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A Tour through Kamraj—Kashmir.

(Continued from last issue.)

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The Lolab is one of the most beautiful valleys in the Kashmir province; it may be briefly described as a broad circular plain, almost entirely shut in by forest clad hills, which rise directly from the level ground; in most cases the trees beginning at the very foot of the hills. There are many villages in the plain and nearly all the land is under cultivation except near Sandigam where there is a large swamp. The plain has a total length of about seven miles and is perhaps two miles broad in places; it runs from S. E. to N. W. and has a narrow outlet at the Northern end; the Southern portion being completely shut in by mountains rising perhaps 3,000 feet above the level of the valley. The whole forms as beautiful a combination of plain, river and forest—covered mountains as can be seen anywhere. There are many charming camping grounds near the forests and just sufficiently far from villages for the traveller to be free from village dirt and annoyances, while at the same time, he is near enough to them to obtain readily such ordinary supplies as he may require. The one drawback is that the river which traverses the valley is of small capacity, being well filled only during the early part of the year; later on, in the autumn, the water dries up and the valley becomes very hot and somewhat unhealthy. On the flattened summit of the range which shuts in the valley to the S. E., is the well known Nagmarg, an open space surrounded by a forest of silver and spruce fir; this is a favourite resort for travellers who stay for weeks enjoying the lovely air and scenery. Nagmarg is just above the Wular lake, which lies to the S. E. immediately at the foot of the range. From the Lolab valley the lake is reached by a made road which ascends from near the village of Diur; the road is a very bad one, being merely, as is usual in such cases, an improvement of the existing *pagdandi*, though attempts have

been made from time to time to ease the gradients by constructing a new line of road. From the summit of the range, it descends at a fairly easy gradient to the village of Alosa on the borders of the Wular lake. In the lower parts, on this side, the road goes through a barren country and is consequently quite shadeless, so that whether going up or down, a start should be made very early in the morning to avoid the heat.

In former years, the Lolab was famous for its bear shooting, but the increase of sportsmen and frequent driving, have thinned them out so that they are now seldom to be seen except when driven down by snow. It has often been said that Kashmir is a country that could be colonised by Europeans and the Lolab Valley quoted as a place where they could settle, but no one can visit this region in August and September and hold to this opinion; the heat is so great that it is self-evident that no European could possibly work in the fields in the daytime; people are apt to forget that at 5,000 feet above the sea, on a plain like this, it can be exceedingly warm, so much so, that it is absurd to think of, say, retired Tommy Atkins ploughing in the sun. In fact there never was a more ridiculous idea than this Kashmir Colony scheme. In the first place there is no land available anywhere, and in the next it is far too hot and unhealthy in the Valley generally for Europeans to think of competing with natives in agricultural pursuits. Probably the only places where they could do out-door work in the Himalayas, are those at about 8,000 feet above the sea, but such places are unsuited to agriculture by reason of the altitude. One of the prettiest places in the Lolab for a camp, is the village of Andarbug and here we halted a couple of days, pitching our tents under some enormous walnut trees. It was still very hot in the day time but the evenings were charming and we enjoyed some rambles into the forest near, searching for ferns and curious walking sticks. The tour was now drawing to a close, as urgent business required a visit to Headquarters, so we up camp, and rising in the dark, got away on our ponies just as dawn was appearing and began the ascent from Diur village, to the Nagmarg ridge, and so on to the Wular lake. On the Lolab side, the road is very pretty, mounting through a deodar forest at first, and then the higher pines, while from the summit there is a great view of lake and distant mountains. The sun's rays were now beginning to be powerful, so after a brief halt, we pushed on down the hill to Alosa; this side, the road is very uninteresting running as it does through a bare country, and we did the right thing in starting so early, thus avoiding the heat: by so doing we had a pleasant march and reached the lake at a little after 9 a. m. Alosa is a rather pretty village on the shore of the lake, that is when the water is high, at present it has receded about a mile from the houses. In order to be near the boats, in which we were to embark for Srinagar, we went on to the ghat and camped there. This is a wretched collection of grass huts on a swampy

place and looked very malarious, the nasty looking nalas near being filled with rotting aquatic plants and the ground cracked in all directions by the heat of the sun. From the slopes above Alosa, which are sparsely covered with bushes of *Parrotia*, *Beaberis*, &c., comes a portion of the supply of hard wood (known as *janglu*) for Srinagar; the villager simply goes where he likes and cuts anything, bringing in so many *hatbas* or pieces above 1½ feet long, to Alosa, where the contractor buys them from him and sends them on to the City. The State gets a fourth share in kind levied at one of the taxing stations. Of course, under such a primitive system, the hill sides are almost entirely denuded of forest growth and other arrangements must be made for the future. We entered our boats the same night, so as to make a very early start and cross the Wular before the wind began to blow, making the passage dangerous for these flat bottomed crafts. As our departure from the Lolab valley was a hurried one, we had to take our chance for boats, there being no time to obtain these from Sopar or Baramula; in consequence we could only get a very small one, so small that one of us had to sleep on the floor, but early in the morning we were able to change into a fine boat which had arrived from Duabgah and so we made our way back to Srinagar.

I have, during this trip seen the principal or at any rate, the most valuable forests in the Kashmir plain; there are others of great extent to be seen in the Lidar, Kuthar and Sindh valleys and towards Vernag and Gulmarg, but so far as can be ascertained, the forests of the Lolab are a long way the best deodar-producing tracts. Looking back on my tramp through these, my principal feeling is one of vain regret that they have not been under proper management during the last 30 years or more; they are of large extent, and from the reproduction to be found in many places and the general growth, it is evident that the soil is admirably suited to the growth of deodar. Had there been no felling of young and immature trees, barking, hacking and destruction by fire, not only could the wants of the people have been supplied, but there would have been sufficient timber for a fine export trade with the plains.

Deodar has hitherto been used for work for which Kail would have sufficed, and it will now be a hard task to break though the custom. Nature has been so lavish that it is a thousand pities man should have done his little all to destroy her gifts, the wonder is that anything still remained, when it is considered that from time immemorial there has been practically no limit or check upon fellings. The only ray of light which pierces the gloom is the fact that the pure Kail forests are of great extent and have been comparatively little worked, also that there is much Kail intermixed with the deodar. By cutting out the former they will have more room, and in time the forests will contain this species alone. Every effort must be made to restrict the use

of the more valuable kind and to this end the price of the one must be raised and the other lowered if necessary for timber sold in Srinagar. But a disturbing factor is the enormous quantity of kail that is said to be required for firewood for the city; to a forester it is simply heart-breaking to see thousands of fine straight logs being taken there and split up for burning when they might be floated to the plains and sold for four times the price. This is a question which will be most carefully enquired into and every endeavour made to substitute something for the valuable timber which now goes to cook the Kashmiris, dinner. Another most difficult matter is the boatbuilding trade; hitherto boats have been built of the enormous *takhta* before described, but to the ordinary mind this is simply "unspeakable" as applied to the Turk! Not only is there a waste of timber, but trees do not now exist in sufficient quantities; there is nothing for it but a revolution in the art of boatbuilding. If these can be fashioned of huge size on the rivers in the plains, there is no reason why the like should not be done in Kashmir, but this will be declared impossible by the Kashmiri, especially when he sees Europeans who ought to know better using so-called planks, 75 feet long, to make a house boat. The natural consequence of this revolution will be extra cost in building, followed by an extra rent to be paid by the globe-trotter for his *donga*, and the cry will go up that the cheapness of living in Kashmir is a thing of the past. The Forest Department will be blamed for raising the price of timber, and it will be a wonder if they can get any one to understand that though as regards forests, Kashmir began with a fine large cake, so many slices have been cut off, that there now remains little more than the crumbs on the plate.—*Vale*.

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