THIS MY VOYAGE

by

TOM LONGSTAFF

If any man shall demaunde of me the cause of this my vyage, certeynely I can sheive no better reason then is the ardent desire of knowledge, which hath moved many other to see the worlde and miracles of God therin.

VARTHEMA, trans. 1576.

NEW YORK

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
WYMAN & SONS, LTD., LONDON, FAKENHAM AND READING

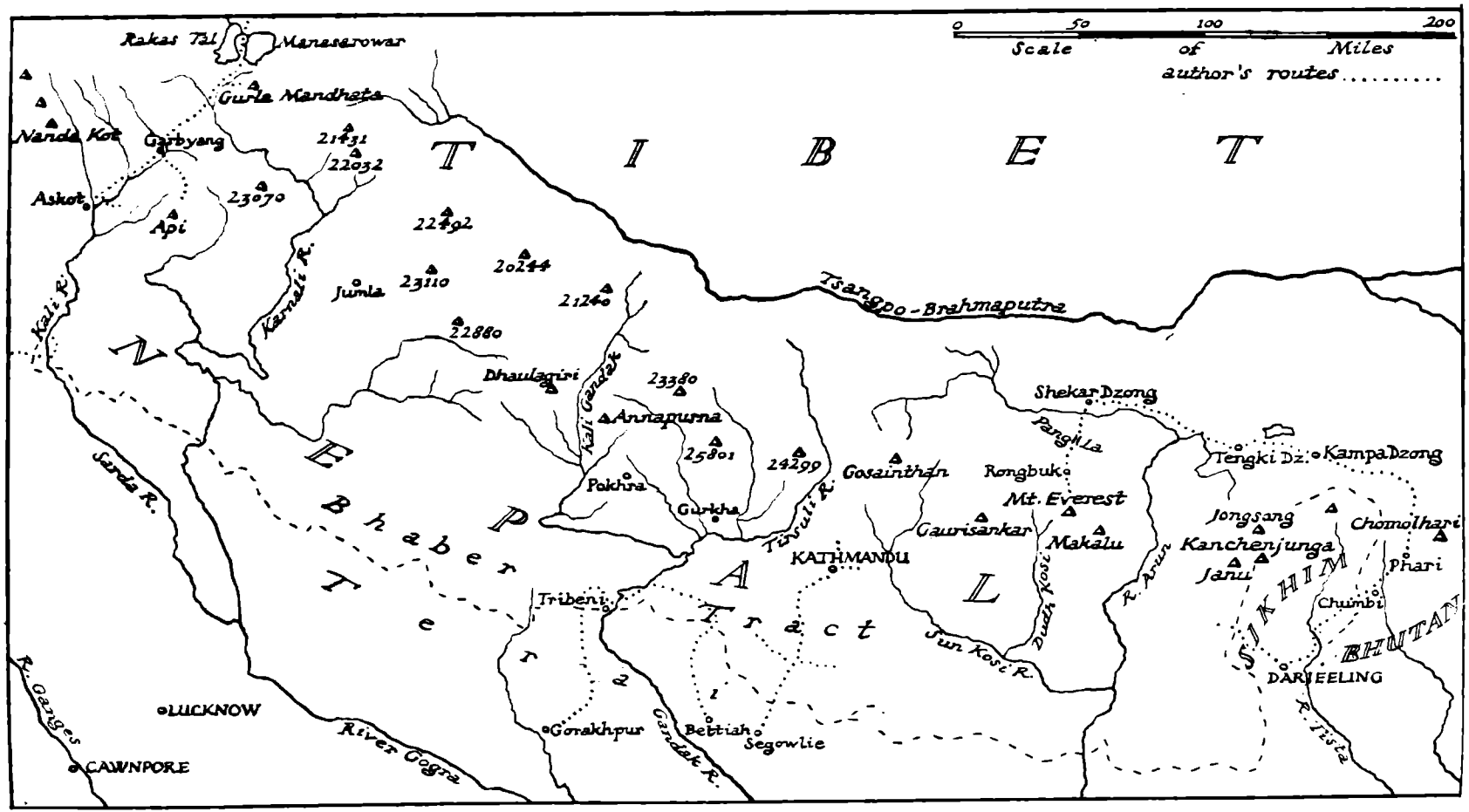
CHAPTER 7

NEPAL

NEPAL is a closed land. Except for the British representative at Kathmandu no foreigner is allowed to enter it without special permission, and that is hard to obtain. Yet through this fascinating country stretches for 500 miles the very finest part of the Himalaya, unexplored by Europeans, a treasure stored up for future generations of travellers. Mysterious Pokhra, tropical, low-lying by a lake and closely backed by the immense peaks of Annapurna, is still beyond our ken.

Nepal is an independent sovereign state, but was for a hundred years the ally of the King-Emperor. Its history is of war and conquest and a military form of administration sits lightly and naturally upon the people. The government is in reality an oligarchy dominated by a Prime Minister who holds all executive power and whose office has been held for more than a century by the great Rana family of Bimsen Thapa, ancestor of the still more famous Jung Bahadur, man of many hair-breadth escapes and single-handed catcher of elephants. The office may descend to a brother, a son, or a nephew, and there have been cases of a ruler voluntarily abdicating in favour of the next in succession. The system resembles that of the Merovingian Mayor of the Palace or that of the Shogun in old Japan: except that his title is Maharaja. The hereditary King, the Maharajadiraj, though sacrosanct, has no executive responsibilities, though he formally appoints the Prime Minister.

The country is inhabited by many different tribes. The most famous are the Magars and Gurungs, backbone of our Gurkha regiments. Inhabiting deeply dissected valleys, separated by high mountain spurs, these tribes are isolated from each other


Rakas Tal
Manasarowar
Gurla Mandhata
Nanda Kot
Garbyang
21431
22032
Askot
23070
Api
22492
20244
Jumla
23110
21240
Karnali R.
Kali R.
22880
Tsangpo-Brahmaputra
TIBET
NEPAL
Dhaulagiri
23380
Kali Gandak
Annapurna
25801
24299
Shekar Dzong
Pangla
Tengki Dz.
Kampa Dzong
Pokhra
Gurkha
Gosainthan
Rongbuk
Mt. Everest
Tisuli R.
Gaurisankar
Makalu
Jongsang
Chomolhari
Kanchenjunga
Janu
Phari
Sarda R.
KATHMANDU
R. Arun
Dudh Kosi
Bheber Terai Tract
Tribeni
Chumbi
SIKHIM
BHUTAN
Sun Kosi R.
DARJEELING
R. Tista
LUCKNOW
R. Ganges
CAWNPORE
River Gogra
Gorakhpur
Bettiah
Segowlie
Gandak R.
Scale of Miles
0 50 100 200
author's routes

and speak different languages, some of which are still known to scholars only by name. The native tribes are mongolian; a smiling, laughing people; but when the Moslem Taghluks under Allah-u-din sacked Chitor many aryan Rajputs fled to these hills. They founded the small kingdom of Gorkha in central Nepal and became the ruling race, retaining their Hindu caste status, still wearing the brahmanical thread and speaking the Khas dialect. Thus we find a Hindu caste system of Brahmins and Kshattriyas imposed on a mongolian and even on a Buddhist background. I cannot believe that any other country in the world contains so many and such varied problems of interest awaiting revelation to western eyes.

The Kali river, up which I had travelled with Sherring to Tibet, forms the western boundary of Nepal right from the Terai, on the edge of the Gangetic Plain, up to the Tibetan frontier. During that journey in 1905 I was naturally tempted to cross the river and to set foot in Nepal. So Pahal Singh, Sherring's frontier assistant, diplomatically arranged for me to call on the Nepalese governor of the district on the opposite bank. As Nepal is a closed land the Kali is not bridged, except for a flimsy structure above Garbyang, the last village in our territory. But at Darchula, two marches above Askot, a rope is stretched tightly across cliff-sided narrows, the confined river flowing in malignant swirls below. Over the fixed rope runs a wooden crutch, from which depends a rope sling as a seat and which can be hauled back and forth across the river. My crossing was watched intently from both sides, for signs of panic which I concealed.

The Lieutenant Sahib, with picturesque Nepalese badge of rank in his turban, received me and showed me over his jail, a clean, open compound with the usual grass hut for sleeping quarters. The inmates seemed to be well treated and my host was at pains to impress upon me that the administration of justice was so strict in Nepal that even he could not keep a man in prison without bringing some charge against him; in fact there was a form of our *habeas corpus* act, probably unique in eastern countries.

A few days later, Sherring being detained at the Bhotia village of Garbyang at the head of the Kali valley, I seized the opportunity of making another small incursion into Nepal. This extreme north-west corner of the state is isolated by a half-circle of snowy mountains, so that Nepalese officials had to travel through British India to enter or leave it. The highest peaks of the isolating range are Api (23,382) and Nampa (22,162 feet). A. H. Savage-Landor wrote an account[31] of his ascent in 1899 of a peak he called Lumpa over 23,000 feet high and described how between 5 a.m. and 6 p.m. he had ascended and descended 10,000 feet in a straw hat, shoes and a "cane", for he considered alpine traditions, and especially the Alpine Club, as fit only for ridicule. This was all very intriguing, and, with three of the Garbyang men who had accompanied him, we entered Nepalese territory. Avoiding the village of Tinkar we skirted wide grassy meadows under the cover of pine woods, but were soon overtaken by Nepalese frontier guards who had spotted us crossing the Kali, here only a rivulet. Diplomacy was called for, so I pretended to misunderstand them and assuming them to be merely game-wardens, promised I would not dream of shooting any game without permission, ostentatiously sent back my rifle to Garbyang, and further gave my word to clear out in three days.

Under the leadership of Landor's men we reached the glaciers, sketched in their topography, and found Landor's old camping place. I had picked up a double pan-pipe lying in the grass; the two tubes of hollow bamboo were decorated with finely incised geometrical patterns and with this and a mouth-organ owned by another of the Bhotias we had a most delightful musical evening. No caste Hindus were present; the men could relax round the same fire with the servantless sahib and the two Brocherels; tea and cigarettes could be circulated. Music under starlight, seated round a crackling camp fire.

Beside the main glacier we found Landor's last and highest camp (13,600 feet) and thence were led to the upper glacier basin (15,200 feet). Here our guides turned from the direction of the

highest peak in sight and led us to our right up loose steep slopes leading on to the crest of a spur running down from the peak which Landor must have been making for, though it was not Api itself, nor was any mountain of 20,000 feet accessible from this spot. The mystery was cleared up when we were shown Landor's cairn (about 16,500 feet) and assured that no one had ever been any further. Landor had taken artistic licence, which indeed might have been inferred from the illustrations in his book.

* * * * *

Four years later I paid a longer visit to Nepal as the guest of the late Colonel J. Manners-Smith, who had won a V.C. in the Hunza campaign and was then our Resident at Kathmandu. The railway ended on the frontier at Raxaul. It was night. I got into my palanquin at once and the easy swaying motion of the bearers padding smoothly along with grunting chorus, soon sent me to sleep. So the fever-stricken Terai was passed and the rare grass shelters of the gentle primitive Tharus, "untouchables", whose race would long ago have become extinct were they not immune to malaria. At Churia there was breakfast and a small riding-elephant ready saddled. These are ridden astride and run along the rough track with a very smooth and easy pace. After Churia we entered glorious heavy jungle, the great *sal* forest stretching for a thousand miles along the first low outward swellings of the Himalaya. That night I slept by the old fortress of Sisagarhi. Next morning the snows stood out bright in the November air along the whole northern horizon, the huge mass of Gosainthan holding the eye, and Gaurisankar so long confused with Everest which is out of sight far to the east. Then, still astride a small elephant, we descended a rough winding track through hilly country very like Kumaon, with occasional villages and cultivation. Ahead rises the Chandragiri pass (6,600 feet), the entry to the vale of Nepal, its ancient stone stairway to be climbed only on foot. On the far side is a descent of some 3,000 feet, mostly a stone staircase of huge slabs; and at the foot a surprise—a landau

waiting on a perfect carriage road. Thus was a *cordon sanitaire* against European infection cast round this blessed kingdom.

We were now in the old Newar kingdom which had lasted 2,000 years, being conquered by the Gurkhas only in 1768. The Newars are of mongolian affinity, many of them still Buddhists, a cultivated race of fine craftsmen. The fields and villages have a Japanese neatness superior to any others met with in the Hill Tracts.

Kathmandu, city of palaces and temples, is surpassed by Patan, the older Newar capital. Here are *stupas*, Buddhist memorial chapels, severely simple domes of brick, raised by Asoka about 250. B.C. The architecture of the many pagoda-like temples strongly suggest Chinese influence: the colours are rich brown of wood with bronze and gilding; whitest stone; bricks red and green; blue tiles, with Buddhist and Brahman decoration intimately mingled.

At Kathmandu Manners-Smith took me to call on H. H. the Prime Minister. Maharaja Sir Chandra Shamshere Jung Bahadur Rana, though a small man, was of striking dignity and distinction. His steady eyes reflected a force of character which made me feel my own inferiority. Yet he talked easily, Manners-Smith translating. The two were evidently great friends, having complete confidence in each other. A great ruler and father of his people, the Maharaja was reforming the penal code and even abolished slavery, always a particularly difficult problem to tackle, though in Nepal it was of very moderate extent and domestic in type. His successor H. H. Sir Joodha Shamshere Jung Bahadur maintained the reputation of his house at the time of the disastrous earthquake in 1933 by a remarkable resourcefulness. His instant control of the price and distribution of food saved a most critical situation: an example which might well have been followed by the Bengali Cabinet during the recent famine.

The Nepalese nobility are passionately devoted to the pursuit of big game and for Christmas 1909 the Maharaja had arranged a shoot for Manners-Smith, to which I was invited. Our camp

was to be near Tribeni on the Gandak river, some 100 miles west of Kathmandu. Roads across the intervening ridges and valleys were poor and to get there we had to return to British India by the way I had come and recross the Nepalese frontier near Tribeni. We rode on elephants across the flat swampy Terai to the edge of the great tree jungle of the Bhabar tract. The forest is of *sal*, a fine evergreen hardwood, with teak and the red-flowering cotton tree, and at the forest edge is the flame of the *dhak* tree, whose flowers come out before the leaves. From camp we could look up the deep valley of the Kali Gandak straight to Dhaolagiri, the Hill of Flame—it catches the first glow of dawn. Seeming so close it was an unforgettable contrast to the semi-tropical jungles around us.

The Nepalese method of hunting tiger requires a hundred or more elephants. Elephant custom and talk is different here to that used elsewhere in India. The mahout is called *phenait*: he drives with a small stick and not with the goad (*ankus*). An assistant (*puchwa*) stands above the elephant's tail, keeping his balance by means of a rope attached to the surcingle and armed with a mallet to enforce obedience. A tiger is marked down in a particular part of the jungle. The elephants start out at dawn in single file, moving with uncanny silence through pathless forest or grass higher than themselves. The guns are spaced out at intervals between the working elephants. Without apparent warning, but at a spot which the head shikari has decided on, the leading elephant swings off to the right and the second to the left, each leading a line which will eventually form a complete circle round the spot where the tiger is harbouring. At this stage you can see not more than one elephant to the front and one in the rear. Yet after twenty minutes or so the ends of the two files will meet: a great circle has been formed perhaps a mile in diameter. All the elephants now face inwards and the *phenaits* signal their position by the imitated call of the barking deer. When all is ready the circle of elephants, each now thirty to fifty yards from the next, closes inwards. We still move in complete silence. No shot must be fired except at the tiger, though a

leopard may be seen or a bear. The heavy *sambhar*, wide-eared stag of the jungle, slips past. Perhaps a herd of the beautiful spotted *chital* with slender antlers is met; they also will glide back through the circle, not alarmed, for they seem to see only the elephants. The smaller hog-deer will creep through the grass. Most beautiful of all is the tiny four-horned antelope. There are peacocks and red jungle-fowl. Gradually the space between the elephants is reduced and the circle becomes evident. Now the elephants are allowed to move less cautiously and the men even speak. The tiger will have been skilfully moved into the most convenient open bit of the jungle and a halt is called when the circle is about two hundred yards across. The grass is over six feet high with stems an inch thick, making hunting on foot hopeless. A staunch elephant enters the still circle to locate the tiger and the excitement grows intense.

Just as the closed circle of great beasts came to a halt, I saw what looked like an ant-hill, such a great nest of hard mud as termites build. But I knew there could be none there and by a sort of intuition reached for my camera; but too late. The ant-hill stood up. It was a rhinoceros: the real king of the jungle which hardly any elephant will face. The Indian rhinoceros (*R. unicornis*), unlike the African, has true tushes. He does not fight with his horn, which he uses for rooting up food plants from the swamps, but charges with his head up and will seize an elephant by the foot or bite him in the belly. This one gave a hoarse challenging grunt. On the side of the circle that he faced, the line opened out and the elephants, quite out of control of their masters, left him a clear path. This was the tiger's chance and he now showed himself behind the rhino. But the elephants were backing and swaying; the line was broken and no one could take a safe shot. The tiger followed the rhino out of the circle to safety, moving at his leisure; turning his head from side to side he grinned at us with the most exasperating derision.

The Indian rhinoceros is now confined to the dense grass-jungles of Nepal and Assam, but in 1527 the Emperor Babar

invading Hindustan found numbers in the jungles of Peshawur, close to the North-west Frontier. Since that country would not now offer sufficient food or cover or water for these great beasts we may safely assume that the rainfall is far less than in those times. Both for its hide, from which shields were made, for the medicinal value of its blood, and most of all for the cups made of its single horn which would detect poison, it has long been mercilessly hunted. Both in Nepal and Assam it is protected; but the Maharaja had given me leave to shoot a specimen, which is now in the Natural History Museum.

Tigers usually have a certain consistency of behaviour which increases the chance of getting on terms with them. Their feeding and drinking times, where they will lie up and when they will move back to a kill, can frequently be calculated. With panthers it is very different: they will do the most unpredictable things. I have had much more exciting times with them than with tigers and once I experienced a terrifying example of their behaviour. Villagers reported that a panther had killed one of their cows whose carcass had been dragged into the bed of a dry nullah below a cliff at a right-angled bend in its course. The opposite bank of the nullah was only some three or four feet high. During the day I left a villager to keep vultures and jackals from the kill and decided to sit up for the panther that night. I reasoned that it would return down the nullah, and that if I sat under the low opposite bank below the bend I could take the shot to the left, without moving my body, as it turned round the corner of the right-angle in the bottom of the nullah. I had to sit on the ground, for there was no tree in which a *machan* might be built, nor could I dig a rifle-pit. I sat alone. The moon rose, following the sunset so swiftly that I hardly knew it was night. In those days I had the most acute hearing. Dead silence. I began to feel rather nervous. Then I heard a beast moving down the nullah, out of sight round the corner, but towards the kill, and I felt better. Suddenly all sound ceased. My mouth got dry. Next I distinctly heard a pebble turn over a few yards *behind* me. Then still nearer my back a dry leaf

cracked. The beast had got out of the nullah and was stalking me from behind. I *must* remember to swing left-about as I rose, so as to get a quick shot. But before I could move my hat was pushed up from behind and down over my eyes. I have never been so terrified. Automatically my right hand left the trigger and pushed the hat up and back over my forehead. As I did so I glanced up and saw against the sky-line, on the top of the little cliff on the opposite side of the nullah, the outline of a beast looking down upon the kill. I realized that it never had come out of the nullah behind me, fired at the white spot on its chest and dropped it. The peculiar behaviour of my hat had merely been due to my hair standing on end.