The Wheel of Life, painted by the court artist of Sikkim

The Wheel of Life

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A
WESTERN BUDDHIST

JOHN BLOFELD

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To my venerable Teachers and to all those friends and others who, by word of mouth or by their writings, have taught me something of Wisdom, this book is dedicated with profound respect.

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Introduction

Among the hundreds of books written about Asian religions, relatively few, excepting those relating exclusively to Zen, concern the spiritual life of the countries farther east than India. Moreover, until recently, most books on Chinese and Tibetan religions have been written by people of an alien faith. As for me, it has been my good fortune to spend most of my adult life in China and neighbouring countries and, as a Mahayana Buddhist, to seek there the wellsprings of a faith shared with the people around me. All I have written is the truth and not fiction, the reconstructions of long past events being as faithful as memory permits.

My main purpose has been to present a series of pictures illustrating various aspects of spiritual and aesthetic life in China and the countries bordering Tibet, especially those aspects which have hitherto escaped the destructive tide of materialism seething in from the West. The underlying theme concerns the spiritual progress (often in a backward direction) of an English Buddhist who, as he grew older, came to long for 'the peace which passeth all understanding'. Most of the incidents took place in China; for during my seventeen years in that delectable country I wandered often in her sacred places and sought out reputed saints and sages, some of whom proved holier than others, while some were merely picturesque.

Though the earlier part of my life in Asia was spent in the pursuit of the ancient and the beautiful quite as much as in a search for spiritual refuge, there came a time when I not only aspired but positively thirsted to stand face to face with Reality. Hence, while the earlier sections of this book, with the exceptions of Chapter 1 and part of Chapter 2, are about equally divided between the aesthetic and the spiritual, it continues on a more solemn note with this search being more or less diligently pursued. For my Teachers succeeded in convincing me that, beyond this sometimes happy but oft-times sad phenomenal world, shines a self-existent, everlasting Light which is the Source of all good, all truth and all beauty. It will be a cause of joy to me if these inadequate descriptions now and then succeed in affording glimpses of this Clear Light to others.

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The true facts of my search have been modified only to a very small extent. Inevitably those matters transmitted to me in confidence by my Teachers have been treated with circumspection. Those parts of my private life having no bearing on my subject have been omitted or slightly altered, especially as regards time-sequence. Moreover, the details of different journeys have sometimes been dovetailed, and my days as an itinerant teacher of English prolonged by about one year to avoid tiresome references to my changes of profession. The pictures of sacred places and portraits of recluses, monks and laymen have not been tampered with at all, with two unimportant exceptions: (1) The 'Leaping Taoist', Milky Way, actually lived on Lo Fao Shan, a mountain so like Tai Yü that a description of both would have seemed tedious. (2) My meeting with the Lama Govinda took place between the time of my initiation in Sikkim and its sequel in Kalimpong, but to have kept to this order would have interfered with the 'spiritual climax'. All such changes, which affect less than 5 per cent of the whole, have been made for the reader's convenience and never once to delude him. Far from exaggerating anything, I have omitted some astonishing experiences, fearing to be taken for a knave or a fool. So it may be that some readers will find the book lacking in sufficiently astonishing incident. For, just as there may still be people to whom Asia is a rude, backward continent scarcely worthy of their consideration, so are there others who revel in travellers' tales of the mystic East, however fantastic. The real marvels are marvels of the human spirit, and of these the book contains more than a few.

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Note on the Use of Non-English Words

Most of the Asian terms used in this book are explained wherever they occur. Only the following have sometimes been used without explanation:

BUDDHA: (*A*) In the sense of the Enlightened One, the title given to Prince Siddhartha after his Enlightenment.
(*B*) Occasionally as a personification of the Absolute, the One Mind, Reality, 'the Buddha in each man's heart', etc.

DHARMA: At once the Buddhist Doctrine and Universal Law, which are held by Buddhists to be two aspects of the same.

SANGHA: (*A*) The Order of Monks.
(*B*) All those who have attained Enlightenment or who have come very close to it already.

KARMA: The Law according to which our thoughts, words and actions in one life produce modifications of our inner being, thus determining the exact nature and circumstances of our next incarnation, and in every way causing us to reap what we have sown and, while reaping, to sow again.

NIRVANA: The ultimate state where, all duality transcended, the individual no longer feels himself separate from the One.

SANGSARA: The state of duality, of multiplicity; this universe of differentiated phenomena which, seen from an unenlightened standpoint, is the opposite of Nirvana, though in Truth they are One.

MAHAYANA: The Northern Branch of Buddhism, current in Korea, Siberia, Mongolia, Tibet, Japan, China and Vietnam; it is based on Sanskrit sutras and teaches both the ultimate Buddhahood of all beings and the Bodhisattva Ideal to be explained herein.

HINAYANA: Also known as Theravada, the Southern Branch of Buddhism current in Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma and Ceylon; it is based on Pali sutras and teaches strictly individual emancipation from Sangsara.

LAMA: (*A*) With a small 'l' it has its English meaning of any monk belonging to the Vajrayana or 'lamaist' branch of Mahayana.
(*B*) With a capital 'L' it has its Tibetan meaning of a very senior or learned monk of that sect.

VAJRAYANA: A branch of the Mahayana commonly called Lamaism, current in Tibet and Mongolia.

My romanization of Mandarin and Cantonese has been inconsistent. Often, I have given the Mandarin form of words, even where the Cantonese form was actually used in the conversations recorded. However, I have generally retained Cantonese place-names in the chapters concerning Hongkong and Canton, so that readers familiar with maps of China may easily identify them. The exceptions are Hsiaokuan for Siukwan, as many maps use this Mandarin form, though the town is just within the borders of Kwangtung; and Nan Hua for Nam Wa, as that monastery is situated in the Hsiaokuan District.

I

The Beginning of the End

THE power-drenched beauty of the dawn at Tashiding in Sikkim—that glittering spectacle of fire dancing across ice—it must seem to the weariest traveller a lavish reward for the discomforts of two days' journey through waterlogged and leech-infested jungles. But to me it was more than this. It had come to hold an inner significance, impossible not to sense, but very hard to describe. I even thought of it as a kind of spiritual baptism, a miraculous soothing of body and mind, to be daily renewed for as long as I remained upon the sacred mountain. Twice already it had made me vitally aware of the dormant forces which, so my Teachers insist, lie hidden and generally quite unsuspected within every man's deepest consciousness. I had even sensed that the fantastic metamorphosis of snow into multi-coloured fire so fittingly accompanied by the unearthly music of the place, magically reflected a meaning beyond all meanings, the ultimate Goal which had until now always seemed impossibly far away. Might not fragments of my mind, shattered like thin glass by the glitter and thunderous noise, suddenly undergo a kaleidoscopic change, and falling into place, reveal that state of pure serenity which lies beyond the highest levels of conceptual thought? Might not the moment have arrived for me to grasp that which the Sage Huang Po so profoundly terms the Ungraspable? Each morning at dawn, for just as long as the colours danced before me, nothing in the realm of mystical experience seemed wholly beyond my reach.

It was not until after the further ascent of the sun had broken the spell that I suffered a reaction—a dampening of my high hopes and an inclination to sardonic laughter. What presumption to have imagined that I, John, could so easily gain an insight into Reality which would make me the equal of a Buddha! How pitifully inadequate had been my preparations for such an apotheosis!

All the same, the following morning would find me scrambling to

Tashiding's summit, with just that hope to carry me swiftly onward and upwards through the darkness, heedless of the sharp stones loose-littering the track beyond the monastery. Useless then to remind myself that what I had come to call 'the music of the dawn' was in no way connected with the brief phenomenon of sunrise. The hiss and roar of the mountain torrents tearing round the two sides of Tashiding and crashing together at its foot had doubtless been heard day and night since long before the foundation of the temple; and, as for the tumultuous throbbing of the drums and the vibrant belly-deep chanting which, issuing from the Tangku Lama's altar-room, blended with the noise of the waters, they had invariably continued without pause since the previous sunset; so they properly belonged less to the dawn than to the bleak windy night. Yet there *was* an intimate relationship of sound and colour, for the deep-pitched melody of voices, drums and hurtling waters formed an ideal accompaniment to the spectacle of 'gods dancing across the snow in flame-coloured garments'. Such music called to mind a cloud-veiled host of Tibet's guardian *Dakini* lurking beyond the nearest snow-peaks—skull-bedecked, blood-drinking deities of awful mien, blowing upon horns fashioned of human thigh-bones, and thwacking drums of tightly stretched human skin!

Each morning before the first glimmer of light shot from the east, I was awake. A silver butter-lamp flickering before a shadow-haunted shrine on the east wall of my cell enabled me to dress without wasting precious time on lighting a candle. Still buttoning my jacket, I leapt down the wooden steps leading to the wide footway and hurried past the various buildings of the straggling monastery. During my short ascent of the path beyond, shadowy mountains would loom vaguely from amid thin curtains of ground-mist, their ramparts towering above Tashiding's conical peak. A brisk ten minutes' walk would bring me to my chosen seat, a flat, smooth rock embedded in moss just beneath the highest point. There I would sit down with my legs hanging in front of me, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the celestial dancers. I avoided the more appropriate Buddha-posture with ankles resting on knees and soles upturned, for I was afraid that the usual pain in the knee-joints would interrupt the spell. Besides, like most Europeans, I look ridiculously ungainly in certain postures which Asians can assume with graceful ease, and I cannot hold them long without sharp discomfort.

Presently, as a curtain rises upon a tableau of ready-poised ballet dancers, the snow-peaks of the higher ranges beyond would leap out

from the drifting darkness; and, with no further prelude, the dance would have begun. I find it vain to seek names for the various fire-born hues which came sweeping across the snow. Purple, rose, peach-colour, blood-red, orange and gold emerged, shimmered and merged again, gliding through shades of infinite variety and swallowing up mile upon mile of darkness. *Oom—oom—oom* thundered the torrents; *Boom—boom—Boom—Baroom—Baroom* crashed the drums; *Ommmmmm Sārwa Tathāgata . . .* intoned the lamas. The breath-catching loveliness of the colour transformations and the sonorous rhythm of the music blended into a single experience, absorbing me to the exclusion of thought itself—until, as in a flash, the dancers scurried over the farthest peaks and I was left staring up at the stark, eye-wearying whiteness of pure, glistening snow. Yet this was not always the end for, at least twice, I remained for a while lost in a state of profound contemplation, my mind so cleansed of discursive thought that I ceased, as it were, to be a spectator and myself became part of the rhythm of reverberating sound and of the whiteness of the snow and the vibrant blue of the night-washed sky.

If I had retained my powers of reflection, I might have been conscious of an almost egoless state, signifying the magnificent victory of Nature over my fine Occidental education; this had so furrowed my mind with 'hard facts' and so chopped it into tiny segments with the knife-edge of dualistic reasoning, that two decades of intermittent effort under the guidance of some of Asia's most gifted sages had been powerless to overcome such an immense handicap. But, while the state lasted, there remained no individual entity to be conscious of its own absence; and, when it was finished, my mind could not properly take in all that had happened. My 'I' tried in vain to capture the nearly reached state of 'no-I'. Little remained but a swiftly fading memory of infinite stillness and blissful tranquillity, a feeling of having touched the rim of a great and inexpressible mystery. And once my lips seemed to be trying to carry back the secret from beyond the veil, for I was surprised to find myself muttering repetitiously: 'Things are, and they are not.' Also, there was a queer little thought in my head that the melody could at once be the song of the water blended with the voices of men *and* the music of the terrible choir of *Dakini*. But what this really meant eluded me.

On the last day but one of my stay at the monastery, no such experience occurred. With the sudden fading of the colours, the glistening snow-peaks themselves began to dissolve in a pearl-grey mist called

forth by the growing heat of the sun; and my own mind, as if in sympathy, became swiftly obscured by thickly gathering thoughts. Perhaps the change was also due to excitement. For on that day I was to receive from the Tangku Lama an initiation which, it was hoped, might lead to such a growth of understanding that only one or two lifetimes need elapse before I should be ready to grasp the Ultimate Mystery. So I was not greatly surprised to find that on such a morning my thoughts kept slipping backwards, enabling me to hold in review my long and often tortuous progress during my present life, together with my many backslidings. Childhood scenes returned to me, each incident standing out against a background of jumbled memories, each adding to my assurance that life is a continuous process stretching forward and backward beyond both past and future 'deaths'. And I perceived much more clearly than before that the connecting link between one life and another is less an unchanging 'soul' than a parcel of propensities—good and bad—carried over from incarnation to incarnation.

How could my chosen mode of life or even my presence there in Sikkim, under such circumstances, be explained in the light of my upbringing and family background, except as the logical result of trends stretching back past my birth? During my earliest years there had been outwardly nothing, however tenuous, to connect me with the Path, nothing to link me even remotely with any aspect of Asia. My parents had lived comfortably in a large flat near Regent's Park, well provided for by the income from my father's several small businesses. Their individual tastes and unremarkable mode of life were entirely in conformance with the English middle-class standards of their contemporaries. Neither of their families had at any time sent sons to help govern India, or daughters to seek husbands among the whisky-empurpled British taipans of China's treaty ports. Probably the only one of us to have set foot in Asia was the unfortunate cousin whose monoplane had been shot down over some Middle Eastern desert during 1916 or 1917.

Yet, as early as my sixth year, there had been an incident which now seemed to me as though a curtain had moved in the wind, briefly revealing some indication of the Path which my previous lives had destined me to follow in this one. It belonged to the days when my father, already a widower, was living in a flat close to that in which I had been born, and where I spent most of my time under the watchful eye of Nerp, my nanny. One morning, she came bustling into my

bedroom carrying the detestable glass of milk with which, on some wretched doctor's orders, my day began. As usual, she greeted me with a smiling 'Good morning,' spoken in her warm, countrywoman's voice, and followed this with an enquiry as to how I had passed the night. Too preoccupied to answer, I burst out excitedly: 'Nerp, I had a dream.'

'Now then, did you, darling? And was it anything special-like?'

I thought earnestly for a while, furrowing my brow in half-conscious imitation of my father.

'Nope. At least, I don't *think* so. I can't remember. But, Nerpy?' My voice became tinged with urgency. 'Nerpy, how do I know that it *was* a dream? P'raps that was real and *this* is a dream—you, too, Nerpy.'

The girl laughed good-naturedly. 'Oh no, Tony-boy. I'm no dream, that I do know. And you'll soon find it out if you don't drink up this lovely milk I've brought you.'

'But,' I protested, 'I may be dreaming that you're saying that.'

Nerp wisely changed the subject and began holding out the glass, forcing me to take tiny sips, the whole process lasting half an hour.

Many years later, I came across a volume of Giles's translation of Chuang-Tsě and, with a sudden rush of memory, recognized my own question in the passage which relates how the Taoist sage, having dreamt he was a butterfly, debated as to whether the man had dreamt the butterfly, or the insect was now dreaming the man.

Throughout the remainder of my childhood, at rare intervals the curtain trembled again. During my second term at Haileybury College, while still under fourteen and quite as ignorant as most schoolboys of that age, my more solitary moments were sometimes troubled by the fear that my comfortingly familiar surroundings might suddenly dissolve, leaving me in a terrifying void. In retrospect it has often struck me that these moments of insight were strangely out of keeping with the rest of my life then—lessons interspersed with football and cricket, and fleeting but bitter feuds with certain masters and boys. No, my moments of terror and even rarer sensations of bliss arose from some other source within my own mind. For example, there was that cold, foggy December evening when I found myself alone in 'Quad'. I was hastening to the dormitory of my 'House', certain of imminent punishment for having needed to go to the lavatory a long way outside

'Quad' just when I should have been making for the dormitory to go to bed. Suddenly the dark stretch of asphalt-bordered lawns enclosed by squat, grey scholastic buildings seemed hostile, as though charged with a malignant, mocking personality. Just before I bounded up the steps leading to the dormitory, I felt impelled to shut my eyes and to pay attention to a voice calling insistently from somewhere inside me. The words, though silently conveyed, were as clear as if they had been shrieked in my ear.

'You are alone in Quad. Your eyes are shut, so how can those lawns, those ugly grey buildings exist? Where there is no eye to see, no hand to feel, how can there be colour, shape or form? And, without these, how can anything exist?'

It was not until after my arrival in China that I encountered the Mahayana doctrine concerning the subjectivity of phenomena, according to which the eye and the act of seeing are as much a part of a visual phenomenon as what are erroneously held to be its self-existent colour, shape and form.

The Himalayan sun suddenly interrupted these childhood reflections by causing me a feeling of moist discomfort. It had now risen high above the mountains, pouring its heat on to the rock where I sat; sticky rivulets of perspiration were wriggling like serpents against my flesh. While moving over to the shade of a nearby tree, I caught sight of several Tibetans in faded gowns of dark crimson or reddish purple, who were rounding the wall of rock behind the tree and driving before them a flock of smelly goats. Bumping against the chest of the foremost man, who was goading the animals with a long staff, was a heavy, open-fronted silver box suspended from his neck by a ribbon of soft red leather. From its shrinelike shape I concluded that it contained a holy image—probably that of the man's tutelary *idam*. As I had so recently been preoccupied with memories, it at once reminded me of an occasion during my tenth year when I had acquired my first Buddha-image. So vivid was the recollection that the tang of wet tarpaulins and salty spray suddenly obliterated the rancid odour emanating from the butter-fed bodies of the Tibetans and the overall smell of their goats.

My most exceptionally lovable Aunt Jessie had, during one of my father's rare illnesses, taken me to the seaside for the Christmas holidays. Each day I made a very small repayment of this kindness by

accompanying her on one of those 'do-you-good' walks by which she set great store. (Indeed, they probably did her unlimited good, for she is now in her hundredth year and still active and hearty.) One morning, when a sharp east wind had driven us from the spray-licked asphalt parade, we sought the comparative shelter of the town's shopping-centre. As usual, I hung on to my aunt's arm, dragging her forward at a furious rate or bringing her to a halt, according to the varying attractiveness of the shop windows. Presently we reached a large, slightly projecting window displaying an assortment of those shoddy ornaments which are the pride of boarding-house-keepers. I was about to steer her away from this dull display when my eye fell upon a Buddha-image (probably Japanese) of green and yellow earthenware.

'Auntie, *look*!' I think my eyes must have been shining. 'Isn't it *pretty*?'

Aunt Jessie, who possessed a great number of small nephews, nieces, grandnephews and grandnieces, had learnt from experience that such urgency in a child's voice must be interpreted to mean: 'I want'. But she was a spinster who lived chiefly to delight the young, so my enthusiasm was not rebuffed. Nor was she the sort of person to spoil the effect of her generosity by saying: 'Yes, darling, but what's the *use* of such a quaint thing?' She allowed me to press my fingers into her arm and hurry her into the warmth beyond the plate-glass doors.

The shopkeeper, a pale, little man with a black, pointed beard, to which his hands kept ostentatiously straying, showed us that this was no ordinary ornament. He conjured up a box of purple incense-cones and, lifting the image from a tray fitting snugly to its base, inserted a lighted cone, bidding us admire the perfumed smoke curling from between the earthenware lips. My aunt, who had turned to me in expectation of seeing me smile with amazement at this novelty, was surprised to observe that I was heartily dismayed. After a moment of shocked silence, I looked up at her with a puzzled frown, exclaiming emphatically: 'Oh, that's *wrong*. Don't you see it's wrong, Auntie? It's —it's—oh no, it's horrid that way.'

Quite baffled by this sudden change, she replied soothingly: 'Very well, darling. I expect you are right. Let's not have it after all. We might even go and look at those rather expensive soldiers which——'

The black-bearded conjuror was not to be set aside so easily. He deftly turned to a shelf behind him and pounced on a more expensive-looking Buddha-image of polished brass. There was a miniature

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incense-bowl affixed to the knees. Again I felt myself tingling with excitement.

'Auntie,' I said in a voice soft with admiration, 'isn't that one lovely? Oh dear, if only it is as cheap as the other, I'd love to have it.'

This she perfectly understood to mean that I *did* want it very much, expense (to her) be blowed.

'You are a funny boy. The other little statue was so much prettier than this ugly brass thing. What does it matter if that scented stuff is burnt inside or out? Fancy a boy caring about such things!' But she was already fumbling for her purse.

I had never seen a Buddha-image before, as far as I know, and I remember thinking of it as 'that pretty Chinese god'. The first image had been dreadfully dreadfully wrong, while this one had suddenly become the most desirable object in the world, to be treasured more than my portable gramophone and my two dozen records at home. I knew my aunt too well to suppose that she would worry about the extra half-crown, though I now suspect that her charities left her little for herself. . . .

For the second time that morning, Tashiding reminded me that I was not in foggy England. The tree under which I had taken refuge no longer protected me from the sun; and the sweat was again slithering down my cheeks and back. So, reluctantly, I turned my back on the mountains and began to stroll down the cobbled path towards the monastery. Beyond the principal Hall of Ceremony, where the creaking prayer-wheels now stood silent beneath the ornamented pyramid-shaped roof, was a double row of irregularly spaced wooden dwellings which all looked equally sleepy or deserted. No doubt, most of the monks had gone to work in the steeply sloping fields beginning a little beyond another Hall of Ceremony at the farther end of the street. It was impossible to see them, for the peeling stucco walls of that ample building and the knoll beyond with its high wall of sacred *mani* stones hid everything from sight, except the ubiquitous background of mountains; but I could imagine the monks at their work. Their long, red sleeves would be rolled back and the skirts of their shabby gowns hitched up so that they bulged over the faded scarlet waist-bands. Or, more probably, they had succumbed to the heat and were lying down, little clumps of recumbent figures dotted about their fields. Even the Tangku Lama's house was silent—a sure sign that he was sleeping off the effects of the arduous night-long ritual which he and his closest disciples performed devotedly throughout the year, from dusk till

well after dawn and often in the afternoons as well. The old scholar-priest had lost the use of both legs and never left his wooden house, unless carried forth to some open-air ceremony; so his immediate disciples seldom left him alone except when he slept.

I ambled slowly through the village, inhaling a complicated odour compounded of incense, urine and fermented barley, drawn by the hot sun from the cracked earth of the street and from the little gardens beyond the silent, shuttered dwellings. For once I could nowhere discover the familiar *plop plop plop plop* of butter and salt being churned into a richly black infusion of stewed brick-tea with the aid of a cylindrical bamboo container and a sort of piston-rod. All movement and all sound, save the chirping of crickets and the distant roar of the torrents, had been stilled by the sun's overbearing strength.

On climbing the ladder to the door of my cell, I was pleased to find that somebody had closed the window-shutters, so that the little place was dim and relatively cool. Having nothing to do, I sat down and allowed my thoughts to return to the Buddha-image bought all those years ago by the English sea.

When I had returned to my father's house, I soon got into the habit of placing the image on my gramophone—another gift from my generous aunt—with some vague idea that the music was a kind of offering. I remembered that one tune, called 'Praeludium', had seemed especially appropriate in that it was at once stately and joyful. Within a few months, I had even managed to procure a handsome Burmese shrine of carved teakwood; for my father, an inveterate attender of country-house sales, could be persuaded to buy almost anything if he felt it was 'going for a song'. At times I filled the miniature incense-bowl resting on the crossed legs with cotton-wool soaked in a cheap perfume called 'Scent of Araby'. I had bought the scent with my own pocket money when I discovered that incense-cones were unobtainable in Dorking, the town where we now lived. That the burner was attached to the legs instead of being quite separate had begun to seem somehow wrong, but this defect never upset me as the smoke issuing from the mouth had done.

For more than two years I treated the image with curiously elaborate respect and even invoked its aid against bullies at school, for I was still unaware of the irony of treating the Buddha as if he were the Old Testament God of Vengeance. Yet, if anyone had discovered my little secret and twitted me with being an idolator, I should have been indignant. My offerings of music and perfumes to what was after

all a heathen idol in the biblical sense of the term continued for a long time without my developing a sense of offending against the Third Commandment. (This now seems surprising when I remember that I certainly heard the uncompromising words of the Ten Commandments repeated every Sunday in church.) For some inexplicable reason, my beloved image and the God of my fathers seldom, if ever, occupied my mind simultaneously. I cannot understand why they did not. It is very sure that, at certain moments, the mere contemplation of the image filled me with a vague mystical sense of peace and wellbeing. It became as characteristic of my little 'study' as the pictures of coaches, tandems and early motor-cars were characteristic of my father's bedroom. Then, soon after my thirteenth birthday, in some way which I have forgotten, I became suddenly aware of having long been guilty of the sin of idolatry. My remorse was savage and immediate. With a powerful toy cannon equipped with metal shells propelled by a coiled spring, I solemnly shot the once-cherished image to pieces and felt virtuous.

I have often wondered at my childish homage to that image, which has several features hard to explain. Why, in the first place, had I persuaded my aunt to buy it in preference to the promised box of soldiers, at a time when I was quite unaware of its significance? Why had the dissociation in my mind of two incompatible deities persisted for so long, and why had I felt some inner compulsion to make those offerings of music and perfumes? I had surely read nothing of the part played by music in the temple festivals of most Buddhist countries, or of the offerings of perfumed water with which Tibetans symbolize the treasures of the universe, or with which the natives of the Indo-Chinese peninsula bathe their images during the ancient New Year Festival. My reading at that time had only taught me to feel contempt for the benighted heathen who 'bowed before sticks of wood and lumps of metal'. How had I failed to connect my own behaviour with theirs?

In later years, I came to know that most Chinese and all Tibetans take it for granted that a man passes through an infinite series of lives, carrying over from one to another the total sum of his *Karma*-formed propensities; and, even before I left England at the age of about twenty-one, I had come (rather uncritically) to share this belief. But until that morning in the Himalayas I had never before appreciated what striking proof of its validity is furnished by those strange episodes in my childhood. It was as if 'something in the air' at Tashiding had sharpened my

perceptions, enabling me to see that Buddhism had played so great a part in my immediately previous incarnation that the 'memory' of a well-loved symbol had lain near enough to the surface of my child's consciousness for me to be able to 'recognize' it at first sight. There is an analogy to be found in the recollections of youthful episodes long vanished from our memories which sometimes occur when we re-encounter once-familiar objects in middle age.

The next picture to stand out clearly from the jumble of memories which besieged me that day concerned an event during my fifteenth year, by which time I had acquired some real knowledge of Buddhism. My interest had been reawakened after the destruction of the image by a beautiful Indian film based on Sir Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*, a book said to be responsible for more conversions to Buddhism among English-speaking peoples than any other single factor. This film made such a powerful impression upon me that, if the childhood episodes I have recounted had happened *after* instead of *before* my father took me to the Polytechnic Cinema to see it, I should never have thought of invoking the doctrine of rebirth to explain them. The reverently performed rôle of Prince Siddhartha, the Buddha-to-be, affected me with feelings of admiration and affection which remained with me ever after. Yet several years had still to pass before I even dreamt of deserting the faith of my forefathers for Buddhism. From time to time during those intervening years, I would feel the breath of the spirit blowing upon me, experiencing a mystical exaltation which lifted me out of my normal grubby-minded schoolboy self, but I remained long convinced that this exaltation came from the God we worshipped daily in our Haileybury chapel.

Meanwhile, the hidden force of *Karma*, unseen, unknown, was guiding both my daydreams and my choice of reading towards an unsuspected goal. If I did not actually experience the Great Thirst, that desperate longing to pass beyond the realm of appearances and to grasp the eternally Real, at least there were times when some dim pre-vision of it occurred to me.

My schooldays, more often unhappy than not, were marked with one piece of extraordinarily good fortune—or good *Karma* as I prefer to think of it. On the day of my birth, my father had rushed to enter me for several noted schools, among which he finally chose Haileybury. His selection of Haileybury, rather than Winchester or Eton, was made on the grounds that it was so near London that he would be able to visit me often. In most ways Haileybury was probably an unfortunate

choice, but its one advantage to me was so enormous that I unhesitatingly attribute its selection to my particular *Karma.*

Haileybury College, spartan in those days even by prevailing public school standards, was a cheerless place for a child whose main interests lay away from football and cricket and who was additionally unfortunate in finding the lessons uninspiring. It had originally been founded to train youths for the service of the Honourable East India Company and later developed a special relationship with the I.C.S. by which India was then governed. For this reason it possessed a tremendous saving grace: its library was rich in works concerning the great civilizations of the East. In the seldom-disturbed section devoted to philosophy and religions stood a complete set of those ponderous volumes, Max Muller's *Sacred Books of the East*, and a wealth of similar works. After a few terms of trying in vain to work up enthusiasm for or at least some competence in the various games and sports, I became known as a 'slacker' of that particularly obnoxious variety who did not even shine in the classroom. Indeed, I was shockingly behind my own age-group in almost every way. These shortcomings gave me an increasing number of solitary hours to spend in the library, that storehouse of 'open sesames' to new worlds. By the time I was ready to sit for the Cambridge Entrance Examination equipped with a shaky knowledge of Latin and a bare sufficiency of French and Maths, I should have astonished the examiners if they had been so unconventional as to examine candidates in their knowledge of the Vedas, the Upanishads or the Laws of Manu. I had even dipped into Sufism with some glimmerings of understanding; I had devoured the enigmatic works of the Taoist sages and read at least some of the Buddhistsutra s translated either direct from the Pali, or from the Sanskrit via Chinese or Tibetan. Certainly my grasp of these great soarings of the human spirit amounted to no more than a well-frog's understanding of the immensity of the heavens, but my own ignorance left me happily unaware of mediocrity. And though my increasingly rare experiences of mystical exaltation still seemed to me to come from God, it was the Chinese philosophers—at once humanistic and transcendental—who principally moulded my development. The Chinese ability to harmonize urbane and smiling humanism with the utmost reaches of mysticism called from me a deep response; until, gradually, I even ceased to welcome the prospect of going up to Cambridge, as I would much rather have hastened out to China. Without a thought as to how I should earn my living in that remote land, I had fully made up my mind to

settle among the Chinese for ever. For, meeting them only through the works of their greatest sages, I had constructed a private myth about them which magnified their real attainments to the point of absurdity. The noble virtues with which Dr Johnson endowed Prince Rasselas were insignificant beside those I allowed the Chinese. All that is delectable in the world—æsthetically, humanistically, spiritually—became synonymous in my mind with the words 'Chinese' and, to a lesser extent, 'Buddhist'; while 'Japanese' and 'Asian' were also words possessing a potent magic. No eighteenth-century enthusiast with his 'Chinese' bridges and garden pagoda, his house cluttered with gaudily lacquered furniture 'in the Chinese taste'; no Oliver Goldsmith or William Beckford had ever excelled me in wildness of exaggeration concerning the virtues and colourfulness of the Orientals.

My actual conversion to Buddhism took place so gradually and with so many conscience-stricken scurryings back to the bosom of the Protestant Church that I cannot be sure at what age I took the final step. However, by the time I went down from Cambridge, my conversion was complete, though I was still at a loss how to reply to questions on the subject, especially questions from people largely ignorant of Buddhist beliefs about reincarnation.

Reincarnation! During that hot morning spent in my cell at the Tashiding Monastery, I carefully pondered the events leading up to my conversion which, in turn, caused me to review the whole subject of reincarnation; a doctrine I had long ago accepted, but with implications I still found hard to understand. I had just fixed upon the idea of 'memories' carried over in the subconscious from a previous life as the principal cause of my conversion when an interruption occurred. Feet pattered outside my door, a female voice grunted as if in pain, and the door was pushed open.

My neighbour, a wrinkled and dried-up old dame, had been across to the Tangku Lama's house and had now returned to present me with a bowl of buttered and salted tea. She was so feeble and palsied that about half the tea had slopped over the rim of the great silver-bound bowl, but she managed to present the remainder with rustic courtesy. Popping out her long yellow tongue in respectful greeting, she mumbled something of which only the Tangku Rimpoché's name was intelligible to me. With a ceremonious movement of both trembling hands, she offered me the bowl, the wrinkles of her face taughtened by her effort to achieve an expression of awe befitting the honour shown to me by the Lama. This task performed, she giggled

nervously, remembered to withdraw her still extended arms and tottered out of the room. Once she was safely out of the way, I found myself grimacing at the tea's rancid odour, for at that altitude the normal midday heat was enough to turn the monastery's entire store of butter. I was glad that so much had been spilt, for the old lady might well be amusing herself by staring at me through the cracks in the wooden partition separating my cell from the one she shared with another devout, bead-telling crone. I could imagine her horror if I were to let her see me throw the tea out of the window.

What? Throw away good buttered tea? Throw away a gift from the Saint himself? Oh you Gods, you Idam and Dakini, rain down your thunderbolts upon this shameless one, this despiser of Chenresigs' nectar!

I drank the lukewarm, salty liquid with a wry face, swallowing it down fast so that the rancid butter would not have time to sicken me. Then, thankfully, I put the bowl on a shelf and began to look round for writing materials. It had occurred to me that, by roughing out on paper a reasoned explanation of my conversion, I would be able to clarify the process in my own mind with a view to giving more intelligent answers to the questions I still received on the subject, especially from Asian friends. Moreover, I wanted to reason out just what it is that reincarnates and what part of the 'individual personality' actually suffers death with the body's death. There was a pile of soft Tibetan paper under some books on the writing-desk—a little table, gaily painted and carven, which rose only a few inches higher than the floor-cushions. Seating myself on the beautifully woven square of Tibetan carpet which formed the upper part of one of these cushions, I drew the paper towards me. First I tested it with my fountain-pen, fearing that it might be too absorbent. The result satisfied me and I was soon at work on a rough draft, pausing often because of the difficulty of recapturing long-past experiences. I even had time to amend the draft to some extent before any further interruption took place. It ran more or less as follows:

What we call 'life' is a single link in an infinitely long chain of 'lives' and 'deaths'. Perhaps, if our unconscious could be raised to conscious level, we should be able to perceive the entire chain stretching back far enough to exceed the most generous estimates of the length of time human

beings have populated this earth. (And why just this earth? Why should not many of our previous lives have been passed upon other earths contained within this stupendous universe?) Perhaps the recollection would include hundreds or thousands of millions of lives lived here or elsewhere, and at this or other levels of consciousness, perhaps in states of being previously unsuspected. Only, it is hard to understand how any mind could encompass so vast an accumulation of memories.

We have no sure means of knowing the duration of the interval between each death and rebirth, but most of my Teachers have held that this present life leads us forwards or backwards from precisely the point reached by the end of the preceeding life. (Thus, the belief that a man may immediately be reborn as a pig or, conversely, as a god would seem to be a popular misunderstanding of the implications of the doctrine of reincarnation—an over-simplfication of a little-understood truth.) Yet, though a person's ever-changing 'individuality' is carried over from life to life in the form of Karmic propensities, it is very sure that the newborn baby has to acquire all knowledge of the OBJECTIVE world afresh. For, if inherited Karmic propensities included conscious memories, then babies would be born as wise as their grandparents. Childhood is chiefly spent in relearning the forgotten language of Touch, Sight, Hearing, Taste and Smell, from which an entirely new set of deductions has to be drawn. On the other hand, abstract propensities including talents, bents, abilities, personal likes and dislikes, and a host of others may perhaps remain intact throughout the journey across the borders of death and rebirth. It is the method of applying these propensities to the exterior world which has to be relearnt. Thus many 'false starts' occur and it follows that, if for some Karmic reason a devout Hindu or Buddhist is reborn in a Christian community, though the spiritual aspect of RELIGION may appeal strongly to him even in his childhood, the form of his religion will be Christian. He will normally remain a Christian all his life—probably a very good one—unless the thinness of the dividing curtain enables him to re-establish links with his former faith. And this same rule surely applies to every other sphere of his mental activities.

Probably most people are linked to their previous lives by abstract Karmic propensities only. If a man encounters a house inhabited by him during a former existence, he may not recognize it at all. Yet, if the house has some vital spiritual or emotional connection with him as he was in his former life, then perhaps a kind of 'subconscious recognition' may take place. Furthermore, a man of very high spiritual attainment is much more likely to recognize objects previously familiar. It is said that very

advanced Gurus can remember every detail of their previous lives, and that the Lord Buddha's Enlightenment carried with it a penetrating insight into all his former lives.

In my own case, I may suppose that I did achieve a small degree of spiritual advancement previously. (For the purpose of this argument, I have ignored the various claims of 'magicians' to have discovered precisely what I was in my immediately preceding existence.) So, not only did 'subconscious memories' of teaching received in former lives cause me, while still a small child, to have philosophical doubts as to the reality of my environment, but when I first encountered a Buddha-image I immediately experienced 'subconscious recognition' of a figure once lovingly revered. Moreover, the sight of this image even induced some sort of obscure 'memory' as to the traditional ways of showing respect to such statues! My years of seesawing between Buddhism and Christianity resulted from an unconscious conflict between a faith 'remembered' below the surface of normal consciousness and that other faith bequeathed to me by my parents and strengthened by the presence of its adherents all around me. Thus, my conversion to Buddhism was in fact a RECONVERSION, which took place after the veil separating me from a conscious recollection of my previous life had now and then been momentarily blown aside. This explains why I became a Buddhist in a manner that was neither clearly reasoned nor the result of logical argument. I certainly did not place the two religions in a balance and carefully weigh the merits of each. Indeed, anyone unable to accept the theory just put forth would be justified in regarding the manner of my conversion as childish or over-romantic and far too little based on reason and knowledge.

While I was making some improvements to this draft, the old Tibetan woman hurried back into my cell trembling as much with emotion as with palsy. Her tongue popped in and out more respectfully than ever. Almost dancing with excitement, she shrieked 'Rimpoché, Rimpoché' and stabbed her forefinger in the direction of the Tangku Lama's house. I awoke to the fact that the hour of my (perhaps final) initiation was at hand. Bundling the scrawled sheets of paper together and pushing them under the desk, I hastened to cover my European clothes with a robe lent to me by the Monastery Administrator for the occasion. For it was thought unseemly and certainly looked ludicrous to perform the kowtow and to sit crosslegged during an important rite with no garment to cover the ugly space between a pair of trousered legs. The old lady's excitement had so infected me that I rushed out

without remembering to brush my tousled hair and walked at a good pace towards the Tangku Lama's house.

The chief disciples and an intimidating array of senior Lamas were gathered around the Rimpoché to receive me. Just as I was about to pass through the doorway of the room and prostrate myself, I had to stop and search agitatedly beneath the flap of my borrowed gown, delving into the loose fold above my hurriedly wound sash. To my infinite relief, my fingers soon encountered the *Kharda*, the ceremonial scarf which must accompany the gift I was about to make, though I had no clear recollection of having put it there a few moments before. Even if these eminent recluses and professors should discover my ignorance, at least they would have no cause to consider me boorish.

Then, taking a deep breath, as for a plunge, I strode forward, fell to my knees and placed my forehead on the ground. Just as I was about to rise for the third time, I felt the touch of the gnarled old fingers on my scalp and immediately my agitation left me. The expression in the many pairs of eyes regarding me was friendly, and I knew then that I had no cause for embarrassment or fear.

2

The Six Pulses and a Regrettable Buttonhole

I HAD rather naively conceived of Cambridge as being essentially like school, a prison still, but with more spacious courts and a measure of greater freedom. Instead, I found it a place of unimagined delights. The friendship and esteem of my fellows no longer depended upon proficiency at games; and, if preoccupation with the works of Asian mystics were eccentricity bordering on madness—the Haileybury view—at least there were other lunatics with whom I could enjoy myself. Yet even this happy discovery did not convince me that my Cambridge life could be more than a pleasant interlude, a more easily endured prolongation of what, over-romantically, I termed my 'exile'.

Towards the end of my stay at the university, my vacations became more and more filled with misunderstandings between myself and my father of the kind which often can occur between father and son when their natures and outlook are extremely opposite, in spite of mutual affection. With us, affection was always present, but there had been much else to drive us asunder. So I decided that, as soon as possible, I would go off to China on my own, my love for that country (which I had as yet never seen) driving me to do what almost no Chinese son worthy of his traditions would have dreamed of doing in his father's lifetime.

Once my decision had been made, China no longer seemed remote. In consequence, my Cambridge life lost much of its charm, and my last months there dragged slowly and more slowly to their end. Less than a week after 'going down', I was on my way to Naples to join the S.S. *Katori Maru*, bound for Hong Kong. As I was leaving England without my father's permission and with almost no funds besides a small loan provided by that same beloved aunt who had taken me to Torquay so many years before, I economized by going third class. The Japanese vessel was small and nearing the end of its

useful existence, the third-class accommodation was primitive, but I was scarcely aware of the discomforts.

On reaching Far Eastern waters, I found that my impatience to arrive was causing me actual pain, a sensation of tight constriction in the chest. Singapore gave me my first glimpse of Chinese life, but in too obviously un-Chinese surroundings. Hong Kong claimed me for less than a day; and the following morning, in a state of childlike excitement, I boarded the Canton express which was soon carrying me across the border at Samchun. To left and right were Chinese rice-fields, Chinese hills. It was for me a moment of drama and, dramatically, I whispered to myself that the exile had come home.

Of course, everything in China differed enormously from what I had imagined day and night throughout the years. A week was enough to prove my Cambridge friends right in assuming that the Chinese could have little in common with my exaggerated library-born fantasies. But those same friends would have been incredulous if they could have seen my reaction, either then or at almost any time during my seventeen years' stay in China; for their scornful predictions of disappointment were never to come anywhere near fulfilment. From the hour of my arrival, I breathed an air even more congenial than the hoped for atmosphere of my imaginings. Certainly my new Chinese friends were much too occupied with their endless family obligations, and especially with the task of filling the rice-bowls of their prolific kinsmen, to pass their lives in the leisurely manner I had pictured. None wore voluminous silken robes and, among the menfolk, less than half retained the severely cut, plainly coloured Manchu-style silk gowns which were in their turn giving place to Western costume. The women, almost without exception, clung to Chinese dress, but sometimes cut in a way which would have horrified their quite recent ancestors. Fewer people still had either the time or the inclination to remain seated for hours amid picturesque bamboo clumps, or to recline against the gnarled trunks of silver-barked pines, discoursing elegantly of age-old humanistic wisdom. I had made too little allowance for the changes wrought during the twenty-five centuries since Lao-tsě rode his ox out beyond the Pass of the Jade Gate. Though I was to find more than satisfying compensations for the loss of my dream, they were for the most part so subtle as to elude classification even after seventeen years. When, in recent years, my bitter nostalgia for China has been remarked, my helpless groping for a plausible explanation has usually ended lamely with such remarks as: 'Well, you

see, in China I *enjoyed* myself. Some of the colours were still unfaded, and there was this and that attraction, but mostly? Well, it seemed as though I were exploring a much-loved home after many years' absence. Something like that, I suppose.'

It was no part of my plan to begin by tying myself down to a regular job. I had arrived almost without funds, but my desire for freedom to travel overrode all considerations of prudence. I lived on what I had brought with me for about a month and discovered that, with the cost of living so low, payment for an article published in a minor British or American periodical was enough to keep me going for weeks. And, when this means failed, a month or two spent in any of the larger cities teaching English to private students could easily provide me with funds for further travels: for I travelled light, did not study comfort, and was content to get about as do the poorer classes of literate Chinese. Besides, I was always sure of a welcome at Buddhist monasteries, where board and lodging cost just whatever the pilgrim's conscience tells him he can afford to pay. My first major trip, which lasted for over a month and covered many hundreds of miles by steamer and specially chartered sampan, cost just under five pounds in English money, including my lodging at shabby, vermin-ridden but friendly inns and my meals in cook-shops which would have satisfied an epicure.

At this very early period, I found Chinese life so entrancing that my interest in Buddhism became for a while submerged in a throng of new interests, though I did continue my meditation practice fairly regularly. At first I was so frustrated by my inability to understand the language and make myself understood that I made tremendous efforts and, within a few months, I could chatter freely (if inaccurately) in Cantonese and get by to some extent with Mandarin. Lacking funds to take me farther afield than the camphor-scented south-east, I grew familiar with the high-pooped junks, their stately progress reminding me of the invisible motions of the planets and the seasons. I found music in the squeaking of paddles against wooden rowlocks of the swift-darting sampans, though I could never discover beauty in the harsh screech of Cantonese violins. I came to know recluses inhabiting the minor sacred mountains of Kwangtung, and sadly missed their company during my month's journey to the neighbouring province of Kwangsi, which two Moslem generals were then ruling with Cromwellian sternness. But, if the mountains there contained no recluses, their ghoulish contortions mocked my school-nurtured

assumption that the greater part of nature is *inanimate*! At Yangsu, reached by water after days of being dragged in a sampan up the turbulent River Kwei by three human barge horses, the fantastic convolutions of the black mountains were alive with daemonic energy. As with basking lizards, if my gaze were withdrawn for a tenth part of a second, they had shifted to new positions by the time I looked again! The Chinese greatly admire the beauty of these mountains. Personally, I found them fascinating, bizarre, grotesque, but scarcely beautiful—unless when their harshness was softened by moonlight and their forms coldly reflected in the waters of the Kwei. They might have been cast out of Heaven with Lucifer, for they were scattered in profusion upon a green plain, flat as the surface of a mirror, each rearing itself in haughty solitude—tall, thin, and with sides so nearly perpendicular that they resembled gnarled, contorted fingers pointing with angry scorn at the sky. Those who have once beheld them must laugh when they hear others complain that Chinese landscape painters over-indulge their imaginations.

Kweilin, the provincial capital, lay farther up the river. It reflected the heavily romantic mood of the scenery, with its battlemented walls and its clusters of fantastically shaped roofs overhanging tree-filled courtyards; but it seemed strange to find no temples. These, I was told, had fallen victims to fire and axe when the local Moslem satraps, Li Tsungjên and Pai Tsunghsi, put their monks to the sword and consigned their libraries to the flames during the establishment of that rigidly puritan rule. So in Kwangsi I had a preview of what China would one day become under the Communists—it was in fact worse, for the generals had no interest at all in the arts; and, besides, men and women alike wore ill-fitting uniforms of field-grey, peaked caps and close-cropped hair. At a little distance, the sex of some people was impossible to determine. After spending a mournful three days amid the now sterilized beauty of this ancient city, I was glad to return to my sampan, to be whirled down the river by the fierce current, dodging in and out of clusters of jagged rocks scarcely visible amid the bubbling waters and clouds of foam-flecked spray. The decks of the sampan were liberally daubed with chickens' blood as an offering to the otherwise dangerous river deities.

The mellower and more familiar atmosphere of Kwangtung delighted me afresh. I rejoiced to see smoothly rounded hills, pagoda-crowned, and to know that the merchants had fat bellies and that the flames still flickered before the altars in the village temples and in the

sea-girt hermitages off the coast. However, before I could visit those hermitages, I would have to recoup my finances. I concluded my journey by taking passage in a steamer sailing direct from the river-port of Wuchow to Hong Kong, where I at once set about advertising for pupils. A fortune-teller idly consulted on the steamer foretold that Hong Kong would soon provide me with a mysterious experience of lifelong significance to me.

To save the expense and discomfort of a hotel, I rented a small ground-floor room giving on to one of those narrow streets falling down the peakside into Caine Road, so steep that even in dry weather a heavy man can scarcely walk down them without clutching at projections of the buildings. For four Hong Kong dollars a month (five shillings) I obtained the services of a sharp little demon called Ah Heng who, though not yet thirteen, could even cook after a fashion.

One evening, I was gripped by a fierce and unaccountable fever. My bones ached, my legs trembled and my head seemed about to burst. I had, just then, no money at all, so it was with reluctance that I sent Ah Heng out in search of a doctor. Obediently, he covered his naked torso with a little jacket of black lacquered silk to match his floppy trousers and walked out barefoot into the lamplit street.

He soon returned, showing no signs of having condescended to hasten, so I was surprised when a doctor arrived almost on his heels. My perceptions were clear again after a short bout of delirium and I gazed at the doctor with growing interest. I saw a slender, scholarly looking man in his middle thirties, dressed in a summer robe of plain white silk and wearing the old-fashioned skull cap topped with a button-sized red bobble which was already as rare in Hong Kong as a top hat in London. His face, with its tightly drawn skin, showed an unhealthy pallor, but the quality of its expression was so striking that I almost forgot my pains and discomforts in the pleasure of watching him. Besides showing concern for a very sick man, the pallid face reflected a deep inner calm, a serenity of mind and good-humoured tolerance which would have made him a good model for the craftsmen who mould the features of the calm, gently smiling Bodhisattvas imaged in wood and stone. I had never before received such an impression of mental alertness and poise, and this impression was heightened by his wholly unstudied grace of gesture and movement.

After some brief courtesies, the doctor stepped close to the camp-bed where I lay and began his 'examination'. Even before that moment,

I had begun to wonder how this fragile, inward-centred being could be a man of science; and now I became seriously alarmed. Clearly Ah Heng had been either too thoughtless or just too lazy to go in search of one of the many local doctors trained in Europe or in the Hong Kong University Medical School. Instead, he had summoned a close neighbour, a physician versed in the ancient medical arts of the East. It was all very well for me to admire the great Lao-tsĕ as a superb philosopher, but I had never envisaged submitting my physical body to the science of the Yin and the Yang. Yet I was soon able to relax. Too ill to deal with the awkward problem of dismissing this doctor and summoning another, I was reassured by the swift, delicate movements of the fingers which drew my hand from beneath the thin sheet.

The feeling of my pulse entailed three consecutive and sustained pressures on each wrist in turn, as though I possessed *six* separate pulses! Meanwhile, a great stillness had fallen upon the doctor; it was as if with his whole being he was absorbing a subtle impression of my condition, perhaps psychic as well as physical. Later, when he asked me about the symptoms of my disease, he spoke with the negligent air of one seeking formal confirmation of something already well-known to him.

After a little while, he seated himself at a cheap rattan table which served me both as a desk and for meals. From somewhere about his person he drew forth a little folder of blue silk containing writing materials. There were a rectangular stick of black ink engraved with squat, solid characters and giving off a faint perfume; a miniature stone ink-slab; two or three thin brushes, and a tablet of very soft paper. Ah Heng, who had been standing by in awed silence, ran into the kitchen-bathroom for water, which the doctor used in grinding his ink with deft, rotary movements of the wrist. I watched the characters of the prescription taking shape beneath a brush which remained uncompromisingly vertical. As with all good caligraphers, the doctor required no support either for wrist or forearm, yet the brush was firmly under his control. When the prescription was ready, Ah Heng was dispatched with it to the Golden Dragon Medical Hall. He ran off holding it reverently as though the brush-strokes had endowed it with sacred properties. He was also clutching two Hong Kong dollar notes which he must loyally have taken from his own pitiful little hoard. I was so touched that I made up my mind to repay him with 100 per cent interest when I could.

The doctor lingered for a little chat. He enquired my Chinese name, which is P'u Lotao, and informed me that his own 'insignificant' name was Tsai Tahai, also that he lived in the next street with his father, a retired physician to the former mandarins of Canton, and that his professional address was in Caine Road, five minutes' walk from my house. Just as he was in the act of rising to take leave, an expression of surprise crossed his face and he arrested his movement.

'Mr. P'u, are you perhaps a Buddhist?'

'So you've noticed my little wall-shrine? Yes, Doctor Tsai, I've been a Buddhist for a few years. And you?'

He nodded vigorously. 'Indeed, yes. But this makes me so very happy. I was not aware that the Buddha-Dharma had spread to your honoured country. Now we shall become the best of friends. You will see. Will you not allow me to express my very great delight by making you an insignificant present of my poor medical services? It will give me so much pleasure. You see, I do not charge my friends—ever—and I should like to be allowed to think of you as a friend.'

My relief at not having to pay a large bill or to produce ready money was swallowed up in a warmth of affection for the pale, little man—an affection which lasted until his death many years later. I was so moved that I could only smile my thanks.

In a few days, I was sufficiently recovered to return one of his daily visits. As our friendship ripened, I came to spend more and more of my leisure hours in the Caine Road consulting-room. Soon, my camp-bed and rattan furniture were hardly more familiar to me than that lovely room with walls hidden halfway to the ceiling with book-cases, above which were framed laudatory caligraphic inscriptions—presents from grateful patients who had hired the city's finest caligraphers to compose them in his honour. Bookcases and furniture were all of heavy blackwood, its sombre magnificence relieved by brilliant spots of colour—the glowing yellow and ruby tints of Ch'ien Lung vases and bowls. I used to sit there for hours at a time, sometimes questioning Tahai about Chinese Buddhism, but more often we would discuss the fast-vanishing traditions to which he clung with gentle and loving determination. In the street outside, twentieth-century traffic roared past. The university-bound buses were often crowded with youngsters self-consciously defying tradition by an elaborate casualness sometimes amounting to downright rudeness and, in some cases, disfigured by nondescript 'campus-style' garments inspired by Hollywood. The girls were less brash in blazoning their

break with tradition, but not all of them shrank from public flirting so long as no actual contact of hand or body was involved.

The atmosphere of this busy street formed a strange contrast to the quiet of Tahai's study—'consulting-room' seemed a hardly appropriate description of a room in which the sole concessions to medical practice were a three-inch cushion of brocaded satin for use during the feeling of the six pulses, and the volumes of ancient medical treatises confined, in sets of six volumes, in dark blue cloth-bound boxes fastened with ivory clasps. Here the fragrance of a fast-vanishing world still lingered; its essence was compounded of intangibles, while its concrete ingredients were the must of old volumes, the very faint perfume of Chinese ink, the tang of Tahai's Fukien tea, and the scent of ever-present flowering plants which were varied according to season.

Although I paid my visits in the long, hot afternoons when few Chinese ventured abroad except in the service of Hong Kong's omnipotent God of Wealth, we were sometimes interrupted by the arrival of a patient. With a deep bow from the waist to the doctor and the merest flicker of the eyes in my direction, the newcomer would sit close to the huge, austerely fashioned desk, his legs reflected in the dark gleam of its polished surface. With the briefest summary of symptoms, to which Tahai seemed to pay little attention, the patient would place each wrist in turn upon the tiny cushion and surrender it to the doctor's light touch. The slow and very careful process of examining the pulses would be performed in mutual silence, enabling Tahai to 'listen for' whatever it was that told him the nature and seat of the complaint, and whether the preponderance of one element—fire or wind, perhaps—was causing the disturbance. No further examination followed, and yet he would be able to discourse at length upon the patient's state of liver or lungs. That these details, often very intimate, should be overheard by an unknown foreigner, a red-furred devil sitting in the corner, seemed to worry nobody except me.

Such was my new friend's fascination for me that my long-overdue visit to the monastery near the summit of Lantao Island was postponed over and over again, while I stayed on in Hong Kong which, but for Tahai and his friends, was so distasteful to me. Autumn arrived and then what in Hong Kong goes by the name of winter, and there were some days when I really needed my thick overcoat. Tahai's white silk gown had given place in October to a warmer gown of pale grey cloth; now he was wearing silken gowns heavily quilted with silk-floss,

I remember that one was bronze, the other a rich shade of dark blue. The polished surfaces of the chairs, some of which had seats and backs of grained marble, beautifully cool in summer, were now hidden beneath hard, flat crimson cushions. As it was no longer too hot to walk about in the afternoons, our chats were often shared by Tahai's friends, some of whom would also invite me to their houses. They were mostly people peculiarly qualified to introduce me to the traditional aspects of Chinese life for, like our host, they were the sons or grandsons of scholars and officials who, from loyalty to the Son of Heaven, had fled out of China Proper at the time of the 1911 Revolution.

Shortly before Chinese New Year came a really cold day. In obedience to some rare whim, on getting up in the morning, I placed a pretty yellow flower in the buttonhole of my warm, English-made suit. That afternoon, I ran all the way to Tahai's place, for a cutting north wind pierced right through my good, warm overcoat. I saw at once that something very unusual was taking place, for which I had come quite unprepared. The large room was densely packed with visitors—all men, and very nearly all in Chinese gowns rather than fashionable suits and overcoats. This small fact told me something about the kind of people they were. Seated upon the couch of honour which, according to ancient tradition, faced the doorway, was an elderly stranger who was clearly a person of great consequence, for I saw at once that he formed the hub of the whole gathering. His drooping 'mandarin' moustache and loose robe of dark purple called to mind the figures in Chinese ancestral portraits. I also noticed with some astonishment that, while everybody else remained standing, three or four of my friends were sitting at the stranger's feet. This was especially odd, for the Chinese, unlike any other Asian race from Egypt to Japan, have used chairs as we use them in the West for as much as eleven hundred years; the floor is considered unclean (even to the naked foot on getting up in the morning); and no self-respecting Chinese dreams of sitting there, even for a moment. One other point I noticed was that, among the few complete strangers present, were three or four whose curiously full gowns were more like robes and were secured by yellow sashes, besides being antique in choice of colour—plum-red or dark ochre. I thought that they might be Mongolians.

While I was hesitating in the doorway, Tahai returned from somewhere else in the building and, taking me by the arm, led me straight across to the majestic guest of honour. On the way he embarrassed me by whispering with great emphasis: 'Be careful,

now. Three full protestations.' Then he raised his voice and, using the sing-song inflections of ceremonial speech, called out in his badly pronounced Mandarin:

'Your Holiness. A young friend from the Western Ocean. A Buddhist. Mr. P'u Lotao.'

I had long been in the habit of prostrating myself before my shrine morning and evening and, though I had never before done this to a human being, I managed to get through the ceremony with sufficient grace to pass muster, laying hands, elbows and head on the ground from a kneeling position and then standing up, kneeling again, and repeating the movement twice more. While doing this, I noticed that 'His Holiness's' robe did not seem to be clerical, despite its old-fashioned cut; nor did he display any clerical adornments, such as a 108-bead rosary. So why the title and why the necessity for such extreme ceremony? It was very puzzling. A deep silence had fallen on everyone, broken only by whispered exclamations of surprise and, I think, of approval. All of them must have known of the normal Englishman's extraordinary aversion to the kowtow, even though he insists on foreigners showing respect to English persons and institutions in the native manner.

The stranger smiled.

'A Buddhist? From *England*? I am glad.' I sensed from these few words that he spoke Mandarin fluently, but his diction was so devoid of those tonal inflections necessary to the comprehension of any Chinese dialect that he sounded like a European beginner who has failed to master the tones. Yet he *looked* typically Chinese—northern rather than Cantonese, but certainly like a Chinese of some sort. Or a Mongolian. I could not be sure.

'Yes, Your Holiness, an English Buddhist.'

He lightly touched my shoulder, indicating that I should seat myself on the floor where three or four people were already sitting.

'Then, as a foreign Buddhist,' the flat voice continued, 'perhaps you would care to ask me some questions or discuss some of your special problems with me. We of Tibet are credited with some little knowledge of spiritual matters and especially of meditational methods.' He was smiling broadly, either with amusement or with genuine pleasure. Impossible to say which.

'Yes—er—Your Holiness; yes, of course. That is . . .' I felt myself growing confused. *We of Tibet?* Could this be one of the so-called Living Buddhas? But, no, they had not addressed him as *Fuyeh*. I had

often read that Tibetan Lamaism is a coarse travesty of Buddhism, thickly encrusted with superstition and black magic, so I had never cared to waste time studying it. On the other hand, this stranger had an unmistakable air of wisdom, kindness and—or so it seemed—of possessing advanced spiritual knowledge; for he made an impression on me like that made by Tahai at our first meeting, though in a different way. This man was more humorous, more laughter-loving, I thought. It had been most impressive to see how he affected the others in the room; I knew them too well to believe that they were mere priest-worshippers or likely to be overawed by a title, however exalted. Just now, Tahai had looked positively like an acolyte before an archbishop. It was all too confusing and, moreover, to add to this confusion, I remembered the stupid flower in my buttonhole. If the stranger was really a man of great spiritual attainment, he would despise me for such silly vanity. My attempt to answer him had long ago tailed off into silence, a silence which had now become embarrassingly prolonged. I felt the narrow, almost lidless eyes examining me with minute attention. At last the calm, uninflected voice spoke again:

'Never mind. A flower is always good.'

I felt myself stiffen with shocked astonishment. *Never mind?* Why had he used those words? It was as though he were reading my thoughts like an—well, yes, quite literally like an open book! I waited for what would follow, tense and excited.

'Of course,' the voice went on slowly, 'flowers symbolize purity. Hence do we offer them to the Precious Ones. Well? You have *no* questions at all?'

I felt he was testing me. By my choice of questions I would reveal the depth or superficiality of my knowledge and spiritual attainment.

'Your Reverence,' I stammered. 'I—I do not speak much Mandarin. Perhaps I could ask someone to interpret? And, really, I am very ignorant. My questions will make Your Holiness laugh at me.'

'You are agitated,' he answered soothingly. 'There is no need for that. And the matter of language is a trifle, not worth your thought. But I see you are still a little flustered. This happy encounter was too sudden. It means much to me, also. Will you not rest a little and formulate your questions at leisure? I am so very curious to know what they will be.'

I seized gratefully at this respite and, getting to my feet, hastened to a far corner of the room, leaving others to crowd forward in my place. For more than an hour, they continued to ply His Holiness with

questions or listened while his clear, flat voice stabbed the silence which fell around him when he spoke. Presently, somebody joined me in my corner near the window. This was Ah Lok, a young man wearing a smart brown suit and a tie of pale green who was a distant connection of Tahai's. I had often noticed that it fretted him to have to conform so much to the rigid conventions of his elders, and I had known him speak at once scoffingly and enviously of his relations' preoccupation with Buddhism. He was a likeable youth with a pretty, rather girlish, face, whose beautiful manners seemed more effortless than they were. I was surprised to meet him at such a gathering.

'Hallo, Number Six, what are you doing among all of us would-be Bodhisattvas?' I spoke in English, roughly translating his Chinese nickname which indicated that he was the sixth of several brothers and sisters.

'Don't waste your time on me, John,' he answered with a grin. 'You should be preparing your *homework* for Teacher. Better think up some high-sounding questions. The Dorjé Lama will not forget, you may be very sure.'

'Who exactly is he?' I enquired softly.

'Some sort of Grand Lama from Tibet, returning there from West China. It's easier to come this way and go all the way round by sea to Calcutta. The direct route crosses too many deserts, mountains and jungles—as you should know if you've read the records of the ancient Chinese pilgrims to India.'

An older man, a stranger who had been standing within earshot, added some information. His English was less fluent than Six's. 'His Reverence, he come from Szechuan Province. He have plenty Chinese disciples there—hundreds, maybe thousands—he stay there twenty-five years, now going back his home, plenty good man, big book-scholar, very holy, have plenty powers. Maybe can fly, but maybe not, or what for he go home by train and ship?' The stranger roared at his own joke, yet he obviously held the Lama in high esteem. 'His name, Dorjé Chüncheh. Chüncheh is Cantonese for Rimpoché, Tibetan title like D.Litt. in England, but much more higher. When you speak him again, you call him "Rimpoché", for make him see you know proper how to do. Let him see English Buddhist is proper Buddhist.'

The old fellow, whose manner suggested a small landowner from a remote district or something of the kind, made me a little bow and drew Six away. I was left alone now, more or less hidden behind the backs of a group of visitors who were straining to hear what was being

said at the farther end of the room. I was not in the least tempted to make up subtle questions just for the purpose of letting the Rimpoché 'see English Buddhist is proper Buddhist'. I had come to share the prevailing feeling of respect for the Rimpoché and, besides, thought this a good opportunity to learn something at first hand about Tibetan Buddhism. After some thought, I managed to frame five questions more or less as follows:

1. *The Lord Buddha once described ritual as one of the major hinderances to Enlightenment; then why have almost all schools of Buddhism, especially the Tibetan, adopted so much ritual?*
2. *In Burma and Ceylon, Gautama Buddha alone is offered respect. Do the other Buddhas and gods in the Mahayana system have any reality and importance for us?*
3. *Do the Bodhisattvas, symbolical of Mercy, Action, Knowledge and the rest, have real power to help us, or are the Burmese right in believing that we must depend solely on ourselves?*
4. *Which form of meditation or contemplation is best for a beginner like myself?*
5. *Many Westerners have claimed that the Tibetan form of Buddhism is the least authentic of all, largely on account of the enormous number of deities and demons, and of the horrific portrayals of the forms even of certain Buddhas. How does Your Holiness account for such widespread error?*

(I was not then convinced that such writers were in error, but by Asian standards my question was already blunt enough to qualify me for inclusion among those barbarians who delight in combative questions and answers.)

Towards evening, when many of the visitors had already taken leave, I found myself still left alone in my corner, as though everybody was aware that I had been set some special task. At last I began to think that I had been driven from the Rimpoché's head by the spate of questions from other and more learned people. When only four or five people were left in the room, I went across to take leave, carefully masking the mixture of disappointment and relief which I secretly felt. I prostrated myself as before. Just as I rose from the third obeisance the Rimpoché's fingers lightly touched my head and I noticed that he was intoning something in a very low voice. The unintelligible words were followed by some brief sentences in Chinese.

'Come back this evening after your meal. Dr. Tsai expects you, and there will be Mr. Li to interpret from Mandarin into English. I speak no Cantonese and Dr. Tsai tells me that you have but little Mandarin.'

'I am grateful, Your Holiness,' I answered. 'I shall come after dinner.'

As I left the room he drew his feet up beneath the purple robe and sat crosslegged on the couch, with eyes half closed, exactly like a painting of an Arahan lost in meditation.

I was taken to dinner in the house of Tahai's aged father, where some eight or nine of the visitors had been bidden. When, an hour or so later, it was time for me to return to Caine Road, I had to go alone, as Tahai was still busy with his guests. I found the Rimpoché seated in the same position as before, as though he had not moved since I had left him. Only one other person was present, a curio merchant from Shantung who had once kept a *bric-à-brac* shop in Bloomsbury. This Mr. Li's English was clear and precise, which made him a good choice for an interpreter, as Mandarin was his native language. We both sat at the Rimpoché's feet and I waited to be asked for the first of my questions.

The expected demand never came. Instead, the Rimpoché began talking, pausing now and then for Mr Li to interpret whatever I had difficulty in understanding. This was often very necessary, for the toneless delivery was sometimes hard even for Mr Li to follow. The shock which the words 'Never mind' had caused me had been partly forgotten during my efforts to prepare suitable questions, so I was not at all ready for what was about to follow; and it was with fresh astonishment that I stumbled upon a realization of what was happening. The Lama began as follows:

'My young friend, the things that worry you are really much simpler than they appear—that is, simple *in a way*, just as in another way they are among the profoundest things in the world. I so much want you to understand, for you are the first man from the Western Ocean whom I have had the joy of instructing. Because of this joy, I am treating you like one of my most intimate disciples.'

I opened my mouth to express my appreciation, but was silenced by a gesture.

'No, please. Listen now, and ask your questions later. Good. Now, touching this problem concerning ritual . . .'

I sucked in my breath. *Ritual?* How could this be a coincidence? Yet surely he could not be dealing with the subject of my very first

question, knowing it to be such, at a time when I had given no hint as to what it would be? My astonishment seemed to amuse the Lama, for his face puckered into a smile that was very near laughter. 'The Lord Gautama Buddha's condemnation of ritual . . .'

Doubt? How could I doubt? But, equally, how did he know? Telepathy? Magic? Black magic? Or was this power the precious fruit of real Enlightenment—a Buddha's Enlightenment? I would have given much to know, for my disquiet amounted almost to fear. But—great Heavens, I wasn't even listening to what he was saying! Whatever happened, I must not lose another word. Leaning forward, I sought to pick up the thread, determined to 'listen with both ears'. Fortunately, my withdrawal into myself can have lasted only a few seconds.

'. . . is the Buddha's meaning. Empty ritual *unaccompanied by its spiritual counterpart*, repeated by rote and not properly understood by the adept—*that* is meaningless; *that* is what constitutes one of the Four Hindrances! But ritual carefully practised so that every gesture, every use made of the sacred symbols, has a fully understood symbolic meaning, rites which help the adept to focus his mind on some aspect of Truth—how can these be hindrances? These constitute the rope, the axe, the spiked boots with which we assail our Everest in the manner of your Western climbers—our Everest, the Mountain of Wisdom, Mount Sumeru itself. Only when the climber has learnt to fly like a bird can he ascend without these things. Without them, he will lose himself among the snow-drifts of ignorance, or fall headlong into the valleys. I will not conceal from you that there are many in Tibet who mistake the climber's tools for Wisdom's jewels and who seek no further. Western travellers in our country meet such fools and return to their own country ready to laugh at or to condemn us all. Yet I have heard that our sacred texts have been translated into your language. How is it, then, that your people are not familiar with those pure gems of Wisdom and Truth?'

I shook my head. By now I was so much under the spell of the Rimpoché's sincerity that I was past being astonished. Whether, while talking to those others, he had reached his mind out across the room and read my every thought, or whether he was only now reading the questions stored in my memory, or whatever the explanation, it seemed quite unimportant beside the fact of the miracle itself. After a short pause, he continued:

'As for the great pantheon of peaceful and wrathful deities, what are they but emanations from your own minds, corresponding to the

noble and evil propensities of your own being? Since Mind alone exists, and since all apparent differentiation between this and that, I and you, is contained within it, where else could the deities (Lha) reside? The mind of every being is as broad and deep as the cosmos itself. It is the entire cosmos, not a part but the whole—call it what you will. If you cannot understand now, be patient until one day when these words will seem to you no more profound than what children are taught by their village teacher. In this world of the senses where I speak to you, good and evil differ as do sunshine and black night, but Mind is above both. Good, evil, lovely, repulsive—all is Mind. The wrathful, blood-drinking deities with their skull-cups and horrid ornaments are as much a part of your mind as the Bodhisattva's Compassionate smile.'

During this part of his discourse, which was much more detailed than its reproduction here, I was doubly glad of Mr Li's services as interpreter. Much that the Lama said was hard to grasp; yet there was nothing that seemed hopelessly improbable or contrary to my understanding. He seemed to be expressing on one level things which I had intuitively understood at a lower level.

'That the Bodhisattvas and deities,' he continued, 'can extend you boundless aid is very sure. Reach out to them and visualize their separate forms, each of which corresponds to something real within yourself. Of, if the method of Southern Buddhism is more to your liking, visualize truth as being symbolized by the Three Gems—so long as you are diligent and faithful, it matters little. As there are many levels of truth, so are there many methods, many means to the one Goal. Once in Kalimpong I met a man from your country dressed all in black, a lama of your people. He quoted to me: "In my Father's house are many dwellings," and when he explained these words I perceived that I had been wrong in supposing the people of his faith to be lost in the darkness of ignorance. I would have admired him very much if he had gone so far as to admit that some of those dwellings might be Buddhist dwellings, but he had the defect of narrow-mindedness, like most Christians who come to "give light to Tibet", as they call it. Otherwise he was a wise and saintly man. Yes, some of those dwellings *are* Buddhist, and even of Buddhist dwellings there are many and many.

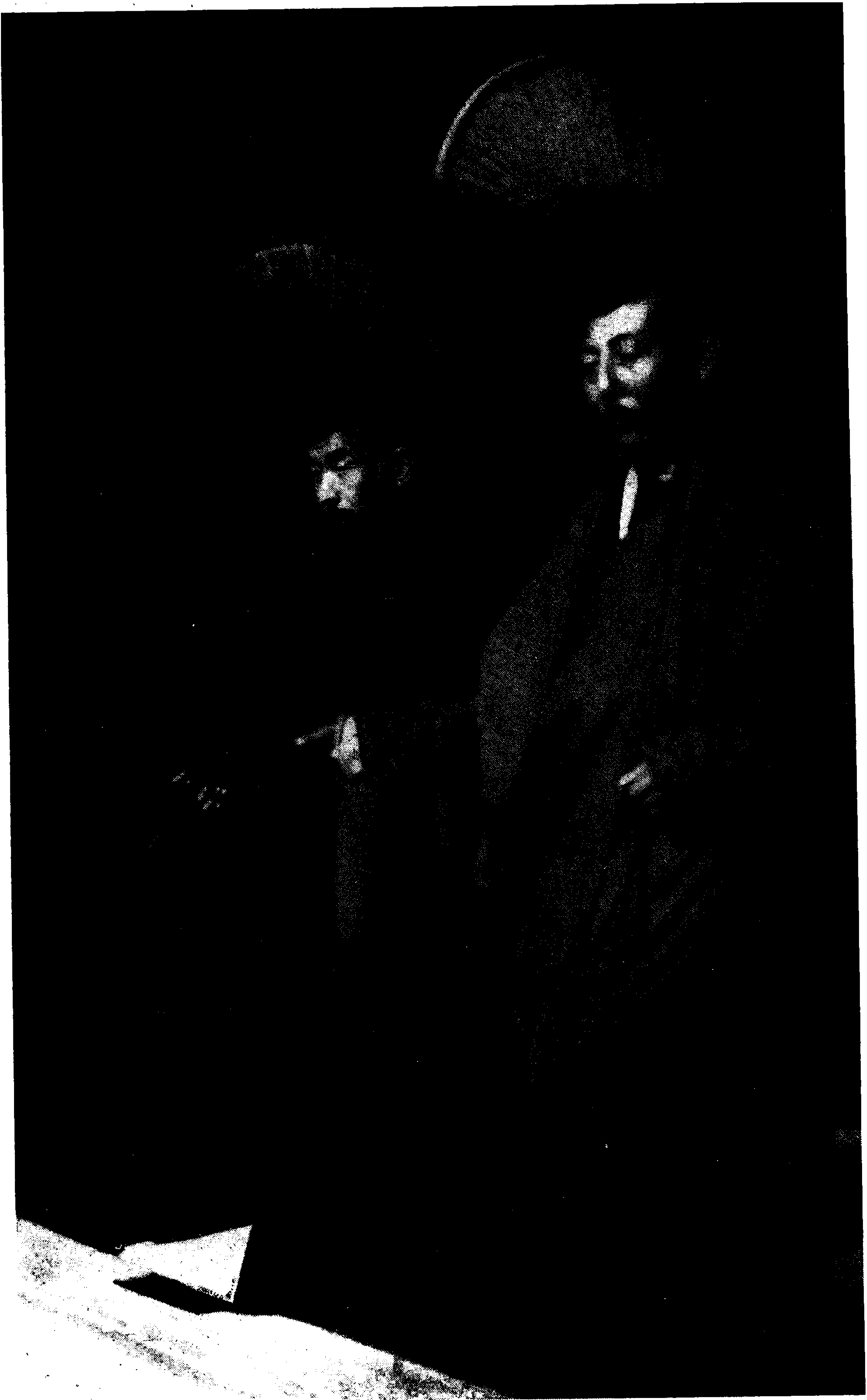
'To use the powers you will gain through meditation, through the inward turning of your mind, you must first gain control of your own "self" as a wrestler masters his enemy, or as a lover wins and

possesses the body of his beloved. For this you will need a Teacher, a guide. I, alas, shall not be with you long; but be assured that when you are ripe for further teaching, a Teacher will appear. Perhaps many. Meditations on the Great Void, on Infinite Mind, visualizations of the deities, contemplation of your own inner being, study of the sutras, the practice and realization of the teachings of the Southern School—all, all are arrows directed to the same target, rays of the same sun, threads of light from the same moon. What does it matter? We of Tibet have long known these things for Truth; yet do not suppose that every monk belted with a yellow or red sash has mastered them. Some there are—simple people—to whom the deities are as *real* as the flower which embarrassed you today. Ignorant, superstitious people. Yet, if they are carried along by the force of their sincerity, they may arrive before you—before me. Here you press a switch and the room is full of light. Does it illumine only those who understand the workings of electricity, or does it equally illumine that cat licking its paws there on the bookcase, or any goggling yokel who supposes that the bulb is a star stolen from Heaven? Be tolerant of others. Perhaps your own exalted knowledge will seem but crude superstition to them!'

The Rimpoché laughed unaffectedly. Then he added words which I shall never forget: 'Be tolerant, love, understand. The whole universe is but yourself. When you laugh at me, you are laughing at yourself. When you break the stem of a flower, you break your own leg.'

He bent forward to touch my head in dismissal. When I looked up, meaning to express my gratitude, I saw that the old man's eyes were half closed, the broad mouth slightly parted, the knotted fingers joined in the mudra of meditation. His mind might have been a thousand universes away, so withdrawn was his expression. Thanks were not needed. So I performed my prostrations with deep reverence, making each movement a conscious rather than an automatic tribute. Mr Li, after taking leave with equal reverence, gently pushed me towards the door.

As soon as we reached the passage outside, Tahai and two or three friends appeared from the next room. But I felt a great weariness and disinclination to talk, which Tahai perceived at once. While courteously inviting me to stay awhile, he was actually leading me by the hand towards the front door. I did not even say goodbye; I just smiled my thanks and walked off into the lamplit street, where the noodle-hawkers who come by night were crying their wares.



Mongolian lamas in full dress

Tahai

The Fifth Uncle

Dorjé Rimpoché was persuaded to remain in Hong Kong for a whole month, lodged in a house which several of my friends had rented for the purpose. With him were his personal followers—three middle-aged Tibetan lamas and a young Chinese boy from Szechuan who was very shy, but said to be an adept of remarkable attainments. Day and night, the Teacher would be found there, seated crosslegged upon a low cushioned stool, instructing little groups of men. For weeks on end, Mr Li left his curio shop in the hands of 'idle, ignorant apprentices'; and Tahai attached a notice to the splendid black and gold caligraphic inscription hanging outside his front door requesting patients only to call before noon, except in cases of extreme urgency. I found it much too difficult to follow the long discourses of these scholars spoken rapidly in a mixture of Cantonese and Mandarin, but just the same I often went to the Tibetans' house. I liked to meet my friends there, or just to watch the Rimpoché at his work. For the wrinkled face, full of benevolent anxiety to accomplish much in a little time; the dark, slit-like eyes often lit with mirth; and the intensely mobile mouth, now pursed, now serious, more frequently curved into a broad smile revealing strong, irregular and slightly discoloured teeth, fascinated me, even when the discussion went far beyond my depth.

One day, when I had crossed over to Kowloon to teach English to the daughters of a retired general known as 'Old Foxy Chan', the Rimpoché, who was very soon to return to Tibet, made an important pronouncement. Later Tahai, who possessed the phenomenal memory of a true Chinese scholar, repeated it to me almost word for word, but in his native Cantonese. The Lama had first spoken of his very real regret at having to leave us so soon, but he was worried about his disciples in Tibet, for his home-monastery could not be reached by post or telegraph in less than several weeks or months. However, he would not leave us without performing a service which we might find to be of lasting value.

'Three years from now,' he said, 'death will claim me and I should be sorry not to pass my last years at home; so I shall not have the happiness of meeting you again in this life, or of leading you forward step by step as is our custom. Instead I shall bestow upon you a 'Grand Initiation', which will include the individual initiations normally performed at long intervals for those who have completed the preliminaries to each successive step. You already have enough knowledge and experience to make use of the lower degrees. For the rest, I shall trust

you not to pursue any of the higher mysteries until you have faithfully followed out the written and oral instructions which I shall leave with you.'

Tahai, fearing that I might be thought too young and too ignorant to be included among those to be initiated, had put in a special plea for me to which the Rimpoché answered that he had already decided to include me, if two of the others would undertake that I would neither practise nor reveal anything of the various methods of inner realization until I had faithfully accomplished the preparatory work. He made this stipulation because, he said, too many foreigners had probed the mysteries either to gain money or fame by writing about them, or else to gratify curiosity, which was sometimes contemptuous and seldom directed at the high ends which those mysteries served. But his own impression, based on slight knowledge of me, was that I was quite sincere. He only feared that, like many young men, I might change later.

A crochety painter from Fukien known as Old Uncle Cheng had at once joined Tahai in pledging my good faith. The old fellow had conceived a curiously grudging affection for me in spite of his intense dislike of Westerners, whose directness of speech he found offensive. This attitude amused the rest of us a good deal, for we all felt that Uncle Cheng was quite often gratuitously rude in a coarse manner that would cause many Westerners to blush. When I returned from teaching 'Foxy Chan's' pretty but subdued and bashful daughters, I received the great news with mixed feelings.

'Of course it *is* a great honour,' I said when Tahai told me in Uncle Cheng's presence what had been decided. 'All the same, I don't really care for these *mysteries*. Did not the Lord Buddha state that he had kept *nothing* back? Then why should there be any esoteric teaching of Buddhism?'

My reply took Uncle Cheng aback. Very much put out by this fresh example of barbarian bluntness, he glared at me and wagged a forefinger almost in my eyes.

'Surely the Lord Buddha kept nothing back. We all know that, Little Brother. But do you suppose that he taught *all* things to *all* his disciples? Does any profound scholar, a member of the Hanlin Academy for example, prate to children of the inner meanings of things? To do so would be to sully his jade wisdom, for to the children it would sound like the braying of mules.'

Tahai tried to restore peace, but I pressed the argument.

'How do we know,' I asked, 'that the Mahayana claim to have preserved the highest teachings, some of them esoterically, is valid? Can we be so sure that these "teachings" were not put into the mouth of the Buddha by later generations of monks?'

Old Uncle Cheng's glare grew fiercer. He exactly resembled an elderly archbishop confronted by a crude, if unintentional, blasphemer. Suddenly he dragged himself to his feet, muttering under his breath, and began limping towards the doorway. Tahai was left to do what he could with this loutish barbarian youth. He smiled a hint I should not take offence and said softly:

'Uncle Cheng is right in a way. The Lord Buddha's Enlightenment revealed to him the face of Truth. Seated beneath the Bodhi Tree, he became intuitively aware of matters beyond the utmost reach of ordinary human knowledge, matters which your Sir James Jeans has only glimpsed through a mist of human ignorance which even he cannot dispel, though he is moving nearer towards confirming what we have always believed concerning the nature of the universe. Was it Eddington who claimed: "The stuff of the universe is mind-stuff"? It is just because the Buddha did say he had kept nothing back that we can be sure the canonical writings contain only the outer husk of his teachings. And don't forget that it is written that he wordlessly transmitted the highest wisdom of all only to Mahakasyapa—a transmission of Mind to Mind with Mind: I am certain that the Mahayana sutras do contain much that was added or composed later, but what is the *import* of these sutras, new or old? Is it not in close harmony with the intuitive knowledge of Reality gained by the mystics of all ages, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, Chinese, Indian, European? Since there can be only one form of Supreme Enlightenment, only one experience of the Eternal, of Reality, and since many people have actually gained this experience by adhering to the Mahayana teachings, how *can* they differ in essential content from the experience as taught by the Lord Buddha?'

I nodded thoughtfully. This argument was impressive. Besides, I had long been in the habit of deferring to Tahai's judgement in such matters; for his appearance, manner, conversation, almost everything about him, bore witness to his undoubted possession of some profound inner knowledge.

He continued in the same quiet voice, smiling a little as he spoke:

'For the present, have faith in your teachers—even in me, a little, if you like. You need age and experience to mellow you, Little Brother. Not that I am so very much your senior, but as you have said yourself,

I belong to a race old in wisdom. Did you not say that we Chinese are born white-haired old men, springing thus from the womb like Lao-tsĕ in the legend? If you are wise, you will accept the initiation. Perhaps, years later, you will be glad that you did so.'

Silence followed. At last I raised my eyes from the floor where a few red ants were crawling cautiously round my shoe. Then I said:

'All right, Big Brother. I will take your advice. I still have a great hankering to approach the inner world in a simpler way through Zen, or as the Southern Buddhists do. I agree that the Hinayana teaching is more dull and arid than the transcendental soarings of Mahayana, but still think it *may* be nearer the truth. I—I'm just not sure. But don't give me up to my own pride, my confidence in my own judgement. Continue to teach me, and no doubt you'll succeed in the end. By the way, when is the Grand Initiation to take place?'

Pleased with my frankness, Tahai made one of his very rare open gestures of affection. (He had a horror of physical contact with other people.) Taking my hand, he held it during the whole of our short walk to the Tibetans' house, where we went to discuss the arrangements for the initiation.

. . . . .

By some mischance, I arrived very late for the rites which were to culminate in the initiation of twenty-six Chinese laymen and myself into the higher mysteries of Tibetan Buddhism. It took place in the large guest-hall of the Tibetans' house. All the usual furniture had been removed and the ground covered with carpets for sitting on. To one side of the room sat the candidates for initiation, crosslegged and upright, but relaxed. They looked grave and even stately in their long ceremonial robes of white cotton. Facing them at a distance was a very low table furnished with various ritual objects. I noticed that the incense-sticks had been laid horizontally upon a bed of ash in an oblong burner, instead of being planted vertically according to the Chinese custom. There were seven miniature silver bowls of pure water mystically symbolizing the treasures of the universe, and a row of finely wrought silver butter-lamps, which gleamed amid the pagoda-shaped *torma* kneaded from buttered flour.

Cross-legged on his cushion behind this altar sat the Rimpoché. He was wearing the 'eight-petalled-lotus' hat to symbolize the spiritual forces that would descend through him upon the initiates. His personal

followers, now clad like the Rimpoché in the dull red ecclesiastical robes of the Gelugspa (Yellow-Hat) Sect, were ranged two on each side of him. I observed these details from the doorway while I was drawing over my ordinary clothes a long ceremonial robe with butterfly-wing sleeves. I glanced with some interest at the faces of my friends. A few of them were watching with expressions of detachment like observers taking a purely scientific or aesthetic interest in the rites; I saw no indication of the mingled rapture and amaze of people overwrought by revivalist eloquence; nor were there signs of the terrible soul-searing remorse engendered by reminding people of their inherent wickedness, of the grim doctrine of original sin. Equally, I failed to discover any suggestions of self-complacency or of spiritual pride in being thus uniquely honoured by a high dignitary of the Buddhist Church. Rather their faces seemed to have borrowed and intensified Tahai's habitual expressions of outward alertness and inward calm. I recalled, now, that the Rimpoché had promised only to endow them with what he called 'seeds' (potentials which must be developed according to precise rules and over a period of years before they would be found spiritually stimulating). This very gradual process of fruition must depend entirely upon the efforts of each individual.

With my gown carefully adjusted, I prostrated myself three times in the direction of the Rimpoché. Then, as unobtrusively as possible, I crawled to a vacant space in the last row of almost motionless, white-gowned figures. The rites, which must have begun an hour or so before my arrival, continued without pause for so long that I lost all sense of time. Chiefly they consisted of sonorous Tibeto-Sanskrit chants intoned by the deep-voiced lamas, impressive but incomprehensible, accompanied by the roll of twirling hand-drums from which clappers depended on silken cords. A profoundly hypnotic effect was produced by the glittering points of flame reflected on burnished silver, the low-pitched hum or growl of the belly-deep chanting, the harsh clack-*clack*-clack-clack-*clack* of the hand-drums, and sometimes by the weaving of the Rimpoché's slender fingers in and out of long, rapid successions of *mudras*. Though, to one ignorant of the words, the ceremony held little variety, I do not think any of us were burdened by a sense of monotony. I, myself, was perfectly happy and at peace until the arrival of cramp-pains in my legs. Surreptitiously I wiggled my feet and raised and lowered my knees beneath the folds of my gown. The nearly motionless calm of all the others filled me with envy.

At last the rites reached their climax. Turn by turn my companions

crawled forward to kneel alone before the little altar with the Rimpoché looming up behind it. For each of them, he intoned a long Chinese invocation studded with mysterious Tibetan words—no doubt the names of spiritual powers which could be regarded as separately existing at one level and as a part of the candidate's own being at another. Then, raising his hands in a ritual gesture, he placed them upon the head of the man kneeling before him, allowing them to rest there for perhaps three or four seconds. Thus each initiate received in the few minutes devoted to him individually the keys to a lifetime of self-development, of which the meaning and use would be explained the following day. As I was facing the Rimpoché, I was unable to see how this solemn laying on of hands affected each successive candidate.

When it was my turn to go forward, I suddenly recalled my sensations as a child when taking my first communion. Not only was the feeling of awe and trepidation similar, but the Lama gave me the same sort of fleeting smile of encouragement as I had received from the bishop almost ten years before. On this occasion, however, the smile was succeeded by an expression of rather terrifying solemnity, which was all the more disturbing because I had seldom seen the Rimpoché without at least the suggestion of a smile hovering round the corners of his lips or shining from his eyes. The invocation rolled forth in a flow of rising and falling sound, so deep that I was reminded of the astounding bass voices which make Russian church music so impressive. Only the Chinese parts of the invocation were even partly intelligible to me.

'In the name of . . . He with a radiant body of lustrous blue, Who dwelleth in the . . . Region, and Who is the Lord of . . . and . . .

'In the name of . . . He with a radiant body of gleaming white, Who dwelleth . . .'

Abruptly, the long invocation came to its end amid a crescendo from the disciples' hand-drums. As before, the Rimpoché raised his hands high in a ritual gesture and this time brought them gently to rest on my head. I had seen this happen almost twenty times to other people, but they had had their backs to me, and I was by no means prepared for what followed. At the touch of those hands, a shock of frightening strength shot through my body, racing down from head to throat and onwards through heart and solar plexus to the base of my

spine, and simultaneously shooting out along my arms and legs, penetrating as far as my fingers and toes. My body must have shaken visibly with its violence. The room swam before me and a darkness, shot with fire, rushed upon me. When, after what seemed to have been a long time, I recovered something like normal consciousness, I was very much surprised to find myself still kneeling in the same place and with the Rimpoché's hands only just in the act of rising from my head. I suppose that the 'long time' had occupied no more than a few seconds. Once his hands were withdrawn I felt able to creep back to my place behind most of the others, and in so doing I passed the next candidate. My current sensations were difficult to analyse. In one way, I felt so drained of energy as to be doubtful about my ability to continue sitting upright; in another way, I was conscious of a hidden but enormous reserve of strength which could, I felt, have been summoned into action by the smallest exertion of my will. (This description is admittedly rather nonsense, but it is the nearest I can get to describing that unfamiliar feeling.) The paradox extended further; I could not be sure if my prevailing sensation was one of joy or of fearful disquiet, of almost exquisite pleasure or something very like physical pain.

During the concluding part of the rites, I sat so dazed and shaken—though curiously happy in a way—that half the people with me had got to their feet and were following the lamas out of the room before I was aware of anyone having moved, or that the drumming and chanting had stopped. In trying to get to my feet, I fell twice to the floor, though the others seemed to have risen without difficulty. Several people pushed forward to help me, smiling and joking about my misfortune in having long legs especially subject to leg-cramp. Privately I doubted if my difficulty in getting up *had* been due to cramp, for I had felt no symptoms of it since returning to my place. Nervous shock might have been the real reason. I did not bother to think it out.

A most surprising aspect of that tremendous experience was the slightness of my later reaction to it. Though it did encourage me to spend more of my time in pondering about spiritual matters and in practising meditation—which I had been more or less neglecting of late, it also led to a certain revulsion from the intricate mystic symbolism of the Tibetan Vajrayana, in favour of what *seemed* to me the nobler simplicity of Zen Buddhism. Very fortunately indeed, this reaction did not set in soon enough to prevent me paying the liveliest attention to the instructions given to me by the Rimpoché on the

following day, for which, many years later, I was to be thankful; and when I escorted the Tibetans to their third-class accommodation (chosen on principle and not at all for lack of money) on the Calcutta-bound ship, I was genuinely oppressed with a sense of impending loss. Yet, within a week, the whole episode had come to obtrude very seldom into my mind. This was so disappointing that I had to remind myself that the Rimpoché had promised me no more than a handful of seeds, together with instructions for their proper cultivation; for I had half expected to be permanently uplifted and set free once and for all from desire for purely worldly pursuits. As nothing of the kind had happened to me, I began to tell myself that perhaps I was still too young to see life as a wheel revolving amid an ocean of sorrows; but, at the same time, I realized that until I did see life that way I had no hope of reaching a state of mind capable of yielding the fruits of Nirvana. I was like a schoolboy who well knows that, if he does not soon begin to work for his examination, he will risk failure and perhaps dismissal from the school, but who goes on postponing the task until tomorrow and tomorrow. This state of mind was to continue with brief interruptions for several years to come.

3

Tiger-bone Wine and a Flute

THE steamer which threads the blue-green, island-dotted sea to Lantao generally carried among its passengers some of those lay-recluses who had retired from the clamour and undisguisedly 'red in tooth and claw' struggle of Hong Kong's business world, to seek the solitude of the hermitages clinging to the slopes of Mount T'ai Yü. For the Chinese, unless fully ordained monks or nuns, are seldom willing to sever family ties completely, and these lay-recluses generally visit their families once or twice a year. I recognized some of them by their distinctive low-collared gowns (much the same for both sexes), while many of those who had temporarily discarded religious dress could be identified in other ways. For even hermits develop occupational characteristics—tricks of speech, manner and facial expression by which they may be distinguished.

An hour or so before dusk, the steamer, which had long been skirting Lantao Island, put in at the port of T'ai O. It was met by sampans rowed by women in crow-black jackets and trousers, darting out to transport passengers and luggage to the jetty. Soon I was walking up the narrow main street overshadowed by unpretentious houses of very dark grey brick. The air was permeated by the stink of acres of dead fish spread out to dry in the sun. As, for some reason which I could not understand, nobody would volunteer to guide me and carry my light luggage up to the monastery near T'ai Yü's peak, I had to accept the only alternative to passing a night among the mosquitoes and the gradually overpowering smell of fish. This was to be carried up the mountain in a sedan-chair of light wickerwork borne by two women padding along front and back with the shafts resting on their shoulders. They knelt to lift me from the ground and experienced some difficulty in rising, but seemed to get along easily enough after that.

The mountain path led steeply upwards from the dusk-blurred

rice-fields, surrounding T'ai O. It was constructed of horizontally laid slabs of rough-hewn granite and it wound up thinly wooded slopes where some of the lower hermitages lay scattered. Their temple-like buildings were prettily secluded behind groves of trees or bamboo hedges and were approached through heavy wooden gates with stone lintels. By the time the bearers began to tire, they had reached a neglected hermitage distinguished by an inscription on a horizontal stone inset above the gateway, announcing in large gold letters that it was 'The Garden of Mysterious Causes'. Here the women set me down and began to rest themselves, chatting volubly and puffing cheap Chinese cigarettes which smelt like burning hay. I got stiffly out from the sedan-chair and strolled into a stone-flagged courtyard lying behind the green-lacquered gates. The doors of the main shrine-room stood wide open, revealing an interior so gloomy that nothing could be seen except for the objects contained in a pool of light cast by two giant candles of crimson wax burning on the altar. Their rays caught the gilded statue of a Taoist divinity, a probably ancient but far from lovely image of the Empress of Heaven. Soon after I had gone over to examine it, I heard the tapping of a wooden staff behind me and, looking over my shoulder, beheld a diminutive old woman emerging into the light. Her eyes were filmed with luminous white scales and she was obviously quite blind. When she spoke, her high-pitched voice reminded me of a five-year-old child's.

'You are welcome, sir. You have come to stay the night?'

'Thank you, no. I hope to reach the Po Lin Monastery in time for some supper.'

She sighed with theatrical resignation. 'Then at least you will take a cup of tea. It shall be brought instantly. Ah Mu-u-u-ui! Tea for the guest.'

These last words, uttered in a shrill ugly scream, had hardly ceased echoing when a small pigtailed girl in dingy black clothes materialized from the darkness like a tiny genii. She was carrying a tray of tea-things. I felt obliged to sit down and accept the tea with good grace, though I knew its purpose was merely to extort a silver dollar towards the upkeep of the hermitage. Presently the old creature, who had been peering towards me as if willing her eyes to see, remarked with some animation: 'Sir, you are a foreigner, are you not?' Her phrasing of the question revealed that she was a woman of small education, for she had used the phrase 'red-furred devil' for 'foreigner' without being conscious of its rudeness.

'Yes, Madam Recluse, a red-furred devil,' I answered gravely. 'How did you guess?'

'The ears of the blind as are the eyes of the deaf,' she quoted with a grim chuckle. 'You speak well, sir, but not as we do.'

Supposing that my bearers would be growing impatient, I finished the cup of tepid tea and got up to go. It was the thin green variety called 'Dragon's Well', which is costly, but this particular potful had obviously suffered three or four waterings in the course of the afternoon. I placed a silver dollar on the tray and murmured something about an insignificant donation, for fear that the ragged child should conceal it for her own use. Almost at once I regretted not having let her do this, for I guessed that her life under the old martinet was miserable enough.

'You are too kind,' came the perfunctory answer and then, more energetically, the recluse added: 'The path is steep, sir, steep and dangerous. There are precipices hard to avoid in the dark. Go up slowly, sir. Go up slowly!'

Suddenly the night seemed less warm. The child-like piping voice had sounded grimly prophetic and I was not too sure that the old crone was innocent of taking a certain pleasure in implanting gloomy apprehensions in my mind. Making some vague reply, I groped my way out towards the gate, while struggling with what then seemed an absurd conviction that her words were intended to have a wider application than the obvious one, though on the face of it it was more probable that her failure to secure a paying guest for the night had made her pettish. I climbed back into my chair; which soon resumed its camel-like swayings.

When we reached the steepest part of the long slope, the tilt was sharp enough to bring my knees up rather higher than my face. The bobbing lantern dangling from one of the shafts dispelled the darkness sufficiently to illumine a disquieting view of yawning blackness just beyond the left side of the narrow path skirting the mountain's edge. Apart from the chirping of insects, the slip-slap of straw sandals against rough granite, and the heavy breathing of my female bearers, the night was ominously silent.

Our next stop was before a wayside shrine. The lantern's soft glow revealed a mere hole in the rock-face to the right of the path. It had been clumsily daubed with crimson, and in the hollow loomed a crude image of a bearded god with sword held ready to slash off the heads of his enemies. The bearers seemed to fear him, for they lighted a few

incense-sticks from the lantern-flame and carefully thrust them among the scarlet stubs crowding the cheap earthenware burner at the foot of the shrine. Perhaps this was the deity who decided whether to guide them safely past or to hurl them over the dangerous precipices. Their brief devotions completed, they signed to me to take my seat and, kneeling between the shafts as they had done before, staggered to their feet exerting far more strength to raise me from the ground than they required for the actual business of carrying me forward. I reflected that the god they had just propitiated was one of those exceedingly ancient deities who go further back into history than the oldest of China's various organized religions, like the hob-goblins of Europe.

For another hour I swayed through the night until, on rounding a sharp bend, I saw several lights shining out high in the darkness above me. The path had now become so steep that the bearers no longer protested when I offered to get down and walk. This decision saved us a lot of time and, sooner than I had expected, because of the difficulty of judging distance in the darkness, I was standing before the monastery gate while the two women shouted shrilly for admission.

The gleam of oil-lamps on smooth, unpainted wood; black-gowned monks with butterfly-wing sleeves billowing as they hastened forward to receive me; serving boys sent scurrying off in search of warm water, soap and a pot of tea; a plank-bed in an otherwise bare cell fragrant with the smell of a freshly stuffed rice-straw mattress—this was a world to which I had become so accustomed during my recent travels that I felt some of the pleasure of a wanderer returning home. And, as expected, I had no sooner washed my face and drunk a cup or two of tea than I was summoned to a good dinner of rice and spiced vegetables, piping hot and so quickly served that it would have been reasonable to look round for Aladin's lamp.

While I was eating this meal in the guests' refectory, the Reverend Receiver of Guests sat with me, pressing me to the choicest morsels in each dish. He had the rather forbidding features of a mediaeval churchman and spoke with great formality. When I showed signs of lingering over a plate of sliced blood-oranges, he informed me that the Abbot was waiting to receive me immediately 'after rice'. The oranges were so good that I stayed to finish off the plate, making up for the delay by hastening to the Abbot's private quarters as fast as I could walk with the dignity suited to a temple. There I was received by a tall, heavily built prelate with a kindly but unremarkable face, who insisted on my omitting the usual prostrations and waved me to a chair. The formal

interchange of names and other details was quickly disposed of, and then came an enquiry as to the length and purpose of my visit.

'Please make it a long visit,' he added hospitably.

'Thank you, Your Reverence. A fortnight, perhaps. I have not come just for a holiday, though; so I may find that I need longer, if I shall not be in anybody's way. I have come to ask your assistance in making a particular study of Zen and of Zen meditation methods.'

The Abbot's gaze of friendly enquiry gave place to an uncertain smile.

'So you are a Buddhist, Mr P'u? That is praiseworthy, very praiseworthy. Of course, I shall do whatever I can. But I hardly think . . . I mean, we do have a Hall of Zen here and nominally there are sessions twice a day, but in practice very few of the monks attend regularly. We are not strict, you know. Everyone is left to do very much as he pleases in such matters. As for *study*, I'm afraid the *Fa-Shih* [Expounder of the Dharma] is away in Kowloon, so there will be nobody to instruct you. I myself . . .' He paused and smiled confidingly. 'I'm just a simple man, a "business abbot" you might say. As in lay life I was a business man I have been selected to attend to matters of administration and the supervision of the monks—my abilities are confined to such trifles. Yet it is necessary to have such a person as my humble self in this capacity, for the Hong Kong Government actually *taxes* temples as though we were a business organization! So there it is. But—er—if you wish to *practise* Zen, the Hall is open to you day and night. Use it as you wish. Or you may find the temple garden or the mountainside more conducive to solitary meditation.'

'Thank you, Reverence. I am fortunate.'

We chatted for a little while longer on general subjects and I happened to mention the old blind woman at the Garden of Mysterious Causes.

'So!' exclaimed my host. 'So you have met Grandma Wang? A little mad, they say—a little cantankerous, perhaps. Is she not? It is strange, though. I have heard people assert that, far from being mad, she has the gift of prophecy, the gift of seeing further than two-eyed people can hope to do. Accurate prophecy, so they say. I suppose she didn't happen to . . . But, no, of course not. You were only there for such a very little time, were you not?'

'H'm,' I replied thoughtfully. 'She certainly did not say anything of importance to me. She just warned me that the path up to this monastery is dangerous to climb in the dark. But, of course, one hardly

needs psychic powers to realize that steep precipices are dangerous to anyone being carried up in a chair at night! All the same, there *was* something peculiar about the tone of her voice and I remember wondering at the time if she had some hidden meaning.'

We both laughed rather uncomfortably. Just then my eye fell upon the old-fashioned wooden clock above the doorway. As it was long past the usual bed-time for Buddhist monks, who rise always before dawn, I stood up to take leave.

Overtired from the long journey by boat and chair, I undressed quickly and threw myself down on the straw pallet with such abandon that the thin planks creaked ominously. Instead of sleeping at once, I fell into a state of drowsy contentment, pleasantly conscious of the change from my bed-sitting-room in Hong Kong. Here the mountain air was fresh; there was also a pleasant tang from the ocean far below and the attractive smell of rice-straw. Now and then a faint smell of sandalwood drifted across from the Hall of Ceremony on the other side of the monastery. At intervals of perhaps three minutes came the mournful d-o-o-ong of a great bronze bell struck once. It intimated that somewhere in a candle-lit bell-tower a solitary monk was passing the night intoning the scriptures for the dead; I was pulled back with a jerk from a dreamy state close to sleep by a vision of the horrid torments pictured in symbolical representations of the Buddhist hells. Some people believed quite literally in those horrors, but at least they were never held to be everlasting. The dreadful doctrine of eternal damnation, of punishment which by its very infinity is out of all proportion to the worst depravities possible in a brief life of seventy years, is quite foreign to the peoples of the Far East. Even a Buddhist who has sinned grievously and who has a lively belief in hellish torments can comfort himself with the thought that, once cleansed of his stock of evil *Karma*, he will emerge from hell to continue going the rounds of self-forged karmic destiny until sense-attachments lose their chaining power and leave him free to seek refuge in *Nirvana*. *Nirvana*? Who could say what it really meant? It is a state sublime and indescribable, a direct realization of the Supreme Reality, a final escape from the bondage of life's Wheel, and analogous to the Christian mystic's goal of union with the Godhead, or with the ordinary Christian's 'living eternally in the presence of God'. A hard teaching, because of the number of lives to be lived through and the oceans of troubles to be encountered on the way, but less terrifying than the frightful, hope-destroying conviction of life eternal amid the flames of hell.

The bell kept me awake for a while. I reflected that, in Buddhism, there is the further encouragement offered by the doctrine of the Short Path. My teachers, Chinese and Tibetan, had insisted that there are methods (methods of which the Rimpoché had recently put me in possession) whereby *Nirvana* can, with stupendous effort, be reached within the course of a mere handful of lives, or *even in this present life*! I smiled as I dozed off, remembering my Cambridge friends' warnings that Buddhists are 'lost in pessimism'. I think I must have been still smiling when I fell asleep.

The next few days were full of enchantment. I roamed the lovely upland valleys and lingered before gaps in the mountains framing ever-changing views of the blue, foam-flecked sea sprinkled with vividly green mountainous islands; and in the early mornings the blue expanse would be dotted with the dark yellows and browns of the slow-sailing fishing-junks. Again and again I was reminded of a series of delicately tinted water-colours by Chinese masters of a sort which I had once taken to be purely imaginative. My walks took me to isolated hermitages where I could rest from the heat in a cool room, chatting with recluses of either sex over cups of jasmine or lychee-scented tea. In the evenings, I would return hungry to the monastery to be regaled with the very special vegetarian food reserved for guests—crisp, golden beancurd fried in sesamum oil, very young and tender bean-sprouts, pickled bamboo-shoots, maidenhair-seaweed, lotus-seeds and more substantial vegetables such as heart of cabbage, bitter melon and that most delectable of all Chinese vegetables known as *kai-tsai*. I wondered if the plain-living monks were some of them sufficiently attached to the sensuous world to envy their fortunate guests.

Yet the more I steeped myself in the atmosphere of the sacred mountain, the less time I gave to the serious business of meditation. Only once did I pass an hour sitting solemnly erect in the fragrant gloom of the Meditation Hall, nor did I make the slightest use of the monastery library's collection of Zen treatises. I tried to assure myself that communion with nature is just another form of Zen, though well knowing that Zen demands a far more strenuous effort than that entailed in the contemplation of natural beauties and the enjoyment of warm sunshine on my skin. The positive distaste which all pious efforts had suddenly begun to inspire in me recalled the old blind woman's 'prophecy'. I felt that her words really had been prophetic, that somehow she had discovered in the recesses of my own mind

symptoms of that reaction against the spiritual life which is likely to afflict a youth who for several months has been pushing himself further in the direction of piety than it is natural for him to go. In this context her 'Go up slowly, go up slowly' took on a profound meaning. The fact that she was a horrid old witch with none of the sweetness of the better sort of recluse in no way invalidated the possibility of her having special powers of mind-reading, especially as she was blind.

I have often thought that our moods attract experiences in keeping with them and, sure enough, no sooner had I frankly abandoned myself to a sort of Taoistic communion with Nature than I came upon a Taoist recluse who had been doing just that for the greater part of his life. I had already enquired of the Reverend Receiver of Guests if there were any Taoists of note in the neighbourhood, only to receive from that somewhat narrow prelate a characteristically sour answer.

'Why bother with those people? As a Buddhist, you ought rather to avoid those who enjoy making a display of spectacular powers. Taoist hermits delight in all sorts of childish antics far removed from the exalted teachings of their ancient sages, Lao-tsĕ and Chuang-tsĕ. Haven't you seen their pictures? Immortals disporting themselves with music, chess and wine among the purple mountains of Fairyland. Drunk with eternal youth, they fly upon the backs of cranes or ride their many-coloured steeds—unicorns, griffins and even dragons!' His lips met in a thin line of disapproval and I secretly rejoiced that sanctimonious churchmen are so rare in China.

'Ah,' I answered teasingly. 'How I should love to ride a unicorn! Not as a substitute for *Nirvana*, you understand. Just by the way.'

Like most Chinese when people begin to argue, he rose to his feet with a swish of his long gown and murmured something about business to attend to elsewhere. After that, he allowed me his company more sparingly than before.

On a clean-washed morning, soon after one of the first showers of the rainy season that year, the breeze blew so coolly that I decided upon a long walk to a lonely part of the island where few hermits dwell. Presently I wandered off the main path to follow a seldom-used track leading through coarse grass and across a wide, boulder-strewn depression. It brought me round the shoulder of a hill to a smaller depression, thickly wooded. Yellow wild flowers like anemones grew among the grass. Clumps of bamboo fell to creaking and clacking with each gust of wind, until the breeze died and a heavy silence, punctuated by the tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk of grass-hidden insects, enhanced my

The author and a Lama from Kam, 1935

A Taoist hermit

The author on the road to Wu T'ai Shan

Mrs Ch'en and her son (centre) at Wu T'ai Shan

feeling of having entered a forgotten land, a sort of Wellsian 'Country of the Blind'. The neglected track widened here and grew more clearly defined, as though this part of it were more frequented. No houses or people were in sight.

Suddenly I paused, startled by a swift pattering of feet from somewhere just behind me. As I looked round, a little girl shot past me, her two jet-black pigtails flying out behind her, her tiny feet pounding the earth like toy piston rods. The long sleeves of her apple-green pyjama-jacket flailing as she ran called to mind a butterfly skimming the grass in panic flight from some predatory bird. This was certainly no ordinary village girl, no daughter of the black-clad peasants of Lantao.

Following her with my eyes, I watched her branch sharply to the left and scramble up a narrow slope set in an otherwise perpendicular rock face. At astonishing speed, she flew up to the top and disappeared across a platform of rock some twenty or thirty feet above the path. The roof and walls of a grey-brick hermitage with an ornamental frieze below the eaves were now clearly visible from where I stood and, spurred by the thought of tea and a place to rest, I began to climb up after her. Dragging myself up the rocky slope proved even more difficult than it looked; roots and grasses trapped my legs and loose pebbles slipped from under me. Indeed, my mode of ascent was ludicrously different from hers. When I reached the top, there was no sign of the girl; instead a tall, dignified recluse in an ample robe of blue stood gazing at me. There was no doubt about his being a Taoist, for his long hair was gathered up into a bun and fastened with an ornamental wooden comb, protruding from a hole in the top of his antique headgear. Here, at last, was a rider of griffins and unicorns.

After a brief stare of surprise, the Taoist pulled himself together and greeted me with the amazing antique courtesy of his kind, bowing almost to the earth without losing so much as a mite of his graceful dignity. In returning this salutation, I felt ridiculous, for it was necessary to bend my legs outward from the knees in order to bring my body low enough, and my trousered legs revealed this movement in all its ugliness. His first words took the form of a courteous invitation to enter his 'humble grass-hut', which consisted of a single room with a low partition to one side which doubtless concealed his bed. The sparse furniture was all of unpainted bamboo, almost elegant in its perfect simplicity, except for a small pearwood altar facing the door and set before a large, colourful scroll. This scroll, the only object in

the room to bear witness to the Southern Chinese taste for flamboyance, depicted a bearded sage in snowy robes astride a brilliantly plumaged crane with scarlet beak, yellow throat and eyes like ruby beads. In the sage's right hand was a horse-tail fly-switch, symbol of his magical accomplishments.

'Pray be seated, Hsienshêng. Do not trouble about ceremony.'

A further exchange of sweeping bows took place before I ventured to seat myself on a bamboo stool just inside the door; and there I remained, firmly resisting all entreaties to take a more honourable place, that is to say one further towards the back of the room. I insisted that he was so far senior to myself that the usual respective positions of host and guests must remain thus reversed. At this point, the little girl appeared from what was probably a kitchen-shed adjacent to the house; but instead of the usual tea-things, she brought a squat black wine-jar, two thimble-sized wine-cups of white porcelain and a saucer of pickled meat-slices, each with a toothpick-like skewer. When all these things had been placed on the table, the child slipped out without a word and my host signed to me to draw my stool up to the table. The inevitable interchange of questions concerning the biographical details of host and guest followed, during which we kept rising to our feet, raising the ridiculous little 'thimbles' on high with both hands, and quaffing the powerful grain-spirit. Then, as we became more relaxed, formality dropped away and the drinking continued without the necessity of rising from our chairs.

'This wine,' said the recluse, 'is something of which I may reasonably be proud. It is a twelve-year-old rice-spirit in which powdered tiger-bones have been steeped for more than half that time. It is a good substitute for the rare elixir of immortality; it fortifies the nerves to an incredible extent, lends tiger's courage, renders the childless prolific, stimulates youth-like spirits in the old, and causes children to attain more rapidly to maturity.'

Though it was too fierce for my taste, of course I was loud in its praises. Besides, I noticed that the fiery stuff slipped down more and more smoothly with every thimbleful. Only when our faces had grown scarlet and our speech a trifle slurred did the Taoist venture to enquire the reason for this 'gratifying visit'. I told him frankly that I had come longing for a cup of tea and a place to rest but that, on perceiving my host to be a Taoist, I had ventured to hope for a glimpse of certain hidden arts. Before he could reply, the child returned with two bowls of chicken noodle soup which she set before us. I watched her deft,

fastidious movements with pleasure. In her, the normal loveliness of Chinese children came near to perfection. No hair could be blacker against the scarlet ribbons, no skin be paler or softer or so entirely without blemish. Jade ear-rings set in gold and a ruby finger ring made it easy to guess that this was his daughter or a close relative. I decided to venture a question, thinking that she was too young for this to be resented; though, usually it is better to wait for information about a Chinese friend's womenfolk to be volunteered. As it was, I waited till she had left the room, lest the question should be taken as an instance of a foreigner's bad taste.

'I noticed,' said the Taoist, 'that you were taken with her. Everybody is—always. Alas for when she is a little older! Yes, you are right; she is my worthless daughter, conceived in folly during my return to the world which lasted for the space of two years. After her mother's death, I had to allow her to share my rustic seclusion. At least she is useful, and I teach her what I can.'

He added that she was twelve years old and that her name was True Pearl. Though he had not dismissed the subject with a curt 'She is my worthless daughter,' it was clear he wished to say no more. As we sipped some excellent tea which the girl brought after the noodles in cups with ancient silver filigree lids and saucers, we spoke of other things. The wine had destroyed the last vestiges of formality and suddenly I heard myself shouting:

'And now, Immortality, how about your arts? Some magic, alchemy or what have you? Conjure for me a lovely maid of seventeen, willow-browed, hibiscus-scented, moon-cheeked, jade-fleshed, almond-faced, peach-breasted; and able to sing and dance the Dance of the Rainbow-Coloured Sleeves, to play languorously on the flute and to toss off goblets of wine as gracefully as Poet Li Po's cupbearer. Or hand me a phial of immortality-elixir that I may share your immortality, or a crock of fresh transmuted gold!' I stopped, panting for breath and wondering whether to be ashamed, but the recluse burst out laughing.

'Alchemy I have never practised,' he shouted back. 'Gold? Where would we spend it on this mountain? No elixir takes effect in but a single dose, and I have twice fled the world to avoid jade-fleshed women.'

'Aha,' I cried. 'You do not deny having the elixir. Pray give me a taste and at least a bottle to add a score of years to my youth!'

He was now laughing so much that the bamboo chair creaked

protestingly. 'Ha-ha-ha-ha! I'll tell you a secret. The elixir *is not something to drink.*'

'Then what?' The powdered tiger-bones were working powerfully within me and I half believed that he really possessed the secret of immortality. For answer, he asked me to guess his age. I stared at him intently, trying to bring the laughing face better into focus. The smooth, well-rounded cheeks might belong to a man in his early prime. On the other hand, the dark eyes were old with wisdom and experience, and there was a faint network of wrinkles at their corners. Indeed, his eyes would have suited a white-haired old man, except that they were so brilliant and needed no glasses.

'Fifty or so,' I explained, remembering that the Chinese prefer one to err on the side of extra years.

'Wrong,' he laughed. 'Guess again.'

'Forty-five? No? Well, sixty, then.' I laughed at the absurdity of the last figure, but suddenly he grew serious and, staring hard at me, answered:

'I shall be seventy this coming New Year Festival.'

'Ha-ha-ha!' I yelled. 'And I shall be a hundred by the next Moon Festival. But please be serious. I really wish to know, for I am convinced you breakfast off the elixir.'

He smiled resignedly. 'You do not believe me? No matter. You are not the first. Just now, you spoke of a flute.' Without waiting for comment, he shouted something through the window in the Chungshan dialect and, in a little while, True Pearl responded by hastening into the room with an immensely long flute. It was of bamboo, lacquered in shining black and with a vertical inscription in flowing, green characters. Without further ado, the recluse put it to his lips.

First there came a gay, lilting tune which was all semi- and demi-semi-quavers. True Pearl, eyes alight with pleasure, seated herself modestly on a stool in the far corner of the room, even condescending to return my little smile of appreciation. It was clear that she adored her father and loved this ancient music as unrestrainedly as she loved him. For the music was exceedingly ancient, or at least I had never before heard anything remotely like it. The mood changed from gay to sad and then to a more solemn kind of joy. I listened entranced, remaining there for so long that the sunlight began to slant in at the door, reminding me that I must hasten back to the monastery or be out on the lonely mountain long after dark.

I tore myself away with regret. Just as I was leaving, I suddenly

remembered that I had asked him nothing of his Taoist beliefs and, rather inadequately, blurted out:

'Before I go, Immortality, do please give me something to remember; something which, however short, will convey the spirit of your belief. . . . I mean, well . . . explain why you are here.'

He stared at me in undisguised surprise, just sufficiently affected by the wine to forget his antique decorum. Then, recovering himself, he answered:

'If you want a sermon, go to the Buddhist monks. They'll give you sermons enough. As for me, I never have anything to say. I'll give you, instead, Li Po's answer to the Emperor's messenger who had vainly tried to persuade him to return from rustic exile to enjoy renewed favour at court:

> Oh why do I dwell among these jade mountains?
> A laugh is my answer. My heart is serene.
> See the peach-petals float on the face of the waters!
> Ah, *here* is a world where no mortals are seen!

True there are no peach-trees here, yet are not the hills and the sky and sea enough?'

The poem was lovely, but what struck me even more powerfully was his 'As for me, I never have anything to say'. From the mouth of a wine-bibbing Taoist I had received a splendid lesson in Zen. Bodhidharma struck silent by the glorious vision of Reality, Li Po silently regarding the floating peach-petals, my Taoist friend in speechless enjoyment of sky and sea—was there any difference between them? It seemed that everywhere I went I stumbled upon hints of the existence of that shining Reality of which it has been said: 'Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know!' Yet there was room in my music-sobered mind for a little doubt to creep in.

'Can wine and the spirit mate?' I asked, hoping my new friend would not take it for impertinence.

'Immortals have been known to ride to Heaven on rivers of wine,' came the laughing reply. 'Wine, guests and scenery go together. With a full moon for company, it is better still. *But*, when wine becomes the master, inspiration flees the mind.' I felt well answered.

Our hurried farewells were full of warmth and I was pressed to return often. I reached the monastery long after dark and found the monks in some distress, fearing that something had happened to me,

but some instinct warned me to say nothing of the Taoist. The others might have been interested enough, but the Receiver of Guests, upon whom much of my comfort depended, would have resented my failure to follow his advice by leaving Taoists well alone.

After that first meeting, I used to go over to see the Taoist almost every second or third day. I tried in vain to get him to discuss Taoist philosophy, in which he declared himself scarcely interested, for he was one of those men, I think, who feel rather than think discursively or discuss. If so, he was probably more of a Zen adept (though without being conscious of it) than any of the Buddhist monks with whom I stayed. Nor could I persuade him to perform any 'magic' for me, except on just one occasion. The Chinese have discovered that children of either sex who have never as yet been consciously troubled by sexual desire are often very good as 'mediums' for a particular kind of fortune-telling. One day, when we had spent an hour or two discussing such things, he delighted me by offering to persuade True Pearl to examine my hand—not to read the lines in the usual way, but to 'see pictures' in it. She was not too willing, having been on the whole rather cold towards me from the first, as if aware that even at her age she easily aroused over-sentimental feelings in the opposite sex; but she adored her father far too much to refuse anything on which he had set his heart.

So it came about that, towards midday, we burnt incense to the sage bestriding the crane in the painting above the pearwood altar, bowed thrice and sat down on bamboo stools which had been drawn up close to the altar. True Pearl placed a cushion on the floor and, having prostrated herself to the picture with exquisitely graceful movements, knelt close to me peering into my palm. Her father was staring at her expectantly and I noticed that her face gradually lost its lively expression until she came to resemble somebody in a light trance. The silence continued so long that I grew impatient and over-excited, until at last the father seemed satisfied and called:

'Speak now.'

She obeyed without hesitation, her voice monotonous, expressionless. Her eyes stared unblinkingly into my hand, which I tried in vain to hold steady for her, as she had shown aversion to holding it in her own. Even before she began to speak, my arm had grown tired enough to make it impossible to keep my hand quite steady. Fortunately, this did not seem to disconcert her.

'I see a hilly place. On every hill a temple or pagoda or a great

statue. There is only one man. He is alone. He is running up a slope. No, now he is walking slowly. More slowly. He has stopped. Oh, now he walks down again. Head forward. Sad, I think. Another man. Or the same one, but on another slope. Running. Now walking. He turns. Oh, silly man! Just like the first, walking down again, slow and sad. And now another. Papa, it is the same man. I don't want to see any more. I know that man will come down before he gets up. Always the same. Yes, he is turning already. Enough. Always the same. Nothing is done.'

The Taoist motioned to me to withdraw my hand. For a little while, the girl continued staring at where it had been, then abruptly she turned to look at her father. He nodded significantly and she quietly left the room.

'What does it mean?' I asked eagerly.

For the first time in our brief acquaintance he was looking almost disconcerted, but he answered with a show of casualness: 'Nothing much, I think. Perhaps she was not in the mood today. Sometimes she sees marvellous things. I am afraid we have wasted your time. Let us go out and look at my new fish pond, which you haven't seen yet.' There was something in his expression and tone of voice which told me that further questions would be unwelcome, so I let the affair slip to the back of my mind while I went with him to look at a little rockery in the centre of a pond as yet unstocked with fish. On the crests of the rocks were miniature pagodas, hermitages and so on, made of earthenware and none of them more than an inch or two high. If there had been a few more of these tiny buildings, I might have supposed that True Pearl's 'vision' had been based on this rockery instead of something she had seen in my hand. I even had a suspicion that this was exactly what my friend wished me to conclude.

Shortly afterwards I bade him goodbye, without going back into the house. During the whole of the walk back to the monastery, I thought round and about this curious little experience. Had the child really seen the things she described, like a moving picture projected on to my hand? Or had something she read there provided her with a shadowy suggestion of such a picture, which she could only make clear by clothing it in a concrete description? Had she really been in a trance and would she have forgotten what she saw as soon as she withdrew from it? I was very disappointed that the Taoist had, by his manner, indicated a refusal to discuss the experience. Why had he offered me such a demonstration if he was not prepared to follow

it up with a proper explanation? As to how to interpret what she had sensed or seen, if it was genuine, there was scarcely any doubt at all. It amounted to an unflattering description of my mode of life, in which the longing for spiritual advance was balanced by the slothfulness that constantly hindered my progress. If her 'vision' applied also to the future, then the old witch at 'The Garden of Mysterious Causes' had been right in warning me to go slowly, for it was obvious that by rushing forward at the beginning I was depriving myself of the energy to carry through to the end.

By the time I reached the monastery, I was determined to go back to the Taoist on the following day and beg him to give me a frank interpretation of the child's words. So, the next morning, I set off immediately after breakfast. I could not foresee that the opportunity to ask the questions trembling on my lips was already past, or that my coming meeting with the Taoist would be my last. For a very horrible experience awaited me.

P'an Tao-shih was walking in his garden when I rounded the shoulder of rock near his house, so he caught sight of me while I was still some distance off and stood waiting to receive me on the ledge above the path. But I had no sooner climbed the steep ascent and reached the ledge than an appalling thing happened. True Pearl, who must have been chasing a butterfly or some other insect, came running towards the edge of that rocky platform and, before either her father or I realized her danger, she had vanished from our sight. I heard myself gasp as, carried forward by the momentum of her own small body and twinkling legs, she disappeared with a thin shriek of terror. For a moment, the horror of it paralysed me, bringing with it a vivid memory of the sheer wall of rock some twenty or thirty feet high. A second shock followed almost at once. Without giving himself time for a moment's thought as to the consequences, P'an Tao-shih had leapt towards the edge and plunged after her. A swirl of sky-blue cloth, a pair of enormous sleeves outspread like wings, and he was gone. But no cry from him echoed the child's shriek.

Sweating and almost vomiting with apprehension, I raced forward and peered down upon a confused vision of motionless apple-green surmounted by wind-blown sky-blue. I ran along to the scalable projection and scrambled down in such haste that my jacket was ripped by thorns and even my face cut open by some sharp object or other. At last I reached the path and struck out through the undergrowth towards my friends. I was too frightened just then to think

it odd that the Taoist was standing up unharmed, holding the little crumpled body in his arms. True Pearl's small face was drained of colour and the eyes tight closed. She seemed not to be breathing. Only the expression on her father's face showed that the worst was not yet certain.

'Her spirit sleeps,' he said quietly, 'but she will recover.'

'Thank God,' I cried, speaking instinctively in English and then, remembering to speak Chinese, added: 'Are no bones broken?'

'I think not, but we must get her to the hospital if she can travel in a chair. Will you——'

'Of course. I shall run straight back to the monastery and ask them to send for a chair at once. With any luck there may be one up there, as several visitors arrived last night.'

While I was speaking, a lovely feeling of relief swept over me. It was then that I noticed something very odd indeed. The child had fallen on to a large patch of soggy ground moistened by the recent rains, so her clothes were soiled with a thick coating of mud; yet her father's gown showed no trace of mud, except for a few splashes near the hem and a ring of dirt where he had clasped the child to him. 'Incredible!' I whispered to myself. 'Why, he *can't* have landed on his feet!' Gazing at the rock-face before me, I reflected that a youthful athlete in full training could scarcely have made that flying descent and, by flexing his knees, landed on his feet. And yet here was a man who, however preposterous his claim to be sixty-nine, was at least well into middle age, and there was no doubt whatever that he *had* landed on his feet, and remained upright! How was it possible? Even at such a time, I could not refrain from asking him.

The Taoist neither dismissed my question as frivolous for so grave a moment, nor immediately understood its significance. In fact, he seemed astonished.

'But of course I landed upright. It had to be a single jump, as there is no foothold higher up. But why do you seem so surprised?' Suddenly he smiled through his anxiety for the child and added: 'No, no. I forgot. You do not know much about Taoists. Briefly, then, practice in running and jumping and *Balanced Harmony* of movement form one of the main "ingredients" in what the vulgar suppose to be the famous elixir of youth. I told you it wasn't anything to drink.'

While still speaking, he began to carry the child gently towards the slope. Of course, I offered to help him, but he urged me to return quickly to the monastery for a chair. So, with a shouted 'Goodbye', I

turned and ran along the path at a steady lope which brought me to the Abbot's quarters within less than an hour and a half, panting and blinded with sweat, but able to talk coherently about the need for a chair.

That evening I dined in the refectory with some new arrivals, to whom I related the story of the child's fall. My description of the Taoist's leap brought murmurs of admiration from the visitors, but none of the three or four monks present seemed much astonished. 'By the way,' I said, laying down my chopsticks and turning towards the monks,' 'how old is P'an Tao-shih?' The question produced some discussion, but there was general agreement that he must be in the neighbourhood of seventy.

'B-but that's preposterous . . . excuse me. I mean that he looks so young with his black hair and ruddy cheeks. But for the wrinkles round his eyes, he might be well under fifty.'

Several of them smiled at this, too polite to contradict, but obviously of the same opinion as before. Presently, one of the younger monks went off to the bell-tower and returned with an elderly man whom they persuaded to relate the following details.

'P'an, or Milky Way as we call him, comes from the same village as myself in the Chungshan District. When I was about ten, I used to support my widowed mother by working for a Taoist from Yunnan called the Sage of the Jade Gourd. Milky Way and another villager, who took the Taoist name of Iron Staff, both became his disciples about that time. They were already full-grown youths, almost ten years my senior. Indeed, Iron Staff, whom I knew much better, was born in the Year of the Pig, which makes him eight years my senior; and I remember that he addressed Milky Way as Elder Brother. So there is no doubt that Milky Way is well on the way to seventy, if not more; but it is some time since we met. He avoids people from his own district, and with good reason.'

'Oh, why? He seems to me a delightful person.'

'Perhaps he is so, but he has committed one great sin for which the villagers will not easily forgive him. As to his youthful appearance, that is not so strange. Taoists are mostly cheats, you know. The Sage of the Jade Stream, however, was a great wonder-worker and there is no doubt he taught Milky Way some of his secrets before he died, for Milky was always his favourite. Even among us monks there are cases of people arresting the onset of age. The Venerable Hsü Yün, for example, is over a hundred years old; yet he often walks ninety *li*

[thirty miles] in a day with less fatigue than most of the young men who follow him.'

'That is wonderful, Reverence, but you were talking of Milky Way's great sin.'

'Yes, yes. You shall hear how it came about. In our village there was a girl who was famous throughout Chungshan for her beauty. She was engaged to the son of a wealthy landowner, the marriage having been arranged by their parents while she was yet in the womb. However, just a few days before their wedding-day, her father died. Milky Way, who was among the Taoists called in to perform the obsequies, exchanged but one glance with her and the two of them were lost. Regardless of the impiety, they eloped on the very day that the Seventh Day Rite was to be performed. Aiyah, it was shameless! They say Milky Way became a layman and went to work in his uncle's medicine shop in Canton. Anyway, they disappeared under this cloud of unthinkable evil.'

'You mean, Reverence, that people were horrified at the idea of a recluse going back to lay life?'

'That? Certainly not. *That* was nothing, especially for a Taoist, for no vow of celibacy is involved. No, have you forgotten that the miserable woman, only child as she was, had deserted her honoured father's coffin for the 'joys of clouds and rain'? Aiyah, what a sin! If Milky Way were to show his face in the district, they would crack his skull open, as he well knows.'

'I see. And then?'

'And then she died.'

'Milky Way's wife? But why? How?'

'She died,' said the monk sternly, 'for having outraged Heaven and Earth by her impiety, but not at once. On the contrary, she enjoyed the best of health until after the birth of her daughter, whom you have seen—poor child. I have heard that the little girl is a real beauty like her mother. It was just after her birth that the screaming fits began.'

'Screaming fits?'

'Just so, just so. They say her screams could be heard from end to end of the street, even frightening the nuns in the Convent of Harmonious Seasons, which was a good way off, I assure you. Of course, it was her father's ghost who caused these screams. What, I ask you, could the doctors do for that? As she grew weaker, thinner, paler, fevers fed upon her body and madness consumed her mind. The doctor, some upstart from the University, spoke of consumption, as

if everybody didn't know the truth a lot better than he did. And so did *she*! Any number of people heard her babbling to the ghost, imploring mercy, screaming her useless repentance. To what end?'

'And yet,' I asked curiously, 'you say, Reverence, that the ghost allowed her a whole year of excellent health. Why?'

'I *told* you,' he answered in considerable astonishment, 'that she was expecting a baby, conceived perhaps even before the two of them fled together. Her father had been a good sort of man. Why should he wish to hurt his own grandchild? Once the child was out of her belly, he could punish her unfilial conduct with a clear conscience.'

'Yet had she been so *very* wicked? After all, she did not abandon her father until *after his death*.'

The elderly monk looked as if he were beginning to have serious doubts as to my sanity. '*After* his death? But that is just *why* the ghost and all her relatives could not forgive her. A man in his coffin has greater need of his children than a man in his bed, for the latter may still hope to procreate more. But a dead man! Did I not say he had no sons? Well, it had been arranged that her husband should take her surname and enter her family, so that their children might continue the sacrifices to her ancestors. The husband had many brothers, so his father agreed to the adoption, especially as it was one of the conditions of the marriage contract. So now do you see that Milky Way and this girl, by their unspeakable conduct, robbed the spirits of her father and her male ancestors of all hope of nourishment in the spirit world? What crime could be worse than that?'

'Reverence, is that a Buddhist tenet?'

'Why, no. Strictly speaking not. But they were not Buddhists and they believed in the necessity of maintaining the sacrifices. I sometimes wonder about such things myself and fear that they were right. That is why I have adopted the young novice you met with me in the bell-tower. He is to be my spiritual descendant and will sacrifice before my spirit tablet. It may be un-Buddhist, but is it not wiser to make sure of our welfare in the next world by adopting every means to prepare for it?'

'I suppose, yes. But tell me what happened next.'

'When the woman was dead, Milky Way wept bitterly, they say. Then he cursed himself for foolishly returning to the world, carried off his child one night and disappeared into the mountains. The next time he was seen, he had become a Taoist again, but he still takes care to avoid Chungshan, I can tell you.'

The visitors to the monastery who had been listening eagerly to the story now got up to go to their rooms. This reminded the old monk that he had neglected his bell long enough, so he bade me good night and hastened back to his tower.

In a few days, news came from Hong Kong that P'an and his daughter had gone to the Tunghua Hospital, that she was suffering from severe concussion and that he had spread his sleeping mat next to her bed in the public ward—a common enough practice in Chinese hospitals. As far as I remember, the girl made a complete recovery after hovering between life and death for several weeks or months. I never saw them again, for I feared to intrude upon them in the hospital and I had left Hong Kong for other cities long before they came out again.

My preoccupation with the Taoist lasted some time. It was no doubt largely due to reflections on the calamity suffered by a small creature so undeserving of pain that I began to take life more seriously again. The beauty and tranquillity of my surroundings could no longer hide the fact that pleasure is often but a painted screen concealing horrors which may at any time spring out and claim a victim. So my last week on the mountain was spent in meditation, during which I tried to spur myself forward to a more energetic search for the source of spiritual delights by recalling that the Wheel of Life often bears a striking resemblance to a mediaeval torture-wheel, but draped in gay hangings with the spikes and chains well hidden.

4

Ordeal by Fire and a Mummified Sage

TAHAI's face lighted with pleasure when I walked into the familiar room for the first time in several weeks; but his reception of the story about Milky Way's incredible leap was disappointingly cool.

'After all,' he exclaimed, 'even I am a better Taoist than people like that. Apart from their dreams of riding griffins which intrigue you so much, they seek only for comparatively trivial things like longevity or prolonged youth. With a lifetime of effort they gain so little. How much nobler were their ancient sages, the incomparable Chuang-tsĕ and the rest. What *they* taught was worthy to be followed. Look, I'll show you.'

He walked over to one of the tiers of bookcases lining the walls and brought out a blue cloth-covered box secured with an ivory clasp. Inside were six volumes, one of which he selected and brought to the table. It was a Soong edition and the printing alone was well worth seeing. He explained that the text was the beginning of a rhymed essay by the eleventh-century Taoist scholar, Tao Chêng of Nan Yeo, and helped me to decipher it.

'Of all the elements, the Sage should take water as his preceptor. Water is yielding but all-conquering. Water extinguishes Fire or, finding itself likely to be defeated, escapes as steam and re-forms. Water washes away soft Earth or, when confronted by rocks, seeks a way round. Water corrodes Iron till it crumbles to dust; it saturates the atmosphere so that Wind dies. Water gives way to obstacles with deceptive humility, for no power can prevent it following its destined course to the sea. Water conquers by yielding; it never attacks but always wins the last battle. The Sage who makes himself as water is distinguished for his humility; he embraces passivity, acts from non-action and conquers the world.

'This,' added Tahai, 'implies that all worth-while activity has its

root in passivity. Action in non-action. What have your Taoist friend's effords to prolong his life got to do with this lofty teaching?'

'Of course, you are right. But his delaying of old age is accomplished by natural means, isn't it?'

'Why try to accomplish it? Nature has her seasons, man his periods of spring-growth, summer-flowering, autumn-maturity and, if he has lived wisely, the snowy beauty of placid old age—man's winter. The seasons do not strive to wrest additional months from each other. Why should a Taoist in harmony with nature's rhythm seek to prolong his youth?'

I admitted that this argument was unanswerable.

'And now,' he continued, 'as you have decided to go to Canton, I must give you a letter to my relative there, Fifth Uncle. He lives in Saikwan, a suburb where the old scholar-officials of the Empire used to dwell. Their descendants are still there and some of the old customs flourish. It's just the place for you.'

A few days later I left for Canton. Fifth Uncle, who came to the station to meet me, treated me from the first as an old friend. He had once been a wealthy man and the husband of many wives; but a late-in-life conversion to Buddhism had caused him to distribute most of his wealth among his ladies and to retire alone to a smallish flat in one of the new blocks replacing the ancient buildings mutilated by Governor Sun Fo's new roads. He was a handsome man of over fifty with a small greying moustache and a face almost as pasty as Tahai's; but with better reason, for he had for twenty-five years been a heavy opium-smoker. I soon felt so much at home with him that, on the very first evening, I dared to ask him a personal question which greatly intrigued me.

'Uncle, Tahai and Six both told me that you gave up opium-smoking under very remarkable circumstances. Is it a fact that you took no medicine and relied solely on your faith in Buddhism?'

'Well, yes. But it was more than faith, you know.'

'Do, please, tell me about it.'

'All right. I suppose you are the hundredth person who has asked me, but I'm glad to tell you, as it illustrates the unlimited power of mind-control. You must understand that I had not only smoked for well over twenty years, but had reached a point where I was smoking as much as an ounce a day, which is four or five times the usual quantity. On my conversion to Buddhism, my Teacher ordered me to give it up completely, as it damages the nerves and makes the highest forms

of meditation exceedingly difficult. He soon convinced me of this and I agreed to stop at once. When my relatives heard about it, they were horrified. Nearly the whole family came to see me and told me the most lurid stories of middle-aged men dying in agony as a result of too-sudden withdrawal. Not that they were against my giving the habit up; it was just that they wanted me to act with caution and withdraw very slowly. Some suggested various Chinese medicines; others advised me to go to hospital and take a course of injections; but I was determined to stop suddenly and completely without any medicine or aids of any kind.'

'Why?'

'I felt that my long years of self-indulgence must have produced a heavy load of evil *karma* for me, and that the suffering attending rapid withdrawal might counterbalance some of it. I was also afraid that, if I took an easy way out, I might slip back into the habit; whereas, if I suffered enough, I should never allow myself to render all my suffering in vain. But, chiefly, it was because I had learnt from my Teacher that Mind is the only reality, that the power of Mind is unlimited, and that spiritual advancement gives man complete dominion over himself. I wanted to put this to the test and prove it to myself.'

'I see. Then why were your relatives so disturbed?'

'They believed that the pains of sudden withdrawal are more than flesh and blood can stand. And so they are, to one who has not marshalled the forces of the spirit. Constant shivering, mucous pouring from eyes and nose, diarrhoea, terrible nervous tension and nervous pain are only some of the symptoms; they have often resulted in death for old and heavy smokers like myself.'

'And did you suffer all these?'

'Only to a limited extent. Of course, I became very weak, so weak that I could scarcely totter across the room. My limbs trembled so much that I could hardly carry food to my mouth and my face grew so bloodless that I dared not look in the glass, fearing to mistake my reflection for the ghost of one already dead. But I succeeded. Day after day, I spent long hours in my shrine-room, emerging only for meals—I developed a voracious appetite—and to go to bed, though sleep eluded me for months. Whenever the pain seemed about to become unbearable, I forced myself into deep meditation, withdrawing into my spirit so far that I grew oblivious of my surroundings and felt my pain-wracked body to be nothing more than a shell which hardly

belonged to me. My Teacher came often to encourage me. He advised me to recall as vividly as possible the intense sufferings the Lord Buddha underwent in his determination to gain Enlightenment. That was a great help. There were times when I came very near to death. If I had not been able to withdraw into the spirit, I must surely have died. As it was, I became so adept at withdrawal that I believe you could have stuck pins into me or burnt my arm with a lighted cigarette without my being conscious of more than a slight pain. So, in the end, thanks to the example of the Lord Buddha and the encouragement of my Teacher, I conquered. The experience was invaluable to me, demonstrating better than anything else could have done that my Teacher was absolutely right in declaring that Mind or Spirit is the only reality and that neither flesh nor any other form of matter can stand against it.'

'And now, Uncle, do you never feel a craving to go back to opium-smoking? People say that it is so soothing that once the habit is acquired the longing remains forever.'

Fifth Uncle roared with laughter. 'Do you know,' he said, 'when opium-smoking friends of mine visit me, I can even lie with them on that blackwood couch over there and prepare their pipes for them without the slightest twinge of desire for something which, in the old days, I desired so desperately that I would have committed crimes rather than go without it. I know only too well that opium is like those tantalizing women who tempted the Buddha just before his Enlightenment. Their forms were of heavenly beauty, but in fact they were loathsome devils of horrid aspect transformed to lure him to destruction. How well I know that! Nothing will ever induce me to smoke again.'

I congratulated him, adding that to a very small extent I could realize how his victory had been won. Then I rolled up my left shirt-sleeve and showed him twelve scars neatly spaced in ranks of three. He understood at once, but asked me to tell him all the details.

Some months before, when I was still living in Hong Kong, a Zen Master had arrived from the distant province of Yunnan. Tahai and many of my friends often went to listen to him preach. One day, he informed us that he was about to hold a ceremony, during which a number of lay disciples would take certain vows, more difficult to observe than the ordinary rules of harmlessness, honesty, continence, truthfulness and abstinence usually enjoined on laymen, but less so

than the vows observed by monks. Some of my friends had urged me to take these vows and I, full of enthusiasm and far too ignorant of my own weakness to realize that I could not possibly keep them all, had allowed myself to be persuaded without much difficulty. In a way it was madness, for many of the vows lay shattered within half a year; but at least I did learn something of the power of Mind.

During the long ceremony, the postulants, including myself, had to kneel before the altar. The pain in my legs grew excruciating; there were moments when I could hardly bear it. Only the fear of admitting defeat in front of an audience of some thirty or more people enabled me to stay where I was, compromising just to the extent of sitting back on my heels for brief periods. At last the order to get to our feet was given and, though the really painful part of the ceremony was yet to come, I felt that it could not be worse than what I had already endured. The Zen Master next produced a little pot of some sticky substance and, ordering us to roll back the sleeves of our white robes, as though for an inoculation, smeared the left arm of each postulant with it, spreading it from wrist to elbow on the inside surface of the fore-arm. After that, he produced some inch-long sections of joss-stick and affixed twelve of them to each postulant's arm in a symmetrical pattern consisting of four rows of three. The incense sticks were then lighted and we began to circumambulate the altar, intoning a Chinese formula which means:

> Homage to the First of Teachers, Sage of the
> Shakyas, the Buddha.

As we marched round the altar, the incense-sticks on our outstretched arms burnt slowly towards the flesh. The chant was taken up by everybody attending the ceremony, each of whom concentrated with all the strength of his mind upon the form of the Buddha. Thus, the mind-force of Zen Master, postulants and congregation was simultaneously focused on a single point. When at last the fire touched the skin and began to burn into the flesh, the mind was not allowed to attend to the pain even for a moment. If, in spite of this, some pain made itself felt, we concentrated all the harder; so that, although the actual burning of the flesh occupied about five minutes, none of us was conscious of more than a vague sensation of discomfort. Yet, when the ceremony was over and concentration ceased, the pain was intense, for the burns were serious enough to produce lifelong scars and took many days to heal. I am not at all sure that the Buddha would have approved

of this practice, as he was against all such extremes of mortification as starvation or mutilation; but there is no doubt that we did learn a valuable lesson in the power of a fully concentrated mind, a lesson which has since stood me in good stead; whenever I am bound to suffer pain, I practise mental withdrawal with fairly helpful results.

Fifth Uncle listened to this story with great attention and expressed himself pleased that I had had an experience which enabled me to understand something of the method he had used to conquer not only pain, but actual illness. A little later, he suggested that we go to bed, as he wished us to get up very early the next morning so that he could introduce me to the pleasures of a Cantonese tea-house.

Like most inhabitants of the Saikwan suburb, Uncle liked to begin the day in a typically Cantonese way, except that he got up even earlier than most people in order to spend the first hour of the day in silent meditation before his household altar. This duty performed, he used to take me to the tea-house he generally patronized, where we often stayed for as much as two hours. It was not one of the most famous tea-houses, for Uncle, like Tahai and most of the stricter Buddhists among my friends, was a vegetarian; he regarded the eating of animal foods as little better than slaughtering animals with his own hands. Fortunately, there were many restaurants and tea-houses catering especially to permanent vegetarians and to those Buddhists who had evolved a typical Chinese compromise by restricting their vegetarianism to certain days in the lunar month. When I asked the point of this, Uncle explained that many people find vegetarianism too difficult to combine with the innumerable social duties of officials and business men, so they limit their vegetarian days to four, eight or fifteen in the month, arguing that as thousands of people do the same the total number of animals slaughtered is considerably reduced.

The tea-house where we breakfasted was in most repects like any other. Furnished with square, blackwood tables and stools inset with grained marble from the Tali quarries, the rooms were crowded with animated groups of officials, merchants, shopkeepers and students, who came and went any time between shortly after sunrise and noon. As soon as we were seated, an attendant would hurry over and ask what tea we preferred.

'Black Dragon,' Uncle would answer, or perhaps, 'Water Fairy' or 'Six Tranquillities' or 'Fragrant Morsels'. If the weather were unusually hot, we might choose a sugared infusion of chrysanthemum petals instead of tea.

A handful of dried tea-leaves would be set before each of us in a lidded bowl, to be filled and refilled half a dozen times with boiling water descending in an arc from the long spouts of gigantic brass kettles carried by half-naked men. Boys or, more rarely, prettily dressed girls would circle in and out among the guests with heavy trays suspended from their necks. On each tray would be laid twenty or thirty saucers containing hot delicacies of different sorts, from which the tea-drinkers could take their choice. The skill of the vegetarian cooks never ceased to amaze me. There would be spiced dumplings of several kinds, pancake-rolls stuffed with minced 'pork' and bamboo-shoots, 'prawn'-patties, spiced 'meats', 'shrimps' folded in steamed rice-flour, 'crabmeat' tartlets, minced 'lobster' rolls, slices of roast 'duck', jellies, cakes, pies and many other things hard to recognize or describe. Every one of the 'flesh'-foods was compounded of purely vegetarian ingredients, in which variously treated beancurd played the chief rôle. In taste, texture and consistency, as well as in appearance, they so closely resembled the foods they imitated that most of them might easily lead a newcomer to suppose they were exactly what they appeared to be. I know of no other city in the world, except Hong Kong, where this particular skill has attained so closely to perfection.

Eating and drinking were by no means the only reasons for our daily visits to the tea-house. Like most other Cantonese, we went there to meet our friends, for nearly everybody sticks to the same house day after day. A very leisurely conversation ensues, during which people sip at their tea or peck at the food so sparingly that the intermittent repast is prolonged for as long as they care to stay. In fact, the tea-house resembled a gentleman's club more than a restaurant, for few women are ever seen there and many of the patrons go to enjoy the company of their friends in surroundings where wives and daughters seldom penetrate.

One morning, when enough time had elapsed to enable me to grow fairly intimate with some of Uncle's friends, the conversation turned upon marriage. We happened to be talking in English, which Uncle spoke almost as well as his native Cantonese.

'John,' said Ah Fei (Fatty), who was one of Uncle's countless cousins or nephews: 'You nearly twenty-three now. How come you still not marry?'

'Twenty-three doesn't seem like hoary old age to me.'

'John, you Englishmen have no sense. Grow up big and not marry

is no good for you. What you do? You go Flower-House sometimes? Or you prefer Flower-Boats on Pearl River?'

I told him I had never been to either and the subject was dropped, for I was blushing uncomfortably. But that afternoon Uncle reopened the subject. Some students who came to the house every morning for English lessons had just left. Uncle and I were gossiping while waiting for a friend who was to take us out to lunch.

'Why don't you get married, John?'

'Good heavens, Uncle, I don't feel the slightest desire at present. I'm much too young. I have no money, except what I get from my students—just enough to live on. And I don't want to tie myself down.'

'But do you think chastity is good for you at your age?'

'Uncle, I'm surprised! I thought that you, once a much-married man, had discovered that chastity is by far the best. Besides, doesn't Buddhism enjoin chastity as a necessary preliminary to progress in meditation?'

'As a man of over fifty, I naturally find it a relief to be on my own. My wives were always bickering and causing trouble to themselves and other people. But at *your* age! That's quite different. Yes, Buddhism enjoins chastity on adepts for the truly spiritual life—monks and very strict laymen. All the same, it can do you more harm than good. Of course, if you find it easy, there's no more to be said. If so, you are born with a wonderful advantage over others. Most young men who keep themselves strictly chaste find themselves visited by sexual fantasies and torturing longings which are much worse for them than occasional visits to the Flower-Houses, while marriage is far better still. The Buddhist precept on the subject is chiefly concerned with the avoidance of physical relationships with unsuitable persons—virgins, other people's wives and so on; or with anyone who might suffer or cause another to suffer as a result. Perfect chastity is dangerous, unless you have really mastered such longings. Buddhism does not enjoin enforced chastity, which is the road to madness, but the gradual mastery of desire. From the time when longings first possessed me to the time when I outgrew them, I lived unchastely for thirty-five years. That was far too long, of course. It was due to my ignorance of Buddhism and Buddhist methods of thought control. All the same, I fear you have a long and uphill fight before you. That is why I wish you would consider getting married. Of course, it is your own affair entirely, but do accept this friendly warning from one Buddhist to

another—*The conquest of Desire's modes of expression is worthless until you have conquered Desire itself.* To enforce chastity upon yourself is insufficient and exceedingly dangerous besides. You must aim at so mastering your desires that they have no power to torment you. This, unless you are a budding Bodhisattva, will take you so long that it is far, far better for you to get married in the meantime.'

I thanked Uncle from my heart for his very genuine concern for me, but told him that I loved freedom to roam at will too much to take his advice in the near future. Privately I reflected that I could not marry during my father's lifetime. I had hurt him enough already. My marriage to a Chinese girl would grieve him too much; marriage to an English girl would make my chosen mode of living well nigh impossible.

. . . . .

After living with Uncle for a few months and continuing my lessons to private students, I felt a great urge to travel again, if only for a few days. I had just been reading the Sutra of Hui Nêng (Wei Lang) which relates how a reputedly illiterate man became Sixth Patriarch of the Zen Sect well over a thousand years ago. Another monk had composed a poem comparing an enlightened mind to a bright mirror on which no dust (illusion) can collect. On having this read to him, Hui Nêng replied with another poem in which he declared that the 'mirror' has no existence and asked whereon such dust can collect. In this way he expressed his intuitive understanding of the voidness of all phenomena, including both illusions and the separate minds of individuals. This expression of enlightened understanding of Zen's deepest truth won for him the Fifth Patriarch's symbolical robe and bowl. After his death all those centuries ago, his body had miraculously resisted decay and, according to widespread belief, was still to be seen at the Nan Hua Monastery in North Kwangtung.

The train journey northwards lasted only a few hours. The endless vista of rice-fields and terraced hills was dotted with those triumphal archways of stone which used to be erected in honour of virtuous and faithful widows. Little change occurred in the scenery except that the black clothes characteristic of Cantonese peasants gradually gave way to the bright blues nearly universal among countryfolk in other parts of China. This change, trivial in itself, gave me a pleasant sensation of

breaking new ground. As the train clanked into Hsiaokuan well before dark, I decided to continue my journey at once. So I walked back along the line to the village of Ma Ba and there turned aside into some low hills, among which the monastery lay hidden. Walking warily along the causeway of granite slabs, some of which were loose, I stopped now and then to enjoy the calm rural scene—huge wooden water-wheels manned by families of peasants who propelled them by energetically stamping their feet treadmill fashion to draw up the water from the lower fields to the higher; groves of fruit-trees encircling small villages with walls of yellow mud and curving grey-tiled roofs; peasants squelching through the mud of their waterlogged fields; ill-favoured yellow dogs, thin and bad-tempered; buffaloes armoured against the sun with a thick coating of wet mud, some with children perched on their broad backs; other children bathing naked in the stream. In my ears was the squeaking of the water-wheels and the tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk of millions of cicadas. When the monastery came in sight, I saw that it blended wonderfully with these surroundings. Its buildings, fronted by a squat pagoda, looked immensely old and their whole atmosphere was one of rustic simplicity, for the walls were faded and weathered until their colour hardly differed from the brown of the hillside beyond.

The present Abbot was no other than the Venerable Hsü Yün, who was believed to be well over a hundred years old, though still able to walk as much as thirty miles a day. He was renowned all over China as the greatest living Master of Zen; so I was delighted to hear the unexpected news that he had just returned after an absence of several months spent in a distant province. Not long after my arrival, I excitedly followed the Reverend Receiver of Guests to pay my respects to this almost mythical personage. I beheld a middle-sized man with a short, wispy beard and remarkably penetrating eyes. He was not precisely youthful-looking as I had been led to expect, but had one of those ageless faces not uncommon in China. Nobody could have guessed that he was already a centenarian. Finding myself in his presence, I became virtually tongue-tied and had to rack my brains for something to say, although there was so much that I could profitably have asked him. At last, I managed to ask:

'Is this famous monastery *purely* Zen, Your Reverence?'

'Oh yes,' he answered in a surprisingly vigorous voice. 'It is a great centre of Zen.'

'So you do not worship Amida Buddha or keep his statue here?'

The question seemed to puzzle him, for he took some time to reply.

'But certainly we keep his statue here. Every morning and evening we perform rites before it and repeat the sacred name while circumambulating the altar.'

'Then the monastery is not *purely* Zen,' I persisted, puzzled in my turn.

'Why not? It is like every other Zen monastery in China. Why should it be different? Hundreds of years ago there were many sects, but the teachings have long been synthesized—which is as it should be. If by Zen you mean the practice of Zen meditation, why, that is the very essence of Buddhism. It leads to a direct perception of Reality in *this* life, enabling us to transcend duality and go straight to the One Mind. This One Mind, otherwise known as our Original Nature, belongs to everybody and everything. But the method is very hard—hard even for those who practise it night and day for years on end. How many people are prepared or even able to do that? The monastery also has to serve the needs of simple people, illiterate people. How many of them would understand if we taught only the highest method? I speak of the farmers on our own land here and of the simple pilgrims who come for the great annual festivals. To them we offer that other way—repetition of the sacred name—which is yet the same way adapted for simple minds. They believe that by such repetition they will gain the Western Paradise and there receive divine teaching from Amida Buddha himself—teaching which will lead them directly to *Nirvana*.'

At once reluctantly and somewhat daringly I answered: 'I see. But isn't that a kind of—well, a sort of—of—er—deception? Good, no doubt, but——'

I broke off, not so much in confusion as because the Venerable Hsü Yün was roaring with laughter.

'Deception? Deception? Ha, ha, ha, ha-ha! Not at all. Not a bit. No, of course not.'

'Then, Your Reverence, if you too believe in the Western Heaven and so on, why do you trouble to teach the much harder road to Zen?'

I do not understand the distinction you are making. They are identical.'

'But——'

'Listen, Mr P'u. Zen manifests self-strength; Amidism manifests

other-strength. You rely on your own efforts, or you rely on the saving power of Amida. Is that right?'

'Yes. But they are—I mean, they seem—entirely different from each other.'

I became aware that some of the other monks were beginning to look at me coldly, as though I were showing unpardonable rudeness in pertinaciously arguing with this renowned scholar and saint; but the Master, who was quite unperturbed, seemed to be enjoying himself.

'Why insist so much on this difference?' he asked. 'You know that in reality there is nought but the One Mind. You may choose to regard it as *in* you or *out* of you, but "in" and "out" have no ultimate significance whatever—just as you, Mr P'u, and I and Amida Buddha have no *real* separateness. In ordinary life, self is self and other is other; in reality they are the same. Take Bodhidharma who sat for nine years in front of a blank wall. What did he contemplate? What did he see? Nothing but his Original Self, the true Self beyond duality. Thus he saw Reality face to face. He was thereby freed from the Wheel and entered *Nirvana*, never to be reborn—unless voluntarily as a Bodhisattva.'

'Yet, Reverence, I do not think that Bodhidharma spoke of Amida. Or am I wrong?'

'True, true. He did not. But when Farmer Wang comes to me for teaching, am I to speak to him of his Original Self or of Reality and so on? What do such terms mean to him? Morning and evening, he repeats the sacred name, concentrating on it until he grows oblivious of all else. Even in the fields, as he stoops to tend the rice, he repeats the name. In time, after a month, a year, a decade, a lifetime or several lifetimes, he achieves such a state of perfect concentration that duality is transcended and he, too, comes face to face with Reality. He calls the power by which he hopes to achieve this Amida; you call it Zen; I may call it Original Mind. What is the difference? The power he thought was outside himself was inside all the time.'

Deeply struck by this argument and anxious, perhaps, to display my acquaintance with the Zen way of putting things, I exclaimed:

'I see, I see. Bodhidharma entered the shrine-room from the sitting-room. Farmer Wang entered it through the kitchen, but they both arrived at the same place. I see.'

'No,' answered the Zen Master, 'you do not see. They didn't

arrive at any place. They just discovered that there is no place for them to reach.'

This reply made me feel proud of myself. It seemed I *had* grasped the point correctly, for the Master had condescended to answer with one of those Zen paradoxes which force the hearer into even deeper understanding. His broad smile was enough to show that he was really satisfied with my reply.

'After all,' I added complacently, 'it's all a matter of *words*.'

Instead of nodding approvingly, the Venerable Hsü Yün turned away from me suddenly and began speaking on quite a different subject to one of his disciples. His withdrawal was so pointed that, for a moment, I felt hurt as by a harsh snub. Then I saw the point and almost laughed aloud. 'Of course that's it,' I said to myself. 'The significance of that turning away is as clear as clear can be. It means, "On the contrary, it is all a matter of no words—*silence*." Of course that was it.' I prostrated myself and walked out to find the room allotted to me for the night.

To my disappointment, the Venerable Hsü Yün left again before dawn the next morning. His favourite residence was a monastery much farther from the railway and thither he was returning for the first time in more than a year, so on that occasion I did not see more of him. I could not follow him as I had promised my students to be back within a few days. However, there was still the 'true body of the Sixth Patriarch' to be visited.

The remains of the Sixth Patriarch comprised a seated figure ensconsed upon a throne in a curtained shrine, which had to be specially opened up for my inspection. Was it a fake or a marvel, or just a clotheless mummy? I still cannot feel absolutely sure. To begin with, the body was nearly black. Had it been lacquered to preserve it against insects or to conceal a pious fraud, or was black the natural colour for a thousand-year-old body? It was impossible to say. Observing the details as closely as the dim light permitted, I lingered on the contours where the bones protruded through the thin flesh, looking for the principal veins and arteries. How to decide if it were genuine? Too full-fleshed for an ordinary mummy, its contours and proportions could not have been the work of a sculptor with less than extraordinary powers. And yet and yet? A human body well over a thousand years old? Incredible! I expressed my doubts as diffidently as possible to the monk in charge of the shrine.

'We have proof,' he gabbled, speaking with glibness of one long

used to similar doubts and questions. 'This body was placed here within the lifetime of many who had known the Sixth Patriarch well, his close friends and disciples. Surely *they* would have detected any fraud? Had they not watched him die? Since then it has always been here—unchanged, unchanging. The many literary references to it during successive dynasties make no mention of its being tampered with or changed. If the original body had been removed at some period, however distant, and this one substituted for it, the local people would have seen what was happening and the story would have spread. The Imperial Authorities would have investigated and there would certainly be a record of the investigation. Yet there is none. So in our opinion the body is unquestionably genuine, say what you will.'

I admitted the force of this reasoning and peered again at the seated figure. On the whole, I was now more inclined to believe than to doubt; but I cannot discount the possibility that this was what the psychologists term wishful thinking, for I love to believe in the existence of the extraordinary. Yet, if the statue were the work of a sculptor, he must have been a man of genius, one who could scarcely have remained unknown to his contemporaries or have been able to sneak secretly into Nan Hua, there to remain at work for months on end, without the secret's leaking out. Despite all arguments to the contrary and in spite of the strange lacquered appearance of the body, I found it easier to believe in its genuineness than to reach an alternative explanation able to hold water. It is only now, after a lapse of more than twenty years, that fresh doubts have arisen in my mind. Moreover, my doubts are of a purely negative character, as I still cannot conceive how a fraud could have been perpetrated.

During the whole of the return journey to Canton, I was preoccupied with this marvel and anxious to discuss it with Fifth Uncle. Uncle, though a profoundly religious man, was by no means credulous; his judgements were generally sound. So I was encouraged in my belief when he expressed the conviction that the figure of Hui Nêng is an authentic corpse and certainly no fraud.

'Well, Uncle,' I said to him, 'Hui Nêng's body is truly something of a miracle. All the same, however much its incorruptibility signifies the power of spirit over matter, I feel that your own success in conquering a deeply rooted opium habit solely by spiritual means is the greater miracle of the two; it makes the power of mind over matter seem as real to me as the statement that twice two is four.'

If Uncle was pleased with this sincere compliment, his modesty

prevented him from doing more than smile gently before carrying the conversation back to my recent trip. When I told him of all Hsü Yün had said to me, he laughed and answered:

'Fancy going all that way to see a great sage in a distant part of the province only to ask him things that Tahai or I could easily have explained to you ourselves! What a pity you did not ask him something really valuable.'

5

The Possessed and a Bath

AT THE time of my arrival in Peking about a year later, it was still unique among the great cities of the world in its reluctance to break with the past. Enclaves of but slightly tarnished and bedraggled splendour still glittered amidst a network of grey brick walls lining silent lanes ankle-deep in yellow dust. Its massive ramparts sternly overshadowed multicoloured lacquer pavilions of gossamer fragility. The geometric precision of ground-plan, which had been minutely ordered in conformance with the points of the compass, was cunningly combined with dream-like fantasy of such a kind that I should not have been over-surprised to come upon dragons and phoenixes gambolling in the parks. The city's effect on me was first to evoke and then forever to obliterate the charming willow-patterned Cathay of my childhood imaginings, for even the prettiest willow-pattern scene could not do it justice.

Sheltered by walls like battlemented cliffs, entered through brobdignagian gateways tunnelled beneath tiers of upward sweeping roofs, its beauty often enhanced by deep blue cloudless skies, it offered enchantments ranging from the delicate and exquisite to the ponderous and grandly austere. I could never decide when the sprawling palace gardens adjoining the Forbidden City looked their best. In winter, I loved to gaze at the thick-piled snow following the contours of the curling roofs and bending down the branches of pine-trees planted when the Manchu Dynasty was still young. In summer, the blue-green water of moat and lake lay hidden beneath floating masses of tangled lotus, and the lake's guardian willows bowed to the water's edge like courtiers confronted by a painted barge bearing its twittering burden of imperial consorts and palace beauties. The dwellings of the well-to-do, though turning blank, enigmatic faces to the public lanes, flaunted scarlet and green lattices towards hidden courtyards adorned with all manner of charming conceits including miniature ranges of

fantastically contoured mountains. Here, according to season, were such delectable sights as twenty or thirty varieties of chrysanthemum in porcelain tubs, or the waxy pink and white of massed fruit-blossom—peach, crab apple, cherry or plum. In summer, people on the hill-tops within the palace gardens looked down upon an enchanted forest, the roofs of the low, sprawling houses now hard to discern beneath the massed foliage of the courtyard trees.

From the first, my senses were so dazzled as to banish all my resolutions to seek what lies behind the façade of the sensual world. If I still cared to visit temples, it was because Peking's temples are no less lovely than her palaces. Until the fever of exploring the city's principal sights had subsided, I begrudged even the few morning hours devoted to earning enough money to enjoy the rest of my time. Only gradually did I come to understand that my students were as much a part of Peking as the palaces and gardens, even if their inherited mellowness was melting in the fires kindled by 'new-style' studies in school and university. Students and foreigners apart, Peking still belonged more to the past than I could have imagined possible. My only disappointment was the impossibility of finding anyone to take the place of Tahai and Fifth Uncle. Pekingese friendship matures slowly; no private doors would be thrown open to me until enough time had elapsed for the gradual growth of trust and affection. My earlier intercourse with the cautious Northerners was limited to smiling acquaintanceship, warmed by hospitality offered only in public places of amusement such as restaurants or the picturesque tea-houses scattered about the palace gardens. I soon became lonely enough to seek out Western friends; especially as, since Peking holds so little attraction for the money-minded Western 'taipans' of the treaty ports, the European and American inhabitants were generally people of great charm who, in varying degrees, shared my enthusiasm for the lovely city. They included painters, sculptors, more writers or would-be writers than I could count, and even some serious scholars.

To enjoy Peking to the full, I tried to make myself as much like a Chinese as possible. A Chinese without family life, family responsibilities and connections seemed unimaginable, so I chose the rôle of a Cantonese visitor. The easiest part of this transformation was the adoption of local costume, which soon ceased to feel like dressing up. For example, in winter I found it far easier to bear the intense cold that way. I wore jacket and trousers of dark blue silk thickly wadded with silk floss, a long fleece-lined robe of similar material and a black

fur hat. In summer, my garments, cut in much the same way, were of very thin silk, either white or pale duck-egg green. Like many of the Chinese themselves, I wore European clothes in the spring and autumn when light woollen cloth just suits the climate. A whole wardrobe of Chinese garments with colours appropriate to the four seasons was beyond my means, besides being ostentatiously old-fashioned.

I soon became sensitive to seasonal changes, for they occurred with such precise regularity that the detailed sartorial instructions printed on the traditional Chinese lunar calendars were appropriate almost to the very day. Moreover, each season used to have its appropriate range of colours for garments, its special subjects for painted wall-scrolls, its proper flowers and its own traditional pastimes. In spring, the poetically inclined, especially old gentlemen, would go boating on the lakes, there to compose poems eulogizing the first green shoots to cling to the bare branches of the willow-trees. Summer was the time to stay at home, taking the air in a courtyard temporarily roofed over with matting supported on long poles, inscribing paper fans with flowing caligraphy or just listening to the rain dripping from the roof. In some houses, jars of different sizes would be placed under the eaves so that the rain-drops slithering from the roof would produce a range of musical notes as they plopped into the water. This was also the time to sip very pale green 'Dragon's Well' tea, as it is said to be 'cooling'. Later in the summer, people from miles round came into the city to admire the giant peonies—once symbols of imperial glory—still growing in the palace gardens. Autumn was the season for gazing at the moon or for a trip to the Western Hills to enjoy the gay reds and yellows, gold and orange of the withering leaves. In winter, the lakes were crowded with skaters who warmed themselves with hot spiced dumplings in the surrounding tea-houses—once the pleasure pavilions of the imperial consorts and their *entourage*. Elderly people clad in heavy furs would totter forth to admire the snow and to find inspiration for the concluding seasonal poems of the year.

For the better enjoyment of these things it was essential to have the right kind of house. I found a modest place in the West City guarded by gates of chipped and faded scarlet lacquer. Its single courtyard had rooms on three sides and a high wall framing the gateway on the fourth. It was flagged with mossy stones and contained a pair of weathered plum-trees too ancient to do more than just play at blossoming in snowy February. The central room facing due south was

by tradition the main living-room or guest-hall; that to the east was my bedroom; the western wing contained a tiny kitchen, a storeroom and a dark, cosy servants' bedroom. Both bedrooms were equipped with a *k'ang*—a wide, brick sleeping platform heated by hot air carried in pipes from a small furnace at one end. The furniture was sparse and very plain—solid wooden chairs, tables and cupboards, attractive because of their severe lines and spartan lack of ornamentation. It was the house of a man less than well-to-do, costing less than sixteen Chinese dollars (one pound) a month and admirably suited to my comparative poverty. My servants were a married couple—diminutive, silent and, if left to do things in their own way, gently efficient; silent, that is, except on occasions when Lao Chao offended his wife and was chased round the courtyard by an irate Chao Ma clasping a broomstick in her chubby hands and wielding it like a two-handed sword.

Within a month of settling down, I accepted a part-time post at one of the universities to augment the income I received from private students. My lecture hours left me free at week-ends and during most afternoons as well. One Sunday morning during my first term, I was disturbed at breakfast by the sound of Lao Chao's voice raised in angry protest. This was so unusual that I hurried across the courtyard to see what was happening just outside the gate. I found the diminutive Chao exerting all his strength to close the gate upon a huge Mongol clad in the shabby remnants of splendid, colourful clothes. The visitor's face was set in an expression of regal indignation and I quickly formed the impression that this was no ordinary man.

'Why don't you allow him to come in?' I asked.

'But, Laoyeh, this man is a common beggar,' answered Lao Chao in surprise.

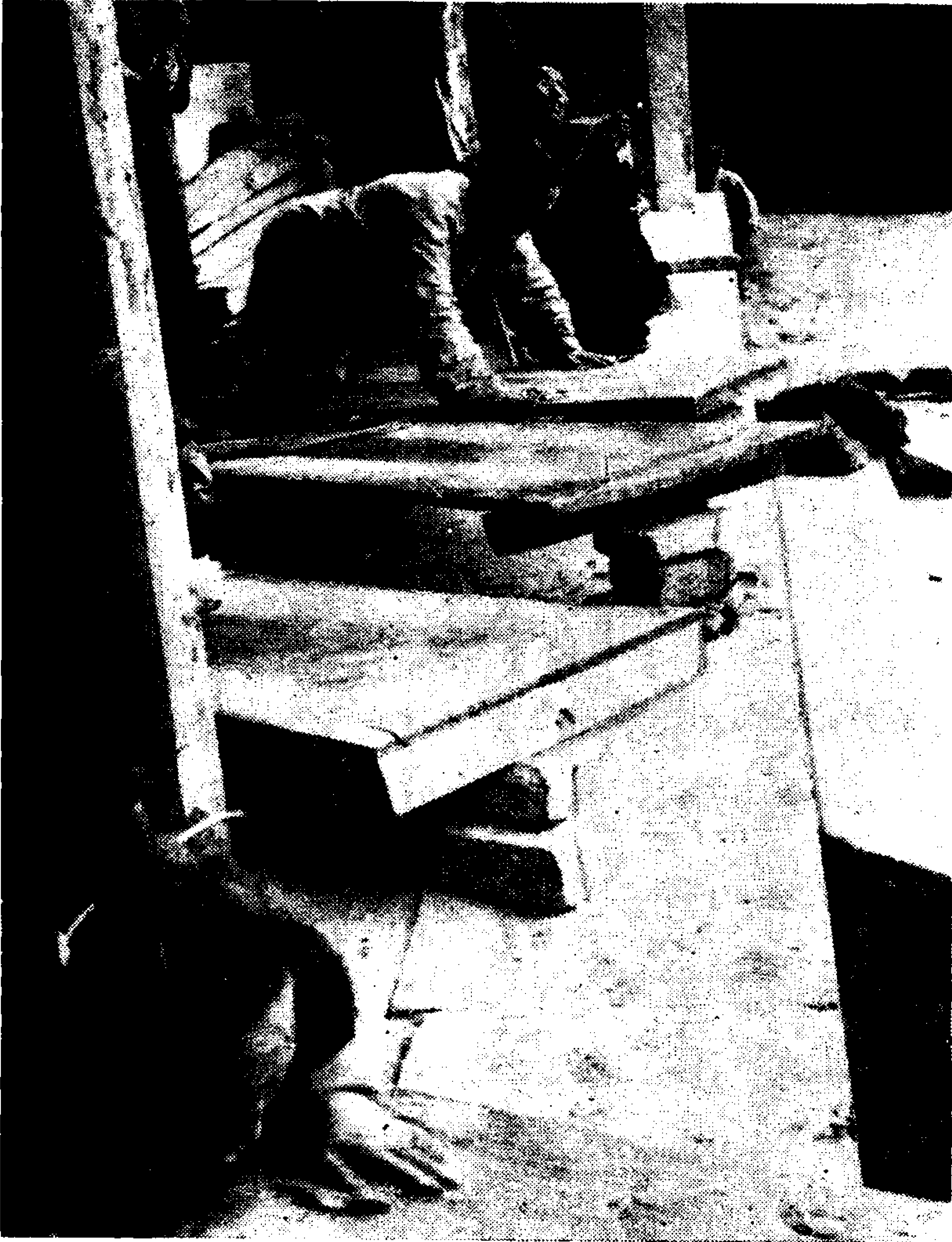
I examined the dress and features of the shabby giant, growing more and more certain that there was something about him which indicated that he was a man who would repay further study, something intriguing but hard to name.

'Please come in,' I said to him quietly. This caused Lao Chao to stand aside, his face suddenly grown sphinx-like, as though he were masking a desire to protest. The Mongol swaggered past him, but greeted me with an elaborate bow. I ushered him across to my little 'guest-hall' where he repeated his bow and sat down on a chair just inside the door. Obviously he knew all about Chinese modes of politeness and it soon appeared that he spoke Chinese fluently.

'I have come from the sacred mountain, Wu T'ai Shan, to collect

The abbot who ministered to the author on the return journey

'Old Manchuria'



The boards for performing ceremonial prostrations, Wu T'ai Shan

Mongol pilgrims, Wu T'ai Shan

money for a temple we are building there. Your servant seemed to think that I am collecting money for my personal use, but of course . . .'

From a deep fold in his gown just where it protruded over his Mongol sash, he drew forth a booklet of beautifully printed receipt-forms with Mongol, Tibetan and Chinese characters printed side by side. This he placed before me with a smile and continued to explain.

'Indeed, many people here have treated me like a beggar, turning me away from their doors. But what to do?' He pointed to his torn and travel-stained silk robe. 'I have walked from Wu T'ai by a very circuitous route taking three months upon the way.'

We chatted for a while and I heard some details about the new temple. Everything seemed in order. I had not the slightest doubt that his claim to be collecting money for the temple fund was genuine. My guest, despite his enormous bulk, seemed a person of some refinement and integrity. The state of his clothes could be attributed partly to the effects of his long journey and partly to the curious Mongol habit of wearing very fine silk clothes day in and day out, and even sleeping in them, without making the smallest attempt to keep them spruce and clean. Cleanliness just is not a Mongol virtue. Mongols are godly in other ways. Why, I even knew one of them who, after a meal, calmly wiped his soiled chopsticks on a splendidly brocaded and relatively clean silk gown!

Presently, by design or by chance, we reached the subject of what is in the West generally referred to as Shamanism, which I take to mean divination by means of a spirit deliberately invited by a medium to take possession of his body. I was more interested than surprised when my visitor claimed that he, himself, was an experienced 'shaman' and that he was quite willing to offer me a demonstration of his powers. The upshot of our conversation was that I agreed to pay him a visit in the Yung Huo Kung, or Lama Temple, on the following evening, where I could be sure of a fully convincing demonstration of spirit-possession. As soon as he had taken leave, carrying away a suitable contribution towards the new temple, Lao Chao attempted to scold me for my 'folly'; but I was so short with him that he backed away crest-fallen.

On the Monday evening, I went by rickshaw to the North City and alighted at the gate of Peking's largest and most dilapidated temple. Several hundred years before it had been a Manchu palace, but ever since the Emperor Kanghsi, a child born within its walls, had come to occupy the Dragon Throne, it had been impermissible to use it for any

purpose but the service of an even higher being—in this case, the Buddha, who is represented in the principal Hall of Worship by a gigantic image. Several thousand lamas still inhabited it, but the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1911 had brought an end to the munificent donations made regularly by the Imperial House, so that its unparalleled grandeur was now in a sad state of decay.

A small boy who was waiting for me at the gate guided me past the great halls of ceremony and into a labyrinth of narrow streets still within the vast, walled compound, where the resident lamas had their individual living quarters. I was led into a tiny cell, unfurnished except for a *k'ang* covered with colourful Tibetan carpets and for the low, lacquered table placed in the centre of the *k'ang*. To one side of this table sat the huge Mongol, crosslegged and facing the door. He invited me to be seated on the other side and to take a cup of buttered tea with him. Meanwhile, he turned to light incense in a burner placed among the silver butter-lamps on the wall-shrine behind him and, at that moment, an old fellow with a drum entered and seated himself on a small stool which the child had set down just inside the doorway. There was no light in the cell apart from the fitful gleam of the butter-lamps on the altar, so the walls and ceiling seemed alive with shadows. The Mongol, who had gestured to me to be seated and handed me my tea in silence, volunteered no explanation of what was about to follow. I sensed that questions would not be welcome, so I composed myself to silence and awaited his pleasure.

Presently the little boy came back with a pair of cymbals, whereupon the elderly drummer started to thwack a wild rhythm upon his drum and the cymbals clashed in unison. The Mongol had closed his eyes and begun to gabble mystic formulas in a deep bass voice, not at all like the mellow tones of his conversation. After five or ten minutes, the gabbling ceased and the Mongol's lips were still, but the music of drum and cymbals seemed to be working up to a crescendo. By the time they reached the tremendous crash which ushered in dead silence, the Mongol had fallen into a deep trance. His lips had slackened and a thin stream of saliva ran down his chin. The altar lamps were quite bright, but as they were behind him his face was entirely in shadow; so it may have been only my imagination which made me feel he had undergone a remarkable facial change—nothing so startling as a Jekyll-Hyde transformation, but enough to create the impression that a younger, stronger and more vigorous, *leaner* man had taken his place. The enormous dimensions of his body remained as before, except that

—again, it may have been my fancy—the great stomach looked much thinner under the loose robe. I was already feeling the first pricking of fear.

Suddenly the whole body trembled with horrid violence and the face tightened into an angry grimace. Until later, when I had had time to reason about the whole occurrence, I felt absolutely convinced that the figure seated next to me was that of a stranger who had not been there when I entered the room! I cannot remember ever having experienced a sensation of greater horror.

Crash! The brass tea-kettle on the low table between us was sent flying on to the *k'ang* and thence to the ground by a sudden outward sweeping movement of his left arm. I started back in fear and cowered against the wall to my left, but the drummer and the little boy sat quite motionless and apparently calm. It was impossible for me to regain anything remotely resembling calm, for I was convinced by then that I was either in the hands of a dangerous trickster or, more likely, in the presence of an unknown spirit manifested in the Mongol's flesh! Both of these ideas were extremely unpleasant, so much so that I had an impulse to flee. Perhaps I should not have been able to restrain myself had I not feared to trust myself to the dark, narrow lanes outside without a guide. Somehow I remained seated on the *k'ang*, trembling visibly.

The arms of the figure seated next to me were now in violent motion, like the arms of a dancer following the spasmodic rhythm of music inaudible to everyone but himself. The butter-lamps trembled and clinked on the wooden surface of the altar. I felt my muscles flex in readiness for a leap towards the door, and I discovered that gooseflesh and the rising of hairs on hands and neck are neither of them a novelist's invention!

The horrid movements halted as suddenly as they had begun, leaving the figure rigid as a bronze statue and with a dreadful corpselike smile fixed upon his face. It was as though the crashing of a drum audible to him alone had abruptly given place to intolerable silence. I heard my own breath rush out in a gasp, just as my muscles relaxed of their own accord; but, the next moment, my body grew tense, tenser than before.

A great voice filled the room, barking out a terse sentence in a language new to me. Then silence again. It was followed immediately by the high treble of the little boy:

'*Yau wen shenmo?*' (What will you ask?)

The question caught me unprepared. My mouth opened but no sound came forth. Though I tried to grasp the idea that the Mongol was just a trickster, the voice convinced me that I had to deal with something or somebody much more dangerous than a fraud. Its quality was utterly different from the Mongol's; impossible to believe the two voices belonged to the same man. So I remained hopelessly tongue-tied, unable even to stammer. My breathing seemed to have stopped. It was as though I were afraid that even the noise of my breath might draw the attention of that terrible figure towards me and perhaps impel it to some act of savage violence. However, some part of my mind continued to function more or less normally and I reasoned that the whole point of this performance was to enable me to ask questions concerning my affairs and to receive answers from the god or spirit. The Mongol must have taken it for granted, when I demanded a demonstration of his powers, that I intended to ask the possessing spirit questions concerning my welfare. For, of course, prophecy and the curing of illness are the main reasons for undergoing voluntary possession. As it was, I had come entirely unprepared and by no effort of will could I force a question—any question—to my lips. I sat there in stupid silence, feeling a mixture of shame and fear. The little boy persistently urged me to speak and the old drummer stared at me enquiringly, but I just shook my head miserably, keeping my eyes fixed on the rigid body seated just across the lacquer table, which was so small that the Mongol, or possessing spirit, could have reached out and clutched my throat.

I do not know how long we would have sat there in tense silence if the old fellow near the door had not picked up his drum-stick and began to rub the instrument with it softly. Almost at once, the Mongol stirred for the first time since the dreadful flaying movements of his arms had stopped. He swayed gently backwards and forwards from the waist up and then, with a gasp, slid back against some cushions banked up behind him and lay back on them with his feet still crossed. At that moment, fear vanished from the room. I found myself almost laughing aloud at his likeness to a fat, old Turkish pasha—a pasha so overcome by an enormous meal that he could no longer support the weight of his own body. In fact I just wanted an excuse to relieve my pent-up feelings. It was difficult to prevent myself from bursting into great peals of laughter, which the Mongols would certainly have taken as an offensive commentary on the performance. Happily, I did just manage to restrain my impulse to hysterics.

Presently the Mongol seemed to awake from a deep sleep. He sat up, stretched his arms, happened to notice me as he glanced round, smiled vaguely and then sat staring at me with a look of curiosity. Unable to think of anything to say, I just nodded a few times and stooped to pour him a cup of tea. When I looked up from the teapot, the drummer and the child had both gone.

'Well?' said the Mongol at last. 'Did you learn anything of interest to you, Mr P'u?'

I thought it best to tell him the truth and to blame myself roundly for my failure to make use of the powers he had just displayed for my benefit. For a moment, he looked perplexed by this confession of feebleness and I thought I should have to endure his scorn. However, his good manners reasserted themselves and he spoke soothingly of the many clients who had fainted during his performances, so that I need not think my stupid fears unique. When we had each had several cups of tea, I asked:

'The spirit which possessed you just now, was it a particular spirit, well-known to you and summoned specially by name; and was it the spirit of a dead man, or was it a god?'

'Most certainly I specially summoned that spirit. To lay myself open to possession by any wandering ghost might have awful consequences for myself and the others present. I should never dare to do such a thing.'

'And this spirit?' I urged.

'It was the spirit I always summon when I wish to help people discover what is hidden in the future or hidden from them during the present. We know that this spirit was once incarnated as an important Lama who dwelt by the shores of the Blue Sea (Kokonor or Ch'inghai); but he has never revealed his true name. We know him as Aiee.' ('Aiee' was the nearest I could get a few hours later to rendering the rather peculiar sound of the spirit's name. Possibly it was not much like that, but I believe it was a sound devoid of consonants, unless perhaps there was an 'h' in it somewhere.) 'Aiee Lama has spoken through my lips a hundred times, but I know nothing of him except what others have told me; for, during possession, I am either unconscious or dreaming dreams having nothing to do with the spirit or the words he utters. I am told that he is angered by questions about himself, but that he will answer any question put to him on other subjects. His answers, they say, are never wrong. Only there are times when he so frightens those who have asked me to invoke him

that they scream or run away in terror. But as I and those who assist me know nothing much of the circumstances of those people, we can seldom guess what it is that has made them afraid. Would you not like to come back tomorrow and ask concerning those matters upon which your life's happiness may depend?'

The atmosphere in that little room was now so pleasant, with the soft lights and gently bubbling kettle restored to its glowing bed of charcoal, that all my fears of half an hour earlier seemed foolish. And yet . . . The memory of the breathless terror was still too fresh for me to be able to dismiss it as baseless or of small account. Though intensely curious to put the spirit of Aiee Lama to such a test as should furnish conclusive evidence of spirit-possession, I dared not face a repetition of such harrowing sensations. I explained all this quite frankly to the Mongol, who smiled and answered that, though entirely at my service, he would not press me to change my mind. So we parted on terms of warm friendship accompanied by his expressions of dignified gratitude for the further donation I made towards the buildings of the temple. I did not expect to see him again, though as it happened we did meet once in far different surroundings. His little serving boy lighted me back through the narrow lanes, past the great halls of ceremony which looked positively gigantic when seen outlined against a cloudy, moonlit sky, and stayed by my side until we reached the main gate which was grudgingly unbolted for me by a sleepy gatekeeper.

When I reached home, Lao Chao provided me with a late dinner, after which I sat for several hours in the combined dining-room, sitting-room and study which was dignified by the elegant title of 'guest-hall'. It was also known as the 'Bamboo Studio', a name which, even today, denotes the room I use to work in, regardless of how often I move house; for it fits two of my Chinese names—Chu Fêng, Wind in the Bamboos, and Chu Ch'an, Meditation beneath the Bamboos. That night I was making a half-hearted attempt to get on with my translation of a play by Ts'ao Yü, China's greatest modern dramatist. More than once I was disturbed by the scurrying of rats or cockroaches hunting beneath my bookcase. Looking over my shoulder, I happened to glance at where the Mongol had sat during his visit; and, for some reason, this put me in mind of a long-forgotten day at school when I had had an argument with my scripture teacher. We had been studying the passage concerning Christ's refusal to perform a miracle merely as a sign to unbelievers—'O ye of little faith', etc. I had felt so certain that a spectacular miracle, impossible to explain in other terms,

would surely convert a whole host of doubters from among the ranks of cynics, waverers and agnostics.

I smiled wrily at the recollection. How right Christ had been! How futile the notion that genuine conversions accompanied by sincere changes of heart can arise merely from the demonstration of miraculous powers! Since my arrival in China, I had myself witnessed a number of events deserving the name of miracle and strongly indicating the existence of a world or worlds of spirits. More than that, I quite firmly believed in the relative illusoriness of the transient, interdependent phenomena composing the sensuous world, as well as in the existence of an eternal, immutable Reality underlying all these shifting illusions. Yet I had remained so far, so very far, from ordering my life in commonsense conformity with such beliefs, and I was daily slipping further in the opposite direction. The transient world was, for the time being, a place exceedingly delightful to me. Even the near certainty that, by giving myself up to its delights so unreservedly, I was forging fetters of ever-increasing girth which would one day chafe and gall me, in no way influenced me to abandon my unspiritual way of life. All the miracles, all the proofs of the spirit's reality which I had witnessed had, for the present, failed to convert me to a wiser way of living.

Meanwhile, all around me was—Peking! And Peking had grown to mean for me more than an assemblage of incomparable palaces and gardens, adorned in season with peonies, chrysanthemum, lotus or plum-blossom; for I had also discovered the fascination of its temple-fairs, markets, curio-shops, theatres, bath-houses, 'flower-houses' and its centuries-old restaurants famed all over China for the delicacies proper to each of them—roast Peking duck, steamed crabs in ginger sauce, 'Mongolian mutton' (roasted by the customer over a pine-log fire built in the centre of the courtyard, its flames casting a ruddy glow over the snow), sucking-pig, sesamum-seed scones stuffed with spiced meats, an interminable list. I had learnt to love and even to understand the weird cries and instrumental obbligatos of the hawkers who, at most hours of the day and night, disturbed the haunted silence of the *hutungs*—those narrow lanes running geometrically from north to south and east to west between high grey walls pierced with ornamental gateways and gates of scarlet lacquer; lanes where the soft felt shoes of the Pekingese fell noiselessly upon layers of yellow dust or heavy drifts of crisp snow. Best of all, most of Peking's delights were no mere relics of a bygone age sentimentally retained; they were woven into

the lives of living people, a people with a very special character of their own—industrious, yet leisurely and unambitious; superstitious, yet gently sceptical; kindly, honest, just, smiling, urbane and ceremonious, rejoicing in beauty as unthinkingly as fish enjoy water, or crabs the soft, wet sand; and having for their most outstanding characteristic an intense loyalty to everyone bound to them by ties of kinship or gratitude.

Even in those days, the decade preceding World War II, there were signs that this ancient way of life was doomed. The *kungyüs*, or old-style residential hotels carved from the nests of courtyards which had once formed the houses of noblemen, were flooded with Japanese lodgers offering the flimsiest of excuses for being in Peking and usually registered as 'students'. The Manchurian provinces had already been swallowed up by the Japanese, and the territory lying between them and Peking, including the city itself, was in the hands of dissident Chinese generals who were, to a greater or lesser extent, Japanese puppets or their unwilling tools. Crude and rapacious southern officials from Chiang Kai-Shek's Central Government in Nanking jockeyed for power and wealth with the equally rapacious but more good-humoured and better-mannered nominees of these warlords. Radios, motor-cars and other incongruous signs of the new age were becoming increasingly common; and in certain shops the customer who lingered without buying was given the impression that he would have done better to stay away, instead of being welcomed like a millionaire with a cup of jasmine tea, an open tin of good English cigarettes, the smiles and bows of blue-gowned attendants and the shopkeeper's friendly, 'See you tomorrow,' to all of which the Pekingese had long been accustomed.

Had it not been for these shadows of approaching change, these omens of the coming extinction of the old, graceful way of life, I might have followed the example of many other Westerners in making Peking my permanent mistress, aspiring to devote the rest of my life to the enjoyment of her subtly stimulating embrace. As it was, I spent two or three delectable years wooing her before this dalliance was rudely shattered by the entry of the Japanese Army in 1937.

That I did not altogether abandon my Buddhist studies or permanently lose the desire to lead a life of more than transient significance was because both Chinese and Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhism were among the strands of which the complicated pattern of Pekingese life had been woven throughout the centuries. My Buddhist interests

which had absorbed so much of my time during the years spent in the south were now and then revived by visits to the city temples and by the several tours I made to view the antiquities in China's northern provinces.

My favourite Peking temple lay within the shadow of the city wall, just near the Gate of Peace which gives access to people entering from the north. It was inhabited by a small band of impoverished monks living very close to starvation level; and parts of it were so neglected that scorpions and even snakes moved about the outer courtyard, where only a narrow path was kept free from the accumulations of rotting leaves fallen from its tall trees, and from shattered tiles and broken fragments of sculpted roof.

The Abbot, a jolly-looking monk whose surplus flesh, instead of shrivelling away altogether, had been softened and whitened by his miserable diet of *ô-tou* (*kaoliang* bread), was a man of considerable scholastic attainment. One evening, I sat drinking tea with him in his shabby little apartment, which had no ornament but a torn wall-scroll mounted on paper unevenly yellowed by time, depicting Bodhidharma crossing a river with his ungainly body, loosely wrapped in a flapping gown, precariously balanced on a single floating rice-straw.

After a while I recounted my experience with the Mongol and mentioned his claim to possess the power of evoking a spirit with the gift of prophecy.

'I have no doubt,' answered the Abbot judiciously, 'that this Mongol you speak of does have powers of a sort, though I am much inclined to suppose that his "spirit of a Lama from the Blue Sea" is his own mind and that the prophecies are based on information which he receives while in a state of unconsciousness from the minds of the people who go to consult him. But let us, for the joy of argument, suppose that the Blue Lama or whatever you call him does enter his body—most unlikely, but never mind that. My question is, what purpose is served by these manifestations?'

'W-well,' I answered, thinking rapidly of what the Mongol had told me, for I knew that my host would not like to be deprived of the 'joy of argument' as he called it. 'Well, such manifestations convince doubters of the reality of a spirit world: and the prophecies probably save people from all manner of unexpected dangers.'

'*Hu shuo pa tao!*' exclaimed the Abbot, which is the Chinese way of saying 'Pshaw!' 'They serve *no* purpose of real value. They convince nobody of anything at all. Who does *not* believe that there are gods,

spirits, ghosts, fairies and so on? Who still needs to be convinced of *their* existence? On the other hand, who has ever been helped or hurt by them? Oh yes, there are stories enough—gruesome stories. But have you ever *met* anyone who can personally convince you that he or someone of his house was once helped by a god, slain by a devil, or harmed by a ghost? I think not. Demonstrations like the one you saw merely show us what we know quite well already, namely that the whole universe is peopled by living beings, the majority of whom are invisible to other beings not of the same order as themselves, except on rare (and generally quite trivial) occasions. But it is true enough that these gods and so on harm people through their own stupid selves. People who have faith in them waste money and time on propitiating them or in buying their generally useless favours and in similar follies. Suppose then that they do win a lottery or achieve a profitable stroke of business through accepting the god's meddlesome advice. What is the result? They think: "Ah, I have a god on my side! I shall be rich. I shall confound my enemies or competitors or both." *Hao chi la!* So they grow even more attached to money-making or blood-letting or whatever their profession or hobby happens to be. They become, if possible, even more vile, even more dead to the voice of conscience or to their longing for the *Real* than they were before. Their evil *karma* piles up and they qualify for hell or for rebirth as *preta* (hungry ghosts)!'

He spoke with such gusto and pretended rage at the stupidity of others that I could not help grinning. Then I brought the conversation round to my beloved griffin-riding Taoist Immortals. 'But what of the Taoists, who are also skilled in the evocation of spirits? Can they qualify themselves to go to congenial heavens, there to ride on griffins, dragons, phoenixes and similar majestic steeds; to play chess with white and black stones for the welfare or woe of mortals, to walk or fly among incredibly beautiful rocks and hills, woods and groves? If a man believes in these things, longs for them ardently and acts accordingly, will he achieve them or at least dream a lifelong dream that he has achieved them?'

The Abbot sipped his tea noisily, letting it gurgle in his throat as a pretty compliment to me: for, only a visit or so previously, I had brought him a catty of the excellent Chekiang green tea he loved well, but could never afford to buy. He actually stood up to refill my cup, as though I were not infinitely his junior in every sense, so I had to get nimbly to my feet and receive the cup with both hands. Then we both

sat down and he poured tea into his own cup, while answering my question.

'Perhaps. Perhaps. Who knows? Men do fashion their own heavens and hells. Only the hells are apt to prove just hells, while the heavens—turn out to be hells, too. So let us suppose that your Taoist achieves his highest goal—immortality. Let us suppose that this immortality lasts aeon upon aeon until the end of the present world-formation. How pitiful his lot! How he will grow to hate his pet griffon! And how dreary the careful counting of every knuckle on every bamboo stem in his grove after all other cures for boredom have been exhausted! He may at first find it thrilling to play chess with the lives of men and women for stakes, but as human beings are innumerable, he will soon come to feel as dull as a rich man forced to play mahjong for copper coins. Rather than immortality, or shall we say longevity extending into aeons, give me the ordinary round of life and death. This way, at last we have change. And who can say that the mosquito sucks less pleasure from a man's veins than a governor sucks from the province entrusted to his care?'

He continued like this for some time, so delighting me by his droll pretence of gravity that I laughed until the rough antique chair gave way beneath me. A more stable chair was sent for, after which the conversation took a more serious tone. I liked the Abbot so much that I suddenly made up my mind to appeal to him as to a father confessor about a matter which had begun to worry me.

'Your Reverence,' I asked hesitatingly, 'there is something I should like——' Then I stopped abruptly, already sorry I had spoken, for a ridiculous schoolboy blush ran up from neck to cheeks, a blush which must have been fully visible to him as the red candle-stub was burning only a few inches from my face. Worse still, he began busying himself with the teapot, wearing an expression of quite unnecessary concentration. Once committed, however, I saw no way to avoid rushing on with my confession.

'As I was saying, I should like your opinion as a learned Buddhist. That is to say, I should like to con—to tell you something about myself.'

'Yes?' A younger monk had slithered into the room with a kettleful of hot water for the teapot, but he was soon gone.

'You see, it's like this. I used to think of myself as a particularly sincere Buddhist. I mean that a Westerner who becomes a Buddhist usually is sincere, as is the way with converts to any religion. Among

other things, I took the injunction to remain chaste very seriously. To a former Christian, it was a relief to know that sex in itself is not a deadly sin; but it was made clear to me that continence is a necessary prelude to any great progress in meditation and to all the exercises for concentrating the mind inwards upon itself. And, yes, really, I did so much want to make progress in that way. I accepted the idea that Buddhism without meditation practice is like a jewelled vessel bone-dry of the liquid it is meant to contain. In the south, I had so many Buddhist friends that I—well, I never felt the need to visit the "flower-houses" for company. Except just once. And that was only to satisfy my curiosity about the famous "flower-boats" on the Pearl River in Canton. I went as one might visit a temple—I—I mean a zoo or a museum. But here in Peking? I have few really close friends here; none of them, except some monks like yourself whom I don't see *very* often, are at all interested in Buddhism or in any aspect of the spiritual life. So, I—er—I took to going to the "flower-houses" in the evenings. At first it was just for company. You know how it is, I suppose. Pretty girls in lovely silk dresses sit with you, talk with you, sometimes sing to you, or just listen sympathetically to your troubles, and so on. You eat sliced fruit or melon-seeds and then you just go away, leaving as many silver dollars as there are fruit or nut dishes on the table. That is, after all, very pleasant in a city like this, where you almost never have any female company at all, where you may know a man intimately without ever meeting his wife or sisters, still less his daughters. You know, Reverence, we Western people are used to the company of women, women who are amusing to talk to, entertaining, graceful and perhaps a little coy, but often no less virtuous than your rather shut-away Peking women. Well, and sometimes I would go to the "flower-houses" with friends—acquaintances—after some dinner party in one of the big restaurants. In fact, that's how I started going there and it was on those occasions that the girls took the trouble to display their accomplishments, to be really witty and entertaining. But when I go by myself, they bother less about conversation. And then and then—well, of course, I saw that I was expected to do something more than nibble fruit and talk, and so I took to spending six silver dollars the following morning, instead of leaving two silver dollars in the evening, which means——'

'Yes, yes,' answered the Abbot impatiently, looking unhappy at being forced to accept such confidences. 'In short, you spent the night. What of it? Young men usually do. I did.'

'So you know what I mean. Well, anyhow it is not a sin as the Christians would have it. But I also know that it must create a powerful barrier to spiritual achievement.'

'Yes, but at your age——'

'Reverence, I may be young, but I have once or twice glimpsed —had a glimpse of—well, seen other and more real things.'

'Ah!'

'And so—and so, oh please tell me how to rid myself of this trouble. Please help me.'

He proceeded to give me very much the same advice as I had received from Fifth Uncle and others while I was still in the south. If I could not refrain from certain desires, certain fantasies, then I should quickly look for a wife. Failing that, the 'flower-houses' were a lesser evil than *forced* abstinence. I had better indulge sparingly for the time being, while learning to put myself in a state of mind in which such desires would lose their urgency and hold out no further charm—a process which might take years. Accordingly, I should get married as soon as possible.'

'You see,' the Abbot continued, 'you are too fond of yourself. You acquire knowledge from people, books, travel, experiences and observation. You pile up scholarly knowledge, aesthetic knowledge, knowledge of the new and the strange, novelties in fact. All this gives you pleasure and your friends admire you for your scholarship, your appreciation of Chinese life, all sorts of things. And this, so you think, is all very worth while. And, in a way, you are right—in several ways. But now, perhaps because of your Christian upbringing, you single out one of these activities for special blame. In truth, you should blame yourself for all or for none. So long as you live on the level of the senses, however intellectual or aesthetic your approach, you will make no progress in that other way we both know of. Yet to fight against what appeals to you so strongly would be to tie your bowels into knots, from which no good at all could come. My advice to you is to stop blaming yourself for this only or that only while allowing yourself the rest. As you are so young and life-hungry, take life with both hands. Take all it has to offer, from the scent of flowers in a garden to the ecstasy bestowed by that secret flower. Experience everything you can, but taking care not to do this in a crude animal way, a stupid mood of self-indulgence. Keep always in your mind the Buddha-truth that life and suffering are indivisible. Everything is transient and subject to change, to growth, to sickness or decay, to death or dissolution.

Enjoy your pleasures to the full, taking care to look beyond them. Examine their fruits for signs of decay. Note the blunted feelings arising from too much enjoyment of any one thing. Note the frequent disappointments. Remember the bad with the good—our memories seldom will do that of their own accord. This is the royal road to self-salvation, for people like you, the path to liberation from your bondage. Instead of fleeing life, which at your age would be stupid, accept it with both hands and examine it for what it really is in the light of an adult intelligence. Note which of its beauties reflect the eternally real and which are mere disguises for the decay and corruption beneath. Flee life only when you see it for something no longer to be borne.'

'And if I never do come to see it that way?'

'You will, you will.' The Abbot laughed, but there was something in his manner to warn me that I had trespassed far enough on his good nature, that while genuinely welcome to the advice just given I was not licensed to make further embarrassing revelations.

We chatted pleasantly of other matters over a freshly made pot of tea. After that, when I got up to take my leave, a novice was sent for to light me across the deserted courtyards. He arrived drowsy from interrupted sleep and carrying a long stick with a paper lantern bobbing on a string; its light was so dim that it barely sufficed to reveal the path. As the night was unusually dark, the temple halls with their great sweeping roofs were at first invisible, but gradually they took shape, starkly black against the faint, scarcely perceptible luminosity of the starless sky. The swaying lantern, inscribed with two large scarlet characters—Harmony and Peace—cast a reddish glow which just reached down to the mossy flags of the successive courtyards. And when we came to the neglected outer courtyard, the slight glow startled insects, and perhaps reptiles, hidden in the thick carpet of rotting leaves, causing them to fly or slither away from under our feet.

In the lanes beyond the gateway were latticed windows, nests of intersecting squares and triangles softly lit from within by wicks floating in saucers of oil. For, in that quiet corner of the Northern City, the electric light had as yet failed to penetrate, probably because most of the inhabitants were too poor to pay for its installation. As so often before, I derived a peculiar delight from the absence in my immediate surroundings of any sound, sight or smell which could remind me of the severe damage caused to an ancient civilization by the great tidal wave of Western influence. Peking was probably the last important

Chinese city in which corners like this, entirely unchanged by the passage of centuries, still remained.

A series of lanes led me to one of those broad, dimly lighted thoroughfares which owed their great width to architects who, though they had never envisaged modern traffic, had been concerned to allow space for the splendid cortège which had invariably accompanied the Son of Heaven during a progress through the city. The road was now smoothly paved and the rickshaw which carried me towards home moved at the speed of a fast-trotting horse. A little way from the mouth of my own lane, I shouted to the rickshaw-puller to halt. I had caught sight of a screen standing before a broad gateway which bore two gilded characters on a green background signifying 'bathing-hall'. As it was still too early for bed, I decided to spend two or three hours enjoying a hot bath and a Chinese-style massage. My spirit had just received its fare share of attention, it was now the body's turn.

A bowing attendant led me to the public drying-room where forty or fifty patrons lay about on partitioned platforms covered with clean towelling. When I had undressed and girded my loins with a towel to satisfy Pekingese prudery, I passed into the bathroom, where three baths the size of small swimming pools containing water at varying temperatures awaited my choice. I chose the middle one, knowing it would be quite hot enough to turn my whole body scarlet and, after soaping myself carefully beneath a shower, I cautiously lowered myself into it. There I was allowed to soak in peace until an attendant was free to give me a massage, for which purpose he spreadeagled me on a sort of crucifix inserted at the shallow end and leant against the side of the bath. The massage was so vigorous as to be actually painful, but it left me with a feeling of renewed strength. Back in the drying-room, where I was subjected to another sort of rather painful massage, I waited till the man had finished slapping my flesh and tweaking my nerves, and then lay back with a sigh of relief to enjoy a pot of good tea and some dumplings containing a confection of sugared beans. Presently, my left- and right-hand neighbours began to chat with me. Discovering to his surprise that I am a Buddhist, one of them asked me if I had ever been to the sacred mountain of Wu T'ai.

'No, I haven't. Do you advise me to go?'

'Yes, yes. It is a wonderful place. Such mountains. It will take you a week by mule from the nearest station. But when you get there, ah! So many profound scholars. Wonderful! And there's a Living Buddha and a Great Lama all the way from Lhasa. Such people! And

do you know, the whole plateau is covered with flowers—wild flowers, just like a garden. As for temples, you'll never believe till you see. Two hundred, three hundred; who knows? I was posted there once as assistant clerk to the magistrate. What a wonderful time that was! Of course I was delighted to return to our Peking, but I'll never forget Wu T'ai Shan—never! And you, Mr P'u, as a Buddhist, you'll feel that you've got to Amida Buddha's Western Paradise already. Yes, really you will. Believe me. Heaven on earth.'

Until he got on to the subject of Wu T'ai, he had seemed a long-winded sort of man, but his enthusiasm for the place made his sentences positively staccato. By now, the conversation had become for me much more than a pleasant way of passing the evening. I was intrigued, especially when I remembered that my 'shaman' had come from Wu T'ai. By the time I began dressing, I was estimating my resources and planning an early visit to the fabulous mountain. It was then so late that we were almost the only patrons left in the bath-house.

During the short walk back to my house, I heard the thin clash of cymbals and the tack-tack of drums coming from a brightly lit house close to my own. A cockerel's scream of pain suggested that a sacrifice was being performed to malignant devils. Lao Chao, who flip-flapped sleepily across the courtyard in slippers to unbolt the gate for me, met me with the words:

'Laoyeh, the Wu family have been afflicted by a malevolent ghost. It has troubled them for months, so now they have called in the ghost-dissipators. Laoyeh, you will find the noise bad. What a pity those people are so superstitious.'

I allowed myself to smile in the darkness, remembering a score of times when Lao Chao had paled at the thought of ghosts.

'Yes, Lao Chao, but better this noise than the continued presence in our neighbourhood of a malevolent ghost. I hope they succeed in dissipating him and that the noise doesn't drive him to seek refuge with us.'

My reward for this sally came immediately. Lao Chao's briskly efficient hands seemed suddenly to lose their power, leaving him fumbling unavailingly with the heavy wooden bar.

'Oh, Laoyeh,' he whispered. 'Pray never say such things. It's just such words as those which . . .'

I walked across to the bedroom, quite amused that just for this once I had perturbed this most well-controlled of men. I had grown to love him dearly, but was sometimes put out by his smugness. I hoped

The sacred dances,
Wu T'ai Shan

Rock-carvings, Yünkang

the fright might do him some good. Then, all of a sudden, I grew penitent. Poor Chao Ma, always terrified of unseen forces, might have overheard my remark and be trembling with fear. Thoroughly ashamed of myself, I reflected that, however sceptical the Chinese might be concerning the existence of divinities of any kind, it is very unwise to jest with them on the subject of ghosts.

6

The Sacred Mountain of Wu T'ai

PEKING, for all its moods of softness, belongs indisputably to the North, where camels and horses take the place of buffaloes. There are times in spring when the sand of the Gobi Desert comes riding in opaque yellow clouds upon the wings of an evil wind, blotting out the sun, seeping through windows and doors, penetrating even into bookcases, and torturing the noses and throats of those who huddle within their houses. In winter, freezing winds bring tears to the eyes which soon form icicles clinging to the lashes. The city's softer aspects are the residue of centuries of imperial rule during which a yearly harvest was reaped of all the manifold forms of beauty which China's far-flung provinces had to offer. So, in pleasant weather, Peking displays southern graces—a gentleness, a languor, a delicacy which offset the grimness of her intimidating gateways set amid ponderous fortifications.

The time came for me to take leave of this voluptuous softness and to journey to Wu T'ai Shan across the great North China plain—in autumn and early spring, yellow and parched as a desert; in winter, a dreary wilderness of snow; in summer, an endless vista of softly waving green or pale yellow. I must enter the lonely mountains lying several hundred miles to the west.

Fortunately it was June, my vacation having begun early owing to a political strike at the university. The little train chugged slowly through the richly cultivated fields which, east and south, stretched to the horizon and far beyond; while, to the north and west, blue and purple hills were already visible. Bare, treeless slopes succeeded the great ocean of rippling green maize and *kaoliang*; and, before dusk, we came to Nank'ou, the principal gateway through the Great Wall. Like a monstrous Chinese dragon, the Wall sprawled across the hills, clinging to the ridges in a series of stupendous undulations. A single hundred-yard section of it would be accounted an engineering feat of

some magnitude. How was it possible to visualize it rising and falling uninterruptedly from the China Sea almost to the borders of Turkestan? the effort of imagination made me sleepy and, just before sunset, my eyes closed. So I knew nothing more until the train came jerking to a halt at Kalgan, Mongolia's gateway. For the first time I was within bowshot of camel caravanseries; of butter-pomaded Mongols who washed or were washed only thrice in their lives (after birth, before marriage and after death); of crowds of men in brocaded clothes, their silks glistening beneath the grease accumulations of years; of men who were fit to challenge Cossacks to feats of daring horsemanship—riders who could loose an arrow from the back of a fast-galloping steed and hit the target as unerringly as an army instructor on the regimental shooting-range. But these things I was left to imagine, to reconstruct from my reading and from my knowledge of the Mongols in Peking. Afraid to leave the train, I lay down on the hard, wooden seat, enjoying fitful dreams with a Mongolian background.

At midnight, we reached Tat'ung, having turned southwards back into China Proper. Even after a hot June day, the night air was chilly, so I was glad to find that my room at the inn was provided with a heated *k'ang*. In fact, it contained very little else. One third of the room-space consisted of a bare brick floor, the rest being taken up by the low brick platform covered with singed straw matting on which I now unrolled my bedding of thinly wadded summer quilts. The only article of furniture was a foot-high table about the size of a large tea-tray placed in the middle of the *k'ang* for use at meals. A bowl of hot water for washing, a rather grimy perfumed towel and a potful of hot red tea were the only luxuries available that night. Being lunchless and dinner-less, I was hungry, but too tired to care much.

An hour after dawn, a lad in a shabby blue cotton gown appeared bringing a very large bowl of coarse earthenware which contained my breakfast—boiled noodles in mutton broth, flavoured with garlic, onion and pepper. Such food does not make an ideal breakfast, but I found it tasty enough to have the bowl twice replenished. My next visitor was the inn-keeper, a crop-headed, harsh-looking man dressed in jacket and trousers of patched, unwashed white cotton. He asked how long I proposed to stay.

'Just one more night,' I answered. 'And, if you will find me horses and a guide, I should like to ride over to the Yünkang rock-temples this morning.'

This was easily arranged. With my guide mounted on another

horse, I rode off through low hills, passing some of the ancient and still primitive coalmines of the region. They were being worked by thin, shabby wretches with packmules. Death by heart-failure overtook men and animals alike with frightening regularity, and they were alike too in being gaunt creatures with hardly any flesh between bone and skin, alike in their lack-lustre expressions, devoid of all joy and hope. I had been told that, in this province of Shansi, after generations of misgovernment, poverty was so great that the farmers scarcely ever tasted the eggs laid by their own fowls, even though they brought in little more than a silver dollar for a hundred and twenty of them—the price of one very good city restaurant meal.

The Yünkang caves, like those of Ajanta, have one thing in common with that very different sort of monument—the Taj Mahal, in that they are among the few places in the world which cannot possibly disappoint even the most extravagant expectations. It is now thought that Buddhism first trickled into China as far back as the second century B.C. By the time these cave temples were hewn from the living rock in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries A.D., the Indian religion was spreading like a bright flame across the face of Asia. The men who came in contact with it then were inspired with a great upsurge of the spirit comparable to that which led to the building of Europe's loveliest cathedrals. Though Yünkang possesses fewer of those wondrous man-made caves than Ajanta, they are even more stupendous. In each cave, the principal Buddha-image (formed by cutting the rock from around it on three or four sides) is so enormous that, in at least one case, I estimated the nose alone to be twice as long as my six-foot body—perhaps much more than that, for it is difficult to judge the length of something high above one's head. The image most often photographed and reproduced in albums is one of the smallest among the principal images, easy to photograph because the cave has fallen around it; and even this one is often seen in reproductions with as many as fifty people standing on the hands and forearms without crowding. The larger images are impossible to photograph as the space around them is too confined. At most, the camera can record some detail of face, limbs or body.

The staggering size of these images strikes the mind with wonder as soon as the caves are entered; but, before long, this wonder is thrust into the background by the even more astounding *beauty* of the sculpture, especially of the thousands of small figures surrounding the giant images. For centuries, these great statues have sat silently brooding

on human sorrows, their lips touched with the faintest of compassionate smiles—but not in solitude. In each cave, walls and ceiling are a mass of intricate carvings. Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, devas, asparas, a host of spiritual beings—thousands upon thousands of them in every cave—stare down at the puny descendants of their inspired creators. Some reflect the brooding calm of the central images; others are running, leaping, flying, dancing, singing, twanging stringed instruments, blowing on horns, waving their arms, flapping their wings, making faces, rocking with laughter in so lively a manner that it is hard not to believe they are living beings petrified by a magician's spell.

I had never thought it possible that inanimate beauty could be so moving. Feeling that I had never seen anything to compare with it, I began to throw my mind back over China's other artistic achievements, wondering if the caves had some equal in other fields. I recalled Chinese architecture—grim, delicate, bizarre; paintings of rocks, mountains and waterfalls, birds, butterflies and every kind of flower; portraits of Buddhas, hermits and monks, officials, emperors and lovely women; porcelain of soft blues and greens, of brilliant reds and yellows, of crimson and ox-blood, of purest white or rainbow profusion of colour; figures of people, animals and plants in ivory, wood, jade, precious stones, silver and bronze—but there could be no end to such a list. Without attempting to think further, I concluded that even China (unless in the Tunhuang caves which I had never seen) has created nothing which exceeds the Yünkang rock-carvings in their power to evoke absolute certainty of a lovely and eternal Reality underlying the world of appearances and tantalizingly reflected by sensuous images and transient forms.

Begging my guide to leave me to myself, I wandered in and out of the caves, finding new beauties and fresh marvels each time I re-entered them. Within three hours, my mind had become so surfeited that I was glad to emerge into the open air and sit down to contemplate the simple and familiar sights of hill and sky. During the ride back to Tat'ung, I realized for the first time that an excess of beauty can be as overwhelming and as wearying as over-indulgence in drink, love-making or laughter.

I was compelled to stay in Tat'ung for several days; the inn-keeper would not hear of my making the week's journey to Wu T'ai without a proper caravan or an escort of some kind. At last, a suitable caravan was assembled, a group of people who, but for the absence of women, could have inspired illustrations for a Chinese translation of the

Canterbury Tales. Of the thirty or forty members of this caravan, those I recollect most vividly are a mounted Mongol Lama in a splendid robe of purple silk; an elderly and very shabby old Mongol on foot who had spent two years on the journey from his home in Northern Manchuria, begging his food and carrying nothing but the clothes on his back; and my own muleteer, a gay young man from a farm which lay directly on our route, at whose house I was to spend a very comfortable night. Most travelled on foot, using horses and mules as pack-animals, but I preferred to make the journey in primitive luxury. For a small sum I was able to hire a mule-litter—a cross between a sedan-chair and the cabin of a very small boat. The floor consisted of netting on which my luggage had been carefully spread out and topped with my bedding to act as a sort of carpet. The walls and roof comprised a cylindrical tunnel supported on a wooden frame, very much like the cabin of a Cantonese sampan. The whole contraption was firmly anchored to two long shafts which projected before and behind so that it could be slung between two mules walking in single file.

For some reason, I and the muleteer who walked beside me were selected to lead the procession, while the much more important purple-robed Lama rode last of all. In general, holy men and merchants occupied places of honour, front and rear, while the pedlars, illiterate pilgrims and pack-animals formed the centre of the caravan. I found the motion of my wheel-less vehicle so soothing that I passed much of the time stretched flat on my back, dozing or drowsily busy with my thoughts, except now and then when I remembered that this was a pilgrimage and shamed myself into sitting cross-legged for an hour, practising meditation. More genuine pilgrims felt obliged to go on foot; indeed, Mongols often make far longer journeys, crawling on their knees or stopping at every three paces to prostrate themselves. The rough, rock-strewn path may have jarred the feet of the mules, but the litter swung between its poles as gently as a slim boat tossed upon lightly running seas. If I got down to stretch my legs, I had to walk very slowly for fear of losing sight of the caravan plodding ponderously behind.

The Chinese peasants and pilgrims chatted and sang as they toiled along the difficult track, which led steeply uphill nearly all the way. The purple-robed Lama could be seen in the distance, solemnly telling his beads as his horse ambled forward in our wake; while the Mongol beggar-pilgrim whom we came to call 'Old Manchuria' would pour forth a stream of pidgin-Chinese to anybody who would listen to him.

At nights, we slept in small wayside inns, usually lying in a row on the *k'ang*, about eight of us to a room—except once when my muleteer invited me to pass a night in much greater comfort at his parents' unusually prosperous farmhouse. I learnt that the old couple had never seen a Westerner at close quarters before, but their peasant politeness was so great that they treated me exactly like a Chinese guest, refraining from any questions beyond the normal polite exchange of biographical information.

All the farm-houses and inns were built round wide courtyards, the living-rooms on two sides with cloister-like stables for the animals opposite. The food was dreadfully monotonous, consisting chiefly of potato soup, porridge made from millet, and coarse maize-bread. Eggs were a luxury seldom obtainable. So, whenever we passed through one of the little walled cities or county-towns, I used to treat all the poorer members of the caravan to a mess of boiled pork and good wheat bread, either roasted in a pan with just a touch of oil or steamed in the form of rolls or meat-filled dumplings. I had thought myself poor, but found the cost of feeding so many people almost trifling.

A day's journey was almost exactly ninety *li* (thirty miles), the *li* varying slightly in length according to the hilliness of the road, this unit being based partly on the time it takes to cover a given distance rather than upon distance alone. There were inns at every half-stage. We would get up early enough to be able to set out at dawn, rest for two or three hours in the middle of the day, and arrive just before or just after nightfall. As many of the muleteers were opium-smokers, they insisted on this long midday halt so that they would enjoy at least two hour's placid smoking after their lunch. Naturally, they also smoked in the evenings as soon as their animals had been stabled and fed. Most declared that, without opium, they could not possibly stand up to such a hard life, which may well be the truth.

Once a day, with uncanny regularity, the leader of my pair of mules would throw himself on the ground and attempt to roll over while still in harness! This caused me many bumps and bruises as well as the destruction of all the brittle articles in my luggage. Each time, the ropes would snap, the litter fall into its component parts and my luggage be tossed with me on to the road. Everybody else appeared to think this a perfectly normal hazard of the journey, but on the fourth day I grew vexed and expressed my displeasure to the patient muleteer.

'But, Laoyeh, the animal is sick.'

'Then why did you offer me a sick animal?'

'Because I have no other, Laoyeh.'

'Then please *do* something about it.'

'Yes, Laoyeh.'

That evening, he borrowed a savage-looking needle as long as a crochet-hook and, before I could expostulate, jabbed it into the mule's cheek, not far from the eye. I was horrified.

'Old Father Heaven! What have you done, you—you turtle's egg [offspring of adultery].'

'Laoyeh, I am not a turtle's egg. You told me to cure the animal. I am trying.'

He seemed astonished and hurt by my outburst, which was the first time I had spoken harshly to him.

'But it was wanton cruelty. The animal can't help being sick. It is abominable to punish a creature for being ill.'

'Laoyeh, abuse me if you like. You have the right to do that. Am I not yours till the end of the journey? But you should not have called me a turtle's egg. The women of our village are all virtuous. Look for turtles' eggs among the offspring of city women in Peking or Taiyüan.'

'Very well, Lao Wêng; you are *not* a turtle's egg, of course. But you are a cruel master to your animals.'

'Cruel, Laoyeh, cruel? Are doctors who cut out kidneys and slice the livers of living men cruel?'

I stalked off to my sleeping quarters outraged by such wanton inhumanity to the wretched mule.

The next day, Wêng watched me climb into the litter without giving me his usual cheery greeting. Obviously I had wounded him as deeply as he had wounded the mule, which I thought served him right. The day passed as usual, but in the evening I noticed that the front mule was stepping out much more cheerfully than before. Neither then nor on any of the three remaining days did he pitch me to the ground or even attempt to roll. It gradually dawned on me that what I had taken for vengeful cruelty had, in fact, been a primitive sort of acupuncture. When I apologized to the muleteer, he told me he had acquired something of this art from a wise old man. He had learnt of twenty-one places on the animal's body, one or more of which must be punctured in accordance with whatever malady attacked it or whatever organ was affected, these places generally having no obvious relationship with the seat of the trouble. It was all very mysterious.

The Chinese have long practised this art successfully on human beings, and, as I have since heard, there are now practitioners of it in Paris and elsewhere in Europe.

On the fifth or sixth day, we came to a deep ford across a wide and swiftly flowing river. Most of the men, who apparently did not share Pekingese prudery, calmly removed all garments below the waist and waded across, pulling their unwilling animals after them. But two or three of the mules were so frightened that no amount of beating would persuade them to cross. They planted their feet squarely on the earth and obstinately refused to budge. Suddenly shabby 'Old Manchuria' lost patience (though he had no animal of his own) and shouted:

'Turtles! Turtles! They Chinese not know how proper man do things Mongolia.'

Then, dragging off his trousers and tying them round his neck, he rushed ferociously towards the nearest reluctant mule on which he exerted such unexpected strength that the astonished, frightened animal allowed itself to be dragged into the water and goaded over to the other bank. After this loudly applauded success, the indomitable old man plunged back to our side and dragged a second mule into the water. If there were others, they followed of their own accord. Soon the whole caravan was across; but I, ashamed to remove my trousers, had to follow Purple Robe's example in being carried over on the back of the most stalwart muleteer, a man whose sinuous strength amazed me, for he was no more muscular than most other Chinese. He performed the service free of charge, reminding me of the three good meals he had had at my expense. My luggage was sodden and dripping; but, providentially, someone had had the wit to tie the bedding on to the roof of the litter, so that, at least, was dry.

But the next day, the hills had given place to real mountains and, here and there, we passed some of the numerous branches of the Great Wall; or, perhaps, they were short inner walls built to guard certain passes. We were now approaching Wu T'ai itself. Its name means Five Peaks or, more literally, Five Terraces, referring to the five main peaks which rise from around a central plateau where most of the three hundred odd monasteries and temples are situated. The last day of the journey was mostly spent upon the ascent of an approach so steep as to be nearly perpendicular in the worst places. I had to make the tiring climb on foot, as the litter-mules could not have carried me up without hardship as well as danger to themselves and to me. At last, gasping and sweat-sodden, I reached the pass in the company of a few other

stragglers. We found ourselves looking down on a sight which might have inspired the original conception of Shangri-La.

The wide, grassy plateau lay only a few hundred feet below the pass. Wild flowers grew in such extraordinary profusion that the old cliché 'carpeted with flowers' seemed the most apt description possible. Here and there, nestling against the surrounding slopes or clinging to overhanging rocks were the monasteries, some large enough to house hundreds of monks, others small temples with only three or four living-rooms attached. To one side of the plateau was a small hill running out like a spur from the surrounding mountain walls. Its slopes were honey-combed with buildings, a monastery even bigger than the Lama Temple in Peking, approached by flights of steps leading from among the clustered roofs of a small town lower down and, at the foot, an exceedingly large *chorten* or Tibetan-style reliquary which resembled a gigantic white bottle. Somebody explained that the town was the residence of the Chinese county magistrate, the chief temporal authority; and that the monastery was the abode of the Kushog appointed by Lhasa as the spiritual ruler of all the thousands of Tibetan and Mongol lamas in the vicinity. Most of Wu T'ai's temples had walls of faded crimson or yellow-ochre surmounted by golden-yellow tiles, once the prerogative of the Imperial Family and of divinities.

Though nearly eight thousand feet above the North China plain, the plateau is so sheltered that the vegetation reminded me of the lush south. Never, even upon the flowery slopes of the Dolomites, had I seen a sight so lovely; nor have I beheld its equal since, unless in some of the high Himalayan valleys.

Our route across one side of the plateau led us past an unusually large Chinese-style monastery, almost the only building in sight to remind me that I was still in China Proper, very far from Tibet and some ten days' walk from Mongolia. The other buildings gave just the reverse impression. We did not stop until we had reached the sloping town just above the giant *chorten* and climbed a flight of steps leading to the gateway of the monastery of P'usa Ting, seat of the Kushog Lama. A merchant in the caravan informed me that, by the terms of a treaty concluded in Manchu times between the Governments of China and Tibet, when the latter was only a nominal dependency, the Lhasa-nominated Kushog was still entitled to exercise control over the monastic population of Tibetans and Mongols. His authority was much like that of a mediaeval cardinal—a Prince of the Church. However, the relatively few black-gowned, bare-headed Chinese monks did not have

to submit to the Tibetan Kushog's authority, being responsible to their own abbots and, in case of crime, to the county magistrate. For Republican China recognized no religious authority except, to some extent, that of the religious leaders among their Mongol and Tibetan subjects, who might otherwise have rebelled. Incidentally, I learnt during the last lap of the journey that there was a local Living Buddha who, as an individual, did not command much respect in any quarter. Having been declared an Incarnation, he was forever a Living Buddha; but, as the rôle did not suit his tastes, he preferred to wear Western clothes; to associate with the local Chinese officials who sarcastically eulogized him as an 'advanced' type of Mongol; and to use his revenue as a Living Buddha for the enjoyment of the usual delights of a rich man in Northern and Central Asia—horses, women, wine, opium, cards and mahjong, together with whatever more eccentric or individual delights happened to please him.

The P'usa Ting Monastery crowning the small hill to which the little township clung was approached by long flights of white steps and built on a series of terraces. To either side of the steps were the shops of the craftsmen, all Chinese, who fashioned all sorts of Tibetan-style ritualistic objects of silk, silver, copper, gold and semi-precious stones, besides painting holy pictures and inscribing banners and charms in one, two or three languages—Chinese, Tibetan and Mongol. Some even added the nearly obsolete Manchu characters, explaining that four gives a more balanced effect to a work of art than three. The enormous monastery was encircled by a blood-red wall, the colour faded, chipped and peeling. On the lower terraces stood the principal halls of ceremony which, inside and out, were so magnificent and in such a glittering state of preservation that I have never, either before or since, seen any magnificence to compare with them. I felt that the sight of them gave me an accurate picture of what the Forbidden City must have looked like in the days of Ch'ien Lung or K'ang Hsi, the greatest of the Manchu Emperors. (I have since heard that both the Japanese and the Chinese Communists so pillaged and destroyed these temples that they are no longer recognizable. However, the present policy of the Peking Government is to make lavish concessions to the religious susceptibilities of the minority peoples of China, so it may well be that some degree of restoration has now been carried out.)

The topmost terrace was occupied by the Kushog's own apartments. My quarters were in the principal guest-block just below those of His Holiness. My room was both spacious and richly decorated. The

k'ang, big enough for eight people, was spread with fine, gaily coloured Tibetan carpets and surrounded on three sides by a frieze depicting in brilliant colours various aspects of Tibetan life, both in this world and some others. The *k'ang* which, though large, occupied only about a quarter of the room, was provided with numerous small tables of carved wood covered with gold and green lacquer. The rest of the room had a red tiled floor and a profusion of Chinese-style furniture decorated in the Tibetan manner. (In such connections, the word 'Tibetan' is more or less a synonym for 'Mongolian', as the decorative arts of the two races hardly differ.) Once more I was reminded of the Manchu Emperors. What I had seen of the Forbidden City and of the Summer Palace near Peking made it certain that even the Emperors and their consorts would not have regarded such a room as unworthy of forming part of their private apartments. It was a delicious pleasure to feel that, for a little while, I could enjoy some of the imperial splendour which, elsewhere in China and perhaps everywhere in the Far East except Lhasa, has completely vanished, or else been retained only in the form of palace museums. The similarity to the Forbidden City was no accident, for most of the architectural and sumptuary privileges of Chinese royalty had been bestowed upon the principal Lamas and Living Buddhas of Tibet and Mongolia, partly in accordance with the old Manchu policy of wooing the two races into a state of willing and largely formal submission, and partly because the Manchu Imperial House observed the Lamaist Faith.

I was made welcome by two very elegant lamas, whom I discovered to be illiterate Chinese selected for their efficiency as butlers. Perhaps 'butler' is an unkind word to use. In effect, their duties were somewhere between those of a Reverend Receiver of Guests and of upper servants in charge of the large monastery staff, who might be laymen or monks. Their precise duty towards me was that of deputy hosts, and hosts I shall call them. Both were dressed in splendid dragon-embroidered robes—the first I had ever seen except at the theatre or at fancy-dress parties. I think the senior eunuchs and officials at the Manchu Court used to dress in exactly the same way, apart from the extraordinary lacquer hats worn by my hosts which looked un-Chinese, rather like coloured versions of the stiff hats formerly worn in Korea. Their manners and bearing were faultless, regal enough for them to have passed muster as senior mandarins in the old days, so long as they were not called upon to read or write! Certainly there was nothing ludicrous about them.

When I arrived at P'usa Ting, I told Wang Lama and Ma Lama that I would be able to accept their hospitality for a few weeks at the most. Later, news came from Peking to the effect that the students would not return to work until Chiang Kai-Shek had altered his policy of allowing the Japanese to gobble mouthful after mouthful of Chinese territory without resistance. On hearing this I foresaw that my stay might be extended for several months. Though sick at heart at the thought of China's sufferings, I was delighted at the prospect of staying so long in such surroundings, for I discovered that Wu T'ai was one of those rare places where Asia had remained wholly Asian, being unadulterated by any Western influence whatsoever. It was just the kind of place in which I had always desired to live; and, if my funds had been inexhaustible, I doubt if I could ever have brought myself to turn my back on so much beauty—at least until the invading Japanese came to drag me away by force. As it was, my funds were exhausted long before I began to think of leaving it, so I was forced to borrow from friends who providentially arrived from Tientsin. As to the precious guru-to-chela teaching which I hoped to find there, I received what seemed at the time disappointingly little; but it was probably as much as I was then in a fit condition to receive; and, in any case, Wu T'ai offered me many other gifts, some of them hard to define, yet none the less valuable for their subtlety. At the very least, the spiritual side of my nature, which had long been weakened by Peking's spiritually (as opposed to aesthetically) enervating climate, was daily refreshed by the winds which blew across the plateau carrying the perfume of incense and wood-fires to the nostrils, and singing of the great Central Asian plains beyond, where the world was either very old or very fresh and young. As soon as I had passed the stage of lying about on magnificent carpets and luxuriating in the princely comfort and splendour of my surroundings, which contrasted so strangely with the hardships of the journey, I began exploring the various neighbouring temples.

One of my first visits was to the little Mani Bhadra Monastery which provided lodgings for the poorer sort of Mongol pilgrim. 'Old Manchuria' called specially to take me over there, hinting mysteriously that I should be welcomed by 'an old friend'. Much intrigued, I gladly accompanied the old fellow whose prowess at the ford had won so much admiration. I loved him for his big heart, his strong limbs, contempt of hardship and body-shaking laugh. The immaculate lamas, Wang and Ma, were shocked by his ragged appearance and

had been most unwilling to let him sully the regal splendour of my chamber; but gorgeous priests, wayside brigands, recalcitrant mules, blood-drinking demons and Chinese soldiers were all one to 'Old Manchuria'. He had just pushed past Their Magnificences and burst into my room roaring with gusty nomad mirth.

The 'old friend' awaiting me at Mani Bhadra was, to my immense surprise, no other than the 'shaman' who had performed for me in Peking. He was lodging there during the building of his new temple and far too busy supervising the builders (all of them Mongols working voluntarily for the glory of the Faith rather than men chosen for their skill) to be able to spare any time disclosing some of Wu T'ai's inner mysteries to me. Besides, within a few days he intended to go off on another fund-collecting tour, this time to get money for the gold, silver, lacquer, porcelain and fine woods to be used for the new temple's interior; but meanwhile he seemed very happy indeed to see me.

In his beautifully appointed cell, there was excellent salted tea churned with fresh goat's butter and drunk from porcelain cups with silver filigree lids and turquoise-studded silver saucers. Alas, when I had taken leave from this busy man, 'Old Manchuria' insisted on my tasting some of his own hospitality. Again it took the form of salted buttered tea, but this time it had been prepared with hair-impregnated rancid camel's butter, bluish black and doubtless many months old. Still worse, out of deference to my 'soft Chinese habits of cleanliness', he took a really filthy old cup and *licked the inside clean with his tongue* before pouring in the smelly tea! Etiquette required that I quaff several cupfuls. I managed it by taking each at a single gulp like nasty medicine, so as not to have to savour it to the full; but this made him suppose that I was thirsty and cupful followed cupful!

Just behind the Mani Bhadra was a cave with a shallow depression in the floor containing water sacred to Samandabhadra Bodhisattva (P'u Hsien, Personification of Divine Action). It was said to have healing powers and to be of mysterious origin. I watched several scores of pilgrims fill their earthen bottles there, yet the water level never decreased, though the pool was very shallow, quite transparent and without any visible means of ingress—apparently there was neither hole nor spring. Eastern places of pilgrimage abound in such small mysteries, some manifestly due to natural phenomena, others much harder to explain, like the Bodhisattva Lights which I was to see later. My Mongol host procured a large, earthen bottle and, filling it at the sacred spring, handed it to me, with many ceremonious marks

of esteem, as a remedy against future ills. It was touching to see the delight of these old beggar pilgrims ('Manchuria' and his friends) in being for once the donors of a gift instead of its recipients. In gratitude I assured 'Old Manchuria' that I should be very firm with Their Magnificences if ever they should bar his way to my table when he cared to grace it. Shaking with laughter, he cried:

'Good, good. They Chinese-Mongols; they not Mongol-Mongols. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. *Chinese*-Mongols! Very funny! Yes, no?'

From this and other incidents, I gathered that the contempt of the warrior nomads for their highly sophisticated but more sedentary neighbours south of the Wall has not changed since the days of Ghengiz Khan.

Another session of buttered tea followed our return from the cave, during which I told 'Old Manchuria' how, on the previous afternoon, two Mongol strangers had walked up to me in the street, demanded a cigarette each, and marched away without a word of thanks. I asked if he thought they were some sort of highwaymen who enjoyed this form of swaggering. The old fellow grinned uncomfortably, but hastened to defend his countrymen in his halting Chinese, by saying:

'Say "Thank you, thank you"—Chinese way. Give, take—Mongol way. Mongols all brothers. You things me; me things you. You sleep me tent; I eat you bread. "Thank you, thank you"—not good, not brother-talk. Just give, just take.' This explanation reminded me of something the innkeeper at Tat'ung had said contemptuously about Mongols:

'Our Chinese merchants find the Mongols too easy. Tell one of them that a Japanese ashtray is a Han dynasty mirror and he'll believe you. Though he may wonder why he can't see his face in it, he will not doubt your word. On the other hand, if a Mongol (except those accursed horse-dealers) tells you his nag is sound in four legs, why then, so it will prove to be. A stupid people!'

I was beginning to understand why so many Europeans in Peking were such fanatical Mongol-lovers. I saw that Mongols—gay, swaggering, robed in filthy, oily, lice-ridden splendour of silk and satin, straightforward, brave, kind, generous, incredibly 'handy'—have many virtues to compensate for the filth of years and the stink of rancid butter oozing from hair, clothes, unwashed bodies and breath. And their virtues are almost exactly complementary to those of the Chinese; so Peking's superlative elegance and refinement sometimes gives birth to a longing for the bluff heartiness of the Steppes.

On my way back to P'usa Ting that afternoon, I stopped among the crowd filling the precincts of the great white *chorten.* Mostly they were Mongol pilgrims, both rich and poor. A stream of them were circumambulating the *chorten*'s base, muttering a never-ending string of invocations, some telling their beads, others with right arms extended so as to preserve the momentum of the great tubular prayer-cylinders encircling it. A richly clad Mongol layman, with an enormous circular fur hat cocked rakishly on one side to display the yellow satin crown, stood languidly staring at me with a half smile upon his lips, as though he would like me to talk to him. When we had chatted for a while, I asked:

'What exactly is the purpose of these prayer-wheels?'

He looked as much taken aback as an English villager would be if questioned as to the *purpose* of church bells!

'Have you not heard, Hsienshêng, that the sacred writings in these wheels are written on one thousand and eighty feet of the finest yellow silk?'

He seemed to think that this was explanation enough.

'Really? Magnificent! But, I mean, are invocations offered in this way efficacious?'

'Indeed, why not? How else could all these illiterates repeat more than a few of them? This way, they offer by turning what they *would* recite if they *could.* Their heart's wish is the same—to honour the Three Precious Ones.'

'I see. But I've noticed even learned lamas twisting small hand-wheels in the same way.'

'Of course. To each man a single mouth. How else could any of us get through all the recitations we should like to offer in a lifetime?'

'And you, Sir?' Noticing some insignia of nobility on his costume I used a Chinese honorific for minor royalties. For answer, he plunged his hand into the pouch-like fold of his orange silk gown which protruded over a bronze silk sash, and brought out a lovely prayer-wheel of silver and white cloisonné. With the merest flick of his wrist, he set it rotating smoothly like the flywheel of an engine and stood waiting for my reaction with a quizzical smile.

'What a lovely thing!' I exclaimed spontaneously, forgetting all about 'You things me; me things you', and so found myself in an embarrassing position. Though he immediately offered me the wheel, he could have had no desire that I should take it, yet I had to be

exceedingly careful in refusing it not to give the impression of scorning either the gift or its owner. Somehow or other, I did manage this without causing the bright black eyes to lose their lazy smile.

The circumambulators were not the only active worshippers in sight. Farther away from the *chorten*, nearer the outer wall of the precincts, were numerous devotees, both men and women, each with a broad seven-foot plank extending from just in front of his feet in the direction of the *chorten*, the farther end raised a few inches from the ground. These people apparently possessed unlimited energy, for they were performing the strenuous 'grand prostration' several hundred or a thousand times in succession and without a moment's intermission. First the hands were placed palm to palm above the head and brought slowly down to the level of the heart; then the devotee would stoop right down and grasp the two sides of his plank just in front of his feet; after that, the whole body would shoot forwards, the hands running along the edge of the plank from bottom to top, until the devotee was lying flat on his stomach with legs outstretched behind him and hands in front like a swimmer. The final movement consisted of raising the joined palms above the head again while the body remained prone, after which the devotee curled up like a caterpillar, rose to his feet and lifted his joined palms for the next prostration. With each of these separate movements a particular mantra was muttered and, if the mind were properly concentrated as well, then body, speech and mind merged into a single rhythm of pure veneration for the Buddha-Dharma represented by the *chorten*. Whereas a hundred and eight prostrations of this kind would leave me, even in my youthful days, almost too weak to stand, Mongols of both sexes and all ages often perform one thousand and eighty prostrations at a time!

Everybody I met there seemed very willing to talk and to welcome my interest in their affairs. A Chinese craftsman among the bystanders provided me with some facts about the *chorten*.

'As you doubtless know already, Hsienshêng, Wu T'ai is the principal earthly dwelling of Manjusri Bodhisattva (Wên Shu, Personification of Divine Wisdom). We Chinese hold that there are nine sacred mountains, five Taoist and four Buddhist, of which Wu T'ai is one. But to these Mongols and Tibetans, Wu T'ai is a place so sacred that merely to come here and circumambulate the *chorten* one thousand and eighty times ensures rebirth into a state many times nearer *Nirvana* than could otherwise be attained in this life. There is said to be a relic of the Buddha in the *chorten*, but whether the *chorten* was built

for the relic or whether the relic was brought here for the *chorten* I do not know. Chiefly, the *chorten* forms a central place of worship where even the most illiterate pilgrims to this mountain may consumate their pilgrimage.'

My informant, though a Chinese, was a devout follower of the Vajrayana and loved to lavish his decorative gifts upon the embellishment of the temples. Obligingly he climbed the great steps with me and took me to see some of the work he had helped to complete in the Great Hall of P'usa Ting. The sweeping roof of yellow-glazed tiles, the colonnade of elaborately decorated scarlet pillars and the crimson walls made it almost a replica of one of the halls of state in the Forbidden City, except that it was in a much better state of repair. The fresh lacquer shone like molten bronze still glowing from the furnace; and the appointments of the interior were the richest I have ever seen before or since. The ceiling of carven panels blazed with multi-coloured stylistic designs; the tremendous pillars (formed of tree-trunks carried there from over a thousand miles to the south-west) were wrapped in gorgeous Lhasa carpets, the altar furnishings were of precious metals and fine porcelains; long, silken banners hung from the ceiling, beautifully embroidered with texts in Tibetan, Mongol and Chinese; and the principal statue of the Bodhisattva carrying his Sword of Wisdom was plated with, if not made of, pure gold. It glittered like a network of diamonds, reflecting the tiny points of flame from more than a hundred votive lamps. On a subsidiary altar were receptacles piled with heavy pieces of jewelry, the offerings of Mongol and Tibetan pilgrims—necklaces, bangles, brooches, large ear-ornaments, belt-clasps, buckles, weapon-holders and archery rings, all these being mostly of gold or silver inset with jade, turquoise, coral and other brilliant stones. I wondered how often these receptacles were emptied into the treasury, and I marvelled at the simple sincerity of the Mongols who themselves lived in tents or primitive shacks, keeping for their own use the barest necessities of life. Such generosity may, from one point of view, appear misplaced; but who can fail to be moved by its sublimity?

A Lama explained to me once that the donors of these offerings gain merit in two ways—a little because their gifts help to supply the monasteries with the means required for their upkeep; much on account of the spirit of relinquishment involved, the degree of merit accruing from a gift being proportionate to the relative degree of sacrifice involved—exactly as in the biblical story of the widow's mite.

(Incidentally, the belief that the gift itself matters much more than what is done with it accounts for the scarcity of organized charities in Buddhist countries, which now causes some of the younger Asian Buddhists to reflect; yet in Burma and Siam, even today, many more people are willing to devote money to the building of unnecessary temples in places where temples abound, than to the upkeep of hospitals, schools and clinics.)

In the Second Hall, rites were being performed when we entered but the Chinese craftsman could not explain their significance. The booming of Tibetan horns, ten or fifteen feet long, the wail of flutes, the crash of drums and cymbals accompanied by voices which seemed to come from deep down inside the stomachs of the worshippers, produced an effect at once harsh and magical—harsh in the sense that such music is by no means sweet, magical in that devotees sustained by the powerful wings of those elemental sounds can rise easily into a state of inner tranquillity and arrest the *karma*-forming processes of conceptual thought.

A few days later, I attended the opening ceremony of Wu T'ai's annual Holy Week. Thousands of Mongol pilgrims, with a sprinkling of Central Asians and Tibetans, took part. All men, and all dressed in crimson ceremonial *kasa* [togas], they sat cross-legged in long, evenly spaced rows, facing inwards towards a central lane running east-west across the Great Court [a quadrangle very much larger than Trinity Great Court, Cambridge]. At one end of this lane sat the enthroned Kushog, robed from head to foot in cloth of gold, surrounded by colourful ecclesiastical dignitaries from each of the great monasteries. The rites opened with the same eerie music and chanting as that just described, but with upwards of a thousand people taking part in the chanting and with horns so long that each required six or eight children to hold it in position! This time the wild music reminded me of the more sombre sounds of Nature—the rumbling of thunder or of a distant waterfall, the crash of a gathering avalanche or, perhaps, of cannon shot echoing among embattled heights. When the chanting had drawn to a close, there followed a 'theological' debate. The combatants, who leapt up from among the crowd and ran to the High Lama's dais, swayed their bodies and stamped their feet, striking their left palms with their right hands in what looked like a ritual dance, meanwhile bellowing forth questions and arguments at the tops of their voices. There were elders who trumpeted like bulls and even a few child contestants who had not yet lost their boyish treble. Every speaker

received an attentive hearing from the huge assembly which now and then broke silence to roar applause, yelling with joy or laughing their splendid nomad belly-laughs. I wondered if the mediaeval debates at Oxford or Paris had had points in common with this one.

As I knew hardly a word of Mongol, I spent much of the time gazing about me. Crowded against the walls of the Great Court were many ladies, some with a fantastic hair-arrangement imitative of the magnificent horns of a mountain ram. I reflected that, just as the Manchus, who owed an empire to their horses, used to have the sleeves of their official robes cut to resemble horses' hoofs and to wear their hair braided into a 'horse's tail', so did these Mongols pay tribute to the flocks which provided them with so much—meat, butter, milk, cheese, garments, skin-tents, blankets, belts, straps, water-skins and many other daily necessities.

Just then, my 'shaman' appeared, having apparently delayed his departure for the sake of the festival. He swaggered up to the rostrum and attacked the venerable Master of the Debate so successfully that the audience rolled where they sat in paroxysms of laughter. Even the defeated Master was forced to join in, and from the outer circle of women came peal after peal of shrill mirth. I would have given much to understand! The combination of deep religious feeling with merriment and homely simplicity is always attractive. The Mongols who conduct their religious debates in this way and the Thais who bring picnic lunches to eat upon the floor of the temple seem to me more truly 'religious' than the hushed, sanctimonious worshippers I had grown used to during my boyhood. During the days which followed, I began to seek out various Lamas who had been recommended to me for one reason or another, but my ignorance of Tibetan and Mongolian created a barrier which, in most cases, was difficult to overcome. My deepest inspiration came from the simple Mongol pilgrims who inspired me with the belief that learning and scholarship are by no means essential to the truly religious life or to gaining freedom from the Wheel. On this mountain dedicated to Divine Wisdom, I learnt that such Wisdom must be sought for in silence and not at all by discursive thought. As one Lama expressed it, 'First purify the temple of your body by expelling all extraneous thought; next, rest in perfect silence with all the doors and windows of that body-temple wide open and, with deep longing in your heart, silently invite the Stream of Wisdom to pour in.'

Another Lama to whom I went to pay my respects at about this

time asked me if I found Wu T'ai beautiful, which led to my asking him the place of beauty in the process of Enlightenment. 'Does not the cultivation of dispassion,' I asked, 'require that we withdraw from beauty as much as from ugliness, and do not the sutras teach that beauty may be an impediment to Truth?'

'How wrong you are,' he answered frankly. 'Beauty is an impediment only when we desire its exclusive possession. But the contemplation of natural loveliness—mountains, forests, waterfalls, and the *right* contemplation of works of art do not excite any longings for hampering possessions, or any lusts. Rather they reflect the silent, shining perfection of *Nirvana*. We of the Vajrayana learn to seek *Nirvana* in *Sangsara*; it is the beauty all around us here which makes us so sure that *Nirvana* surrounds us now. When the Third Eye (the eye of the spirit) is opened, you will not seek *Nirvana* elsewhere than in your own heart and own surroundings. The joy of beholding the scarlet and gold of sunrise or the multi-coloured carpet of flowers on this sacred plateau is of the same order as the joy of the Ultimate Oneness, though it be only a reflection of a reflection's reflection. When you go back to the city and find ugliness around you, place flowers or jades in your house to remind you of the beauty which awaits the opening of your spirit's eye.'

Of course the ordinary Mongol pilgrims did not understand things thus. To the more simple-minded among them, the Personification of Wisdom had become another god, a process analagous to the deification of *Sōphē* among certain Byzantine sects—yet even this development deserves more than the scornful shoulder-shrug with which some Western scholars have reacted to it. For Buddhists, Divine Wisdom has nothing to do with factual knowledge or book-learning. *Prajna* is that intuitive knowledge of Reality which lies far above the level of conceptual thought; indeed it is interrupted and blocked out by conceptual thought. It follows that *one-pointed* meditation on *Prajna*, whether conceived of in the abstract or as a deity, is more likely to lead to *Prajna*'s realization than any careful analytical study of the sutras or any amount of discursive meditation to discover whether *Prajna* is a substance, a state, or otherwise. The latter type of 'scientific' meditation cuts the mind into many compartments and makes access of Intuitive Wisdom impossible. Thus, there are teachers who claim that direct approach to Truth comes more easily to the illiterate or semi-illiterate than to the scholar, the former having less mental sediment to dispose of.

Scattered on lonely peaks and precipitous slopes, or dotting the fair, sun-warmed plateau were shrines and temples to Manjusri (Wisdom) without number. Generally he was depicted in his benign form as a compassionate being whose smile belied the ferocity of the blue lion he bestrode or the menace of his upraised Sword of Wisdom. Sometimes, he appeared as a lovely youth—symbol of eternal spring; but occasionally he could be seen in wrathful form as the blue-bodied, bull-headed, thousand-armed Yamanataka ringed by a circlet of blue flames and dancing on a bed of corpses. I do not remember the significance of this symbolism. Christian missionaries, on seeing such figures in Buddhist temples, find in them a justification of their belief that the 'heathen' are ruled by fear; but in this they err; for, though in all Buddhist countries terrible monsters, demons and Raksha can be seen in the temples, Buddhists are never taught to fear them. In some cases, they represent the powers of evil which, having been converted to Buddhism, now hold the office of Guardians of the Holy Dharma; in other cases, the beings themselves are held to be divine, but their hideous, ferocious forms symbolize Buddhism's hostility towards the impersonal forces of ignorance and evil (the two are really synonymous) and they are *never* in any single case regarded as hostile to living beings. That would be impossible, for Buddhism teaches that the worst 'sinner' is a poor, sad creature deluded by his ignorance of Truth, and therefore to be pitied rather than hated or despised. In the case of Yamanataka, though I do not remember the significance of the symbolism in detail, I know that the wrathful forms of the various Bodhisattvas *in general* symbolize the perfection of Truth which, lying beyond all duality on the plane of the One Mind, is beyond good and Evil, beauty or ugliness; hence symbolism only in terms of beauty and tranquillity would imply the exaltation of the part at the expense of the whole. The lesson to be learnt from the wrathful and peaceful aspects of the Bodhisattvas is that beauty and ugliness are ultimately one, or rather that both of them vanish when perfection is achieved. This *must* be so, for light is inconceivable without dark; therefore, if Ultimate Perfection contains the one, it must also contain the other, whereas its own perfection raises it above both.

Before Wu T'ai's innumerable altars, incense and butter-lamps burnt day and night. Some of the pilgrims spent as much as five years on the return journey, travelling on foot from the farthest reaches of Mongolia's deserts and the uttermost confines of Tibet's wilderness of snow to lay their offerings upon these altars. The deep religious

satisfaction of the multitudes, twirling their prayer-wheels, clicking their rosaries, bowing themselves to the earth, chanting sutras and intoning invocations before the shrines has probably had no counterpart in the West since mediaeval times. Such boundless sincerity soon put me to shame when I reflected on my own coldly intellectual and sceptical approach to Truth. Wu T'ai taught me that doctrine matters little, that faith, sincerity and a burning desire for Enlightenment provide us with more than nine-tenths of the equipment we need for the journey to *Nirvana*.

One day, the lamas Wang and Ma suggested that I pay a visit to the Venerable Nêng Hai, Abbot of the great Chinese monastery I had passed on my way across the plateau to P'usa Ting—a very Jewel of Wisdom, they called him. I took their advice, but rather unwillingly, as my visits to Wu T'ai's greatest men had previously been disappointing and left me with a strong prejudice in favour of the lesser known Teachers there. For example, my visit to the Kushog Lama (possibly ill-timed) had been a very formal and unproductive affair. Affably, but rather absent-mindedly, accepting a ceremonial scarf from my hands, he had condescended to return it by draping it around my neck with his own illustrious fingers. A good beginning, except that nothing much followed. A few formal words of welcome, a blessing, somebody signalling that it was time to leave—that was all. As for my visit to the Living Buddha, that had been very much worse. A plump youth with a face almost as colourless as his Western-style suit of Shantung silk, he scarcely bothered to look up at me from the photographs he was studying with two Chinese officials from the magistrate's *yamên*. At the moment when I rose to kneeling position from the ritual prostration, he suddenly laughed in my face as though I were a performing ape, thereby providing me with the only instance of discourtesy from a man of high degree which I encountered during seventeen years in China!

'Aha, what have we here? A European Buddhist? Very nice, very nice indeed. May I press you to a glass of Buddha-nectar?' He waved his hand towards a half-empty brandy bottle standing on the table next to the photographs. 'No? Aha. Then to what else am I indebted for the honour of your—er—your etcetera, etcetera—you know what I mean?'

The Chinese officials were staring woodenly at the tablecloth, laughter in their eyes, lips firmly compressed lest they, too, be guilty of unmerited discourtesy.

'I came to offer my *respects*,' I answered coldly. 'Having done so, I ask permission to retire.'

'Granted, granted,' he cried petulantly, clearly stung by my tone and perhaps afraid that his Chinese companions considered him too boorish. 'You may go. We—er—are attending to important affairs. I thank you.'

With great deliberation, I repeated the triple prostration as elaborately as I could, forcing myself to concentrate on the teaching: 'Bowing to the Robe, you bow to the Buddha, not to the poor, naked wretch it conceals.'

With these two episodes in mind, I approached the Chinese monastery scarcely expecting that the Abbot of so grand a place would have much time to spare for me. In general, I had found Mongols and Tibetans more spiritual than the Chinese. Ergo, in a place where the Tibetan Kushog had been briefly courteous but uninterested in me and the Mongolian Living Buddha positively insulting, it seemed unlikely that the leading Chinese Abbot would take me to his bosom merely because I was a co-religionist from the outermost rim of the world. I had yet to learn that the Venerable Nêng Hai fully deserved his reputation as scholar and saint.

Nêng Hai had spent many years in the Tibetan and Mongolian borderlands, chiefly in the Chinese province of Kokonor (Ch'ing Hai, the Blue Sea or Lake) where the three cultures blend. He was now attempting a compromise between Lamaism and Chinese Buddhism, incorporating the salient features of both. Symbolically, he wore robes of Lamaistic yellow-ochre cut in the Chinese fashion with butterfly-wing sleeves. His monastery, Kuangchi Moup'ang, was outwardly like any other important Chinese monastery, but included a subsidiary Great Hall where initiates practised the higher branches of Vajrayana meditation and rites. My first meeting with him came near to confirming my worst fears. He was scarcely more cordial than the Kushog Lama had been, but in this case the reason was too obvious for me to feel hurt. He had just returned to his sleeping place after delivering a two-hour sermon and, not being of strong physique, was naturally tired. Seated cross-legged on his couch, he accepted my prostrations and offered me a little earthenware plaque of the Bodhisattva Manjusri which he suspended from my neck by a blue ribbon. After that I was free to go, partly because he was really tired and partly, as he told me later, because he took me for one of the countless pilgrims who used to come to him for no other purpose than to be able to include him among

the 'sights' seen on Wu T'ai. During subsequent meetings, he became very warm towards me and to this circumstance I owe much of my knowledge of the Vajrayana.

One day I asked him: 'Your Reverence, will you tell me why you, brought up as a Master of Zen, now prefer to instruct your disciples through the medium of the Vajrayana? Such cases must be very rare.'

'Yes, rare,' he replied, 'for few of our Chinese monks know enough of the Vajrayana to appreciate its great value. As for your question, I can answer it best in symbolic language. Regardless of sect, or even of religion, we must symbolize the Ultimate Perfection as a calm and shining void, whereas *Sangsara* is a vast whirlpool of shifting forms. Some regard them as separate and seek to pass from the 'lower' into the 'higher'; others, accepting their oneness in theory, strive to realize it in fact. Symbolically, we may imagine an enormous circle, pure and motionless in the centre, turgid and violently disturbed at the outer rim, but without any definite boundary line between the stillness at the heart and the violent motion at the circumference. There are, so to speak, various intervening states. As the Taoists have said, the One becomes two (positive and negative); the two, eight; the eight, sixty-four; the sixty-four, myriads of transient entities. Visualize, therefore, pure spirit at the centre, from which spring certain major forces of tremendous power; visualize these forces as dividing and subdividing towards the circumference, and subdividing yet again and again until the myriads of 'separate' objects result. Visualize these main, secondary, tertiary and lesser forces as the Transformers which, mutually interacting, produce all that is—myriads and myriads of ever-changing entities. You may, for reasons I shall not go into now, visualize the centre as pure white; from this radiate the four main Transformers in the form of flames—green, yellow, blue and red respectively; and with smaller flames issuing in turn from them, coloured in intermediate hues. As we go towards the circumference, the flames get ever more numerous by subdivision and, of course, smaller and less clearly defined, until at last they merge into the outer whirling chaos—mud-coloured, smoke-coloured, unclear, murky.

'Now, a Zen adept (and some of other sects, other faiths) seeks to leap from the muddy whirlpools straight into the pure white, radiant stillness at the centre. This *can* be done and *has* been done, but it is an extraordinary feat of which few are capable. Most of us do well to aim first at a more modest result. The Sages of the Vajryana have, through Enlightenment, been able to make a detailed study of the intermediate

forces and the Main Transformers nearer the heart of the circle. (With patience, faith and pertinacity, you may discover them for yourself.) They have even learnt to harness these transforming forces and they have handed down to their disciples methods for harnessing the force or forces suited to each one individually. By concentrating upon a force selected by your teacher and harnessing it according to his instructions, you will gain much power—power which all too many adepts foolishly misuse to perform vain "miracles". But you must use this power to penetrate more deeply into the circle, to come in contact with the secondary and even with the primary forces; these, being Transformers of tremendous power, will sweep you towards the Centre; in this very life, they will transform your *Sangsaric* surroundings into *Nirvana* itself. Thus will you achieve what you may not be strong enough to achieve by the more direct method of Zen, unless you are one of those for whom Zen is the best way of all.

'As evidence of the truth of all this, consider how many men of different faiths have wrought marvels and achieved sainthood through the power of their God or gods, all attained through fervent prayer and contemplation. What is that God but another name for the Centre, those gods but other names for the Transformers? Names are unimportant. Have you not met Buddhists groping in the outer darkness and Mussulmans or Christians whose faces shine with Truth? Just as many Mongols here regard Manjusri as a god, rather than the personification of Divine Wisdom, so do Christians mistake the Divine Forces for angels, the Centre for God; yet what does it matter? All prayers, rites and methods of concentration which open up the inner man must bring forth the inner Light, whereon their purpose is achieved. I am a Vajrayanist only because I conceive, rightly or wrongly, that the Vajrayana Sages have mapped the road more completely and better understood the methods of harnessing the Transformers than people of most other sects and faiths. I have met Christian missionaries at Kokonor who are laughable in their ignorance; I have also met two missionaries of the Heavenly Lord (Catholic) Sect who are fully Enlightened Bodhisattvas! Let those Buddhists who are still lost in darkness kneel before them in all humility.

'Truth, as you have known for a long, long time, resides only in the innermost depths of your own being; but there are many layers of truth and many paths to approach Ultimate Truth. The Vajrayana possesses knowledge of more than a thousand of those paths (which are yet the One Path). Other teachers know of one, two or three. So

it is to the Vajrayana Sage you must go, if you would learn which of those many paths is exactly suited to you. If you prove worthy, such a teacher will render up to you the keys for unlocking each of the great gates of brass which bar the way to Everlasting Truth.'

So saying, he paused and stared at me in silence for what seemed many minutes. Then he asked me certain questions concerning my initiation at the hands of the Dorjé Rimpoché. When I had answered as best I could, he exclaimed with a sigh:

'Such a wonderful opportunity lost! How very sad that you were too young and ignorant to benefit!' Several similarly enigmatic remarks followed, until finally he said:

'Yet the seed once planted cannot die. Water it diligently and it will surely sprout. How could you have been so foolish as to arrive late for that Grand Initiation? In the first part, which you missed, lay something of priceless value to you. Your *karma* is the strangest admixture of good and evil. Ah well, rest tranquil in the knowledge that, when the time comes, the Greenness will be there!'

'Greenness?'

'Yes, the colour of the trees, the colour of the Northern Region.'

'I don't understand, Your Reverence.'

But he had walked away, leaving me with an enigma not to be resolved for many years.

Staying in Nêng Hai's monastery were a doctor and a banker, two good friends of mine from Tientsin. Though both were wealthy men and likely to bestow large gifts in return for the hospitality they enjoyed, they were entertained in a manner infinitely spartan compared with the luxury I enjoyed at P'usa Ting. The food was strictly vegetarian, the sleeping rooms as simple as could be, the taking of wine, even by visitors, strictly forbidden. The contrast between the two monasteries was significant. Chinese Buddhism, with the partial exception of Zen, places emphasis on the renunciation of the world—this doctrine being a necessary corrective for the Chinese attachment to physical ease and comfort. Tibetan Buddhism, 'catering' for the spartan Tibetans and Mongols, teaches the realization of *Nirvana* through *Sangsara* or 'seeking Truth *through* life'. Though Tibet has its hermits like Milarespa (who cut his trousers into covers for nose and fingers, claiming that if the sexual organ needs concealment, the same must be true of fingers and nose, since one protuberance cannot be more or less vile than another), the Vajrayana on the whole prefers the method of accepting life's glitter, rather than withdrawing from it, since a

properly controlled study of baubles is more likely to lead to personal conviction of their worthlessness than the method of turning away from them and *believing* them worthless. This doctrine can be safely practised by the wise anywhere, and even by the majority of people in those countries where material comfort is still far too rare and slight to be overwhelming as it has become in the modern West and, to a lesser extent, in the cities of China. Hence the spartan simplicity of Chinese monastery guest-rooms as compared with the splendour of the richer Tibetan monasteries.

On the day of my first visit to Nêng Hai, my Tientsin friends, Dr Chang and Mr Li, walked back to P'usa Ting with me, as they were due to bestow offerings upon the pilgrims assembled for Holy Week. Once more I took my place in the outermost row of the crimson-togaed Mongols seated in the Great Court. The long opening invocation was chanted as usual; I had by this time learnt that it was associated with the offering of a *mandala*—a complicated pattern of precious stones laid upon a mound of rice by the officiating Lama. It represented the whole universe, including sun, moon, earth and stars, together with all precious things therein contained. The words of the invocation include some more or less to this effect. 'If the whole universe were mine, with its limitless wealth of beauty, I would offer all of it without exception, as a token of my boundless respect for the Holy Dharma, well knowing that even such an offering is far from worthy of an object thus sublime.' In other words, even the glory of sun and moon fades before the brilliance of transcendental Wisdom, Enlightenment, Reality!

My Chinese friends were both dressed in dark silks which formed a striking contrast with the glittering garments of the senior Lamas and the Kushog's robe of cloth-of-gold. After saluting the Kushog and extolling the merits of the assembled pilgrims, who had endured such hardships among burning deserts and dizzy mountains in order to do honour to the Bodhisattva Manjusri upon the sacred mountain, they each handed a sack of silver coins to a gaily dressed attendant. Thereupon, the two attendants moved up and down the long ranks of seated pilgrims, placing five *mou* (half a silver dollar) in the hands of each. Such a gift was at that time equal to the price of four or five simple meals; the total must have amounted to several thousand dollars. Spiritual refreshment followed. More brightly clad attendants appeared, each carrying a tall, silver vessel decked with peacocks' feathers and sacred *kusa* grass. The pilgrims cupped their

hands in turn, receiving a few drops of holy water from the spout of the vessel, of which they sipped one part and placed the remainder upon their heads.

'What is this holy water?' I asked an elderly Chinese-speaking Mongol on my left.

'This holy water, first is water. First, people take to temple as offering of purity. Then it symbolized what people give up. Now brought from temple for us, it symbolizes merit come back to us. Two Chinese pilgrims make big merit *by our help*. We receive gifts, so they can get merit. Now we gain merit, for helping them get their merit.'

My informant's Chinese was far from good, but I think that this more or less renders his meaning. His words contained an idea quite new to me; namely that, though it may be more blessed to give than to receive, yet he who receives confers a favour upon the giver! The more I thought about it, the more I found this idea acceptable.

After the close of the ceremony, I rejoined my two friends and arranged with them to go upon a tour of the five sacred peaks as soon as Holy Week should be over. Meanwhile, I particularly enjoyed the spectacular events occurring on the last two days of that festival. On the penultimate day, a grand religious dance was held. As with the other public festivals, it took place in the Great Court; but, this time, everybody except the performers was crowded in a densely packed circle, men, women and children all mixed together and forming a kaleidoscopic mass of shifting colours. Close inspection revealed that the silk and satin brocades were covered with grease-stains and every other sort of grimy discolouration, while hair and faces glistened with butter and sweat. From a little distance, the crowd looked elegant enough to grace an imperial reception, so rich-looking their furs, silks and heavy jewelry. Presently the Kushog arrived, accompanied by the usual scintillating throng, together with the Chinese civil authorities in their drab, postman-like official uniforms, and the Living Buddha, dressed in a suit of sharkskin. His Holiness's boredom was manifest, his smile sardonic and condescending; but to the Mongols he was every inch a Living Buddha, an incarnation of divinity. Though they all knew of his loose manner of living, their veneration for him was unimpaired, unless in the privacy of their own hearts. I imagine that this provides a close analogy with the veneration accorded by mediaeval Europe to the most loose-living of popes.

I am not one of those who dismiss the Tibetan belief in Living Buddhas or Divine Incarnations as mere nonsense. I prefer to think

that the Lamas entrusted with the task of discovering such an incarnation from among children born soon after the decease of his predecessor, may sometimes err. In any case, it was quite impossible for me to believe in the divinity of Wu T'ai's Living Buddha, who was very well known for a dissolute mode of life and for scorning his sacred duties quite openly. On the other hand, to a firm believer in the reincarnation of all living creatures, there is nothing incredible in the claim that certain very holy persons can choose where they will be reincarnated and that they can be identified by their old followers after rebirth. 'Living Buddha' would seem to be something of a misnomer, except perhaps in two or three cases. The phrase 'Sacred Incarnation' would be less susceptible to misinterpretation.

Of the dancing, my Chinese friends and I could understand only the general theme. The chief dancers, masked and fantastically garbed, were divided into two main groups—the Forces of Good and the Forces of Evil, each with its own range of costumes and each with dance-movements peculiar to itself or to the sub-groups into which it was divided. The characters included Bodhisattvas, gods, heroes, warriors, kings and lamas on the one hand; ghosts, witches, skeletons, spirits, demons, magicians and so on formed the other group. Minor characters, such as birds, animals and monsters, seemed to be attached to both parties. Curiously the skeletons (boys dressed in black costumes, adorned with bones crudely painted across them in white and wearing skull-masks) had enormous male sexual organs attached to them—a survival from pre-Buddhist days, no doubt; but why should *skeletons* be thus distinguished?

The dancing, like the accompanying music, was exciting, bizarre, fantastic, macabre, now and then tensely thrilling, but never in my judgement even remotely beautiful. On the whole, I preferred the Forces of Evil; for, when the arena was given over to that horrid company, there was a kind of truth expressed. I mean that the groups of gyrating, contorted, hideously grimacing monsters did succeed in giving an impression of *living* evil; while by no stretch of imagination could the stately, sword-wielding Virtuous Ones be thought to mirror, however distortedly, the grave inevitability of ultimate justice, or the peaceful triumphs of such gentle virtues as benevolence, pity and compassion. Besides, it was tiresome to see the smug-faced Virtuous Ones gain such *easy* victories over the recognizable symbols of folly and vice. I had heard it said that such dances stemmed from a pre-Buddhist period when 'primitive' men, finding themselves at the mercy of

Nature's terrible forces, were by no means convinced of the ultimate triumph of good; so perhaps the easy victories gained by the Virtuous Ones were added by later choreographers with tongue in cheek.

The dancing, though splendidly colourful, was entirely eclipsed by the events of the following day. Early in the morning, a magnificent procession set out from P'usa Ting and followed the traditionally serpentine route to another of the principal monasteries. According to ancient custom, the Kushog Lama and all his followers were obliged to pay this visit of state every year. With the passing of centuries, the procession and attendant rites had become more and more elaborate. Even the producers of such magnificent spectacles as *Henry V* or *Quo Vadis*, *The Ten Commandments* and so on might be excused for goggling at the display I was fortunate enough to behold that day. The procession equalled a Roman Triumph in scale and probably surpassed it in the lavishness of equipment and paraphernalia. I doubt if the most skilful pen could do justice to it and I am very sure that I can at most give some vague notion of its splendour.

All the morning I stood on a little knoll and watched the two-mile-long procession approach and recede, winding its way across the flower-spangled plateau. The gorgeous, scintillating splendour of men and bedecked animals, their jewels, precious metals, silks and brocades gleaming in the sun, robbed the wild flowers of their colours, stole the blue from the sky and the crimson or ochre from the monastery walls. First came a group of grave, satin-clad beings on white steeds with silver-chain harness and embroidered saddle-cloths. They were followed by a rainbow-coloured troupe of musicians, the trumpeters with eight gaily dressed children marching before each to support their prodigiously long instruments, which thundered continuously. Immediately after these musicians came the Bodhisattva's palanquin, its silken curtains parted so that the golden statue shone like fire in the August sun and lightning seemed to flash from the blade of the enormous Sword of Wisdom. The procession of riders and footmen which followed stretched almost two miles to the rear, the great dignitaries and their followers from each of Wu Tai's three hundred monasteries having laid aside their ecclesiastical togas for gay costumes exactly like those worn thirty years before by the mandarins and eunuchs taking part in solemn ceremonies before the Throne of the Son of Heaven. Even the costumes of lamas Wang and Ma (too junior in the hierarchy to take part in the procession) would have seemed drab in such a throng. Almost at the end of the procession came the Kushog

on foot, his immediate attendants bearing those ancient symbols of royalty or divinity, a ten-foot gilded pole supporting a golden fan and a many-tiered ceremonial umbrella of white and gold. His face was entirely hidden by a fringe of golden tassels falling forward from his headdress; from a little distance, he looked less like a human being than an animated image entirely covered by plates of gold. So much pomp and splendour was hard to reconcile with the gently austere doctrine of Gautama Buddha; as a spectacle, the procession has never in my experience been equalled.

The traditional route twisted and turned so that the procession would pass through the outer domains of numerous intervening monasteries and enable the various abbots to pay their respects. In each place, a portable altar had been raised, surrounded by dignitaries who lighted incense and candles as the procession drew near. Twice they performed the triple prostration, first to welcome the palanquin of the Bodhisattva and again to pay respects to the Kushog. The latter was preceeded by two resplendent figures bearing long poles to which was attached a horizontal silken banner or curtain, of which the lower edge was only some three feet above the ground, so that the whole formed a moving screen for His Holiness. As he approached, individuals would spring from the ranks of spectators lining both sides of the route, hurl themselves under this screen and then roll hurriedly out of the way of the oncoming Lama. There was a degree of skill in this exercise, for to have touched the banner with one's head would have brought upon one the bystanders' scorn and to have collided with the Kushog would have been so destructive of his majestic dignity as to amount to a kind of sacrilege. Just as I was picturing such an unfortunate collision in my mind, my legs unexpectedly started carrying me forward and, almost as though somebody else had willed it, I found myself flopping to the ground beneath the curtain and then rolling vigorously away as the golden shoes approached. My feelings at that moment were those of a car driver whose vehicle suddenly skids out of control. I have often pondered that curious little event and tried to account for it, but always in vain. I supposed I must have *desired* to do it just for fun and that I was in too much haste for the desire to register properly in my mind, but even this explanation seems very odd.

When the procession had passed, I sat down on the little knoll from which I had witnessed its approach and waited for it to return. Meanwhile I reflected upon my enormous good fortune. Except in Lhasa and perhaps one or two other Tibetan cities, such grandeur cannot be seen

A lamaistic statue of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, Peking

Sculptures discovered in or near the remains of Nalanda University

Sculptures discovered in or near the remains of Nalanda University

in the world today, unless in its synthetic Hollywood form; for pageantry on a vast scale has vanished from the earth. In many countries the totality of all the colourful experiences of a lifetime might not amount to half what I had seen in a space of less than two hours. The days of emperors, kings and princes have gone; their descendants have vanished from the earth or else retain the merest shadow of their forefathers' glory. Even in places where majestic pageantry still exists, as in the Vatican, those taking part seem to be in fancy dress on account of the drab modern clothes of the spectators. Fortunate indeed was I to have beheld during the late thirties of this century a spectacle which perhaps equalled in splendour the progress of the great Ch'ien Lung on his way to sacrifice at the Altar of Heaven, or one of the solemn processions of the mediaeval Church, or the enthronement of some world-conquering monarch such as Alexander. Not only was the procession itself the very acme of gorgeous splendour, but the lovely, flower-decked plateau, the green and purple mountains beyond, the brightly coloured buildings of a score of monasteries and the gay ornaments and costumes of the spectators all combined to provide a harmonious background only somewhat less splendid than the writhing rainbow-hued 'dragon' winding its way across the sacred ground.

Alas, soon after, Wu T'ai was destined to be a battlefield. There, Japanese fought Chinese and Communists fought the Kuomintang Government. How much of her former glories remain?

. . . . .

The day came when I joined my friends on a tour of the five peaks or 'terraces' from which Wu T'ai takes its name. The party consisted of Dr Chang, Mr Li the banker, and myself, together with Mrs Ch'en, a devout widow, and her extraordinarily beautiful seventeen-year-old son, Kungtsun. Naturally we were accompanied by guides and muleteers. The Ch'ens were Southerners who had come to the holy mountain in order to gain merit for the recently deceased Mr Ch'en's spirit. Kungtsun wore a long, grey robe of plain cloth and a white armband to symbolize his bereavement. The robe suited his rather graceful beauty; and I was happy that he did not follow the example of so many educated Chinese youths in wearing Western clothes; for, as all the elders wore Chinese gowns as a matter of course, there was not a single thing in sight to destroy the pleasant illusion of having slipped

back several centuries into a better world. It is perhaps very childish of me, but I love to cultivate such illusions on the all too rare occasions when this is possible. I believe that anyone who loves China must be in love with the past; for almost every ugliness there, except that of poverty and its attendant evils, is connected with the present century.

I shall not describe the journey to each peak separately. They were all very lovely, but word-pictures of them would make them appear tediously alike. Instead I shall describe two striking incidents which occurred respectively on the first and last peak visited.

At the foot of the first of the five peaks stood a shrine dedicated to T'ien Lung Wang, a pre-Buddhist deity charged by the ancient gods with the duty of controlling the rain and therefore styled His Majesty the Dragon of the Sky, in contrast to another deity, His Majesty the Dragon of the Ocean. Like many similar deities, they are thought to have embraced Buddhism and to have become Guardians of the Faith. (The Buddhist and Catholic Churches have both shown much wisdom in their treatment of vanquished gods and of the ceremonies and feasts connected with them.) Now Mr Li (unlike myself) was one of those members of our little caravan who felt it proper to propitiate the old gods. He should therefore have been among those who went forward to pay their respects at this shrine, since in China obligations towards particular deities depend upon whether they are among those you believe in or not—a very logical and proper attitude, I think. However, Mr Li was no horseman; neither mounting nor dismounting were particularly easy for him, so he declined to get off his mule and join the muleteers and Mrs Ch'en in their devotions. A little later, as we rode up the rocky path into still cooler regions, clouds began to obscure the sun; range upon range of mountains was swallowed up in the dragon-mouth of the coming storm; and the first deluge of that summer burst around us. The rain drove horizontally towards us, cutting through our clothes and drenching us as thoroughly as would a waterfall. Our limbs began to shake, our teeth to chatter, and the dripping, dispirited mules to slither upon the dangerous slope, dislodging stones beneath their hoofs. The path became a stream in full flood. For some reason, the rain turned my lovely red-bronze Mongolian robe bright green—a metamorphosis from which it never recovered and which rendered it unwearable, since green is never worn by males in China and it was far too large for any Chinese female. After an hour or so of bitter discomfort, we came to a small wayside temple which was able to provide us with a heated *k'ang*, where we lay down

in a long row naked beneath our bedding, while our clothes were dried before a roaring fire in another room.

'Don't worry,' said Dr Chang. 'These summer rains never last long.'

He was terribly wrong. The next day and the next, the rain showed no signs of abating; rather it beat with increasing fury at the windows and was blown horizontally against the mountainside. Everyone grew gloomy and each showed it in his own peculiar way—some by talking not at all, others by talking far too much. Mr Li, normally a jolly man, would hardly speak when spoken to, preferring to gaze out at the rain muttering incantations under his breath, or were they imprecations? We never knew for sure. During the second afternoon of our captivity, he suddenly astonished us by leaping from the hot *k'ang*, pulling on his heaviest robe and shouting out the Chinese equivalent of 'mea culpa'. Before we could restrain him, he rushed out of the room, on through the outer doorway and into the cold, drenching wilderness beyond. Within a few seconds, he looked like somebody who has just been dragged from a deep pond. Once he turned round waving gallantly and then he plunged forward to the garden gate. We looked at one another helplessly. The more active members of the party felt that we should rush out and try to restrain the madman; but, confronted by that devastating rain, our teeth already chattering though we had barely left the warm *k'ang*, we allowed our courage to fade into an uncomfortable silence. Meanwhile, Mr Li had disappeared from sight behind thick curtains of rain.

The next morning, the rain came sweeping at the windows as before. His Majesty the Dragon of the Sky was clearly in a towering rage, for it was sheer vindictiveness to vent so much divine displeasure upon the head of poor tubby little Mr Li. I suggested to one of the monks that we were as much responsible as Mr Li, as most of us had omitted doing reverence to the Dragon.

'No,' he answered firmly. 'Why should He blame you, since you don't believe in Him?'

If this way of looking at things is right, then the old gods will die without a struggle, feeling unable to punish whole generations of men simply because they no longer believe. Would it not be better if each god should be adopted by one man and his descendants for ever, to preserve Them from extinction? Personally I should like to adopt the little Kitchen God who, if honey is smeared upon his lips just once a year, refrains from any adverse comment when he makes his annual

report on the family in the heavenly regions. Incidentally, I believe there is a Christian analogy to the Chinese belief that the gods punish only those who have faith in them. I have heard it said that, whereas Christians will be unable to enter the Kingdom of Heaven in a state of sin, more leniency will be shown to those heathen who never had an opportunity to listen to the Word.

About noon that day, the sky began to clear. First the beating of the rain on the roof diminished and then patches of blue appeared here and there in the watery grey sky. By three o'clock, we had a lovely view of range upon range of new-washed mountains, their delicate pastel shades forming a setting to flashes of rich colour where the sun shone upon pools of water. And before dark, as we were beginning to expect, Mr Li returned. He was still on foot, panting and sweating, his tummy-line apparently reduced by several inches, his trousers soaking wet from ankle to knee as though he had waded his way back. No doubt that is just what he had done. Happy and triumphant, he burst into the room shouting 'Good, good, very good, very good,' threw himself upon the *k'ang* with a sigh of pleasure and presently burst out laughing.

'I've done it!' he cried. 'The sacrifice was accepted!'

And what a sacrifice it had been! I doubt if anyone besides Mr Li and Mrs Ch'en seriously believed that the rain had come as a punishment to him, or that it had stopped just because he had paid for his impiety; but every one of us quite properly regarded him as a hero. For the rest of our journey, we deferred to him as to a born leader and intrepid mountaineer.

During the days which followed, we found ourselves alternately climbing up and down steep muddy slopes, for each of the five peaks was at some distance from the others. Some of them were so very steep that, coming down, I twice slid from my wooden saddle, over the mule's head and on to the ground just in front of its hoofs. I had almost decided to walk the rest of the way when a young muleteer had the bright idea of tying on a heavy stone in such a way that it formed a high pommel, thus saving me from further mishaps of that kind. The days were so hot that walking up the steeper slopes to spare the animals was enough to bathe us in sweat. The nights, spent in small temples near the highest point of each peak in turn, were on the contrary so bitterly cold that the drinking water often froze. In one lonely temple, we saw hundreds, if not thousands, of rats. Striking a light in the kitchen during the night, I saw the whole floor covered with them. I am still puzzled as to what they live on during the winter months when

three or four resident monks live there cut off from the outside world with only sufficient provision for their own spartan needs.

With the intention of providing our tour with a suitable climax, we deliberately left the South Peak until the last. I suppose pilgrims who know something about Wu T'ai always do that. We reached the highest temple during the late afternoon and gazed with interest at a small tower built upon the topmost pinnacle about a hundred feet above us. One of the monks asked us to pay particular attention to the fact that the windows of this tower overlooked mile upon mile of empty space. Though we were surrounded by mountains on all sides, there was no single peak which seemed to be on a level with that tower. This observation of the entirely empty space confronting it was very necessary to our appreciation of what we hoped to behold during the night. What we expected to see was a very extraordinary phenomenon which many people suppose to be a manifestation of the Bodhisattva himself, something reminiscent of the burning bush and pillar of fire seen by Moses!

We went to bed soon after dark, but in such a state of excitement that none of us could sleep. The cold was so bitter that Kungtsun and I, each rolled up in a cocoon of warm blankets, lay with the backs of our cocoons tightly pressed together for warmth. Then, shortly after midnight, a monk carrying a lantern stepped into our room and cried: 'The Bodhisattva has appeared!'

Almost oblivious of the cruel cold, we threw off our thick quilts and hurried into our padded gowns and warm cloth shoes. My teeth were chattering loudly, but the cold held no pain for me then, even though I had stepped from my cocoon almost naked. (Living long in China I had, probably quite illogically, learnt to believe firmly in two things—that hot tea is more cooling than iced water, and that sleeping naked beneath warm quilts is warmer than wearing clothing between quilts and skin.)

At last we were ready. Fully dressed, we wound quilts about us like cumberous shawls and walked out into the monastery compound. The ascent to the door of the tower occupied less than a minute. As each one entered the little room and came face to face with the window beyond, he gave a shout of surprise, as though all our hours of talk had not sufficiently prepared us for what we now saw. There in the great open spaces beyond the window, apparently not more than one or two hundred yards away, innumerable balls of fire floated majestically past. We could not judge their size, for nobody knew how far

away they were, but they appeared like the fluffy woollen balls that babies play with seen close up. They seemed to be moving at the stately pace of a large, well-fed fish aimlessly cleaving its way through the water; but, of course, their actual pace could not be determined without a knowledge of the intervening distance. Where they came from, what they were, and where they went after fading from sight in the West, nobody could tell. Fluffy balls of orange-coloured fire, moving through space, unhurried and majestic—truly a fitting manifestation of divinity!

I do not know if this extraordinary sight has ever been accounted for 'scientifically' and I am not much interested in such explanations. It is far lovelier to think of them as divine manifestations, however prosaic their real nature may be. But is it prosaic? Marsh gas, you say? Marsh gas right out in space, a thousand or more feet above the nearest horizontal surface and some hundreds of feet from the vertical surface of a cold, rocky mountain innocent of water? Surely not. Human manipulation? Yes, if you first suppose two or three hundred men all clothed in black and able to swim slowly through space. Fireflies? Even supposing they were really much closer than they seemed, fireflies almost the size of small footballs? I doubt it very much. And why should these gases or flies appear only between midnight and two in the morning? The belief that the Bodhisattva thus manifests himself to the faithful is no easier to accept than the theories just disposed of, but *is it more difficult*? I do not know. Assuming that a Wisdom Force does exist in the universe as a separate entity—separate, that is, on the plane of differentiated phenomena—it is still difficult to understand why it should manifest itself materially in the form of slowly moving balls of fire. I really do not know. What remains? Silence, perhaps, is best.

. . . . .

A month or so after our return from the five peaks, the day of my departure drew near. Almost on the last day, I revisited a Lama from whom I had learnt many pieces of wisdom. My purpose was just to say farewell, but somehow the discussion veered to the fearful hells depicted in certain Buddhist temples. I asked the old man if these hells exist in fact and how literal he thought the pictures were. This was his answer:

'Hell is very real, make no mistake. The agonies endured there are

not at all those depicted in the temples, but none the less terrible for that. To be in hell means to be shut off from the Eternal Light. This Light is everywhere. It shines in your own heart, though you have not eyes to see it; it shines in the mountains and in the cities, though few are aware of it. This Light is Truth. It will reveal to you your own real nature, whereby comes Enlightenment. This Light is Love. It sustains all beings everywhere and ultimately carries all of them beyond the realms of suffering. This Light is Wisdom. It fills men's hearts with the only knowledge that is not attached to perishable things of no account. Those who live in this Light with eyes to see live in *Nirvana*. Those who live by this Light and glimpse it once or twice are travelling towards *Nirvana*. Those who deliberately shut their eyes to it, blinded by ignorance, lust and anger, live in hell. For hundreds, thousands, millions, aeons of lives they will suffer birth, sickness, decay and death, pursuing pleasure but never finding happiness. What torture by fire, ice or iron could be worse than that? Yet even those in the deepest hells have the promise of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva that they shall be delivered. At last, all will dwell in the Light. But how long, how long will that be? The wise man seeks it now. For he who has found it can laugh at pain and weariness, and he will know that the utmost pleasure of the senses is dross beside the pleasure of beholding the Light. You, English youth, have perhaps glimpsed this Light, or at least heard of it upon good authority. Seek it diligently. He who turns his back upon it, or who sits down by the wayside to rest overlong, is doomed to aeons of suffering without hope of glimpsing it again until a million million years have paid for his arrogance or scornful dilatoriness. If you do not seek diligently, you will not need to question others about hell!'

He laughed as he spoke those last words, but there was no laughter in his eyes, only kind concern. I think he had read my character all too well. Often I have longed for the Light, but not ardently enough to carry me beyond all lesser pursuits.

The Venerable Nêng Hai also had a farewell message for me.

'Goodbye, my dear pupil. Prosper. Do not let yourself be led astray. You are too fond of reading all manner of books and seeking out all manner of teachers. Some of them will deny the intellect and the senses. They will say these have no place in the life of one who seeks Enlightenment. They will be wrong. That kind of austerity is not for you. Remember this, a life dedicated to the search for Reality requires the *proper use* of intellect and senses. Intellectual knowledge will help you, if you harness it to the search for Wisdom and do not

seek other knowledge as an end in itself. The appreciation of beauty will help you to know what is in store for you, the beauty of Reality being the beauty of a jade bowl or a mountain grove increased to an inconceivable extent. Only, beware of Desire. Take joy in beauty, but never, never desire its manifestations for yourself. Inhale their fragrance and pass on. Goodbye for the present. Remember my words and be sure that we shall meet again in this life.'

Then, for the second time since I had come under his instruction, he added something very curious indeed. As I was leaving the room, I heard him mutter as though more to himself than to me: 'Meet again, but shall we ever speak again?' These words were so strange that often in the years that followed they would come into my mind. Yet, when we did meet again and the words took on some meaning, they did not so much as enter my head until after we had parted for the last time.

. . . . .

I left Wu T'ai in the company of Dr Chang and Mr Li, the Hero of the North Peak. We travelled by a route new to me to Tingchow, a railway station south of Peking. My last breakfast at P'usa Ting was saddened by the genuine distress of lamas Wang and Ma, who seemed very reluctant to let me go. They loaded me with presents, mostly bowls and rosaries made of some local wood, and begged me to return the following year, little knowing that the Japanese Army in its most destructive mood would be their guests during the next summer. As I was short of money, I hired a single mule, to which my luggage and bedding were strapped in such a way that they formed a platform upon which I was expected to ride crosslegged! I wish my horse-loving, hunting-fond father could have seen me then. I fear it would have convinced him that I had fallen among a 'decadent race'. Just as we were about to set off, I ran down to the Great Hall to take leave of Manjusri Bodhisattva. Whether he was really the Personification of Wisdom or the Presiding Genius of the Mountain or whoever he was, he had lavished the gifts of happiness upon me with open hands, and I was grateful. Not for the first time, I found myself saying farewell to a sacred place with a heart full of remorse for the opportunities for spiritual development which I had wasted; yet I was somehow certain that spiritual influences had wrought some change in me despite my poor co-operation. At the very least I had profited from the example set by the steadfast Mongol pilgrims with their unshakable conviction

of the superiority of spirit to matter, with their admirable sincerity and open-handed offering of much more than (as it seemed to me) they could afford to give.

For the last time, I entered the lovely hall, that gorgeous monument to a still living faith, and bowed myself to the ground before the sacred image. The kindly, bearded face, lips touched with a smile of tolerance and compassion, stared down at me through the clouds of incense smoke. As always, by night and by day, it was illuminated by tiny points of flame from a hundred and eight silver lamps, the flickering light endowing the statue with life and movement. Dawn was breaking and the first ripple of that day's stream of pilgrims flowed up to the altar as I prepared to leave.

'Goodbye, goodbye,' I thought. 'Goodbye to the living past with its unstinted beauty, its benign faith, its deep sincerity, all of which linger here though the altars of the world lie cold and neglected, their flames extinguished perhaps for ever. How long will you remain, little city of the gods? That I came before the black night of ugliness engulfed you, before coarse laughter drove the life-force from your sacred groves and holy altars—this I count as an omen of great good. Perhaps, after all, I have not been born too late.'

The return journey by mule held in store for me one bizarre incident. One day, hungry and thirsty after my ride in the hot sun, I felt the strength ebbing from me and doubted if I should be able to ride as far as the next inn lying half an hour's journey beyond the top of the pass which we had just reached. At this point consciousness must have deserted me. I remember the sensation of falling towards the ground and of lying amid unnatural darkness. Nothing more.

When I recovered my senses, I was lying on a *k'ang*, my head pillowed on the lap of the Mongol Abbot of Peking's Yellow Temple, who was the most illustrious member of our little caravan. His kind, wrinkled face, lit by the light of a single candle, looked reassuring, especially as it broke into a smile just as my eyes opened. I had for some time been aware of a soft, pleasantly hypnotic voice muttering the *Mani* invocation over and over again in an unhurried chant, scarcely audible; and, for a moment, I had thought of myself as a little child being lulled to sleep by the crooning of its mother. Instead of fingering his rosary, he was softly stroking my forehead with the tips of his old fingers. (I believe he was in his late eighties at the time, though he bestrode his mule like a young man of sixty or less, sitting firmly upright in the saddle.)

After welcoming me back to consciousness with a smile, he produced a small silver bottle and allowed three or four minute globular pills, smaller than lead-shot, to roll from it into his palm. These, he explained later, were made of dyed wheat flour and impregnated with the force conjured up by reciting health-giving mantras over them during a night-long vigil. I swallowed the pills with a mouthful of buttered tea and fell back into a comfortable doze.

Time passed. I do not know how long. Though dozing more or less, I was too tired to sleep properly and I was conscious of people drifting in and out of the room. Presently I noticed that somebody was talking about me in very soft undertones.

1st Voice: Is he all right, Reverence?

The Lama: Yes. If he sleeps, he will ride tomorrow.

2nd Voice: And the demon?

The Lama (chuckling gently): There was no demon. He called repeatedly on Yamanataka—Manjusri in his Wrathful Aspect.

3rd Voice: Who did, Reverence? What are you whispering about?

1st Voice: This evening, the foreigner here fell from his mule at the top of the pass. We had to lift him and to hold him in the saddle all the way down here. He is heavy enough.

3rd Voice: Well?

1st Voice: Well what?

2nd Voice: All this about Yamana-something. You pilgrims and your Tibetan names! Aren't Chinese names good enough?

The Lama: He lay on the ground for a while. I watched over him until somebody had caught his mule and brought it back from down the hill. All the time he was talking in Tibetan. Lao Yü and Lao Chiang both heard it too. I speak very little Tibetan, sacred recitations apart, and could not understand much, but it was surely Tibetan. I think he implored Yamanataka either to do for him something he desired, or to avert something from him. I could not know which, but he seemed very earnest about whatever it was.

3rd Voice: What of it? Saying prayers is common enough with you people and the foreigner has surely learnt the habit from you. The difficulty is to get you pious pilgrims to say anything but prayers.

2nd Voice: Yes, but he was talking in *Tibetan*! He's English or American, or perhaps Russian. Those people don't talk Tibetan.

2nd Voice: M'm. Clearly you've got hold of one who does. You just said so, didn't you?

The Lama (very softly): Tomorrow, I shall ask him.

At this point some noisy, rather drunken muleteers burst into the room and had to be driven out. Then Dr Chang and Mr Li returned from dinner. Dr Chang felt my pulse, said that I was better and soon blew out the candle. After that there was silence except for the scarcely audible murmur of the Lama at his devotions. Soothed by this rhythmical murmur, I soon fell asleep.

Early in the morning, the servant who brought water for washing and a pot of tea was followed by two pilgrims and a cloth-pedlar with some rolls of cloth already strapped to his back. They pushed past the servant towards me, all shouting questions together. So great was their urgency that I guessed at once that some sort of bet was to be decided by my answer.

'Laoyeh, you don't speak Tibetan, do you?'

'Hsienshêng, tell him you speak Tibetan. He doesn't believe it.'

'Englishman, do you speak Tibetan or not?' (This from the rather truculent pedlar.)

The answer was simple. Knowing much less than the Lama had modestly admitted to the night before, I answered: 'Except for a few sacred recitations, not a word.'

The three men immediately started a furious argument in their thick Shansi dialect, speaking so quickly that I got even less than the gist of it. All I could make out was that it was something about Yamanataka, which surprised me, for I was still very sleepy and had not yet remembered the conversation of the previous night. At last, they grew calmer and one of the pilgrims said politely:

'Laoyeh, do you know the sacred recitation connected with Yamanataka?'

'No, unless you mean the short one of three words?''

'No, not that one.'

'Then the answer is certainly no.'

The Lama, who had been listening with great interest, raised his eyes to mine and gave me a long, thoughtful stare. Then, shaking his head as though the matter were beyond him, he took up his rosary and let the beads pass slowly through his fingers. I had a strong feeling that he was doing this for me, as if some evil threatened. Somehow we only came to speak of the incident once and that very briefly. It was as much a puzzle to him as to me. What was there to say?

7

Life in a Zen Monastery and the Fruits of Meditation

LEAVING Wu T'ai Shan for almost anywhere but Peking would have felt like stepping out of a technicolor world into a sombre realm of black and white. Peking's fast fading but still glowing colour made the transition less abrupt. Quite soon after my return, the unexpected acquisition of a little money enabled me to perform a pleasant duty which was long overdue. I was, in spite of our many misunderstandings, very fond of my father, and the examples of Confucian filial piety all around me in China had made me ashamed of my behaviour in leaving him without a word. I felt that I must take this opportunity of hastening to England to ask his forgiveness and obtain his permission to continue living my own kind of life in China on condition that I should visit him every few years.

The train journey, hard class, via Siberia to Moscow, Warsaw and London, cost less than forty pounds in those days, and the wooden bunks on which we slept were no hardship to one used to a brick *k'ang* or to the plank beds commonly used in South China. The distance overland from Peking to London was, in point of time, shorter than from Peking to Wu T'ai Shan, being only eleven days' journey!

My father poured his forgiveness upon me and gave me his blessing. Light at heart, I enjoyed his company for a few months and prepared to return to China in the winter of that year (1937). Meanwhile, Japanese encroachments had finally brought about full-scale hostilities between China and Japan. The Chinese, freed at last from Chiang's timorous policy of tamely submitting to the gobbling up of more and more Chinese territory, began by putting up a gallant resistance; but it was soon clear that the war would last many years and that half of China would be brutally trampled by the German-style boots of the invader. Peking, my beautiful Peking, was among the first cities to

fall. So, instead of returning to witness her pain, I took ship from London to Hongkong and continued my wanderings about South and South-West China.

After a year or so, I reached Kunming, capital of Yunnan, the lovely province bordering Burma and what was then called French Indo-China. It was a place of a thousand delights. The city's ancient battlements rise from a high, fertile plateau, its earth rich and many coloured, too far south for the winters to be cold and high enough for the cool, clean air to soften the rigour of southern sunshine. Its population, mostly descended from political exiles from the north, are a cheerful, self-contained people who for centuries have augmented their living by sending mule-caravans to the countries across the border and into the high mountains where dwell those colourful tribesmen—Miao, Yao, Lohei, Akah, Lü, Pai I (Thai) and many more; tribesmen whose customs are those of two and three thousand years ago. Near the walls of the city is a lake where the mist lies low in the early mornings and slowly thins to reveal thickly forested mountains beyond, with the sun glinting upon the yellow porcelain roofs of temples half hidden among the trees.

Chief of these temples or monasteries is Hua T'ing Ssŭ, where I had a special claim to hospitality; as, some months after my visit to the great Zen Master, Hsü Yün, at Nan Hua, I had met him again in Hongkong and taken part in a ceremony during which several of us were accepted (at least nominally) as his disciples, each receiving from him an initiate's name which was a passport to hospitality in any of the temples under his actual or remote authority. It happened that, many years previously, Master Hsü Yün had journeyed to Yunnan and discovered Hua T'ing Ssŭ in a state of neglect, its ancient buildings crumbling in tragic decay. Seeing this, he not only raised ample funds for its restoration on a magnificent scale, but sent one of his closest followers to be its abbot and to establish strict Zen discipline. As Hsü Yün's disciple, even in a purely formal sense, I could expect a welcome there for as long as I cared to stay.

The Sino-Japanese war, the loss of Peking (including my own little store of *bric-à-brac* which, left at the university for safekeeping, had been stolen by the Japanese troops quartered there), the terrible destruction of the flower of the Chinese Army, the revolting cruelty of the invaders and many similar horrors all combined to reduce me to a state of black depression. The layers of wadded silk which had for so long cushioned me from the spikes of the Wheel were wearing thin. More

thoughtfully than hitherto I contemplated the suffering of millions and millions of fellow beings living in squalid poverty at the mercy of vast climatic disasters and harried alike by their own troops and the enemy's. *Sangsara* was more than justifying its Chinese name of 'Bitter Ocean'. And I? At any moment some frightful blow might fall, my transient happiness be cut off, my body disfigured or my mind deranged, my whole being become the sport of grinning demons. Day by day these things happened to countless ordinary people in no way worse than myself. I grew ashamed of having had so much to enjoy and of having done literally nothing for others. Had I not wasted grief on the loss of a few trifling curios at a time when tens of thousands of families were mourning the loss of their dead? 'Out, out!' I thought. 'Let me break *Sangsara*'s bonds before it is too late, even if I have to struggle all my life. Let me seek at once the austerity of monastic life and there pursue the Path of Enlightenment through Zen with all my strength.' For a little while I felt as if the Great Thirst had come upon me, though I realize now that I was arrogant in supposing that I had indeed reached that advanced stage in the life of the spirit.

To many people, my decision to enter upon a life of self-communion within the tranquil halls of a monastery may seem a very eccentric outcome of my concern for the sufferings of others; yet my decision was perfectly logical if judged from the standpoint of the Mahayanist philosophy of living. I had already come to have implicit belief in the doctrine that all life is One and that the One is spirit or mind only, its seeming division into myriads of entities—walking, leaping, swimming, flying, wriggling, crawling—being quite illusory or, at best, real in a strictly transient sense. Moreover I had learnt that the relation of the individual to the totality of all existence is more intimate than that of the part to the whole. Could the veils be drawn aside, it would be seen that, in an important sense, the individual *is* the Whole, that the self-purification of one is in a measure the greater purification of all, just as a cup of clean water cast into a great vessel of murky liquid lightens the colour of all. From another and equally valid point of view, if the physician, healer of the body, requires years of preliminary training, how much more must the would-be healer of the spirit attentively cultivate the mind with which he must perform his work! A Christian, though believing himself damned for his sins, may still feel able to assist others by preaching Christ to them; a Buddhist, with no Saviour to offer, can only illuminate the Way for others from his own wisdom and experience. Though he may not hope to

save his fellow beings in the mass, he may aspire to nourish the spiritual growth of a few chosen disciples; and even this aspiration must remain a dream unless he has so far pierced the veils of his innermost consciousness that he can anticipate every difficulty and understand those dark problems which are beyond the disciple's power to express in words. He must be so steeped in intuitive knowledge that his disciples' groping for words can be brushed aside as the Dorjé Rimpoché had once brushed aside mine. To be of the smallest help to a single human being in matters of eternal moment, he must himself be far along the Path to Enlightenment. Such progress is best achieved in that secluded tranquillity where, free from anxiety and obligations, he can practise meditation night and day, preferably inspired by the calm beauty of mountain, lake and forest.

Lest some should regard contemplative monks as *selfishly* seeking their own individual escape from the Wheel, it should be remembered that Mahayana monks must offer a solemn pledge that, for the sake of all sentient beings, when all desire is transcended and freedom won, they will remain voluntarily in *Sangsara* ready to offer their spirit and their flesh again and again, to be reborn endlessly into sorrow as Bodhisattvas or in any other form, as pools of strength from which other Path-climbers may drink, there to remain until every other being has entered *Nirvana* before them or is prepared to enter in their company.

I had no intention as yet of taking a monk's vows, for in the Mahayana countries such vows are taken only by those who hope to remain monks for life. In Thailand or Burma, a man may enter and leave the monkhood as many as three times; in China, to withdraw even once is to admit defeat and to be an object of shame. Unsure of myself, I formed the more humble intention of living *as* a monk, sharing the Zen life down to the smallest detail, but retaining my freedom to return to lay life or to take vows as might at some future time seem best. In other words, I wished to be a novice.

Having made up my mind, I crossed over from the city to the Western Hills in a large rowing-boat. A canal connecting the West Gate with the mouth of the lake led past the pagoda-like drum-tower, in which is suspended a tremendous horizontal drum used for warning the city of approaching invaders. During the two-hour journey across the lake, lovely as Como or Lugano, I suffered from the midday sun which, even in the gentle climate of Yunnan, can be cruel when the water reflects and magnifies its glare. The boatmen stood to their oars

facing the prow, while a third man steered by means of a long sweep. At the further shore, they pointed out a short-cut through the woods which would bring me to the main road close to the monastery grounds. In less than half an hour, I reached its outer gate.

Hua T'ing Ssŭ closely resembles other Zen monasteries of its size. The whole estate, about the size of a small private park in England, is enclosed by a low wall and closely encircled by the forest. Passing through the outer gate, I entered an informal half-wild garden containing a bell-tower from the upper storey of which a deep, solemn note shivered on the air at intervals of about two minutes, a note believed to bring to the sufferers in the transitory hells Ksitigarbha's (Ti Tsang Wang P'usa's) message of comfort and ultimate release. Next came a second wall pierced by a moongate and, beyond that, a small formal garden leading to the gateway of the monastery proper, which faced straight across the lake into the sunrise. The principal buildings strictly followed the formal design which for two milleniums or more has been employed by the builders of Chinese palaces and temples. The two Great Halls raised upon stone platforms formed two north-south oblongs in the huge east-west oblong courtyard enclosed by the remaining buildings standing in an unbroken rectangle. These other buildings included an elaborate gatehouse, a library, refectory, guest-rooms, living-rooms, the novices' schoolroom, a block printing press and the House of Spiritual Ancestors, where the spirit-tablets of deceased monks were venerated. Attached to the north side of the rectangle were a series of smaller courtyards containing the Hall of Meditation, the Abbot's private quarters and garden, the offices of the administrative staff, storerooms, kitchens, bathrooms and washrooms. Seen from a distance in its wild setting, the monastery was a place of ravishing beauty; its red walls made it a square-cut ruby in the green-blue setting of forest, lake and sky. From close at hand, the recently restored colours looked overwhelmingly bright—the walls almost crimson, the lacquered woodwork scarlet and green, the eaves and roof-beams covered with multicoloured floral designs against a blue background, the main buildings tiled with imperial yellow, and the smoothly flagged courtyards gay with flowers and flowering shrubs. All this required the softening effect which, during the next ten years, would be accomplished by the hand of time.

At a little distance to the west of the main buildings stood the cremation tower containing hundreds of niches, some filled and others awaiting the ashes of the dead in bronze caskets. Most of the buildings

Ancient chetiya in Thailand

Ancient chetiya in Thailand

were low, but the single-storeyed Great Halls could comfortably have contained three or four storeys of ordinary size. The interior appointments of the Halls bore witness to the amalgamation of Zen and Amidism which has taken place everywhere in China. One of them was never opened during the nine months I stayed there and I almost begin to wonder whether its very existence is a figment of my imagination. The other contained giant gilded statues of the three principal Buddhas, also to be understood as three aspects of Reality. They had been carved by specially skilled craftsmen brought for the purpose from the coastal city of Ningpo. Back to back with the central image was a very lovely statue of Avalokiteśvara (Kuan Yin), the Personification of Compassion. This was a dark bronze about five feet high depicting the Bodhisattva in female form. The walls of the whole building were covered from floor to ceiling with the most entertaining coloured plaster representations of the Five Hundred Arahan (Lohan) or chief disciples of Gautama Buddha. They had been designed by a master of fantasy. Some were cruelly mirthful travesties of fierce, black-bearded Indians with huge noses and bulging eyes, recalling the instinctive distaste which the Chinese feel for thick beards and very prominent features, both of which are unknown among the sparse-bearded, smooth-faced Chinese. Other Arahan were depicted as Chinese (which, of course, they cannot have been, though many were probably Nepalis with rather Chinese features). Most wore expressions of childish self-satisfaction; some had arms and even eyes capable of infinite extension and among them were to be found almost every conceivable oddity and eccentricity except the pornographic, this last being wholly absent. The artist's odd fancies brought to mind two aspects of Chinese Buddhism. Chiefly they illustrated the feeling that, as religion is a part of life, there is no good reason to divorce it from humour. A man rolling with mirth and giving forth a great belly-laugh is surely nearer heaven than a thin-lipped, stern-faced inquisitor! The images also suggested the Far Easterner's attitude towards those Hinayana saints who are believed to have concentrated on their own Enlightenment without taking the Bodhisattva Vow to use that Enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. As Gautama Buddha's personal disciples to whom the whole world is indebted for the transmission of his teachings they must receive an honoured place in the temples, but the honour is tinged with irony.

As soon as I entered the monastery for the first time, I hastened to pay my respects in the Great Hall, during which time the Reverend

Receiver of Guests was informed of my arrival. Presently he came forward to welcome me and provided me with temporary quarters near the guest-hall. The next day I sought an audience with the Abbot who readily agreed to allow me to undergo a period of training exactly like a monk's. The outward symbols of my transformation were to be a shaven head, a wide-sleeved robe for ceremonial occasions and a narrow-sleeved one for ordinary wear. I must not, however, wear the *Kasa* or sacred toga which is worn during the performance of rites. When all had been arranged, I was given a private cell in the compound of the Meditation Hall (Japanese—Zendo); and, after some probation, permitted to spread my sleeping mat in the Meditation Hall itself.

The monks in a Chinese Zen monastery are divided into two groups. One consists of those monks who are less occupied with contemplation, including both administrators of the community and those busy with menial tasks, all of whom have their special duties in shrine-halls, offices, library, kitchens or wherever it may be. Their minimum spiritual duties are confined to attendance at the rites celebrated before dawn and before sunset. Attendance in the Meditation Hall is encouraged but not required. Upon certain occasions, some of them may be included in the small chapters of monks who perform special rites for the sick, the dying and the dead. The second group consists of Zen monks proper. They sleep and spend most of their waking hours in the Hall of Meditation under the discipline of an Usher; and they are required to engage in several periods of meditation every day, taking instruction from the Preceptor. Their ritual duties are the same as for the other group, but they are spared all menial and administrative tasks. During four days a month, no meditation is performed and the daily rites are sharply curtailed, so as to give the monks time to attend to head-shaving, laundry, bathing and mending. There are also four holy days, approximately on the 1st, 8th, 15th and 23rd of each lunar month, on which the drearily spartan refectory diet is supplemented by a vegetarian feast held in the Hall of Meditation itself and eaten with much ritual and formality. On ordinary days, the refectory food was almost always the same—old rice thick with the dead bodies of weavils, a soup of water in which pumpkins had been boiled with salt; a pumpkin mush (the vegetable scooped out of the 'soup') to all of which was added a relish of pickled chillies. Such a diet would have been insufficient to sustain health without the weekly feasts including such luxuries as *fried* vegetables and health-giving beancurd. The diet was not intended to be quite so spartan, but the monastery was having

financial difficulties. The rich men who had responded so lavishly to Hsü Yün's appeal for funds to restore the monastery had tightened their purse-strings as soon as the Master's presence was withdrawn from their city.

Before I describe my personal observations and experiences, it remains to say something of the arrangement of the Meditation Hall which, for some months, became the centre of my existence. It was a big square chamber about the size of a hotel private banqueting hall or of an exceptionally large university lecture-room, to which light was admitted through barely translucent paper windows on one side only. In the centre rose a small, octagonal shrine and round three sides of the room ran a low cushioned platform almost eight feet wide. At night the monks slept on it, heads towards the shrine, feet to the wall, forming a long line of shaven-headed figures humped beneath quilts of coarse grey cloth. During meditation periods, they sat on the edge of the platform facing the shrine. I suppose there was enough space for fifty or sixty to sleep there with a short space between each quilt, but our meditation group consisted of between thirty and forty only. Subdued conduct was necessary at all times, silence only during meditation periods and the hours set apart for sleep. The hall was much too dark for study, but we were able to do such jobs as mending our clothes there. Opportunities for exercise were rare, so we enjoyed occasional visits to the monastery's own fields to help bring back the crop of chillies or for some such purpose. For health's sake and to assist in calming our minds, each meditation session included one or two short periods of marching briskly round the central shrine at an ever-increasing pace, the rhythm of our steps being marked for us by the tapping of a so-called wooden fish.

When I grew to know my companions better, I found that they fell loosely into several categories. Besides the pious ones self-dedicated for the love of a contemplative life and thirsty for *Nirvana*'s peace, there were many who had drifted into the life—vowed by their parents upon condition of mother or father recovering from some illness, or driven to seek refuge from conscription (which in Chiang Kai-Shek's China often spelt death from malnutrition and disease long before the soldiers received their first weapons or came within a hundred miles of the enemy). Yet others were lazy fellows who preferred pleasant quarters, an assured supply of bad food and the dignity of monkhood to having to contend with natural calamities and predatory soldiers for their livelihood. In fact the hundred or so monks

there included almost every type of human being except, of course, the riotous, swashbuckling, adventurous and physically heroic types, all of whom would have found the timeless calm unendurable.

I have heard people (from the West) say that in any all-male community, however pious, homosexuality is sure to flourish. Well, during my nine months in Hua T'ing Ssŭ, I came to know a great deal about my immediate companions without discovering traces of sexuality of any sort. Rules, tradition and spiritual aspirations apart, the diet alone was sufficient to reduce physical desire to a minimum; but my impression is that even the least sincere monks, the refugees from conscription and so on, were quite uninterested in homosexual attachments. Among the Chinese as a whole, this sort of abnormality is rare; partly, I think, because they understand the art of living better than we of the modern West, with the result that nervous disorders of all kinds are comparitively rarer. Most of us did indeed form strong attachments to friends, which seems to me perfectly normal for men cut off from the love of parents, brothers, sisters and children. Their vows did not supernaturally put an end to the desire to love and be loved; and only those rare contemplatives and recluses who have reached a very advanced stage of non-attachment grow quite independent of this need. The rest compensate for the loss of family ties by ties of comradeship which do not, I think, need to be explained in terms of sex, unless by those extremists who see the serpent's mark in everything, including man's noblest and most spiritual aspirations.

My own affections soon warmed towards the kindly men whose life I shared and in particular towards Suting, a youth who had already spent six years as novice and full-fledged monk. He took me in hand from the first, showing me how to order my gestures and movements in the formal, ritualistic manner proper to the inhabitants of a strict monastery. He instructed me in my ceremonial duties and, more important than all the rest, tried to interpret the Preceptor's instructions which preceded each period of meditation, turning them into simpler language and providing illustrations from his own head. He also helped me to memorize the words of the morning and evening rituals which must be recited in full without the aid of a book, and did much more for me besides. Some of our brief leisure time we spent walking along the road which led through those lovely wooded mountains to the temples beyond. From Suting I learnt about the younger monks, how each individual reacted to the life, how serious each was or was not and how the strict discipline affected each of them. Without a loyal, devoted

guide such as Suting, I should have felt lost. For, though I gained much from those nine months of monastic seclusion, I was too young and too ignorant, too wedded to the world in spite of my desire to transcend it, to have endured the hardships and rigid mental discipline alone. Suting tempered these hardships with the softness of his ungrudging, unselfish affection and with the relaxing effect of his never quite subdued gaiety. The son and brother of barbers, he came from the lowest possible stock, for even in casteless China, actors and barbers are looked upon with scorn; yet he was a generous, rarely gifted person whose straightforward and abiding faith in the Buddha-Dharma I envied. Once, when I asked him why he had been so kind to me from the very first, he answered that he had been quite overwhelmed with happiness at the thought of someone coming from the ocean's rim to join the sacred community to which he belonged, and he had felt it a great honour when I had shown myself willing to lean upon him as upon a staff.

Our day would begin an hour or more before dawn. I can still picture the early morning scene vividly. The Meditation Hall is in pitch darkness relieved only by a circle of light glimmering from the flame before the octagonal shrine. We are lying side by side in a long row which follows the alignment of three consecutive walls, our heads pointing towards the shrine. Whoever has been on 'night watch' is still standing before the altar, slowly prostrating himself and rising again in an endless succession of beautifully controlled movements. Suddenly a few of the sleepers awaken, roused by the sound of a stick being knocked sharply against the courtyard flags—*dik dik dik*. Presently the soft note of a sounding bronze joins in—*dik dong dik dong dik dong*. The tapping ceases and we hear only *dong dong dong*. Then the giant temple drum breaks in and we get *dong boom dong boom dong boom* until the notes of the sounding bronze cease and the rhythm of the great drum slowly increases its tempo. Over the space of twenty minutes, it changes from *boom boom boom* to *baroom baroom* b'room-b'room-b'room, until the drummer rains down blows with all his strength and produces the sounds brum-brum-brum bm-bm-bm bm-bm-b'*boom* finishing on a terrific crescendo.

By this time, Suting has dragged the quilts off me, forcing me to face the cold, and accompanied me, first to answer nature's call, then to wash, clean our teeth and don our ceremonial gowns. All this we have done without supervision but at the speed of recruits anxious to please a bullying sergeant-major. Now we are filing from the outer

darkness of the courtyard into the Great Hall ablaze with lights, administrators and menials to the left, contemplatives to the right. As each takes his place before the altar, he prostrates himself three times; then, at a given signal, the prostrations are repeated in unison. The *ting* of a silver bell brings us to our feet for the last time and at once the solemn incense chant begins.

'The scented clouds from glowing tripod rise . . .

Long invocations follow, addressed to names which may be taken as those of actual divinities, or as universal forces and aspects of the One Reality, according to the individual development of each and the measure of his understanding. Besides the invocations, there are all sorts of reflections, undertakings, precepts and so on, as well as *mantras* or mystical formulae recited in Sino-Sanskrit. The chanting and the throb and chime of percussion instruments and the glitter of scores of candles reflected as sharp points of light upon the golden statues never fail to elevate the heart to regions of tranquillity and beauty hard to penetrate by other means. At last comes the final prostration and we file out of the Hall. Dawn is just breaking and, as we gaze east across the lake, the whole sky blazes with colour.

Now it is breakfast-time, an informal meal of rice-porridge taken wherever we happen to be standing when it arrives from the giant cauldrons in the kitchen. I smoke a cigarette and offer the packet round, but it is seldom that anyone accepts. Smoking, while not forbidden, is somehow unbecoming to monkish gravity, besides being evidence of a minor attachment.

Comes the *bok bok bok* of a 'wooden fish' (the scarlet and gold hollow percussion block which has long since become indispensable to jazz orchestras everywhere, though few know its sacred origin). This is the signal to enter the Meditation Hall. *Bok bok bok ting* . . .! Silence. The session has begun. For about ten minutes we sit loosely erect in the lotus posture which I alone cannot manage properly. Suting watches with a smile my efforts to make the soles of my crossed feet point skywards. Nothing is required of us during those ten minutes except that we should sit quietly, letting our minds grow gradually tranquil and trying quite gently to empty them of wayward thoughts. At such moments each mind is like a pool into which a restless child has at last stopped throwing stones.

Bok! We get to our feet, fall in line and begin to circle round the

shrine. Gradually the tempo increases until, towards the end, we are moving as fast as possible without actually breaking into a run, our heads held forwards and our shoulders hunched in the special ritual position for speedy circumambulation.

Bok! Everybody stops dead. *Bok bok!* We hasten to the part of the platform nearest to where we happen to be standing. *Bok bok!* We sit down, folding our legs as before, and I attempt quite vainly to hide my failure to achieve the position under the folds of my long gown. From the height of my knees everybody can see that I am cheating, but this is a small matter.

Ti-i-ing! The silver bell is struck by the Preceptor who now begins his daily instructions, most of his words being too technical for my understanding. Suting will have to explain them later. The main point of yesterday's instruction was that we should reflect on the old conundrum 'Who reverences the Buddha?' in the sense of 'Who am I?' Mere repetition of the words is not enough. Equally, any attempt to answer the question by logical deduction is Zen-wise, a waste of time. Then what? Ah, what? I wish I could question Suting again, but the silence rule is strictly kept and my friend is already sitting with half-closed eyes lost in a world to which I have not yet found the way in.

A stick of incense has been lighted and none of us will move until it has crumbled to a little heap of grey ash. Unable to concentrate, as sometimes happens to me, I examine my companions' faces. I know that Suting is meditating conscientiously. I guess that Hsiangting and Ch'ingting are dreaming away the minutes and longing for the ordeal to be over. Wênting may be doing either, or else be lost in some metaphysical speculation unconnected with the purpose of the meditation. Probably a little less than half of those present are using their time to the best advantage.

Two young monks, chosen as lictors for the day, are padding softly round the room with their lictors' boards. If either of them sees a head too far forward or saliva dribbling from a mouth, he will know that the owner of head or mouth has fallen asleep. Accordingly he will strike the offender's shoulder to awaken him. The flat of the board will produce much sound and little pain; the edge will make no sound but cause much pain; which is used will depend on whether or not the victim is an old offender.

Silence! A long, long silence. I try hard to deal with yesterday's conundrum. Once or twice I congratulate myself on having entered some supernormal state, only to find that it is merely a sensation of

vagueness induced by staring too long at the same point—purely physical, a tiny obstacle to progress rather than an advance. I try to remember Suting's explanation of the Preceptor's words. 'Don't just repeat the conundrum like a magic formula.' Good, I won't. 'Keep it in your mind continuously.' Good, I will. 'Do not waste time seeking its logical meaning or trying to explain it to yourself.' Good, I . . . Not so good! If I avoid vain repetition, what remains but to think out its meaning? If I avoid thinking out its meaning what remains but vain repetition? Let me start again. And so on, and so on. The incense-stick smoulders downwards to the ash in which it was planted and I am still far from hitting upon the right method.

Bok! We get up and circumambulate briskly, some with minds already inward turned and oblivious, except in a very perfunctory way, of their surroundings. At least the others move briskly. As for me, I can scarcely hobble so frightful is my leg cramp and the sensation of 'pins and needles'.

Bok! Halt. Back to the nearest seating place. Time for the second and last round of this session. During the remaining hour I make scarcely more progress than before. (It was not until my third or fourth month in the monastery that I began to understand the way of approaching Infinite Spirit, known to Zen adepts as Infinite Mind.)

At the end of the session, the novices hurry to the schoolroom, while the rest of us are free to employ our time in private meditation or in some sort of recreation, such as walking along the high path parallel with the lake. Lunch-time is announced by the striking of a much bigger 'wooden fish' which actually looks like a fish besides being made of wood. (I presume that the very curious shape of the more usual kind is really a stylized representation of a fish's mouth alone.) We file into the refectory and stand while a long, musical grace is chanted, during which a few morsels of cooked rice are ceremoniously carried to a pillar in the courtyard and left there—a symbolical offering to wandering spirits. Judging from what we had yesterday and the day before, the lunch will consist of rice, pumpkin soup and pumpkin mush, with salt as the only seasoning except for the chilli relish served separately. I am still worldly enough to remember with great satisfaction that tomorrow is a feast day and that some of the vegetables will be *fried!* I feel I shall never quite get used to the bizarre contrast of living in such palatial surroundings with gleaming lacquer and carved woodwork everywhere and yet leading a life in some ways as spartan as that of a private in the Chinese Army!

The second half of the day passes very much like the first and by 9.30 p.m. we are all in bed, except for those who meditate or perform prostrations before the altar throughout part or all of the night.

From this description of a day at Hua T'ing Ssŭ, it may appear that our lives were dull, whereas I enjoyed very great happiness there until the last month or so of my stay. The most obvious pleasures which any visitor to the monastery would readily appreciate were visual ones—the entrancing views of mountain and lake, the splendour of the temple architecture, the flowers in the courts and the pageantry of the daily rites. There were besides all sort of other enjoyments, extremely simple in themselves but lovely just because of the monotony they served to break—chats with wise old monks over cups of tea; visits to neighbouring temples and to the cave of our local hermit who was reputed to live exclusively on a diet of candlegrease and grass; the good food on feast days; the ceremonies on special occasions such as the beautiful ritual in honour of the Moon Goddess on the 15th day of the 8th lunar month; intimate conversations with monks of our own age and, above all, the overwhelming joy at those moments when 'the Buddha within', the indwelling Eternal Spirit which is One and yet Many, manifested itself in our hearts. Suting, who added so much to my pleasure in many ways, had some lively tales to tell of the wild mountain and jungle tribes of the border region where he had spent his childhood; and he had much to teach me as my very first Chinese friend among people not belonging by birth and upbringing to the scholar class.

Naturally my most absorbing interest lay in the satisfaction of my purpose in coming to live as a monk. I wished to understand Zen, to see if it was the best method of approach for me and, if so, to practise it day and night that I might gain a closer understanding of life and, ultimately, stand face to face with Reality. So much has been written in English on the subject of Zen that it would be presumptuous of me, or at least superfluous, to add my own description of its aims and methods, except as they affected my own spiritual development. In those days, I was too young and too little prepared by reading and personal instruction to benefit from the experience to the full. It was months before I came to realize just what I was looking for and approximately how to reach it. Zen had attracted me in the first place because it offers a short cut with some possibility of gaining a full insight into Truth *in this Life*; and secondly on account of its *apparent* simplicity which makes the use of images and ritual not wrong but

unnecessary. An added attraction was that this 'doctrine without words' requires a knowledge of very few scriptures; whereas to master the teaching of most of the other sects it is better to have a thorough knowledge of Chinese or Tibeto-Sanskrit or pure Sanskrit, or two and even all three of these, the ability to read Japanese being a further requirement in some cases. Moreover, the few books really essential for the student of Zen are available in English; and, even in the original Chinese, they pose no great linguistic problems to one familiar with the special phraseology employed.

In time I discovered that it had been a great error to suppose that Zen is a *simple* approach to Truth. Despite the absence of insuperable linguistic difficulties, it is in some ways the most difficult of all possible approaches, just as a short cut to the top of a steep mountain is the most arduous route for the climber. Today, when I hear my fellow Western Buddhists praise Zen for its relative simplicity or because it can be combined with a strenuous business or professional life, I feel envious. Of course these matters appear very differently to different people. All I cay say for certain is that, for me, the Zen approach would be a full-time job for life and that, even if I had no family now and could enter the Sangha permanently, I doubt if I should have time to come face to face with Reality before my death. I comfort myself with the words of the Venerable T'ai Hsü who declared that the various sects are like beads in the same rosary and that each one of them is the best approach for certain individuals.

Yet, though I may be Zen-wise obtuse, my months in the monastery were not wasted. I believe I may claim to have made some progress in converting from theoretical knowledge to partial realization two supremely important truths—that the real man is pure spirit (Mind) and that this pure spirit is One with the Universal Spirit (generally called the One Mind). I also came to understand certain profoundly meaningful paradoxes and even to attain a certain degree of intuitive realization of their validity. When a Zen Master declared that *Nirvana* is *here and now*, or that the Present is the only reality, I think I really did understand the truth at which those teachings point; or perhaps I should say rather that I came closer than before to understanding it. I did see that the injunction 'When hungry, eat' is no less spiritual than, for example, 'Nothing exists but the One Mind (Spirit)'. Before I left Hua T'ing Ssŭ, if I had not passed beyond the iron peaks of dualism which guard the Ultimate Mystery from our eyes, at least I could now and then see the light shining between their

jagged crests. If I was still far from having realized *Nirvana*, at least I knew better than to seek for it anywhere outside my own mind. I knew that, since *Nirvana* is no other than *Sangsara* seen with a pure vision, it was wrong to think of going *from* the one *to* the other. I understood that if a lump of filthy mud *appears* less beautiful than the loveliest imaginable jade, the fault lies not in the mud but in my vision. (Oh, look at that hideous tin roof; how it interrupts the view! Interrupts? It *is* the view—part of it.)

It is difficult to describe how I came to have a clearer perception of these truths. No moment of *Satori* cast its light upon me; never for one moment did I behold Reality face to face. Nor did I reach to any state of consciousness more than a little 'above' my normal one. Yet, slowly, during the long, tranquil hours in that dimly lighted Hall, never quite without the faint perfume of incense (and never without the disturbance of its whining, cruelly biting mosquitoes), some little trickle of the water of Truth splashed drop by drop into my mind. The trickle was never the result of striving after a specific object; and I soon abandoned the *Koan* method ('Who reverences the Buddha?' 'Who am I?'), finding it barren and fruitless for me, though others have discovered deep satisfaction in it. Perhaps an analogy will best express what I did do with my mind during the long hours of meditation.

If we are gazing out of the window and I say: 'Look at that tree,' both the command and the action are meaningless except in relation to the tree. But suppose we are sitting on a mountain peak surrounded by uniform, motionless white mist, floating above, around and below —a nothingness, in fact; if, at such a moment, I say: 'Look!' the command does, I think, have meaning. Now, in Zen we are told not to examine a conundrum logically; so, even when we employ a *Koan*, our striving is in a sense without a specific *object*; yet we do *strive*; we do not just sit with minds like lifeless lumps of wood or stone. Were I compelled to do that for which I am so little qualified, to teach the method of Zen meditation, I should say: 'Do not look at that tree; it won't help you at all; on the other hand, don't just sit, *look*!'

I know this analogy is very imperfect, but unfortunately Zen, like all other methods of striving to come face to face with Reality, is not easily expressed in words, except where speaker and hearer have entered upon a relationship so intimate that the latter intuitively realizes what lies behind his teacher's words. I have only ventured to say as much as this because a long description of my life in a Zen monastery seems to demand *some* account of the fruit I gathered. I am

sorry the crop was so small, for there was plenty of fruit on the higher branches of the trees for those who knew how to harvest it. Fortunately, I still have a transcription of something Suting said to me at a time when I was feeling very discouraged. Perhaps his way of putting things is clearer than mine. It is certainly much deeper. Noticing my despondency, he said:

'Elder Brother, I don't know how many of us younger monks here really understand the Preceptor. I find his lectures far from clear. Still, I have discovered for myself that if I just sit perfectly still, so still that I am conscious of the blood drumming in my ears, and open up my mind to—no, not to anything—just open up my mind; though nothing happens the first time or the second, one day I begin to feel some response. My heart seems to be talking to me, revealing secrets of which I had never so much as dreamt. Afterwards, I am left in a state of marvellous happiness. A Light shines within me and about me, and they are One. My heart seems to have seven doors which open one by one, the Light getting brighter and brighter all the time. And when the meditation period is over, I feel as if everything that happens to me is good; as if all of it is directed by the Light; as if, without thinking much, I do just what is best for me to do; as if I am being carried by a great stream just where it is best for me to go. Then, sooner or later, from habit I do something which brings me against the current of the stream; the Light fades and I am as before, but for a while I am lonely as when I was first separated from my mother. I think this is because I have a heavy load of *Karma* which drags me back and sets me against the stream again and again. What gives me hope is that, each time all this happens, the Light seems to stay with me a little longer.'

It will be readily seen that Suting, though my junior in years, had gone a long way past me on the road to Truth. I did not understand all of what he said at the time, entirely missing its deeper implications; but, since then, I have come to appreciate his words more fully. I am quite positive now that the whole secret of life lies within the innermost being of each one of us and that, if only we could open the 'seven doors of the heart' and keep them open, we should be able to live godlike lives, strictly in accordance with the *Dharma*, the universal laws of life and being, without any strain or effort. So long as the doors remain closed, our senses lead us against the current and whatever attempt we make to live in accordance with what seem to us to be the universal laws involves tremendous effort and renunciation. Do not the Taoist sages with their doctrine of action proceeding from non-activity mean

just what Suting meant when he spoke of moving with the current—'Without thinking much, I do just what is best for me to do.'

More than seven months passed in happy tranquillity. Then, gradually, a change set in. I began to notice the stirring of desires which had been absent before—longings for certain sights, sounds and even smells belonging to the world across the lake, some of them so trivial as to astonish me by the strength of their attraction. My previously rare expeditions into the city (originally about one in six or eight weeks) became more frequent, until at last I was forced to admit that to continue playing the monk would be a fraud. It took a further six weeks of careful thought before I came to a final decision. That decision once made, I sadly put off my black robe, stopped shaving my head and prepared to leave.

On the last day, the Preceptor, who, like most of the other monks there was very poor, placed in my hand a silver dollar as 'a gift for the journey'. This charming gesture implied that, so far from having to make an offering to cover the cost of nine months' hospitality, I 'deserved' to be rewarded for my 'services' to the monastery. Such unexpected kindness did something to lighten the grief of saying goodbye to so many warm-hearted friends. Sure now that the monastic life was not yet for me and shamefully agog for 'the world', I shed no tears of disappointment—that came much later, when I had seen more of my precious world! Yet I came very near to shedding tears as one by one the junior monks came in to say goodbye and, one by one, I visited my seniors for the same purpose. Naturally I felt leaving Suting most of all. He had been my constant companion and mentor for over nine months, during which we had eaten, slept, walked and meditated side by side day and night. Of course he came down to the shore to see me off and I remember gazing at him as the boat pulled farther and farther from the lakeside, until he was no more than a little black dot against the green of the forest.

I tried with indifferent success to follow his parting advice to me. 'Do not grieve, Elder Brother. We shall miss each other, but let it not be too much. As the Preceptor said yesterday, you and I and all beings are animated by the One Spirit. No parting and no meeting ever really take place. When we rejoice at a meeting or grieve at a parting, we are allowing false understanding to take the place of truth. Wherever you go, in this life and in lives to come, I shall be with you. The Light which shines deep, deep within your own heart is my Light, the Light of all. And when at last we have gained the object of our great search,

even apparent differences and divisions will melt away. You and I will know ourselves for the One that we have never ceased to be.'

Then he added: 'The Preceptor spoke those words for your sake, only you were not there to hear them. I promised to pass them on, but please take them as coming from me, and be happy.'

8

Oases in a Blood-red Ocean

SOON after I left Hua T'ing Ssŭ, war spread from the Far East and engulfed the world. The inner tranquillity, most precious of the gifts I carried away with me from the monastery, was now to stand me in good stead, but there were to be times when the lurid scarlet of a world in flames came near to dimming the Light within me almost to darkness, and there was to come one period when it seemed to me that the Eternal Light shone no more. Like so many of those who stood upon the brink of death, I was tempted to gaze greedily outwards at the forms of beautiful women, the softness of silken fabrics, the glitter of jewels, the passion of song, the frenzy of intoxication, the scent of the flowers of evil and the taste of delicious meats. It was only later that I discovered once more the inevitable corruption beneath and learnt how easily the bubbles of false happiness burst from pain of loss or the cloying of excess. It took me several years to regain my faith that only he who looks within with steadfast gaze can penetrate the veils of darkness and reach at last the source of all joy, the everlasting perfection of which the forms of beauty sensible to eye and ear, to smell, taste, touch and consciousness are but pale, watery reflections. I wasted those barren years in forgetfulness of the fact that the ecstasy known to Master Eckhart and to St John of the Cross as union with God and to the Buddhist Masters as the realization of Truth or as Enlightenment can be found nowhere else than at the centre of our being. Those who have had the briefest experience of it are for ever freed from the bonds binding them to the Wheel. For them the Fates will weave their webs in vain. My life would have taken a very different course if I had had even a momentary glimpse of the face of Truth before leaving monastic seclusion probably for ever in this life.

According to my Teachers, the adept who hopes to gain Enlightenment must first learn to practise the selfless dedication of himself to others which St Paul calls Charity; he must learn *reasonable* self-control,

not based upon forceful abstention but upon wise renunciation following recognition of the hollowness of the objects of his desires; and he must learn to calm his mind to such a degree that not the smallest wayward thought can ruffle its surface, especially during his periods of meditation. No doubt it was because I had not sufficiently cultivated these prerequisites that my long stay in the monastery failed in its principal objective.

From Hua T'ing Ssŭ I continued my wanderings for a little while and then returned to England, intending to equip myself for an academic life as a sinologist. The outbreak of war in Europe soon put a stop to these plans and I joined the Army. Ideally, a Buddhist should and must be a pacifist, following the example of the strong man in the parable who voluntarily put his body within reach of a famished tiger too old and weak from hunger to pursue him. Believing in reincarnations stretching for incalculable aeons forward and backward, knowing that life and suffering are under any circumstances inseparable, immune to the foolish belief that victory for his own side will result in a world full of justice and happiness, imbued with a profound conviction that all life is sacred and that killing is the worst of sins, he should die rather than raise his hand against another. On the other hand, it is natural to be more deeply moved by the sufferings of a dog in front of our eyes than by news of death-dealing famine in a remote place previously unknown to us. Geographically, Poland was almost next door to me; and, humanly, I do in fact set more store by the events of this life than by those of lives past or to come. As the tales of Poland's appalling sufferings mounted, I became impatient to join the Army and follow my fate in that direction. As it fell out, I never wielded a sword and so never discovered whether, face to face with an enemy, it would be easier for me to kill or to let myself be killed. For two years, I laboured with a pen among those intelligence officers in the War Office whose business it was to deal with events in the Far East; after that, I was seconded to our Embassy in Chungking as a civilian, where I performed the work of Cultural Attaché. Death came near to me only in the form of bombs, both in London and Chungking. How ill prepared I was for it to strike can be judged from the following anecdote. Once, when I was sitting in a Soho Chinese restaurant, bombs began to crash down so close at hand that the whole building trembled. At that critical moment, my one prayer was: 'Heaven grant that the bomb doesn't strike until *after* the meal!' What a thought for a man probably about to die! Then, if ever, was the time for putting into practice

the instructions of my Tibetan Master: 'During the moments preceding death, concentrate with all your strength upon the Inner Light. Visualize the world as a sad, weary place full of hollow pleasures and real sorrows, a place you never desire to see again. Do this that the bonds of attachment may be sundered and a state nearer to *Nirvana* won.' Upon another occasion, fire-bombs fell all around me as I hastened down a street to a party in a friend's house. One fell so near that my coat was singed. Did I take refuge in a doorway and enter into deep self-liberating meditation? I did not. I hurried foolhardily ahead resolved that, unless a bomb fell upon me and reduced me to a screaming pillar of fire, I should on no account be deprived of the pleasures of wine and female company awaiting me. What a shameful confession for one to whom so much had been revealed! Somehow war impregnates the very atmosphere with evil. Men become coarser and more primitive in their pleasures. A lurid red Force seems to dominate the world and men drive the angels from their hearts. Though heroism and self-sacrifice flourish, they go hand in hand with brutal contempt for other virtues. Or perhaps, it was only in me that this ugly change occurred and that, unconsciously, I was judging my fellows by myself.

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In war-scarred Chungking, grey and battered city built upon a thousand flights of muddy steps at the confluence of two rivers, where a cloudy sky is so common that 'the dogs bark at the sun', and where Japanese planes rained death once each day for months on end, both duty and inclination led me to the war-lapped islands of peace which still survived in that ravaged land. My duty lay in cultivating the acquaintance of Chinese intellectual leaders, in visiting widely scattered universities which had taken refuge far inland, and in arranging for limited help to be given in the form of teachers of English, books and laboratory equipment, and of fellowships and scholarships for Chinese scholars going to Britain. Among the scholars with whom my work brought me in contact was the Venerable T'ai Hsü, sometimes called by Westerners 'the Chinese Buddhist Pope', on account of his efforts to unite the various temples and laymen's organizations into a single body powerful enough to defend itself against government depredations. The National and Provincial Governments, composed largely of officials who had been nurtured on the anti-religious propaganda forming part

of the school curriculum during the time of the Kuomintang Government, were constantly requisitioning temple lands and monastery buildings for other purposes, and sometimes so that individual officials could get further revenues into their own hands. Temples and monasteries had been powerless to resist, as there was no 'Church' organization, each of the larger temples and each of the laymen's associations being self-governing communities. In the days of the Empire, they had been in a way united, as all of them came under that organ of the imperial government which had to do with religion, and many of the temples received lavish patronage from the emperors themselves. Thus, there had always been somebody to appeal to for justice. The Kuomintang Government, though some of its members showed a lukewarm favour to Protestant Christians, generally took the attitude that religion is superstition and harmful to the nation's progress. At the time I am speaking of, only one really prominent official was a Buddhist and his was a position carrying with it very little actual power.

T'ai Hsü's dream was to have a well-knit organization like that of the Tibetan or Catholic Churches not, as his enemies averred, in order to throw the weight of religion into the political game, but both as a measure of self-defence and in order to have some means of bringing all temples and all monks up to the high standard already achieved by the best of them. I never came to know him intimately, partly because his Chekiang dialect was so thick that even his own servants could not always distinguish between the commands 'Bring on dinner' and 'Bring me some money'—*tsai* (food) and *ch'ien* (money) being almost identical in sound when pronounced by people from Chekiang trying to speak Mandarin. In appearance, he was a short, tubby man who shaved his head in the orthodox style but wore a long, drooping 'Mandarin' moustache. His eyes were kind and his face mirrored essential goodness of heart, without suggesting either saint or sage. He was, I think, a born administrator of the sort that every organized religion requires to look after those material aspects of its welfare with which contemplatives and recluses cannot be bothered, and for which they seldom have the right capacity.

Once, while we were sitting upon the terrace of a bombed temple in the heart of the city, to which some nineteenth-century Chinese architect had whimsically added a Grecian porch, T'ai Hsü told me of his plans for establishing modern schools in all the larger monasteries, both for the improvement of Buddhist scholarship and to teach the

novices something of modern science, English and other 'lay' subjects.

'There is a lot of opposition to my scheme even from among Buddhists,' he observed. 'People are so prejudiced against innovations. They do not see that, if Buddhism is to hold its own in a modern world, it must be modernized. If not, the Government will do to us what your Henry VIII did to the Catholic monasteries in England.'

My surprise at this display of unmonkish erudition caused him to smile gleefully. Then he added, speaking through an interpreter who understood his peculiar dialect and could render it into Mandarin: 'The Authorities are good to the Christian missionaries. Why? Because China owes them its first modern universities and countless schools at every level from kindergarten to college. Why should we Buddhists continue to lag behind?'

He paused and seemed to expect me to applaud these sentiments, thus placing me in an embarrassing situation, for I entirely agreed with his critics in feeling that the world has already more than enough schools and universities where people are taught to make a detailed study of some minute portions of the outer circumference of the circle of existence, and that it is the business of monastic schools to inculcate the secret knowledge whereby men may be led to concentrate upon the very hub of existence, the central point from which all else radiates. As one Zen monk said to me on this very subject: 'Suppose you have a great longing to behold the West Lake. Naturally, you will seek the first reasonably fast conveyance going in that direction. You will not sit at home studying the composition of water! Even if you learn from experiment that the pure water of the West Lake is free from all defiling particles, it will not add to your enjoyment of the lake's beauty, nor help you to reach it more quickly. T'ai Hsü with his lay studies for monks and his teaching of the Sastra of Pure Consciousness is wasting the monks' time. The Sastra fills their heads with arguments about void, non-void, seeds of consciousness, fields of consciousness, materialism, idealism, materio-idealism and all the rest. How will that help a single monk to deliver himself from the illusion of *Sangsara*? And beside that one quest, what do all those other things matter? Leave them to the scholars to play with, if they like, while monks get on with the job of Enlightenment for themselves and for all living beings? Is that not a full-time quest in itself?'

My Zen friend also criticized T'ai Hsü's fondness for 'proving' the truth of Buddhism by modern science. (I am ashamed to say that I once

did something of the same kind in my little book 'The Jewel and the Lotus'.) It is an unprofitable pastime and undignified for those who honour their Faith above all else. In the first place, few if any Buddhist scholars know enough of modern scientific theories of the nature of the universe to have more than a faint glimmering of what they are all about. In the second, to exclaim delightedly: 'Ah, such-and-such a Buddhist tenet *must* be right; Eddington (or Einstein) has *proved* it' is putting the cart before the horse in a most laughable way. Do not 'scientific' explanations of the nature of the universe, the composition of matter and so on undergo profound changes every few decades? What was formerly declared beyond all possibility of doubt to be black, is now 'proved' to be white. Then, during the inevitable time-lag between a 'discovery' and its popular acceptance, the scientists or their successors push their researches 'further'; just at the moment when the credulous public are beginning to cry that black is white, the scientists hit upon the new discovery that the so-called white is after all black. We have gone from idealism to out and out materialism and are now on our way back to idealism. Nobody knows what will come next, but it is surely too much to hope that Eddington and Einstein will remain unchallenged. What has all this, however necessary in other ways, got to do with the eternal verities? The experience of standing face to face with Reality *never* changes. Mystics of every age and every continent, Plotinus, the Buddha, Lao-tsě, Eckhart, Blake, countless Hindu sages and the adepts of Sufi wisdom, though separated by immense distances of time and space, are remarkable for their unanimity. Were it not that their understanding of the supreme experience is coloured by their preconceived notions about God (Truth, Reality, the Godhead, *Nirvana*), their accounts of it would be almost identical. Indeed, I cannot believe that one who has reached to the supreme experience can be even slightly deluded in his understanding of it; it is only that, while groping for words in which to clothe the experience, he is apt to chose terms most readily understandable to those around him. Thus the Catholic mystic speaks in terms of Catholic theology, the Sufi in terms of Allah, and so on.

The Venerable T'ai Hsü, who died a few years after the war, deserves honour for his unflagging devotion to the service of Chinese Buddhists, for the whole-hearted way in which he flung himself into the work. He was a man of immense learning and some wisdom, but no one, least of all himself, thought of him as a sage or as spiritually enlightened. Even had he lived at a time of peace and plenty, it is

doubtful if he would have succeeded in uniting Chinese Buddhists into a 'Church', for Buddhism in China has long been ailing. The wonderful inspiration which once carved cathedrals from the living rock and infused the poetry and painting of China with the breath of the spirit, died long ago. The overthrow of the Manchu dynasty merely hastened by a few years a break-up long foreseen. In the great monasteries and the small temples alike, men strong in spirit have long been few and hard to find. The ardent religious spirit which animates Tibetans and Mongols has not been seen elsewhere in China for many centuries. Chinese Buddhism had become like a great tree dying from lack of sustenance to support its great bulk. But the Spirit, the Inner Light, never dies. It may be that, as a result of the pruning caused by war, revolution and the present avowedly materialist régime, the life of the tree may be saved and, in the course of one, two, ten or twenty generations, a great spiritual awakening take place which will lift Chinese Buddhism to the high elevation it reached at several periods during the dynasties of Wei, T'ang and Sung. Until then, the Light will continue to shine in the hearts of a few here and there, like my friend Tahai. Never, never can it be altogether put out.

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A less prominent Buddhist figure in Chungking was the Dilwar Hutukhutu, a Sacred Incarnation from Mongolia. He had once lived among tens of thousands of nomads who treated him with all the respect due to pope and feudal prince combined. His limbs had been accustomed to the touch of cloth of gold and his kindly, pock-marked face had been framed by a jewelled headdress worthy of an emperor. The Japanese, on seizing Manchuria and part of Mongolia from the warlords nominally subject to Chiang Kai-Shek, had appreciated the enormous value of such an ally in the furtherance of their imperial designs. So they had wooed him with offers of large subsidies and with promises to maintain his royal-sacred status, which Chiang Kai-Shek's Republican, religiously unsympathetic government had barely recognized. That the Chinese of that period accorded even grudging recognition to Lamaist dignitaries and Mongol feudal princes was purely for reasons of political expediency. Had the Central Government once attained full power in the north, the Sacred Incarnations and Mongol royalty might have been driven from the seats of power for ever. For these and many other reasons, the Dilwar might well have

repudiated all loyalty to his Chinese overlords, with or without Japanese inducements to do so. He had not, I suppose, a drop of Chinese blood in his body; and that Mongolia was a part of China was due to historical events for which he had no reason to be grateful. Besides all this, the Japanese political and military leaders included quite a high proportion of pious Buddhists; however much at variance with the Dharma their actions may have been, such men were quite genuinely pious and thus more to be relied upon by the Dilwar than the agnostic or lukewarm Christians of Nanking (later of Chungking). So the Japanese expected the Dilwar to accept their patronage with joy.

They were wrong. Despite everything, the Dilwar's heart retained a curious loyalty towards the contemptuous Republicans who had inherited the Manchu Emperor's rôle of feudal overlord to the Mongol rulers. Rather than side with the Japanese, this once glittering figure disguised himself as the servant of an American professor at Tsinghua University, my old friend Robert Winter. In this humble disguise, he fled from right under the noses of the Japanese; for, as America and Japan were not then at war, they placed no obstacle in the way of Bob Winter's leaving Peking to journey via Hong Kong to Kunming, wartime refuge of Tsinghua University. Perhaps the Dilwar expected that the Chinese authorities would show some appreciation of a noble action of the utmost value to them, in that it secured the allegiance of countless Mongols who might otherwise have offered their excellent cavalry to the Japanese. Perhaps he was too wise to expect appreciation and too great-hearted to care for it.

When I first met the Dilwar in Chungking, he was living in a state of dismal poverty. I beheld a dark-faced, pock-marked man of about fifty-five with shrewd, dark eyes, an ever-ready smile which bespoke warmth and gaiety, a body emaciated by hunger, a shabby old gown of bronze-coloured cloth and a wooden rosary. He was like the Lama in *Kim* come to life. Both in appearance and in ability to suffer much without complaint, he was so like that rich old abbot who travelled as a beggar, striding from city to city in his single-minded search for the Stream of the Sacred Arrow, that now whenever I talk about this book to my Thai students (it is one of their set-books), I seem to see the Dilwar before me.

From our first conversation, I guessed that the Hutukhutu had been coldly received by the Chinese authorities. In all fairness, let it be said that most of them probably had not the remotest idea of his previous status as a god-prince in the 'barbarous' regions beyond the

Great Wall, and that it was therefore impossible for them to gauge the extent of his sacrifice. On the other hand, those officials belonging to the organ of state responsible for Tibetan and Mongolian affairs must have known all about him, so the treatment he received is hard to forgive. A trifling pension was granted to him, enough to sustain life at the beginning, but it was not raised when the currency continued its headlong downward rush to the point where a hundred *yuan* (dollar notes) were worth decidedly less than a box of matches.

I did not discover all this at once, for the Dilwar was always laughing merrily and no word of spontaneous complaint passed his lips at any of our meetings. I certainly did not know that he was starving until I had several times invited him to a cheap little Northern-style restaurant where the food reminded him of his home. Though he ate enormously, I supposed it was just because he enjoyed a robust appetite. The clue which ultimately led me to the truth was the curious contrast between his normally excellent manners and his tendency to grab hungrily at the little steamed loaves, which in the North take the place of rice, devouring one in two bites and quickly seizing another.

The Dilwar did not resent questions about his misfortunes, but he answered them as calmly as if he had been talking about the spitefulness of fate towards a distant acquaintance; until at last I came to understand that for him they were not misfortunes. He had learnt to take life as it comes. Well and good if his followers clothed him in cloth of gold and fed him from jewelled vessels. Well and good if I treated him to a cheap meal, for then he welcomed the opportunity to eat his fill. Yet if there were days when he had nothing to eat at all, well that was part of life too. He accepted everything with a smile and his infectious laugh rang out on the smallest provocation. At Wu T'ai I had discovered a Living Buddha lacking both scholarship and moral worth. In Chungking, I learnt that a Living Buddha may be a saint.

The Dilwar's *Karma* did not permit him to remain too long in a state of penury. Post-war conditions made his return to Mongolia virtually impossible, so he accepted an invitation to go and live in the United States. There, besides assisting students engaged upon research into Mongolian affairs, he has been installed as the Abbot of the first Vajrayanist temple in the western hemisphere. Though no longer god-prince to tens of thousands of followers, he may actually prefer his present tranquil mode of life to the pomp and circumstance of former days.

Not long ago, I had occasion to visit the Himalayan town of

Kalimpong and came one day to a narrow street of low houses chiefly inhabited by Mongols who had fled from their homes and reached Kalimpong via Lhasa. In one of those little houses, a certain Lama showed me some beautiful robes and ritual implements which had, for good reasons, to be quietly sold. When I enquired to whom they belonged, the Lama smiled affectionately and whispered: 'To His Holiness, the Sacred Incarnation, Dilwar.' That was one of the moments when I deeply regretted my relative poverty. I should have loved to buy one of those beautiful things as a present for my kindly, pock-marked, noble-hearted friend who might have been happy to regain one of the treasures from which circumstances had forced him to part.

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My work often took me on journeys to remote places. Once I was fortunate enough to be sent to visit a university evacuated to the foot of Omei Shan which, like Wu T'ai, is one of the chief sacred mountains of China. During my visit, I managed to snatch three days in which to explore the chief sights of that almost legendary place. The time was all too short and, as often in those days, I lamented that I was no longer my own master. I had temporarily lost the buoyant faith and expectation which had made my visit to Wu T'ai so memorable, but I particularly wanted to reach Omei's peak on account of poor Tahai who might be suffering all sorts of horrors under the Japanese occupation of Hongkong. (The connection between Tahai and Omei will appear in what follows.)

Omei Shan is sacred to Samandabhadra Bodhisattva (P'u Hsien), the personification of Sacred Activity. It has an intimate iconographical relationship with Wu T'ai in that the Lord Buddha is often depicted with the sword-wielding Manjusri astride his blue lion on one side and the sceptre-wielding Samandabhadra astride his white elephant on the other. Together, they symbolize the Lord Buddha's Perfect Wisdom and the Perfect Activity proceeding from it. In most other respects, the mountains differ profoundly. Wu T'ai lies amid the grasslands of the North and most of its ancient monasteries spangle a wide plateau, so that visits from one to another entail no more than a pleasant stroll. Omei, lying in the subtropics, is a massive giant narrowing towards a single peak and ascended by an amazing staircase, surely the longest flight of steps in the world. Athletically inclined youths manage the ascent in eight hours; most people require a day and a half or more.

The monasteries cling to precipices and ridges difficult of access; moreover, as for the most part they are built of wood in the south-western Chinese fashion, they have been burnt down so often that almost nothing remains of architectural splendour or historical interest. Worse still, the monks there no longer enjoy a reputation for saintliness or scholarship, but are noted only as magicians, the heroes of adventure-crazed schoolboys. (I once knew two runaway children in Hong Kong who set out for Omei undaunted by the prospect of walking almost a thousand miles with no more than the price of an ice-cream and a cinema ticket in the pocket of each.) The Chinese have for centuries produced a type of lurid comic scarcely better than those now causing such anxiety to Western parents; and, in their pages, Omei is depicted as the abode of monk-magicians who can leap over ten-foot walls, materialize swords from their breath and send them flying to cut off the heads of their enemies. Unbalanced children, instead of holding up the local filling-station, like juvenile delinquents in America, set off for Omei to learn the black arts.

Omei's gigantic staircase gives it an added disadvantage. The steps are so steep and irregular that the whole attention must be concentrated upon them, instead of upon the glorious views of fertile plains to the east and of the grand mountains of Tibet to the west; and the muscular pain involved in ascent and descent is much more intense than it would be if a corkscrew path took the place of the uncompromisingly vertical stairway. To make matters worse, I was pressed for time and my porter-guide kept urging me forward, allowing me no rest, for fear that we should be out on the mountainside after dark and a prey to wild beasts or robbers. In the midst of my own discontent, I felt deeply envious of some of the more humble pilgrims I met by the wayside, men and women whose sublime faith made them glad of the hardships which climbing involved and unwilling to omit paying respects at a single temple or shrine, however difficult the detour. These were the true men of spirit before whom it was fitting to be silent about the supposed difficulties of the way. They included old women with bound feet who literally went up on their knees, taking many days to cover the whole distance.

About halfway up the mountain was a monastery which served as a comfortable lodging place for the night, but visitors there were in constant danger from hordes of monkeys. A band several hundred strong haunted the neighbourhood. They had grown so contemptuous of men that they were more feared than afraid, especially as what passes

for sophisticated humour among monkeys is a little coarse by human standards. They used to watch visitors to the monastery through the window and, when the latter were bathing or sleeping, snatch their discarded trousers and hang them upon a tree, in full view of everybody, but out of reach.

That night, the assistant to the Reverend Receiver of Guests told me how, in pre-war days, a general and his favourite concubine were being escorted up the mountains, she riding in a litter, when one of the monkeys, by treating the lady with a certain familiarity, caused the general to fly into a rage and cut off the arm of the offending animal. Within less time than it takes to tell the tale, scores of infuriated monkeys surrounded the general's party, gnashing their teeth, gibbering and gesturing so fiercely that his followers grew fearful and refused to risk battle. A monk from that monastery, seeing their predicament, called to the general to put away his sword and to abandon all hostile intentions. The monkeys, who knew him well, allowed him to approach the besieged party; whereupon, addressing the general boldly, he admonished him for drawing blood upon the sacred mountain and suggested that the monkeys might be pacified by a large distribution of fruit and grain. The general agreed all too eagerly and the monk, seeing his advantage, exacted the promise of a large contribution to the monastery in return for the offerings to the monkeys he would provide. The monkeys rushed upon the gifts as soon as they arrived and the general's party hastened to seek sanctuary within the monastery walls.

While listening to this story, I found myself growing to have a certain liking for the general. My knowledge of the ways of warlords convinced me that most of them would have solved the difficulty by shooting down some of the monkeys and frightening the rest into running away. A general's escort was always armed with Tommy-guns, so a frightful execution would have resulted. But perhaps I gave the general more credit than he deserved. He may have been short of ammunition or frightened by the mutinous behaviour of his followers.

The second day of my ascent passed much like the first until, late in the afternoon, I reached the temple which nestles within the shelter of Omei's lofty peak. The scene before me was shadowed by driving clouds and a fine drizzle; I seemed to be on a smallish island, for a grey-white sea of clouds lapped around me concealing all but the immediate foreground. I stood there, cold and damp and wretched, hardly able to take in that I was more than ten thousand feet above the surrounding plain. It was well that I had seen at least something of the view from the

porch of the 'monkey temple', for the rain and cloud did not disperse until after I had returned to the mountain's foot. Since morning, my thoughts had dwelt almost continuously upon Tahai.

Most Mahayanists have a patron among the Bodhisattvas resembling the patron saints of Catholic and Orthodox Christians. Sometimes they are chosen by their Teachers; sometimes a ceremony is held during which the adept casts a flower upon a painted lotus, each petal of which contains the likeness of a Bodhisattva. It is believed that an unseen force will carry the flower to alight upon the face of the Bodhisattva most suited to become the adept's patron. Tahai, a man who dwelt in the world of spirit and of thought-forms much more than in the world of activity around him, had, during his first initiation, cast a flower which fell upon the face of Samantabhadra, the Personification of Divine Action; thus Omei Shan was the earthly home of his patron and he had always longed to make the pilgrimage I was now performing on his behalf. No news of him had been received since the Japanese occupation had descended upon Hong Kong like a curtain of darkness. Many people had perished and hunger and fear might be the fate of the rest. Believing in the power of thought to traverse immense distances, I hoped to send him comfort by conveying to him the feeling that something was being done to bring him into a special connection with the patron Bodhisattva to whom he was devoted. I do not, of course, literally believe that the Bodhisattva is a sort of god who grants special favours for the performance of a pilgrimage to Omei in person or by proxy. But my whole conception of the Bodhisattvas, which I learnt from Tahai himself, is a conception of omnipresent spiritual forces. I believe that it is possible to establish a certain connection with these forces and I hoped that, with an intensely concentrated mind, I should be able to reach Tahai in some way. Unless Tahai had already become a seer, it was too much to hope that I could transfer to his mind a vivid picture of what I was about to do for him upon Omei. I hoped only that when next he contemplated the Spirit of Divine Action, his heart would become suffused with renewed hope and strength, and thus be better able to bear whatever misfortunes he was compelled to suffer. There is, besides, a Buddhist doctrine called the Transference of Merit, according to which a simple mental resolution on the part of the merit-maker can transfer that merit to whomsoever he will. The Lord Buddha himself emphasized the merit-making value of pilgrimages, as can be seen in the sutra describing the manner of his passing, the Mahaparinirvana Sutra. Hence I thought it not impossible that the

merit of climbing Omei in a reverent frame of mind could be transferred to my friend. If all this sounds too much like superstition, why then I must admit to being superstitious; yet I believe that the whole matter could be described in terms acceptable to those who have made a scientific study of the power of human thought and who are prepared to admit that there are many purely natural thought-powers (as opposed to supernatural powers) which the scientists of today grasp as imperfectly as those of a century or two ago grasped the power and capabilities of electricity. Is it quite impossible to believe that the day may come when we may wield powers similar to those of radio and television without requiring the transmitting and recording instruments on which at present we depend? I do not think that anyone who has a wide acquaintance among quite ordinary Tibetan or Mongolian Lamas could continue to regard such things as sheer impossibilities; for, in Tibet, backwardness in the physical sciences is to a surprising extent compensated for by many astonishing achievements in the realm of mental sciences—a statement with which the great psychologist C. G. Jung would certainly agree.

That cold, wet night, while standing somewhere around ten thousand feet above the world and shivering beneath a borrowed quilted gown, I took my place before the Great Altar with the monks of the temple ranged on either hand. There, in the name of the pious layman, Tsai Tahai of Hong Kong, I performed obeisance to the Rider of the White Elephant, Wielder of the Jade Sceptre, Perfect Activity Arising from Perfect Wisdom. Presently, I was bidden to stand to one side that the officiating monk might continue the rites on my behalf as I was far too unskilled to do more than commence them myself. As in Hua T'ing Ssŭ, I took my place on the right among the contemplatives and from there watched the performance of a rite of which the symbolism was older far than Buddhism itself—symbolism unchanged since the very dawn of Chinese civilization. On a long piece of yellow-tinted paper had been inscribed in exquisite caligraphy a letter imploring the Guardians of Virtue to protect the layman Tsai Tahai from the perils of war, famine and enemy occupation, this protection to extend unto his family and his household and to all whom he held dear. Before the gleaming statue of the Boddhisattva, the words were intoned in a softly musical voice, the phrases taking on the cadence of poetry. Then the yellow paper was consigned to the sacred fire that the 'essence' of the invocation might 'mount on high', wafted aloft by the flames.

Back in my cell, I expected to fall asleep easily. Instead, my mind was thronged with memories and a great homesickness for the monastic life came upon me. I reflected that I lay in the heart of sacred ground where for thousands of years human beings (Buddhist and pre-Buddhist) had come to offer their heartfelt reverence. The atmosphere was charged with the spiritual force of their devotions. Very wide awake and conscious of an unusual flow of energy working within me, I relighted the crimson candle and sat up crosslegged upon my bed. Hour after hour, I sat silently reviewing the events of the last two or three years—wasted years. Though my religious faith had remained intact, it had become an empty thing, so far had I fallen below the standard I had reached while in Hua T'ing Ssŭ. A great urge came upon me to rededicate myself to the life of the spirit, together with a bitter awareness that, back in Chungking, my resolution would waver and perhaps die amid the noisy materialism of my surroundings, for I am one greatly dependent upon the company I keep. Among saints, it is easy enough to approach to sainthood; out in 'the world', it is hard to remain not 'of the world'. (I have of course used 'world' in a very special sense. In a wider sense, religion and saints are very much 'of the world', since living beings compose the world and the spirit lies within the hearts of every one of them.)

My forebodings were increased by the circumstances accompanying the dawn. The rain still pattered on the roof, so I was to be denied of that peculiar mark of Heaven's esteem which is regarded as the climax of every successful pilgrimage to Omei. On fine days, sunrise there is followed by an extraordinary phenomenon. Pilgrims standing at a point just below the peak and looking across a great gulf immediately below them behold an immense shadow cast across the gulf, known as 'the Shadow of the Buddha' on account of its curious likeness to a gigantic Buddha-image. Many attempts, none of them wholly convincing, have been made to 'explain' this phenomenon, which remains as mysterious as the lights I saw upon Wu T'ai. Believers take it one way, non-believers another. I do not pretend to know whether it is 'natural' or 'supernatural'; nor do I care, for I have been taught to regard natural and supernatural as one. A drop of rain-water is to me no less mysterious than a ghost, a ghost no more foreign to nature than a drop of water. Yet it saddens me to find that so many people, when confronted with a beautiful mystery, care nothing for its beauty or its power, desiring only to hit upon some 'scientific' means of 'explaining it away'. They might just as well stand before an exquisite Angelo

statue and say: 'Pooh! It's nothing really—just a piece of stone cut about with a mason's chisel.' True, of course, but...

Deprived of my only chance in this life to behold the Shadow, I set off to the head of the staircase pursued by a sadness rooted in my reflections during the night-watches. Somehow I managed to descend the longest staircase in the world in less than one day, but at such a cost to my leg muscles that I was laid up in my bedroom at the university for the next forty-eight hours.

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Soon after my return to Chungking, I was sent upon official business to Chengtu, a walled grey-brick city affectionately styled 'Little Peking'. Its residential lanes bordered by low grey walls pierced with bronze-studded lacquered gates (but black and gold instead of Peking's scarlet) and the charming courtyards lying behind produced a sometimes startling resemblance to the Empress of Cities.

Now it happened that the Omei pilgrimage had brought down wrath upon my head. Some missionaries had written in to the Embassy complaining that the British Cultural Relations Officer had, while visiting Omei, openly worshipped the abominable idols of the heathen, thereby prejudicing their labours in the vineyard and injuring the Embassy's repute. So I had been gently reprimanded and advised to avoid giving further offence in this manner. This kindly meant advice had for me a tragic result which confirmed the veiled prophecy made by the Venerable Nêng Hai many years before.

My visit to Chengtu was undertaken in the company of a not very sympathetic colleague. One day we were standing in a temple courtyard admiring its faded beauty and, incidentally, listening to the hum of a sermon being preached in the building facing us. Presently the flow of sound ceased, benches scraped against a stone floor and the cloth-shod monks could be heard shuffling their feet. Just as we were going to turn away, a chant began, sufficiently melodious to detain us longer. At that moment, an ochre-robed figure came hurrying out of the building and walked straight towards where we stood. It was Nêng Hai.

Seven years before at Wu T'ai, Dr Chang, Mr Li and myself had all performed the simple rite whereby we were accepted by Nêng Hai as his personal disciples. This being so, the *only possible* way for me to greet our Teacher after a long separation was to prostrate myself before

his feet. But now what was I to do? My Embassy colleague had no idea of my predicament and he was not a man whose discretion I could trust in any matter which seemed to him derogatory to British prestige. My reprimand had been gently worded, but I was intended to obey and, besides, it had come from Sir Eric Teichman, a delightful person whom I should have been sorry to offend and, in fact, more of a 'Teacher' to me than Nêng Hai himself.

My colleague and I were standing right in the path of the oncoming Abbot, whose eyes were raised to our faces and *seemed* to be directed especially at me. My mind in a turmoil, anguish in my heart, I held his gaze for a while and then—impassively stepped aside. The Venerable Nêng Hai walked straight past without turning his head and disappeared into another building. I longed to run after him and throw myself at his feet in the privacy of his room, but just then X (my senior) said: 'Hurry up. We're awfully late. Old General Liao has probably never been kept waiting since he and his family took over the province. He fancies himself a sort of king and we had better humour him.' Silently I followed him out into the street and ordered rickshaws to take us to the warlord's mansion.

The next day, we left Chengtu at dawn. When, on my next and last visit to that city, I called at the temple, Nêng Hai had gone. Oh, why had I not had the courage to take X into my confidence and hurry after my Teacher, if only to spend five minutes with him? Later on, I thought of several ways in which, had I been less flustered, I could have put the matter right. As it was, I had in a sense been guilty of denying the Lord Buddha as Peter, with much better reason, denied Christ, for a Mahayana initiate is taught to look upon his Teacher (whether one or several) *as* the Buddha himself. Once the ceremony of being accepted as a disciple has been performed, then that Teacher, however imperfect in his personal life, *is* the Buddha in the eyes of those he teaches. He is not, of course, regarded as infallible—that would be too much against Buddhist sound common sense—yet he must be obeyed implicitly, for how can a disciple presume to know whether his Teacher is right or wrong until he has put that teaching into practice? The latter may order some practice which seems to the disciple to be against common sense until further illumination discloses its value. If and when a disciple becomes convinced that his Teacher is leading him in the wrong direction, he may then very respectfully request leave to seek the Dharma elsewhere and the request cannot be refused.

I am still unhappy when I recall this incident, so accurately predicted by Nêng Hai himself. Did he, after an interval of seven years, recognize me and, hurt by my discourtesy and ingratitude to one who had spent many precious hours instructing me, pass on in silence? Or did he behold nothing more than two bronzed Englishmen, strangers who were rather slow in moving out of his way? I shall never know. And, assuming that he did recognize me, did he really feel hurt or did he have some intuitive knowledge of the reason for my failure to speak? The latter would have been impossible to explain to him. How could I say to my Teacher: 'As I am now a member of His Britannic Majesty's Embassy, it would be regarded as demeaning were I to prostrate myself before you'?

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A few months after that unfortunate meeting, my *Karma* once more exercised an important influence on my life. I became ill and, receiving permission to rest for a few weeks in the country, I went to stay in an old monastery in the heart of the hills beyond Chungking. A girl of whom I was fond, and who one day came to visit me there, provided me with a perfect example of the average modern, educated Chinese youth's attitude to the world of the spirit. To reach my room, she had to pass through a hall full of statues of the Buddhas and probably of some ancient gods as well. Even at midday, the hall was shrouded in gloom, and Ying was more than a little frightened by the time she reached the pleasant room where I lay.

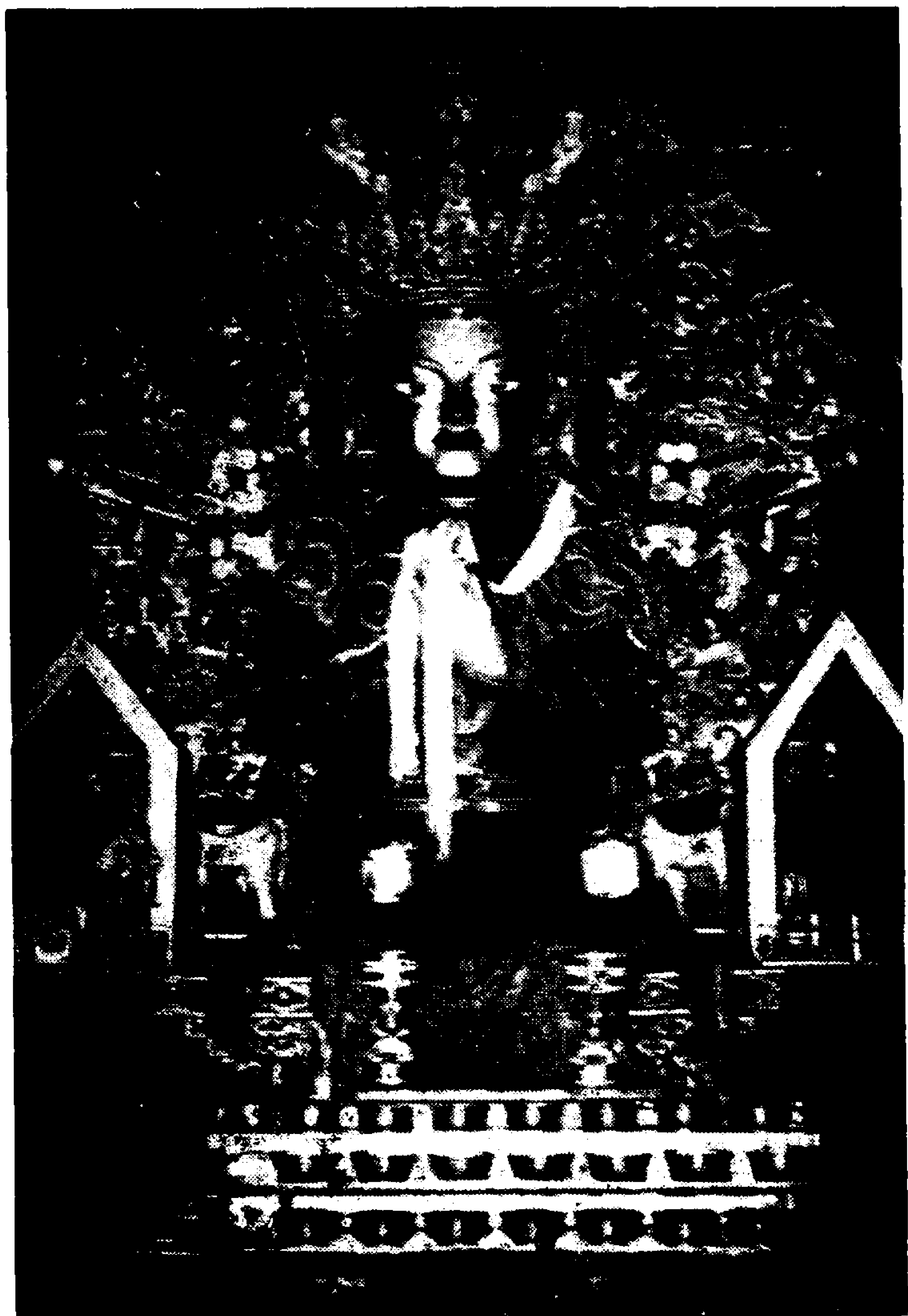
'But, Ying, what's the matter? *You* don't believe in the Buddha, the Bodhisattvas or the gods. You've told me that often enough and chided me for being old-fashioned and superstitious. What were you afraid of in there? Statues?'

'G-ghosts,' she answered nervously. 'In a nasty, gloomy old place like this, there are sure to be ghosts.'

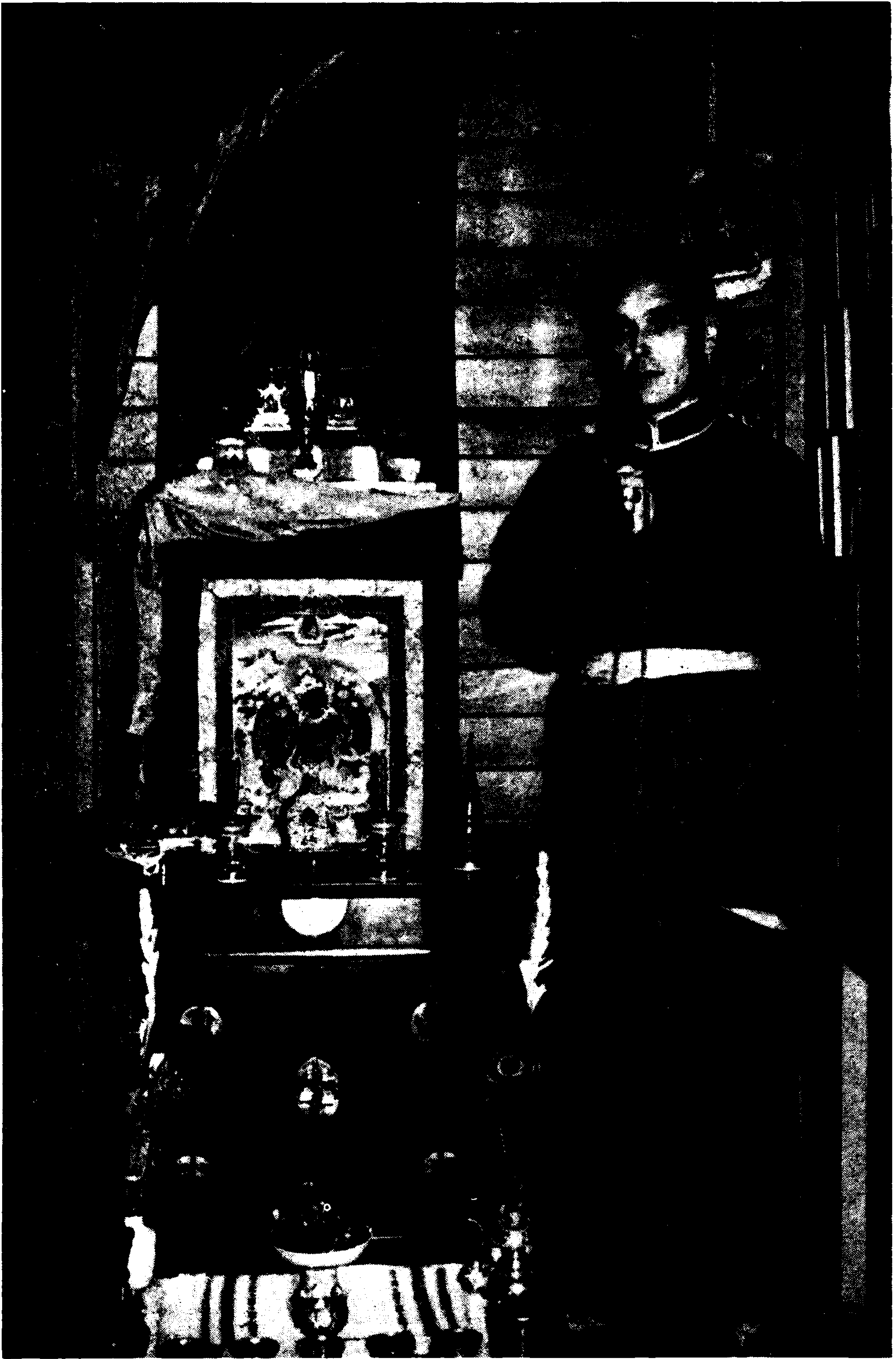
'My dear Ying,' I exclaimed, feeling rather annoyed, 'what a queer creature you are. You dismiss all beneficent supernatural beings or forces as mere superstitious nonsense, yet you are ready to believe completely, utterly in *evilly* disposed spirits. How *very* Chinese of you.'

I am sure that my final exclamation was not unfair, in so far as it related to present-day Chinese youth. Few educated young men or women have any religion beyond a vague, somewhat Confucian, belief in the abstract 'laws of Heaven'; yet there is hardly one of them who,

A *Rakṣa* in a temple courtyard, Thailand



Altar of a Himalayan temple



The author beside his household shrine in Bangkok, after initiation

left alone in a dark or gloomy place, can laugh wholeheartedly at the idea of ghosts. It is as though the Chinese as a race are intuitively aware of the omnipresent realm of the spirit, only that their 'modern' education has so conditioned them that this awareness has come to take its lowest and most unproductive form.

However, Ying had nothing to do with my being so beholden to my illness for an important step in my life. One day, while I was pottering about the monastery, I fell into conversation with the elderly monk in charge of the block-printing press which had for centuries been reproducing Buddhist works from heavy blocks of wood on each of which the text of a single page was beautifully hand-engraved. Thus a book containing one hundred pages required one hundred separate blocks of wood. The disadvantages of this method of printing are obvious; the advantage is that the lovely engravings are preserved virtually for ever, so that reprints can be made at any time. After showing me the press, my guide took me to the library and offered to lend me some of the volumes produced in that monastery during the last several hundred years. They included a work of one of the early Zen Masters, the *Tun Wu Ju Chieh Yao Mên Lun*, which title can be roughly translated as 'The Path to Sudden Attainment'; it was composed by the T'ang scholar Hui Hai.

I carried this volume, excellently printed on soft paper, back to my cell and began to examine it. Presently it occurred to me that, though the content was very deep, the wording was such that a man with some knowledge of Zen would not find it too difficult to translate. It contained some very striking paradoxes, of which one caught my eye as soon as I opened the book for the first time.

> A fool seeks for the Buddha, not for Mind.
> A sage seeks for Mind, not for the Buddha.

To somebody unversed in Zen, this couplet would seem to suggest that the writer had no faith in Buddhism; to a Zen adept, it is clear that the Buddha (here used in the sense of Absolute Reality) *is* Mind, other than which nothing has any real existence. The more I read, the more I was tempted to essay a translation into English, which I finally produced. I know now that it was not a very good translation and that it contained far too many mistakes. Nevertheless, it did open up a new kind of work for me, culminating (up to now) in my new translation of the Dialogues and Sermons of Huang Po, one of the greatest of the

early Zen Masters. It is a work which wonderfully expounds Zen, pointing directly to the way for us to come face to face with Reality! I feel that, if I were to die tomorrow, at least my life would have produced one fruit of value to seekers after Truth. This is not a specially profitable thought, but somehow comforting. I often think that, if I had not fallen ill at that time and conceived the idea of translating Hui Hai's book, I might never have thought of embarking upon this kind of work. That is why I feel sure that my *Karma* caused me that illness, not in the usual way as a penalty for disobeying some of nature's spiritual or material laws, but that a great purpose might be fulfilled.

. . . . .

Before leaving West China at the end of the war, I enjoyed one more deeply satisfactory experience. Somewhere to the north-west of Chengtu, there is a mountain which (unless I misremember) is called Ch'in Ch'eng Shan, a minor sacred place for Taoists. The river guarding its approaches from the city is crossed by means of a very curious narrow bamboo raft. The passengers squat on stools not more than nine inches high, after first removing their shoes and socks. By the time the load is heavy enough to induce the raftsman to move, the little craft is so weighed down that the deck sinks just under the water! It is a most extraordinary sight to see passengers being poled across. They seem to be crouching actually upon the surface of the water with no visible support, like partakers in a miracle.

The sacred mountain is one of a long range. It contains absolutely nothing of pre-eminent interest—some fine bamboo groves, some handsome pine-trees, a happy intermingling of temperate and tropical plants and three or four Taoist temples, pretty but in no way unique. That is all. But to me it was a joyful place. Wartime Chungking had become a scarred, ugly city, and the war-harassed Chinese had lost so much of their traditionally graceful way of life. The men's long gowns had given place to ugly, postman-like uniforms, the silks to grey or blue cotton cloth, beautifully leisurely manners to a sort of catch-as-catch-can attitude, and all pleasure and much goodness had been marred by the cruel hardships of inflation, enemy bombing and official rapacity. But there on Ch'in Ch'eng Shan, everything had remained unaltered for centuries. The Taoist recluses wore long, flowing robes, and their hair was braided into buns which, secured with ornamental combs, protruded through headgear reminiscent of the coiffure of

Ming dynasty scholars. In the temples, wine was heated in small antique winepots of charmingly engraved bronze and served with elaborate courtesy by men whose every movement betokened an inner harmony of spirit coupled with the utmost grace of body and limbs. Simple faith in the old gods and respect for the genii of rock, stream and mountain still lingered there. It was a great, if melancholy, joy to see all these things once more, a joy lovely to recall now that the old Taoist way of life has probably vanished from the earth. In the evenings I would sit, knees to chin, ensconced in a grotto just above the temple where I lodged, having purposely chosen that spot that I might listen to the curious and unforgettable music of the wind in the pines. One night, when the moon had just risen, I suddenly recalled the poem of Li Po which True Pearl's father, Milky Way, had recited to me all those years ago:

> O why do I dwell among these green mountains?
> A laugh is my answer. My heart is serene.
> See the peach-petals float on the face of the waters!
> Ah, *here* is a world where no mortals are seen!

Though I did not realize it at the time, this was my farewell to Old China, the China I had learnt to love so well.

9

Blood-Brotherhood and the Night of the Spirit

UP TO this point in my narrative, though I have drawn a sincere picture of China's spiritual life as seen from deep down inside by one in love with the surviving features of her gloriously rich past, I have been guilty of one omission of supreme importance. Owing to my personal concern with Buddhism, I have said almost nothing of the great Confucian doctrine. It is true that I myself have come very little under the influence of Confucius, except at the time when I grew ashamed of my unfilial treatment of my father; but I have always admired the courtesy and restraint, the harmonious way of life and the well-balanced behaviour which the Chinese have derived from the Sage. Moreover, nobody could deny that Confucianism has had an infinitely greater effect upon the development of Chinese civilization than have Buddhism and Taoism put together. So it is a fitting and pleasant task to pay tribute here to my friend and sworn-brother, Chin P'eishan—a Confucian of Confucians.

After the war, I obtained from the Chinese Government a roving research scholarship for the purpose of studying T'ang Dynasty Buddhism; and, following a brief visit to England to settle some affairs arising from the death of my father, I returned to Peking. During more than nine years, scarcely a day had passed without my recalling some facet of her beauty and without my feeling an almost physically painful longing to return. Alas, I found her very faded and very tired after the long years of enemy occupation. The thick, red clouds of war had left an evil trail behind them. The stark, poverty-dealing inflation continued unchecked and the rapacity of the newly arrived Central Government officials from the south-west had to be seen to be believed. Poverty stalked the city, reducing the middle classes—especially the teachers and students—to near destitution. There were stories of thin, half-starved professors dragging rickshaws in their spare time,

and at least one professor committed suicide, unable to bear the shame and misery of having to watch his adored children cry from hunger. To all this was added the ever-present threat of civil war which, during the next two years, drew nearer and nearer the city. I grew to feel that Peking lay silently awaiting its fate and that my dream of living out my life there would soon be rudely shattered. Sick at heart, I found my power to withdraw into an inner tranquillity of spirit had decreased almost to vanishing point, for I had not yet reached the stage where a man learns how to live a spiritual life that is quite independent of his surroundings. Apart from the gradual improvement of my Chinese Buddhist scholarship, nothing of consequence happened to me during those two years except my intimate and deeply rewarding friendship with the Confucian scholar, Chin P'eishan; and my marriage which, though happy, forms no part of this story. None of the joy I have derived from writing this book can compare with the joy of writing a memorial to that most excellent of men. It is, in a way, fitting that my chosen model of a Confucian gentleman should be a man without any formal religion, because this illustrates how, in China especially, a highly spiritual life and the lack of any positive religion sometimes go together. He did not *disbelieve* in gods, Buddhas or Bodhisattvas; but to him they were of no more immediate importance than fleecy white clouds in a summer sky. To call him irreligious would be the reverse of truth.

We first met shortly after my return to Peking. I was using the telephone in the British Consul's anteroom, where several of his Chinese staff were busily working, when the ruddy-faced Assistant Air Attaché burst in by one door and strode across to the other. A very thin old gentleman who had been writing with a Chinese brush at his desk stood up to show respect to an official of the foreign government he served. This courteous action was rewarded by the red-faced young man in uniform with a breezy:

'That's all right, boy.'

Boy! The faces of the Chinese clerks froze, but the old gentleman himself smiled acknowledgement and went on brushing characters on to the vertically lined official notepaper. A little later, when I had finished my telephone call, this old man complimented me on my Chinese. A conversation followed, ending with an invitation to visit him in his house just across the courtyard of the 'English Palace'.

I learnt from somebody that my new friend was in fact a Manchu nobleman of the Ai-hsin-chieh-lu clan, a direct descendant six generations removed from the brother of K'anghsi, that most splendid and

puissant of emperors. He was still under sixty, but looked vastly older chiefly on account of the desperate hardships suffered during the war-years, which had besides resulted in tuberculosis. For some thirty years he had served the British Legation (later Embassy) rising to the highest post open to a Chinese, that of Senior Writer. He had also been tutor to successive batches of diplomat language-students whom he had lived to see become men of high rank—ministers, consuls-general and so on. As the child of a Manchu family dispossessed at the time of the 1911 Revolution, he had little reason to feel loyal to the Republican government; but he was intensely loyal to China as his home and he had transferred to the British Government he served so faithfully that special loyalty which every man, according to Confucius, owes to his feudal lord. His scholarship and ability in the composition of elegant Chinese official documents—models of terseness and vigour—were greatly appreciated by the Japanese who, during the eight long years of occupation, had repeatedly made him tempting offers to secure his services for the puppet government. Though such work could in itself have been innocuous, he maintained his scornful refusal to the end. Rather than fail in loyalty, he endured those eight years with increasing misery, selling off his possessions one by one until, when he came to the gate of the 'English Palace' to welcome the British officials returning after the Japanese surrender, he had almost nothing left but a change of clothes. He remained in British service until his death in 1949, leaving a will in which he wrote that, though he had nothing left with which to provide for his family, he felt confident that those he had served so well would look after his widow. This confidence was sadly misplaced. The Foreign Office 'under existing regulations' could not see its way to providing a pension; the subscription raised from among P'eishan's former students who were now seniors in the diplomatic service scarcely paid for a simple funeral. His widow was saved from destitution by the British Council's employment of their son.

But to return to our friendship. Within a month of our first meeting, we had become close friends. There were even days when he would come by rickshaw to my house, though his health was so bad that the smallest expedition of this kind exhausted him. Much more often, I used to go to spend the evening with him. In time, our friendship blossomed to such a degree that he came to mean as much to me as Tahai had done in my Hong Kong days, and from P'eishan I learnt much about the attitude to life of an old-style Confucian gentleman.

He was the product of the former Chinese system of education which had for its object the making of a perfectly balanced man—upright in thought and behaviour, aesthetically lovely in conduct and gesture, and qualified to enjoy the refined pleasures attainable by those whose erudition and aesthetic perceptions have been fully developed. He believed in an abstract impersonal entity called Heaven, with which Earth (and therefore Man) must live in the same harmonious relationship as a perfect wife and husband. Whenever Man breaks this harmony, disaster overtakes the whole of creation. To maintain it, Man must 'live according to the Way of Heaven', loyal to his superiors, kindly to his juniors, respectful to his ancestors, nourishing his descendants, and faithful, trustworthy and generous towards his equals. If he belongs to the scholar-official class, the literati, he must in addition polish himself by engaging in gentlemanly pursuits—literature, philosophy, the performance of the rites, history and caligraphy, with the optional addition of some of the following—callisthenics, painting, music, chess, archery and the connoisseurship of bronzes, porcelains or jades. Whosoever performs his duties diligently need have no fear of Heaven's displeasure. Nor gods, nor demons can harm him, though he may be overwhelmed in general disasters stemming from the wickedness of his generation. Such a man may, if he wishes, embrace Buddhism or any other religion to prepare for the next life; but he should give most of his attention to what lies before his eyes—*This Life.*

Like all Confucianists, P'eishan attached great importance to good form. (I was often scolded by him for neglecting conventions, whether British or Chinese.) At Chinese New Year, when the junior members of his family came to perform the three-fold *kowtow*, woe to the youth who was perfunctory or graceless. P'eishan's own life was beautifully ordered. On certain days of the year, this must be done or that, certain things cooked with just such and such ingredients as the ancients had specified. Thus, on a certain day in the twelfth lunar month, we must all eat *lapachou*—a millet porridge made with the addition of several sorts of grain and other ingredients. Nothing, of course, might be omitted from the ancient recipe. Had not his father and his grandfather always enjoyed *lapachou* on that day? At New Year, the ancestral scroll (containing name-inscribed oblongs in ascending order, like a family tree) was unrolled and suspended above an altar that the appropriate sacrifices might be made before it.

'P'eishan, do you *really* believe that the ancestors will personally

come to enjoy the fragrance of these offerings of cooked food, incense, fruit and wine?'

He looked at me thoughtfully.

'Who knows? Our people have acted thus since the remotest antiquity. Two thousand five hundred years ago, Confucius exhorted us to preserve such customs in every detail, customs which even then were old enough to be styled "ancient". Furthermore, did not the Master say: "What can we know of Heaven who know so little of our own world?" Very well, let us not enquire too deeply into the reasons for these things. Be satisfied that what wise men have thought fit to do for three, four or five thousand years cannot be altogether without merit. The continuation from generation to generation of the rites means the continuation of civilized form; and, without form, we would be as the birds and the beasts. Ancestral sacrifices in particular unite the generations, besides inculcating respect for the old in the minds of the young. It is thus that a civilization can be preserved almost for ever; and hence, with the present lapse of these rites in so many households, civilization is perishing today. With the disappearance of the forms comes the disappearance of the realities for which they stand.'

This and much, much more I learnt from P'eishan. At last I grew so fond of him that, very hesitantly, I asked if he would consent to our swearing blood-brotherhood—hesitantly because, though I knew he loved me, I wondered how he would respond to the idea of presenting his ancestors with an Outer Barbarian as an adopted descendant. My fears were groundless. His thin, wrinkled face lit up with a smile such as I had never seen before; he appeared quite overcome with happiness, as though I had the power to confer rather than entreat an honour. One morning, we rode unaccompanied in rickshaws to the Temple of Kuankung, God of War and Patron of Sworn Brothers. There, in its gloomy, almost deserted, interior, where throughout the centuries countless others had taken the oath before us, we knelt to the god and pledged ourselves to be as true brothers until death. In case of trouble or necessity, each would give unstinted help to his brother or to his brother's family. Next, in the presence of the deity who had recorded our oath—a bearded god with a face far redder than the Assistant Air Attaché's, fiercer but somehow pleasanter—I, as the younger, prostrated myself before P'eishan as the elder. Henceforth, I must never call him P'eishan, but always Takô, meaning Big Brother.

The next rite was our joint worship of his ancestors, for the purpose of reporting our oath to them. This was simply done at Takô's home

before the ancestral scroll; but my ancestors presented something of a problem. I *had* no scroll. I did not even know the Christian name of my great-grandfather, let alone those of his forbears. I knew only that my paternal grandfather had gone to London from Norfolk, where the main branch of our family has lived for many centuries at Hoveton House, and that Norwich Cathedral contains the bones of many Blofelds, some of them its former deans. Fortunately, I had photographs of my father and grandparents. These I placed upon an altar with flowers and incense, and to them we announced our new relationship. I fancy that my grandparents, good, middle-class English people born almost a century and a half ago and probably only vaguely aware of China as the remote source of good tea, silk and lacquer, must have been astonished when an angel summoned them to Peking, there to receive the report of a grandson they had never known and of an adopted grandson so alien. Unlike Chinese ancestors, they were not used to summonses of this kind. (I must confess that I failed to report my marriage to a Chinese girl to my honourable ancestors, fearing that their old-fashioned minds might be outraged by such intermingling of the blood of two races. Indeed, though I had many years before decided that, if ever I should marry, my wife would surely be Chinese, I had not dared to take this step in my father's lifetime for fear of hurting him, as the outworn racial prejudices of the past still linger among men of his generation, now in their eighties and nineties.)

My marriage to Chang Meifang was followed by the expectation of becoming a father. By then, the Communist armies were within gunshot of the city. A siege was inevitable and, fearing great hardships for mother and child, I decided to take my wife to Hong Kong. Parting from Takô was bitter sorrow. We passed the last night in his little house, and early in the morning he staggered with me to the gate of the huge 'English Palace' compound. Sick and weighed down with grief, he could scarcely walk. By the time we reached the main gate, he could no longer remain on his feet, but sank on to a stone mounting-block just outside. It was then that his Confucian reserve came to his aid, enabling him to resist tears better than I. As we drove away in rickshaws, I looked back through the mist of my own tears to see him sitting impassively watching us recede into the distance—probably for ever. The bystanders could not know what went on behind that wrinkled mask, but I knew that his grief was greater than mine because of his higher capacity for noble-hearted love.

Within a few months of our parting, the victorious Communist

Army entered the city at just about the time Takô took to his death-bed. With the final passing of the last remnants of the old ways of life, Chin P'eishan, one of their finest products, turned his back upon the changed city and ascended to join the spirits of his ancestors. Though his trust in the government for which he had toiled so long was misplaced, modern governments being too impersonal to reciprocate the Confucian spirit of obligation between friend and friend and of unstinted loyalty to official superiors, I like to think that his ancestors gave him a welcome consonant with the service and devotion he had displayed towards them all his life. If the Emperor K'anghsi possesses an imperial hunting park in the Confucian heaven as beautiful as his former park in the Western Hills, I pray that P'eishan has received a modest mansion there, where he can live for ever among the trees and flowers he loved so well and which, year by year, he enshrined in his poems of the four seasons.

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My bitter grief at leaving the city I had longed to make my home and the brother who had embodied its very spirit was scarcely assuaged by the touching welcome I received from Tahai; for, although he and his family had come unscathed through the Japanese occupation, many evils of another kind had fallen upon them and Tahai was already a dying man—his face more drawn and white than ever, his body little more than fragile bones and bloodless skin. Saddened and confused to find my world falling in ruins about me, having no clear idea of where to go or what to do, I felt that the low-banked spiritual fires within me had ceased to give forth the smallest glow. Death or blight had fallen upon those I loved; my wife and I felt all alone in the world, rudderless ships drifting aimlessly about the ocean of *Sangsara*. What hope was there for us? Even Tahai, who had seemed to me a future Bodhisattva, so good, so kind, so filled with that wisdom which comes to those who have rent the veils and seen deeply, deeply into their *real being*, Tahai so much higher than the gods who, their aeons of heavenly bliss exhausted, must return to the lower stages of the Wheel—even such a man had become the victim of shattering blows, of tragic impotence to protect his own family from endless discomforts and humiliation, and been rendered destitute of almost everything but his own unalterable sweetness and simple dignity. Of what use to me, then, to tend the shrine, to study the sacred books, to search the depths of my own

heart seeking to come face to face with Reality? A single jolt from fate resulting from some shadowy weight of evil *Karma* still remaining and even spiritual giants must go hurtling down into the abyss! Were not those men who had been dead to the spirit from the days of their youth—frequenters of brothels, red-nosed drunkards, white-faced morphine addicts, procurers of girls, salacious pimps, oily ponces—were not these people to be *envied* their ignorance of beauty unattainable? Was not Tahai, who as Christians or Hindus would say had seen the face of God, now to be found sitting silent and dazed, smiling gently into the abyss of hell?

Away with Buddhism, I thought. What is a spiritual life? Let me not cheat myself. Life lasts for seventy years or less, with the last ten or twenty lived under growing disabilities or worse. Let me eat, drink, fornicate, laugh if I could, sing and dance. Is not the only absolutely inevitable experience—death?

. . . . .

Fortunately this terrible mood did not sit upon me all the time. A healthy son was born to me, followed by a daughter. For three years I stayed in the hills near Kowloon, coming in every day to teach in a pleasant school, living a shallow day to day life and shutting my mind, whenever possible, to the evil blasts of that hot wind from hell. Meanwhile, China bled in spirit. The new Communist Government was giving her people a better standard of living, constructing railways, roads, schools and hospitals, damming the great rivers and, so it was said, stamping out corruption; *but* the ancient traditions which had made Chinese civilization unique in the world for several thousand years were branded as 'bourgeois and aristocratic reactionary tendencies' and condemned to extinction. Even her beautiful script, the pride and glory of untold generations of scholars, was slated to be gradually replaced by the dull, unadaptable twenty-six letters of the roman alphabet! China might still live to become the richest and most powerful nation in the world, yet a stranger to her own self in whom even the memory of the untold wealth of beauty she had created would soon be no more. At times, I managed to close eyes and ears to all this, living only for the moment; at others, the full horror of it overwhelmed me, filling my cup of bitterness to the brim.

There is a passage in Tchaikovsky's Pathetic Symphony which I find more moving than anything else in the realm of music. Up to that

moment, the melodies have been gay and lilting, with only a trace of underlying sadness here and there. Troikas gallop through the sparkling snow, diamonds sparkle on the snowy bosoms of beautiful ladies at the ball, whose hands are extended to the lips of men in splendid uniforms. We smell the hot tallow from the chandeliers, the sweetness of the ladies' bouquets and the perfume discreetly sprinkled behind their shell-pink ears. All is love and all is joy. The composer, having snatched a kiss from his beloved, rushes home to dream of his good fortune. Bursting with joy, he sees a letter from her on his desk and tears it open. Then:

Boo-hoo boo-hoo! An agonized cry; an anguished sequence of notes which will be woven into the theme of all that follows. It is stark, it is terrible. In real life, countless Russians and not a few Chinese have committed suicide on hearing that awesome symphony. *Boo-hoo boo-hoo!* I know that cry so well. I knew it before I ever heard the symphony which, owing to my long absence from Europe, did not occur until some time during those Hong Kong years. That terrible sound was the theme underlying not only the symphony but also my own life at that time. Despite days or even months of relative tranquillity, every now and then a little breath of air would blow down from the distant, as yet unseen, high mountains of Tibet, still fresh with the purity of diamond-sparkling snow; a little shower of the snow itself, magically unmelted by the hot winds of *Sangsara* and hell, would blow against my cheek. It spoke to me of beauty imperishable which I had glimpsed and lost, which once seen can never be wholly forgotten, nor the anguish of its loss diminished, nor any other beauty take its place. If there had so far been no moment in my life when I could say: 'Now I am standing face to face with imperishable beauty,' I had often and often been touched by its light. So it happened that, whenever a little puff of snow-laden air touched my cheek, wherever I happened to be, all else would vanish from my mind but the vision of those high, unscaled peaks. A bus-conductor would ask in vain for my fare, the dog in my garden lick my hand unheeded, my pupils burst out laughing at their absent-minded purveyor of adverbs and participles. During the few seconds while the wind remained on my cheek, there could be no response. Then it would be gone. I would hasten through my current duty and rush home to be alone, there to await the gradual lifting of that frightful anguish, while my wife and children marvelled at my evil temper. And then another day would dawn and find me chastened, trying hard to be a cheerful companion as before.

Those mystics—ancient and modern, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, Sufi, Buddhist, Hindu and Taoist—who have left some record of their spiritual experiences have, as Aldous Huxley's 'Perennial Philosophy' demonstrates so well, displayed an extraordinary unanimity which makes it impossible to suppose that they were the victims of their own delusions, for how could a thousand men unknown to each other dream the same dream? There *must* be a reality underlying their vision; their unanimity is marred only by their understandable attempts to describe the indescribable in words their respective co-religionists could understand. Many of these mystics have written of what is sometimes called the night of the spirit. That is, they passed through a period of varying length full of gloom, agony of spirit and of despair, sometimes accompanied by sensations of intense spiritual suffering. And then, just when all hope seemed dead, the clouds dispersed and before their eyes arose the incomparable Nirvanic (or Olympan or Heavenly) sun in all its glory. Wafted from the brink of the abyss, they beheld at last the Glorious Vision.

It would be presumptuous for me to call my own period of bitter anguish the night of the spirit, for I am still very far from the Glorious Vision. Nevertheless, in view of something which occurred to me one day, I have dared in my own thoughts to refer to that agonizing period as the 'little night of the spirit', a foretaste of what I must suffer when the real night approaches. I had just been completing arrangements to take my whole family to Thailand, where I had been offered a university post; I was sitting in my hillside garden at Shatin almost for the last time, and silently taking farewell of the beauties of hill and inland sea, when a strange thing befell. My eye had been following my little son who was running about chasing dragon-flies when, quite suddenly, a mood of intense joy possessed me, yet springing from no apparent cause. For a little while I sat gently relaxed in my chair, experiencing what almost amounted to quiet ecstasy. Presently an inner voice, like that which had sometimes spoken to me in my childhood days, spoke again. I do not mean that actual words reached my ear, but the thoughts which came to me had a very powerful likeness to words spoken by someone other than myself.

'The time of gloom and anguish is passing. They were not, as you supposed, merely the aftermath of good things passed beyond recall, but a prelude to better things to come. To call your gloom the night of the spirit would be needless exaggeration, for you are far indeed—probably aeons away from attaining the Glorious Vision. Nevertheless,

an experience resembling the night of the spirit has been yours, a preliminary taste of the full agony to be. Henceforth, do not be afraid to gaze upon the high mountains, or even to approach them (the Himalayas) in the flesh. Here in Hong Kong is not the best starting point, nor will Thailand be very much better for your purpose. Wait patiently, then, for the opportunity to come. Do not seek to hasten its arrival, but have faith in your future.'

Afterwards, I got up from my chair and lighted incense upon the altar with a full heart. This time, the burning of incense was no mere ritual, no hindrance to progress along the Path; it was performed with true faith and reverence for the first time in more than two years. From the depths of my heart, I recited the ancient formula learnt seventeen years before from the Dorjé Rimpoché:

Namo Gurubé Homage to my Guru
Namo Buddhaya Homage to the Enlightened One
Namo Dharmaya Homage to the Eternal Law
Namo Sanghaya Homage to the Sacred Order

10

The Great Pilgrimage

THE inner voice had warned me that Thailand would not provide me with a clear vision of the sacred beauty I was seeking, yet I was destined to pass five years there before the opportunity came for me to visit India and the Himalayas. Thailand, home of paradox! Thailand all warmth and smiles, yet with the sombre and fantastic ever present. Thailand, where almost every object, every architectural pattern, is of alien origin—Cambodian, Indian, Chinese, Melanesian or Western, but all blended into a pattern uniquely Thai. Thailand where, among gorgeous monasteries and countless yellow-robed monks bearing witness to Wisdom and Truth, there are symbols of older faiths and darker powers still lingering within the temple courts.

At first I came to doubt the message of that inner voice. Surely this country was the very place to nourish the flame freshly rekindled within my heart. But when a year had passed full of the excitement of living in novel surroundings, the flame subsided to a point where it neither gave flickering warning of its own extinction, nor fulfilled its early promise of blazing up and purging me of wartime and post-war accumulations of dross.

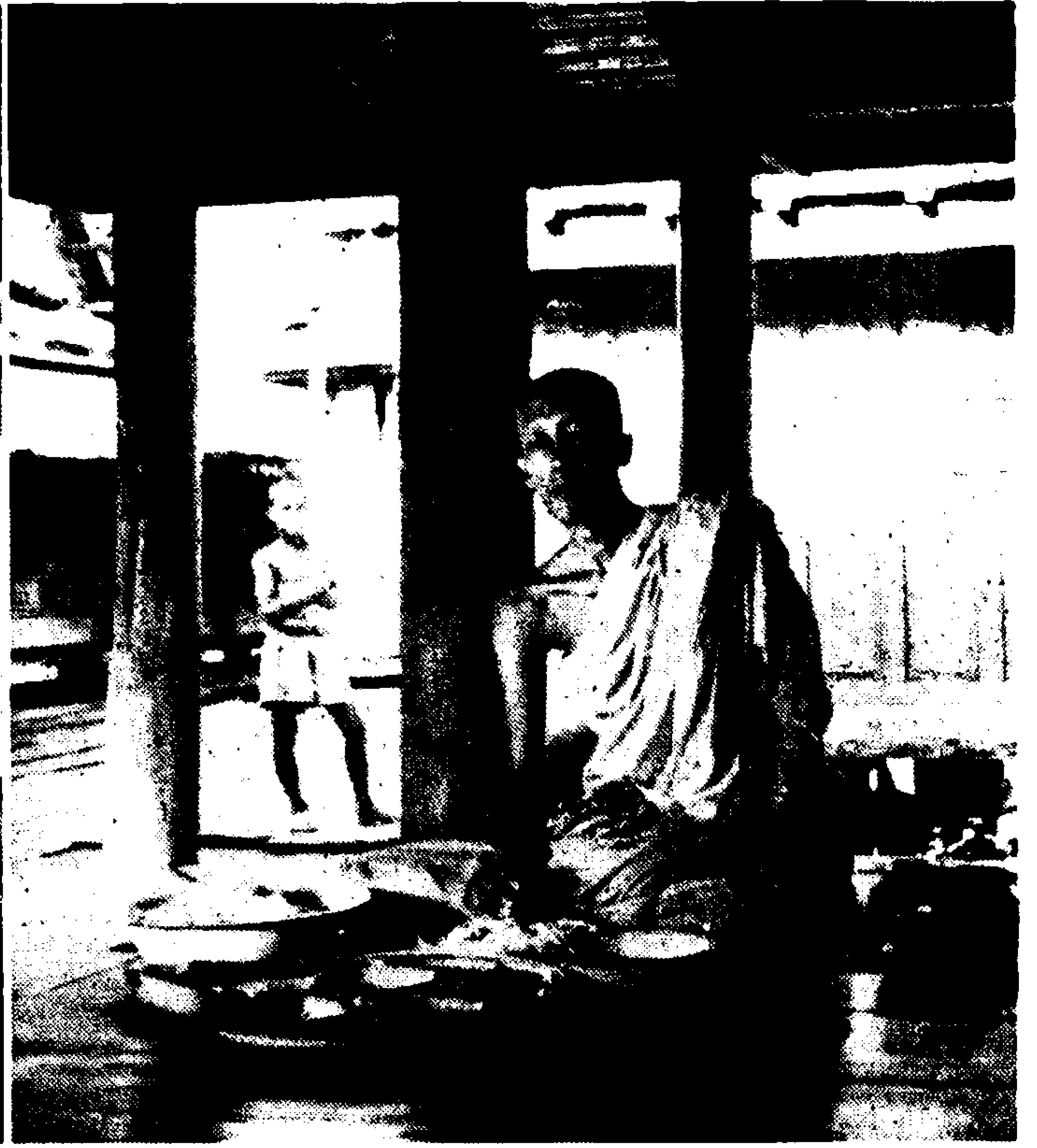
To a newcomer, Thailand appears a veritable citadel of the Buddhist Faith, a country where everyone from King to fisherman pays homage to the Three Jewels. Only a person with stern or fussy puritanism of taste could remain unaffected by the intricate splendour of the numerous royal *wat* (temples under the patronage of the King); for, seen from a distance, their spires and halls appear to be hidden beneath clusters of jewels. Where else on earth, Burma's Shwe Dagone alone excepted, can such a blaze of colour be found? The architects seem to have distilled their blues from tropic seas and plundered the wings of kingfishers; stolen their reds and yellows from fire, rubies, topaz and amber; magically extracted their greens from forests and jungles, and discovered the secret essence which stains the young rice-plants a vivid

emerald; adding to these a lavish profusion of gold, both red gold and yellow. The halls are sheltered from the harsh sunlight by multi-tiered roofs, soaring one above another, each with its gleaming burden of orange and yellow tiles bordered with blue tiles and green. Their spreading eaves are supported by columns encrusted with gold-leaf, scarlet lacquer or coloured glass mosaic. Their walls, no less richly ornamented outside, are inside covered from floor to ceiling with frescoed scenes from sacred story, with green for demons, white for hermits, red and white for the hosts of Hanuman, gold for the Buddha and gold for kings and heroes. In the courtyards stand reliquary towers, their delicately tapering spires washed with pure white, or encrusted variously with gold-leaf, coloured porcelain tiles, or tinted plaster inset with amber, turquoise and ruby glass. And everywhere, on roofs, in halls and courtyards, painted or sculptured in plaster, wood, bronze or stone, are effigies of those fantastic beings which, born of South India's riotous tropical imagination, have been adopted and nurtured throughout the centuries by the Thais and Cambodians until they have grown away from their original forms and taken on south-east Asian characteristics of their own—*Naga* (serpent-gods), *Garuda* (half men, half birds) and *Ṛaksa* (hideous sabre-toothed, green-faced leering demons). The ancient missionaries of the Buddhist faith, finding their converts so much attached to these beings, feared to overthrow them and, instead, gave them an honoured position as Guardians of the Faith. Concerning these weird beings I have a theory that, just as the Thai form of Buddha-image represents all that is noble and lofty in the Thai character, so do *Naga*, *Garuda* and *Raksa* represent the evil propensities of the race.

Throughout the country, in cities and towns, villages and jungle-hamlets, monasteries are thickly scattered, ranging from wooden or whitewashed brick buildings of primitive simplicity to the soberly ornamented royal temples of the erstwhile rulers of the Northern States.

Traditionally, all Thai menfolk from the King downwards enter the Sacred Order for at least a short part of their lives, ranging from a few weeks to a lifetime. And day after day, from century to century, with the inevitability of the sun's rising, the monks issue from their monasteries at dawn and gravely perambulate the streets to receive food-offerings from the faithful. In some rural areas where communications are still confined to the water, the monks come forth each in a tiny cockleshell canoe, their robes forming splashes of mustard yellow or

Thai monks eating



A Thai abbot at his repast

Interior of a Thai temple

Tibetan tanka from the author's collection, depicting Tara

orange against the greens and blues of jungle-fringed rivers and canals. Upon lunar Holy Days, spaced in accordance with the four phases of the moon, the villagers gather in the temple-halls to listen to sermons. When the preaching is done, they sit upon carpets spread before the image of the Compassionate One, smoking banana-leaf cigars, chewing betel-nut, drinking strong Chinese tea and enjoying a picnic meal brought from home, while chatting sometimes of village affairs, sometimes of their understanding of the Holy Dharma. In doing all this, they behave as informally as if they were in the house of a respected and warmly cherished friend. It is always a joy for me to watch or take part in this spontaneous intermingling of religion with the functions of daily life. When I was a child, I dared not speak above a whisper in the presence of my God. Now, I delight to eat and drink tea before the face of the Buddha, who was a man as I am, and who became an Enlightened One as I and all of us have the power to become.

It is not to be expected that the faith of simple farmers and fishermen can be a very pure form of Buddhism. They seem to regard the Lord Buddha very much as ordinary Christians regard God, as a deity who in response to prayer and offerings will avert evil and render aid. Such people are less concerned with hastening their entrance into *Nirvana* than with acquiring enough merit to ensure a felicitous life in this and future incarnations. But at least theirs is a genuine heartfelt faith, one which makes them on the whole cheerful, uncomplaining, malice-free and easily satisfied with simple joys. It is to these unsophisticated people that Thailand owes its lovely nickname, the Land of Smiles.

In the great city of Bangkok, the atmosphere is much less uniformly pious. Many intellectuals, still firmly bound by the spell of the nineteenth-century Western materialism, pay little heed to Buddhism's more spiritual aspects or to the non-materialist implications of the new concepts of the universe propounded by the West's most advanced physicists. Some at least have even accepted at their face value definitions of Buddhism originating, unknown to them perhaps, from among insufficiently informed nineteenth-century Western scholars, whose knowledge of the Dharma was so faulty that they could declare: 'Buddhism is not a religion, but a system of psychology,' or 'The Buddha intended the doctrine of reincarnation to be understood allegorically!'

So far has this deterioration gone that the older generation are

seriously perturbed. The more spiritually minded elders are shocked to find reasonably well-educated youths now and then visiting shrines and temples for such purposes as guidance in the choice of state lottery tickets!

As for Thai monks, whose admirably strict adherence to the Vinaya (Rules of Monastic Conduct) is plain for all to see, my comparative ignorance of the Thai language makes it impossible for me to gauge the exact nature of their intellectual and spiritual interpretation of the Dharma. Some of my Thai friends, however, feel that members of the Sangha sometimes overstress the importance of Pali language studies and of carefully memorizing passages from the scriptures, instead of spending most of their time upon those spiritual exercises which aim at the understanding of Truth and consequent liberation from the Wheel. How far this criticism is justified I have no first-hand means of knowing. I know only that the inner voice, heard in my hillside garden at Shatin several years ago, was right in prophesying that I personally must not expect to receive especial spiritual inspiration in Thailand, and that this would come to me at some future time, in the Himalayas. Meanwhile, I had learnt enough Thai to amuse myself studying those lesser 'spiritual' phenomena with which Thailand abounds—fortune-telling, the summoning of spirits, the art of gaining invulnerability, and similar matters of small importance which continue to hold a perennial interest for most people, though the world's great religious teachers, including the Lord Buddha, have warned us that they are more often harmful than beneficial and never of the slightest use towards genuine spiritual progress.

For five years, my life in Thailand continued at an even pace, my quiet, pleasant work at the university now and then enlivened by a splurge of colour, as when I attended temple fairs in some of the unmodernized country districts. On such occasions, I could watch the sinuous, bejewelled dancers dance through the streets in their siken costumes, followed by women with offerings for the monastery piled high on carven trays of gold and scarlet lacquer. Once I took part in the annual pilgrimage to 'The Buddha's Sacred Footprint' which is embedded upon a hillside near the little town of Saraburi. An endless stream of pilgrims came to place their foreheads upon the rim of the enormous 'footprint', a foot-shaped declivity in the rock which is protected by a little shrine with yellow roof and gilded eaves. The smoke of incense was so thick that I retired from the shelter coughing.

And did those Feet in ancient time
Walk upon Thailand's mountains green;
And was the All-Enlightened One
On Thailand's pleasant mountains seen?

This misquotation seemed to me peculiarly apt, as there is absolutely no 'historical' reason for supposing that the Lord Buddha ever journeyed to Thailand. I have questioned countless people on the subject and received widely different answers.

'Nonsense,' say the moderns. 'The whole thing is just a rustic superstition.' 'Yes and no,' say the less literally minded. 'The historical Buddha never reached this land. There *was* no Thailand then, for the Thais were still living in their ancient home among the hills of south-west China and Bangkok was still under the sea, though probably not Saraburi itself. The Lord Buddha visited that hill in spirit and left his *symbol* on the rock.' 'Certainly the Lord Buddha went there during his lifetime,' say the country-folk. 'Does not the footprint prove it? There in the hills near Saraburi, he taught his disciples day and night.'

'But,' I would exclaim, 'what about the *size* of the footprint? The size, the size!' Usually their answer would recall a well-known biblical saying: 'O ye of little faith, with God all things are possible!' For that is just what the country-folk feel about the Lord Buddha. Sometimes the wiser ones would add: 'How can a spiritual body be measured in feet and inches?' How indeed?

Towards the end of my fifth year in Bangkok came the prelude to the experiences for which I longed unceasingly. During a picnic with some friends, I had once visited *Wat Chalerm*, a beautiful but abandoned temple a little way up the river from Bangkok. It is surrounded by splendid trees of unusual height and by one of those magnificent walls which normally enclose Thai palaces. The atmosphere of the place exercised a strange attraction over me and I decided that I must be sure to return there alone, for I am one who best enjoys beauty in solitude and silence. Months passed, but my resolve to go back there lingered in my mind; it became almost what I believe the psychologists term 'a compulsion'.

Late one Sunday afternoon, the desire to go there suddenly visited me with irresistible force. Without a word, I got up and walked towards the shed housing my car.

'Where are you going?' asked my wife, startled by the abruptness

of my movements, but something compelled me to give only a vague and unsatisfactory answer. If my going out alone on one of our all too rare afternoons together hurt her, she was too good a Chinese to show it. She just asked if I would be back for dinner, to which I could only answer: 'Probably.' For, since long before the Prince Siddhartha abandoned his beautiful wife, Yashodara; since long before Jesus rebuked the young man who claimed he had a newly wedded wife to attend to; since the beginning of man's history as a spiritual being, mothers and wives have been left standing on the doorstep whenever their men have gone forth to do battle with the spirit, whether the great battle of their lives or a tiny skirmish like the one in which I half thought I was about to engage. No doubt women feel compelled to leave their men on similar occasions, for the spirit can only be disclosed or wrestled with in solitude.

Brick houses gave place to wooden houses, wooden houses to orchards and little huts on stilts, and at last I reached the river about ten kilometres above the city. From the Nontaburi jetty I was propelled farther upstream by an old man who stood to his oars facing the sampan's prow, like the boatmen who once took me across to Hua T'ing Ssŭ. It seemed to be an omen. Upon the broad, blue-grey Menam Chaopeya I passed a string of rice-barges, ten or twelve in single file drawn by a tiny, tired-looking launch. Canoes and sampans toiled upstream returning from the city markets, the women wearing those extraordinary 'truncated' straw hats peculiar to Central Thailand. Orchards and rice-fields spread away from either bank. The river, a broad, blue-grey stripe woven across an emerald-green sarong, reflected the afternoon sun, already low in the sky.

At last we reached the wooden jetty. The giant trees, heavy with their burden of leaves grown huge after the rainy season, made the approach to the temple so dark that the castle-like wall looked black and sinister. Sinister? No! Black and austere, but not unfriendly. King Rama IV, the scholar-king to whom the famous Anna did so much less than justice in her books, had loved this place. I hoped that his ghost haunted it still. A lovely man, whose ghost would be well worth meeting! I passed through the great gateway and found myself opposite the main hall of the temple. The floral design on its gables reflected the slanting sunlight in colours gay, yet soft; the whole building was beautiful with that gentle, unassuming beauty of an earlier taste than had inspired the intricate grandeur of Bangkok's

royal temples. Or was it only that the sunlight was softer at this hour?

What had I come for? To which part of the temple must I go? What did I half expect to find? All around me, ten thousand voices—the voices of birds, frogs, crickets, insects, creatures galore—shouted the answers to these questions, but each kind of creature in a different tongue and all alike unknown to me. A St Francis were needed here, I thought.

Without paying much heed to what I was doing, I seated myself on a pile of ancient bricks, still busy with my thoughts. My questions were half answered now. This was a *very* special place, as peaceful as the crumbling temples in the more deserted parts of the ancient princely capitals of the North. But a peaceful atmosphere was very far from being all. There was a remoteness, a timeless quality, about this place which lifted me out of my rather dreary self, making me feel one with past and future. I wondered whether this *wat* had the same effect upon other people, or if it were only a setting for an experience which the karmic sequence of my life had made inevitable for this moment.

But what was that 'karmic experience' to be? Looking back on that evening, I find that, except for a tiny and at the time almost unintelligible incident, nothing really happened at all. I came. I sat. I stared at a beautifully decorated gable of plastered brick with a stylistic pattern of flowers in relief. I reflected a little, got up and started for home. Absolutely nothing more than that. I experienced no *Satori*, no blinding flash of understanding, no single moment different in intensity from any other moment. There was no trance, no feeling of bodily lightness, no seeming disintegration of the body-prison. Just I, a middle-aged Englishman, sitting on some bricks and feeling pensive. If there was any specially significant moment, it was the moment when a peculiar green shade used in the decorations reminded me suddenly of something Nêng Hai had once said to me upon Wu T'ai Shan, some enigmatic reference to greenness which seemed to have some bearing on my future spiritual development—something I did not fully understand until my journey to the Himalayas.

So in a sense nothing much happened during that visit to Wat Chalerm. Yet, in another sense, something of tremendous importance to me occurred. Though the black shadows which had fallen upon me on Hong Kong had never returned in full force, I had for some years

come very close to experiencing their darkness again. I was secretly bleeding to death from wounds caused by the apparent meaninglessness of life, by the sequence of death and destruction which had befallen so much that I loved and so many of my friends, by the seeming shrivelling up of my once cherished ideals. Though the sacred Dharma remained in my mind as something eternally true and lovely, it had seemed to move further and further from my reach, leaving me more and more indifferent to the life of the spirit. Now, although nothing tangible happened to me at Wat Chalerm, in some mysterious way I felt convinced that my wounds were soon to be staunched, that there was promise of spiritual wholeness to come. If there was more, it was so subtle that only some part of my being beyond the state of normal perception became conscious of it. The one sure thing is that I left the temple an inwardly happy man, knowing that some great experience was in store for me very soon.

The sun set on the Chaopeya as the little craft swept me back to Nontaburi. By eight o'clock I was home, not too late to join my wife for dinner. I was happy, happy, happy—yet I felt it almost impossible to eat or to speak. Anything I could have said would have been so unutterably vague as to give the impression that I was a prig, or mad, or suffering from the exaltation of religious mania. So I told my wife that I had a headache and she, dear that she is, brought some very special Chinese tea up to the bedroom. After the tea, I lay alone in the darkness enjoying the almost forgotten sensation of being completely happy. Happy about what, I did not know.

The next day or, at most, the day after, a telegram arrived from the B.B.C., soon to be followed by a long explanatory letter, of which the gist was as follows:

'We wish you to go to India upon a pilgrimage to the sacred places of the Buddhists. In return for a series of talks to be recorded and sent to London for broadcasting in connection with the 2500th Anniversary of the Lord Buddha's Parinirvana, we shall pay all your expenses, as well as paying a fee for each talk at the usual rate.'

To add to my good fortune, I was just due for six months' leave from the university. The income from my salary and the B.B.C. combined would cover the cost of my longed-for journey to the Tibetan borderlands where I knew some great spiritual opportunity or experience awaited me! The still, small voice which had spoken to me in Hong Kong bidding me be patient, the sense of happiness which

had come upon me at Wat Chalerm had both pointed to an experience which was now virtually within my grasp. Once more I lit incense upon my household altar with fervour and joy in my heart.

. . . . .

The first step of my pilgrimage took me to Burma. As I flew over the wall of hills dividing that country from Thailand, I felt in my heart that my good *Karma* was about to bear rich fruit—that fruit which can be harvested only once or twice in a lifetime. What was shortly to befall me in India and beyond could, if I were determined, be the turning point of my life. How wise were the ancient Chinese with their doctrine of *Wu Wei*, of activity springing from passivity, of submitting fearlessly to all that happens including what may seem to be incalculable loss. Truth cannot be grasped by the throat like a highwayman's victim, but will reveal itself in its own time. Whether I should find it during this life or after a hundred incarnations to come no longer seemed important. 'Slowly, slowly catchee monkey.' All that need matter henceforth was that I should keep myself in a constant state of preparedness.

Rangoon, though its temples, with the proud exception of the glorious Shwe Dagone, lack the beauty and carefully tended appearance of Bangkok's *Wats*, was clearly a city where the Buddhist faith bulked large in the hearts of the people. The celebrations planned for the two thousand five hundredth Anniversary were not only spectacular but displayed the deep wisdom of the planners. They centred round the convocation of the Great Buddhist Council, the sixth of its kind since the Lord Buddha's passing. For an entire year, thousands of monks had been busy studying, comparing, correcting and finally reciting in full assembly the whole of that enormous collection of scriptures, the *Tripitaka*, thereby putting the stamp of orthodoxy upon the revised texts. The *Tripitaka* is so vast that thousands of monks and the co-operation of all the *Theravadin* (Hinayana) countries were needed for the immense task. In imitation of the First Great Council held in a cave soon after the Lord Buddha's passing, the Council at Rangoon was also held in a rock chamber. As nothing of the sort existed in the neighbourhood, a chamber capable of containing many thousand people had been constructed of rocks by the devoted labour of men and women who had poured into the

capital from every part of Burma. Travelling at their own expense, they came in crowds—villagers and farmers, woodsmen from the jungles, miners from the ruby mines and jade quarries, boatmen from the dangerous Salween Gorges; Burmans, Shans, Karens and people of many other races. All rejoiced to be able to labour with their hands for the greater glory of the sacred Dharma. The resulting 'cave', ugly from the outside, was inside a place of beauty, a fit setting for the dazzling concourses which filled it at the beginning and end of each of the six sessions of the Council. Upon these occasions, besides being pleasantly cool and dim after the glare of the merciless sun, it was filled with splendour. All around were tiers of balconies decorated in soft yellow, blue and gold vaguely reminiscent of ancient Egyptian temple art, to which row upon row of solemn, shaven-headed monks added the rich colour of their yellow and orange robes. The vast floor space was crowded with laymen who sat upon acres of clean matting facing the altar, men and women alike clad in fine silks, the men with gay headcloths, the women decked with cascades of flowers and jewels. Next to the grand procession at Wu T'ai Shan, they formed the most splendid assembly I had ever seen; yet the faces of the majority showed clearly that they were giving scarcely any thought to their own magnificence; their calm gaze was directed to the rites being performed at the altar, their full attention given to the solemn words of the speakers. When the conch-shells wailed forth their most ancient of all ritual musics, I felt that I was witnessing the rebirth of faith, that Buddhism in Burma was entering upon a new incarnation to be a redoubled blessing to the peoples of the East and a brave answer to the horror now threatening the world. Here was a country twice fought over savagely and from end to end during the recent world war, its ancient buildings wrecked by the bombs of friend and foe alike, its people rendered homeless and, one would think, desolate; a country which, during the past eight years of 'peace', had not known a single day free from that legacy of the Japanese—civil strife; a country where even now rebels and bandits indulged in daily orgies of burning, looting and killing; a country doubly weak and impoverished by invasion and civil strife, and but newly freed from a century of alien rule—and yet, poor in wealth, poor in strength, and bleeding still, this nation had made a splendid gesture to the whole world. At a time when richer countries wasted their substance on piling up the engines of war, the Burmese had poured forth their public and private resources for such peaceful

purposes as the building of this vast cave, the erection of a Pagoda of Peace, the holding of a Great Council involving the housing and feeding of many thousands for a whole year, the construction of Buddhist libraries and every other means of propagating the sacred Dharma, the noble Doctrine which declares:

Never in this world does hatred cease by hatred: hatred ceases by love, and this according to a law which has existed for ever.

. . . . .

My pilgrimage proper began within two or three days of my reaching Calcutta. It was intended to culminate upon the evening of the full moon in May, a day thrice holy to Buddhists even in ordinary years, being according to an ancient tradition the day of the Lord Buddha's Birth, of his Enlightenment and of his final Passing into *Nirvana* at the age of eighty. Therefore, during this most auspicious year, it was to be a day of supreme significance, the greatest day for Buddhists during the last two thousand five hundred years. On the other hand, April and May are the months when a pitiless sun burns up the land of India, its heat said to be insupportable to travellers unless inured to it by long experience of hardship. The shade temperature frequently rises to 115° and not seldom to 120° or more. Hence the Indian Government and the Buddhist authorities had decided to postpone the great pilgrimage of guests from all nations until November when India is in her softest and most beneficent mood. However, I had decided to brave the heat, not only because this better suited the requirements of my B.B.C. sponsors, but because I should gain the solitude I preferred and because of my instinctive feeling, shared by pilgrims throughout the ages, that a pilgrimage entailing hardship is all the better for that. I was very far from being able to emulate the faithful Mongols and Tibetans who travel for months or years prostrating themselves to the earth at every three paces, or those splendid old Chinese ladies with bound and crippled feet who climb ten-thousand-foot sacred mountains on their knees; but I was happy to know that my own pilgrimage to earth's most sacred places (for Buddhists) would take me along that Middle Path which lies between excessive comfort and excessive mortification of the flesh. Since it was to be paid for by others, my own contribution must at least include some small sacrifices of another kind than wealth. To this end, I undertook to

dress simply, to abstain from alcohol as well as from food involving the death of living creatures, and to confine my reading and (if possible) my thoughts to appropriate subjects. These self-imposed obligations I managed to observe faithfully, except that my thoughts were not always under control and that now and then I succumbed to the temptation of buying a newspaper. Most of my reading matter I carried with me.

Of the ten places specially sacred to Buddhists on Indian and Nepalese soil, I visited seven, travelling by train, bus, on foot or on horseback and reaching them somewhat in the order dictated by their geographical positions *vis-à-vis* one another. But the story of such a journey is best told according to the sequence of events in the Lord Buddha's life with which the various places are connected, and this in any case was very nearly the order in which I visited them.

As nearly all the world knows, the Lord Buddha was born Prince Siddhartha, only son of the ruler of Kapilavasthu, a small state situated on what is now the Indo-Nepalese border, the actual place of his birth being the Garden of Lumbini which lay some distance from that city. At the time of my visit to Lumbini, the road had not quite been completed, so I decided to make the journey from the rail-head on horseback, starting at dawn. I set off on a thin, hired nag along a sandy track which led me through the rice-fields and across several streams where the villagers were performing the ablutions with which each Hindu day begins. They were standing up to their waists in the water, laving themselves from brass pots, India's inevitable *lotas*. The men's bodies, burnt copper colour by the sun, glistened as the water slid over them; the women were as fully dressed as if they had been standing on dry land. If the ford lay far from a village, instead of bathers there would be brightly plumaged birds pausing in their morning drink to stare superciliously at the clumsy human intruder on a strange, four-legged beast and the tattered figure (my guide) who slouched beside. Presently the green vegetation grew sparser; I could almost see the implacable advance of the yellow sand which, by a process of erosion, is rapidly turning this part of hungry India into a desert. By now the sun stood high in a brazen sky and the temperature had almost reached its peak for that day—I learnt later that it had been 116° in the shade. A burning wind sprayed me with coarse particles of sand, clogging eyes and nostrils and rasping my throat. I had never in my life experienced such cruel discomfort, but I knew that worse would

follow, for the blisteringly hot ride back to the rail-head would have to be accomplished that afternoon. Foolishly I had brought no hat and was wearing a short-sleeved bush-shirt, so that my lower arms were in danger of having all the skin burnt off their upper surface. Then, presently, I had an inspiration. I had learnt from the Thais never to travel without *pakaoma* and *kan*. The former is a strip of cloth about three feet wide and six feet long, normally folded and worn like a sash round the waist; the latter a small silver bowl used both for drinking and for laving the body when the water is too shallow to allow a proper bath. As for the *pakaoma*, I have counted no less than twenty-two separate ways in which it may be useful to a traveller short of necessities. On this occasion, I made a sort of Arab headdress of it, wearing it so that it protected head and neck from the sun. I also managed to cover both arms with it by using one end to cover the left arm to the wrist and by grasping my left shoulder with my right hand, so as to bring the other arm under the protection of the part shading head and neck. As I am much taller than the average Thai, it was too short to cover head and both arms together, unless I rode in this strange fashion.

I arrived at Lumbini scorched, thirsty, saddle-sore and altogether miserable. Alas, the beautiful garden had, in the course of two and a half milleniums, given place to near-desert country. The Nepal Government's plans for a new garden of sal trees had not been carried out and the arrangements for the reception of pilgrims in November were far from complete. There were a rest-house, a few pedlars' stalls, a small, dilapidated Hindu temple, a fine new Buddhist temple with Nepalese-style carven windows still under construction, and two cairns of carelessly gathered bricks from vanished monasteries. Ah, what a scene of desolation! Why had I come where so little was to be seen? Surely I had been chasing a mirage, romantically searching for something long vanished from the earth. Heat, flies, sand and a few buildings either ruined or uncompleted. In the distance, a dried-up vegetation engaged in hopeless battle with the advancing desert. What spiritual refreshment could be hoped for here by a traveller parched, blackened and miserable? I could not dream that these dismal surroundings were about to become the setting for a most lovely experience—one I can never possibly forget.

After tethering my horse and resting awhile, I went in search of the stump of a stone commemoration pillar erected there almost two thousand three hundred years ago by the Emperor Ashoka who,

having conquered all India by fire and sword, lived to become a devoted peaceful servant of the Compassionate One and the leading Buddhist missionary of all time. The remaining stump was too meagre to be at all impressive except on account of its history. Yet, mindful that I was on pilgrimage, I seated myself nearby, composed my mind reverently and entered upon a discursive meditation, trying to evoke the scene of the sacred birth which had taken place on or very near the spot indicated by the base of the Ashokan pillar. Presently I entered upon a vivid daydream.

Before me stood a deliciously cool and shady forest of sal trees all laden with scarlet flowers and surrounded by mile upon mile of fertile fields. In the distance, a glittering cavalcade was approaching. Messengers rode before, proclaiming that Her Majesty Queen Mayadevi was returning to her father's house, there to await the birth of her royal child, whom the astrologers had foretold might one day rule the earth. The cavalcade drew near. I saw warriors in snow-white *dhoti*, behelmeted and mailed in chain of silver; courtiers in coloured silks with graceful curved swords supported by golden chains worn across their naked breasts; women unveiled in the ancient style, but with the outlines of their figures modestly concealed beneath fold upon fold of their gold-bordered saris. Chariots followed, drawn by white oxen with gilded horns, and at last a palanquin carried upon the shoulders of three score bearers, its heavy silken canopy hiding the lovely Queen who sat within. Presently a tiny hand emerged and gestured lightly to a courtier riding a white and strawberry horse close to the palanquin's left. A word of command was barked down the line and the procession halted. Women hastened forward from their places behind the royal palanquin, their saris aflutter; and from within stepped down a lady, her outer garment a simple sari of silver-edged white silk gauze; her lovely docile face full with the fullness of approaching motherhood; her eyes alight with pleasure as she gazed at the scarlet clusters upon the sal trees. Smiling to her ladies, she walked slowly towards the welcoming shade of the forest, moving cautiously lest she stumble and hurt her precious burden. Beneath the finest tree of all, which flaunted its scarlet beauty as though contemptuous of mere human adornment, she stopped and raised her hand, supporting the weight of her body upon a heavily laden branch. That which was about to befall no man dare even try to imagine. I knew that her child would be born even as she stood upright leaning upon that lovingly offered branch. Hurriedly I turned away my head—or, rather, I opened my eyes to the hot glare.

Gone were forest, smiling fields, thrice-blessed Queen and cavalcade. There was nothing in sight but the burning ugliness of the present. Yet I felt beautifully refreshed. I was smiling and inclined to sing. What I had seen had been neither dream nor vision. I had merely shut my eyes and deliberately induced a picture of the events which have made Lumbini a place ever to be remembered. But either the magic of the place itself as the repository of subline thoughts proceeding from the hearts of generation upon generation of pilgrims, or else the state of mind which the mere thought of being in Lumbini induced, had clad my imagining in such rich colours that I felt like a man awakened from a delicious dream—a dream so real that even the lotus-shaped henna stain upon Queen Mayadevi's palm remained imprinted on my memory. Though the journey back to the rail-head proved as physically painful as I had feared, there was such a sense of gladness in my heart that bodily fatigue had no power to distress me. I knew that my journey to that grim-looking place had not been in vain, for 'neither poppy nor mandagora' could have induced such vivid and lovely thoughts in any other setting than sacred Lumbini.

I had heard that little remains of Kapilavasthu except a few mounds of bricks encompassed by jungle. The necessity to be in Delhi for *Wesak*, the Festival of the May Full Moon, made it impossible to include Kapilavasthu in my tour. Next in order came Bodhgaya, the Place of Enlightenment, for Buddhists the holiest place in all the world. I reached it easily by horse-cart from the railway station at Gaya, finding there a sleepy village just beyond which there was much to see and nothing to disappoint me.

Most striking in appearance and the first building to catch the eye is the splendid *Vihara*, its five conical towers arranged like the pips on the five of hearts or clubs. In the days of the Chinese pilgrim Fa Hsien (fifth century A.D.), these towers had been covered with gold and inset with precious stones. Even now, with only the underlying stonework restored, the *Vihara* is a lovely sight. All around stand rest-houses and temples built by Buddhists from different parts of Asia—Chinese, Tibetan, Burmese, Indian and so on. For my lodging I chose the handsome *Dharmasala* erected by the multi-millionaire, Birla, for the use of pilgrims of all faiths. The *Dharmasala* is an institution peculiar to India. An Indian Rockefeller or Ford, as part of his charitable activities, builds comfortable rest-houses at various places of pilgrimage, where travellers of any religion are welcome to free lodging,

usually for a period of three days. The Indian rich man, rightly I think, believes that the best way of helping people is to encourage them in those activities which tend to benefit the spirit, rather than those aiming at an increase of worldly knowledge or at pleasure and amusement. In many parts of India, hotels are either primitive and filthy or non-existent, so the *Dharmasala*, beautifully clean and adequately comfortable, are a great boon to travellers.

Much of my leisure time at Bodhgaya I spent with an unhappy Chinese monk who had lived for two years in the Tibetan temple (the Chinese temple being occupied by a nun) and who suffered from the terrible disability of knowing no language which anybody around him could understand. His joy on hearing me address him in Chinese was unbounded; he seemed to want to laugh and cry at the same time. On the day following my arrival, he prepared with his own hands a splendid vegetarian banquet, to which I was bidden to bring any of my new acquaintances at Bodhgaya whom I chose. After months of uninterrupted silence—for some reason, he did not seem to be intimate with the Chinese nun—he talked and talked and talked, revelling in the sound of his voice like a castaway mariner lately delivered from a desert island. Poor, unhappy man that he is, he seems to be doomed to spend the rest of his life in that place, being afraid to go back to China and having no money and no papers to enable him to live in Burma or Thailand where so many of his compatriots are living. Even the Calcutta Chinatown would afford no shelter to a monk with no money and no friends there.

Another man seemingly happy to see me was a German monk who had come all the way from Norway overland, wearing his yellow robe and begging food or transport along the route—a courageous man distressed to find that, in this part of India, his fresh-looking yellow robe, far from bringing him the alms of the compassionate, attracted beggars who, mistaking him for a well-to-do Swami, nearly tore his robe in their importunity for gifts of money from him. This part of his story surprised me, for India is a place so enamoured of the holy life that the most obvious charlatan needs only to dress himself as one of the numerous kinds of holy men to be certain of support, and often of luxurious living. I suppose the German monk's inability to speak Hindi, coupled with the Asian's firm belief that all Europeans are immensely rich, was the cause of his sad plight. I believe that, if he had walked proudly and caused his eyes to flash as though conjuring up divine wrath, instead of behaving with true Buddhist meekness, he

need never have gone hungry or short of the cost of transport to the next centre of pilgrimage.

In Bodhgaya, from ten in the morning till five in the afternoon, a burning, dust-laden wind like a blast from the desert made it impossible to go out of doors. I used to lie almost naked against the stone flags in the shaded courtyard of the *Dharmasala*, reading or sleeping, and gasping with open mouth like a newly landed fish. But in the early mornings and during the last two hours of daylight, that scorching, dust-blighted place offered the keenest spiritual delights. Behind the five-towered *Vihara* can be found two objects which, for those Buddhists who like myself do not scorn the idea of mere things possessing a sanctity of their own, are so sacred as to command the deepest possible veneration. One of these is a young tree marking the exact sight of its lineal ancestor, the original Bodhi Tree, beneath whose boughs the Lord Buddha attained Enlightenment. The other is a large marble slab covering the original *Vajrasana*, the Bodhi-shaded place where the Lord Buddha seated himself to attain Enlightenment, resolutely determined to die on that spot or obtain a complete victory there over primordial ignorance, the source of all suffering and all evil.

Those unfamiliar with the work of the Emperor Ashoka may, after reading thus far, have come to suppose that I am an over-credulous person like those pilgrims in the Middle Ages who returned from the Holy Land believing that the little bits of wood for which they had paid enormous prices were genuine remnants of the True Cross. In fact, this type of credulity is unnecessary to convince Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike that these sacred places are really those at which the main events of the Lord Buddha's life occurred. Unlike Jesus, Gautama Buddha enjoyed the esteem of his own and all neighbouring peoples during the greater part of his lifetime. The Indians, with their traditional veneration for sacred spots, probably built the ancient monasteries found in such places quite soon after the Lord Buddha's passing, especially as the Lord Buddha himself personally recommended pilgrimages to the Places of Birth, Enlightenment, the First Sermon and of his Passing into *Nirvana*. Only two and a half centuries later, at a time when Buddhism was still in a flourishing condition and when the sacred places had never for a moment passed into hostile hands, the Emperor Ashoka erected commemorative pillars at each of the principal shrines. Of course some of these pillars may mark only the approximate sites of the sacred events, but there is much less room

for error than in the case of most other holy places in the world. Moreover, I agree with Monsieur Jean Herbert in believing that the power which certain places have of evoking a mood of intense spirituality stems chiefly from the atmosphere created by the pious thoughts, high aspirations and ardent prayers of generations of pilgrims who have come to those places century after century with deep faith in their hearts. If I am right in so believing, then whether or not a sacred place is really the exact site of the event said to have taken place there does not much affect the spiritual stimulus it provides.

Morning and evening I went to prostrate myself so that my forehead touched the stone covering of the *Vajrasana*, the Seat of Enlightenment. Owing to the intense heat, even Asian pilgrims were very sparse at that season, so usually I enjoyed complete solitude, except for the presence of the silent Hindu who sold flowers there for offerings which could be strewn upon the stone slab. After prostrating myself, I would sit with legs crossed, facing the Bodhi Tree and trying to visualize the Great Event which had made a human being so much more than divine and gained for him the title of Teacher of Gods and Men.

The Prince Siddhartha, after sorrowfully stealing away from his sleeping wife and son, had wandered in the forest seven years, seeking ever the cause of life's suffering and its cure. Sometimes he remained under the instruction of forest hermits who practised awful austerities, sometimes he was alone; but neither study nor austerities brought him nearer his goal, which was to release sentient beings from suffering for ever. He sought this goal out of compassion for himself and others, having sickened of the empty delights of palace and harem and been moved by the sight of so much suffering around him—poverty, pain, sickness, bereavement, the creeping havoc of old age and the horror of death, which things must come even to his royal father, his beloved foster-mother, his adored wife and child, and of course to himself also. At last, his search almost at an end, he seated himself beneath the ancestor of the very tree at which I was gazing, vowing that, though his flesh might rot, his blood dry up and his bones crumble to dust, he would not move from that spot until the secret of life and death had been wrested from the depths of that inner consciousness which united him and all beings with the Source of Life itself.

According to legend, while he sat beneath that tree he suffered similar temptations to those of Christ in the wilderness. Mara, the Tempter, reminded him of the prophecy promising him dominion over

the whole earth and swore that the alternative would be destruction at the hands of the horrid devils whom he now summoned. Failing to cause greed or fear, he sought to excite lust with visions of exquisitely beautiful girls dancing lasciviously, but in vain. By the third night the victory was won. The last veil was torn aside and there dawned in the young prince's mind a penetrating insight into Truth, so that he stood boldly face to face with Reality. While so many others had sought to discover nature's secrets by examining minutely one or other section of the Wheel's rim, the Prince had penetrated right through to the centre of the hub and, taking his stand at this central point, found himself possessed of all knowledge. Yes, life is suffering—this he had long ago discovered; but now he had learnt the cause of suffering, which is craving; also that there is a sure way by which suffering may be finally overcome; and lastly that the way to its extinction lies in the Noble Eightfold Path—Right Views, Right Aspirations, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Endeavour, Right Mindfulness, Right Inward Turned Concentration. These Truths could deliver men from the endless round of birth and death and they, beholding Truth in all its fullness, could enter into *Nirvana*, passing from the transient to the Eternal never more to return.

I, meditating on these things at the very place where perfect Wisdom was made manifest, knew that in these few days the flame in my heart had burnt up brighter than ever before, had burnt as steadily and unwinkingly as the perpetual flame upon Kandy's sacred altar. Nothing, it seemed, could ever quench or lower this flame, unless it were my own folly, my own deliberate choice of sensuous enjoyment, or my own sluggishness in tending to the needs of the spirit. It was this sluggishness which I feared above all. Nor must I forget that a weight of evil *Karma*, forged in this and past lives, still clung to me—a weight which no magic could dissolve or fling aside. I well knew from my Teachers the strength and tenacity of evil *Karma*. All the same, I saw that my fate was in my own hands and my future hopeful *provided I had the strength of purpose to continue the struggle without remission.*

After his Enlightenment, the Lord Buddha journeyed through the jungle to the deer-park of the King of Banaras, where he preached his first sermon to some of the many hermits dwelling there. In this sermon, he enunciated the Four Noble Truths of Suffering, its Cause, its Extinction and the Method of its Extinction by treading the Noble Eightfold Path. It contains the strong foundation upon which a mighty structure of doctrine was erected later, both during and after the

Buddha's lifetime. It is therefore not only the first but also the most fundamental of all the countless works which together comprise the Buddhist scriptures.

I reached Banaras (formerly called Benares) by train and went on to Sarnath by pedicab—a more humane development of the rickshaw which takes the form of a tricycle with a saddle in front for the man who propels it and a rickshaw-like 'armchair' behind for one or two passengers. The road is still picturesque, its traffic consisting of modern vehicles interspersed with bullock-carts and an occasional camel or elephant. Many of the houses along the way are topped by realistic sculptured peacocks among which real peacocks perch and fly, so that it is sometimes amusing to speculate upon which of the birds are statues and which are not.

Sarnath is in a sense magnificent. Of all the places in India, it has been chosen as the showplace of the Government's deep interest in Buddhism. Consisting of many acres of trim lawns, it contains an ancient *Vihara*, a splendid modern one, rest-houses and temples erected by men of many nations, a fine museum, and an almost complete Ashokan pillar, besides many partly excavated ruins. Even the King's deer-park has been restocked with deer. But, in consequence of so much comfort and magnificence, the atmosphere has become more like that of a tourist resort than of a centre of spiritual life. No ennobling or enriching experience befell me there, and my reading of the First Sermon at the place where it was delivered gained nothing from such appropriate surroundings. More than ever I came to believe that the spirit must be tended in solitude, unless by those saints who can create an inner solitude wherever they go. So, in a day or two, I left for Rajgriha.

On the way to the hills of Rajgriha, I stopped for a few days at Nalanda, the site of a once tremendously large Buddhist university. According to the Chinese pilgrims who visited it while at the height of its fame (seventh century A.D.), there were no less than ten thousand students, each with two attendants, whose food, clothes and transport by elephant or litter were all furnished by the Ruler of the Gupta empire. Foreigners from many countries studied there and contributions came from as far away as the Hindu King of Sumatra. Would-be students from all over India and abroad had to submit to a stiff entrance examination, in which seven or eight out of ten normally failed. The Chinese pilgrims who recorded these facts have generally been regarded as accurate observers, so there seems little reason to doubt

that *over thirty thousand* persons including teachers, students (all monks) and servants were supported there by the munificence of the reigning monarch helped by other contributions. Assuming that all these people lived within the university buildings, Nalanda must have been more than twelve times the size of Oxford University today, if we take into account the fact that Oxford houses only about one half of its resident students, the others being boarded out in lodgings.

Alas, scarcely a ghostly remnant of these former glories exists today. The greater part of the university lies under ploughed fields, though some excavation has been done and a few large ruins exposed. The tradition of Buddhist learning is carried on by a small, attractively designed and exceedingly well-equipped College of Pali Studies, of which the name is somewhat misleading. The library contains books not only in and about the Pali language, but volumes written in or concerned with Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese and other languages necessary for the complete study of Buddhism, including sets of the *Tripitaka* in Tibetan and Chinese. The beautifully clean living quarters are furnished with electric fans, flush toilets and other unexpected conveniences. Lectures are given to about fifty students of various nationalities on classical languages, Buddhism, philosophy and kindred subjects. I felt that the college, though tiny, is a not unworthy successor of the great university, and I share the hope of its Indian founders that it may become the nucleus of a great university to be built there at some time in the future.

Five or six Thai monks studying there welcomed me like a long lost friend, so eager were they to receive news of their country of the kind which newspapers fail to give. When the time came for me to take the toy-like train connecting Nalanda with Rajgriha, the three Thai monks who had come to see me off suddenly leapt on to the train just as it was crawling out of the station; they were moved by a kindly impulse to spare me the difficulties of exploring the scattered sights at Rajgriha without any knowledge of the Hindi language. Otherwise, I should certainly have missed some of the most worthwhile sights there.

Rajgriha is a small town standing near the incredibly extensive ruins of King Bimbisara's capital. Beyond it lie some low hills containing the sanctuaries of many faiths—Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jain and, if a certain Russian writer is to be believed, it will one day contain a Christian shrine; for, according to him, Jesus spent many years of his life there. To many Asians there is nothing at all fantastic

in such a claim. It is widely believed in Asia that the 'lost years', between the time when Jesus as a boy of twelve confounded the elders in the temple and the beginning of his ministry at the age of twenty-nine, were spent in India; and that the essence of his teaching was borrowed from either Hindu or Buddhist teachers, or both. This, it is said, accounts for the close similarity between, for example, the Sermon on the Mount and certain Buddhist texts, but especially for the more mystical parts of the gospels which reflect the same universal truths as those perceived by the sages of other faiths. Just as many Westerners have come unthinkingly to identify Jesus more or less with the West, either because of the close relationship between Christianity and the ethics of Western civilization, or because they are unwilling to visualize their Saviour as a 'coloured man'; so have the peoples of India and the Far East tended to emphasize Jesus' Asian origin, pointing out that both his mysticism and his doctrine of selfless compassion are an essential part of religions older than Christianity. Some Asians suppose that Jesus came into contact with Indian teachers living in the Near East; others contend that he himself came to India and resided in some Indian monastery for many years. I do not know of much evidence for these views, though I am puzzled by the Bible's silence regarding the seventeen missing years. I do not regard similarity or identity of doctrine as evidence of direct Indian influence upon Jesus, for I am convinced that any man who searches deeply into the inmost recesses of his own spirit will come upon the same eternal Wisdom proceeding from the indivisible unity of our real minds (or spirit) with the real Mind (or Spirit) which fills the universe, other than which nothing has more than a transient, dreamlike reality. A tiny child left upon a desert island to grow up without a single human companion would, if he searched deeply and constantly into his own mind, come upon truths identical with those taught by the Buddha, Jesus, Lao-tsě and all the other enlightened sages. If he could communicate those truths in some way, they would be purer than any communication the world has received, for such a child would not attempt to clothe Universal Truth in the special terms employed by the followers of some particular religion. Thus the Asians, more broadminded than the men of the West, have no entirely exclusive religion. All—Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims—are very willing to concede that Jesus was a great Bodhisattva or prophet. It is saddening to find that only a small number of Christians reciprocate by granting the possibility of divine inspiration to any prophets but their own.

The rolling hills of Rajgriha contain many places of interest to Buddhists. Within sight of the little town is the Vulture's Peak, where the Lord Buddha resided for many years in between his preaching tours and where, according to the Mahayana tradition, he expounded most of the esoteric teachings peculiar to the Mahayana scriptures. My Thai friends took me to the foundations of a small cell upon that very peak which some believe to have been the Lord Buddha's dwelling. However doubtful this tradition, it is pleasant to sit there and indulge in one of those 'perhaps-it-was-really-so' moods which most lovers of antiquity now and then permit themselves. Near the foot of that hill is the actual site of the prison where the unhappy King Bimbisara was imprisoned by his ambitious son. There, he was slowly tortured to death and from there, according to tradition, he used to lift up his eyes to the hill and take comfort whenever he observed a tiny moving spot of yellow, indicating that his beloved Teacher was present upon the Vulture's Peak. Upon another hill I saw the cave where the First Great Council, archetype of the one I had attended in Rangoon, was convened almost two thousand five hundred years ago. But my favourite recollections of those grassy hills have little to do with archeological discoveries. One evening, as we strolled in the hills, I was startled to hear the familiar *dup-dup* of a Chinese hand-drum. Presently a Japanese monk came running round a bend in the path, his feet seeming scarcely to touch the ground so lightly did he run. Energetically he tapped his drum, bellowing incessantly in a dramatic Kabuki-like voice: 'Reverence to the Lotus Sutra'. So inwardly concentrated was he that he almost collided with us, stopping himself only just in time. Whereupon he bowed three-quarters of the way to the ground, smote his drum with extra vigour, and roared out the same formula; but this time it was intended as a greeting, rather as a mediaeval friar might have used 'God is good' for 'Good morning'. As it happened, I knew how to reply with the same Japanese words in the same Kabuki-like voice, and did so, bowing almost to the ground. Of course I expected his face to light up with surprise. Not at all. Without the smallest flicker of astonishment, he bowed again and continued running down the hill, as though a stray Englishman reciting a Japanese sacred formula on an Indian hillside was the commonest thing in the world. In fact, his rhythmical tapping, his impressive roaring and panther-like movements were a peculiar form of meditation. Probably he was barely aware of my existence and had been much too absorbed to know or care whether I was Japanese or not.

As darkness was falling, we came to an ancient bath-house fed by a hot spring once used for ablutions by the Buddha himself—or so it is said. The warm water came splashing out of stone pipes fashioned to resemble the heads of *Naga*. The bath we enjoyed there was both refreshing and, to me, highly romantic. While we dried ourselves by the light of oil dips, an old Hindu approached, crying:

'Alms in the name of God. I perish of hunger.'

One of the young Thai monks, looking straight in his face, said slyly: 'Which God?'

'This God,' cried the old man, bursting into a peal of laughter and jabbing his finger into a toothless mouth. I was amused by such sincerity and gave him a few coins, whereupon the old fellow, perceiving the yellow garments my friends were just putting on, cried in a penetrating voice that echoed through the stone bath-house:

'Buddha Bhagawan ki-jai! Victory to the Blessed One, the Buddha!'

'It seems we've made a convert,' I said laughing, but not derisively, for the old man had been true to his Hindu religion, the most catholic in the world, in exalting a sage or god reverenced by others. There had not been the smallest insincerity.

The memory of my last evening at Rajgriha, when my Thai friends had gone back to Nalanda, can hardly be described. Towards sunset, I paid a call on the Abbot of the Japanese Temple; and just as the rim of the sun dipped behind the hills I came out of the gate into the main road leading to the town. Just at that moment, the air about me throbbed with thunderous vibrations, as a splendid Japanese drum, probably of enormous size, poured forth its farewell to the sun from somewhere within the temple.

Bong bong bong bong-bong *bong*! On and on it went in just that familiar Chinese rhythm, loud as thunder in my ears, but thunder crashing on a magic note which seemed to dissolve *Sangsara's* mirage, freeing men's Mind from their bodies, promising bliss inconceivable.

Often I have been moved by the sounds of percussion instruments used in the Far East for sacred purposes; they give forth an elemental music with stirring vibrations of uncanny effect, whether they are of stone, bronze, wood or stretched skin. Instantly they induce a mood of profound meditation, so difficult to achieve otherwise without long-sustained effort. But the power of this drum exceeded anything in my experience. The whole world appeared to dissolve in a luminous mist

as the spirit rose to a kind of ecstasy, so that the drum's sudden cessation wounded me like a knife-thrust, dragging me back to the world of forms. Of course the 'luminous mist' and 'knife-thrust' must not be taken too literally. It is just that they somewhat correspond to an inner experience not easily clothed in words. Perhaps silence is wiser than attempted descriptions of the subtler experiences of the spirit, for these seldom escape distortion when forced into the armour-stiffness of words. Yet, were silence always to be maintained, we could not convey even the husks of our greatest experiences to others, and the literature of religion would become a collection of useless and misleading descriptions of externals.

From Rajgriha, I journeyed to Sravasti, site of the famous Jetavana Monastery where the Buddha often stayed for a season and taught the people there. It is related that Anathapindika, a rich merchant, was so anxious to acquire this garden for his beloved Master that he went so far as to offer the prince who owned it as much gold as would be required to cover its entire surface with coins of that metal. The prince, originally reluctant to part with it, was so struck by Anathapindika's devotion that he accepted half that price. Even so, the amount paid was enormous; and it is said that the monastery built there was of a splendour worthy of such dearly bought ground. Nothing remains now of much interest to someone like myself without archeological knowledge —nothing but the merest fragments of ancient brick buildings. My only experience there worthy of record was a touching little incident connected with my Burmese or Thai style sunshade of orange-coloured oiled paper. It happened that the Burmese monk who guided me round the ruins had an identical sunshade which he was carrying that day. The simple Hindu villagers, seeing the local holy man approach, followed by another man with the same kind of sunshade, supposed that I was a 'holy man' also. Accordingly, when they had 'taken the monk's *Darshan*' by humbly touching his foot or knee, they hastened forward to obtain mine. My attempt to make them understand that I am far from holy fell on deaf ears as we had no language in common. (The 'taking of *Darshan*' is a Hindu rite with several variations. The theory is that some virtue can be transferred from a sacred image or holy man to the person who 'takes *Darshan*', usually by gazing at or touching the object of veneration.) The most moving and instructive aspect of this little incident is that it illustrates the noble catholicity of the Hindus who accept a holy man for the real or supposed sanctity of his life and do not stop to argue as to whether he is a co-religionist or not.

This, I think, is an outstandingly admirable quality, even in a land containing so much to admire and among a people by whom the spirit is so often willingly accorded more nourishment than the flesh.

The last stage of my pilgrimage before its culmination in Delhi took me to Kusinagara, where the Lord Buddha at last abandoned his worn-out body which, since his Enlightenment nearly fifty years before, had stood between him and utter absorption into the state of *Nirvana*. From pure compassion he, who had already won freedom from bondage to the Wheel, had clung to and tended that body that the whole of his Wisdom could be transferred to others and handed down for the enormous benefit of posterity.

By the time the bus from the nearest railway station had set me down at Kusinagara just opposite the Burmese rest-house, it was close on midday and the heat so frightful that I feared collapse. A very aged Burmese monk advised me to lie down in one of the bedrooms for pilgrims until the heat had somewhat abated. On that day, the thermometer crossed the 120 mark! I found myself gasping for breath, sucking in the air through my mouth. But at about five o'clock in the afternoon I felt able to walk across to the well which served for bathing. In good Thai style, I girded my loins with my *pakaoma*, allowing the trousers to slip from under it, and was thus able to bathe in full view of anyone who happened to be passing. Winding up a bucket of water, too cold for me on account of the well's great depth, and using my silver *kan* (Thai-style bowl), I sluiced water over myself. It was almost like bathing in iced water. Again I found myself gasping for air. India had taught me never to travel even for half a day without a change of underwear; and for this I was thankful, as my vest and pants were as wet with perspiration as if they had been retrieved from the well. Much refreshed, but still languid from the scarcely abated heat, I set out to explore.

The ancient temple enclosing a famous reclining image of the Buddha was closed, so I had little to do but to sit gazing at the *stupa* (bottle-shaped reliquary tower) which marks the actual site of the Lord Buddha's *Parinirvana* or final passing. As had become my custom in sacred places, I first prostrated myself towards the *stupa* and then sat down to meditate and to read the scriptures appropriate to that place. As the Maha Bodhi Society's guide-book declares so truly, Kusinagara is the only one of the Buddhist shrines which arouses melancholy. I found it easy to visualize the Lord reclining in his favourite position, lying on his right side with his head resting upon a cupped hand supported by his elbow. Above him were twin sala trees similar

to the one beneath whose shade he had been born. Their falling flowers sprinkled him as he and his mother had been sprinkled at the time of his birth exactly eighty years before. And all about him were weeping disciples and the hastily assembled villagers from round about. But he exhorted them not to weep, reminding them that 'everything born, brought into being or created by having its various parts assembled contains within itself the inherent necessity of dissolution'. So saying, he commended his cousin and most devoted disciple, Ananda, for his years of selfless devotion to his Master and for his excellent effect upon the others. To the villagers who wept, dishevelled their hair and rolled on the ground in anguish, he explained that, though their Teacher would soon be no more, they must not grieve, for the Truths he had taught and the Rules he had provided for the Order would forever be Teacher to them all. Then, speaking to the whole assembly of monks and laymen, he exclaimed:

'Behold now, brothers, I exhort you saying: Decay is inherent in all compounded things! Work out your own salvation with diligence.'

Those were his last words. Entering into the successive stages of meditation, he withdrew further and further from the consciousness of outward things and peacefully passed away.

It is hard for a Buddhist to contemplate this scene, while meditating in Kusinagara itself, without weeping. I had to remind myself that the Lord Buddha had chidden his disciples for their tears, requiring of them a firm resolution to work out, each one for himself, salvation from the Wheel. I put away my book and meditated for awhile, sharply aware of the voices of birds and insects all around. This put me in mind of Wat Chalerm where the first hint of my coming pilgrimage had been dimly perceived. Now, already, it had reached its spiritual (though not physical) climax. Was the hidden promise which had come into my heart at Wat Chalerm fulfilled, or did greater experiences await me? In a little while, the certainty dawned in my mind, not for the first time, that the turning point of my life would be reached somewhere in the Himalayan borderlands of Tibet. I was content that this should be so.

In New Delhi, upon the night of the Full Moon in May, even while Mr Nehru was making his moving speech to a vast concourse of people assembled in an open park, the orb of the moon suffered a dark eclipse. In Delhi the darkness was total, and many millions of Buddhists from Korea to Ceylon must have shuddered at such an omen occurring upon the most auspicious night in the last two thousand five hundred

years. It seemed indeed an evil portent, but we in that vast New Delhi audience had our fears swept away when the strong voice of Mr Nehru rang out to declare:

'Just as the orb of the moon is about to emerge from the darkness in all her radiant glory, so will the world emerge from the darkness of fear and disaster if the people, whether Buddhist or not, will faithfully practise the Wisdom and Compassion with which the teaching of Lord Gautama, the Enlightened One, is so deeply imbued.'

11

The Tibetan Borderlands and Initiation

THE next stage in my preparation for what lay before was immersion in the beauties of India. My pilgrimage had left me refreshed in spirit, joyful at having walked so closely in the footsteps of the Enlightened One, and filled with that access of energy which inevitably follows sustained control not only of deeds, but of thoughts and words. During the months which now unfolded, I entered three times into the Himalayan regions and saw besides many of the wonders of the Northern India plain. This communion with beauty—the majesty of snow-laden mountains and primaeval forests, the marvellous architecture of vanished epochs, the half-sacred half-profane music and dances of India, the warmth and lavish quality of Indian hospitality greatly enriched my understanding.

In Banaras, the all-embracing, I was bewildered by the intermingling of so much purity and filth, beholding almost fleshless spirit and wholly fleshy flesh woven into a unique pattern. Here, the temple of Kali reeked with the blood of decapitated goats; there, a sage sat for days or weeks on end in communion with the highest spirit. Sordid dancing-girls, money-grubbing priests and decorated corpses mingled with sages learned in the ancient arts and saints lost in the beauty of Truth and Love. Only India holds the key to such mysteries.

In Lucknow, I rediscovered the charm and refinement that linger in those cities which, like Peking, have not long since been ruled by princes enamoured of beauty. It is said that in Lucknow the very *ghari-wallahs* (drivers of horse-cabs) employ the diction which once adorned the lips of Persian and Moghul princes. In this city, Hindu and Moslem have united to create a superb blend of their separate ancient cultures. Even today, the magic of Haroun-al-Raschid's Baghdad is reflected there; for it is the home of fragrant oils distilled from flowers and of milky sweetmeats incredibly delicious; of jewels in ancient settings and finely embroidered muslins; of noble architecture; of courteous,

soft-spoken men and pale-skinned, doe-eyed women; of divinely inspired music and dance; of *bhang* which, powdered and mixed with milk and almonds, brings strange, multi-coloured dreams; of people whose gestures are so graceful that even to watch them conversing is a pleasure in itself.

In Jaipur, that rose-red city, I found a jewel of loveliness set in a desert of cruel rocks and jagged, castle-crowned hills, where the June heat is so ferocious that the smallest exertion might, for one unaccustomed to it, spell death. In Ellora and Ajanta, I beheld sculptured and frescoed beauty like that of Yünkang and hardly to be excelled in the courts of heaven. And everywhere in India I met with a warmth of heart and lavish hospitality which leaves the stranger overcome with astonishment and gratitude. While enjoying all this beauty, I kept in mind the Tibetan teaching that loveliness attainable through the senses and the heart, when unsullied by a passion for possession, intensifies the thirst to drink from beauty's Source.

One day I came to the ancient Himalayan town of Almora, only to find that the Hindu sages I sought had fled further into the solitude of the mountains. Instead, I heard of an advanced adept of the Vajrayana, by race a Westerner, inhabiting a retreat in the vicinity. As I have found that Western Hindu and Buddhist recluses seldom succeed in transforming themselves into more than herons, I approached the Lama's hermitage more from curiosity than in the hope of discovering a golden eagle fully fledged. I was wrong!

For several hours, I followed a broad path winding through forests into the mountains and clinging to ridges with views of blue ranges looming like islands from a sea of dove-grey mist that swirled above the hidden valleys. Near the peak, a barely discernible track led me to a cottage surrounded by a garden of carefully tended flowers well secluded behind shrubs and tall grasses. Such is the home of that golden eagle among adepts, the Lama Govinda, German by birth, Tibetan Lama by the triple right of scholarship, spiritual attainment and advanced initiation. The Lama, who belongs to the 'Red-Cap' Sect which permits Lamas to marry, shares his solitude with a remarkable wife, Li Gotami.

The interior of the hermitage consists of a single room, forming a setting of appropriate simplicity for the glowing, jewel-like colours of Tibetan religious paintings mounted on gorgeous silken scrolls. Here, on two occasions, I passed some of the most valuable hours of my whole journey across India. Li Gotami, a sensitive painter fond of rich

colours, is herself as pretty as a picture with her pale, intelligent Parsee features and her sari of fine, homespun fabric. The Lama is an ascetic-looking man of over fifty with pink cheeks and a very small, pointed beard. He was dressed in a plain robe of maroon-coloured cloth. From our conversation then, from our subsequent correspondence, as well as from some of his writings, I judge that he has a profound knowledge of Tibetan religious literature and that he is deeply versed in the theory and practice of the Vajrayana. Indeed, I learnt later that the Tibetans themselves accept him as a Lama of high attainment, without needing to make the smallest allowance for his being a foreigner! This would be scarcely possible to credit, had I not witnessed his erudition for myself. Far more important, the Lama Govinda possesses that rare and indescribable quality by which a man of transcendant spiritual attainment is instantly recognized. Nor years of right action, nor absolute purity of body, speech and mind can alone produce this unique fruit of spiritual understanding. It can be achieved only by one far advanced in the arts of mind-control and of turning the consciousness inward upon itself; but, once gained, it declares itself at sight to all but the spiritually dead. The Lama is so soft-spoken and modest that I doubt whether he has the remotest idea of the effect he produces on others.

Even a visitor with no particular interest in the Vajrayana could hardly fail to enjoy talking with people so steeped in the arts of India and Tibet and themselves exponents of forms of painting in which Eastern and Western influences are delightfully harmonized; moreover the Lama's erudition embraces many aspects of Tibetan, Indian and Chinese culture besides Buddhism. Even his gestures have unconsciously acquired something of that almost ritualistic grace which adds so much to the dignity and charm of well-born Tibetans. But the most memorable result of my visits was the hope with which the Lama filled me. So often before, the relatively small success of other Western adepts had made me fear that I was attempting the impossible. I had come to suppose that insuperable difficulties prevent a man born and educated in the West from mastering the spiritual sciences of the East, for which Asian adepts are able to train from childhood. At last I had met a European who ranked both in knowledge and spiritual attainment with some of my most admired Asian Teachers—a splendid omen. The effects of a Western education involving the outward-turning of the whole personality do not make attainment of the inner Wisdom wholly impossible.

For various reasons, my stay at Almora could not be prolonged. As

I walked away from the Lama's hermitage for the last time, with the mountains and forest looking their loveliest in the slanting sunlight of evening, I formed a firm resolution to return one day and beg instruction. I doubt if the whole world contains another man able to express himself fluently in English who is so deeply versed in the mysteries of the Vajrayana, so admirably qualified to explain them to Western adepts.

In Tibet, even more than elsewhere in Asia, those who have given years of their life to acquiring English are seldom knowledgeable about the well-springs of their indigenous culture or deeply versed in spiritual matters. This has always been one of the stumbling blocks to the appreciation of Asian scholarship by Westerners. Similarly, those Westerners best qualified to appreciate spiritual and cultural matters seldom have the time to become masters of one or more Oriental languages, even if they get as far as speaking them fluently. Thus, with the exception of the Lama Govinda and Dr Evans Wentz, Western writers have seldom achieved more than a superficial description of the Vajrayana's outward forms, which largely accounts for the Western prejudice against this profound form of Buddhism and the charges of 'mumbo-jumbo' levelled against it. Even so, it amazes me that Westerners who have had the smallest contact with educated Tibetans can imagine that the source of their inspiration is crude 'abracadabra'. Their very manner, the gay serenity of their expressions and their swift intelligence cry out against such error.

. . . . .

During my pilgrimage and subsequent journeyings about India, my thoughts as to the precise nature of the experience awaiting me in the Tibetan border regions had gradually crystallized. Ever since my early twenties when I had been initiated by the Dorjé Rimpoché, I had intermittently practised some of the preliminary meditations and rites open to me, but with small success. Yet my attempts to penetrate deeply into Zen and other forms of Buddhism had always ended in my return to the Vajrayana as being best suited to my attainments and spiritual capacities. Within the Vajrayana, there are literally hundreds of approaches suited to different types of people, and it was only within recent months that my choice (guided, I believe, by my *Karma* and by the hidden design of my Teachers) fell upon a particular form of meditation related to Döljang (Sgrolmaljank'u) which develops from

certain symbolical rites used to clothe abstract concepts and processes in more nearly concrete forms. No sooner had I concluded that this was the ideal route for me than I recalled the veiled prophecy of Nêng Hai, which suddenly took on meaning and confirmed the wisdom of my choice. That I had remembered this prophecy at Wat Chalerm before leaving Thailand and then, almost incredibly, forgotten it again convinced me that my subconscious had deliberately blinded me until the time was ripe. Most unfortunately, or else for obscure karmic reasons, I had allowed something to delay my attendance at the Grand Initiation twenty years before and so missed that part of it which would qualify me for the path I was now determined to follow. In a flash of insight it became abundantly clear to me that the mysterious experience awaiting me in the Himalayas would take the form of, or at least be crowned by a particular initiation into one of the Sgrolmaljank'u Rites, accompanied by a detailed course of instruction. Now I hesitated no longer. All that remained was to discover where I must go, for no genuine Lama would bestow this initiation upon a stranger just for the asking.

The choice lay among the following places: Ladakh and the other Tibetan border monasteries in or near the province of Kashmir; the semi-independent state of Sikkim ruled by a Tibetan king; Bhutan, a similar state which white men rarely obtain permission to enter; the Indian border towns in the Darjeeling district; and the Tibetan monasteries in the mountains of Nepal. Since the establishment of the Peking Government's suzerainty over Tibet, those places are the only ones left in the world where a Westerner from a non-Communist country may hope to come in contact with Lamas qualified to bestow such initiations. As to which place to choose, a combination of events made it abundantly clear that the longed-for experience awaited me somewhere in Sikkim.

The preliminaries to my journey were soon arranged. Before long, a bus was carrying me up that marvellous road which, winding upwards by the turbulent Tista, leads to Gangtok, Sikkim's capital seven thousand feet above the plain.

I stayed in a small Indian hotel where a traveller can have a bed but not often a room to himself. The balcony overlooked the bazaar with its sprinkling of Indians in white *dhotis*, its crowds of slightly built Nepalis and entire absence of Westerners. Among them strode tall, pink-cheeked Tibetans, the men with scarlet-ribboned queues of thick black hair rolled around their heads, their long gowns hitched

high so that they bulged over their waist-sashes and displayed knee-high boots of soft-coloured leather. I had often seen Tibetan men in China, but Tibetan women I now saw for the first time and was astonished by their beauty—pale, smooth-skinned faces with apple-red cheeks, jet black eyebrows and two thick plaits of hair dancing behind them. Their ankle-length, sleeveless robes of darkish wool contrasted with the pale red, orange, yellow or blue silk of their long-sleeved blouses. Many also wore gay, horizontally striped aprons, a few decorated at the upper corners with the brocaded insignia of nobility. None of them in the least resembled the unwashed, butter-smeared, mat-haired creatures whom travellers meet in Tibet's wilder regions. That evening I gained my first inkling of the sophistication of the beauty-loving city-dwellers of Tibet.

The next morning, I hastened to pay my respects to the Chief Minister, a gentle, elderly man with bright eyes and cheeks almost red enough to match the scarlet ribbon entwined in his coiled queue. Except for his red Tibetan sash, he looked exactly like a mandarin who has stepped out from a Chinese ancestral portrait; it seemed incongruous that his English was fluent and correct. We liked each other from the first and he, without appearing too hopeful, promised to help me overcome the chief obstacle lying before me, that of finding a Lama both qualified and willing to bestow the initiation upon a stranger. I was inwardly confident, feeling that events were taking a karmically predestined course of which I knew the end.

'There is,' he said, 'at least one man in Sikkim perfectly suited to your purpose, the Rimpoché now living at the monastery of Tashiding. But the journey may make you wish you had changed your mind, for the rains have already damaged the paths and may drench you from morning to night. Then, if that doesn't deter you, how will you persuade him to bestow the initiation? Your permit to stay in Sikkim will expire long before you have had time to complete the preliminary course of study and practice which normally takes months, if not years. Another difficulty is that nobody there speaks a word of English and your knowledge of Chinese is useless anywhere in Sikkim. So what will you do?'

Finally he undertook to write a letter to the Tanku Rimpoché explaining that, besides being a Buddhist of many years standing, I had received important initiations at the hands of the Dorjé Rimpoché, also that I undertook to perform on my own all necessary preliminaries to the rites and meditations to be unlocked for me by the initiation.

I stayed in Gangtok several days while preparations for my journey were in hand. The city's chief beauty lies in its splendid panorama of hills; architecturally, the royal temple within the palace precincts is one of the very few buildings of interest. The inner walls are ablaze with murals which, though fine examples of the traditional style, have been executed within the last few years. I pricked up my ears when somebody mentioned that one of the two artists responsible for the work was still living in Gangtok. To him I hastened and commissioned two pictures, including one very important for the meditations I was about to learn. (Mounted on brocaded silk in the royal Buddhist colours and secured to a roller with ends of beaten silver, it now occupies the place of honour in my household shrine, its beauty a constant inspiration.) I also bought other objects, chiefly of wrought silver—butter-lamps and various sorts of ritual paraphernalia. To a Buddhist, none of this paraphernalia is essential; even the most complicated rituals of the Vajrayana can be performed mentally in a bare cave, if necessary; but it is hard to resist the age-old desire to beautify the shrine containing the sacred symbols of a cherished faith, particularly for one like myself who finds properly understood symbolism a great aid to spiritual concentration.

Before leaving, I was invited to my first Tibetan party which took place in a room bright with multi-coloured rugs and carven woodwork painted in colours reminiscent of those used to decorate altar-screens in mediaeval Europe—brilliant but never harsh like the industrially produced paints with which Western manufacturers now flood the more accessible parts of Asia. The entertainment included the constant serving of *ch'ang*, or Tibetan 'beer'. A very fat bamboo container silver-bound and half filled with fermented grain was set before each guest. It contained a long, thin bamboo to serve as a drinking 'straw'. On to the grain servants frequently poured hot water, filling the container to the brim, and at each pouring the water immediately changed to a warm, milky coloured 'beer', very mild and pleasant to the taste. I tried to be reasonably abstemious, but now and then the ladies of the house would form a circle and dance round me, singing a song which meant something like:

> We gladly bid welcome to you.
> Alas that your hours here are few.
> But, while you are here,

Please drink up your beer
To honour the hosts
Who strive to please you.

Such an invitation is impossible to refuse, so I was relieved to discover that *ch'ang* is the mildest fermented drink I had ever tasted.

The next day, I set out for Tashiding. The first stage was accomplished in torrential rain by bus and jeep along the only motorable road in Sikkim apart from the fine main road running due north and south of the capital. At the end of this short stage stood a Government rest-house and, from its balcony, I was to catch my first view of the glorious snow-peaks beyond. The rain stopped towards evening and, for a few moments, the drifting clouds parted to reveal a jagged line of pure white touched with the first pink of sunset. Almost before I had time to cry out, this tantalizing glimpse of beauty was swallowed up in angry black clouds, as though an elderly Muslim had returned home to find his youngest wife revealing herself at the window to the ravished passers-by. Soon the rain was swishing down more relentlessly than before. All through the night it rattled upon the roof and hissed upon the sodden lawns.

The next day I rose at dawn and, as the rain showed no signs of abating, I put all my trust in my thick waterproof and splendid knee-high Tibetan boots. An hour later, a rain-sodden and dispirited horse, kindly put at my disposal by the local *kazi* (land-owner), was led into the compound by the groom who was to accompany me on foot with a baggage cooly bringing up in the rear. I had not ridden for as much as half an hour when my waterproof belied its name by giving up the battle and allowing the rain to seep in as through a garment of gauze. As for my new boots, their wide tops permitted the water to pour inside and fill all the space between boot and leg.

Knowing that the rain might pour for days, I decided to ride forward at all costs, following a widish path which wound upwards through the dripping jungle. By midday, the top of the slope was behind me. The groom intimated that I should now dismount and walk forward on my own, as the *kazi* did not like his horse to be ridden by a heavy man on a steep downward slope. The cooly had dropped out of sight, probably far behind; so I soon found myself alone in a strange country, unable to communicate with its inhabitants even if any of them should venture out in such weather. Soaked to the skin and increasingly miserable, I trudged forward. The path had narrowed so

much that I could almost have touched the streaming branches on either hand. Its centre had become a rushing torrent; I had to drag my heavy, water-logged boots through three feet of water. To either side were slippery banks infested by thousands upon thousands of leeches hungry for good warm human blood. So many of them wormed their way stealthily over the tops of my boots and disappeared deep inside that the water squelching from the boots was soon tinged with the blood flowing from those who, after gorging themselves and increasing their girth tenfold, had been squashed between foot and leather. Once I thought of stopping by a rock to take off my boots and remove the leeches; but I had no sooner sat down than a great host of fresh leeches advanced from all sides, rearing their loathsome bodies up like cobras in excited anticipation of a meal. With a moan of disgust, I leapt up and hurried back to the rushing water in the centre of the path. I guessed that at least fifty of them had found their way into my boots and were busy feasting off my blood. The absence of pain was small comfort, for they filled me with that unspeakable loathing which they inspire in all who see them for the first time. Old-stagers in those jungles find them no more revolting than ants or ladybirds!

My new boots began to chafe my feet, causing increasing pain. I was in a wretched state—soaking wet, hot, sweaty, tired, footsore, hungry, thirsty and ever conscious of the vampire leeches fattening on my blood. Hour after hour went by and still the path bored into uninhabited jungle. I could have wept with vexation and with fear of taking the wrong path and having to spend the night trudging on and on until exhaustion brought me to the ground to become a prey to a whole army of leeches. Then, as from heaven, a warmly comforting thought came to drive away all my woes. Once I had read of a pious Tibetan journeying to seek wisdom from a mountain-dwelling recluse. The hermit, aware of his approach, conjured up terrific snow-storms and fearful landslides all along the route, to test his strength of purpose; yet the traveller never wavered, but pressed forward boldly, for he was determined either to reach his Teacher or perish in the attempt. I do not suppose that my relatively mild sufferings were due to anything more than the normal weather at that season. All the same, I began to regard them in the light of a test of endurance, a mark of heaven's high favour, whereupon my heart lightened and even my horror of the leeches abated somewhat. Thenceforth, I splashed along with renewed energy, singing out the Fourfold Invocation to Guru, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha which I fitted to a lovely old Chinese tune, dwelling on the

syllables so that they rose and fell in a cadence of semitones. Had anyone been there to hear, they might not have found it much better than frog-croaking; to me it was inspiring. Not for the first time, I reflected on the immensity of mind's power over matter. This is magnificent, I thought. What I am enduring now will make my pilgrimage a worthy sacrifice. This fiercely driving rain and all my present troubles are omens of success. Formerly the minutes had dragged like hours; now, the last hour of my journey sped by as though I had robbed it of fifty of its minutes. When next I grew weary, the rest-house was perched just a hundred yards above where I was standing. A final spurt of energy and I was beneath its roof.

Within five minutes, a young Nepalese was fanning logs into a blaze in the fireplace; and I, having stripped off all my dripping clothes, was comfortably arrayed in sarong and toga composed of two curtains purloined from the rest-house window. Flinging myself into a chair before the fire, I touched the tails of the leeches clinging to my legs with tobacco unrolled from a cigarette, and had the pleasure of seeing them drop to the floor to be gathered up by the servant and carted out of sight. Next my cooly arrived and proudly displayed my bedding and spare clothes which were not even damp from the rain, so cunningly had he rolled them into his waterproof sheet. On the advice of the Chief Minister, I had brought food with me and was able to enjoy a plateful of curried potato and onion, served with a mound of soft white rice and washed down by my favourite Chinese tea brought all the way from Thailand. At dusk I went to bed and fell into a dreamless sleep.

Dawn the next morning! The first of many glorious, gorgeous Himalayan dawns with the sky-line of monster snow-peaks revealed in all their majesty, their everlasting snows touched with fire by the rising sun. This was the beginning of a seeming miracle. I was now within sight of Tashiding and, for as long as I remained on or in view of that mountain, *no rain fell.* I had come, perforce, at the height of Sikkim's rainy season, when the skies often shed blinding torrents of rain for days on end. Who could have imagined such good fortune? Not until the second day of the return journey did the clouds burst asunder and drench me as before; no spot of rain marred my happiness on Tashiding. Were I one of those people who believe that Heaven will reward the earnest prayer of one individual by withholding the rain, however much the farmers lament its absence, I should surely have claimed a genuine miracle wrought on my behalf.

The final stage had to be covered on foot. When I had engaged a local Nepali as cooly-guide, I walked straight down from the rest-house into a valley some two thousand feet below. The paths were still rushing cataracts, but in that valley no leeches dwell, nor upon the slopes of Tashiding. The valley is shaped like an enormous bowl rimmed with steeply sloping mountains. In the centre is Tashiding, an almost perfect cone rising two thousand feet above a kind of moat formed by two torrents which clash together at its foot, hissing and roaring so loudly as to make conversation in the neighbourhood well-nigh impossible. A fine bridge crosses this turgid 'moat' and then the climb begins. Tashiding is cruelly steep, almost precipitous; and the shorter path to the summit is so strewn with rocks and boulders that I often had to use four limbs like a monkey; yet my cooly, half my size and burdened besides with my luggage, leapt upwards like a stag. Later, telling the story of that climb to an English-speaking teacher who arrived after some days, he said: 'Poor Englishman. I felt so sad for him. But for his luggage, I should have offered to carry him up on my back.' An athletic man unburdened could have covered the distance in less than half the time I took, but my heart pounded so much from the unaccustomed strain that I grew dizzy. A curtain of mist flickering before my eyes and want of breath compelled me to make many pauses.

At last, at last, when the sun was low, I gained a sort of platform near the peak. In front of me was a pile of stones inscribed with the mystic words:

OM MANI PADME HUM

which play so great a part in Tibetan Buddhism—a part so sadly misunderstood in the West that the Lama Govinda has devoted a book of over three hundred pages to expounding the mantra's full significance![1] The sight of this inscription galvanized me like the appearance of an oasis in a desert, for it meant that I had arrived, that I already stood within the monastery grounds. I strode forward and found myself gazing at a long street of wooden dwellings running between two sizeable temple buildings.

My cooly had preceded me to give notice of my arrival and to inform the authorities that I was the bearer of a letter from the Chief Minister to their spiritual master, the Tangku Rimpoché. The first

[1] *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, Lama Anagarika Govinda. Rider & Co.

person to see me was an old woman who repeatedly raised both hands to her forehead and protruded her tongue in friendly greeting. Hobbling to a nearby hut, she came back with a chair—surely a rarity there and perhaps the only one in that place, for I never saw another. I had scarcely sat down with a sigh of relief, when the sight of a burly monk hastening towards me brought me quickly to my feet. I was amused to find that long acquaintance with Chinese monasteries enabled me, even though this was a Tibetan, to know for certain that he was the Chief Administrator or Head Lama. Not that he wore any insignia of rank; it was just that the seal of authority was engraven upon his face and reflected in the ponderous dignity of his movements. Many Mahayanist temples have two heads—a spiritual and a temporal head, either of whom may be the Abbot. The spiritual head is less easy to distinguish, for there may be several monks as spiritually advanced as himself; or he may belong to a community in which nobody (including himself) has attained to that state. The administrative head is as easy to spot as a mayor among aldermen.

Dressed in a robe of woollen stuff and dangling a long, black rosary from his left hand, he came striding forward with a smile of welcome. He saw at once that I was very tired, so he cut short the usual courtesies and led me to a little room which had been hurriedly prepared for me. It contained everything essential—a bed, floor-cushions and a desk eighteen inches high. There was also a wall-shrine and a few shelves, some of which had been cleared to receive my scanty possessions. After two days of what to me had seemed great hardship, I thought the room positively luxurious and grinned with pleasure when an old woman appeared with hot buttered tea and some rock-like corn-cakes to be dipped in it until softened.

In China, nobody need carry food with him. Every village has its restaurant and every monastery its provision for guests. The Tibetan custom is different, probably because monks are often poor and food scarce; so I had brought my own tea, rice, curry-powder, onions, potatoes and oil, as well as sugar and coffee. I was just wondering whom I could induce to cook some of this for me, when my truly remarkable cooly carried in a delicious meal he had cooked himself. I had engaged this man at a low figure just to carry my luggage. His assumption of the posts of cook and very efficient body-servant was done entirely from kindness, and from now on he was to look after me as a father looks after a rather feeble-minded son. A member of the blacksmith caste, he was held by Hindus to be a low creature; to me he was a treasure,

always smiling and gay, always ready to find means of adding to my comfort, and so highly intelligent that he soon discovered how to converse with me at some length, using my twenty words of Hindi and eking them out with the language of looks and gestures.

Supper was followed by coffee, after which I felt ready to collapse on to the bed and fall into a deep sleep. However, no sooner had I begun to undress than the Head Lama appeared to inform me that the Most Venerable Tangku Lama was awaiting my visit of courtesy.

The Tangku Rimpoché, whose reputation for learning and spiritual attainment has, I believe, made him the most outstanding personality in Sikkim, is a member of the 'Red-Cap' Sect; thus, if any hair remained to him, he would wear it long instead of shaving his head in the orthodox manner. Instead, he wears a wig. Crippled in both legs, he sits all day on a floor-cushion with a rug over the lower part of his body. His plum-colour toga is patched and faded, his absurdly unrealistic wig is worn carelessly askew on his bald head. Almost any other man so dressed would be taken for a clown or for an elderly half-wit, and inevitably become the butt of the local urchins. Not so the Tangku Lama. His expression and above all his eyes demand instant respect and obedience. Were he able to walk and if, in some miraculous manner, he were transported to the centre of a snow-covered village street in England, I can imagine the village urchins rushing towards him with whoops of derision, scooping up balls of snow ready to pelt him. But if, at such a moment, he should turn round and smile straight into their eyes, I surely believe that the raised hands would be lowered and the snowballs fall unheeded to the ground; for the quality of the Lama's expression is such that no reputation for holiness, no knowledge of his exalted position as a Rimpoché, is needed to convince all who see him of his immense power and perfect gentleness of soul.

When I had performed the ritual prostrations and presented him with a ceremonial scarf, he motioned me to a cushion where I sat for perhaps five minutes gazing at him with intense pleasure, while he remained very still, quietly examining me and weighing me up, rather as Tahai had done more than twenty years before. Of course this silence was not according to precedent for such occasions; it was because we had no common language. Except for what was said in the Chief Minister's letter, the Rimpoché's only means of discovering something about me was to scrutinize me while employing that inner vision which no doubt reveals far more to him than his eyes.

A small group of disciples sat in the same room busy with various

tasks. I was conscious of their discreet stares and somehow sure that they were friendly. There was no suspicion of arrogance or hostility towards a foreigner. An extraordinary aspect of that first meeting was that, to a small extent, the Lama and I were able to converse. That he should be able to read my thoughts I took for granted as soon as I had seen what sort of person he was; the difficulty was for him to convey his thoughts to me. Somehow, with the aid of my twenty words of Hindi, half a dozen Chinese words he happened to know, the Tibeto-Sanskrit technical terms concerning the matter which had brought me there and which were common to us both, the language of looks, signs and gestures, all aided by our mutual knowledge of the contents of the letter of introduction, the Lama was able to convey to me most of what he wished to tell me.

The following dialogue represents what I am almost sure he would have said in very similar words, if we had had a common language. I suppose it took about half an hour for him to make himself understood by round-about means, employing all the aids I have mentioned.

The Lama: 'The Initiation you desire cannot be bestowed without careful preparation. When you have learnt and performed all the preliminaries, I shall be happy to perform the necessary rite.'

Myself: 'Rimpoché! I beg you to understand that it is impossible for me to spend more than a few days here—let alone months or years. My permit will expire in two weeks from now and I have to get back to my job by October 1st.'

The Lama: 'We are dealing with deeply sacred matters. Surely you understand that we must act in seemly fashion. What is time? What does your permit matter, or your getting back to your job, when such spiritual benefits are at stake?'

This interview and several of the same kind to follow did not distress me. I knew that initiations are not given away for the asking like apples or a bunch of grapes. I knew that the Lama understood my difficulties very well, but wanted time to observe me, and that his final word had not been spoken. Yet I was so impatient that the following morning I sent my excellent servant back to his village to procure a horse and persuade an elderly English-speaking teacher, who had already refused once to make the journey, to ride back with him to interpret for me. I was afraid the Lama did not fully appreciate how much of the preliminary ground I had covered already. No doubt it was a foolish or at least a useless action, for the Lama certainly intended to base his decision on what he observed in me rather than on

anything I could urge in my favour, but I wished to leave nothing to chance.

During the days while I waited for the interpreter to arrive and for some time after that, I spent most of my time alone. Except for one or two short periods each day when the Tangku Lama sent for me to instruct me in certain Tibeto-Sanskrit verses to be committed to memory, I was left so much to myself that I suspected the Lama had given instructions for me to be allowed solitude in which to prepare myself. If I were right, then clearly he was inclined to grant the initiation. Every morning began with the magical dance of fire upon snow, during and after which I used to sit entranced, entering sometimes into states of consciousness deeper than any I had previously attained. Generally, within an hour or so of dawn, the splendid snow-peaks were swallowed up in cloud; yet, even then, Tashiding enjoyed local sunshine which drew mysterious shadows from the rocks and trees. My morning meditation ended, I would wander about, sometimes going as far afield as some neighbouring heights attached to Tashiding by a narrow spur, thereby just preventing the conical mountain from being an island. All day long, except when I returned to my room for a meal or a rest, I was more or less in a state of meditation. At certain intervals I practised the strenuous concentration which leads directly to the hidden places of the spirit; at other times I let my eyes wander over sky and mountain, feeling keenly alive to each lovely detail but refraining from all discursive thought. This exercise is very difficult to describe. As the eye lingers upon one object or another, the mind registers it in terms of: 'Ah, thus it is and thus'; shape, colour and texture are taken into the mind, but not in terms of beautiful or ordinary, nor even in terms of round or long, thick or thin, white or blue. Everything is seen just as it is; no judgement is made, nor any attempt at mental description involving comparisons between black and white, large and small. 'It is so, it is so, it is so'—that is all. I believe that contemplating the thusness of rock, tree or hill gave me greater pleasure than can be derived from examining them in the usual interpretive way. As soon as I say: 'That hill is blue', I am thinking in terms of opposites—of blue and other-than-blue; but if I just gaze at a hill, taking in all its details without even naming them to myself, without making any comparisons involving differences of colour, shape and texture, I can sense an intimate relationship between the hill and myself; almost I seem to know what it is like to be that hill—or so I like to think. On emerging from this type of contemplation,

I used to find my mind wonderfully rested and, better still, the essential doctrine of ultimate Oneness had taken on added meaning, added reality for me.

Another exercise I performed is much easier to describe. I spent some time reasoning discursively about the meaning of life and the place of each individual in the universe according to the understanding I had developed during the last twenty years, particularly my understanding of Buddhist doctrine—but this exercise, though fascinating, is quite unprofitable, as the Lord Buddha was fond of pointing out. Until Enlightenment—intuitive perception of Reality—is achieved, no amount of reason will produce the answers to such questions, and to ponder them is not especially conducive to Enlightenment.

As soon as my servant returned with the reluctant school-teacher, I hastened to visit the Tangku Lama and to reinforce my pleading with the help of an interpreter. The Lama's amused expression told me at once that I had been to quite unnecessary trouble, though I fancy he was a trifle moved by this expression of my urgent longing for his decision. I think that, in any case, I should have received his answer that day or the next. As it was, the old school-teacher had apparent reason to flatter himself that he was entirely responsible for the happy ending to my quest. To him the Tangku Lama addressed these words:

'The day after tomorrow is an auspicious day. Already my disciples are preparing the necessary ritual objects for the rite of initiation. In the afternoon of that day, the English disciple will be summoned. Let him see to it that he is in all ways prepared. Furthermore, let him pay careful heed to this. The initiation is all-important; without it, he could not venture along his chosen path. Yet the rite in itself is worth little without proper instruction. Let him proceed at his convenience to some such city as Darjeeling or Kalimpong and there put himself in the hands of a Lama of high attainment, bringing with him if necessary a Tibetan layman somewhat learned in Buddhism to interpret, and let him study the various stages of the rite and visualization verse by verse, sentence by sentence, word by word, until all is clear as a crystal gem. Then only let him begin to practise. Finally, let him understand that this path, though one among thousands, is in itself sufficient. Let him follow it to the end. Let him cease his leaping from branch to branch and walk straight forward, pausing to breathe when difficulties arise, but never again retreating.'

To all of this I joyfully assented. On the eve of the initiation ceremony, I felt not so much excited as wonderfully at peace with

myself. Looking back, I saw how I had been advancing step by step by a switchback route towards the peak I was now approaching. My initiation into the Vajrayana more than twenty years before had not immediately borne visible fruit, but it had led me to see in that Vehicle some truths to which my countrymen are often blind. Two decades of intermittent experiment with several schools of Buddhism and many methods had followed and now, at last, I had quite determined to quit shillyshallying and to concentrate my effort along the one Path. Too long I had hesitated through bewilderment at the wide choice of routes. At my age I should have advanced far beyond the stage of wavering between them. Moreover, there had been numerous indications, mostly unheeded at the times when they occurred, pointing steadily in the direction I was now determined to go. My failure to progress in Zen; my frequent fortuitous meetings with learned Lamas, even in South China where Lamas are almost never seen; the veiled prophecy of Nêng Hai; and my curious intuition at Wat Chalerm were only some of the indications driving me not only in the direction of the Vajrayana but towards a particular path within that Vehicle's wide compass. Further indications of a more subtle and mysterious nature had also occurred. And now the Tangku Rimpoché had promised to unlock the gate and set me firmly upon my way, inspired by all the power he could transmit to me!

At last the day of days dawned. I have already described how it began with the splendid spectacle of the gods dancing, followed by the evocation of vivid recollections from the long-forgotten past, as though this too were part of the Lama's plan for me. All was prepared just as I had so earnestly desired; and yet, when I entered the Tangku Lama's room where the rite was to be performed, I was nearly overcome with trepidation.

Of the initiation itself it is not proper to say much. During its course, I was conducted to the two Great Halls to pay my respects before the Lord Buddha and Guru Rimpoché (Padma Sambhava), the founder of the Vajrayana in Tibet. After that I was led back to the little room where the rites continued for many hours. Their climax came when the sacred symbol of my chosen Path was laid upon my head. During the few seconds it remained there, I experienced physical sensations similar to those which, so many years before, had accompanied the Dorjé Rimpoché's laying on of hands; except that, whether because my perceptions had coarsened with the years or for some other reason, the feeling of shock was less intense and I felt no fear. On the

other hand, the immediately following sensation of spiritual elation was beyond anything in my experience.

At the very end of the rite, I felt a spontaneous desire to lay my head against the Lama's crippled and carefully covered limbs. He smiled at this and I felt his hands rest upon my head in calm benediction. Now at last I had my heart's desire. This *could* be the turning point of my life. Except for certain instructions to follow, all that others could do for me had been done. Henceforth, my fate rested, not in other hands, but in my own.

To celebrate the conclusion of a long and arduous rite, which had proceeded for eighteen hours in all, some large meat dumplings were served to all who had taken part. During this meal I sat cross-legged next to the Lama who, with true Tibetan hospitality, pressed more and more dumplings upon me. I do not think I have ever in my life seen a lovelier sight than the smile on the face of the Rimpoché when he pressed the thirteenth and last of my lion's share of the dumplings into my mouth. It was a smile of sheer happiness and boundless affection for those who shared his meal.

Epilogue

From Tashiding, heavy with the sadness of parting, I journeyed back through the mountain jungle to Gangtok, and thence to Kalimpong, the high-perched city which forms the ancient gateway to Tibet. There I fulfilled the Tangku Rimpoché's instructions in all respects. With the generous assistance of a Lama with the hard-won title of Geshé and with an excellent interpreter, I studied each step of the Path that was now mine; and, returning to Thailand, recorded every word of the instructions in a beautiful volume compiled with loving care. Its thick pages are laid between carven boards of fine wood and wrapped with richly brocaded silk. Between those wooden covers lie all the weapons and the armour for bursting the bonds holding me to *Sangsara's* Wheel. Properly used, they *could* gain for a more faithful adept than myself *Nirvana in This Life*!

Though it is not permitted and would not be of advantage to others to disclose the details of my individual Path, the general conclusions reached as a result of my studies and meditations based largely on the Vajrayana may be of some interest. From them it will be seen just what was that force which caught me up at the age of twenty-two, descended upon me again at Wat Chalerm and carried me forward to the sacred places of India, bringing me at last to the end of my search among the mountain approaches to Tibet.

I believe that the universe is full of impenetrable mysteries about which speculation profits nothing; yet, concerning the Mystery of Mysteries we have two sure sources of knowledge. There is the virtually unanimous teaching of the world's mystics, regardless of sect or faith, and there is the unwavering intuition which descends upon us at those moments when the controlled consciousness is firmly turned inwards upon itself. At such moments the great Mystery is disclosed to us—the perception that *all life is one*, the Mystery of the *one in the many*. When the false duality of sensory experience is transcended, a marvellous Wholeness is discovered, a glorious Unity—not a distant 'heaven' lying far beyond the universe of form, but this very universe

now seen in the light of Reality. It is the *full*, permanent realization of this which constitutes Enlightenment.

Western mystics often speak of *Attainment* of Union, but this nomenclature involves a notion of duality; the Buddhist therefore, though describing precisely the same experience, prefers to speak of *Realization* of the Ultimate Unity, from which in fact no separation can ever have taken place. Whether we speak of this Unity as God or the Godhead or *Nirvana* or the One Mind or Universal Spirit or Ultimate Reality matters not one jot. All terms are misleading, for the 'name which can be named is not the eternal Name', the Limitless cannot be caught within the limitations of speech. Buddhists, who wisely avoid the word 'God' because of the dualistic implication of a creator and a created, often fall into a similar dualistic error by speaking of *Sangsara* and *Nirvana* as two separate states, instead of as two aspects of the One.

Sooner or later, in one life or another, all men are driven by an irresistible force to seek this One. Besides the negative drive arising from the suffering inseparable from life—bereavement, loss, pain, sickness, infirmity, death and all the rest—there is the positive drive arising from an inborn thirst for realized unity. By less developed spirits, this drive is misunderstood, thus causing them to cleave to one single part of the Whole—a lovely girl, a limited ideal, a particular form of beauty or object of pleasure. But, as all such misguided clinging leads only to bitter disillusion, a shadowy apprehension of the Unity itself gradually arises in their hearts, an apprehension which when transformed to realization bestows unimaginable bliss, 'the peace which passeth all understanding'.

However much a man thirsts for this bliss, he can never hope to attain it without careful preparation, including the practice of inexhaustible compassion with which to slay the false notion of an ego, an individual self; the unrelaxing self-control by which the senses are mastered and immense spiritual energy generated; and the daily performed practice of 'meditation'—a name loosely comprising all those methods whereby the consciousness is firmly directed inwards upon itself.

There is but the one Goal, the only goal by which life is fulfilled, but the paths leading to it are without number, even though we may exclude all those which do not require the exercise of love, self-control and 'meditation' (of which the higher form of prayer is a variant imbued with equal power). All religions, and all those sects which go beyond mere ritualistic distinctions, were founded by men with at

least some knowledge of the Goal, but this knowledge has all too often been lost sight of by their followers who have retained but the empty shells of religion, golden chalices robbed of the water of life. So long as the Goal is understood and diligently sought, each man's sect or religion is a valid means of approach. Most unhappily, the majority of the world's religions have so declined that those who preserve the highest knowledge, generally called 'mystics', form a small part of their membership and are even viewed askance as possible heretics!

Even when the Goal is recognized, the necessary inward turning of the consciousness is exceedingly dangerous, unless body and mind have been well prepared by reasonable abstinence and the acquirement of true compassion; hence the Vajrayana insistence upon the need for a teacher, a guide along the narrow path from which a fall entails such penalties as madness or aeons of retrogression. The shorter the path chosen, the steeper and more dangerous. As the Gèshé Ganden said to me in Kalimpong: 'It is better to go to Lhasa slowly on a yak or on foot, progressing only a few miles a day, than to fly to the holy city, unless you can trust yourself to maintain perfect control of your aeroplane. The slightest hesitation or dizziness, the least fumbling, a moment of dozing off and the plane will plunge downwards into a sea of flame!'

Yet the Short Path offers certain compensating advantages, in that there is infinitely less time for backsliding—one or a mere handful of lives instead of perhaps myriads, during which the karmic force accruing from thoughts, words and deeds may send you wandering in many a desert or a wilderness of sterile mountains. No man, on the short path or the long, knows the conditions of his next birth. To delay the search, to live for sensuous enjoyment in the vague hope of 'reforming' later is quite as dangerous as assaulting the steepest approach.

The followers of every path, but especially of the Vajrayana, may sometimes gain the wisdom to bend sangsaric snares to their purpose. Thus, rites and symbolism, which, if misused, are a sure hindrance to Enlightenment, can be of great benefit when properly employed as aids to concentration, as barriers to the flow of wayward thoughts, as sublimators of otherwise harmful emotions. Concerning these, the essential requirement is that the meaning and purpose of each symbol or rite is constantly borne in mind, so that they never deteriorate to the level of empty forms. Similarly, the various forms of beauty, if recognized as mere reflections of Ultimate Beauty and never allowed to become the objects of desire, can be of great encouragement and

benefit. The Vajrayana lays considerable stress on the employment of sangsaric illusions for their own destruction. (If, as happens far more rarely than some Western writers would have us believe, orgies and other sensual delights are indulged in by tantrists upon the excuse of employing sangsaric illusions for their own destruction, such tantrists have departed as far from the true teaching of the Vajrayana as certain mediaeval heretics with horrid sexual aberrations departed from the true teaching of the Christian Church.) Lest adepts should be led to wrong conclusions by this doctrine, the Vajrayana lays great stress upon the avoidance of the Ten Evils and the practice of the Ten Virtues.

	The Ten Evils	*The Ten Virtues*
Of Body	Killing	mercy
	stealing	generosity
	fornication	continence
Of Speech	lying	truthfulness
	slander	kindly talk
	harsh words	gentle speech
	idle talk	profitable speech
Of Mind	covetousness	generous thoughts
	malice	desire to help
	lack of faith	faith

(By 'faith' is meant the conviction that life has a spiritual purpose which, as taught by the Buddhas, transcends all material values. Faith in a religion other than Buddhism would assuredly not be regarded as lack of faith.)

The Vajrayana also provides methods of harnessing and utilizing the various forces of the universe which, conceived diagramatically, form the connecting links between the Unity at the 'centre' and the myriads of entities at the 'circumference'. (The inverted commas are to suggest that Reality has no 'centre' and no 'circumference', neither 'here' nor 'there', 'this' nor 'that', 'now' nor 'then', since Reality transcends both space and time.) The mysteriously powerful results obtained by the devotees of various religions through the worship of 'gods' and 'spirits' can be explained in terms of these forces, for some adepts achieve a degree of control by means of the intense mental

concentration involved in the higher forms of prayer. Similarly 'magic' powers of all kinds are derived from the whole or partial control of some of these forces, or as by-products (best ignored) of intense inward-turned concentration. Such 'magic' powers are rarely, if ever, a help towards Enlightenment, but often a hindrance; they should never be employed except in an emergency to save others from pain or disaster.

So long as we remain shackled to life's Wheel, we are inexorably governed by the Law of *Karma*, which ensures mathematically corresponding results from every expenditure of energy in thought, word or deed; but the free will remains always unfettered and can be constantly employed not to combat but to utilize the evil results arising from past *Karma*, and to prevent fresh evil *Karma* from arising. Once an action has been performed nothing on earth can stay the coming of its karmic results; therefore the wise man performs all necessary actions for their own sake and never, under any circumstance, bothers his head with worry as to the results. Since they are inevitable, worry is a foolish waste of energy.

Thus it will be seen that the Goal of the Vajrayanist, as of other Buddhists and of the wisest followers of all religions, is Enlightenment (known to the Christians as Salvation), which can be described as realization of Ultimate Reality or Union with the Divine Spirit (known to Christians as living in the Presence of God). It is achieved solely through the Original Self (the Christ Within), that indestructible Reality at the core of every being. A so-called living being is seen as a mere abstraction, a composite bundle of transient qualities such as personality, desires and aversions, loves and prejudices, memories and similar idiosyncrasies of many kinds; beneath which lies the diamond-hard, undefilable pure spirit—the Buddha Nature, the Original Self, Original Mind, the Original Nature, the Christ Within. This Buddha Nature is and has always been One with the Ultimate Reality, a union which has been hidden from us by primordial ignorance, the arch-foe to be banished only by Enlightenment. So long as the false reasoning based on sensory perceptions leads to a *feeling* of separation, it is essential to work arduously for the full *realization* of that self-existent Unity. Theoretical understanding is not enough. Love, self-control, the proper appreciation and use of beauty and, above all, long hours spent in wisely directed concentration-meditation will inevitably bring us to the Goal.

With this knowledge and with the particular method of 'meditation' now open to me, I *ought* to make rapid progress, *but* . . .

Back in Bangkok amid the clamorous surroundings of a worldly city, with few friends to share my enthusiasm or to drive me forward with stern words of encouragement and by high example, the great urge which lay upon me daily in the mountains has sadly declined. No longer am I blessedly tormented by the Great Thirst; no longer do I maintain iron control over the sinews of body and spirit. I long to press forward along the Path, but not until I came to write this book did the longing revive sufficiently for me to renew my daily efforts, relinquished about a year ago. The future is still in my own hands; the longing to make good use of the fast-flying years is there; but whether I shall gather strength to press the great assault, steeling the will to gain all or perish—time alone will show.

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