt and sad, but I managed to restore their good spirits by

buying them comic papers from the bookstall at the entrance to the shop.

After that I took them to a news cinema, running a children's show, and they laughed at the cartoons till the other people in the picture house turned round in an effort to quiet them. Then, like puppets worked by the same strings, they jumped to their feet and drew their revolvers and fired at the little mouse who danced madly across the screen. They became angry when the mouse did not fall dead and topple into the palms and paper flowers that filled the orchestra. Sighting more carefully, they fired again and then again and I had the greatest difficulty in pacifying them, for the words "ice cream" no longer had the emotive value of several hours earlier and it was only by shouting: "Jam tarts, boys," at the top of my voice that I was able to move them from the cinema at all.

We went to a large underground restaurant for supper, and while I ate a normal meal, the two detectives filled themselves with all the sweet things they could see or imagine. I hoped that they would not add to my embarrassment by being sick and hurried them along towards the hotel, but they showed no signs of indigestion and would have eaten the same amount again if I had been willing to pay for the feed, for I noticed that they still gazed in at the windows of all the confectioners' shops that we passed and looked at me hopefully.

When we reached the hotel I was rather disconcerted to find that they expected that I would allow them to sleep in my bed with me, and I had a good deal of trouble before I could persuade the manager to rig up a large double-bed mattress, propped up on apple-boxes, at the foot of my bed for them. I undressed and washed and put on my pyjamas, but the two detectives just lay down as they were, on top of the blankets, without removing either their boots or their bowler hats. As I went towards my bed I noticed that the pastries and other sweetmeats that they had not had time to eat were sticking out of their bulging pockets.

Once in bed, it occurred to me that it would be a good idea to telephone Colonel Roscoe, so I lifted the phone and dialled his number. I heard the man who answered me say to someone else beside him: "Colonel Roscoe? At dinner with the P.M.? It's Mr. Michael." Then he apparently recollected that I could hear him and probably covered the mouthpiece with his hand until he was ready to go on. "Excuse me, sir, I'm afraid you will have to wait for a moment while I switch you on to the private line."

The phone clicked and buzzed for a few minutes before Colonel Roscoe spoke: "Hullo, that you, Michael? How are you? It's all right about tomorrow, isn't it?"

"Yes," I replied, "everything's all right, thanks. I just wanted to know whether I'm going to be inflicted with these two detectives for much longer. If I am it's going to cost me a small fortune in sweets and the government

will have to pay the bill. I've been trying to make them sick all evening, without any success, and now they're lying at the foot of my bed looking at me with hungry eyes. Can't you get them taken away for the night or something?"

He laughed and said: "Tell them to come to the phone, will you, Michael? I'll give them their orders. The P.M. and I came to the conclusion that you really did not need further supervision. Oh, by the way, we have tried to find the chap who drove you up to town to give him our thanks, but we've failed to find him. You can't give us any further details, I suppose? No? That's a pity."

"You don't know that I meant you to fail. A fine lot of thanks that chap would have got from you," I thought, as I beckoned the two detectives to the phone, saying: "Colonel Roscoe."

They fought over the receiver like two children with only one new toy between them. At last one of them got it and said: "Yes, dear darling Colonel Roscoe, we've been very good boys. You'll give us each another nice strong black cigar? Oo-ee, goody, goody!" and he dropped the phone and clapped his hands. The other picked it up and used exactly the same words: "Yes, dear darling Colonel Roscoe, we've been very good boys. You'll give us each another nice strong black cigar? Oo-ee, goody, goody!" and then he too clapped his hands.

I lifted the receiver and said: "Good night, Colonel. See you at the club tomorrow morning. What time?

Ten? Yes, I can manage that. Good night."

My two detectives stood by the door. "Good night," they said, "and thank you very much for the lovely time we've had, dear Mr. Michael. Thank you, too, for all the nice things and the books." They bowed and went out, shutting the door carefully behind them, and I heard them clump down the corridor, singing "The Blood of the Lamb" softly as they went. I turned out the light and fell asleep.

I woke when someone tapped softly on my door, and yelled: "Come in," fully expecting to see the platter faces of my two familiar spirits, the detectives, but it was only a pleasant-looking girl carrying a tray with morning tea.

She looked at me closely as she drew the curtains and seemed to be unwilling to leave the room. At last she plucked up her courage and said, shyly: "Are you really Mr. Michael, the gentleman that came all alone over the Pale Peak? Are you really him?"

"I'm afraid so," I replied, "but you mustn't believe any of the things the papers have said about me. It's nearly all untrue. I came across the Peak because I wanted to see what lay on this side and it was the only way over, not because some god told me to or because I was doing anything for the honour of my country. I really am an ordinary man, in spite of my extraordinary face."

She smiled and said: "I wonder if you'd give me your autograph for my collection." She pulled a small book, bound in cheap red morocco, from inside her blouse and

held it out to me open, with a fountain pen. "Here, sir, just above Colonel Roscoe's. He is a nice gentleman, isn't he?"

I agreed dryly, and signed my name hoping that I would come out above the Colonel in real life as well as on paper. The maid was still talking. "You know, sir, that this hotel belongs to Colonel Roscoe?" she was saying and I smiled, realizing why the detectives had wanted to enter it the previous day and why the Colonel had been so willing to remove his supervision.

When the maid had gone, after promising faithfully that she would not tell anyone else that I was in the hotel, I drank my tea, ate the biscuits, and got out of bed.

I dressed slowly, looking forward to talking to the boys. I seemed to have developed a taste for public speaking in the church pulpit and I was quite willing to talk again. A straight-from-the-shoulder talk was what they wanted, I reflected; well, they might find it was a bit too straight for their liking, but I could not help that. They had asked for a straight talk and mine would be as straight as a plumb line and would not bother about the corners of refinement.

I went down to the dining-room and ordered breakfast. As I passed the head waiter and he bowed to me, rubbing his hands together, I noticed that there was a dark blue thread running through the shiny black material of his jacket and knew that I would need to be very careful indeed in the hotel and leave as soon as I possibly could.

After breakfast I had a shave in the hotel barber's shop, as my face was still very tender and I decided that I might as well make the best of all the comforts of civilization while I could. At twenty to ten I set out for the Explorers and United Services Club.

When I left the hotel I noticed a small man slip unobtrusively from the door and start following me. I thought I would have some fun with him and walked quickly round a corner and popped into a tobacconist's to buy some cigarettes. When I came out of the door the little man was standing right in front of me, looking all ways and glancing suspiciously at the passers-by. I paid no obvious attention to him, but bumped into his shoulder as I passed, lighting a cigarette, and swore at him for getting in the way. He sighed with relief when he saw it was I and was profuse in his apologies and insisted on walking up the street with me to continue them, saying: "You know how it is? I thought I saw a friend turning the corner and was looking for him and so got in your way, sir. I hope you will understand that it was quite unintentional." I caught sight of the blue thread as I replied: "Of course I understand that it was quite unintentional. What else would it be?"

He left me at the entrance to the club, and this time the hall-porter recognized me and took me straight along the corridor to Colonel Roscoe's room.

"Hullo, my dear boy," the Colonel exclaimed. "You are punctual! If you don't mind waiting just a moment

until I've finished signing these letters, we can make a start then and I'll have all my business off my mind."

He sat down at the desk and pulled a pile of papers, in a wire tray, towards him. Unobtrusively I tried to read some, but found I could not make head or tail of them; they seemed to be in some sort of code and the heading did not include any address, but was merely a cabbalistic design.

Instead of writing his name, the Colonel made another sign, like a crescent broken by a snake, at the foot of each page. I noticed that he wore kid gloves so as to leave no fingerprints on the paper and that he consulted a small black-bound book, which he took from his breast pocket, before he made other code-notes in the margins of several of the letters. At last he finished and, having folded the cipher documents into their respective envelopes so that I could not catch even a glimpse of the addresses, he walked over to the wall and lifted the edge of one of the panels, disclosing a slot into which he put all the letters.

"Straight to the registered department of the G.P.O." he said, laughing. "I often have to give the P.M. some advice on colonial matters and he had that gadget fitted up for me, to hurry things along and to make sure that there was no chance of a leakage. For, as you can guess, some of the colonial matters that I have to deal with would be very valuable, very valuable indeed, to an unscrupulous business man."

I noticed that now that none of the effects of his truth-

drug remained, the Colonel did not mention the secret service or his connection with it and, instead, made a great pretence of being a minor official, with great practical experience, at the colonial office.

He pressed the bell in the mantelpiece and my two detectives quickly appeared at the door. They showed no signs of recognizing me and their heavy faces were as blank as clay pint-pots. "Good morning, boys. How are you behaving? Being good boys?" he asked, and they nodded so violently that I wondered whether their bowler hats were not stuck on with some sort of glue to prevent their moving. "Well, here's a bag of sweets for each of you and, as a great treat, I'm going to take you for a ride in the car."

"Oo-oo-oo-oo . . ." they whistled between their teeth, and rushed across to the Colonel and tried to kiss him.

"Not before strangers, boys. You know the rule," he said sternly, and they fell back, their fingers twisting nervously.

"Sorry, dear darling kind Colonel Roscoe," they chorused. "We didn't mean to be naughty. Please, please don't be angry with us and we'll be extra specially good boys."

He paid no attention to them, but took my arm and walked down the corridor. They followed us, whimpering and whispering endearments. When we reached the hall he turned and said: "It's all right, boys, I'll let you off this time, but don't dare try to take advantage of me

again." Their dull faces broke, so suddenly that I almost thought I heard them crack, and they grinned delightedly and took toffees from their bags, unwrapped them, throwing the gaudily striped papers down on the solemnly tessellated paving of the hall, and popped the sweets into their vast pillar-box mouths.

Outside, beside the pavement, there stood a magnificent jade-green limousine, with a chauffeur dressed in a livery to match. The chauffeur opened the door and I climbed in, but, looking at his face, I was surprised to see that he was the head waiter who had bowed to me earlier that morning in my hotel. Neither of us gave any sign of recognition and Colonel Roscoe followed me in.

Then it occurred to me that this really might be a plot to catch me and take me to an asylum and I gripped the haft of Marlin's ice-axe firmly, determined that they would not get me without a struggle. Colonel Roscoe noticed the way in which I was holding the ice-axe and laughingly remarked: "I see you've still got your talisman with you. It didn't do poor Marlin much good, did it? Perhaps you'll have better luck. My mascot is certainly less unwieldy." He produced a pink crystal elephant from his waistcoat pocket, saying: "I've carried this about with me for a good many years now and perhaps if I'd had it with me when I made my assault on the Peak I'd have reached the summit and forestalled you and poor Marlin. Who knows?" He shrugged his shoulders and laughed shortly.

It was hard to believe that this hard-bitten ex-mountaineer could be really dangerous. He seemed to be the sort of man who would be at home in a club, swapping stories with his cronies about this wind-slab and that tricky traverse, with a glass of whisky and soda at his elbow, not the sort of man who ruled a secret service, the man who was intent on wiping out any man who wanted to improve the condition of the people. He was talking now about mountains, the Andes, the Alps, and the Himalayas.

Suddenly we were interrupted and almost deafened by the simultaneous reports of two revolvers. I looked out of the window and saw that the two detectives had fired at a bunch of balloons tied to a bamboo stick held by an old man in the gutter. We did not stop, but went on at the same even rate.

The Colonel opened the window between us and the detectives and said, playfully: "Now, now, boys, you mustn't be naughty and waste your cartridges. Don't be so noisy or you might make me angry."

The detectives hurriedly put their guns away and the Colonel shut the window and leaned back, remarking: "These boys are always up to some mischief or other. I'm afraid that they'll get themselves into hot water one of these days. There's no harm in them, you know, but they are just a trifle backward and allow their impulses to get the better of them at times, just like great big babies."

All this time we had been travelling in a northerly di-

rection and we were now on the outskirts of the town. The streets of tenements had given way to bungalows, each with its own neat little garden, with carefully arranged patterns of blue lobelias, scarlet geraniums and many-coloured lupines. Between these desirable residences I could see the green fields, mottled with the sandy yellow of the corn which was beginning to ripen.

Ahead of us there rose a great slender, tall spire from a square, ugly brick box. Colonel Roscoe pointed to it and said: "There's the school. I got my first experience of mountaineering and its penalties there. I climbed the spire one Founder's Day and placed a chamber-pot on the weather-cock. They had to shoot it down and someone squealed on me. There was great talk for a time of expulsion, but fortunately the old Head was a damned good sport and decided that a good beating would be enough punishment for a boyish prank. By God, he'd an eye as straight as a die and he gave me ten of the best. My God, I can still feel them and I can still remember him saying: 'That's all, Roscoe,' as he drew back after the last one. I can still remember the way he held out his hand to me as I stood up. 'There's no hard feeling, is there, Roscoe?' he asked. 'I had to do it and I hope that you'll keep your climbing to the holidays in future and remember that a flag is a better ornament to a summit than a household utensil, whatever its charms.' Jove, he was an old sport, and how we boys respected him for it!"

We entered a drive, fringed with horse-chestnut trees

and dainty flimsy larches, while the rhododendrons were dark mounds rising from the bright grass banks on either side. When we came in full sight of the school, I noticed that there were hundreds of boys dressed in khaki uniforms standing at attention with their rifles at the slope. As our car stopped and the chauffeur came round to open the door, I heard the barked command: "Company, present arms!" and the clatter as the rifles were quickly swung into the desired position.

A short red-faced man, with a nicotine-stained grey moustache, wearing a neat grey herring-bone lounge-suit, stepped forward to greet us. "Morning, Roscoe," he snapped in a military tone. "Y'see we've done the honours for you. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Michael. Wonder if you'd care to inspect the corps?"

I had not the slightest idea of how to set about the job of inspecting a large body of boys dressed in uniform, but Mr. Boswell had apparently taken it for granted that I would treat his question as a command, and Colonel Roscoe, having spoken to the two detectives in a whisper, was following him towards the neat ranks. I let them lead the way and we walked between row after row of boys, all standing stiffly at attention, looking at their khaki uniforms and bright buttons.

It seemed to take a very long time, but at last Mr. Boswell walked off towards a side door and we followed him. We went along a passage, a long corridor cut into pieces by many doors covered with green baize, and entered a

large room. "Don't as a rule till sun's over foremast," Mr. Boswell barked, taking a key-ring from his waistcoat pocket and strutting towards a tantalus, "but in the circumstances, eh, Roscoe and Michael? Might as well, eh?"

He produced glasses and poured stiff pegs of whisky into them, splashing a little soda on top. As we sat down I noticed the ubiquitous blue thread in his lapel and thought that the Colonel, in spite of his own drug, must have been mistaken when he told me that there were only two hundred of them.

As we drank, Mr. Boswell jerked questions and remarks at both of us. "Roscoe told you the sort of thing we want? Y're a very sound man, Roscoe; trust you before I would m' own father. Nothing least bit controversial, y'know. Usual stuff, attractions of mountains an' so on. Not too difficult, eh?"

I made noises in the affirmative to everything he said and looked around the room. It was lined with book-cases containing complete, calf-bound, sets of the classics, detective stories, thrillers, and books on shooting. This last seemed to be the Headmaster's hobby, for there was a great deal of silverware in the room and I noticed that every piece bore an inscription of some sort stating that it had been won by Harold Boswell for some unequalled performance with a rifle.

"Interested in shooting, perhaps, Michael?" he flung at me, and when I replied that I knew practically nothing about it, he started to lecture me on the subject, larding

his conversation with technicalities, such as bulls, outers, grouping, and magpies, which left me no wiser at the end of his talk than I had been at the beginning.

A large clock on the mantel-shelf, won as a prize for snap-shooting, I noted, struck twelve and we rose to our feet, putting out our cigarettes, and walked slowly down more interminable corridors, lined with knotted yellow pine and floored with worn stone, until we came to a vast hall. We entered directly on to a platform, where there stood a row of bentwood chairs with masters seated in them and a small table with a carafe of water and a thick tumbler placed neatly on it. I was given a seat behind the table and Mr. Boswell remained standing, holding his hand up to still the polite clapping of the boys, who sat in serried ranks in front of us.

"Just want to introduce," he snapped, "Mr. Michael, who's y'all know, came over the Pale Peak by himself. Magnificent achievement. Couldn't see m'self doing it. Not got that kind of mind. Want everything cut and dried. Won't keep Mr. Michael waiting. Mr. Michael."

He grabbed me by the sleeve and jerked me upright. There was a little clapping as I looked round the hall and discovered that all my enthusiasm for public speaking had gone. I wondered whether it was now too late to escape by feigning a faint or something. I could not remember any of the things I had intended to say and I had no notes, as I had been so sure I would speak easily; but there was nothing for it, I must make a start somehow,

since the clapping had stopped and the boys were looking at me expectantly.

"I am neither a mountainer nor an explorer," I said. "I am merely a man cursed or blessed—you can yourselves choose which you prefer—with curiosity. I climbed the Peak, not because it was a great or inspiring thing to do, but only because I wanted to see what this country was like and it was an obstacle in my path.

"As you probably know, from the newspapers, something has gone wrong with my memory, so that I am unable to remember much about my own country and have now become curious about it. Have any of you ever thought of what curiosity means? Do you want to know how other people live? Pygmies on the Congo and Tibetans in their monasteries? Have you ever looked at a North American totem-pole? To you it is just a rudely carved and painted bit of wood, with quaint figures, but to the savage it may be a link with his god and it may also be the history of his family, each generation adding its own symbol.

"All of you have families of which you are justly proud, but have you ever wondered what bit each generation has added to *your* totem-pole? Uncle Dick, who was a High Commissioner in West Africa, or your Cousin John, who built the aluminum works up by the lake, what did they add? How many people did they crush to make the fine bright paint to daub it with? From what smaller but no less important totem-poles did they crib that slick design,

that clever bit of treatment, and what did they do with the smaller totem-pole? Did they let the man who made it have it so that others could see where they got their bright idea, or did they destroy it so that their unoriginality would not be known or proved?

“How do the people live who supply the bright ideas for these totem-poles? We will not bother now about the African who supplied Uncle Dick with his idea, but how about the labourer who worked on Cousin John’s scheme by the lake-side, the crofter who had lived there for hundreds of years only to be dispossessed at short notice? What do they feel about these things? Are they adequately recompensed for their long hours of labour or their homeless state? How do *they*, your near neighbours, live?

“It is questions like these that make up what I call curiosity. But such curiosity by itself is not enough. You are not going to do any good by compiling long heavy lists of statistics to be buried in a government blue-book, or by district visiting with the vicar’s wife or slumming during the holidays. None of these activities are of any use. What do you intend to do to see that there is a fairer state of affairs here in your own country? Are you going to say: ‘My people never worried about these things, so it’s no use my worrying either,’ or are you going to try what you can do to help, to relieve suffering so that you are not dispensing charity, but giving each man the things that are his by right of having been born?

“Look around you at your well-fed companions, your natty Head and suave and soldierly Colonel Roscoe there. What do you think they are doing to set these obvious wrongs right? Are they just content to let things slide? No, they are not letting things slide, they are not doing their best to make things better for everyone. They are actively fighting against the men who are trying to improve matters a little. They are the evil creatures that make oppression worse, the men who tread on the fallen. There are no rules for them in the fight. They’ll hit a man when he’s down. They’ll deliver the blow beneath the belt, the elbow planted in the kidneys in a clinch, the butt with the bullet head, and the rabbit-punch behind the ears. They do this because they are safe. The referee has turned his back and is not interested in the fight. You, all of you, are the referee. What is your decision, gentlemen? Are they disqualified?”

I had noticed Colonel Roscoe rising to his feet and Mr. Boswell growing redder in the face, and, as I paused, the Colonel burst out: “Michael, you can’t get away with this. You’re mad. That’s treason. I arrest you in the name of the Queen!” He was trying to pull an automatic from his jacket pocket, but it had caught in the lining and I hit him in the fleshy part of the arm with the point of Marlin’s ice-axe.

I charged towards the little door at the side of the platform, knocking Mr. Boswell over the edge into a pile of musical instruments, obviously the property of the school

orchestra. I slammed the little door behind me and then realized that I had come out of the wrong door—the door on the opposite side of the hall. However, there was no going back and I sprinted along the stone corridors. By pure luck I saw daylight down a side corridor as I flew along, and I swung round and ran towards it. It led out to the front of the school, and there, with the engine ticking ever so gently, stood the jade-green limousine with my two detectives holding hands beside it. There was no sign of the chauffeur.

I staggered up to the plain-clothes men and gasped: "Boys, you remember me, Michael?" They shook their heads for a moment and then their eyes brightened and they pulled their books from their pockets.

"Peter Rabbit, Jemima Puddleduck," they said. "More ice cream and jam tarts?"

"Yes," I said, panting for breath. "Colonel Roscoe said I was to take you in his car to have some ice cream and jam tarts. Come along quickly, now."

I jumped into the driving-seat and they scrambled in after me. I crashed the gears home as I heard shouting behind us and, looking in the driving-mirror, saw a crowd of men running out of a door. We shot wildly down the drive. "Man chasing us," the detectives chorused. "Green man. What will we do?" I caught a glimpse of the green-liveried chauffeur-head-waiter and snapped: "Oh, shoot him! He might steal your ice cream," and concentrated on the task of keeping the huge brute of a

car on the road. I heard the crash of two quick explosions and, in the mirror, saw the green-clad man fall forward in the dust and realized that my two companions had taken my half-joking interjection for a command. I crashed on down the drive, passed the lodge just as a man seized one of the gates, and turned towards the town.

I could not stick to the green car for long, I thought; it was far too obvious and I would need to ditch it and my familiar spirits somewhere. I drew up at a wayside café with a notice saying: "Ices," gave them sixpence each, and said: "Now be good boys and run along and get your ices and cakes."

They tried to embrace me, but I managed to slip out of the other side of the car just in time. As soon as they were safely inside the café, I looked around to see if I could think of any other means of escape, just as a bus came lumbering round the corner. I jumped on it and ran up the stairs.

We had only travelled about a quarter of a mile when we encountered a stream of police cars and motor-cycles, all driven by the bowler-hatted rank and file of the secret service, tearing along at top speed. They forced the bus to draw over to the side of the road to let them pass, and I thought, with relief, that that would provide me with a few minutes' start, but I was sure that they would catch up with me eventually.

I was the only passenger on the top of the bus, and when the conductor came up, I made the sign with my lifted

hand surreptitiously to see if he would recognize it. He repeated the sign, so I told him, as fast as I could, who I was and what had happened.

"What you want," he said, "is a bus going the other way. They won't expect you to do that now and they'll have stopped searching the buses going out of town, but they'll be on to this one soon."

He leaned out of a window on the off side and stopped a bus going in the opposite direction. "Gent got on the wrong bus," he shouted, and then whispered to me: "Careful of them on that bus. I don't know them."

As I climbed the stairs to the top of the other bus, the conductor leaned over and I saw, as if it had been enlarged a hundred times by a microscope, a thin blue thread in his lapel, clear against the maroon uniform. I mumbled something about having left a message behind and jumped off the bus again, nearly falling, as it was travelling pretty fast. I dodged through the speeding cars, ignoring the cries of startled drivers, and managed to reach the pavement in safety.

I saw the conductor looking back at me and hoped that he would never be up against me again, as he would certainly be able to identify me without any trouble. As soon as the bus was out of sight, I recrossed the road, at a pedestrian crossing this time, and dived down a side street. In a second-hand-clothes-dealer's I bought a trench-coat and a broad-brimmed black felt hat. I buttoned the ice-axe inside my jacket and pulled on the coat,

» O V E R T H E M O U N T A I N «

hoping that no one would notice the slight bulge on my left side.

Then I went into a café and ordered a cup of tea and pretended to read a racing-newspaper which was lying on the table while I wondered what I could do next.



Suddenly I remembered the press-photographer whose camera had been destroyed by the detectives and fished his card out of the pocket in my belt. His name was Rupert Lorne and his address was 47 Rawdon Gardens. I asked the man behind the counter where Rawdon Gardens was and he scratched his head for a moment before shaking it.

"No, I can't say that I know the name," he said, and turned to the other customers in the café. "Any of you chaps know where Rawdon Gardens is?"

They shook their heads and said that they were sorry

that they had no idea, except that it was not in this part of the town, and I was just on the point of leaving when an elderly street musician, with a wooden leg, spoke. "I think it'll be down in the city, somewhere by Dante Square. The best way for you to get there will be to take a bus. A number 3 will do you, and ask the conductor."

I thanked him, paid for my tea, and left the café. I set out towards the city on foot, for I was unwilling to risk another bus after my recent experience. It was a long walk and I made it appear longer by sticking to the crowded side streets, as I was afraid to venture on the main roads at all. I walked along pavements lined with stalls, piled with cats' meat, vegetables, clothes, books, and varied junk, from old door-knobs to stuffed parrots, and edged my way past women carrying shopping-baskets and strange-shaped parcels.

Several times I saw some of the blue-clad stolid plain-clothes men loitering at the street corners, but none of them made any effort to stop me or, indeed, looked at me with the least curiosity. I decided that I had better try to change the rest of my gold coins into a more usual currency while the search for me was still more or less unorganized and before someone remembered my source of ready money and told the police about it. Whenever I passed a jeweller's I went in and sold two or three of my coins until my trouser pockets were heavy with silver and my breast pocket bulged with dirty torn notes which no one could trace.

I had to be very careful about asking people the way, as I was afraid that I might make the serious mistake of asking a blue-thread man, and I was sure that by this time they would all be on the look-out for me and would make no mistake about me, for they appeared to have the usual amount of intelligence and would not be so liable to forget me as the ordinary rank and file of the secret police.

I found that Dante Square was less than three hundred yards from Jerome Square and that Rawdon Gardens lay south of them both, parallel with their lower ends. 47 Rawdon Gardens was an old house which had been converted into self-contained flats. When I rang the bell marked "Rupert Lorne," there was no answer. It occurred to me that as it was still only afternoon, Lorne was probably occupied somewhere taking photographs, if he had managed to get a new camera. So I left the Gardens, thinking that they were too broad and too lacking in cover for my comfort and that I was as visible there as a black rabbit would be on a snow-covered hillside.

I went along the side streets and twisted through narrow alleys until I arrived at the café where Jack and his friend had taken me the day before after we had succeeded in mislaying the detectives. I walked in as if I was a regular habitué and grunted: "Evening, Manuel, steak and chips, cabbage, and a cup of tea, no sugar," as I went towards the corner, where I noticed that there were several of the men who had listened to me so intently the previous evening.

It was very hard to believe that I had only been knocking around for about a couple of days. It seemed as though I had been dodging the slab-faced police and the blue-threads for a matter of weeks.

As I approached the men who were seated at the table, I made the usual sign and they looked up at me. One of them, and I noticed that it was the man who had played the detective with Jack, jumped to his feet and stared at me. "My God," he said, "if it isn't Mike. I'd hardly have known you in that get-up. What the hell have you been up to now?"

I could not say that I was sorry that he had had some difficulty in recognizing who I was, for he had had plenty of time to study me the day before and if he could not place me straight off, it would seem that it was very unlikely that any of the blue-threads would be able to pick me up on a verbal description, without even a photograph as a backing.

I sat down and told them how once again I had got into trouble, and as soon as I had finished, several of them offered to put me up until I could decide what I wanted to do. By this time, however, I had made up my mind that I wanted to see the photographer, as he would probably have some newspaper friends who might persuade their papers to defend me. They agreed with me that it was quite a good scheme. At that moment a man poked his head in through the shop door and said, "The cops are making a door-to-door search and they'll be here in a

minute or two. Anyone who wants to had better scoot."

Several of the men started to their feet and Manuel opened a door behind the counter and lifted the flap. Pulling me with them, they went through it. I was surprised when, instead of descending the stairs that obviously led to a back yard, they started to climb up. We passed several landings with doors opening off them, but paid no attention to them until we came to the top of the narrow stairs, when we entered an attic with an enormous cistern taking up half the floor-space.

I thought this looked like a cunning idea, that there was probably a hiding-place inside the cistern, but one of the men jumped on top of it and opened a trapdoor and we scrambled out on to the roof.

We went slowly along inclines of slates and across flat patches of lead until we came to a gap between two houses, where a narrow passage separated them. Two of the men went to the corners of the house where we stood and looked down into the street to make certain that no one was coming and we crossed on a plank which another man placed in position.

I saw that the houses where we were now climbing were of much better construction than the first lot and whispered to one of my companions: "Where are we now?"

"Jerome Square," he replied, smiling. "They'll never think of looking for us on top of the clubs." At length we arrived at a square concrete box on top of one of the

roofs and Jack's friend pressed a bell gently. The door was opened in a minute or two by a man dressed in brown dungarees. "This is Bill," one of the men said as we entered the box, which I now realized was a small swimming-pool, lighted by a glass roof.

We sat down on the floor and lit our cigarettes. Seeing my surprised look, Bill explained: "This is Lord Tamarisk's house, next to the Explorers' and United Services Club. His Lordship, bless his little heart, is away on a voyage round the world. I'm the engineer and caretaker in charge of all his little gadgets; he's got a mania for mechanical toys and they need to be kept in working order so that he can start playing with them as soon as he gets back. So you're Michael, are you? There's been the hell of a lot of fuss about you today. Busies have been bouncing up and down the club steps with their revolvers in their fists, and they've been responsible for some pretty nasty accidents by driving at top speed round corners without paying any attention to the other people on the road. God, though, it was funny when two of their own cars collided, going at about seventy and not braking at the corner of the square. Six of them got killed and the others rushed out of the club and started firing at the wreckage, thinking they were being attacked. I saw it all from the front of this house. However, you're safe enough here and, as far as I'm concerned, you can stay as long as you like—that is, till His Lordship turns up, which won't be for another six weeks at least."

I told him of my intention to find Lorne and see whether he had any friends who would be able to help me, since it was impossible for me to go on living as a fugitive for the rest of my life, and I must settle things somehow. We discussed plans for my escape and I mentioned Colonel Roscoe's private letter-chute, saying that I thought it must pass somewhere along the side of the house we were in. Bill was all for going downstairs at once and trying to find it so that he could read the Colonel's correspondence before sending it on. I thought it was a great pity that I had not been able to steal the Colonel's code-book and pointed out that the letters would be useless without it; anyhow, I said, the Colonel was not a complete fool and would obviously have changed the code as soon as he had discovered its loss. They agreed with me, looking rather crestfallen, and someone produced a pack of greasy cards.

We played crib and talked till nine o'clock; then I got up and said I really had better go and see if I could find Lorne. We went out on the roof again and on our arrival at Manuel's found that he had left a sign that everything was all right again; this sign merely consisted of a newspaper left lying open on a chair on the top landing in such a way that it looked perfectly normal.

In the café there were a few more men and they nodded to us as we re-entered the room in single file. I talked to one or two of them and then, pulling my hat well down over my eyes and turning my coat-collar up, I went out.

As I turned the corner I nearly collapsed with fright,

for I ran slap into a plain-clothes man who was gazing in at a tobacconist's and confectioner's window. However, though he looked at me indignantly as I apologized, he did not try to stop me, but went into the shop, and as I passed, I heard him asking for a halfpennyworth of Policeman's Taffy.

I walked round to Rawdon Gardens and rang Lorne's bell. There was no answer for a long time, but just as I was thinking that it was hopeless and I would need to try again later, the door opened. A young man peered out.

"Hullo," he said. "Want me?"

I replied: "Yes, can I come in? Here's your card. The one you gave me yesterday."

He took it and looked at it carefully, all but biting it to test its genuineness and holding it up to the light to see that the watermark was not a forgery. "It's mine all right," he announced, "but I'm damned if I can remember giving it to you. Where did you get it?"

I was getting tired of standing out on the doorstep and was also afraid that one of the blue-threads might come round the corner, so I snapped, rather pettishly: "For God's sake, let me come in. I had a beard covering my face when you gave it to me. Do you remember now?"

"My God, yes," he replied. "Come in, come in," and he almost yanked me over the doorstep and up the flight of stairs to his flat.

He pushed me into a chair and poured a bottle of beer into two glasses. "I am glad to see you," he said. "I did

want to thank you. It was frightfully decent of you to give me that towards a new camera. The old one was insured, but I wouldn't have got the money out of the company for weeks. I've been saving up for a new camera, but without your money I couldn't have got it. Now, though, I'm all right. I bought it this morning. It's a beauty. Look." He produced his new camera from its case and eagerly began to show it off, pointing out its remarkable features. Suddenly it appeared to occur to him that he did not know who I was, and he asked: "What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't," I replied, "but it's Michael, as a matter of fact."

He dropped back into his armchair and exclaimed weakly: "Christ! What a scoop! What a scoop!"

After that he asked me for my story and I gave him enough of it to allow him to understand what sort of hole I had got myself into. When I had finished he looked thoughtful and said: "Well, I don't really know what I can do to help you. I think the best thing I can do is to ring up old Murrit of the *Independent* and ask him if he can give you a hand. I know him because he was a friend of my father and I'm sure he won't let you down by telling the police or anything like that." He looked up at the electric clock on the wall and went on: "He'll be at his home at this time of night, so I'll have to try and get on to him there."

He went out into the tiny hall, shutting the door of the room behind him, and I heard the tinkle of the phone as he picked up the receiver and then the mumble of his voice as he spoke. When he returned he was smiling. "That's all right," he said. "Old Murrit wants me to take you round to see him now. He says he won't promise anything till he's seen you and heard your story, but if it seems to him that there's a good enough news-story in it, he'll try and put things right for you. I'll trot out now and get my car from the garage and will be back in a minute to pick you up." He filled up my glass, placed a snap-brim hat on his head, and flung a long thick woollen scarf round his neck before going. "Tootle-oo," he remarked cheerily. "I won't be long."

I drank my beer and looked into the glowing bars of the electric fire, thinking that as I was in so much trouble already, it would not matter if I took the risk of running myself into some more. I had seen the *Independent* and knew that it was the only opposition paper in the country, of liberal tendencies and only tolerated because the owner was a popular young sporting baronet, Sir Harry Bracesplit, and there would have been a tremendous public outcry if anyone had dared to interfere with him or any of his activities. I remembered, also, having read in one of the badly printed little pamphlets in Jack's room that no doubt the government found it useful to have something which they could point to and say: "Look,

aren't we open-minded? We actually allow this paper to attack us"; they could use it as a stick to beat other and more extreme ventures.

My thoughts were interrupted by Lorne's return. "Ready?" he asked, and I rose to my feet. "You'd better wrap this round your neck and then you won't look out of place in a sports-car," handing me a scarf of the same size and texture as the one he was already wearing. I went down the steps behind him and squeezed into the rumble-seat of a very small, low car, having some difficulty in preventing the ice-axe from stabbing me in the ribs.

Lorne drove fast along the semi-deserted streets, just scraping past heavy lorries, buses and traffic lights. He puffed at a huge rough briar, having some difficulty in keeping it alight as he drove, and I could see that he was acting the part of the hero of a thriller, rescuing the wrongfully accused man from the clutches of the police. He was enjoying himself and spoke only in curt monosyllables, obviously the strong silent man intent only on his job, with no time for taradiddles or pretty speeches.

We drove south this time and I was relieved to think that we were putting a good distance between me and Colonel Roscoe and his staff headquarters. I remembered, rather ironically, that by rights I should, just about this time, have been delivering a solemn lecture to the National Exploration Club on the climbing of the Pale Peak, but I soon forgot it, as it was driven out of my mind by Lorne's driving, which seemed to follow the principle

that if you were quick enough you could go anywhere safely, even under a street-car.

After about twenty minutes of this hair-breadth-escape driving we entered one of the suburbs and drove up a private road where the houses were all large solid edifices of red brick. We drew up at one of these, and Lorne, before the brakes had stopped squealing, had jumped out of the car, run up the doorstep, and pealed the bell. I got out more slowly and followed him. The door was opened by a middle-aged man with kindly eyes and a bewildered look. Lorne struck a dramatic attitude and cried: "Mr. Murrit, this is Michael."

"So I see," he replied dryly, "but if what you have told me is true, I very much doubt whether Mr. Michael wants his name to be shouted about from the house-tops. Come in, sir," and he made way for me. Lorne looked subdued for a minute or two, but soon recovered his spirits when Mr. Murrit produced a sherry-decanter, saying: "We may as well have a small drink, for I'm rather afraid, Mr. Michael, that I will have to keep you waiting for a few minutes. What young Lorne here suggested to me on the phone seemed to me to be of such importance that I thought I had better ring up my owner, Sir Harry, to authorize any steps that I might want to take. He is on his way here now and should be here any minute."

We talked about the countryside and birds. Mr. Murrit appeared to be a great authority on both and told me with visible pride that he had been the first person

to notice the presence of several rare strangers among the more common varieties of birds. I remember that two of them were the parrot crossbill and a harlequin duck, about which he went into rhapsodies, producing illustrations of them, and stressing their rarity and his luck in having observed them when his whole attention was taken up by another species.

There was a loud ring at the bell, and Mr. Murrit got up and hurried to open the front door, exclaiming: "That'll be Sir Harry. I know his ring."

A young man wearing evening dress, with a weak face, preceded him as he re-entered the room. This young man held out a limp hand in greeting. "How d'ye do?" he said. "Murrit pulled me away from a party to meet you. Let's hear your story and see if it was worth coming all this way to listen to it."

When I began, Mr. Murrit picked up the telephone beside his elbow and said: "Special," and all the time I was telling my story he kept on repeating bits of it into the telephone, reading them from a block of paper on his knee on which he made a shorthand transcription of everything I said. I only told them what I thought fit, leaving out any references to Colonel Roscoe's truth-drug and the blue-threads. I was glad that Mr. Murrit did not invent anything for me to say, but merely repeated my words into the receiver, and I hoped that, now that the true story had been let loose, the other papers would be forced to give up their lies and look for the truth as well.

When I had finished, Mr. Murrit said: "Well, Mr. Michael, I don't think you'll have anything to fear from the police once the papers are out. If I know anything about them, and I must admit that I should, I would say that the thing which they are most afraid of is being laughed at and I've carefully kept back the story of the sweet-eating detectives and their passion for Colonel Roscoe, to spring it if anything goes wrong." He looked at his watch and continued: "Let me see, it's a quarter to twelve now. The papers will be read by people who have their breakfasts up till nine o'clock. That means that you had better stay in hiding till about ten tomorrow morning to let the gossip get about. I'm afraid that I can't offer to put you up. As the editor of the only opposition paper I'm liable to a sudden inspection by the police at any time of the day or night, and once they see the papers, they may try and get you to make you withdraw your statements before the edition is fully out, and of course they'll come and visit me."

Sir Harry Bracesplit spoke diffidently. "How'd you like to come to a party? They daren't do anything to me and I must be getting back. Come on if you're coming."

I did not see that there was anything else I could do at that time of night and so I said good-night to Mr. Murrit and to Lorne, who almost overwhelmed me with his thanks, saying how glad he was that it was his camera that the detectives had chanced to smash and asking if I would let him take my photo with his pocket camera,

without which he never went anywhere. I refused to let him, saying: "If everything is all right tomorrow, we'll see about it, but I don't want there to be an odd photo of me floating around loose until I know that I am safe."

I went out with Sir Harry and got into his car. From the outside this car looked like a super-racing model, but inside it was upholstered like the lounge of a luxury liner. As we drove off, I saw two plain-clothes men going up the steps to Mr. Murrit's house and guessed that his phone line was tapped and that I had only just managed to get away in time. I hoped they would not worry him too much on my account.

"Thirsty, old boy?" inquired Sir Harry. "Just open the dashboard and we'll have a snifter. That knob there." I pulled the knob he had indicated and disclosed a fully fitted miniature cocktail bar. I lifted the shaker and poured out two cocktails. I was surprised that they showed no inclination to spill and that the car also was absolutely steady, although the speedometer showed that we were travelling at about seventy-five miles an hour.

I mentioned this to Sir Harry as I sipped my drink and asked what the secret of it all was. "Oh, there's no secret," he replied, "it's just a matter of special springs and a gyroscopic arrangement. Makes it comfortable, though, doesn't it? Would hardly know you were travelling if it wasn't for the road running under you and the lamps flicking past beside you. I always said there was no need to sacrifice comfort for speed, and this car shows that I was

right. It's nearly as comfortable as you could wish, I think, though certainly I've noted one or two points that need modifying and I'll have them attended to when I order my next year's car."

I wondered what the car had cost to build, but thought it might seem impertinent to inquire. I saw from the use of rare woods and bright metals, however, that it must have cost a fortune to provide the upholstery and the interior decorations alone, without bothering about the specially silenced engine and the super-body with its luxurious springing.

Looking out of the window, I found that we were in a part of the city that I seemed to know, and the next moment we drew up at a house in Dante Square.

Bright lights shone in most of the windows of the house and I heard laughter and music. Sir Harry strolled up the steps to the front door, peeling off his lemon-yellow gloves. He nodded to the blue-clad secret police who were clustered at the bottom of the steps and I tried to follow his example, though my heart leaped up and down as if it was going to crash right through my breast into the pit of my stomach, where there was a hollow ready to take it. However, the police merely smiled in a friendly half-witted way and we went on untroubled. When we were safely through the door, Sir Harry turned, as if he had forgotten something, and went back and spoke to the police, saying: "I'll send out some cakes and lemonade for you boys." There was a chorus of thanks and someone called

for three cheers for Sir Harry, which were given in the slightly self-conscious manner of children when ordered to cheer by a teacher.

Sir Harry beckoned to a footman and told him to see that the police were given a feed, and the butler removed his overcoat. Then the butler took my dirty trench-coat and my weather-beaten black hat and tried to take Marlin's ice-axe, but I refused to let him have it and made some pretence of using it as a walking-stick as we went upstairs. I was determined that if I had to cut and run again, I was going to take the ice-axe with me; I was not going to risk leaving it anywhere where it might be mislaid or stolen.

I tried to apologize to Sir Harry for the state of my clothes, which were a trifle mud-stained and crumpled and looked very squalid beside his immaculate black and white, but he waved my attempts at explanation aside, saying airily: "Oh, that's all right, my dear fellow; nobody will mind and I'll explain."

We entered an enormous room with white and gold walls. It was crowded with people, either gathered in little groups talking at the top of their voices or dancing to the hot jazz of a Negro band. A tall, willowy woman, dressed in a flowing vermilion gown, came towards us and held out her hand wearily. "Oh, Harry," she drawled, "you are a naughty wicked man. Here am I, who have been looking positively everywhere for you and you come sauntering in as if there was nothing the matter and you

had nothing to be ashamed of. What on earth have you been up to now? You are so devastatingly energetic." I noticed that Sir Harry's voice was nearly as tired as hers had been when he replied: "Oh, Elsa, darling, where would I have been but getting you a lion? This is Michael, the man with the lots of energy who strolled over the Peak; you know all about him, and there will be lots more in my filthy newspaper tomorrow morning."

She looked at me in a languid manner, running her eyes up from my wrinkled brown shoes to my damaged face. I felt that she did not miss much and that she was sizing me up. "Most people who do things are the most frightful bores. Are you a bore?" she said. "Let's drift across to the others and you can tell me about yourself and I'll let you know if you are a devastating bore or merely dull."

I thought I had better try to talk, but she did not listen to me. She looked round the room in a dissatisfied manner as if she was looking for someone. She saw a woman dressed in peacock green and walked slowly towards her, with me following like a puppy on a string. When we reached the woman, she drawled: "Oh, my dear, it's such fun. Harry has brought me the most frightful man. His name is Michael and he says he came across the Pale Peak. Too absolutely devastating for words. And that's not all; he's got the most wonderfully ugly face, my dear, even better than your husband's, Sylvia. Look at him, isn't he awful?"

She waved a weary hand at me, and Sylvia, whose last name I never discovered, glanced at me in a bored way and remarked icily: "How too frightful for you, my darling!"

We drifted on round the room, and my guide, or trainer, gathered a few more of her friends, who looked at me as if I were some peculiar sort of animal which had wandered from its proper surroundings in a zoo or a circus. One young man, who was wearing a paper hat, had a bright idea. "Let's make the bear squiffy," he shouted, "and see what happens. I've never seen a squiffy bear."

Elsa looked at him coldly. "My dear Tony," she said freezingly, "you are far too hearty. Don't you know that nobody's hearty nowadays? You're always so terribly out of date. All the same," she added in a thoughtful tone, "the idea's not really too bad, for you. Since you are so energetic, darling, you might mix the drinks and bring them over."

Tony went away grumbling and returned in a few minutes carrying a tray on his outstretched hand; he had torn a strip of bright cloth from somewhere—it looked as though it came from a girl's dress—and this was hung over his arm like a napkin. "Jeeves at your service," he said. "What will you have, *mesdames et messieurs*?"

The tray held an enormous cocktail-shaker, a good many small glasses, and a silver pint-pot. The others were given the glasses and I was given the pot, filled to the brim

with the contents of the shaker.

Tony then upset his glass over a girl, and in the confusion that followed I managed to empty nearly all of the pot's contents down the back of the sofa, leaving only a drop at the bottom. I had no remorse for damaging someone's property, as none of the others seemed to mind breaking chairs or burning holes in the brocade upholstery with cigarette-ends, and anyhow, I thought, these people are rich enough not to notice a little extra expense like that caused by the removal of alcohol stains.

As soon as they looked up again, I lifted the pint-pot to my lips, said: "Cheerio," went through the motions of swallowing, and drank the few evil-tasting and smelling drops that I had left in the bottom.

Then I put the pot down with a crash and remarked: "That's better."

"My God," Tony said slowly, looking at me in horror, "Elsa, your bear has drunk it all just like a pint of bitter. He'll die. I put some ether in it to give it a kick." He moved closer to me and went on: "How do you feel, old man? Would you like to be sick? I'll give you a hand if you like, work the old tummy muscles and so on."

"No," I replied, "I don't feel the least bit sick. What I should like now is a good strong whisky and soda to wash the taste away. It was pretty foul-tasting stuff that, even though it had a slight kick."

He looked at me as if he thought I was joking, and I got to my feet to get the drink. "Christ," he said, "the

man drinks a pint of my special poison just like beer and doesn't fall down. He asks for a nice strong whisky and soda to wash the taste away. He's bloody unnatural, that's what he is. Am I nuts or am I nuts? Tell me, someone, quick. Christ!" and he went away to get me my drink, holding his head as if he was afraid that it might fall off if he let go.

The others were looking at me curiously and sipping their drinks. "Oh, my bear," said Elsa, "do tell me where you got that head. What's the secret? One teeny-weeny glass of Tony's special blend is quite enough to knock most of us cock-eyed."

"There's no secret at all," I relied truthfully. "You just need to be careful what you drink and how you drink it, that's all. Anyhow, I didn't like the smell or the taste of the stuff and I only get drunk on things I like."

Tony brought back my whisky and soda, looking rather as if he was afraid that I might have died and been buried during his absence. I was by this time, after my experiences with Colonel Roscoe's whisky and now this cocktail, inclined to be suspicious of all drinks and said: "I hope that this is just pure whisky and pure soda and that you haven't put any cyanide in with it to see if you could kill me, for I warn you that I am by no means immortal and I certainly don't want to die just yet."

"No, no," he protested, "I swear that's just an ordinary drink. What do you think I am, an utter swine? I gave you that pint as a joke, but I swear that I never meant to

let you drink more than a quarter of it. You were so quick that I couldn't stop you."

He seemed to be telling the truth, but I was still cautious and tasted a drop of the whisky very carefully, rolling it round my tongue, before I drank.

He was still worried about the effects of his cocktail, presumably because he had made it and therefore knew what was in it, and he kept looking anxiously across at me. The others, however, were not in the least perturbed and called to their friends, as they went past, to come and see Elsa's bear, who had just taken a pint of Tony's poison in one gulp and was now drinking whisky and soda, saying: "Oh, my dear, I just daren't think what his insides are like. They must be too absolutely frightful for words."

There was a general demand that I should repeat my notable feat by drinking another pint, but I demurred, saying: "Once a night is all I allow myself and even then I choose my nights with care."

Tony rose to his feet and, with unexpected firmness, said: "Look here, you chaps, I might have killed this man and I don't think it's fair that you should ask him to do it again. His stomach"—here there was an interruption in the shape of a chorus crying: "Oh, Tony what a nasty word!" but he paid no attention and went on—"his stomach, I say, may be lined with tin, but even if it is, I don't think he can expect it to stand up to my stuff for ever."

I was very grateful to him, as I knew that if they

brought me another drink I should certainly not be able to get rid of it as easily as I had the first.

Everyone seemed to be getting rather drunk and Elsa insisted on my trying to dance with her, even though I steadfastly refused to relinquish my hold on Marlin's ice-axe.

As we whirled awkwardly to the blaring music, she nimbly avoided my clumsy feet and shouted, all her weariness gone: "Look, I've got a performing bear and I can make him dance."

When someone trod on her dress and one of the shoulder-straps broke, she turned and cried: "You clumsy beast, Archie! Even my pet bear hasn't done that yet." I could see the rise of her breasts where the dress hung loose and I must have held her tighter, for she flung her arms round my neck, saying: "Oh, my darling bear, I almost love you. You are so sweet and so ugly."

She kissed me and it was pleasanter than I had thought it would be. I hugged her, like the bear I was impersonating, and kissed her in return.

We went slowly, moving with the dancers, to a door that led into a wide well-lighted corridor. Elsa took me along it to a dark and curtained alcove where there was a sofa. We were kissing each other when the curtain was whipped back and I saw that the corridor was filled with blank-faced plain-clothes men. Elsa sat up and started to rearrange her hair, and as she did so, I noticed that her

dress had got pulled down and that a blue thread ran across her brassiere.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry, my darling bear," she said, "but I had to do it. Please, please come back to me when you escape, for I really do love you. Please come back and we won't be interrupted the next time."

A tall man wearing a dark grey lounge-suit stepped forward. "My name is Captain Hooker," he announced, "and I take it that you are Michael, the mountaineer? Well, I regret to have to inform you that I must take you into custody on a provisional warrant while charges are formulated against you. My orders are to tell you that these charges will include assault, battery, attempted murder, incitement to rebellion, incitement to murder, theft of an automobile, and violation of traffic regulations."

I turned to Elsa, smiling, and she lifted her face towards me as if she expected a kiss. I hit her on the cheek with the open palm of my hand and whirled round to face the police. There was a gap between the first two and I darted for that, swinging Marlin's ice-axe high above my head.

Even as I hit the first man with the flat of the axe I heard Elsa, whom I had expected to be in tears, shouting encouragement to me: "Oh, dear darling bear, I do love you. My he-man!" She laughed and I was angry, and the wooden-faced police fell back before my onslaught.

Captain Hooker shouted: "Stop or I shoot," but I

reached the door of the big room before I heard the crack of his revolver and saw a big mirror at the end of the corridor splutter into fragments.

"That's seven years' bad luck to you," I cried as I dived towards the dancers, looking for Sir Harry. At last I saw him standing against a gilt column with a glass in his hand. I ran towards him, and just as I reached him I saw the tall figure of Captain Hooker starting to thread his way between the dancers on the other side of the room.

"Sir Harry!" I cried, and he turned. "They are after me now; what shall I do?"

"Nothing," he replied languidly. "We can't allow the police to invade our parties as if they were a lot of trippers trespassing on private ground."

He walked towards Captain Hooker. "What is this I hear, Captain Hooker?" he said. "Do you actually mean to say that you came here with the intention of arresting one of my guests?"

"I'm very sorry, Sir Harry," the other replied. "Acting under Colonel Roscoe's orders, I'm afraid."

"And who the devil is Colonel Roscoe to give orders in my house?" inquired Sir Harry in an angry voice. "Go back and tell the Colonel that I will undertake to look after Mr. Michael until morning, when I'll ring him up. Oh, by the way, you might tell him to read tomorrow's, or rather today's, *Independent* before he takes any further action. And tell him I would like to know as soon as possible what he intends to do about this arrest. I doubt

whether it will be proceeded with. If you wish to, you can surround this house with your men, but I give you my word that Mr. Michael will not attempt to leave either before nine o'clock tomorrow morning or before he receives a letter stating that the prosecution will not take place."

Captain Hooker saluted and withdrew towards the corridor, gathering his men as he went, from the buffets, where they were stealing sweetmeats and cadging glasses of ginger ale.

I saw Elsa, the strap of her dress mended, coming towards me through the crowd. As she drew near, I thought I could detect the mark of my hand under the powder on her cheek. She walked straight up to me and said: "Oh, you funny darling bear," and threw her arms round my neck.

I was a bit dazed by the events of the last few minutes and wondered what sort of place I had wandered into. I felt as if I was a puppet in a period play where everything was like moves at chess and I could only move according to my rank. However, I had found a sanctuary which would keep me safe till the morning.

The room was very noisy now and people were passing out and breaking glasses. Elsa took me by the arm and pulled me with her along the corridor again. I went willingly. This time, however, we did not stop at the alcove, but passed it and went up a broad staircase.

The room we entered had the same white and gold

scheme of decoration as the rest of the house and was hung with eighteenth-century brocades. We sat on the edge of the vast elaborate bed and embraced and I was happy for the first time in that country. She locked the door before she started to undress, saying: "We won't be interrupted this time."

I looked at her as she lay in bed and thought how desirable she was and started to follow her example. I was just going to climb into the tall broad bed when she cried: "Oh, my bear, you've forgotten something. You've forgotten your ice-axe. You must bring it with you and we can keep it like a naked sword between us all night."

We did not.



>> CHAPTER TEN <<

When I woke in the morning I crept out of bed without waking Elsa and put on my clothes quietly before leaning over the bed to kiss her good-bye, but she opened her eyes and glanced at the clock, which read half past eight, and said: "What, my bear, up and away so early in the morning? I don't expect that I'll see you again, so kiss me, my ugly sweet."

I kissed her, picked up Marlin's ice-axe, and unlocked the door gently. I went quietly down the stairs and, looking through the open doors of the big room, was surprised

to see that the party was still going on and that Sir Harry was still standing by the pillar where I had last seen him, still holding a half-empty glass in his hand.

When he saw me he waved the glass vaguely and I went across to him. He was only slightly drunk and it did not show much in his speech as he said: "You're all right now, Michael. Look what I got about a quarter of an hour or so ago." He waved a letter in front of my eyes and I took it and saw that it was an order from the Home Secretary stating that no charges would be preferred against the man Michael, in the circumstances. I thought that though the circumstances might refer to Sir Harry's threat to print the whole story, the phrase was rather worrying. However, for the time being, at least, I was free of the police and their powers of arrest.

"Good-bye," I said gratefully, "and thanks for all that you've done for me."

"Bye-bye," he replied. "Oh, by the way, where'd you spend the night? With Elsa? You know she's my wife? But, bless you, I don't mind." He waved his hand airily and I left the room.

I took a bus to the district where I had stayed with Jack and walked hurriedly down Shillinglaw Grove. There was no answer when I rang the bell at his lodgings, so I tried several streets until I found the café where he had taken me after he had brought me up to town on Sunday. Toni was writing on his blackboard out in front and I said: "Morning, Toni. Jack in?" He looked at me in a

puzzled way for a moment or two and then seemed to recognize me as he replied: "Oh, heem? I think you find heem inside."

Ordering a cup of tea, I walked in and looked round till I saw Jack sitting in a corner. When I spoke to him he rose to his feet waving a copy of the *Independent*. I took it from him and saw that Mr. Murrit had been very truthful in his statements about me and that he had also been cunning in that he had printed only half of my story, up to my escape from the pulpit. The column ended with the words: "Read the rest of this remarkable true story tomorrow and see what an intelligent foreigner thinks of our schools and police and of his treatment by the latter."

I knew that, now I was free, he could doctor up the story that I had given him so that it would not read flatly and yet would not make the police angry, and that, as long as I remained news, the police would not be likely to molest me in case he printed the true story. I told the men who were sitting round the table of my escape from the school and how I had found a sanctuary for the night, altering the story of Captain Hooker's attempt to arrest me so that I did not need to mention Elsa.

After breakfasting off liver and bacon and chips, during which time I suddenly realized the difference between my surroundings and those of an hour or two earlier, I walked round to Jack's garage with him and, after saying *au revoir*, I set out to saunter round the town, thinking how good it was to be free and able to go exactly where I

liked with no fear of interference. I strolled along the main streets, crossing the roads under the very noses of traffic policemen, and, as a little joke, I bought a pocketful of lollipops and amused myself by handing them out to every plain-clothes man that I met.

I felt that I was on top of the world and smiled at passers-by, who looked kindly back at me, thinking no doubt that I was perhaps more than a little mad.

Since my clothes felt shabby, I went to a ready-made tailor's shop near Dante Square and bought myself a complete new outfit of everything, changing in the shop. I also had a Turkish bath and a shave. Then I set out again and sang and whistled as I walked, and forgot the secret police, the blue-threads, Colonel Roscoe, and Father Podmore in my interest in the things about me—the strained face of a man jumping off a moving bus, the face of a child eating a toffee apple, and the movements of women's faces as they gossiped in the middle of the pavement.

I visited picture galleries and then went and looked at second-hand motor-cars, looking for something on which I could spend my money, forgetting all about the people to whom the money I was thinking of spending would be a fortune.

Suddenly I saw a little wizened man make the sign with his hand. "Pst," he whispered, "there'll be a meeting in Manuel's tonight. Eight thirty sharp. The word went round to tell you, someone said we'd know you by the ice-axe, as they were sure you wouldn't have lost that,

even if you had changed your clothes. I've had a bit of a job finding you."

Noticing a white-coated attendant pushing back the doors of a pub, I said: "How about a bitter, now you have found me?" and we went in. I played darts with the little man and he beat me nearly every time; in fact, I believe that he would have won all the games if I had not had a fluky turn in which I got three trebles and finished that game. This seemed to me a good omen and I hoped my luck would be in now.

As we left the pub, I noticed a newspaper boy run past, carrying a placard bearing the words: "Famous Explorer Dead," but I thought nothing of it until we reached a news-stand and there on a placard was: "Colonel Roscoe Murdered."

I went into the shop and bought a paper, wondering who had killed him and why they had done it. Standing on the pavement again, I looked through the paper to see what there was about it, but there seemed to be nothing in the news-columns. At last I found it in the Stop Press: "Colonel Roscoe, explorer, mountaineer, author, and adviser on colonial affairs to several governments, died this morning at 11.45. His death is stated to have been caused by a blood clot, believed to have been caused in the first place by a blow which he is alleged to have received from Michael, well known as the man who crossed the Pale Peak, yesterday morning at Bricken College. A warrant for the arrest of the man Michael on a charge of first-

degree murder has been issued and it is confidently expected that he will be apprehended shortly."

"God," I thought, "that's torn the whole bloody thing to bits again." Wearily it occurred to me that I was again on the run, and after refusing the offer of shelter which the little man immediately made and asking him to give my regards to the others, I jumped on a bus going in a westerly direction. This time I sat just at the top of the stairs in such a position that I could see who was climbing them before they could get a decent look at me. I took a ticket for the whole journey and held up my paper before my face, pretending to read it, but really thinking that I was after all lucky, as I was wearing my new clothes, and the police, who could not possibly know about them, would continue looking for me, and describing me, in the suit that I had got from Father Podmore. I hoped that the tailor had been dumb enough not to recognize me and that he would not think it worth communicating with the police about a strange customer, and I hoped that even if he did recognize me from the description, he would be grateful that I had paid cash and would not feel inclined to report me.

I hoped that I might get clear away to the high country, and then I would lie low, somewhere, until the hunters had grown tired of looking for me and there was only a skeleton force still occupied in the search. Then, it occurred to me, I would need to get back to town to collect the equipment necessary for my journey back over the

Pale Peak, for I now knew, as clearly as I would ever know anything, that there was no place for me in this country.

Several times I saw the plain-clothes men dawdling at the street corners and once I thought that one of them was going to get on my bus, but he contented himself with a detailed scrutiny of the lower windows and did not bother about the top. I wondered whether they would have surrounded the stations by this time, for I noticed, on looking at a map of the bus route, that the bus I was on stopped beside a station and I thought that a train would provide the easiest method of travel to the uplands. So when we arrived at the terminus I went into a news-agent's and bought a cheap map of the countryside, which I took with me to a public lavatory, where I was able to study it in comparative seclusion, after paying a penny for admittance.

I expected that the police would probably expect me to make for the foot-hills at the base of the Peak and that they would mass their biggest forces there. So I decided that it would probably be better if I made for a little market town a good many miles north of the Peak, but still on the plateau. I went towards the station, keeping a careful look-out for detectives, but though I did see one or two, they paid no attention to me or my movements.

At the entrance to the station itself there was one plain-clothes man, playing with a whipping top and a leather bootlace and completely oblivious of anything that was going on around him. I went straight up to the booking-

office and asked for a first-class return to Ailsdon, thinking that I was being very cunning indeed, as the secret service would certainly not expect me to take either a first-class or a return ticket if they decided that they would try to check up on railway travellers.

The clerk told me that I would have to wait twenty minutes before the train came in, so I bought some newspapers and retired to the lavatory in the station, where I discovered that the search for me was still in progress and that I was expected to make for the Peak, where my apprehension would be a simple matter. The description of me that was given to help the public to identify me was very accurate, but dealt with my old clothes, which by now, if the man in the tailor's shop had been honest, should be in the hands of some beggar. It seemed to me that except for my face the only recognizable thing about me was Marlin's ice-axe, and that could not be helped, as I was determined not to give it up, whatever happened.

When the train came in, I found an empty first-class carriage and made myself comfortable in a corner of it, hiding the ice-axe in my overcoat and looking round the edge of my paper to see if I could spot any blue-threads among the passers-by, for I knew that they could not yet have discovered that I had found out the secret sign used by Colonel Roscoe's department.

I had the carriage to myself and thought that I had a fair chance of escape if the police were concentrating on the Peak alone and not bothering about the unscalable

parts of the range. I could remain there until they decided that I had escaped some other way and slackened their cordon.

I lit my pipe and leaned back, filling the compartment with blue smoke. In spite of the fact that it was climbing all the time in long snaky curves, the train was a fast one and stopped only once or twice. It was after the last stop before Ailsdon that a ticket-inspector came round to punch my ticket. "Afternoon, sir," he said. "We're going to have a bit of excitement soon, and I'm afraid that will delay the train a little. Police orders have been telegraphed along the line. They were handed to the driver when we slowed down a few minutes ago, and we have to stop at Ashley Halt till they've made a search of the train. They say that we may have the man who did that murder, of Colonel Roscoe, you know, on board, though I must say I haven't seen him and I'm not a man that misses much that's going on around him. Thank you very much indeed, sir."

After he had left the compartment, I thought this news over and found it very disturbing. I wondered what I could do. I put on my overcoat, buttoned all my clothes, and pushed the ice-axe firmly through my belt so that it would not get in the way.

It was a very steep incline to Ashley Halt and the rails were curved so that I could often see the engine. I leaned out of the window and discovered that about half a mile ahead the little station lay and that ranks of police were

drawn up on both sides of the line all holding their revolvers at the ready.

There was to be no escape by jumping from the train and making a break for it. Then it occurred to me that I was in the last carriage of the train and that there was an observation platform at the back. I sprinted along the corridor towards it. There was no one there and I jumped up on the railing at the back and felt with clumsy, sweating fingers for some projection on the roof. I found the roller of an awning, felt for the brackets that held it in place, and then, with one good hand-grip, swung madly and somehow managed to scramble on to the roof just as the carriage drew level with the first of the detectives. There was no time to do anything except lie still and hope that I had left no trail to show which way I had gone and that they would not think of searching the roof.

There was a lot of shouting when they found my deserted compartment, and I realized that, like a fool, I had neglected to tidy up by shoving the papers under one of the seats. Then most of the police were dismissed and I heard others shouting as they started to beat the countryside. Once a triumphant cry and the smack of a revolver-shot made me wonder what unfortunate man had been sufficiently like me to deserve a bullet.

The train started again, slowly at first, so that I had no difficulty in hanging on, but then apparently the driver decided that he needed to make up for lost time and, in spite of the incline, he started to speed up. I managed to

grab hold of a ventilator, but that only made things worse, for there was no foot-hold and my legs threshed about in the wind. Suddenly we swung round a curve and my fingers were torn from the ventilator. I felt myself sliding along the roof. Panic-stricken, I tried to grab something—anything would do—but the next moment I was floating quickly through space.

It was really delightfully easy, I thought, and I wondered why men did not go in for flying like this to a greater extent. It deserved to be a popular pastime. I felt as though I were being carried on the wind, and my hands flapped lazily at my sides. I was sure I was setting a world's record for a solo long-distance flight and I felt extremely pleased with myself.

Then with a loud crash and the breaking of branches I landed in a bush. I was winded and did not know how many bones I had broken. Going by the force of my fall and the noise I had made, I guessed I was just a bundle of broken bones held together with skin, and when I gingerly tried to sit up, I was much surprised to find that I still could.

Somehow or other, there did not seem to be anything very much the matter with me. I was bruised, certainly, but I could still move all my limbs, I could stoop, and I could turn and shake my head. "Christ," I thought, "I am lucky! Here I am, absolutely unhurt, and I'm a step ahead of the police; they'll never dream that I could have broken through their cordon." I looked around me for

the first time since before Ashley Halt and saw that I was in wooded country; the tall shapes of firs and larches and the squatter shapes of oaks and elms were all around me.

"Well, Michael, my boy," I said, "you're bloody lucky so far, but you mustn't strain it. Get into these woods and put as big a distance as you can between yourself and the railway track."

I dived into the undergrowth and struggled through briars and brambles till I found a bridle-path. I was damned hungry and thought I must find some place to buy food where my ill fame had not preceded me. I did not hurry through the wood, for I was afraid that I might startle a pheasant or some other game-bird which would deliver me into the hands of a gamekeeper, who might in turn hand me over to the police as a poacher, and then the fat would be in the fire all right. I strolled slowly, trying to forget my hunger by smoking and by looking for different kinds of plants. I found several ferns that I knew by sight and a great many bee-orchis and jacks-in-the-pulpit, but I did not find any wild strawberries or raspberries.

Longingly I looked at several fungi and tried to remember all that I had known about them. Were these the edible sort? I thought that probably they were and that I could therefore eat them with impunity, but then it occurred to me that I was trying to persuade myself that they were a harmless species and I did not dare to try them. I attempted to chew grass, but it was not in the

least satisfying and only seemed to make my appetite keener. I had very little idea in what direction I was heading, but guessed from the moss on the trees that I was going towards the north-west.

Then I saw a thin wisp of smoke curling through the trees somewhere near the edge of the wood, where the trees were thinner, and I wandered towards it.

It seemed to be coming out of the ground and I wondered vaguely if the people in this part of the country lived in subterranean burrows. I did not much care where they lived so long as they had some sort of food they were willing to part with. The smoke was rising from the other side of a clump of gorse bushes only a few yards ahead of me now, and I walked very cautiously to the side of the bushes and peered round them, afraid that I might see a camp of policemen or something of that sort.

I very nearly fell headlong down the side of a cliff. I lay down on my stomach, wormed my way close to the edge, and looked over. I was looking down into a disused quarry. An elderly tramp was lying back beside the little fire which was sending up the thin line of smoke which had attracted me. He was rolling a cigarette while he puffed at a dirty old clay pipe.

I moved back, intending to go round to the gap in the front of the quarry and enter it that way, but I carelessly knocked a pebble over the edge with my elbow as I straightened up, and it went bounding down the steep

side and just missed the recumbent tramp. He started and sat up, shouting: "Oy, who's there throwing bloody rocks about? Come down out of there and let me see you."

I got to my feet, for I had flung myself flat again, and showed him that I was harmless; then I climbed down a less steep side of the quarry. He looked me up and down and then spoke: "What do you think you're a-doing here with your mountaineering axe and your fancy tweeds? You're a bloody long way from the hills. What the hell do you think you're up to? Practising for the winter sports, huh?"

I shook my head and, thinking it would be useless to try to convince him that I was merely a visitor to the district, I told him quite frankly that I was on the run and gave him a certain amount of my story.

"Ho," he said, "a bloody foreigner, are you? Well, I must say you don't look it and you don't talk it, which is one up for you. Why should you expect me to give you a bite of food? Don't know? Ho, well, we'll see what we can do with the limited resources at our disposal."

He produced some stale-looking bacon and some heels of bread from his pockets and fried them in an old round tin lid. He boiled some water in another tin and put some tea into it. When he had finished these operations, he said: "Ho, here we are. I'm afraid that the lobster Newburg is just a trifle off today and that the grocer forgot to send in the port, but I suppose you will be quite

content with a makeshift meal, my sir?"

I nodded, smiling, and he laughed shortly. "What are you waiting for? Not the grace? For there won't be none, not if you wait all the bloody night." I did not care if the bacon was slightly rancid and the bread slightly harder than the heels of my shoes. I was so hungry that I could have eaten leather boiled and wood sawdust made up like mincemeat.

When we had finished eating, I offered him a fill of tobacco and we lay back on the flat stones and looked at the wisps of smoke from our pipes as they curled and ringed in the still air. I was still free, I told myself, and the police would surely not expect me, a stranger in the country, to be able to find my way about the country or a place to hide. I thought that if only I could remain out of sight for a few days, the police would either believe that I had attempted to climb the Peak without the proper equipment or that I had somehow managed to escape from the country by sea.

I wondered vaguely why I had not tried the sea as a means of escape and guessed it was probably because I knew nothing much about boats, and, anyhow, I had met no sailors and would probably have had a great deal of trouble in trying to stow away satisfactorily. Then there was only one port and I did not know the routine of a harbour and had no one to show me the ropes. Perhaps, I thought, I should have asked Jack Ford to put me in touch with some sailors, by means of the grapevine sys-

tem that they apparently used, but now it was too late. These bloody blank-faced police would be clustered like flies round every entrance to the port and they would probably have got some description of my clothing from the chatty ticket-inspector, so that I could no longer rely on my new suit as a good disguise.

When I thought of my clothes, I looked down at them and realized that, although they might be new, with the shop creases not yet entirely vanished from the trousers, they were full of jagged little tears and there were dark patches on my arms and legs where they had been scraped along the roof of the train.

I wondered how I could manage to collect the necessary equipment for my journey back across the Pale Peak, for it was obvious that I could not climb in these brown shoes, which were flimsy compared with my boots. The golfing nails would slide where the tricouni studs would enable me to climb on the icy slopes without the trouble of cutting a long flight of steps with Marlin's axe. My clothes might be of a good thick homespun, but the wind would cut through them like a knife and they would afford little or no protection as I neared the summit.

Suddenly it occurred to me that since there was a warrant out for my arrest on a charge of first-degree murder, I might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb and add burglary to my other accomplishments. My old boots and my tattered leather clothing were still at Father Podmore's vicarage and they were all that I needed; there

was no necessity for me to return to Gorot if I could find them.

I wondered what time it was and asked the tramp, who replied: "What the bloody hell has the time got to do with you? When you're on the run, one day is just as good as another as long as you're still free. Anyhow, I'd say it was about time we dossed down. I do hope you will stay for the night, sir. What time would you like your shaving-water and tea in the morning?"

I was irritated by his habit of dropping into these mock-genteel phrases and said: "For God's sake, stop it. Whereabouts do we sleep?" He smiled at me and led the way towards the other side of the quarry, leaving the fire still sending its straight plumes of smoke towards the sky. We stumbled among rocks until we came to a gap into which we edged our way. At the far end of the narrow crack there was a broader place where the rocks overhung so as to make a sort of shallow cave.

I took off my jacket and rolled it up before I put it under my head, remembering that I still had a good deal of money and thinking that, however honest the tramp was, he would presumably not be proof against the temptation of so much money, which would seem to be just asking to be taken. He lay down on the other side of the cave and, like an animal, soon fell asleep; I heard him grunting and snoring as I looked out of the narrow crack and saw the stars in the clear sky.

I lay awake for a long time, wondering if the police

would succeed in tracking me down and what would happen when they did find me. It was going to be absolute hell climbing back over the Peak again so soon, but it really did seem to be the only chance I had. Perhaps, I thought, it would be a good idea to give myself up and let them bring me to trial, hoping that the papers, led by the *Independent*, would raise enough stink to procure a pardon for me.

Then it appeared to me that I would be branded as a Red by the prosecutor on account of my associates and my two speeches, and that would result in both the big newspaper barons, Hedgedoom and Vaux, issuing orders to their editors about the treatment which I was to receive. Consequently the mass of the middle classes would be violently prejudiced against me, as these were the papers which they took as their Bible.

It would be so easy, though, just to give myself up and let the trial go as it liked and my sentence follow according to what the judge thought I deserved, but I could not do it, for I was determined to rediscover myself before I died; I would loathe to go out with only a Christian name as a handle. Moreover, I could not be sure even that my case would ever reach the courts, for one of the slab-faced babies might shoot me down as I advanced to surrender, just for the fun of hearing the big bang that his revolver would make when fired and seeing me blown backwards by the detonation.

I fell asleep in the early hours of the morning and woke

to find myself stiff and cold. There was a damp ground-mist in the quarry which seemed to soak right through my skin. I rose and stretched myself and looked across at the tramp, who was still snoring gustily, and I remembered, curiously without regret, the previous morning when I had bent over Elsa to kiss her. I left two notes under a stone by the tramp's head in such a position that he could not miss them when he woke, and left the cave.

I went out of the mouth of the quarry and walked briskly along the rutted track, trying to warm myself. I heard a lark singing somewhere overhead and thought it was damned lucky to be able to fly above this damp, penetrating mist. Suddenly, however, it began to lift and a few minutes later the sun shone. I knew that it was going to be a hot day as I struck towards what I guessed, from the morning sun, to be the west.

Until I could find exactly where I was, my map would not be of much use to me, but I did not dare to take the road which lay about a hundred yards away on my left. Instead, I walked along beside hedges and in the bottoms of dry ditches, so that I was travelling parallel with the road. The fresh air seemed to have whetted my appetite and I was nearly as hungry as I had been when I ran across the tramp.

At last I saw a small cluster of houses and guessed that there would be some sort of shop there. I approached the village warily, keeping a sharp look-out in case there was a cordon of secret police, but there did not seem to be

any of them about. I found from a road-sign that the name of the village was Clubham Hatch, and sitting under the hedge, out of sight of any chance traveller on the road, I looked it up on the map and discovered that I was about five miles to the north-east of Ailsdon and about twelve miles from the range, which I could not see because of a steep wooded hill on the other side of the village. I wondered whether the fact that none of the blue-coated police were visible meant that they had arranged a trap for me, but I was so hungry that I did not much care, so long as I managed to get something to eat. I stepped out into the middle of the road and, swinging Marlin's ice-axe, entered the village whistling.

It appeared that there was only one shop, which combined the duties of post-office with those of draper, grocer, confectioner, tobacconist, drysalter, and God alone knows what else. I walked boldly in and started to buy the things I wanted from the old woman behind the counter. I purchased bars of chocolate, dried fruits, a needle and thread to repair the rips in my suit, and anything else that I thought I might need.

As she was giving me my change, I noticed her stiffen and saw that her eyes were fixed on Marlin's ice-axe. She dropped the coins slowly into the palm of my hand, and gasped: "You're—you're—?"

Seeing that she must have recognized me, I cursed myself for a fool for carrying the ice-axe so visibly and whirled out of the shop, snapping: "Yes, I am."

As I went, I heard her talking hurriedly into the phone and I ran forward towards the trees that covered the steep hill. I thought that I had probably got about half an hour's start, as the search for me would hardly be well organized within that time, guessing that the nearest police depot was at Ailsdon.

But less than ten minutes later, when I was hurrying up the hill, I heard the roar of a heavy-engined aeroplane, and through the trees I saw a dark blue monoplane. I thought I was safe so long as I remained in the wood, for it would be sheer waste of cartridges if they tried to machine-gun the wood. But suddenly I was thrown from my feet by a blast of air and saw, a long way ahead of me, part of the wood swaying and crashing. Trees were crumpled and blown aside as if they had been children's toys made of match-sticks and dyed loofah. I realized that the police were trying to bomb me out and only stopped myself from running wildly all over the place by saying firmly to myself that I must find shelter somewhere, there must be a hollow for me somewhere.

The only shelter I could see seemed to be the deep bed of a narrow stream. I crawled down the high bank towards the trickle of water and started to try to hack a hole in the clay sides with Marlin's ice-axe. I was nearly deafened by the waves of air that rocked all round me and I heard the trees falling and saw the flames the bombs had started. It seemed to take me hours to hack a hole large enough to hold me, but I suppose that really it was

only a matter of minutes, for the clay was cracked and came away in great damp chunks with every blow. I crawled into my refuge and tried to build up a bulwark in front of my face with some of the clay I had removed.

At last it seemed that I was shut in like a cocoon and I drew myself into as little space as I could and took a deep breath of the earthy-smelling air.

I was safe, I supposed, so long as no bomb landed either directly on top of me or directly in front of me in the bed of the stream. The earth shook as if I were in the middle of an earthquake, and there was a tremendous crash as a tree fell on top of my makeshift dugout. "Christ," I thought, "they must believe that I am very important when they set out to kill me at this expense." It must have cost a small fortune, for I am sure that the bombing continued for at least a quarter of an hour, making due allowances for my exaggerated sense of time, and that there must have been an expert bomber at work, for the bombs seemed to burst in every part of the wood; they started at one end and finished that part before they moved at all, so that I should have had very little chance of survival if I had not been under cover, for the lateral explosion would probably have killed me.

It was the utter ruthlessness of it all that really appalled me. I knew that the efficiency experts behind this would not rest content with having bombed the wood, but were likely to send a well-armed search-party through the wreckage to look for my remains, now that the plane had

finished its work of destruction.

I lay on in my dugout looking through a hole in the bulwark at the tangle of branches that seemed to block my exit completely. I was right about the search-party, for I soon heard a siren blowing and, shortly afterwards, the shouting of the police as they beat their way through the wood.

Directly above my head I heard a voice, military and sharp, saying in a would-be-jocular tone: "I expect he was blown to pieces and all we'll find is strawberry jam. Yet they were only light bombs and shouldn't have done that unless, of course, Ramsden scored a direct hit. Anyhow, he can't still be alive." With considerable difficulty I resisted the temptation to reply, from my voluntary grave: "Oh, no, you bastards. He couldn't still be alive, could he?" but I amused myself by imagining the faces of the secret police if I had suddenly popped up like a jack-in-the-box beneath their very feet. I lay still and ate some of my dried fruit and chocolate.

I lay like this for at least a couple of hours before I dared to push away the muddy wall in front of me and clamber stiffly through the fallen smashed tree that filled the bed of the stream with foliage.

I looked around me and saw that something had gone wrong with the world. It had been turned upside down and there was a horrible acrid smell where before, without noticing it, I had inhaled the scent of crushed pine-needles and trodden bracken. Hardly a tree was left

standing and those few that remained upright no longer looked like trees but seemed to be cut out of barkless wood and left jagged by some mad god in a hurry. The great broken spikes stood up where a tree had been broken off, and, what seemed to be so peculiarly horrible, the ground was scattered with dead birds, wrens, thrushes, yellowhammers, chaffinches, and the rest. They did not seem to have been killed by flying splinters as a rule, but merely by the concussion, for the only blood that I could see dripped or oozed from their beaks.

I tried to wipe the mud off my clothes and also made some attempt to mend the rips with the needle and wool that I had bought at the shop at Clubham Hatch. Then I set out again, for I thought now that I had a much better chance than before, since the police believed that I was dead and would slacken their search for me at once. I scouted about among the fallen trees before I left the wood, just in case they had left a skeleton guard to make sure that I was dead, but they must have been sure that their bombing could have left no living creature in the woods, for I saw no one.

Sitting in a field by the edge of a rush-fringed stream, I tried to shave with the razor that I had bought two days previously. My hand shook and I gashed my face in several places and left my upper lip unshaved, hoping that the stubby hairs would grow quickly enough to alter my appearance to some small extent.



When I reached the road, I decided that bold tactics were the best and I flagged a heavy lorry that was coming along the road towards me. The driver slowed down and I climbed into the cabin beside him, moving his jacket from the seat and glancing at the lapels to see if there were any blue threads on it, before I sat down.

“Christ, mate,” he said, “you don’t half seem to have been in the bloody wars. What have you been getting up to?”

I was fairly fed up and was tired enough to be reckless, and so I told him exactly who I was and what had been happening to me and said that he could hand me over to the police if he wanted to, as there was probably some small reward out for me and it would function even though I was supposed to be dead.

When I had finished he looked up from the road and glanced at me. "God, man," he said, "you're all right with me. I'm for you all right as far as I can go. I've been hearing that you'd been killed by accident. The story was that you wandered into a part of the country where bombing manœuvres were in progress and stopped one. It's in all the papers now and there are statements saying how sorry they are that this accident occurred; they wouldn't have killed you for worlds. They've got the wind up, for the *Independent* this morning had an article by a lawyer saying that the first-degree murder charge could not stand against you, that the most they could get you for was manslaughter. Christ, man, I wonder what the little display of bombing cost?"

He pulled a folded paper from his pocket and handed it to me. It was a special and finished with the words: "While it is inconceivable that there could have been any life left at the centre of the bombing, the government would like to find Mr. Michael's ice-axe for the national collection of relics of the great. A small reward is offered to the finder, who is asked to communicate with Ailsdon Police Dept."

This bit about my ice-axe seemed to be rather disturbing. It might mean that the government would not be satisfied that I was dead until they had it safe in their possession. I mentioned this to my companion and he laughed. "You don't know the people in Clubham Hatch. If the reward offered is more than the price of a new ice-axe, there will be about a dozen or so axes given to the police by the day after tomorrow. Marlin's name carved on them, and all."

I hoped that he was right, but all the same I was worried at the thought that the executive brains at the head of the secret police in this district would become suspicious when they saw more than one axe and would begin to doubt whether any of them was mine.

I saw ahead of us a small town, which the driver told me was Ailsdon. When I asked him if he was going to stop there, he told me that he was delivering bales of stuff to the police barracks. "I don't expect that you much want to go there with me. Well, that'll be O.K. I'll drop you off at the eating-house where we always stop. The chap who keeps it is a good man and he'll see you through all right. Here, smear your face with the grease off this rag and put on my cap and you'll pass muster as my mate." He handed me an oily bit of waste and I rubbed the thick blue-yellow mess over my cheeks, leaning over behind him so that I could see myself in the driving-mirror and make certain that I made an artistic job of my disguise.

We rattled along the cobbled streets and drew up at a

hut with a large canvas sign hung along the front of it, giving the prices of pies, teas, and other things. We went in and the driver walked over to the man behind the counter.

"Hullo, Nobby," he said. "Look after this chap, will you? He'll tell you all about himself. He's on the run."

Nobby reached out a hand and lifted the flap of the counter, gesturing to me with his thumb to get into the back room. "I'll be back, mate, when I've handed these things over to the bastards," the driver finished as he went out, and I went into the little room and sat on a bench in front of a little square cast-iron stove.

Nobby looked in and said: "You can start to tell me your story now. When I shove my thumb down, just you put the brake on till I see who it is, for you never know in this bloody town that the cops won't dodge in for a bar of chocolate or a pennyworth of sweets."

I seemed to spend a good deal of time in telling people who I was and how I had got into trouble, but there seemed to be no other way, since I had not had my story printed to distribute like circulars, and I started once more, stopping at Nobby's gesture once or twice, but continuing whenever he told me to go on. I knew by this time exactly what to say, so the tale did not take very long and was much less encumbered with useless detail than it had been at the first telling.

When I had finished, Nobby came and leaned against the door-post, polishing a cup mechanically with a yellow

duster, and said: "Well, you certainly seem to have seen a good bit of our country for a stranger and to have done it in double-quick time. I suppose you're right and that your only way out is to go back where you came from, the other side of the Pale Peak. I can't say that I'd like the job you've taken on, but then, I can't suggest a better alternative.

"You're right, you know, you can't trust what the papers say about your death or the government's regrets that it should have occurred. I wouldn't mind betting that if you read any of these rags tomorrow morning you'll find out that you were a hero of the bloody first water, who never did anything wrong, was perhaps a trifle reckless, with the hotheadedness of youth, but still was a fitting example for every schoolboy of perfect courage and the spirit of adventure. They'll dig up an explorer who went up the Congo fifty years before you were born and he'll publicly recant for saying that modern youth is decadent and unwilling to take a risk. They'll blab about the irony of things that you, the perfect hero, should come safely through a blizzard to the Peak, to be killed by a tenpenny bomb during manœuvres. You see, I know all the bloody claptrap.

"Yet you know that if the day after tomorrow you went out and said: 'I'm not dead,' you would cease being the hero and become the dangerous foreign agitator again. They wouldn't let up till they'd got you shut up safe in a concentration camp. They can put you there without a

name and without a trial. Then 'an unknown man who was detained by the police a day or two ago for investigation has been shot while trying to escape.' Finish! Napool!" and he spread his hands expressively, holding the cup upside down with the cloth hanging out of it, before he went on: "But it hasn't come to that yet. You're still free and you can still try and get back on the Peak before they catch up with you. I'll do what I can to help you."

He went out into the hut and poured a cup of tea for someone from the urn that stood on the counter. Then he popped his head back and said: "I expect you could do with a meal? I'll fix it up."

When he came back with his arms full of plates, I pulled out a bundle of notes, remarking wryly: "You'd better let me pay you for this. It's bloody funny, I've got plenty of cash and it's no use to me at all. And, anyhow, I'd rather that you and your friends had it than have it taken by these pot-bellied, slab-faced bastards to buy meringues and liquorice bootlaces."

He looked at me and replied: "I'll take some of it, then, and will stand the boys a feed—at least, those of them who'd be with you—and I'll tell them on the quiet who's standing it."

"Thanks, Nobby," I said, and held out the bundle of notes for him to count off as many as would serve his purpose.

The driver who had given me my lift into the town

came back and said: "Well, Mike, how goes it? Nobby fixed you up yet?"

"Not yet, Alf," Nobby replied, "but I'm thinking that Bert should be in soon. You know he goes right down the length of the range driving a government lorry, driving all night, poor beggar. I think he'll be glad of a chance to do the police in the eye." He turned to me and went on: "The wall-eyed bastards shot his old man about three weeks back. The old man was carrying a drop and he told one of them to get the hell out of his road and the runt shot him in the stomach. Took nearly a week before he died, with his guts tied up in knots and bleeding inside. Bert would be only too glad of the chance to get back at them, and I'm sure he'll give you a hand."

Alf sat down with me and ate a pie and mashed, and drank a cup of tea. When he rose to go, he wished me good luck. Nobby said: "Alf, you'd better thank your pal while you get the chance for the feed you'll get the next time you're in." Alf asked him what he was talking about, and to my embarrassment he insisted on explaining. I tried to give Alf some cigarettes as a mark of my gratitude, but I had great difficulty in making him accept them; he said that the feed I was giving the boys was quite enough, and I had to explain exactly how well off I was and how little use my money was to me before he would take them.

I sat on alone in the little room while I listened to Nobby chatting with his customers through the half-open

door. I wondered whether I really would manage to reach the Peak this time and whether, once I got to the foot, there would be any place where I could hide for a night or two in comfort before attempting the assault once again. I was really rather frightened by the thought of the numbing cold that ate into my body like acid and the wind-slab that looked firm and was as treacherous as thin ice on a pond, but I realized that I had to go through with it, as I should not be safe from the police until I was either out of the country or dead.

At about nine thirty Nobby opened the door and brought in a little hard-faced man in dungarees. "This is Bert," he announced. "I've been telling him about you and he says he'll be only too glad to try and get you through to the foot of the Peak. He's carrying arms and munitions for the police in the isolated stations, so you might get through, though he tells me he's been stopped by the tecs once or twice today. I'm afraid that they're still on the look-out for you. You're such a bloody slippery customer, they can't convince themselves that you're really dead till they've got you shut up in a coffin. You know that the Peak only lies about fifty or sixty miles down the range, as the crow flies, but it's more than double the distance by road. You should get there by about five in the morning, which is slow going, but the roads are so bloody bad that a car can't make a decent average at all."

Bert sat down on the bench opposite me and examined

me. "Nobby," he said, "you got an old set of overalls? They'll hide the tweed, which would give him away at once." Nobby rummaged in a big wooden box and produced a set of pale blue dungarees and I squeezed my way into them and put on the cap that Alf had given me.

"Ah, that's a bit better," Bert said. "Let's see now. Put the cap a little more on the side of your head and let a lock of your hair dangle down in front. That's it. You'll do."

I sat down again and, as we drank more tea out of the big thick white cups, we discussed the secret police and their peculiarities. Bert, naturally, was very bitter about them and the way in which they let loose their revolvers on the slightest provocation. "But, by God, if any of the bastards try to stop us tonight, I'll get them," he said. "I've been issued a gat to protect the contents of my lorry, as there's supposed to be a gang of bandits somewhere in the foot-hills and they might attack me for the sake of the machine-guns I'm carrying. So there's nothing to prevent me thinking that a cop is a bandit and letting him have it right in the guts, where they got my old man."

I asked him if he knew about the blue-threads and he replied that the word about them had been passed along so that all his pals knew about it before I had gone to bed that night. When I told him about Colonel Roscoe and his truth-drug, he laughed till the tears ran down his wind-beaten cheeks.

"My God," he said, "of all the gall! To make the bas-

tard take his own medicine! It was damned useful, though, that information you got. You see, these bloody blue-threads were in our councils and naturally knew about our plans in advance. We wondered who was splitting, but could never find out, and yet valuable men were constantly disappearing and we all knew what had happened to them. Concentration camps, you know, for discontented workers.

"I met a chap once who'd managed to escape from one of these camps. Poor beggar, they shot him in the back two hours after I'd been speaking to him. 'Killed resisting arrest.' Well, anyhow, he told me a bit about the way they work these camps, as they call them, though they're really just prisons. A warder to each man, he said, and electric lights burning all night and alarm bells ringing at odd intervals so that the prisoners never got to sleep properly.

"They used to draw lots among the prisoners every week, and the man who was chosen was either shot or tortured in front of the rest to show them what would happen to them if they dared to disobey an order or show any sign of revolt. The man who was chosen was lucky if he was shot, for during the torture they used to have a doctor at hand to see that he was kept conscious with injections and so forth.

"The worst of it was that they drew the lots at the start of the week so that you knew that something was coming to you at the end, though you didn't know if it was death

or torture, for you didn't hear that till the night before. Many of them, my pal told me, had committed suicide but the bastards thought of a way to stop that, by passing the punishment on to someone else, so that suicide was thought a pretty dirty trick, as it left your mates in the lurch.

"This chap who'd escaped was what was known as a good prisoner—that is, he kept a civil tongue in his head and was very careful when his warder was watching him. Anyhow, they'd put him on to clean out the cesspool from the governor's house. No tools allowed, of course—nothing but your bare hands. Well, he found a gold chain at the bottom and drew his warder's attention to it. The stupid bastard stooped to pick it up and he hit him as hard as he could behind the ear with a brick that he'd worked loose. Told me how pleasant the sound of the swine's skull crunching under the blow was—said he'd been waiting eighteen months to hear that very sound. Well, the dead warder fell on his face in the muck and this chap stripped off his clothes and changed with him and then, in a hoarse voice, called out to the other warder to come and see his poor bleeding prisoner, who'd passed clean out from the stink. He stood with his rifle at the ready and shot the other as he appeared on the edge and he, too, fell down in the muck.

"Then he scrambled out before the rush of warders, who on looking down into the pit saw a warder and a prisoner lying there and thought he'd shot the prisoner

for assaulting the warder. His face, you must remember, was covered with muck. Anyhow, in the general run-around he got clean away. It was just sheer luck and it didn't do him any good except that he got a quick death instead of a lingering one.

"It's a bloody life in this country, where they can get away with things like torturing their political prisoners and shooting old people in the street, just because they tell you to get out of their way and you like the sound of your gun. My God, I'd like to get a smack at them, and I will, too, before long, even if they get me after.

"Now that we've found out about the spies who were in our midst, we should be able to push on a bit faster. We'd always wondered who was at the head of the secret service till you were lucky and managed to diddle Colonel Roscoe. Now he's dead, they'll have a bit of a job replacing him and we'll get a start made before they've got everything reorganized. You must come back again when we've put things right."

He rose to his feet and pulled on his cap and we went out, saying good-bye to Nobby, who gave me several bars of chocolate. Bert swung the crank and his engine spluttered noisily as I climbed into the cab.

I looked at the alarm clock which hung from the dashboard on a piece of string and was surprised to see that it was twenty to eleven and that we had been talking for over an hour. The heavy lorry bumped and rattled over the cobbles of the quiet little town, which looked so peace-

ful and pleasant except for the vast concrete box, behind high walls with revolving spikes, which hung brooding over it. "Police barracks," Bert remarked, and he spat expressively in its direction.

We climbed for a good while and then started on a stretch of flat moor where all that we saw was an occasional hare that halted in the dim gleam of the headlights or a grouse that whirled across the road in a scurry of large wings. Everything was quiet and delightful and I might have forgotten where we were and the thin chance of escape I had, if it had not been for the cocked revolver that Bert laid on his knees and fondled in a pleasant manner whenever he could spare a hand from the wheel.

All night we drove over this quiet country and I dozed until early in the morning, when I could see the Peak rising like a sword a few miles ahead of us and the glassy-walled range stretching as far as the eye could see on either side.

Suddenly, glancing at Bert, I noticed his mouth tighten. "Here they are, the bloody bastards," he said dispassionately, and put his foot down on the accelerator. The lumbering lorry quickened at the pressure. He had seen a movement ahead of him on the pale ribbon of road and, without warning, the path was blocked by the blue-clad secret police.

A tall man dressed in grey stepped forward, and I recognized him as Captain Hooker. Bert did not slacken our pace at all and we lumbered on. Suddenly there was a

sharp crack and a star appeared on the windscreen in front of me.

"That's what I've been wanting," Bert mumbled between clenched teeth and he lifted his revolver, holding the wheel with one hand, and leaned out of the side window and started firing at the police, who were now only a few yards ahead of us. I saw two of them go down and heard him mutter: "In the belly!" without triumph, and then we were in the middle of them. There was a confusion of shots and I thought that we were going to get through without any further trouble, but suddenly hands clutched the top of the door and Captain Hooker swung into view. "Stop!" he began. "In the name . . ." and I hit him in the face with a short jab of Marlin's ice-axe. He screamed and released his hold.

I felt the old lorry jerk as we went over one of the policemen Bert had shot, and then we were through, the lorry still going like a tank. There was a sharp barking rattle and the top of the cab dissolved into splinters of wood and metal. Then I knew, though I had never heard it before, that we were under machine-gun fire. Bert laughed and said: "Let them fire, we've got a tin body," and until we were out of range the chatter was kept up intermittently and the old lorry was as full of bullets as a hive of bees. They whanged and buzzed briskly as they hit the iron partition behind us and flew off at a tangent.

"I don't think these bandits will attempt to hold up a

government lorry again," Bert remarked happily, and held out a piece of paper for me to look at, saying: "This is my passport and they'll find they can't do a thing to me because of it."

I unfolded the sheet of paper and saw that it was a strictly confidential letter from the Home Secretary himself, warning Driver XLM.1432 (Bert interjected: "That's me") that there might be an attempt to waylay him on that road and that he was not to stop for anyone at all, as it had come to the ears of the government that the criminals were in the habit of masquerading as members of the secret police. Orders had been issued to Police Department 23ybs2 that Driver XLM.1432 was to be provided with a revolver, and he was instructed to make whatever use of this weapon he thought was needed to protect the stores which he was carrying.

"So you see," Bert went on when I had finished reading this document, "I'm sitting pretty and the police and the Home Secretary can fight it out between themselves. Oh God, that was good, though; I got four of them, all in the belly, and you gave their commanding officer a smack that'll spoil his pretty features. Christ, the old man would have enjoyed it."



» CHAPTER TWELVE <<

As we drew near to the village, Bert turned to me and said: "I think you'd better scoot now. I'll get hold of a pal at Lanshape and give him all the dope and he'll swear he was my companion when I thought I was attacked by bandits. It would be a bit too risky to try and pass you off as my mate before all these police. They'd want to see your identity card and everything else, and I wouldn't be surprised to find that they've got your fingerprints from one of the places where you've

been. They check fingerprints as a matter of routine, so you'd be in the soup all right. I must remember to wipe the cab clean in case your prints are on it. I can't stop here, for I must push on and get my mate and tell him his story before they catch up with me. Cheerio, and I hope you'll be back here when things are better. I hope you find the Peak easier."

He stopped the lorry and I climbed out and wished him success in his coming argument with the police. For a moment or two I stood watching the lurching pock-marked lorry lumber on down the hill towards the valley where the village lay. Then it occurred to me that I was standing in full view of anyone who came along the road, and I dived towards the heather.

I found a niche in between two rank bushes of bog-myrtle where the heather was long and thick and I crawled into it. I could see the road through a gap, and after about three quarters of an hour one of the blue-serge-suited police sauntered along, bound for the village. He was chewing a piece of grass and kicking a pebble in front of him, following it idly from side to side of the road. As he wandered slowly on, I thought that it was not remarkable that the ordinary member of the secret police was easy to dodge, and wondered who was the originator of the magnificent idea of making policemen out of mentally deficient children. I thought that the chiefs must curse the fact that they had such babyish material to work with and must pray for the day when

the whole secret police force would consist of blue-threads.

One thing, however, about these infantile detectives was that they were absolutely ruthless and had neither minds nor consciences to worry them about the things they did. However tough and depraved the blue-threads might be, I believed that they were still able to realize what they were doing and consequently to feel worried sometimes about the rights and wrongs of their actions, and so they might eventually rebel against their masters in a way that these terrifying babies never would, for the latter were contented with a world that supplied them with plenty of sweets, toys, and loud bangs.

I heard a clatter coming up the road from the village and peered out. The noise was caused by a string of cars of all sorts and conditions proceeding towards the place where the police had tried to hold us up. In one of them I noticed Dr. Cornell and thought that I had not been a very good advertisement for him. I had not mixed with the right people at all and I had broken nearly all the laws of the country, including, I expected, any that dealt with the matter of aliens and their registration. The policeman who had come down the road kicking a pebble now sat beside Dr. Cornell sucking a stick of barley sugar.

When the cars returned in about half an hour, I noticed Captain Hooker propped up in the back of the doctor's car with his face hidden in white bandages. I wondered what damage I had done and whether he would be laid

up for a long period, as I hoped, for I thought that with him out of the way there would be one less blue-thread able to recognize me if he got even a passing glance at my face. I was glad that I had not let Lorne take my photo; that meant there were still comparatively few people who knew my face, and even a sketch would not enable the navy-blue half-wits to recognize me easily. I suddenly realized that I was very tired, as I had not slept all night, and the night before had not given me much rest owing to the mist and the hard rocky points where I had lain. I needed to be well rested before I attempted to climb the Peak again, so, after making certain that the heather and bog-myrtle would hide me from all but the closest inspection, I pillowed my head on my arms and fell asleep.

From the position of the sun when I woke, I guessed it to be late afternoon. I ate some of my chocolate and finished my dried fruit. I wanted to smoke, but did not dare, since the police might have left guards on the moor to see that there was no one there, even if Bert had managed to get his friend to swear that he had been with Bert in the lorry and that neither of them knew anything about me.

I was worried in case Captain Hooker had recognized me before I hit him, but then I remembered that the last time he had seen me I had had Elsa's lipstick on my cheeks, where there now was engine grease, and that the dungarees and cap would have changed my appearance to a considerable extent.

I felt very stiff and had bad pins and needles in my left leg, and my arms felt heavy and sore. I pushed my head up among the bog-myrtle, but I could see nothing but blank heath to the edge of the hill below which the village lay. I was not entirely sure of the countryside, but I had looked at the map frequently enough to give me some idea of the lie of the land, and I remembered, from my walks in the garden, that there was a thick hazel copse on one side of Father Podmore's garden, which ran up the hillside towards me.

I decided that I would try to get there and edged my way through the heather and bracken. It seemed to take hours to travel a few yards, but I did not dare stand up and risk letting myself be seen. I had to worm my way round the edges of the boggy parts because I did not want to get wet, as I could see no hope of managing to dry my clothes if I did get a soaking, and I knew that the job of trying to climb the Peak in my tired condition would be bad enough without the added hindrance of wet and soggy clothes.

The edge of the copse was separated from the heather and bracken by a cart-track and I had to rush across it and trust to luck that no one saw me. I dropped flat among the bushes and waited for the shot or cry which would mean that I had been spotted, but neither came and I lay safe. Then I crawled to a rivulet that dripped among the bushes, and took off my dungarees and washed my face. I managed once again to shave by touch, but it

was a very painful business since I had neither soap nor a new blade in my razor. I tried to clean my clothes and brushed most of the caked mud off my coat and trousers. The latter I took off and, sitting on my jacket to protect myself from the sharp twigs on the ground, I finished sewing the rips together.

I tried to smoke a cigarette, cupping the end in my hand and dispersing the smoke by blowing it out on the ground, but I found that I obtained neither pleasure nor satisfaction from this surreptitious inhalation and nipped the end out and put it carefully in my pocket so as to leave no obvious signs of my rest in the copse. I found I got far more pleasure out of sucking a square of milk chocolate slowly.

Though I hadn't the slightest idea what I intended to do, I crawled to the edge of the copse and looked down towards the vicar's garden. Then I realized that there was no time like the present and I decided to wait until it was dark and then try my hand at burglary and see if I could manage to find my boots and my old clothes, which would still serve to protect me from the whip of the wind.

I lay flat on my stomach sucking chocolate and wondering what time it was and how long I should have to wait before trying to break into the vicarage. I saw a few people moving in the village and wondered what they would say if they knew that I, the dead climber, was watching them as they went about their odd jobs, following the cows or fetching water from the well.

Father Podmore walked slowly across the garden towards the church, still fiddling with his crucifix. I wanted to throw a broken twig at his feet to see just what effect it would have. He spent a long time in the church and I cursed him senselessly, wondering why he did not go to bed at a decent time and let me start looking for my property. After his return to the house the light in his study burned late and I fretted while I waited for the eyes of the house to become blind.

I knew that, once I had made my raid, the game would be up, for Father Podmore would realize that I was the only person who would want the heavy studded boots and the leather clothing. I saw that I would have to start my climb before the people in the vicarage were up, no matter if my strained muscles might ache and my bellows want mending.

Once I reached the Peak, I thought, I should be safe, for I could not imagine the slobbery infantile detectives starting up the arête or cutting steps in the icy slopes.

At last the light in the study went out, and a moment later a light appeared in one of the windows upstairs. After that had gone out I restrained myself until I thought that Father Podmore had had time to get to sleep, and then I felt my way gradually down the hillside, being careful to make no noise, till I came to the back wall of the garden. I hooked Marlin's ice-axe over the top, just as I had done when escaping from the police on Sunday, and pulled myself up and then dropped quietly into the

flower-bed beneath the wall, crushing a lupine as I did so.

Gingerly I walked towards the dark shape of the house and groped my way round till I found the study window. I had decided that I would make my entrance through that window, as I knew how the furniture inside was arranged and there would not be much risk of my making a noise by knocking over a chair or stumbling on an unexpected stool or foot-cushion.

When I reached the window, I tried to open it, but found that I could not, for it was latched. This was an unexpected set-back and I was afraid that I would have to try to make my entrance by some other way and just hope that I would not make a noise. Then it occurred to me that I might be able to slip the latch, and I took my knife out of my pocket, wondering while I did so why the makers of the otherwise compact instrument had fitted it with a gadget for taking stones out of horses' hoofs. I opened the largest and strongest blade and slid it into the narrow crack between the upper and lower panes of the window.

At first I could make no impression on the thin sliver of metal that kept the window shut, and then I remembered that I was outside the window and was pushing the catch in the same direction as if I had been inside. I withdrew the knife and inserted it on the other side of the fastening and pressed. It began to move gradually and then clicked back suddenly, making, I thought, as much noise as a pistol-shot. I dropped on all fours in the rock-

ery beneath the sill and waited, my face in a sea-pink and the flavour of thyme tinging my nostrils, but no one came, so I rose gradually and pressed the palms of my hands against the pane and pushed upwards.

The window slid open quite silently and smoothly and I crawled in, on to the top of the desk. I lit a match and looked around me and was delighted to see the nickelled electric torch lying on the mantelpiece. I picked it up and pressed the button and a thin bright beam of light shot across the study.

Then I opened the door, inch by inch, and went out into the passage. Boards creaked and groaned and I thought that I must have been making enough noise to wake Rip Van Winkle or the Sleeping Beauty, but there was no movement anywhere in the house as I crept up the stairs.

I went quietly along to the room where I had slept, and listened at the door to make certain that Father Podmore was not entertaining another traveller, but I heard no breathing and went in. Although I looked all round the room, I could see no signs of my kit and wondered whether by any chance Father Podmore had moved it into his own room. I listened at his door and heard his satisfied regular breathing as I opened the door and flashed the light round the room, keeping the beam low in order not to disturb the recumbent priest. There were several cupboards and I had to look in each one of them. When I eased open the door of the last, a shoe dropped out and I

shut off the torch and waited for Father Podmore to challenge me, but he merely grunted and turned in his sleep.

I looked into every room upstairs and went through all the cupboards in the hall and kitchen. As it began to dawn on me that Father Podmore must have disposed of my things as useless rubbish, I grew angry. My things, I thought, my boots with their tricouni studs, my leather jacket, my fleece-lined gloves and helmet, the most valuable things in the world, were probably crowded with empty soup-tins and cinders on some rubbish-heap. I left the kitchen, mad with anger and trying to make up my mind to rush up the stairs to wake Father Podmore and demand the return of my property, with menaces, but as I went along the front passage there was a noise and my caution forced me to dodge into the lobby. The noise was not repeated and I was just going to start again to go upstairs and shake the priest to life when I struck something with my toe. I flashed the torch on and could have shouted with joy, for there was my kit, my rucksack with the boots tied to the shoulder-straps by their laces.

As fast I could without making a noise, I left the house, trying to make everything look the same as when I had entered, as that might delay pursuit until the absence of the clothes was noticed. I was not able to fasten the window behind me, but I shut it and wiped the panes with my sleeve to obliterate the marks of my flat hands, hoping that its unlocked condition would be charged to a forgetful maid if anyone noticed it. It was only when I

had reached the flower-beds beside the wall that I realized that, in addition to my kit and Marlin's ice-axe, I was carrying Father Podmore's expensive electric torch. I hid it carefully among the roots of a large Oriental poppy, for I was determined that I would take nothing that was not mine from the house, and I thought that it would turn up when the garden was searched to find how I had made my entry.

Just before leaving I had noticed the time by the clock in the study; it was ten to two and I was aware that I had only about an hour before it would grow light enough for me to make a start, and I needed to set out as early as I could. I lay down among the hazel bushes and dozed fitfully until I thought an hour was up and it was getting lighter.

I slung my pack on my back and set out westwards. Every action and feeling seemed to be familiar, the rucksack swinging loosely on my back, and the feel of the haft of the ice-axe in my hand. Even the walk to the Pale Peak seemed to have been done before, or else there was not much difference between the two sides of the mountain.

I had expected many things, I remembered, from this strange country, savages or civilized men, but I had never expected to come to a land where the police were second only to God and had the rights of life and death in the belly-guns that nestled in their shoulder-holsters. I wondered idly if mountains had anything to do with Colonel Roscoe's being head of the secret police. Perhaps, I

» O V E R T H E M O U N T A I N «

thought, he had looked down from some rocky gable and had decided that he was nearly God, looking at the people like ants, and had become possessed by a desire to rule their lives. Perhaps he had heard that God moved in a mysterious way, and had become the leader of the secret police only to prove that he was God, to prove it both to himself and to the people. Anyhow, it was a damned queer country, and I, who had believed myself to be normal, was a stranger there, an eccentric who did not know how to behave, but consorted with other madmen who shared the idea, the heresy, that all men were created equal.



» CHAPTER THIRTEEN «

Looking up at the Pale Peak, I knew then that I believed in some god—not, however, a god who was a personal possession of Father Podmore and his sort, but one who had made the Peak and had made men, made them equal at the start and then left them to arrange their own society as they wished; and they had botched the job.

It did not look promising and I thought that I might fail somewhere on the Pale Peak, but even if I did, I would have good company in a good death, a better death

than a bullet in the lungs from a baby-faced detective with the intellect of a frog. In spite of the fact that I might be going to die, I was gloriously happy and whistled as I plodded over the short-napped grass towards the base of the Peak. At least I was going towards my own country, to discover myself, and that was what I wanted to do. I was free now and it was a fight between me and the mountain, not between me and other men. I was happy and glad that I was leaving all beastliness behind me and going towards the clean cruel snow and ice.

It was drizzling as I took my first steps among the loose rocks, like shale, but I seemed to have no difficulty in climbing the slippery slope. I mounted higher and higher, singing at the top of my voice. I seemed to have conversed in whispers for weeks, and now it was good to shout till I was hoarse. It was rough going but it did not worry me, not even when the thin drizzle thickened into a downpour of rain. I put on all the tattered clothes I had in my kit as it got colder, and I sat down under a rock and ate some of my chocolate and smoked a pipe. It was the first pipe I had ever really enjoyed. The hiss of the rain as it fell in the glowing bowl was a pleasant sound and I knew that I was going to cross the Peak in safety.

I slipped on the rocks, but had none of the awful fear which clutches at the pit of the stomach like some unknown hand out of a terrifying night. I was lighter than air and would float if I chanced to fall. Marlin's ice-axe was my magic wand and would carry me to the summit on

wings of snow if I so desired, but it was my climb and I was not going to miss an inch of it; I was not going to miss the thrill of gazing suddenly over precipices and seeing nothing but the grey mist, and I was not going to miss one moment of the good clean hard rain falling on my cheeks. I did not feel the least bit tired, nor did I suffer from my loss of sleep during the previous night or two.

I would climb and climb and climb, up higher even than the top of the Peak. When I got to the summit I would find a further Peak and I would mount that and climb till I was clear of the world and, there among the cold stars, I would mount and mount until the world itself was but a star to me. Marlin and I would sit on the summit of some mountain in space and we would rest among the feathery clouds and be so happy.

Suddenly, through the sleet, I noticed Father Podmore approaching me, his thin fingers playing with the crucifix on his breast. I stood straight while he blessed me and said: "My son, I wish you luck in your attempt. Do you not feel God helping you? Here you have a chance to understand His reality, to meet Him on His high places. Ah, my son, would that I had your spirit to seek Him in the wilderness."

He was blocking my path to the summit and I swept him aside with a blow of Marlin's ice-axe, but I had hardly gone more than a few feet before he was back in front of me. "My son," he said again, "I do not wish you to think unkindly of me. I may have been hasty in asking

you to do things for me, but I did it for the glory of God and not for any personal aggrandizement. Unless God helps you, my son, you cannot reach the summit. The way is barred. Remember that and fall on your knees and beg Him to forgive you for your stupid pride. False pride, my son, leads more men astray than wilful sin does. Will you not admit to me now that you feel God's hand upon your shoulder, guiding you in this waste? Do you not see Him making your path smooth to the summit? Be of good cheer, my son, for God is with you and nothing you can say or do can alter that fact."

"I do not feel your god at all," I answered. "I am alone here, and you are a shadow made of my fancy and the mist. I feel no god's hand upon my shoulder and the path before me is still as steep and as difficult as it was before I started my climb. I have no pride that can be compared with yours; you make God in your own image, not in the common image of humanity. Your god has no place in his heart for the oppressed or the needy. He is the god of the rich, the god who dines at eight and knows the vintages of wines and the flavour of rare morsels of food. Your god has a well-filled belly and sleeps at night between smooth linen sheets and knows nothing of the park bench and the spread newspaper. Your god recommends charity, never having had to receive it himself and yet denies their right to such men as are not fortunate in your eyes."

Father Podmore smiled at me benignly and held up his

hand again and said: "My son, be not too hasty in your judgments. I who stand here before you have worked always for the betterment of mankind, as the law of God commands. My God, as you call Him, is a God of infinite mercy and patience, but He cannot let the blasphemer go unpunished for ever. How many of those who now sleep on park benches believe in God or have not taken His name in vain. The Lord God is a just God but He can be very terrible when roused. You, my son, the known brave man, have no right to deny Him. If I, who was never the man of action, can truthfully say that I feel His presence in every stone and leaf in the countryside, how much more must you be aware of Him, alone here and near death."

"No," I replied, "I am not your fairy-story hero, to feel the urge to great achievement. I came over the Peak to see, I thought, a fair land and pleasant people, and I met you and your kind. The fat slugs batten on the richness of humanity even as the slugs batten on the richness of the trees in your quiet garden—that garden where the heavy bee flies lazily and the fat starlings fill their crops at leisure—that garden where you can sit and forget mankind in your adoration of an impersonal god, or a god who feels only when you or one like you is troubled, which is seldom. I am going to climb this mountain without the help of your god—if any god is with me, he is my god and the god of the mountain. You have no jurisdiction in this place. Now go, sweet shade, and pick your

tender-bloomed peaches and forget me and my troubles. I have had enough of you."

He raised his hand and said: "My son, you say hard things of me, but the spirit of charity is great. Therefore I bless you and say: God go with you; for if He does not, you will get nowhere."

He vanished in the sleet and I was alone to struggle on towards the summit, cursing the shadow that had delayed me. The sleet stung my face and I was glad of it, glad of the pain, for that at least was real, while Father Podmore was not. Indeed, I wondered if he ever had been real and had not been merely a puppet of coloured rubber, actuated by a cunning machine and with a gramophone instead of a voice, for everything he said seemed to be artificial.

I looked at the snow where he had stood and saw, impressed in the slushy ice, a cross of the same shape as the one he had played with. I lifted Marlin's ice-axe above my shoulder and hacked at it until it had ceased to resemble a cross at all. As I smote, I thought that I was really doing no harm to the man who had once died on a cross, for I respected what I knew of him. It was not his cross I was wiping out, but the cross of Father Podmore, the cross that had no meaning beyond that of the fingers extended to avert the evil eye. The cross in the ice was somehow wrong, the chance mark of an abominable creature who had passed that way, and I saw that all I could do was to wipe out every trace of this monstrosity. It was

not a cross to carry but one to obliterate and forget.

The ice was forming on my eyelashes, and my eyes felt as weary as they had on my previous adventure on the Peak, but my limbs were delightfully supple and fresh and I stepped on, on towards the summit. I would find peace on the other side and discover who I was and there would be neither injustice nor terror. I would try to get help for my friends who suffered under the yoke of the government and its half-witted assistants.

I could reach heaven by climbing high enough and I might go there before I descended. It was a steep climb, but easy; everything except the weather was with me and I did not much care what the weather was like, for nothing could harm me. I could go on for ever, I had strength that no man had ever had before me, and I could endure when the toughest had dropped exhausted in the snow to freeze into a part of the mountainside.

I was the greatest climber in the world and no mountain could withstand my assault. Kangchenjunga, Nanga Parbat, and Everest itself were footstools for my feet and mole-hills that I would flatten with a careless swing of my foot. I was a giant and I wore seven-leagued boots and could step from mountain to mountain right round the world, and when I was tired of the world, I would go and explore the craters on the moon. I would see what there was on the dark side, for no cold could harm me now.

Suddenly I saw ahead of me a tall man dressed in mountaineering clothes. His back was turned to me and his

hands were raised towards the summit in an attitude of prayer. He turned when he heard the impact of the axe as I chipped steps. I saw that it was Colonel Roscoe, but not the Colonel Roscoe I had known—a younger and more cheerful-looking man.

“Hullo, Michael,” he said. “So we meet again. This is where I failed, but you, the amateur, went on and won. You won much, but you do not know what you did not win or what you lost. I know you now, but I am forbidden to tell you, for you must find the answer for yourself, and when you find it you’ll realize where you went wrong. I lost myself once on this mountain and I did not find myself for years. Not, in fact, until you arrived, Michael. I had been wrong for years. I did the wrong things and fought for the wrong ideals. I look now towards the Peak and wish that I had done nothing else all my days. But, you see, I looked down and became sick. I grew to fear all mountains because they were greater than I was, and I thought that I might become powerful among men. I admit that I was wrong. I should have tried to climb the Peak again even at the cost of lying like Marlin, a cold, lifeless, yet triumphant body, near the summit.”

This man was not the schemer. He was the man who had tried to climb the Peak and the man I had glimpsed when he was talking of Everest. I was sorry that he had failed, and said in all sincerity: “Colonel, can I ask you to accompany me? I know I will reach the summit and

I'd like you to come with me. Come on."

"No, Michael," he replied, "I was not meant to reach the summit. I can only stay here and watch you younger men pass me on your way. The man you met as me, the secret-service agent and the retired army man, got higher up the mountain and you will doubtless meet him, but he is not a real man, I swear he isn't. I, here, am the real Roscoe, the man who is happy to be here and wait for the world's end. I am no longer the spider in its web waiting to entrap unwary flies. I am just a man alone against a mountain, and although the mountain wins I am glad to have pitted my strength against it. I know too much now and I knew too little in the past. I wanted to be omnipotent, but was merely the chess-man, a knight perhaps, of others more powerful than myself. You who cannot win today have won and I who could not lose have lost. Are you content to have climbed the Peak, Michael?"

"I want to climb it again, if that's what you mean, Colonel," I said. "It's the only course left to me. I can't go back, because your blue-threads would seek me out and I should die a dirty sneaking death trapped in a corner like a rat when the terriers set on it. I must go forward and, at any rate, death here would not be so frightful. The snow is clean and the ice is cold."

"Oh, you won't die this time, Michael," he said. "I have no power to stop the blue-threads, for I was not their master, and I no longer am a Colonel. I am Captain Roscoe. I'm afraid that you will meet the Colonel later

and that he will be rather unpleasant, for, you see, I was one side of the man you knew, and now that we have split, we are more or less free of one another. Neither of us, though we thought we had, ever had any real power; we were the puppets of a system. I came nearer to what I wanted than he did when I climbed this height up the Peak. It was a strange death you dealt me, Michael. Death in a boys' school from the glancing blow of an ice-axe. Will you let me for the last time hold the axe you found on the summit?"

He reached out a white hand, which brushed mine as it gripped the haft. Its touch was colder than the touch of the ice and harder than steel. I looked straight at his face, just for a moment, and he smiled wearily.

"Well," he said, "you must go on and I wish you luck with the other of us. You may fail, but no ill should befall you. Good-bye, Michael, and please try to remember me and not the man who waits higher in the snow. You will find that he funk'd the difficult traverse across the top of a precipice. He always was beaten by his fear of heights. Good luck."

I went on up the icy cliff and, looking back, saw the sad yet happy figure standing upright, oblivious of the snow driving in his eyes, staring after me. His references to failure puzzled me, for I knew that I would reach the summit, and that was success. Nothing could stop me. I was stronger than any engine that was ever built, and my heart had more power in reserve than any turbine. I was

going on to the summit though all the ghosts in history should rise to try and prevent me.

The ice seemed to be very soft and to break easily, but it did not worry me, for I was immortal. I was nearly a mountain myself and so nearly God. I could slide uphill as easily as down. The snow was harder now and stung the blood to my cheeks, and I knew I was getting higher and that after the snow or in the snow I would find the summit.

I seemed to have chosen a difficult place to climb, as steep as the wall of a house, and I was just going to start on a difficult traverse when I saw that a dark figure blocked my way. This was Colonel Roscoe grown fat and lazy-looking. I wondered why he had been allowed to get so high while the Captain had been stopped lower, but I was without much curiosity about him.

"Get out of my way, Colonel," I cried. "I want to pass and I have no time to waste on you."

"Ah, my dear boy," he replied suavely, "impetuous as ever, I see. That was a dirty blow to deal a poor helpless old man, so many years your senior. I wasn't expecting anything like that from you. You know, my young friend, you are far too hotheaded ever to be successful. You should think more before you speak and then you wouldn't get into trouble so often. You know you shouldn't let your own class down. Things are bad enough for us decent people without our having traitors in our midst to deal with."

"Get out of my way, you gross lazy beast," I shouted. "If I hadn't hit you, you would have shot me without hesitation. As for traitors, what are your blue-threads?"

"Oh," he replied, "I see you've been talking to my young brother down there. You shouldn't believe what he tells you. As a matter of fact, I think you two must have a good deal in common, you're both so damned hasty and you both like these confounded mountains. I can't see what it is you like in them, myself; they give me the creeps. As for calling my blue-threads traitors, they were not traitors but spies. We need to know all about the movements of these revolutionaries and we can't just ask them what their plans are—even you wouldn't expect us to do our work like that. No, no, it's no use saying that our work is oppressive and unjust. It is absolutely necessary. If these people came into power, as I think I told you before, the country would be in a state of collapse within a few days. Look, I've got some of my friends here to support my statements."

He waved his hand, a podgy flabby starfish, and I saw the figures of Mr. Boswell and the two wooden-faced detectives, who were sucking ice-cream cones, which seemed to me a bit strange in all the cold. I felt that the secret service had managed to catch up with me and I lost my head and made a rush at them, swinging Marlin's ice-axe, not knowing how I managed to keep on my feet. I hit Colonel Roscoe and he disappeared over the edge of the precipice. The others followed him as if they had all

been roped together. I steadied myself and looked ahead to see them reappear, remembering Father Podmore, but there was no one there and then I heard a crash and knew that the bodies had been smashed to pieces on the sharp rocks below.

As I traversed the edge of the precipice, I remembered Captain Roscoe and hoped that he was now completely free of his other half and that he would have peace to look up towards the summit he would never reach. I thought of his shade standing on the icy shelf and dreaming of the final step and the top where Marlin slept. I thought that the two of them might meet somewhere on the lower reaches, for although Roscoe could not climb any higher, I saw no reason why the ghost of Marlin should not travel where it liked upon the mountain. I wondered whether I had finally killed the Colonel and I hoped with all my heart that he was dead and would not worry the Captain.

The going was certainly stiff and I was surprised to find that I was still climbing very easily. Obviously the Peak must be much smaller than I had believed it to be, and I could not understand how I had ever feared the job of climbing it. I was taking great wide strides and wherever my feet fell they found a hold. The cold was not worrying me at all and I was breathing as easily as if I had been walking along a beach inhaling a fresh sea breeze.

I sat on a flat rock, covered with hard frozen snow,

and ate some more of my chocolate and smoked another pipe. I was not sure what time it was or how near the summit I had got. It did not seem to be snowing as hard, and though the cold was bitter, it did not creep into my bones as it had done the first time I had scaled the Peak. I was not the least bit tired and my eyes had stopped worrying me; I could see as clearly and was as fit as I had ever been in all my life.

I rose to my feet again and stretched my legs before going on towards the summit. The snow was thin enough to allow me to see for a distance of about thirty feet ahead of me and I set my face towards the steep slope of rock and ice. I climbed on easily and was not perturbed when I started a wind-slab avalanche that nearly took me with it over the edge of a precipice.

I could not lose now. It was absolutely certain that I would reach the top. I was so sure-footed I might almost have been a mountain goat; I leaped across crevasses that were so broad that normally I would have had to skirt them, and I felt as high-spirited as a schoolboy just let out of school. I laughed to think of the secret police guarding all the possible exits from the country while I was safely out of their reach on the Pale Peak. It amused me to remember the solemn obituary notice they had given me after they had bombed the wood at Clubham Hatch. "After all," I thought, "if it is always as easy to climb the Peak as it is today, there is no reason why I should not lead some of my friends from my own country

to help the others I am deserting.”

I went on and on and thought that though the actual job of climbing might be very simple, it did seem to take a very long time, and I kept thinking that mounds in the snow were the summit, which I expected to see any minute. To make things a little more difficult, the snow grew thicker again and the flakes whirled in my face as if they wished to lead me astray. Though my limbs were still as supple as oisiers, my mind was not as clear as it had been and I saw shadows in the snow.



I was back at the party with Sir Harry, and everyone seemed to be enjoying himself. I was the only silent person there. They looked at me curiously as they danced or wandered past. Suddenly the voice of Captain Hooker rang out: "You, I presume, are Michael, the mountaineer. I have received orders to arrest you." I lifted my ice-axe and struck towards the sound, but I hit nothing except the face of the mountain.

Up and up I crawled until I reached the flat top of a narrow rock needle. There was no way to continue and

I turned to descend to find another path up the Peak. Facing me I saw Elsa, dressed in the bright vermilion she had been wearing when we met.

"My God, Elsa," I cried, "I never thought I'd see you here. Rather out of your usual environment, aren't you?"

"Oh, my sweet bear, you've come back to me," she replied. "I always knew you would. Did you know that when you left that morning I lay, dry-eyed, and wondered when you would come back to me?"

"My dear," I said, as gently as I could, "I'm afraid I haven't come to you. You've come to me. We are on the Pale Peak, near the summit. Do you not feel the scurry of the snow-flakes against your tender cheeks? Doesn't the cold eat through that thin dress? My darling, we are alone on the edge of nowhere. Look round you and tell me what you see."

She seemed to waken a little, glanced about her, and kicked the snow with the toe of her red shoe. It burst into a little cloud. Then she flung herself into my arms. Unconsciously I braced myself to stand the more than ice-cold of Captain Roscoe's hand, but she was as warm and real as she had been when I lay beside her in the richly decorated bed.

"I'm so frightened, my bear," she gasped. "You will look after me, won't you? Please, please, forgive me. I did not mean to give you away, but I was ordered to do it and didn't dare refuse."

She nestled into my shoulder, paying no attention to the snow that was caked on the leather jacket. I stroked her hair and made some efforts to comfort her, while I thought how soft her hair was and how desirable her lips. Looking at her, I noticed that the snow beside her face was unmelted, and yet in my arms she was warm and alive.

I half realized that it was a ghost I held, but I could not wholly convince myself that she was not a real person who had somehow been transported to join me on this pinnacle. The wind blew coldly against me and the snow caked my face and gloves, but I noticed that no flake rested on Elsa's dress or body. She might still have been in the big room in the house at Dante Square for all the effect that the weather or the place had upon her appearance.

"My dearest darling Elsa," I said, "it's all nothing but a bad dream and you are at home somewhere. I am alone on the Pale Peak and the snow is my lot, not yours. Darling, I love you. Look at me, my pet, and tell me, do you think it is you that is real or me?"

She lifted her eyes and spoke: "I know now, darling bear, that I'm only a ghost, but I had to come and see you and know that you hadn't forgotten me. You do love me, don't you, my honey bear? You will come back to me, won't you? Michael, I love you and I'll wait if you promise to come back to me some day. I love your ugly face; it's the one real thing in the dream world where I live."

She lifted her face to mine and I bent and kissed her. Suddenly her face grew cold in my hands and I opened my eyes to see that I had covered my face with my snow-caked gloves and that I was alone on my narrow needle. The snow was thickening and it was getting dusk. I clambered down to the real face of the Peak and continued my climb. I was still going easily, but I was not quite sure which direction I was travelling towards, except that it was always upwards.

I seemed to have reached the summit, but I was still climbing, finding fragile foot-holds on the points of stars. It was very tricky climbing, because if I missed my hold, I might go plunging through space to land on some unknown planet. On the top of the farthestmost star I saw a figure sitting and I climbed steadily towards it.

It took a long time and was very difficult, but at last I scrambled up the arête that led to the top of the star and came face to face with the figure. It was Marlin and he was smiling, his tired eyes friendly as he looked at me.

"We two met at the summit," he said, "but today, Michael, you are going the wrong way and you will not reach it. Perhaps another day, but not today. You see, my friend, I have got your axe and I am glad that you have mine. It is a good axe."

When he spoke, all the strength that was in me went and I felt inexpressibly weary. I had not believed the others when they had told me that I should fail in my attempt, but now that Marlin, who knew all the difficul-

ties and their solution, told me, I knew that it was definite and I should fail.

"Christ," I said, "I can't afford to fail, for I have nowhere to go. I must go on. I must go on."

"No, my friend Michael," Marlin replied, "you cannot go on. You must go back. You can try again even if you fail today. Whatever they have done or whatever they will do to you would be nothing to the knowledge that you had kept on too long and could never try again. I know, for that is what happened to me. Go back now, Michael, go back. You are suddenly weak and your limbs hurt, but still you have the strength you need to take you down again. I know the bitterness you feel, but you will get over it when you succeed the next time. Go back, my friend, while you can."

I was back on the mountain and I turned and with leaden feet stumbled down the slope with Marlin's command repeating itself in my ears. "Go back, go back," the voice said. I was tired and wanted to sleep, but I could not rest, my feet went on and on, taking me with them. I slid down banks of ice and snow and as I slid I heard Elsa's voice crying, ever so faintly: "Oh, my bear, I love you. Come back to me." But when I shouted, there was no answer.

The wind blew about me, but I could still see fairly clearly when I reached the place where the Colonel had stood. I was glad to see that he was gone; no sign of him remained on the narrow shelf and I did not hear him

talking dully behind the blasting snow.

I had no idea of protecting myself and I do not know how often I missed death in that mad downward plunge. As I passed the place where I had left Captain Roscoe, I noticed that he had become a part of the mountain and was turned to a stone buttress. His features were well preserved and his lips had a happy smile; I was satisfied that he was content to have got even so far up the Pale Peak, so long as he was not troubled by his other beastly half.

I went on and on, down and down, stumbling into crevasses and only just managing to pull myself out as the fragile edges broke beneath my weight. The side of the Peak grew steeper as I got lower, for I had ceased taking the path I had climbed up and I was now making a bee line for the foot. I was travelling very fast in spite of my weariness, for I was slipping on ice and loose rocks and covered long distances on the miniature avalanches I started. Somehow I always escaped plunging to my death.

I think my eyes were shut for long periods and that I must have been saved by some unsuspected sense of balance. I tried not to think about the secret police and the blue-threads, but it was hard to forget that I would have to try to dodge them when I reached the plain and the village. I wondered what they would do to me if they caught me, and I hoped that I could find some refuge where I could gather enough strength for another attack on the Pale Peak. I, who had not cared for mountains, now found that a mountain filled my life and that I was

almost fond of it and its friendly little jokes—landslides, wind-slab avalanches, and pinnacles that led nowhere.

I was now back in the thin drizzle and thought it would not be long before I reached the bottom, when I saw Father Podmore, dressed in his white surplice, standing with outstretched arms before me.

“My son,” he said, “what did I tell you? Except God go with a man, he will get nowhere. I told you that you should ask God’s aid in your venture and you scorned me.”

I tried to sweep him from my path with a blow from Marlin’s ice-axe, but he was always in front of me and always talking. I cursed him with all the foul curses I could think of, but it was no use, he would not disappear.

“My son,” he said, “whosoever is not with me is against me. Why are you stubborn? Have you not learned that humility is the greatest of all the virtues? All I ask of you is the admission that I was right—the admission that you could not climb the Peak without God’s help. Let us kneel now and ask forgiveness of Almighty God for your sins of omission and commission. Let us pray that you be brought to see the light. Let us beseech God in His infinite loving-kindness to bless you, the least of His creatures, in your enterprises and help you in your hour of failure. My son, I knew when you set out that you could not climb the Peak without God’s help, and when I told you, you laughed me to scorn. My son, I forgive you for your insult to me as a man, but I cannot forgive

you for the insult to me as God's earthly representative. You must ask Him to forgive you for that."

I rushed faster and faster down the steep side, trying to overtake the lean figure that went backwards before me, but he was always just ahead of me, his face pious and his little gold crucifix hanging over the white of his surplice. I thought I was going mad, but I did not dare to stop and rest, for if I had done so, I knew, Father Podmore would have seized his opportunity and started the service for the burial of the dead. That would have been a curse and I would die on the side of the Peak. I did not want to die; in fact, I could not die, for Marlin, who knew everything, had told me that I would make a successful assault later when I tried again.

The last few hundred feet of my descent were the worst, for I saw the ghosts again and knew them to be ghosts and felt no communication with them. First the Colonel appeared beside Father Podmore and spoke jeeringly: "You can't succeed in anything. You desire power over an inanimate object like this mountain and you can't get that. Much better, my dear boy, try like me to gain power over people. Have you ever ordered a man to be killed? No? Well, until you have done that, you don't know what power is. You cannot have any idea of what it means to stop a life. You say a word and a living man becomes just so much cold meat. To end lives is the ideal power. You will never have power, for you stopped the life of a much more powerful man than yourself. You

fool, did you think you could forget me and escape from me? Did you imagine that when you swept me from the precipice you killed me? All you did was to show your foolishness in rejecting my ideals—the ideals that must win in the end. Power always wins and you can't stop it winning. Father Podmore, here, will bear me out in what I say." He turned towards the lean priest, who nodded and touched his little cross.

"Yes, my son," he said, "Colonel Roscoe is right. God is all-powerful and He deals out His power to men in little quantities. Some with this gift of power become emperors, some statesmen, and some few—those wise ones who realize the source of their power—priests. The Colonel and I may not always have seen eye to eye, but on the subject of power we are in complete agreement. Whosoever shall lose his life for My sake shall find it. I too know the necessity of death, my son, the need for the strong man to wipe the weakling and the hindrance from his path. It may seem bitter and unjust to you, my son, but it is the will of God. Repent now before it is too late, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand and I will enter into My place and I will help to choose the few sheep from the multitude of goats. Pray for forgiveness for your too hasty hand and tongue before it is too late."

"Get from my path," I cried. "You are only figures in the mist and you talk as I would have you talk, and think as I would make you think. Get from my path, I tell you, I'll have no truck with you, the creatures of my tired

mind. Get back to your shades, you flimsy ghosts!”

They fell silent, but they still went on before me down the mountainside. They seemed to be still talking, but I heard no words come from their moving lips and I went on and on towards the plain and the secret police from whom I had fled.

Next I saw Captain Roscoe. He was tall and straight and he smiled happily as he said: “I am a part of the mountain now, Michael. Not the summit, for that is Marlin, but the lower steep arête that runs towards the summit, the gullies of stone and the first lines of snow. Marlin was lucky, for he got his triumph and had no anticlimax. I was unfortunate in a way, for I was led wide of my ambition by the desire for power which the Colonel has told you about. You were the lucky and the unfortunate man. You did not desire the summit and you reached it; you desired a new and better country which you did not reach. When you think of me, Michael, remember me as you see me now, happy and somewhere near my real objective, having forgotten the false one of my other half. Though he got higher in the eyes of men, he was not happy. He had the fear of mountains in his mind continually, but had to go on, for he was afraid of people and what they said even more than he was afraid of mountains. He was made what he was by fear, and now he is gone I have no fear.”

I would have answered him, but he gestured upward with his hand and took lithe steps up the rocky side again

towards his resting-place. Looking at the mist where he had disappeared, I saw a vermillion shadow coming down to me and I knew that I was to meet Elsa once again. She stood in front of me, untouched by the pouring rain, with her hair soft and gleaming as if she had been standing under bright electric lights.

"Michael, my sweet," she said, "I come once more to tell you that I will wait for you on the summit. You will not find me today, but the day when you climb again you will know that I wait there for you. You will come back to me, my bear, I know. You will come back to me through the gale and the blizzard. You will walk through the walls of prisons and under the withering fire of machine-guns to come to me. You will walk through the wilderness of lonely ice and the wilderness of the crowded city, but you will come back to me. Michael, I love you and you must come back, you must return to me."

She seemed to be pleading with me and I wanted to take her in my arms and tell her that I would return to her over mountains and seas, but I could not move and no words came. I looked at her, thinking how desirable she was, and I forgot the Peak. I forgot everything except the fact that I wanted her more than anything in the world. I wanted to feel the small sweet bones round the hollow of her neck and to count the ridges on her backbone. I wanted to bury my face in her hair and feel its softness and to run my finger-tips over her subtle body. She smiled at me gently and went on: "Michael, my

darling, it is only a little journey up the Peak, but too long for you today."

She turned, smiling, and left me. I would have followed, but somehow I managed to realize that she had only been a ghost of my own making, so I went on down the steep and slippery side. I do not know how I managed to get down at all, for I slipped and fell among the boulders, but never seemed to hurt myself. The loose rocks fell away from my feet and went crashing down below me, but somehow no rocks fell above me. Still Father Podmore and the Colonel went on ahead and I once or twice sent boulders flying down the hillside towards them, but they took no harm and the great rocks passed through them and left no trace of their smashing course.

At last I reached the grass and sat on a rock and wept bitterly, for I knew that I was beaten and that I could not reach the summit. When I looked up and wiped my face on my wet sleeve, I saw Father Podmore standing on a rock shaped like a pulpit.

"Friends and fellow-workers," he was saying, to my surprise, "I, too, know the bitterness of defeat, I have been beaten all along the line. I wanted to be bishop and I became vicar of this parish. Like Swift in his madness, I cried out and cursed the day I was born, under who knows what evil star, and I shouted: 'I am what I am.' Yes, I am willing to admit that I fell into the fatal sin of blasphemy and took the words of God to myself. But since then I have been changed and I now work for a

better understanding between men—peace and goodwill on earth. Let God order your life and you will have no worries. Until I was changed I swore like other men and abused the privileges of my cloth, but now I let God rule my life and, in my quiet times, I find what I am to do throughout the day. Trust in God makes for trust in man and that's what I work for. With a changing world come changing customs and men, too, need to be changed. There can be no discontent in the God-ruled world. 'Let God rule your life' is the order for today and then the Church militant will win. Confess your sins in public and they vanish. My friend here, Colonel Roscoe, whom you all know as a good upright honest bluff gentleman, used to drink and swear, but since he was changed he has become a new man, intent on building a new world. I will now, my friends and brothers, ask the valiant soldier to say a few words to you on his experience."

He climbed down from the rock and his place was taken by the Colonel, looking very fierce and with bloodshot eyes peering out from beneath his bushy eyebrows.

"I am pleased, comrades," he announced, "to have the chance of addressing you for a moment. All I wish to say now is that I have hunted sharks in the ocean, lions in the desert, and pigs in the jungle, but I have never in all my life had a job that thrilled me so much or gave me so much sport as that I have today of hunting for God, here at home. Thank you."

He, too, climbed down and I watched him and Father

Podmore, arm in arm, turn their backs on the Peak and vanish in the rain. I heard a slight noise and looked again at the rock, to find that Marlin stood there. His tired eyes were gentle as he spoke: "Go back now, Michael, my friend. Go back and face defeat. We three will meet again at the summit."

I noticed he was holding Elsa's hand as they went towards the loose rocks. I was alone in the rain at the foot of the Pale Peak. I remembered the guns waiting for me and turned wearily away from the place where I had wandered all day. I had no idea of how near I had been to the summit and could remember little of the climb except the ghosts.

I realized that I had not yet discovered myself and that I had no idea who I was or what my own country was like. All I knew was that things would be quiet there and I would have time to rest there and would not need to fear the quick shot in the back or the concentration camp. I would be free of all this entanglement. But behind me the Pale Peak still stood, hidden in the mist, a barrier between me and that freedom I desired. There was nothing for it but to go back and throw myself on the mercy of one of the villagers and trust that he would keep me hidden till once again I was strong enough for the assault.

It was slow going back because my feet would not move as I wanted them to, but still wanted to climb and climb upward for ever. I wished that I had ignored Marlin's command, since it was only the word of a ghost, and that

I had kept on until I dropped, holding his ice-axe as my passport to the summit. The rain now was heavy and not in the least refreshing; nothing could refresh me now, I thought, except the sight of the high plains on the other side.

As I got the trick of it once more, I walked fairly steadily and once more my body felt capable of the utmost endurance, though my mind was tired and inclined to wander. I could walk on and on, an automaton, until I crossed this land and reached the sea; I could march for miles and observe nothing at all, see no birds or flowers, no people and no landscape. I was a dead body walking, driven by a clockwork motor, mindless and eyeless, yet gifted with some intuition that kept me upright in the roughest country and that would enable me to walk on water and float across chasms.

I saw, far ahead of me, the lighted window of the vicarage and made toward it, knowing that the village lay just behind and that, unless the police got me first, I would run some small chance of finding shelter there, as there were sure to be a lot of people who loathed the police and would be willing to run the risk of letting me sleep in some corner of a barn or shed.

I went carefully as I drew near the vicarage, for I did not wish to run into Father Podmore any more than I had wished to have his spirit for company on the mountainside. I saw no one as I passed and I kept close to the walls and hedges so as to be ready to hide in a patch of

shadow if I saw anyone coming. Once I thought I was cornered and I tried to keep the rustling leaves still as I cowered in the hedge when I heard footsteps approaching, but it was only a girl, her head covered with a mackintosh. My heart I was sure had been beating as loud as her footsteps on the macadamized road, but she had not heard me. I could not think properly now and only knew that I could not spend another night out of doors and that I would have to trust to luck in my choice of a house.

As I entered the village, clinging to the walls and darting from one patch of shadow to another, I noticed a crowd of men and thought they were waiting for me. But I had not the strength to retreat and advanced slowly towards them. With a flow of relief I saw that I was at the inn. It was closing-time and these were the men who had been in the bar. I did not want to pass them, as I was sure there would be at least one blue-thread among them, so I drew into the porch at the front of the hotel and cowered down, making myself as small and invisible as possible.

It was obvious that I would need to wait until they had dispersed, and I sat on, fretting with impatience, until the last verbose good-night had been said and the crowd began to break up into twos and threes which sauntered away. When the last of them was a good hundred yards from me, I decided that I would move on and choose a small cottage to ask for sanctuary, but when I stood up I found that after being a giant of strength and endurance

» O V E R T H E M O U N T A I N «

all day, I was now a physical weakling whose legs could barely hold the weight of his body. I could go no farther, but must trust myself in the hands of the innkeeper. I tapped on the door with the haft of Marlin's ice-axe and waited till it was opened. A stout good-tempered-looking man stood in front of me. I drew myself upright, leaning on the ice-axe, before I spoke.

"Father Abbot," I said with a last attempt at humour, "I am come to lay my bones among you."



The innkeeper took my arm, pulled me inside quickly, and led me into the kitchen, where there was a blazing fire in the range. He shouted to someone who was obviously his wife to bring him blankets and a hot drink of rum and lemon. Then he started removing my clothes and I had no strength left either to hinder or to help him as he undid my boots and pulled them off and then stripped me naked. He got a large towel and rubbed me with it till my skin tingled.

While he was doing this his wife came in and poured

some boiling water into a pint glass, half full of rum, with slices of lemon floating in it. This she made me drink in spite of the fact that I could barely swallow. I was pushed into pyjamas, already heated in front of the fire, and made to sit in an armchair wrapped in blankets.

I lay there for a few minutes unable to talk while the innkeeper and his wife fussed round me. She made me eat a plate of scrambled eggs.

At last they seemed to have finished, and when his wife left the room, the innkeeper sat down opposite me and began scraping out his pipe with quick thrusts of an open knife. Then he tamped the tobacco down with his thumb, tore a strip from a newspaper and made a spill from it, which he lighted between the bars of the fire. He puffed at his pipe and waited until it was going properly and then looked across at me, without any visible signs of curiosity showing in his face.

"I say," I began, "do you know that you're sheltering a fugitive from justice? There's a warrant out for my arrest on a charge of murdering Colonel Roscoe. I am Michael, from the other side of the Peak, you know, and the secret police are after me."

"It's all right, boy," he replied, "I know all about you. There was a young man of the same name as yours, good-looking young chap he was, the nephew of the vicar, who started out from my hotel about ten days back to climb the Peak and get over to the other side, just like you. You saw nothing of him on your journey?"

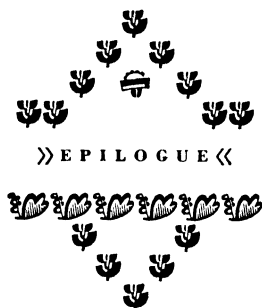
"No," I said, "nothing. He must be dead somewhere on the mountainside, for he was not at the summit when I got there. The only person there was Marlin. If I find your friend's remains when I set out again, I'll mark the spot with something. I can't stay in this country any longer, for the police won't rest till they've got me. I must cross the Peak and get back to my own country. I must escape."

"I know you must cross the Peak," he replied thoughtfully, "for it's your only way out, but somehow I don't think you'll find the remains of my young friend there. I don't think he lies on the Peak."

He was looking at me curiously and I felt that something terrible was going to happen. He took his pipe out of his mouth and laid it on a corner of the range and felt with his thumb and forefinger in his waistcoat pocket before he went on again.

"Yes, I'm afraid that you'll need to try to cross the Peak, and I'll see that you're hidden till you're fit to make the attempt, but I don't think you'll find the body of my young friend lying there. You see, he isn't dead."

He paused and I suddenly knew where I was and who I was. This was my own country and I was Michael Podmore. I stared at the innkeeper and knew that he was Robert Cobb even as he unclenched his hand and I saw lying on the palm a Chinese coin with a square hole in the centre.



» EPILOGUE ‹

For Marlin, who on the Peak alone
Felt the storm's weight upon his shoulder,
There was no disillusionment, no growing older,
And no tomb held his ice-axe and his bone.

While I travelled with luck and beat the gale,
Found kind hands, warmth, and a bed,
And yet would have been better with the dead,
The fortunate voyager who was not known to fail.

Reward for journey and the rash word spoken
I got back my keepsake penny token.

A NOTE ON THE TYPE
IN WHICH THIS BOOK IS SET

The text of this book was set on the Linotype in Baskerville. The punches for this face were cut under the supervision of George W. Jones, an eminent English printer. Linotype Baskerville is a facsimile cutting from type cast from the original matrices of a face designed by John Baskerville. The original face was the forerunner of the "modern" group of type faces.

¶ John Baskerville (1706-75), of Birmingham, England, a writing-master, with a special renown for cutting inscriptions in stone, began experimenting about 1750 with punch-cutting and making typographical material. It was not until 1757 that he published his first work, a *Virgil* in royal quarto, with great-primer letters. This was followed by his famous editions of *Milton*, the *Bible*, the *Book of Common Prayer*, and several Latin classic authors. His types, at first criticized as unnecessarily slender, delicate, and feminine, in time were recognized as both distinct and elegant, and both his types and his printing were greatly admired. Printers, however, preferred the stronger types of Caslon, and Baskerville before his death repented of having attempted the business of printing. For four years after his death his widow continued to conduct his business. She then sold all his punches and matrices to the Société Littéraire-typographique, which used some of the types for the sumptuous Kehl edition of Voltaire's works in seventy volumes.—

COMPOSED, PRINTED, AND BOUND

BY H. WOLFF, NEW YORK. THE

PAPER WAS MADE BY S. D.

WARREN CO.,

BOSTON

