

L. G. Spurr
please return

Letter No. 3

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Dear People:

We are in Katmandu! It is October 8 and a cool early morning. I have just waked to hear birds singing, people talking a strange tongue and have just looked out the window to see a sunny court yard full of trees and flowers. Across a brick wall some handsome tiled roof houses are visible. It seems like heaven!

We are in the Maharajah's guest house. I have a big room and bath room with the usual big tin tub but running water in other respects. The Houstons live upstairs where there is also a sitting room and terrace. The dining room is opposite me from which soon will come (I hope, I hope) my breakfast. We arrived at about six last night after four days' travel from Delhi, the last two spent coming over the historic mountain way into this valley. On October 4 we flew from Delhi to Lucknow. There in a small branch station seething with heat and humanity we met up with Abdul and our luggage just in by train. Abdul is recent, our previous bearers having been thought unequal to the strains of rough travel. Abdul looks like a brigand and we suspect that he is but think his qualities will be useful in getting us around North India. At about one we climbed onto an old-style Sahib car, attached to a little narrow gauge train. Also embarking with us was a company of Gurkha soldiers, small, alert, neat and spry. We enjoyed our first view of these native sons of Nepal with their Mongolian cast of face, and got several quick smiles as they went by. The Sahib car, antiquated but fairly comfortable, is like a Pullman compartment, only it extends the width of the train with two bunks down each side (one a double-decker) and has a small washroom at one end. Three electric fans beat on us all day and all night and believe me, you need them! Just a word here about health precautions. With our arrival in India we've been careful not to eat or drink anything that hasn't been cooked or boiled, nor do we touch fruit unless it can be peeled or has been soaked in potassium permanganate (known locally as "pinky water"). We've taken the new Malaria preventive pills and of course were shot with every known tropical germ before leaving the U.S.A. There's no question of the need for all this: with all the heat, people, flies and filth, you can just see the bugs lined up, ready to pounce. But it is very limiting to one's diet - Nell and I worked out that we'd had just 2 square meals in 4 days getting to Katmandu, the rest being mostly nibbles from a cracker box and swallows from a thermos.

Rickety as the little railroad seemed (how we bounced and swayed from side to side) and many the times our car got switched from one train to another, but we arrived at Raxaul at 2 the next afternoon, right on the button, which is more than can be said for many fancier trains and smoother road beds. There was complete bedlam on the sizzling platform and amid the turmoil it was hard to know what to do next and how. Finally we located the official Nepal guest-house and made for it, a line of porters leading the way, our baggage on their heads in Indian style. Here we stayed for the rest of the day, finding it cool, quiet and clean (at least relatively). Cool baths in big tin tubs were refreshing and a good dinner came in about 8, very welcome.

At 8 next morning we climbed onto the little Nepalese train, the only railroad in the whole country. It goes just 18 miles, from the Indian border at Raxaul to Amlekgauj. Hardly had the train started at its snail's pace (it takes 4 hours to cover the route!) than we had the surprise of our lives. There, across the rice fields, we had our first view of the Himalayas! Nobody had told us they could be seen so soon. Wonderful in outline, white and shimmering, they reached higher up in the sky than you'd ever imagined anything doing, and seemingly so totally unrelated to the heat ridden country through which we were passing. It was like a vision; something so beyond all previous experience. We kept looking (gulping and breathing deep) until we had passed the open lowlands and the deep forest began,

shutting us in completely. This is the terai, the country where no visitor is allowed to stop overnight because of the danger from wild animals (it is the greatest big game region left in the world) and/or disease (a particularly virulent brand of malaria flourishes here). Glad to be in a train and in broad daylight and so free from all its terrors. We looked out fascinated at the dense jungle with its close-woven green pattern. Orchids were growing in profusion and Nell swears she saw a cheetah disappearing into a thicket! At Amlekganj (the end of the line) the usual uproar met us. An incredible number of people and animals (and insects) were milling around all but swamping us and the station wagon that was to be our next conveyance. In this we drove the 28 miles to Bhimpedi. Still the Terai to begin with, but then things began to open up, fine streams appeared and steep craggy slopes. Wonderful to find the heat retreating and that we are starting to climb. In an hour and a half we were at Bhimpedi, our first truly Nepalese village. The people are a delight, cheerful, busy, full of humor and responsiveness. Dignified too, and a little shy. A bevy of little boys were occupied with their kites, tremendous fun to watch. The kites were miles up and the boys busy letting out and taking in line on big spools with great deftness and skill. This is one of Nepal's national pastimes, we are to find. Ahead of us now was the steep mountainside leading to Sisagarhi Pass. We could see the path mounting in great zigzags. This is the beginning of the high road to Katmandu, the historic (and the only) route to the capital city of Nepal. How wonderful we felt! Just imagine, Dears, cool for the first time in weeks, high country in front of us and looking forward with all our being to what lies ahead. Lively little gray Tibetan ponies were awaiting us and the 7 or 8 coolies who will carry our baggage. The ponies are wonderfully sure-footed, and need to be: soon we were going up steeply, often on what amounted to stone steps of a rough and tumble variety. The coolies, piled high with our possessions, fell into a slow and steady pace, knees always bent a little, faces serious and tranquil under the tump-line. They are mostly barefoot as are our pony boys. It gets more and more beautiful as we rise; the late afternoon light makes every leaf shine by itself in that vast forest. (Here I am in the present tense again! having terrible trouble with it; a new disease! but it all seems to be happening again as I sit writing about it). We cross a spur and see the Sisagarhi fort high above. At about 4:30 we pass it and mount the steep stone steps that lead to the guest house. Here we are met by a dignitary and ushered upstairs where we have 2 large adjoining rooms. Dinner, for which we are more than ready, is curryish and chickenish, as most of our meals have been and will be for some time. Also we have chupattis, a round flat meal affair shaped like a pancake. They are marvelous, spreadable with jam, cheese, whatever you have. (I eat several). Then, dear People, a wonderful night's sleep in the cool and quiet.

Next morning we were on our way by 8. A beautiful clear post-monsoon day which we are told we can expect at this season from now on. At 6000 feet we cross Sisagarhi Pass and there again are the Himalayas! All across the horizon and clear as crystal - we think we locate the Gosintha group (furthest left) and the Ganesh Himal (next over) and suspect that the long, less punctuated and more distant like of mountains furthest to the west must include Mt. Everest. Tried some pictures here but without a telephoto lens they may not show much. Next we drop 2000 feet (and no nonsense) into the valley beyond. What looks like a ski lift operating beside and above us is the rope-way that carries loads into Nepal. But the human back is still the main burden bearer. We pass hundreds of coolies bent nearly double under mammoth loads. Here are some of the things they carry: great trunks and boxes piled high; huge clusters of tan pottery stacked up in 2 baskets that swing at either end of a pole balanced on the shoulders; bales of cotton material in bright colors. Sometimes the coolie is barely visible under a vast mound of hay or load of wood, and sometimes they actually mount the steep track with a man

or woman in a basket on their back! These human loads lie inert as dead people and usually have a cloth spread over them from under which arms and legs hang limply. We pass women load carriers too, and children. All have impressive physiques. They are small, wiry and muscular, and move in perfect balance and rhythm. The mood is cheerful, too, both on the path and in the villages we go through. Smiles follow us everywhere and it is clear we have lots of comedy as well as news value. But everyone is friendly and well-disposed. We share in little homely scenes - like seeing 3 Nepalese boys caught playing cards on some temple steps by an irate little woman (their grandma, probably) who scolds them for slighting the family chores and busts the game up. We understand every word; it could have been in English and happened in Keokuk, Iowa. Our way through the valley has been following a fine river. Water buffalo are in it, and little boys bathing and having a wonderful time. Fishermen fix large nets across the stream, weighting them with rocks on the bottom. We cross the river several times, by narrow suspension bridges that Oscar's pony doesn't like at all. Then we reach the head of the valley and start climbing up to Chaudaagiri Pass. Here we have really steep and rough going but the horses are wonderful and we plug right along. The view from the top is superb - we are 8000 feet and the valley of Nepal is below us with Katmandu gleaming with its turrets and towers in the golden afternoon light. The high peaks are mostly hidden in clouds but the foothills are beautiful and ring the valley completely around. As we start the descent of the pass, we see far over to the left a beautiful group of high summits clear, shining and white. The descent goes fast and far easier than the various accounts of it had us to expect. In fact, dear readers, we think our predecessors "took on" a bit over this journey. This second day is long but by no means really difficult or dangerous, and what it has of weariness is entirely offset by the interest and beauty of everything. I loved every minute and it was every bit as wonderful as I had expected, and much, much more. Lovely flowers were growing on the north slope and I walked down, picking one of each variety and making a lovely bunch which I have on my table here at the guest house. At the bottom of the hill the road widened and went over broad grassy slopes with fine trees. In the lively village where the motor road begins there were crowds whose big entertainment obviously came from watching what comes over the hill. A car was waiting for us - how wonderful it looked! Our bones were aching somewhat and we were glad to have arrived. About six, after the baggage was sorted and the coolies paid off, we started on our way down a broad avenue to Katmandu through the gathering darkness and arrived soon after at our new abode. So here I have you up to date, my Dears. xxx

The crosses mark elapsed time and now it is the eleventh. Tomorrow is the first run of the Air Service between Katmandu and Patua and I want to send this letter off by it. Hope it arrives! and hope Uncle Phil who will get the letter first will get a thrill from the postmark.

Lots has happened since I wrote the above. Katmandu and the beautiful valley are more wonderful than I can describe (but will try to in my next). We have been widely entertained and have met the Maharajah - we think we are a social success here, hope so anyway, and Nell and I have been wearing all our best clothes. Shall describe all the finery, all the doings, in Vol. 4. Much love, My Dears! Do wish I felt I had done better in my writing but writing, I find, is easier when your eyes, ears and heart are not so full. Nose, too! There are some amazing smells. You'd love the sounds - little pipings in odd melodies are heard constantly, and rhythmic beatings and bursts of distant singing. And the birds warble their lungs out all the time. The foothills that border the valley look like piles of stiff blue-green taffeta set about in folds (Nelly noticed this). Clouds are billowy against the blue sky. Days are warm, evenings cool and a soft wind is almost always blowing, fine for the kites and fine for us. It is a heavenly, milk and honey spot and we feel incredibly lucky to be here. Did I tell you we are #75,76 and 77 of all Americans ever to visit Katmandu? And of course, on the Kosi, we shall be the first of any sort, except the natives. Goodbye, Dears! I think lovingly of you all and feel you are of me. (Please do!) Betsy.