Opening extract from

The Abominables

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Published by

Marion Lloyd Books

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MARION LLOYD BOOKS

First published in the UK in 2012 by Marion Lloyd Books
An imprint of Scholastic Children's Books
Euston House, 24 Eversholt Street
London, NW1 1DB, UK
A division of Scholastic Ltd.
Registered office: Westfield Road, Southam, Warwickshire, CV47 0RA
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ISBN 978 1407 13297 6

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
Papers used by Scholastic Children's Books are made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

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1

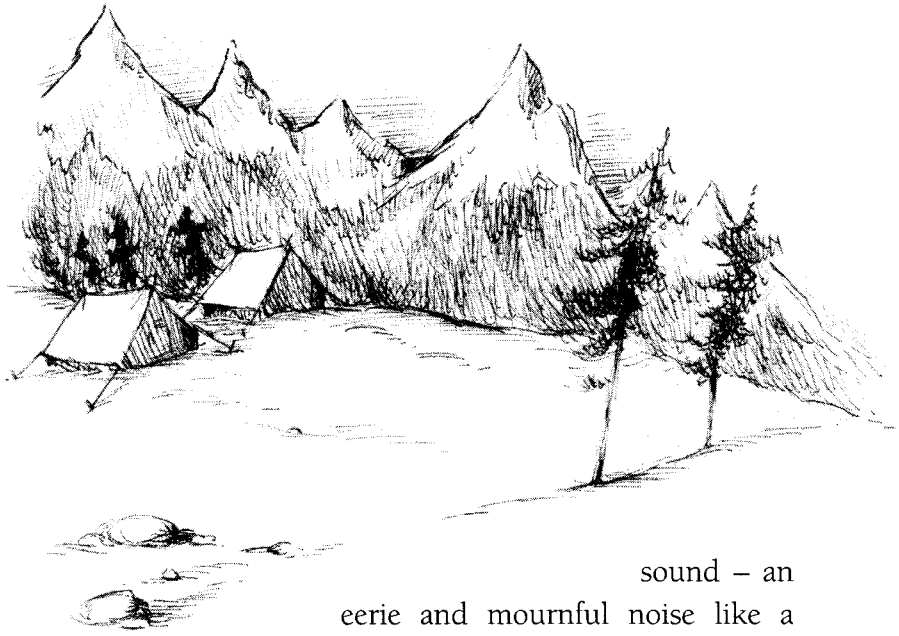
Kidnap

About a hundred years ago something dreadful happened in the mountains near Tibet.

A beautiful young girl called Lady Agatha Farlingham was sleeping peacefully in a tent pitched on a ledge below the summit of a mountain known as Nanvi Dar. Beside her, wearing a green woolly nightcap against the bitter cold, slept her father, the Earl of Farley, and in another tent close by slept their three porters, tough natives of the Himalayas, who carried their baggage and looked after them.

The Earl had come to the roof of the world to search for rare and unknown plants which grew only in these high and dangerous places. He was a famous plant hunter and he liked his daughter Agatha too much to leave her at home in England doing all the boring things that girls had to do in those days, like painting pictures of ruins, or taking walks with their governess, or visiting the poor, who often preferred to be left alone.

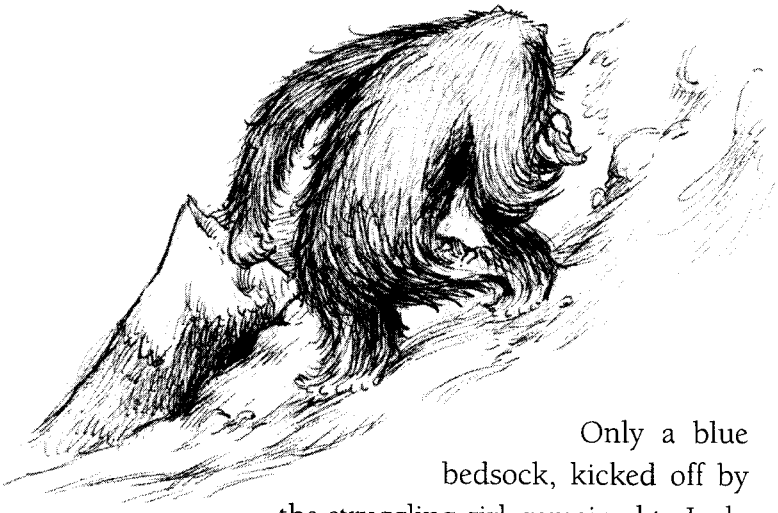
Soon after midnight on that awful night, Lady Agatha was woken by a most strange and unearthly



sound – an eerie and mournful noise like a train with indigestion.

She sat up, pulled her father's heavy tweed jacket around her shoulders and bravely stepped outside. And then it happened. Out of the blackness and the snow there loomed a ghastly, gigantic, hairy THING. Before she could even scream, a pair of huge brown arms grasped the terrified girl and then the foul beast turned and, leaping swiftly back up the sheer side of the mountain, vanished out of sight.

The poor Earl and his porters searched and searched for many days, risking death in the cruel blizzards and the raging wind, but it was useless. The fresh snow had wiped out all possible tracks.



Only a blue bedsock, kicked off by the struggling girl, remained to Lady Agatha's distraught father. He took it back to England, to his ancestral home at Farley Towers, and slept with it under his pillow for the rest of his life. And when people asked him what had happened to his lovely daughter, he always said she must have lost her memory and wandered away and been buried by an avalanche. Because he simply wouldn't believe what all the porters told him: that his daughter had been carried away by a yeti – that vile monster who can tear a human being limb from limb, or crunch one up in a single bite. A creature so terrible and fearsome that it is known as The Abominable Snowman.

But of course the porters were right. Agatha *had* been carried away by a yeti. He had run with her high over the sacred mountain of Nanvi Dar, and all

her kicks and struggles and screams felt no more to his brute strength than the hiccuping of a flea. Until at last the thin air, the bitter cold and blind terror brought release and the poor girl mercifully fainted.

When she came round she knew at once where she was. There could only be one place as beautiful as this: heaven. The sky above her head was a marvellous rich, royal blue with little fleecy clouds. The grass on which she lay was soft and sweet-smelling and studded with beautiful flowers: tiny blue gentians, golden primulas, scarlet lilies. Agatha sat up. She felt sore and bruised but that was understandable. You couldn't die and go to heaven without feeling a little bit uncomfortable.

She looked around. The air was warm, and she saw trees covered in red and white and cream blossoms as big as plates. There was a stream, crystal clear and bubbly, with kingfishers darting about its banks. Far above her an eagle circled lazily. She was in a broad valley, surrounded on every side by sheer, jagged cliffs and escarpments. And then to her surprise, beyond the steep ridges which surrounded the valley, she saw the unmistakable outline of the peak of Nanvi Dar, glittering white in the early morning sun.

"Perhaps I haven't died after all," said Lady Agatha.

And there was something else that didn't go with the idea of heaven in the least. A few metres away from her, sitting so quietly that she had taken it for a boulder or the stump of a huge tree, was an absolutely enormous dark brown beast. It wasn't a bear; it was much, much bigger than a bear. It wasn't a man; it was much, much hairier than any man. And then she remembered. A yeti. She had been carried away by a yeti over mountains so dangerous that she could never make her way back alone. She was trapped here in this secret valley, perhaps for ever.

"I should feel terribly frightened," thought Agatha.

But feeling frightened is an odd thing. You either feel it or you don't, and Agatha didn't. Instead she got up and walked quietly towards the yeti. Then she leaned forward and put her hand on the yeti's arm. At once she was buried up to the elbow in long, cool, silky, tickly hair, masses and masses of it.

The yeti leaned forward. He blew softly with his lower lip to clear away his hair – and then Lady Agatha Farlingham became the first human ever to see a yeti's face.

She thought it a most interesting and distinguished face. Yetis have huge, round, intelligent eyes as big as saucers. If you stop and look into a yeti's eyes,

instead of just running away and screaming, you can't be afraid. Yetis also have snub noses and big ears and the ears have a most useful flap on them, an ear *lid*, which they can close. This saves them from getting earache in the fierce Himalayan winds, and is also useful when they don't want to hear what people are saying. Their mouths are big and generous-looking.

Best of all are their smiles. "Before I had seen a yeti smile," Lady Agatha used to say, "I didn't know what a smile was." Not only was the yeti's smile beautiful, it was very, very comforting to anyone who might be worrying about being eaten. If you want to know what a person eats, look at his teeth. The yeti's teeth were white and even and quite flat, like the teeth of a very clean sheep, and Agatha understood immediately not only that the yeti *wouldn't* eat her but that he *couldn't* eat her. And in fact, as she found out later, yetis are the strictest and most careful vegetarians.

"Oh, I *like* you," said Agatha, holding out her hand.

A great burden seemed to fall off the yeti's back. He got up and stood there, waiting, with his head on one side, till Agatha got up too, and then he began to lead her along the floor of the valley towards

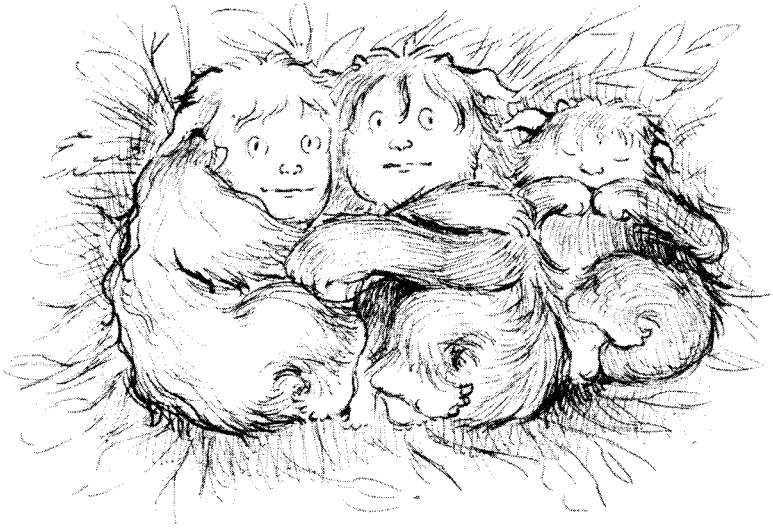
a little copse of slender Himalayan birches where some yaks were peacefully grazing. And as he walked, Agatha saw that his enormous feet – each about the size of a well-fed dachshund – had eight toes and were put on back to front. And this, of course, was why later when people tried to track yetis in the snow they never found them. Yetis who seem to be going are really coming, and yetis who seem to be coming are really going. It is as simple as that.

Suddenly the yeti stopped, bent down to a little hollow by the bank of the stream and began to clear away the dried grass and sticks which covered it. When he had finished he grunted in a pleased sort of way and then he moved aside so that Agatha could see what he had uncovered.

"Oh!" said Agatha. Sleeping peacefully, curled up in each other's arms, were two fat, furry baby yetis. She bent down to touch the one nearest to her. Its silly, big feet were pulled round its plump stomach and when it opened its eyes and looked at her, they were a deep and lovely blue.

Then she tickled the other yeti and it twitched in its sleep and woke too, and *its* eyes were a rich and serious brown.

But the yeti father had begun to look anxious.



Something wasn't right. He began to stir the babies round, prodding and digging and turning them over like underdone sausages. And then he pounced, and with a proud grunt, held something out to Agatha.

It was another baby yeti – but so small and squashed and funny-looking that it might just as well have been an old glove or a tea cosy or a run-over cat. And when it opened its eyes and looked at her, Agatha got a shock. One of its eyes was a bright and piercing blue, the other was a deep and serious brown.

"A wall-eyed yeti," said Agatha in amazement.

Later she called him Ambrose.

2

The Trouble with Yetis

As soon as she saw the orphaned yetis, Agatha gave up all idea of escaping from the secret valley. No, she would stay and bring the babies up to be God-fearing creatures and give them a mother's love. For she realized at once that the big yeti who had kidnapped her must be a widower who had lost his wife in some tragic accident and that he wanted her to care for his children.

And care for them she did. The very fat, blue-eyed baby was a girl and Agatha called her Lucy, after the kennelmaid who had been her best friend at Farley Towers. The brown-eyed yeti, who was a boy, she called Clarence. And of course there was Ambrose, with his mad eyes and his squashed face – Ambrose who was always being sat on by the others, or falling into mouse-hare holes, or getting lost.

The first thing Agatha did, naturally, was to teach all the yetis to talk. Father learnt to speak quite quickly even though he was over three hundred years old by the time Agatha came to the valley and it is not so easy to learn things as you get older. And of

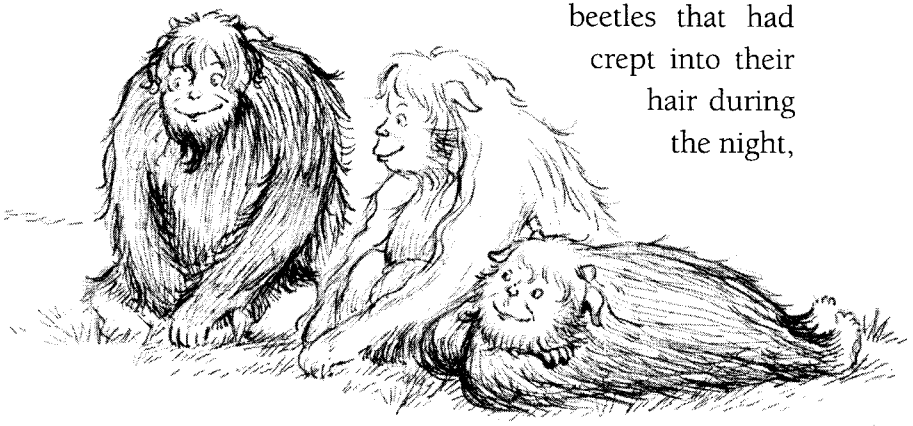
course the children learnt as easily as they breathed.

After that, Agatha taught them all the things that her governess had taught her, like the importance of good manners: not burping after meals, not scratching under the armpits however much one itched, and *never* closing one's ear lids when people were speaking to one. She taught them how to clean between their teeth with a sharpened stick, and how to wash their eight-toed, backward-pointing feet in the stream after they'd been running because smelly feet are *not* polite. She taught them sums and their alphabet and how to sing hymns. Best of all, she used to tell them stories. Soon after she arrived in the valley, Father had realized that a well-bred English girl needed somewhere to call home, and he had gathered stones and built her a little house, no more than a hut really, roofing it with branches and grass. In the evenings, Agatha would sit outside with the yetis around

her. "Once upon a time..." she would begin.

The yetis were *mad* about stories. *Puss in Boots*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *The Three Bears* – all day they followed her about, begging for more. As for Ambrose, long before dawn Agatha could hear him sitting and *breathing* outside the entrance to her hut (by the time he was two years old he was much too big to get through it), waiting and waiting to hear about Ali Baba, or poor Cinderella, or Dick Whittington's cat.

At first Lady Agatha was surprised by how easily the yetis took to a civilized English upbringing, but she soon realized that they were truly kind and considerate by nature, not only to each other, but to every living thing. In the mornings, when she combed them, they would cup their huge hands to catch the little spiders and beetles that had crept into their hair during the night,



and release them carefully on to the ground. They always looked where they were putting their huge feet, avoiding worm casts and spiders' nests and molehills, in case someone was at home. So they were particularly pleased when Agatha taught them to say sorry, for you should Always Apologize for Any Inconvenience You Have Caused.

But when they began to apologize to everything they ate (and yetis eat a lot), saying "Sorry, mango," "Sorry, flower," "Sorry, yak-milk pancake," Lady Agatha thought that this was going too far – Moderation In All Things – and taught them to say grace. "For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly thankful." It was not a great improvement. They did say grace politely when they sat down to a meal together. But yetis graze quite a lot, on grass or fruit or young tree shoots, and they went on apologizing as they wandered about, so that there was an almost constant murmuring in the hidden valley, rather like a swarm of contented bees. Agatha tried to persuade them that saying sorry to every nut and berry was not the English Way, but although she was a remarkably good governess, in this she failed. The yetis continued to apologize to every blade of grass.

*

This doesn't mean, of course, that they were perfect. Perfect yetis, like perfect people, would have been dull. Lucy's little problem was food. She really loved eating. All day one could hear Lucy wandering up and down the valley saying, "Sorry," before she cropped a mouthful of grass or, "Sorry, tree," before she chewed up a branch. The result of this, of course, was that she became very fat, and the hair on her stomach looked as though it was growing on an enormous kettledrum. And because her stomach was always full, Lucy slept badly. Or rather she *slept* all right but she walked in her sleep. When you heard a terrible crash or a fearful rumbling noise in the mountains of Nanvi Dar, it wasn't necessarily a rock fall or an avalanche. It was just as likely to be Lucy falling over a tree stump as she blundered with unseeing eyes out of her bed.

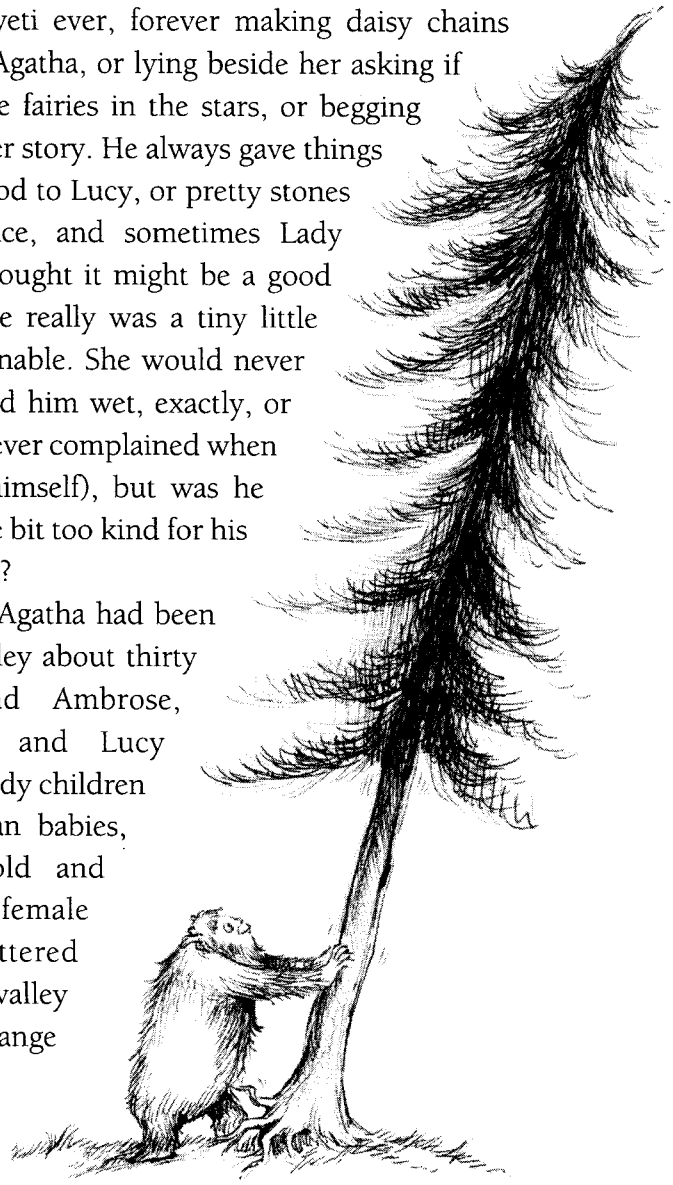
Clarence had a problem too. With him it was his brain. When he was small, Clarence had been naughty and left the valley without telling Lady Agatha and gone climbing on his own, and a gigantic boulder had come loose and hit him on the head. After that Clarence's brain did not work too well, so that while he was as strong as the others and could pick a fir-tree as easily as a daisy, he was really not

very bright and could only say one word at a time and that was usually wrong.

As for Ambrose, he started life as a little mewling thing, all eyes and feet and not much in between, and Agatha had some very worrying moments, sitting up with him when he was teething or running a temperature. Once, when he had had a runny nose for a full month, she said, half-joking, "Ambrose, you really are an abominable snowman." The name stuck and he was Ambrose the Abominable from then on. Because of all the trouble he had caused her as a baby, and the times when she seriously thought he might not survive, he had a special place in Agatha's heart. This sometimes happens to mothers, however hard they try to love all their children absolutely equally. But at last the worst was over, and Ambrose grew fast, and he grew strong. When he was nineteen, before he lost his milk teeth, he pushed over the biggest pine tree in the valley looking for woodlice to play with, and he would cheerfully lift boulders the size of telephone boxes to help Lucy make a Wendy house. If anyone had happened to catch sight of Ambrose, with his wall-eye and enormous strength, their knees would have started to tremble and sweat would have broken out on their brow. He really did look like people imagined yetis to be –

abominable. In actual fact, however, he was the soppiest yeti ever, forever making daisy chains for Lady Agatha, or lying beside her asking if there were fairies in the stars, or begging for another story. He always gave things away – food to Lucy, or pretty stones to Clarence, and sometimes Lady Agatha thought it might be a good thing if he really was a tiny little bit abominable. She would never have called him wet, exactly, or soft (he never complained when he hurt himself), but was he just a little bit too kind for his own good?

When Agatha had been in the valley about thirty years and Ambrose, Clarence and Lucy were already children rather than babies, a very old and stringy female yeti tottered into the valley from a range



of mountains to the east. They called her Grandma, and just sometimes after she had taught her to speak, Agatha wished she hadn't, because all Grandma did was grumble. She grumbled about her rheumatism, she grumbled about her teeth. She grumbled about her share of juniper berries at lunchtime and about how careless Ambrose was, bouncing on her corns. But the yetis knew one had to be kind and gentle to the old and they behaved beautifully to Grandma. The only thing they wouldn't do, even for Lady Agatha, was to keep their ear lids open when she sang. And really, you couldn't blame them. Grandma singing "Onward Christian Soldiers" as she milked the yaks didn't just sound like a road drill. It sounded like a road drill with tonsillitis.

Even after Grandma came, Agatha's family was not complete. A few years later, Father, who sometimes went exploring in the High Places, came back with a rather shy and nervous yeti a few years younger than himself.

When he was young, Uncle Otto (as they called him) had had a Dreadful Experience. He was standing on a pinnacle of rock admiring a most beautiful and uplifting sunrise, when two Sherpa porters, carrying the baggage for a party of mountaineers, had come round the corner and seen him. Uncle Otto had

smiled most politely, showing all his beautiful white teeth in welcome, but the porters had just screamed and gibbered and, throwing down their packs, had rushed down the mountain so fast that one of them had fallen into a crevasse and been killed.

After this, Uncle Otto had always felt shy and unwanted, and soon afterwards a bald patch had appeared on his high, domed forehead. There is nothing like worry for making your hair fall out. But when Agatha taught him to speak, and to read, she was amazed at his intelligence. In the pocket of her father's jacket, which she had slipped on before she was carried away, had been a copy of the Bible, and Uncle Otto used to spend hours sitting under his favourite rhododendron tree and reading. What's more he never skipped like the others did but even read the bits where Ahaz begat Jehoadah and Jehoadah begat Alameth. Not that he was conceited – far from it. It was the others who were so proud of him.

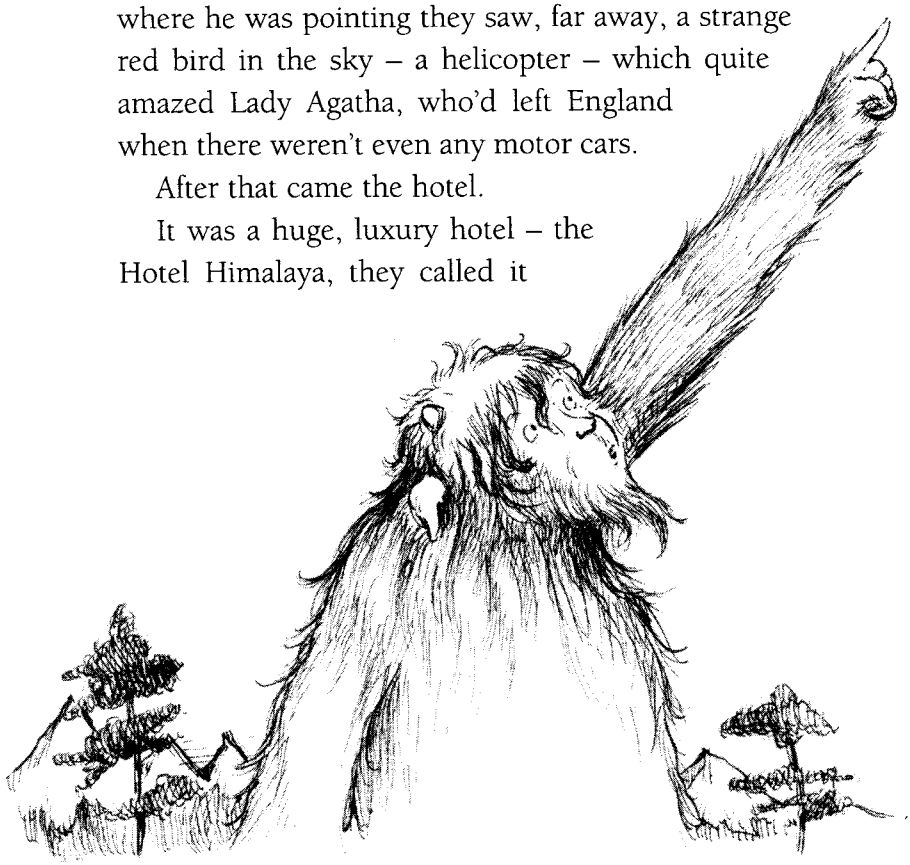
And so the years passed peacefully and happily for Agatha and her yetis in the secret valley of Nanvi Dar. Because there was no smoke to get into her lungs, or petrol fumes to give her headaches, or chemicals to mess up her food, Agatha grew old only very, very slowly. Nearly a hundred years after

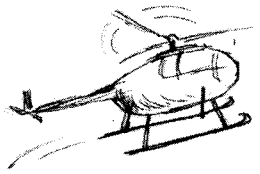
she had come to the valley she was still healthy and strong.

But in the meantime the world outside was changing. More and more mountaineers came to climb the high peaks with newer and shinier tents and ropes and ice axes and stood about on the top of them being photographed and quarrelling about who had got there first. And then one day Clarence said, "'ook! 'ook!" and when they had looked up to where he was pointing they saw, far away, a strange red bird in the sky – a helicopter – which quite amazed Lady Agatha, who'd left England when there weren't even any motor cars.

After that came the hotel.

It was a huge, luxury hotel – the Hotel Himalaya, they called it





– built just across the border in the province of Bukhim, so that wealthy people who were too lazy to walk anywhere could sit in their rooms and watch the sun go down on the peaks of Nanvi Dar. The hotel meant new roads, and plane loads of tourists. It meant litter on the snowy slopes, and monasteries serving egg and chips and rubbishy souvenirs. It also meant new kinds of people: property developers and speculators, people who thought of the mountains not as beautiful places to be respected but as something that might make them rich.

Lady Agatha wasn't a worrier, but she began to worry now. It seemed to her only a matter of time before someone discovered the valley. And she knew enough about the cruel and terrible things that might happen to her yetis if the wrong people found them. They could be put in zoos behind bars with people poking them with umbrellas and throwing toffee papers into their cages. They could be put in a circus or a funfair and treated like freaks. Or – but this was so awful that Agatha began to shiver even as

she thought of it – they could be hunted and killed for sport as the great mammals of Africa had been hunted and killed when man first set eyes on them.

"Now listen, my dears," she said to her yetis, gathering them around her. "I must ask you to stay safely hidden in the valley. No climbing in the High Places. No exploring."

"But I want to meet humans," said Ambrose. "You're a human. They could be our friends and tell us stories, like you do. And we could help them lift things."

Lady Agatha sighed. She blamed herself, of course, for not having been more honest about the world from which she came. But how could she explain about human wickedness to the yetis? They would simply never understand it. She could only hope that the yetis would obey her.

And the yetis did. Ambrose, in any case, was busy taming his pet yak, an animal called Hubert. Yaks (which are a sort of small and very shaggy cow) are stubborn and hardy animals. But they are not very clever at the best of times. They don't need to be because all they do is eat grass at one end and give milk at the other. All the same, there had probably never before been a yak as stupid as Hubert.

He was about the size of a folding pram, with

a sad, boot-shaped face, a crumpled left horn and knees which knocked together when he walked. Hubert knew he had a mother, but he was never quite sure which of the yaks was her, and when he did find her he would suddenly get the idea that he was supposed to be back with Ambrose. Sometimes he would get so muddled that he would just bury his head in a hollow tree or a hole in the ground and give up; there were Hubert Holes like that all over the valley. Ambrose, however, wouldn't hear a word against him, and as he said, Hubert was probably the only potholing yak in the world.

But though all the yetis were as good and careful as could be, something dreadful did happen after all.

In a way it was Lady Agatha's fault for cooking such a lovely yak-milk pudding for their supper. Father and Uncle Otto had three helpings each; Grandma and Clarence and Ambrose had two. But Lucy said, "May the Lord make us truly thankful," to the yak-milk pudding no less than *five* times. Nobody can have five helpings of pudding and sleep soundly. And that night, Lucy rose from the bed of leaves in which she slept beside her brothers, and with her blue eyes wide open and her arms stretched out in front of her she walked – sightless and fast asleep – across the meadows, scaled apparently without effort the ferocious cliffs surrounding the valley, and stepped out on to the eternal snows.