

PUFFIN BOOKS
THE EXPLOITS OF PROFESSOR SHONKU
THE UNICORN EXPEDITION

Satyajit Ray (1921–92) was one of the greatest filmmakers of his time, renowned for films like *Pather Panchali*, *Charulata*, *Aranyer Din Ratri* and *Ghare Baire*. He was awarded the Oscar for Lifetime Achievement by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 1992, and in the same year, was also honoured with the Bharat Ratna.

Ray was also a writer of repute, and his short stories, novellas, poems and articles, written in Bengali, have been immensely popular ever since they first began to appear in the children's magazine *Sandesh* in 1961. Among his most famous creations are the master sleuth Feluda and the scientist Professor Shonku.

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THE EXPLOITS OF PROFESSOR SHONKU
THE UNICORN EXPEDITION
AND OTHER STORIES

Satyajit Ray

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Introduction

A middle-aged scientist. Somewhat eccentric. Lives very quietly in small-town Giridih with a cat called Newton and a servant called Prahlad. In his laboratory, his experiments result in inventions that rock international scientific circles. Some love and admire him. Others hate and envy him. The only person who remains completely unimpressed by his scientific prowess is his neighbour, Avinash Babu.

This scientist is Professor Trilokeshwar Shonku, whose exploits have held readers spellbound for more than forty years. Shonku does more than invent new things. He travels—not just by land, water and sky, but also through time. In fact, the very first Shonku story that appeared in 1961 (in the newly revived *Sandesh* magazine) was called 'The Diary of a Space Traveller'. It was from his diary—a red notebook which came down to earth with a meteorite—that one first learnt of his extraordinary adventures. More diaries were

subsequently found in his house, and so the stories continued until Shonku's creator died in 1992.

In those thirty-one years, nearly forty stories appeared. They took the Bengali literary world by storm. Until then, science fiction had rarely been written for children in Bengal. Why, one might wonder, did Satyajit Ray think of writing it? After all, he did not remain a student of science once he had left school.

When this question was put to Ray in an interview, he simply replied, 'I was always interested in science fiction.' His father (Sukumar Ray) and grandfather (Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury) were both men of science, in addition to being writers, artists and composers. Satyajit had grown up reading the works of Jules Verne, H.G. Wells and Conan Doyle, and had been deeply impressed and influenced by their writing.

What is interesting is that, at first, Shonku was intended to be a comic character. He was based on the character Heshoram, created by Sukumar Ray in his well-known spoof of Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*. Sukumar called it *Heshoram Husbiarer Diary*. In it, Professor Challenger became Heshoram, the intrepid traveller who discovered a strange land inhabited by equally strange creatures. Professor Shonku took his cue from him. Ray once described Shonku as a 'mild-mannered Challenger'. In due course, however, Shonku became serious business, although there are unmistakable touches of humour in virtually every story.

The early stories bear clear evidence of the light-hearted, 'comic' aspects of both Shonku and Avinash Babu. The latter's role initially was simply to act as a foil to Shonku, but soon he became an important and

useful ally. In the stories that feature in this collection, the two men step out of Giridih and travel to places where no man has ever travelled before. As a matter of fact, none of these stories are set in Giridih. 'Professor Shonku and the Radiant Fish' sees them diving into the deep sea; then they roam the jungles of Africa in 'Professor Shonku and the Gorillas', and find themselves in a strange and wonderful island ('Professor Shonku and the Mysterious Island') that lures and beckons . . . who knows to what end? 'The Unicorn Expedition' is arguably the best known of their adventures together that takes them to Tibet and beyond. The remaining three stories do not include Avinash Babu, but in each of them Shonku travels abroad. His interaction with the international world of science brings not just new adventure, but also piercing insight into human behaviour.

A major reason why the Shonku stories have always remained popular is simply that they bring the world outside closer to home, and Ray's young readers can learn a great deal about foreign lands and foreign cultures. The focus never shifts from the main plot, the action never loses its pace, yet, snippets of information are dropped and absorbed, lessons are taught—subtly and obliquely—to show what greed and malice can do to a man, and how important it is to know the difference between right and wrong.

It is interesting that the first works of Ray that appeared in English translation were neither collections of his short stories nor any of his immensely successful mystery stories featuring the detective Feluda. They were a handful of Shonku stories (*Bravo! Professor*

INTRODUCTION

Shonku) translated by Kathleen M. O'Connell in 1983 for Rupa. In 1987 Ray himself did a few more for Secker and Warburg (*Stories*); and in 1994 came *The Incredible Adventures of Professor Shonku*, translated by Surabhi Banerjee and published by Penguin India. Two of Ray's translations of *Shonku* feature in this book; the others are all new.

More than forty years after his maiden appearance in *Sandesh*, Professor *Shonku* now faces a completely new audience that has been exposed, to a far greater measure, to the entire genre of science fiction—not just in print but also on the silver screen. Unlike the first generation of readers, those who will read these stories have seen films and television programmes like *ET*, *Star Trek*, *Jurassic Park*, *The X-Files* and *Taken*. Their expectations will be entirely different. How will they find these stories? Laughably simple? Hopelessly dated? Mildly amusing? Thoroughly enjoyable? Fascinating?

It would be useless to speculate here. Only time will answer that question. But one thing can be said for sure. The magic of Ray's lucid language, elegant style, succinct and graphic descriptions, gentle yet absurd humour and—above all—his ability to understand children has never failed before. It cannot fail now.

My thanks go once again to Bijoya and Sandip Ray for their continued affection and encouragement, and to Penguin India for their support and cooperation.

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Gopa Majumdar

THE UNICORN EXPEDITION

1 July

Exciting news. A diary belonging to Charles Willard has been found. Only a year ago, while on his way back from Tibet, this English explorer was waylaid by a gang of Khampa robbers who made off with most of his belongings. By a supreme effort, Willard was able to reach the town of Almora in India, in a state of near collapse. He died there soon after. All this I had read in the papers. Today, I received a letter from London from my geologist friend Jeremy Saunders. He says that among the few personal effects that Willard left behind, was a diary which is now in Saunders's possession. The diary mentions a most unusual event. Knowing of my great interest in Tibet and the Tibetan language, Saunders has passed the information on to me. Here is an extract from his letter:

You know that Willard had been an old friend of mine. I called on his widow Edwina a couple of days back. She mentioned that among Willard's possessions sent to her from Almora was a diary. I borrowed the diary from her. Unfortunately, much of the writing has been washed away, but the very last entry is quite legible. It records an incident which took place on 19 March. Only two lines describe it: 'saw a herd of unicorns today. I write this in full possession of my senses.' Seeing a storm coming up, Willard had stopped writing at this point. I am most curious to know what you feel about the extraordinary statement.

Willard had been careful to assert that he was in his right senses, because like the dragon of the east and the west, the unicorn has been known as a product of human imagination. But I have some hesitation in using the word imagination. I have a book open before me on my desk, which is about the ancient civilization of Mohenjodaro. Apart from pottery, toys, figurines and ornaments, diggings at Mohenjodaro have revealed a large number of rectangular clay and ivory seals bearing carvings of, amongst other things, animals such as elephants, tigers, bulls and rhinoceroses. In addition to these familiar animals, there are representations of a beast unknown to us. It is shown as a bull-like creature with a single curved horn growing out of its forehead. Archaeologists have taken it to be a creature of fantasy, although I see no point in depicting an imaginary creature, when all the others shown are real.

There is another reason for thinking that the unicorn may not, after all, be a fantastic animal. Two thousand years ago, the Roman scholar Pliny clearly stated in his famous treatise on animals, that in India there exist cows and donkeys with a single horn. Aristotle, too, maintained that there were unicorns in India. Would it be wrong to conclude from this, that in India there did exist in ancient times, a species of unicorn which became extinct here, but which still survives in some parts of Tibet? What if Willard had accidentally stumbled upon a herd of them? It is true that in the last 200 years many foreign explorers have visited Tibet but none has mentioned the unicorn. But what does that prove? There are still many unexplored regions in Tibet. Who knows what species of animal may exist there?

I must pass my thoughts on to Saunders.

15 July

Here is Saunders's reply to my letter:

Dear Shonku,
Thanks for your letter. I have managed to decipher some of Willard's entries towards the end of his diary, and am even more astonished. On 16 March he writes: 'Today I flew with the two-hundred-year-old lama.' What on earth does he mean? Flying in an aeroplane? That sounds most unlikely when Tibet lacks even railways. Does he mean flying without the aid of an aircraft? Like a bird? But is such a thing possible? Such a statement raises doubts about Willard's sanity. And yet the doctor—Major

Horton—who examined Willard in Almora categorically stated that Willard's brain had not been affected. The entry of 13 March mentions a monastery called Thokchum-Gompa. According to Willard: 'A wonderful monastery. No European has ever been here before.' Have you heard of this monastery? Anyway, the upshot is that Willard's diary has fired me with a great impulse to visit Tibet. My German friend Wilhelm Kroll is also enthusiastic. He has been particularly intrigued by the mention of the flying lama. I suppose you know that Kroll has done important research on magic and witchcraft. He is also an excellent mountaineer. It goes without saying that it would be wonderful if you too could come with us. Let me know what you decide.

With best wishes,
Yours,
Jeremy Saunders

A flying lama! I have read the autobiography of the Tibetan saint Milarepa. He was able to perform supernatural feats by Tantra and yogic meditation. One of the feats he became adept at was flying. Did Willard fly with the help of such a yogi?

I haven't been to Tibet; but I have read about it and learned the Tibetan language. Willard's diary has raised my curiosity to a high pitch. That is why I'm thinking of joining Saunders's party. It would actually help them if I did, because I have inventions of mine which would

considerably reduce the strain of such a journey.

27 July

My friend and neighbour Avinash Babu threw up his hands when I told him I was going to Tibet. Having accompanied me twice on my trips abroad, his wanderlust has been aroused. I had to tell him about the hazards of such a journey. He replied, 'So what? What more could a devout Hindu like me want, than to have a glimpse of Lord Shiva's own mountain Kailash?' Although Avinash Babu knew about Kailash, he didn't know about the holy lake at its foot. 'What!' he exclaimed, 'Lake Mansarovar is in Tibet? I always thought it was in Kashmir.'

I didn't mention the unicorn and the flying lama to Avinash Babu because I have doubts about them, but when I mentioned the Khampa bandits, he calmly said, 'Don't worry, Lord Shiva will protect you from harm.'

We have decided to start our journey from Kathgodam. I have sent a wire to Saunders saying that I shall arrive in Kathgodam on 1 August. We will, of course, have to travel light. When I told this to Avinash Babu, he said, 'What about my pillows? I can't sleep without them.' I have promised to make him a couple of inflatable ones. For high altitude wear, I'm taking vests made of Shanklon fabric. In case anyone has breathing trouble, we are taking small portable oxygen cylinders. In all, the luggage shouldn't weigh more than 10 kg. We can buy suitable footwear on the way in Almora.

It has been quite stuffy here these last few days. Possibly a portent of heavy rains. Once we cross over into Tibet, we shall be out of reach of the monsoon.

10 August, Garbayang

I haven't had any time for my diary these last few days. We left Kathgodam on the third, by taxi for Almora. Thereafter we have travelled 150 miles on horseback to reach Garbayang yesterday evening.

Garbayang is a Bhutiya village at an altitude of 10,000 feet. We are still in India. To our east runs the river Kali. Across the river one can see the dense pine forests of Nepal. Twenty miles to the north, one has to negotiate a pass in order to reach Lipudhura. Beyond Lipudhura is Tibet.

Mount Kailash and the Lake Mansarovar are about forty miles from the Tibetan border. Not a great distance, but the terrain is difficult and the cold bitter. Besides, there are other unforeseen hazards which have discouraged ninety-nine per cent of Indians from venturing into this region. And yet, the landscape we have passed through even at this early stage, gives a foretaste of the grandeur that lies ahead.

Let me describe our party now. Besides Saunders and Kroll, a third European has joined us. His name is Ivan Markovitch; he is a Russian by birth but lives in Poland. He speaks English quite well, but with an accent. He is the youngest in our group, and the tallest. He has blue eyes, a headful of unruly brown hair, thick eyebrows and a drooping moustache. We met him in Almora. He was also bound for Tibet, the reason being sheer wanderlust. He joined our party as soon as he learnt that we were also headed the same way. He seems a reasonably decent individual, although I have noticed that he seldom smiles, and even when he does, his lips curl up but his eyes remain unsmiling: a sure sign of a

closed mind, which is probably why Kroll has taken a dislike to him.

Wilhelm Kroll is a round, ruddy individual no taller than five foot six inches, and with no hair on his head except for a few golden tufts about the ears. It is impossible to guess by looking at him, that he has climbed the Matterhorn four times. A highly qualified anthropologist, Kroll makes no secret of his deep interest in the occult. He fully believes that the unicorn and flying lamas may well exist in Tibet. I have noticed that Kroll has a habit of lapsing into absentmindedness, so that you have to call him thrice before he answers.

Saunders is five years younger than me. He is a well-built handsome man with intelligent blue eyes and a broad forehead. He has read about a dozen books on Tibet in the last couple of weeks, to prepare himself for the journey. He doesn't believe in magic or yogic powers; even reading about Tibet hasn't converted him. There is nothing he relishes more than a lively argument with Kroll, and he indulges in it at every opportunity.

My neighbour Avinash Babu, has come for the sole purpose of pilgrimage. He is now seated a few yards away from us, sipping Tibetan tea from a copper bowl, with his eyes on a yak tethered to a nearby pole. Only this morning he remarked, 'All our lives we have seen the yak's tail at the end of a silver handle being waved at religious ceremonies. Now, for the first time, I see where it really belongs.' Actually, it is the tail of the white yak which is used in rituals. The ones here are mostly black. They are invaluable as carriers of luggage. We are taking with us four yaks, six ponies and eight porters.

Avinash Babu has warned me that I shouldn't expect him to hobnob with my foreign friends. 'You may know sixty-four languages; I know only one. I can say "good morning" and "good evening" all right; and if one of them should slip and fall into an abyss I could even say "goodbye". But that is all. You can tell them I am one of those Indian sadhus who observe a vow of silence, and my only purpose in coming is pilgrimage.'

The three Europeans and myself are now seated in front of a Bhutiya shop, having our breakfast of tea and sampa. Sampa is a ball of ground wheat which you soak in tea or water and eat. The tea is not like our Indian tea at all. It comes from China and is known as brick tea. Instead of milk and sugar, this tea is taken with butter and salt. It is poured into a cylindrical bamboo cup and stirred with a bamboo stump, till the three ingredients are thoroughly mixed. Tibetans drink it at least thirty times a day. They also eat the meat of goat and yak. We are carrying with us a large stock of rice, lentils, vegetables, coffee and tinned food. If and when we run out of stock, we shall have to fall back on my nutriment pills.

Having now read Willard's diary myself, my curiosity has increased a hundredfold. A group of Tibetan wool merchants has arrived here. I asked one of them about unicorns. He only grinned at me as if I was a child asking a stupid question. When asked about flying lamas, he said all lamas could fly. I don't think anything will come out of talking to these people. We doubt if we will have Willard's luck, but we're all hoping that we will. In his entry for 11 March, Willard talks about a place whose name he doesn't mention, but

whose geographical position he gives as Lat. 33°3' N and Long. 84° E. The map shows it to be roughly 100 miles north-east of Mount Kailash in a region called Chang Thang. This is supposed to be a particularly hostile terrain, quite bereft of vegetation. Some nomadic tribes pass through it once in a while, but no one lives there. The place is also known for blizzards which bears through seven layers of woollens to freeze one's bones.

We are prepared to put up with everything, provided we achieve our goal. Avinash Babu says, 'You mustn't worry. My faith in the Lord of Mount Kailash will guarantee the success of your mission.'

14 August, Purang Valley

We have set up camp beside a torrential river at an altitude of about 12,000 feet. It is afternoon now, and the sun is about to go down behind the high, snow-clad mountains which surround us, making the atmosphere chillier by the minute. Surprisingly enough, although the nights here can be extremely cold, in the daytime the temperature often rises to ninety degrees Fahrenheit.

Since I knew we would be climbing high, I reminded everyone that we were carrying oxygen. Saunders and Avinash Babu needed it. Kroll didn't, since he was from the mountain resort of Meiningen, and therefore used to heights.

Markovitch too said he was used to heights. He was to realize later that he had done something very foolish. We were proceeding quite peacefully with five of us up front on our ponies, followed by our porters and the yaks loaded with our baggage. As we crossed

the Gurup-la pass at 16,000 feet, we heard a strange noise above the clatter of hooves and the whistling of the wind. Someone amongst us had broken out in wild laughter.

I looked around and realized that the laughter was emanating from the man at the head of the group, Ivan Markovitch. We all stopped.

Markovitch had pulled up too. He now dismounted, still laughing, and stood swaying perilously close to the edge of the road which dropped 2,000 feet into a gorge. If he went over, Avinash Babu would surely have an opportunity to say 'goodbye'.

Saunders, Kroll and myself dismounted and hurried towards Markovitch. The man's eyes looked glazed and, like his laughter, suggested a mind bereft of sense. It was clear what had happened. Above 12,000 feet, the oxygen content in the atmosphere begins to thin. This causes some people to feel no more than a slight discomfort in breathing, others faint, or show symptoms of insanity by weeping or laughing hysterically. Markovitch belonged to the last category. Our porters had probably never encountered such an exhibition before, for they too had started to laugh. The mountains around, now echoed with the laughter of nine men.

Kroll suddenly came up to me and said, 'What about giving him a sock on the jaw?'

I was bewildered. 'Why sock him?' I asked. 'It is lack of oxygen which is making him laugh like that.'

'Precisely,' said Kroll. 'You can't make him take any oxygen in this state. If I knock him out, you can force it down his nose.'

Before I could answer him, Kroll had turned round

and delivered a mighty blow on the man's jaw. I got busy with the medication, and in ten minutes Markovitch had regained consciousness. He looked about with a puzzled expression, rubbed his jaw, and got back onto his pony without any more fuss. We resumed our journey.

Later, sitting around the fire, we fell to talking about fantastic creatures. What strange beings the human imagination had concocted in past ages! Of course, some scholars say that they are not wholly imaginary. Remnants of the memory of creatures seen in pre-historic times are said to persist for ages in the collective human consciousness. By adding his imagination to such shreds of memory, man creates new species. Perhaps the pterodactyl and the aepyornis are really the progenitors of our mythical Garuda and Jatayu, and the Roc in the tale of Sinbad, a giant bird whose young fed on elephants. In the folk tales of Egypt, one reads of the bird Ti-Bennu which became the Phoenix of later European myths. Then there is the dragon which appears both in the myths of the East and the West. The difference is that the dragon of Western mythology is a malignant demon, while that of the Far East is a benevolent god.

It was I who finally changed the subject and raised the question of Markovitch, who was away resting in his tent. We hadn't yet told him the real reason for our expedition; it was my feeling that we should tell him now. We should also make clear to him the terrible hazards of the Chang Thang region. If, after knowing the risks involved he still wants to come with us, then let him do so. If not, he should either branch off on his

own or get back to India.

'You're right,' said Kroll. 'Why should we burden ourselves with someone who can't even mix properly? Let's have it out with him right now.'

The three of us went into Markovitch's tent. He was sitting crouching on the far side, dimly visible in the half-light. Without beating about the bush, Saunders told him about Willard's diary and our search for the unicorn. Even before he had finished, Markovitch blurted out, 'Unicorns? Why, I have seen dozens of unicorns. Even today I saw one. Didn't you see it?'

We exchanged glances. It didn't seem as if Markovitch was being facetious. Kroll left the tent humming a German tune. He had obviously given up Markovitch as a bad case. Now the two of us came out too. Kroll lit his pipe and said in a mocking tone, 'You don't think it's lack of oxygen that makes him talk like that, do you?' Saunders and I were both silent. 'I haven't the slightest doubt that we have a loony in our midst,' said Kroll, and walked off with his camera towards a large boulder, which had the Tibetan mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum* inscribed on it.

Is Markovitch really a madman? Or is he just pretending? I have an uneasy feeling in my mind.

Avinash Babu seems to be the least worried person in our group. I have known him for forty years. I never suspected that he had any imagination. He has always pooh-poohed my scientific experiments and my momentous inventions have never produced any admiration or wonder in his mind. But the trips abroad that he made with me—once to Africa and once across the Pacific—seem to have brought about a change in

him. There is a saying that travel broadens the mind. This certainly has been more than true in the case of Avinash Babu. Today he came up to me and whispered in my ears an old poem about Mount Kailash, which compares it with a million moons and describes it as the home of heavenly beings. It is clear that he still believes the age-old legends about Kailash. I'm afraid he will be disappointed when he comes face-to-face with the real thing. Just now, he is observing the porters cooking their meal; they're going to have wild goat for dinner.

In the far distance, I can see a group of men on horseback coming down the path which we shall take tomorrow. Till a little while ago, the group had seemed like a conglomeration of moving dots. Now I can see them clearly. The sight of them seems to have excited our porters. Who are those people?

The temperature is dropping. We can't stay out much longer.

14 August, 7 p.m.

A momentous event took place a little while ago.

The group we had seen approaching was a gang of Khampa robbers. We now have proof that this was the very group which waylaid Willard.

There were twenty-two men on horseback, everyone with swords and daggers tucked in their belts around their thick tunics, and old-fashioned blunderbusses slung across their shoulders. Besides the men and horses, there were five woolly Tibetan dogs.

When the gang was about a hundred yards away

from us, two of our porters, Rabsang and Tundup, rushed up to us and said, 'Please bring out all your weapons, sir.' I asked him if we were supposed to turn them over to the bandits. 'No, no!' said Rabsang, 'They have great respect for foreign weapons. If you don't bring them out, they will just run away with everything we have.'

We had three firearms with us—an Enfield and two Austrian Mannlichers. Besides, I had my own invention—the Stun-gun. This was actually a pistol which produced a 'ping' instead of a 'bang' when the trigger was pressed, and injected a needle which instantly stunned the victim. Saunders and Kroll brought out their guns from the tent. There was no sign of Markovitch. I had to keep my hands free in case the Stun-gun was needed, and yet three guns in the hands of two men seemed odd, so I handed the third to Avinash Babu. He first made a show of protest, then took the gun, turned his back on the bandits and stood facing the river, ramrod straight.

The bandits arrived. The huge shaggy dogs started barking at us as if they were bandits too. These gangs usually raid the encampments of the nomads and make off with all their belongings. To turn against them without proper arms, means certain death. It is not easy to run these gangs to ground in the wild, snow-bound country, but when the Tibetan police do get their hands on them, the robbers have their heads and right hands chopped off and sent to Lhasa. I have also heard that the bandits are so afraid of retribution in hell that after each raid they undergo a spell of absolution by either circumambulating Mount Kailash, or climbing a cliff and loudly proclaiming their misdeeds for all the world to hear.

The bandit in front seemed to be the leader. A snub nose, ringed ears, and a deeply lined face belied his youth. His slit eyes now regarded the four of us with deep suspicion. The others held on to their reins, obviously waiting for the word from their chief.

Now the chief dismounted, strode up to Kroll and said in a thick voice: 'Peling?' Peling is the Tibetan word for a European. I answered for Kroll. 'Yes', I said, 'Peling.' But how did he guess Kroll was a European?

The deep croak of a rook could be heard from somewhere. Apart from that, the only sound came from the swiftly flowing river. The bandit went up to Avinash Babu. I'm not sure why my friend thought fit to bow in greeting to the robber, but it was obvious that the latter found the gesture highly comic. He gave a sharp prod to the butt of the gun in Avinash Babu's hand and burst into an unseemly guffaw.

I was now alarmed to see Kroll slowly raising his gun towards the bandit, the veins in his forehead standing out in reckless rage. I was forced to restrain him with a sharp gesture. Meanwhile Saunders had moved up to my side. 'They have an Enfield too,' he whispered through clenched teeth.

I turned towards the bandits and found that one of them, a particularly fierce-looking individual, was indeed carrying an Enfield. We know from Willard's diary that he had an Enfield. The gun wasn't among his personal effects when he came to Almora. That and the fact that the chief could recognize a European, made it obvious that this was the gang that had plagued Willard.

But there was nothing that we could do about it.

The gang far outnumbered us. I could see that they were just biding their time before getting down to the serious business of plunder.

I was wondering how long this cat-and-mouse game was to go on when a diversion occurred. Markovitch suddenly emerged from his tent, staggered towards the gang and pointing with outstretched arms at the Tibetan dogs, cried out jubilantly, 'Unicorns! Unicorns!'

At this, one of the huge mastiffs suddenly took a menacing stance and with a nasty growl leaped at Markovitch.

But before he could reach his target he had dropped down on the ground senseless. The reason for this was, of course, my pistol. My right hand had for some time been gripped around its butt in my pocket. At the crucial moment the hand had come out and performed the conjuring trick.

Markovitch suddenly seemed to lose grip on himself and collapsed on the ground. Kroll and Saunders lifted him up between them and bore him back into his tent.

And the bandits? There was an incredible transformation in them. Some of them dismounted and were down on their knees, while others who were still on their ponies made repeated gestures of obeisance towards me. The chief too had in the meantime, thought it prudent to get back on his mount. That the combined threat of twenty-two bandits would vanish so quickly, I had never imagined.

I approached the man with the Enfield and said, 'Either you hand over that gun or I'll make the whole lot of you suffer the fate of the dog.' He immediately offered the gun to me with shaking hands. I now

addressed the whole gang: 'You took this gun from a peling, I want you to turn over to me whatever else you took from him.'

Within a minute various objects were produced from the bag of the robbers—two tins of sausages, a Gillette safety-razor, a mirror, a pair of field-glasses, a torn map of Tibet, an Omega watch and a leather bag. I opened the bag and found in it two standard books on Tibet by Morecraft and Tiffenthaler, both bearing Willard's name in his own handwriting.

Having confiscated the objects, I was about to command the bandits to go away, when they themselves turned tail and, in the gathering dusk, disappeared the way they came.

I now relieved Avinash Babu of the Mannlicher and went to see how Markovitch was faring.

He was lying on a rug on the ground with his eyes closed. As I flashed my torch on his face, he slowly opened them. One look at his pupils told me that he was under the influence of some potent drug, perhaps the source of his unicorns. Drugs like cocaine, heroin and morphine may well lead to hallucinations. An addict like Markovitch would be a great handicap to our expedition. Either we get rid of him or of his addiction.

15 August, 7 a.m.

When last night Markovitch went without dinner even when we urged him to join us, I was even more convinced about his addiction. Drugs tend to deaden one's appetite. When I told Saunders, he blew his top. 'He must be questioned at once,' he insisted. Kroll said 'You two are too gentlemanly. Let me do the questioning.'

After dinner, Kroll dragged Markovitch out of his tent and taking him by the scruff of his neck, hissed into his ears: 'Come on, out with your drugs, or we'll bury you in the snow and leave you to rot. No one will ever know.'

I could see that, although groggy, Markovitch had turned pale. He wriggled himself free, put his hand in his valise and pulled out a hairbrush which he handed to Kroll. At first I thought this was another symptom of the Russian's addiction; but Kroll could, with his German astuteness, immediately make out that Markovitch had given up the real thing. With a little pressure, the wooden back of the brush opened like a lid, revealing a store of white powdered cocaine. In a few moments the powder had become part of the Himalayan atmosphere.

That Markovitch's craving too had disappeared with the cocaine was made clear when this morning at breakfast, the Russian helped himself to four glasses of tea, nearly a pound of goat's meat, and a considerable amount of sampa.

11 August, beyond Sangchan

It is two-thirty in the afternoon now. We are resting outside a monastery on the way to Lake Mansarovar. We have passed many monasteries on the way, each of them built on a cliff and each affording a splendid view of the mountains. One must admit that the lamas have a fine sense of atmosphere.

To the north stands the proud peak of Guria Mandhata, 25,000 feet high. Beside this, many other snow peaks can be seen from here. A little further on,

are the great lake and Mount Kailash, the goals for which Avinash Babu is gamely striving.

Needless to say, no sight of unicorns so far. Animals can be seen frequently, but they consist of wild goats, sheep, donkeys and yaks. Occasionally one can see a hare or a field rat. We know there are deer and hare, but we haven't seen any yet. Last night hyenas were prowling near our camp; I could see their glowing eyes in the light of my torch.

Saunders has almost given up hope. He now believes that Willard too was under the influence of drugs; that flying lamas and unicorns were both drug-induced hallucinations. He seems to forget that we had met Major Horton at Almora, and seen his report concerning Willard. There was no mention of drugs in that.

There is only a single lama living in the monastery outside which we are now resting. We met him a little while ago. A strange experience. We had no intention of going into the monastery; but when Rabsang told us about the solitary lama, and that he hadn't spoken for fifty years, our curiosity was aroused. We climbed the hundred steps from the road and entered the sacred building.

Built of granite, the monastery was dark and clammy inside. In the main hall, were seven or eight Buddha statuettes ranged on a shelf at the back. At least three were made of solid gold. A lamp was burning on the shelf. Alongside was a pot with a dollop of butter in it. This, and not oil, was used to light the lamps in the monasteries. Avinash Babu pointed to an object on the shelf and said, 'I'm sure that is used for tantric rites.' It

was a human skull.

I said, 'Not only that; lamas are known to drink tea from such skulls.' Hearing this Avinash Babu gave a slight shiver.

The mute lama was in a small room on the eastern wing of the monastery. He sat cross-legged on the floor beside a small window, slowly and patiently turning his prayer-wheel—a lean, shaven-headed man whose arms and legs had grown unusually thin from sitting down for hours at a stretch. One by one, we paid our respects to him. He gave each one of us a red thread as a sign of benediction.

We sat on a low bench facing him while he looked expectantly at us. Since the lama wouldn't speak, we should have to put questions which could be answered in sign language. I went straight to the crucial question.

'Are there any unicorns in Tibet?'

The lama kept smiling at us for a minute or so. Five pairs of eyes were tensely fixed on him. Now the lama moved his head up and down—once, twice, three times. In other words, there were. But then he moved his head again, this time from side to side, meaning there weren't.

What kind of an answer was that? Could it mean that there were unicorns at one time, but not any more? Kroll turned to me and whispered, 'Ask him where they are.' Markovitch too was all attention.

I put the question Kroll had suggested. In reply, the lama raised his shrivelled left hand and pointed towards north-west. That was the direction we were going—to Chang Thang beyond Mount Kailash. I now felt impelled to put a third question.

'You are a yogi; you can see into the future. Please tell us if we will be able to see this wonderful creature.'

The lama again smiled and moved his head up and down three times.

Kroll was now in the throes of intense excitement. He said quite loudly in English, 'Ask him if he knows about flying lamas.'

I turned to the lama. 'I have read about your great saint Milarepa,' I said. 'He says he was able to travel from one place to another through the air. Are there any Tibetan saints still living who are capable of such a feat?'

I noticed a hardening of the look of the silent lama. He shook his head sideways quite emphatically, meaning there were none.

Before leaving the monastery, we left some tea and sampa for the mute lama. Among travellers and nomads in these parts, whoever knows about the mute lama, leaves some provisions for him when they pass the monastery.

Coming outside, Kroll and Saunders fell into an argument. Saunders was not prepared to give any credence to the lama's statements. He said: 'One moment he says yes, the next moment no. When you're contradicting yourself like that, you're making no statement at all. I think we have only wasted our time.'

Kroll, by the way, had a totally different interpretation of the lama's answers. He said: 'To me the meaning is crystal clear: "Yes" means that the unicorn exists, and "No" means that he is asking us not to look for it because of the danger involved. But naturally we shall ignore his warning.'

For the first time, Markovitch joined in our conversation. He said, 'Suppose we do come across a unicorn; have we decided what we're going to do with it?'

Kroll said, 'We haven't thought of that yet. The first thing is to track down the creature.'

Markovitch lapsed into silence. It seemed that he has some plans of his own. Now that he is rid of the cocaine habit, he seems much more energetic. I have also been observing in him a great interest in lamaseries. When we left the monastery after our talk with the mute lama, Markovitch stayed back to explore the place a little more thoroughly. Is the drug addict turning religious? I wonder.

19 August, 10 a.m.

Just now we crossed the Chusung-la pass and had a glimpse of Lake Ravana and the white dome of Mount Kailash behind it. Lake Ravana is called Rakshasa Tal in Tibetan, and Mount Kailash is Kang Rimpoche. The lake isn't a particularly holy one, but at the first sight of Kailash, our porters prostrated themselves. Avinash Babu was a little perplexed at first, but the moment he realized he was looking at the holy mountain, he reeled off a dozen names of Lord Shiva, fell on his knees and touched the ground again and again with his head. The holy Mansarovar is to the east of Lake Ravana. We expect to be there by tomorrow.

20 August, 2.30 p.m.

We have halted by a hot spring to the north-west of Mansarovar. We shall reach the lake as soon as we are

over the hump to our left.

Today for the first time in over a week, we all had a bath. A pall of vapour hangs over the spring which contains sulphur, and is very warm. One feels remarkably refreshed after a bath in it.

I wouldn't have opened my diary now but for an incident which took place a little while ago.

Avinash Babu and I were using the west side of the spring while the others bathed in the north side. When I had finished my bath, Kroll walked over and, as if he had come for a casual tete-a-tete, said in a low voice, 'A messy affair.'

I said, 'Why, what's the matter?'

'Markovitch.'

'Markovitch?'

'A snake in the grass.'

'What has he done now?' I knew Kroll had a particular dislike for Markovitch.

Kroll kept up that smiling, chatty tone and said, 'We had taken off our coats and kept them behind a boulder before we got into the water. I was up after a dip or two. Markovitch's coat was lying next to mine. I could see the inside pocket, and couldn't resist the temptation of looking what was in it. There were three letters. All with British postage stamps, and all addressed to a Mr John Markham.'

'Markham?'

'Markham—Markovitch, John—Ivan, don't you see?'

'Where were the letters sent?' I asked.

'To an address in New Delhi.'

John Markham . . . John Markham . . . the name seemed to ring a bell. Where had I heard it before? Yes.

It was in the papers some three years ago. A man caught smuggling gold. John Markham. He got a prison sentence too, but had managed to escape by killing a guard. The man was British, but had been living in India for a long time. He used to run a hotel in Naini Tal. An escaped convict. Now he has teamed up with us and is trying to pass himself off as a Russian living in Poland. He wants Tibet to be his hideout. He's a swindler all right, perhaps with more villainy up his sleeve. I had to praise Kroll's sleuthing. I told him of Markham and his dark deeds.

Kroll kept up his toothy smile simply because Markovitch could see us from where he was. He mustn't suspect that we were talking about him.

Kroll laughed out loudly at nothing, dropped his voice, kept smiling and said: 'I suggest that we leave him behind. Let him freeze to death in the blizzard. That would be his punishment.'

I didn't like the idea. I said, 'No. Let him come with us. We will hand him over quietly to the police when we return.'

In the end Kroll agreed to my proposal. Must find an opportunity to tell Saunders and must keep a sharp watch over Markovitch.

20 August, 5.30 p.m.

In the famous Sanskrit poem *Meghdoot* of Kalidasa, there is a description of swans and lotuses in the Mansarovar. We have seen flocks of wild geese, but no swans or lotuses as yet. Apart from that, I can say that the descriptions of the lake one reads in travel books come nowhere near the real thing. I cannot even begin to

describe how one feels at the sudden sight of the vast expanse of vivid and transparent blue, in a terrain of sand and rocks. To the north of the lake stands the 22,000 foot Mount Kailash, and to the south, rising almost straight out of the water, stands Guria Mandhata. All round are mountains dotted with monasteries, their golden domes glistening in the sun.

We have pitched our tents about thirty feet from the edge of the lake. There are many pilgrims around. Some of them are doing their circumambulation of the lake by crawling, while others are doing it on foot with prayer-wheels in their hands. Mansarovar is sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists. Geographically, the place is important because the sources of four great rivers lie close by. They are Brahmaputra, Sutlej, Indus and Karnali.

Apart from doing obeisance by lying prone on the ground, Avinash Babu made our foreign friends get down on their knees by repeatedly saying, 'Sacred, sacred—more sacred than cow!' But what he did after that was far from prudent. He went to the edge of the lake, threw away his overcoat, put his palms together and plunged straight into the water. The icy water numbed him instantly. However, Kroll managed to drag him out and force some brandy down his throat, thus bringing some warmth back into his body.

Now Avinash Babu is up and about again. He says he has had arthritis in his left thumb for the last twenty-six years which the water of the lake has completely cured. He has filled three empty Horlicks bottles with the holy water, which he says he will sprinkle on us from time to time to keep us from trouble.

Nearby in Gianima, there is a large market from which we have bought dried fruits, cakes of frozen yak milk and woollen tents. Kroll has bought an assortment of bones, one of which—a human thigh bone—can be played like a flute. He says they will be useful for his research on witchcraft. Markovitch had strayed from the group in the bazaar for a while. He got back only ten minutes ago. We haven't found out what he brought back in his bag. Saunders has managed to get rid of some of his pessimism. He has realized that even if he cannot find a unicorn, the unearthly beauty of Mansarovar and the extraordinarily clear and invigorating atmosphere of the place make the trip more than worthwhile.

We shall set off for the dreaded Chang Thang tomorrow. Our destination will be Lat. $33^{\circ}3'$ N, and Long. 84° E.

Avinash Babu is now sitting on the sand with the sun on his back, his face turned towards Mount Kailash and a pocket Gita open in his hand. We shall now find out how far his faith is able to tide us over travails.

22 August, Chang Thang, Lat. $30^{\circ}5'$ N, Long. $8^{\circ}8'$ E
It is 8.30 a.m. now. We have set up camp beside a small lake.

A strange occurrence last night. At midnight, with the temperature well below freezing point, Kroll came into my tent, woke me up and announced that he had found highly suspicious objects among Markovitch's belongings. I was amazed. 'But didn't he find out that you were rummaging amongst his things?' I asked.

'How could he? I had mixed some barbiturate in

his tea last night. It's not for nothing that I learned sleight-of-hand. He's now fast asleep.'

'What did you find?'

'Come and have a look.'

I wrapped myself in a thick blanket, left my tent and crawled into Kroll's. The moment I entered, a strong, vaguely familiar odour assailed my nostrils. 'What's this smell?' I asked.

Kroll said, 'Well, this is just one of the things I found. It is in this tin.'

I took the tin and opened the cap. My mouth fell open.

'But this is musk!' I exclaimed in a shocked voice.

'No question about it,' said Kroll.

I knew there were musk deer in Tibet—a species which was fast becoming extinct from the rest of the world. It is a deer the size of an average dog which carries an extraordinary substance in its stomach. Musk is used in perfumery. A gram of musk costs nearly thirty rupees. In India, soon after the start of our journey, I met a musk dealer in Askot who alone had exported under government licence, nearly Rs 4 lakh worth of musk. I said, 'Is this something which Markovitch bought from the bazaar at Gianima?'

'Bought it?' The question was put by Saunders, his voice oozing sarcasm. 'You think these were all bought by Markovitch?'

Saunders opened a bag and brought out from its depths a mass of black yak wool, five gold statuettes of Buddha, a gold vajra set with precious stones, and some twenty or thirty loose gems.

'We have a real robber in our midst,' said Saunders.

'I'm absolutely sure that he filched the musk from some shop in Gianima just as he filched the other objects from the monastery.'

Now I realized why Markovitch stayed back in the monastery. What a daredevil the man is!

This morning, Markovitch's behaviour suggested that he hadn't yet found out about last night's raid. Everything was put back in place before we left. We had also discovered that Markovitch was carrying a weapon with him—a .45 Colt automatic. Markovitch hadn't mentioned this to us. Not that the weapon is going to serve him any purpose now, because Kroll has made off with all the bullets.

**25 August, Chang Thang, Lat. 32°5' N, Long. 82° E,
4.30 p.m.**

The terrifying aspect of Chang Thang is gradually revealing itself to us. The elevation here is 16,500 feet. We are now in an uneven terrain. Sometimes we have to climb four or five hundred feet to negotiate a pass, and then descend again.

We haven't seen a single tree or shrub since yesterday morning. All around us are sand, rock and snow. Even here the Tibetans have carved their mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum* on rock faces. There are no monasteries here, although we do come across an occasional chorten. Of human habitation, there is no sign at all.

The day before yesterday we suddenly found ourselves in a nomad encampment. There were nearly five hundred men, women, children, goats, sheep, donkeys, dogs and yaks occupying a large territory with

woollen tents pitched everywhere. The people were jolly, with a smile on everyone's face, obviously happy in their rootless, wandering state. We asked one or two about unicorns but got no satisfactory answer.

When they heard that we were going further north, they vehemently advised us against it. 'In the north there is Dung-lung-do,' they said. 'Beyond that you cannot go.' From their description it sounded as if Dung-lung-do was a place surrounded by a high wall which is impossible to scale. Nobody knows what lies beyond the wall. These people have never seen it, but Tibetans have always known about it. In earlier times, some lamas are said to have gone there, but no one in the last three or four hundred years.

When the mute lama's warnings hadn't discouraged us, why should we listen to these nomads? We have Charles Willard's diary with us. We must follow in his footsteps.

28 August, Chang Thang, Lat. 32°8' N, Long. 82°2' E
I am writing my diary sitting in my camp beside a lake. A strange experience today. We were crossing a valley with dark clouds in the sky threatening a storm, when Saunders suddenly cried out, 'What are those?'

Further up, where the valley ascended, we could discern a dozen or so dark forms. They seemed like a herd of animals. We asked Rabsang, but he couldn't say what they were. The strange thing is that whatever they were, they all stood rooted to the same spot.

At Kroll's instigation I looked through the Omniscope. 'Do you see horns?' Kroll asked breathlessly. I had to admit I didn't.

In another ten minutes the mystery was solved. They were wild donkeys, nearly twenty in number, all standing stiff and lifeless in the snow. Rabsang explained what had happened. They got buried in the snow in the blizzard and died. Summer has since melted the snow and exposed them again.

Our stock of foodstuff is dwindling. We had bought some tea and butter from the nomads with Indian money; they will last for a while. We are all heartily sick of eating meat. But vegetables are in short supply too. Everyone has had to take my food-and-drink pills from time to time. Soon there will be nothing left but these pills. Kroll has been using spells and incantations learnt all over the world from Mexico to Borneo, to find out whether we will have the luck to stumble upon a herd of unicorns. Five spells said 'Yes', six said 'No'.

Thirty or forty miles to the north of where we have camped, the land seems to rise abruptly. Through binoculars it has the appearance of a table mountain. Is that Dung-lung-do? We are actually near the location mentioned by Willard in his diary.

But where is Willard's monastery—Thokchum Gompa? Where is the two-hundred-year-old flying lama?

And where is the herd of unicorns?

29 August

An electrifying experience in a wonderful monastery.

There is no doubt that this is the Thokchum Gompa of Willard's diary. And we have proof of that too. Three minutes before reaching the monastery, we found carved on a rock face by the roadside the letters CRW, which obviously stood for Charles Roxton Willard. I

must mention that all our porters except Rabsang and Tundup have absconded. I doubt if Rabsang will ever desert us. He is not only trustworthy, but there's not a trace of superstition in him. He is a rare exception among Tibetans. The others have taken away with them all our ponies and four yaks. Only two yaks are left. Our tents and some of our heavy baggage can go on their backs. The rest we will have to carry ourselves. And since our ponies are gone, we will have to do the rest of the journey on foot. The high plateau is getting closer by the hour, which is why excitement is running high among the group. We all believe that must be Dung-lung-do, although we still don't know what it is. Saunders believes it is the wall of a fortress, while my feeling is that behind the wall is a lake which is not shown on any map of Tibet.

The monastery I am about to describe, was hidden from view till the last moment. It was situated behind a granite hillock. As soon as we crossed the hillock, it came into view, evoking expressions of surprise from all of us. Although the sun was behind the clouds, the splendour of the monastery made it appear paved in gold from base to spire.

As we approached it, we had the impression that there were very few occupants in it. The whole place seemed wrapped in silence. We climbed the slope and made our way through the main entrance. A huge bronze bell hung overhead across the threshold. As Kroll pulled the rope, it rang with a solemn sonority, the reverberations persisting for nearly three minutes.

It was quite clear from the moment of entry, that no one had been here for a very long time. There was

everything one would expect in a monastery, except human beings. When Saunders's loud 'Hellos' produced no replies, we decided to explore. Kroll's behaviour made it clear that he was not going to leave Markovitch alone. There were too many gold objects about. Saunders went over to the door to the left of the hall, while Avinash Babu and I went to the door on the right. There was a thick layer of dust on the floor and abundant proof that rats lived here. We had just entered a room when a sudden scream stopped us in our tracks and froze our blood.

It was Saunders's voice. We ran to investigate and were joined by Kroll and Markovitch, the four of us arriving simultaneously at the door of a room, on the right of the central hall. Our way was blocked by Saunders who had stopped at the threshold, apparently riveted by something at the back of the low, dank room.

Now I realized the reason for the scream.

An ancient, shaven-headed lama sat cross-legged at a desk on the far side of the room, his body bent forward, his eyes open but unseeing, his shrivelled hands placed on the withered pages of an open manuscript.

The lama was dead. When and how he had died there was no way of knowing, nor how his corpse had escaped decay.

We were all inside the room now. Saunders was back to his normal self. He had been suffering from nerves for some time, which explains his extreme fright. I know if our expedition is successful, he will surely regain his health.

Now we turned to the other objects in the room.

On one side was an assortment of brass and copper vessels which gave the impression that we were in a kitchen. On inspecting the vessels, we found that they contained powdered, liquid and viscous substances of various kinds and hues. I couldn't recognize any of them.

The opposite wall had shelves overflowing with ancient manuscripts. Below the shelves, on the floor, stood eight pairs of Tibetan high boots, all intricately embroidered and set with gems. Besides these, the floor was strewn with bones, skulls and animal skins. Kroll cried excitedly, "This is the first monastery where I feel I am in the presence of ancient magic!"

I had no feeling of fright, so I approached the dead lama. I wanted to find out what he was studying when he died. I had already noticed that the manuscript was in Sanskrit, not Tibetan.

I gently tugged at the manuscript and it slipped out from under the corpse's fingers and came into my hands. The lama's hand stayed suspended in the air three inches above the desk.

A quick glance told me that the subject of the manuscript was scientific. I took it with me, and the five of us left the gloom of the monastery and came out into the open.

It is two in the afternoon now, I am sitting on a flat rock outside the monastery. I have gone through a considerable portion of the manuscript in the last couple of hours. That the Tibetans had not confined their studies only to religion is now clear. The manuscript is called *Uddayansutram* or 'A Treatise on Flying'. It describes how a person can be airborne by purely chemical means. I had heard of the treatise. In Buddhist

times, there was a great scholar in Taxila in India, known as Vidyut-dhamani. He was the one who composed the treatise and left for Tibet shortly thereafter. He never came back to India, and no one in India ever learnt about his scientific researches.

The manuscript describes a substance called *ngmung*. With the help of *ngmung*, the weight of a person can be reduced to such an extent that a breath of wind can make him soar 'like a feather plucked from the back of a swan'. There is a description of how *ngmung* can be prepared, but the ingredients mentioned are totally unfamiliar to me. The dead lama must have known about these ingredients and must have succeeded in preparing *ngmung*. Doubtless this is the two-hundred-year-old lama with whom Willard flew. That the lama should have died within the last six months is our misfortune, or we too might have flown like Willard.

Everybody is preparing to leave, so I must close now.

30 August, Lat. 33°3' N, Long. 84° E

Willard's diary mentions camping on this location. We have done the same thing. We are now reduced to five members including Rabsang. Markham alias Markovitch has disappeared, and he must have persuaded Tundup to go with him. Not only that, they have made off with our two last yaks. I had noticed Markham chatting with Tundup several times. I had paid no attention then; now I realize they had been conspiring.

It happened yesterday afternoon. Within two hours of leaving the monastery, we were caught in a blinding

storm. We didn't know who was going which way. When after half an hour the storm subsided, we found that we were two members and two yaks short. On top of that, when we found that there was a gun missing, we realized that it was not an accident. Markham had deliberately run away and had no intention of returning. One way to look at it, is that it is good riddance, but the regret remains that he has escaped punishment. Kroll is greatly upset. He says this is the result of mollycoddling him. However, there's no use crying over spilt milk; we shall proceed to Dung-lung-do without him.

The wall of Dung-lung-do is now constantly in our sight. There are still another four or five miles to go, but even from this distance, the great height of the wall is apparent. In width it seems at least twenty-five miles. The depth, of course, cannot be guessed from here.

The wind is rising again. Must hurry back into the tent.

30 August, 1.30 p.m.

The sky is overcast, and a blizzard is blowing with the sound of a million shrill flutes. It is a good thing we bought those woollen tents in Gianima.

It looks as if we will have to spend the whole day in the tent.

30 August, 5 p.m.

One of the highlights of our expedition took place a little while ago.

At three, the storm let up a little, and Rabsang brought butter-tea for the four of us. Although the fury

of the storm had abated, occasional gusts of wind caused the tents to flap.

Avinash Babu had just sipped his tea and said 'Aaahh!' in appreciation when we heard a yelling from somewhere. We couldn't make out the words, but the tone of panic was clear. We put down our pots and rushed out of the tent.

'Help! Help! Save me! . . . Help!'

Now it was clear. And we could recognize the voice too. Till now Markham had been speaking English with a Russian accent; now, for the first time, he sounded thoroughly British. But where was he? Rabsang too looked around in a bewildered way, because one moment the voice seemed to be coming from the south, and the next moment from the north.

Suddenly Kroll shouted, 'There he is!'

He wasn't looking north or south, but up in the sky, directly above us.

I looked up and was astounded to see Markovitch come floating towards us. One moment he plummeted down, and the next, a gust of wind sent him soaring up. It was in such a state that he waved his arms about, and screamed to draw our attention.

There was no time to think how he had arrived at such a predicament; the question was how to bring him down, because the wind kept blowing him this way and that.

'Let him stay there,' Saunders suddenly bawled out. Kroll promptly dittoed the suggestion. They both thought it was an excellent way to punish the miscreant. And yet the scientist in me said that unless he was brought down, we wouldn't be able to find out how he got

airborne in the first place. Rabsang, meanwhile, had used his native intelligence and got down to business. He had tied a stone at the end of a long rope and was ready to fling it at Markham. Kroll stopped him. Markham was now directly above us. Kroll shouted at him, 'Drop that gun first.' I hadn't noticed that Markham was carrying a gun. Like an obedient boy, Markham released his hold on the weapon which dropped with a loud thud on the ground, sending up a spray of snow ten feet away from us.

Now Rabsang sent the stone flying up to Markham with unerring aim. Markham grabbed it, and Rabsang brought him down by vigorous pulls at the rope.

As he dropped down, I noticed that Markham was wearing the ornate boots, of which we had seen eight pairs in the dead lama's room. Besides this, the bag he was carrying on his shoulder turned out to contain valuable gold objects pilfered from the monastery. There was no doubt that the robber had been caught red-handed. But, at the same time, he had brought to light something so exciting that we forgot all about reprimanding him.

Markham had run away from us all right, and the first thing he had done was to go to the Thokchum monastery and load himself up with some of the precious objects kept in the central hall. Having done that he had gone to the dead lama's room and helped himself to a pair of the gem-studded boots. Walking in them had made him realize that he was feeling lighter. When he had gone a couple of miles with Tundup, a storm had come up from the south and wrecked all his

plans by hoisting him up and blowing him back in our direction.

Kroll and Saunders were naturally astonished to hear the story. It was then that I told them about the manuscript and the substance ngmung. 'But what is the connection between the substance and the boots?' asked Kroll.

I said, 'The manuscript mentions a connection between the substance and the sole, or underside of the foot. I'm sure the lining of the boot has a coating of ngmung.'

This might have led to an argument, but having seen Markham aloft with their own eyes, Kroll and Saunders accepted my explanation. Of course, all three of us were now anxious to possess such boots. Rabsang said he would bring them for us from the monastery.

Markham is now completely tamed. We have taken away from him everything he had stolen. We shall put them all back in place on our way back. I do hope Markham will behave himself from now on, although at the back of my mind runs the Sanskrit proverb which says that coal will never shed its blackness however much you may wash it.

31 August

We have pitched our tents about 200 yards away from the wall of Dung-lung-do. We are going about in our boots, waiting for a strong wind to take us across the wall to the unknown region beyond. The wall rises steeply up to a height of about 150 feet. Even the geologist Saunders couldn't tell what kind of stone it was made of. It is remarkably smooth and hard, bluish

in colour, and resembles no known variety of stone. Kroll has made a few attempts to scale the wall by leaping with the boots on, but in the absence of a strong wind he couldn't rise beyond twenty or thirty feet. I am consumed with curiosity about what lies beyond the wall. Saunders still insists that it must be a fortress. I have stopped guessing.

8 September

In the far distance, I can see a large group of people approaching. If this turns out to be a bandit gang, then there is no hope for us. It was the magical climate of Dung-lung-do that gave us the energy to walk ten miles on foot and arrive at this spot. But now that energy is ebbing. The wind is blowing from a direction opposite to the way we are going; so the boots are of no help at all. Our stock of food is dangerously depleted, and there are few of my tablets left. In this state, in spite of being armed, a bandit gang could cause no end of trouble. As it is, we have lost one of our members, although he was himself responsible for what happened. It was his excessive greed that spelled his doom.

A little while ago, Avinash Babu said, 'I don't know what your Omniscope reveals, but Kailash, Mansarovar and Dung-lung-do have endowed me with supernatural vision. I can already see those people are nomads. So they will do us no harm.'

Well, if they do turn out to be nomads, they would not only do us no harm, but might actually provide us with ponies, yaks and provisions—in fact, everything we need for our return journey.

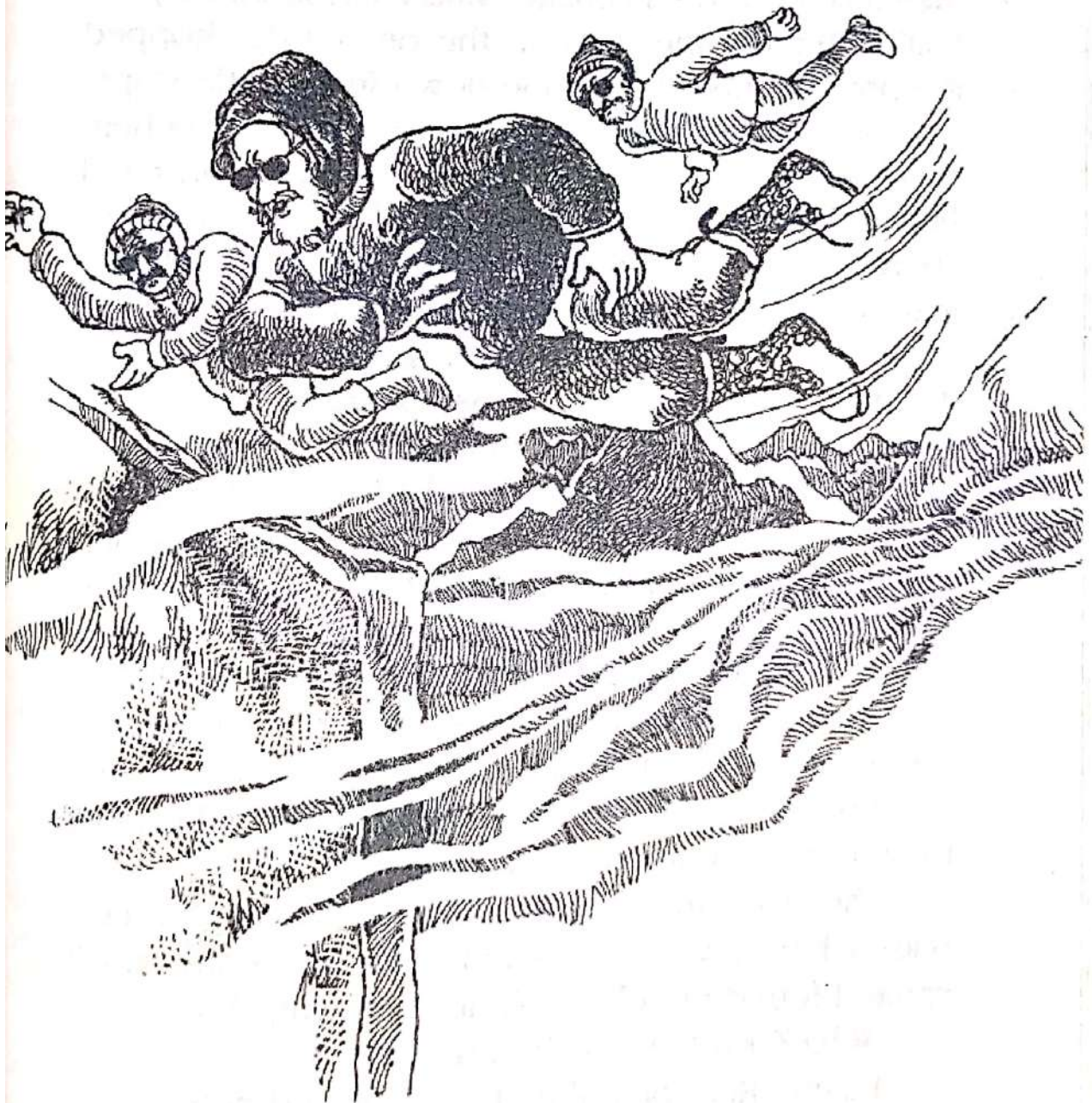
After waiting for thirty-seven hours, on the first of

September, at one-forty in the afternoon, the state of the sky and a rumble of thunder told us that the kind of wind that we had been waiting for, was in fact on its way. Avinash Babu had dozed off, and I woke him up. Then we five booted-men, stood with our backs to the approaching storm and our faces to the wall. In three minutes the storm hit us. Being the lightest of the group, I was the first to get aloft.

It is difficult for me to describe the extraordinary experience. The storm carried us streaking through the air, both forwards and upwards, while the wall ahead plunged forward and downward at the same time, revealing more and more of the view beyond. First we could see snow-capped peaks in the far distance beyond the wall on the far side; then came into view a wonderful green world—not a fort, nor a lake—which the wall had kept hidden from us. We were about to enter this world over the top. From behind me I could hear Kroll, Saunders and Markham expressing their child-like wonder in English and German, while Avinash Babu exclaimed, 'Why, this must be the garden of Eden—yes, the garden of Eden!'

As soon as we crossed the wall, the storm magically abated. We landed gently on the green grass, very much like a 'feather plucked from a swan's back'. I said green because of the green colour, but never before have I seen such grass. Saunders shouted, 'Do you know, Shonku—not a single tree here is familiar to me? This is a completely new environment.'

Saunders proceeded immediately to collect specimens of flora, while Kroll got busy with his camera. Avinash Babu rolled on the grass saying, 'Let us stay



here. Why go back to Giridih? The soil here is wonderful. We can grow anything we want.' Markham took off his boots and made his way through the tall grass.

Dung-lung-do seemed to be at least as large as Mansarovar. It was a concave valley surrounded by the wall. Although the wall on the outer side dropped steeply, the inner side came down in a gentle slope. Saunders was right; not a single specimen of flora here was known to us. The trees abounded in varicoloured flowers and fruits which we now recognized as the source of the exquisite, heady smell which had drifted across the wall to reach our camp.

The four of us were exploring the place in our boots, advancing by gentle leaps, when we suddenly heard a swishing sound. The next moment something passed across the sun casting a giant shadow. And now we saw it: a colossal bird as large as 500 eagles put together, with feathers as resplendent as that of a South American macaw.

'*Mein Gott!*' cried Kroll in a hoarse whisper. The next moment he was about to raise his gun when I restrained him by raising my hand. Not only was the gun useless against the bird, but my mind told me that the bird would do us no harm.

The bird circled above us three times and then, with a long cry like a foghorn, flew back the way it came. I found myself involuntarily saying, 'Roc.'

'What?' Kroll asked in bewilderment.

I said, 'Roc, or Rukh. The giant bird in Sindbad's tale.'

'But we're not in the land of Arabian Nights, Shonku,' said Kroll impatiently. 'This is the real world.'

There is ground under our feet, we can touch the leaves with our fingers, smell the flowers with our noses.'

Saunders shook off his wonder and said, 'There isn't a single insect around, which is most surprising.'

The four of us were advancing when we suddenly found ourselves up against an obstacle. For the first time we were faced with an object on the ground which was not a species of flora. A twelve-foot-high boulder, bluish green in colour, obstructed our path. How far it stretched on either side was hard to tell. Kroll suddenly gave a mighty leap which took him soaring and landed him gently on top of the boulder. And then something wholly unexpected happened; the boulder heaved and started to move to our left. Kroll too was being borne along with it when he suddenly yelled out, 'My God, it's a dragon!'

Yes, it was a dragon. One of its legs was now passing in front of us. Meanwhile Kroll had jumped off the back of the beast and had joined us. We stared in amazement at what was visible to us of the giant beast. It took it nearly three minutes to pass by us, swishing its huge scaly tail and disappear behind the dense foliage. The smoke which now hung over the forest must have come from the nostrils of the beast.

Saunders had sat down on the grass and was holding his head in his hands. He said, 'I feel like an uneducated boor up against these strange creatures in these unfamiliar surroundings, Shonku.'

I said, 'But I like it. I'm glad to discover that there are still surprises left, even for learned men like us in this planet of ours.'

I have lost count of the wonderful things we saw in

the next hour of our expedition. We watched a Phoenix being consumed by flames and a new Phoenix rising from its ashes and flying off towards the sun. We saw the Gryphon, the Simurgh of Persian legends, the Anka of the Arabs, the Nork of the Russians, and the Feng and the Kirne of the Japanese. Among lizards we saw the Basilisk whose unblinking stare can reduce anything to ashes, and the salamander which is proof against fire and which, as if to prove the truth of the legend, was again and again passing through flames and emerging unscathed. We also saw a four-tusked elephant which could only be Airavat, the mount of the Hindu god Indra. The stately pachyderm stood eating the leaves of a tree, whose dazzling brilliance could only mean that it was the celestial tree Parijat, of our mythology.

But Dung-lung-do is not just a forest of gorgeous trees. We had proceeded a mile or so along the northern wall when we were suddenly confronted with open country bereft of vegetation. Before us were enormous boulders with caves in them from which emerged blood-curdling roars and snarls. We realized we had come to the region of legendary demons and rakshasas, a common feature of fairy tales of all nations. Emboldened by the fact that none of the creatures paid the slightest attention to us, I was debating whether to enter the caves or not, when a frenzied, high-pitched cry made us all turn to our left.

'Unicorns! Unicorns! Unicorns!'

It was Markham, and his voice was coming from behind a large boulder.

'Has he been taking cocaine again?' asked Kroll.

'I don't think so,' said I, advancing towards the boulder. As I crossed it, a unique sight nearly stopped my heartbeat.

A big herd of animals, both adult and young, was passing in front of us. Each looked like a cross between a cow and a horse, was pinkish-grey in colour, and had a single spiral horn on its forehead. I realized that they were what launched us on our expedition. They were unquestionably unicorns, Pliny's unicorns, the unicorn of Western mythology, the unicorn on the seals of Mohenjodaro.

Not all the animals were on the move. Some stood chewing grass, some frisked about, while others playfully butted each other with their horns. Like Willard, we too were watching the scene in full possession of our senses.

But where was Markham?

The question had just crossed my mind when we saw a strange sight. Markham had emerged from the herd of unicorns and was running towards the wall behind us. But he was not alone; he was grasping with both hands a unicorn cub.

Saunders cried out, 'Stop that scoundrel! Stop him!'

'Put your boots on! Put your boots on!' screamed Kroll. He had started running after Markham. We too followed him leaping.

If the warning had readied Markham in time, perhaps he wouldn't have acted the way he did. Running up the grass slope Markham gave a leap and dropped out of sight behind the wall.

Later we learnt from Rabsang that as soon as he saw Markham jump over the wall, he had run towards

him. But there was nothing for him to do. The two-hundred-foot fall crushed all the bones in his body. When we asked about the unicorn, he shook his head and said he had only found Markham's body; there was no unicorn cub with him.

My conclusions about Dung-lung-do have found favour with both Kroll and Saunders. My feeling is that if a great many people believe in an imaginary creature over a great length of time, the sheer force of that belief may bring to life that creature with all the characteristics human imagination has endowed it with. Dung-lung-do was a repository of such imaginary creatures. Perhaps it was the only place of its kind on earth. To try to bring anything from Dung-lung-do into the world of reality was futile, which is why the unicorn vanished as soon as Markham crossed the limits of the world of fantasy.

The mute lama's saying yes and no almost in the same breath, now bears a clear meaning; the unicorn exists, though not in reality. But the lama was wrong when he said no to the question of flight. Perhaps he didn't know about the manuscript.

Avinash Babu said at the end of our discussion, 'So there is nothing for us to show when we get back home?'

I said, 'I'm afraid not. Because I doubt if Kroll's photographs will come out, and our boots won't help us to fly, because the manuscript says that ngmung melts in the heat of the plains.'

Avinash Babu sighed. Now I played my trump card. 'Have you realized that we are going back younger by about twenty years?'

'How's that?'

I wiped the snow flakes off my beard and moustache.

'Why, they're black again!' exclaimed Avinash Babu.

'So is your moustache,' I said. 'Look in the mirror.'

At this point Saunders came in. He looked younger too and a weak tooth of his had become stronger again. He heaved a deep sigh of relief.

'Nomads, not robbers,' he said. 'Thank God!' I can hear the sound of horses' hooves, and the barking of dogs, and the shouting of men, women and children. The cloud has lifted and the sun shines again. *Om Mani Padme Hum!*

Translated by Satyajit Ray

