

Kampa Dzung

1921 12
MOUNT EVEREST EXPEDITION.

June 5 1921

My dearest Ruth, I must write to you at once as an unexpected opportunity of despatch has presented itself, & also for another reason. Dr. Kellas died this afternoon - you will have seen the news a month or so before you receive this - my sadness at this event makes my thoughts fly to you and wonder what your thoughts will have been. I know it is no use saying don't be anxious because anxiety is unreassuring & comes upon us unbidden. But it can be dispelled by reason. You must not let this event increase your anxiety in general. The plain fact about Kellas is that he had worn himself out before the expedition started. After a very hard time - bad feeding & exposure etc while mountaineering - during which time he lost a stone in weight, he allowed himself only 4 or 5 days in Darjeeling to recuperate. He had diarrhoea there before we started but made nothing of it, but later the trials of our first 10 days brought it on again & he had no strength to fight against it; he simply became weaker & weaker.

You must consider his case altogether exceptional. Other people have suffered from diarrhoea & got over it perfectly well - every one in fact has had it but myself.

Well so much for argument about it to put the matter straight in your mind. These are many other thoughts. It has been a distressing business - He was carried every day from Phoxi in some sort of litter by his own coolies.

We have been able to do very little for him - he was very shy about being seen in the act of retiring & insisted on starting after the rest of the party. On the first long stage (21 miles) from Phasi Bullock & I went out & met him & walked in the last mile or more with him in the dark & generally speaking one or other of us saw him on the way. Yesterday he was in a state of collapse en route & Herson & I got him down to a shelter while Bullock went on & got Wollaston who administered laudanum & brandy. But except for such incidents one scarcely saw him as he went to bed the moment he came in & never had a meal with us. It seemed to me a very tragic end today as none of us was with him when he died. His body is lying in a tent now & we shall bury him to morrow or the next day in sight of the three great mountains he ascended.

After all this about Keller I don't know where to begin with my news. I have given in a certain amount in the general account which I enclose. The great personal fact is that I am very fit & am used with getting acclimatized. I took an evening walk the day before yesterday & went very well up to about 17,500 ft to a ridge where I had a glorious view & saw the sunset & the clouds fade on some glorious peaks. Yesterday's ride in across an absolutely bare plain swept by the bitter wind was trying - one talks of riding but a mule is a poor beast to ride especially if he is underfed & 3 1/2 miles an hour is as much as he is likely to do towards the end of a day; however I was none the worse for yesterday & to-day for the first time since we left Phasi the wind hardly bothered us. Bullock & I make ourselves tolerably comfortable in our tent & keep warm enough at night & sleep well. We've been having about 15° of frost at nights. Here we shall have two complete days' rest &

I shall send you another letter - I must get that off now by the man who goes to Phasi to morrow starting at 6 o'clock. So I had better stop now. I am full of loving thoughts for you & George.

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As we are now on the tableland of Tibet I suppose it may fairly be said that the first stage of our journey is done. Personally I never imagined this first stage as anything of a problem to the expedition as a whole; it was going to be very wonderful from my own point of view, but the one hundred government mules were to take our packing cases & beds - belonging as a matter of course to Kampa Dzong where the real fun would begin.

But the fun began almost at the ~~beginning~~ beginning. Sikkim is a formidable country to travel in. If you go up the valleys you are likely to die of suffocation or fever. Consequently we came across them. The paths are mostly slipping pavé at a very steep angle, & when you put 160 lbs (or more) on a mule's back & ask him to go 4000 ft up & 4000 ft down in a day unless he is a very fit mule & trained to the work he doesn't like it; & if he rains as it always does in Sikkim at this time of year he gets a sore back. After 5 strenuous marches the government mules were only fit to be sent back to Darjeeling. It seemed much better as we were on a trade route where Tibetan mules were available to hire them - which was done & they took us very efficiently to PHARI.

To get into Tibet from Sikkim we had to cross a high pass the Telep la (14300). As we came up from 2500 ft in 3 days this was likely to be rather a mountain sick affair compared with ordinary Alpine standards. Most of the party rode ponies which apparently didn't feel the height; no more did the coolies, cooks, sarsis & all the riff raff with me or two

Exceptions. But I made this an occasion for testing my wind & found it quite as much as I wanted & was tired & headachy on the descent (down to 9000 ft) which is contrary to all my Alpine experience though Bullock says it corresponds with his.

We went down to the Chumbi valley & afterward followed it up to the tableland. It was a remarkable change of scenery from the moist & semi-tropical Sikkim to a much drier climate & a vegetation much more like Europe, with pine- & birch trees very prominent. The Chumbi valley in fact was not at all unlike many valleys in the Alps - only I doubt whether any alpine valley can display such a variety of orchids, primulas, fritillaries, anemones ranunculus or such a mass of strawberry flower - to say nothing of rhododendrons which cover the hillsides. It was not otherwise a great change from Sikkim to Tibet. We had seen many Tibetans on the other side & in features they are not so very different from Lepcha (and the camera will deal with that). The houses seemed more solidly built & with bigger eaves - deeper shadows. Yatung where an English trading station has been established by treaty looks somewhat a prosperous village & has a fine situation at the junction of two valleys.

The great change was coming up to the plains. It seemed the most surprising thing to happen in a few hours - in a few hours after waking in a small mountain valley among flowers & trees where everything seemed near & friendly, to deluge into a great grey arid basin among rolling hills where the eye was carried an incredible distance & saw at the end of the prospect a steep snow mountain towering up alone - a country where everything was unfriendly & far. And then Pharsi after ten⁺ miles dusty walking in the glare of the plain (my pony had gone back to Darjeeling

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after the Telep) - Phari seemed to prove that we had come to a new world altogether other than the mountain valleys. One saw primarily a formidable square-built stone fort - beneath it a very insignificant by comparison a low dark mass. This turned out to be the walls of Phari - no roofs are to be seen -; the whole town is constructed of turf, rough stones being used to weight down the walls. It is the most incredibly dirty wassen that can be imagined. The streets which run in all directions are commonly about 10 ft wide & have walls on either side about 10 ft high. Generally there is ditch filled with all kind of refuse; sometimes one walks on an earth ridge between two ditches. Peering through occasional dark doorway one can make out the dim interiors of shops, which differ only from other interiors in that goods for sale are hanging from the ceiling or stored on shelves - strings of dried cheese or vegetables were often exhibited. The principle grain shop was peculiar - a wide subterranean passage, ~~steps~~ of which the roof was supported by wooden pillars; here I met besides a dozen dogs a calf & a yak which were taking their pastime therein much jostled by those who intended to purchase flour or grain from the sacks on the floor. And the butcher's shop was unlike others I have seen - a small courtyard where half a dozen sheep were hanging in various stages from the bone dry to the freshly killed, & some skins; but the whole display seemed to be out of skin & bone beside indescribable things. Whenever the streets widened out to a more open space a few animals, mostly donkeys or yaks would be lounging; and everywhere were dogs; Phari must contain more dogs to the acre than any other town in the world & each dog is noisier than any I have met elsewhere.

I said there were no crops in Phasi. It is a testimony to the climate that the inhabitants don't think it worth while to keep off the rain with anything more adequate than some rough construction of wood & turf; and there seems to be a purpose in keeping flat roofs, for they frequently serve as yards for the beasts. People & animals live here in fact at close quarters & perhaps one reason is that in this bare country without even a scrubby bush let alone a tree dump is the only fuel & it is commonly dried & plastered on the side of the houses.

Enough about Phasi. We had not to live for two days within the town, but in a bungalow 200 yds outside it. I shan't easily forget that scene either; - the little courtyard generally filled either with Tibetans (in their dressing gowns) or with transport animals or with both, our stores piled in a verandah exciting with our whole ménage the jabbering curiosity of a crowd of idlers.

Phasi marks a stage in our expedition not only because it was our first halting place in the uplands - the beginning of our long trek across this desolate country - but also because the real difficulties of transport began here. So far we had been on the high road, so to speak. In turning westward to Kampe Dzay we must leave the route to Lhasa. Arrangements for this journey were made at Phasi through a provincial governor the Joy Pen. After an incredible amount of haggling with the headmen of various villages en route it was decided that we should take 40 loads straight through on 40 animals, the remaining 94 loads would have to be changed at each stage. And so on the 31st of May we set out with a nucleus of little donkeys, the littlest donkeys, & a various assortment besides of mules & cows, changed now to yaks with a few odd mules & donkeys.

Nothing I suppose will ever be more busy than the first stage from Phasi, twenty one miles north across an absolutely

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flat desert of gravel. The two fortunate circumstances were that the cold wind was at our backs & that there was a snow mountain to be looked at. It is no use pretending that mountains are always beautiful. Chomolhari (about 24000 ft) rising abruptly out of the plain to more than 9000 ft above us was certainly a very tremendous sight, astounding & magnificent: but in broad daylight however much one may be interested by its prodigious cliffs one is not charmed; one remains cold & rather horrified. But in the evening light this country can be beautiful snow mountains and all; the harshness becomes subdued, shadows soften the hillside; there is a blending of lines & folds until the last light so that one comes to lose the absolute bareness feeling that here is a pure beauty of form, a kind of ultimate harmony.

Our great enemy of course is wind. On the best days it is absolutely calm in the early morning, chilly at first & as the sun gets up quite hot (the sun is always scorching, threatens to take one's skin off); any time between 10.0 & 12.0 the wind gets up, a dry, dusty, uncessing wind with all the unpleasantness of an east wind at home. Towards evening it becomes very cold & we have frost at nights. But yesterday I noticed the wind dropped quite suddenly just before dinner & one could keep warm enough in a tent after that. The real problem for comfort now is to get a tent pitched so as to have some shelter when the day's destination is reached.

I suppose no one who could judge us fairly as a party would give much for our chances of getting up Mt Everest. The hardships such as they have been so far have not left us scathless. Dr Kellas arrived

at Phasi suffering from enteritis & though he is somewhat better has
been carried from there on some form of litter. Wheeler has constantly
been suffering more or less from indigestion & has been sufficiently
bad these past two days to make it a real difficulty to come on.
Reehorn seems frail & ^{has} suffered two falls from his mule which
haven't helped him to enjoy the kind of life. All have been more or
less upset inside at different times. However Herson (the geologist)
Howard Bury & myself are all very fit, & Bullock & Willerton
seem likely to survive. We've all been better since we opened
our stores at Phasi. But we're still cursed by the same abomin-
able cooks. We shall meet Moshead at Kampa Dzang about
June 5 & should be at Tugri not later than the 20th - so
we aren't much behind time.

