

AN  
UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY  
THROUGH  
SIKKIM AND TIBET  
TO CHEMOLANGH

JOHN EASTON



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THROUGH  
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TO  
CHUMOLAORI



*PHARI*



*'Beyond the fortress, rising straight from the plain, lay the snow-white mountain Chumolaori.'*

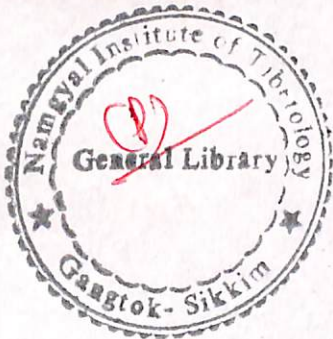


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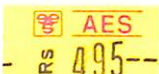
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AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY

*THROUGH SIKKIM AND TIBET*

*TO CHUMOLAORI*

BY

JOHN EASTON

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## CONTENTS

	PAGE
FOREWORD . . . . .	IX
ILLUSTRATIONS . . . . .	XI
I. SILIGURI TO GANGTOK . . . . .	I
In the club—Qualifications for a sweeper—Mules—A Muleteer's rhapsody—Rungpo—Ants and Herodotus—Singtam—A digression—Shamdong—Another digression—A scramble—Gangtok—A disillusioned man	
II. GANGTOK . . . . .	14
Sikkim—Tibetan frontier—A thumb that groped—Kinchenjunga—Japanese lithographs—Carpets—A baby with a hard head—The Secretary—The <i>guru</i> —The Maharajah—Travelling under difficulties—'Om mane padme hum'—Meditative stimulus—Hailstones and wheels—Marriage—Jan Steen—Disbursement—The mule <i>bundabast</i> —A miserable specimen	
III. KARPONANG AND CHANGU . . . . .	27
Verandah bridges—The <i>Khud</i> —A pony that is a mule—Descent from a pony—Karponang—Idiosyncrasies of a princess—Shoing a sweeper—The first mule train—La paix armée—A <i>ghuddi</i> —The frozen lake—Ghosts and corkscrews—Changu	
IV. THE NATHU LA . . . . .	38
Alarms and excursions—The ravine—A hazardous turn—An opportunity thrown away—The cairn—Chumolaori—In Tibet—A scramble—Champi-thang—The boy who sniffed—Smoke	
V. THE CHUMBI VALLEY . . . . .	47
A land of honest men—The saving of a treaty— <i>Chorten</i> —Thoughts on burial—A monastery—A head of hair—Puck—Chumbi—The Yak—Tea—Yatung—Flies—The Agency—An affair of life and death—Printing in Tibet—A way of removing evil—A boy and a peach tree	

# CONTENTS

	PAGE
VI. PHARI DZONG . . . . .	62
Outposts—We meet McGovern—The plain of Lingmathang—A muleteer bewitched—A land without future—Aconite—A mysterious building—Goutsa—Encumbrances—The caravan splits up—Back to the Middle Ages—A lost saga—Filth—The dzong—The dzongpön—Tribute—Phari—A guest that will not go—A jewel—The eternal babu	
VII. THE GOUTSA GORGE . . . . .	77
Excursions on Gyantse—The frozen waterfall at Dotah—Return to vegetation—From a bungalow window—Poetic justice—Eggs—A Lhasa dignitary—Tibetan currency—The Sweeper dances—A medical mishap—Psychic phenomena—Adventure in Lhasa—Liberal Government in Tibet—The Great Lama	
VIII. YATUNG, OR SHASHIMA . . . . .	92
A visit to the Depön—Summary punishment—The Rupön—The Underground Palace—The Depön—The British Army— <i>Tashe Dele</i> —The habits of the chopstick—Tennis at high altitudes—Vagaries of a muleteer—More poetic justice—A Caribbean pony—Piphithang—The village at the foot of the Pass	
IX. THE DZALEP LA . . . . .	105
Relics of adventurers—Langram—A friendly <i>chowkidar</i> —Mist—Sleet—Cold—A staircase—Kapup—A fire that smoked—Taku La—Gnatong—A prisoner—The cemetery—The ascent of Mount Lingtu—A receding village— <i>Shaitan ko rasta</i> —Jeyluk—A small boy and a French artist—The legs of the table	
X. SEDONCHEN TO PESHOKÉ . . . . .	121
Another prisoner—Lingtam—Landslides—Rongli—Poisoned water—A misadventure—Ari—An interrupted story—The release of Lhaten—The sorrows of Satan—A mule has his day—Pedong—The scurvy <i>chowkidar</i> —Kalimpong—Hired ponies—Peshoke—A gimcrack town—Darjeeling	



## FOREWORD

PHARI, as the crow flies, is approximately four hundred and fifty miles from Calcutta, and two-thirds of that distance is traversed by the Eastern Bengal Railway: a train journey of twelve hours divided into two sections. The first section of railroad is standard gauge: it terminates at Santahar, where the traveller changes into a narrow-gauge section and proceeds to the terminus at Siliguri, lying at the base of the Himalayan foothills. The journey through the plains of Bengal has been hot, dirty and tedious: the scenery monotonous: unbroken plains of cultivated land and paddy fields, with an occasional mud village or group of farms: colourless save when the sun rises or sets: telling no tale except at Paksey, where the Ganges sweeps on its turbulent course.

At Siliguri the country puts on a new face. Close wooded foothills loom up ahead: a cool breeze from the snows spells relief in store for the jaded European; squat Mongol types from the neighbouring hills banish memories of the *dhoti* and the spectacled babu. Here the miniature railway in two long tracks sets out on its climb. The western track climbs to Darjeeling, the summer capital of Bengal: the eastern winds up the Teesta valley to Kalimpong in British Bhutan.

Darjeeling and British Bhutan are districts of Bengal. They lie side by side and together comprise a strip of territory fifty miles broad and

## FOREWORD

twenty miles deep snatched from the state of Sikkim to afford a haven for wearied officials and a prosperous corner for the tea-planting community. They are bounded on the west by Nepal and on the east by Bhutan, two independent states, both sacrosanct and closed to the wandering traveller. Northward lies Sikkim, a British Indian state ruled by a Maharajah, stretching as far as the Great Himalayan range and the Tibetan passes.

From Kalimpong the road climbs north-east through Sikkim for fifty miles to the Tibetan passes of the Donkhia range, where one crosses the frontier; thence it descends into the Chumbi valley, and continues north-eastwards a further fifty miles to the Tableland of Tibet. It is the hundred miles of road from Kalimpong to Phari that this book sets forth to describe.

To the men and beasts who were the companions of my journey tribute has been paid in the narrative; to those arbiters of our fortune, Major Bailey and Mr. Macdonald, I express once more our heartfelt thanks; but no man may set out on this journey untrammelled without being under an obligation to Mr. Percy Brown, whose wisdom and help in the preparation for the marches have lightened many a load, physical and mental, both for man and beast. The photographs illustrating this book are his work, and are an earnest of his knowledge of the frontier.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
PHARI . . . . .	Frontispiece
‘ Beyond the fortress, rising straight from the plain, lay the snow-white mountain Chumolaori ’	
TEESTA VALLEY . . . . .	6
‘ Far below the waters of the Rongni Chu had decided to become a river ’	
CHUMBI VALLEY . . . . .	22
‘ Life is one great conflict against mountains that brook no crossing, earth that gives no food ’	
KARPONANG . . . . .	32
‘ The pine-clad hills were a feast of colours : greens, blues, and dark purples ’	
BELOW CHANGU . . . . .	36
‘ Sudden bends and turns, with overhanging boulders ’	
CHUMOLAORI . . . . .	42
‘ The divine mother of mountains : unconquered, untrampled ’	
AMO CHU . . . . .	48
‘ Continued its way into Bhutan down a narrow valley, fertile and cultivated ’	
YATUNG . . . . .	56
‘ Nestling so snugly in the valley, with its plain and fields, and the pleasant waters of Amo Chu, in this fair strip of Tibet ’	
GOB SORG . . . . .	64
‘ An old Chinese village with a keep overlooking the path, now deserted and ruined ’	

# ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
PHARI DZONG . . . . .	72
‘ Surely an Amadis of Gaul once rode across those barren plains, clattered through the muddy towns, and caught a favour from a turret window as he passed ’	
GOUTSA GORGE . . . . .	78
‘ Bubbled and chattered as its many threads were gathered into one skein ’	
LINGMATHANG . . . . .	86
‘ A green carpet of short turf, intersected by the many deviations of the Amo Chu ’	
GALING-KA . . . . .	96
‘ With its rickety bridge and straggling huts ’	
PIPHITHANG . . . . .	104
‘ Wooden houses, with wooden roofs in the form of planks, kept from blowing off by large stones ’	
DZALEP LA . . . . .	108
‘ A white barren waste, broken up by great masses of rock ’	
RHENOCK . . . . .	128
‘ Large, hot, and full of flies ’	

## I

### SILIGURI TO GANGTOK

WHEN in the Club that evening I asked Dr. Bishop if he would come with me to Tibet, he merely assented and we proceeded with our conversation, for it is in that casual fashion that interesting events occur in one's life, and when some weeks later I reminded him of the conversation he told me that he had written to the Political Officer in Sikkim and that it was all right. In this way it happened that he and I, with two large boxes of food, two valises, two cameras and two pairs of glare-glasses, left Calcutta by the Darjeeling Mail early in the hot weather, on Good Friday evening, and settled down to *picquet* at a hundred roubles a point without much let or hindrance.

India has prepared many condiments for those who feed at her tables: fever, thirsts, greenfly and beggars: buffalo carts groaning along the dusty roads before an impatient motor car: legless *lalwallahs* that chew their *pan* at the level crossings, heedless of the frenzied hoots that bid them open: post office officials of all kinds: and above all, this matter of railroad travelling. She chooses the hottest and fiercest of days, and places an over-worked and over-irritated man in the dirtiest and shabbiest of carriages, and sends him hurtling through miles of dusty simmering country.

## AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY

Dust, white, black and grey, clogs the creases in his hands, glues his collar to his neck, sticks his shoulders to his shirt, streams down his face, lies thick in his ears, and turns his snow-white trousers to the pepper and salt of a market farmer in his Sunday best. At the platforms sleeping men, in the wrappings of a corpse crying out for a much-needed burial, strew themselves before your path: *pan* chewers breathe their reek in your nose and spit their juice within an inch of your boots: cunning boxwallahs urge the purchase of their gewgaws from Benares: small naked boys beat upon their stomachs and cry out for rice money.

The train jangles on from station to station: the oven roars and blinds and roasts, and the everlasting panorama of earth, earth, earth, here a tree and there a cow, slips idly by.

At Paksey we came to the great suspension bridge and clanked noisily across. A faint breeze hung over the river, and I leant far out of the window and snuffed it up. I also uttered a prayer in honour of him that built the bridge, not because he had set up one of the longest and most graceful bridges of its kind, but in that he had persuaded the Ganges to flow under it after it was built.

Night came, and with it somewhat of a coolth and south breeze that filtered through the meat-safe window where dirt had not clogged. We changed over to the narrow gauge and continued our way in the luxury of a private saloon.

We stopped at a wayside station in the middle of the night, and voices broke in on our sleep: a high well-pitched voice, that meant others to hear besides its immediate listeners: 'Well, goodbye you fellows: thanks very much for seeing me off, don't you know. I hope you

have a good time, and all that sort of thing.' Said I: 'That must be somebody going to Darjeeling for a month's leave—railway, I suppose.'

Said Bishop: 'It sounds to me like one of the heaven-born of the new school saying goodbye to his babus,' and, alas, it was so.

At Paksey we collected the first member of the caravan, a Bengali sweeper whose chief qualification was the fact that he had no family ties; this recommendation had a certain grim humour which set us thinking. At Siliguri on the following morning we secured a cook-bearer, a good enough fellow, a Nepalese who had served with the Mount Everest Expedition and was rumoured to be a Christian.

We left Siliguri for Kalimpong Road by the Darjeeling-Himalaya Railway after an early breakfast. To appreciate the beauty of the scenery, the restfulness of trees and hedges, of stony paths and sidewalks, one must spend some time beforehand in the plains of Bengal, and, for a full realisation of the great peace that one enjoys as the Teesta Valley slowly reveals itself, better preparation cannot be found than a sojourn of eighteen months in Calcutta.

The Teesta is not unlike a large salmon river in spate in Scotland. The water is greener, the shale is greyer, and there are trees; the boulders also are larger; but the hurry and scramble of the waters are the same, and spell the same secret—great fish lurking in deep pools.

So the train puffed its way up the twisting, wriggling track, now proclaiming its certainty that the next incline would be its last, now dashing forward with a shriek of excited triumph. We left it unhampered by our advice, and lolled back, our feet higher than our heads, computing how many pipes it would be necessary to smoke before we had

## AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY

sufficient nicotine to put on the tails of the leeches that would attach themselves to us during the march.

We reached the terminus at Kalimpong Road at noon, where we found our ponies and their syces, and a muleteer with two mules. The muleteer threw up his hands in consternation at the sight of our kit and loudly called for an extra mule, which he did not get, but had to content himself with a coolie whom he proclaimed as being sufficiently strong to carry a small basket to Rungpo.

Of the ponies, who were to be our most intimate companions, much might be written here, but it is better that their characters should be revealed slowly, just as they were revealed to us. Suffice for the present that Bishop's was a roan named Lucifer, and mine a black named Gyantse. Of the mules, one may say at once that fears suggested by previous army experience seemed groundless. They appeared to be orderly, peaceable creatures, standing placidly without admonishment or exhortation while our luggage and kit were piled upon them. One was grey, and highly respectable; the other was black, and a *budmash*. The grey mule, in view of his great age and respectability, bore the heavier burden and intended to lead the caravan; the black mule, whose load was negligible, also intended to lead the caravan. And so, leaving the arbitration to the beasts themselves, we set out.

As we had no experience of the sort of thing mules and muleteers do, and as time was no object, we decided to keep with our baggage for that day at any rate, and pranced out uncomfortably in the mules' wake, where we witnessed that great struggle which is the epic of the Phari highway—the fight for the leadership. Epic of the countless shifts



and devices concocted by the *budmash* mule so as to get one box at least in front of the grey mule; of the parrying and edging, and thrusting down slopes; of mad headlong career round corners; of jostling and stamping; of a slow sparring walk, eye to eye, and a sudden dash for supremacy: it occurs, is occurring at this moment, in every mule train that is moving along the way, whether it carries wool or kit, or some kazi collecting taxes, or an official from Lhasa prospecting in the Goutsa gorge for a site to build a mint. And the *budmash* mule, in the cool of the evening, left his respectable leader tired and jaded, and pirouetted to the front, and danced and ambled at will, feeding on dry and dusty leaves and bits of stick, heeding little the cautionary 'Tchu' and 'Tsa' jerked at him from the rear by the muleteer. But the grey mule plodded on, with the heavier load.

The road to Rungpo is good; a cart road following the right bank of the Teeṣta through woods and clearings. We rode at peace, spending most of the time in observing things that were to prove part and parcel of the day's work later. My pony at once revealed a trait in his character that could only be cured by the application of a bamboo switch, and, until that switch was cut and applied liberally, progress was considerably slower than it might have been. He also showed a peculiar aversion to ride by the side of Lucifer, and maintained that aversion to the end of the journey. This may have been due to the fact that before he was 'discovered' and trained for racing purposes he had been a pack pony in Gyantse and broken in for the mule train. He certainly had many traits of the mule in his nature, especially the virtue of being absolutely reliable in a stiff climb.

## *AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY*

We were too early for flowers, but the road was as beautiful as one could wish, and in parts strangely reminiscent of the Ashdown Forest.

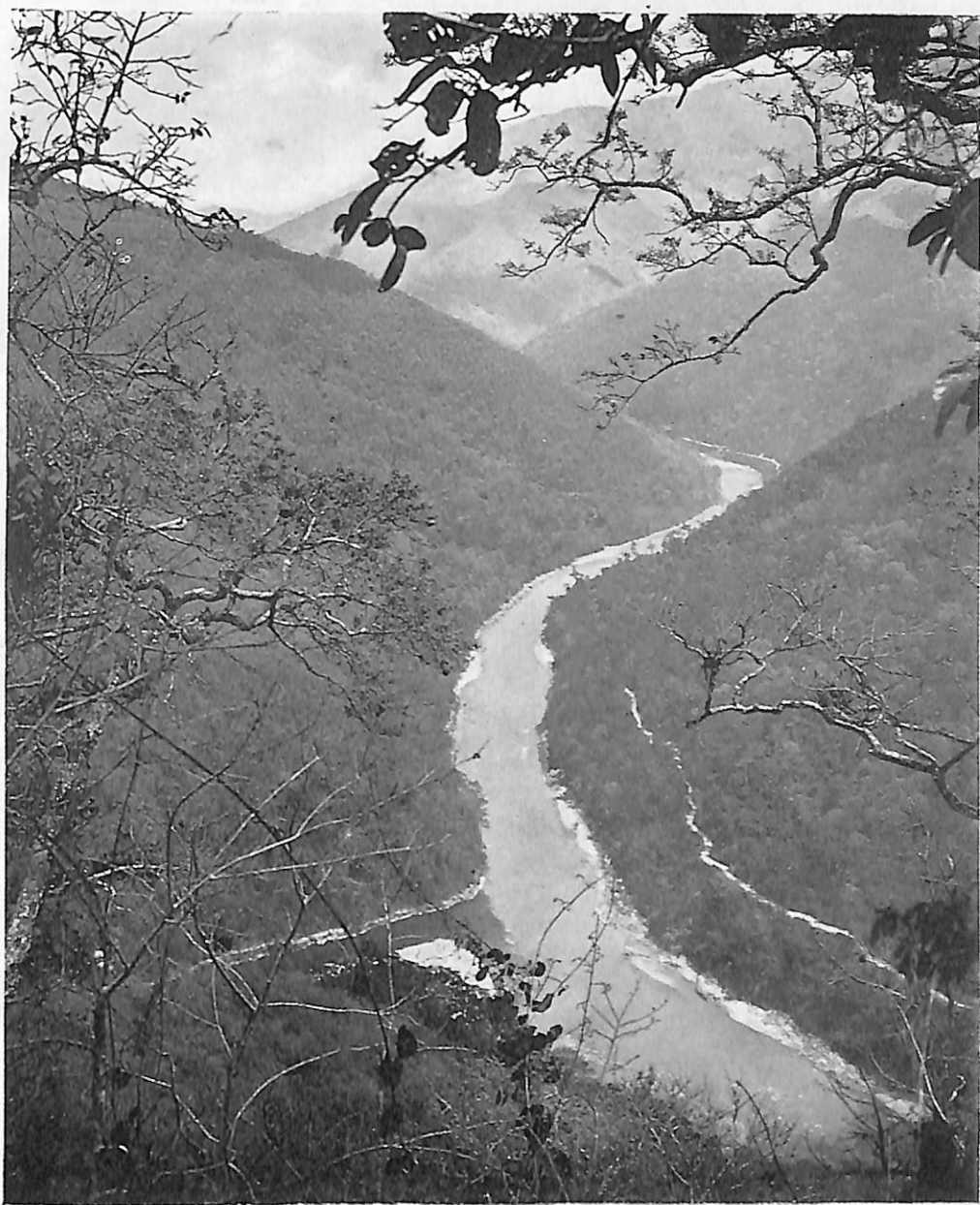
Towards evening our caravan was augmented by two kazis on their ponies and a group of coolie women with baskets. The muleteer, whether on account of the proximity of our destination or the bevy of ladies behind, burst into song, or snatches of yodel, greatly to our satisfaction and his own enjoyment, and gave tongue until sundown, when we reached the suspension bridge at Rungpo separating us from Sikkim. The bridge was closed for repair, but a makeshift had been rigged up. Here we fell in with a police patrol who collected our permits for Sikkim—and so we came to Rungpo.

Rungpo consists of a small collection of sheds and huts. Before one of these stood an exceedingly smart police corporal, who called himself to attention, saluted us with great zest and pointed the way to the dâk bungalow, some two hundred feet above the village.

This bungalow is certainly the best equipped, if not the most picturesque, to be met during the journey. It has a large verandah, excellent rooms, flowers, table-cloths, and baskets of orchids hanging from the eaves. Here we found tea and baths awaiting us and sat down in two long chairs, meditating on the day's march, and watching a blue mist slowly creep up and overshadow the gorge of the Teeesta stretching before us. We discussed the question of that third mule, and felt that had we been anywhere else than at Rungpo that third mule would have been the burning topic of the hour.

There was a great peace in the valley, even though the mist meant to change to rain and spoil the next march.

TEESTA VALLEY



*'Far below the waters of the Rongni  
Chu had decided to become a river.'*

## SILIGURI TO GANGTOK

We turned in early, after further discussion as to the third mule. The night was hot and the mosquitoes devilishly keen on the fresh meat that the gods had sent them. I groped my way across my room and discovered a window, unnoticed before, but on opening it found to my disappointment that the mist had carried out its promise and rain was falling heavily.

It was still raining in the morning, but owing to delays due to the engagement of a coolie in place of the mule, and the despatch of a box of probable luxuries to Kalimpong in order to lighten our load, we did not get away until nine o'clock. The rain considerably stopped as soon as we were on the ponies, and we continued our march up the valley to Gangtok in comfort.

The Teeṣta valley here is cultivated, in small steps bordered with white stones. Far below we could distinguish five women in blue garments steadily marching in single file with great loads on their backs, reminding Bishop of the old story of the large ants that inhabited Tibet and grouted for gold, which he attributed to Herodotus.

Our first halt was Singtam, a village at the junction of the Rongni Chu with the Teeṣta. Singtam in some ways marks the end of familiar civilisation. One might say that the bridge that crosses the stream at the entrance of the village marks the entrance into the wilds, and that the long string of fluttering prayers, strips of cloth and ends of twisted paper, is really a defence to keep away stray bogies and outlanders.

The village is shaped like the letter T; it consists of native rest-houses, single-storeyed with thatched or wooden roofs. Each rest-house has a large verandah, on which merchants sit measuring the grain or

### AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY

weighing out other commodities: a carpenter making a table, a blacksmith hammering out flat a mule's shoe. Strangers are frequent here, and we attracted little attention. We sat and ate biscuits, while the muleteer and the syces explained to the villagers exactly what fit of madness had driven us into that part of the world.

After Singtam the valley becomes wilder; the stream winds through large white boulders, and the path passes underneath hanging cliffs. We left our mules and servants behind and rode on ahead. From this point onward, except on one occasion, that became the order of the day, and towards the end of a day's march we were at least two hours ahead of our servants. This has its disadvantages, for at times one must postpone the satisfaction of the inner man beyond the limits of one's temper, a fact that we were forced to feed upon more and more as we progressed on our journey.

Some three miles before Shamdong we started to climb. The road became less rugged and more earthy, and had a tendency to hang over the side of precipices, although our real introduction to the *khud* was not to come until much later. On the way up we passed the grave of a pioneer who had been accidentally killed in the construction of that road. He seemed a quaint link with the past, an early victim of the preparations that culminated in the Younghusband Expedition in 1904.

The Younghusband Expedition is still a very real tradition among all those who have been to Tibet or are connected with things Tibetan. But to me this solitary grave brought back a very different recollection of this tradition. It was in Lille Citadel in 1915, after the vigorous but somewhat abstruse operations that have been called the Battle of Loos.

A Gurkha officer, who had been captured on the first day of the battle, was standing in a doorway of the prison as I was brought in by my captors, and he received me with a doleful, sympathetic salaam.

From a strong sense of regimental duty I had read with care the history of the Younghusband Expedition, so that when I went down to walk some forty times round the courtyard on the following day and saw him smiling all over his face, and noticed the Tibetan ribbon on his coat, I went up to him and, knowing no Hindustani and he knowing no English, used the one magic word 'Younghusband.' His smile became a beam as he recognised my regimental badge, and in the incoherency of his answer I recognised the word 'Macdonald.' We became great friends, in spite of the limitation of our intercourse.

He had one philosophy of life, which was to draw a circle and put himself in the middle. In this way he explained to me the circumstances leading to his own capture at Loos: it also served to illustrate the discomfiture of the Tibetans at Tuna, Karo La and Gyantse. Later on he caused a serious breach of the peace by becoming a circle himself and putting some one else in the middle; it happened in this wise.

When orders came through for us to proceed to Germany, I, owing to an altercation with a German Staff Officer on the subject of a clothes-brush, was left behind at Lille as a hostage for the behaviour of some Indian prisoners; they had a barn full of Sikhs and Gurkhas and found them a trifle difficult. A few days later one of the Kaiser's artists came into the citadel with the express purpose of painting some of the oddities assembled there; and did me the honour to pass me by in favour of this Gurkha, as having greater possibilities. The Gurkha was

*AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY*

quite pleased and, having removed his Balaclava helmet, stood in an extremely fierce posture before the artist, while I watched the progress of the portrait. It was an excellent piece of work; the man could certainly paint, and when he had finished I beckoned to the Gurkha to look at it. I have rarely seen a man's expression change to rage so instantaneously. He called up a companion, who at once shared his mortification. Owing to the action of the Balaclava and the natural fall of the hair the Gurkha's *ticki*, that single lock of hair, a parachuter in his flight to heaven, had become flattened, and had escaped the artist's notice; and so at one fell sweep of the brush a hopeful soul had been deprived of its means of transport. A brown streak drawn perpendicular to the crown placed matters once more on a friendly footing, but the artist had dallied enough with the British Army; he turned his attention to a French Colonial Officer.

On the whole I was not sorry to see the end of my Gurkha, for he and his party were more than a handful, especially in the train when we finally left for Germany. The Prussian subaltern in charge allowed them all to get out at a wayside station, with the result that they refused to get in again. He then meditated adding to the glamour of his second-class Iron Cross by falling upon them with the bayonet, so that it was high time to intervene. I took my Gurkha aside, drew a large circle and put him in the middle. A few minutes later we were steaming out of the station.

The men in those coaches were of the same stuff as those who, nearly twenty-five years ago, drew this great circle in the Himalayas and placed themselves in the middle, and the solitary Pioneer's grave

seemed a more potent memorial of the work even than the road he had helped to build.

We pushed on to Shamdong, a rest-house built on the site of an old camp of the roadmakers, and found a polite kazi in a claret-coloured frock beaming at us from the road side. He seemed disappointed that we should ride through his village without going up to the bungalow for tiffin; but ride through we did, and halted a mile further up, at a cairn of stones built round a wooden post. We loosened our ponies' girths, tethered them to the post, and sat down to cocoa, biscuits and chocolate.

When we had finished our meal and had looked about us we were surprised to find that the cairn was really situated on the edge of a great precipice, and that the young bamboo growth had hedged it in and given it the appearance of a winding country lane; we were not able to discover whether the cairn had been erected as a memorial, or for some other purpose. Had the bamboos not been there we should have had an uninterrupted view of the whole of the Rongni Chu Valley from Singtam.

Some two miles below Shamdong the road divides, and there is a bridle-path, so called, leading to Gangtok, which saves three miles. Here we found our host for the coming night awaiting us with fresh ponies, Kunduling Cock and Aristocrat, stable-companions of Lucifer and Gyantse; and up that bridle-path we had our first experience of the Bhutia pony come into his own.

The thrill of the first moments of that scramble is indescribable, for walking and trotting in turns along the cart road from Kalimpong



### *AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY*

had not given us a hint of what these ponies are capable of doing. A scramble up paths built of boulders at impossible angles with impossible bends, hoofs clattering, bodies straining forward, all pressing for the leadership; a jostle and a scurry; the vigour of the moment seemed to grip every nerve in one's composition, and at every bound of the pony one felt endowed with a gift of new energy and new determination.

In the middle of the hot weather, when the Darjeeling season is at its height, the Bhutia ponies assemble from far and near for the races. Going is keen, and the form of the ponies well known, so that speculation is rife and much controversy rages in the bazaar as to the probable winners. Form is not the only standby, and many a good race has been upset by the favourites taking the order of proceedings into their own hands or mouths. Some bolt through the crowd and retire to their stables before the race is a minute old: others shed their jockeys on the race-course, leap the light wicker barricade and make for the bazaar at a gallop.

Both Kunduling Cock and Aristocrat had many wins to their credit and were favourites at the coming meeting, so that they were held back on this account from going with us into Tibet. On the road, or when trekking, Kunduling Cock would not tolerate any pony ahead of him, and Aristocrat accepted the situation and kept a length behind him: to do otherwise would have turned the simplest ride into turmoil: but on the race-course he was the faster pony, and went all out to win. Strangely enough the journey into Tibet had the effect of a tonic on Gyantse, for he carried all before him at the following meeting and

## SILIGURI TO GANGTOK

beat his own more illustrious stable-companions, who had been kept behind to train for the occasion.

We arrived at Gangtok in time for an early tea, and spent the evening in discussing the road up which we were to travel, and the sort of thing to be expected of the road. Our host had been to Lhasa two years previously with Sir Charles Bell, and had recently returned from a shooting expedition in Bhutan, so that his knowledge of what was in store for us was considerable. Skins of leopard, snow-leopard and bear, all in the magnificent coat obtainable at such altitudes, showed what could be made of a journey into the Himalayas when one has time to linger on the way.

The mules arrived some three hours later, but the sweeper did not get in until half-past ten, having been regaled upon the way by stories of the heights he was to surmount and the great depth of snow he would be expected to cut his way through. He had already decided that 6,000 feet is quite high enough for the aspirations of any Bengali, however disreputable his caste or slender his family ties, and his low mind, fed by the cunning of the plains, was cogitating some plan whereby he might escape climbing the formidable barriers that stretched across his path: also he was very drunk.

## II

### GANGTOK

THE unbroken stretch of the Great Himalaya Range is the natural frontier of the Tibetans, and sufficiently forbidding for them to wish to respect its fastnesses. And yet, when the large finger groped forward from the Tibetan hand, and gently stroked Chumolaori into the hand's grasp, like some croupier at a gaming-table, it reached still further, and found the fertile valley of Chumbi, and settled in the valley. So that an oblong slice of territory some twenty miles broad and forty miles long, that should be Sikkim, is now Tibet. Geographically the Chumbi Valley is in Sikkim, and the bleak table-land of Phari should be the last outpost of Sikkim, that long dreary brown waste which stretches towards the Great Range and crosses into Tibet proper at the Tang La, 15,200 feet above sea-level.

The Chumbi valley is the highway for the Tibetans to Western civilisation by way of the marts of Kalimpong. At Chumbi or Yatung, which is also called Shashima, they meet the river Amo Chu and, turning half right, travel south-west over the passes Dzalep La or Nathu La to Sikkim and Kalimpong.

The history of the changes and chances that have led to the encroachments of the finger and the final dismembering of the Sikkim

## GANGTOK

corpse is written on the stones of broken walls and bleak camps on the mountain-side. Here the Chinese had a wall, here the Tibetans pitched a camp, but as to the reason for the wall or the camp one need give little heed: inconsequent deeds are in keeping with the scenery that staged them, and it matters not if the Chinese or Tibetans held the keep.

Gangtok, at the head of the Rongni valley on the road to Tibet by the Nathu La, is the capital of the State of Sikkim and contains all that makes up a capital: the palace of the Maharajah, a monastery, a hospital and a jail. Far away to the south-west one can just distinguish Darjeeling; to the north-east is the range of hills, some 12,000 feet high, which threaten the path to the Donkhia Range and Tibet. They still have snow on them in early April, and, with the evening mist hanging over them or the black cloud that spells an early morning fall of snow, are grim enough. To the north-west, her great crest towering above intervening hills, lies Kinchenjunga, white and clear in the brilliant morning sun.

The first sight of snows and a real mountain is unforgettable. Often one has seen some great pile of tumbling white clouds and thought of it as a great mountain, but the real mountain has nothing of the cloud-dream about it. It is clear cut, sharp, grey, immensely old and immensely material, with a strange sense of cruelty that spells Mother Earth. Even when the foot of the range is covered in rolling snow-white cloud through which a few peaks thrust their heads, there is the same strange feeling of reality, of the triumph of the domain of men, of some hard material victory snatched from the world of spirit.

## *AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY*

a long plait. In his company we climbed the hill to the Maharajah's palace.

The palace is a large square building of two storeys, gaily decorated in Chinese fashion and painted in bright colours, blue, red, yellow and green. The ground floor is taken up for the most part by a large temple, containing an image of the *guru*, the instructor of the Buddha. Before the *guru*, as an aid to his contemplation, were the seven bowls of brown porcelain with Chinese characters embossed in gold, containing holy water, and near by sat a lama, the guardian and attendant of the temple, offering prayers and reading from the holy books. There is a quietness and peace in Buddhist temples, an atmosphere of age-old philosophy and calm meditation. There is also an atmosphere of grimness helped very much by the architecture. A low dark building with great wooden beams supporting the roof: two low beams to act as seats for the lamas, who sit in a row up the centre of the temple each side of the Buddha. A collection of books—manuscripts folded between strips of wood and inserted each in its own pigeon-hole—a banner or two, a large unwieldy foghorn to keep away demons, and the indispensable tea-pot: these formed the furniture of the temple. On the lawn in front were stretched the gaudy blue robes for the devil dancers, drying in the sun in readiness for the approaching festival, and some men and women were engaged in erecting a stage. A wandering Tibetan beggar, with cymbals and grotesque mask, was dancing before the palace. He kept up a quaint, mournful dirge and executed certain interminable treadmill gyrations.

The Maharajah himself lives in the Summer Palace, a modern

## GANGTOK

house furnished in European style some fifty yards from the Winter Palace, as the large house on the hill is called. We found him sitting in a small drawing-room, waiting for us. He has an intellectual face, has read a great deal and interests himself chiefly in his religion and the people. He is a friend and admirer of the Trashe Lama, the spiritual head of the Tibetan Buddhists, who directs lama thought from Shigatse and is as much venerated by the Tibetans as the Dalai Lama himself. In 1904, when the Dalai Lama escaped from Lhasa in face of the Younghusband expedition, the Trashe Lama took over the control of Lamaism, and the same Chinese proclamation that deposed the Dalai Lama vested the spiritual power in the Trashe Lama. This spiritual power he retained after the expulsion of the Chinese in 1912.

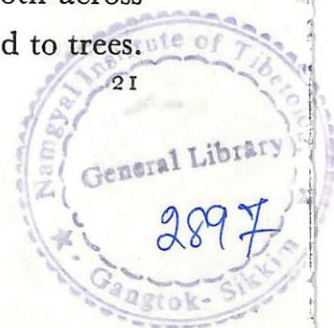
The Maharajah had received that morning a letter with two photographs from the Trashe Lama at Shigatse; the sight of the Kodak Printing Paper envelope which contained them and the fact that it had come from such a man and from such a place seemed most incongruous.

It is this devotion to his religion that has made the present Maharajah so popular with his people. He succeeded to the throne after the early death of his brother, who, having acquired at Oxford ideas out of keeping with the simple philosophies of Gangtok, had the misfortune—as the Secretary expressed it—to die soon after his return to his State. His successor, with the exception of visits to Calcutta and Delhi, has not travelled extensively, nor, bearing in mind his brother's experience, does he wish to do so. In any case, apart from the question of expense, for the Sikkim exchequer is a poor one, it is difficult for a man of the

thief had taken the seventh; and that the lack of it should not interrupt the meditations of the Buddha they had hung from a beam a large coloured ball, a cheap Christmas decoration bought for an anna in the Kalimpong bazaar, on which he might gaze in calm oblivion. The lama considered that the gaudy coloured ball, in strong contrast to the beautifully chased bowls of porcelain, provided a more effective stimulus to the image's devotions.

There seemed to be a great peace in the six bowls of unruffled water, the transparent quiet of the ball, the dark silent temple, the steady glow of the oil lamps, and the grim forbidding look of the wooden beams and unswept ceiling.

Outside the wind whistled, the rain poured down, the heavy sodden prayer flags flapped from their poles. Man is so much in contact with the elements in Sikkim and Tibet; his life is one great conflict against mountains that brook no crossing: earth that gives no food: snow, ice, hail and burning sun; it is little wonder that he has turned animist: that implacable demons and fiends seem ever to be seeking for his destruction, haunting the wild mountain side, raging among the mountain torrents, mocking him from the snows and smiting crops with hailstones as soon as he has coaxed the crops from the unwilling soil. It is a land of stone and rock, and so that dreary wail of praise—'Hail to the jewel and the lotus'—is sent up everlastingly, in wheels at the porches of the temples, in wheels by the hands of devoted lamas, in wheels by the hands of traveller, beggar and herdsman; by a hundred flags on cairn and crest, by a thousand fluttering strips of cloth across river and torrent, strips of cloth caught up in bushes or nailed to trees.



## AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY

*Om mane padme hum* (Hail to the jewel and the lotus)—a strange cry for pity, for consolation to those who can strive against and conquer the demons, a pathetic cry, a wistful cry wrung from those who have no vision of the jewel or of the lotus, only of relentless cold, hail, wind, rain, snow, barrenness—a great conspiracy of bogies hatched in this glorious expanse of beauty. *Om mane padme hum*—but they gaze into the face of the Medusa.

So when your crops are eaten up by the hail, you climb the hill to the monastery and give gifts of kind and money to the good lamas, and the large fog-horn is produced from the recesses of the temple, and a hideous din is made with it, hurled across valleys, echoing through the mountains: and, if the hail stops, your climb and money have had a good return: and if the hail continues, then surely your enemies have given more money, richer gifts to another monastery, and the demons are driven your way by a bolder clatter: and so you climb the hill once more, with more money and richer gifts, and the horn re-echoes down the valley once more and up through the hills, and one day the hail will stop: *Om mane padme hum*.

A picturesque place is Gangtok, perched on its hill at the head of the Rongni valley, and the jewel in its crown is the Residency, with its roses, orchids and dovecot: polished oak floors, pictures, books: great fireplaces, an English country house hidden away in the hills of India.

The Sikkimese are a happy lot, in spite of the bogies and the elements. Marriage is a thing that does not bother them much. A woman may have a couple of husbands if she likes or more, and nobody



CHUMBI VALLEY



*'Life is one great conflict against mountains that  
brook no crossing, earth that gives no food.'*

## AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY

We stayed for one day only at Gangtok, and left it on the following morning for the march proper to Phari Dzong. Our host had made a careful *bundabast* for the mules. Four altogether were necessary, with a muleteer in charge: two for our baggage, one for fodder, and one for servants' baggage and general *impedimenta*. They were to accompany us to Phari Dzong and return with us to Kalimpong Road Station. A sum inclusive of all expenses—mules, muleteer, fodder, food and stabling—was fixed with the kazi: a deposit was paid: and we congratulated ourselves on having made such a *bundabast* as would relieve us from all transport worries during the expedition—these were our salad days, when hope beat high !

A jingle of bells during the latter stages of breakfast advised us that the mules had arrived. There were six of them, for that is the custom of the country, to bring more than the number stipulated and to allow the contracting parties, after endless argument, to settle between them which seem the least unfit. A long rope with a stake at each end was stretched on the ground: the stakes were driven in and each mule was hobbled to the rope by the right fore-leg. The mule at the end of the row was as miserable a specimen as one could hope to see: small, thin, knock-kneed, heavily ribbed: a jaded eye and a mouth made for yawning. I at once demanded that he should be thrown out. The muleteer was flabbergasted: '*Bahut accha wallah hai, Sahib*' ('A very fine fellow, Sir'), and he burst into a torrent of Sikkimese. When translated his arguments were certainly potent. He said that that mule ate less corn, less grass and did more work than any other mule in Sikkim: and he backed his opinion by giving it the heaviest load. He was

certainly justified. If ever beast aspired rightly to that term of 'accha wallah' it was that mule. It carried the heaviest load daily without complaint: it always looked on the point of death: it always nearly died a mile before our destination: it just did not expire on reaching its stable. It walked slowly and painfully in the rear of the caravan: it turned neither to the right nor the left: it showed no sign of life nor interest in life: it made no complaint and lifted not its voice: and it ate less corn than one can cram into a decent-sized cigarette tin.

The leader was an old hand, a brown mule with one large bell: the second mule had a great string of bells, and provided the music on the way: the third mule was insignificant and had no bell: nor had the miserable specimen: perhaps he would have tolled his own knell on it.

All was in readiness except the servants' baggage, and the leading mule was still without a load: since it was to bear the responsibilities of the journey it was kept as light as possible. The servants' bundles lay on the ground, an easy load for this sage and active beast, once they had been tied into a compact bale. The muleteer tried to tie them, but the thong—a long strip of tough bark—snapped as soon as it was drawn round. This obstacle overcome, the muleteer tried to lift the bundle, but failed: then the *mali*, attracted from his orchids by the violence of the discussion, tried to lift it and failed—and they both decided that it contained iron. This intrigued the mules immensely, especially the miserable specimen, who looked at it lovingly, wondering why it could not be substituted for or added to the ton or so already piled on its back. At last the muleteer and the *mali* and the two syces put their

## AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY

ominously, and regained the road on the opposite side, where, feeling rather proud of ourselves, we sat down to boiled eggs and cocoa.

The road from Gangtok to Karponang is not the most beautiful stretch in the march, but it is interesting, for in it one is subjected for the first time to all those experiences which are to become part of the day's routine later, although not met with in the even tenor of the average way. Of these the most alarming is the *Khud*, the precipice overhung by a path cut out of the side of the mountain.

This overhanging path varies in breadth from ten feet, which is a comfortable breadth, to eighteen inches, which is cutting it rather fine. In civilised parts of the world, such as parts of Sikkim, especially the road to Tibet over the Dzalep La on the Sikkim side, it has been made up with large flat stones, well laid and levelled at a slant towards the side mountain, like the bend on a *luge* run. The breadth of this made-up *khud*, for *khud* implies the combination of path and precipice, is rarely less than six feet, and a very safe and comfortable path would be the result were it not for the perversity of the Bhutia pony.

The Bhutia ponies are generally 'discovered' as pack animals or riding ponies in the mule trains bringing wool from Tibet. They are taught to emulate the habits of a mule, and any propensity for deviating from the habits of a mule that they may show, such as cantering or trotting, is carefully thrashed out of them. The reason for this is that the Tibetan saddle is really a perch, a pile of bedding on which the kazi balances himself, his knees drawn up halfway to his chin. A canter would dislodge him at once, a trot would place him in an extremely awkward predicament, and reduce his working parts to the

consistency of a beaten egg; so the pony is trained to walk and to amble only, and a high price is paid for a good ambler. If one rides in the orthodox English fashion this same amble develops into a form of torture.

The Bhutia pony is trained for the mule train, and he conducts himself as a mule. He walks at a steady even pace, and ambles when occasion demands: he also possesses one other of the mule's idiosyncrasies. For the mule is a beast with curiosity, and he finds a strange fascination in gazing over space, in hanging over the precipice the utmost ounce of his body consistent with the law of equilibrium: so he revels in the *khud*. He walks on the extreme edge of the *khud*, with half his body, half his pack, his head and, if possible, at least two feet hanging over the side. If the road is rough, loose, obviously dangerous, he will linger lovingly on it: push his head over the side and drink in the scene in the valley two thousand feet below. If the road is good, built up, but has below its edge soft loose earth, which has not yet crumbled or been washed away in the valley, he will leave the road and walk on that loose earth. And the Bhutia pony who has started life in a mule train, even if in the meantime he has been trained to polo and racing and has all the tricks of galloping, cantering and trotting at his elbow, will revert to the habits of the mule when he gets to the *khud* again, and walk on the edge and amble and play his tricks.

At first these tricks are alarming: to feel half of one's body hanging over the edge: there is a strong tendency to keep one's neck rigid and stare straight to one's front, although one knows that the beast is sure-footed, and perfectly happy: going his own way in his own land.

## AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY

All these things are first experienced on the way to Karponang, and the preliminary terrors overcome during that stretch of road which lies between the eighth and ninth milestones. Here the *khud* is very typical: the mountain side bare and stony, the valley some thousand feet below, the path strewn with boulders and loose earth.

I was riding some two hundred yards behind my companion. The road was steep, and I had long given up any attempt to keep Gyantse in the middle of the path. We had been climbing for the last hour at an even walk. The steady movements of the pony, the rhythmic clatter of his hoofs and the quiet calm of our surroundings had produced a kind of lethargy in me; my thoughts were very far away. Suddenly there was a rustle in front of us, a boulder with loose earth crashed on to the path a few yards ahead, Gyantse was on his knees and I was rolling over on the path: fortunately I had come off on the side opposite the *khud*, otherwise these words would not have been written.

It took me some time to recall my wits, and I felt very shaken when I picked myself up; I sat down on a boulder for a minute or two, waiting for my breath to come again, for the suddenness of my fall had left me sick and dizzy. Gyantse was unhurt, but frightened.

Landslides seem to be the one thing that these ponies are really afraid of, and the toll claimed in horses, mules and men in a year on this account must be heavy. I led the unwilling Gyantse past the cause of our accident, mounted again and was glad to get clear of that stretch of road. I learnt from that incident to gather my wool in more suitable places.

The slight drizzle which habitually comes on in the early afternoon, when the clouds that have gathered in the valleys have had time to climb to the tops of the hills, now started. In a driving mist we pushed on to the rest-house, a wooden building perched on the hillside amid a cluster of wooden outhouses, and reached it at three o'clock.

We soon got a large log-fire going, stabled our ponies and waited for the mules. As we waited we looked over the Visitor's Book and were much amused to read the complaint of a certain Russian Princess, who had made the tour of the Passes in 1921 with a companion. She complained of draughts, a lack of curtains and general niceties of civilisation. These complaints were far from our own thoughts, which tended to the singing of paeans to him who strewed dak bungalows in the path of travellers, or to primitive man, who discovered the comfort afforded by great logs burning in a great hearth. Curiously enough these ladies had already crossed Bishop's path in Mesopotamia and Persia, where they had travelled considerably during the latter months of the War. The foreign lands bordering the remote confines of the British Empire seem to have an irresistible attraction for them.

The mules arrived about an hour later, and the jingle of their bells aroused us from our lethargy. We went to the door and found that the clouds had lifted still further, and everything was clear.

The Karponang bungalow lies at the head of the gorge of the Rongni Chu. It is a little below the snow line. The pine-clad hills and great overhanging boulders were a feast of colours: greens, blues and dark purples. Overhead a turquoise sky: to the north the great mass of cloud rolling upwards towards the summit of the Himalayas.

### AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY

Opposite on the other side of the gorge a great buttress of mountain bulged southwards, and round this buttress wound the road that we were to take on the morrow: a narrow path dividing into two, one upper and one lower, marking the snow line round the hill. We could trace it from where we stood, chiselled out of the side of the hill, now shaded by trees, now bleak with snow, now crossing some frozen waterfall, now clinging to the bare mountain side, now a verandah bridge overhanging the valley. We could trace it for some three miles as it crept round the buttress, as far as the Lagyap La where, the buttress rounded, it turns north-east again and climbs to Lake Tanye Tso, to Changu and Nathu La.

The prospect of that path was as beautiful as one can hope to see. Above it was the snow-clad crest of the buttress: far below the waters of the Rongni Chu had decided to become a river, had gained shape and direction, and were gliding like some huge serpent towards the great Rangit River, towards Teesta, towards Ganges, towards the sea.

The evening drew on and we turned into the bungalow. On the verandah an abject sight awaited us. There sat the sweeper in complete kit, plus two blankets: his puggaree entwined over his Balaclava: mournfully contemplating the snow-clad line of mountains, to cross which was to be his bitter lot on the morrow. He complained that he had forgotten his boots, and could go no further. But the *Chowkidar*, for the sum of annas eight, produced two uppers that owned no soles and two soles that owned no uppers, and Bishop produced his medicine chest. The sweeper blanched at the sight of the bottles and instruments; and when two bandages were produced he made ready to give



KARPONANG



*'The pine-clad hills were a feast of colours :  
greens, blues, and dark purples.'*

up his life. The uppers were drawn over his feet, the soles clapped on. While I held them fast Bishop wound his bandages across and around, and so our sweeper was well and truly shod, like a cat in paper shoes. Tchugro came out to inspect him. 'Do you see that?' he asked, jerking his thumb towards a snow-clad peak some seventeen thousand feet high. 'We are going over it to-morrow.' Then he bade him good-night with a smile.

On the morrow we left the rest-house at nine o'clock, a glorious morning, cloudless, brilliant with colour. We decided to take the upper road and had started to climb by a zigzagged causeway when the shouts of the syces and the yodelling of the muleteer from below warned us that the path had given way further on and was impassable. We came down with some reluctance and resumed the lower path. Later on the remains of a large landslide marked the place where a stretch of the upper path had collapsed and tumbled into the valley, carrying trees and boulders in its course and damaging the lower path.

Snow lay here and there, for we were on the edge of the snow line, and the road consisted chiefly of verandah bridges and loose earth. There were sudden bends and turns, with overhanging boulders, and Gyantse turned these blind corners with a great show of reluctance, as if fearing the bogies that lurked behind them.

At one point we turned and found the path descending steeply by a series of verandah bridges to a bamboo bridge across a great waterfall, and mounting again to the snow level beyond.

Here, winding down from the opposite side of the valley, a long train of mules loaded with wool slowly plodded towards the bridge.

## AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY

Their bells jingled and filled the whole valley, before so silent, with a faint murmur, and the mules as they scrambled down the path to the bridge, appeared and disappeared like flashes of light in the gaps among the trees.

They were led by two stalwart Tibetan peasants, with hideous, swollen faces; their eyes covered by giant spectacles, their great tongues lolling out in the amenities of an early morning salaam. The mules clashed and stuck with our own at the bridge, and there was much rushing and shooing before our mules were packed side by side in a neat line with their noses over the *khud*. The train went by individually with mad rushes and scampers, jostling our mules with their packs of wool, driven forward in a frenzy by the yells of the muleteers. It was a confused and disturbed scene, and I marvelled why half of them did not go over into the valley. In their rear rode the kazi, an old and gnarled Tibetan on a shaggy pony. Both master and beast were dressed in gay trappings, and looked extremely business-like, especially the former, in spite of the benevolent aspect imparted to him by his long white hair. For he carried a long-barrelled flint-lock, a weapon spelling danger to its possessor, and met our greetings with a ferocious glare.

The road up from the bridge was bad and continued to be bad until we came to the place where it rejoins the upper road. This marked the end of the buttress which had been visible from Karponang, and we turned into the Changu valley after a last look at the Rongni Chu.

Vegetation had now ceased; a few blasted pines and withered

rhododendron twigs, that could have known no leaves and precious little sap, were all the signs of life visible. The road was good and the valley continued straight and open as far as the sixteenth mile from Gangtok, where it branches into two. At this point are the remains of a camp of the 1904 expedition, a small plateau of about an acre of withered grass, close cropped, and brown mud; well sheltered from the north by a bend in the valley.

A *ghuddi* or tea-house stands at the junction of the roads, and the road itself merges into the valley. For the Rongni Chu here is a trickle of water, and the valley into which we had turned had been climbing steadily until it had reached the level of the road. Henceforth the valley and the road were one, and the sides of the valley, covered with snow and blasted tree-stumps, were only one thousand feet high, of which about three hundred were visible. The breadth of the valley from hill to hill could not have been more than four hundred yards, and very straight and desolate it seemed.

From the edge of the camp, where we sat and munched chocolate, we could look back down the valley along the sides of which our road had wound; on the trickle of water that tumbled down to help swell the serpent that we had seen from Karponang. A blue mist was rising in the far distance, the herald of the afternoon cloud, and emerging from the mist we could see an insignificant cone-shaped hill with a square white speck on it: this was Gangtok.

The valley was warm though desolate. Under the large boulders were clusters of primulas and a small yellow flower resembling a dandelion. Snow became more frequent, and took the form of drifts

## *AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY*

rather than patches; soon it became a carpet, obscuring even the primulas; rock took the place of earth, and barren waste had caused even the blasted pine-trunks to disappear.

The road was cut out of the rock; it was slippery and treacherous. The valley climbed higher and higher, and the side of the ravine seemed more undulating. We were coming to the crest of the barrier, to the summit of that line of mountains, 13,000 feet high, which had looked so formidable from Gangtok.

The mist had now rolled up and reached us; before us the ravine ended abruptly in a great dam of rock over which streams of water trickled gently. The air was damp and cold, the mist became cloud, and there was a feeling of cheerlessness and desolation.

We climbed over the dam and found, stretching for half a mile before us, the frozen Lake of Tanye Tso. The path ran by the edge of the lake, the ice was thin with a covering of snow: there were gaps here and there through which black water gleamed. A grey boulder at the lake-side marked the twentieth milestone from Gangtok; it was a place to sadden a Satyr.

The mist changed to cloud, the cloud changed to drizzling rain, and the rain changed to hail. It seemed to be the end of the world, a jumping-off place to some fresh experience: a creepy waste where nothing that had happened in life seemed to matter. The dark gloomy lake and the barren mountains of earth and boulder that enclosed the lake formed a large bowl, a basin perched on the top of the earth, in which a man might be held while the ghost within him was forcibly and painfully extracted and driven to roam round the basin until it

BELOW CHANGU



*'Sudden bends and turns, with  
overhanging boulders.'*

## IV

### THE NATHU LA

THE next morning, owing to unavoidable delay, we did not succeed in getting away until eight o'clock, well wrapped up, with spares in the shape of woollen helmets and mufflers in our haversacks. There had been a heavy fall of snow during the night and the ponies had difficulty in keeping to the track, which was barely eighteen inches broad. In the end Lucifer refused to march in it, and plunged about in the drifts on each side of the track, which were from three to four feet deep. The only thing that could be done was to send the mules ahead to clear a path and march behind them. This ruse succeeded, for they trampled out a narrow track of some fifteen inches through the snow along which the ponies, save for occasional excursions into likely-looking drifts, were content to follow.

The road was broken and narrow, and our attentions were confined to the difficulties it offered; it led from mountain top to mountain top, over crests and round buttresses of stone. The mountain crests were too close to one another for a long sweeping view: and they looked decidedly grim and barren. At length after a long detour round the crest of a hill, we found a ravine stretching before us at the head of which lay Nathu La.

## THE NATHU LA

The approach to the Nathu La and the Pass itself are not formidable: the last stages of road are veritable road and not an iniquity, as is the approach to the Dzalep. The approach has been so gradual that there is no need for a formidable climb, and save for the actual scramble over the snow-covered pass, the way is easy enough.

The Pass, when compared with the Dzalep La, is rarely used and is not open all the year. The road itself is a natural path made by countless feet of mules; when we crossed, it had been opened only a week. The snow was from three to four feet deep, and frozen. Over this frozen and slippery path lay a foot of fresh snow, representing the fall of the previous night. This fall, which in the early stages of the march had completely obliterated the path, at this stage merely made it treacherous. For the path had been hacked or trampled down through large drifts, so that a bank of snow lay each side and the footholds and strong places where man or mule might tread in safety were obliterated; there was much stumbling and holding up and whistling and hallooing by all concerned.

The Pass itself seemed to be retreating before us. Time after time we surmounted what we had hoped to be the final crest, only to find another crest confronting us with the obvious appearance of being our coveted goal. At one point we were nearly all swept down in a tumbling mass of beasts, men and odd limbs into the valley beneath—it happened in this wise.

The mules had tired, and were scrambling up with great reluctance, so much so that the leading mule wished to argue the advisability of advancing further, and always chose an awkward moment for his



*AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY*

protests. At one point in the way we came to a most hazardous turn, where the road was nearly perpendicular and afforded no foothold for the ponies, and little attraction for the mules. They seemed to slip back two feet for every foot they climbed, so that our position was precarious: we could only grip hard, keep quiet, and not be too anxious about the 500 feet or so of sheer drop beneath. It was a moment for a brisk and thoughtless scramble, but the leading mule cleared the steep and stood still ! Nothing would move him. He refused to budge until he had regained his breath and enjoyed the picturesque nature of his surroundings. And we were left clinging to the ice at an angle of eighty degrees, like drunken flies with elastic legs; hoofs slithering and slipping; ponies showing a tendency to lose their heads; the three mules in front inclined to faint and fall back load and all upon the top of us. It was a moment of varying emotions. The muleteer had experience of such moments, and started to fling snowballs right and left. He seemed to be glued to the mountain side, to be breaking shop-windows from the cover of the village pillar-box, and he got the mule on the back of the neck with such effect that the beast actually moved. A scramble and a bound forward by all of us: for a moment we thought we were clear. But the miserable specimen of mule, who had regarded the last proceedings as a favourable opportunity for giving up the ghost thrown away, was not to be outdone by his leader; he stopped in his turn to recover, not his breath but his life, and no snowball could shift that gallant frame. We were left in a worse predicament, for the snow had been turned into glass by the slipping and backsliding of those who had been held up in front of us previously. It seemed as if nothing could

## THE NATHU LA

save us from being carried away. Then the ponies made a sudden leap upwards and carried mule and all forward to safety; but we were well pleased to clear that hazardous turn.

Once we were clear, I dismounted and stumbled forward gaily over what I took to be the Pass. But another range awaited us beyond, and it was fifteen minutes before we stood by the cairn of stones that marked the Nathu La.

Round the cairn stood a few strips of bamboo with prayer flags tied to them, and a yak's tail fluttered from the cairn itself, although it was not the yak's tail that engaged our attention.

Behind us was nothing but mist; clouds had obscured the gorge up which we had climbed. Before us, as far as the eye could see, stretched Tibet, cloudless, gleaming in the midday sun. Range upon range, furrow upon furrow, stretched the brown barren hills, picked out in chocolate and black, clear-cut and distinct each from each, the sun gilding the crests and throwing them forward in relief from their fellows behind, like furrows in a giant's field, or neat and orderly plaster hills on a relief map. Behind them, thrusting a mighty spire ten thousand feet into the cloudless sky, snow-clad, ineffable, Chumolaori, divine mother of mountains. One pure white spire towering above those furrows of chocolate and black, rich chocolate, rich black, and the whiteness of snow. Above all a cloudless sky, not blue but turquoise, a vista of mighty jewellery, glittering beneath an Eastern sun.

The wind swept cold and pure, cut against our faces, whistled in our ears, filled our eyes with tears, but all unheeded as we gazed at

## AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY

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 it—*Om mane padme hum !*

No wonder that men creep in paltry numbers on the face of it, or hide in holes beneath the surface of it. Here is a place where man is of no avail; where a close analysis and investigation of his soul is a task to draw tears of pity. Man dwells upon the face of it, an intruder; above it stretches the divine mother of mountains, unconquered, untrampled, untrammelled—Chumolaori: the purest gem in that mighty diadem.

At one's side, the paltry cairn thrown up by a passing peasant, the yak's tail, the bamboo canes, the fluttering prayers: a gale of wind would sweep them headlong. But the winds pent up in the plains of that table-land of Tibet, caught in her hollows, compressed in her mountain cups, rage and shriek to no purpose around Chumolaori. She stands there serene, immovable, unconquerable: a prayer of God, that can only be gazed upon in wonder: simple as that other prayer of God: a snow-white peak, solitary, magnificent, towering ten thousand feet above the place where man can tread.

We started the descent into Tibet in silence: leaping from crag to crag, splashing through the thaw that was snow, following a trickle of water that served as a road. A mule left the track and wallowed in a deep drift; the syces ran to the rescue, but we passed on unheeding : if the devils of that land demanded a mule as a sacrifice, they should have it. The beast was dragged out kicking from some five feet of snow. The great chocolate ridges welled up to the sky as we scrambled down

*CHUMOLAORI*



*'The divine mother of mountains : unconquered, untrampled.'*

## AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY

path overhung the valley and was free from snow: at the inside the loops brushed against sheer precipice, and the path was made up of pine logs thrown across horizontally, and built into the side of the mountain, covered with a thin layer of ice. The ponies were once more in their native country and knew it. They stepped out with great vigour, trotted round the outside loops and picked their way cleverly over the slippery logs; the air gradually filled with the scent of pine, and became warmer; we rode on in great spirits.

After some three miles we came to a clearing. The ponies broke into a canter, a sure sign that our destination was near at hand, and soon we saw a hut with chickens scratching in the muck-heap before it. A small hole had been cut into the side of it to serve as a window, and through the window was thrust the dirty face of a Tibetan woman. She yelled something to us, and pointed down the valley. We waved a welcome, cantered on and rounded the bend, where we saw, perched on a small hill to our left, the rest-house of Champithang.

It was built in the style of a Swiss ch<sup>^</sup>let, of wood, with a long verandah and a small clearing in front shielded from the valley below by a wooden railing. We loosened our ponies' girths, tied them to the railing, and went into the bungalow.

The rooms were bare but large, with great fireplaces. A sniff on the verandah heralded the arrival of an extremely small boy with red and fat cheeks, staggering under the load of some great logs of wood. He threw them into the fireplace, announced with solemnity that he was the *chowkidar*, and ran for the fire. This he brought in a large shovel, and placed in the fireplace, for in Tibet the fire burns night and day

all the year; then, going on his knees, in the intervals of his sniffs he blew the embers into flame, and soon had a large fire going. In spite of the fact that none of the smoke went up the chimney, but dashed back against our faces in a thick swirling cloud, the fire gave the place a decided air of warmth and comfort.

The boy himself was an interesting little creature. His father had died some twelve years previously and his mother, who was officially in charge, was an invalid, so that for some years he had been acting as *chowkidar*, and drawing the pay befitting that office, his only aid and abettor being a small dog with a curly tail. He was dressed in an English coat and breeches and a Balaclava helmet, with long Tibetan boots of red and blue wool and a thick muffler—for the most part garments that were relics of some old expedition. He looked after us well for all his sniffing, and, judging from the prices he tried to extort from us for fuel and oil, had a keen and practical mind for business. His oil, however, was bad and the lamps smoked abominably.

We had not to wait long for the servants, and opened a cake to celebrate the occasion, enjoying our tea as it has rarely been enjoyed before. We dipped into the three novels that comprised the bungalow library, and when these pathetic exiles had yielded their poor secrets, turned our thoughts and speculations to the new civilisation that was to be unfolded to us, or the old civilisation that was to be recalled, in the Chumbi Valley. The night drew on, dismally cold, heralded by the usual mist, which had swept over the Pass in our wake and had nearly caught us up before we reached Champithang. We transferred our fire from room to room, but all the chimneys smoked, so that we

*AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY*

decided on the two inside rooms nearest the hillside as being more sheltered, and there we slept.

A hot bath in front of the fire before turning in made sleep a comfortable proposition, nor did the discovery that my British warm coat had been left behind at Changu tempt me to return for it.

## V

### THE CHUMBI VALLEY

WE woke to a brilliant sun and cloudless sky, and found to our delight that the bungalow of Champithang had been pitched among scenery even more beautiful than we had anticipated. From the bend of the valley we could see the ravine stretching up to the Nathu, with the pass clear cut and gleaming in the sun; strangely inaccessible it seemed, in fact our climb of yesterday appeared like a fantasy, a dream that had heralded this Swiss morning.

On the other side of the valley, which was about a mile across, towered the snow-clad buttress separating the approach to the Nathu from that to the Dzalep; great pine trees covered the lower slopes and filled the morning air with their scent. Far down in the opposite direction lay the Chumbi Valley and the road to Chumolaori.

My first care was for my British Warm, and I left a note to be handed to the next Tibetan wool train that might pass, so that the coat could be collected at Changu and taken through to the Doctor Sahib at Gangtok; all of which was done in this land of honest men, and the coat is with me now: but I was to feel the want of it badly later on.

We set off at eight o'clock on our ride to Yatung. The air was warm, all sense of bleakness had vanished, and one felt a great sense of



## AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY

A short scramble down the hillside brought us to the Monastery. It was a large two-storeyed building, built of stone with red wooden roofs, surrounded by a thick belt of pine, looking very much like a large house of playing cards which nobody had had the indecency to blow down. We found but few lamas present: one who had once been a leper; another with the thickest and most heavily populated head of hair I have yet seen; and two small boys. They were dressed in long thick rusty-red robes of wool, and were all beams and smiles; at their invitation we passed through a gaily decorated archway into the courtyard.

The leper ran on in front and spun joyfully the large wooden spools with prayers painted upon them, which had been set in racks on each side of the gateway: but neither god nor man came out to welcome us.

The courtyard was empty, although the monastery was alleged to house 'nine times ten lamas,' for so the man with the hair expressed himself in his medley scraps of Hindustani. In the middle was a large stack of wood fuel, and into the north side cloisters had been built, decorated in red, yellow and blue, with scenes from the life of Buddha, and adorned with many fiends and ferocious beasts. Here the lamas are in the habit of sitting down in meditation, airing themselves in the sun—as well they might.

The lama with the hair showed the greatest interest in my camera, and insisted on looking through the sights as I took a snapshot of the courtyard. As a result his mop of hair not only brushed but rested against my cheek and neck for the best part of a minute—a distinctly

unsavoury favour, nor did my imagination spare me as to the results of the caress.

The most interesting of the four was the smaller of the two boys: an urchin of eight years. In addition to his red cassock he had a peaked elf's cap of the same colour, and red and blue long woollen boots, while in a sack on his back he carried a skin containing holy water. As he was about to go down to Chumbi to visit his mother he offered to guide us into the village, and set off down the hill holding Bishop's hand. He answered Bishop's Hindustani, of which he understood nothing, with smiles and queer little Tibetan monosyllables, bounding and dancing along the path at a great pace, dragging Bishop down the hill in his wake. His elf's cap seemed to worry him, and after a while he took it off and laid it flat on the top of his head, and so balanced it.

The road swept round the hill in a wide detour, passing by great rocks and waterfalls, only lacking heather to be part of the Western Highlands of Scotland; the sun-warmed haze was full of the hum of insect life, bringing to us both a general feeling of return to humanity. We were now close to the village, and, at a bend in the road, we saw our first yak, feeding by the wayside. Soon we came to a short cut, and Puck, as we had named him, pointed it out as the fitting and proper way to approach Chumbi. He then proceeded to go down it—to us it was a scramble, almost a climb—in what must be the orthodox way of taking short cuts to the good people of Shashima. He placed his hands rigidly by his sides, and by the simple process of stepping out into the air and allowing himself to fall until one of his feet lightly brushed the ground, when he at once thrust forward the other foot,

### AN UNFREQUENTED HIGHWAY

descended in a series of bounds at an astounding pace. Having reached the bottom of some harrowing sector he would look back at the *sahiblog* in amazement, mingled with contempt, at their inability to imitate him. And so he proceeded, bounding forward in front of us like a will-o'-the-wisp, and gazing up reproachfully at our clumsy efforts to keep up with him; at last his patience gave way and, without even a wave of the hand, he broke into a trot which so exceeded anything we could accomplish that he was speedily lost to sight.

And so we came to Chumbi: a neat little village, with a very fine *chorten* at its approach upon which a gilded spire gleamed in the sun: we sat watching it from a mound above the village, until the syces arrived with the ponies.

The three villages in the Chumbi Valley are neat and clean to look at, and consist of large wooden houses, with wooden roofs in the form of planks, evenly cut, laid across the house and kept from blowing off by large stones. Between each village the land is cultivated, chiefly with barley, though the crops are meagre and of poor quality. The fields are small, and divided up by short stone walls, very much in the manner of Maltese cultivation. The streets in the village are narrow and winding, made up of great cobbles, with many twists and curves, just as if the houses had been built first and the paths to them had later become streets.

Two very fine large wooden houses facing each other, with a quaint gabled house forming the far side of the square, make the market-place at Chumbi; a yak train had just arrived, and the bales were lying on the ground in readiness to be despatched to India. The

yak do not go further than Chumbi: thence onwards the wool is carried by mules over the passes to the Kalimpong bazaar; for the yak could not stand the heat of the Sikkimese valleys, and even the Tibetans themselves complain of the heat in Kalimpong and occasionally suffer from heat stroke.

This yak is a curious creature, a beast with long woolly hair, matted and thick as fleece: giant sheep and Highland cattle rolled into one. It is universal provider to the Tibetans, giving them its flesh for meat, its milk for butter, its hair for clothes, its tail for a whip, its dung for fuel and its own self for beast of burden and draught. It can go for long periods without food, and is at its happiest when snowed up, for in its natural state it lives in herds above the snow line; a hardy beast, well adapted to the barren bleakness of its haunts.

We rode through the winding streets, up over a bridge, and stopped at a small *ghuddi*—a house where one can get tea—by the wayside. The host was a cheery man with a smattering of Hindustani, doubtless a legacy from the Mount Everest Expedition. We were rather afraid of his tea, having heard much beforehand of this delicacy, which is a nauseating draught, food and drink in one, oily greasy food such as the cold man loves: yak butter and tea boiled up together, with a lump of mutton fat to float on the top if one is considered of sufficient importance to merit such a luxury. After a long canter on a cold day upon the table-land this tea becomes very refreshing if one has been long enough in the country to overcome its initial nastiness: we were never able to contemplate it with anything but horror, although Bishop was made to swallow several dishes of it before we returned to India.

## THE CHUMBI VALLEY

proved to be much narrower than we had expected. The Amo Chu, which tumbles down the middle, is a broad stream running rapidly through large rocks, and has every appearance of offering first class fishing. Actually the fish are very small and scarce, for the river is only a score of miles from its source and less than a dozen from the snow line.

We rode through the village of Piphithang. The road is straight and runs through the courtyard of the house of the Depön, the Chinese Trade Agent that was, who now acts as Tibetan Governor of this part of the world and has powers of life and death; we clattered past his courtyard unchallenged, for we had decided to postpone our visit to him until after our return from Phari.

Yatung itself—Shashima that was—is hidden from Piphithang by a bend north-eastwards; it is a large village divided into two parts by the Amo Chu. We were now on the right bank—having crossed by a large plank bridge beyond Piphithang—where lies the main part of the village, the Trade Agency, the Post Office, the guard-room for the platoon of the company forming the Trade Agent's escort—the main body is at Gyantse—and the polo ground, where Tibetan ponies are broken in and taught the tricks of their trade before being sent to India.

On the left bank, sheltered under the hill and commanding a sweeping view up and down the valley on either side, is the rest-house. To get to the left bank one crosses by a wooden arched bridge, so narrow and frail that ponies can only cross one at a time at a walk, and even after these precautions the bridge swayed ominously.

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