A SOLDIER IN SIKKIM

by

H. WHITELOCK

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TO MY WIFE

Listen to the invocation of the Dawn.
Look to this day . . . in its brief course
Lie all the realities, all the verities of life,
The bliss of growth,
The glory of action,
The splendour of beauty;
For yesterday is but a dream . . .
And to-morrow is only a vision . . .
But this day well lived makes every to-morrow
a vision of hope,
And every yesterday a dream of pleasure.
Look well then to this day . . .
This is the invocation of the Dawn.

Extract from the Sanscrit,
written 6,000 *years ago.*

PREFACE

In all probability anyone unfortunate enough to gain possession of this book, and having sufficient determination to peruse its mis-spelt, ungrammatical pages, will consider that an apology is due from its singularly incapable author.

The purpose of this preface is to offer that apology in advance, and to plead what extenuating circumstances there are.

Writing is an accomplishment which so many of us believe we possess. If only we put our mind to it we feel we should produce best-sellers by the score. May I humbly claim that this is an illusion from which I ceased to suffer years ago, mindful of the many hidden snags, and my own extremely limited ability. I decided early in life, therefore, that my efforts should be confined to a very different sphere.

War, and its consequent partings, whilst not changing my beliefs, has inevitably forced upon me a number of activities in which I did not normally indulge, amongst them the writing of this book.

No doubt an inveterate diarist would regard my puny efforts with scorn. I am aware that this account of twelve days spent in the beautiful country of Sikkim is only a rather detailed diary, but it represents an unparalleled literary effort on the part of one who is normally a lazy and indifferent correspondent.

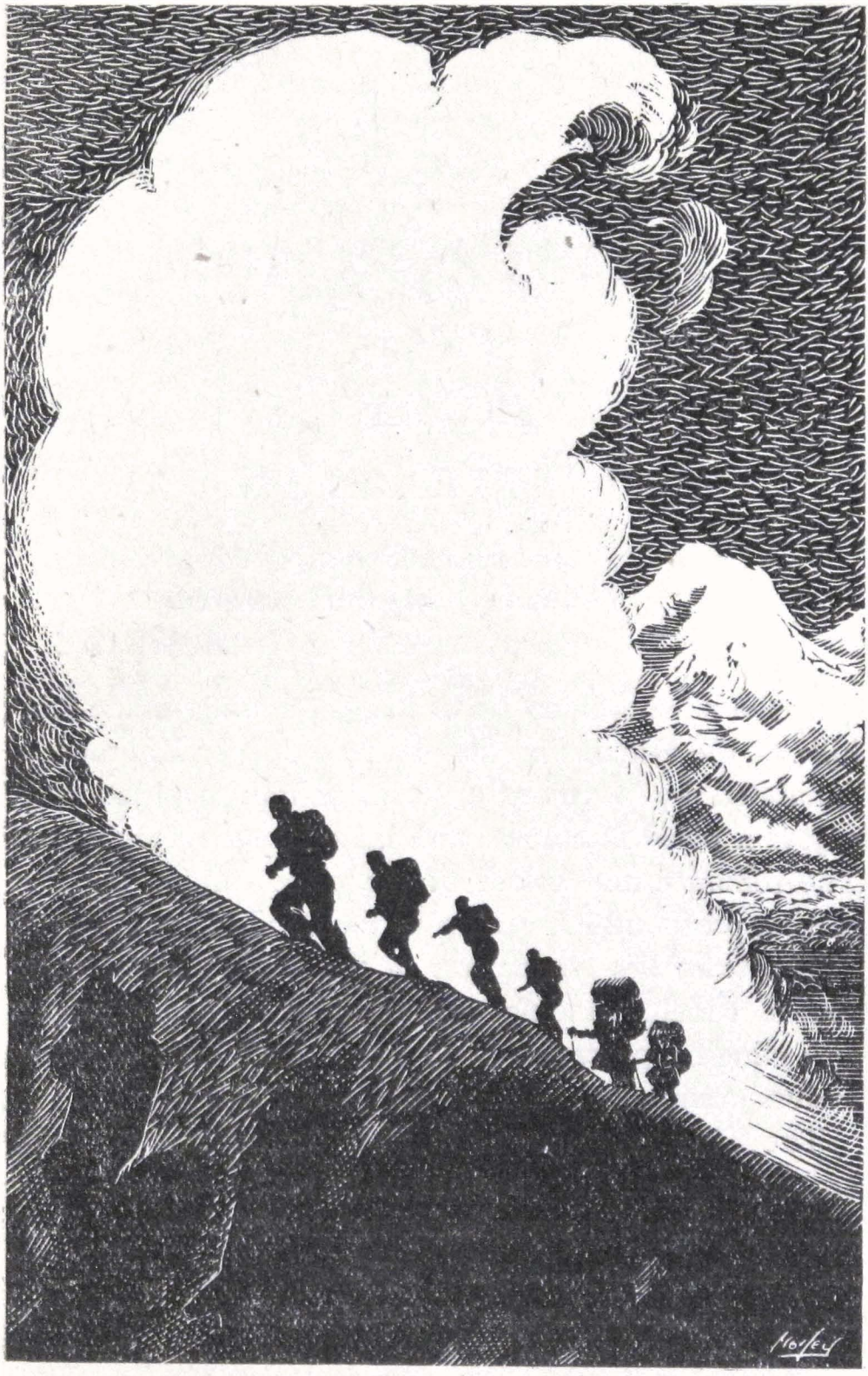
This book then, has been written for my Wife, upon whose indulgence and favourable prejudice I know I can rely. I hope that any of my friends who are sufficiently interested in my doings to read it also, will be prepared to make similar allowances for my shortcomings.

It only remains for me to say that the actual writing has been done at odd moments and in some very odd places. Anyone at all familiar with Army life will appreciate all that is implied by the above remark.

If, through this halting and ineffectual medium, I am able to convey very slightly the thrill of achievement and the profound impression made by the grandeur and majesty of the scenery which it describes, then I can feel that I have accomplished, in some slight degree, that which I set out to do.

June, 1944. H. W.

A brief Glossary of the Hindi and Nepali terms used in this book can be found on page 68.



A SOLDIER IN SIKKIM

CHAPTER I

INSPIRATION

" . . . A wondrous thing of our dreaming,
Unearthly, impossible seeming."
—A.W.E.O.'S.

In the northernmost tip of Bengal, nestling in the foothills of the Himalayas, lies the township of Kalimpong. Inhabited by a colourful cosmopolitan population, it enjoys a pleasant climate and magnificent surroundings. The romance and colour of the place cannot help but make a profound impression on the mind of the observer.

The town lies astride one of the world's oldest trade routes, which, winding and climbing fabulous heights and clinging precariously to steep precipitous descents, arrives eventually at Lhasa, the capital of Tibet.

The Tibetan muleteers in their decorated knee boots and their quaint fur caps are to be seen with, and without their shaggy charges, in the streets of the town. They are generally very dirty but invariably cheerful, and to the casual observer seem happy and contented. That they can put the big knives which they always carry to good

use, should occasion arise, I am quite prepared to believe.

On market days the streets of the town present a rapidly changing kaleidoscope of colour. The people from the surrounding countryside bring in their produce to sell—big bamboo baskets full of golden oranges, baskets of vegetables of all kinds, little black pigs also in baskets, chickens too, and ducks and geese—all these things are carried on the backs of the people to the market of Kalimpong. Many of the people come long journeys, some having to spend the night on the mountains, arriving at their destination early in the morning.

The cloth-sellers, with gay-coloured satins and silks, which will eventually make some of the lovely saris which the women wear, occupy quite a large part of the market. Old-clothes-sellers, tobacco dealers, and a miscellany of vendors of all kinds are also to be seen, whilst thronging the streets are Nepalis, Bhutanese, Ghurkas, Sikhs, Sikkimese, Chinese, and many other races too numerous to mention. Many lively arguments ensue between the dealers and the people, and many a bargain is struck after perhaps an hour's discussion, accompanied by appropriate gestures. It is a fascinating occupation to wander in this medley of tongues and races, colours and creeds, and one must be insensible to atmosphere indeed if one's curiosity concerning the lands and customs of these people is not aroused.

I was particularly attracted by the Tibetans with their colourful costume and rakish bearing. The long trips they make with their mules over the snow-covered mountains, carrying supplies to far-away China, and bringing, once every year, wool and skins from their own little-

known country, rekindled in me a desire to penetrate into the mountain fastness which surrounds their home and see for myself all the interesting things which I felt must be there. My desire was increased by a day's trip to Sikkim. We only went as far as the border, but the rocky trail climbing down the steep mountain-sides, winding through forests of teak, and past the primitive kilns of the charcoal-burners, to eventually arrive at the banks of the rushing, roaring Teester, was an experience which aroused in me the wanderlust and made our return an anti-climax. There and then it was decided by my friend Martin and myself that our next leave would be spent on a trek to Tibet.

Our enthusiasm exceeded by far our knowledge. We talked airily of mule teams, ponies, etc. I think we visualised ourselves riding at the head of a sort of miniature Everest expedition with teams of mules trailing along behind us. I know I did. I pictured us making camp for the night, sitting in front of the light of a blazing fire, chatting with our muleteers, and discussing plans for the next day. The language question bothered me not at all in my day-dreams, nor did any of the other practical problems, of which I shall write later.

Our holiday being over, we returned to the Plains, where, in the weeks that followed, we speedily forgot our leave and all the hazy, exciting plans we had made for our next one.

CHAPTER II

PLANNING FOR THREE

"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things,
Of shoes and ships and sealing-wax,
Of cabbages and kings."—L. C.

The weather was beginning to get hot again; the comparative cold of winter was leaving us; visions of the sticky, steamy days to come were in the minds of us all. Some of the trees were obeying the unnatural behests of Indian nature and were donning fresh green garments, discarding worn-out brown ones as they did so.

Our Battery carried out a series of moves. We no sooner unloaded and unpacked everything than we had to pack and reload it again. No one liked anyone; the future seemed like an insurmountable brick wall stretching as high as the eye could see into the pitiless blue of the Indian sky.

Back in the Calcutta area, with the consequent heat and humidity, my thoughts turned longingly to the cool mountains. I saw in my mind's eye the snow-covered giants, and wandered again in the colourful medley of

Kalimpong streets. The memory of our plans for a trek to Tibet flashed through my mind; situated as I was it made a very pleasant picture and without more ado I sought out Martin and suggested that we make tentative arrangements. His enthusiasm had waned somewhat, he no longer fancied himself in the role of an intrepid adventurer, leading an expedition into a little-known country. In fact, he confessed to a human weakness for the flesh pots. "On my next leave," said Martin, "I am going to take things easy—a little riding, a little walking, lashings of good food, plenty of reading, and above all, lots of sleep." All my efforts to make him see the error of his ways were of no avail; it was useless for me to paint the glowing details, to try and stir his imagination to the same pitch as on the day when we first conceived the idea. The plains had got him. That was obvious. His mind was dwelling on cool drinks under shady trees in a temperate climate. A tough trip over rocky trails in a rarefied atmosphere with food out of tins or cooked by ourselves was an alternative which only made him shudder. So with reluctance, for he is a very pleasant companion, I scratched him from my list of possibles.

When Martin and I first thought of making the trip we had decided that a party of three or four would be just about right. I only had one other chap in mind, and that was a very good friend named Sid. He is young and tall, with wavy hair and quite handsome, but after a long period I have succeeded in not holding that against him. Sid was quite enthusiastic about the idea and we discussed several details without really getting down to things. One point upon which we did make a start was

an effort to learn Hindusthani. We decided we would spend about an hour a day, learn three or four hundred words, and get an idea of the grammar, so we started our lessons right away.

Our chief concern, however, was to find another member for our party. Naturally we wanted someone congenial and who would fit in. On a trek such as we anticipated a certain amount of hardship and discomfort is inevitable; a moaner would only make things worse and probably spoil our holiday. It was a sudden inspiration which made us think of Harry Vigours, a friend of both Sid and myself, who is a very likeable chap indeed. A little persuasion and Harry became a member of our party; apart from certain dark remarks concerning tigers, falling over precipices, and dying of mountain sickness, he seemed very enthusiastic.

It was now possible for us to get down to serious planning. I wrote off for information to Mrs. Odling, of Kalimpong, a very good friend of our regiment. In the meantime, Sid bought a book which contained all the information I had written for, and a sketch map of Sikkim.

We decided to have a general meeting to discuss all the various points. We held this in our mess room early one evening, with our maps spread on the table in front of us and our guide-book ready to hand; we attracted a certain amount of attention and quite a lot of witticisms. A glance at the map confirmed the view which we had all formed, namely, that Tibet was too far for the limited time at our disposal. We were not particularly cast down,

however, as Sikkim, with its gigantic peaks of over 28,000 feet, seemed a very attractive alternative.

I had made a short list of the more important points which we had to discuss. They were :—

1. Mode of travel.
2. Route.
3. Number of coolies or mules required.
4. Clothing and food.

and perhaps most important—expenses.

When we found that mules were hired in teams of eight, with two men to look after them, we ruled them out straight away as being too expensive, and decided to walk. Our guide-book gave us examples of the necessary servants which a trekking party should take. These included a cook, a sweeper, a tiffin coolie, and various other functionaries, all of whom we decided we could dispense with. We thought we would just take as many coolies as were necessary to carry our kit, and so we decided to work out the weight of the food and clothing that we would be taking with us. Here, again, we consulted the guide-book and found once more, long comprehensive lists of what we considered to be unnecessary clothing. Our list, when we had worked it out, was very simple. Against the imposing examples of the guide-book it seemed almost primitive. The food question was the same. Apparently the jaded appetites of the "pukka sahibs," the normal visitors to Sikkim, require the assistance of various pickles, sauces, jams, etc. We decided that appetite is the finest sauce and made out our list accordingly.

We came to the conclusion that by carrying our large packs ourselves we would need three coolies for our bedding, food, etc. Our rail warrant would take us to Giele Khola or Kalimpong, but as we wished to reach Northern Sikkim, we thought it would be a good idea to hire a car to take us to Gangtok, which is the capital. There was some discussion as to how much this would cost, and I eventually put down a tentative estimate of a hundred and forty rupees for the return fare.

Our original objective was to have been the Donkya-la. It is reputed to be the finest mountain scenery in the world, and as the height of the pass is over eighteen thousand feet, I can well believe that this is so. On discussion it became apparent that the distance was too great for the limited time at our disposal. We were very disappointed at the thought of having to turn back without reaching this wonderful pass, and so decided to ask for an extra two days' leave, which if obtained might barely make our ambition possible. Here I might mention that we made no allowance for the rarefied atmosphere and merely considered the physical distance to be covered. Later information on this subject showed us the fallacy of this reasoning.

At the end of about four hours' talking, we had made some sort of order out of chaos. A list of clothes and another of foodstuffs had materialised. The various sources from which we would obtain them had also been arrived at and the weights of the various articles we should be taking had been found. The last item on our list for consideration was expenses. We had gradually compiled this during the course of the evening, and sad

to relate, it exceeded by far the amount which we would be able to save. The whistle for lights out went while we were still frantically trying to pare off rupees from different parts of our expenditure and we went to bed that night in a somewhat chastened mood but determined to cut down the cost somehow.

The next day was Sunday and as we had a certain amount of free time, Sid and I got to work on our problem. Like most problems, it had been simplified by a night's sleep. By dint of re-arranging the disposition of our kit and cutting down our clothes to a minimum we were able to do without one coolie. We also effected a saving on food and finished up by bringing the expenses well within the bounds of possibility.

All these arrangements were made some considerable time before our leave was due. We decided to defer writing for our frontier passes and Dak bungalow reservations until a month before we expected to go. Other preliminary enquiries regarding cars, etc., we thought could be made at any time.

CHAPTER III

FATE TAKES A HAND

"The best laid plans of mice and men
Aft gang agley."—R. B.

Some weeks slipped by. The weather became even hotter. The Battery indulged in another move. We began to think that perhaps it was time for us to make some definite plans, so I wrote to a taxi firm, enquiring the cost of hiring a car for the return journey to Gangtok. They replied that they would be unable to guarantee to meet us at Gangtok for the return journey but would do the outward trip for one hundred and twenty rupees! The peace-time rate for the return fare was thirty-five rupees! So that was the first blow to our hopes.

About this time one of the lads asked if he could come with us. We said yes, gladly, as it meant that the expenses would be cut down quite a bit. However, he was not sure whether he would come with us as he was trying to get permission to visit his brother in Bombay.

We also had another enquiry from a chap named Jerry Brown, commonly known as "The Mole." He was tremendously keen on the idea and very eager to come indeed. We told him we had in all probability a fourth for our party, and that we could not take more, as, quite apart from the fact that it would tend to make an unwieldy number with possible internal dissension, the Dak bungalows in many instances only have sleeping accommodation for four. Poor Jerry was rather disappointed

at this, so I promised to see the other chap and ask him to make up his mind right away.

Jerry's delight knew no bounds when I told him he could come as our possible fourth had decided to go to Bombay. When he next went to town, Jerry bought a beautiful Ordnance may of Sikkim, cut and mounted on canvas, and bound into a book. It cost him eleven rupees. When he refused the other members' share of the cost of this lovely map, he straightway became endeared to their mercenary hearts. Jerry performed another very useful service, for it was he who told us of the mail bus that runs from Giele Khola to Gangtok. This would undoubtedly be cheaper than hiring a car, so we decided to make enquiries about it.

As there were now four of us going, the question of food, weight, etc., had to be gone into again, so we had another meeting. Unlike the previous one, this was satisfactory in every respect. We arranged all details of food and clothing and decided that the most important things to be accomplished apart from applying for our Border Permits (which was done right away), was, firstly, to get hold of a camera and films. This was by no means easy, as films had practically disappeared from the market, and when they were available commanded fancy prices. Secondly, to try to hire coolies in Gangtok in order that they would be awaiting our arrival. This too seemed a pretty tall order as we were unacquainted with anyone in Gangtok, which was hardly surprising as there were only about three white people there in any case. Thirdly, we were to try to book reservations on the mail bus. Our information regarding this bus was that if they had any

room after the mail, etc., was loaded, they would take passengers, but it was not possible to book in advance. So it seemed we had some pretty difficult problems to solve.

The visit of Mrs. Odling to our camp provided us with an opportunity of which we were quick to take advantage. She promised to help us. The coolies at Gangtok she could arrange with a friend of hers who lived there; the reservations on the mail bus—well, her name would probably have enough weight to manage that, so two of our worries were over. With regard to the third one—the camera—we were in despair about this, but miraculously that too seemed to be solved. We were promised the loan of an American camera and films. We didn't know the people who were loaning it to us, we just knew someone, who knew the people with the camera! So it seemed as if all our troubles were over.

Whilst we talked of troubles being over, fate was tempted to roll over and yawn a little, for a few days later Sid was taken to hospital. I told him before he went that he should try not to over-eat himself as it was getting near time for our trip, but like most good advice it went unheeded! When I called at the hospital to see him I had quite a shock as it was suspected that he was suffering from dysentery, in which case he would never be fit enough to go with us. This proved to be a false alarm and he was soon out, only to find that it was his turn to visit me as I went down with a touch of influenza. I was not particularly worried as I knew I should be fit and well before we were due to go, and indeed this proved to be the case.

About this time Old Lady Fate abandoned yawning as a pastime and really got cracking. A day after I returned from hospital, a postcard arrived informing us that coolies were unobtainable in Gangtok. The alternative was to hire them at Kalimpong and send them to Gangtok to await our arrival. This meant four extra days' pay to each one. The rate for coolies had gone up from three to four rupees a day, and as we finally decided that we should require five coolies, this meant that their wages, without taking into account the inevitable bucksheesh, would amount to two hundred and eighty rupees. We would only want them for ten days as I undersood that our request for two extra days' leave had been turned down. One more up to fate!

Her last blow was perhaps the most cruel. The lovely American camera of our dreams, about which much learned discussion had taken place between Jerry and myself, on the question of filters, reflected light in snowy country, exposures, apertures, etc., was all so much hot air—the owner had departed to Bombay and had left our expedition camera-less!

By a stroke of luck, Harry managed to borrow a very decrepit box camera, and I was able to fiddle about with it and by tightening the spring, increased the shutter speed and improved one or two other odds and ends. I was rather doubtful about it but it was the best we could do. Films were the next problem and so we despatched a frantic letter to Messrs. Kodak at Bombay, appealing to their generosity and better nature. We awaited the result of this letter with some trepidation because we knew if they let us down we were sunk.

CHAPTER IV

OUR EMISSARY DEPARTS

"For ye'll tak' the high road
and I'll tak' the low . . ."—T.J.

At this stage we were still floating. How we managed it I can't conceive. We must have had lots of that rugged endurance which is the Englishman's proudest inheritance (*sic.*). Our troubles came thick and fast. We no longer cared whether we were able to get films or not. The time of our departure was rapidly approaching but our Passes and Frontier Permits had not arrived. A wire was sent ten days before we were due to leave. It elicited a response some three days later to the effect that matters were now in the hands of the District Commissioner. We were extremely worried. We felt we would never receive them in time. As if this was not enough, five days before we were expecting to be on our way the Battery had orders to move.

This seemed like the last straw. I felt sure we would never make a start now. I was greatly relieved when I

found that it had been arranged for us to remain behind as rear party and that we would be allowed to proceed as planned. A whole host of smaller details went wrong at this time but I will not enlarge upon them; sufficient to remark that Jerry was away on another job and we had to arrange to have him recalled. This accomplished, we experienced the usual chaos and discomfort occasioned by a move, and finally found ourselves left behind by the Troop but still without films, permits, etc.

When we reported to B.H.Q. I made our position known and received a very sympathetic and understanding hearing. It was decided to send one of our party up to Darjeeling in person to collect the passes; he would be able to join the rest of the party at Silliguri.

Even the railways seemed to conspire to defeat our purpose. The Darjeeling Mail had been withdrawn two days previously. The Bengal-Assam Express had ceased to run for some considerable time. The only alternative was the Silliguri Passenger, a very slow train indeed, which, not content with stopping at every station, generally stopped two or three times in between.

We worked out quite a complicated time-table and found it could just be done. The unfortunate who made the trip would have to spend three nights on different railway stations, but we considered that after all the trouble we had experienced and all the obstacles we had overcome, it was well worth while, as without the Permits, etc., the whole thing would have to be cancelled and all the provisions which we had bought, besides those which we had acquired by devious means, would be wasted. Also our coolies would be starting out from

Kalimpong in order to meet us at Gangtok and we would be unable to communicate with them in time to prevent their departure.

On Sunday night, Sid went to Sealdah station in order to catch the Silliguri Passenger at seven-thirty the next morning. Yes ! poor old Sid was the unlucky one ! He departed looking like a cross between an injured martyr and a gladiator determined to do or die, with the threats ringing in his ears of what we would do to him if he failed to obtain the Permits.

Naturally, we were all extremely concerned with the results of Sid's mission. It seemed to us that the possibility of last-minute success was very remote and we were all very eager to meet Sid at Silliguri on the following Tuesday.

CHAPTER V

SIKKIM STATE

"He that goes to the Hills goes to his Mother."

—INDIAN SAYING.

The following is a very brief description of the historical and biological background of Sikkim.

Sikkim is a small independent State lying to the north of Darjeeling; it measures approximately seventy miles from north to south and forty miles from east to west.

Despite its limited area this country is of exceptional interest. Situated within its narrow confines is the most magnificent mountain range in the world. This is the Kanchenjunga Group which, according to the time of day or the season of the year, reveals its untrodden peaks in varying moods.

Leaving on one side the enchantment of possessing these mountain giants, the scenery throughout the length and breadth of Sikkim is magnificent.

Masses of mountains, rising range upon range, sweep away in endless vista. Wooded slopes give way to barren

crags and towering jagged rocks, which in the far distance are covered by an ermine cloak of eternal snow.

Huge valleys and narrow rocky ravines run in all directions, carved out by glaciers untold ages ago. The fertile valleys of the lower hills are well cultivated, whilst at higher elevations the thrilling spectacle of a cascading mountain torrent may often be seen hundreds of feet below a vantage point.

A tribe of people known as the Lepchas are the original inhabitants of Sikkim. Of Mongolian extraction, their language and other characteristics would seem to suggest that they are an ancient tribe, emigrated from Southern Tibet.

The reigning family, however, seems to have been Tibetan from the start. Buddhism does not appear to have been introduced into Sikkim until as late as the seventeenth century, previous to which the population were undoubtedly Animists. The Buddhist religion was introduced by monks flying from the persecution of the Reformists in Tibet. The people of Sikkim were influenced largely by the authorities of Lhasa. Religion, politics, social matters, and all State institutions were based mainly on those of Tibet.

With the beginning of the nineteenth century a considerable change took place. A difference of opinion between Sikkim and Nepal was decided by the British Government in favour of Sikkim, after which the English assumed the position of Lords paramount. Disturbances within the State made it necessary for the Government to send a force to occupy the country, in order to impose a treaty of good relations, which was

observed for some years, until increasing Tibetan influence made necessary an expedition, which destroyed a fort built by the Tibetans at Lingtu, and eventually drove them over the Jelap La.

In 1890 a convention was concluded, the country boundaries defined, and Sikkim was declared a protected State, since when it has been governed by the Maharaja and a Council of Leading Subjects guided by a British Political Officer.

The original inhabitants, the Lepchas, are now very much in the minority, more go-ahead immigrants from Nepal having recently far out-numbered them. Essentially a child of nature, with unlimited jungle lore and a natural love of all living things, the Lepcha is ill-equipped to compete with his more enterprising neighbour the Nepali.

The climatic conditions of Sikkim vary between the two extremes. In the lower valleys bamboos, palm trees and orchids flourish in tropical heat, whilst arctic conditions prevail amongst the heights. The great glory of Sikkim are its rhododendron-covered mountains. These plants vary in size from small shrubs a few inches high to large trees of over forty feet. Upon the higher slopes eidelweiss grows in profusion, also primulas, violets and many other beautiful flowers and flowering trees.

A large number of birds are found within the boundaries of Sikkim. Between five and six hundred species have been recorded; the reason for this great variation within such small limits is the wide range of climatic conditions and the difference in temperature at various heights. Due to the density of the vegetation and the

steep precipitous formation of the slopes, observation is extremely difficult. Bird life varies in size from the gigantic Lammergeyer, about four feet in length with a nine and a half feet wingspan to the minute Flower Pecker, scarcely more than three inches in length.

Butterflies and moths are exceptionally abundant, some six hundred species of the former having been recorded and nearly two thousand of the latter. The majority of moths are comparatively small, but some of them are amongst the largest of the insect race. The Atlas moth, which is the largest of them all, is sometimes nearly a foot across.

Gold is to be found in many parts of Sikkim and there is doubtless a bountiful supply of many other minerals. The steep and rugged nature of the country makes exploitation of its natural wealth extremely difficult, and this, coupled with its remote situation, is probably responsible for the fact that most of the people earn their livelihood as porters, agriculturalists, muleteers. Despite the assumption of concealed wealth, the true richness of this tiny State lies in all its glory before the eyes of the traveller and a lasting store of unforgettable memories will result from a few weeks' sojourn there.

CHAPTER VI

THE STORM

" But nature whose sweet rains fall
On unjust and just alike."—O.W.

A scene of wild disorder greeted my eyes as, sitting on a bed in our very first Dak Bungalow, I wrote these words. Sodden clothing hung on chairs in front of a big log fire, more wet pulpy masses which were our socks and shirts hung on a line. Kit-bags and tinned food were strewn indiscriminately around the room. Blankets and towels and other articles of kit lay or hung haphazardly in odd corners; a smell of paraffin pervaded the atmosphere.

Mr. Odling was certainly right when he told us of the storms which break in this part of the country. A torrential storm of lashing icy rain had engulfed us some three or four miles from this haven, and within two or three minutes we were drenched to the skin.

Perhaps I had better begin at the beginning and pick up the thread of this rather rambling story from the time when Sid left for Darjeeling.

Harry, Jerry and I experienced a considerable amount of discomfort after Sid left, as we had to move our kit and all the Sikkim gear to three different places and spend a night at each one of them. However, the day for our departure finally arrived, and we had suffered no mis-

adventure greater than some paraffin leaking from our container.

Our train was very crowded and we had ten people in a compartment meant for five. However, we finally arrived at Silliguri after spending twenty-four hours on a journey which normally takes twelve.

We met Sid at the refreshment room at Silliguri. He was sitting amidst the remains of what had evidently been a very good breakfast. Knowing his propensities I did not feel that I could deduce that his efforts had been successful, as no matter what the circumstances I knew he could be relied upon to eat as much as is humanly possible. Jerry, Harry and I settled ourselves at the table and after ordering breakfast gazed expectantly at the unresponsive features of our friend. I hardly dared ask him what the result of his trip had been. When he waved the passes under our noses a tremendous weight was lifted from my mind. Sid told us that our original trip was not possible due to the fact that our dates clashed with other trekking parties, and so he had worked out an alternative route. Apparently a letter had been sent to us explaining this fact, but we had never received it. I said to Sid " that is going to cost us eighty rupees, as our coolies will have started for Gangtok." He replied, " Oh, no it won't, a duplicate letter was sent to Mrs. Odling, and she has stopped them. I 'phoned her whilst at Darjeeling."

The alternative tour which Sid had arranged seemed to be very good and promised some of the finest scenery in Sikkim. We were to follow the Kalimpong-Lhasa Trade Route to the Jelap La, and would be able to put

one foot into Tibet, so my original ambition would be partially realised.

After meeting Sid, we travelled together the rest of the way to Kalimpong, and apart from losing Jerry's bedding roll, had no further mishap.

We spent the night at Mr. and Mrs. Odling's. Their beautiful home overlooks the town and is packed with curios from Sikkim, Tibet, Bhutan and other States and countries which they have visited. Mr. Odling took Jerry out in the car and found his bedding, to our great relief.

A good deal of laughter was caused at dinner when we mentioned that we were taking with us one blanket. " My God ! " said Mr. Odling, " do you realise there will be six feet of snow on the Jelap La ? " We rather sheepishly admitted that we had not thought there would be quite so much, " and what's more," Mr. Odling continued, " you will probably have to dig at least one of the bungalows out of the snow." Mrs. Odling came to our rescue as she had done on so many occasions during the planning of the trip and loaned us two more blankets each. Without her assistance this effort of ours would never have come off at all.

Our coolies arrived early next morning and we hurried out eager to meet the men who were to make our expedition possible and who were to be our companions for the next two weeks. We found five rather short, lightly built Nepalis, dressed in nondescript clothing, obviously overawed by their surroundings, standing shyly by our kit. " Yes " and " No " constituted the extent of their English, but we managed to make ourselves understood by

means of my halting Hindi and Sid's Bengali. I was rather anxious to find out if they considered that they would be able to carry our kit, especially as we now had an additional eight blankets, and to be quite truthful, I was not particularly impressed by their physique. When I had managed to make myself understood they laughed at my fears, and as they afterwards demonstrated, they were more than capable of doing their job.

Before we started out we discovered that the paraffin had leaked over our bread, eight two-pound loaves! We stopped in the town to buy more, but could only get eight one-pound loaves. However, as we had flour and forty packets of biscuits we hoped for the best.

We left Kalimpong rather later than we had intended, as we had to wait for the bread to finish baking. We found the Trade Route to be a gradual ascent along one side of a valley, with a river running hundreds of feet below us. The scenery was very pleasant. On the way we passed a teak forest and eventually arrived at the hill village of Algarah. By this time we were in the clouds and Mr. Odling's warning of the storms which usually break at about two o'clock at this time of the year was dominant in our minds.

After we had left the village behind us, where our presence had caused some excitement, we had a stiff climb up a rough cobbled track. No sooner had we reached the top than the storm broke in all its fury. Within two or three minutes we were drenched to the skin and the next few miles to the bungalow seemed endless. When we arrived, shivering with cold, looking like drowned rats, we found the Chowkidar was out, but we managed

to get some firewood and quickly lit a fire. We stripped off our wet clothing and soon began to feel better.

Things seemed more cheerful after a hastily cooked meal. Sid and Jerry went down to the bazaar to buy " under and alue," whilst I remained behind to write and gaze at the view. As I looked out of the window I was faced by the huge mass of mountains on the opposite side of the valley. They looked very black and sombre in the fading light, but the ominous feeling which they invoked was relieved by the white fleecy clouds which clung lingeringly to their wooded slopes and summits.

A tranquil air prevailed over the countryside. The storm had passed. All around, the terraced slopes of the mountains went rippling away, as far as the eye could see. In the distance, huge peaks with mist-enshrouded tops, towered into the sky. Gradually the friendly clouds dispersed. Obeying some force stronger than themselves, they reluctantly left the earth-bound giants and were swept away high over the peaks, until the eye could follow them no more.

Soon it was dark. Presently a crescent moon rose high into the sky and far away into the distance the snow peaks gleamed faintly in the moonlight. Very soon now, I thought, we shall be up there with them.

Sid and Jerry returned from the bazaar with awful stories of the Himalayan Bear, a huge beast, over eight feet high, and very common in these parts. Apparently several of the villagers had been mauled and killed by these brutes recently.

Before going to bed I went round and bolted all the doors. No! Not scared—just careful!

CHAPTER VII
ACHIEVEMENT

" . . . And jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain top."—W.S.

On looking out the following morning I was enchanted to see soft cotton-wool clouds chasing each other down the valley below me. Overhead, too, the clouds seemed to be massing and I hoped it would not rain.

In the bungalow, complete disorder reigned supreme. A lot of our things were still wet and we had to fly around in order to get our coolies and ourselves off by eight o'clock. Eventually we set forth at eight-fifteen. We knew that although we only had some nine miles to do, it would be a pretty stiff day, as we could see the next bungalow way up on the side of a mountain at the end of our valley.

The first four miles were downhill all the way. We followed a very rough track, meeting many mule trains on the way. The mules were gaily caparisoned and most of them had big red tassels or pom-poms and jingling bells hung upon them. Their drivers were the usual colourful Tibetans with their inimitable, jaunty, rakish attitude. It was very pleasing to see their rather impassive Oriental faces break into broad smiles at our

" Salaam," and to hear their loud " salaam, salaam " in return.

We reached the Rissi Chu after passing through some lovely country and having a glorious view of the snow peaks.

We paused for a moment on the small bridge which spans the Rissi Chu. Once on the opposite bank we were in the State of Sikkim; part of our objective was about to be achieved. From where we stood we could see the tiny bamboo hut which was the police outpost, and soon we were signing our names and entering particulars in the book which the policeman gave us. We were forced to take shelter inside the hut as a sudden shower came on, but we were soon on our way up.

After a very stiff climb we reached the mountain village of Rhenok. Here we stopped to buy eggs and potatoes and to sign a book which a smiling constable presented to us. During this latter operation we were surrounded by almost all the village inhabitants, who followed us in a long stream as we went down the bazaar.

As this was the last place of any size which we should be passing through, we decided to buy some slippers for our coolies. These they would require when we reached the snows. We had a terrific argument with the dealer, a huge Tibetan, wearing large gold ear-rings. All the people crowded around us and thoroughly enjoyed themselves, interjecting comments and advice of their own. Eventually the bargain was struck, our coolies were very pleased with their shoes, and we left the village to a chorus of " salaams."

We had planned to reach the bungalow at Arita by two o'clock. We managed to do this after a very steep and exhausting climb. The bungalow was a very pleasant one. We soon had a log fire blazing up the chimney and a hot meal on the table. As we looked out of the bay window we saw, high up on the opposite slope of the valley, the bungalow of Pedong, in which we had spent the previous night. Tired, but content, we went early to bed, after giving Sid a large dose of hot rum for the cold he had caught whilst waiting about on the stations during his trip to get our passes.

The morning of the third day dawned bright and clear. We set off in high spirits. The steep cobbled track led us down to the Rongli Chu, which we crossed by means of an ingenious cable suspension bridge that swayed from side to side as we made our way across. The rushing torrent leaping the rocks fifty feet below us was an impressive sight, and I was pleased to find that our track followed the stream for the next five miles.

Soon after crossing the river we reached Rongli Po, where we stopped to buy a bottle of " Mawa," a very potent brew, which we thought might be useful when we reached the snows. We little knew that only a few hours later we were to be very pleased indeed at possessing this peculiar concoction.

The owner of the spirits shop took us to see his distillery. It was like a scene from Dante's " Inferno." The interior of the mud hut was very dark. Strange shadows were thrown from the sunken furnace and flickered across the walls and the earth floor. The water was carried into the hut by the primitive, but effective means of bam-

boo pipes. A stream was found high up the mountain side and bamboo poles were split in half to form troughs which carried the rivulets of water to the various houses. In one corner of this weird distillery some people were squatting, eating their meal. It is very difficult to convey the atmosphere of the place. It seemed black and ageless, as if it had existed for centuries of time, and it was a relief somehow to step outside into the bright sunshine of the valley once more.

Pushing on again we followed the river which wound its way through a narrow gorge. The sides of the mountains became ever steeper and the road was pretty rough and climbed steadily. The scenery was grand in the extreme and made an unforgettable impression on my mind. It was very hot in the valley, which was not surprising, as it was only about two thousand five hundred feet above sea-level. We looked about us carefully for orchids, which grow in profusion at comparatively low heights but our vigilance went unrewarded; probably it was too early in the year. As compensation for the lack of orchids there were a lot of flowering trees, beautiful yellows, reds and mauves, which made vivid splashes of colour along our pathway.

Eventually we reached a point where we were undecided which way to go. Jerry, who was reading the map, finally decided to take a rough track which climbed very steeply uphill. After gaining over a thousand feet in height, we pointed out to him that it was a comparatively unused track and showed no signs of the constant flow of traffic one would expect on the Lhasa Trade Route. I asked to look at the map and decided our route

lay across the river and up the mountain which we could see opposite us. Somewhat wearily we retraced our steps. On reaching the point where we had turned off we found we were faced with an exceptionally steep ascent. Up and up we climbed, each turn in the track finding us more and more tired.

After two hours of this laborious going we were within sight of the bungalow of Sedomchen. Thick clouds were all around us. Poor Harry was in a state of collapse and could go no further. He was saturated with sweat and was icy cold. Jerry pushed on to the bungalow to get the fire alight, whilst Sid and I, supporting Harry on each side, continued to stagger on. Soon we had to stop and let him rest whilst we waited for our coolies to catch us up. When they did so we gave Harry a stiff dose of the "Mawa" we had bought at Rongli Po, and finally managed to reach the bungalow. When we arrived we stripped Harry of his clothes and rubbed him down. Then, wrapping him in blankets, left him in front of a blazing fire. I was frightened that he would catch pneumonia. It was some time before we could get him warm. Finally we put him to bed under about ten thicknesses of blankets.

In the morning we were relieved to find Harry much better but still weak. By a stroke of luck we had arranged to spend two days here and he was able to get a good rest. I spent the day practising my culinary art and baked lots of plain and currant biscuits, which disappeared almost as rapidly as I could cook them. Prior to starting, it was arranged that I should act as cook on the trip, and I proudly record that I provided an amazing variety of dishes, all

of which were eagerly devoured without a single complaint.

It was very pleasant this lazy day. We enjoyed the rest and visited the village which lay immediately below the bungalow. Many "salaams" and much laughter greeted our appearance. I suppose we seemed very queer to the inhabitants—they certainly appeared very picturesque to us.

As we walked back to the bungalow our thoughts turned to the trip which lay ahead of us on the following day. The bungalow which was to be our objective was some 12,000 feet above sea level and we knew that a stiff climb would be our portion. We were a little worried about Harry, as we knew 12,000 feet was the height at which one is apt to get mountain sickness, so we determined to make as early a start as possible:

CHAPTER VIII

SNOW

"East is East and West is West
And never the twain shall meet."—R.K.

The next morning we were up as early as usual. We had by this time devised a system. Harry packed his and Jerry's bedding roll, Sid was responsible for his and mine, and I cooked the breakfast.

The cooking was always done in a little outhouse and the coolies cooked their food on the same fire. I think the trip was an education to them in many respects, as it was somewhat unusual to find "Sahibs" doing their own cooking.

The air of the outhouse was always filled with the most acrid wood-smoke I have ever experienced and my eyes were streaming with tears long before the meal was cooked. Our breakfast was generally a simple one, consisting of eggs fried, boiled or poached, porridge and biscuits. The coolies were very helpful and always eager to show the attachment which they seemed to have formed for us by performing small chores and they used to help me by stirring the porridge, making the fires, etc. When I entered the door in the morning they would greet me with a loud and cheery "salaam." They were wonderful people, slight of build, and of nondescript appearance, yet they were capable of carrying incredible loads up steep and rocky tracks. We, who carried nothing, were usually pretty tired at the end of the day, and yet those wonderful

people carried on as if nothing had happened. Of course, they are born to the hills, but even so they seemed to achieve the impossible.

After breakfast we started climbing up a steep zig-zag track which went on and on interminably. The bungalow we had just left lay in a bowl of mountains which was filled with clouds—huge white masses—seething and bubbling like steam from a giant cauldron. Soon we were on our way up. It seemed as if we were on top of the world. Surely, we thought, this old mountain cannot go much higher—but it just went on going up.

On the way we stopped to pick handfuls of luscious wild strawberries which grew in profusion on those steep slopes. The sun was warm, and the world seemed very pleasant. The glorious white blossoms of the magnolia mingled with the green foliage of many trees. Soon we came upon rhododendrons, but only isolated shrubs were flowering—all of them the crimson variety. Later on in the year all the higher slopes would be covered with rhododendrons of all colours. They vary in size from small shrubs only a few inches in height to large trees of over forty feet.

As we climbed higher and higher the vegetation became more and more stunted. The few trees which clung to the rocky slopes were covered with lichen. The aspect became bare and primitive, moisture dripped from the empty branches of the miserable trees. It was like a scene from a petrified forest. One almost expected to come face to face with a dinosaurus or some other primeval monster. The lichen hung like dripping stalactites and the witches' trees, stirring slightly in the

faint breeze, assumed fantastic shapes. A weird landscape which did not fail to have its effect upon us, and our footsteps, which had been inclined to lag in the brilliant sunshine below, now gathered speed.

A break in the clouds showed us the snows quite close, but considerably higher up. Almost at the same moment four white people came into view round the corner. They were the first we had seen since entering Sikkim. They told us they had left Sedomchen that morning. This was the village for which we were making. They painted a horiffic picture of the road that lay in front of us and said probably we would not arrive until eight p.m. This proved to be a gross exaggeration, and was in my opinion a pretty poor show as one naturally expects accurate information regarding the condition of tracks, passes, etc.

Soon after leaving these individuals we passed our first snow and before long we were walking on the snow-covered heights. We had an excellent cup of tea, a most welcome surprise, especially as the village of Ling Tang, where we purchased it, was a somewhat bleak and desolate looking spot.

The " shop," a wooden hovel, was perched precariously at the side of the track as one entered the village. The beams were black with the smoke which filled the interior. We sat down on a bench near the fire. Our tea served in long brass goblets, was brought to us by a Tibetan woman who was wearing the large brass or " gold " earrings that are so much a part of the Tibetan costume. Squatting on the floor were a number of muleteers, the owners of the mules we had noticed outside. The smell of damp wool, mule sweat, and other odours, the source

of which we hesitated to enquire, mingled with the ubiquitous smoke. Our presence caused a mild sensation, but when it became apparent that we were filled with friendly feelings, our departure from normal European behaviour was overlooked. After distributing cigarettes all round, a gesture which finally allayed any lurking suspicions, we finished our tea and went out into the welcome fresh air.

After leaving the village, we soon found ourselves amidst desolate, snow-covered slopes, bare of any signs of life, with just an occasional black rock sticking up to relieve the eternal whiteness. We were wearing our coloured glasses by now, and were very grateful for them as the light, reflected from the snow, was blinding.

The trail we were following wound on and on for endless miles. I swear a Sikkim mile is three times as long as an Irish one, and goodness knows, they are supposed to be long enough. Eventually the track made a sharp turn round the shoulder of the mountain and at this part it was only about a foot wide. Sid, who was slightly ahead of us, was walking on the outside edge, and as he turned the corner he met a mule face to face and tried to pass on the outside. He was struck by the pack of wool strapped to the animal's side and only avoided plunging over a hundred foot drop by clinging to the pack until the mule and his unexpected passenger turned the corner, when he was able to reach safety. What a moment!

It was an awful job passing those mule trains on a narrow ledge. The mules only made allowance for the size of their own body and forgot the bulky pack which

they carried each side of them. We always endeavoured to be on the inside when we saw a mule train, although this meant we had to climb the side of the mountain and stand knee deep in snow.

At last we arrived at the village of Gnatong. Just outside there was a cemetery with a monument erected to the memory of the men of the Derbyshire Regiment who died in those bleak inhospitable regions. Some had died from exposure whilst lost, and others were killed on active service whilst driving the Tibetans from a fort which they had built some way outside the village. This they did after a short encounter, compelling the Tibetans finally to withdraw through the Jelap La.

We were very tired when we reached the bungalow. The map said we had walked eight miles, but we considered that it must have been twelve. We had started at a height of about thirteen thousand feet, climbed to sixteen thousand, and then dropped down to twelve thousand three hundred. Jerry had a touch of mountain sickness and went to bed soon after we arrived. Sid and I got the dinner, and I cooked a huge batch of biscuits, about forty plain and currant. I hoped they would last a while as we anticipated a hard time the next day and I did not expect to be able to do any cooking. The Chowkidar at this bungalow was a Tibetan and we had some difficulty in making ourselves understood. Up to now we had got on amazingly well with the language question. Our coolies were Nepalis but spoke a little Hindi as well. Sid had a smattering of Bengali and I knew a little Hindi, so between us we manged quite well.

CHAPTER IX

THE GATEWAY TO TIBET

" Open then the door!
You know how little while we have to stay,
And once departed, can return no more."—O.K.

A hailstorm of incredible violence came on soon after we arrived at Gnatong. The vista of the village and the surrounding countryside was indescribable. The wind screamed round the miserable huts and the hailstones leapt high into the air from the force of impact with the earth or roof. I expected the whole ramshackle collection to be swept away by the violence of the storm, but the villagers, in their furry hats and moccasin knee-boots, walked about as if the violent upheaval was an everyday occurrence, as I supposed for them it might very well be.

The next morning a world of white met my gaze as I made my way to the outhouse to do the cooking. The primitive village lay in front of me and just below the bungalow. The aspect was bleak and desolate in the extreme. How people were able to maintain life up there was beyond me. The village was just a huddle of decrepit huts lying in a rugged hollow. The main street was a jumble of rocks, mud and manure when the sun was strong enough to thaw the ice and snow which covered it for most of the year. There were no shops worthy of the name and it was impossible to buy supplies of any kind. There were no more than twenty-five huts in the village,

most of them built of mud or rock. They generally had a wooden roof, but to our surprise a few were made of corrugated iron. The people were necessarily very hardy and lived a life deprived of any form of comfort unless one included under that heading the native liquor, the potency of which probably enabled them to escape for a brief period from the hardships of their daily life. Despite the many drawbacks to which they were born, the villagers were invariably cheerful, and their bearing was one of sturdy independence.

We left the bungalow soon after breakfast. The distance to the next Dak bungalow was shown as four miles, but we accepted this as a provisional estimate only. Our experience had made us extremely doubtful of the veracity of both map and guide-book, although it is only fair to say that miles which ascend at an average angle of forty degrees must inevitably seem longer than those which conform to a more comfortable standard.

Our way lay along a track which climbed steadily up the snow-covered slopes, and as the thaw had set in at these heights it was not long before our feet were saturated. Our faces soon began to feel the effect of the sun reflected from the snow, but fortunately we had taken some lotion with us and so were able to prevent much discomfort from this source.

After a fair climb we reached the Tuku La at a height of thirteen thousand four hundred feet, and later the Neo La at thirteen thousand six hundred feet. A bizarre view was unfolded as we reached the top of the Pass. A dead, lifeless white world lay beneath us with pinnacles of snow-covered rock towering up into the clear blue

sky, and billowing drifts of snow stretching away into the distance. It was like a scene from some other planet. Gazing at this awe-inspiring landscape I felt very small and insecure. The faint mark of the trail in the snows beneath us, with its promise of food and warmth at the end, made a comforting distraction, and soon, having crossed this deathly region, we were hurrying down a steep descent with the bungalow at Kupup (the highest in Sikkim, thirteen thousand feet) in sight.

When we arrived at the bungalow dissension split our ranks. Sid and I wanted to push on to the Jelap La, which we could see through a gap in the fobidding mountains to the east of us. Jerry was in favour of a meal first, but we were too impatient to wait for our coolies to arrive. Whilst the discussion was going on we asked the Chowkidar if the path to Chungu, our next stop, was open. He replied by taking us to the door and showing us the huge expanse of snow, underneath which lay the track we would have to follow.

The question of whether we would immediately go up to the Jelap La or not was solved by my succumbing to an attack of mountain sickness. This is somewhat unpleasant while it lasts. It is caused by the rarefied air, and the symptoms are a steam hammer banging away inside one's head. A couple of aspirins and a rest soon put me right.

By this time our coolies had arrived, so we prepared a meal, and whilst doing so asked their opinion of the chances of proceeding to Chungu the next day. Their answer was an emphatic "No!" The snow, which was six to eight feet deep, was in parts fairly hard on top,

but rivers of water were running down the slopes underneath. It was a surprising sight to see one of these under-snow rivers emerge for a brief distance only to disappear under another drift.

We were naturally very disappointed at the thought of returning by the same route, so we promised our coolies double pay if they would try to make the trip to Chungu. They, infinitely wiser in mountain lore than we, would not commit themselves, and so we decided to wait and see what the morning brought forth.

After dinner, Sid and I set out on a journey which in retrospect seems to me to be one of the most foolish things I have ever done.

We decided to go up the Jelap La, the "Gateway to Tibet." Harry and Jerry were very comfortable in front of the fire and would not accompany us, so we set off alone at about two-thirty p.m. Our boots and socks were still soaking wet so we went up in gym. slippers, with no socks. The very thought of it now makes me shudder. The track was pretty steep all the way, and for the first mile and a half was just a running stream. Our feet were soaking wet, but kept fairly warm as we were walking on rocks and stones. The next mile and a half lay through deep snow. We were unable to see more than a few feet as we were surrounded by thick clouds. It became increasingly cold and presently it began to hail. We were undecided whether to go on or not as there was every indication of a heavy snowfall. If this had occurred our path would have been covered over in a very few minutes and we should have been hopelessly lost in one of the most inhospitable regions on earth.

We stopped for a short breather and tried to make up our minds what to do. We both felt a little scared, but neither of us would admit it, and in any case we did not feel inclined to turn back after such a hard climb. The intense cold and the stinging hailstones forced us to make a decision and so we pushed on.

We were soon rewarded with the sight of a cairn of rocks on which were hung some tattered Prayer Flags, whipped to shreds by the force of the wind driving through the narrow pass. The other side of the knife ridge was Tibet!

Running down the slope we entered what is probably one of the most secret countries in the world. It was impossible to see for more than a few feet and the icy gale chilled us to the bone. Despite all discomforts I think this was one of the most thrilling moments I have ever experienced. Tibet at last!

It was far too cold to stay for more than a few seconds, and our sodden feet were beginning to freeze. We turned and ran the mile and a half down through the snows. All feeling had gone from our feet, but when we reached the track, which was free from snow, they gradually became warmer. We arrived back at the bungalow two and a half hours after starting out, a fact of which we were rather proud, as the normal time for the six-mile journey in reasonable weather was three hours. We found Jerry and Harry looking very comfortable, with the table laid for supper. It was good to see the blazing log fire and to remove our wet clothing and feel the friendly warmth in comparison with the bleak atmosphere we had just shut out.

CHAPTER X

THE KINGPIN

"I am Monarch of all I survey.
My right there is none to dispute."—W.C.

Conditions for travelling failed to improve during the night. Our coolies maintained that it was impossible to reach Chungu. We decided on their advice to spend another day at Kupup in the hope that the snow's crust would harden sufficiently to enable us to proceed. Having decided this, the four of us and one of the coolies went up to the Jelap La again. The rest of the coolies stayed behind and one of them offered to cook our lunch.

In the bright morning sunlight the prospect seemed very different. Eventually we arrived at the cairn of rocks and there unfolded before our eyes was the most magnificent spectacle I have ever seen. There are no superlatives capable of describing the grandeur which faced us. The icy wind still blew into our backs but we were too enthralled at first to notice it. Down, down, down, swept the magnificent Chumbi valley. Far away in the distance huge mountains seemed to rise sheer from the valley bed. An indescribable atmosphere pervaded the whole scene. The huge valley and the distant mountains had a hostile air. Surveying them it was easy to understand why so few people have penetrated into this mountain fastness. My longing to do so was increased

by the brief glimpse which I had, but should I be unable to gratify it, I have at least an unforgettable memory of one of the grandest pieces of mountain scenery in the world.

Finally tearing ourselves away from the enthralling spectacle, we returned to the bungalow and were welcomed by the beaming faces of our coolies. The lunch they had cooked for us was excellent and we did full justice to it. The remainder of the day we spent indoors, as the usual afternoon hailstorm arrived to time.

The next morning we persuaded our coolies against their better judgment to attempt to force the trail to Chungu. The result was a hopeless failure. After proceeding some little distance over the hard crust of the snow, they began to sink into waist level. On going to the assistance of one of them who was in difficulties, I too went through the crust and found myself standing in a stream of water which was running unsuspected beneath us. It was icy cold and undid all the care I had taken in drying my boots on the previous night.

There was nothing for it but to return the way we had come, so overcoming our natural reluctance we covered the four miles which lay between us and the bungalow of Gnatung.

I have described the country which we passed through and also the village of Gnatong, but I did this last an injustice which I feel I must correct.

In the previous description of the village it was mentioned that supplies were unobtainable, but our second visit proved that this was not the case. On our arrival, Jerry, in his office of Commissariat, went out to try and

get some alue, under and dhúde, but without much hope. To our great surprise he returned in triumph with all three. It appeared he had met a Tibetan in the village who was the Kingpin of these parts and he had supplied him with our wants. I was rather fascinated by Jerry's description of the man, so later in the evening Jerry and I went to pay a social call.

The house was quite pretentious as houses go in these parts of the world and had a corrugated iron roof, a sure sign of greatness. When we arrived our friend was out, but the members of his family, or servants (I don't know which), brought us a couple of chairs, a most unusual article of furniture, and we sat in front of the fire and endeavoured to make conversation. As they all spoke Tibetan and we English, with just a smattering of Hindi, our efforts were not very successful. We sat by a huge earthen stove, the top of which was crowded to capacity with cooking utensils of every shape and size. They were brewing Tibetan tea, which is a mixture of tea, butter, rice and other odds and ends, and it required a stout heart and strong stomach to tackle this, as we had previously found. Over the stove strips of meat were hanging up to dry, and at the back of us a shoulder of mutton hung upon the wall. In one corner of the room there were some large vessels, something like old-fashioned butter churns, which I believe are used for making the tea which they drink incessantly. The walls of the large and gloomy room were covered with the skins of various animals, and with pots and pans made of brass and copper. The wooden floor was bare and the whole place had a stark and primitive atmosphere, but the people

seemed happy enough and we were all reduced to laughter as we tried to converse.

Eventually the big man of the village returned and invited us into his office. What a contrast! There in that desolate spot, there was at least one man who enjoyed comfort—even luxury. His office was rather small but very well lit with paraffin lamps and he placed two chairs for us in front of a comparatively modern stove which stood in the centre of the room. On the walls hung a Winchester rifle and another rifle the make of which was unknown to me. Also on the wall were several photographs, and a Tibetan sword of fine workmanship, together with a large knife. On the window-sill there was a gramophone and he told us he had English, Chinese and Hindi records. His accounts and book-keeping were done at a workmanlike desk, and an air of well-being and prosperity pervaded the place.

Sitting in this comparatively luxurious oasis the truth of the old adage about judging by appearances was brought home to me, and I returned to our bungalow with food for thought.

In the morning we set off across the snowfields for the bungalow of Sedomchen. Nature's scene-shifters had been at work during the four days which had elapsed since we had previously passed that way. There was still plenty of snow, but the track was fairly clear. Climbing up from Gnatong we reached the shoulder of the mountain and were rewarded with the glorious sight of the Kanchenjunga range gleaming in the bright morning sunlight, with Kanchenjunga itself dominating the whole scene.

We traversed the eight miles to Sedomchen in fairly quick time. The road was very steep and downhill all the way, but the rough cobbles were rather hard on our feet.

When we arrived at the bungalow we found that someone else was in occupation. This was a difficulty which we knew we must expect, as owing to the fact that we had to return by the same route the bungalows would probably be booked by other parties who were coming up behind us.

We had no alternative but to push on to Rongli Po, a further nine miles. Although this meant paying our coolies double, we did not mind as we were bound to be several days late, due to our inability to reach Chungu. Naturally, we did not want to over-stay our leave longer than we could help.

We reached Rongli at five p.m., having been on the march for nine hours. During this time we had dropped from thirteen thousand feet, amidst the ice and snow, to tropical heat at two thousand five hundred feet. We were pretty tired when we arrived at Rongli, as seventeen miles was an extremely long way to travel in such rough country, especially as we had been without food since breakfast.

The bungalow stood on the banks of the river, a rushing torrent, which was swollen by the melting snows of the heights we had left behind us.

We had been told before starting on our trip not to drink water from streams or rivers at a height less than six thousand feet as there was every chance that the water would be contaminated by villagers living higher up the mountains. Above this height the risk was less. We

reached Rongli with our tongues hanging out, and after collapsing in chairs, implored the Chowkidar to " Panni Lao." He took a glass jug and I watched him go down to the river, fill the jug, and return to the bungalow. I was far too tired and thirsty to care where the water came from, and I did not tell the others until the jug was emptied.

CHAPTER XI

THE FUNERAL

"Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast."

The bungalow on the banks of the Rongli Chu was close to the cable suspension bridge which I mentioned earlier. When we started out in the morning a long, long mule train was streaming across the flimsy structure, which swayed jerkily from side to side.

We stood on the verandah of the bungalow and watched the winding procession of mules and men climb up the steep zig-zag track which began at the end of the bridge. The bells of the foremost leader could be heard far up the slope. All the way down the mountain-side at intervals the bells of the leaders of each section rang merrily in the clear air. It was a very picturesque scene, and we were soon a part of it ourselves.

Up and up we climbed, walking in amongst the mules with the smell of mule sweat and damp wool in our nostrils. We exchanged salaams with the muleteers as we gradually caught up with those in charge of each section but had to refuse their request for cigarettes as we had run out of them.

All the previous day was a cigarette-less day for us. Jerry and I did not mind much as we had our pipes, Sid was completely unaffected as he did not smoke, but poor Harry was rather hard hit, so I rolled him a cigarette

made of paper and pipe tobacco, which he said he enjoyed very much. I suppose in some circumstances one can smoke anything! The crux of the story occurred that evening when I made another cigarette for Harry and tried one myself. A certain amount of laughter was caused amongst our coolies when they saw us smoking these rough-and-ready gaspers, and one of them, the eldest of the party, went into his quarters and returned shortly with three packets of cigarettes which he gave us as baksheesh. We all had a good laugh over this as they were the same packets which we had given him on previous nights, and as he did not smoke, he had saved them. We had taken five hundred cigarettes with us for the coolies and had given them a packet each, every night. I thought it was a charming gesture on the old boy's part. Our coolies seemed to have become as fond of us as we had of them.

After an hour and a half's steady going we succeeded in making our way right through the mule train and soon left them behind us, hidden from view by the trees, but with the faint tinkling of their bells to remind us that if we paused for rest they would be with us once more.

The stiff climb had made us all pretty warm, so we removed our shirts. Sid and Jerry looked rather funny because they were carrying umbrellas which the coolies had loaned them as it looked like rain when we started out. It wasn't long before we spotted a party of Tibetans higher up the slope. They were sitting down in a circle, eating their food. When Sid saw them he opened his umbrella over his head and stalked majestically in front of us. Clad in boots and shorts, with a water-bottle slung

over his bare shoulder, and holding the umbrella in his hand, he looked indescribably funny.

As we passed the Tibetans I walked close behind him, tapped my head significantly, and murmured "Pugla Sahib." A look of consternation spread over their faces and nodding slowly they tapped their foreheads in sympathy with my gesture. Sid swept past them, wildly waving the umbrella, and gave them a loud "Salaam, salaam." This was almost too much for me and I had a hard job restraining my laughter. Having turned the bend where they were sitting, I could hold out no longer, and turning to look at them burst out laughing. They were quick to realise that we had been pulling their legs and broad grins spread over their faces. They shouted at us in Tibetan and we shouted back in English—both sides parted very happily.

We reached the bungalow at Rhenok rather earlier than usual and went down to the bazaar for supplies. On the way we heard some reed pipes playing and drums and cymbals rolling and clashing. We looked down on to the road beneath us and saw a funeral procession winding along in single file. The body was carried on a bier, covered with cloth, and the musicians walked in front. The peculiar half tones produced by the pipes and the uneven rhythm of the drum and cymbals combined to produce a weird and mournful sound which echoed dismally through the sunlit valley. As the winding procession reached the village a veritable cacophony of sound burst from the primitive instruments. The first few bars of this frenzied effort reminded me of a "hot break" by a modern jazz band. Any of the devils with which these

folk people their hills, would I think, be well and truly warded off as the unfortunate was carried to his last resting-place.

We spent a pleasant half hour in the village, which was rather a pretty one. There were a number of brilliantly coloured flowering trees which gave the place almost a festive appearance, despite the funeral cortege. We purchased several necessities, including, wonder of wonders, cigarettes. Jerry and I also invested three annas in some large leaves of tobacco which we tried in our pipes but did not enjoy very much.

We attracted the usual amount of attention in the village and when we returned to the bungalow some of the people accompanied us for part of the way.

CHAPTER XII

RELUCTANT FAREWELL

. . . We've been long together
Through pleasant and through cloudy weather,
'Tis hard to part . . ."—A.L.B.

The road to Algarah was all uphill. It climbed fairly steeply up the mountain-side in the inevitable zig-zag pattern. The slopes were well wooded, and walking was very pleasant. We soon covered the nine miles between us and Algarah and passed en route the bungalow of Pedong where we had spent the first night of our trek. The weather on this occasion was in direct contrast to the storm-swept scene which greeted our first visit. Overhead the blue sky was patterned with lazy white clouds. The leaves of the trees gently stirring in the morning wind, scintillated in the bright sunshine. Here and there a bird was singing and the plaintive repetition of the cuckoo was borne faintly to our ears.

In the village of Pedong we met the Chowkidar. He was very interested to hear how we had fared since leaving him, and quite an animated conversation took place in the main street. "Kupup-Chungu rusta bohut krabe," we said. "Burra Baraf nay jaiger Hum log abe Kalimpong Jaiger" he replied in English, which was about as accurate as our Hindi. That was the funny thing about most

of those conversations; both sides tried to get as much practice as they could.

We had the good fortune to arrive at Algarah on market day. The village made a colourful picture, with all the stalls set up in an open space at one end of the town. We wandered from stall to stall and shop to shop in our invariable quest for alue, under and dhude. We were very lucky as we were able to buy some ghee and roti, the first we had seen in any bazaar since we started the trip.

Our purchases made, we returned to the bungalow, where we cooked and despatched one of our gargantuan meals, after which we asked the Chowkidar if he would have a Nappi come to the bungalow.

When the Nappi arrived we sat on a chair in the garden and had our hair cut. As I had not shaved for eight days I had a shave as well. The bungalow was situated quite close to a place where the mule teams halt for the night and we soon had a crowd of huge woolly Tibetans standing round enjoying the unusual spectacle of white men having their hair cut. For my part I did not find the proceedings quite so enjoyable. The Nappi was rather nervous and his razor was rather blunt, but after a painful five minutes I was able to present a clean-shaven face to the admiring audience. When this part of the entertainment was over our big woolly friends still showed no signs of leaving and so we tried to converse with them. We told them that we had been to the Jelap La and that to-morrow we were going to Kalimpong. After this our efforts seemed to fall rather flat and we began to admire the knives which they were all wearing.

They were very pleased to show us their Churi's and we tried to buy one without success. Sid and I did, however, buy a rosary each, and some Tibetan coins. Sid then performed for them a trick which never failed to bring the house down during the trip. Two of his front teeth were false and he could allow them to drop down at will. As can be imagined, his appearance when he did this was very grotesque, and on this occasion he had to perform encore after encore.

Long after we had lit the lamp our big friends hung around the outside of the bungalow. We went to bed rather unhappy in the knowledge that to-morrow we would be leaving them, and all they stood for, far behind us.

The next morning we started our last march. No bungalow, with its friendly Chowkidar, would await us at the end of the journey. We all felt a little sad at the thought of leaving the huge mountains and their simple friendly people, but we had as a consolation the fact that our trek had been a huge success. We had estimated our foodstuffs to a nicety and all the arrangements we had made for the trip itself had worked out perfectly. We were two days late, it was true, but this was due to no fault of ours. We knew we should be punished for our sins when we returned, despite our forced march. Whilst we would have preferred to have returned on time we felt that the magnificent scenery of the past two weeks was ample repayment for any future discomfort.

The road to Kalimpong was downhill all the way and had a very good surface. We were able to make good time, and as we walked along the side of the smiling valley,

with the river rushing and tumbling hundeds of feet below us, our spirits gradually brightened.

We reached Kalimpong at eleven-thirty a.m. and went into Gumpo's for coffee. I should explain that Gumpo's was the meeting-place of the town and at that hour was filled with local residents and people on leave. We were very much out of place in our ragged shorts and shirts, with holes in our boots due to the snow. Jerry even had his heel tied on with a piece of string, but we did not care as we felt we had accomplished infinitely more than those people, with their " Pukka dhobi," could ever hope to do. A piece of conceit which reflection tells me was probably untrue.

When we met Mrs. Odling she insisted that we went to her house for a bath and tiffin, which we did, and after a most enjoyable meal and an hour or so's relaxation, we took a taxi for the twelve miles to Geili-Khola.

Once in the train, although still among the foothills, we felt our holiday had really come to an end.

Our carriage was full of Nepali girls dressed in their bright-coloured clothes. We noticed they had all removed their nose ornaments, and in the course of a rather belaboured conversation discovered they were on their way to join the W.A.C.(I.). I could not help thinking of what a different life lay ahead of them. Their colourful saris and scarves would be laid aside, replaced by drab khaki uniforms. The cool hills and simple village life to which they were accustomed would be exchanged for the heat of the plains and an ordered Army existence. Like gaily-coloured birds they fluttered for this brief transitory period in the unfamiliar background of our rather dirty

carriage. Their expressive, mobile features accurately mirrored their conflicting emotions. Our paths had crossed at a turning-point in their lives. A strange and bewildering future lay in front of them. Watching their light-hearted journeying towards their unknown tomorrow I could not help hoping that kindness and understanding awaited their arrival.

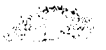
Symbolic of the war and its effect on every race of people, my interest in these future members of Britain's Armed Forces caused me to ponder my own situation. Behind me a never-to-be-forgotten experience and in front . . . What? An infinitesimal cog in one of the greatest war machines in history, new experiences lay ahead of me too. In this unpredictable war all things are possible and who knows, my next leave may be spent in the less majestic but well-loved hills of England?

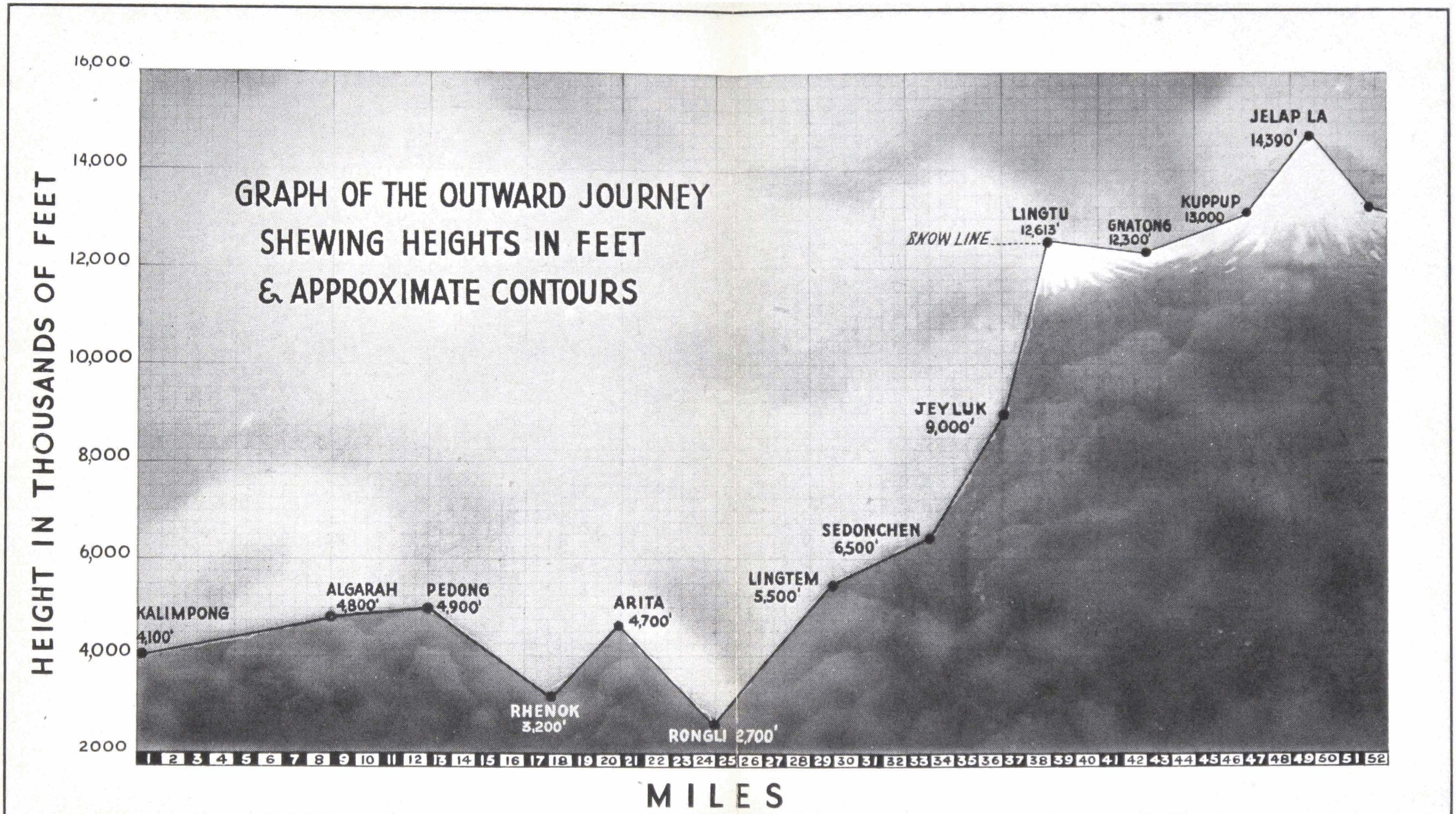
April, 1944.

THE END.

GLOSSARY

Under - - - -	Eggs
Alue - - - - -	Potatoes
Dhude - - - -	Milk
Ghee - - - - -	Cooking Fat
Roti - - - - -	Bread
Panni - - - -	Water
Chu - - - - -	River
Po - - - - -	Village
La - - - - -	Pass
Mawa - - - -	Native Spirits
Dhobi - - - -	Laundry
Pugla - - - - -	Mad
Nappi - - - -	Barber
Churi - - - - -	Knife
Chowkidar - - - -	Caretaker




GRAPH OF THE OUTWARD JOURNEY
SHEWING HEIGHTS IN FEET
& APPROXIMATE CONTOURS
HEIGHT IN THOUSANDS OF FEET
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14,000
12,000
10,000
8,000
6,000
4,000
2000
KALIMPONG 4,100'
ALGARAH 4,800'
PEDONG 4,900'
RHENOK 3,200'
ARITA 4,700'
RONGLI 2,700'
LINGTEM 5,500'
SEDONCHEN 6,500'
JEYLUK 9,000'
SNOW LINE
LINGTU 12,613'
GNATONG 12,300'
KUPPUP 13,000
JELAP LA 14,390'
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52
MILES