

# DOCTOR WHO

*The Aberration of Stars*

by Philip Boyes

My Dearest Emmeline,

My last letter ended with me in a quandary, faced with a great decision about my future. Some time has passed since I penned that, but I ask that you bear with me if I do not reveal straight away the decision I have made. These things are best understood in their proper context, I feel, so that one can see all the events that shaped one's thinking and led up to the choice ultimately made. I pray that knowing the whole story you will not judge that I have chosen ill.

After we rescued Tom our progress back down the col was slow. His strength gradually returned to him but he remained weak and his leg troubled him greatly, although mercifully it did not prove broken. It took all our efforts to assist him through the dangerous obstacles of the descent and to regain the comparatively easy footing of the glacier. For that whole day we spoke very little save for what was necessary to accomplish this task. Tommy would not be drawn on what he had been seeking out here, or on what calamity had left him in such a wretched state on that ledge. Nor did he say anything about the sphere I had seen him holding. On the contrary, he took especial care to keep it hidden, even from Kilgare. I longed to ask the Doctor about it but we had never a moment alone and some instinct held me back from mentioning it openly in front of the others. So in silence I pressed onwards, worrying at these thoughts in the howling quiet of my mind.

We caught up with the main expedition in mid-afternoon. We heard them before we saw them: a pair of rifle-shots echoing across the mountainside. Our first hint that for all the challenges we had faced, matters stood far from rosy with those left behind.

Anne grew angry at the sound of the bangs. 'Idiots! What are they shooting at? They'll have half the mountain down on us.'

I had thought the same thing. *Avalanche*. The mountaineer's greatest fear.

A few moments later we spied Travers. He stood atop a great pinnacle of ice, his rifle raised to his shoulder as he took aim at something below that we could not see. From the speed his gun tracked it, his quarry moved fast – too fast. He did not fire again, but after a moment put up his weapon with an exasperated flourish.

We hurried on and found the expedition all in uproar with men were scurrying hither and thither and shouts of panic rising in all quarters. Gear was scattered for some distance across the mountainside. The cause of their dismay was wretchedly apparent: a great trail of scarlet-stained snow led away right from the middle of the confusion and at its end was a sight more horrible than anything I had seen before. I have no wish to burden you with the terrible image that was revealed to us, sweet Emmeline, so I shall skirt over the detail. Let it be sufficient to say that the remains we saw were mauled and mangled so completely that they were barely recognisable as a man.

'Hawkins,' Travers said angrily, coming down to meet us. 'It took him right from our midst, brazen as a fox in a hen-coop.'

I could scarcely believe it. My mind filled with memories of that stolid, tawny-haired lad who had first found us by the TARDIS. I could not connect those images with the hideous sight that lay before me. I felt sick, and cold to my heart.

The Doctor bowed his head for a moment in respect or thought. 'You saw it, then?'

'We all did. Clear as day. Or would have, if it hadn't moved so fast. But it was here and it was real.'

'What was it?' asked Jamie. 'Some kind of wild beastie?'

'No, lad. It was no animal.'

'A man then?' said Kilgare, his voice little more than a snarl between gritted teeth.

'That neither. We all know what it was. It was what we came here to find. The Tibetans have a name for it. They have several. *Mi-go. Michê. Yeti.*'

'The Abominable Snow-man,' said the Doctor.

Anne looked at the bloody snow with disgust. 'Abominable is the word.'

It was a long afternoon. The Doctor spent almost all of it with a brawny Northerner by the name of Greenhalgh, the expedition's medic (but the kind of man who preferred the term 'sawbones', which he delivered with a rather wolfish grin). Together they examined Hawkins' remains. It was a grim task and I was happy to be left out of it. The Doctor came back afterwards looking sad and sat on his own for a while, playing a heart-breaking little tune on his recorder and gazing out across the mountaintops. The others went to bury Hawkins – or rather to set up a cairn of stones over him, since the ground here is nothing but frozen rock and ice. There was nothing for me to do and the quiet soon began to chafe. I thought about Tom. He had barely spoken two words to me. I try not to feel bitter towards anyone, but it rankled a little. Such gratitude as he seemed to feel for his rescue he directed entirely towards Kilgare.

He was with him now some distance away from me, watching the raising of the cairn. His pack lay unattended. I would never have a better chance to sneak a look at that mysterious sphere I had seen him with. Once I had the notion, it too had me, and it would not let me go. Unnoticed by anybody, I stole over to my cousin's things and commenced rooting through them. The sphere was not hard to find – he had tried to hide it, but exhausted as he was, and perhaps not quite yet back in his right mind, it was a half-hearted kind of hiding. And he did not have many belongings among which to secrete it – a few bundled spare clothes; a camera; notebooks and pencils; a pocket Bible; strangely, a photograph of a young man in evening-dress. The globe was under all these, wrapped in a shirt.

It was warm to the touch. That struck me as a great surprise since it so closely resembled a polished sphere of ice. Its surface was as perfectly smooth as glass but the deeper inside one looked, the more imperfections became evident – all the flaws and air-bubbles and cloudy patches one sees in ice. And yet they were more than that. As I gazed deeper, the bubbles seemed more to resemble stars in the heavens and I saw that the clouds were in fact *nebulae* and galaxies. I was peering not into a frozen ball of ice, but into the cosmos itself. I could see so much – every

corner of Creation, in all its magnificent wonder. Emmeline, it was so beautiful! I almost forgot to breathe.

And then I noticed something that gave me pause. All those stars and galaxies and clouds of shining gas – there was something less than random about them. Just as, I suppose, when we look up to the night sky, some quirk of our human brains imposes patterns on the disposition of the stars and shows us horses and ploughs and hunters in their constellations, so it was with this, on an ever-so-much more massive scale. Just for a moment, I glimpsed some fault in the randomness – some emergent order in the cosmos that should never have been there. It was – in a fundamental way that I felt instinctually and at the basest level of my being – *wrong*. This was not something imposed from above by a rational mind – no fingerprint of the Creator. This was a pattern coalesced like a crystal from the random chaos of Nature, and I felt all Nature's cruel and bloody indifference harnessed in its strange intelligence. And intelligent it was. Vastly and unfathomably so, as the mind of God to the lowliest mite. I have never screamed, Emmeline. Never in all the time I have travelled with the Doctor, for all the horrors I have seen. This was the closest I have ever come. The sheer distorted Darwinian horror of what I glimpsed appalled me.

I dropped the sphere, choking, gasping. I staggered back, then ran – ran for all I was worth to where the Doctor was sitting.

He took one look at me and smiled that lopsided little smile of his. 'You looked into it, didn't you, Victoria?'

'I didn't think you knew about it,' I managed to stammer after a few moments.

'Neither does your cousin. I think we should keep it that way, don't you?'

I nodded dumbly. 'Have you seen anything like it before?'

'I haven't looked as close as you,' he said, 'but no, I'm very much afraid I haven't. I can guess, though. A fragment of something. A shard of some cosmic intelligence frozen in crystal.'

He played a sequence of three notes on his recorder. Individually each was strange, slightly off-key. Together the effect was almost uncanny, as perfect an encapsulation as one could imagine of what I had felt looking into the ice. I felt a sudden need to sit down. He wrapped an arm around me and squeezed me close.

'Keep an eye on Tom, Victoria, hmm? He may not be the cousin you remember. Not quite.' And then he was up, on his feet, holding down a hand to me. 'Come on. We should probably go and pay our respects to young Hawkins, don't you think?'

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We suffered no more attacks from the Snow-man over the next few days, but the weather took a turn for the worse and it grew markedly colder. On each of the following nights we lost a man to frostbite. The second – A Sherpa – was still alive the following morning but was in such a frightful state that there was nothing either the Doctor or Greenhalgh could do. The man died

soon after breakfast. The others took to piling on as many clothes as they could move in, but of course the Doctor and I had nothing beyond what we had been wearing when we left the TARDIS. The Doctor gave me a little device to carry in my pocket which emitted a moderate, comforting warmth that seemed to spread through my whole body. I was grateful for it beyond words. I asked if he had one for himself but he just shook his head and smiled. He says he does not feel the cold like we do. I am not sure I entirely believe him.

This only added to the growing problem of poor morale. All the chafing irritations which develop between men confined in each other's company for long periods seemed increasingly difficult for them to bear, and there were numerous incidents of frayed tempers and arguments. Following the loss of their compatriot, the Sherpas grew ever more open in their dismay that we continued to ascend the mountain. If the *mi-go* had not served as indication enough that our venture was cursed and that we should turn back, then Tom's injury and basic common sense should certainly have served. There were plenty among the British who agreed, and Tom's refusal to countenance such a retreat was the subject of much heated discussion.

More than just a natural reaction to the misfortunes that had befallen us, this constant deterioration in good cheer and civil relations between the men seemed to me something darker: as if some black spirit of the Mountain set each man at war with his fellows – and even within himself, for even when there were no outright disputes, everyone looked in some way discomfited and at the edge of his nerve. Tom himself did nothing to engage with or stop this decline. He led us from the front, silent and altogether aloof. His leg had recovered a little in the last few days, but he still moved slowly and occasionally had to lean on Kilgare for support. Any one of us could have overtaken him and left him far behind. Instead, by some unspoken consensus we held back and matched his crawling pace. Ahead of us the peak loomed close and sharp as a gigantic dinosaur-tooth. The most difficult parts of the climb would come over the next few days.

The afternoon after the night I wrote my previous letter, we had to tackle a narrow traverse that stretched between two pinnacles. The snow was deep underfoot and on either side was a drop so immense that clouds shrouded the ground from view. The Sherpas went up ahead, paying out ropes. The rest of us proceeded lashed together in a long train. It was not especially steep, but the wind forever threatened to sweep us to our doom and even when it did not gust, the edge seemed to exert a siren-fascination of its own, as if calling to some death-instinct deep within us that longed to leap and fall. I did my best to ignore it, staring fixedly at my feet as I trudged forward. So it came as a great surprise when I glanced up and found Tom walking alongside me. He looked by now much recovered from his ordeal, and was beginning to look rather dashing again. He reminded me of my father as a younger man, as he was in my girlhood, before his ruinous association with Maxtible.

Tom greeted me with a rather awkward clearing of his throat. 'Victoria,' he said. 'That is, Miss Waterfield – ' Seeming to realise how absurd it was to address one's cousin thus, he said again, 'Victoria. It occurs to me that I have behaved towards you with rather less courtesy than

you deserved with regard to the not inconsiderable risks and exertions you undertook latterly on my behalf.’

Truthfully, Emmeline, that was how he phrased it. Bless him, he was nervous.

‘No, Cousin, you haven’t.’

‘I’m sorry. I – ’

‘Really, Tommy, think no more of it. I would have done the same for anyone, and after all, *we* are blood! To tell the truth, I never expected I should encounter any of my family again.’

‘That’s very kind. But then, you always were. I remember when...’ He seemed to lose his train of thought. ‘It was such a blow to all of us when your father’s ship was lost. We always believed you among the drowned! And now here you are, returned to us, and in the strangest of places. In truth, that had something to do with my slowness in coming to thank you. It’s no excuse, I know, but to see you now, on this mountain – thirty years on and aged less than half that...’

‘Half?’ I spluttered. ‘You think I look *fifteen years* older?’

‘Where have you been, Victoria? How are you alive and why did you never send word? Not so much as a letter. We grieved for you. Your aunt and uncle... There are few enough Waterfields left but we still might have helped you! Your inheritance is still unclaimed.’

I waved away questions I had no idea how to answer. ‘I’ve been travelling,’ I said.

‘With the Doctor.’ It was evident from his tone that he did not approve. I felt my mood harden.

‘Yes.’

He sensed my irritation and tried a different tack. ‘Kilgare told me what you did for me. It is... I would not have expected such... heroics of you, from my memory of our younger days. You were always so gentle and sweet...’

‘And I am not sweet and gentle now?’

‘You pick on those words and not “heroics”?’

He sounded exasperated. As was I. ‘Do you disapprove, Tommy?’

‘I... I wish such things had not been required of you.’

‘I saved your life.’

‘And I’m grateful, believe me. But it’s rather a shock. You have changed so very much.’

‘I’ve grown up. We both have.’

He looked over at the Doctor. ‘Who is he? How singular he must be to have entranced you so greatly that you have abandoned your family and all you formerly held dear for three decades! That should wander the distant places of the world and take upon yourself all manner of outrageous risks.’

I nodded towards his mountaineering kit. ‘What’s sauce for the goose...’

‘I can’t help wondering what your father would say if he could see you.’

‘I daresay he’d be proud of me for saving your hide. Good day, Tommy.’

Our set-to did not go unremarked. That evening when we bedded down for the night, Anne spoke to me.

‘He’s not a bad man, but he’s rather a stick-in-the-mud in some ways. He gets terribly exercised about what’s right and proper and how one ought to behave, especially where ladies are concerned.’

‘I’m surprised he agreed to let you join the expedition.’

‘You should have seen his face! A proper picture! Mind you, he didn’t have much choice in the end. Edward can generally get his way with him and I have Edward wrapped round my little finger. I think I had it easier than you, though. When all’s said and done I’m a woman of a certain reputation, and people expect such things from me. No-one will think any the less of him for my presence. But a member of his family, that’s a whole different kettle of fish.’

‘I don’t think that’s it,’ I said. ‘Or rather, I do. You’re right of course, but I think there’s something more to it.’ There was something about the closeness of the tent, embattled by the wind and snow and lit by the warm yellow light of the paraffin lamp, that inspired confidences. ‘Don’t you think *everyone* is acting a little strangely? Argumentative and impatient and suspicious.’

‘Things always get a little fraught on long expeditions. And perhaps the thinning of the air?’

‘It’s something more,’ I insisted. ‘Don’t you feel it? It seems like it gets worse the higher we climb.’

‘*Chomo-lung-ma*,’ she said with a smile. ‘Perhaps the Goddess-mother of the World resents us probing her secrets?’

Perhaps she did. Along with the ever-worsening atmosphere in our group, I felt a growing sense of *presence* about the mountain itself. The closer its peak loomed, the more it seemed not simply *there* but a force or personality in its own right. One that brooded and seethed and guarded a thin-skinned pride.

‘Today, on the narrow traverse, I felt like I wanted to jump off.’

‘That’s the monkey in you. The death drive. Don’t listen to it.’

It’s funny, Emmeline, how seductive death can be. Even for one such as me, who is happy in life and revels in its adventures, there is some peculiar attraction to the thought of oblivion. To disappear from the world and be troubled no more by its complications and worries, to drown all cares in a sweet and eternal Nothing. Such thoughts disturb me. I do not like to believe we are such broken and perverse creatures.

This intimacy of introspection was ended sharply. A gunshot outside! We bolted from the tent. Travers was in the middle of the camp, his rifle raised and his eyes wild as a savage’s. He swung this way and that, seeking out his prey as a crowd of worried mountaineers gathered around him.

‘Edward!’ Anne exclaimed, and he suddenly swung the gun to point at her. My heart was in my mouth. There was no reason in his eyes; only terrible, all-consuming fear. Anne batted the barrel of the rifle away. ‘Edward, whatever are you doing?’

‘I saw it! In the camp. It’s here!’

‘The Snow-man?’ asked Kilgare.

He nodded urgently.

The Doctor stood at the edge of the group, all sombre and thoughtful. ‘Did anyone else see it?’ he asked, looking from man to man. He repeated the question in their own language to the Sherpas who had been on watch. Their answer was negative.

‘It was here,’ Travers insisted. ‘It’ll kill us all if we give it half a chance. We need to hunt it down. Now, before it goes to ground.’

‘I don’t think that’s a very good idea,’ the Doctor warned, but Travers wasn’t listening.

‘Who’s with me? No? No-one? Are you all cowards? Fine, well sod you all! I’ll go on my own!’

He put up his weapon and shoved past Anne, barrelling out of the camp and away into the skirling darkness. She shouted after him.

Anne ran back into our tent and returned a moment later with a revolver and a lantern. ‘I’m going after him.’

The fragile bubble of surprise that had held us silent burst and everyone seemed to be talking at once. At least half of them were telling her not to go, as if she was never going to listen to such advice. But to go alone would surely be suicide. So I ran after her. Jamie was not far behind.

The Doctor seemed flustered and upset by the whole business. ‘Oh dear!’ I heard him cry behind us. ‘Oh no! Victoria! Jamie!’ But in the end he came too. What else could he do?

I have mentioned how night closes in on the mountain, how it besieges and stalks the camps like a ravaging beast. That is nothing, Emmeline, to the overweening fear of being out in it. The darkness is total, the lantern illuminates a scarce few feet ahead, and that all swirling snows and frozen mists. Each step could bring death a hundred ways: an unseen crevasse, a sheer edge, black ice, a knot of stone. Out here in the black and sheer cold, even a twisted ankle would spell disaster.

Sometimes we heard Travers shouting in the darkness, whether in reply to our own calls or at the beast – real or imagined – I cannot say. We tried to orientate ourselves by those noises but they were faint and the wind and the echoes of from the cliffs cast aural illusions to every quarter. In truth we had little notion of whether we were travelling even vaguely in the right direction.

The Doctor was still agitated, fussing like a mother hen. ‘Oh Anne! Why couldn’t you have stayed where you were? The creature was homing in on Tom’s lodesphere. If we’d just stuck with him it would have brought it right to us!’

‘Aye,’ said Jamie, ‘and poor old Travers would be dead in the dark somewhere.’

‘Yes,’ the Doctor said with a little sniff. ‘Well that’s very likely to happen to all of us now.’

‘This is what it wants,’ I said, with a sudden flash of understanding. ‘To split us up, to set us one against the other.’

‘What does?’ the Scots lad asked. ‘Ye’re making as little sense as he does!’

‘The mountain,’ said Anne.

I shook my head, a pointless gesture in the dark. ‘The thing *in* the mountain. The thing that’s watching from the summit and lurking in Tommy’s globe. The aberration I saw in the stars.’

I saw it again at that moment, in the snowflakes that whirled in the lamplight. They say that every snowflake is an individual, that no two have ever been the same for as long as the world has been. In that instant I saw – and knew at a glance – that two of those snowflakes dancing in the winds in front of us were identical. And two more. *Every* snowflake was the same, and the patterns in which they spun were not random but the expression of some order so complex as to be all-but-unfathomable. Scientists tell us that human thought – all we are and all the ideas that have ever been – arises from tiny electrical sparks in the cells of the brain and the nerves, sparks that might seem random in themselves but which together create a mercurial order from which arises an unmistakable Intelligence. So it was here, but how much greater, how much more infinitely complex the Intelligence born of snow-crystals and mist-eddies, of harmonies of wind and the epochal dances of the stars!

‘Look out!’ the Doctor shouted. Something huge and ragged and fast as a wolf flew at us from out of the darkness. I glimpsed teeth and talons and long hair crusted with hoarfrost. I was thrown down into the snow – by Jamie I think. He and Anne were shouting. The lantern-light was swinging and pitching madly. She must be trying to bring her gun to bear. I knew it was hopeless. The thing was too fast and it had the element of surprise. We were going to die, I was certain of it. I lay on my back in the snow and I did not weep or scream or make any sound at all. I just thought of Tommy and my father and of home, but most of all I thought of all the worlds and all the times that I would never get to see.

The whole incident could not have lasted more than a handful of seconds.

There was a rifle-shot. The beast staggered back and for a moment I saw it almost clearly, limned in the orange light of the lantern. It was tall and brutish, lithe but prodigiously muscled, a crude semblance of humanity. I could see no eyes in its mockery of a head, only darkness.

Another shot. Tom came striding out of the night and fired again and again into the creature.

Except it was not a creature, not in truth. When the last bullet struck it seemed to burst apart, not into blood or gore or any of the physical stuff of life, but into snow and mist and night. It became one with the blizzard that rushed headlong around us – for in truth they had always been one – and then in an eye-blink both storm and monster were gone. Above me the

stars were brighter than ever I had seen them, nauseating in their wrongness and apart from anything else, much too close. Altogether too close, it seemed to me, and getting closer.

Light swirled around us, colour and noise and impossible patterns. I saw Tom fall to his knees, whatever energy had sustained him finally giving out. The Doctor was flapping his hands and saying something with great urgency, but I could hear nothing save the unearthly harmonies of the broken cosmos. And then it was all too much for some base animal part of my brain and I sensed nothing more at all.

When next I came to myself, I was not on the mountainside, nor anywhere that could really be called a 'place' at all. Around me was darkness and overhead a thousand trillion stars in strange and unsettling constellations. The ice beneath me – for ice it most resembled – had the same disturbing, blood-warm quality as Tommy's globe. Anne and Jamie and Tom lay nearby, still unconscious.

The Doctor was standing with his back to me. 'A rather impressive display,' he called up into the unfamiliar heavens. 'Was it in aid of something, or just for your amusement?'

If there was an answer it came in the wheeling susurrus of the unfelt breeze and the oddly shining fey-light of the stars and was beyond my ability to decipher.

Tom began to stir. I ran to help him. 'Travers?' he murmured.

I looked around, but I could not see him. Probably now we never would. It was terrible to think of him all alone, out in the mountaintop night.

'You came after us,' I said.

He levered himself painfully into a sitting position. I could see him consciously striving not to look at the strange surroundings in which he found himself. Carefully and deliberately, he focused his attention entirely on me. 'Felt... like I owed it.'

'Thank you.'

He waved the words away.

The Doctor was still carrying on his one-sided conversation with the stars. 'You lure people here, set them against each other. Why? It's all just a big game to you, is it?'

Something changed in the feeling of the world, something that might have been an answer, if only I knew how to interpret it.

'No, not a game. You're after something, aren't you? Ha-ha! So that's it!'

Tommy's eyes widened. From inside his pack he withdrew the ice-globe. He looked from it to the un-place around us, noting their sameness. I looked again into the sphere and among its lights and colours I could see us now as if from far away, staring into the globe – and within that I could see us repeated again, and so on. An infinite regression.

'What is it, Tommy?' I asked. 'Where did you find it?'

'I... It's like a blur. I just knew I had to go there. Couldn't ignore the feeling in my head. I found him – Carruthers. Found it on him. He made the summit, you know. He made it and he was on his way back. With this.'

There was a sudden shriek. Anne leapt at him and was snatching for the globe. I was startled – we both were. I hadn't noticed her awaken.

She was shouting curses and assaulting Tom with fists and fingernails. 'You brought all this down on us! Lodesphere, the Doctor said! It's all been about that bl\_\_\_ ball!'

I grabbed her by the collar and yanked her off him, even as Tom stumbled to his feet and backed away.

'The Snow-man was already after us before he found it, remember!'

She struggled a little, then the fight seemed to go out of her.

'Yes,' the Doctor said. 'A little appetiser, to get the psychic juices flowing.' He chuckled and raised his eyes to the sky again. 'I'm right, aren't I? You're after the part of yourself that's trapped in that globe. The part Carruthers stole.' I looked up and I saw that the stars above weren't stars at all, but globes just like this one, each of them holding the frozen light of a cosmos gone awry. 'Must be terribly uncomfortable being splintered like that. I wonder who did it. They must have had a very good reason.'

'I can feel it in my head,' Tom said. 'It wants me to give it to it. It's making *me* want to give it to it.'

'Well then do,' Anne said. 'For God's sake, give it what it wants so we can all go home.'

'I don't think that would be a very good idea,' the Doctor warned. I knew in my heart he was right. The thing I had glimpsed was utterly indifferent to the lives of others. Its designs were its own and it would pursue them without compassion or inhibition. No good would come of restoring it to wholeness.

There was *frisson* in the air, a clenching, a snarl of rage, felt but not heard.

'Doctor,' Tommy said, 'I think I need to get out of here. Very soon, before I do something I don't mean to.'

'We're still on the mountain,' I said. 'None of this – I don't think it's real.'

'It's real,' the Doctor said, 'but it's a different reality. An astral plane at a tangent to our own.'

'And what does that mean?' asked Anne.

The peculiar animus that inhabited this limbo had no intention of letting him reply. I felt its rage as a violent twist in my stomach, a burning in my marrow. For a heartbeat it was as if all the oxygen in the air had been instantaneously replaced by something else, something alien to the table of known elements, which I could not breathe and whose toxicity reached beyond the merely physical. The very alignments of the crystal stars suddenly seemed at odds with our continued existence. Did I imagine it, Emmeline, or did I glimpse claws and fangs in the darkness around us? Not one Snow-man but a legion, all around us and leaping and tearing at each other as they rushed to catch us first.

The Doctor began to speak very quickly. 'It means we're only here so long as we allow it to convince us we are. All of you, listen! You need to look beyond what you can see around you. Don't trust it. Don't let your eyes see it. Screw them up tight if you need to but don't let yourself

believe in it. We're still on the mountain. Say it with me: *we're still on the mountain. We're still on the mountain.*'

We did, over and over again. The hardest part was closing my eyes – was forcing myself not to look at the monsters which my eyes told me were about to end our lives in a storm of violence. But once my eyes were closed it was surprisingly easy to make myself believe. I had already intuited the falseness of the place, that it was no more there than the stars I saw in the crystal. Where intuition leads, intellect is quick to fall into line.

The Doctor gave a cry of delight.

I opened one eye. Then the other. We were on the mountainside. Dawn was breaking over the eastern peaks, gilding the clouds below us.

'It worked,' breathed Tom.

Such relief we each felt then! Such a sense of deliverance and catharsis as perhaps even the most devout have never experienced in church. The sense of reality, of the solidness and rightness of the world was almost overwhelming. I sat down heavily in the snow and gasped down great breaths of cold air.

'Wait,' Anne said suddenly. 'What about Jamie?' The boy wasn't with us. 'Oh God – he was still out cold when we left! He's still there, isn't he? The creatures...'

'Well I don't know, do I?' he flustered, clearly upset. 'It created the yeti to take the lodesphere. But it knows Jamie doesn't have it. It has no reason to sustain them.'

'And if it's angry? If it lashes out?'

He shook his head sadly. 'We just have to hope.'

'We should go back for him,' I said. 'Can we?'

'I don't think so. Not unless it takes us there.'

'Well why doesn't it?' asked Tom. 'Why doesn't it try again for the sphere? Why doesn't it send a Snow-man now?'

'It's not at full strength. Its power seems to be intermittent. I think that's why it tried to get us to bring it the sphere rather than just having a yeti fetch it for it.'

'Still,' Tom said, 'I'd rather be rid of it. Should never have picked the blasted thing up.' He made as if to hurl it over the nearest cliff edge but the Doctor hurriedly interposed himself.

'Don't do that! If we lose it, we lose any chance of getting Jamie back. But the Intelligence will be watching and waiting. It will know where it is, Mister Waterfield, and it'll only be a matter of time before it gets someone else to fetch it for it. Here, give it to me. Thank you. I'll keep it safe.'

Beyond that, Emmeline, there is little left to tell save what I promised you at the outset – the decision I have made. Scouts from the main expedition found us some time later and guided us back to the others. They had not found Travers, and we reconciled ourselves to what we had felt all morning in our hearts – that he would not be coming back either. With this loss still raw, Tom announced to those who remained that we would be turning back. The Sherpas were

delighted. The British generally greeted the news with a muted sort of relief. Those who knew of the expedition's true aims were satisfied – Carruthers' resting-place had been found and the mystery of the Snow-man unfolded; those who had just wanted to conquer the mountain and inscribe their names in the history-books had by and large lost their appetite for adventure with the deaths of their friends. Only Kilgare was unreadable. I have no idea to which camp he belonged.

By some tacit agreement, no-one spoke of Travers or Jamie during the descent. That hurt me for a while, for the fate of Jamie especially weighed greatly on my mind. I could not help picturing him alone and frightened in that darkness, ever-so-brave but also guileless and uncomprehending. If he did survive, I did not like to think what it would make of him. I wanted the others to recognise his loss, to mourn openly for him and all the others. But that is not the way of men such as these. Their silence was acknowledgement enough; the weight of loss they bore told in their stooping gaits and haunted faces. These men, I reminded myself, had known Jamie far better than I. I had no doubt many of them would brood on the deaths of this expedition for the rest of their days.

As for myself, I mourned Jamie and Travers and the others, quietly and with every step. I could not help thinking of their families who waited at home for news of their sons' glory, and for the black heartbreak that would be theirs. And so my thoughts came round once more to my own position. As I walked and climbed down the mountainside in that funereal quiet, sometimes in my mind I walked through the gardens of our house in Sussex, with the warmth of summer and the buzzing of the bees in the flowers all around me. It seemed to me that Father walked by my side, so close that I could almost smell his scent of pipe-smoke and wood. The house and the garden would still be there – mine now, I supposed. Perhaps his study would be untouched and I might nestle myself in his big leather chair and breathe in that beloved fragrance once again. It would be a little musty I suppose, but still there despite the years.

But what should I have to become? I thought of Tom on the mountain traverse, of his starchy strictures about how one should behave. Had that all been due to the baleful influence of the presence that dwelled on the mountain? It would be nice to think so, but I am not so naïve. And even if Tommy proved me wrong, he was not the only one who thought that way. I saw the disapproval with which Kilgare looked at me, the stares from the others. Even now I was a curiosity.

I do not belong in an England where men think me an aberration for merely being myself. I think, maybe, Emmeline, that I do not belong in England at all.

When I thought myself about to die, it was not England that filled my thoughts. It was not the Sussex garden and not my father's reassuring smell. It was the Universe. It was the Past and the Future and the countless worlds that might be mine.

I could have stayed. I suppose I could have joined Anne on her adventures, or struck off on travels of my own. I do not deny it has a certain appeal, but for now I know it would not be enough. I have tasted Everything, Emmeline, and there is not enough of this world to sate me.

And besides, there is Jamie to consider.

I see the Doctor brooding at night over the globe of ice. First on the mountain and now in the TARDIS, after we have said our goodbyes. He has not tried anything yet. He is afraid to, I think. But I have crept into the library after midnight and spied him there in his seat, with his feet on the table and books all around him. The sphere lies before him and he stares at it, steeping his fingers and rubbing his chin.

Soon, I think, Emmeline, he will try something. And when he does, he will need my help.

Your devoted wanderer in Time and Space, for ever,

*Victoria*