

TWENTY YEARS
IN THE HIMALAYA



C. S. Bruce.

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TWENTY YEARS IN THE HIMALAYA

BY

MAJOR THE HON. C. G. BRUCE, M.V.O.

FIFTH GOORKHA RIFLES

WITH 60 ILLUSTRATIONS AND A MAP

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P R E F A C E

I AM attempting in this book to give to those interested in Mountain Travel and Mountain Exploration, who have not been so luckily placed as myself, some account of the Hindu Koosh and Himalaya ranges. My wanderings cover a period of nineteen years, during which I have not been able to do more than pierce these vast ranges, as one might stick a needle into a bolster, in many places ; for no one can lay claim to a really intimate knowledge of the Himalaya alone, as understood in the mountaineering sense at home. There are still a great number of districts which remain for me new ground, as well as the 500 miles of the Himalaya included in "Nepal," which, to all intents and purposes, is still unexplored.

My object is to try and show the great contrasts between people, country, life, etc. that exist in the different districts, from the Kafir border on the west to the Bhootan border on the east. Between these extremities probably no greater contrasts could be found on the world's surface. The

Highlands of Scotland and Southern Italy do not present greater contrasts.

Language, manners, customs, and the appearance of the people have nothing in common, and even the vegetation varies entirely.

(Many of the expeditions in which I have taken part have already been fully detailed, and I do not intend to do more than add a few personal experiences.)

To the keenest climber mountaineering in these great ranges is more of the character of mountain travel than of a climbing expedition, such as could be planned in Switzerland, and at present it must be so, unless the traveller is content to march direct to some group and stay there. But few travellers are so content, as there is so much new country to be seen, and all the surroundings are of such interest that the time for climbing particular peaks has not yet arrived. Even if any single collection of mountains were taken, such as the more or less isolated Nanga Parbat group, a great deal of time must be lost in exploring for the correct route by which to attack the mountain, which incurs covering a great amount of country, probably with the additional worry and trouble of a large train of coolies.

The transport question throughout the Hindu Koosh and Himalaya is undoubtedly a difficulty, but

in my opinion should not be so great a one as many recent travellers have found it. They, however, are generally handicapped by being unable to communicate direct with the people, and by not understanding their point of view. The different native races are much worse fed, certainly worse clothed, and probably more superstitious regarding the great mountains than the Swiss were 100 years ago, and yet there was considerable difficulty at that period in getting even the best chamois hunters to undertake any new bit of exploration. What would have happened if a whole village had been ordered to send every available man with some unknown Englishman, and to stay with him for a fortnight above the snow-line, is better imagined than described, yet this is what must necessarily occur in the Himalaya.

It will therefore be understood that to get the best work out of men who cannot be expected to go, as a body, anything but most unwillingly, requires tact, sympathy, and understanding kindness towards them, as well as considerable assistance, in the matter of extra food and clothing, if they are to be employed for any length of time.

I must here mention the remarkable success of Mr. Monrad Aas and Mr. Rubensen with their parties, whom they took to a height of 22,000 feet, and with whom they stayed, I believe, for a

week and more at over 20,000 feet. I employed some of the same men last year,¹ and they told me that they were perfectly willing to go back to the snows at any time. Of course natives of different districts differ so much in physique and character that good results cannot be always expected (any more than the same kind of treatment is suitable for all), but there are many races in the mountains quite capable of giving the best assistance to mountaineering parties, especially if properly treated in a manner they understand. Travellers of no Eastern experience seem to me to have either treated all natives as being quite useless and helpless, or else to have expected of them much too high a standard. The truth is that even amongst the least enterprising tribes there are always a few really good men to be got, and among the most enterprising there are always a good percentage of shirkers. Such a condition is not unheard of even in Switzerland. The great difficulty for travellers is that they have to take whatever porters they can get, and have not the opportunity or time to pick and choose. The best natives, however, though quite at home in ordinary snow, have no familiarity with the upper ice world in the same manner that Alpine guides and porters have. In fact I have never

¹ April 1909.

met any native who, for knowledge and judgment of snow or of ice, or in power of dealing with either, was ever the equal of any second-rate Alpine guide.

A great deal of the most delightful of Himalayan travel can be done in the second grade valleys, and certainly, to my mind, in far more beautiful and attractive country than the great bare mountains and valleys of the farther ranges, however stupendous and wonderful their ice scenery may be. In these middle ranges many of the transport difficulties can be obviated. It is only when one pushes far afield, many days' journey from villages, in the great wastes of mountain and ice, far beyond human habitation, that the porter question becomes really vital. Roads fit for animals are few and far between, though the domesticated yak does yeoman service whenever he can be obtained, and is a most wonderful animal, clumsy in appearance, but walking with apparent ease over ground that would puzzle any pony or mule, and quite happy in a climate which would be fatal to either without shelter or protection.

A last word on the training of mountaineers ; it is almost an impossibility to train a mountaineer in the Himalaya. The country is too large, not sufficient variety can be obtained, and for an amateur one has to go so far, and gets so few days in the real mountains. The Himalaya will

never produce an Alexander Burgener or an Emile Rey : it is impossible to get the experience. No ! not even fancy rock-climbing will ever arrive, for there is much too much of interest on all sides to spend much time in any one locality. All mountaineers who wish to have an all-round knowledge must train in the Alps. Two or three seasons under first-rate guides or amateurs in the Alps will teach ten times as much as a lifetime of Himalayan mountain travel or Shikar, for purposes of further exploration ; and, looking back, I can see what an immense amount I have lost by not having had that training. I have done my best to make up for it later, but without any real success ; if I could only have looked forward when quite young, I should have eliminated many difficulties and accomplished many more actual climbs. Still I do not regret my wanderings, though I often think with a sigh of the problems that I have needlessly refused to tackle.

I have to thank, for photographs and much other assistance, Dr. T. G. Longstaff, Mr. A. L. Mumm, Professor Collie, Mr. G. Hastings, Captain the Honourable A. C. Murray, and last, but certainly not least, Mr. Burlington Smith of Darjeeling for his beautiful Panorama of the Eastern Himalaya.

C. G. BRUCE.

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