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AMONG

THE TIBETANS

Isabella L. Bird

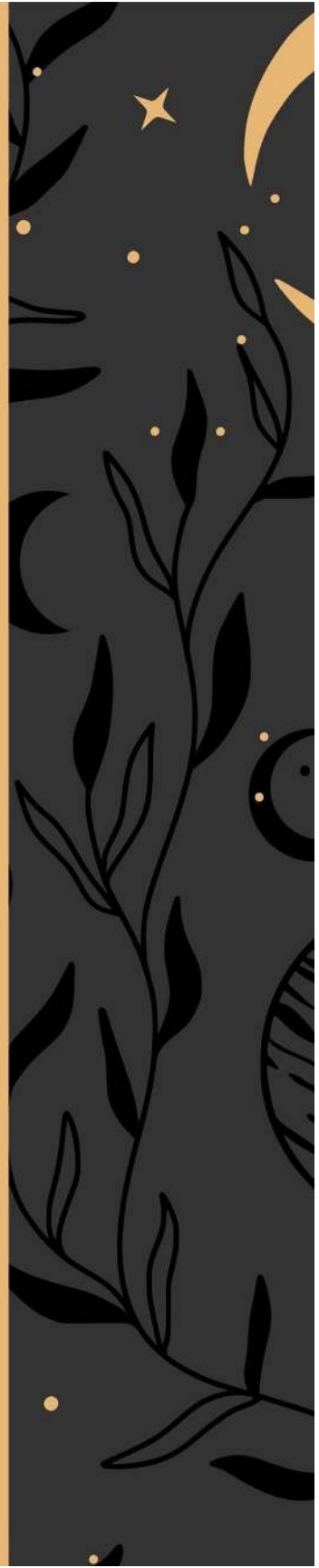


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ISABELLA L. BIRD

Among the Tibetans

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The Start



The Vale of Kashmir is too well known to require description. It is the 'happy hunting-ground' of the Anglo-Indian sportsman and tourist, the resort of artists and invalids, the home of pashm shawls and exquisitely embroidered fabrics, and the land of Lalla Rookh. Its inhabitants, chiefly Moslems, infamously governed by Hindus, are a feeble race, attracting little interest, valuable to travellers as 'coolies' or porters, and repulsive to them from the mingled cunning and obsequiousness which have been fostered by ages of oppression. But even for them there is the dawn of hope, for the Church Missionary Society has a strong medical and educational mission at the capital, a hospital and dispensary under the charge of a lady M.D. have been opened for women, and a capable and upright 'settlement officer,' lent by the Indian Government, is investigating the iniquitous land arrangements with a view to a just settlement.

I left the Panjab railroad system at Rawul Pindi, bought my camp equipage, and travelled through the grand ravines which lead to Kashmir or the Jhelum Valley by hill-cart, on horseback, and by house-boat, reaching Srinagar at the end of April, when the velvet lawns were at their greenest, and the foliage was

at its freshest, and the deodar-skirted mountains which enclose this fairest gem of the Himalayas still wore their winter mantle of unsullied snow. Making Srinagar my headquarters, I spent two months in travelling in Kashmir, half the time in a native house-boat on the Jhelum and Pohru rivers, and the other half on horseback, camping wherever the scenery was most attractive.

By the middle of June mosquitos were rampant, the grass was tawny, a brown dust haze hung over the valley, the camp-fires of a multitude glared through the hot nights and misty moonlight of the Munshibagh, English tents dotted the landscape, there was no mountain, valley, or plateau, however remote, free from the clatter of English voices and the trained servility of Hindu servants, and even Sonamarg, at an altitude of 8,000 feet and rough of access, had capitulated to lawn- tennis. To a traveller this Anglo-Indian hubbub was intolerable, and I left Srinagar and many kind friends on June 20 for the uplifted plateaux of Lesser Tibet. My party consisted of myself, a thoroughly competent servant and passable interpreter, Hassan Khan, a Panjabi; a seis, of whom the less that is said the better; and Mando, a Kashmiri lad, a common coolie, who, under Hassan Khan's training, developed into an efficient travelling servant, and later into a smart khitmatgar.

Gyalpo, my horse, must not be forgotten—indeed, he cannot be, for he left the marks of his heels or teeth on every one. He was a beautiful creature, Badakshani bred, of Arab blood, a silver-grey, as light as a greyhound and as strong as a cart-horse. He was higher in the scale of intellect than any horse of my acquaintance. His cleverness at times suggested reasoning power, and his mischievousness a sense of humour. He walked five miles an hour, jumped like a deer, climbed like a yak, was strong and steady in perilous fords, tireless, hardy, hungry, frolicked along ledges of precipices and over crevassed glaciers, was absolutely fearless, and his slender legs and the use he made of them were