Lepcha Land: Or, Six Weeks in the Sikhim Himalayas - Primary Source Edition

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Florence Donaldson

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LEPCHA LAND

OR

SIX WEEKS IN THE SIKHIM
HIMALAYAS



BY

FLORENCE DONALDSON

WITH A MAP SHOWING ROUTE, AND 106 ILLUSTRATIONS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY P. AND F. DONALDSON

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PREFACE

In offering to the public this slight sketch of a brief sojourn in the Sikhim Himalayas, I do so with no pretence of adding to the scientific or historical knowledge of the district. But I hope it may interest some of the many whose work in life makes it impossible for them to indulge in the love of travel which has developed so greatly among all classes of British society. In this account of what may best be described as a prolonged picnic in one of the byways of the Himalayas-where Time still walks on crutches-I have attempted no description of the flora and fauna of a country which, though it offers few facilities for sport, boasts a marvellously luxuriant vegetation, and is said to possess a hundred different species of orchid. Nor have I made more than a few necessary remarks on the history of the different races to be found in it. All this has been already done. The following pages-written at the request of friends-are only intended to describe a journey among new and interesting surroundings, undertaken in 1891 just after a fresh awakening on the part of the Indian Government to the political importance of Sikhim. But, at the time, desire for extended influence was checked by Chinese diplomacy, and the prospect of more friendly intercourse put still further back by the enduring antagonism of the great Lamas of Llassa. The last nine years have made

little outward difference either in the country or in our position. The permission to make a traffic depôt at Yatung—a few miles beyond the Jeylap Pass—proved a very trifling concession after years of diplomatic angling. It was found to be too bleak and barren a spot to be of any sort of commercial value. But during the past year there has been a renewal of the agitation against the influence of China, which so hampers the natural trade between Hindustan and Tibet. Current events, however, and the probable parcelling out of Chinese territory, are likely to open the flood-gates of Western civilization. But when this comes to pass, "Lepcha Land" will be a misnomer, and another primitive, patriarchal and peace-loving people will have died out.

F. D.

Simla, 1900.

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LEPCHA LAND

CHAPTER I.

CALCUTTA TO SILIGURI.

Planning a holiday—Where to go—The buffer state—Sikhim— Preliminary arrangements—"Chhumbi" and "Tuko"—Off at last—An amusing incident—Siliguri.

It was one afternoon, during a break in the rains a few years ago, that my husband and I, reclining on long cane chairs, exhausted with the steamy heat and with the effort of trying to read, first seriously mooted the question of getting away to the hills on privilege leave. Calcutta had been specially trying, but when indeed is it otherwise? As we mutually agreed that we needed a holiday, it was not long before we had definitely decided to apply for one, and began busily counting up the leave due to us, and arranging on what date we should go.

It was already late in August, and we found that the six weeks' notice required in applying for leave would bring us near to the Durga Poojahs. The Poojahs, as they are commonly called, happened to fall at a convenient time, and there was a possibility of getting them as well as the thirty-four days due to us on the accumulative system of official leave. Rather more than six weeks altogether! This would, indeed, be worth trying for, and our spirits rose at the thought.

The question of where this holiday should be spent involved the most careful consideration, and the oppressive heat was forgotten in eager discussion of trips by land and sea. We were both good sailors, fond of the water, and had often meditated a visit to the Andamans or to Burma; but October was the month of cyclones, and we felt hardly equal to being lashed by the tail of the monsoon in the Bay of Bengal. Darjeeling was vetoed at once. We had no wish to stay at this fashionable hill station. We had lived in the mofussil, and knew what it was to long for the civilized society of our fellow-countrymen. After vegetating for months in monotonous routine of work and up-country isolation, we had longed to share in the amusements and frivolities obtainable at a hill station; but now we had been some years in Calcutta and yearned for a thorough change and freedom from restraint.

We could have enjoyed the globe-trotter's trip, and have spent our weeks roaming from city to city, haunting the busy marts and religious head quarters of the many different races and creeds of Hindustan; or in studying the ruins of old dynasties, and musing over the relics of a past civilization; but interesting as this could not fail to be, it would not give us the cold air and bracing climate we craved, and indeed, considered a sine qua non of a holiday. At any cost we must fly the plains. The beautiful Neilgherries would give us the tonic we needed, but entailed a long, hot and fatiguing journey of many days. Kashmere appealed to us in all the romantic imagery of Lalla Rookh, and the perfume of the Garden of Roses came wafted on the wings of imagination as we conjured up its far-famed beauties; but sober matter-offact reminded us that it would take at least a fortnight to reach Srinagar, and remembering that it was the land of the tourist, we turned from it as from an evil to be avoided, and voted it too far.

Among the many difficult problems requiring to be solved from time to time by our statesmen, and those in authority in India, none is more important than the great question of how best to guard our frontier. What . the sea does for the British Isles, or the established policy of civilized nations to maintain inviolate the recognized boundaries of a country, are both factors wanting to the preservation of our Indian empire. The natural boundary of a great mountain range is of little avail when so many races and peoples are ever on the watch to overrun us: whether in the nomad spirit of pure love of marauding. and simple delight in adventure for such booty as they can find, or egged on by some greater power in the background, that, if successful in thus forcing an entrance, might pour down and overwhelm us. The policy of the buffer state is the only safe one, but necessitates constant vigilance, and leads, as we have so lately experienced, to frequent arguments with our wild hill neighbours.

It was after the days when our Afghan difficulties had been so brilliantly settled, and before the Manipur disasters, that the attention of the Government was turned towards Sikhim. This mountainous country, lying in the Eastern Himalayas, is the buffer state between us and Chinese Tibet, and unexpected friction rose with the ruling Rajah. He showed undue favouritism to his Mongolian neighbours, and we naturally resented it, whereupon the Tibetan plumage was ruffled, and they tried to peck at us. Preferring to carry the war into the enemy's country, we marched quietly through Independent Sikhim, and had our skirmish with the Tibetans on their own borders. A few scratches, followed by much kowtowing, and the scribes took up the case. But the correspondence promised to be lengthy and far-reaching; and while the courteous interchange of English parchment

with Tibetan palm leaf backed by highly-decorated Chinese paper went on, it was thought that matters might be facilitated if we established a small garrison on the frontier for the benefit of our buffer state. The Sikhim Rajah was not as grateful as he should have been, and he fell somewhat into disgrace. But these matters developed slowly. Echoes from the British garrison on the heights stationed at 12,030 feet above sea-level, and near the Jeylap Pass, were wafted down to Calcutta and awoke much interest there, for in no other part of the world, surely, had English soldiers been called upon to live in so rarified an atmosphere. At one time there was a prospect of a great embassy to Llassa, and it was the talk of Calcutta for a whole season. There was much packing up of scientific toys and tooth-brushes, to be presented as the offerings of civilization, and tender farewells were taken of the favoured few selected to enter this land of the sealed gates. But somehow the procession never got further than Darjeeling, and the undertaking had to be classed among the things "that might have been."

The district in which this favourite sanitarium was built had once belonged to Sikhim, but was bought by the English Government from the ruling Rajah. Subsequent treaties gave us wider sway over the southern spur of the Eastern Himalayas, and resulted in our possession of British Sikhim, and the adjoining British Bhutan, lying still further to the East. Tea gardens had sprung up rapidly on the sunny slopes in these districts; Christian missions had been established in the centres most easy of access; and here and there a small house had been erected for the brief visits of the political or forest officer. The occasional traveller, therefore, was always sure of a hospitable welcome, but the facilities of getting about were too few to tempt many of the tired plains folk. Independent Sikhim had been barred to all visitors, unless by special

permission, until within the last few years; but now that we had a political agent stationed in the heart of the country, and this temporary British garrison on the heights, English travellers could climb the mountains where they chose in safety.

Now it happened that a mission friend and fellow amateur photographer, living in British Bhutan, but whose mission extended over Sikhim, wrote to us during those few days in which we had been vainly trying to decide where to go in our holiday, and describing the beauties of the country, said, "he often wondered that no amateur photographers came to explore a neighbourhood where every step offered such perfect subjects for the camera."

"That is just the place for us," exclaimed my husband, as he put down the letter; "I will write to him at once and see what help and advice he can give us if we start on an exploring tour through Sikhim."

I was only too willing to carry out such a novel idea: it would entail daily riding, constant change of scene, pure bracing air, and be a sort of prolonged picnic. We were both fond of photography and had plenty of apparatus at our command.

The letter was soon written and brought a prompt reply, satisfactory in every way, besides being full of information and advice as to what we should require to take with us. On the strength of it D. sent in his application for privilege leave, and asked to be allowed to take in the Poojahs. It is always wisest in such circumstances to expect success, and make all preparations for departure in anticipation of sanction, though the possibility of being refused at the last moment lends a spice of excitement which adds something to the craving to get away. In this case there was so much to do and to think about, to plan and arrange, and prepare for the march, that the trying weeks of steamy heat passed far

more pleasantly than usual, though they left us about as washed out and run down as most other Anglo-Indians who have spent years in the enervating climate of Lower Bengal. Packing went on slowly but steadily, and every day added something to the definiteness of our arrangements, so that by the time D. received the official sanction to his privilege leave, nearly all our heavy baggage had been forwarded by the Teesta Valley bullock train to Kalimpong, the capital of British Bhutan, there to await our arrival. We had been warned not to count on any food supply in the unfrequented regions we were going to, so I bought stores of tinned provisions and packed assortments in 20 lb. boxes, convenient for coolies to carry, and containing in each one sufficient to satisfy all our wants for a few days together. This prevented the necessity of opening more than one box at a time-a plan we afterwards found of immense advantage. Cooking utensils and enamelled crockery were carefully selected and packed in a special basket. Warm clothes for the higher altitudes, as well as cooler ones for the valleys, were stowed away in light wicker trunks, covered with waterproof canvas to keep out the wet. Several dozens of photographic plates, besides chemicals and spare apparatus, were also sent on in advance; and when all had been despatched, we turned our attention to getting ready the things we should have to take with us. Tents were to be provided at Kalimpong, and hill ponies would be procured for us at Siliguri by a tea-planter in the Terai, at whose house we were to spend a night on our way up.

The first day of the Poojahs arrived, and everything was ready. We had bundles of warm bedding with thick, new blankets; our own saddles, together with bits, bridles, and other accessories required for hill ponies; a box of food for the one Mahommedan servant we took

with us; our personal luggage; three cameras, and the two small hill dogs we had owned for the past year, and who were important members of the party. They were named respectively "Chhumbi" and "Tuko." The former was a Bhootea dog about the size of a rough-haired English terrier. His long coat was bright fox colour set off by a coal-black muzzle, white breast and paws, and a fine bushy tail curling half over his back. "Tuko" came from Tibet—brought over by traders—when a tiny puppy. He was about the size and colour of a Dandie Dinmont. His black coat, soft as cat's fur, was marked something like a tabby's, while his short paws

and curly tail were tipped with cream colour. Both were good watch-dogs. On reaching Sealdah station, we found it crowded to excess with hundreds of people of all classes going to Darjeeling for the Poojah holidays. Two long trains were required to find room for all the passengers, and



" Chhumbi."

were despatched following each other. Every seat was occupied; the heat was stifling, and we were all tired enough when we reached the Ganges, and had to take to the steamer by which passengers are ferried across this mighty river. Here we found a comfortable dinner served on deck, and enjoyed the soft wind that blew across the water and refreshed us even more than the food and drink.

We were not inclined to rouse up very early in the morning, after a somewhat broken night's rest, and the sun was well up when we began to dress. The train stopped at Jalpaiguri before we were ready, and I let down a window to look out and enjoy the fresh cool breeze blowing from the hills. "Chhumbi" looked also, and then to my horror suddenly jumped out and made for

some long grass opposite. I could only seize "Tuko" lest he should follow his companion's example, and call to my husband who was in the adjoining bath-room. A shout to "Chhumbi" was only responded to by a joyful wag of the tail, and in a moment D. had opened the door and ran after the culprit, picking him up and regaining the carriage just before the train started, and



before he had realized that he was in his shirt-sleeves, and with the tooth-brush he had been using when the catastrophe happened still in his hand. How we laughed! Poor "Chhumbi!" he couldn't understand being shut up in a shaky train on such a deliciously cool morning. Another hour and we were at Siliguri, where we had breakfast, and bid farewell to friends in the train who were going on up the hill.