CHAPTER V

SUPERSTITIONS AND STORMS

Great mountain peaks usually excite superstitious awe in the minds of the simple peasantry who dwell in the valleys beneath them. Their height, their isolation from the everyday affairs of life and their grandeur impress men with a sense of their insignificance, persuading them against all judgment and reason that there are forces abroad beyond human ken.

During the Middle Ages the Alps were popularly reputed to be the abode of monstrous dragons ; the uneasy ghost of Pontius Pilate was believed to haunt the slopes of Mount Pilatus above Lucerne, and as late as the latter half of the last century, Edward Whymper wrote of the Matterhorn : " There seemed to be a cordon drawn around it, up to which one might go, but no farther. Within that invisible line gins and effreets were supposed to exist—the Wandering Jew and the spirits of the damned. The superstitious natives in the surrounding valleys (many of whom firmly believed it to be not only the highest mountain in the Alps, but in the world) spoke of a ruined city on its summit wherein spirits dwelt ; and if you laughed, they gravely shook their heads ; told you to look yourself to see the castles and the walls, and warned one against a rash approach, lest the infuriate demons from their impregnable heights might hurl down vengeance for one's derision."

With the advance of civilisation, however, most Alpine

superstitions became legendary. Sturdy guides haul tourists to the summit of the Matterhorn, the ghost of Pontius Pilate is enjoying a well-earned repose, and the dragons have fled before the hosts of Mr. Thomas Cook and the Polytechnic Institute.

Yet even in such an accessible mountain range as the Alps superstitions die hard, and the traveller who forsakes the tourist highways will still find ancient beliefs that have been handed down through countless generations. How much more, therefore, must superstitions be rife among the stupendous ranges of the Himalayas? The fact that their greatest peaks have defied the best efforts of skilled mountaineers, and that, of the sixty odd peaks over 25,000 feet, not one has been scaled, is in itself a justification of the belief that a cordon is drawn round the summits beyond which man may not enter, where dwell the gods in icy detachment from the world.

The most rationally minded of men cannot gaze from Darjeeling upon Kangchenjunga without experiencing something of the same emotions of the simpler-minded Sherpas and Lepchas who dwell in the valleys below. He will find himself wondering half in shame whether there is anything in the tales told him of the powerful god whose sacred throne rests upon its summits, the " Five Treasures of the Snow," and whether the snow-fields and glaciers suspended in mid-air above a misty ocean are indeed the abiding places of the Mi-go, the Abominable Snow Men. He will gaze on Siniolchum and reflect that if there is a God of Inaccessibility, his unapproachable halls and palaces must be fashioned beneath the icy flutings and sweeping scimitar-like ridges of that amazing peak.

It is easy to understand the superstitions of the natives who live round Kangchenjunga. Their fears and fancies are merely an outward expression of a primitive instinct that recognises in Kangchenjunga something beyond human understanding ; a world apart, akin both to Heaven and to Hell ; something to be revered, feared and worshipped.

At first sight it seems strange that men should flock so willingly to the banners of expeditions such as have attempted Everest and Kangchenjunga. The reason is not far to seek ; there is prestige and honour to be gained in daring the inaccessible and braving the wrath of the gods. The Sherpas may be the prey to superstitious fears, but they are men enough to be able to conquer them.

Mountain superstitions are much the same the world over ; it is, therefore, curious to find such a unique superstition as the Abominable Snow Men so firmly implanted in the native mind. Our porters, even the most educated among them, swore that they had seen them, and described them as being white-skinned and naked, but covered with thick hair. Whence did this belief originate ? Was there once a wild tribe that roamed the Himalayas—a tribe, perhaps, of white nomads from Southern Siberia, half ape and half man, to give to this superstition a foundation of fact ? During the last Everest expedition wild rumours were afloat that the expedition actually encountered these beings. Actually, however, no European has set eyes on a Snow Man. The nearest approach to fact was the experience of Mr. E. O. Shebbeare, who accompanied the 1929 Bavarian expedition to Kangchenjunga. He relates that when ascending to the Base Camp his porters begged him to come with them to see the footprints of a Snow Man in

the snow. When, however, he arrived at the spot a fresh fall of snow had covered the ground.

Thunderstorms are common among the Himalayas. Most fine mornings see the cloudy galleons sweeping up from the steamy Plain of Bengal. Slowly they sail over the green foothills or float in lazy stateliness on the blue hazes of the deep valleys, their keels in shadow, their sails of massive cumuli bellying thousands of feet aloft in the sunlight. As they advance, they are augmented by the warm, moist air currents from the valleys. Magically they grow larger ; their girth and height increases every moment ; they are sifted by the upward breezes, broken and distorted into all manner of queer forms by vagrant winds ; momentarily dissipated by unexpected blasts. They become a mighty fleet and pass in splendid line ahead towards the huge wall of the Himalayas, where they assault in misty surges the snowy bastions of Kangchenjunga.

Towards mid-day the first thunder echoes in deep growls along the valleys. A smooth slaty pall of nimbus, underhung with coppery billows of cumuli, slides up the zenith. The thunder becomes louder ; its solemn booms are resolved into an angrier crackle. Spiteful lightning spears the whale-backed crests of the foothills and leaps among the clouds. A veil of rain is borne along by the thundercloud trailing hill and valley, blotting out the sunny hillsides, sweeping over the ridges.

Local thunderstorms occur almost every day among the foothills of the Himalayas ; they seldom attack the great peaks, and usually expend their wrath before the evening, their apparently indissoluble clouds melting into the night. But, occasionally, there are storms which are neither local

nor confined to the foothills. I saw such a storm at Darjeeling.

The afternoon had been thunderous, and storm after storm had stalked over the hills, their hailstones bringing dismay to the tea planters whose leaves were ready for plucking. The sunset was wild as I climbed Observatory Hill. Long, tendrous clouds, bridging a gap between the dense curtains of cumuli, had been twisted by the wind until they appeared like bloodstained claws groping in the sky. The sky between was that ominous cat's eye green, a colour that mountaineers and seamen instinctively distrust. One doresque shaft of ruddy light striking through the turmoil of mists fell upon the Singalila ridge. Day was dying as I gained the summit of Observatory Hill, and sullen draperies had been drawn across the sunset. In the south lightning flicked a restless whip over Tiger Hill ; in the east, towers of cloud were occasionally revealed by fountains of lightning. Once again came thunder, long heavy vibrations shaking the earth ; lightning blue and vivid slashed the peaks of the Singalila ridge and Nepal.

On the summit of Observatory Hill there is a Thibetan temple, not a building, but a forest of prayer flags ringing a small space in which is set a primitive altar. Here, as though to propitiate the gods, and perhaps, in particular, the great God of Kangchenjunga, the lamas began to pray, a low mutter breaking forth into a wail of religious fervour, accompanied by the monotonous ringing of a hand-bell. I felt that indefinable sensation that every visitor to the East feels sooner or later—that time and space are limitless, that man is but the puppet of fate, a mere plaything of elemental forces beyond his comprehension or control.

Thibetan music is the epitome of that strange mountain land of the Himalayas. Its weird dirge-like monotone, its occasional passionate crescendo, suggests infinity, the presence of great mountains and limitless spaces, the fears and hardships of those foredoomed to dwell on bitter wind-swept plateaux and gaze for ever on the barren slopes and inhospitable solitudes of Central Asia.

The praying ceased ; between two rolls of thunder no sound disturbed the hilltop save the sigh of an awakened wind among the prayer flags and the distant clamour of Darjeeling.

The storm came up apace with glares of bluish lightning and staccato thunder that flung in waves of sound across the valleys or rolled and grumbled like immense engines on the ridges. Rain and hail swept the hill ; the lightning leapt in furious confused brilliance. Thunder, crashing and majestic, came hard on its heels. In a few minutes the storm was gone, its turbulence swallowed in the night. A small star gleamed tentatively, was extinguished by a cloud scud, and gleamed again more confidently. The subsiding groan of the wind among the prayer flags broke a heavy silence.

Other and more distant storms took up the tale. In the direction of Everest sudden floods of white light soundlessly illuminated the cloudy pavements of the sky, picking out in faultless detail the towers, minarets and cupolas of a cathedral of mist towering above the world. As though jealous of his supreme neighbour, the God of Kangchen-junga struck out with fierce blue swords and vicious darts of forked lightning. Somewhere over Bhutan and Thibet another cloud winked with bibulous persistence like some

lesser mountain god delighting in this fiery combat of Himalayan giants.

No thunder was to be heard. From the depths of the Rangit Valley beneath, mist wraiths swayed upwards like jinns from the confines of a monstrous bottle. The moon was rising as I turned to go ; her calm radiance seemed to quell the stormy disputes between earth and sky. Beneath her contemptuous gaze the distant lightning became desultory and wan. The clouds were withdrawn from Kangchenjunga. Far up in the awakened stars something white gleamed steadfastly—the summit.