

I Found Shangri-La

by JOHN C. BEHAGUE.



Here is adventure

The story of an R.A.F. man's climb over the
Himalayan mountains into a paradise valley
in the "Forbidden Land" of Tibet.

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

In May of 1945 a small number of British adventurers — many of them Rover Scouts — penetrated the Himalayan mountains into Tibet. They met with adventure in abundance. This booklet is a record of an ex-R.A.F. wireless operator, who declares that he was so impressed by what he saw and heard during the expedition that he will spend the rest of his life planning to return to his "Shangri-La" in the heart of the fertile Chumbi Valley of Tibet. "The Western mode of living," he says, "seemed cheap and insignificant to me whenever I had time for reflections at the end of a day's climbing." He believes that if more of our young men could be lured to the hills and the mountains instead of the dog tracks and public houses there might be a hope for civilisation.



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Chapter one

THE BEGINNING OF IT ALL.

MY interest in the "Forbidden Land" began many years before I read James Hilton's book *Lost Horizon*, but I must confess it did much to further stimulate that interest. So much so, I am reminded by an old service friend, that when my unit was under canvas near Rugby preparing for overseas service the title on my tent was "Shangri-La," to which was coupled the notice "Knock twice and ask for the High Lama!" Strange are the workings of fate.

Surrounded by natural ramparts forming the most formidable mountain range in the world, Tibet stands aloof from civilisation as we know it. Isolated and well-nigh impenetrable she has been visited by few white men. "There have been long intervals of time between such venturesome travellers," writes David MacDonald, one of the few living authorities on Tibet, "nearly all of whom have left behind some record of their journeys. Always there is the same story of exceptional hardships and perils that have been encountered."

The Himalayan range is a terrible maze of mountains swept by blizzards and icy winds. Eighty peaks tower above 24,000 feet — a thousand more above 20,000. Small wonder that the adventurer thinks twice before setting his compass for Lama Land. More than three-quarters of this loftiest country in the world lies over 10,000 feet above sea level. A population of only three or four millions lives in an area of more than 700,000 square miles — about fourteen times the size of England.

Many have asked if I ever regretted the pooling of my total leave for twelve months; the hard climbs and marches through the dense forests of Sikkim; the 14,500 feet climb over the Himalayas to reach Tibet. . . . "Was it worth it?" they asked. My only reply to them is that I shall spend the rest of my life longing and planning to tackle the whole expedition again. There is something indescribably attractive about the Himalayas; the terrible beauty; the solitudes that sink into your very soul; the rocky tracks that seem to ascend into the heavens . . . all leave an unforgettable impression. The famous explorer, A. H. Savage Landor, was once told by a venerable old man of Kumaon: "Once you have visited the

snows of the Himalayas you will have to return to them time after time until you die. When away from them, all through your life you will ever see them before you in your dreams." Landor was captured by Tibetans and was so severely tortured that he remained an invalid for some time afterwards. Yet he returned! I think that some day I shall return to those challenging mountains.

I was working with an R.A.F. squadron in India when I first received intimation of a 1945 expedition into Tibet. Frantic investigations produced the information that this was being organised by a Squadron Leader Westcott, a Padre with no mean reputation for his travels in all parts of the world, and that the expedition was limited to Service Rover Scouts with previous climbing experience. I was not a Rover and the only climbing experience I could claim was a few days in the hills at Chakrata and one or two aerial ascents! But I was far from being discouraged. Doug. Dingle, a good friend and a Rover, who was also very interested in the expedition, vouched for me, and soon I was in communication with the leader. Though there had been a tremendous response to the plan, fate was working with me. I was accepted!

In for a penny I decided to lay down a pound by planning a more ambitious expedition of my own once inside Tibet. Together with Dingle and two other colleagues, I intended leaving the main party and penetrating by pony into the heart of the Tibetan tableland. This entailed fresh visas and the very necessary permission from the Tibetan authorities — an extremely complicated business. But Westcott, as enthusiastic as a grasshopper, promised to do everything he could. I well remember the stream of notes from his H.Q. detailing the snags and setbacks. His was a tremendous task and my impatience must have caused him to generate steam beneath his clerical collar.

The task of securing visas proved to be every bit as difficult as the climb over the Himalayas. Time means nothing to the Lamas and, to make matters worse, they are extremely particular about granting permits to even the highest officials. Securing leave from the Squadron was a sticky job, too. "Time off to go to Tibet! Humph!" as one officer expressed himself. I couldn't have chosen a harder period, for half my section were months overdue on their applications for leave and our aircraft fully operational. It seemed a hopeless situation, but I persisted and I succeeded.

There were forms of all shapes and sizes to fill in: Sikkim pass forms, Tibetan pass forms and medical forms. The

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medical examination was stiff, for the Tibetans have a horror of travellers dying on their doorstep. Weight, girth of abdomen, pulse rate had to be registered and submitted — important items these because climbing in high altitudes is not only a matter of experience but birth. Then there were heart, lung, urine and blood pressure tests, and a sub-section was devoted to identification marks. In all, a worse ordeal than my initial service medical !

The weeks passed with still no news of the almighty visas. Messages from Squadron Leader Westcott kept arriving stressing the uncertainty of prospects, and another seemingly hopeless situation developed. Finally, the worst happened : two of the boys who were to have joined me on my longer trip were posted on a course — I felt really depressed. This meant the cancellation of all my wonderful plans and that I should now have to journey to the Kalimpong starting point alone, as Dingle was stationed in the opposite corner of Bengal.

Chapter two

DIRT AND DEGRADATION.

I COMMENCED my travelling from Dhubulia, Bengal, on the 5th of May. Here is an extract from my diary for that date: "Uncertainty has dogged this trip from the very beginning; even now as I sit in the stuffy second class compartment of this Indian train speeding towards Calcutta, I cannot be certain that I shall ever realise the goal of my journey — Tibet. With my normal casualness about time I missed the *gharry* (lorry) to the station, and sat for a great length of time by the side of the dusty track awaiting a miracle. The train was due out at 1209. At 1200 a rickety old camp contractor's wagon, full of coolies and building materials, approached. Waving frantically, I succeeded in attracting the driver's attention and, slinging my luggage into a pile of muck, I clambered aboard, setting off amidst gasps of astonishment from the *burra-sahib* onlookers and chortles of glee from the coolies!"

What sights one sees on Indian railway sidings! Small, naked coolie boys, inevitable weed in mouth, dashing hither and thither, heads piled high with more pounds of kit than any English porter would venture to trundle; lower caste women with dropped saris and a total lack of concern, breast-feeding pot-bellied infants; skin and bone natives chewing, ever chewing the filthy betel nut and staring into space like English cows; little withered hands forever passing before your eyes with the accompanying cry of "bucksheesh, bucksheesh! . . ."

The scene as the already overcrowded train pulled in is still vivid within my mind. There was a great concerted rush to secure any available space. Bundles, tin trunks, earthenware chatties, children . . . were thrust through likely-looking windows, their owners following through the same unorthodox openings. Nothing dismays the Indian traveller; if a compartment is full he travels on the running board.

We pulled into Calcutta on time — an unusual occurrence — and during the three hours at my disposal I walked round to visit my friends at the *Star of India* newspaper office in Chowringhee. They were in a state of absolute confusion. "It's all over," they told me. "Germany will surrender at any hour now. We've already started printing a Victory Supplement!"

My lack of like enthusiasm rather surprised them, but the war in the West seemed so remote to me there in the sticky heat of Calcutta. Fourteenth Army men on leave had already commenced their celebrations. I was glad to be escaping from it all.

My train reservation to Siliguri had, of course, been lost; so I contented myself, together with a packed mass of other B.O.R.s, with a filthy third class coach-cum-cattle-truck. Sleep seemed an impossibility, but I slept where I sat for a few hours and awoke feeling stiff and looking much bedraggled.

I can put up with hardship when hardship is necessary — and I had more than my fair share of it during the five years I spent as an aircraftsman in the R.A.F. — but the insanitary, insufferable travelling facilities laid on for B.O.R.s in India (and Egypt, for that matter) were shockingly disgraceful. We were often herded into stinking trucks with wooden slats as seats, being left there on a diet of bully beef and ration biscuits for days on end. Sanitary equipment there was none — except for a small screened hole in a corner where between 15 to 30 men were forced to wash, shave and attend to the needs of nature.

Siliguri was reached the next day and with it the hills. It was good-bye to the stench and oppression, and hello to peace, beauty and adventure. Changing trains here, I took the toy-like miniature railway which leads to Geille Khola, the nearest station to Kalimpong. This was travelling de-luxe, intoxicating and interesting. Around hills, across chasms, over rivers and sometimes, it seemed, up the very rock face itself the track wound, with the little engine in front puffing and blowing like a fussy but energetic old man. It is surprising how this tiny steam engine had the strength to pull such crowded carriages, for there was no cogged wheel arrangement beneath the cab, as used on most mountain railways; but it got there and at a steady 20 miles an hour, too.

There was quite a surprise awaiting me at Geille Khola, for here, instead of the usual coolie porters, were tiny and remarkably pretty hillgirls, all not more than twelve years of age. I was most reluctant to pile my stack of baggage upon the heads of such a procession of queens, but they insisted, and with astonishing energy the chattering children ran away up to the roadway with my entire kit.

A pleasant journey by road brought me to Kalimpong Arts and Crafts Centre, where I received both courtesy and comfort from the Odlings, of whom Spencer Chapman, the eminent climber and explorer, has many kind words to say. Here, too, was Squadron Leader Westcott (brimming with good spirit and organisation), and a general gathering of the Rover

clans. Hitherto I had eyed the Rover movement with the contempt that is born out of ignorance. "A lot of 'sissies', full of artificial goodwill, with hairy legs and little handcarts. . . ." That was my opinion of them until I had marched with them, talked with them and shared their comradeship. What a fool I had been! These were men with guts and determination, tackling every obstacle with a laugh, eager to help the underdog and willing to pass on the most cherished of information. The Rover and Scout movements have the power to lead the youth of Britain to a glorious To-morrow; I hope with all my heart that they will succeed.

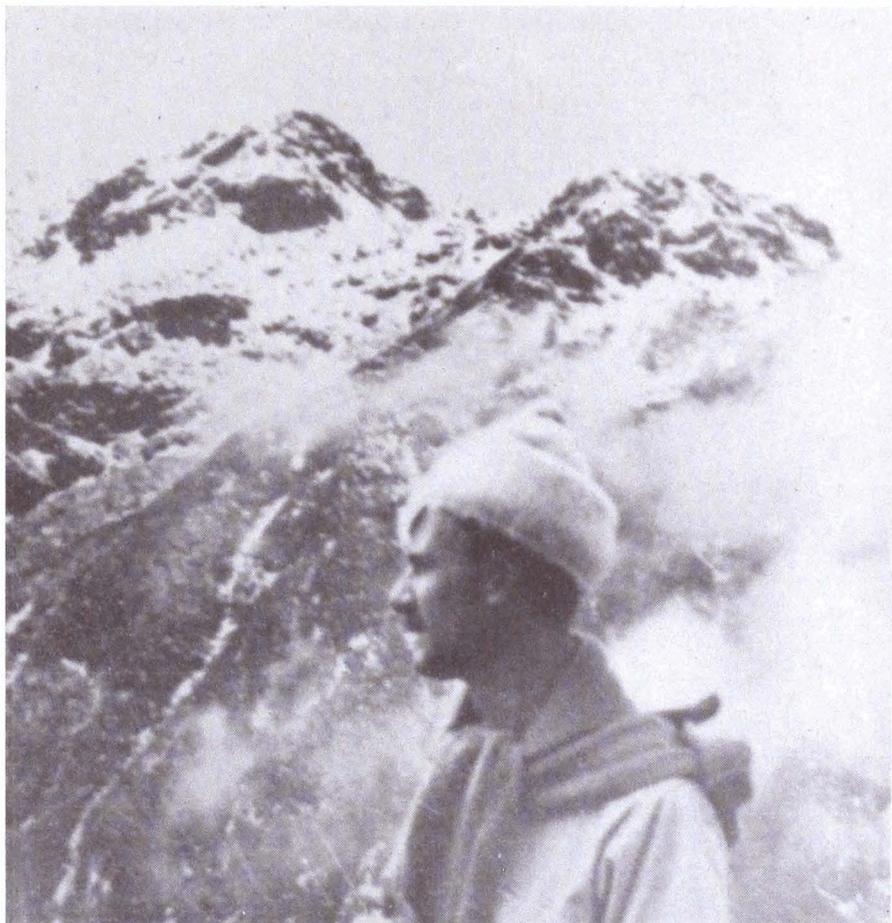
Everyone else had brought crates of provisions for the expedition. I, inexperienced greenhorn, had decided to purchase my supplies in Kalimpong. Imagine my shock when I discovered there were no facilities in the town for providing food suitable for the trip.

Had Fate finally flung down her glove, I wondered? Was I doomed to return all those miles to Bengal without realising my ambitions? Without rations I was stranded. Once again the black clouds of depression descended upon me. I racked my brains for a solution, but it was from the party to which I was introduced that the answer quickly and unexpectedly came. They, with great kindness, offered to share their provisions with me. The show was on and we were all set to start. The party consisted of Capt. Herbert Brice, the leader; Jack Sullivan, second in command and i.c. porters; Wally Lambert, Quartermaster of the expedition; Ray O'Dell, the first aid man; Bill Ward, treasurer; and Jock Longmuir. A grand bunch of fellows. Of Doug Dingle there was no sign. My only hope was that he could catch up with the party once we had set off.

First came the difficult task of hiring suitable porters to carry the mountain of equipment and provisions we had piled up outside the Odlings' canteen. We had little choice, for they were all a wild-looking lot. Eventually, however, we had twelve husky types signed on. What a collection! Here were Tibetans, Bhutias, Bengalis and one or two cross breeds of all three; some with Mongolian-like features, others with Chinese. All were bare-footed and wore some kind of headgear, whether patched-up balaclavas, trilbies or woollen helmets. With their unkempt hair and flashing eyes they were more like brigands than porters. Most of them had made the journey over the Himalayas before, we were informed, which was an important point.



Tibet is over-run with beggars, many of whom are regarded as holy. The refusal of alms to one of these tattered characters brings forth a shower of oaths and curses.



This photograph of the author, outlined against the gaunt rocks of the Himalayas, was taken at an altitude of 13,000 feet during a halt in the climb up to the pass into Tibet.

Chapter three

OFF ON THE ROAD TO TIBET.

THE big day dawned — but not brightly ! We left Kalimpong on the morning of the seventh in the face of a driving drizzle, mud splashing our bare knees, moisture dripping off our bedding rolls. . . . The column of porters, all carrying remarkable loads of between 70 to 80 lbs. each, advanced at a trot between the red-roofed bazaar buildings, and we congratulated ourselves on our luck at hiring such energetic natives — then we turned a corner and found all our baggage dumped at the roadside with not a sign of any of them. At first thought we feared they had deserted us and hopped off with the ten rupees advance pay in their ragged pockets ; then breathless enquiries revealed that they had merely rushed away to deposit the cash with their wives. They were really quite a faithful crowd, as we found out later.

We chose the lower road from Kalimpong, a rough, dungy track used by the muleteers carrying in wool from Tibet. There was wild and glorious country all the way northwards to our first halt ; on one side a wall of rock and jungle rose up into the misty sky, on the other was a sheer drop of a thousand feet or more. The village of Algarth was our half-way mark, where we stopped for the dainty sandwiches so carefully packed for us by the good women of Kalimpong. Rather a filthy little spot Algarth, with festoons of prayer flags topped by weird twigs to scare away evil spirits. A superstitious lot, these people, whose precautions seemed to serve only to lower them still deeper into their own filth. And so on to our first Dak bungalow at Pedong.

We had covered less than twelve miles when we arrived in the late afternoon after marching for eight hours. It had been rough going. Glad we were to find such comfortable quarters awaiting us. We killed one of the two chickens we had purchased in the bazaar, opened up cans of stew and feasted like lords at a solid oak table illuminated by four candles. Here we met a fellow traveller who had just descended from Tibet. He had been badly buffeted by the cutting winds that blow in the mountains, and his face was disfigured by cold sores and peeling skin. He told us many a strange story ; gave us plenty

of helpful tips. We received warnings, too, of blizzards ahead of us at the passes, of snow blindness and mountain sickness.

The historic eighth of May was not such a wonderful day for us. Pedong to Pakyong, in the heart of the Sikkim country, should have been our easiest of stages ; instead it was a heart-breaking, back-breaking trial. The start was fair enough ; we were off at 8-0 a.m. and the morning was a fine one.

After an hour's marching we ran into the damp, sickening leech country. Accursed blight ! We had only to stop for a second and they were crawling up our ankles — slimy horrors with groping heads, persistent as snakes, wingless vampires in search of human blood. . . . They must be the most loathsome things in the world. Every expedition which has passed this way has cursed their existence in no uncertain language. We soon passed the breeding ground of these wretched things, but we didn't entirely lose our clinging companions. Glancing down at my ankles after some time had elapsed, I discovered to my horror that my socks had changed from white to red. Whipping them off I found my feet saturated in blood oozing freely from half a dozen wounds and, near them — leeches. One of the party performed a ceremonial war dance over them with his heavy climbing boots. This was a satisfying sight to me but it didn't help to stem the flow of blood. The leech, before it starts its sucking operations, injects into the hole it has burrowed a fluid secreted by itself which prevents the blood from congealing. No pain is felt by the victim, the leech gorging itself up to the size of a small balloon before dropping off.

On and on we progressed, sometimes stepping cautiously along paths that clung precariously to the hillsides and looked down thousands of feet to the jagged river bed below. Our first objective was the valley of the Rangpo Chhu, where we intended crossing the swift-flowing river by means of the bridge marked on our maps. However, after marching for more than two hours, we were unlucky to find — no bridge. It had been swept away by floods. We made an attempt to wade across, but the current was too powerful and would have spelt disaster to us if we had ventured more than a few feet out. This setback upset our plans ; we now had to force march back up sheer hill faces to reach a second bridge five miles up river. The climb told on all of us. Sweat trickled from every pore, and my heart pounded like a steam hammer. We reached the bridge after a most demoralising march to find more climbing ahead. This served to sap our strength still more and to empty every one of our water bottles.

Stopping at a tiny stone dwelling to ask for water we were

received with a friendliness I have seldom met out East. First, gallons of water were secured for us in large jars — all very cold and refreshing — then the resident very shyly offered me a great bunch of Sikkim lilies and delphiniums, grown on his own little plot. The rest of the company received choice rose blooms or cactus flowers. It was a gesture I shall always remember.

It was late evening when we eventually reached our rest hut at Pakyong where, to crown our unfortunate day, we found that the porter, whom I called Tiffitin, had disappeared and had not been seen by any of the other porters for a considerable period of time. Tiffitin, a full-blooded Tibetan and a trustworthy individual, had been in charge of my complete kit, including sleeping bag and warm clothing, which were essential to me for the high altitudes that lay ahead. Bunking down time came with still no news of the missing man, so once again I had to accept the charity of my comrades, this time in the shape of pooled bedding.

We were delayed in our start the next morning. The porters' loads were constantly altering as we consumed our cans of food, making it a difficult job for Jack Sullivan to arrange equal distribution.

For the first four miles the track was an excellent one, making it possible for us to stride out and make up for lost time. Most impressive sight of the day was a long avenue of rubber trees. I have never seen rubber trees like them in any quarter of the world. The Indian banyan is famous for its grotesque shape, but these trees were one hundred times more cvil-looking. There was no recognisable trunk on any of them ; they seemed to consist of one mass of black, sprawling branches, like so many twisted arms reaching out to grasp the lonely traveller. Someone suggested that they must surely be a joke on the part of Dame Nature — to me they appeared to be the devilish trick of one of the gods of the forest, in whom the sallow-faced Lepchas (the true natives of Sikkim) believe and respect. So superstitious are these natives that they frequently place heaped bowls of precious food in the forest as offerings to the gods. On one side was a drop of two thousand feet to the river, on the other far side a towering face of rock and, in between, this fantastic avenue. It was a strange experience walking along between these mistakes of nature. There was a peculiar brooding silence over everything and not a sign of bird or beast.

Chapter four

WE REACH A CAPITAL AND MEET WITH A DEFEAT.

A VERY stiff climb lasting three long hours after emerging from the avenue and Gangtok was reached. For the capital of Sikkim, Gangtok was a big disappointment. It consisted of tin roofed shacks, the usual bazaar and just a dozen fairly modern buildings — no larger in reality than a small English village. Here was a store licensed to sell opium, and great crowds of youngsters fascinated by the sight of our outfit.

I was overjoyed to find Dingle awaiting me here. He had journeyed on ahead by *gharry*, having a very rough trip on the rocky, indirect roads ; but he was much less exhausted than we were and was impatient to make the climb.

The Dak bungalow, in which we rested, was a comfortable residence commanding a fine view of the surrounding ranges. We noted the shifting clouds of snow on the peaks and passes ahead and shivered. It was 6,000 feet here but very hot during the daytime.

After sleeping between two irritating Army blankets the previous night (due to the disappearance of my porter), I was not looking forward to a second night of discomfort. However, luck seemed to be against me for, long after the sun had set behind the mountains, a strong wind sprang up rattling the shutters, and with it came heavy rain. I was wondering what on earth I would use to keep warm once we reached the snow layer when the door was thrown open with a crash and in staggered a bedraggled man clutching a dripping pile of baggage — *my* baggage! Without a word he dropped it at my feet, then stretched up to regain his breath. Close questioning revealed that Tiffitin had been taken ill between Pedong and Pakyong, and with admirable honesty had found another man willing to attempt the trip. This man had double-marched across the hills, and had “delivered the goods” as instructed. How he had guessed my immediate identity will always remain a mystery. It was just one of those things that happen and are never believed when one relates them afterwards. I slept well!

The next day was declared a rest period. We had intended it to be that way but the local football enthusiasts

(they must have been the Sikkim State Eleven) thwarted our ideas delivering into our hands a signed ultimatum ordering us to play them at soccer. This we wanted to refuse — until someone raised the question of British prestige ! What a game ! It was played 'neath a white-hot sun on a terrifying pitch bordered on two sides by precipices, against a team of wiry, bare-footed lads, all first rate footballers. I was severely sun-burnt. The little strength I had left within me after all my heavy marching evaporated after the first five minutes, and my boots were completely ruined. With superb control of the ball and bursts of speed I have seldom seen in professional soccer they licked us to a frazzle. Four—one was the closing score. Lucky we were it was not more.

After this nightmare we treated ourselves to a glorious bathe in a tiny swimming pool above the pitch, and . . . more leeches ! As we sat there, half-naked in the grass, the dreadful things crawled up our bodies in their dozens. It was only by plunging into the cooling water that we were able to rid ourselves of them.

In the afternoon we were invited by the British Political Agent, Sir Basil Gould, to his residency. Sir Basil, who represents the British Government in Sikkim and Tibet, lives in a house set in delightful grounds high up above the town. We first toured the spacious gardens, admiring the orchids, lily pond and the women gardeners, then came tea in an oak-ceilinged room decorated with Tibetan tapestry and two excellent oil paintings of the Dalai Lama. Oriental rugs covered the floor ; a log fire gave out a pleasant aroma, and steam rose from a glistening teapot on the cake-covered table. How very pleasant it was to sample British hospitality such as this after our two and three years' absence from home. And there was Tibetan strawberry jam with a delicious, nay ! exquisite, flavour. Sir Basil asked for personal opinions on a unique collection of private musical recordings he had made inside Tibet. It was typically Tibetan music ; music I have always associated with that country ; wild, colourful, unrestrained music, and I liked it, though I did detect grimaces on the faces of Jock and Ray. I glanced through the wonderful albums of Tibetan photographs and wished very much that my camera was capable of catching so many interesting shots. On behalf of all, I take this opportunity of thanking Sir Basil Gould for his warmth and kindness to us.

Leaving the beautiful valley of the Rougnek with the long line of prayer flags guarding its one end and the monastery the other, we reached our objective — Karponang — in record time. Some wild and rugged scenery was passed on the journey

up — by far the most breath-taking we had yet observed — and in the distance were the mountains over which we would eventually pass, their forbidding fingers white with snow. On this day we passed snow clinging to the ridges in the rock face. I picked up a handful and the party gathered around fingering it — it was the first snow we had seen at close quarters for many, many months — there was much more ahead ! What a glorious panorama beneath us as we climbed : silvery waterfalls tumbling from above the clouds down to the valley below ; the dark greens of the wooden hills blending into the lighter greens of the moss-covered rocks : and away, so far away it seemed, beneath wisps of white cloud, Gangtok stood like a fairy kingdom on its 6,000 feet “hillock.” The hut at Karponang we found to be spacious, but extremely cold and draughty. With the aid of a roaring log fire and a change into warmer clothing we soon made ourselves comfortable.

Chapter five

A STRANGE VISITOR.

EARLY in the evening we had a visitor. A Tibetan girl was ushered into our company. She sank upon her knees before us, tongue out and head bowed — the customary form of greeting in Tibet. Our interpreter said the girl had heard there were white sahibs in the hut and had called in for medical treatment. She looked healthy enough with her flashing eyes and red cheeks, and Ray, our medical man, was puzzled as to what her ailment could be. Then she bared her head, pointing to the centre of her scalp, where we were astonished to see a great gaping hole. It was fully an inch in diameter descending right down into the skull. That she was alive at all was a miracle, but she appeared to feel no pain, and even flashed us an occasional smile. Further interrogation revealed nothing of the cause of the injury; we did discover, however, that she had been suffering with it for nine months. We gave her the only treatment possible, cutting away the matted hair, applying an antiseptic and bandaging her up. Our advice to contact the nearest doctor was rather foolish because there was no nearest doctor, and it seemed fairly obvious that she would make do with our temporary dressing.

When a Tibetan dies it is the custom to cut a slit in the skull of the corpse to allow the soul to pass out. I wondered if someone had been experimenting on the girl in an effort to prove this theory, or if she had at any time gone into a trance and been mistaken for dead. We were in strange country now and very near to the home of the dreaded "snow monsters." Anything was possible.

Many stories have been told of the strange beings supposed to live in the Himalayas. The Tibetans call these things "Sukpa," or snow monsters, and some swear they have seen their footprints. The Sukpa are said to be very tall creatures, partly man, partly beast, partly spirit, and capable of jumping like kangeroos. Bloodsuckers by nature, they spring out from their hiding places upon the unwary traveller, sometimes carrying off women. Fantastic? Perhaps so; but the Tibetans think otherwise.

Ray O'Dell had been lagging behind the party during the

previous few days. His feet had been paining him greatly, being blistered and swollen. The pace and the climbs must have caused him agony, but he never murmured and was as bright as the rest of us. We hoped things would be better with him when we tackled the climb proper which lay a short distance ahead. The porters were a cheery lot and had given us little cause for complaint. Despite their heavy loads and the rough going they seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves.

An event of the day had been the sighting of our first Yak — a fierce-looking creature covered by long, black hair, with up-turned horns and a great bushy tail. It seemed to me to be a cross between a bull and a reindeer. They are peaceful enough animals in spite of their looks, being extremely valuable to the people of Tibet. From the Yak they obtain meat, skins for boots and bags, hair for blankets, and the tails are exported from the country as fly swats.

The 12th brought another glorious day's march. There was magnificent scenery everywhere ; beautiful waterfalls, towering cliffs, frightening drops. . . . A feeling of high exhilaration swept over me as I stepped out alone ahead of the party along the snow-splashed track. I experienced the sensation that amongst all this vast loneliness and loveliness was an undefinable something, so great, so grand that nothing else in life seemed to matter. I wanted to shout out, to sing, to greet my God, whom I knew to be so near. It was a feeling I had known before in the northern hills of India, a feeling I had wanted to experience again. And now I wanted to make my whole life a pursuit of it.

We encountered several landslides on the march. In some places paths had been ripped away by the torrents ; in others huge boulders barred our progress. The track in places was merely a ledge hewn out of the rock face ; sometimes it resembled anything but a track ! Twisting and climbing, now narrowing, now petering out altogether the trail ran on. Several times during the day we were forced to halt to gasp the thin, cold air into our aching lungs.

The lake at Changu came into sight in the late afternoon, then the hut. The lake is hemmed in on all sides by a circular range : snow and ice run down to the water's edge : it is cold and deep and very beautiful. Soon after our arrival at the somewhat ramshackle cabin, Squadron Leader Westcott, Ray and Jock amazed us by plunging into the icy water for a short, short swim. They returned to the log fire with triumphant looks upon their blue faces.

Herbert Brice was very ill with mountain sickness here, and the rest of the party were all experiencing head and tummy



Something of the awe-inspiring majesty of the Himalayan Range is captured in the photograph seen above, which is taken from Darjeeling.

Right is the leader of J. C. Behague's party, Capt. Herbert Brice, with Lt. Jack Sullivan, the second in command.





Fourteen thousand three hundred feet up, with snow drifts obstructing progress and a bitter wind penetrating the warmest clothing, members of the party are seen on the final stage of their climb into Tibet.



A few seconds after the photographer had taken this shot, high up in the Himalayas, a howling storm of snow and ice descended upon him. Blizzards are frequent in these places, many a lonely traveller being engulfed and frozen by them.

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aches. I have always had the reputation of a man with a cast iron stomach, being able to travel by air or by sea without the slightest feeling of nausea, but even I began to feel the effects of the altitude. We were at 13,000 feet here ; snow was thick in the air, with further outlook decidedly unsettled.

Chapter six

UP THROUGH THE CLOUDS TO THE GATEWAY INTO TIBET.

OFF to an early start the next morning on the most exciting and hazardous part of the expedition — the crossing of the Nathu La into the “Forbidden Land.” A terrible track faced us, and as we slipped and slithered up through the clouds so the temperature steadily dropped. I was thankful for the extra-warm clothing I had pulled on. Up past two frozen tarns we climbed, up and up and up, our breath forming miniature clouds around us ; then on to the upper snows. With the pass still high above us things looked grim. We all adjusted our smoked or coloured glasses and pulled tight our laces. Snow blindness and frostbite have claimed too many victims in the Himalayas — warned, we were forearmed.

Our only indication that a trail existed at all was by the hardened patches of snow. This was it, the climb proper. No halts were possible, we had to push on or freeze. I understood then why Tibet has remained clothed in mystery since the beginning of history — its few inlets are passable only to those with strong legs and stout hearts. It was a hellish climb — the most exhausting I had ever known. Snow six feet deep with patches as hard and as slippery as glass, and a terrible drop of many thousands of feet on one side. . . . I tossed a chunk of ice over the edge during the earlier part of the climb and watched it disappear from a tiny speck to a mere nothing. Most demoralising !

As I climbed higher my brain became blurred and my head felt as though someone had applied a vice to it, the pressure tightening with each step I took. I thought I heard the rapid and muffled thumping of drums and twisted my head around in an effort to trace their direction. I listened again. There it was ! Thump, thump, thump. . . . Was this some mad Tibetan approaching ? No, poor idiot that I was, staggering on with brain spinning crazily — it was my own heart, pounding at a terrific rate.

How easy it looks on the map : the thick red line running so freely across the mountains. . . . “Follow me,” it seems to say, “and you can’t go wrong.” I wonder how many have followed this blood-red line to disaster ?

Across narrow bridges of hardened snow, higher, still higher we climbed, until my mind refused to function at all ; my short, sluggish steps becoming purely automatic. Hollywood's ideas of the gateway into Tibet, as presented in *Lost Horizon*, and those of my own actual experience differ tremendously. It was a struggle to restrain the feeling of despondency that swept over me at some points. With legs feeling as if they were fastened to tremendous weights, throat and tongue dry, and breath coming in such short gasps that it seemed impossible to keep moving, I staggered on until the last few hundred feet of climbing divided me from Tibet. None of us remember how we managed that last bit, but somehow we pushed up past more mists to the highest point of the Nathu La — 14,500 feet. I fell down upon an icy shelf and endeavoured to regain my breath.

My first glimpse of Tibet — a long green and brown valley centred by the blue streak of a river ; an inviting-looking valley ! I had little feeling left within me to appreciate this picture witnessed by so few white men, for the intense cold and the piercing wind seemed to be penetrating into my very marrow. This was the moment that comes to one but once in a lifetime — and I was far too concerned with my own miserable reflexes to give it more than a few seconds' thought. Nature has a cruel way of wrapping up her treasures ; this was probably her cruellest.

I quote the words of explorer John Easton, who passed by this way some years ago :—"The wind swept, cold and pure, cut against our faces, but all unheeded as we gazed at the marvel stretched before us. For all doubts faded, and all fears were dispelled ; before us stretched immortality, purification, a revelation of the world as God sees it, where no man has stepped to mar. . . ."

Marking this highest point of the Nathu La was a cairn bedecked with frozen prayer flags. I waded through deep snow, head bent against the bitter wind, to reach it.

Lucky I was to escape a whirlwind of snow and ice which descended upon the tail end of the party after I had begun the descent. They were forced to huddle together for safety and warmth as this miniature blizzard struck them.

The scramble down into the valley was a difficult one, for the track had been completely blotted out by the heavy snow, and we were forced to paddle down the bed of an active stream. Many skeletons were seen and the body of a mule blocked our passage at one narrow corner. After "slipping" down for 1,000 feet, we paused for refreshment — ration biscuits and

cheese, swilled down with uncomfortably cold water ; it was good, very good !

Continuing along the river bed we reached a drier track and were able to make better time along the side of the valley, until grey clouds swept over the peaks and whirling snow lashed about us. No use bemoaning our misfortune ; we had to push on. The ground became a soggy morass, mud splattering our legs from the knees downwards. It was filthy going. At every bend we peered anxiously ahead through the driving snow for a glimpse of the Champithang hut ; at every bend we were disappointed. Just as we were beginning to think we had passed the elusive place we saw it, like some tempting dish, before us. Our pace quickened, and soon we were *boloing* (shouting) to the *chowkidah* for logs and *garum pani* (hot water). Not a very pleasant introduction to Tibet, this ; we were, however, still many thousands of feet up, and the valley had yet to be penetrated.

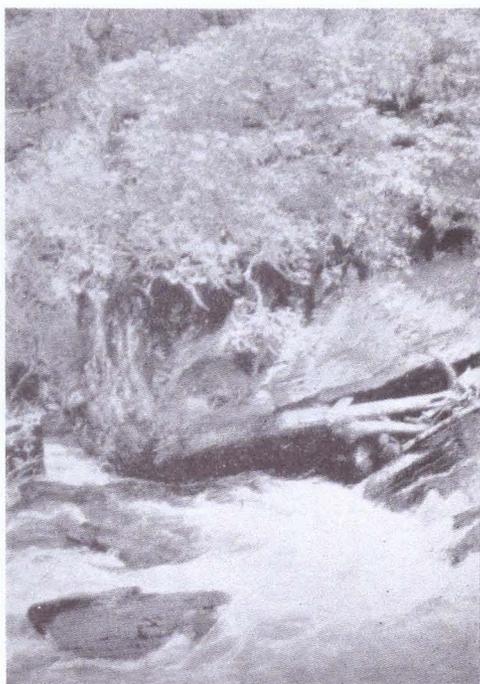


This distinguished-looking old man is a Tibetan Lama. The prayer wheel he is seen holding contains thousands of paper prayer sheets, the messages on which are said to be delivered to the gods with each rotation of the wheel.



Above : The start of the day's climbing. Despite their heavy loads, the coolies are eager to tackle the obstacles that lie ahead.

Right : One of Spencer Chapman's shots — Rhododendrons overhanging a torrent in the beautiful Chumbi Valley.



Chapter seven

THE PARADISE VALLEY.

THE next day, with the snow falling fast outside, we were reluctant to break camp and face the icy blast. It was a bitter morning, with the track trampled into a skiddy slush by the mules. After a few hours' marching our greased boots had given up the ghost (bless those Indian bootmakers!), being almost as wet inside as out. Another steep descent then the snow turned to rain. A poor consolation. Down below, prayer flags appeared, then a golden dome and, finally, the shape of Kargyu monastery. It made an impressive sight from afar — like a great glittering palace — but when we drew nearer our aesthetic tastes were a little shocked — it proved to be ramshackle and very dirty. In fact, I swore afterwards that it was the dirt alone that held it together. But that is off the record.

Passing three large cho-tens (in which lie sacred relics), and the head of a dragon, spouting water through its mouth, we reached the entrance hall of the place. This was decorated with colourful murals of gods and devils in most unconventional poses, and had, on its two extreme sides, rows of huge prayer wheels which seemed to have seen good service. We waited here for a while twirling the wheels and hoping that our prayers for an abatement in the rain situation would be answered, when the figure of an ancient Lama came limping along across the dungy courtyard. He was an old, old man with one stained tooth prominent in his mouth, his rambling speech being interrupted every now and then by loud cackles. I christened him Moore Marriot on the spot! By means of signs and pointings we managed to convey to him our desire to see more of the monastery, and with slow, stumbling steps and a rolling gait he led the way past heaps of dung and rubbish into the inner precincts. Up a rickety, rotten staircase, around dirty passages we wound, until we arrived outside a pair of double doors.

I didn't dream of what was next to come into view. Fumbling with a gigantic key he unlocked the doors, swinging them open to reveal — a room, so colourful as to be dazzling to the eyes. Facing us was a golden altar backed by a glass-encased statue of a goddess covered from head to feet with sparkling jewels. Around it, lining the walls, were hundreds (that is no

over-statement), of smaller figures, all beautifully worked, all protected by panels of glass. It seemed incredible that such a filthy place should harbour this treasure house. Surely, I thought, this was the eighth wonder of the world ; but I was to learn, later, that there are much finer altar rooms in Tibet. The sight of this one room was, in itself, enough compensation for the rigours of the climb over the Himalayas. More wonders followed. . . . From here we were led into another room, similarly decorated, but with whole regiments of still smaller gods staring at us from their window boxes. It was like some fantastic dream in technicolour. I pinched myself to make sure I was still awake, and caught Jock doing likewise.

An educated Lama, tall and less dilapidated than " Old Moore," took over at this point. He had a knowledge of Hindustani, making it possible, with Jack as our translator, to follow him fairly easily. In the conducted tour that followed we were led into other altar rooms, some containing figures eighteen feet high, perfectly coloured and all covered with glistening gems. It was an experience that will live in my memory forever. We were astounded at the fineness and vastness of the ornamentation ; shocked by the dirty surroundings. Superstitions are strange things. As David Macdonald records in his *Twenty Years in Tibet*, the Tibetans consider dirt to be lucky, and when the accumulations on sacred images are washed off the cleansing water is drunk as a medicine.

Then came another surprise ; in walked the High Lama. I had always wanted to meet a High Lama, but this one was a mere boy, some seven years of age. He was a pleasant, rosy-faced youngster with very bright eyes and a cheerful smile, which seemed rather out of place against his musty-smelling monastery and drab-coloured robes of office. Here, his life would be moulded according to the rites of the Higher Council ; here, he would live and die, High Lama of Kargyu.

What constitutes a " Shangri-La " ? In James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* it was peace, solitude and beauty. I was shortly to find my own Shangri-La in this Chumbi Valley and I was to discover the very essence of all these qualities.

There was a long climb down into the valley as we renewed our march in the direction of Yatung. The rain stopped, the sky cleared from a dismal grey to a turquoise blue as we walked into paradise. . . . A crystal clear river, gurgling merrily over a rocky bed, lush green fields, pine trees, birds, bees, wild strawberries and rhododendrons . . . oh, the rhododendrons ! Here were great, wild bushes of them, above and below us ; huge red, white, pink, purple blooms pouring forth a sweet,

delicate fragrance such as I had never smelt before. Bushes, I say! They had trunks as broad as trees and boughs heavy with blossom. Rhododendrons, rhododendrons at every turn, at every point, their petals forming a living carpet, their colours adding to the magnificence of the mountain scenery. And there were clusters of primroses and golden daisies everywhere. Oh! What glory! Here was beauty; indescribable, magnificent beauty, tucked away in this peaceful Chumbi Valley of Tibet, safe from the molesting hands of cheap tourists, safe for generations to come.

How cheap are words. I wish that I were a poet or a great writer so that I might capture the glories of my Shangri-La, and record them for the benefit of all who worship beauty. Perhaps the finest description of this wonderful valley comes from the pen of Edmund Candler, who was with the British Military Expedition that penetrated Tibet in 1903. I quote from his book *The Unveiling of Lhasa*:-

“ In springtime there is a profusion of colour. The valley is beautiful, beyond the beauty of the grandest Alpine scenery, carpeted underfoot with spring flowers, and ablaze overhead with flowering rhododendrons. To try to describe mountains and forests is a most unprofitable task; all adjectives of scenic description are exhausted; the coinage has been too long debased. For my own part, it has been almost a pain to visit the most beautiful parts of the earth and to know that one's sensations are incommunicable, that it is impossible to make people believe and understand. . . .

“ The sense of the Himalayas is intangible. There are elusive lights and shades, and sounds and whispers, and unfamiliar scents, and a thousand fleeting manifestations of the genius of the place that are impossible to arrest. Magnificent, majestic, splendid, are weak, colourless words that depict nothing. . . . So it is a poem of the imagination — Kubla Khan — that seems to me to breathe something of the spirit of the Yatung and Chumbi Valleys, only there is a little less of mystery and gloom here, and a little more of sunshine and brightness than in the dream poem. Instead of attempting to describe the valley — Paradise would be easier to describe — I will try to explain as logically as possible why it fascinated me more than any scenery I have seen.

“ Besides the primulas — I counted eight different kinds of them — and gentians and anemones and celandines and wood sorrel and wild strawberries and irises, there were the rhododendrons glowing like coals through the pine forest. As one descended (down the valley to Yatung) the scenery became more

fascinating ; the valley narrowed, and the stream was more boisterous. Often the cliffs hung sheer over the water's edge ; the rocks were coated with green and yellow moss, which formed a bed for the dwarf rhododendron bushes, now in full flower, white and crimson and cream, and every hue between a dark reddish brown and a light sulphury yellow — not here and there, but everywhere, jostling one another for nooks and crannies in the rock.

“ The great moss-grown rocks in the bed of the stream were covered with equal profusion. Looking behind, the snows crowned the pine trees, and over them rested the blue sky. The valley has . . . an intangible fascination, indescribable because it is illogical. Certainly the light that played upon all these colours seemed to me softer than everyday sunshine ; and the opening spring foliage of larch and birch and mountain ash seemed more delicate and varied on common ground. Perhaps it was that I was approaching the forbidden land. But what irony, that this seductive valley should be the approach to the most bare and unsheltered country in Asia ! ”

Chapter eight

A CHEERFUL AND COLOURFUL RACE.

LATER, we passed through our first Tibetan village — Pipitang — and experienced our first taste of Tibetan curiosity. They all came running out to see us: old men, old women and crowds and crowds of children, laughing and joking, pointing and gesticulating. The well-built buildings and well-dressed people surprised me. Compared with the average Indian village Pipitang was a Utopia. The houses were large and solid looking with stone walls and timbered roofs, each doorway bearing a squiggly chalk mark, as if some band of mischievous boys had been at work. These, I was informed, were sacred symbols guarding the occupants against the evil spirits supposed to creep down from the mountains after night-fall. I was struck by the healthy complexions of all the villagers. The women looked like painted dolls, the men like over-made-up opera stars, so rosy were their faces and so gay their clothes.

We Westerners are a miserable crowd. Shackled to the conventional lounge suit and trilby, fearful of the glances of our fellow citizens we are doomed to lead a colourless existence. As the years go by we seem to slide deeper into our rut of misery. If a Tibetan ventured down one of our busy city sidewalks he would cause such a sensation that all traffic would stop and hundreds would be injured in the panic to catch a glimpse of this unorthodox being. Lucky Tibetans! I envy you for your colourful, comfortable clothing and soft, warm boots. Convention is a curse!

The Tibetans wear very distinctive clothing; the men, clinging breeches, soft leather knee boots decorated in contrasting colours, low dark jackets and a whole range of headgear. When on the march they usually wrap their jackets around their waists and sport bright woollen jumpers. The women wear similar boots to the men which are even more distinctly coloured, pinafores one blaze of all the hues in the rainbow, billowing blouses which make them appear stouter than they really are, and high basket-shaped hats edged with fur and worked with wool. Both sexes wear ear-rings — more often

than not a heavy golden ring studded with one green gem hanging from one ear only. Both wear their hair in plaits, the women decorating theirs with ribbons or woollen "danglers."

Almost every woman we met wore a beautifully worked charm box around the neck containing talismans to guard against illness. Like all mountain folk they had high cheek bones, but their faces were a cross between an Eskimo and a Chinese appearance, for they possessed flat noses and almond eyes. I did not see one dispirited Tibetan woman during the whole of the time I spent in Tibet. All were very cheerful and pleasant. Women work very hard here — enjoy a great amount of independence.

It is interesting to learn what these people think of us. An educated Tibetan lady, Richen Lhamo, writing in her book, *We Tibetans*, remarks, somewhat caustically: "The average European is not good-looking according to our ideas. We consider your noses too big, often they stick out like kettle spouts; your ears too large, like pig's ears; your eyes blue like children's marbles; your eye sockets too deep and eyebrows too prominent." No wonder we caused so much amusement at Pipitang.

A little-known fact about the women of Tibet is that when one marries a brother in a large family she usually marries, also, all his younger brothers. Polyandry prevails amongst the lower-class people all over Tibet.

We found an overcrowded rest hut at Yatung, with one tiny room for the eight of us. By this time we had accumulated a pile of dirty stockings and were forced to have a general wash day. With all the stockings hanging around the fireplace to dry it seemed more like Christmas.

Yatung was one big bazaar, for every other house served the purpose of a trading post. The town, if one could call it that, consisted of two streets stretching side by side for some hundred yards and was surrounded by the usual strings of prayer flags flying from strings and tall poles. Souvenirs were hard to find for the Tibetans seemed to have no idea of the value of the Indian rupee, and did not appear to want our money, anyway. As much as 150 rupees (approximately £11) were being asked for small, ill-made ornaments. When one attempted to bargain, the article was usually plucked from one's hand and pushed out of sight. I was most fortunate to get into conversation with an elderly Tibetan gentleman, who spoke a little English and Hindustani: nothing was too much trouble for him. Displaying a courtesy which I find distinctly lacking in Britain to-day, he conducted me from house to house, acting

as my interpreter. Thanks to him I was able to secure several valuable souvenirs, including a beautifully made pair of Tibetan knee boots lined with Yak wool and soled with Yak hide.

Greatest "shaker" of the day came when we observed a large knot of people gathering below the trade agency. Enquiring about this assembly we learnt that this was Victory Celebration Day in Yatung, and that most of the townsfolk were taking part in V Day sports! This was Tibet, loneliest, most secretive country in the world, and here were its people celebrating the ending of a war they knew so little about! There was pony racing, musical chairs, and three-legged races. This was just as fantastic as Alice in Wonderland.

One can hardly call the Tibetans a reticent race. Whenever we paused in our hiking around the valley the men would walk up to us, hands in pockets, feet well astride, and eye us up and down like farmers inspecting cattle. We must have appeared rather terrifying with our bearded faces and variety of uniforms, but they were totally unafraid. The children thought us a great joke, for wherever we went we were surrounded by a crowd of jabbering, laughing youngsters. I did not see a single thin or unhealthy child; they were all radiantly fit and one thousand times sturdier than the average Indian child.

The children here play hopscotch just as the British children do, and appear to be an extremely happy lot. The children of the world are essentially alike in many respects. If young representatives from every quarter of the globe were placed together on some island or peaceful spot they would get on famously with one another. It is only when minds become twisted with religions and politics that they retire into their own small circles and refuse to "play ball" with their neighbours. More is the pity that the statesmen of our world cannot become children again.

The idea that the British people are the greatest race of tea drinkers is entirely erroneous. During my short stay in the Chumbi Valley I was amazed to discover that the Tibetan drinks an average of between fifty to sixty cups of tea a day. But what a brew! Ingredients used are salt, soda, Chinese brick tea and rancid butter. These are all churned together in a narrow pitcher and knocked back with gusto. Another popular drink is a barley beer which, needless to say, is not taken so liberally as tea.

Chapter nine

SOME REMARKABLE TALES OF MAGIC AND MYSTICISM.

I HAVE to confess the fact that I found the Chumbi Valley singularly lacking in one respect. There was no mystery. Perhaps if I had ventured farther across the great windswept plateau as far as Lhasa, the capital, I might have collected one or two spine-chilling stories of magic and mysticism. Strange things do happen in Tibet, but only those who have spent a lifetime in the country are rewarded by such sights of the unknown.

Perhaps the strangest story recorded concerns Dorje Phagmo, the incarnation of the goddess Tara, of the Samding Monastery, who is said to have changed herself and her attendants into pigs when invaders were threatening the monastery. The invaders forced an entry into the place, but were so disgusted at finding naught but swine occupying the premises that they turned on their heels and galloped away. Later, Dorje Phagmo metamorphosed herself again and returned to her normal duties.

Also strange, but undoubtedly true, is the fact that meat rarely goes bad in Tibet. In his book *The People of Tibet* Sir Charles Bell comments: "There can be but few countries in the world where the householder fills his larder with meat but once a year and consumes his hoard, healthily and happily, during the ensuing twelve months. But such is the ordinary practice in Tibet. No doubt he supplements it with fresh meat, but none the less he treasures the old. Sometimes the whole carcass is kept, sometimes the meat is cut and dried in strips, the latter being especially useful in travelling. Killed in October, the animals are at their fattest after the good grazing of the summer months. And winter is at hand to freeze the meat and keep it in good condition. The surplus unconsumed at the end of twelve months goes on from year to year. It is not uncommon to see mutton five years old." Photographer to the 1924 Everest expedition, Capt. J. B. L. Noel records the fact that whilst in Tibet he ate smoked mutton forty years old. Grain keeps good for at least a hundred years, the dry, clear atmosphere being better than any refrigerator.

Every Tibetan believes he may be reborn, not only in



A TIBETAN OFFICIAL



AND HIS WIFE



Yatung, seen above, is regarded as being a large town in the eyes of the Tibetans. In actual fact it is no bigger than a small British village. Houses are extremely well-built and its people both healthy and cheerful.

human form but as an animal, bird or fish. Buddhism forbids the taking of life ; in observing this law many monks do not venture outside their monasteries during the rainy season for fear they should tread on the insects that abound during this period. To "cover" themselves for any microbe they may have swallowed during the day a special prayer is chanted every morning. Despite these precautions, many Lamas are great meat eaters. Their excuse is that the sin of killing rests upon the head of the butcher whom, they believe, will be reborn into a life of agony.

The use of tobacco is said to offend the gods, but it has not been found possible to enforce its prohibition, as was proved by the persistent requests from every Tibetan I met for "cigarette." The history of Bhutan, says Sir Charles Bell, contains a statement made by the first Dharma Raja fulminating against tobacco as a great crime : " There is one evil custom which is the forerunner of the Tempter himself. It is spreading among the general population as well as among the garrison forces and the bodyguards of the Dharma and the Deb Rajas. This is the unceasing use of the evil, stinking, poisonous weed named tobacco. The smoke from this drug defiles the sacred objects of worship, the Images, the Books, the Relics. It weakens the gods above, causes fighting among the spirits of the Middle Air, and injures the serpent spirits below. From this arises an endless cycle of epidemics, wars and famines in human world. . ."

The Tibetan Hell is one million times more terrifying than our worn-out bogey of the pit of bubbling brimstone. Ignominious Tibetans who have led miserable lives are threatened with the " Filthiest place in Hell," where giants with the bodies of dragons, and heads with beaks will tunnel their carcasses, and worms feed upon their flesh. The liar, it is said, will have his tongue stretched to ten thousand times its normal size, following which it will then be ploughed up by teams of yaks. A truly terrible fate.

Tibetans have no liking for either burial or cremation. When one dies he is ceremoniously sliced into small portions and fed to the ravens and vultures. The few explorers who have witnessed this gruesome ceremony have all been sickened by the horror of it. A series of photographs I had the opportunity of viewing were enough to nauseate me, so goodness knows how the photographer felt. Lamas perform the last rites ; one carving with a sharp knife, flicking each portion to the eager birds, another pounding up the bones with a stone. This they regard as a great charity to their feathered friends.

Whenever I repeat the strange stories told to me during

my short sojourn in Tibet I am, more often than not, greeted with the exclamation, "Fantastic!" "Impossible!" or "How ridiculous!" Despite the remarkable nature of these tales and their poor receptions in the civilised (so-called) world of the West, I, personally, believe them. But then, I also believe in re-incarnation, so I suppose I, too, come under the heading of "ridiculous."

There is the story of the British surgeon (related to me by an unusually sane person), who befriended a Tibetan official and was asked when his time came to depart over the Himalayas, if there was anything he wanted as a parting gift. The surgeon, being a joker by nature, asked for a handful of fresh peaches, knowing full well that what he asked was an "impossible" request. Unperturbed by this tall order the Tibetan led him into the heart of his house, dismissed all his servants, drew the curtains and, after much pacing backwards and forwards, sat down before a table and went into a deep trance. Bewildered by this unexpected performance the surgeon gazed wide-eyed across the darkened room, restraining the utterances that were welling up within his throat. Thirty minutes elapsed, the Tibetan shuddered back to life again, staggered across to the curtains, shook them apart, and there, standing solidly upon the once-empty table, was a heap of peaches, as perfect and as fresh as if they had just been plucked. The surgeon, I was told, found the fruit perfectly edible.

From another source I heard of the remarkable powers of some Lamas, who, in the solitude of their cell-like rooms, amuse themselves by performing tricks of mysticism, which are frowned upon by the higher officials, and carry with them heavy punishments if the priests are caught practising them. Two little balls of dough are placed into close proximity to one another by the squatting Lama; a tremendous force of concentrated thought is generated and, unbelievable though it may sound, the balls of dough sprout arms and begin to wrestle with one another. Great fun is experienced from these bouts, which are said to last many rounds.

The tale of the Abbot of Pehte is famous in Tibetan history. When the fortress and town were threatened by Dzungarian invaders, the Abbot, using mystic powers, gave the lake the appearance of green pastureland, into which the Dzungarians galloped and were engulfed. But that was a long time ago.

Much of Tibet's early history is based on fable and is about as accurate as our old testament, but that does not alter the fact that in this cold age of science miraculous events have been witnessed in Tibet by learned and responsible travellers.

I ask my more sceptical readers to study their articles and books for themselves.

Madame Alexandra David-Neel, first white woman to enter the holy city of Lhasa, in an interview with Norman Colgan of the *Sunday Express*, tells of the men who have achieved mastery over mind and body and reveals that she herself conducted psychic experiments during her stay in Tibet.

"In these psychic experiments," she says, "I created a phantom monk, which appeared as an objective human being to all who saw it. This assumed an existence of its own until, after a tremendous mental battle, I dissolved it."

It is the accepted Tibetan belief, she states, that thought can create substantial bodies visible to others; and goes on to say: "It took me six months to create a fat, jolly monk who appeared to myself and others. But I did the job too well. The monk began to lead an independent existence I had not contemplated when I began the experiment. He became lean and sinister and began to threaten my peace of mind. Once a herdsman looking into my tent took him for a live Lama. It took me months of mental struggle to dissolve this unwelcome phantom."

"The most fascinating place in the world," is how Madame David-Neel describes Tibet. She, too, is eager to return there.

One of the most terrifying rites practised in Tibet (details of which the *Express* appears to have failed in extracting from Madame David-Neel), is called rolang or "the corpse who stands up." A Tibetan occultist is shut up alone with a corpse in a darkened room. To animate the body he lies on it, mouth to mouth, and while holding it within his arms he repeats continuously the same magic formula, excluding all other thoughts from his mind.

After some time has elapsed the corpse begins to move. It stands up and tries to escape, but the Tibetan, clinging tightly to it, prevents it from rushing away. Fiercer and fiercer struggles the body, leaping up and down to almost ceiling height, carrying with it the man who has given it life. Continuing to repeat mentally the secret words, the magician clings to his Frankenstein, keeping his mouth upon its lips. Then, the critical moment arrives; the tongue protrudes from the corpse and seizing with all his force, the Tibetan grips it between his teeth and bites it off. Failure to do this is said to bring certain death to the sorcerer and freedom for the corpse. The body then collapses and cannot again be made to move. The triumphant magician treasures the severed tongue, which becomes a powerful charm.

Chapter ten

A HARD MARCH OVER THE “HUMP.”

MY Shangri-La, the Chumbi Valley, takes on a different aspect in the winter months. Bitter blizzards blow over the mountains and the fields and villages are covered with a thick shroud of snow. An illustration of the grimness of Southern Tibet in winter-time is given by David Macdonald in his book *Twenty Years in Tibet*.

One morning his children went out for a walk after a heavy snowfall: “Coming round a corner in the road, not very far from the Agency, they saw what they took to be three Bhutanese coolies, carrying large loaded baskets, halted by the roadside to rest, their loads being supported on short sticks stuck in the snow. As the youngsters came closer they thought that these men were grinning at them and hailed them, but got no reply. This was extraordinary, as in Tibet one always receives an answer when one addresses anybody. On closer inspection it was found that the three coolies had been frozen to death standing up. Apparently the men had stopped to rest, supported by their loads, and while dozing had frozen to death. Their grins were caused by the retraction of their facial muscles.”

On the high, unprotected Tibetan plateau things are infinitely worse. Summer and winter there is a bitter, biting wind which penetrates the warmest clothing. At no place is it less than 14,000 feet above sea level and it is bare and desolate. Yet, people live and thrive here, burning yak dung as fuel in their strongly fortified houses.

Time passed quickly, it soon being time for us to leave this fertile valley and retreat to the scorched plains of India. There was a different route facing us now — the Jelap La, Kupup, Sedonchen, Rhenock, then a double march back to Kalimpong.

There was much discussion about the crossing of the Jelap pass. Snow had been falling heavily on the higher levels and going was sure to be tough. We decided to hire four pack mules so that if any of us felt the strain of climbing we might have their services.

The morning of our departure dawned gloriously, with the sun revealing the surrounding peaks in golden splendour. The mules were not due until eight o'clock, so the main portion of the party moved off leaving Herbert and Ray to handle the

animals. What a climb! With mouths as dry as the dust, sweat trickling from us, we had to force ourselves along. Our rest at Yatung had served only to soften us.

Three-quarters of the way up we halted to await our leader, our medical wallah and the mules. Perched on a rocky ledge 12,000 feet up, we built an open fire and brewed tea. It was pleasant at first, dipping into the rations, admiring the splendid views, but after three hours of it we began to experience that sinking feeling. Where on earth could they be, we wondered? Pictures of mules slipping over the edge of the precipice flashed before our minds. We felt very dispirited. Just as we were giving up all hope of ever seeing them again, they appeared on the narrow track below us — minus mules. Another brew of tea was hastily prepared as we awaited their arrival.

Theirs was a tale of woe. Officialdom had held back the mules, delaying the pair of them for a considerable period of time. It was only by the use of sheer bribery that they had managed to secure a pony apiece to take them to the foot of the mountains, after which they had been compelled to march.

As they were relating their experiences to us dark clouds came sweeping over the range and snow began to fall. We were due for a hard crossing.

With sluggish steps we moved up into the ice level, to be met by a stinging blizzard of snow. Once again my senses seemed to freeze up and my mind switched to "automatic pilot." Bill was only a few yards in front, but his imprints were almost filled by the time I caught up with him. Breath coming in quick, quick intakes, heart throb-throbbing, feet moving without my head knowing it and sweat forming on my brow despite the intense cold — that was my condition, for a period of time too long to be healthy.

At last! The top of the pass appeared over a huge drift of snow, my mind unfroze for a moment, and I urged my feet on. A stumbling march, a great gasping and — there! A state of utter physical exhaustion set in as I stopped, arms limp by sides, snow stinging my unprotected face, too weak to move. "The view from the Jelap La is one that should not be missed," says one traveller in his book, to which I would add, "blizzards permitting."

The others arrived eventually, all equally exhausted. And there we stood, wide-eyed and panting until our hearts resumed their normal rhythms. Then we laughed and said: "Well, it wasn't as bad as that bloke at Pedong made it out to be," and "Easy, wasn't it?" Oh! This British sense of humour.

There was a nerve-racking trail down, first deep in snow

and very slippery, then rocky and very slushy. Down, down, down, sometimes ankle-deep in water we progressed, until the Kupup valley came into sight. The remaining three miles to the rest hut were just as hellish. We found the tiny, two-roomed Kupup rest hut a heaven. With two roaring fires going, gallons of hot tea brewed, we were soon thawed out. These rest huts were sanctuaries. Spotlessly clean, usually very comfortable, they were something to dream about during the toughest parts of the day's marching.

A boulderous, terrible, at times almost vertical track known as the "Sikkim Staircase" presented itself the next morning. Jock described it as "the road to Hell" — I looked upon it as Hell itself! At one point it dropped 6,000 feet in two or three miles and its steps were littered with broken boots — and bones. I lost the sole of my left boot and the best part of the heel of my right, and my temper did not feel too secure at times. . . . But the views made up for the agony. They were magnificent Valley after valley, fold after fold stretched out before our eyes, and in the misty distance were the plains of Bengal. As usual, the rest hut played hide and seek with us. Our maps were disappointingly inaccurate; it was a case of always the next corner, always the next corner. . . . Until, at last, hope almost gone, it appeared, a little red speck at the end of a distant valley. Then our feet sprouted wings: using every available short cut down sheer hillsides, slipping and scrambling, sending down avalanches of earth and stones, we blazed our own trails to our objective — Sedonchen, a cosy hut, tucked away in a mountain bowl with living quarters in a top storey and front door perched at the top of a flight of stairs.

An early start from Sedonchen, down more razor-edged tracks, until I lost my other sole. With but a thin slice of leather protecting my already blistered feet I became desperate, using short cuts, no matter how dangerous, to escape the torturous rocks. On more than one occasion my inexperienced feet slipped from beneath me leaving me clutching little more than a few blades of grass. There was hardly time to glance around at the views, so intent was I in guiding my feet, but I stopped at one or two high points to gaze back at the snow-tipped peaks. How mighty I felt standing there like some God looking down upon the tiny valleys below. Then down I descended until my valley bed was firm beneath my feet and the hill ridges up, up, up above. Now the feeling was reversed; I was taken aback by the immensity of the surroundings. How small and insignificant I felt then. And the birds seemed to chirrup: "Back where you belong! Back where you belong!"

Chapter eleven

SOME SURPRISE MEETINGS IN CALCUTTA.

AT Rhongli we halted for *tiffin* and were overwhelmed by flies — sure sign we were back in the land of the living again. Two roads lay before us : one more direct and very steep ; the other following the river, not quite so steep but less direct. There was a general “ pow wow ” around the maps, it being decided that Ray and I should push off on the longer route, the rest of the party on the other. It was an unfortunate choice. Apart from the gymnastic tricks we had to perform on single log bridges spanning yawning chasms, we were threatened by a tribe of hostile monkeys and had our nerves wrenched by a family of wild boars. And we had much hard climbing and marching to do (contrary to the wretched map). The Sikkim folk we encountered had no idea of distance. Asking some half a dozen different natives the distance to Rhenock we received estimates of between one mile and six. I arrived at the dak bungalow sticky with sweat, parched with thirst, and promptly swallowed an entire jugful of water — a foolish but highly satisfying act.

What a feast we had that evening. This was our last dinner before reaching Kalimpong, so Wally was able to dig deep into the precious rations, presenting us with a delicious five course dinner, consisting of soup, fish, chicken and a host of other dishes. We rounded this off with a full-throated sing-song (much to the delight of the porters), then retired to our beds well filled and happy.

With the sky a clear blue, the green hills beckoning to us we started out on our last double lap of seventeen miles to Kalimpong. Warm going at first, with the morning sun hot upon our faces and some fairly stiff climbing. We reached Pakyong in time to escape a rainstorm, being able to shelter and attend to our mid-day snack.

My battered boots were sucking in all the rainwater, refusing to release one drop, when we took the muddy road from Pakyong. The sun came out again, however, and Doug. and I forged ahead of the party, taking a narrow track worn into the hillside as a short cut. It was a wonderful walk which we would have

appreciated more fully if our minds had not been centred on the delights ahead. Food is a terrible temptress.

There was much staring and chuckling at our bearded faces and ribboned boots when we entered the clean, pretty little town of Kalimpong. Doors flew open, bazaar wallahs left their shops, even the dogs seemed curious at the sight of the dusty, dishevelled travellers. Abundant hospitality awaited us at the canteen, where, with the aid of hot water and clean clothing we were able to transform ourselves into presentable beings again.

The morrow brought hard farewells as the party split up to journey back to its respective units in Bengal and Burma. Alone, I suffered a grim trip back to Calcutta in a carriage alive with cockroaches. How I hated civilisation as I sat counting the hours in that fetid truck. I would have given every anna in my possession to be breathing the clear, invigorating air of the Chumbi Valley again.

Chowringhee's most comfortable haven, the Toc H Club, was reached, and I lay on my bed dreaming of turquoise skies and the rugged grandeurs of the Himalayan ranges. The fan overhead was churning up the sultry atmosphere, depositing it in chunks beside me as I re-traced my journey back over the valleys and forests of Sikkim, up the mountain tracks into the virgin snows. I glanced around the room at my other bed-mates. All in Calcutta on leave, I guessed. What a god-forsaken hole for a leave when such paradises lay within travelling distance!

Suddenly I caught a snatch of conversation from the fellow in the next bed to mine. "Strange," I thought, "I could have sworn he mentioned Tibet." Then, springing from my position, I yelled: "Tibet! Don't tell me *you're* going there?" I must have startled him for he twisted round and gazed at me queerly. Explanations followed and I learned to my astonishment that he was due to follow the same route as myself on a government mission within the next day or so. This was a most astounding coincidence. Sir Basil Gould had spoken of a man arriving at Gangtok that month, but I little expected to find him by my bedside in Calcutta. He was ill-prepared for the journey; had no maps and little idea of what to expect ahead. I gave him as much information as I could, together with my spare map, then went downstairs into the lounge for a drink.

Remarkable occurrence number two! Here I bumped into Mr. Hopkinson, the British acting political agent to Tibet, who was looking for his charge. Here, also, I met two Rovers who had formed part of one of the other parties. Two days later I was hailed by Herbert Brice and Jack Sullivan in Chowringhee,

I FOUND SHANGRI-LA

and later still by Jock Longmuir and Ray O'Dell.

I shall not be the slightest bit surprised if, in the near future, I do not bump into the whole happy band of them again. Like me they will be pining for the glories of the Tibetan scenery ; the eternal snows ; the colours and scents of the mountain flora ; and the beauties that no man can describe.

Someday, perhaps, we may all go on that same expedition again.

*“ It is a call of the great spaces, and of the great mountains.
It is a call that mocks at the song of the lotus-eaters of old,
It is more insidious than the siren's call,
And it is a call that, once heard, is never forgotten.”*

THE END.