

TO A MOUNTAIN IN TBET

By Colin Thubron

excerpt



CHAPTER ONE

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The sun is rising to its zenith. Silver-grey boulders lie tumbled along the track among mattresses of thorns and smoke-blue flowers. The storm clouds that hang on the farther mountains do not move. There is no sound but the scrunch of our boots and the clink of the sherpa's trekking pole. Underfoot the stones glisten with quartz.

These first hours have a raw exhilaration. The track shimmers ahead with a hard brilliance. The earth is young again. Perhaps it is the altitude that brings this lightness and anticipation. Within an hour we have flown from near sea level to over 8,000 feet, and I feel weightless, as if my steps will leave no trace.

Beneath us the little town of Simikot hangs above an abyss of empty valleys. Its corrugated-iron roofs flash among patches of green barley. It is slipping behind us. From its runway of parched earth the Twin Otter aircraft that carried us in has already turned and flown away between the mountains. There are no roads here. Humla is the remotest region in Nepal, little visited by trekkers even now. The nearest paved highway – the lowland route from Kathmandu to Delhi – lies hundreds of mountain miles to the south, and to the east the climbers' lodestars – Dhaulagiri, Annapurna, Everest – are out of sight.

As we walk, a dark-forested gully opens to the west, carving a giant corridor through the mountains. Its walls rise in vertiginous foothills towards 15,000-foot summits gashed with snow and clouds. Noiselessly far below us, through this immense gulf so steep as often to lie out of sight, the Karnali river is raging coldly down from the highest source of the Ganges. It is nowhere navigable, but for the next ten days it will steer us northwards. It twists ahead with a chill magnetism, mounting by icy steps higher and deeper through the western Himalaya, for a hundred miles before us, into Tibet.

By trekkers' standards our party is small and swift: a guide, a cook, a horse man, myself. We move scattered above the river, while lone traders pass us the other way, leading their stocky horse and mule trains between lonely villages. They are dark, slight men in torn anoraks and brimless headgear, marching to the clank of their animals' tin bells and crying softly to the strays to keep in line. Their women walk alongside, sashed and scarved in magenta and blue, their

sinewy wrists layered in bracelets, their nostrils and ears dangling golden discs. They look fierce and open, and laughingly meet your eyes. The delicacy of the plains has gone.

We reach a cairn stuck with weathered stakes, then descend through pines towards the river. Its noise rises to us in the hiss of far-down cataracts. Peacefully beneath us, and seaming the far banks in long yellow shelves, the terraces of an unseen village are ripening with corn. The slopes flame with the reds and purples of late spring, with shrubs I do not know. Giant walnut trees appear, and silvery aromatic shrubs, while overhead the mountain peaks gather in jagged crenellations and seem to enclose the place in a private peace.

We are through the village almost without knowing. Granite boulders overshadow dwellings frailer than they: cottages of dry-stone walls and bleached timbers sunk among the igneous rocks. They look half deserted, mellow and pastoral above their fields, so that as we go on high above the river, past rice paddies and a little shrine to Shiva, I imagine this a valley of Arcadian quiet.

Then a man joins us on the path. He is vivid with troubles. His jacket is patched, his trainers split. He fires a volley of questions at the sherpa. How can he get out of this place? There's nothing for anybody here. His family can't support itself on its patch of rice field . . . it isn't enough . . .

His eyes spear us out of a sun-blackened face. He follows us for miles. He cannot bear to let us go: we, who carry the aura of a wider world. He has never been to Kathmandu, never left this region. But rain has loosened the earth around his house, and it is sliding down towards the river.

'I am fifty-six now . . . my life is too poor . . . My son and daughter-in-law want to buy a new horse, but we cannot afford one . . . a horse is forty thousand rupees . . .'

Yet this dirge comes with a hardy sparkle, as if he were talking about other people. He grins with disordered teeth. 'Their horse is old . . . it will die . . .'

Of course. This is a cruel region in a poverty-stricken land: bitter winters and narrow, rock-strewn earth. Arcadia is falling to bits as he speaks. The farmed terraces are dropping behind, and above us the naked rock is bursting through the green hillsides in huge, serrated shoulders.

Sometimes the track lifts precipitously on steps hewn sheer from the cliff face, or ascends on rubble stairways where a stumble will pitch us into the abyss.

At one of these bottlenecks we find the rock daubed red with the Maoist rebel emblem – a hammer-and-sickle circled beside a swastika (here an archaic symbol of good fortune) – but the guerrillas themselves have gone. For ten years they paralysed this region, and would politely leach for money the few foreigners who ventured in. They took over 13,000 Nepalese lives. But now, three years later, with Kathmandu's royal dynasty swept away, they are jostling for power with the decrepit politicians in the capital, and their old slogan – 'Follow the Maoist path!' – is flaking from cliffs and walls.

At last the farmer turns back, waving buoyantly, his voice fading among the rocks. 'We have no king now . . . we have nothing . . .' And then, as if, after all, he might follow us to the end: 'Where are you going?'

When the sherpa cries back, 'Mount Kailas!' the name echoes down the river like a broken secret. The farmer does not hear it. It is the noise of somewhere imagined or hopelessly far away.