

PROLOGUE

My name is James Foster, and I am a doctor. To prevent the obvious question, I come from a town over a hundred miles to the north of Gloucester. Where that is doesn't matter in the slightest. It isn't relevant to the story, except insofar as the inhabitants of the area are known for their hardheaded, no nonsense or frivolous attitude to life, an attitude which I may fairly claim I am in full sympathy with.

Having little or nothing in the way of false modesty, I can say that I am a good doctor. At least, few of my patients die under treatment and of those who do, none have ever come back to complain. I work in general practice, in partnership with two other, somewhat younger doctors, on the outskirts of a busy little town, a job that gives me as much satisfaction now as it did almost thirty years ago when I first started, although I have a much smaller practice than I used to. Nor do I work as long hours, preferring to give more time to family life than I once could. Of course, treatments change over the years but people do not change, at any rate not very much. I've reached the stage where I could safely say that I had seen it all before, and that life had little in the way of surprises. This is what I thought, and firmly believed, up to a few months ago, up until the time that Bernard Harris came to see me.

After his visit my comfortable little world was shattered in a way which I couldn't even begin to imagine beforehand. Not that anyone would notice. I mean, I haven't started to swing from the chandelier, singing Rule Britannia and making monkey noises at passers by. There's nothing like that. My wife has probably sensed that I've gone a bit quieter and more reserved, but she certainly puts that down to the strains of work and the fact that I am winding down towards retirement from a job that I have always given myself to wholeheartedly, ever since I first qualified. Nor do I wish her to believe anything else. I love my wife deeply for many reasons, not all of them obvious and I have no desire to cause her any unnecessary alarm. There is no doubt that I have been given a great deal to think about and I almost wish that I hadn't.

I should explain that, although I have been a doctor all my working life, that wasn't my original intention. Before changing to medicine, I had been training for the priesthood in the Catholic Church. It was a training I took seriously, naturally, until the awful day when I realised I had lost my faith. Or perhaps I simply realised that in fact I had never had faith, not the sort that a priest needs at any rate. The whole thing seemed to be a set of meaningless rituals. Of course, our whole lives are ruled by rituals of one sort or another, but these were the sort that it was impossible to accept without living a life of lies. Worse still, without living the same lies on behalf of other people. Don't misunderstand, I have the deepest respect for truly religious characters and I can see a deep need for some sort of faith. It simply wasn't for me, that's all. I tried hard to overcome my doubts, but failed. It was a traumatic time for me and my parents. They, I know, were bitterly disappointed, although they never showed it, neither by word nor deed. Since that time, I have never entered a church, even getting married in a registry office, so deeply did the experience scar. I believed then, rightly or wrongly, that if a man was to do a thing, it should be done one hundred percent. Either I was wholly part of the church or I was completely out. Now, I do not know what to believe.

After searching around for a while, I turned to medicine, thinking that if I couldn't cure men's souls, I could at least help to cure their bodies. I considered that if science didn't always have the answers, it could provide a foundation from which I could work and build up a new way of life with new thinking patterns. It was during my medical studies that I met the young woman who was later to become my wife. There were difficulties during the first years of our marriage, largely because of the effects of my earlier training, but she was the very epitome of patience and understanding. I willingly pay tribute to the woman who helped me through those difficulties to become the man I am today.

One of the difficulties arose from our only child, a daughter we both loved deeply. When she died of cancer while still quite young, my despair went deeper than the love I bore for her. It became clear that not only could I not cure souls; there were strong limits on my ability to cure bodies as well. Naturally I had always been well aware of the

fact, but a man can hope. Of course, one cannot apply dispassion to one's own child but I began to wonder and question the meaning of life all over again. It was my wife who pulled me through that very dark time when science failed and there was no faith left to help. Well, my wife is not really relevant to the story as such, although my daughter is, very much so, but I give the background, as it may make what follows more credible.

Mr. Harris asked to see me one day in early April of this year. At that time he wasn't actually one of my patients but I assumed he had just moved in to the area and was changing his doctor, as he changed his address. This proved to be the case, as he explained, yet wasn't totally the way of it.

'I hope you don't mind my coming to you,' he said. 'The fact is, I was told you were an older man and were prepared to give a bit more time to your patients. It's a rather sensitive matter, you see, and I'm not sure I could explain it to a younger man.'

I put on my best expression of disinterest, knitted my fingers together and leaned forward to listen. Quite what I expected to hear I couldn't say, although I have heard enough in my years in the profession to be able to say that I really have heard it all before. Or so I thought. What he told me was so far outside of my experience that it disturbed my sleep for several nights afterwards and indeed, disturbs my waking hours to this day. For this reason, I thought it better to put it all down on paper, in the hope that I can make some sense of it.

CHAPTER 1

'Of course, I don't really expect anyone to believe the whole story,' said Bernard Harris. 'It's so fantastic; I can scarcely give credence to it myself. Here we all are, scurrying about our daily business, coming and going as though the things we do are important. Maybe they are, or maybe they just seem that way at the time. However, there are other things going on, in the background, so to say, things normally unseen, only dreamed about, existing in a world of fantasy. Or do they? Even now I'm by no means certain. All I can be sure of are the facts, or what I think are facts. At least, certain things

happened which I believe I remember accurately. Some are verifiable. Others, well, I know they are facts, but there are no outside witnesses and I cannot prove any of them. Still, I am known as an honest person, and maybe that counts for something.'

He apologised. 'I'm sorry; I probably sound as though I'm babbling. I hardly know where to begin.'

I smiled at him encouragingly. 'That's all right, Mr. Harris. Start at the beginning and tell me everything. You're the last patient today, so I have plenty of time.'

'Well,' he said, slowly, obviously marshalling his thoughts into a logical order, 'it all happened some time ago, last winter to be precise. You certainly remember last winter as the winter we would all like to forget.'

I did. We all do. Something odd is happening to the world's climate. Floods in dry places, whirlwinds of a severity previously unknown, baking, scorching heat in otherwise moderate climes and the vicious cold of the winter gone by, the cold that brought out the prophets of doom in their hundreds, predicting a new ice age as a result of the thermometer plunging to a level where it scarcely mattered whether it was regulated in Fahrenheit or Centigrade. Now, in August, as I write this, it is warm enough, even too warm for real comfort - another extreme - but who can forget the sight of deep banks of snow in England only a few short weeks ago? Indeed, I understand there are still the remains of snowdrifts high in the Pennines. A strange scene indeed, yet Bernard Harris had seen stranger still, in places which are well accustomed to snow and ice. To paraphrase one who was a much better writer than I will ever be, there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in anyone's philosophy.

'Where to begin?' asked Mr. Harris. 'The whole thing is like a circle, having no definite starting point, and naturally no end. Perhaps it would be best to pick a point, maybe not quite at random, and say that it all started there. That point is a night in Arlanda airport a bit over half a year ago, early in the New Year, in fact. Not that I should have been in Arlanda, not that I should have been in Sweden at all, let alone near Stockholm. I have nothing against Stockholm, you understand, it's a beautiful city and one of my favourites but it simply wasn't supposed to be on the itinerary that year. What had

happened was that the snowstorms that swept the northern hemisphere had been particularly bad in Scandinavia and my route back home had been altered as a result. Arlanda being the only open airport within comfortable reach, we were diverted there, landing just before that too was closed. Sweden is well equipped to deal with snow but it couldn't cope with the amount that came down then, at least not in such a short time.

'So there I was, together with a few hundred other passengers, stranded in Sweden at a time when I should really have been back at work. Not that I missed the work so much, but I could have done with somewhere a little more comfortable in which to spend the night while waiting for the storm to blow out. Still, if the alternative was to be flying around in circles at two thousand feet, waiting for the fuel to run out, I'll take Arlanda any time, even if it meant sitting in the concourse for several hours. As a matter of interest, I caught sight of a barometer in one of the airport shops. It had fallen so low that the needle had reached backwards to indicate high pressure once again, in total defiance of the realities of the weather.'

An announcement boomed across the spacious concourse to the effect that refreshments would be laid on as soon as possible. A man sitting opposite caught Bernard's eye and gave a wry smile.

'It looks like being a long night,' he said.

'It could be worse,' Bernard said, pointing upwards.

'Yes, better on the ground than in the air.'

'As a matter of fact,' Bernard said, with a touch of pride, 'I have seen it worse, just last week. At least the temperature is reasonably moderate, even outside. Moderate for Sweden, that is. I was struggling in minus fifty only a few days ago.'

The man gave a low whistle.

'Cold,' he said.

'I don't want it any colder,' Bernard agreed.

'Where were you to find that sort of temperature then? At the North Pole?'

'Not quite so far. In Lapland, on the Finnish side. I was doing a bit of skiing there, when I was caught. I've never seen weather like it.'

'Working up there?' he asked.

'No. On holiday.'

'Seems an unusual time for a holiday. Or an unusual place at least. Most people go for the sunshine.'

'Oh, but I like Lapland,' Bernard explained. 'I've been there before in the winter. It's all right as long as you have decent clothing and carry a bit of food wherever you go. I'm well accustomed to it.'

'So what's the attraction, if I may be so curious as to ask?'

'Peace and quiet,' he replied. 'I'm a teacher. Harris is the name, Bernard Harris.'

'Donald Vickers.'

He waited, but there was clearly no more information coming at the moment. Equally clearly, the explanation of the job hadn't answered the question he had asked. Bernard explained further.

'When I say I'm a teacher, I should say I'm a special education teacher, which means I deal with what has been termed the rejects of society. I've been doing it now for the past seven years, although I don't remember breaking any mirrors. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy the job, but it's one that makes enormous physical, emotional and mental demands. I'm always ready for a break at this time of the year and it feels good to get right away from it all and go to some place where I don't have to keep my temper if I don't wish to do so. Or find it necessary to lose it either. Hence Lapland in the winter. There aren't many people there even in the height of the summer tourist season. Right now, it's practically empty.'

'I understand that sort of job can be rather tougher than most people imagine,' said Donald Vickers.

His companion grinned back at him. 'I have thought of putting up a plaque, a sort of roll of honour, to celebrate the fact that more of my pupils have gone to prison than ever ended up in Oxford and Cambridge, though I doubt if the Headmaster would approve. Most aren't like that, I will admit. Most of them are decent kids from decent

families, kids it's possible to get really fond of. The others? Well, "misfits" describes them best, perhaps.'

'Such as?'

'Do you really want to hear horror stories?' he asked.

'As you said, it's going to be a long night. It would help pass the time.'

'Very well, but don't say you weren't warned. Let me see now. Yes, let Darren stand for the rest. He's a bit extreme, perhaps, but not too much so. He hadn't been in our school a week when he was caught selling cigarettes and beer to the other pupils, with much arm bending and shin kicking if anyone failed to buy. He set fire to the place once but made up for that on a later occasion by blocking the toilets and flooding the floors. Another time he stole a car, in company with a couple of other anti social characters, ran into another vehicle and injured the driver so much the poor chap ended up in hospital for half a year. After that, thankfully, he was taken out of our hands and put into a place a little more secure. Well, a lot more secure, really.

'That,' Bernard said, 'was Darren. 'He never forgave the school for getting him into trouble over his earlier misdeeds and wasn't slow to let us know about it. Predictably, he's in prison now and has been for some time, under high security or so I understand, but his nearest and dearest have adopted his role in society. Nothing really changes. Still, it keeps some of us in work, even if it is a bit stressful.'

'Hence Lapland? Presumably you've enjoyed it, despite the low temperature.'

'Very much so and yet...' Bernard glanced at the clock. Not even midnight.

'Look,' he continued. 'I don't want to bore you, but I had an odd experience last week up in the hills. I'd be glad to know what you make of it.'

'Odd experiences are my stock in trade,' Donald commented. 'I should warn you that I'm a writer and that anything you say may be taken down and used in a work of fiction, along with the usual disclaimers.'

Bernard gave a short laugh. 'Well, that doesn't bother me as long as you spell my name right. Seriously, if you can get anything out of this, you're welcome to use it. What sort of books do you write?'

'Anything that brings the money in, novels, mostly. That's my excuse for being here, researching background material for the next one. On my own this time. Normally I'd be accompanied by my wife, but she's pregnant, and didn't feel up to travelling in the winter. Just as well, the way things have turned out.'

He prompted Bernard gently. 'Your strange experience?'

'Strange. It was more than strange. Not frightening, or anything like that. On the contrary, I've never been less frightened in my life. That was one of the oddities. I should have been frightened. You see, I thought at one time I was going to die.'

'One moment,' said Donald. 'I see the refreshment counter has just opened. Would you like something? A coffee, perhaps.'

He made his way to the short queue, coming back a few minutes later with two steaming mugs of coffee and four large cinnamon spiced buns, of the type the Swedes do so well. Bernard began eating while marshalling his thoughts into some sort of coherent order.

'It was only last week it happened, yet in a way, it seems as though a lifetime has passed. As I told you, I went to Lapland, quite a long way up, almost as far as you can get, quite a long way north, near to the border with Sweden. I could tell you the name of the place where I stayed, but I doubt if I'd pronounce it properly, and without a map, I don't suppose it would mean anything to you, unless you know the area.'

He looked questioningly at Donald, who shook his head.

'No, I visited Lapland many years ago, but didn't get so high up, barely across the Arctic Circle, in fact.'

'It was pleasant up there,' Bernard continued. 'Cold, but not too cold to be outside, about minus ten. I'm not bad on skis, cross country that is, and the exercise kept me warm. It's a dry cold, and you don't feel it so much as you would in England.' He laughed briefly. 'I think everyone makes that comment, about the dry cold. It's true,

though. It does make a difference. Did you know that Finnish schools send their pupils outside in the winter as long as the temperature is above minus fifteen? It must prove something, if only how much tougher they are. Anyway, I'd been there a week and had covered quite a lot of ground, working up to about twenty kilometres in the day, coming back to my lodgings each night. The weather remained stable and it encouraged me to go a bit further one day. I felt happy about it, because there was a good moon and even though the sun never rises during the day at this time of the year, it was quite light enough to see where I was going. On this day, I headed for a wilderness hut in the hills. Not that the hills are so high, or even very steep, well within my capacity, I thought. And so they would have been, if I hadn't struck an outcrop of rock, fallen and twisted my knee. Of course, I really shouldn't have been out on my own, I know that, but that's a different matter. Solitude was the reason I was there in the first place.'

The pain was exquisite. Bernard let loose several rip roaring oaths, gathered only partly from his pupils and closed his eyes, rocking backwards and forwards in agony. Slowly, he tried to stand. Next to impossible. He flexed his leg cautiously, finding to his relief that he could do so without any suspicious grating sounds. He reached out for the ski bindings and unfastened them, then used the poles to lift himself upright. It was no good. He could stand, but couldn't walk. Dropping down to sit on the ground again, he turned to face downhill and pushed with his good leg, humping himself along backwards. At intervals, he turned to look behind him. Good, the wilderness hut he had been aiming for was in sight and just a little more effort was required. At length, he reached his goal, opened the door and entered the hut. As he expected, it was empty of people but had a good amount of wood stacked neatly at one side, white bark gleaming in the little light that penetrated inside. There was the usual supply of emergency food piled neatly on a rough wooden shelf that doubled as a bunk bed and he had more, he knew, in his rucksack, enough for two or three days. It wouldn't take that long for a rescue to be effected, as he had sensibly left word as to his route, destination and time of return. He lit a fire, and settled himself to wait.

It was only minutes later he came to realise that rescue may take a little longer than he had envisaged. A wind had sprung up suddenly, as it so often does north of the Arctic Circle, bringing flurries of snow in great quantities. It snowed all night, the wind banking up great drifts against the sides of the hut. Towards morning the snow eased, while the temperature fell, to what he discovered later was minus fifty two, which probably meant several degrees colder still on the hills where he was.

It was a cold that penetrated with steely fingers, a cold that was insidious in its insistence that he slept. He tried to fight it off, knowing the dangers of sleeping in that bitter temperature. Inevitably, he dozed, yet the pain in his knee, combined with the mournful howling of the wind outside, all served to wake him at regular intervals. It was during one of these intervals he discovered the fire had gone out. It hadn't been much of a fire in the first place, spluttering and smoking, barely giving any real heat at all. The wood was damp, he thought. Frost had provided a cover for it and now made it all but impossible to set fire to. Or maybe it was simply too cold to burn. He didn't know. Cursing, he made his way to the fireplace with difficulty, favouring his bent knee and tried to relight the wood. He looked around. No paper to be found, except for a few scraps laid amongst the ashes. Those and a film carton was all he had. Even his matches were in short supply, as he had used the best part of the box to start the flame originally. Nothing helped. The fire sputtered and went out. Only the barely warm charred remains of birch logs remained to give the illusion of warmth. It was at that point that Bernard realised he could easily die, up there on the hills, unsought by anyone until such time as that vicious storm moderated to a point where a search became feasible.

He returned to the bunk and tried to reserve as much energy as he could. The temperature inside, never high, fell steadily lower and lower. Bernard began shivering uncontrollably, a shivering that drained him of strength. Again he dozed, waking only when a combination of cold and pain forced him to his senses. There was something else, too. He looked around, startled to see that he was no longer on his own. Somebody had entered the hut while he was asleep, a small shadowy figure standing in front of a lit candle. It was impossible to see if it was a man or a woman.

'Hello,' he said, before memory came to him. 'I'm sorry, do you speak English?'

'Yes,' said the figure. It was a woman after all. The high, clear voice gave it away.

'Thank goodness you've come,' said Bernard. 'The storm must have stopped. Has the temperature risen?'

The woman came nearer, limping slightly on dragging feet. 'No, not yet. I'm afraid you'll need to stay here for a while longer. You've hurt yourself?'

He nodded. Somehow, it didn't seem like a question. 'Yes, I've twisted my knee. I just managed to get here before the storm began.'

'Does it hurt a lot?'

'It does rather. I don't think it's quite as bad as it was, but I'm not sure. It's so cold, I can hardly feel anything. I tried to light a fire, but it kept going out.'

'That's all right,' she said. 'I can see to that.'

She turned away and bent over the grate, arranging wood. Moments later, flames rose high, brightening up the entire hut and sending shadows flickering across walls and ceiling. He wondered how she had succeeded where he had so abysmally failed.

'Come closer,' she said. 'You're cold. Warm yourself up here. It won't take long.'

Bernard dragged himself to the fireplace, and sat gratefully on a rough stool he found there, holding his hands out to the welcome heat. He looked at the newcomer with interest as he gradually thawed out. A woman it was, of indeterminate age, but young certainly. She could have been almost anything between fifteen and twenty five. She was small too, small even for a Lapp, which he didn't actually think she was. The colouring was wrong for a start. She was much too pale, and her English sounded natural, speaking it as he had never heard a foreigner speak it before. Even the few words she had used had verified that it was almost certainly her native language. He

wondered where she had sprung from, and why, if she was in the area, he hadn't noticed her before.

She pushed the hood back from her head, giving Bernard a better view of her features. There was a curious looking mark high up on her forehead, small and round, like a rather fuzzy outlined Indian caste mark, though she was no Indian. Her hair was dark enough in all conscience, but Bernard thought he had never seen anyone as pale in complexion. She appeared almost transparent. Not albino, just transparent. He checked her eyes to be certain. They were brown in colour, disposing of the albino theory. They were also calm and serene. This girl, he thought, young though she obviously is, has seen much and knows a great deal, has experienced a great many things. Not the sort of experiences that his pupils often had too much of at too early an age. Their eyes were wild with knowledge they hadn't the maturity to cope with. This girl knew... something that was hidden to others, yet the knowledge had not spoiled her. He shook his head irritably. What had brought that thought into his mind? What on earth was he thinking of? Stop fantasising man, he chided himself. She's just a young woman who has got caught out in the storm, the same as yourself. There's nothing special about you, and there's nothing special about her, so stop making things up. Just the same, he was aware that he had never seen eyes quite like hers.

'Are you hungry?' she asked. 'I can make you something.'

'No, at least, not very. I could use a hot drink though.'

She made no further comment, but busied herself at the fire. Soon, the smell of coffee filled the air and there was a steaming hot mug placed on the rough table in front of him. He accepted it gratefully.

'Aren't you having one?' he asked, surprised.

'No, I don't need any.'

He bent his cold fingers around the mug and drank, studying his companion as he did so.

'Where did you come from?' he enquired.

'Where do any of us come from, Mr Harris?'

That startled him. 'How do you know my name?'

She smiled, the movement lighting up an already attractive face.

'There aren't too many Englishmen this far north at this time of the year,' she replied. 'Who else could you be?'

He nodded in understanding, not noticing immediately how deftly she had evaded his original question. That awareness came only much later, long after he had returned home.

'I'm glad you came,' said Bernard lamely. 'That is, I'm sorry you got caught out and had to end up here, but I'm glad I'm not on my own. I couldn't get the fire going properly, you see, although normally I have little bother. Then it got so cold I began to wonder if I would... well, if I would survive.'

'Are you afraid to die, Mr. Harris?'

The question startled him.

'Afraid? Well, I hadn't really thought much about it. I mean, who does, after all, except the elderly, perhaps.'

'And sometimes the young. In fact, isn't it often the young that fear death more than the elderly? They don't always realise that what counts is not the number of years, but the number of experiences that are put into them. Given that, the length of a person's life is irrelevant.'

Bernard grunted. 'Maybe. Just the same, I'd rather have a good many more years yet, and I don't think I've lacked experiences, even though the present one is something I could do without.'

The girl smiled at him. 'It'll be something to tell your grandchildren about. You needn't even exaggerate it.'

'Keep on telling me I'll have grandchildren,' he said wryly. 'I like the sound of it. I don't want to die yet. It's bad enough having to die at all, without doing so out here in the wilderness. '

'So you are afraid to die. You shouldn't be. It's natural enough, of course, but surely it's a great adventure, something to look forward to, the last stage of life before whatever comes next.'

Bernard regarded the girl solemnly. 'Life after death?' he said. 'I'm sorry, I'm not really a religious character. I can't quite go along with that. When you're dead, you're dead, that's it, nothing else. At least, nothing I can accept.'

'You mean you haven't found any proof to the contrary.'

'Well, yes, to be fair, I suppose I do mean that,' said Bernard. 'I don't know anyone who has.'

'Did you ever hear the story about the dragonfly grub?' asked the girl suddenly.

'What?' Bernard was startled by the abrupt change of subject.

'The dragonfly grub that lived at the bottom of a pool, buried deep in the mud, had done so for quite two years and never felt the urge to consider the meaning of life.'

'I don't suppose they need to,' said Bernard, feeling a little light headed.

'Perhaps not, but this is only a story, where such urges are permitted. One day, it started crawling up the stem of some reed or other, drawn by the ghostly light that streamed from the sky and that was spread out over the surface of the water. It ignored the protests of the other inhabitants of the pool, all of which told him he was going to his certain death.'

'It might have been a female,' Bernard pointed out.

'So it might,' she agreed with a transforming smile. 'One with a mind of her own. Anyway, the grub promised to come back from the other side if it was at all possible, and let everyone else know what it was like. Of course, once outside, it split its skin and stepped out as an air breathing dragonfly. It could no longer return but that there was life on the other side was beyond doubt. To the other denizens of the pool, it had died. They never knew, could never even envisage just how much more there was outside of their own terms of reference.'

'Well, it's a nice fairy story, I'll grant you that.'

'Fairy story? Oh no, Mr. Harris, it's nothing as trivial as that, if fairy stories really are as trivial as they are often supposed to be. You see, the story isn't totally accurate. Sometimes, not often, dragonflies do return to the water. It takes a lot out of them but they can pay a short visit before returning to the air once again.'

'Where they die anyway,' said Bernard. 'Eventually.'

'Or perhaps pass on to yet another stage. One which we can't see, or seeing, lack the intellect to understand.'

'Perhaps,' grunted Bernard.

'You're not convinced, I can see, but that's not too surprising. It must all seem like nonsense to you. Maybe it is.'

'I'm sorry,' apologised Bernard. 'I don't mean to be rude. It's just that, at my age, I can't really envisage death yet. When I do think about it, it's not exactly a welcome thought.'

'Perhaps you are afraid it will hurt. Many people do, I believe.'

'My father died after a long and painful illness. It wasn't pleasant for him. It wasn't pleasant for the rest of us, especially when we could only watch him suffer and were powerless to help his pain.'

'My mother died in the same way,' responded the girl. 'Death itself was painless though. Death itself was kind. It was the remnants of her life that caused the suffering.'

'It's a point,' Bernard admitted. 'Just the same, I can't really go along with the "peace after pain" bit. We simply don't know, do we?'

'It may be that what is usually called peace or a sleep for all eternity is in reality a very busy time for the person involved.'

'Yes, well, I'll wait and see,' said Bernard, thinking that she was really more naive than she first appeared.

They talked at greater length passing on to other subjects and Bernard found himself drawn to the girl and her maturity beyond her apparent years, allowing for her simplistic thoughts on the hereafter. Other than that she seemed to be knowledgeable

and well educated, a welcome and refreshing change from his pupils. She prepared some hot food for him but once again took nothing for herself. Bernard found that odd, but again the pain in his leg drove the significance of the action from his mind until much later. Slowly the hut grew warmer and it was possible to relax. Bernard stretched out on the bed and fell asleep in relative comfort, content in the knowledge that he would not be allowed to drift away into that slumber from which he believed there would be no waking up. When he did awake, the fire had died down to barely glowing embers, though the hut was still comfortably warm. He was alone again, the girl having disappeared. Slowly and painfully he half walked, half crawled to the door and opened it with a struggle. Dry powdery snow fell in across the step, half covering his boots. The moon shone brightly and the temperature had clearly risen. His shoulders slumped in relief. Some hundreds of metres below, he could see several figures walking up towards him. Even at this distance, he could see that the girl was not amongst them. He wondered where she had gone. More, he wondered just why she had gone. A pity, he thought, he would have liked to get to know her a good deal better. He owed her a lot and payment could hardly be settled by means of a simple handshake.

CHAPTER 2

'That's quite an ordeal,' said Donald, looking at him oddly. 'Frightening in its way, yet you say you felt no fear at all.'

'None whatsoever. At first, yes, but not after the girl arrived. Of course, having company of any sort was a great relief, especially the sort that manages to get a fire going in such a vicious temperature, yet it was as though I was being looked after by a guardian angel. An odd thing to say perhaps, considering my viewpoint on the subject, but there was something about that girl that was a real comfort.'

'So who was she? Did you ever find out? I assume you tried.'

Bernard looked troubled. 'You can take that for granted. Yes, I did try, but that's the oddest thing of all. As I said, I fell asleep shortly afterwards, when it was warm

enough, but when I woke up, she had gone and the rescue service was on its way to find me. I asked about her but they said I must have been dreaming. I was told that there were no footprints in the snow except for their own.'

'Perhaps that means only that she left some time before and the snow had drifted in and covered her tracks,' suggested Donald.

'That would have been my assumption, except that the wind had dropped and it had stopped snowing some hours earlier. There were animal tracks clearly visible. Of course, I don't know just how long I had been asleep. Maybe she had left while it was still snowing, though why anyone should do that is beyond my understanding. Besides, the temperature must have been still very low then, rising sharply, so I was told, only an hour or two before I was rescued. Anyway, there was more to it than that. When I continued asking, someone made a check and came up with the information that while I was one of four English people in the area, the other three constituted a family and were together all the time. Yes, there was a daughter, but she was only nine years old, a good deal younger than the one that shared the hut with me. Not that she was all that old herself, but certainly no child, not much younger than myself, I would have said, though it was hard to say for certain. Naturally I wished to thank her properly and I also wanted to see her again. She saved my life after all. Say what you like, that creates a bond between people, especially if one of them is a beautiful young woman. To be honest, that is one of the reasons I wanted to see her again. Chemistry rearing its head of course but none the worse for that. I don't know if she had a boyfriend but I would have been more than willing to step into any position of that nature that might have been vacant. I tried to get to the bottom of the mystery but gave it up when people started looking at me oddly and murmuring things about mountain sickness. I suppose they must have been right. Maybe I did dream it all. Yet it is as real in my mind as this airport and the storm outside. Still, no doubt the strains of coping with my pupils will push it out of my mind. When I finally get back to work, that is.'

'You'll be late starting, I guess,' said Donald, changing the subject.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

