

LANDS OF THE  
**THUNDERBOLT**  
SITHIM, CHUMBI & BHUTAN  
EARL OF RONALDSHAY



# LANDS OF THE THUNDERBOLT

SIKHIM, CHUMBI & BHUTAN

BY THE

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'AN EASTERN MISCELLANY' AND 'INDIA A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW'



CONSTABLE AND COMPANY LIMITED

LONDON

## PREFACE

SOME explanation of the title which I have given to this volume is, perhaps, called for. The countries described are situated in the Eastern Himalayas on the northern borders of Bengal. They contain some of the most impressive mountain scenery in the world; and if their interest lay solely in their physical characteristics, they would be worthy of the homage of the most blasé traveller. Of Sikhim—the scene of the greater part of the excursions described in these pages—it has been said that it is probably the most mountainous country in the world; that within its small compass—it has an area of less than 3000 square miles—it rises in a tumult of ranges from 700 to 28,000 feet; that in a two hours' scramble one can descend from Alpine gentians to tropical bamboos; that the higher altitudes are ice and rock, the lower a wilderness of forest ridges and precipitous gorges, with seldom a level space and barely room for a footpath by the side of their torrent beds.<sup>1</sup>

But the interest of these countries by no

<sup>1</sup> Mr. W. H. Buchan in *Blackwood's Magazine* for April 1912.

means lies solely in their scenery, magnificent though it is. They possess also an unusual human interest by reason of the curious lines on which the thought of their people has developed, and of the strange customs and practices to which that thought has given rise. The peculiar bent of their minds has been produced by the meeting of two fundamentally opposed ideas concerning the nature of things which, instead of rebounding when they met, coalesced. Those ideas were rationalism on the one hand and superstition on the other. The former was represented by the metaphysics of early Buddhism ; the latter by the demonolatry which, under the name of Bön-pa, passed for religion in primitive Tibet. It is true that the former had already undergone large changes as a result of contact with thought akin to that of the latter, before ever it penetrated the mountain regions ; but the process of coalescence was completed after it had done so, and it is only in these countries that the thought and practice which are the products of this process have survived.

The man who more than any other was responsible for this paradoxical combination of ideas was a Buddhist missionary known in India as Guru Padma Sambhava, and in Tibet as Guru Rimpoché. The story of his mission, during which were laid the foundations of the elaborately organised religion to which the term *lamaism* is

usually applied, is told hereafter. He became a power in the land, and one of the chief emblems of his might was the *vajrah*, or symbol of the thunderbolt of Indra. In Tibet the word *vajrah* became *dorjé*, and as time went on it became one of the most common of all the emblems associated with priestly power. It is almost always to be found among the objects on the altars in the temples. It is an essential object on the tables of the three priestly office-bearers whose duty it is to officiate at the temple services. The abbot or spiritual head of a monastery bears the title of Dorjé-lopon, "the wielder of the thunderbolt or sceptre." In Bhutan the title of the spiritual head of the country, known to the outside world as Dharma Raja, is Druk Gye-po, the meaning of which is the "Thunder king," that is to say, the king of the Drukpa or Thunderer sect of Buddhists; and his motto, engraved in the centre of his official seal, is *Bdag Druk Yin*, signifying "I am the Thunderer." And finally, Darjeeling, the name of the famous hill-station which was the starting-point of all the expeditions which form the subject matter of the following pages, is commonly said to be a corruption of Dorjé-ling, "the place of the thunderbolt," the name of a monastery which once stood on a well-known eminence in the modern town, now known as Observatory Hill. In the interests of historical accuracy I should, perhaps, add that I believe

the commonly accepted explanation to be incorrect. A derivation seldom heard, but which I have the best of grounds for believing to be correct, is that which attributes the word Dorjé in the first half of Darjeeling to the name of a lama, Dorjé-rinzing, who founded the monastery which once stood on Observatory Hill. The shrine was subsequently removed to the Bhutia Basti, where it remains to this day; but the former site retained the name of "the place of Dorjé lama."

It is, however, immaterial to my present theme whether the true derivation is from "the place of the thunderbolt" or "the place of the lama named thunderbolt." Either theory bears witness to the fact that in lands in which symbols are at a premium the thunderbolt takes a prominent place. And in any flag or coat-of-arms designed for lamaism, in accordance with the traditions of heraldry, it would most assuredly appear as a conspicuous object. So much in explanation of the title.

The volume has been conceived as part of a larger whole which is designed to give some idea, not merely of the physical characteristics of the Indian empire, but of those subtler differences between East and West which are to be found in the thought and attitude towards life of its peoples. And from this point of view it is incomplete apart from its companion volumes. From a narrower point of view it may be regarded

as self-contained. That is to say, viewed simply as a narrative of travel in somewhat out-of-the-way countries of great natural charm, and among people whose strange characteristics give them an unusual interest, it is complete in itself and is intelligible without reference to either of its companion volumes.

It has become almost a convention that a preface to a volume of this kind should conclude with the author's acknowledgements to a variety of persons for various services. Where I have been indebted to others for information or for opinions, I have acknowledged my indebtedness in the text. Such acknowledgement as I feel to be appropriate to this preface I prefer to make in the form of a dedication. I dedicate this volume (without permission) to the Elder, the Cavalry Officer, and the Sardar Bahadur, the almost constant and altogether delightful companions of the rambles of which these pages are the record.

But one word more in explanation of the invocation with which this volume opens. According to an ancient legend a request went forth from the famous University of Nalanda to the great Buddhist masters throughout India, from the mountains of Kashmir to the palm groves of Ceylon, that they should compete in composing a hymn in praise of Manjusri, the god of Wisdom. Five hundred learned teachers

responded to the invitation; and when the five hundred hymns were examined it was found that they were identical, differing not by so much as a single word: an interesting parallel, it may be observed, with the case of the seventy-two Jews who, according to an ancient tradition, confined in separate cells, produced the seventy-two identical Greek versions of the Hebrew scriptures which came to be known as the Septuagint.

The obvious explanation of this apparent miracle was accepted, namely, that the five hundred composers had each and every one served but as the mouthpiece of Manjusri himself. Hence the vogue which this celebrated hymn enjoys to this day. For the translation I am indebted, with the exception of a few verbal alterations which I have ventured to make, to an erudite scholar of Sikhim, Kazi Dawa Samdup.

I should, perhaps, add *pro forma* that the illustrations are from photographs taken by myself.

RONALDSHAY.

*January 1928.*



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**Map—showing the Author's Routes.**

## HYMN TO MANJUSRI

Obeisance to the Divine Protecting Lord and Teacher  
Manjusri,

Whose Wisdom shineth forth gloriously, free from the two-  
fold mental gloom—like the sun free from clouds,

Bearing the sacred volume against his heart to symbolise  
His perfect knowledge of all Truth in its very reality.

Regarding those who are still in the captivity of the ocean  
of existence, enveloped in ignorance and its attendant  
suffering,

As a mother does her only son, and calling on them with  
his divinely sweet voice possessing the sixty vocal per-  
fections,

The deep thrilling and thunder-like resonance of which  
arouses them from the deep sleep of ignorance and frees  
them from the fetters of Karma,

Bearing the Sword of Wisdom for cutting the weeds of  
suffering and lighting up the gloom of ignorance.

Pure from all Eternity, endowed with the divine attributes  
of those who have passed beyond the ten degrees of  
Perfections, O, Thou, chief amongst royal princes,

O, Thou, dispeller of the gloom of my heart, adorned with  
the hundred and twelve beautifying ornaments, obeisance  
to Thee.

Let the radiance and glory of thy Wisdom, O, Loving One,  
Dispel the sloth and gloom of my heart.

Graciously bestow on me the light of courage and intellect,  
That I may understand the sacred words and scriptures  
aright.

## CHAPTER I

### THE COMING OF SUMMER

**WINTER** in Bengal is short-lived. It would scarcely be recognised by the denizen of a temperate clime as winter at all. The landscape is studded with green trees. A warm sun shines daily from a cloudless sky. The mean temperature varies from 65° in January, when it is at its lowest, to 86° in May and June. And by the month of February Dame Nature is busy with her annual spring-cleaning. She plies her duster and broom vigorously among the trees, brushing off dead leaves which linger on after the new foliage has appeared and scattering them broadcast over the ground. For this reason spring is the nearest approach to an English autumn of which Bengal is capable.

But Dame Nature is not content with a mere superficial dusting. Donning her spring garments she takes up her palette and brush and she proves herself a wonderful artist. Bougainvilias and bauhiniyas she paints purple and mauve. She is lavish, too, with varying shades of yellow; but her most brilliant achievements are in full-blooded tints ranging from crimson to scarlet. Early in February she is at work on the cotton tree. She

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makes a clean sweep of the leaves, and in their place covers the spreading branches with large blossoms of vivid red the brilliance of whose colouring is accentuated by the absence of foliage which she has arranged. And scarcely has she started unfolding the blossoms on the cotton tree when she turns her attention to its rival, the palash or "flame of the forest," which she causes to burst into glorious flower. To the scarlet of its great clusters of flowers she adds a touch of ruddy gold, taking her idea, one may suppose, from the success which she has achieved in blending those colours beneath the rind of the blood orange. Her work, as always, is a wonderful harmony; and if the flower of the cotton tree seems to have borrowed its hue from the burning flush of the sky at sunset, the flame of the forest seems equally to reflect the burnished gold of a resplendent dawn.

In the meanwhile other influences are at work. About the time that she starts painting the forest, the wind veers round towards the south, rapidly losing all pretence of sharpness, and by March is blowing steadily from that direction. The maximum shade temperature creeps up to 90° F., and during March and April jumps frequently to over 100° F. The mean temperature during March climbs from 76° F. to 84° F., and by the end of the month it is for only a brief period during the twenty-four hours that the mercury drops a degree or two below 75° F. If summer has not yet come, winter at least has gone.

The man from Central and Northern India



accustomed to the stark aridity of his own country marvels at the wide diffusion of green ; and mindful of the scorching temperatures of the lands from which he hails, where it is nothing unusual for the thermometer to register 120° in the shade, is apt to scoff at the comparative mildness of Bengal. He does not appreciate the significance of an atmospheric humidity which for a brief period only at the driest time of the year—April to May—falls below an average of 80 per cent, and which even at such times at any moment may—and, in fact, frequently does—rise above 90 per cent.

It is this burden of moisture that gives to the land its wonderful viridity, with its deceptive appearance of freshness. Its woods, so attractive to look at, become the haunts of brazen-tongued birds that punctuate the heavy hours during the heat of the day with their monotonous and exasperating cries. The too-well-named copper-smith hammers away on his single metallic note, and the brain-fever bird asks an eternal question in maddening ascending crescendo. And beyond the delusive shade of the trees the sun casts a fierce glare despite the abundance of green.

During these months the wind blowing from the Bay of Bengal passes like a warm breath across the land and piles itself up against the mountains in the far north. This process is not carried on without interruption. There are moments when it seems to be hurled back on its track, causing violent storms known familiarly as nor'-westers. The drowsy stillness of the afternoon is suddenly broken. There is a rustle and

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uneasy stirring among the trees. A cloud of dust scurries across the plain, and the storm sweeps down, driven madly along on a gale of wind. For a time the whole atmosphere is in a state of wild disturbance. Inky clouds rumbling ominously, and spitting jagged darts of flame, pour forth a deluge of water and then pass on again. The wind dies away and the rain ceases. For a short time there is a wonderful clearness in the air, and a fragrant smell rises from the ground. But these things are of short duration. The air becomes rapidly warm again and heavy with moisture which it drinks up from the saturated soil, and in the morning the sun burns and smites fiercely once more as if no storm had been.

In April, as if tired of so much fiery decoration, Dame Nature is at work again sweeping the red blossoms completely from the cotton tree and replacing them with a coating of fresh green. But she is far too great an artist not to appreciate the appropriateness of such colouring to the burning heat of the season which is rapidly approaching, and before long under her deft fingers the Gold Mohur flames fiercely into flower. One has little hesitation in proclaiming this to be her masterpiece. There is nothing that can surpass it in wealth of blossom or in richness of hue. And as if conscious of having reached the zenith of her fame she casts aside her palette and brush ; and one becomes conscious that in place of the garment of spring she has almost imperceptibly changed into the hot and heavy cloak of summer.

Whatever opinion a man may hold of the agreeableness or otherwise of a Bengal spring,

there can be no two opinions of the long and burdensome days of a Bengal summer. Before the sun has climbed far on its daily path one shuts up one's house, closing doors and windows against the entrance of the hot suffocating air. One labours grimly at one's desk, curbing one's irritation as one's papers scatter beneath the stirring of the close air caused by the electric fan. As one pants and perspires one thinks longingly of the cool breezes of the distant hills. And sooner or later, if one is free to do so, one follows in the flesh the nimbler flight of one's errant thoughts.

## CHAPTER II

### ACROSS THE PLAINS

A FAMOUS master of dialectic once found it necessary to point out that in all discussion it was reasonable to postulate, on the part of the parties to a controversy, a knowledge of such elementary factors in the case as might be regarded as being axiomatic. "If, for example," he explained, "I describe the Fen country of the Eastern Counties of England as a flat country, I take it for granted that those to whom I address my observation, understand that the statement is subject to such qualification as is due to the fact of the earth being round."

Subject to the same qualification it may be said with perfect truth that for thousands of square miles the Bengal landscape spreads itself in flat monotony to the farthest limits of sight. A man who had lived in the deltaic tracts of Bengal all his life could not possibly know the meaning of the word mountain, except by means of what the logicians call "derivative knowledge." It is true that the plain is an inclined one, but the inclination is so slight as to be almost negligible. Calcutta, which is distant eighty-six miles from the sea, is about twenty feet above

mean sea-level, and during a journey of over three hundred miles north from the capital to Siliguri one rises less than four hundred feet.

It is difficult to discover in these three hundred miles any feature which is of assistance in painting the landscape upon one's memory. There is neither hill nor rock, nor, indeed, so much as a stone, to dispute the unchallenged ascendancy of the rich alluvial soil. During the early summer the whole land would present to the eye an unruffled expanse of burnt sienna, were it not for an abundance of semi-tropical vegetation spread in irregular patches all over the scene. Bamboos, palms, plantains, mangoes, banyans, and a host of other trees, clad sumptuously with foliage and in some cases with flowers, flourish in dense clumps—the product of a rich soil and of a languorous and vapour-laden atmosphere.

As in the case of almost all rural scenes in India, the predominant note is one of untidiness. One is left with the impression that here Nature is still rudely defiant of the efforts of man. His handiwork is apparent certainly—one sees it in the drab fields that presently will bring forth an abundance of rice, and in the picturesque collections of fragile and unambitious buildings in which he dwells. But all the time one knows that he is there on sufferance. The whole landscape is much nearer to Nature—primeval, untutored Nature—than an agricultural landscape in Europe, for example. The exuberant vitality of the great life principle of Nature lurks amongst the dense thickets, ever responsive to the creative caress of the warm moisture-laden air. The

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Great Mother waits only the moment of man's departure to spread over the earth a dense coverlet of riotous vegetation. And, in fact, on all sides of one this is actually happening. Villages deserted for one cause or another—an epidemic of disease or the shifting of a water-course—are swallowed up by the jungle, and the place thereof knows them no more. Buildings of brick and stone are equally powerless before the inexorable advance of the jungle, which, if permitted to do so, sooner or later closes in upon them and brings about their dissolution. There are many parts of Bengal where it is no uncommon thing to see trees of appreciable size growing upon the almost perpendicular brick spires of the temples. On one occasion I received a petition from the congregation of a mosque in Chittagong for the restoration of the building, it being stated by the petitioners that the floor was sinking and the building tumbling down, roots of plants having penetrated deep into the walls. But the most amazing example of the power of the Bengal jungle that I have come across is provided by the ruins on the outskirts of the ancient city of Murshidabad. Here the forest has completely swallowed up the great artillery park of the famous line of the Nawabs who ruled Bengal from that city. A solitary relic of the past gives indication of the site once bristling with the guns of this powerful line of oriental rulers. It consists of a huge cannon seventeen feet six inches in length and five feet in circumference, weighing, according to an ancient inscription, seven and a half tons. The remarkable thing about it is that

it hangs suspended horizontally some feet above the ground, embedded in the *trunk* of a pipal tree which has wrapped itself about it and now holds it aloft in an iron grip. With such examples before one's eyes one realises why it is that there are few historic buildings in Bengal.

There is undoubtedly a curious fascination attaching to these vast spaces with their chequered green surfaces. To the people inhabiting them they make an immense appeal. For the great Bengali poet of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there is no land that can compare with them for natural beauty. These limitless level spaces fill him with an exuberant joy. He writes with a love amounting to passion of "the unobstructed sky filled to the brim, like an amethyst cup, with the descending twilight and peace of the evening," and he speaks with reverential wonder of "the golden skirt of the still, silent noonday" spreading over the whole immensity of the landscape "without let or hindrance."<sup>1</sup>

But it is not of these lands of great spaces that I am now about to write. The chapters that follow rest upon a very different background—a crumpled world of towering mountains, the very antithesis of the unbroken surfaces of the Bengal plains. And these few sentences have been written for the reason that there is one beauty of the plains and another of the mountains, and that the beauty of the one provides just the foil required to enhance the beauty of the other.

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Sir Rabindranath Tagore to a friend dated September the 22nd, 1894.

## CHAPTER III

### A GREAT ASCENT

**THE** traveller from Calcutta steams into Siliguri in the early morning, and if he is not too weary to exercise his powers of observation he will at once find indications that he stands upon the threshold of a different world. The monotony of the country through which he has been passing is interrupted. It is interrupted most palpably by the appearance of a new type of humanity. Men and women with strongly marked Mongolian features and wearing more ample and more picturesque garments make their appearance upon the scene. But there are other things less pronounced, perhaps, but nevertheless perceptible, whose cumulative effect is to arouse an expectation of change. Siliguri is palpably a place of meeting. Rolling stock of two distinct types stand in rows on the railway sidings. Large sheds with corrugated iron roofs overshadow the usual mat and thatch house of the Bengali peasant, suggesting the temporary storage of produce in process of transportation from one region to another. Collections of outspanned bullock-carts add to the impression. The discovery that here the metre gauge system ends and the two-



foot gauge of the Darjeeling-Himalayan railway begins, confirms all that these things hint at.

Presently the morning haze which dims the horizon to the north assumes vague forms. It seems to be crystallising in masses of dark and blurred outline. Interest, dulled by the heat and jaded by the monotony of the past, revives. One steps into a railway carriage which might easily be mistaken for a toy, and the whimsical idea seizes hold of one that one has stumbled accidentally into Lilliput. With a noisy fuss out of all proportion to its size the engine gives a jerk—and starts. The buildings of Siliguri, iron-roofed sheds, railway workshops of brick, stacks of timber, and here and there a one-storied bungalow resting in mid-air upon an under-structure of substantial piles, straggle along on either side of the miniature track until they are brought to an abrupt standstill by the broad bed of the Mahanadi river. As one puffs along at something over ten miles an hour, the amorphous shapes in front of one take on clearer definition, and before long stand out as giant tree-clad spurs of the outer Himalaya. Cultivation merges into forest of densely packed timber trees festooned with creepers.

Six miles from Siliguri we pull up at Sukna, a small station buried in forest at the foot of a wall of mountains. We have risen a hundred and thirty feet in the six miles without noticing it; from Sukna onwards, we are climbing stertorously for forty miles, in the course of which we scale close upon seven thousand feet of rugged mountain. No special mechanical device such as

a rack is employed—unless, indeed, one can so describe the squat and stolid hill-man who sits perched over the forward buffers of the engine and scatters sand on the rails when the wheels of the engine lose their grip of the metals and race, with the noise of a giant spring running down when control has been removed. Sometimes we cross our own track after completing the circuit of a cone, at others we zigzag backwards and forwards ; but always we climb at a steady gradient—so steady that if one embarks in a trolley at Ghum, the highest point on the line, the initial push supplies all the energy necessary to carry one to the bottom. I speak from personal knowledge when I say that to travel forty miles with no adventitious aid beyond that of one's own momentum is a novel and an agreeable experience.

As one climbs higher one passes into a clearer air, and looking down upon the plains from which one has come one perceives them soft and indistinct through an atmosphere saturated with moisture. One such glimpse is sufficient to explain the why and wherefore of many things—of mosquitoes and malaria, of prickly heat and irritability of temper, of certain plainly marked characteristics of the people inhabiting these soggy plains which may be summed up compendiously as inertia.

If one makes the journey at any time between the end of March and the beginning of November one is pretty certain to find oneself enveloped in mist or in rain before reaching one's destination. This is inevitable under the circumstances, for

the colder air of the mountains can no longer retain the moisture with which the hot air of the plains is saturated, and condensation is bound to take place. The annual rainfall at Darjeeling is approximately 122 inches, and of this amount all but about  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches falls between March and November.

Once over the outer range one finds oneself in a world as different from that which one has left behind in the morning as Scotland is from the Sahara. Darjeeling itself is completely walled off from the plains, for its buildings cling to the summit and flanks of a spur which juts out abruptly from the northern face of the outer range of mountains. The spur itself hangs suspended above the deep valley of the Rungeet river which flows at right angles to it, six thousand feet below. On the farther side of the river rise ranges of mountains in gigantic tiers, so that if one stands with one's back to the main axis of the outer range one is faced by a vast amphitheatre of mountains filling in the little state of Sikkim and lifting themselves up in the far distance from the lofty highlands of Tibet. The culminating point in this stupendous panorama is the mass of Kanchenjunga, which rises to a height of over 28,000 feet above sea-level and 21,000 feet above one's own level as one observes it from Darjeeling.

The watershed of the main outer chain which is crossed on the journey to Darjeeling runs west for some distance and then curves northwards. A series of rivers flow down its northern and eastern slopes into the basin which is drained by

the Rungeet. The latter river itself flows parallel to this range—that is to say, from its source in the great plexus of mountains leading up to Kanchenjunga it flows south until it strikes the elbow of the range, when it turns east past the Darjeeling spur until it empties itself into the Tista which carries the waters of Sikhim through a vast gap in the mountain system to the plains of Bengal. During its southward course it is joined by a network of rivers which have scoured deep valleys in the mountain system, reducing it to a chaotic tangle of peaks and spurs. To put it in another way. The outer range of the Himalayas rising abruptly from the plains of northern Bengal, is like the wall enclosing a vast natural amphitheatre in which lie the lovely mountains and valleys of Sikhim. And it is from the summit of this wall, consequently, that can be obtained the best bird's-eye view of that delightful country. The route along the watershed is, therefore, the obvious one for a preliminary survey.



*Plak 2.*

THE HIGHLANDS OF SIKHIM: MOUNT JANNU, THE EAGLE PEAK.