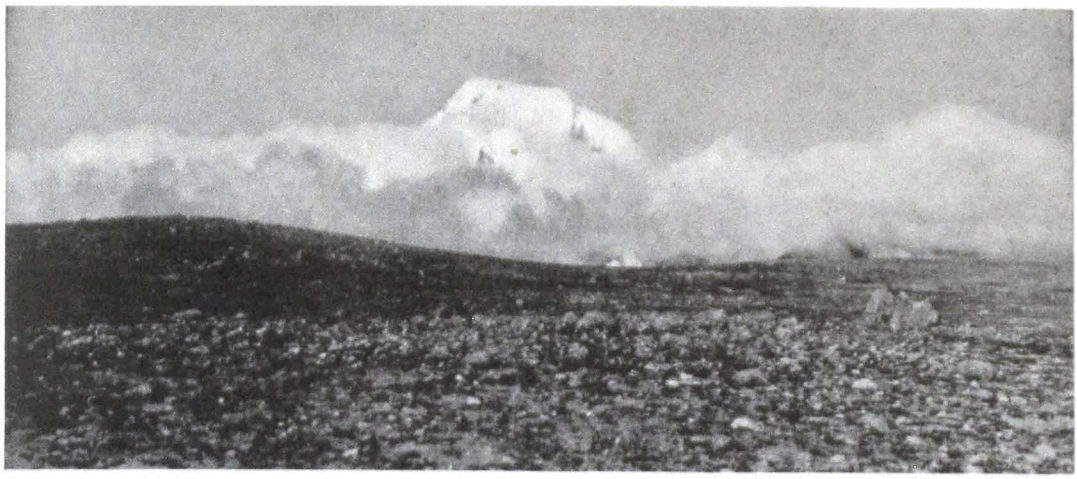

Sunrise on the Tibetan Plateau

AMONG THE NOMADS OF TIBET

Wanderers on the Roof of the World—The Sturdy Inhabitants of the Vast Tibetan Plateau Who Live Behind the Great, Snow-Covered Wall of the Himalayas

By C. SUYDAM CUTTING
Trustee of the American Museum

IF there is any one race of people that shows an utter disregard for the elements of nature, it is the nomads of the great Tibetan plateau. Living the year around in tents in a high and wind-swept land, often well over fifteen thousand feet above the level of the sea, they appear to be completely happy and thoroughly comfortable.

It was during the summer of 1930 that I visited this bare and elevated land. Having obtained the permission of the Dalai Lama himself, I went to India, and thence traveled up over the steep and winding trails among the world's most impressive mountain range to the southern borders of Tibet, which lie just to the north of Darjeeling, where that fascinating little city is situated within sight of Mt. Kinchinjunga and her greater sister, Mt. Everest.

Along the border of this country of nomads, one finds a few villages where agriculture is practised, and to one of these, Khampa Dzong, we made our way. Being on the frontier, it boasts quite a large fort which, for purposes of defense, is elevated about 600 feet above the plain. Angling steeply down to the foot of the hill on which the fort is erected, runs a heavy wall built to protect the defenders when they come down to get water.

Even so close to the giant Himalayas this portion of Tibet is largely level, and looking to the south one sees the glittering, snow-covered peaks beyond a great plain that, near Khampa Dzong, is dotted with the irregular fields tilled by the local Tibetans. A cluster of low, flat-roofed houses lies on the level ground below the fort. On a near-by hill a smaller fort stands, built as a secondary protection, while an old, and now disused execution tower stands deserted at the foot of a steeply sloping rock.

We were received with the utmost friendliness by the Dzong Pen, or governor of the town, and for two nights were put up in his home.

Away from these border villages one

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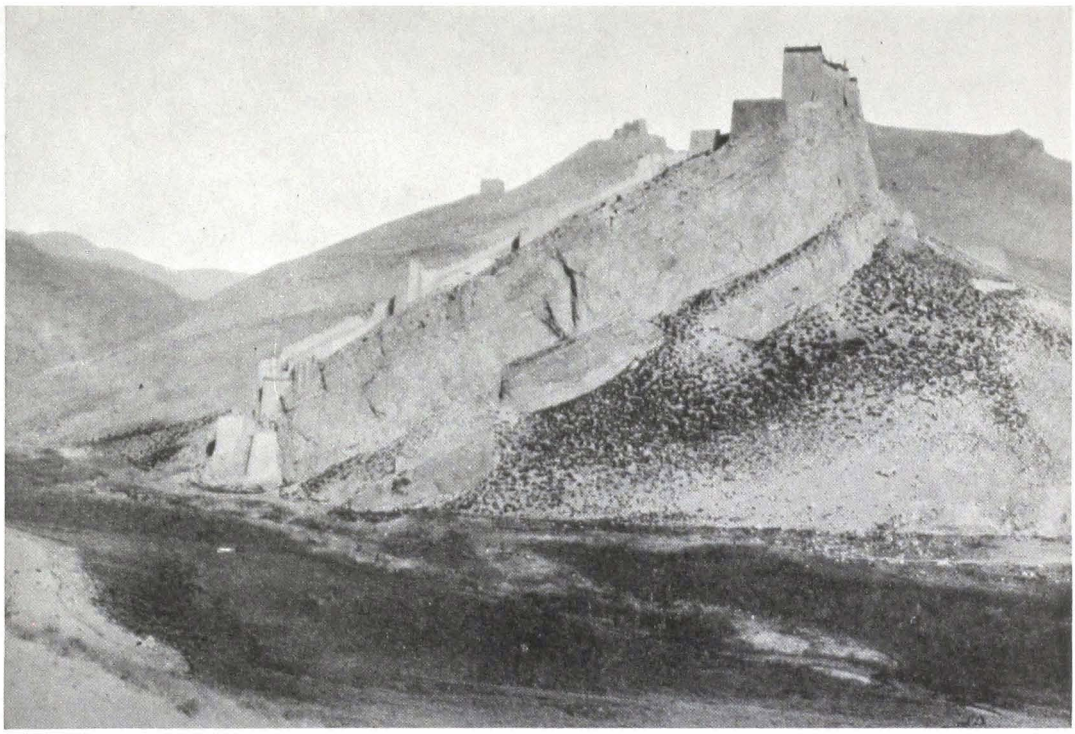
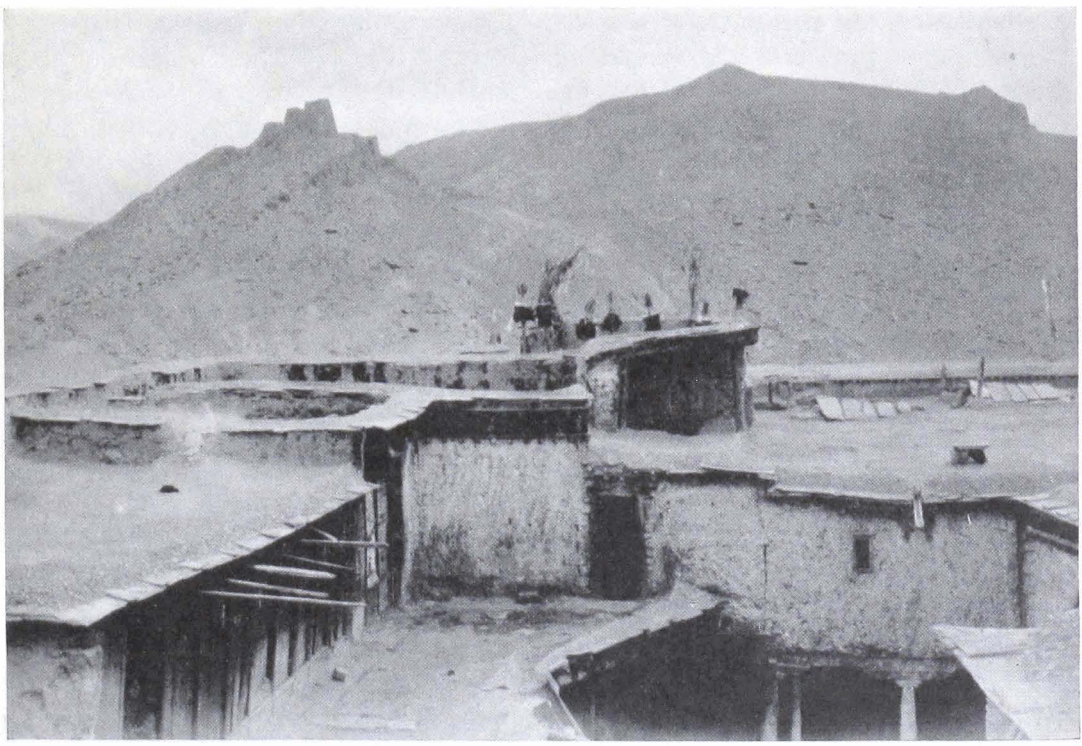


THE FORT AT KHAMPA DZONG

Built to guard the southern boundary of Tibet, this ancient fort stands high on a hill near the town on Khampa Dzong. The wall constructed on the hillside leads to the fort's water supply

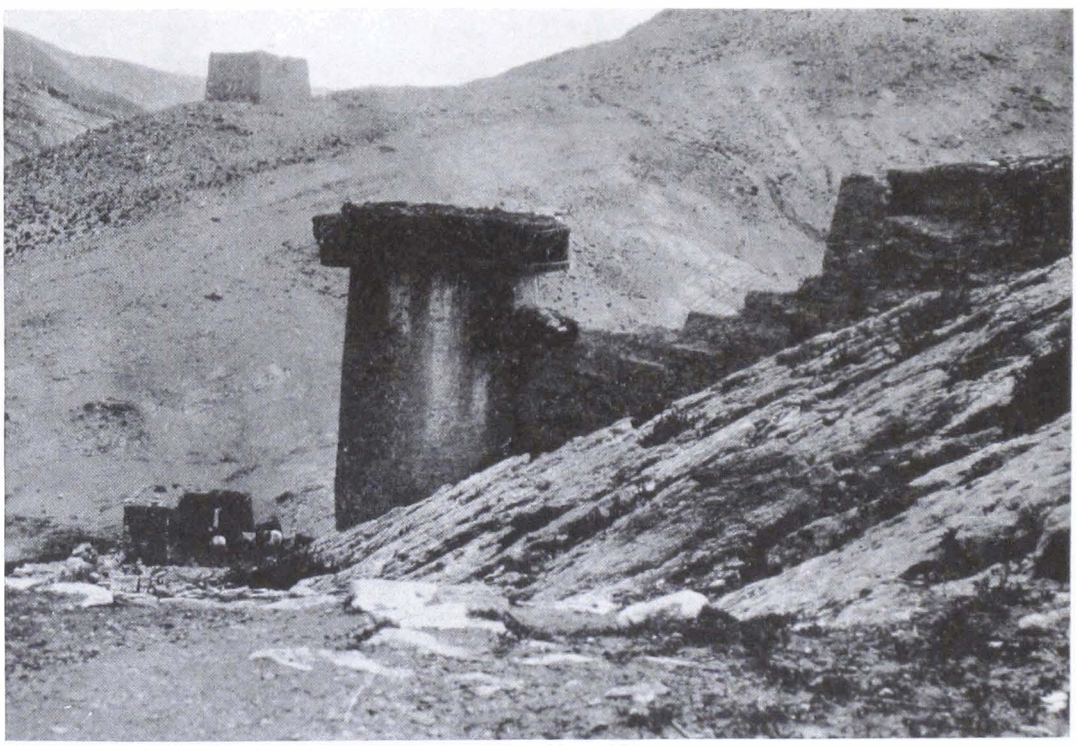


INSIDE THE FORT AT KHAMPA DZONG

The small fort on the hilltop in the distance is for the purpose of preventing an enfilading attack. Neither fort, naturally, could withstand an attack by modern artillery

KHAMPA DZONG

The city wall is shown running steeply down the hillside, while a part of the village is visible at the foot of the hill. Khampa Dzong is one of the few places where agriculture is practised



THE EXECUTION TOWER

This ancient structure at Khampa Dzong is no longer in use. The size of the tower can be estimated from the horses that appear to the left of its base

LOOKING SOUTH FROM THE FORT AT KHAMPA DZONG

The irregular patches of fields are tilled by the local Tibetans. As one travels north from this village, the country rises, with the result that agriculture becomes impossible. The mountains shown in the distance are the Himalayas

finds conditions radically different. Dependent upon grass and moss for the sustenance of their herds, and uninterested in agriculture, the Tibetans wander here and there across the windy plateau, leading their hardy, nomadic lives.

Their herds are made up of sheep, goats, horses, and yaks, which, with the exception of the yaks, feed on the grass which is to be found in the stream bottoms. The yaks, however, indigenous as they are to the region, are permitted to wander about among the hills where they find the moss that is their favorite food.

The country is well adapted for long marches, and traveling with a caravan is easy, for the going is good and water is to be found readily. The coarse grass of the country is common although it disappears as one climbs the ridges, moss taking its place. The latter is, to a great extent, the food of the game of the country—the sheep, Ovis ammon, Bhurrel, gazelle, and wild ass.

Large lakes are common, but are often brackish. Springs are rare and are invariably thermal, very hot and impregnated with sulphur. The streams are of snow water, excellent to drink, and are very numerous. In the course of almost any march one is likely to pass one or more, some of which attain considerable size.

The nomads always camp near these streams, as along their banks a more luxuriant type of grass is to be found. It is here that one sees the sheep, the goats, and the horses, while the yaks wander off to the ridges, where they roam all night feeding. These beasts require an abnormally long time to feed, and must be allowed to wander at will, with the result that a good two hours must be spent in the early morning in collecting the yaks and loading them before a caravan can move.

It is true that the yak is ideally suited to the country. Nature has given him ample protection from the cold and the wind. He finds his food in the most unpromising districts, and can carry a pack

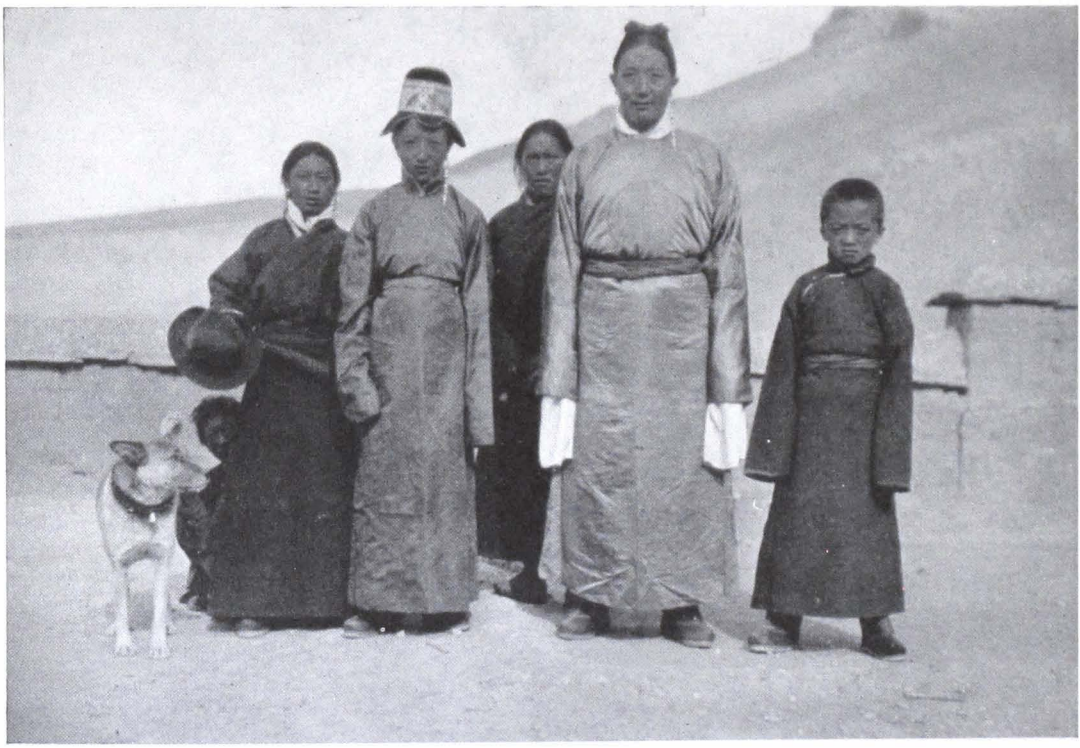
of considerable dimensions. His marches, however, should not greatly exceed ten miles a day, which makes rapid cross country travel impossible. On the other hand, with proper treatment the animal is indefatigable and can be used indefinitely. Furthermore, from the herds of yaks the natives obtain almost every necessity. Yak butter is a staple article of food. Their wool and their skins are used in the manufacture of clothes and tents, while yak dung supplies the most widely used fuel of the region.

Slowly—at no more than two miles an hour—the yak does his day's march, groaning constantly as he goes. And whether on smooth going or along precipitous and dangerous trails his pace never varies. Heavily laden, he will mount the most appalling slopes at very high altitudes and, despite the most uncertain footing, will maintain the same speed as on the level.

The people of this rugged land have literally conquered the elements. They are the survival of the fittest. Those who could not combat the severity of the elements of the higher sections of the Tibetan plateau have either moved elsewhere or died long ago.

The plateau has very little rainfall—about eight inches a year. On the ridges and peaks, however, the latter of which often rise to twenty thousand feet or more, there is much greater precipitation, and from these comes the plentiful water supply.

What a person unaccustomed to living in such a land will mind by far the most is the terrific wind. The higher the altitude, the greater is the wind's severity. In summer, at fifteen to sixteen thousand feet, it starts blowing between eleven and twelve o'clock noon, and blows violently all day until sunset, when it dies down to a dead calm. At higher elevations, it starts



THE GOVERNOR OF KHAMPA DZONG

With his three sons. The two figures in the background are servants who were eager to be photographed but were not permitted to take more prominent positions

A CARAVAN AT AN ALTITUDE OF 15,000 FEET

The country is excellent for travel with caravans. Though rain seldom falls, the country is well watered by streams formed by melting snow on the higher peaks. Grass grows along these streams

THE PRINCIPAL TIBETAN BEAST OF BURDEN

Yaks not only supply milk from which the nomads' important diet of butter is made, but these animals also are ridden, are used to carry heavy packs, and are able to find sustenance on the higher ridges

MR. CUTTING'S CAMP

Beside a lake at an elevation of 17,200 feet. Heavy winds constantly sweep this barren land, growing stronger as the altitude increases

LUNCH WITH THE GOVERNOR

On the roof of the "gubernatorial mansion." Signs of western influences are not lacking. The chairs are of the type once common in American soda "parlors"

A NOMAD VILLAGE
These tents were pitched at an altitude of 15,900 feet. They are securely and cleverly anchored by the use of heavy stones, and seem able to withstand even the most violent gales

earlier, and in winter it blows during all the daylight hours.

The tents of the nomads are perfectly adapted to the windy land in which they are almost the only shelter, and the natives have learned to perfection the art of anchoring them with stones, for tent pegs in such a land would prove useless. Taut ropes keep the tents from rattling and also keep that section of the tent that is to windward from blowing in. No matter how high the wind is, these tents rarely seem to move or rattle. Tiny and flea-ridden, with rarely a fire except for cooking, and only a slit in the top through which smoke can escape, these tents are yet perfectly acceptable as dwelling places to the Tibetans. It seems fortunate that these people are so comfortable and at ease out of doors, for during wind, snow, or rain, they must be out most of the time.

We often made our camp beside that of some Tibetan group, and were interested in many of their customs. A curious one is the milking of the sheep. Shortly before sundown every day, after the animals are brought in from grazing, they are all roped together. When properly aligned—and sometimes there are two or three dozen fastened together—milking is begun. Astonishingly little milk is collected, but it is carefully put away to be made into butter. Nor is the least care taken to keep the milk clean. Whatever filth may get into the containers is removed—if at all—without the least hurry.

The butter that they make is one of their most important articles of diet. Although they have plenty of excellent mutton—excellent, too, in its ability to keep well—they rarely eat it. It is on buttered tea that they seem principally to subsist. This strange concoction is sometimes mixed with millet, but is often prepared more simply The butter is made from the milk of yaks, goats, or

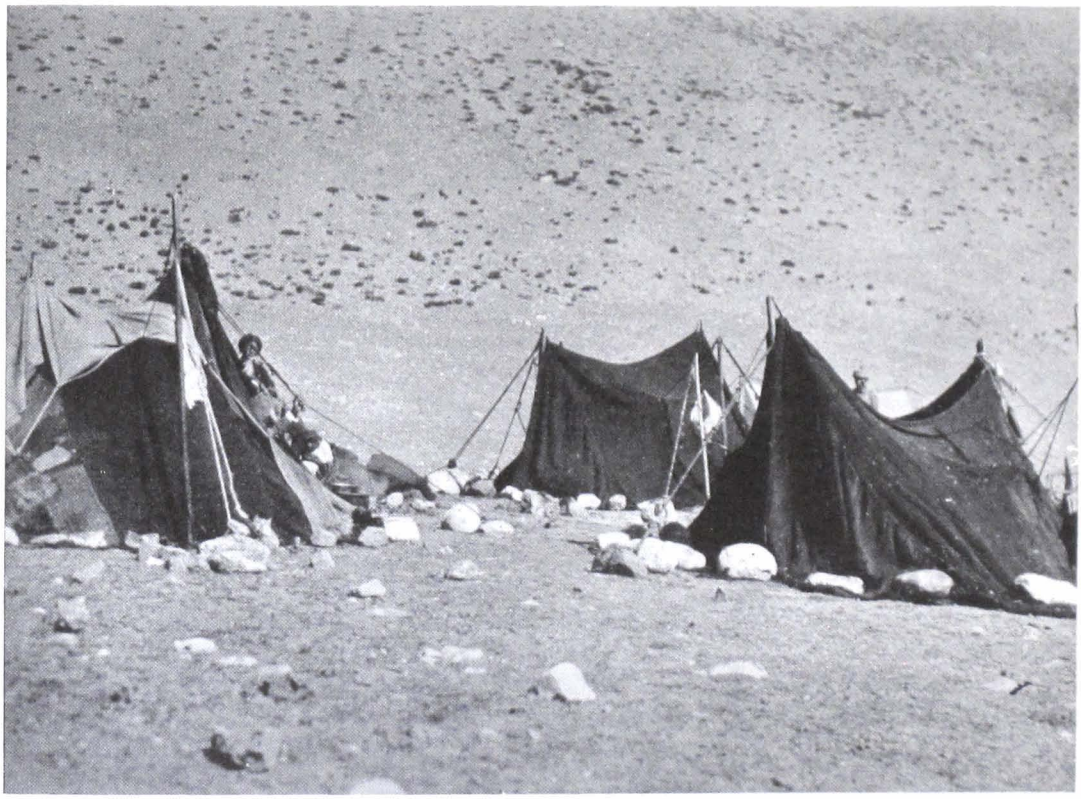
sheep, and then is clarified. This latter process makes it keep very well although it is always somewhat rancid. The brew of buttered tea is a hot, thick liquid. The tea is the black type from China, imported into Tibet in brick form. It is inferior in quality, as it is merely the sweepings of poor tea.

This is put into a wooden churn and churned up when the liquid butter is poured over it. The liquid, if not too rancid, is palatable enough, especially if one is hungry and cold. As for the taste of the tea, there simply isn't any. All one tastes is the hot, rancid butter sometimes flavored with salt. When mixed with millet it is made into cakes called *tsamba*. The average Tibetan can consume vast amounts of this nourishment.

The economic and social world of the Tibetan nomads is interesting and in some characteristics almost unique. They have little need for money, as bartering is largely carried on among themselves. Their usual exports consist of sheep and goats, skins, and buttered tea packed in animal gut.

In marriage these people often practice polyandry, a wife sometimes having two or three husbands. This type of marriage seems to work out in eternal domestic felicity. Brothers are very apt to be the husbands of a girl and the peace and harmony resulting from this marriage regime seem to be the direct opposite of that of polygamy.

The women of this part of Tibet are far from beautiful to western eyes, but they are often cheery and friendly. Their costumes are somewhat voluminous and are rarely—perhaps never—clean. The outstanding characteristic of the Tibetan



A NOMAD CAMP

Though these tents are able to stand in the heaviest winds, they are not likely to appeal to any but nomads. They are small and overrun with fleas, while any fires built inside fill them to the choking point with smoke

NOMAD WOMEN
These women are carrying water to camp, and are wearing the typical nomad headdress, which is known as the Lhassa type

feminine costume is the headdress, which is of the so-called Lhassa type. The whole top hamper on the women's heads is held in place by being interlaced with many wisps of their hair. This interlacing is so complex that the hats are never taken off, except possibly at long intervals in order to be reset. These nomad women always wear their headdresses at night.

Babies, when they are born, are quite light in color. This color, however, does not last long owing to the presence of the soot from the dung fires. As they grow older they become darker and darker. Washing is quite out of the question. The water is too cold and there is no proper way of heating it in sufficient quantities for bathing.

Because of the average temperature and the dryness of the air, both being due to the extreme altitude, Tibet is a healthful country. To dwellers accustomed to lower altitudes, it is quite livable, provided they have normally strong hearts and do not go to Tibet at too advanced an age. It is, however, a common saying in Tibet that should Tibetans go to the plains of India, they would die. Of course, although the low altitudes of India would be oppressive to a race that has lived for generations at an altitude of more than 10,000 feet, it is the great heat of India that would wear them down.

Villages in Tibet, though they may be filthy, have no stenches such as one finds on the plains south of the Himalayas. In Tibet there are no pests of flies or crawling insects. The air seems always fresh and the water clean.

Tibetans all look, and are, healthy. Plague and cholera have never crossed the great divide and entered their land. Although they drink snow water, there is very little goitre. They have inherited a country that is cold and bare, with a season between frosts of barely four months. Yet they thrive. Virile and hardy to a great degree, they are kindly and happy. No famines ever visit Tibet, for food to their liking is abundant.

The hierarchy of priests, at the top of which is the Dalai Lama, who is the head

HERDED
FOR MILKING

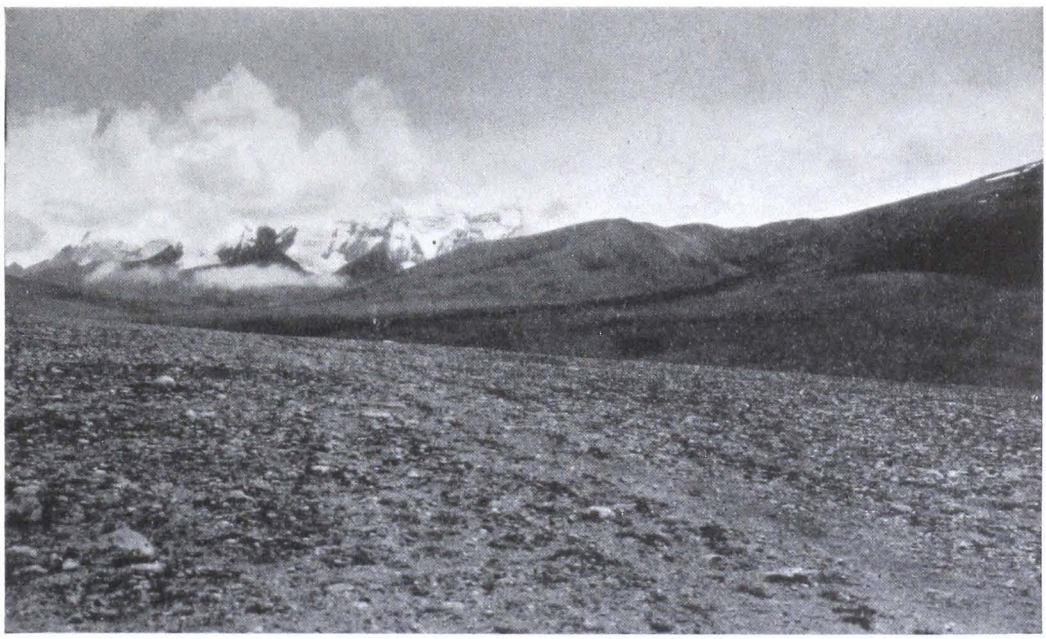
The sheep are collected shortly before sundown each day and tied with their heads together as shown in this picture

MILKING SHEEP

This nomad matron, with her Lhassa type headdress, is engaged in milking her herd. All the milk is churned into butter, from which the staple dish of "buttered tea" is made

of the spiritual as well as the temporal government, wishes to keep foreigners out of the country, and to preserve the autonomy of Tibet. Foreigners, as a rule, should have no business in Tibet. It can never become a tourist route. Should the governing body of Tibet adhere to their present principles, it would be unreasonable for anyone to dispute them.

The Tibetan landscape is usually very impressive, due to the grandeur of the gigantic snow-covered peaks and the vast and almost level valleys. The term "Roof of the World" alone has its allure. If the scenery were to be analyzed, it would seem to be hardly more than slide rock and distance, yet no such statement is fair to the land. Shut off from the north by the vast distances of central Asia, and from the south by the glittering peaks of the Himalayas, among which Mounts Everest and Kinchinjunga stand supreme, this land is likely for generations yet to come to live as it has lived for generations past—almost untouched by the outside world—little affected by the problems, the advantages, and the handicaps of civilization.



THE HIMALAYAS
Rising above the plateau. The spot at which this picture was taken was 19,000 feet above sea level