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Please return

Letter No. 5

Mrs. Elizabeth S. Cowles

Delhi, India Oct. 15, 1950

Dear People:

This is installment #5 and will be the wind-up on Katmandu. Will you be sorry to leave? We shall. The days here have been full to bursting, - and also full (and running over) is MY CUP, the one the Psalmist tells about. I cannot imagine anything more, more "wonderful, various and new" than my life the last five months. Expect it will take the rest of my span of years to digest!

I am writing this in a large and pleasant guest room in the British Embassy where we have been staying with Sir George and Lady Falconer for our last days in Katmandu. The embassy is on high ground in the outskirts of the city - lots of great trees about (a Norfolk Island pine by my window) and the hills showing through the great stems. This sunshine is so wonderful! Makes everything look luminous, as if lighted from within.

We lead a soft life here (bathroom like home, linen sheets!) and the Falconers have been wonderful to us. Being under their wing has been a lot of fun. Reminds me of Karachi and the Warrens. Yesterday there were big doings at the parade ground. Wonder if I've gotten around to telling you about this vast expanse of green? Would tell its size in acres but never seem able to remember how big one is - anyway this is a huge space, all grey-green grass and big enough for an army to maneuver, in fact one does. Nepal is a military state, wonder if I've gotten around to telling you THAT? If not, you'd better get yourself a better correspondent. It is, of course, one of its important features - and one of Katmandu's important features is this parade ground or Maidan. Soldiers can be drilling on it, and boys playing soccer, and a sq. mile of sheep and goats hard at work nibbling (they never have to mow, and this is why) and still room and to spare. In the center is a great tree. Back in the mid 1800s one of Nepal's heroes, Jang Bahadur, staged a neat coup d'etat here. So here we were (on the Monday in question) standing under the big tree along with all the dignitaries. The whole place was lined with soldiers and rows of cannon. Then the Maharajah drove up. He had a handsome mounted guard with green-striped turbans and prancing horses. 30 (count 'em) generals and excellencies (all Rana brothers and sons and nephews and cousins) were standing at attention in the order of succession, #1 candidate first. (No chance of this family line dying out, there are dozens of them!) Two Brahmin priests in red and white flowing robes and with gold crowns and staves in tone as His Highness stepped out of his carriage and onto the platform (where you and I are). By now the Houstons and I have seen him several times and feel very friendly, which he seems to, too. He shakes hands and smiles sweetly, eyes sparkle and so do quite a few diamonds which he wears in great hunks on his cap. Next comes the King. He also is in uniform with shiny boots (and shiny diamonds) but his eyes don't shine any and one gets the impression that the life of a figure-head sovereign isn't much fun. Now we go up, one by one, and get presented to him by the Maharajah who definitely is having a good time. When I come up he says to the King: "She is the one who wants to go up the south side of Mt. Everest" (a slight exaggeration, your Highness, I think to myself) but the King only fastens a glum eye on me and says nothing. (He can't speak in public) We all curtsy and say "Good afternoon, your Majesty" - doesn't it sound like a musical comedy? It really was. I kept thinking I'd never had a chance to say "Your Majesty" to anyone before and never would again - so spoke up good and loud and tried not to fall down while curtsying (and didn't).

After the presentations, everyone stands at attention while 2 bands play the National Anthem. This is an odd piece, made to sound odd by the fact that one band is 2 bars or so behind the other (this is on purpose, Lady Falconer says - which is oddest of all). Then with a roar like the last judgment, the soldiers all fire their rifles and every blessed gun in the valley goes off. (This is called a "feu de Joie" and the Nepalese love it). The din is Fearful! Clouds of smoke billow skywards. After the uproar dies down, the King and Maharajah sit for a while

and the Excellencies and generals join us and there is conversation. I talk to the Maharajah's son (he has two) who is a nice young man and teases me about jumping so when the cannon went off. Then we talk about photography. He goes up and asks the King if I may take his picture and next thing you know I have my Bantam up in front of their Highnesses and have snapped both of them. Jang Bahadur's tree is big and leafy and it was rather late in the afternoon and so a bit dark - but the diamonds were shining to beat all so maybe it will turn out.

Two days before, we had had a private audience with the Maharajah. On the button of 4 o'clock we drove up to the Singha Durbar (his palace) all white colonnades with a vast courtyard and endless formal flower beds. We were shown in, up some stairs and into a long succession of elaborate rooms. One had a mural of a tiger shoot on the four walls; another was a great state room, all crystal and mirrors, with a throne at one end and fountain in the middle. I kept picturing everything coming in over the passes by coolie back - especially a large grandfather clock, made of fancy cut-glass like a huge perfume bottle. Then came a real surprise (and laugh). A small ante-room next door was lined with Coney Island mirrors: you know, the kind that make you fat and thin, tall or wide. (!) No time to look ourselves over in these because we were being ushered into the Maharajah's sitting room and there he was. Hope you have gotten the idea by now (you should have) that he is a very fine and also a very able man? He seemed really interested in our Kosi river trip and told his son #2, the Foreign Minister, who was also present, to see that we were given every assistance. We expressed thanks for this and for everything and told him we'd been having a marvelous time in Nepal, true, too! (He looked pleased). He talked about his country, its old isolation and the new trend; its effects and dangers. About the new parliament he said, "I sometimes wonder how many of the people have the faintest idea what a parliament is." He is interested in the U.S.A. (which everybody is). "I am one of the few in my family," he said, "who have never visited America." I told him to come to Colorado; that it is very like the valley of Nepal - one reason I feel so at home here. He gave me a sweet smile. He was dressed in the black, long-coated outfit the Nepalese gentleman wears, with a military hat (which he kept on) that had an immense diamond insignia in front. There was a huge rock in the middle, big as the Cullinan, and crossed diamond Rukris below. (This is the famous Nepalese curved dagger and appears on stamps and coins here as well as tucked in every man's belt you pass on the street. A ferocious affair! (I now own several and will show you). Our audience lasted about half an hour. Before we left, we presented our land camera which Nell had wrapped beautifully in silver paper and ribbon. With it, as a sample of its work, we gave him a snapshot we'd just taken of the guest house we're staying in. He seemed pleased, and so did his son (had the distinct feeling the son was going to try his darndest to take it over!) As we walked out the door, his Highness called our attention to the Coney Island mirrors, said they'd been brought out from London in '08 and stood in front of one to show us the effect, which was, of course, marvelous. Said they always made a hit with people. Then we all shook hands and we left, going back down all the long rooms, feeling very warm in the heart towards Nepal and the man who runs it.

Now, this brings me pretty much up to the present, I guess. I won't try (you wouldn't recover - neither would I) to tell you everything about it. I've been going on the Sample theory - just a touch, here and there. I hope it has given you a little of the feel of things. The sight-seeing days (I described one) have been going on steadily - we've visited Patau and Bhatgaon, the great Buddhist temples at Swayambhunath and Boddhnath (the ones that have the great eyes) and seen the burning ghats at Pashpati. This is where the Rana family (upstream) and everybody else of Nepal (downstream) is brought when dying and laid with his feet in the Bagmati River. After his death, he's put on the round stone ghats on the river bank and burned. None of this foolishness about cemeteries and burial plots! Ashes are

just blown away. (Although if you're a Rana, you may have a fine stupa built in your memory). The Bagmati is to the Nepalese as the Ganges to the Indian. Having seen both I vote for the Bagmati. The Ganges is dark brown, untidy and with all its advances and retreats, in flood and after, has pretty much messed up the country it goes through. The Bagmati on the other hand is a lovely clean brisk river and the happiest phases of Nepalese life cluster around it. Little boys are swimming and playing, women wash their bright-colored saris, water buffalo are a picture of contentment, on hot mornings up to the ears in its cool ripples. Even the funerals don't seem greatly to depress the Nepalese. No thing, in fact, does. He is the cheerfullest, busiest, strongest little person you can imagine and his wife and his children take after him. We are leaving him with the strongest respect and affection.

Social life here has been very pleasant, too. As there are exactly 8 Europeans in the community, you can imagine that even temporary additions are very welcome. There is also an Indian Embassy and staff. On Tuesday we went to a reception there. All the official ladies had on beautiful saris and we all sat on red brocade chairs in a great long room with crystal chandeliers. Nell and I told the ladies we thought saris were the most beautiful and the most practical woman's dress in the world (which is what we think). We complimented them on having the sense to be above fashion changes but guess what - they say they aren't! Styles in saris vary from year to year apparently and when borders aren't the thing any more they chop theirs off and wear them plain! So I guess women are all alike, after all. Indian ladies think everything American is perfectly marvelous and are crazy to hear about nylon and plastics. We all agreed that a nylon sari would be a fine combination of the best in both lands.

xx Dears, there has been a gap of some days (this is now Oct. 20) and we are in Calcutta, the Black Hole of, which is what its best hotel, the Great Eastern, seems to us to be like. It is a fearful city and at the moment in the grip of the last of the monsoon, - the dark and the wet and the heat is especially trying after our beautiful valley we left yesterday. In this city we find the Mother India we have read about; I shall let Katherine Mayo do the describing, and you read it if you haven't already. Don't think it's my metier. It is perhaps enough to say that there is filth, unspeakable noises, hunger and disease. At every turn and nowhere you look do you see a trace of anything that is clean, or quiet, or healthy, or happy. It weighs heavily on the spirit.

The flight down from Katmandu was a tremendous experience. In his great spirals to gain altitude, the pilot gave us a fine last look at everything in the valley and the snow peaks (it was our best and clearest day) were dazzling in the distance. Oscar and I got the profile map out and identified all the big ones including - a terrific thrill - Mt. Everest itself over to the east. It is 88 miles away and fools you by not looking high, but as the plane rises it assumes its real importance and is still in view ages later when you've crossed the sprawling Ganges and are deep in India. The next biggest one we saw was Manesh (26,651) the tip of Gosainthan (26,291) and Hamelchuli (25,801). They are all terrific peaks, with outlines like the Dent Blanche though far vaster and whiter. One feels like the country boy accustomed to buildings on the scale of a Rexall store in a country village when he first lays eyes on Rockefeller Center. I had the thought (maybe I was wrong) as we flew S.W. that I might also be seeing the long ridge of Anapurna and (perhaps) the point of Dhauligiri.

It was quite a contrast: the trip out with the trip in. Three hours versus four days! but of course we are not back in Delhi yet - we take a noon plane today and shall be in about 5.

O, must tell you (I know you have been wondering) that one of the Maharajah's menials arrived at the Embassy the night before we left, bent double under presents from H.H. fifteen in all (we counted)! Divided three ways that makes quite a haul. The loot included Rukris, a lovely ivory and sandalwood box, some fine brass figures, Nepalese jewelry for Nell and me and 2 evening bags. (!) No wonder excess weight on the plane ran to 65 lbs.

Lots to do from now on. Tilman is here in Calcutta and had dinner with us last night. Much talk about food, equipment, maps and plans. He will come over to Delhi in a few days and we all leave by train for Jogbani (last stop in India) on the 27th, where on the 30th we have a rendezvous with the following (1) Four Sherpa porters, (2) Eighteen coolies, (3) A Nepalese liaison officer, (4) 2 Tibetan ponies. The Sherpas, as you know, are the wonderful hill men who have played such an important and often heroic part in the great Himalayan Expeditions. The 18 coolies will lug our 900 lbs. of food and equipment in (and out) the 125 rough miles that will lie between us and Mt. Everest. The liaison officer is an absolute necessity and one of the Maharajah's helpful arrangements. He will act as sponsor and as go-between with the natives in the wild country we shall be going through. Through him, we should be able to get sheep, chickens, goats, eggs, flour, rice and such, to augment the stores brought from America. The ponies are also H. H.'s special present (very difficult to get over here) and should be of enormous help. We plan mostly to walk, of course, but it will be a fine thing to have them available to alternate with. The Sherpas make and tend camp and do the cooking - I am to oversee this; shall be Head Housekeeper. I want to be of real service to the expedition here. Hope very much to earn my keep and fix it so they eat better, live better, and have a nicer, cheerfuller and more comfortable time than if it had just been men. If it doesn't work out so I shall be really sad and apologetic and promise to stop bothering people to take me places.

We figure 12 days march to Namche Bazar, last real town before Everest. It lies at 12,000 feet (we begin, at Dharan, at 1000). Beyond Namche Bazar we don't know what we'll find except there is a small summer settlement about 8 miles further on (16,000 feet) named Dingboche. What happens here (and beyond) is what we're making this trip to see. No European has ever been here, or anywhere near. Some interesting climbing data should emerge about Everest itself. With Charley Houston and Tilman (no climbers anywhere are any better) the expedition will be in a position to establish some facts about the feasibility of attempting the mountain from the south. There are enormous advantages in favor of this. The approach through Nepal is all nearer and easier, and politically possible (with Communism threatening in the North access by Tibet will probably be closed for years. The technical problem, too, would be simpler in certain respects. A season of settled weather (this one) could be used which is closed to the north side attempts where - as that face is in shadow - it is just too cold. From the Tibet side they have had to use the later, warmer and less settled season.

Does this begin to shape up to you as something wonderful? It does to me.

This will be all for now. I'll write again before we leave, as the plans gather and plans are further developed. Maybe you'd be interested in what we're taking in the way of food and equipment. All we have in the way of cameras will be - I think - seven! Mine are both acting up (ugh) at the moment and I am leaving them in hospital here at Calcutta - Tilman to bring them to Delhi with him next week. It is the only thing that has gone wrong at all so I can't (and don't) complain.

Much love! B.