CHAPTER IV

A FIRST GLIMPSE OF THE HIMALAYAS

In order to meet Wood Johnson and make some of the preliminary arrangements for the expedition, I left the first party at Agra, and travelled on alone to Siliguri. The "Darjeeling Mail" from Calcutta arrived there soon after dawn. The night in the train had been a stifling one, and intense heat had not improved a slight attack of dysentery contracted at Agra. Yet, it was impossible not to experience a thrill, for Siliguri lies at the foot of the Himalayas, and I craned my head out of the window to try and catch a glimpse of the great mountain range we had come so far to see. But nothing was visible save a few miles of the monotonous heat-soaked Plain of Bengal.

Alighting on the platform, I found my hand clasped by Wood Johnson. He said, "I knew it was you, because you are obviously a climber." I replied that at the moment I certainly did not feel like one, as my stomach appeared to be full of gnawing rats. "Oh! That's nothing," was the comforting reply, "everyone gets these little 'tummy' troubles out here."

It was during breakfast that I learned that I was expected to accompany Wood Johnson on the pillion of his motor-cycle to his tea plantation at Rangli Rangliot, 5,000 feet up, thirty miles from Siliguri and twenty from Darjeeling. Three years previously I had risen from a muddy

ditch by the side of a remote road in Wales whither I had been hurled at a speed of forty-five miles per hour vowing that I would never again ride a motor-cycle. Now, this vow must perforce be broken.

I will not mention the make of the motor-cycle, as this might be considered derogatory by the makers. We had not proceeded a mile from Siliguri when a portion of the horn fell off. Many bullock carts were on the road, and vigorous blasting on the horn was required to move them. After a search, we retrieved the lost portion, and proceeded on our way.

The road from Siliguri is flat and straight, as straight as a Roman road, and with a fair metalled surface. On either hand is dense jungle ; tangled, knotted masses of trees and undergrowth, interspersed with tall, coarse elephant grass. Here are to be found elephant, leopard and tiger. Indeed, Wood Johnson told me that a man eater of the last species had recently caused considerable alarm in the district. The road we were on is a unique highway. It is the connecting link between India and Thibet, the great trade-way along which Thibetans pass to sell their goods in India, and the route followed by three Everest expeditions. After the sullen-eyed Bengalis of Calcutta and the plains, it was a relief to see the yellow-skinned, almond-eyed, alert little men from Thibet and Nepal, with their wide, cheery grins.

As we chugged and exploded through the silent forest, dim, unsubstantial shapes far overhead began to loom through the haze, the Himalayas. In no other mountain range that I have seen is the transition from plain to mountain so abrupt. One minute we were

on the Plain of Bengal, as flat as a golfing green, the next the wooded jaws of the great Teesta Valley had enclosed us.

The Teesta Valley is one of the most superb valleys in the world. Though no snow peaks are visible from its lower portion, the traveller realises that he has entered the Himalayas. Above him the valley sides rise for thousands of feet at such a steep angle, it seems almost impossible that the dense tropical vegetation can cling to them; below, in a rocky bed of giant boulders carried down by the turbulence of the monsoon rains, thunder the melted snow waters of Kangchenjunga, and the glaciers of Northern Sikkim.

Where it debouches on to the Plain of Bengal, the valley floor is but a few feet above sea level. Luxuriously beautiful though the forests are at this low altitude, they serve but to breed one of the most malignant malarial mosquitos known to exist. It is said of Teesta Valley malaria that once it is fairly in the blood, the victim will never entirely rid himself of it. That this is a truism is shown by the poor physique of the Sikkim Lepchas, who inhabit the valley. This race of gentle mild-eyed people is being gradually, but ruthlessly exterminated by disease and malaria. Their plight is not helped by a strict conservatism regarding marriage, which decrees that they shall not marry Thibetans, their hereditary enemies. Thus the evils of inter-marriage are added to those of disease, evils that increase as the population decreases. It is only fresh and healthy blood that can save the Lepchas from extinction.

Soon after entering the valley, the road began to climb

in a series of hairpin bends. These Wood Johnson negotiated at a high speed, while relating to me how the previous year he had run off the road, fallen a considerable distance with the motor-cycle on top of him, and had to spend three months in hospital. Fortunately, it was on a straight section that the tyre elected to go suddenly flat. The valve was at fault, although had the tyre been punctured, it would have made little difference, as Wood Johnson possessed no repair outfit.

We were five miles from the nearest village where help could be obtained. First of all, we attempted to continue as before, but even at a slow speed the motor-cycle slewed unpleasantly about the road, and after I had received a bruise on the shin, I suggested to Wood Johnson that he should go on alone, repair the valve, and return. With no weight on the pillion this was possible, and a few minutes later he was out of sight.

To one who had but recently escaped from the cold, damp vapours of a London February, the heat seemed terrific. From all sides came a shrill symposium of innumerable insects, and the harsh clatter of frogs. It was my first experience of a tropical forest, and as I wished to see more of the Teesta Valley, I decided to continue walking along the road.

For the most part the hillside rises steeply and directly from the road, but at one part there was a comparatively level intervening stretch of forest. It was while passing this that I was suddenly startled by an unpleasantly malevolent snarl. Looking to the left I could clearly distinguish between the matted undergrowth the form of a large tiger, not more than five yards away. Apart from

Zoos and circuses, it was the first time that I had ever seen a tiger, and I must confess that Wood Johnson's story of the man eater recurred unpleasantly in my mind. My only weapon, a pocket knife, seemed a poor defence. It was a situation requiring tact. If I ran, the tiger might regard this as an indication of timidity, and follow me. If I stood still, he might assume me to be an attacker, and himself attack. The best compromise was to continue quietly walking down the road. Once I heard a rustle as though the brute was following me through the jungle, but after two hundred yards the flat jungle gave place to a buttress of crags abutting against the road. I could breathe more freely, for the tiger was scarcely likely to follow me along the open road. It was, of course, much to be regretted that I had not a rifle, for to have shot one's first tiger in such circumstances would have been unusual. The fact that farther along the road several natives passed me showed that in this district, at least, nothing is to be feared from tigers.

A mile or so farther on was a native hamlet, consisting of thatched, wooden houses resting on log piles. Here the road divided, one branch climbing the hill towards Darjeeling, the other continuing along the valley, after crossing a tributary of the main Teesta River by a well-made suspension bridge. By the bridge, I sat down to wait for Wood Johnson. At length, he arrived, and we continued once more on our journey.

I told him of my encounter with the tiger, and gathered that I should consider myself lucky seeing one so soon after arriving in India. Other men had been out for years, and had not seen a tiger. He, Wood Johnson, would have

given a month's pay to have seen that tiger at the business end of a rifle. The tiger had already killed deer, and other animals. There was, of course, no question of it attacking human beings unless itself attacked. All this I gathered as I bumped painfully up and down on the pillion of Wood Johnson's motor-cycle.

Presently, we left the road in favour of a narrow lane that winds up the hillside to Rangli Rangliot, 4,500 feet above the Teesta Valley. In England, this lane would be much in demand by motor-cycling clubs as a test hill. People would line its one in three gradient and hairpin bends to cheer the intrepidity of the riders, but in this part of the world it is only one among many other hills of a similar character habitually traversed by the Austin Seven cars and motor-cycles of the tea planters. Wood Johnson said his record was twenty minutes for this particular ascent, but that out of consideration for my stomach he would not try to break it. Anyway, Fate willed otherwise. We had climbed but two or three hundred feet above the main road when the engine, after a few splutters and a sharp cough, stopped dead.

This time it was a twist-grip throttle control that had broken. A caravan of laden ponies under the charge of some natives was coming up the path. They wished to pass us, but this Wood Johnson would not allow. He said they would interfere with our future progress. First of all, we endeavoured by an ingenious arrangement of string to manipulate the throttle from the handle-bars, then Wood Johnson in the saddle, and myself and two natives shoving, the motor-cycle was pushed up the hill. After several attempts the engine suddenly elected to start with a gallant

roar. I sprang on behind, Wood Johnson let in the clutch, and once more we shot up the hill. But we had not gone more than a few yards when the engine again spluttered and coughed to a standstill. The same laborious process was then repeated, after which we sat down exhausted amid a circle of interested natives.

The noon-day heat was appalling. Divesting ourselves of the majority of our clothes, and giving them to one of the natives with instructions to bring them up, we once more attacked the problem of our recalcitrant mount. First of all I thought of something ingenious, and then Wood Johnson thought of something even more ingenious. The result was always the same, a vulgar splutter and a sarcastic cough. An hour or two later we hurled the contraption to the side of the road, and sat down to consider the situation. We were very hot, Wood Johnson's hand was bleeding from contact with one of the sharp edges common to all motor-cycles, my stomach had not been improved. The motor-cycle tilted over by the side of the road at an inelegant angle, with its horn tied together by string and lurching drunkenly over one handle-bar, seemed to leer at us. There was nothing for it but to walk uphill. Luck was with us. We had not got half-way when we met some unladen ponies coming in the opposite direction, two of which we at once commandeered.

It was now possible for the first time since leaving Siliguri to appreciate the surroundings. As we climbed, the tropical heat of the Teesta Valley was gradually superseded by a temperature comparable to that of a warm English summer day. The jungle thinned, and abruptly we emerged from it on to open slopes covered in tea. A fresh

evening breeze greeted us, seeming to whisper of high places and the snows. Thousands of feet below now was the Teesta Valley with its argent river thread. Northwards, rolling hills stretched like grass-grown slag-heaps towards the factories of the snows. These grass and forest-clad hills are but the foot-hills of the Himalayan wall, yet they are as great in scale as the main range of the Alps. In the Alps one may gaze down into a valley and see trim, neatly laid-out little villages and fields, roads, railways, and electric-power lines, but these give to the mountains an artificial taint, and even on the summit of Mont Blanc or the Matterhorn the mountaineer cannot escape entirely from civilisation. But amid these lower foot-hills of the Himalayas there are few signs of commercialism. True, man has hacked a way here, and scraped a clearing there, but generally speaking the country is the same as it always has been. Up there, in the evening stillness of the tea-gardens I experienced for the first time in my life that subtle feeling of joy and sorrow intermixed which comes to all who are born with the love for mountains. Joy for the vision and hope of the unknown, and sorrow in realising how many adventures there are to seek, and how pitifully short is the life in which to seek them.

Gielle Tea Estate, where Wood Johnson works, is one of the most beautifully situated among the Darjeeling district tea-gardens, and commands a view up the Teesta Valley towards the snows. A pleasant evening was spent there as the guest of Mr. McKean, Wood Johnson's manager, who had kindly given permission for the latter to accompany the expedition, although it meant single-handed work on the plantation for the next three months.

McKean had lived twenty years at Gielle, and it was largely due to his expert tuition in the handling of native labour that made Wood Johnson so invaluable to the expedition.

He presented me with a kukri as a memento of the occasion. The cutting powers of this heavy, curved knife in the hands of an expert Gurkha is amazing. It is said that with one blow a bullock's head can be severed from its body, whilst during the War it was a favourite amusement among men of Gurkha regiments to crawl across " No Man's Land " at night, lie " doggo " on the parapet of the enemy trench, and lop off the head of the unfortunate sentry or anyone else who happened to pass. But apart from its unique cutting powers, the kukri is useful in many other ways, and during the expedition I saw it employed in cutting up firewood, opening packing-cases, sharpening pencils, hewing down vegetation and other varied, if menial tasks.

That evening a number of tea-garden coolies came in with baskets of freshly plucked tea. Most of them were women, sturdy little Nepalis with gay coloured headdresses, necklaces and earrings. In spite of a heavy day's work, for which they are paid but a few annas, they have always a smile at the end of it, and they stood outside the factory laughing and chattering like school children starting out for a treat. The gaiety of these hill people is indeed infectious, and one cannot but compare these lively little women of the hills to the morose Hindu women of the plains.

It was late when Wood Johnson and I left McKean's hospitable roof. Innumerable fireflies flitted round us as we

passed through the silent plantation. Somewhere in the direction of the Himalayas lightning flickered restlessly. The profound quietude of the hills was broken only by the distant throbbing of a native band.