

THE LEGEND

JACK

HIGGINS

YEAR OF THE TIGER



THE CLASSIC BESTSELLER

JACK HIGGINS

Year of the Tiger

HARPER

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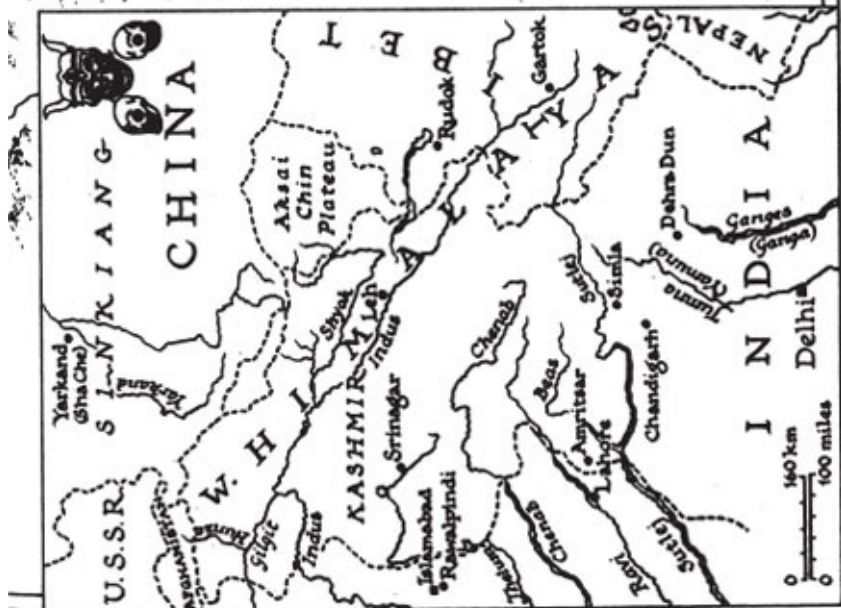
PUBLISHER'S NOTE

YEAR OF THE TIGER was first published by Abelard Shulman in 1963 under the name of Martin Fallon. The book went out of print very shortly after first publication, was never reprinted and never appeared in paperback.

The author was in fact Jack Higgins, Martin Fallon being one of the pseudonyms he used during his early writing days.

This edition of YEAR OF THE TIGER was revised and updated by Jack Higgins in 1994, and we are delighted to be re-publishing it in 2013 to a brand new audience of thriller fans.





In March 1959, after the failure of the revolt by the Tibetan people against their Chinese masters, the Dalai Lama escaped to India with the help of the CIA and British Intelligence sources. A remarkable affair indeed. But three years later the British masterminded an even more remarkable coup. It was something like this ...

They were closer now, he could hear the savage barking of the dogs, the voices of his pursuers calling to each other, firing at random as he ran headlong through the trees. There was a chance, not much of one, if he could reach the river and cross to the other side. Another country and home free. He slipped and fell, rolling over and over as the ground sloped. As he got to his feet there was an enormous clap of thunder, the skies opened and rain fell in a great curtain, blanketing everything. No scent for the dogs now and he started to run again, laughing wildly, aware of the sound of the river, very close now knowing that he'd won again this damned game he'd been playing for so long. He burst out of the trees and found himself on a bluff, the river swollen and angry below him, mist shrouding the other side. It was at that moment that another volley of rifle shots rang out. A solid hammerlike blow on his left shoulder punched him forward over the edge of the bluff into the swirling waters. He seemed to go down for ever, then started to kick desperately, trying for the surface, a surface that wasn't there. He was choking now, at the final end of things and still fighting and, suddenly, he broke through and took a great lungful of air.

Paul Chavasse came awake with a start. The room was in darkness. He was sprawled in one of the two great armchairs which stood on either side of the fireplace and the fire was low, the only light in the room on a dark November evening. The file from the Bureau which he'd been reading was on the floor at his feet. He must have dozed, and then the dream. Strange, he hadn't had that one in years, but it was real enough and his hand instinctively touched his left shoulder where the old scar was still plain to see. *A long time ago.*

The clock on the mantelshelf chimed six times and he got to his feet and reached to turn on the lamp on the table beside him. He hesitated, remembering, and moved to the windows where the curtains were still open. He peered out into St Martin's Square.

It was as quiet as usual, the gardens and trees in the centre touched by fog. There was a light on the windows of the church opposite, the usual number of parked cars. Then there was a movement in the shadows by the garden railings opposite the house and the woman was there again. Old-fashioned trilby hat, what looked like a Burberry trenchcoat and a skirt beneath, reaching to the ankles. She stood there in the light of a lamp, looking across at the house, then slipped back into the shadows, an elusive figure.

Chavasse drew the curtains, switched on the other lights and picked up the phone. He called through to the basement flat where Earl Jackson, his official driver from the Ministry of Defence, lived with his wife, Lucy, who acted as cook and housekeeper.

Jackson's voice had a hard cockney edge to it. 'What can I do for you, Sir Paul?'

Chavasse winced. He still couldn't get used to the title, which was hardly surprising for he had only been knighted by the Queen a week previously.

'Listen, Earl, there's a strange woman lurking around in the shadows opposite. Wears an old trilby hat, Burberry, skirt down to the ankles. Could be a bag lady, but it's the third night running that I've seen her. Somehow I get a funny feeling.'

'That's why you're still here,' Jackson said. 'I'll check her out.'

'Take it easy,' Chavasse told him. 'Send Lucy to the corner shop and she can have a look on the

way. Less obvious.'

'Leave it with me,' Jackson said. 'Are we going out?'

'Well, I need to eat. Let's make it the Garrick. I'll be ready at seven.'

He shaved first, an old habit, showered afterwards then towelled himself vigorously. He paused to touch the scar of the bullet wound on the left shoulder, then ran his finger across a similar scar on his chest on the right side with the six-inch line below it where a very dangerous young woman had tried to gut him with a knife more years ago than he cared to remember.

He slipped the towel round his waist and combed his hair, white at the temples now but still dark though not as dark as the eyes in a handsome, rather aristocratic face. The high cheek bones were a legacy of his Breton father, the slightly world-weary look of a man who had seen too much of the dark side of life.

'Still, not bad for sixty-five, old stick,' he said softly. 'Only, what comes now? D-Day tomorrow!'

It was his private and not very funny joke, for the D stood for disposal and on the following day he was retiring from the Bureau, that most elusive of all sections of the British Secret Intelligence Service. Forty years, twenty as a field agent, another twenty as Chief after his old boss had died, not that it had turned out to be the usual kind of desk job, not with the Irish troubles.

So now it was all over, he told himself as he dressed quickly in soft white shirt and an easy-fitting suit by Armani in dark blue. No more passion, no more action by night, he thought as he knotted his tie. And no woman in his life to fall back on, although there had always been plenty available. The trouble was that the only one he had truly loved had died far too early and far too brutally. Even the revenge he had exacted had failed to take away the bitter taste. Yes, there had been women in his life but never another he had wanted to marry.

He went into the drawing-room and picked up the phone. 'I'm on my way, Earl.'

'I'll be ready, Sir Paul.'

Chavasse pulled on a navy blue raincoat, switched off the lights and went downstairs.

Earl Jackson was black, a fact which had given him no trouble at all with the more racist elements of the British Army, where he had served in both 1 Para and the SAS, mainly because he was six feet four in height and still a trim fifteen stone in spite of being forty-four years of age. He'd earned the Distinguished Conduct Medal in the Falklands and he and his wife, Lucy, had been with Chavasse for ten years now.

It had started to rain and when Chavasse opened the front door he found him waiting with a raised umbrella, very smart in grey uniform and peaked cap. As they went down the steps to the Jaguar Chavasse glanced across at the garden. There was a slight movement in the shadows.

'Still there?'

'He certainly is,' Jackson told him and opened the passenger door at the front, for Chavasse always sat next to him.

'You mean it's a man?' Chavasse said as he got in.

Jackson shut the door, put the umbrella down, went round the car and slid behind the wheel. 'But not an ordinary man.' He started the engine. 'Lucy says he's sort of Chinese.'

Jackson drove away and Chavasse said, 'What does she mean by sort of?'

'She says there's something different about him. Not really like any Chinese she knows and quite different from those Thais and Koreans you see in their restaurants.'

Chavasse nodded. 'And the skirt?'

‘She just got a glimpse while he was under the lamp. She said it seemed like some sort of robe and as far as she could make out in the bad light it was a kind of yellow colour.’

Chavasse frowned. ‘Curiouser and curiouser.’

‘You want me to do something about it, Sir Paul?’

‘Not for the moment,’ Chavasse told him, ‘and stop calling me Sir Paul. We’ve been together too long.’

‘I’ll do my best.’ Earl Jackson smiled. ‘But you’ll be wasting your time with Lucy. She just loves it.’ And he turned out on to the main road and picked up speed.

The porter at the Garrick, that most exclusive of London clubs, greeted him with a smile and took his coat.

‘Nice to see you, Sir Paul.’ He came out with the title as if he’d been doing it all his life.

Chavasse gave up and mounted the majestic staircase with its stunning collection of oil paintings and went into the bar. A couple of ageing gentlemen sat in the corner talking quietly, but otherwise the place was empty.

‘Good evening, Sir Paul,’ the barman said. *There it was again.* ‘Your usual?’

‘Why not?’

Chavasse went and sat in a corner, took out his old silver case and lit a cigarette while the barman brought a bottle of Bollinger RD champagne, opened it and poured. Chavasse tried it, nodded his satisfaction and the barman topped up the glass and retreated.

Chavasse toasted himself. ‘Well, here’s to you, old stick,’ he murmured. ‘But what comes next, that’s the thing?’

He emptied the glass rather quickly, refilled it and sat back. At that moment a young man entered, paused, glancing around, then approached him.

‘Sir Paul Chavasse? Terry Williams of the Prime Minister’s office.’

‘You must be new,’ Chavasse said. ‘I don’t think we’ve met.’

‘Very new, sir. We were trying to get hold of you and your housekeeper told us you would be here.’

‘Sounds urgent,’ Chavasse said.

‘The Prime Minister wanted a word, that’s the thing.’

Chavasse frowned. ‘Do you know what it’s about?’

‘I’m afraid not.’ Williams smiled cheerfully. ‘But I’m sure he’ll tell you himself. He’s on the way up.’

A moment later and John Major, the British Prime Minister, entered the bar.

His personal detective was behind him and waited by the entrance. The Prime Minister was in evening dress and smiled as he came forward and held out his hand.

‘Good to see you, Paul.’

Williams withdrew discreetly and Chavasse said, ‘Thank God you didn’t say Sir Paul. I’m damned if I can get used to it.’

John Major sat down. ‘You got used to being called the Chief for the past twenty years.’

‘Yes, well, that was carrying on a Bureau tradition set up by my predecessor,’ Chavasse told him. ‘Can I offer you a glass of champagne?’

‘No thanks. The reason for my rather glamorous appearance is that I’m on my way to a fund-raising affair at the Dorchester and they’ll try and thrust enough glasses of champagne on to me there.’

Chavasse raised his glass and toasted him. ‘Congratulations on your leadership victory, Prime Minister.’

‘Yes, I’m still here,’ Major said. ‘Both of us are.’

‘Not me,’ Chavasse reminded him. ‘Last day tomorrow.’

‘Yes, well, that’s what I wanted to speak to you about. How long have you been with the Bureau Paul?’ He smiled. ‘Don’t answer, I’ve been through your record. Twenty years as a field agent, shot three times, knifed twice. You’ve had as many injuries as a National Hunt jockey.’

Chavasse smiled. ‘Just about.’

‘Then twenty as Chief and, thanks to the Irish situation, leading just as hazardous a life as when you were a field agent.’ The Prime Minister shook his head. ‘I don’t think we can let all that experience go.’

‘But my Knighthood,’ Chavasse said, ‘the ritual pat on the head on the way out. I must remind you Prime Minister, that I’m sixty-five years of age.’

‘Nonsense,’ John Major told him. ‘Sixty-five going on fifty.’ He leaned forward. ‘All this trouble in what used to be Yugoslavia and Ireland is not proving as easy as we’d hoped.’ He shook his head. ‘No Paul, we need you. I need you. Frankly, I haven’t even considered a successor.’

At that moment Williams came forward. ‘Sorry, Prime Minister, but I must remind you of the time.’

John Major nodded and stood. Chavasse did the same. ‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘Think about it and let me know.’ He shook Chavasse by the hand. ‘Must go. Let me hear from you.’ And he turned and walked out followed by his detective and Williams.

And think about it Chavasse did as he sat at the long table in the dining-room and had a cold lobster salad, washing it down with the rest of the champagne. It was crazy. All those years. A miracle that he’d survived, and just when he was out, they wanted him back in.

He had two cups of coffee then went downstairs, recovered his raincoat and went down the steps to the street. The Jaguar was parked nearby and Jackson was out in a second and had the door open.

‘Nice meal?’ he asked.

‘I can’t remember.’

Jackson got behind the wheel and started up. ‘You all right?’

Chavasse said, ‘What would you say if I told you the Prime Minister wants me to stay on?’

‘Good God!’ Jackson said and swerved slightly.

‘Exactly.’

‘Will you?’

‘I don’t know, Earl, I really don’t.’ And Chavasse lit a cigarette and leaned back.

As they reached the turning into St Martin’s Square Chavasse said, ‘Stop here. I’ll walk the rest of the way. Time I took a look for myself.’

‘You sure you’ll be all right?’ Jackson asked.

‘Of course. Give me the umbrella.’

Chavasse got out, put up the umbrella against the relentless rain and walked along the wet pavement until he came to the next turning which brought him into the square on the opposite side from his house. He paused. There was a touch of fog in the rain and he seemed to sense voices and laughter. He crossed to the entrance to the garden in the centre of the square.

The voices were clearer now, the laughter callous and brutal. He hurried forward and saw the mystery man clear in the light of a street lamp, being manhandled by three youths.

One of them wore a baseball cap and seemed to be the leader. He swatted the mystery man across

the side of the head and the trilby hat went flying, revealing a shaven skull.

~~'Christ, what have we got here?' he demanded. 'A bloody Chink. Hold him while I give him slapping.'~~

Chavasse, seeing the man's face clear in the light of the street lamp, knew what he was. *Tibetan*. The other two lads grabbed the man by the arms and the one in the baseball cap raised a fist.

Chavasse didn't say a word, simply stamped hard against the back of the lad's left knee, sending him sprawling. The youth lay there for a moment, glowering up.

'Let's call it a night,' Chavasse said, putting down the umbrella.

The other two released the Tibetan and rushed in. Chavasse rammed the end of the umbrella handle into the groin of one and turned sideways, stamping on the kneecap of the second, sending him down with a cry of agony.

He heard a click behind and the Tibetan called, 'Watch out!'

As Chavasse turned, the one in the baseball cap was on his feet, a switchblade in one hand, murder in his eyes. Earl Jackson seemed to materialize from the gloom like some dark shadow.

'Can anyone join in?' he enquired.

The youth turned and slashed at him.

Jackson caught the wrist with effortless ease, twisting hard, the youth dropping the knife and crying out in pain as something snapped.

Jackson picked up the knife, stepped on the blade and dropped it down the gutter drain. The other two were on their feet but in poor condition. Baseball cap was sobbing in pain.

'Nigger bastard,' he snarled.

'That's right, boy, and don't you forget it. I'm your worst nightmare. Now go.'

They limped away together, disappearing into the night, and Chavasse said, 'Good man, Earl. Many thanks.'

'Getting too old for this kind of game,' Jackson said. 'And so are you. Think about that.'

The Tibetan stood there holding his trilby, rain falling on the shaven head, the yellowing saffron robes beneath the raincoat indicating one thing only. That this was a Buddhist monk. He looked about thirty-five with a calm and placid face.

'A violent world on occasion, Sir Paul.'

'Well, you're up to date at least,' Chavasse told him. 'Why have you been hanging around for the last three days?'

'I wished to see you.'

'Then why not knock on the door?'

'I feared I might be turned away without the opportunity of seeing you. I am Tibetan.'

'I can tell that.'

'I know that I seem strange to many people. My appearance alarms some.' He shrugged. 'I thought it simpler to wait in the hope of seeing you in the street.'

'Where you end up at the mercy of animals like those.'

The Tibetan shrugged. 'They are young, they are foolish, they are not responsible. The fox kills the chicken. It is his nature. Should I then kill the fox?'

'I sure as hell would if it was my chicken,' Earl Jackson said.

'But that would make me no follower of Lord Buddha.' He turned, to Chavasse. 'As you may see, I am a Buddhist monk. My name is Lama Moro. I am a monk in the Tibetan temple at Glen Ariston in Scotland.'

'Christ said that if a man slaps you across the cheek turn the other one, but he only told us to do

once,' Chavasse said. Jackson laughed out loud. Chavasse carried on. 'Have you eaten?'

'A little rice this morning.'

Chavasse turned to Jackson. 'Earl, take him to the kitchen. Let him discuss his diet with Lucy. Tell her to feed him. Then bring him up to me.'

'You are a kind man, Sir Paul,' Lama Moro said.

'No, just a wet one,' Chavasse told him. 'So let's get in out of the rain.' And he led the way across the road.

* * *

It was an hour later when there was a knock at the drawing-room door and Lucy came in, the apple of Jackson's eye, a face on her like some ancient Egyptian princess, her hair tied in a velvet bow, neat in a black dress and apron.

'I've got him for you, Sir Paul. Lucky I had plenty of rice and vegetables in. He's a nice man. I like him.' She stood back and Moro entered in his saffron robes. 'I've got his raincoat and hat in the cloakroom,' she added and left.

Chavasse was sitting in one of the armchairs beside the fire, which burned brightly, a glass in his hand.

'Come and sit down.'

'You are too kind.' Moro sat in the chair opposite.

'I won't offer you one of these.' Chavasse raised the glass. 'It's Bushmills Irish whiskey, the oldest in the world some say and invented by monks.'

'How enterprising.'

'You're a long way from home,' Chavasse said.

'Not really. I left Tibet with other refugees when I was fifteen years of age. That was in nineteen seventy-five.'

'I see. And since then?'

'Three years with the Dalai Lama in India then he arranged for me to go to Cambridge to your old college – Trinity. You were also at the Sorbonne. I too have studied there, but Harvard eluded me.'

'You certainly know a great deal about me,' Chavasse told him.

'Oh, yes,' Moro said calmly. 'Your father was French.'

'Breton,' Chavasse said. 'There is a difference.'

'Of course. Your mother was English. You had a unique gift for languages which explains your studies at three of the world's greatest universities. A Ph.D. at twenty-one, you returned to Cambridge to your own college, where they made you a Fellow at twenty-three. So there you were, at an exceptionally young age, set on an academic career at a great university.'

'And then?' Chavasse enquired.

'You had a colleague at Trinity whose daughter was married to a Czech. When he died, she wanted to return to England with her children. The Communists refused to let her go and the British Foreign Office wouldn't help.' Moro shrugged. 'You went in on your own initiative and got them out sustaining a slight wound from a border guard's rifle.'

'Ah, the foolishness of youth,' Chavasse said.

'Safely back at Cambridge, you were visited by Sir Ian Moncrieff, known only as the Chief Intelligence circles, the man who controlled the Bureau, the most secret of all British Intelligence units.'

‘Where in the hell did you get all this from?’ Chavasse demanded.

‘Sources of my own,’ Moro told him. ‘Twenty years in the field for the Bureau and twenty years as Chief after Moncrieff’s death. A remarkable record.’

‘The only thing remarkable about it is that I’m still here,’ Chavasse said. ‘Now who exactly are you?’

‘As I told you, I’m from the Tibetan temple at Glen Aristoun in Scotland.’

‘I’ve heard of it,’ Chavasse told him. ‘A Buddhist community.’

‘I live and work there. I am the librarian. I have been collating information on the escape of the Dalai Lama from Tibet in March 1959.’

A great light dawned. ‘Oh, I see now,’ Chavasse said. ‘You’ve found out that I was there. That I was one of those who got him out.’

‘Yes, I know all about that, Sir Paul, heard of those adventures from the Dalai Lama’s own lips. Now it is what comes after that interests me.’

‘And what would that be?’ Chavasse asked warily.

‘In nineteen sixty-two, exactly three years after you helped the Dalai Lama to escape, you returned to Tibet to the town of Changu to effect the escape of Dr Karl Hoffner who worked as a medical missionary in the area for years.’

‘Karl Hoffner?’ Chavasse said.

‘One of the greatest mathematicians of the century,’ Moro said. ‘As great as Einstein.’ He was almost impatient now. ‘Come, Sir Paul, I know from sound sources that you undertook the mission and yet there is no record of Hoffner other than his time in Tibet. Did he die there? What happened?’

‘Why do you wish to know?’

‘For the record. The history of my country’s troubled times under Chinese rule. Please, Sir Paul, is there any reason for secrecy after thirty-three years?’

‘No, I suppose not.’ Chavasse poured another whiskey. ‘All right. Strictly off the record, of course. Flight of fancy, when you put it on the page.’

‘I agree. You can trust me.’

Chavasse sipped a little Bushmills. ‘So, where to begin?’

But where did anything begin? A long time ago, he told himself. A hell of a long time ago.

Chavasse wore a sheepskin *shuba* wrapped closely around him, sheepskin boots and a hat of some indeterminate fur, flaps down over his ears. He cradled a British Lee Enfield rifle in one arm and allowed the hardy mountain pony to find its own way. He thought he heard a plane at one point, but could not be sure as the sound faded rapidly.

The Land of Snows, the Tibetans called this part of the border area, and it was well named. A living nightmare of a place with passes through the mountains as high as twenty thousand feet. It was not uncommon for mules in the caravans in the old days to die of asthma and for their masters to get pulmonary edema, their lungs filling with water.

An ironic way to die, Chavasse thought, to drown while standing up. Of course, it didn't matter these days. No more caravans to India, by Chinese decree.

It started to snow again lightly and he paused to check the ground ahead. The sky being blanketed by low swollen clouds, there was no snow glare. He had spent the previous night in a herdsman's cave sheltering from a sudden blizzard, and had started again at first light. Now, the pass between the peaks emptied on to a final slope that ran down towards the Indian border. In fact in the far distance there was a flicker of colour, obviously a flag, and Chavasse urged his pony forward.

The border post was quite simple. A large stone hut, no barbed wire, no defence system. Half a dozen Indian soldiers stood outside wearing white winter-combat uniforms, the hoods pulled up over their turbans. There was a jeep painted in white camouflage and the young man leaning against it, smoking a cigarette came forward and looked up at Chavasse.

'Mr Chavasse? I am Lieutenant Piroo. We heard over the radio from Tibetan freedom fighters that you were coming.' He smiled. 'I'm surprised that there are any left if the reports we get of Chinese reaction are true.'

Chavasse heaved himself out of the saddle and a soldier led the pony away. 'Oh, they're true and right. They're killing people by the thousands, wiping out whole villages.' Piroo gave him a cigarette and lit it for him and Chavasse continued. 'No, I'm afraid this time they intend to wipe out Tibetan resistance once and for all.'

'Which is why the Dalai Lama has fled?'

'Yes, he hopes to continue the struggle from India. Do you think Prime Minister Nehru will accept him?'

'Oh, yes, that has been made quite clear. But come, Mr Chavasse, my boss is waiting to see you Gela. That's about ten miles from here.' He smiled. 'And only sixteen thousand feet.'

Chavasse got into the jeep and Piroo slipped behind the wheel. 'And who might your boss be?'

'Colonel Ram Singh. Very correct and old-school. Even went to Sandhurst.' Piroo, in spite of the jeep sliding from side-to-side on the rough track, found another cigarette and lit it one-handed. 'Thought the CIA were to do great things? Help the rebels and so on?'

'They dropped in a certain amount of arms,' Chavasse told him. 'Mostly British because they didn't want the Chinese to make an American connection. Other than that, they haven't done much.'

'But you have, Mr Chavasse. British Intelligence still functions, it would seem.'

'So they tell me.'

'I understand you were told by the Indian Government not to cross the border, but went anyway?'

'That's true.'

'And Major Hamid went with you?'

'Also true.'

Piroo shook his head. 'Crazy Pathan. They'll court martial him for this.'

'No they won't. He's behind me right now with the Dalai Lama. I only came ahead to confirm the arrival time. Hamid will be an instant hero to every Indian on this continent.'

'Perhaps not, my friend.'

'And what do you mean by that?' Chavasse demanded.

'Oh, that's for my boss to tell you.'

Chavasse sat there, frowning and they came over a rise and saw a number of Nissen huts below beside an airstrip. The aircraft parked at one end had twin engines and was painted white.

'A Navajo,' Chavasse said. 'What's that doing here?'

'A quick link with the lowlands. Supplies, communications. The Airstair door means we can get stretchers in.'

'And why the white strip?'

'So that if I stray over the border it will make it more difficult for the Chinese to shoot me down.' Piroo smiled. 'Oh, yes, Mr Chavasse. I am the pilot. Indian Air Force, not Army.' And he drove down the track.

* * *

It was warm in the Nissen hut as the four officers and Chavasse leaned over the map on the table. Colonel Ram Singh was small and fierce with a thin moustache, the medal ribbons on his shirt making a fine show.

'Not good, Mr Chavasse, not good. I can tell you unofficially that Prime Minister Nehru and the Indian Government are prepared to receive the Dalai Lama. Piroo here was to fly him out as soon as he arrived.'

'Which isn't likely now, I'm afraid,' Piroo said. 'I made an overflight, quite illegally, of course. His finger touched the map. 'Here is the Dalai Lama's column. I'd estimate by now about fifteen miles to go.' He indicated again. 'And here, twenty-five miles behind them a Chinese column coming up fast, jeeps, not horses. Certain to catch them before the border.'

Chavasse examined the map carefully. 'When did you see all this?'

'An hour ago. Not much more.'

Chavasse nodded. 'I came that way myself. The terrain is terrible. Even a jeep is lucky to cover ten miles in an hour. Rough ground and boulders everywhere.'

'So?' Ram Singh said.

'That means the Chinese are still on the other side of the Cholo Gorge. Hundreds of feet deep. There's an old wooden bridge there. It's the only way across. Destroy that and they've had it. The Dalai Lama will be home free.'

'An attractive idea, Mr Chavasse, but if you are suggesting that Lieutenant Piroo should somehow bomb their bridge, I must say no. Chinese territory; that is what they claim and we are not at war with China.'

'Well, I am.' Chavasse turned to Piroo. 'You carry parachutes on that thing.'

'Of course.'

Chavasse said to Ram Singh, 'Meet me half-way, Colonel. You've already allowed Piroo to fly over there. Let him volunteer again. You find me some explosives. On the way in we drop a message to the Dalai Lama's column to alert Hamid as to what's going on, then I'll parachute in at the bridge and blow it up.'

'But what happens after?' Piroo demanded. 'You'll be all alone out there on foot.'

'Hopefully Hamid will ride back for me.'

There was a long silence; all the officers exchanged glances. The Colonel looked down at the map drumming his fingers on it. He glanced up.

'You would do this, Lieutenant?' he asked Piroo.

'My pleasure, Colonel.'

'Madness,' Ram Singh said. 'Total madness.' Suddenly he smiled. 'We'd better get cracking, Mr Chavasse. Not much time.'

* * *

Ram Singh said, 'A very simple explosive, Mr Chavasse.' He opened an army haversack and produced one of several dark-green blocks. 'We get it from the French Army.'

'Plastique,' Chavasse said.

'Totally harmless until used in conjunction with one of these timer pencils.' He held a few up. 'Five-minute fuses, but the two with yellow ends are two minutes.'

Chavasse took the haversack on his back and pushed his arms through the straps. One of the officers helped him into a parachute, another gave him a Sten-gun with two magazines taped together which he draped across his chest.

Ram Singh picked up a weighted signal can with a great scarlet streamer attached to it. 'This is a message for Major Hamid. It tells him exactly what you intend.' Ram Singh put a hand on Chavasse's shoulder. 'I hope he finds it possible to, how shall I put it, to retrieve you, my friend?'

'He's a Pathan,' Chavasse said simply. 'You know what they're like. He'd walk into the jaws of hell just to have a look.' He smiled. 'I'd better get moving.'

Ram Singh pulled on a parka and led the way out. It was snowing a little, loose flakes on the wind and very cold. They crossed to the Navajo, where Piroo already had the engines warming up. Chavasse paused at the bottom of the Airstair door and Ram Singh shook hands and saluted.

'As God wills, my friend.'

Chavasse smiled, went up the steps and pushed the door shut. Piroo glanced over his shoulder at the boosted power and they roared along the airstrip and lifted off.

In spite of the layers of clothing he wore, Chavasse was cold – very cold – and he found breathing difficult. He looked out of the window to a landscape as barren as the moon, snow-covered peaks on either side. Now and then they dropped sickeningly in an air pocket and were constantly buffeted by strong winds.

Piroo glanced over his shoulder and shouted above the roar of the engines.

'I'll curve round to the gorge first. Let's make sure the Chinese are still on the other side before we communicate with Hamid.'

'Fine,' Chavasse told him.

They entered low cloud which enveloped them for five minutes, came out on the other side and there was the gorge below, the bridge in clear view. Even clearer was the Chinese column perhaps

quarter of a mile on the other side, racing towards the bridge very fast over what was at that point flat plain.

‘No time to hang around. They’ll be at the bridge in ten minutes,’ Chavasse shouted. ‘I’m on my way. Take me down to five hundred.’

Piroo dropped the nose, the Navajo went down and levelled out. Chavasse moved awkwardly because of the bulk of his equipment and released the Airstair door. There was a great rush of air. He waited until they were as close to the bridge as possible and tumbled out head first.

Hamid dismounted and waited while one of the Tibetan freedom fighters galloped to where the sign can lay on the snow, the scarlet streamer plain. The man leaned down from the saddle, picked up the can and galloped back.

Hamid was a typical Pathan, a large man, very tall, dark-skinned with a proud look to his bearded face. Behind him the column had stopped as everyone waited. The horseman arrived and handed over the can. Hamid opened it and took out the message and read it. He swore softly.

From behind, a voice called, ‘What is it, Major Hamid?’

The Dalai Lama, covered by sheepskins, lay on a kind of trailer pulled by a horse for he was too old to ride.

‘It’s from Chavasse.’

‘So he got through?’

‘Unfortunately there’s a Chinese column very close to us on the other side of the Cholo Gorge. It would seem Chavasse has dropped in by parachute in an effort to blow the bridge. I must go to his aid.’

‘I understand,’ the Dalai Lama said.

‘Good. I’ll take two of the escort with me. The rest of you must press on with all possible speed.’

He rode across to one of the carts and picked up a Sten-gun and two magazines which he stuffed into his saddle-bag, then he gave a quick order to two of the Tibetans and galloped away. A few moments later they went after him leading a spare horse.

Chavasse hit the ground heavily perhaps 100 yards from the bridge. He lay there for a moment winded, then stood up and struggled out of his parachute harness. There was still no sign of the Chinese and he unslung the Sten-gun and ran along the uneven track between outcrops of rock.

It was stupid, of course, such exertion at that altitude, and by the time he reached the bridge, he was gasping for air, his breath like white smoke. He started across and it swayed gently. He got to the centre, took off the haversack and selected a block of plastique, inserted a five-minute timer, lay down and reached over the edge and wedged the explosive into a space between the ends of two struts. He activated the timer, stood up and, at that moment, a Chinese jeep appeared on top of the rise on the other side.

Its machine gun opened up at once. Chavasse ran, the Sten-gun in one hand, the haversack in the other. He reached the end of the bridge, ducked behind one of the supporting posts, found another block of plastique, inserted a yellow two-minute fuse and activated it.

The jeep kept firing, bullets clipping wood from the post. He laid the plastique block down, returned fire with his Sten and a lucky shot knocked one soldier out. The jeep, half-way across the bridge, paused, another just behind it and, on the ridge above, the rest of the column arrived.

‘Just stay there,’ Chavasse prayed and tossed the block of plastique out on to the bridge.

To his horror it actually bounced over the edge where it exploded in space. The jeep started forward

firing relentlessly, followed by the other, and the column moved down on the other side.

Chavasse ran up amongst the rocks, head down, glancing back to see the two jeeps reach fir ground. At that moment and just as the convoy started across, there was a huge explosion. The cent of the bridge twisted up into the air, lengths of timber flying everywhere. The two lead jeeps in the convoy on the other side went with it.

As the reverberations died away there were cries of rage from the Chinese soldiers in the two jeep which had got across, three left in one and four in the other. They both fired their light machine-gun into the rocks below the escarpment and Chavasse cowered down and opened his haversack. One block of plastique left. He inserted the remaining two-minute pencil and started to count, the Sten-gun ready in his other hand.

He fired it in short sharp bursts with his left hand, still counting, and they raked the rocks with machine-gun fire so fierce that he had to keep his head down and hurl the block of plastique blindly. This time his luck was good for it landed in the jeep containing four soldiers and exploded a second later with devastating effect.

He glanced over a rock and saw only carnage. The four soldiers killed outright and the other jeep tilted on one side, its three occupants thrown out. As Chavasse watched, they got to their feet coughing in the acrid smoke and picked up their weapons. He stood and opened fire with the Sten, three bullets kicking up dirt beside them, then the magazine simply emptied itself. He threw it down and turned and ran for his life as the three Chinese cried out and came after him.

Bullets ploughed into the ground beside him, kicking up snow as he struggled up the slope and then a cheerful voice cried, 'Lie down, Paul, for God's sake.'

Hamid appeared on the ridge above, holding the Sten light machine gun in both hands. He swept from side-to-side, cutting down the three Chinese in a second. As the echoes died away he looked at the ruins of the bridge.

'Now that's what I call close.'

'You could say that.' Chavasse scrambled up the slope and saw the two Tibetans below holding Hamid's horse and the spare. 'How thoughtful. You've brought one for me. Prime Minister Nehru and the Indian Government are prepared to receive the Dalai Lama. The Indian Air Force plane that just dropped me in will be waiting on the airstrip at Gela. We'll all be in Delhi before you know it.'

'Excellent,' Hamid said. 'So can we kindly get the hell out of here?'

The British Embassy in Delhi was ablaze with light, crystal chandeliers glittering, the fans in the ceiling stirring the warm air, the French windows open to the gardens.

The ballroom was packed with people, anyone who counted in Delhi, the great and the good, not only the British Ambassador, but Prime Minister Nehru, all there to honour the Dalai Lama, who sat in a chair by the main entrance, greeting the well-wishers who passed him in line.

Chavasse in a white linen suit, black shirt and pale lemon tie, stood watching. Hamid was at his side, resplendent in turban and khaki uniform, his medal ribbons, particularly the Military Cross from the British, making a brave show.

'Look at them,' Chavasse said. 'All they want to do is to be able to boast that they shook his hand. They'd ask for his autograph if they dared.'

'The way of the world, Paul,' the Pathan told him.

There was a Chinese in the line, a small man with horn-rimmed glasses, an eager smile on his face. Chavasse stiffened.

'Who's that?'

The young lieutenant behind them said, 'His name is Chung. He's a doctor. Runs a clinic for the poor. He's Chinese Nationalist from Formosa. Came here six months ago.'

Dr Chung took the Dalai Lama's hand. 'Chung – Formosa, Holiness,' they heard him say. 'Such an honour.'

The Dalai Lama murmured a response, Chung moved away and took a glass from a tray held by one of the many turbaned waiters.

The Dalai Lama beckoned the young lieutenant to him. 'Enough for the moment. I think I'll have a turn in the garden. I could do with some fresh air.' He smiled at Chavasse and Hamid. 'I'll see you again in a little while, gentlemen.'

He made his way through the crowd, escorted by the lieutenant, nodding and smiling to people as he passed, and went out through one of the French windows. The lieutenant returned.

'He seems tired. I'll just go and tell them at the door to warn new guests that he's not available for presentation.'

He walked away and Hamid said, 'When do you return to London?'

Chavasse lit a cigarette. 'Not sure. I'm waiting for orders from my boss.'

'Ah, the Chief, the famous Sir Ian Moncrieff.'

'You're not supposed to know that,' Chavasse said.

'No, you're certainly not,' a familiar voice said.

Chavasse swung round in astonishment and found Moncrieff standing there, in a crumpled sand-coloured linen suit. He wore a Guards tie, grey hair swept back.

'Where on earth did you spring from?' Chavasse demanded.

'The flight from London that got in two hours ago. Magnificent job, Paul. Thought I'd join in the festivities.' He turned to the Pathan. 'You'll be Hamid?'

They shook hands. 'A pleasure, Sir Ian.'

Moncrieff took a glass from the tray of a passing waiter and Chavasse said, 'Well, they're all here as you can see.'

Moncrieff drank some of the wine. 'Including the opposition.'

'What do you mean?' Hamid asked.

'Our Chinese friend over there.' Moncrieff indicated Chung, who was working his way through the crowd towards the French windows.

'Chinese Nationalist from Formosa,' Chavasse said. 'Runs a clinic for the poor downtown.'

'Well, if that's what Indian Intelligence believe they're singularly ill-informed. I saw his picture in a file at the Chinese Section of SIS in London only last month. He's a Communist agent. Where's the Dalai Lama, by the way?'

'In the garden,' Hamid told him.

At that moment Chung went out through one of the open French windows. 'Come on,' Chavasse said to Hamid and pushed his way quickly through the crowd.

The garden was very beautiful, flowers everywhere, the scent of magnolias heavy on the night air, palm trees swaying in a light breeze. The spray from a large fountain in the centre of the garden lifted into the night and the Dalai Lama followed a path towards it, alone with his thoughts. He paused as Chung stepped from the bushes.

'Holiness, forgive me, but your time has come.'

He held an automatic pistol in one hand, a silencer on the end. The Dalai Lama took it in and smiled serenely.

'I forgive you, my son, death comes to all men.'

Hamid, running fast, Chavasse at his back, was on Chung in an instant, one arm round his neck, hand reaching for the right wrist, depressing the weapon towards the ground. It fired once, a dull thud and Chung, struggling desperately, managed to turn. For a moment they were breast-to-breast, the tall Pathan and the small Chinese. There was another dull thud, Chung went rigid and then slumped to the ground. For a moment he lay there kicking, then went very still.

Chavasse went down on one knee and examined him as Moncrieff arrived at the run. Chavasse stood up, the gun in his hand.

'Is he dead?' the Dalai Lama asked.

'Yes,' Chavasse told him.

'May his soul be at peace.'

'I'd suggest you come with me, sir,' Moncrieff said. 'The fewer people who know about this the better. In fact it never happened, did it, Major?'

'I'll handle it, sir,' Hamid said. 'Utmost discretion. I'll get the Head of Security.'

Moncrieff took the Dalai Lama away. Hamid said, 'Pity the poor sod decided to shoot himself here and we'll never know why, will we? As good a story as any. You stay here, Paul. You'll make a fine witness and so will I.' He shook his head. 'Peking has a long arm.'

The Pathan hurried away; Chavasse lit a cigarette, went and sat on a bench by the fountain and waited.

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