

ESAU

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Philip Kerr

A Marian Wood Book

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ONE

The Discovery

So much glamour still attaches to the theme of missing links, and to man's relationship with the animal world, that it may always be difficult to exorcise from the comparative study of Primates, living and fossil, the kind of myths which the unaided eye is able to conjure out of a well of wishful thinking.

—Solly Zuckerman

1

Great things are done when men and mountains meet.

—William Blake

THE ICE RIDGE, its delicate formations cut deep into the face of Machhapuchhare like dozens of giant bridal veils from a celestial wedding ceremony, soared above his throbbing head in the dazzling, late afternoon sunshine. Beneath his cramponed feet, his toes barely gripping the vertical ice wall, stretched the yawning gap that was the Annapurna South Glacier. Some eight miles behind his back, which ached from the weight of a heavy rucksack, the distinctive peak of Annapurna rose from the ground like a huge octopus. Not that he was looking. Cutting hand- and footholds with an ice axe at twenty thousand feet meant there was no time to relax on the rope and enjoy the view. Scenery counted for nothing when there was a summit to be reached. Especially when it was a summit that was officially forbidden.

Western climbers called it Fish Tail Peak, which underlined how the sinuous twisting mountain might elude a man's grasp. At the suggestion of some sentimental Brit gone native, who had himself failed to

reach the summit in 1957, the Nepalese government had declared that Machhapuchhare, three times as big as the Matterhorn, should forever remain pure and inviolate. As a result, it was now impossible to get a permit to climb one of the most beautiful and challenging of all the peaks surrounding the Annapurna Sanctuary.

Most climbers might have let it go there, for fear of the consequences. Jail sentences and fines could be imposed. Future expedition permits could be denied. Sherpas could be withheld. But Jack had come to regard this mountain, Machhapuchhare, as an affront, a mockery of his publicly declared intention to conquer all the major Himalayan peaks. And as soon as he and his partner had successfully completed their officially sanctioned ascent of Annapurna's southwest face, they decided to climb without a permit. A lightning assault that had seemed like a good idea until the bad weather hit.

He pushed himself up on one of the footholds he had cut earlier, reached up with his axe, and hacked another handhold out of the ice face.

Bad enough, he thought, that mountaineers were obliged to stop climbing Kangchenjunga just a few yards short of the summit to keep from defiling its holy peak. But that there should be a mountain that you were actually forbidden to climb was unthinkable. One of the reasons you went climbing in the first place was to get away from terrestrial rules and regulations. Jack was quite used to people advising him that this mountain or that wall was unclimbable. Mostly he had proved them wrong. But a mountain you were forbidden to climb, and by a government too—that was something else. As far as their liaison officer in Khatmandu was concerned, they were still on Annapurna; their Sherpas had been bribed to keep silent. Nobody was going to tell him where he could and could not climb.

The very thought of it was enough to make Jack wield the axe with greater ferocity, sending a shower of ice chips and water spray into his weather-beaten face, until a crumbling step beneath his boot made him stop to adjust his balance and fumble to insert another ice screw.

Not easy wearing Dachstein woollen mitts.

"How're you doing?" shouted his climbing partner from about fifty feet below.

Jack said nothing. Muscles aching from his ice climb, he clung to the wall with one hand as he tried to turn the screw with fingers that were

numb with cold. If he didn't get off this wall soon he would risk frost-bite. There was no time for a report of his progress. Or lack of it. If they didn't make the top soon, they were in serious trouble. Days spent in a hanging tent had cost them valuable fuel. There was only enough for another day or two at the most, and without fuel they could not melt snow for their coffee.

At last the screw was tight and he was able to take the weight off his arm. He drew deep breaths of the thin mountain air and tried to steady the alarming pulse in his temple.

Jack could not recall a more demanding piece of ice climbing. Even the Annapurna had not seemed so hard. Near the top, Machhapuchhare looked not so much like a fish tail as a spear point driven up through the earth by some giant subterranean warrior. There was no doubt about it: High-altitude wall climbing remained the real challenge for any modern Alpinist, and Machhapuchhare's Gothic heights, as sheer as any New York skyscraper, were perhaps the ultimate test of all. What a fool he was. Let him finish the climb before he worried about the authorities discovering what he had done.

The throbbing in his head seemed to diminish.

Except that now he was aware of a strange whistling in his ears. Like tinnitus at first, it grew louder, until the whistling had become a roaring, like the sound of an artillery shell fired from a warship in a distant bay, until the noise filled his ears and he wondered if he was experiencing some dreadful effect of high altitude, a pulmonary edema or even a cerebral hemorrhage.

For a brief and nauseous moment Jack heard the screws that held him on to the rock face grinding in the ice as the whole mountain shook, and he closed his eyes.

A moment or two passed. The noise ended on the glacier somewhere to the north of him. He remained aloft. The breath he had been unconsciously holding escaped from his chapped lips in an exclamation of gratitude and relief as he opened his eyes again.

"What the hell was it?" shouted Didier, at the bottom of the ice wall.

"I'm glad you heard it too," said Jack.

"Sounded like it was over the other side of the mountain. What was it?"

"Somewhere nearer the north, I reckon."

"Maybe an avalanche."

"Must have been a hell of a big one," said Jack.

"Up here they're all big ones."

"Could even have been a meteorite."

Jack heard Didier laugh.

"Shit," said Didier. "As if this wasn't already dangerous enough. The Almighty has to throw rocks down on us as well."

Jack pushed himself away from the wall and, leaning back on the rope, he looked up at the huge overhang of ice above his head.

"I think it looks okay," he shouted.

In his mind was a picture of the avalanche debris that he and Didier had seen scattered at the foot of the ridge they were on, an unpleasant reminder of the risks he and his French Canadian partner were taking.

"Well, I guess we'll know all about it soon enough," he added quietly.

The week before they had arrived in the Annapurna Sanctuary to mount their lightweight, two-man assault on the tenth highest mountain in the world—and then its forbidden sister peak—a German expedition, much larger than their own, had been wiped out by a big avalanche on the south wall of Lhotse, the great black peak that was linked to Everest by the famous south col. Six men had died. According to one of the Sherpas who had witnessed the accident, a whole serac, several hundred tons of solid ice, had collapsed on top of them.

To avoid any similar falls of ice, Jack had been following a course to the side of the ridge, but now he was right under the danger area, an enormous boulder of hard ice attached to the rock by nothing more than frost.

If this lot were to go, he told himself, they would really be in for it. To take his mind off the danger, he began to divert himself by trying to remember the name of the Greek hero condemned by Zeus to an eternity of pushing a huge stone up a hill. As it constantly rolled down again, his task was everlasting. What was his name?

But even as the question passed through Jack's mind, a long, ghostly finger of loose powder snow blew off the crest of the overhang and joined the faintest trace of cloud that rolled across the flawless, bright blue sky. Some of it showered Jack's face, refreshing him like a burst of spray from a bottle of eau de cologne. He licked the cool moisture from his cracked lips, lifted his ice axe and started to cut another handhold on the perilous route he had mentally marked out. It would take him to the corner of the ridge, away from the threat of icy obliteration.

He paused as hundreds of shards of snow and ice came scampering off the crest of the ridge like tiny, suicidal white lemmings, and when at last they stopped, he realized that the throbbing in his head had started again.

"Sisyphus," Jack muttered, remembering the Greek's name as he quickly finished the handhold. "It was Sisyphus, the Crafty." An eternity of second chances. That's what it looked like. The boulder above Jack's head would come down only once. And that would be it. The terminal descent of man. He tugged a length of rope through the piton runners and moved up the ice arête.

"Sooner I get out from under this bastard the better."

His ears had started to play tricks on him again. This time it was as if he had gone deaf. Jack stopped where he was and repeated his last sentence, but it was as though the sound had been sucked away from the mountain. He felt the words vibrate in his mouth but heard nothing. There seemed to be some kind of vacuum into which all the sound on the ice ridge was emptying and, like the dead calm before a storm at sea, the sense of menace was overpowering.

He looked down and called out to Didier, but once again his shout was snatched away, and the sound merged into thunderous rumble. A second later, the mountain shrugged off several thousand tons of snow and ice, shutting out the blue sky behind the frozen black curtain of an enormous avalanche.

Enveloped in a huge cumulus cloud of stifling snow and drowning vapor, Jack felt himself carried off the rocky, mountainous altar.

For what seemed like an eternity he fell.

Trapped inside the belly of the white whale of the avalanche, with nothing to inform his battered senses of the world outside it, he had no impression of speed or acceleration, nor even of danger. Just of overwhelming, elemental power. It was as if he were in the very grip of winter. Kept together by the cold, he would melt and disappear as soon as he hit the ground. Jack. Jack Frost.

Almost as suddenly as it had started, the direction of the avalanche seemed to change, and feeling an increasing pressure about his body, Jack instinctively started to swim. He kicked his legs, thrust out his arms, and struggled to reach some imaginary surface.

Then everything stopped and all was dark and silent.

HIS LEGS WERE FREE. But his whole upper body was covered in snow. Struggling backward, Jack collapsed onto a hard rocky floor. For several minutes he lay there, stunned and blinded with snow. He found he could move his arms, and gently he cleared his nose, mouth, ears, and eyes of snow. He looked around and realized that he was in a kind of bergschrund—a big, horizontal crevasse in the rock face. The entrance to the bergschrund was stopped up with snow, but the light shining through seemed to suggest that he was not blocked in too deeply.

The rope, still tight around Jack's waist, led through the snow blockage. Struggling to his knees he gave the rope a hard pull. But even as he crawled through the snow and hauled at the rope, he knew that Didier must be dead. That he himself was alive seemed improbable enough.

After several frantic pulls, the frayed end of the rope appeared. Dragging himself to the mouth of the bergschrund, he managed to peer out. One look at the obliterated slope below seemed to confirm the worst. The avalanche had been a huge one. It had swept the whole lower glacier, from twenty thousand feet right down to Camp One on top of the Rognon at about sixteen thousand. Like Didier, the Sherpas there would have had little chance of survival.

Somehow the avalanche had dumped him on the very lip of the bergschrund. At a different angle a collision with its hard lower lip would have killed him. Instead the bergschrund had protected him from the lethal icy debris that now rendered the route back down the north face to the Rognon and Camp One unrecognizable.

Sick to his stomach and yet somehow elated that he had survived unscathed, Jack sat down and began to remove the snow and ice from inside his jacket and trousers, pondering his next move. He estimated it was about fifteen hundred feet back down to Camp Two at the foot of the rock face. At just above seventeen thousand, the camp was located where the rock wall overhung the glacier, and there was just a chance that this might have protected the two Sherpas there from the worst of the avalanche, although they were almost certainly buried much deeper than he was.

Even so, he knew that he could not climb down before dark. His radio was gone, and the route down was too difficult to attempt in his condition with the sun already setting. Besides, he had a rucksack of

stores still strapped to his back and he was aware that his best chance was to spend the night in the bergschrund and climb down first thing in the morning.

Jack shrugged off the rucksack and stood up painfully to inspect what would be his sleeping quarters for the night, almost impaling himself on one of the long icicles that hung from the vaulting ceiling, jabbing the darkness like the teeth of some forgotten prehistoric animal. The icicle, as long as a javelin, broke off and smashed on the floor.

He opened his rucksack and took out his Maglite.

"Not exactly the Stein Eriksen Lodge," said Jack, at the same time reminding himself that it might just as easily have been his grave.

If only they had left it at the southwest face of Annapurna. That would have been enough for most people. It was their own good luck that had defeated them, for their lightweight ascent of Annapurna had been blessed with such fine weather that they had completed it in half the allotted time. But for his own vaulting ambition Didier Lauren and the Sherpas on the glacier below might now still be alive.

He sat down again and flashed the light around him.

The bergschrund was shaped like a funnel lying on its side, about thirty feet wide and twenty feet high at the entrance, narrowing at the rear to a tunnel about five feet square.

With hours to kill he decided he might as well see how far the tunnel bored into the mountainside. Advancing to the rear of the cave, he squatted down and shone the powerful halogen beam along the tunnel.

Jack knew that the Himalayas were home to bear and langur, even to leopard, but he thought it unlikely they would have made their home in such an inaccessible place so far above the tree line.

Bunched down on his haunches, he started to make his way along the tunnel.

About a hundred yards in, the tunnel sloped upward, reminding him of the long and narrow passageway that led to the Queen's Burial Chamber in Egypt's Great Pyramid—a journey that was not for the fainthearted, the claustrophobic, or the orthopedically afflicted. After only a short hesitation, Jack decided to push on, determined to find out how deep the cave was.

Mostly the mountains were the original Pre-Cambrian continental crust of the Indian subcontinent's northern margin and consisted of

schists and crystalline rocks. But here in the bergschrund and nearer the summit, the rock was limestone, from a time when the world's highest range of mountains was the floor of the shallow Tethys Sea. These early Paleozoic sediments had lifted almost twelve miles since the onset of the Himalayan mountain building around fifty-five million years ago. Jack had even heard it said that there were parts of the range that were still rising at the rate of nearly half an inch a year. The Everest that he and Didier had conquered, without oxygen, was almost two feet higher than the Everest scaled by Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing back in 1953.

The tunnel slope leveled off, with the roof becoming simultaneously higher so that he was able to stand straight again. Pointing the almost solid beam of the flashlight above his head, Jack found he was in an enormous cavern, and certain only that the ceiling was beyond even the range of his Maglite, he decided that it must be at least one hundred feet high.

He shouted out and heard his own voice bounce back off the invisible walls and ceiling, reinforced and prolonged by reflection in a cold, dark resonating chamber that had already left him feeling chilled to the bone. By this sound he might have judged himself to be standing not inside a cavern underneath Machhapuchhare Himal but in the soaring vault of a ruined and forgotten Gothic cathedral that was now the hidden hall of a malevolent mountain king. Designed to carry the human voice upward in praise and prayer, to God in heaven, the vault was filled instead with the silence of the tomb.

How long had this silence prevailed before being desecrated by his presence? Was he the first human to have entered the cavern since the creation of the Himalayas some one and a half million years ago?

AT FIRST HE THOUGHT it was a rock he saw in the artificial beam of his Maglite. It was a moment or two before his untrained eye perceived that, staring back at him from the moist, earthen floor of the cave, and about the size of a melon, was the bony face of a nearly complete skull.

He dropped to his knees and immediately began to brush away the dirt and gravel from the find with his gloved fingers. Jack was well aware that the Himalayas contained an abundance of fossils. Only a few

miles away, on the northern slopes of Dhaulagiri, the seventh highest mountain in the world, he had once found an ammonite—a spiral-shaped mollusk dating from 150 to 200 million years ago. Muktinath was famous for its Upper Jurassic fossils. To the west, the Churen Himal in Nepal, and the Siwalik Hills of Northern Pakistan, had yielded many significant hominid fossils. But this was the first time Jack had discovered anything himself.

He lifted the skull clear of the dirt and examined it carefully in the beam of his flashlight. The lower jaw was missing but otherwise it looked to be in remarkably good condition, with a near perfect upper jaw and an unbroken cranium. It was larger than it had looked on the ground, and for a brief moment he thought it might have belonged to a bear until he noted the absence of any large canine teeth. It seemed to be hominid, and after a couple of minutes' further scrutiny he felt quite sure of it, but he had no idea if what he was looking at was related to any of the other fossil hominids for which the Himalayas were known, or even if it was a fossil at all.

He thought of the one person who would be able to tell him everything there was to know about the skull. The woman who had once been his lover and who had consistently refused to marry him, but who was rather better known as a doctor of paleoanthropology at the University of California in Berkeley. He knew her simply as Swift. Maybe he would present his find to her as a gift. There could be no doubt that she would appreciate having the skull more than any of the other souvenirs he had promised to bring her back from Nepal, like a rug or a *thangka*.

He could almost hear the unprincipled advice that Didier would have offered him.

"Trust you, Didier," Jack said sadly. "Besides, there's still the small problem of getting down from this mountain to consider."

Jack returned to the bergschrund entrance carrying the skull in his hands. He looked inside his tightly packed rucksack and decided that something would have to be left behind if he was to get the skull down the mountain. But what? Not the sleeping bag. Not the first-aid box. Not the socks, the advance base rations, the Nikon F4 camera.

He started to unpack the rucksack.

A half-full bottle of Macallan malt whisky came to hand. Quite apart from the fact that he and Didier enjoyed drinking it, whisky was a more

effective treatment for frostbite than vasodilator drugs such as Ronicol. High-altitude rock climbing was one of the rare occasions when the medicinal properties of alcohol really could be justified. And this was an emergency.

Jack sat down on the floor of the bergschrund and uncorked the bottle. Then he toasted his friend and prepared to finish the bottle.

2

Health to the green steel head . . .

—Robert Lowell

INDIA.

The telephone rang.

Pakistan.

The telephone rang again. The man stirred in his bed.

In recent weeks when the phone rang during the night, it had usually been something to do with the worsening situation between these two ancient enemies.

The man wriggled his way up the bed, switched on the bedside light, collected the receiver, and then leaned back against the padded headboard. A quick glance at his watch revealed that the time in Washington, D.C., was 4:15 A.M. But his thoughts were ten thousand miles away. He was thinking that on the Indian subcontinent it would be mid-afternoon on a hot day made warmer by the posturings of the Indian and Pakistani leaders and the dreadful possibility that one of them

might decide that a preemptive nuclear strike against the other was the best way of winning an as yet undeclared war.

"Perrins," yawned the man, although he was wide awake. A bad attack of indigestion, the result of a supper cruise down the Potomac aboard the presidential yacht *Sequoia*, had seen to that.

He listened carefully to the somber-sounding voice on the other end of the secured line and then groaned.

"Okay," he said. "I'll be there in half an hour." He replaced the receiver and cursed quietly.

His wife was awake and looking at him with a worried expression.

"It's not—"

"No, thank God," he said, swinging his legs out of bed. "Not yet anyway. But I have to go to the office all the same. Something that 'requires my urgent presence.' "

She threw back the quilt.

"No need for you to get up," he said. "Stay in bed."

She stood up and slipped on a bathrobe.

"I wish I could, dear," she said. "But that dinner. I feel like I'm pregnant again. Pregnant and overdue." She headed toward the kitchen. "I'll make some coffee."

Perrins shuffled into the bathroom and held himself under an ice-cold shower. Cold water and coffee might be the only stimulation his heart would get for the rest of the coming day—just like the day before.

Fifteen minutes later, he was dressed and standing on the porch of the red-brick colonial. Kissing his wife good-bye, he stepped into the back of a black Cadillac sedan that the office had dispatched to collect him.

Neither the driver nor the armed guard alongside him in the front said anything during the drive north up the Henry G. Shirley Memorial Highway. They were both the speak-when-spoken-to types, servicemen who had driven and protected Perrins for the last year. They knew that a man attending a dawn meeting at the Pentagon might have other things on his mind than the unusually severe cold weather and the way the Redskins had been playing.

Just south of Arlington National Cemetery, the highway deviated to the east and the familiar concrete shape that was the biggest office building in the world came into view. To Perrins it seemed only appro-