

ON THE WAY TO KARAKORAM. I¹

MOUNTAINEERING IN REMOTEST KASHMIR

BY PHILIP C. VISSER

[THE author, a well-known Dutch explorer, describes in the following article the early stages of his expedition to the unexplored portions of one of the highest mountain ranges in the world. It lies in Northern Kashmir and its loftiest peaks are only seven hundred feet lower than Mount Everest.]

SPRING in Kashmir! No imagination can conceive its charm without the actual experience. The fragrance of blossoms fills the air. Thousands of fruit trees spread a blanket of tender bloom over the plain and the mountain-sides. Broad mustard fields color the landscape with their yellow glow. Irises, tulips, and other flowers carpet the earth and nod and sway in the bits of turf that cling to temple roofs and housetops. The young green of the giant chinar-trees is reflected in the smooth waters of lake and stream. The Garden of the Mogul is a riot of gorgeous blossoms — that wonderful garden reminiscent of princely glory and royal love of beauty. It is as if the approaching summer sun poured its creative power in a mighty flood across the plain of Srinagar as it lies embraced between the outspread arms of the Himalayas and the Pir Panjal.

Throughout this miracle of spring we lived upon a house boat that we called the Flying Dutchman. It was anchored in the shadow of an immense

chinar-tree on the River Jhelum. We also had a little rowboat in which we made excursions to all sorts of idyllic places, where we reveled in the vernal luxuriance of flowers and fragrance that abounded everywhere in this fairyland.

But we had much to do preparing for our expedition. Tents, boats, and supplies must be provided; and long daily conversations were devoted to the details for our caravan.

Our party was to consist of my wife and myself and my friend Baron Harinxma Thoe Slooten — a name that proved an insoluble puzzle to our native servants, and to the postal and telegraph officials as well, and was speedily abbreviated to Baron. Then there were my old Swiss guide, Franz, who had been with me on many an Alpine climb and also in India once before, and a second guide, a young Swiss, previously unknown to me, named Johann. Besides these were the native members of our party. I had just taken energetic measures to rid myself of the Kashmir peddlers who insisted on forcing their wares upon us. Therefore I was in anything but an amiable mood one morning when a little, persistent-looking man with a jet-black beard, wearing a long tussah coat and trousers, started to walk down our gangplank, from which I had just chased a crowd of clamorous hucksters.

'Can I come up, Sahib?' the little fellow asked.

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I thought he was another silk-peddler. 'Come up!' I shouted from the roof of the house boat, red with anger.

'I won't trouble you long,' he said, with a broad but somewhat nervous smile.

'Trouble me!' I echoed. That was too much. I was just on the point of kicking him out when he added:—

'I'm Affras Gul, your topographer.'

I barely recovered myself in time to unclench my fist and extend my opened hand in cordial greeting. This modest, thoughtful, energetic Indian gentleman proved a treasure. He spoke fairly good English; but when his vocabulary failed him he shouted so loudly that curious natives used to gather around to see what the trouble was about.

Among our regular servants the first in order was our Kashmir cook, who had already accompanied several well-known explorers upon expeditions into Central Asia. He was not only a cook, but a favorite butt for the wits of the other servants, and thankful as a child for a friendly word.

Allah Baksh was the Baron's personal servant. He was a dandy with a curled moustache, and when we were not watching was very proud of twirling the little swagger-stick that he proposed to take up the Karakoram Mountains with him. His confidence in himself was in inverse proportion to his altitude above the sea, and he was now near sea level.

Munir Khan was the personal servant of my wife and myself. He was an imposing man, covered with medals and conscious of his worth. He had taken part in two Mount Everest expeditions. Whenever he had a chance to do so he made the coolies wait on him; and he served us as rarely as possible.

The tenth member of our party was our topographer's servant. His loyalty to his master was quite out of the

ordinary. Last of all I must mention Patiala, who was equally devoted to his master and mistress. He was the gentlest beast you can imagine, but had too good an opinion of mankind to be of value as a watchdog. Had he been a human being he would surely have believed in universal peace.

The Government of Kashmir placed at our disposal our four-roomed house boat, another house boat with two rooms for the guides and the topographer, a kitchen boat in which the servants lived, and a fourth boat for our luggage. We planned to drop down the river with this flotilla, to cross Wullar Lake, and to reach Bandipur in twenty hours. That was to be the starting-point for our caravan.

April 25 dawned with horrible weather. Thunder rumbled around the mountain peaks, rain fell in torrents, the wind howled through the trees, waves beat high against our boat. We set forth at four o'clock in the afternoon. A cinema man tried to film us while the current rapidly bore us down the stream. Black clouds clung to the mountain slopes. The gray town quickly vanished in a watery veil and darkness settled upon the land. Thus we slipped along between black banks into a new life, an unfamiliar country, and an unknown future.

About midnight what we had been expecting happened. The heavy rains had swollen the river until our house boat could no longer pass under the bridges. We were forced to stop just before the last of these, brought to a dead halt before our expedition was fairly under way. But our Indian topographer, whom we called for short Khan Sahib, refused to take the word of the boatmen. About three o'clock in the morning he went on land, ascended the bridge, unrolled his turban, and used it to measure the distance between the bridge and the water. The

flood was subsiding. At six o'clock he took another measurement.

'Sahib,' he shouted, 'we can make it. But hurry up, for the water's rising again.'

With stentorian voice he aroused the people on the neighboring houses and ordered them to crowd on to our boat. We cast loose and glided under the bridge. Keen suspense, great shouting and excitement — and we stuck fast!

Khan Sahib drove the natives across the bridge into the prow of the boat, and with a roar of jubilation she slid forward and through. Practically every person who lived anywhere in the vicinity had gathered on the bank to watch us, and every mother's son of them stretched out his hand for baksheesh, swearing that it was his weight that had saved the day.

We made rapid progress toward Wullar Lake, above which we could see patches of blue sky, harbingers of better weather. Every official and anyone who had any apology for pretending to be an official had gathered on the wharf at Bandipur to welcome us. Here the garrison provided eight wagons ready to carry our luggage.

We had carefully planned in advance the unloading and reloading of our equipment. The topographer and each of us Europeans were to take charge of specific articles of baggage. The scheme was perfect in theory, but faulty in practice. In two minutes such crazy confusion reigned that all I could do was to take my cinema apparatus and film the riot. Franz scratched his head and remarked, 'Sir, it looks as if we had never been away from home before.'

Consequently during our first day's march the caravan was in hopeless disorder. Our imposing procession practically organized itself, and I felt as if I were a member of a pageant. The parade was led by the heavily laden wagons, the first of which bore

the Netherlands flag, which our servants thought made us more impressive. Next came the principal members of the party, on horseback, followed by mounted officials in queer Oriental costumes. Our servants wound up the parade, the cook, with a milk can in one hand and a basting-pan in the other, bringing up the rear. Even after him, however, and on both sides of us, circled a great party of men and boys begging baksheesh and declaring that they had labored arduously reloading our luggage.

We made camp a short distance beyond Bandipur. The evening landscape was wrapped in peace. A mountain stream sang its monotonous but welcome song in front of my tent as we discussed the task immediately ahead of us. The Himalayas are still wrapped in winter at the end of April, and both passes that we had to cross were buried in snow. But people who ought to know assured us that ponies could get through.

Consequently the following morning saw us struggling forward with forty-eight of these useful animals in tow, toward the dak bungalow at Fragbal, the first stage of our journey of one hundred and eighty miles to Gilgit, where we were to enter the true high-mountain country.

We were glad to leave Bandipur, for cholera was raging along the lake and spreading into the back country. Our route as far as Fragbal was a constant succession of delights. The trail wound in and out along the base of the mountains and was bordered with a marvelous wealth of flowers, among which lilies predominated. The bungalow at Fragbal was beautifully situated in a grove of tall pine trees, with the view open to the south, so that we could look down upon the lake and across the plain of Srinagar, beyond which we were able to discern the snow-capped

summit of Pir Panjal above its wreath of mist.

But we were not left in peace. Fresh snow had fallen not far above the bungalow, unusually far down into the forest belt for this season, and we were informed that it would not be possible to cross the pass with ponies. Johann made a reconnaissance and confirmed this information, so that there was nothing to do but send the animals back to Bandipur and to ask for ninety coolies in exchange. During the night the rain again fell in torrents, and the thunder rumbled and rolled incessantly. A violent wind howled around the bungalow and through the trees. The temperature fell until we were glad to hug the fire.

Next morning coolies began to arrive much sooner than we expected. They brought word from the *Teshildar* at Bandipur to the effect that he had sent for more coolies; and by evening we had seventy-three assembled. After some debate we decided to start early next morning with this number, leaving the representative of the *Teshildar* behind to send forward the other seventeen as soon as possible.

We had an interesting but strenuous trip over this first Himalaya pass. At ten thousand feet or more the snow was several feet deep and our carriers had great difficulty in advancing. They sank deeply into the snow and the whole procession had to halt and rest every fifty steps. The highest point was between eleven and twelve thousand feet above the sea. Beyond it the trail continued for miles downward through a perfect winter landscape. This made a deep impression upon Allah Baksh, for it was the first time he had ever brought his umbrella and swaggerstick into such scenery.

'Sahib,' he asked somewhat timidly, 'how deep is the snow here?'

'Four or five feet, Allah.'

'And we can't sink through it?'

'No, Allah.'

'How deep is the snow and ice on the Karakoram Range, master?'

'Oh, about a thousand feet, Allah.'

He stared at me with wide-open mouth. 'They say that there are deep chasms up there, Sahib.'

I nodded.

'So if I should fall into one I'd fall a thousand feet?' he conjectured with a look of resignation, adding after a moment's reflection, 'Then there wouldn't be any Allah Baksh after that.'

A fascination hovered over this wilderness of snow. It was soothing and yet threatening. The sky and the snow itself were just like those of the Alps. And yet we could feel that we were crossing the Himalayas, leaving India behind and penetrating the heart of Asia. Possibly our long, straggling line of toiling carriers, little black dots moving across the vast white landscape, was responsible for this impression.

We Europeans put on our skis, but could not do much with them because the snow was too sticky. The only result was to arouse the wonder and admiration of the coolies. They also thought it a remarkable thing for my wife to walk across the Himalayas at this time of the year. The servant who was detailed to carry her personal luggage at first wanted her to stop every hundred yards. He was astonished — and personally disappointed — when she kept right on without halting once.

The descent immediately below the snow-line was very steep, so that some of our coolies slipped and rolled, with more damage to their packs than to themselves. At the bungalow on the other side we found all the officials of the district assembled to greet us. Ninety fresh carriers were also waiting. The bungalow itself was a beautiful building, and a bright fire was burning in every room. The highest official

present, the Teshildar, who had been instructed by his Government to see that we were provided for, decided to accompany us for the two days' journey as far as Bursil Chauki, the bungalow at the foot of the Bursil Pass on the boundary of his district.

This second pass, which is between twelve and thirteen thousand feet high, has a far worse reputation than the one we had just crossed. It is buried so deeply in snow that it is not open to ordinary travel until the middle of

June or the first of July, on account of the danger from avalanches. During the winter and spring many postal carriers have been killed while crossing it. Even the road between the two passes was not reassuring. It was covered for long distances with huge boulders which had rolled down from the mountain-sides during the last rains, and in places it was entirely obliterated by avalanches. We had to proceed with the greatest caution for the entire distance.

THE LOST OTHERS

BY O. L. S.

[*Irish Statesman*]

You set your heart on Nancy,
 You won your fancy, lad.
 But love had never taught you
 What other names she had,
 Or what gay Naiad lent her grace,
 What shining Oread.

You did not know what beauty
 Thronged in one light disguise:
 What eyes gazed out of Faëry,
 What Sibyl from the Wise,
 What burning miracle her soul
 Was in its native skies.

You won your pretty Nancy,
 But she was all you had.
 The starry women vanished.
 A lonely lass and lad
 Mutely upon each other gaze
 Nor know why they are sad.