

WITH THE SIKKIM TIBET MISSION FORCE.

BY CAPTAIN C. W. MAINPRISE.
Royal Army Medical Corps.

ON November 13th, 1903, I received orders to proceed immediately to Calcutta and mobilise Section D, No. 21 British Field Hospital for service with the Sikkim Tibet Mission Force. At the time I was doing duty in the Station Hospital, Barrackpore.

The section was quickly mobilised, and on the afternoon of Sunday, November 29th, we left Calcutta for Siliguri, where we arrived early the next morning. Here we waited one day, equipping the hospital establishment with the special Tibetan scale of clothing, and the following day we proceeded to Rungpo, four days' march from Siliguri. This march was an easy one, as the country is here fairly flat, and we passed along through the Teesta Valley, which is most beautifully wooded and quite a pleasure to one who had lately arrived from the plains of India. We followed the course of the Teesta river the whole way, and thus had no difficulty in the matter of drinking water. Our transport, which was mule, kept up a splendid pace, and provided they were not allowed to rest on the way we had no difficulty. Unfortunately, on our first day's march, after marching about six miles I called a "halt," and to my horror immediately several mules began to lie down, the hospital boxes became unfixed, and one box went rolling down a *khud*, appearing as if it would be smashed to pieces every moment. However, it was subsequently recovered, and appeared sound, though I was afraid to look at the contents inside. After this catastrophe there were no more halts for the mules.

On arriving at Rungpo I found orders to wait until we received further orders. The Mission and escort at this time were at Gnatong and were awaiting sufficient transport and supplies to proceed over the Jalap Pass to Phari and Tuna. At Rungpo our Army Bearer Corps men were replaced by thirty Tibetan doolie bearers, who had been recruited mostly at Darjeeling, and the arrival in camp of these men I shall never forget. They were dressed in any clothing they could pick up at Darjeeling, mostly ladies garments, and the sight of a Tibetan in a saucy sun bonnet with red strings and a lady's dressing jacket as a coat, with ordinary trousers, was too funny. However, these Tibetans were excellent fellows and would work and sing all day long. They

will do anything for a *sahib*, but do not like to be ordered about by a native.

On December 11th we heard of the advance of the Mission and escort from Gnatong into the Chumbi Valley, but to our regret no mention was made of the British Field Hospital. So evidently the General did not think there would be any serious opposition on the part of the Tibetans, and as transport was very scarce we had to remain behind. As subsequent events proved, the Mission met with no opposition and were safely escorted to Tuna, and left there with a small escort. The General and most of the troops returning, some to Phari Fort, some to the Chumbi Valley.

On December 30th I received a telegram saying my hospital was urgently required at Chumbi; so on January 1st we started off. Unluckily not sufficient mule transport was available, and we had to move by bullocks. It was only when we began to load up that I began to see our difficulties. Directly a bullock was loaded up off the beast started, tail in air, snorting vigorously, and in a short time—well! it was ready to be loaded up again. Again and again this happened, and I began to think we should never load up. Bullocks loaded with hospital boxes were the worst. The rattling of the contents of the boxes nearly drove the animals wild, and when I saw the boxes thrown off, I imagined myself arriving at Chumbi with a few fragments of food and a few broken bottles, all that I could collect of our once smart and trim hospital. Alas! for my commission. However, our Tibetan doolie bearers came to our assistance nobly, and by holding on to the horns of the animals for some time, gradually the beasts got accustomed to the load, and we got on better.

The first march from Rungpo to Roratung (nine miles) is an easy one, but next day it was not so good. My diary says: "Started for Lingtam (twelve miles); bullocks again our transport; had a very trying march, as not only was it mostly uphill, but the bullocks gave no end of trouble, the loads continually slipping off, or being kicked off and delaying us."

Next day Coolies were provided for us and proved ever so much more satisfactory than the "biles." The march of about eleven miles was very severe. It was impossible to ride at all as the path was too steep and irregular; lined with paving stones of a kind. Late in the afternoon we arrived at Jaluk, a most dreadful spot, and very bad camping ground, on the sides of a hill. I had ridden on to look for the camping ground and found Jaluk enveloped in a cold thick mist. None of the hospital had arrived, so I set to work and lit a fire. As my diary says, "I never felt so cold and miserable

in my life." The hospital establishment eventually straggled in, very tired and exhausted, and altogether we were very glad to have some supper and get to bed. We were now some 10,000 feet above sea-level, and next day had our march to Gnatong, the stiffest climb of the whole journey. The road for the first four miles is very steep indeed, and our men were feeling very much the effect of the rarified air. After every few paces they had to stop to take breath and to relieve the sense of suffocation they were experiencing. Some complained much of a "splitting headache," others had a feeling of "nausea," whilst others would have felt all right had it not been for this difficulty of breathing.

After the first four miles the road was more or less downhill, and we eventually arrived at Gnatong (about 12,400 feet). It was bitterly cold here, with a nasty cold, cutting wind, which made us use the hospital boxes as a barricade against the wind. However, some afternoon tea, and later a good dinner before a blazing fire at the 8th Gurkha's mess, made me look at things more cheerfully, though I still had the night before me.

Sleeping in a tent in the open at Gnatong is no small experience in the month of January, with a gale blowing and a temperature 20° below freezing. My hospital staff had evidently been warned of this, because soon after arriving both my assistant surgeons and my hospital storekeeper asked permission to sleep in the fort that night, as they had found friends who owned huts and fires, and these luxuries they had been invited to share. As we had no patients I consented, contenting myself with the thought that I was all the greater hero. That night I slept (?) with all my clothes on, save a Balaclava cap, instead of my helmet, and yet was too cold to sleep. I had a waterproof and three blankets underneath me, and four blankets, including a thick Tibetan blanket, above, to say nothing of all spare clothing I could lay my hands on. The wind was blowing so hard that I thought the tent would have been down upon me every moment; but I did not care, as I thought, at all events, this will be another covering! However, like all things, the night came to an end, and early next morning we began to pack up for our march to Kapup, a short march of six miles only. Here we arrived after a fairly easy march, but in the afternoon the wind again began to get up and the cold was bitter. That night my assistant surgeons said it was the worst they had ever experienced, but as they had not slept out at Gnatong, I do not think they were competent to judge. I, at all events, possibly through the severe training of the night before, slept better than they did. Hence virtue has its reward.

Next morning my senior assistant surgeon complained of mountain sickness, could eat no breakfast, and the sight of a cigarette nearly made him faint. This was not a good condition in which to start to cross the Jalap Pass. After a late start, due to the lack of sufficient transport (Coolies), we began to ascend the pass (Jalap) so much talked about. At first the path was very steep but rideable, later on too rough and irregular for riding. At the top my assistant surgeon and myself thought that we would stop and admire the view, but we found this impossible. In spite of our poshteens and warm coats underneath, the wind seemed to blow right through us; and the difficulty of breathing made us glad to hasten down the opposite side and wait for the rest of the hospital, who came over in ones and twos, all greatly distressed, but only too glad to hear the worst of the pass had now been completed. The road down from the pass was very bad, in fact, "road" is too dignified a title for such a path, and it was a case of simply jumping from boulder to boulder. We encamped at Langram, the camping ground being really a portion of the dry bed of the river.

That night we had to send out our doolie again up the hill for three miles to bring in an officer commanding a mule corps, who had been seized with mountain sickness and was unable to get into Langram. However, when the doolie arrived this officer had already pitched his tent and gone to bed, from which he absolutely refused to budge, saying that all he required was to be left alone. So our tired doolie bearers had their journey for nothing.

Next morning we started on our final march to Chumbi Camp, passing through the famous Chinese Wall at Yatung, the supposed trading place by treaty of the English and Tibetans; but where, with the exception of Miss Anne Taylor's (the lady missionary of Tibet) store for drugs, general stores, &c., there were no signs of trading of any sort. Again passing through more Tibetan villages, whose curious inhabitants looked very inoffensive, in fact, rather glad to see us, we reached the Chumbi Valley. The valley rather disappointed us, as we had heard so much of its fertile and smiling appearance; but from what we could see it looked anything but fertile, being rather barren and bare. However, this was January, and the valley has since made amends. We soon arrived at the camp, pitched our tents and made ourselves snug, as we heard that we should probably remain here some time.

Of our stay in Chumbi and of our advance to Gyangtse, and of the fights at Guru and Red Gorge, I must tell in another number of the JOURNAL.