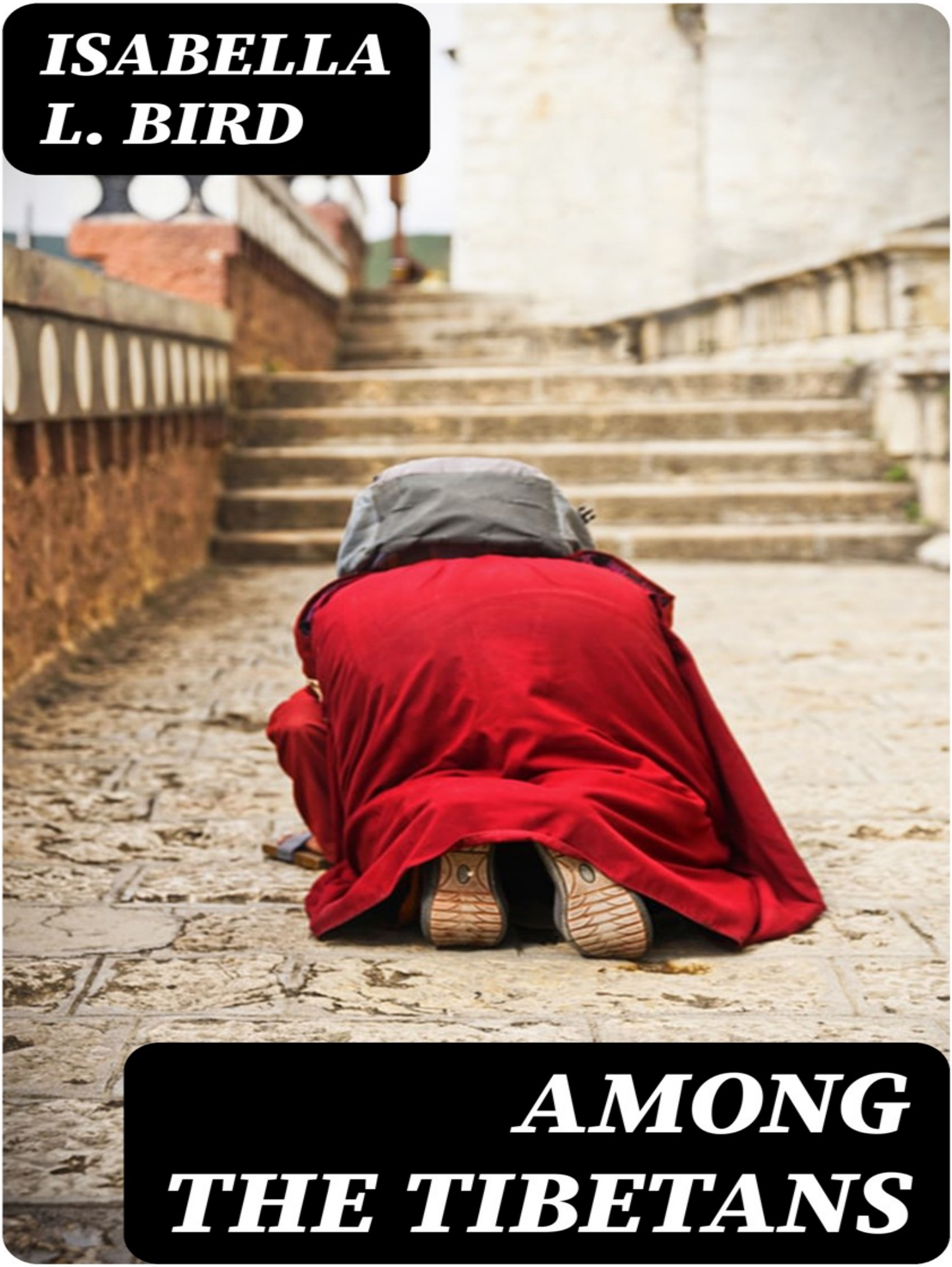
ISABELLA L. BIRD



AMONG THE TIBETANS

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Among the Tibetans

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CHAPTER I

THE START

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The Vale of Kashmir is too well known to require description. It is the 'happy hunting-ground' of the Anglo-Indian sportsman and tourist, the resort of artists and invalids, the home of *pashm* shawls and exquisitely embroidered fabrics, and the land of Lalla Rookh. Its inhabitants, chiefly Moslems, infamously governed by Hindus, are a feeble race, attracting little interest, valuable to travellers as 'coolies' or porters, and repulsive to them from the mingled cunning and obsequiousness which have been fostered by ages of oppression. But even for them there is the dawn of hope, for the Church Missionary Society has a strong medical and educational mission at the capital, a hospital and dispensary under the charge of a lady M.D. have been opened for women, and a capable and upright 'settlement officer,' lent by the Indian Government, is investigating the iniquitous land arrangements with a view to a just settlement.

I left the Panjāb railroad system at Rawul Pindi, bought my camp equipage, and travelled through the grand ravines which lead to Kashmir or the Jhelum Valley by hill-cart, on horseback, and by house-boat, reaching Srinagar at the end of April, when the velvet lawns were at their greenest, and the foliage was at its freshest, and the deodar-skirted mountains which enclose this fairest gem of the Himalayas still wore their winter mantle of unsullied snow. Making Srinagar my headquarters, I spent two months in travelling in Kashmir, half the time in a native house-boat on the Jhelum and Pohru rivers, and the other half on horseback, camping wherever the scenery was most attractive.

By the middle of June mosquitos were rampant, the grass was tawny, a brown dust haze hung over the valley, the camp-fires of a multitude glared through the hot nights and misty moonlight of the Munshibagh, English tents dotted the landscape, there was no mountain, valley, or plateau, however remote, free from the clatter of English voices and the trained servility of Hindu servants, and even Sonamarg, at an altitude of 8,000 feet and rough of access, had capitulated to lawn-tennis. To a traveller this Anglo-Indian hubbub was intolerable, and I left Srinagar and many kind friends on June 20 for the uplifted plateaux of Lesser Tibet. My party consisted of myself, a thoroughly competent servant and passable interpreter, Hassan Khan, a Panjābi; a *seis*, of whom the less that is said the better; and Mando, a Kashmiri lad, a common coolie, who, under Hassan Khan's training, developed into an efficient travelling servant, and later into a smart *khītmatgar*.

Gyalpo, my horse, must not be forgotten—indeed, he cannot be, for he left the marks of his heels or teeth on every one. He was a beautiful creature, Badakshani bred, of Arab blood, a silver-grey, as light as a greyhound and as strong as a cart-horse. He was higher in the scale of intellect than any horse of my acquaintance. His cleverness at times suggested reasoning power, and his mischievousness a sense of humour. He walked five miles an hour, jumped like a deer, climbed like a *yak*, was strong and steady in perilous fords, tireless, hardy, hungry, frolicked along ledges of precipices and over crevassed glaciers, was absolutely fearless, and his slender legs and the use he made of them were the marvel of all. He was an enigma to the end. He was quite untamable, rejected all dainties with indignation, swung his heels into people's faces when they went near him, ran at them with his teeth, seized unwary passers-by by their *kamar bands*, and shook them as a dog shakes a rat, would let no one go near him but Mando, for whom he formed at first sight a most singular attachment, but kicked and struck with his forefeet, his eyes all the time dancing with fun, so that one could never decide whether his ceaseless pranks were play or vice. He was always tethered in front of my tent with a rope twenty feet long, which left him practically free; he was as good as a watchdog, and his antics and enigmatical savagery were the life and terror of the camp. I was never weary of watching him, the curves of his form were so exquisite, his movements so lithe and rapid, his small head and restless little ears so full of life and expression, the variations in his manner so frequent, one moment savagely attacking some unwary stranger with a scream of rage, the next laying his lovely head against Mando's cheek with a soft cooing sound and a childlike gentleness. When he was attacking anybody or frolicking, his movements and beauty can only be described by a phrase of the Apostle James, 'the grace of the fashion of it.' Colonel Durand, of Gilgit celebrity, to whom I am indebted for many other kindnesses, gave him to me in exchange for a cowardly, heavy Yarkand horse, and had previously vainly tried to tame him. His wild eyes were like those of a seagull. He had no kinship with humanity.

In addition, I had as escort an Afghan or Pathan, a soldier of the Maharajah's irregular force of foreign mercenaries, who had been sent to meet me when I entered Kashmir. This man, Usman Shah, was a stage ruffian in appearance. He wore a turban of prodigious height ornamented with poppies or birds' feathers, loved fantastic colours and ceaseless change of raiment, walked in front of me carrying a big sword over his shoulder, plundered and beat the people, terrified the women, and was eventually recognised at Leh as a murderer, and as great a ruffian in reality as he was in appearance. An attendant of this kind is a mistake. The brutality and rapacity he exercises naturally make the people cowardly or surly, and disinclined to trust a traveller so accompanied.

Finally, I had a Cabul tent, 7 ft. 6 in. by 8 ft. 6 in., weighing, with poles and iron pins, 75 lbs., a trestle bed and cork mattress, a folding table and chair, and an Indian *dhurrie* as a carpet.

My servants had a tent 5 ft. 6 in. square, weighing only 10 lbs., which served as a shelter tent for me during the noonday halt. A kettle, copper pot, and frying pan, a few enamelled iron table equipments, bedding, clothing, working and sketching materials, completed my outfit. The servants carried wadded quilts for beds and bedding, and their own cooking utensils, unwillingness to use those belonging to a Christian being nearly the last rag of religion which they retained. The only stores I carried were tea, a quantity of Edwards' desiccated soup, and a little saccharin. The 'house,' furniture, clothing, &c., were a light load for three mules, engaged at a shilling a day each, including the muleteer. Sheep, coarse flour, milk, and barley were procurable at very moderate prices on the road.

THE START FROM SRINAGAR

Leh, the capital of Ladakh or Lesser Tibet, is nineteen marches from Srinagar, but I occupied twenty-six days on the journey, and made the first 'march' by water, taking my house-boat to Ganderbal, a few hours from Srinagar, *viâ* the Mar Nullah and Anchar Lake. Never had this Venice of the Himalayas, with a broad rushing river for its high street and winding canals for its back streets, looked so entrancingly beautiful as in the slant sunshine of the late June afternoon. The light fell brightly on the river at the Residency stairs where I embarked, on *perindas* and state barges, with their painted arabesques, gay canopies, and 'banks' of thirty and forty crimson-clad, blue-turbaned, paddling men; on the gay façade and gold-domed temple of the Maharajah's Palace, on the massive deodar bridges which for centuries have defied decay and the fierce flood of the Jhelum, and on the quaintly picturesque wooden architecture and carved brown lattice fronts of the houses along the swirling waterway, and glanced mirthfully through the dense leafage of the superb planes which

overhang the dark-green water. But the mercury was 92° in the shade and the sun-blaze terrific, and it was a relief when the boat swung round a corner, and left the stir of the broad, rapid Jhelum for a still, narrow, and sharply winding canal, which intersects a part of Srinagar lying between the Jhelum and the hill-crowning fort of Hari Parbat. There the shadows were deep, and chance lights alone fell on the red dresses of the women at the ghats, and on the shaven, shiny heads of hundreds of amphibious boys who were swimming and aquatically romping in the canal, which is at once the sewer and the water supply of the district.

Several hours were spent in a slow and tortuous progress through scenes of indescribable picturesqueness—a narrow waterway spanned by sharp-angled stone bridges, some of them with houses on the top, or by old brown wooden bridges festooned with vines, hemmed in by lofty stone embankments into which sculptured stones from ancient temples are wrought, on the top of which are houses of rich men, fancifully built, with windows of fretwork of wood, or gardens with kiosks, and lower embankments sustaining many-balconied dwellings, rich in colour and fantastic in design, their upper fronts projecting over the water and supported on piles. There were gigantic poplars wreathed with vines, great mulberry trees hanging their tempting fruit just out of reach, huge planes overarching the water, their dense leafage scraping the mat roof of the boat; filthy ghats thronged with white-robed Moslems performing their scanty religious ablutions; great grain boats heavily thatched, containing not only families, but their sheep and poultry; and all the other sights of a crowded Srinagar waterway, the houses being characteristically distorted and out of repair. This canal gradually widens into the Anchar Lake, a reedy mere of indefinite boundaries, the breeding-ground of legions of mosquitos; and after the tawny twilight darkened into a stifling night we made fast to a reed bed, not reaching Ganderbal till late the next morning, where my horse and caravan awaited me under a splendid plane-tree.

CAMP AT GAGANGAIR

For the next five days we marched up the Sind Valley, one of the most beautiful in Kashmir from its grandeur and variety. Beginning among quiet rice-fields and brown agricultural villages at an altitude of 5,000 feet, the track, usually bad and sometimes steep and perilous, passes through flower-gemmed alpine meadows, along dark gorges above the booming and rushing Sind, through woods matted with the sweet white jasmine, the lower hem of the pine and deodar forests which ascend the mountains to a considerable altitude, past rifts giving glimpses of dazzling snow-peaks, over grassy slopes dotted with villages, houses, and shrines embosomed in walnut groves, in sight of the frowning crags of Haramuk, through wooded lanes and park-like country over which farms are thinly scattered, over unrailed and shaky bridges, and across avalanche slopes, till it reaches Gagangair, a dream of lonely beauty, with a camping-ground of velvety sward under noble plane-trees. Above this place the valley closes in between walls of precipices and crags, which rise almost abruptly from the Sind to heights of 8,000 and 10,000 feet. The road in many places is only a series of steep and shelving ledges above the raging river, natural rock smoothed and polished into riskiness by the passage for centuries of the trade into Central Asia from Western India, Kashmir, and Afghanistan. Its precariousness for animals was emphasised to me by five serious accidents which occurred in the week of my journey, one of them involving the loss of the money, clothing, and sporting kit of an English officer bound for Ladakh for three months. Above this tremendous gorge the mountains open out, and after crossing to the left bank of the Sind a sharp ascent brought me to the beautiful alpine meadow of Sonamarg, bright with spring flowers, gleaming with crystal streams, and fringed on all sides by deciduous and coniferous trees, above and among which are great glaciers and the snowy peaks of Tilail. Fashion has deserted Sonamarg, rough of access, for Gulmarg, a caprice indicated by the

ruins of several huts and of a church. The pure bracing air, magnificent views, the proximity and accessibility of glaciers, and the presence of a kind friend who was 'hutted' there for the summer, made Sonamarg a very pleasant halt before entering upon the supposed severities of the journey to Lesser Tibet.

SONAMARG

The five days' march, though propitious and full of the charm of magnificent scenery, had opened my eyes to certain unpleasantnesses. I found that Usman Shah maltreated the villagers, and not only robbed them of their best fowls, but requisitioned all manner of things in my name, though I scrupulously and personally paid for everything, beating the people with his scabbarded sword if they showed any intention of standing upon their rights. Then I found that my clever factotum, not content with the legitimate 'squeeze' of ten per cent., was charging me double price for everything and paying the sellers only half the actual price, this legerdemain being perpetrated in my presence. He also by threats got back from the coolies half their day's wages after I had paid them, received money for barley for Gyalpo, and never bought it, a fact brought to light by the growing feebleness of the horse, and cheated in all sorts of mean and plausible ways, though I paid him exceptionally high wages, and was prepared to 'wink' at a moderate amount of dishonesty, so long as it affected only myself. It has a lowering influence upon one to live in a fog of lies and fraud, and the attempt to checkmate a fraudulent Asiatic ends in extreme discomfiture.

I left Sonamarg late on a lovely afternoon for a short march through forest-skirted alpine meadows to Baltal, the last camping-ground in Kashmir, a grassy valley at the foot of the Zoji La, the first of three gigantic steps by which the lofty plateaux of Central Asia are attained. On the road a large affluent of the Sind, which tumbles down a pine-hung gorge in broad sheets of foam, has to be crossed. My *seis*, a rogue, was either half-witted or pretended to be so, and, in

spite of orders to the contrary, led Gyalpo upon a bridge at a considerable height, formed of two poles with flat pieces of stone laid loosely over them not more than a foot broad. As the horse reached the middle, the structure gave a sort of turn, there was a vision of hoofs in air and a gleam of scarlet, and Gyalpo, the hope of the next four months, after rolling over more than once, vanished among rocks and surges of the wildest description. He kept his presence of mind, however, recovered himself, and by a desperate effort got ashore lower down, with legs scratched and bleeding and one horn of the saddle incurably bent.

Mr. Maconochie of the Panjāb Civil Service, and Dr. E. Neve of the C. M. S. Medical Mission in Kashmir, accompanied me from Sonamarg over the pass, and that night Mr. M. talked seriously to Usman Shah on the subject of his misconduct, and with such singular results that thereafter I had little cause for complaint. He came to me and said, 'The Commissioner Sahib thinks I give Mem Sahib a great deal of trouble;' to which I replied in a cold tone, 'Take care you don't give me any more.' The gist of the Sahib's words was the very pertinent suggestion that it would eventually be more to his interest to serve me honestly and faithfully than to cheat me.

Baltal lies at the feet of a precipitous range, the peaks of which exceed Mont Blanc in height. Two gorges unite there. There is not a hut within ten miles. Big camp-fires blazed. A few shepherds lay under the shelter of a mat screen. The silence and solitude were most impressive under the frosty stars and the great Central Asian barrier. Sunrise the following morning saw us on the way up a huge gorge with nearly perpendicular sides, and filled to a great depth with snow. Then came the Zoji La, which, with the Namika La and the Fotu La, respectively 11,300, 13,000, and 13,500 feet, are the three great steps from Kashmir to the Tibetan heights. The two latter passes present no difficulties. The Zoji La is a thoroughly severe pass, the worst, with the exception perhaps of the Sasir, on the Yarkand caravan route. The track, cut, broken, and worn on the side of a wall of rock nearly 2,000 feet in abrupt elevation, is a series of rough narrow zigzags, rarely, if ever, wide enough for laden animals to pass each other, composed of broken ledges often nearly breast high, and shelving surfaces of abraded rock, up which animals have to leap and scramble as best they may.

Trees and trailers drooped over the path, ferns and lilies bloomed in moist recesses, and among myriads of flowers a large blue and cream columbine was conspicuous by its beauty and exquisite odour. The charm of the detail tempted one to linger at every turn, and all the more so because I knew that I should see nothing more of the grace and bounteousness of Nature till my projected descent into Kulu in the late autumn. The snow-filled gorge on whose abrupt side the path hangs, the Zoji La (Pass), is geographically remarkable as being the lowest depression in the great Himalayan range for 300 miles; and by it, in