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 L. Austine Waddell
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CHAPTER I

TO DARJEELING AND THE PREPARATIONS FOR OUR JOURNEY

“In a hundred ages of the Gods I could not tell you of all the glories of the Himālaya.”—*Old Sanskrit Poem.*



THE long cherished dream of years is about to be realized! To-morrow we plunge into the wilds of the mightiest alps in the world to explore their little-known regions, to camp among their breezy heights and thundering torrents, and to live among their semi-savage Tartar tribes.

We are starting from Darjeeling, on the threshold of the mountains, and famous for its view of those distant peaks with which we are now going to make closer acquaintance. Let us then invite the reader to accompany us to Darjeeling to look

at our preparations for the journey, to see some of the strange people who are to be our companions, and enjoy the magnificent scenery by the way.

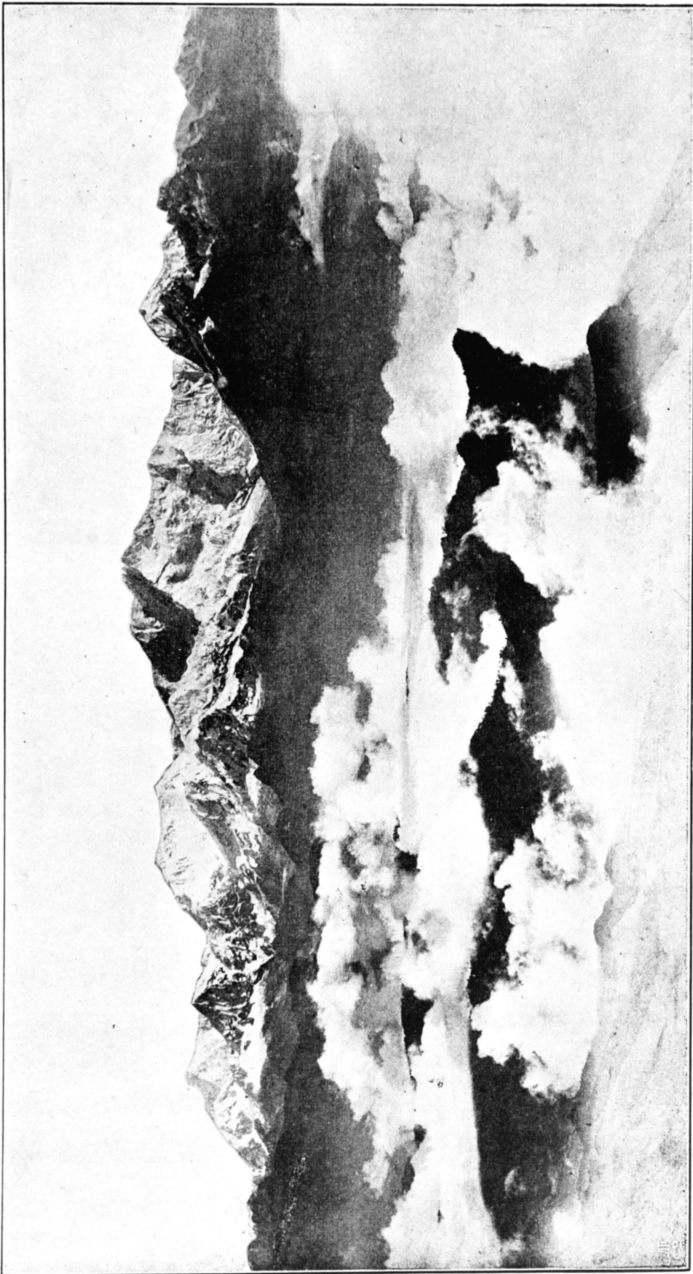
The journey from India to Darjeeling can now-a-days be done comfortably within twenty-four hours from Calcutta, thanks to the railway. Vividly do I remember my first journey to that mountain health-resort.

How refreshing it was to escape from the vegetative artificial existence and steamy heat of Calcutta, and after speeding along on the leaden wings of the Northern Bengal express, to emerge one April morning from the train at the comparatively cool station of Siligoori. ⁴ We now could see looming high above the quivering haze that smothered the dusty plains, the soaring peaks of the cool "hills," as Anglo-Indians are wont to call these loftiest summits of the earth. In the distance they looked as if they belonged to another world. Their lower ranges were hid in the grey haze and rosy morning mist, above which towered the purple spurs of the higher ranges, rising above the clouds in long lines, tier over tier, up to the snows, which were topped by the dazzling white peaks of the mighty Kanchenjunga,

"Whose head in wintry grandeur towers,
And whitens with eternal sleet;
While summer in a vale of flowers
Is sleeping rosy at his feet."

When we had fortified ourselves against the anticipated cold of our sudden ascent into these high regions, by putting

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THE HIMALAYAS OF SIKHIM RISING ABOVE THE CLOUDS.

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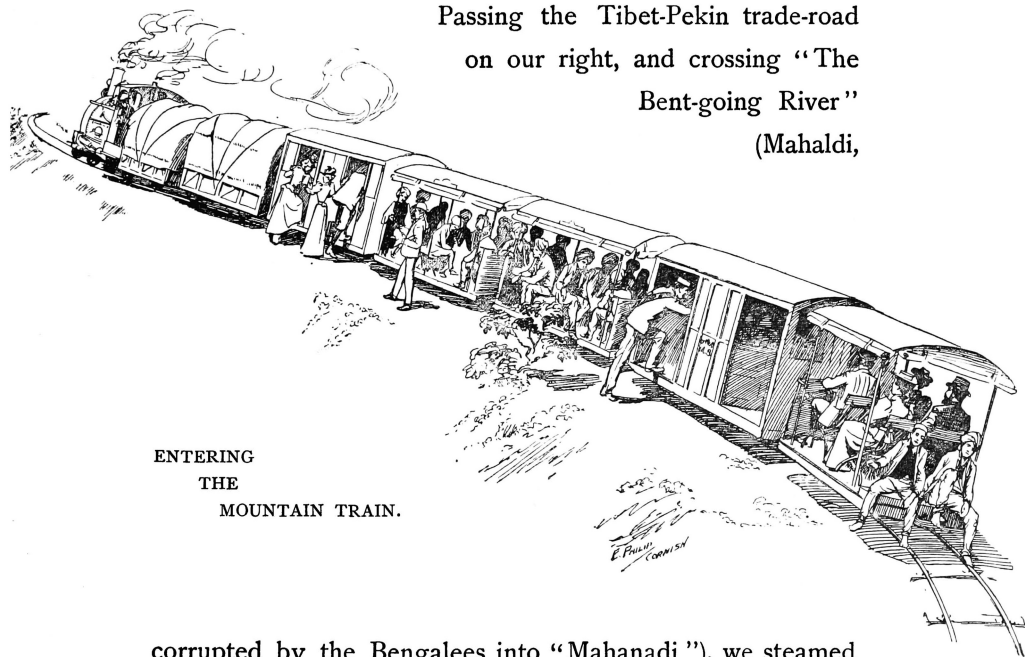
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IN THE MOUNTAIN TRAIN

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on warmer clothing and snatching a hasty breakfast, we entered the little toy-like train that was to carry us up the mountains, and ensconced in arm-chairs in one of the open cars, we were soon rattling gaily across that dreaded belt of fever-laden forest—the *Terai*, which separates the plains from the foot of the hills.

Passing the Tibet-Pekin trade-road
 on our right, and crossing “The
 Bent-going River”
 (Mahaldi,



ENTERING
 THE
 MOUNTAIN TRAIN.

corrupted by the Bengalees into “Mahanadi”), we steamed through some deserted tea-plantations in clearings in this deadly forest. For in this poisonous atmosphere no labourers can be induced to settle. Each fresh batch of imported coolies soon flees panic-struck before the “Black-Death” (*Kala-azar*), “Black-water Fever” and other malarial pestilences which lurk in every brake and lay their avenging

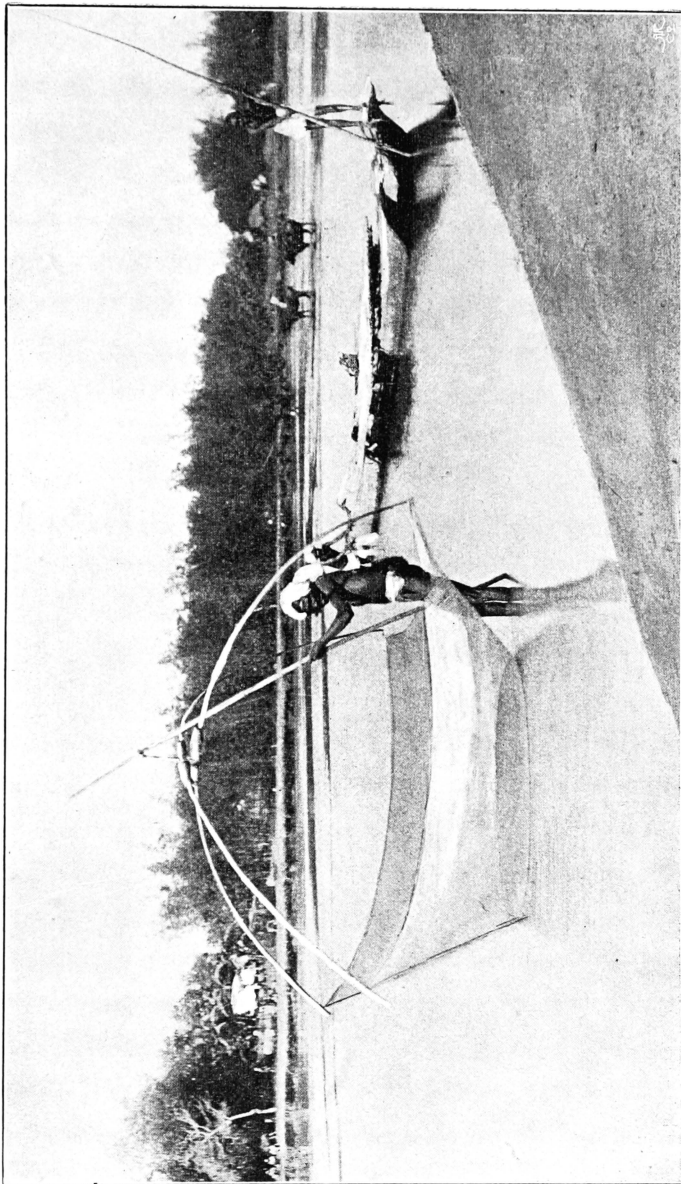
hands on every intruder who invades their reeking solitude. And they claim their victims also from the highest. Here it was that a former English vice-queen of India caught fatal fever when halting to sketch by the wayside in returning from a visit to Darjeeling. Amidst this desolate tangle of grass-grown tea-bushes are to be seen a few ruined huts of the planters, perched on tall posts to lift them somewhat above the rank exhalations, telling a sad tale of British capital and enterprise sunk in an almost hopeless waste.

Nor is it only man who suffers here. The tea-plant itself is attacked by more than the ordinary number of blights and diseases, from which the plantations overlooking us a few thousand feet up the mountain-side are comparatively free.

Still it is possible to get acclimatized even to such an unhealthy place as this. The few wild aborigines, the Mech and Dhimal, who live in the depths of these forests, and who will undertake no hired service, have acquired almost as much immunity from the deadly fevers of these forests as the tigers and other wild beasts who make this their home. And as we steam along past clumps of up-standing Sal trees, which look like pines in the distance, you may see in the clearings on the banks of the streams that deeply score the plain, some of the black aborigines⁵ fishing in the shallows with long push-nets of Chinese pattern.

Further on we passed through a bit of real “jungle”

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FISHING IN THE TERAJ WITH PUSH-NETS OF CHINESE PATTERN.

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THROUGH THE TERAJ JUNGLE

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or primeval forest, with a wild luxuriance of vegetation as rank as any in the heart of Brazil. Its tangled thickets of sensitive Mimosa and dark greenery between the tall tufts of giant grass twenty feet in height, are still the haunt of the tiger and of the herds of deer and boars on which he preys, also of wild elephants, rhinoceros, buffalo and other big game. And here, under the figs and the stalwart cotton-trees with their fiery crimson blossoms, clusters of fern and clumps of moss carry the cool influence of the snowy mountains far out into the dust beclouded plains.

The ascent begins quite suddenly. The Himalayas here shoot up abruptly from the Indian plains like giant cliffs from the sea-shore, so that here, at their base, notwithstanding we were about 300 miles inland from Calcutta, we are yet scarcely more than 300 feet above the sea-level, though in the next thirty-five miles or so of railway we rise over 7,000 feet, and pass within a few hours up through all the gradations of climate, ranging from tropical to temperate and sub-Alpine. We can see here, from this deep base, at one glance, the striking differences in the foliage that sharply demarcate the different climatic zones as detailed by Hooker, and which give such magnificent and varied scenic effects as are to be seen in no other part of the world. Not even in this very same range further to the north, can the like contrast be seen. For in the north-western and Panjab Himalayas the mountains do not rise so suddenly. The outlying sandstone range of the Siwaliks, famous for

their mammoth fossils, intervenes; and owing to the much less rainfall there and the greater heat and drought of spring, and greater cold of winter, the vegetation is not only very much less luxuriant and varied than here, but many of the lower slopes there are almost burned up and bare of trees.

This part of the Himalayas that we are now entering is called "Sikhim", which seems to mean "The Land of Mountain Crests".⁶ It may be viewed as a stupendous stairway hewn out of the western border of the Tibetan plateau by glaciers and great rivers and leading down to the Indian plains, with a fall of about 17,000 feet in a hundred miles. The face of this vast incline is roughly cut up into countless peaks and ridges of stupendous height, and valleys of corresponding depth, adown which dash the glacial streams and thundering torrents of water precipitated by the excessive rainfall of this rainiest section of the Himalayas, for it faces the Bay of Bengal and receives the full force of the heavy summer rains or "monsoon" And the deep gorges of the rivers so interpenetrate the mountains as to carry a hot climate far along their banks, till the semi-tropic vegetation becomes almost overhung by snowy peaks, thus giving endless variety of climate and scenery, from the torrid heat of the tropics up to the bleak arctic cold of Tibet and its everlasting snows. Zoologically, Sikhim is situated on the borderland between the Palæarctic and Oriental regions, and at the junction of the Chinese, Malayan and Indian sections of the latter region. Thus its