

A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush



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Preface by Evelyn Waugh
Epilogue by Hugh Carless



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Hugh Carless of Her Majesty's Foreign Service, without whose determination, it must be obvious to anyone who reads it, this journey could never have been made.

Epigraph

'Il faudrait une expédition bien organisée et pourvue de moyens matériels puissants pour tenter l'étude de cette région de haute montagne dont les rares cols sont à plus de 5000 mètres d'altitude.'

L'Hindou Kouch et le Kaboulistan
Raymond Furon

Preface

Mr Eric Newby must not be confused with the other English writer of the same surname. I began reading *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* in the belief that it was the work of his namesake, whom I have long relished. I found something equally delightful but quite different.

Mr Eric Newby, I have since learned, is the author of an exciting sea-log, *The Last Grain Race*, an account of how at the age of eighteen he signed on as an apprentice of the Finnish barque *Moshulu*, lived in the fo'c'sle as the only Englishman, worked the ship, rounded both capes under sail in all the vicissitudes of the historic and now extinct passage from Australia to the United Kingdom of the grain-carrying windjammers. His career in the army was heroic and romantic. The bravado and endurance which had briefly made him a sailor were turned to the King's service. After the war he went into the most improbable of trades, *haute couture*. It would strain the imagination to picture this stalwart young adventurer selling women's clothes. We are relieved of the difficulty by his own deliciously funny description, which immediately captivates the reader of the opening chapters of *A Short Walk*. One can only use the absurdly trite phrase 'the call of the wild' to describe the peculiar impetus which carried Mr Newby from Mayfair to the wild mountains of Afghanistan. He was no sailor when he embarked in the *Moshulu*; he was no mountaineer when he decided to climb the Hindu Kush. A few days scrambling on the rocks in Wales, enchantingly chronicled here, were his sole preparation. It was not mountaineering that attracted him; the Alps abound in opportunities for every exertion of that kind. It was the longing, romantic, reasonless, which lies deep in the hearts of most Englishmen, to shun the celebrated spectacles of the tourist and without any concern with science or politics or commerce, simply to set their feet where few civilized feet have trod.

An American critic who read the manuscript of this book condemned it as 'too English'. It is intensely English, despite the fact that most of its action takes place in wildly foreign places and that it is written in an idiomatic, uncalculated manner the very antithesis of 'Mandarin' stylishness. It rejoices the heart of fellow Englishmen, and should at least illuminate those who have any curiosity about the odd character of our Kingdom. It exemplifies the essential traditional (some, not I, will say deplorable) amateurism of the English. For more than two hundred years now Englishmen have been wandering about the world for their amusement, suspect everywhere as government agents, to the great embarrassment of our officials. The Scotch endured great hardships in the cause of commerce; the French in the cause of either power or evangelism. The English only have half (and wholly) killed themselves in order to get away from England. Mr Newby is the latest, but, I pray, not the last, of a whimsical tradition. And in his writing he has all the marks of his not entirely absurd antecedents. The understatement, the self-ridicule, the delight in the foreignness of foreigners, the

complete denial of any attempt to enlist the sympathies of his readers in the hardships he has capriciously invited; finally in his formal self-effacement in the presence of the specialist (with the essential reserve of unexpressed self-respect) which concludes, almost too abruptly, this beguiling narrative – in all these qualities Mr Newby has delighted the heart of a man whose travelling days are done and who sees, all too often, his countrymen represented abroad by other, new and (dammit) lower types.

Dear reader, if you have any softness left for the idiosyncrasies of our rough island race, fall to and enjoy this characteristic artifact.

EVELYN WAUGH

1959

CHAPTER ONE

Life of a Salesman

With all the lights on and the door shut to protect us from the hellish draught that blew up the backstairs, the fitting-room was like an oven with mirrors. There were four of us jammed in it: Hyde-Clarke, the designer; Milly, a very contemporary model girl with none of the normal protuberances; the sour-looking fitter in whose workroom the dress was being made; and Newby.

Things were not going well. It was the week before the showing of the 1956 Spring Collection, a time when the *vendeuses* crouched behind their little cream and gold desks, doodling furiously, and the Directors swooped through the vast empty showrooms switching off lights in a frenzy of economy, plunging whole wings into darkness. It was a time of endless fittings, the girls in the workrooms working late. The corset-makers, embroiderers, furriers, milliners, tailors, skirt-makers and matchers all involved in disasters and overcoming them – but by now slightly insane.

This particular dress was a disaster that no one was going to overcome. Its real name, the one on the progress board on the wall of the fitting-room, pinned up with a little flag and a cutting of the material, was *Royal Yacht*, but by general consent we all called it *Grand Guignol*.

I held a docket on which all the components used in its construction were written down as they were called up from the stockroom. The list already covered an entire sheet. It was not only a hideous dress; it was soaking up money like a sponge.

‘How very odd. According to the docket *Grand Guignol’s* got nine zips in it. Surely there must be some mistake.’

Hyde-Clarke was squatting on his haunches ramming pins into *Grand Guignol* like a riveter.

‘This dress is DOOMED. I know it’s doomed. BOTHER, I’ve swallowed a pin! Pins, quickly, pins.’

The fitter, a thin woman like a wardress at the Old Bailey and with the same look of indifference to human suffering, extended a bony wrist with a velvet pin-cushion strapped to it like a watch. He took three and jabbed them malevolently into the material; Milly swore fearfully.

‘Mind where you’re putting those ... pins. What d’you think I am – a bloody yoga?’

‘You MUST stand still, dear; undulation will get you nowhere,’ Hyde-Clarke said.

He stood up breathing heavily and lit a cigarette. There was a long silence broken only by the fitter who was grinding her teeth.

‘What do you think of it now, Mr Newby?’ he said. ‘It’s *you* who have to sell it.’

‘Much worse, Mr Hyde-Clarke.’ (We took a certain ironic pleasure in calling one

another Mister.) ‘Like one of those flagpoles they put up in the Mall when the Queen comes home.’

‘I don’t agree. I think she looks like a Druid in it; one of those terribly runny-nosed old men dressed in sheets at an *Eisteddfod*. How much has it cost up to now?’

I told him.

‘Breathe OUT, dear. Perhaps you’ll look better without any air. I must say there’s nothing more gruesome than white jersey when it goes wrong.’ ‘Dear’ breathed out and the dress fell down to her ankles. She folded her arms across her shoulders and gazed despairingly at the ceiling so that the whites of her eyes showed.

‘There’s no need to behave like a SLUT,’ said Hyde-Clarke. He was already putting on his covert coat. ‘We’ll try again at two. I am going to luncheon.’ He turned to me. ‘Are you coming?’ he said.

We went to ‘luncheon’. In speech Hyde-Clarke was a stickler in the use of certain Edwardianisms, so that beer and sandwiches in a pub became ‘luncheon’ and a journey in his dilapidated sports car ‘travel by motor’.

Today was a sandwich day. As we battled our way up Mount Street through a blizzard, I screeched in his ear that I was abandoning the fashion industry.

‘I saw the directors this morning.’

‘Oh, what did they say?’

‘That they were keeping me on for the time being but that they make no promises for the future.’

‘What did you say?’

‘That I had just had a book accepted for publication and that I am staying on for the time being but I make no promises for the future.’

‘It isn’t true, is it? I can hardly visualize you *writing* anything.’

‘That’s what the publishers said, originally. Now I want to go on an expedition.’

‘Aren’t you rather old?’

‘I’m just as old here as on an expedition. You can’t imagine anything more rigorous than this, can you? In another couple of years I’ll be dyeing my hair.’

‘In another couple of years you won’t have any to dye,’ said Hyde-Clarke.

On the way back from ‘luncheon’, while Hyde-Clarke bought some Scotch ribs in a fashionable butcher’s shop, I went into the Post Office in Mount Street and sent a cable to Hugh Carless, a friend of mine at the British Embassy, Rio de Janeiro.

CAN YOU TRAVEL NURISTAN JUNE?

It had taken me ten years to discover what everyone connected with it had been telling me all along, that the Fashion Industry was not for me.

CHAPTER TWO

Death of a Salesman

The rehearsal was set for four o'clock on Tuesday. At eleven o'clock on Tuesday morning I was called to the telephone. It was the London agent of one of the great New York stores.

'Miss Candlemass is coming to see your Collection this afternoon.'

'We're only having the rehearsal this afternoon. The opening's tomorrow.'

'Miss Candlemass has a very tight schedule.' (I wanted to say I was sorry and hoped that it would be better soon.) 'She's on her way home from Paris. She's open to buy.'

'We'll be very happy if she comes to the rehearsal. It's at four o'clock.'

'She's only free at one-thirty. Make it one-thirty and you'll have to be READY. She doesn't like to be kept waiting.'

He went on to say that Miss Candlemass was only interested in tweed suits and that the material had to be of a precise weight and proof against the corruptions of moth and rust and every other natural and unnatural ailment.

I told the Managing Director. He pretended to be unimpressed. I told the Head of the Boutique, who was not unnaturally furious, We told the workrooms that they had two and a half hours less to make the final adjustments in the suits and one of the skirt-makers had hysterics and had to lie down on the couch reserved for those suffering from female disorders; we told the model girls that they would have to lunch in the canteen, all four had lunch dates; the Commissionaire was warned to man the *porte cochère*; the counting-house was ordered to stand by from one o'clock onwards to be ready to answer any difficult questions about shipping and customs. I set off in a taxi on a circular tour of London cloth merchants to obtain swatches of the sort of material required by Miss Candlemass. Then I came back and re-costed the collection.

By one-thirty the atmosphere was electric. The Commissionaire was in position; the Head of the Boutique was ready to receive Miss Candlemass; the model girls were poised on the threshold of the changing-room with the first suits strapped on, like racehorses under starter's orders. I had just finished heavily annotating three programmes in dollars. The only person not present was Hyde-Clarke.

'I do not propose to change the habits of a lifetime to suit the convenience of a citizen of the United States,' he remarked, and departed to luncheon. He proved to be the only one of us who had correctly appreciated the situation.

At half past three Miss Candlemass arrived. It was quite obvious, without her saying so, which she did incessantly during her brief stay on the premises, that she had been lunching at Claridges.

The party consisted of the Shoe Buyer from the same store, readily identifiable

because he was wearing a pair of brown crocodile shoes; the Agent, normally a man of briskness and decision, now reduced to a state of gibbering sycophancy by the proximity of Miss Candlemass; and Miss Candlemass herself. All three were a uniform, bright shade of puce. I must say in my lunchless state I envied them. The Head of the Boutique, a Scotswoman of character, refused to admit their existence, for which I admired her deeply, so that it was left for me to escort them to their seats.

Miss Candlemass was about nine feet high and hidden behind smoked glasses in mauve frames studded with semi-precious metal. She was like a lath, with very long legs, just too thin to be healthy, but she was very hygienic, smelled good and had fabulous shoes and stockings. With her dark glasses, the general effect was that of being engaged in watching an eclipse of the earth from the moon.

She didn't get as far as the showroom. As she clicked across the hall, she was attracted by the scent counter. She swooped on the largest bottle of scent we put out, a Rajah size flagon as big as a port decanter, and began to croon over it.

'Why don't you take it, Minnie?' said the man in the crocodile shoes, to whom I had already taken a violent dislike.

'Well, I rather think I will. I just adore these people's perfume.' She opened an enormous black gladstone bag and dropped it in.

They sat down and the model girls came streaming in wearing our beautiful new suits. I handed Miss Candlemass the annotated programme and a nicely arranged pattern card with the fruits of my morning's labours neatly arranged on it.

Miss Candlemass wasn't paying any attention. She was well away describing the Duke of Norfolk who had been lunching at the next table, in minute, ecstatic detail, for the benefit of the agent, who, by reason of his status, had been given a seat with his back to the engine.

'What do you think of them, Miss Candlemass?' Sixteen suits had passed in front of her.

'A very lovely family; and so old.'

'Yes, but the suits?'

'Suits. I don't want any suits, do I? I'm filled up with suits. I want to see some dresses.'

'But, surely, Miss Felsheim buys the dresses?'

'Yes, Lulu buys the dresses, but I just adore to see dresses. You know all that lovely perfume makes me feel in the mood for dresses.'

We showed the dresses. Finally *Grand Guignol* hove into sight. Great changes had taken place but it still looked ghastly. Miss Candlemass loved it and swore to tell Miss Felsheim about it. As Milly tore round for the long beat to the changing-room, she passed me two envelopes. One contained the perfectly enormous bill for the scent, beaten out in a white heat of rage by the ladies in the counting-house. The other contained a cable. I read it.

It came from the British Embassy, Rio de Janeiro, and was addressed to 'Eric Rubey, Shammersmith' (I lived in Hammersmith), which would account for the slight delay. How it had arrived at all was a mystery. It bore three words.

OF COURSE, HUGH.

The showroom, already large, suddenly expanded. I understood what Sassoon meant when he wrote, 'Everyone suddenly burst out singing.'

Miss Candlemass was saying, 'I'm afraid you haven't got it, Mr Newby.'

'Splendid, splendid.'

'We did much better with Raymond Beale; he really studies the American market.'

'Mr Beale has since gone bankrupt. Hi-de-ho.'

As they were leaving I handed the bill for the scent to the agent.

'I think Miss Candlemass is expecting that as a *pourboire*.'

'So do I, very strict firm this, tum-te-tum, very businesslike.'

'I don't think she's going to like this, Mr Newby. It may make things more difficult.'

'She can put it down to the shoe department, tra-la-la.'

'I'd better give you a cheque if you insist. You're very cheerful for someone who hasn't had an order. Are you always like this?'

'No, hardly ever. I've just had some really good news.'

He wrote a cheque. When they had gone I gave it to Madame Fifi, the aged *vendeuse* who ran the scent department.

'Good boy,' she croaked, patting my cheek. 'That was a dummy bottle – full of coloured watair.'¹

Hugh Carless, who had replied so opportunely to my cable, entered the Foreign Service in 1950. The son of a retired Indian Civil Servant, himself a man of unusual intellectual attainments, he is, like so many Englishmen, in love with Asia. For a time he was posted to the School of Oriental Studies, from which he emerged with a good knowledge of Persian; then to the Foreign Office, from which he frequently disappeared on visits to industrial plants; once he went down a coalmine. It was even suggested that he should visit a couture house and he approached me with this project, which did seem to have a certain educative value. It at least accorded far more with my pre-conceived ideas of the Higher Diplomacy, which derived from an intensive study of the works of E. Phillips Oppenheim, than the visits to atomic piles and computer factories that the spirit of the age demanded.

His Persian being both fluent and academic, he was lucky to be posted to our Embassy at Kabul where he could actually make use of his talents.

From time to time he wrote me long letters, which came to me by way of the District Postmaster, Peshwaar, which I read with envy in the bedrooms of the provincial hotels I stayed in when I 'travelled'. They were not the sort of letters that third secretaries in the Foreign Office usually write, full of details of the compound, the current indiscretions, the cocktail parties and the people passing through. Instead, they spoke of long, arduous, and to me fascinating, journeys to the interior, undertaken with horses and mysterious beings called Tajik drivers.

It was early in 1952 that he first mentioned Nuristan.

'An Austrian forestry expert, a Herr von Dückelmann, has recently dined with me,' he wrote. 'He has been three or four times in Nuristan. Food there is very scarce, he says, and although he himself is a lean, hardy man he lost twelve pounds in weight during a ten day trip to the interior.'

Later in 1952 he wrote again.

I have just returned from an expedition to the borders of Nuristan, *The Country of Light*. This is the place for you. It lies in the extreme N.E. of Afghanistan, bordering on Chitral and enclosed by the main range of the Hindu-Kush mountains. Until 1895 it was called Kafiristan, *The Country of the Unbelievers*. We didn't get in but we didn't expect to, the passes are all over 15,000 feet and we didn't have permission. So far as I can discover no Englishman has been there since Robertson in 1891. The last Europeans to visit it – von Dückelmann apart – were a German expedition in 1935, and it's possible that no one has visited the north-west corner at all. I went with Bob Dreesen of the American Embassy.

I had heard of Dreesen. He was one of the American party which escaped from the Chinese Communist advance into Turkestan in 1950, evacuating the Consulate from Urumchi by lorry to Kashgar and then crossing the Karakoram Range into India with horses. Hugh went on to speak of a large mountain, nearly 20,000 feet high, that they had attempted to climb and of one of his men being hit on the head by a great stone. At that time it had all seemed infinitely remote, and subsequently Hugh had been transferred to Rio de Janeiro; but the seed had been planted.

Hugh's telegram was followed by a great spate of letters which began to flow into London from Rio. They were all at least four pages long, neatly typed in single spacing – sometimes two would arrive in one day. They showed that he was in a far more advanced state of mental readiness for the journey than I was. It was as if, by some process of mental telepathy, he had been able to anticipate the whole thing.

'Time', he wrote, 'is likely to prove a tricky factor for me. I have been posted at Tehran. I hope to leave here on 12 May and fly home via the United States where I must spend five days in New York with a friend' (the sex of the friend was unspecified but he subsequently married her). 'I could meet you in Stamboul on 20 June. We can be in Kabul on 1 July. I have heard from my Ambassador in Tehran who hopes I will be there by August. He will probably allow late August.'

In answer to my unspoken question about how I was to be in Stamboul on 20 June, he continued.

'I have ordered a vehicle for delivery at Brighton' (why Brighton, I wondered) 'on 25 May. It will be a station wagon with sleeping accommodation for two and will have a wireless set and two extra wheels.' It was typical of Hugh that he could invest a car radio with all the attributes of a transmitting set without actually saying so. 'You will have to leave England on 1 June whether you drive to Stamboul or ship from Genoa or Trieste.'

This was heady stuff but then, quite suddenly, the tone of the letters changed.

I don't think we should make known our ambition to go to Nuristan. Rather I suggest we ask permission to go on a *Climbing Expedition*. There are three very good and unclimbed peaks of about 20,000 feet, all on the marches of Nuristan. One of them, Mir Samir (19,880) I attempted with Bob Dreesen in 1952 (*vide* my letter of 20.9.52). We climbed up to some glaciers and reached a point 3,000 feet below the final pyramid. A minor mishap forced us to return.

He was already deeply involved in the clichés of mountaineering jargon. I re-read his 1952 letter and found that the 'minor mishap' was an amendment. At the time he had written, 'one of the party was hit on the head by a boulder': he didn't say who. He continued remorselessly:

This will leave us free to approach the War Office for equipment [I had rashly mentioned a Territorial

Regiment with which I was associated] and the Everest Foundation for a grant. It will be honest, honourable, and attainable, and if only partially so leaves us free to return to that part NEXT YEAR.

I was filled with profound misgiving. In cold print 20,000 feet does not seem very much. Every year more and more expeditions climb peaks of 25,000 feet, and over. In the Himalayas a mountain of this size is regarded as an absolute pimple, unworthy of serious consideration. But I had never climbed anything. It was true that I had done some hill walking and a certain amount of scrambling in the Dolomites with my wife, but nowhere had we failed to encounter ladies twice our age armed with umbrellas. I had never been anywhere that a rope had been remotely necessary.

It was useless to dissemble any longer. I wrote a letter protesting in the strongest possible terms and received by return a list of equipment that I was to purchase. Many of the objects I had never even heard of – two Horeschowsky ice-axes; three dozen Simond rock and ice pitons; six oval karabiners (2,000 lb. minimum breaking strain); five 100 ft nylon ropes; six abseil slings; Everest goggles; Grivel, ten point crampons; a high altitude tent; an altimeter; Yukon pack frames – the list was an endless one. ‘You will also need boots. I should see about these right away. They may need to be made.’

I told Wanda, my wife.

‘I think he’s insane,’ she said, ‘just dotty. What will happen if you say no?’

‘I already have but he doesn’t take any notice. You see what he says here, if we don’t go as mountaineers we shan’t get permission.’

‘Have you told the Directors you’re leaving?’

‘Yes.’

‘You *are* in a spot. We’re all in a spot. Well, if you’re going I’m going too. I want to see this mountain.’

I wrote to Hugh. Like an echo in a quarry his reply came back, voicing my own thoughts.

I don’t think either of you quite realize what this country is like. The Nuristanis have only recently been converted to Islam; women are less than the dust. *There are no facilities for female tourists.* I refer you to *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, volume on Afghanistan, page 70, line 37 *et seq.* This is somewhat out of date but the situation must be substantially the same today.

I found the book in a creepy transept of the London Library.

‘What does it say?’ asked Wanda. ‘Read it.’

“‘There are several villages in Kafiristan which are places of refuge, where slayers of their fellow tribesmen reside permanently!’”

‘It says “fellow tribesmen” and I thought you were going to Nuristan. This says Kafiristan.’

‘Don’t quibble. It was called Kafiristan until 1895. It goes on; listen to this: “Kafir women are practically slaves, being to all intents and purposes bought and sold as household commodities.”’

‘I’m practically a slave, married to you.’

“‘The young women are mostly immoral. There is little or no ceremony about a Kafir marriage. If a man becomes enamoured of a girl, he sends a friend to her father to ask her price. If the price is agreed upon the man immediately proceeds to the girl’s

house, where a goat is sacrificed and then they are considered to be married. The dead are disposed of in a peculiar manner.”

‘Apart from the goat, it sounds like a London season. Besides he admits it’s all out of date. I’m coming as far as I jolly well can.’

‘What about the children?’

‘The children can stay with my mother in Trieste.’

I was heavily involved on all fronts: with mountaineering outfitters, who oddly enough never fathomed the depths of my ignorance; possibly because they couldn’t conceive of anyone acquiring such a collection of equipment without knowing how to use it: with the Consuls of six countries, and with a Bulgarian with whom I formed an indissoluble entente in a pub off Queen’s Gate. He was a real prototype Bulgarian with a big moustache and lots of black hair.

‘Have a pint of Worthington, Mr Kolarov.’

‘I SHALL like it.’ He threw his head back and it was gone.

‘You like it?’

‘Not strong enough. I shall have a cognac, then I shall have a Worthington, then perhaps another cognac, then perhaps I shall be more gay.’

More soberly with the Foreign Office, who had to obtain permission from the Ambassador at Kabul for Hugh to visit Afghanistan. I was interviewed by a representative of the Asian Desk in the sombre room full of hair sofas and broken umbrellas reserved for persons like myself, intruders from the outside world without credentials. We faced each other across a large mahogany table. Like all such encounters it was not a success.

‘We have sent the Ambassador a long cable.’

‘But that was a month ago.’

‘It is not as simple as you think.’ Without undue subtlety he managed to convey that I never thought at all. ‘You can hardly blame *us* if you leave a request of this kind until the last moment, besides, there is nothing to stop you going to Afghanistan, the cable only refers to Carless.’

‘Grr.’

With the Autumn Collection. It was now the second week in May. I was leaving in a fortnight. To add to my troubles I now received a letter from Hugh. It was extremely alarming. I read it to Hyde-Clarke.

‘These three climbs will certainly be a good second-class mountaineering achievement. But we shall almost certainly need with us an experienced climber.’

‘I thought you said he was an experienced climber.’

‘So I did. Do listen!’

“‘What about Adam Arnold Brown who is now in India as a head of a public school at Begumpet?’” Here Hyde-Clarke chuckled.

‘He was head of the Outward Bound Mountaineering School in Eskdale, and has done a good deal of Alpine climbing. He and I were at Trinity Hall together. I have sent him a cable asking him to join us in Kabul by air for a five-week assault on three 20,000 feet peaks but he may be on leave. His address in London is V/C (WRATH) W.C. 1.’

‘Very appropriate, but what a terrifying cable to receive.’

‘That’s only the beginning. Listen to this.’

‘It is just possible that he may not be able to come. In which case we must try elsewhere. In my opinion the companion we need should not only have climbing ability and leadership but round out our party’s versatility by bringing different qualities, adding them to ours.’

‘It sounds like the formula for some deadly gas.’

‘Will you listen! This isn’t funny to me.’

‘Perhaps he would be a Welsh miner, or a biologist, or a young Scots doctor. Someone from quite another background, bringing another point of view ...’

‘For the first time,’ said Hyde-Clarke, ‘I’m beginning to be just a little bit jealous. I’d love to listen to you all lying on top of one another in one of those inadequate little tents, seeing one another’s points of view.’

‘Why don’t you come too? I don’t see why Hugh should be the only one to invite his friends.’

‘All proper expeditions seem to have a faithful administrative officer, who toils through the night to get everyone and everything off from London on time and then is forgotten.’

‘I like the part about being forgotten.’

‘I know how busy you must be but couldn’t you find one?’

‘With a ginger moustache and a foul pipe ...’

‘Captain Foulough?’

‘Why don’t you write to Beachcomber?’

We pursued this fantasy happily for some time.

“‘Have you approached the Everest Foundation? They are there to assist small parties such as ours.’”

‘Not quite like yours, I should have thought,’ said Hyde-Clarke. ‘I should try the Oxford Group. Ring up Brown’s Hotel.’

I received only one more letter before Hugh left Rio.

If you want to take a Folboat you could make the passage down the Kabul River from Jalalabad, through the frontier gorge in Mahsud Territory, just north of the Khyber, past Peshawar and Nowshera to Attock where the waters of the Kabul and Indus rivers flow together through a magnificent defile. There on the cliffs Jelal ud Din, the young ruler of Bokhara and Samarqand, made a last stand against the Mongol hordes and, having lost the day, galloped his horse over the cliffs, which as far as I can remember are 150 feet high, swam the river, went to Delhi and carved out another kingdom.

[1](#). Fortunately this was merely a *plaisanterie*.

CHAPTER THREE

Birth of a Mountain Climber

When Hugh arrived from New York ten days later I went to meet him at London Airport. Sitting in those sheds on the north side which still, twelve years after the war, gave the incoming traveller the feeling that he was entering a beleaguered fortress, I wondered what surprises he had in store for me.

His first words after we had greeted one another were to ask if there was any news from Arnold Brown.

‘Not a thing.’

‘That’s bad,’ he said.

‘It’s not so disastrous. After all, you have done some climbing. I’ll soon pick it up. We’ll just have to be careful.’

He looked pale. I put it down to the journey. Then he said: ‘You know I’ve never done any *real* climbing.’

It took me some time to assimilate this.

‘But all that stuff about the mountain. You and Dreesen ...’

‘Well, that was more or less a reconnaissance.’

‘But all this gear. How did you know what to order?’

‘I’ve been doing a lot of reading.’

‘But you said you had porters.’

‘Not porters – drivers. It’s not like the Himalayas. There aren’t any “tigers” in Afghanistan. No one knows anything about mountaineering.’

There was a long silence as we drove down the Great West Road.

‘Perhaps we should postpone it for a year,’ he said.

‘Ha-ha. I’ve just given up my job!’

Hugh stuck out his jaw. Normally a determined-looking man, the effect was almost overwhelming.

‘There’s nothing for it,’ he said. ‘We must have some lessons.’

Wanda and I were leaving England for Istanbul on 1 June. Hugh and I had just four days to learn about climbing.

The following night after some brisk telephoning we left for Wales to learn about climbing, in the brand new station wagon Hugh had ordered by post from South America. He had gone to Brighton to fetch it. Painted in light tropical colours it had proved to be rather conspicuous in Hammersmith. Soon it had been covered with swarms of little boys and girls whose mothers stood with folded arms silently regarding it.

We had removed all the furniture from the drawing-room to make room for the equipment and stores. Our three-piece suite was standing in the garden under a

tarpaulin. The drawing-room looked like the quartermaster's store of some clandestine force. It was obvious that Hugh was deeply impressed.

'How long have you been living like this?'

'Ever since we can remember. It's not all here yet. There's still the food.'

'What food?' He looked quite alarmed.

'Six cases of Army ration, compo. in fibre boxes. It's arriving tomorrow.'

'We can always leave it in England. I don't know about you but food doesn't interest me. We can always live off the country.'

I remembered von Dückelmann, that hardy Austrian forester without an ounce of spare flesh on him, who had lost twelve pounds in a fortnight in Nuristan.

'Whatever else we leave behind it won't be the food.'

'Well, I suppose we can always give it away.' He sounded almost shocked, as if for the first time he had detected in me a grave moral defect. It was an historic moment.

With unconcealed joy my wife watched us load some of the mountaineering equipment into the machine.

'We'd better not take all of it,' said Hugh. 'They might wonder why we've got so much stuff if we don't know how to use it.'

Over the last weeks the same thought had occurred to me constantly.

'What about the tent?'

The tent had arrived that morning. It had been described to me by the makers as being suitable for what they called 'the final assault'. With its sewn-in ground-sheet, special flaps so that it could be weighed down with boulders, it convinced me, more than any other single item of equipment, that we were going, as the books have it, 'high'. It had been specially constructed for the curious climatic conditions we were likely to encounter in the Hindu Kush.

'I shouldn't take *that*, if I were you,' said my wife with sinister emphasis. 'The children tried to put it up in the garden after lunch. Whoever made it forgot to make holes for the poles.'

'Are you sure?'

'Quite sure. You know it's got those poles shaped like a V, that you slip into a sort of pocket in the material. Well, they haven't made any pockets, so you can't put it up.'

'It's lucky you found out. We should have looked pretty silly on Mir Samir.'

'You're going to look pretty silly at any rate. I shouldn't be surprised if they've done the same thing to your sleeping-bags.'

'Have you telephoned the makers?'

'That's no use. If you send it back to them, you'll never see it again. I've sent for the little woman who makes my dresses. She's coming tomorrow morning.'

We continued to discuss what we should take to Wales.

'I should take your Folboat,' said Hugh. 'There's bound to be a lake near the inn. It will be a good chance of testing it BEFORE YOU PASS THROUGH THE GORGES. The current is tremendously swift.'

I had never had any intention of being either drowned or ritually mutilated in Mahsud Territory. I told him that I hadn't got a Folboat.

'I was almost certain I wrote to you about getting a Folboat. It's a pity. There's not much time now.'