

Praise for Michelle Paver

‘*Dark Matter* is ... [a] wild beast that grabs you by the neck’

The Times

‘The ultimate test of a good ghost story is, surely, whether you feel panicked reading it in bed at midnight; two-thirds through, I found myself suddenly afraid to look out of the windows, so I’ll call it a success’

Observer

‘Told in the increasingly fearful words of Jack as he writes in his journal, this is a blood-curdling ghost story, evocative not just of icy northern wastes but of a mind as, trapped, it turns in on itself’

Daily Mail

‘Paver has created a tale of terror and beauty and wonder. Mission accomplished: at last, a story that makes you check you’ve locked all the doors and leaves you very thankful indeed for the electric light. In a world of CGI-induced chills, a good old-fashioned ghost story can still clutch at the heart’

Financial Times

‘*Dark Matter* is a spellbinding read – the kind of subtly unsettling, understated ghost story M.R. James might have written had he visited the Arctic’

Guardian

‘Jack becomes sure that an evil presence is trying to drive him away from Gruhuken. Paver records his terror with compassion, convincing the reader that he believes everything he records while leaving open the possibility that his isolation ... has made him peculiarly susceptible to emotional disturbance. The novel ends in tragedy that is as haunting as anything else in this deeply affecting tale of mental and physical isolation’

Sunday Times

‘It’s an elegantly told tale with a vivid sense of place – and it’s deeply scary’ *Sunday Herald*

‘*Dark Matter* is brilliant. Imagine Jack London meets Stephen King ... I loved it’ Jeffery Deaver

‘Disquieting and poignant in equal measure, Paver’s novel reminds us that fear of the dark is the oldest fear of all. An ideal read for long winter evenings’ *Irish Examiner*

‘There is an icy thrill to this gripping ghost story’ *Choice*

‘Everything you could want from a ghost story and more – her ability to describe a setting so perfectly that you can see it in your mind’s eye is amazing. Wow, basically’ *Waterstones Books Quarterly*

‘An artful exercise in suggested menace’ *SFX*

‘Gruhuken is reportedly haunted, and hints as to why are skilfully drip-fed through a tense and strangely beautiful narrative that bristles with the static electricity of a stark, vast, frozen Arctic night’ *Metro*

‘The very best ghost stories usually concern the predicaments of the living rather than the return of the dead. It’s a point appreciated by Michelle Paver, whose haunting new novella so cleverly illustrates how it is fear, rather than death, which is the great leveller’ *Lady*

Also by Michelle Paver

Dark Matter

Chronicles of Ancient Darkness

Wolf Brother

Spirit Walker

Soul Eater

Outcast

Oath Breaker

Ghost Hunter

Other Novels

Without Charity

A Place in the Hills

The Shadow Catcher

Fever Hill

The Serpent's Tooth



Thin Air

A Ghost Story

MICHELLE PAVER



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Thin Air

Were we wrong to attempt the conquest of Kangchenjunga? Some would say that we were, and that it is a sin to lay siege to the highest mountains on earth. Moreover, of the three mightiest peaks – Mount Everest, K.2 and Kangchenjunga – seasoned alpinists regard Kangchenjunga as the most lethal. It stands apart from the rest of the Himalaya, its avalanches are legendary, and its rarified air induces a degree of nervous sensibility – one might almost say abhorrence – which tests the mettle of the doughtiest man.

Nevertheless, I remain convinced that to vanquish it would be the purest expression of the ideal of Empire: the defeat of the unknown, the triumph of Man over Nature. Yes, our attack on Kangchenjunga failed. Yes, our Expedition ended in tragedy. However, I believe that we who survived may yet hold our heads high, for against terrible odds we retrieved our fallen comrades from the mountain's icy grip, and buried them in a manner befitting Englishmen, having accorded them those honours for which they had so dearly paid.

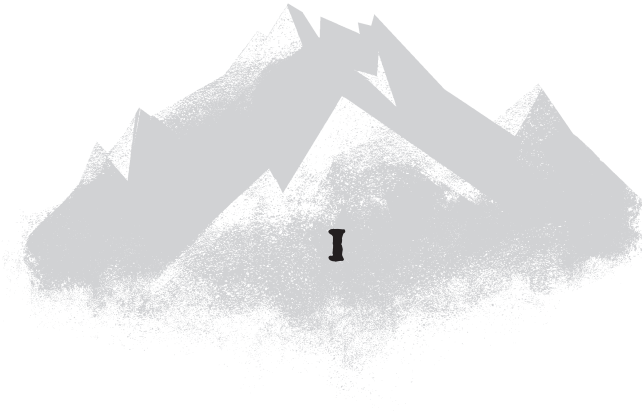
General Sir Edmund Lyell,

Bloody But Unbowed: the Assault on Mount Kangchenjunga, 1907.

MICHELLE PAVER

Edmund Lyell is a pompous windbag and third-rate mountaineer who doomed our expedition by fatally underestimating Kangchen-junga. He is also an adroit self-publicist who turned himself into a national hero by penning a 'best-selling' account of the tragedy. What his book largely ignores, but what still haunts me decades later, is the fact that although the mountain killed five of our number, we only laid to rest four.

Private memoir of Captain Charles Tennant,
unpublished.



Darjeeling, West Bengal, April 1935

'Ah *there* you are, Dr Pearce!' Charles Tennant's daughter comes striding across the lawn with two springer spaniels at her heels. 'This dreadful fog, you won't get your view of the mountain now, *what* a shame!'

'Perhaps it'll clear up,' I reply, bending to stroke the dogs.

'Heavens no, quite closed in, best come back inside. We can't have the expedition medic catching a chill before you've even set off!'

'Thanks, I shall, directly I finish my cigarette.'

'Indeed,' she says with a tight little smile.

Millicent Tennant is fortyish and formidable in tweeds, and years of pulling in her lips have sunk creases from mouth to chin, like a ventriloquist's dummy. She seems to enjoy thwarting people, and doesn't approve of me slipping away from her tea party; perhaps she suspects that I'll try to approach her father on the sly. She guards Charles Tennant like a dragon,

and clearly relished telling us that because the old man had a 'turn' shortly before we arrived, he can't possibly see us, or anyone else, for at least a week. 'And by then you'll all have headed off into the wilds, *such* a shame.'

The others were wretchedly disappointed, but I don't mind, I'm elated simply to be here. I can't quite believe that after weeks of travelling, I'm standing on a Himalayan ridge seven thousand feet up, in Charles Tennant's rose garden – *Charles Tennant*, the last survivor of the Lyell expedition.

Perhaps it's lack of sleep, but everything around me seems preternaturally intense: the smell of wet roses, the scream of that bird; and from somewhere beyond the mists, the pull of the mountain we're going to climb.

'Do mind the edge, Dr Pearce,' warns Millicent Tennant. 'Rather a nasty drop.'

I lean over the low stone wall, and suck in my breath. 'Good Lord, so it is.' Through the murk, I can just make out the red glimmer of a native village, horribly far down. The treetops below me are forbiddingly still; but almost within reach, a small, shadowy form stirs on a branch. Perhaps that's one of those macaques about which I've been warned.

I do wish I could see the mountain. I was late reaching Darjeeling, and at the Planters' Club I found an ecstatic note from Kits, summoning me to *tea with Charles Tennant!! Who knows, perhaps I shall be the one to persuade him to break his famous silence!!* When I arrived at the old man's bungalow, after a jolting ride in a horse-tonga through misty tea plantations, the others told me what 'stupendous views' they'd had

only an hour before; but by the time I'd escaped the drawing room and found my way to the garden, clouds had rolled in and the mountain had disappeared.

And they really are *clouds* swirling around me, a dank, silent invasion that's turned the afternoon prematurely dark.

'Did I mention that I know your fiancée's people?' says Millicent Tennant, declining my cigarette case with another tight little smile. 'Your *ex*-fiancée, I should say.'

'Really?' I murmur. 'I had no idea.'

'Oh yes, poor dear Clare is *quite* a favourite. I gather she behaved impeccably. Won't say a word against you.' She's watching my face, her small eyes beady with curiosity.

Poor Clare indeed. But I shan't apologise to Millicent Tennant. I did enough apologising in London.

'So frightfully sudden,' she remarks. 'Scarcely more than a week before the big day.'

'I'm afraid it was. But Clare agrees with me that it was for the best.' And no, I'm damned if I'll tell you why I broke it off just so that you can tell the whole of Darjeeling. What could I say? That I realised in the nick of time that I was turning into my brother?

The silence lengthens. My hostess's pencilled brows rise. 'Well,' she says crisply. 'The others will be wondering where you are. Your brother, poor fellow, seems rather out of sorts.'

The understatement makes me smile. Kits did his best to charm his way into Charles Tennant's presence, and when that failed, he went into a sulk.

'Kits is a little cast down,' I explain. 'He's revered the Lyell

expedition since he was a boy, he can recite whole pages of *Bloody But Unbowed*. He'd set his heart on meeting Captain Tennant.'

'Oh, what a shame.' She plucks a leaf off her skirt. 'Well. I must be getting back to my other guests. Do bear in mind that these are the tropics, Dr Pearce. Darkness falls rather more sharply than what you'll be used to.'

'Thank you, I shall.'

When at last she's gone, I light another cigarette and let the fog and the smell of wet roses wash her out of my mind.

I lean over the wall. Hard to imagine that down there lies steamy malarial jungle. According to Kits, our mountain's not even fifty miles away, but it'll take us three weeks' hard trekking to get there.

My stomach tightens with excitement. You've done it, Stephen, you've actually done it. No more London, no more Clare, no more apologising. Nothing but snow, ice and rock. A million miles from the messy tangle of human emotions.

It's strange, but since my ship left Southampton, I've scarcely allowed myself to think of the mountain itself; perhaps I was afraid of jinxing things. I've simply pictured a generic white peak, like the Crystal Mountain in that storybook when we were boys.

But now, quite suddenly, it's *real*. I don't care that I can't see it. It sent these clouds, it's making its presence felt. I can feel its cold, clammy breath on my skin.

We set off in three days. I can't wait.

Thin Air

* * *

She was right: night has fallen as fast as a door slamming shut.

As I'm stumbling back across the lawn, the darkness moves behind me. Then a head peers over the wall, and a shadowy form slinks off. The macaques are taking over the garden.

I make for the light spilling from the French windows on to the verandah, but at the foot of the steps, I bark my shins on a pile of rocks, and swear.

'Who's there!' calls a man's voice: sharp, well-bred, old.

Oh Lord, these aren't the drawing room doors, I've taken a wrong turn. 'I beg your pardon, I've—'

'Don't stand out there like an idiot, come in and shut that bloody door behind you!'

I find myself in a large, dingy study that reeks of stale cigar smoke. Logs crackling in a grate, a moulting tiger skin on the floor, a lamp with a tasselled shade barely lightening the gloom. Smokers' accoutrements are everywhere: table lighters, humidors, brass ash-stands. Piles of papers on a huge sandalwood desk are held down by Indian curios: a vicious curved dagger, a fearsome wooden mask with bulging eyes; and resting on a mahogany box, some kind of native trumpet, fashioned from what was clearly once a human femur.

The owner of the voice sits hunched in an easy chair in the corner furthest from the light, with a plaid rug over his knees. He is old but looks strong: wide shoulders, springing silver hair, small flinty eyes taking my measure. His raw-boned face is mottled with broken veins, and shockingly altered from the

famous photograph in which he stands grinning at the camera beside Edmund Lyell, but that lantern jaw and those dark, triangular brows are unmistakable.

At one stroke I'm a boy again, standing in awe before my hero. 'You're Charles Tennant,' I blurt out inanely.

'Well *done*,' he rasps.

'I'm frightfully sorry, sir, I was trying to find the drawing room—'

'Don't fuss, I can't abide fuss! You're here, so you'll stay!'

My God, it's really him. I step forwards and offer my hand, suppressing an ignoble spurt of glee: poor Kits, he'll be incandescent with envy. 'Stephen Pearce, sir, how d'you do?'

'You don't look old enough to be a medic,' he growls, ignoring my hand.

I permit myself a slight smile. 'I'm thirty-four.'

'Wasn't there some problem with the medic?'

'I'm a last-minute replacement, sir, he broke his leg in a motor smash three days before they sailed...' I trail off in embarrassment. That's not an easy chair he's in; it's a Bath chair: the self-propelling kind with wooden hand-rims to the wheels. Charles Tennant lost both feet to frostbite.

Smiling grimly at my discomfort, he demands to know why I was swearing on his verandah. I mention the rocks, and he gives a mirthless bark. 'It's a grave, didn't you notice? Grandson's fox terrier. Stupid little tyke ran under a tonga. The dog, not the boy.'

I press my lips together and nod. Then I catch sight of a

large framed photograph on the wall behind the desk, and I forget everything.

The sight of it is like music, a deep, strong note thrilling through me. It's utterly different from Everest, or Annapurna, or K.2. No lone triangular summit, but a vast broad-shouldered massif spiked with several chaotic peaks, with one jagged fang just dominating the rest. Kangchenjunga.

No one seems to agree on what the name actually means, but most settle for 'The Five Treasures of the Snows'. Although what does *that* refer to? The peaks? The five enormous glaciers pouring down its flanks?

It catches at my heart, and I feel that peculiar bite of eagerness and dread which I always get before a climb. We're going to conquer that mountain. We're going to be the first men in the world ever to stand on top.

Tennant squints up at the photograph with narrowed eyes, as if it hurts to look. Then, with an odd, convulsive twitch, he turns away. 'The Lepcha call it *Kong Chen*,' he mutters. 'Means "Big Stone". Doesn't stop the damn fools worshipping it.'

'Can one see it from here, sir?' I've an idea that the French windows face north, although now of course they're black.

'That photograph was taken from where you're standing,' says Tennant with startling bitterness. 'One never knows when it will appear.' He is clutching his knees. His hands are large and powerful, with ropy blue veins. His knuckles are white with strain.

I wonder how he can bear to have the mountain always before him: a constant reminder of the companions who

never returned. I wonder what he sees when he looks at that photograph.

And I'm beginning to wish that the others were here with me, because I feel like a badly prepared schoolboy. I'd planned to read up about Lyell on the voyage out, but the porters lost my book-bag at Southampton, so I've only the haziest recollection of what actually happened: a blizzard, an avalanche, and five men dead.

The old man sits hunched in his Bath chair. He is not at all what I expected. In *Bloody But Unbowed*, Charles Tennant was such *fun*: the awfully good sort whom everyone wanted for their best chum. What turned him into this bitter, twitchy wreck of a man?

I suppose what he went through would be enough for anyone – although by all accounts, it didn't alter Edmund Lyell. He lost a leg and a hand, but he made a success of his life: the book, the lecture tours, the knighthood...

Tennant misses nothing. 'Shattered your illusions, have I? Not another damn fool who's worshipped us since the nursery?'

'No,' I say evenly. 'I did till I was nine, but then my older brother took my copy of *Bloody But Unbowed*. He's having tea in your drawing room. He'd give anything to be here, talking to you.'

'Is he the idiot who's decided you'll try our route up the south-west face?'

I'm taken aback. 'I didn't know that we were.'

'What, you don't even know where you're *going*?'

Thin Air

Bloody hell, Kits, you might have told me. 'As I said, sir, I'm a last-minute replacement. I... expect they chose it because it's the best route.'

'It is, but you'll never do it.'

'Why not? You nearly did.'

He hesitates, and his expression turns guarded. 'We would have done it if it hadn't been for Lyell. Don't you believe that penny dreadful of his. He was a bad mountaineer, a dreadful leader – and *vain*. "Heroes" often are.'

He speaks with such hatred that I remind myself that he's in his sixties, and, if his daughter is to be believed, far from well.

'The south-west face, sir,' I hazard. 'Is there a problem with it?'

'—Problem,' he mutters. He darts a glance at the photograph, then recoils with a shudder. Something flickers across his face: something very like fear.

Then it's gone, and he's in command of himself. 'What *problem* could there possibly be,' he rasps, 'on the most dangerous mountain in the world? Know the Himalaya, do you? Climbed here before?'

'No, sir. First time in India.'

'Good God in Heaven.' He gives me a pitying stare that makes me flush.

I decide to throw caution to the winds and put the question I'm burning to ask. 'Why did you never write an account of the climb yourself, sir?'

'What the devil gives you the right to ask me that?' His

tone is belligerent, but his glance strays to his desk, and I catch my breath. Can it be that he *has* written something?

'I'm sorry if I was impertinent,' I say carefully. 'But I'm sure you'll understand why we're all so fearfully curious. It's been nearly thirty years, and you've never spoken of it, or written—'

'Brother climbing with brother?' he raps out. 'Get on with him, do you?'

The change of subject is so blatant it's an insult, and it slams the door on further questions.

'We've climbed together for years,' I reply coolly.

A disbelieving snort. 'What about the others?'

'I only met them today, we came out by different routes—'

'So why'd you want to climb it?'

'I'm sorry?'

'You heard me, why?'

'Does one need a reason?'

Surprisingly, he seems to like that. The corners of his mouth turn down in a grim smile. 'You're aware that Norton regards it as harder than Everest?'

'Yes, so I've read.'

In the silence that follows, it feels as if the spectres of Norton's ill-fated companions, Mallory and Irvine, are with us in the room.

The silence continues. The old man seems to have forgotten about me. He is still clutching his knees and clenching his lantern jaw. 'It'll kill you if it can,' he says between his teeth. 'Oh yes. You have no idea...'

Thin Air

Once more, he glances at the photograph – and recoils with that strange, convulsive shudder.

And now I'm sure of it. He's frightened. Charles Tennant, one of the toughest mountaineers who ever lived, is *frightened* of that mountain.

'Hand me that box on the desk,' he snaps, making me jump.

'Um – which one, sir?'

'The one with the *kangling* on top.'

'I'm sorry, the what?'

'The trumpet, damnit!'

Removing the thigh-bone trumpet from the lid, I do as he says. He places the mahogany box on his knees, then covers it with both hands.

My heart begins to thud. Has he been keeping me here for a reason? Appraising me? Nerving himself to tell me – *what?*

Or am I letting fatigue and excitement distort my judgement?

The silence has become intolerable, and he shows no sign of breaking it.

I'm still holding the thigh-bone trumpet. Its mouthpiece is blackened silver, its other end studded with grimy turquoise. For something to say, I ask him what it sounds like.

His head swings round, and he stares up at me with undisguised horror. '*What?*' he says in a cracked voice. 'What it – *sounds* like? What the devil d'you mean by that?'

Christ, what have I said? The blood is draining from his face, and his lips are turning grey. My idle question seems to have tipped him over the edge.

He's rocking back and forth, and his gaze has turned inwards, into the past. '*Every night*,' he whispers. '*Every night*, do you understand, I see them ... my comrades of Kangchen-junga. I see their arms outstretched ... I hear their cries for help ... Yes ... I shall always see them ...'

I'm casting about for water, Scotch, anything. Decanter on a bookshelf: brandy by the smell. I splash some in a tumbler and hold it to his lips, but he thrusts me aside with startling strength.

'Get out!' he shouts. 'Get out, and don't come back!'