Away in the remote fastnesses of Eastern Tibet is a beautiful snow-peak—the Sacred Mountain of the Tibetans. Every year thousands of pilgrims, travelling on foot from far and near, make the toilsome circuit of this mountain, thereby, they believe, acquiring much religious merit and ensuring another year of happy life. The Author made the circuit of the Sacred Mountain, and illustrates his description with some very interesting photographs.

DOWN in parched, dusty Mandalay, in the neighbourhood of the lovely Arracan pagoda, you may at any Christmastide, during that short three weeks of what in Burma is facetiously called the "cold weather," meet with certain incongruous horse-dealers, barbarously contrasting with their surroundings.

They are tall men, swarthly of complexion, monstrous dirty, disdaining water even in this mild land, with greasy unkempt locks tied in a short pigtail. Their dress is shepherd-like—a loose gown of coarse cloth, low-necked and wide-sleeved, reaching to the ground, but tied up above the knees by day with a girdle from which hang flint and steel, and maybe a short sword thrust through; shapeless, tight-fitting cloth boots, reaching to the knees; and to crown all, perhaps a bashed-in Homburg hat picked up with childish delight at a local auction!

How ill these scarecrows contrast with the daintily-gowned Burman, cleanly and debonair, and with his sparkling, flower-decked wife!

But speak to them in Chinese—or better still in their own tongue, if you can command its intricacy—and you will find them the most charming and simple folk. They will greet you with smiles of welcome, showing rows of milk-white teeth, spreading out their hands, as the custom is, to prove that they grasp no treacherous weapon. They will certainly ask you to share their frugal meal, for they are a generous and hospitable people; and when their tongues have been unloosed with a little of the dangerously-fiery spirit which the Chinese nusscall hsiao-chin or "small wine," they will open their hearts to you and tell you of the great green grass plateaux, blue lakes, wide windy spaces, and snowy mountains beyond the hot monsoon jungles of Burma. Their talk makes you long to get away from the dust of royal Mandalay, away from the scented evergreen jungles, away even from the tranquil peace of dreamy Burma, into the free solitudes beyond, where the silence is broken only by warrior rivers fighting their way through the mountains, by shrieking winds, and the thunder of the avalanche. So, with your head in a whirl, you bid farewell to your hosts who are starting homewards on the morrow, and at parting they pay you the friendly roadside compliment of their country, by sticking their tongues out at you!

The secret is out with the tongue, and you all know now that our uncouth horse-dealers can only be Tibetans!
Passing through shady teak forests, by villages of thatched huts, where Shans in wide flat hats of woven palm-leaf urge lazy buffaloes to the plough, we reach the edge of the plain and, entering the jungle, begin to climb. So long as we are in British territory the road is fair. One might, in fact, ride a motor-cycle along it—preferably someone else’s.

Soon we are high up in the hills, passing through a fine gorge, our ears filled with the glamour of the river below. Hark! the silver notes of a gong ring through the forest. Look to the mules! The road is narrow and a caravan is approaching us.

On the fourth day the frontier is crossed, and, leaving the Burmese jungles behind, we emerge into the open cultivated valleys of China.

Now we have our first experience of Chinese “mule inns.” The mules are tied up in the courtyard, from which open bare rooms—dark, dirty, and malodorous. A solid square table, a hard chair without arms, and a filthy wooden bedstead, with boards for springs and a straw pallet for mattress, comprise the fittings. So I set up my camp-cot.

As we travel east the mountains grow higher, the scenery wilder. Cultivation is confined to a few isolated plains, all of them over five thousand feet above sea-level. We cross the great Tibetan rivers, Salween and Mekong, by suspension bridges built of iron chains hung from stout masonry towers, across which boards are laid. Though several hundred years old, they are quite strong, but only two mules at a time venture on them, and they sway heavily in a strong breeze.

There is much to see by the wayside now. It is market day in one village, and on the raised platform of a gaudily-coloured open pavilion, in the courtyard of the little white Buddhist temple, a troupe of wonderfully-dressed actors are performing one of those unending plays (with several morals, but no plot) beloved by the Oriental. Since women are not permitted to act in China, their parts are taken by men, with shrill-edged falsetto voices.

Hard by, the crowd are noisily buying and selling, arranging marriages, casting horoscopes, discussing crops and prices, telling fortunes, gambling and quarrelling.

Here in Bhamo, or “New Market,” as the Chinese inaptly call our Shan-Burman village, with its handful of Englishmen, its native regiment, bazaar, pagodas, and swamps, we hire mules, and set out down the white dusty road which leads to China.
in English money perhaps half a crown, and weighs several pounds.

At the end of the twenty-first day's march we reach a lovely city with a deep blue lake on one side, and towering mountains dusted with snow on the other. All round us are waving fields of beans, flax, and pulse, with the beautiful opium poppy in out-of-the-way corners. It is a great surprise coming through the mountains on to this lovely plain, six thousand feet above sea-level. If the great triennial fair is on, you will meet men from half Asia here; now is the time to buy curios. It is a long business buying anything in China, and the following conversation ensues over a pair of earrings on which my fancy rests.

Of course you will not do anything so gauche as to pay up, without a murmur, the price asked; that would disappoint the seller terribly—for not having asked more.

"How much do you want for these earrings?"

"These, ta-jeu? five taels of silver."

"It is too much; I will give you two taels."

"Ta-jeu is a great official, therefore he is rich."

"Only Chinese officials are rich. Yun-man is a beautiful country, but there are many bad men. Where do you come from?"

"From Li-kiang. How much will ta-jeu give for the earrings?"

"I have been to Li-kiang during the great fair, at the Temple of the Water Dragon. Will you sell that bangle?"

"This? No, I do not want to sell it."

"It is a poor bangle, but I will give two taels for it!"

"How much for the earrings, ta-jeu?"

"I do not want them—they are poor earrings."

"Yes, it is getting hotter every day now. Very well, you shall have them for three taels, ta-jeu!"

"What, the bangle? I do not want it! I cannot wear it."

"The earrings, ta-jeu?"

"Oh! two taels! I will give it you, but they are not worth it."

"Very well, two and a half taels. Take them!"

Travelling on, now northwards, we come in a few days to the last cultivated plain, the last Chinese city, before entering on the green pastures of the Tibetan country. In the narrow cobbled street crowds stare at us till, parted by the cry "Ssukko-lai-te" (mules coming), our caravan...
splits them in half, bells jangling, muleteers shouting strange oaths. We notice that the
women here, though garbed as Chinese, no longer
distort their feet, and are, in fact, quite different
in appearance. They are Mosos, a strange
tribe, once a power in the land, whose chief
claim to notice is the fact that they have a
picture-writing like Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Leaving the last city in China, we climb
up to the green grassland plateau—green in
summer, that is, but in winter white and frozen.
There are no more suspension bridges, and when
we come to cross the Yangtze, here called
the Gold Sand River, we find only a great clumsy
flat-bottomed scow.

How the mules hate jumping the high boarded
side of this awkward-looking craft! It is with
the greatest difficulty that the muleteers goad
the last of them over into the already-crowded
scow, where they are packed like sardines.
In mid-stream, when we are rushing down with
the swift current, they become restless, and one,
jumping up, puts his forelegs over the free-
board, as though he intends to commit suicide.
The scow lurches, and I hold my breath—and
my tongue, for our boatmen are skilful and
experienced. The wayward mule is coaxed back
with a stick, and we are safely landed, despite
alarms. We have been swept four hundred
tyres down-stream in crossing.

Up on the plateau, herds of shaggy-haired
yak, annoyed at being disturbed, raise their
heads menacingly, and glare at us through
bloodshot eyes. Huge rug-headed dogs, almost
as big as the yak, guard the substantial houses,
and bay fiercely at us, straining to be at our
throats.

Over the brow of yonder hill glitter two golden
domes, where endless roofs and walls, painted
red and white in stripes, and pierced with small
window-frames, rise in endless array. Several red-robed men
of coarse features scowl at us none too
pleasantly, for the lamas are suspicious
of Europeans near their great monas-
teries.

It is all so like mediaeval England, I
cannot help thinking. When I see these
thievish monks in
their secluded moun-
tain monasteries I am
reminded of Merrie
England, and Shake-
spere's plays, and the
Wars of the Roses, as
though it were all in
real life again.

Now we have
another experience of
Eastern Tibetan
country—the hot, arid,
almost lifeless
gorges of the great rivers. Bare brown cliffs
tower up for thousands of feet, a hot wind blows
incessantly, and after a few miles of this we are
thankful to stop at a village perched high up
above the river, and drink sour yaks' milk with
the kindly Tibetans in the large dark kitchen.

You, reader, must realize that we have been
marching now every day for five weeks, and are
slowly, but surely, nearing the starting point
of our pilgrimage round the Sacred Mountain.

To-day we are faced by a peak which rears
its head fifteen thousand feet above sea-level.
For two days we toil up the steep path through
forests, till on the third day we are above the
trees, and the wind from Tibet is blowing straight
in our faces. On our left rises a grand range of
snowy peaks, apparently but a stone's throw
distant. At last we reach the pass, breathing
hard, and, looking ahead, see, across wooded
valleys, a clear-cut pyramid of snow and ice
rising proudly above all the surrounding
mountains. It is the Sacred Mountain of
Eastern Tibet.

Dropping down into the valley, we presently
reach a poor little village of flat-roofed, mud-
walled houses at the head of a glen. Mountains
tower all round, and groups of buxom Tibetan
girls are out on the house-roofs amongst shocks of
barley, singing to the rise and fall of the flails;
the mountains fling back their voices and the
shunting sunshine stains their faces a deeper
red. Through this village every year, from the
north, so as to keep the Sacred Mountain on
their right hand, pass all the pilgrim bands
from Eastern Tibet; men, women, and children,
dirty, ill-kempt, ignorant, and cheerful. They
begin to arrive in October, and thence almost
daily, in long lines, till the passes are finally
closed in February; for there are four passes
over twelve thousand feet—two of them over
fifteen thousand feet—to be crossed during the ten or twelve days’ march round the mountain. In autumn: and early winter, however, the weather is at its best, the snow peaks ever in view, the night vivid with stars, and by day the turquoise sky of Tibet is undimmed by a single cloud.

Sitting under the rhododendron blossoms, high up on the mountain-side, looking across a deep rent torn through the mountains—the Mekong Gorge—to the glittering snowy pyramids opposite, a great longing came over me to become a pilgrim as well. So when autumn came, and the crops were gathered in, and the merry Tibetans gave themselves over to pilgrimage, I packed a few things, hired a few baggage animals, and set out.

Daily minstrels were coming into our village, to sing and dance; the rains were over, the forests gorgeous with orange, red, and yellow livery; and daily strings of pilgrims marched sturdily down the steep cobbled street, packs on their backs, staves in their hands, loose sheepskin coats flying open in the breeze. Save that on their heads they wore conical sheepskin caps, with large ear-flaps, they were dressed very like our horse-dealers of Mandalay.

By day a bare arm and shoulder are thrust out of the coat for coolness’ sake, and the heavy fold in front serves as a receptacle for various articles, such as a sword, a wooden eating-bowl, a fowl or two, and a pipe. It is like a grotesque conjuring trick to see these men dive into the recesses of their huge coats and produce a miscellaneous collection of articles. At night the girdle is undone, and the long robe shaken out and the crops were gathered

and the crops were gathered in, and the women do their share of the work, each carrying a load like a knapsack on her back, and a good iron pot bubbling. The Tibetans gave themselves over to

Tibetans gave themselves over to

Tibetans gave themselves over to

After supper there is music—soft haunting airs such as the Tibetans love, while the mothers fondly croon their children to sleep. Then the men will comb out the women’s hair for them, and butter it; and the women will attend to their menfolk’s matted locks. Grease is the great feature of Tibet, as it must be in all very cold countries. Everything is greasy—men’s hair, women’s complexions, but most of all, clothes; for in winter they wear but one garment, the sheepskin coat, hair inside, next the skin—and what a fine temperature that greasy, matted sheepskin maintains!

salted tea is pleasant enough, though really to appreciate it, such is the association of ideas, one wants to look upon it as soup, and not as tea.

The frothing, chocolate-coloured fluid is drunk liberally from wooden cups and kneaded with tsamba (parched flour) to form a bolus. These are the staples of Tibetan fare, and no Tibetan ever travels without his rawhide bag of tsamba, a wooden box of butter, a brick of tea, and a little bag of gritty red salt—the last three, perhaps, carried within the ample folds of his cloak.

In the pilgrims moved on day after day, the men twirling in their hands the little prayer-drums in which lie coils of paper covered with prayers; children march bravely along, sometimes holding their mothers’ hands, sometimes being carried; and all mutter as they go: “O mani padme hum! O mani padme hum!” (“Sacred jewel in the lotus!”). Our party, marching in the opposite direction, stopped at night where the pilgrims camped, under cliffs blackened by the fires of generations; and here, seated round the fire with our friends—for all pilgrims were our friends—we watched the big iron pot bubbling.

Into the pot had been cast herbs and a pinch of salt, to make broth, and tea was being churned in a tall wooden brass-bound cylinder, in which someone stamped a piston up and down, to emulsify the butter. The Tibetans, by the way, make their tea with butter and salt instead of milk and sugar. Save that the butter is apt to be hairy, owing to the playful method of manufacture, which consists in kicking around a yak-skin of milk (hair inside), buttered and

A Tibetan girl of the Mekong Valley.
Gradually the men begin to nod. One by one their heads fall on their breasts, and, leaning against each other, feet to the blaze, cloaks wrapped round them, they fall asleep in strange attitudes.

Towards dawn, someone awakening replenishes the dying fire; at last day breaks, the white ashes staring into the limpid sky. But the men soon blow new life into them, a red spark springs to life, and the fire is soon burning merrily again. How welcome is the hot buttered tea now, with twenty degrees of frost on the ground!

And now comes the crossing of the Mekong. There are no chain suspension bridges here. Instead, the passage is effected by means of a bamboo rope sloping from bank to bank, one each way, down which you slide, suspended helpless in a leather loop hung from a bamboo slider. With a push you are heaved off the platform into space, trussed like a chicken. A quick rush through the air, a view of the river roaring below, a smell of burning, and you are being untied on the far bank, none the worse for your adventure. Animals and baggage are sent across in the same way, but are even more helpless; if anything goes wrong, they remain suspended in mid-air till a Tibetan, working his way out along the rope, can aid them.

Crossing the first high pass, we find the summit crowned by a heap of stones, to which, if we would acquire merit, we must each add one; in the centre of the pile, which we pass on the left side, is stuck a bundle of bamboos from which flutter ragged flags and pieces of paper, wafting prayers to heaven. There are a number of altars set in the cliffs, too—each a slab of stone laid flat, with offerings of food, such as slices of pear, walnuts, rice, or tsampha, set on them.

Crossing the mountain range and coming down from the snow and ice into the tropical warmth of the Salween Valley, we find the limestone cliffs beautifully carved and sculptured. In past ages, cavities have been worn in the rock; and with a patience fitly to be compared with the works of geological agents, devout pilgrims have carved sacred prayers and Buddhas carved in the rocks of the Salween Valley.
long prayers and pictures of the Buddha inside these hollows.

There is also a small *chorten* here, with rows of big leather-bound prayer-drums—five-foot cylinders attached to iron spindles, carrying literally miles of paper, on which is written the sacred prayer. The pilgrims walk round these in procession, setting each one groaning and squeaking in turn, thereby acquiring merit; for this twirling of prayer-drums is equivalent to saying the prayer many thousands of times, and repetition, vain or otherwise, is the secret of religious success in Tibet.

Presently we come to a patch of green, with shady trees, stands out in the bare gorge like an emerald in a brazen setting. At this spot warm water gushes from the base of the cliff, forming a tiny oasis in the khaki-coloured valley, and here the pilgrims halt and wallow.

All around the rocks are covered with neatly-executed inscriptions and pictures, testifying to infinite patience, for the spot is surely sacred. Hot water from solid rock in a desert—it is a miracle!

After crossing another high pass we reach the swift little Wi-chu. Stark and grim, colossal walls of rock rise all round us, culminating at last in the glittering twin peaks of another snow mountain, standing sentinel over the awful solitudes. Between these mazes winds snake-like, coil against coil, the Wi-chu; and from the next pass we look down on it both ahead and behind, flowing in opposite directions and gleaming blue as a Damascus blade.

At last we reach the monastery of Pitu, a fine big building, white-washed, with a large central temple, hung with heavy black cloth in front. On the steps leading up to the doorway, and round a *chorten* close by, loll a number of dissolute-looking yellow-robed priests, who eye us with disfavour; but the villagers welcome us.

Next day we attend a service in the monastery. Rows and rows of yellow-robed priests sit cross-legged on the floor, and
on a dais above, supported by high priests, sits
that awesome figure, a "living Buddha," or
reincarnated priest. Rapidly, in a deathless
silence, he dons a prayer, while the little
butter lamps on the altar flicker and scarcely
penetrate the gloom of the big hall. Then
the voice ceases, and immediately the answer
is caught up by a hundred guttural throats,
and as they too sink into silence there comes a
sudden blare of trumpets and conch shells, the
roll of drums, and the clang of cymbals.

And now cups of tea and rolls of bread are
handed round by silent monks—the interval
for refreshments has arrived.

On our way out we are set upon by an enor-
mous mastiff which has been unloosed by some
playful monk. There is a scramble for back
seats, someone hits the brute over the head with
a stick, and before any damage is done order
is restored.

Night finds us round the fire again. Someone
brings out a bamboo whistle and plays a sad
air in a minor key, while another twangs a
bamboo comb, very like a "jews' harp." In
the cold dawn they churn the salt tea in the big
wooden cylinders, and pack up their belongings.

Nearing the last high pass, a great dome of
glittering snow suddenly pops up its head close
at hand. This is the nearest we ever get to the
Sacred Mountain, and for a few minutes we gaze
at it entranced. Even from the deep Mekong
and Salween Gorges we have seen that pure
summit, and it has rarely been completely hidden
throughout our tour.

Descending to the Mekong once more we must
go very slowly, for the snow above, melting
in the bright sunshine, has trickled down into
the forest below and, freezing again, glazed the
path with ice. We reach the river, and cross
by a rope bridge. Toiling upwards once more,
we look back and see the mouth of the glen
blocked by the white peaks—our last view of
the Sacred Mountain. Here is a pretty village
with large flat-roofed houses hidden beneath
spreading green trees and scattered amidst
cultivated slopes; there is no winter here,
only autumn, and presently those slopes will be
emerald green, and the pear trees freighted
with blossom. Continuing to climb, we are in
the grip of stern winter again, and soon reach
the last pass. Below, mellow in the afternoon
sunshine, nestles the village from which we set
out ten days ago.

From a neighbouring roof comes the jingle
of bells and the wail of a Tibetan fiddle—yak
hair stretched across snake-skin. Some strolling
minstrels are amusing the crowd. The man,
wearing an apron of bells, is dancing as he scrapes
the fiddle, while the woman, dressed in a bril-
liant blue skirt and emerald-green jacket, sings
in a quavering falsetto. Two children, who
complete the troupe, are banging cymbals and
performing strange antics; from time to time
the leader fires off old, old gags, in a loud voice,
and the crowd roars with laughter.

Just beyond, a wild-eyed, rug-headed sor-
erer, sitting cross-legged on the ground by a
bed of sickness, is ringing a hand-bell and
mumbling prayers. He is casting out a devil
on best Old Testament lines.

But our pilgrims go quietly to their homes.
Their pilgrimage is over; they have acquired
much merit along the hard and narrow way, and
will live happily, so they believe, for another year.