

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.

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(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.



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

