

# THE MISHMIEE HILLS



T. T. Cooper

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If our earth has today become a most comfortable abode of *homo sapiens* with amenities and facilities never dreamt of before, it is because we had always in our midst men and women of extraordinary courage and endurance who braved all perils and succeeded in their goals.

Among such people have been travellers and adventure-seekers who bitten with wander lust, have traversed unknown regions and enriched our knowledge of the world. One such intrepid soul is the author of this most interesting book who remained absent from his native land of England for fourteen years, the last three of which had been devoted to travels through strange and often unhealthy and inhospitable countries, inhabited by ferocious tribes.

This book gives an absorbing account of the journey which the author undertook in the early sixties of 19th century to penetrate Tibet from China with the object of opening new routes for commerce. For six months he passed safely through China from East to West traversing impassable snowy ranges of Eastern Tibet and through wild frontier region, infested by Mangol bandits. He reached the town of Bathang, some two hundred miles from Sudiya, the frontier post of Northern Assam. His attempt to cross Bathang in Tibet to Sudiya to open a commercial route was foiled by the combined action of Chinese jealousy and the intolerance of the Lamas of Tibet.

For centuries in the past, China supplied some six to eight million pounds of brick tea annually to Tibet. The retail monopoly was granted to Lama priests who by this means held the lay population of Tibet at their mercy. This English pioneer of commerce was arrested by two hundred Lama

soldiers. He was obliged to change his route to Tibet through Assam and he came to Shanghai.

He came to Calcutta accompanied by a Chinese Christian as his interpreter, a Tibetan boy-servant, a Chinese lad and a Mohammedan assistant interpreter who had served in China. This return journey was marred by a devastating fire which broke out in their ship. On return to Calcutta, he was warmly received and entertained by Lord Mayo, the then Viceroy of India who evinced keen interest in his journey. For nearly an hour he sharply catechised him on all the countries he had visited and was about to visit.

The river journey from Calcutta to Gauhati and from there to Dibrugarh and Tezpur and finally to Sudiya and to the land of hill tribes of Degeroo Mishmees, Miris and Abors who inhabited the hills in Assam, bordering Tibet have been widely described. In the author's own word, "They are a savage and warlike people divided into innumerable clans—each clan having its Head Chief who represents it in the great councils held for the purpose of settling affairs of importance concerning the general welfare."

The land, the people, the topography, the wild beasts, the flora and fauna, the mountains and rivers, specially the myriad moods and shapes of great Brahmaputra, the breath taking scenic beauty of Assam have all been profusely described in a captivating language which only the author is capable of describing

To do full justice to this unique book and its author, the readers are advised to go thoroughly through it and see for themselves what wealth of information it contains about the marvellous land of Assam and its picturesque tribes.

Rs. 295

(Contd. on the next flap)

# The Mishmee Hills

*An account of the journey made in  
an attempt to penetrate Tibet  
from Assam to open new  
routes for commerce*

T. T. Cooper



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TO THE RIGHT HON.  
LORD STANLEY OF ALDERLEY

AS A TOKEN OF ADMIRATION  
FOR HIS ZEALOUS INTEREST IN ASIATIC PROGRESS  
AND OF GRATITUDE FOR MUCH PERSONAL KINDNESS

*This Book is Dedicated*

BY HIS OBLIGED AND HUMBLE SERVANT

THE AUTHOR

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# NEW ROUTES FOR COMMERCE.

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## CHAPTER I.

### PRELIMINARY.

Retrospect—Assam Tea for Thibet—Start for Calcutta—The ‘Clan Alpine’—Fire! Fire!—Struggle for Boats—Brave Chinese Women—The Steamer Saved—Ships’ Boats.

IT was in the firm belief that the extension of British commerce in China could alone lead to the establishment of that industrial progress among her people which is required to save them from decay as a nation, that the writer started from Shanghai on a pioneering journey. The object of this was, if possible, to determine a practicable trade route between India and China, whereby the millions of these neighbouring giant empires might enter into commercial intercourse. The details of that journey have been already submitted to the public; but in order to make clear the motive of the travels described in these pages, I may recall the fact that, at the end of six months, after passing safely through the Empire of China, from east to west, traversing the almost impass-

able snowy ranges of Eastern Thibet, and running the gauntlet among the nomad Mongol banditti infesting the valleys of this wild frontier region, I found myself at the town of Bathang, some two hundred miles from Sudiya, the frontier post of Northern Assam. Although the journey had demonstrated the impracticability of a trade-route over the rugged mountains, covered with perpetual snow, yet a natural wish to be the first Englishman who had penetrated overland from China to India prompted the attempt to complete the interval which lay between Bathang and Sudiya. This attempt was foiled by the combined action of Chinese jealousy and the intolerance of the Lamas of Thibet.

For many centuries China has supplied Thibet with six or eight million pounds of brick tea annually. This article being a necessary of life to the Thibetans, the Chinese Government, who hold the wholesale monopoly of the export tea trade, have granted the retail monopoly to the Lama priests, who, by this means, hold the lay population of Thibet at their mercy. Thus the Chinese protect their tea trade, and the Lama priests their religious and political influence over the Thibetans. It is plain, therefore, that the opening up of commercial intercourse with the Europeans of Assam, that tea garden of India, would threaten at once the Chinese tea trade and the priestcraft of Lamanism; the English pioneer of commerce must therefore be prevented from reaching India at any hazard. Accordingly, I was arrested by two hundred Lama soldiers, obliged to change my route, and ultimately thrown into a Chinese prison in the city of Weisee foo,

from which, having been rescued by the interference of some friendly tribes, I retraced my steps to Shanghai.

While travelling in Thibet, I had been struck with the vast importance of the tea trade between that country and China, and now the project of diverting at least a considerable portion of that trade to Assam from China forced itself upon me as at all events to be attempted.

A few weeks spent at Shanghai, amidst the kind hospitality of many warm friends, entirely removed all traces of the hardships endured during the previous twelve months, and I found myself already impatient to begin to attack Thibet on the side of Assam, hoping that the *espionage* of the Chinese might be evaded, and the way prepared for such intercourse between our Indian tea garden and Thibet as might hereafter result in an extensive trade.

As Calcutta was to be the starting-point, it was necessary to conduct thither my party, consisting of four individuals. First, faithful George Philip, a Chinese Christian, who, as interpreter, had shared all the difficulties and dangers of the previous journey, but who, nothing daunted by past perils, eagerly volunteered to accompany his master on the new undertaking. Next, a Thibetan boy, named Masu, about fourteen years of age, who could speak Chinese, and whom I had purchased of his mother for eight taels.\* An assistant interpreter was added, named Owhelee, a Mahomedan, from Bombay, who, having served some years in the native army at Hankow, could speak Chinese fluently,

\* A tael equal to 6s. 8d.

and might thus prove a useful auxiliary in case of possible intercourse with Mahomedans from Yunnan. Lastly, a Chinese lad, named Lowtzang, who was engaged to act as general servant.

A free passage having been offered to myself and followers to Hong Kong by the kindness of my friend Mr. Dexwell, of the American firm, Messrs. A. Heard & Company, we embarked on board the good steamer 'Erl King,' and arrived safely at that port. Here we transhipped ourselves to the 'Clan Alpine,' bound for Calcutta, berths on board of this vessel having been placed at my disposal.

In these days of steam and travel, a voyage down the treacherous China Sea, through the Straits of Malacca, and up the Gulf of Bengal, is looked upon with as little interest as a trip across the German Ocean, save when the traveller chances to encounter one of the 'specialités' of those seas in the shape of a tai-fung,\* or cyclone; then he feels conscious of such an awful warring of the elements, and such an intense desire to avoid like encounters for the future, as is sufficient to invest his voyage with an interest never to be forgotten.

Our voyage to Calcutta, though it was not rendered exciting by a tai-fung (as these convulsions of Nature only occur during the three hot months of June, July, and August), has, nevertheless, indelibly impressed itself on my mind.

We had left Hong Kong behind us two days, and the good steamer 'Clan Alpine' looked, as I watched

\* Typhoon.

her by the light of a full moon from a seat in one of the quarter boats, like some sporting mammoth rolling along the smooth surface of the sea.

It was a fine night, calm and quiet ; even the booming sound of the paddles, as they beat the water, seemed less loud than usual. Ah! those glorious tropical nights spent on the ocean ; who can remember them without unconsciously recalling their soothing effect ? On this evening I retired to my cabin, feeling calmer than usual, for the cool and pleasant night had succeeded an exceedingly hot day. The long hours of the night had passed, and I was lying in that state between waking and sleeping, wherein sounds, though heard indistinctly, seem to repeat themselves like echoes—sometimes near, at other times far off.

In this way I had heard eight bells (four o'clock) struck, and the soft sound seemed floating away in the distance, when, in horrible contrast, an agonised yell caused me to leap from the berth, and rush on deck scarcely awake. All was still ; but, looking towards the forepart of the vessel, I saw issuing from the forehatchway a long, bright column of fire. The shriek of 'Ho!' ('Fire!') which had roused me, had been uttered by one of the two hundred Chinese passengers on board.

Fascinated for a moment, I could not take my gaze off the flame as it leaped up perpendicularly through the calm morning air, while a lurid glare, lighting up the decks, grew in brightness as the flame increased in volume and roar.

Suddenly I spoke, as though addressing some one at

my elbow, 'We are on fire,' then slowly descended to the cabin ; having dressed carefully, and secured my papers, watch, and revolver, I returned to the deck, where now confusion and terror reigned.

Above the moaning and screaming of some twenty Chinese women gathered about the cabin door, was heard the hoarse but loud voice of the captain giving orders to the crew of Calassees running about the decks, who, with terrified faces, rendered hideous by the glare of the fire, looked like demons attending on the fire-god, busy with the destruction of our vessel. I could not remain idle amidst such a scene, so hurried forward to the captain, who stood, pale but stern, directing the working of the fire-engines, and asked him if I could be of any use. Without taking his eyes off the flame which shot up through the hatchway in one unbroken roaring column, twenty feet high, he told me to go and look after the Chinese women, and keep them quiet ; having received his orders, I felt from that moment quite cool, and returned to the stern of the steamer.

It was just daylight, and the women recognising me at once surrounded and clung to me with all the energy of despair. They were now perfectly quiet and dumb with terror, while one or two of the elder women in hoarse whispers asked me to save them, and in trying to comfort the poor creatures I forgot my own fear, and succeeded in making them all sit down on the deck.

I had scarcely ceased explaining to them that their only safety depended on remaining perfectly still, when a slight breeze having sprung up caught the tall column

of flame still roaring from the hold of the vessel, and forced it downwards along the deck. This drove the crew, hitherto engaged with the fire-engines and buckets, towards the stern. As the heat of the flame reached us, the calmness of my charges gave way, and, mixing with the now panic-stricken crew and Chinamen, they rushed to the boats.

The scene that ensued was horrible ; the boats were crowded with twice as many as they could carry, and dozens of poor wretches, fearful lest they should be left behind, still struggled to get in, while the more fortunate occupants resisted them most savagely.

Seeing that it would be useless to enter any of the boats, I stood and contemplated the awful struggle for safety.

All order and discipline were at an end ; those of the crew who could not succeed in getting into any of the boats made frantic efforts to lower them into the sea ; each man worked independently of the other, so that some of the boats were dropped from the davits and smashed on touching the water, while another, suddenly let go at the bow, hung to the davits by the stern, and the crowd of people in her fell out and struggled together in the waves. Five of the six boats in the ship were thus rendered useless, and more than a hundred creatures were hanging on to ropes, hen-coops, and the oars and masts of the swamped boats floating round the ship which had lost her way, owing to the engines having been stopped on the breaking out of the fire.

The only remaining boat in the ship, a very large life-

boat, lying on the guards of the paddle-box, had so far resisted the efforts of the people to launch her. When it appeared certain that the last and best boat in the ship was in danger of being lost, I hurried forward to the captain, who, with the European officers and engineers, were still bravely struggling with the flames, and told him that five boats were useless, and the last one in a fair way of being disabled; when he heard this he rushed aft to the arm rack, and bade me and my three Chinese, who kept close to us, and were perfectly calm, to arm ourselves with cutlasses and guard the lifeboat until his return.

There were two other passengers on board, so these gentlemen, together with myself and followers, after a short struggle with the men who were making frantic but idiotic efforts to launch the boat, succeeded in keeping possession of her until the captain and some of the engineers came, and in a cool manner set to work to launch her. This was soon effected, and six men were thrown into her, including my Chinese followers. The captain then desired his three passengers to follow, and placed me in charge, with orders to pull off from the ship, and commanded me not to approach until he beckoned. He and his officers then returned to the fire.

When we had got away from the ship, the yells and curses of those on board were dreadful, and a hundred hands were held up, some entreating us to return, and others cursing us for leaving them. The minutes that we lay off that burning ship were most painful; a number of despairing fellow-creatures were left there with no

other alternative than death by fire or water, while we in the boat were at least only exposed to gradual starvation on the open sea.

Any impulse to try and save the lives of those on board was stifled by the knowledge that if our boat approached the side of the vessel a hundred desperate creatures would throw themselves into it and swamp her. Thus for nearly two hours did we lie off the burning ship, watching the maddened antics of those despairing ones on her decks.

In the meanwhile we were joined by another boat, one of those swamped in launching, which had been baled out by the Chinese women, a number of whom, clinging to the davit ropes, gallantly helped themselves, while a crowd of men ran about the decks utterly helpless. I was greatly pleased to see the women comparatively safe under the care of the third officer. Their bravery in rescuing this boat was grand ; they had run great risk in the successful attempt, and one only out of the twenty on board was drowned.

At last the volume of smoke from the vessel began to clear away, and we could see the Europeans calmly at work about the decks ; shortly the smoke died away altogether. Then a cheer rang out from the plucky men who had saved our ship from the flames, and the captain hailed us from the paddle-box. On going alongside he told us that the steamer had a great deal of water in her, and to prevent the boiler fires being drowned, it was necessary that her engines should be set in motion, to pump the water out.

Having told this welcome news, he desired me to pull round and pick up as many of the people who were floating about on oars and spars, &c., as we could take into the lifeboat. This was a pleasant task, and we soon had our boat so full that for safety we were obliged to make for the steamer, which steamed round us in a circle, to get rid of our living freight. This done, we picked up the rest, and then were taken on board again.

The vessel looked a wreck, but she was soon cleaned up, and by noon we were steaming away on our voyage.

From subsequent inquiries it was ascertained that the fire originated in the fore-hold, which was filled with crates of Chinese crockeryware packed with straw, and among these a Celestial had stowed himself away for the purpose of enjoying his opium smoke, and the little lamp used for lighting the opium having been overturned after he fell asleep, set fire to the straw.

Considering the length of time that the fire burned, and the combustible material which fed it, the ship suffered little damage; the woodwork of her fore compartment was nearly all burnt, some of the beams nearly through, while the deck in some places was warped, from the heat below, and the cargo in this part of the vessel was entirely destroyed.

Our casualties, considering the frightful panic of the Chinese and crew of Calassees, were very few; if I remember rightly, nine persons were reported to have been drowned, among whom was only one woman.

But for the calm prevailing, the loss of life would have been dreadful; and but for this fact, and the great

bravery of the European officers on board, as fine a vessel as ever floated would have been lost, and, in all human probability, I should not have lived to tell the tale, for we were three hundred miles from the nearest land.

Considering the number of souls constantly afloat on the ocean, hundreds of miles away from land, and the accidents so frequently occurring which render the safety of the passengers dependent on boats, a brief digression on the subject of ships' boats may be excused.

Having made perhaps as many as thirty voyages in as many different ships, I have never felt in any one case that, had it been necessary to take to the boats, we should have been saved by them.

Twice I have been in a position in which it was necessary to lower boats. Once on a voyage up the China Sea, when, our vessel having struck on a coral reef off the Paracel group of islands, two of the three boats on board were lowered, but one had the plug out, and filled before she got away from the ship's side, and the other was so leaky that two men were kept baling the whole time that she was employed in laying out an anchor.

In the case of the 'Clan Alpine,' although her boats were fitted with oars, masts, water kegs, and lockers, there was neither bread nor water on board of them, and if the fire had spread rapidly we should scarcely have had time or opportunity to get provisions on board. In many other cases I have known that not a

single boat in the ship has been in readiness for lowering, and many times on board our great ocean steamers I have trembled at the knowledge that much precious time would be lost in provisioning boats, were any emergency to require their use.

I often thought that the pleasure of the voyage would have been greater had I known that every boat had bread and water in her. There is no reason why every ship's boat should not be fitted up with oars, masts, and air-tight provision lockers, kept constantly full; nor why a weekly inspection of boats should not take place on board of every ship, especially on our mail steamers, and the result of such inspection be entered in the log-book, on the responsibility of the captain. It would add to the efficiency of the boats in case of need, which is greatly to be desired.

In less than ten days after the occurrence of the fire we arrived at Calcutta, where I was soon hospitably entertained by one of the merchant princes of India.

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