CHAPTER I

THE CALL OF THE RED GODS

On my return from Western China in September, 1910, I settled down to humdrum life with every prospect of becoming a quiet and respectable citizen of Shanghai. But in vain; travel had bitten too deeply into my soul, and I soon began to feel restless again, so that when after four months of civilised life something better turned up, I accepted with alacrity. This was none other than the chance of plant-collecting on the Tibetan border of Yunnan, and though I had extremely vague ideas about the country, and the method of procedure, I had mentally decided to undertake the mission before I had finished reading the letter in which the offer was set forth.

Three weeks later, on the last day of January, 1911, I bade farewell to my friends in Shanghai and started once more on my travels, sailing on the ill-fated Delhi, destined to make her last voyage just a year later. Soon we exchanged the bitter snow-storm which beat in our faces as we steamed out of the boundless Yang-tze for the warmth of the tropics, and I saw again the far-flung outposts of our eastern Empire, strung like gems at either end of that magic tiara of the Indies, which guard the approaches to the South China Sea. However fully the guardian islands of Hong-Kong and Singapore may satiate the inhabitants with their undoubted distempers, to the traveller at least they are never anything but charming.

At Penang, which in the business part of the city boasts nothing of beauty save an occasional Traveller’s palm spreading its great fan over temple or hong—surely, as indeed the name suggests, one of the most remarkable of

W. T.
The Call of the Red Gods

all the strange forms of tropic vegetation—I changed on to the British India boat for Rangoon, where we arrived three days later, and I spent a week in making preparations to go up country. It is not a really fascinating city, though the glory of the Shwe Dagon compensates for everything, and the gorgeous colouring of temple and lake, of earth and sky—here at last was the Oriental splendour of romance—rivets the attention of the newcomer. What it is all like during the south-west monsoon I do not know, but I imagine that the sunshine is all in all to Lower Burma. During the rains the dripping black skies must smudge the whole landscape with dreary greyness in spite of the vivid green vegetation springing to renewed life.

At last, my business completed, I entrained for Bhamo nominally three days' journey by rail and boat, and having a few hours to wait at Mandalay, I took the opportunity of visiting some of the sights in the ancient capital, a city of shops and temples. Thebaw's palace, now Fort Dufferin, to this day presents a crude but despoiled magnificence, mirrors and throneless daises being the only conspicuous articles of furniture. After inspecting these and other glories of Mandalay in a sufficiently lethargic manner, for it was the hottest day I can remember, I returned to the station in time to catch my train.

Then northwards once more, past lovely meres where the wild-fowl wheeled in hundreds before settling down to rest, till the sun went down in a fog of crimson behind the purple hills, and we sped on into the darkness of another night. Early on the following morning we changed into the local train bound for Katha, on the Irrawaddy; and there we found awaiting us the steamboat which was to complete this tiresome journey to Bhamo.

There was little water in the river now, the spring rise not having commenced, but the fact that we ran aground in the middle of the afternoon and remained there till nine o'clock next morning, when we were pulled off, incommode us not in the least; for it was all part of the journey and quite delightful after two nights in the train.

Late on the following afternoon we saw the white houses of Bhamo show up over the trees which fringed the river bank, and presently we tied up a couple of miles...
The Call of the Red Gods

below that curious little village of many vicissitudes. Nearer we could not get, and the journey was completed overland in a gharry. Having been in turn Chinese, Burmese, and British, Bhamo could no doubt tell some strange stories of frontier fights, raids, and other incidents of its chequered career. Cooper, the great Chinese traveller, was murdered here, and it was from Bhamo that the ill-fated Margary started on his last journey. In addition to the British authorities, civil and military, the polyglot population of Bhamo now includes Burmans, Chinamen, Shans, Kachins, Chittagonians and other peoples from India, while specimens of most of the frontier tribes are occasionally to be seen there, and a large volume of trade still passes through the little border town in spite of the French railway to Yunnan-fu. At this time it was probably more lively than usual, on account of the friction on the Burma-Yunnan frontier further north.

I spent five days in Bhamo, chiefly waiting for some of my luggage which the railway company had failed to account for satisfactorily, and the only civil authority with whom I had dealings was by no means encouraging and from start to finish poured cold water on my proposed journey. My preparations, however, being as far as possible complete, I decided to delay no longer in Bhamo, but to cross the frontier at once. I had obtained the services of a civilised Kachin to minister to my needs until I could engage Chinese servants to go with me the whole journey, but at the last minute his wife put her foot down (even Kachin women can assert themselves in a crisis) and refused to let him come. I was therefore abandoned to the tender mercies of a somewhat unlovely looking lad of doubtful but decidedly mixed parentage and little experience, who nevertheless served me faithfully as far as T'eng-yueh.

What delightful fellows the Kachins are! I was quite distressed at parting with my tribesman. Clean, neatly dressed, and debonair, he stood waiting motionless behind my chair or moved noiselessly round the bungalow as a waiter moves round a first-class London club.

On February 26 the mules were loaded and headed towards the distant dancing hills; an hour later I too mounted, and turning my back on sun-scorched Bhamo,
The Call of the Red Gods

cantered slowly down the long white road that leads to China.

The initial stage out of Bhamo is only nine miles, and it was undoubtedly this fact alone which caused me to feel extraordinarily lonely on the first evening of my journey. Arriving very early in the afternoon there was of course nothing to do but to take out a gun and look round for game, but, do what I would, there was no getting away from the sense of utter desolation which seemed to crush me. Even the mild excitement of putting up a barking deer amongst the reeds of the river failed to alleviate the depression and after dinner I was only too glad to crawl into bed and, weary in spirit, court oblivion in sleep. Never again did the sense of paralyzing isolation come so vividly upon me as on that first night, when all the trials that awaited me seemed to take shape and rise in arms to mock my ignorance and feebleness.

The scenery as the plains of the Irrawaddy valley are left behind and the road gradually ascends the mountain side to traverse the gorge of the Taping river, grows more and more picturesque, and the booming of the torrent, soon a thousand feet below us, alternately dies away and swells up louder and louder as the road sweeps round the gullies. Finally we catch a glimpse of it foaming over the rocks, and then it quickly dies out of sight and sound once more, till only the tinkle of our gongs echoes through the slumbering forest. The mules, with the natural cussedness of the breed, trudge stubbornly along on the extreme edge of the precipice, though the road is, as a matter of fact, respectably broad here. It takes a little time to get accustomed to the idea of riding along with one leg hanging over the edge of a precipice, whence a sheer drop would land one on the tree-tops hundreds of feet below.

On the fourth day we crossed the bridge which marks the frontier between two Empires. To us in our little island, a frontier sounds a more or less nebulous quantity, something drawn rather whimsically on maps, and a chronic source of petty international jealousies as difficult to define as the boundary line which gives rise to them. But this elusive idea becomes almost a physical reality when one crosses the frontier of a British possession overseas,
Map 1

Key Map. Showing the relation of the region traversed to China, Tibet, Burma, and Assam. [The figures refer to the large scale sketch maps.]
The Call of the Red Gods

thus bringing to a focus, as it were, the days which are past and all that lies before one in the new world. Especially is this the case on the return journey, when the hardships are over. Never shall I forget the thrill of joy which quickened me when I crossed the Yunnan-Burma frontier on January 1, nearly a year later, and looked back down the vista of months spent far from our heritage in the East. It was not that the future seemed much brighter than the past, for never had I enjoyed myself more; not that I found the efforts of a Public Works Department—erect telegraph poles and taut wires, reliable bridges, mile posts, and rest-houses provided by a paternal government—filling a long-felt want; but simply that the act of crossing our own frontier again, with all that that frontier stood for, made my heart throb a little more quickly.

A few miles farther I was surprised to see an Englishman sitting in the doorway of a hut on the mountain side, smoking a pipe, and closely watching some fifty coolies who were busily engaged in mending the road.

I of course stopped for a chat and soon discovered that my companion was a keen naturalist, years of lonely watching while engaged on such work as this having made him extraordinarily observant, and quick to detect the slightest movement. Mr Oliver, for such was his name, asked me if I had seen any monkeys, and on my replying in the negative, he merely said: “Then watch that tree.”

I looked down the mountain slope in the direction indicated to a strapping forest giant that spread aloft a great canopy of branches hanging above the road, and waited. One minute, two minutes; not a leaf stirred; the forest was silent and seemingly deserted; not even the tinkle of a stream disturbed the profound quiet. And then suddenly, as though a breath of air had sighed over the jungle, a shiver seemed to pass through the branches of the tree, and almost immediately a brown shadow appeared out of the foliage, ran along a branch which swayed dizzily, and crouched; he was followed by another, and another, and yet others, now plainly visible, and still the branch swayed rhythmically as it became more and more depressed. “Phayre’s leaf-eating monkey” (Semnopithecus Phayrei), said my companion shortly; “watch them travel from tree to tree.”
6  

The Call of the Red Gods

At that moment the first monkey leapt; there was a splash of foliage in the tree below, the branch, lightened of a portion of its load, recoiled, and as it came down again the second monkey sprang into the air, hands and feet neatly gathered together. And so they went on, the monkeys leaping one by one from the branch end as it swung up and down, till there was but one left, the branch by this time see-sawing to within a short distance of the goal. Down went the last of them, tail streaming out behind, and away into the jungle after his companions, who had by this time swung themselves out of sight.

But it was now time for me to move on in pursuit of my caravan, and leaving the naturalist to superintend his coolie gangs, I went my way, eyes very wide open, trying to see more monkeys.

No event worth recording took place till the fifth night, when the harmony of the evening was temporarily interrupted owing to the exceedingly bellicose attitude of the innkeepers at Chiu-cheng who, with unusual singleness of purpose, one and all refused to admit me. Eventually I was driven to seek shelter beneath the roof of the village school house, and can testify that here they look upon education with an indulgent eye, since the fact that I might annex endless school books did not weigh heavily with them in comparison with the fact that they did not desire my presence within their homes. It occurred to me that I was now beginning to feel the full force of Chinese displeasure over the Pien-ma incident on the frontier, but subsequent events caused me to modify this view considerably.

By this time we had left the river gorge and the teak forests behind us, and down in the open valley, where the Taping flows between extraordinarily bare treeless hills, we had rain, and the road rapidly resolved itself into a quagmire, which the peasants were diligently adding to by dredging their rice fields and dressing the track with the semi-liquid slime.

It is but eight mule stages from Bhamo to T’eng-yueh, and the road is sufficiently well known to require no detailed description here; but I was destined to meet with a small mishap on the eighth day when, starting early in
The Call of the Red Gods

the morning and leaving the mules to follow at leisure, I dashed off alone and lost the way. However, after following devious paths somewhere south of the main pack-road, I ultimately reached the city late in the afternoon, though not before my mule had thrown me three times, and I was thoroughly hot and exasperated. Curiously enough, though starting on the right road at the other end, I lost my way again on this very same stage from T'eng-yueh ten months later, finding yet a third route with considerable success—of a sort; so that I have still to discover the proper road over this section.

Arrived at the city, I marched straight into the Consulate and surprised almost the entire European population of six having tea with Consul Rose, who, in spite of my dishevelled appearance, gave me a very warm welcome.

While it is undoubtedly true that I had come into Yunnan during a period of stress, the continued forays over the frontier into the Kachin country of Upper Burma having led to a British expedition in that direction, things were not so hopeless as the Deputy Commissioner in Bhamo had painted them. But in any case I now had the Consul at my back, and a short chat with him was enough to dispel any suspicion of gloom which might have tended to come over me when I reviewed the prospects of success. Mr Rose suggested A-tun-tsi as likely to prove an excellent centre for my work, promising that if I found any difficulty in getting there, he would take the necessary steps on my behalf. The Taotai, indeed, was an altogether wretched person, anti-foreign by nature and furious with the British on account of the frontier trouble; but his position between the devil and the deep sea was by no means an enviable one, for Mr Rose had already brought pressure to bear on him owing to a local boycott of British goods. The consequence of this, as he informed the Consul with a wry smile, was that people from all over the province had written to him, cursing him for showing favour to the British, and no doubt he would have liked to stop me from going further into Yunnan. Realising that the futility of such an action would have been made abundantly clear to him, however, he took a safe line and gave me permission to go to Lichiang-fu, questioning the Consul
The Call of the Red Gods

closely as to what I was doing. No mention was made of A-tun-tsi, for it is a safe thing in China not to ask too much of any man, but to go from one to the other, approaching the more friendly officials and ignoring others according to circumstances. To the Taotai at T'eng-yueh, A-tun-tsi was probably a savage place where people were engaged in cutting each others' throats and a European would infallibly be killed, whereas to the official at Wei-hsi it was the obvious place to make for. Once in Lichiang I was quite beyond the control of the Taotai, though not out of reach of the Consul, so that this concession was perfectly satisfactory as far as it went, though I had no intention of going to Lichiang.

I spent twelve days in T'eng-yueh, waiting for my baggage, as the guest first of Mr Rose, then of Mr Howell, Commissioner of Customs, and delightful days they were—scampers over the grave-strewn downs on the spirited little Yunnan ponies, snipe shooting, and occasionally a game of rounders with the 'boys,' cooks, gardeners, and other members of the several households. Those games of rounders in a little dell surrounded by the necropolis hills were great fun, for the Chinese were as keen as schoolboys on the game, many of them after a little practice showing surprising skill. But it was a little disconcerting in the middle of an exciting international match when seven o'clock came and the ranks of both sides were suddenly decimated by the defection of the cooks, and the cooks' boys, and the cooks' boys' helps, who all rushed frantically away to prepare dinner.

At this time there was a little flutter of excitement amongst the half-dozen Europeans at T'eng-yueh, owing to the forthcoming marriage of the 'General's' daughter. The 'General' was a man who had been sent to pacify the T'eng-yueh district during the great Mohammedan rebellion fifty years before, and had found it so pleasant that he had stayed there ever since. He was a great favourite with the Englishmen, who were amongst those who sent wedding presents, and it is sad to recall that he was one of the first victims of the rebellion seven months later. According to current gossip the sponsor for his daughter's worldly goods was only accepting one thing in four, a course which while
Plate I

Temple built over a boulder near Tali-fu

Mr A. Rose, C.I.E. Late Acting-Consul at T'eng-yueh