

DONGTSE

OR

STRAY BIRD NOTES FROM TIBET

BY

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(*With two plates.*)

Tibet is a land of lakes. Open any good map of the country and you will find them scattered throughout the length and breadth of the plateau like so many creeping amœbæ—lakes of all shapes and dimensions, big, little; deep, shallow; fresh, salt. On these lakes, amidst the vast solitudes of the great tableland, the Bar-headed Goose breeds in myriads, undisturbed and unmolested, save by its own feathered enemies, and the few Tibetans who take its eggs. Then winter comes. The lakes freeze to a depth of several feet. Food is unobtainable, so the geese must perforce depart. Some turn south and descend to the fertile plains of India, but many remain in the lower valleys drained by the great Tsangpo. Here the rivers still flow albeit choked with ice, and the midday sun has still sufficient power to thaw the frozen ground. It is in these 'rongs' or cultivated valleys of Southern Tibet that the Bar-head will be found in winter, either in fields of barley stubble or sunning themselves on shingly river banks. In similar situations there will also be Brahminy Duck innumerable, and here and there flocks of Black-necked Crane (*Megalornis nigricollis*).

As regards duck, Mallard and Common Teal alone remain throughout the winter in small numbers. Gadwall, Wigeon, Shoveler, Pintail and the various Pochards just pass through hurriedly on migration, to feed themselves fat on Indian jheels.

It was late in December 1924. The old year was almost dead, and save for scraggy Tibetan mutton our larder was empty. Something had to be done and that quickly, otherwise we should fare ill during the New Year. There was no game in the immediate neighbourhood of Gyantse. 'H' and I had scoured the country for miles around and had hardly seen a feather. So we decided on a trip to Dongtse, a day's march distant. This, of course, meant sleeping in a Tibetan house with a temperature down to zero, and no fire-place to huddle over in the evening.

But this chilly prospect did not deter us and off we started at sunrise on our sturdy Tibetan ponies; our food and bedding and that of our servants on, three mules in the rear. It was piercingly cold, but there was no wind. What a terrible enemy the wind is in Tibet; without it the climate would be perfect, but when it rages as it too often does in winter, the climate is execrable. To be caught in a Tibetan blizzard in mid-winter is an experience no one ever forgets.

You may wear all the woollen clothes in your wardrobe and you will be chilled to the bone. You may swathe your face in a mask or muffler, wear the most wonderful dust-proof glasses ever fashioned, and it will be of no avail. Your eyes, mouth, nostrils will be choked with sand, your breath will freeze, and the icy spicules on your mask or muffler will sear your face like sandpaper. In Tibet, with all due deference to Gilbert, there is no 'beauty in the bellow of the blast', —at any rate, in winter. As we ambled along across the stubbly barley fields to Tsechen we disturbed flocks of Horned Larks (*Otocorys alpestris elwesi*) and Mountain Finches (*Montifringilla nivalis adamsi*) whilst every now and then the Tibetan Sky-Lark (*Alauda arvensis inopinata*) would rise almost beneath our ponies' hoofs.

Of all the songsters in Tibet I think we exiles loved the sky-larks most. As soon as the first green growth showed itself in spring they would burst into praise, and then onwards right through the summer the valleys simply rang with their song. Indeed, so full of joyousness were they, that on clear bright moonlight nights one would sometimes hear them singing two or three hours before dawn. Crossing the Nyang-chu River by a typical Tibetan stone-pier bridge we investigated the swamp at the foot of the village of Tsechen in the hope of finding geese, but were disappointed. A few Brahminy alone greeted us. These we left in peace for we seldom shot Brahminy, partly because they are not very palatable, and partly because they are venerated by Tibetans and are so absurdly tame. I always felt more inclined to feed these birds rather than shoot them, for they would generally allow one to approach within fifteen or twenty yards, and would then show no more fear than the average duck in a London park.

It is no uncommon sight to see these ducks waddling about on the flat roofs of Tibetan houses, and in some places they will even nest inside the houses in old lumber rooms. As everybody knows, the Brahminy in India is one of the wariest of ducks and the fearlessness it displays in Tibet is therefore all the more astonishing.

Leaving Tsechen we soon found ourselves in thick Buckthorn jungle (*Hippophae rhamnoides*), over which the Tibetan Clematis (*Clematis tangutica*) climbed in dense and tangled masses.

Bird life here was particularly abundant, and none was more conspicuous than Guldenstadt's Afghan Redstart (*Phœnicurus erythrogaster grandis*); the male gorgeously attired in chestnut and black with a snow-white wing-patch and crown, the female more sombre looking like a big edition of the Indian Redstart.

Rose Finches (*Carpodacus rubecilloides lapersonnei*) and (*Carpodacus pulcherrimus davidianus*) also abounded and flocks of Tibetan Twites (*Acanthis flavirostris rufostriata*), most persistent of chatterers. Here and there the Robin Accentor (*Prunella rubeculoides*) uttered his sharp 'tik-tik' as he darted from bush to bush, whilst at intervals we saw the Brown Accentor (*Prunella fulvescens fulvescens*), easily identified by reason of his long white supercilium.

Once we caught a glimpse of a pair of little Tibetan Tit Warblers (*Leptopæcile sophiæ obscura*) resplendent in purple and lilac, restlessly searching for food in the thick undergrowth.

Then, crossing a flowing stream fed from warm springs, we put up a pair of Ibis-bills (*Ibidorhynchus struthersi*) which flapped lazily away uttering their characteristic oft-repeated cries. This strange bird has a remarkable altitudinal range in winter and may be seen on the Teesta and its tributaries a few hundred feet above the Indian plains, and at elevations of 13,000 feet and over on the rivers of the plateau. The eggs of the Ibis-bill were unknown for many a long year, and even now are rare in collections. Yet they are not difficult to find once you know *when* and *where* to look for eggs, and *what* sort of eggs to look for. Here is the recipe. Look for eggs the last week in April or first week in May; search for nests on high ground in stony river beds especially where the river bifurcates to form an island; and keep your eyes open for four sage-green, brown-spotted eggs in a shallow depression amongst the shingle. If, by great good luck, you should stumble across a month-old chick, send it to South Kensington, and the Museum authorities will offer you their best thanks.

Immediately after putting up the Ibis-bills we saw what appeared to be the father of all snipe strutting about quite complacently on a small bare patch of swampy ground. It was so tame that it allowed us to approach within ten yards before it rose. 'H' then crumpled it up, and it turned out to be the Himalayan Solitary Snipe (*Capella solitaria*).

Leaving the scrub jungle behind us we made for the river, and after meandering along for three or four miles, we suddenly came on a flock of a hundred or more geese, basking in the sun on the opposite bank.

They allowed us to approach within range but the river was unfordable and it was useless to shoot. So we threw stones at them instead, and off they went down stream loudly protesting. On and on they went until they had almost disappeared from sight. Then they performed a most perfect 'about wheel' and came back straight towards us. When they passed over us they were so high that I thought them out of range and never even raised my gun. 'H' however, gave them his choke barrel and winged an old gander which came hurtling through the air to fall with a tremendous thud at our very feet. After this we made poste-haste for Dongtse. Before leaving Gyantse we had armed ourselves with a letter of introduction to the head steward of a large house belonging to the Phala family, and this we presented. We were immediately admitted into a huge Tibetan building several storeys high, built in the form of an open square,—the stereotyped design for a Tibetan house. A large open courtyard occupied the centre. The ground floor was devoted to stabling and godowns.

Ascending a series of steep wooden ladders which did duty as stair-cases, and having passed through several perilously low doorways (built purposely to keep out evil spirits), we eventually reached the guest chamber, a big room with a low ceiling supported by wooden pillars, and a latticed paper-paned window overlooking the courtyard. A hundred images peered down upon us from niches in the wall. The customary scarf of greeting having been presented, and a few cups of 'chang' (slightly alcoholic barley water), having



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been quaffed, we thanked our host for his kind hospitality and scampered off on our ponies to explore as much of the neighbourhood as possible before dusk.

We soon saw several flocks of Black-necked Crane. They are normally very shy birds, and often the only possible way of getting within gun shot is to circle round them on a pony gradually drawing closer and closer, just as a Sindhi shikari stalks 'houbara'.

In this way we got within range of three birds, and then flung ourselves from our ponies and did a little rapid fire. All went off apparently uninjured, but one bird having gone half a mile suddenly collapsed, and we retrieved it with great joy. We then discovered a flock of twenty geese out of which we accounted for three. It was now getting dusk, and a few flakes of snow began to fall, so we mounted our ponies and cantered back to our quarters, where we consumed much tea and toasted ourselves over a brazier fire which our host had most thoughtfully provided.

Dongtse is an interesting place quite apart from its natural history. It possesses a famous monastery, which is built on a rocky mountain spur, and commands a glorious panorama of the Nyang-Chu Valley stretching as far as Gyantse thirteen miles distant. Forty-six years ago an erudite Bengali schoolmaster named Sarat Chandra Das visited this monastery and stayed for some considerable time with Lama Sengchen Dorjichen the abbot, who was a Tibetan scholar of great repute and an incarnate Lama to boot. The Lama helped Sarat Chandra Das to reach Lhasa, which in those days had not previously been visited by any Britisher save by an eccentric English gentleman called Thomas Manning in 1811. In due course the Tibetan Government learnt that Sengchen Dorjichen had assisted Sarat Chandra Das in his enterprise, and became so infuriated that they took the Lama prisoner and threw him into the Tsangpo.

Accounts of the method by which he was drowned differ. One version relates that he was sewn up in a sack and cast into the Kongbu Tsangpo; another, that a stone was tied round his waist and that he was lowered into his watery grave at the end of a rope.

From Lama Sengchen's private apartments (carefully preserved and treated with the greatest respect to this day), one can see on the opposite side of the Nyang-Chu Valley a few miles distant, the hermitage of Nyang-Tö-Kyipo. Here Tibetans undergo voluntary immurement in dark cells for varying periods, sometimes for life. I once paid a visit to this place, but the story of these hermits, like the cells in which they live, is dark and depressing, so we will pass it by. The curious reader of these notes if he so wishes, will find a vivid description of this hermitage together with further details of Sarat Chandra Das and his visit to Lhasa, in two books dealing with the Tibet Mission of 1903-04, viz., Landon's *Lhasa*, and Waddell's *Lhasa and Its Mysteries*. But what the reader will not find in any book on Tibet that I know of is a reference to the picturesque monastery of Tenchokling situated up a side nallah two miles to the south of Dongtse. I once spent two glorious summer days in this monastery and witnessed a most grotesque lama dance or *Cham*. The numerous actors in this religious performance



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