



LHASA AND ITS MYSTERIES

WITH A RECORD OF THE
EXPEDITION OF 1903-1904

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CHAPTER XV.

GYANTSE TO LHASA, PAST THE YAMDOK SEA, AND ACROSS THE TSANGPO VALLEY.

THE dispersal of the Tibetan forces, which for nearly two months had menaced the Mission camp, cleared the air of the war-clouds which had been hanging over Gyantse, but was not followed by any sign whatever that the Lamas were anxious to seek a settlement or cease from further hostilities. His Majesty's Government were therefore forced to decide that the Mission, with its large military escort, should proceed to Lhasa; that the negotiations with the Tibetan authorities must take place at that city itself; and that the expedition should be withdrawn as soon as possible thereafter. This indeed was obviously the only course possible to effect a speedy solution of the question without prolonging the operations into another winter season, with its many disadvantages and expenditure of life and money, and to prevent the expedition developing into a campaign of conquest and annexation, which was never contemplated.

Whether the advance to Lhasa was to be by peaceful marches, or whether we should have to fight our way thither, was still a doubtful question; for even so late as seven days after the capture of the *jong*, the Bhutanese mediator, the Tongsa Penlop, received a letter from the nominal peace delegate, Yutok, the Tibetan Councillor in charge of the troops at the Kharo Pass, stating that he had no orders to

proceed to that forbidden city; for, urged they, if we did go there, the Grand Lama might die from the shock to his religious feelings. They also gave the unsatisfactory news that this dignitary had left his capital, and had retired to a monastery several days' journey beyond. In the suite of the envoys came an English-speaking Chinaman, who, with a keen eye to business, interviewed the chief commissariat officer on the quiet, and told him that he would contract at Lhasa to supply him with as many stores of grain and common provisions as he wanted, which looked as if we were really nearing a metropolis at last.

The crossing of the river was accomplished in six days, the whole of the force having been ferried over by the 30th of July.

The left, or northern, bank was delightfully fertile and well wooded, and it was satisfactory to find that the people had not bolted from the villages, a sure sign of returning confidence. The villages were pictures of agricultural peace, and the prosperous-looking inhabitants were busy harvesting, reaping, threshing the corn, and building stacks. So populous was this part, that I counted over a dozen hamlets within 2 square miles. The fertility of the fields here was amazing; the wheat, barley, peas, and beans were breast-high, and quite equal to the best English crops, as were also the vegetables, so that many of our people, after their long privations, revelled in the peas and radishes.

We encamped at the village of Chagla, in a grove of alders and poplars, alongside an orchard of apricot and walnut trees with the fruit almost ripe. Some of the alders and willows were fine old trees 40 feet high; and the dense rank growth of wildflowers and weeds along the borders of the fields was such as to make this part of the Tsangpo oasis a quite suitable habitat for the rhinoceros and to bring the discovery of the

fossil remains of that animal by Sir R. Strachey near the source of this river into harmony with present-day facts.

Leaving the ferry without any regrets, we once more turned our faces Lhasa-wards, and, proceeding 4 miles down-stream, entered on the 31st July the tributary valley which led directly up to the holy city, now under 40 miles distant, and with no more intervening passes to bar our way. The cultivated valley, with its rich crops of oats (*yogo*), peas, mustard, rape and coriander, ended abruptly about 2 miles below the ferry. Here a bold, jagged spur of granite, destitute of all verdure, ran down abruptly into the middle of the river, whose deep main stream swept the foot of the cliffs, and seemed to leave us no passage whatever.

Our track—the great trade route to Lhasa!—now narrowed into a stony trail along which we had to pass in single file, over masses of rocks fallen from above, threading in and out amongst giant rusty boulders, and climbing giddy staircases hewn across the face of the granite cliffs overhanging the rushing, swirling tide of the muddy Tsangpo, a few yards below. At these dangerous spots, where many travellers must have lost their lives, the cliffs and boulders were profusely covered with rock-cut sculptures of various divinities and their mystic spells, all brilliantly besmeared with their conventional colours. The image most frequently figured was appropriately the "Saviour-Goddess of the Sea and Rocks," Tara (in Tibetan *Dölma*), a form of the "Goddess of Mercy," the benefactress who guards the traveller from the dangers of the falling rocks, and of the scething waters below his path. The next most frequent image was that of the wizard founder of Lamaism, one of whose shrines was perched on a small rocky islet with an old gnarled weeping willow drooping over it, whilst

the founder of Buddhism was scarcely represented at all. This defile was nearly 2 miles long, and about the most formidable natural barrier we had yet encountered. The strongest part of all was at its lower end, where it joined at right angles the valley leading up to Lhasa. Here the rocks rose up in almost sheer cliffs into colossal columns and aiguilles, owing to the massive crystalline granite splitting sharply along its lines of cleavage, and on the topmost pinnacle, nearly half a thousand feet above us, outlined against the sky, stood looking down upon us the old castle of Chu'sul and its lower fort on a knife-edge ridge much nearer. These two forts, although now more or less ruinous, had evidently been of enormous strength, and this marvellously strong natural position, commanding so effectually the trade-routes from India, Nepal, Bhotan and Shigatsé to Lhasa, and also the approaches to that city against a hostile force, tends to corroborate the tales told of the prominent place this stronghold took in bygone feudal wars and invasions. Luckily it was not held against us, although an immense heap of newly collected stones at its lower end showed that the Lamas had intended to hold it; so our long column laboriously emerged, winding in single file into the open valley of the Lhasa river, the Kyi or "River of Happiness," at the village of Chu'sul.

The Lhasa Valley, here at its mouth about 3 miles broad, seemed less fertile and cultivated, and with fewer trees than the central valley we had left, being blocked by a broad belt of sand from the Tsangpo, which river, now deflected from its westerly course by the Chu'sul cliffs, turns sharply down southwards, looking like a continuation of the Kyi river; and on its opposite or right bank, about 6 miles below, stood the large red-walled fort of Gongkar and its monastery, surrounded by trees and considerable cultivation.

Turning up the valley of the Kyi, we passed through