

GLIMPSES OF THE GUJAR FOLK.

BY MISS EDITH A. WILLIAMS.

THE valley of glaciers lies bathed in the evening sunshine as we pick our way over boulders and fallen pine, beside the rushing sea-green river, and look across to the glaciers that gleam dully in the hollows between the rocky peaks. We rest awhile and watch an immense flock of sheep grazing on an island in the river, and then leisurely crossing a snow bridge to the other side.

Suddenly, a peculiar whistling cry rings out above our heads, and is immediately taken up by the shepherds below. Again and again it rings out, till with great bounds and furious barking, the shepherd dog is off and is racing up the slope of an avalanche on the opposite hill. For see! clear against the snow are two shaggy black bears, trotting one after the other in quest of an evening meal. Lame ones there are in the flock, who might fall an easy prey, but in a few minutes all is over. The bears, frightened by the noise, trot back quietly over the snow and disappear into the woods, whilst the dog rounds up the stragglers of the flock and peace settles down on the valley once more.

Whence came that first warning whistle? we see the blue smoke curling up from scattered camp fires and presently on the farther side of a tree, we come upon the Gujar folk at home. The wood is full of them and we soon learn to know their traces. A fire-place is hollowed out at the root of a tree; sometimes a shelf is carved in the trunk above; and for cooking and shelter—when such are needed for several days,—a hut is made of pine logs crossed, the sides thatched with fresh boughs, and the floor strewn with grass. There the whole family lives when not engaged in keeping a sharp look-out for the safety of their flocks. Here to-day and gone to-morrow are flocks and shepherds, leaving behind them hill-sides cleared of pasture, and ruined, blackened pine-trees, the ready victims of next year's avalanche.

From such a camp came the warning that sent the black bears home again.

II.

We have climbed straight up a steep, slippery birch slope, and pause for breath at the edge of a rocky ravine, where the turbulent stream is fed by the melting of the ice of the glacier far above. There is a soft, rustling sound, and we turn to see two women, who come forward and kneel at our feet, murmuring compassionately, "Tired! Tired!" Regardless of protest, each possesses herself of a leg, and proceeds to massage it thoroughly, with the skill into which every Indian woman seems born. One by one, shy, bright-eyed children join the group, gaze wonderingly on the strangers, and muster up courage to show us small rock crystals in the hope of pice. "Will you drink goat's milk?" asks a friendly bye-stander, and then we hear the birch trees below us groan and, with a rush, "four twenties" of fine, long-haired mountain goats are swarming round us. It is feeding time, men, women, and children swing themselves up on to the lower branches of the trees, bending them down with their

weight, till the hungry goats can reach them. Some of the animals in their eagerness stand on their hind legs, reaching over the heads of others, whilst some clamber up and join the family on the branch itself. We, also, put our strength to the work, to the amusement of the children, and the distress of the kindly Gujar women, who protest ere long that we are putting ourselves to too much trouble!

In the valley, on our way home, we are met by a herd of big buffaloes in charge of a fine-looking old Gujar patriarch. "Mem Sahib," he says, as we pass: "give me medicine for my eyes. The light of the sun is to me as the light of the moon, and the Doctor Sahib has gone to the war." Pitifully, as we look into the noble old face, we say: "we can give you no medicine. Go to the hospital at Srinagar." We might just as well tell him to go to the moon, as to that far-away city of bridges, strange houses, and stranger motors, which must be "just like London where all the English folk live"!

III.

We are 12,000 feet up among the mountains, encamped by a strange valley of boulders, (the work, probably, of an old glacier, for no other natural force could have piled the boulders up so high, cross-ways, end-wise, *anyhow*), from under which the boom of a hidden river sounds unceasingly. The rare Kashmir poppy of exquisite, indescribable blue blooms here and there among the rocks, whilst the slopes of the hill are a mass of deep blue borage, or creamy white with columbines. From high up we look across to a range of rocky peaks standing out clearly against the paling sky,—peaks whose sides look so precipitous that we are certain no human foot could tread them. Here, at least, we are alone, we think. Yet, as the daylight fades, a little, twinkling light shines out from far up that steep slope opposite. The Gujar folk again! Even as we reach that conclusion, blue, misty smoke among the trees, and the barking of a dog just below us, prove to us that the Gujars share with us the valley of rocks also. We explore. Before long, we come upon a huge rock, the lower side of which is deeply hollowed out, forming a fine, natural recess. There they are, the Gujar folk! There is no need even of a hut, for under the shadow of a mighty rock, in perfect shelter, the whole family lives, including the latest baby calf!

The next morning, our presence being known, the camp is besieged by Gujar folk—children troubled by sores, women and old men with rheumatism, fever, pains and aches of various kinds,—all are confident of receiving the precious medicine that cures all. The look of wondering incredulity that spreads over a father's face when the Mem Sahib has to say: "I have no medicine for your boy," hurts like a stab. You, who would travel among the hills of Kashmir, take a good supply of homely medicines with you for the Gujar folk!

A strange, wandering race they seem to be, honest and hard-working. The State tries to induce them to settle in the fertile valleys, but vainly for the most part. As soon as the snows leave the mountain sides they are off and up to the heights! Who can blame them? The valleys of Kashmir indeed are beautiful, but theirs is no beauty to overcome the spell of the rocky peaks, the regions, where, against the grey boulders, shines the wondrous blue poppy!