CHAPTER XVIII

THE RETURN TO DARJEELING

We had arrived back at the Base Camp on June 10. The following day was necessarily a rest day, and we devoted it to lounging about the camp, writing letters to home, or making desperate endeavours to fill in many blank pages of our diaries.

For some time I dutifully hammered away at a dispatch on the portable typewriter, but soon I gave even that up, and sitting in the sun on the warm springy turf allowed my mind to wander back over the events of the past fortnight. From May 29 to June 12 there had been for me only one rest day, and that was on June 1 when we had lain in our tents unable to move owing to a snowstorm. Kangchenjunga had been too nerve-wracking for enjoyment, but though we had had some tough and trying times on the Jonsong Peak we had enjoyed them, too ; we had not been merely avalanche fodder, we had climbed free from nerve-strain and anxiety, and life had been very good. Staying on in the Lhonak Valley as Professor Dyhrenfurth wanted to do might result in some useful exploration and geological work, but to me at least the thought of a hot bath submerged every other consideration. I looked at my hands ; they were brown and wrinkled with the sun and wind, the hands of an old man. My fingers explored my face, pulling on the red beard sprouting therefrom with a feeling, not of pride at its luxuriant growth, but of loathing.

Hoerlin had been the only one to escape a beard, and had been known as Pallas (Pallas Athene). Dr. Richter had weighed us that morning. The work of the past twelve weeks had told, and we had all lost a stone or more each, Professor Dyhrenfurth as much as twenty-two pounds.

By courtesy of *The Times*

That afternoon Schneider and Hoerlin returned from the Dodang Nyima Range. They had added yet another success to their splendid climbing achievements by ascending the Dodang Peak, 22,700 feet. With characteristic modesty they had little to say about it, beyond the fact that the climbing had been of a most difficult nature. They had

cut steps for many hours in the toughest ice they had ever encountered, and the picks of their ice-axes bore striking witness to the toughness, for they were bent round out of alignment. First of all they had descended to the Choten Nyima La, across which runs the Thibetan frontier ; thence they had climbed the Dodang Peak. It had cost them nearly a day to work through a difficult ice-fall, and on the final climb they had only just escaped being benighted, so difficult had been the work.

Wood Johnson, who was much better, was anxious to return to his tea estate, as his leave was nearly up. Frau Dyhrenfurth, Dr. Richter, Duvanel and myself decided to accompany him, leaving the remainder of the party to attempt the ascent of the Lhonak Peak, and afterwards cross over one of the passes into the Zemu Valley in order to view the great eastern precipices of Kangchenjunga and the ice ridge attempted by the Munich expedition. Whether or not they would be able to do this before the arrival of the monsoon was, however, doubtful. It needed only a glance down the valley to see the clouds flooding steadily up from the Teesta Valley, and it was practically certain that the latter part of their programme, at least, would be spoilt by the rains, as the Zemu Valley receives them earlier than the head of the Lhonak Valley.

One march from the Base Camp down the Lhonak Valley was a yak-grazing ground, and a runner was sent down ordering yaks to be sent up for our luggage. Perhaps it was memories of Wood Johnson's adventure with the Khunza yak that led Duvanel to object strongly to having his exposed films and cinematograph apparatus yak-borne down the valley. However, while even a Lhonak yak

might have objected to the yakmanship of Wood Johnson, it apparently did not mind carrying Duvanel's films, and the matter was thus amicably settled. As a matter of fact, I noticed no desire on the part of Wood Johnson to "yak it" down the valley.

June 12 was another beautiful day, and Europeans, porters and yaks started off in great fettle. Frau Dyhrenfurth was left behind, typing Professor Dyhrenfurth's letters and articles, and was to follow with her servant later.

A mile or two down the valley we turned for one last look at the beauties we were leaving. The huge snout of the Lhonak Glacier was thrust down the valley like some tremendous earthwork of the gods. Far above rose the Jonsong Peak, serene and peaceful. Had we really stood on that remote summit, so far above the world? Dominating the head of the Lhonak Glacier stood the Lhonak Peak, rising in perfect symmetry and superb simplicity. Northwards, was the brown reef of mountains separating us from Thibet. Silently we stood gazing at the Jonsong Peak. It had taken and given some hard knocks. We had conquered it, but conquered not its spirit, it had merely suffered us. The true mountaineer does not regard a vanquished summit with contempt, but rather with increased respect. Kangchenjunga is terrible, it is difficult to think of it in any other way. It is a giant, with all a giant's meaningless passions and illogical rages. The Jonsong Peak is a more tolerant mountain. In stature it cannot rival Kangchenjunga, therefore, it is more sober, less blatant. After being cast out from the precincts of Kangchenjunga, we had approached it with humility, and it had welcomed us.

One last regretful glance at brown valley, silver peak and

YAKS AT THE JONSONG BASE CAMP

gentian sky. We turned. Soon a corner had hidden peaks and glacier from view.

For some distance we strolled over turf and over the shoulders of rolling hills that put me in mind of the South Downs. We were well content with life ; so too were the porters. Even the " Thundering Herd " of yaks seemed to sense the gaiety of the occasion, and increased their normal speed of two miles to nearly two and a half miles per hour.

We were short of coolie food, but word had been sent down to Lachen, and we were expecting to meet some loads. Unfortunately, they were sent on the other side of the glacier torrent, and it was only with considerable difficulty that a sack of coolie food was slung across on a rope, for it was impossible to ford the torrent.

We passed the end of the valley leading up towards the range running south from the Langpo Peak. Looking up it we were rewarded with a fine view of the Tent Peak, with a plume of monsoon clouds tearing its summit.

The grass, at first dry and green, became greener and more luscious. Brooks of clear, cool water babbled down the hillside to join the turgid mountain torrent that followed the valley. Little flowers grew beside them, many of which were familiar Alpine friends, and for the first time since leaving Kangbachen we came upon dwarf rhododendrons. The broad valley narrowed abruptly into a steeper defile. Just before it did so there was situated a little group of huts, marked on the map as Tancha.

A stiff wind was blowing down the valley, and we took good care to pitch our tents to the windward of the filthy hovels in which dwelt the yakherds and their families. This portion of the Lhonak Valley reminded me of a valley in

the Red Coolins of Skye, only here the ground was not bog-like, there was no misty drizzle, and neither bannock cakes nor whiskey were to be purchased at the yakherds' huts. For the rest there were the same bare slopes, and colourful reddish rocks and broken crags, similar to those of the Red Coolins. At eventide when the sun gilded the hillcrests, I almost felt that I had only to walk to the crest of one of them to see the landlocked waters of the sea lochs, and the dim, blue isles of the Hebrides. The darkness fell more swiftly than it does over the Hebrides. Here was no lingering twilight, no gradual merging of blue and violet, violet and purple, but a sudden and brutal switch over from light to darkness.

We began to feel anxious as to the whereabouts of Frau Dyhrenfurth, but presently we espied two figures in the gloom, and went out to greet her. She had been kept longer than had been anticipated by her typing duties, and it was not until long after we had left that she was able to leave the Base Camp, together with her servant, a youth of sixteen, named Kipa. She had forded the torrent under the impression that we had gone down the same route as that followed by the men carrying coolie food, and she had had to cross back. Kipa, who had carried her, had been nearly carried away and drowned by the swiftly running waters. As it was she was very wet, and anyone with a less tough constitution might well have caught a severe chill.

My estimate as to the distance from the Base Camp at which we might expect to meet the monsoon rains was not far out, for we had not marched more than a mile or so down the valley the following morning when we ran into a depressing drizzle and damp mists. Wood Johnson revelled

in it, for being a North-countryman it naturally reminded him of the purlieus of Manchester and Wasdale Head. I fear that for my part I found it merely depressing. It soon cleared up, however, and as we descended to a flat plain marked on the map as Langpo, the sun peered out again.

We were now on the north bank of the river, having forded it with some difficulty below Tancha. We began to encounter a number of side streams flowing from the main watershed of the Himalayas to the north, along which runs the Thibetan frontier. Sometimes, it was no easy matter fording these, but the porters were used to such work, and carrying us pick-a-back, picked their way sure-footedly through the rapids.

One of these streams, the Chaka Chu, flows down the valley at the head of which is the Nakpo La Pass on the frontier of Sikkim and Thibet. It is a pass probably not often used, but we came across an old man with his son and a yak. The yak was laden with an extraordinary variety of objects. Had Lewis Carroll seen it he might have mounted his White Knight on a yak instead of the more conventional war-horse. If the White Knight had been so mounted, he would not have needed to fall off, he would have been thrown off, and that frequently.

Tucking up their dirty robes, the old man and his son strove to coax the yak across the stream. First of all the son pulled on the bridle, while the old man shoved behind ; then the old man pulled on the bridle while the son shoved behind. These proceedings seemed merely to bore the yak, and it turned its brown eyes upon the two in the same pitying way that Wood Johnson's yak had regarded him. At last, after many efforts to budge the yak had failed, the

old man and his son halted, too exhausted even for profanity. As they did so, the yak gave them one contemptuous glance, and with stately tread, crossed the stream of its own accord.

A little distance beyond this stream we camped. Though our height was only 14,000 feet, wet snow was falling heavily and the climate had degenerated into a rawness similar to that of a November day in England. For the first time on the expedition we felt really chilly. Up high we had experienced occasional numbness and had narrowly escaped frostbite on two or three occasions, but though one might numb, one did not shiver. In order to experience a really unpleasant form of cold, it is unnecessary to leave Great Britain. Towards evening the sun broke through for a short time, but the snow instead of evaporating was resolved into a wet slush.

The next morning saw us tramping along a path of muddiness reminiscent of a clay valley in Surrey. Wood Johnson rejoiced in it, for it reminded him once more of Manchester. We were now in a delightful country " between the pinewoods and the snow," the alps of Kangchenjunga. I would that I were a botanist, and it was indeed unfortunate one was not included in the party. The whole hillside was covered in dwarf rhododendrons in full bloom ; there were clumps of gorgeous blue poppies, and everywhere dwarf pines, to say nothing of many flowering mosses and rock flowers, some of which were familiar and some were not.

The valley narrowed almost to a gorge. We ate our lunch near some great drifts of avalanche snow Everything pointed to the fact that the rainfall and snowfall are

far greater in the lower part of the Lhonak Valley than in the upper. The snow line was definitely lower, and the drifts still left on the hillside suggested a heavy winter snowfall.

As we had only been able to take yaks to our last camping place, word had previously been sent to Lachen for local coolies to carry our loads. We met some twenty-five of them both men and women. They had come up from Lachen the same day, and expected to reach our last camping site ere nightfall, a prodigious piece of walking. These Lachen people are remarkably handsome, with finely chiselled features and smooth, clear skins. Like most of the peoples who dwell in these upper valleys of Sikkim and Nepal they had emigrated from the bleak plateaux of Thibet to the more fertile valleys south of the main Himalayan watershed.

Shortly after passing them, we entered the gorge of the Zemu Chu.[1] We were on the north-eastern bank of the stream, and it was essential to cross to the south-west bank in order to reach the camping place at Yaktang at the junction of the Zemu and Lhonak valleys.[2] Former travellers have mentioned a huge boulder resting in the torrent bed, by utilising which it is possible to cross the torrent. This may be possible at normal times, but certainly not during the rains. A party of our own men, under the charge of Tikeram, who had been sent on ahead some days previously, and aided by the Lachen men had, however, constructed a bridge from pine trunks to which cross

[1] Chu equals River.

[2] The nomenclature is here somewhat confusing. The Zemu Chu is not the stream from the Zemu Glacier, but the lower portion of the Lambo Chu which flows down the Lhonak Valley.

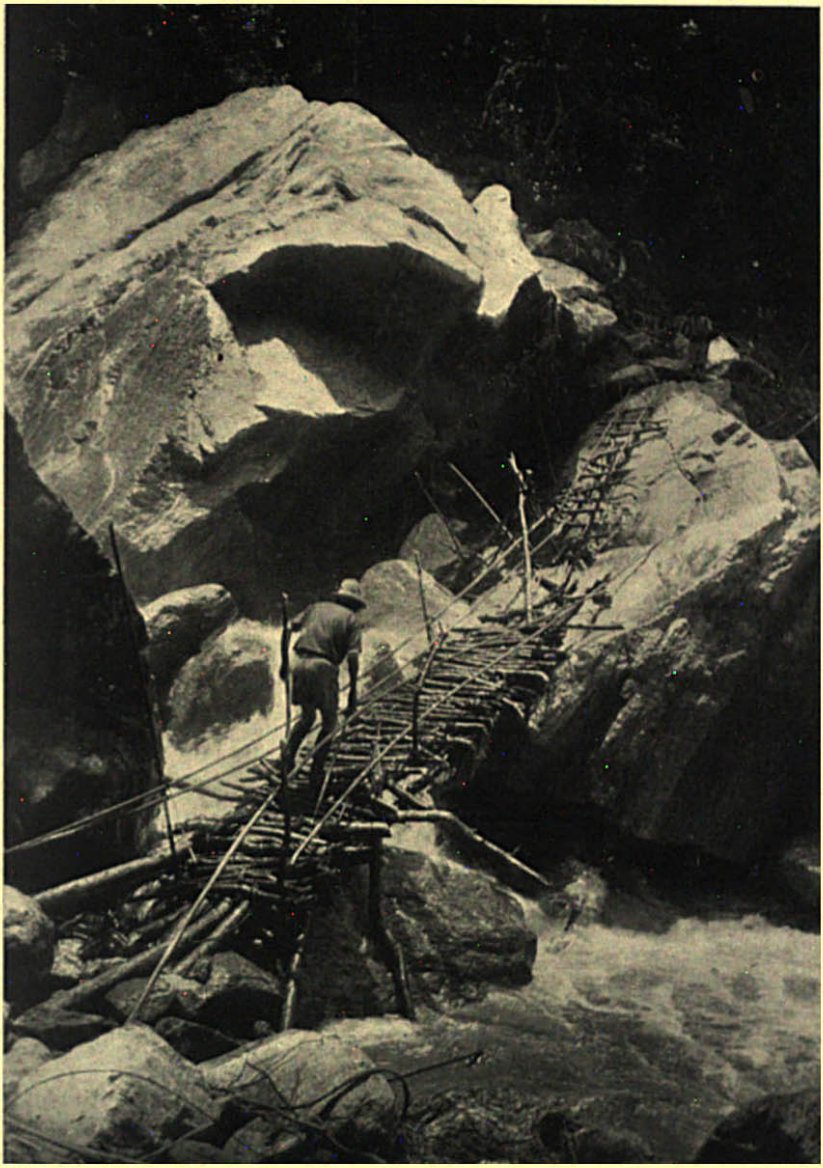
pieces were lashed with yak-hair rope. Though primitive in appearance, it was strong enough for its purpose, and well worth the fifteen rupees charge for the yak-hair rope by the Head Man of Lachen. We crossed it gingerly, one by one, for to have fallen into the boiling torrent beneath would have meant certain death.

We were now down to the level of giant rhododendrons and coniferous trees. Beyond our home-made bridge the way had been prepared and a track hacked through the snaky tangle of rhododendrons. Had it not been prepared, we could not possibly have got to Yaktang that day. The gorge was a wild gloomy place, and its gloominess was enhanced by a low roof of cloud. We felt imprisoned. I found myself longing for the upland breezy slopes of the Lhonak Valley, for there is something terribly depressing about these great gorges that carry the melted snow waters of the Himalayas to the plains.

The gorge opened suddenly out, dropping at the same time fully 1,000 feet to Yaktang. Down the pitch thus formed the swollen torrent of the Zemu Chu roared in a tremendous cataract. What a place for a hydro-electric station! A million or more horse power which could easily be harnessed are going to waste.

We found ourselves once more in the region of deciduous trees, and for the first time since we had left Yoksam a tropical forest enclosed us. Wild strawberries were growing everywhere, but they were watery and tasteless. The path became muddier and muddier. Wood Johnson and I were far ahead of the others, and we hurried on.

At the junction of the Zemu and Lhonak valleys there is a flat open space, where is situated the shepherd's hut



A HOMEMADE BRIDGE OVER THE LHONAK RIVER

dignified by the title of Yaktang. Here we found the assistant cook, comfortably ensconced before a roaring fire, and proceeded to arouse him to a sense of his duties. It was found that he had in his possession a large tin of strawberries: these, together with a tin of condensed milk, were opened and engulfed—there is no better word to express our hunger and greed—by Wood Johnson and myself. A day or two after this episode, Frau Dyhrenfurth, when checking her list of stores, announced with joy that so far as she could remember there was still a tin of strawberries unopened and uneaten. The cook was told to produce them. He could not, neither, fortunately, could he speak English or German. His jabber in Nepali was, however, translated by Wood Johnson to the effect that the cook regretted it, but the strawberries had been eaten. A more literal translation would, however, have been to the effect that Wood Johnson and I had eaten the strawberries and he, the cook, did not see why he should be blamed. Now, I fear, the "Memsahib" will know the disgraceful truth as to the fate of that tin of strawberries.

It was a dismal night, but despite the rain we preferred to camp on the wet grass outside the hut rather than on the years' old layers of offal comprising the floor of the hut. We had hoped to obtain a view of Siniolchum, but the monsoon had now this part of the Himalayas in its grip, and we marched down the valley squelching through glutinous mud under a leaden sky. We reached Lachen before midday, and for the first time for over two months entered the door of a civilised dwelling.

At Lachen there are two lady missionaries, one of whom, Miss Konquist, a Swedish lady, has been there for thirty

years. Their good work is evidenced by the neatness and cleanliness of the village, and the industry of its inhabitants. The latter had been taught weaving, and I brought back with me to England a handsome rug, dyed in natural colours from the flowers of the Teesta Valley, and a quantity of cloth, as superior in quality as the finest Harris homespun. The fact that anyone should spend thirty years in such a remote corner of the world bears testimony to the charm of Lachen. It is indeed a beautiful little place, nestling on a shelf of the Teesta Valley, 8,000 feet above sea level, amid charming woodlands, dells and glades where many varieties of fruit and vegetables, including the homely apple tree, flourish.

We were invited to tea at the Mission House. Surely it was never before invaded by such a set of blackguardly looking ruffians. I exclude, of course, the "Memsahib," whose appearance went far to redeem that of her bewhiskered companions. It was strange to be sitting in a drawing room again, balancing a cup of tea in one hand, and biting elegantly at a piece of bread and butter held in the other. I fear our bites were neither elegant nor few, and the excellent cakes and scones provided disappeared at almost an indecent speed.

From Lachen to Gangtok is four marches. The weather was kind to us for the first two marches, and we were able to enjoy the scenery and flora of one of the loveliest valleys in the Himalayas, the great valley of the Teesta River. Owing to landships, it was impossible to take ponies more than a few miles beyond Tsuntang, one march from Lachen. The rains had begun, so the missionaries told us, at Lachen eleven days ago, when we had been enjoying

fine weather on the Jonsong Peak. They must have been very heavy indeed, amounting to a cloudburst, for between Tsuntang and Singhik the path had been obliterated in many places by landslides, which in some cases had swept broad tracks through the dense forests. We had expected to find many leeches, but curiously enough, we encountered hardly any, although in some places it was necessary to keep a sharp look-out.

Singhik bungalow is in a delightful situation, and admirably placed for a stay of several days for botanists who like to browse among the varied flora of this part of the Teesta Valley, but after my own experience there, I think I should prefer to give it a miss in the future.

In order to finish a dispatch to *The Times*, which was to be telegraphed from Gangtok, I sat up until after midnight writing. The job done, I took up the candle by the light of which I had been writing, and started off to the room I was sharing with Wood Johnson. In order to get there I had to walk along the verandah. I had hardly passed out of the sitting-room door on to the latter, when suddenly I received a heavy blow on the neck almost sufficient to stun me. Thinking I was being attacked by some robber or other evil disposed person, I let out a yell, and dropping the candle turned round to face my attacker. There was no one there, the verandah was deserted! Then came a horrid thought, above the verandah the roof was supported by rafters; perhaps a snake hanging from one of these had struck the blow! I put my hand to my neck, but there was no blood, neither was it bruised or sore, though the blow had seemed a heavy one. I took up the candle, relit it, and passing along the verandah, entered

the bedroom. My yell had been sufficient to wake Wood Johnson, but not to get him out of bed—*that* would require nothing short of an earthquake, or some other natural cataclysm. The obvious explanation was a bat, owl, or some other nocturnal rover, yet, one of these could scarcely have felt like a human fist. There would, in addition, have been the beat of wings. Probably it was due to a lack of a suitable explanation but my sleep was a disturbed one. I dreamt that I was trying to escape from something malignant and horrible. Then the ground I was standing on began to rock in the grip of an earthquake. I awoke to find myself standing on the unfortunate Wood Johnson trying to climb out of the window. Altogether, it was a somewhat disturbed night.

Between Singhik and Dikchu the weather during the day was no longer able to contain itself, and broke wrathfully in what novelists writing of the tropics usually describe as " ropes of rain." I did not see anything that resembled " ropes of rain," and it will probably give a better idea to the scientifically minded reader of the rainfall to say that it probably fell at the rate of about one inch per hour.

The bungalow at Dikchu is in a bad situation, and is only 2,000 feet above sea level, near the Teesta River, and in the middle of dense jungle. It is well within the malarial area, and as I have before remarked Teesta malaria is one of the most virulent forms of malaria known. Also, the moist heat was unpleasant after the clear cold air we had been used to. Lightning flamed through the jungle canopy, and the rain roared down so loudly as almost to drown the crash of thunder. We had no mosquito nets, and we

were badly bitten during the night. It was probably here that Dr. Richter and Kurz got a touch of malaria.

The weather rained itself out during the night, and we climbed up to the Penlong La in fine weather, save for a desultory shower or two. Near the pass we were met by servants of the Maharajah of Sikkim with the Maharajah's own racing ponies. It was a kindly thought and the ponies fairly flew along guided by the familiar Chu ! Chu ! which is successful above all exclamations in this part of the world in galvanising ponies and yaks into activity.

The first thing that encountered our gaze as we entered the dak-bungalow at Gangtok was a bottle of whiskey standing like a Serjeant-Major before a row of tins containing various delicacies, a gift of the Maharajah's. We were greeted also by Mr. Dudley, the Maharajah's secretary, and his wife, whose hospitality we are never likely to forget.

Gangtok is something like Darjeeling on a smaller scale. There are the same terraced roads, and platforms for houses cut in the hillsides. The following morning we called upon the Maharajah and the Maharanee, and were shown round a temple that was being constructed in the Palace grounds. The interior was being painted by expert native artists. Though there appeared to be little in the nature of any preliminary plans or drawings, the work was being executed with extraordinary accuracy as regards spacing and attention to detail. The wonderful designs were Chinese in their conception, and were presumably intended to represent incidents in the life of Buddha and the beliefs of Buddhism. But in one corner was a squatting figure with a cruel countenance and sardonic grin, which we were told was the God of Kangchenjunga. Before we

left I mentioned the little incident at Singhik to the Maharajah who told me that people avoid the bungalow as far as possible and even double march in preference to spending a night there. Possibly, however, he only told me this out of politeness to my story !

That evening the Maharajah entertained us to dinner. I fear that we were hardly dressed for the part, but any slight diffidence we may have felt regarding our beards and clothes was soon forgotten under the influence of an excellent dinner, including one or two strange Chinese dishes with which we were not familiar. Indeed, I found myself relating to the Maharanee, who speaks excellent English, my best stories, which were translated into Thibetan for the benefit of a stout gentleman who sat on my other side, who, I gathered, was the Holiest Lama of Sikkim. That evening his holiness was not proof against certain Welsh stories into which I endeavoured to impart as much as possible of that accent for which the leader of another great Himalayan expedition is renowned. It was a convivial evening. Among other things we were told that once a year a great dinner is given by the Maharajah to the Lamas of the Sikkim Monasteries, and that it is considered an insult to the hospitality of the Maharajah if the Lamas are able to leave the Palace on their own legs. I can well believe that they never do.

The following morning we said good-bye to Gangtok, and to Mr. and Mrs. Dudley with regret. We had hoped to be able to travel in motor-cars all the way to Darjeeling, but owing to floods and the main road bridge being down at Tsingtang we walked and rode. Riding proved something more than exciting, for our ponies had been trained as

racing ponies, and one and all hated to see another pony in front of them. Their mouths were like iron, and at times it was impossible to hold them in. I shall not easily forget mine bolting at a point where the road was narrow and turned a sharp corner, below which sheer cliffs two or three hundred feet high fell to the torrent beneath. For a non-horseman like myself it was a relief to cross the temporary bridge at Tsingtang to find a little fleet of docile " baby " cars waiting to take us over the last stage of some forty miles to Darjeeling.

We stopped at Gielle Tea Estate, where we were hospitably received by Mr. McKean, Wood Johnson's Manager. Darkness and rain were falling as the gallant little cars, laden to overflowing, toiled up the steep hills to Darjeeling. A little later the fashionably dressed habitués of the ballroom at the Mount Everest Hotel were startled by the appearance of a number of ill favoured tramps, the entrance of whom was greeted by the band with what some described as " Die Wache am Rhein " and others as " The Star-spangled Banner " or was it the Frothblowers' Anthem ?

Three days later we took leave of Wood Johnson and many hospitable friends at Darjeeling, and motored down to Siliguri. Our servants and porters said good-bye to us as we got into our cars and each of them slipped little cotton scarves over our shoulders as a mark of esteem. I shall always remember the grip of Nemu's horny hand.

Two glimpses with which we were rewarded on that journey are memorable. The first glimpse occurred as we came out of the monsoon mists which were enwrapping Darjeeling and the hills round with a grey shroud, to see the Plain of Bengal stretched out below us in the sunlight.

For three months we had seen nothing but hills, mountains and valleys; now we looked upon one of those vast fertile plains which had been vouchsafed by Nature for the use of man. Far into the dim blue distances it stretched, with its dark green forest blurs, and the silver thread of the great Teesta River, no longer turbulent, but calm and serene, bearing the melted snows of the Himalayas to the ocean. To appreciate life to its full, you must sample its contrasts. We had toiled amid the snows, our cheeks had felt their harsh coldness, had been scorched by their burning suns, and lashed by their bitter blizzards. Now the soft warm air of the plain came up to meet us. Tropical forests enclosed us, and above the purr of the car we could hear the *chanson* of innumerable insects.

The second view was later when we had left the hills, and were passing along the flat straight road near Siliguri. The last gleams of sunset were fading from earth and sky, the insect chorus had died away, and no sound came from the hushed forests on either hand. Before us stretched the plain, behind us rose the Himalayas. A range of towering cumuli clouds rested on the foothills, their crests sharply outlined against a saffron sky. Grand, solid, immovable, they rose, seemingly as eternal as the great mountain range over which they stood watch and ward.