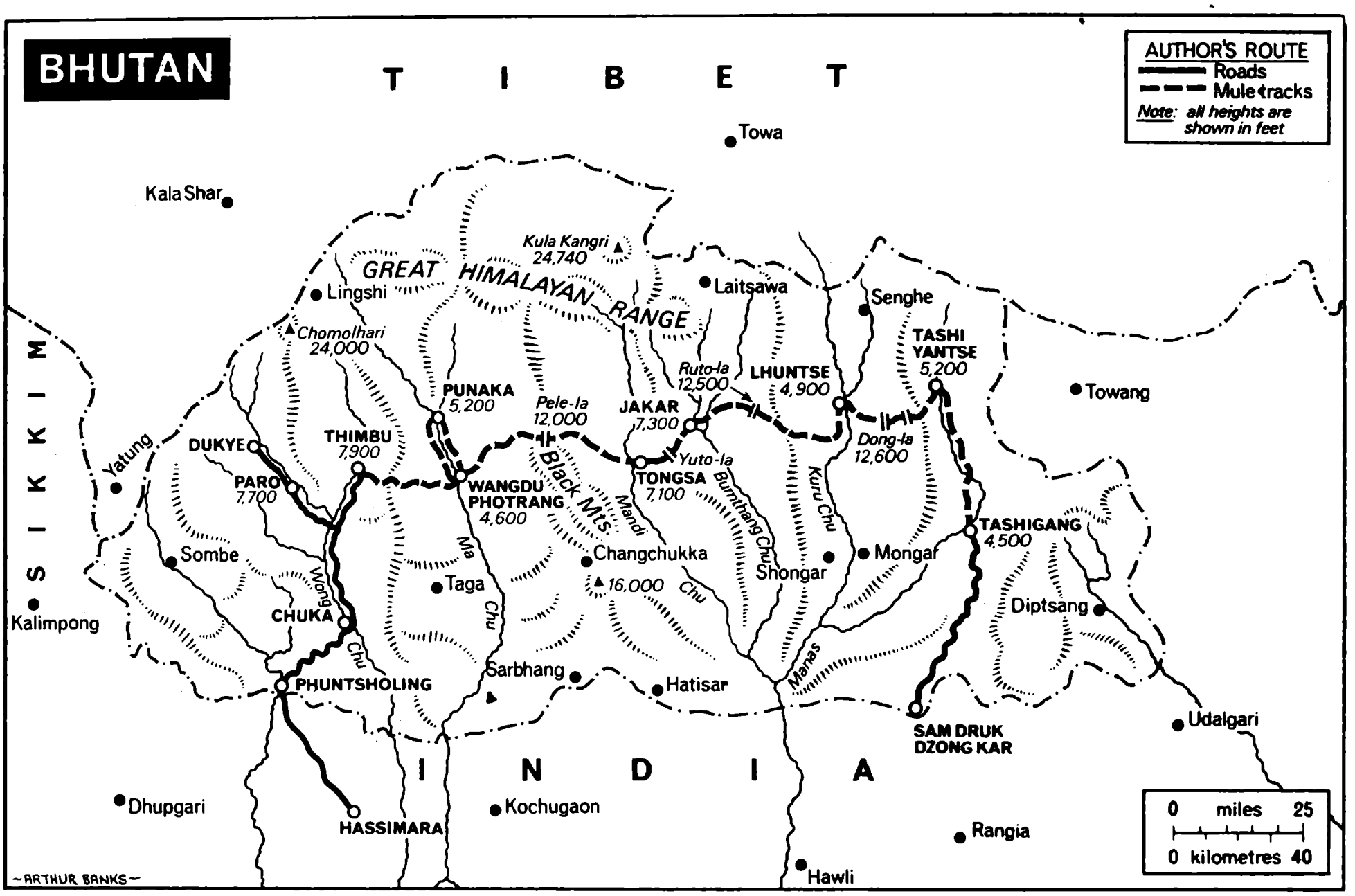
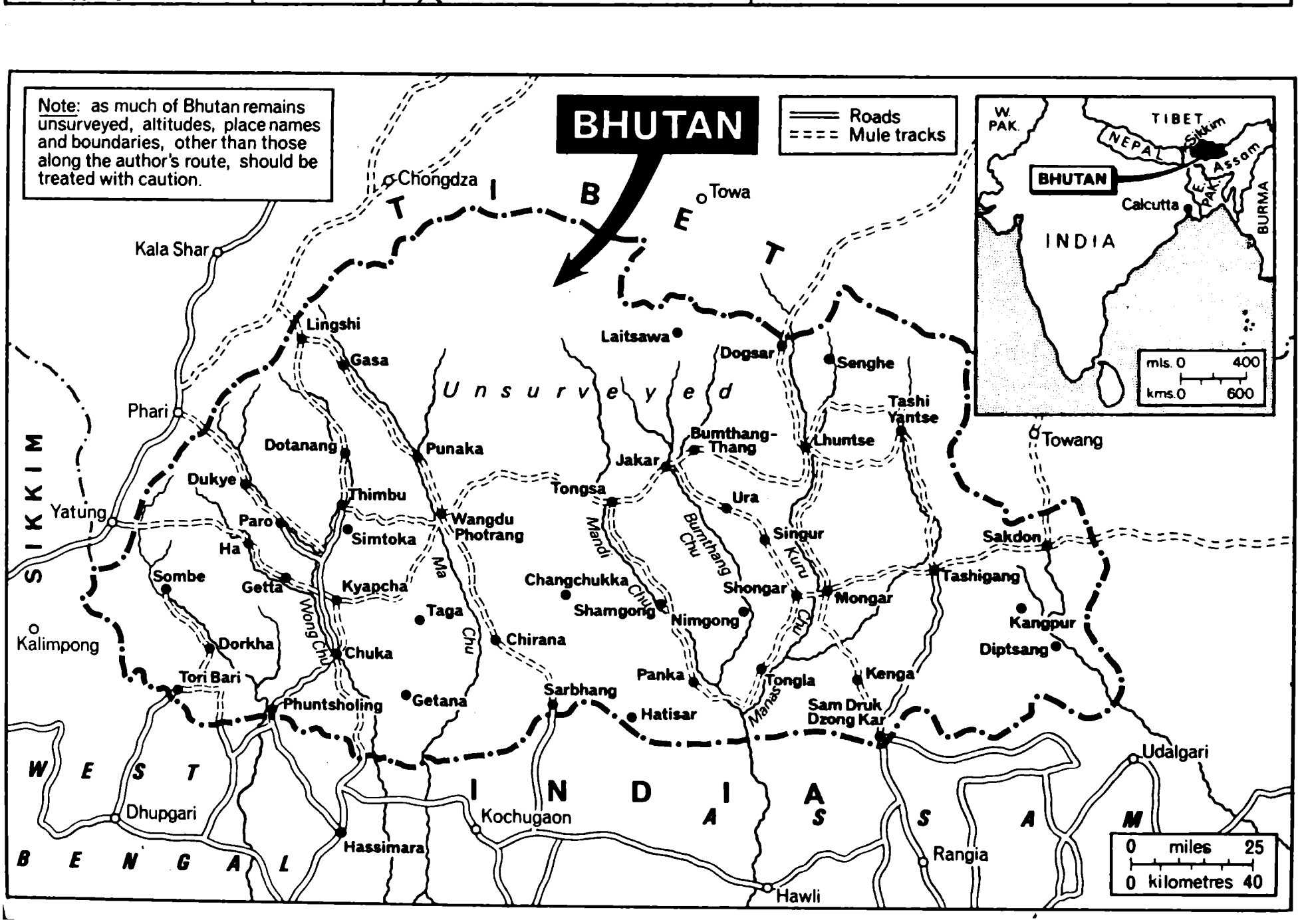

BHUTAN
TIBET
AUTHOR'S ROUTE
Roads
Mule tracks
Note: all heights are shown in feet
Towa
Kala Shar
Kula Kangri 24,740
GREAT HIMALAYAN RANGE
Laitsawa
Lingshi
Senghe
Chomolhari 24,000
TASHI YANTSE 5,200
Ruto-la 12,500
LHUNTSE 4,900
PUNAKA 5,200
Pele-la 12,000
JAKAR 7,300
Towang
THIMBU 7,900
DUKYE
Dong-la 12,600
Yatung
PARO 7,700
WANGDU PHOTRANG 4,600
Black Mts.
TONGSA 7,100
Yuto-la
Bumthang Chu
Kuru Chu
TASHIGANG 4,500
SIKKIM
Sombe
Mandi
Changchukka
Shongar
Mongar
Ma Chu
Taga
16,000
Wong Chu
Kalimpong
CHUKA
Chu
Diptsang
PHUNTSHOLING
Sarbhang
Hatisar
Manas
SAM DRUK DZONG KAR
Udalgari
INDIA
Dhupgari
Kochugaon
HASSIMARA
Rangia
Hawli
0 miles 25
0 kilometres 40
~ARTHUR BANKS~


Note: as much of Bhutan remains unsurveyed, altitudes, place names and boundaries, other than those along the author's route, should be treated with caution.
BHUTAN
Roads
Mule tracks
W. PAK.
TIBET
Sikkim
NEPAL
BHUTAN
Assam
E. PAK.
Calcutta
BURMA
INDIA
mls. 0 400
kms. 0 600
Chongdza
Towa
Kala Shar
Lingshi
Gasa
Laitsawa
Dogsar
Senghe
Unsurveyed
Phari
Tashi Yantse
Dotanang
Punaka
Bumthang-Thang
Lhuntse
Towang
Jakar
Dukye
Thimbu
Tongsa
Ura
Yatung
Paro
Wangdu Photrang
Simtoka
Singur
Sakdon
Ha
Mandi
Bumthang Chu
Kuru Chu
Sombe
Getta
Kyapcha
Changchukka
Shongar
Tashigang
Mongar
Taga
Shamgong
Nimgong
Kangpur
Kalimpong
Dorkha
Wong Chu
Chuka
Chirana
Diptsang
Tori Bari
Panka
Tongla
Kenga
Phuntsholing
Getana
Sarbhang
Hatisar
Sam Druk Dzong Kar
Udalgari
WEST BENGAL
Dhupgari
Kochugaon
Hassimara
Rangia
Hawli
0 miles 25
0 kilometres 40

Lords and Lamas

A Solitary Expedition Across the Secret Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan

Michel Peissel

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, King of Bhutan, for the hospitality extended to me in his name in the citadels and forts of his kingdom. To Her Majesty Ashi Kesang. Queen of Bhutan, I am grateful for her solicitous hospitality.

I express here my special thanks to Dasho Sangye, the Honourable Deputy Chief Secretary of His Majesty the King of Bhutan, for his sympathetic assistance. My gratitude extends also to the Lords of the Law of the dzongs of Bhutan, in particular to the Trimpons of Tongsa, Jakar, Lhuntse and Tashigang, whom I profoundly admire as wise rulers of their great fortresses.

To the Reincarnate Lamas and Abbots of Bhutan whom I encountered, I pray that the Jewel of the Lotus grant them fruitful reincarnations and long life.

Most of all I wish to express my admiration and affection for Tesla Dorji, widow of the late Prime Minister of Bhutan and her sister, Betty-la Taring, both of whom for ten years encouraged and counselled me in achieving my wish to visit the Land of the Dragon.

To the peasants and serfs of Bhutan I am grateful for the hospitality and assistance they extended to me on my way across their land. To Tensing, my servant and companion, I wish to say here that I will always recall with affection his kindness and devotion.

MICHEL PEISSEL

1

Eden the Spat-Upon

I PACED SLOWLY down the endless corridor. Walls covered in crystalline white marble and the cold dull pulse of air-conditioning gave me a sense of roaming some gigantic morgue. The electric lights were dim and the closed doors shone, one after the other, in varnished, natural mahogany. It was 1 a.m.

A departure by night anywhere carries an aura of mystery. Under a pale green sign, moving as if in a dream, I pressed the elevator button. The folding metal doors clattered shut. I descended slowly.

In the lobby a gigantic chandelier glittered with the pale reflection of a small lamp. The lobby was empty. Turning right, I went to the reception desk and was greeted by the stirring of the clerk. He grinned awkwardly as he adjusted his jacket.

'335,' he said, turning to fumble in the pigeon-holes. He glanced at a slip of paper and added: 'JAM Air leaves at two.'

The clerk flicked his thin, Bengali wrist and four ragged skeletons appeared, with 'Grand Hotel' written on their soiled turbans. They scuttered off through a back door after my bags.

A wide corridor led from the desk to the hotel entrance. Mahogany colder than marble reflected unlighted showcases and a thick carpet with indescribable designs which somehow recalled England. All was still save for occasional shadowy figures momentarily shown up by the lighted corridor as they passed outside. White ghosts draped in loose cotton, the few living souls of the night in that city of death, Calcutta, named, some claim, from Golgotha.

Around me eight million people were perspiring and sleeping the tormented sleep of hunger in the monsoon of fever and anonymous tragedy. I was glad it was all over.

The baggage bearers descended in a silent, barefoot procession, bent beneath my loads. They deposited them in a corner and stayed there in the shadow, enveloped by the general torpor of the night.

I sat down to wait, expectant, yet sleepy. Over the top of the desk I could see the head of the clerk slowly drooping, overcome by a sleep tortured, no doubt, with dreams of the world beyond the Victorian rigour and comfort of the Grand Hotel, that white marble elephant lost in the middle of slums, a frigid universe in a world of heat, the pale shadow of a dead empire, an asylum for the foreigners who, less and less frequently as the years went by, stopped in Calcutta for business but never for pleasure. It was as though Morpheus was slowly reclaiming his own, Calcutta, a land where malaria once ruled and where indolence is bred as a product of fever: fevers rising from the humid mud banks which bog the harbour year by year, striving to stop the ever-decreasing flow of ships which sail past the sunderbunds up the Hoogly to the ghats of the ageing metallic heart of a dead empire. Calcutta to the India of today is like a discarded leg iron to an incurable paralytic.

Never had I felt more lonely than in Calcutta. I wondered even if God could trace my steps and find me sitting before the desk at the Grand Hotel surrounded by eight million other anonymous souls. Who, I wondered, could ever count the sleeping ants on this gigantic pile? The heat that reached the desk from the street seemed to glue me to the city as it bound everything in the same opaque syrupy warmth. I coughed and my cough echoing in the dark, empty lobby made the clerk stir, and died away on the carpet alongside dusty footprints.

In forty-five minutes I would be leaving. I remembered my dreams of purgatory. This was surely it, a land of the half dead. I had always preferred heaven and even hell with its glittering flames, scorching fire and demons. As a child, anguish had attracted me more than indifference, than purgatory, uniformly grey, silent, crammed with the neutral souls of the faithful, departed and colourless.

The clock counted the minutes, the silence became unbearable, the dark heat more suffocating. There are moments of lucidity, which are usually moments of fear. Everything suddenly appeared to me as a futile stage, and a stage it was, one that I had taken ten years to set, and now I suddenly realized that the curtain was about to rise.

How ridiculous one appears to oneself at such moments. I, ludicrously dressed in a beige tropical suit, bought in Rome because it corresponded to my idea of the role I was about to play.

The role of a classical hero in a worn-out drama. I am not an original, though I had always hoped I was.

This is the account of the journey I undertook in the summer of the year that will be remembered as that in which man circumnavigated the moon.

When the clock struck two at the Grand Hotel there were no spectators, only myself weighed down by incongruous baggage dictated by the haphazard fancy of a belated necessity to get organized.

At 2 a.m. nothing happened. How can an airline possibly be called JAM? How could it even exist? Certainly it is not listed in any directory. Yet twice a week they flew to Hassimara. I was bound for Hassimara, a name that promised a worthy setting for the first act in my progress towards the Kingdom of Bhutan, the world's last truly unexplored land.

At three the bus arrived. Again I counted my baggage and then the outstretched palms. The old bus stood in the light. A beggar stuck out an arm with no palm. The driver swung into his seat and drove off, slowly, ever so slowly. At each jolt the headlamps flickered. Alone, surrounded by empty seats, I made my way through the main artery of purgatory, along the road to Dum Dum, the city's airport.

Yard by yard for fifteen miles the headlights swept the streets, lighting up on either side the hallucinatory vision of thousands of corpses, bodies wrapped in soiled cotton, the bodies of those millions who every night sleep on the pavements of Calcutta, in the gutters, on boxes, perched in rickshaws, cuddled against cows, horses, carts, cars, huddled in groups or in clusters. The ghastly picture of a sleeping purgatory awaiting the dawn that would spell a renewal of the inferno of daily life in that sordid metropolis. Every night, it has been estimated, nearly a million homeless people sleep in the streets between two days of starvation. Some of the bodies I saw were already corpses that would not rise. In a few hours the toll would be counted, but as I headed for the airport dead and living looked alike, human forms under cheap shrouds.

I had already set out unsuccessfully six times to go to Bhutan. Six times I had boarded a plane to Calcutta, looked at the hostess with the air of one about to leave the planet, sneered at tourists

with a Livingstonian smile, passed Customs with the guilt of a person fleeing beyond the reality of police control. Each time I had written down Bhutan as my 'ultimate destination' on those little police cards handed out on planes. For ten years I had been in the process of going to Bhutan. In the last few I began to be haunted by a strange dream, the nightmare of failure. I needed no astrologer to interpret it. It was simple and clear. I would see the map of the world, Africa . . . Asia, then, slowly I would be attracted to the dark smudge of the Himalayas and there I would pace about freely from Mount Everest to Mustang and to all the places where I had been. Then the dream would darken. I would see Bhutan, obscure and alluring, as large as Switzerland, the last uncharted country of Asia, a land in 1970 more mysterious and unknown than the hidden face of the moon. I knew that there and there alone I could not go. I would wake up with a feeling of defeat.

Fate, it seemed, was always against me. The first time I had set out for Bhutan in 1959, the Dalai Lama's elder brother, then living in America, had given me a letter of recommendation to the brother of the Prime Minister. Asking no more, I had charged off from Boston to Delhi, from Delhi to Calcutta, from Calcutta to the little airfield of Badogra. There I had taken a jeep up to Darjeeling, whence I had been smuggled across to Kalimpong, India's gateway to Tibet. In Kalimpong I had been introduced to the right people, whisked off in another jeep to Bhutan House and there handed my letter to Rani Chuni, the sister of the Maharaja of Sikkim, the mother of the Queen of Bhutan and also of the Prime Minister. I remember well this first contact with Bhutan. Rani Chuni, a small, austere woman who chilled the blood in the veins of all who dared approach her, came into the room, smiled a deadly grin, offered me a glass of orange juice and said:

'There is little or no chance of your getting an answer,' as she took my letter, adding: 'If you were to enter Bhutan you would be the first Frenchman to do so.' After which she answered 'no' to every word I said and led me to the door.

I had covered ten thousand miles by plane, train and jeep for that three-minute interview. My letter was not answered. I was comforted by people telling me that others had waited six months, two years, ten years and never been admitted.

Not discouraged, that same afternoon I made friends with the wife of the Prime Minister. A Tibetan princess, she was in great distress because her country was being ravaged by China. My first attempt to visit Bhutan coincided with China's takeover of Lhasa.

I was wholly captivated by Tesla. The next day I was taking Tibetan lessons with Tesla's sister. A week later I was escorting her and a host of girls from Lhasa to a ball given by Tesla for the first Tibetan refugees.

I stayed a month in Kalimpong. Tesla wrote to her husband, Jigme Dorji, the Prime Minister, but all to no avail. Then a cable arrived from Peking. The family wept. Tesla's father, the famed Tsarong, the great Tibetan reformer, the favourite of the Dalai Lama, had died, so the cable said, 'in prison'. In fact, he had been, at seventy-two, the victim of the Chinese, he the most progressive of all Tibetans. I left Kalimpong and my new friends in tears.

Three years elapsed during which Bhutan was ever present in my mind. In 1963 I set off again for India and sought out Tesla. Her husband, the active Prime Minister of Bhutan, was now more than ever the key man to visiting that kingdom. I had my chance.

I went to Calcutta, where I saw Tesla and the Prime Minister. The following day a large parcel was brought to the hotel, a gift from the Prime Minister's wife to my own: a Tibetan silk gown, a silk apron and a lace blouse. Along with it came an official invitation to Bhutan. Delighted, I returned to Kathmandu where I had been staying and awaited the date. Three weeks later I heard a brief item on the news:

'The Prime Minister of Bhutan, Jigme Dorji,' said the commentator, 'has been assassinated.'

I dared not believe my ears, but thus my second attempt ended in tragedy.

I returned to France, left for Mexico and then flew to London to see the Prime Minister's sister only to learn that she and her brother had been exiled. I went back to India, saw Tesla again and begged her to help me but she could do nothing. Her position was delicate. The assassination had momentarily signalled the fall of all her husband's family except for the Queen, her sister-in-law.

I wrote to the Queen with the accent of desperation that six years of yearning breeds, but received no answer. Some said the

mail was censored; after all, Bhutan did not belong to the International Postal Union. I could wait no longer. Now familiar with Himalayan ways and speaking Tibetan, I planned to go to Bhutan in disguise, as a monk, begging my way, perhaps with a Tibetan friend. But in my mirror back in Europe my nose looked too long, my eyes too light, my skin too pale. I could cover my face in ashes and saffron paint, like a Hindu sage seeking the sources of some sacred river, I thought, but meanwhile two more years went by. . . .

In 1967 I went to Delhi again. This time I was determined to succeed. I arranged to meet Mrs Gandhi, the Prime Minister, and pleaded my cause eloquently. I also saw the Indian Minister of External Affairs, the First Secretary and the Joint-Secretary as well as the head of the Indian Secret Service. I needed Indian backing for a permit to cross Bengal and Assam, to traverse the Inner Line, the restricted frontier zone that seals off Bhutan from the rest of the world to the south. I spent three months going to the Foreign Office every day. Every day I was told to return the next. The issue of my permit was 'imminent'. It never came and I headed back to the West once more. I had failed again.

Thanks to my interest in Bhutan I had become familiar with most of the Tibetan regions of the Himalayas yet I had never reached my original goal. I was upset to see after ten years others succeed where I had failed, entering Bhutan as guests of the King and Queen. Even a Frenchman had been invited. It seemed I would now be the last.

The Himalayas were changing rapidly. Now everyone knew where Nepal was. Kathmandu had become a hippy capital. Sikkim, which was virtually unknown when I first set out East, was on everyone's lips, its American Queen assuring it a popularity of which it had never dreamed. The flight of the Dalai Lama had also made Tibet popular. Everyone had gurus, even in Chelsea and Greenwich Village.

Only Bhutan remained alone, unknown. No expedition had ever climbed its peaks or surveyed its extent. Scholars could only guess at its population, anything between 500,000 and 1,000,000. Not even detailed statistical handbooks contained a line about it. The truth was that in 1968 Bhutan remained the last unmapped country of Asia. A land of mystery, a kingdom still partly governed by monks and ruled by a monarch who had never been

photographed by the world's press, whose capital alone is accessible to those very few fortunate enough to have been befriended by the King or Queen of Druk.

Druk, meaning dragon, is the kingdom's real name. It was the British who called it Bhutan, the land of the Bhots, in other words of the Tibetans, to whom the Bhutanese are closely related.

Unable to go to Bhutan, I had travelled hundreds of miles in the most remote corners of the Himalayas instead. I had slept in monasteries, near Everest, eaten roast barley out of wooden bowls around small fires in deep valleys and on barren plains in Mustang and I now even spoke Tibetan. I had become a stranger in my own country because I only needed to close my eyes to see the vast, high lands of what has been called the roof of the world. In this way I could in the West forget the extensions of Calcutta, the purgatory of technological lands with their hustle and noise, their clashing machines which often reduced men to ghosts lying in the gutter at factory gates or in hovels on the humid plains of Bengal, Paris, London, New York and all the gigantic cities of this unromantic world.

Yet I could not forget that each time it was Bhutan which had led me to the Himalayas and, in spite of all my expeditions, the nightmare recurred. For I had failed to get to the Land of the Dragon (as the kingdom is called) where, at twenty-one, I had first pictured myself an explorer as in those polychrome pictures depicting Cortez or Columbus.

Now I had come back. Yet I was afraid because I knew that one rarely awakes from a dream to reality without disillusionment. I had lost my enthusiasm. Negotiations in Delhi and a long wait in Calcutta had killed the spark of ambition in me. In purgatory, hope is but a distant flicker of light. Maybe I had waited too long. Still, I was off again.

Eventually the corpses no longer gleamed in the headlights of the bus. We had passed the gate of Dum Dum, a gigantic concrete plain, and were heading for a remote hangar. The bus stopped. The concrete apron sent up waves of heat into the night and the electric bulb in the shed sent out a sickly glow. I heard a howl and saw a stray dog run across the airfield. A man was busy weighing packets on a scale. He was JAM Air: pilot, clerk and steward. I sat down under an old news clipping of a nude girl torn from some cheap paper, counted my bags and waited.

I had waited ten years for this moment and thought I could wait no more. An hour dragged by. A jeep suddenly charged across the runway. My heart thumped. Two young men with shaven heads and Mongolian features descended. My fellow passengers.

The DC3 was full of newspapers. I do not know which fascinated me more, the papers or the huge wads of cotton wool sticking out of the ears of my fellow passengers, or perhaps it was the door that the pilot had forgotten to close and which consequently banged against the old and dented fuselage. With an uncertain roar we took off into the night leaving below the flicker of lights guarding the sleeping bodies of Calcutta. I feel elated only when moving and now, as the plane picked its course northwards, dodging the billowing clouds of the monsoon, my mind danced with optimism.

'The only convenient way to Bhutan is by helicopter,' the Joint-Secretary of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs had said when he handed me the longed-for authorization to cross the Inner Line, which allowed me access to Bhutan's border. I was now heading for Hassimara, an Indian border town on the extremity of West Bengal and Assam, the second best means of reaching Bhutan. From there a Bhutanese jeep might pick me up. After that, everything would depend on chance. I realized that after ten years I was no farther forward than when I had first set out with the letter from the Dalai Lama's brother. Now I had no letter of recommendation, only the excuse that I had once been invited by the brother of the Queen, the late Prime Minister, whose family had fallen out of favour and whose murder was attributed by some to the fact that he was too progressive. In 1959 Bhutan had possessed neither roads nor contacts with the outside world. In 1968 it still did not belong to any international organization and its eighteen thousand square miles had still to be mapped accurately, its flora and fauna to be studied, its customs, peoples, tribes and languages to be recorded; but now at least a road reached Thimbu, the new capital.

Against all probability, the plane had gained altitude and was rising into the dawn which now glared yellow on the dense mass of clouds piled endlessly on top of one another. Below, all was dark save for an occasional twinkle. The door continued to bang, letting in a cold breeze, the first I had felt for weeks. India. How I

loathed India. Perhaps because its monstrosity so accurately reflects the truth. What we in the West can cover up with a coat of paint, what we can ignore by enclosing it in hospitals, morgues or asylums, is out in the streets in India. The truth about man is written on the face of every Indian. Lurid, hideous, immodestly glaring under the sun, the crippled, the plagued, the starving skeletons are revealed for all to see to teach us that we too are only living skeletons, more or less padded but still walking bones. In India physical and mental monstrosities are displayed everywhere. The truth is always embarrassing and so is India. From the deliberate mutilation of children to the absurd mutilation of the mind by drugs or psychic practices, India is the universal farce which in cooler climes we dissimulate with pseudo-scientific labels. It is as if the sewer of the world, having circled the earth, opens up in India, for all to contemplate the hideous by-products of our humanity. India is the sin not only of Indians but of ourselves. Life in its ugliest form, the limits of exploitation of man by man, the total lost dignity of a race that urinates on all fours is often a lesson in humility. Only in India are we reminded that despair is a sin.

The plane droned on, a lost sound in the heavens of massing rain clouds.

Dawn came to the earth below, to the waterlogged land of the great delta where the Ganges and the Brahmaputra meet, thousands of miles from their sources, and mingle water drawn from the same mountain, collected on either side of Tibet's sacred Mount Kalias. Water and muddy fields reflected the glow of light through the clouds. My Bhutanese co-passengers were holding hands. Had they flown before? Were they thinking of their villages for which they were now heading? Soon both would have to walk for six or seven days to find that place they called home. I had liked them immediately, for they belonged to the world I had come to see. They were real Bhutanese. They looked so strange with the cotton wool sticking out of their ears and their impeccable white shirts and narrow, olive-green trousers which they wore, like the uniforms of schoolboys of foreign missions.

The plane began to descend. Was it Hassimara already? JAM Air offers no flight plan to inform the inquisitive passenger. Passengers, it must be said, are rare cargo. Seats are screwed in place specially to accommodate bipeds.

Jaipalguri at dawn. A name on the map was now a succession of canals and flooded fields with a small grassy strip where we made a bumpy landing. We all climbed out. I felt foolish in my beige suit. I approached the Bhutanese, who took the cotton wool out of their ears. I smiled, said something in Tibetan, but they did not seem to understand. I insisted and they looked surprised, annoyed, slightly suspicious. Strange, I thought, remembering Tibetans. One of them answered. He spoke Tibetan. His face lit up but he was reserved. He explained that they were bodyguards of the Paro Penlop:

'Ah,' I said. 'I met the Paro Penlop two days ago in Calcutta.'

They smiled more warmly, reassured.

I suddenly recalled my painful interview in Calcutta with the young half-brother of the King of Bhutan. 'He is twenty-four, but looks much older than his age,' Tesla's sister, Betty-la, had warned me.

My interview had been a complete failure. I was intimidated and so was he, but he never showed it. He just stood there immobile, his round, blunt face completely expressionless, speaking soft, indifferent words. Meeting no response I had blundered on, expressing my interest in going to Bhutan and my desire to stay there as long as possible, perhaps longer than the one month permit I had. He did not answer. We stared at each other and I do not believe I had felt more ill at ease since Rani Chuni had said no to every question I had, at twenty-two, dared, with the arrogance of my age, to put to her. After three endless silences we both had the charity to straighten up, and I excused myself. For what? For nothing, just in order to leave.

Newspapers were thrown out of the plane. Little coolies danced around great bundles, playing a game, to see who would be the first to dare to try and pick one up. The pilot disappeared into a shed; when he came back we all headed for the door and climbed back in. I said something funny and one of the Bhutanese laughed. The other gave me a Paro Penlop stare: he had already got the cotton wool back in his ears. The door was shut this time and we bounced off on what certainly seemed to me like the ultimate flight of JAM Air.

Four minutes later we were circling a patch of Bengalese jungle, a bubbling foam of tall trees, then a swoop and we were down. In one minute exactly the door was opened, newspapers were

thrown out and we were off again. Thus the printed word reached some nameless airfield on its way to some nameless villages. Who, in this place, could read? I wondered. And, if they could, what did they care about the happenings of the world?

We gained height and then my heart leapt. On our left were the Himalayas. It was like turning a corner and seeing one's own house, like spotting one's wife in a crowd. I then realized how much during all these years back in Europe and America I had missed them. I could no longer control my excitement. I whispered all sorts of congratulations to myself. Everything else was forgotten. It came to me at last that those hills were Bhutan. We were flying level with the lower hills, green and lush. The rolling body of mountain upon mountain, cut by dark green valleys, merged into the light green of the plains which now and then turned suddenly white with rocks and pebbles as we flew over the stony beds of torrents, rivers exploding as they reached the lowlands and fanning out delighted to be free of the enclosing walls of narrow gorges. Jungle alternated now with sparsely wooded fields and tea gardens. We were over the Douars. This was India's tea belt stretching from Darjeeling to Shilong along the southern border of Bhutan, between it and the Brahmaputra river. The very name, Douars, recalled Bhutan to me. This stretch of territory, now beyond doubt one of India's most financially productive, the source of nearly all the tea we drink from Buenos Aires to Balbek, was once under the shadow of the feared Bhutanese and had to be taken from them by force of arms. Here, every winter, when the monsoon heat had died down, the great hill warriors of the Land of the Dragon would descend to rape the women, steal the harvest and exact levies. They always went unpunished as no one dared to enter their mountain stronghold. Even the infuriated British never dared to enter those hills, although countless British subjects were kidnapped by the men of the Land of the Dragon. When the British sent letters of protest they went unanswered, in the same way as my own letter a hundred years later. The exasperated British sent an official to settle the problem, the Honourable Sir Ashley Eden, Envoy Plenipotentiary of Her Majesty Queen Victoria. The Bhutanese ridiculed this feathered dandy, obliged him to sign a humiliating treaty and, in fact, so maltreated him that Sir Ashley Eden had to escape from Bhutan by night to save his life. The treaty was

repudiated on the grounds that it had been signed under duress. The Crown had been humiliated, a preposterous, unthinkable occurrence the like of which was to be found nowhere in the annals of British colonial affairs. Reprisals, warned the British, would be terrible. 'The treatment [given to Ashley Eden] . . . was so disgraceful that the British Government cannot allow the Government of Bhutan to go unpunished,' wrote His Excellency John Lawrence, Viceroy and Governor General of Her Britannic Majesty's possessions in India, in an ultimatum in 1864. For once someone called the British bluff. The Bhutanese let the infuriated British protest go unanswered. They simply captured two mountain guns and defeated a British detachment. And British retaliation? Well, it never came. The following year the same Viceroy approved a treaty whereby 'in consideration of the Government of Bhutan having expressed regret for its past misconduct . . .' the British were to give 50,000 rupees annually to Bhutan in compensation for the Douars which the British now annexed. The Bhutanese returned the two guns. The joke was still on the British because Bhutan had never owned the Douars in the first place. No British soldier ever ventured into the hills to avenge poor Ashley Eden, who had been 'spat upon' and treated most 'disgracefully'. Bhutan, the naughty boy, having 'expressed regret' for his past misconduct, the British civil servants sportingly forgave. Bhutan simply closed its borders to the British and kept them closed while collecting its annual revenue from India. In 1910 the first hereditary king of Bhutan along with all the chiefs of the land's great forts got the annual 'compensation' increased to 100,000 rupees. Bhutan continued to seal its frontiers to all western intruders, but faithfully collected its dues.

In 1949, after Indian Independence, a treaty of friendship was signed between the Government of India and the Government of Bhutan by which the Bhutanese obtained the return of one of the Douars (which had never belonged to them) and a fivefold increase of the old 100,000 rupees rent. Neither the British nor the Indians were a match for the Bhutanese. Why? My contacts with Tibetans gave me a clue, my interview with Rani Chuni a hint. This was one of the many questions I came to solve. After all, I now had a stake in Bhutan. Had I not myself for ten years been infuriated by Bhutanese diplomacy? Bhutan is surely a land of diplomats. Who else could claim to have succeeded in collecting rent for one

hundred years and then in multiplying this rent five times for territories they had never owned? In 1962 the rent was further increased to 1,000,000 rupees.

The plane came slowly down. This time I hoped it might be Hassimara. We landed on a vast concrete field.

My fears were back. Would I, after all, be allowed in? I dared not believe it. Ten years had taught me to be wary of Indian police and Bhutanese diplomats. Hassimara.

Hassimara it was. Weeds fought to reclaim what cement had stolen. There is something about airfield weeds. They all look alike from Kennedy to Reykjavik to Hassimara. Something also similar in concrete. The setting was not as grandiose as I had thought. On climbing out with a sigh of relief and a desire to pat the plane on the back, I was crushed by an intense heat, yet it was only seven thirty. A hostile group of Indians waited, looking at me. I clung to the Bhutanese. Tea boxes were stacked up near two aggressive-looking men. Nothing happened. Newspapers and boxes were unloaded; then, after what seemed a year, came my bags, all of them. I was perspiring heavily. I could see nothing beyond the weeds, only a few trees, no shed. I sought the already congested shade of the wing of the plane.

'Where are you going, man?' a really nasty-looking character asked me. 'Your Inner Line permit?'

My heart leapt. Even though I have committed no crime, I cannot help feeling guilty when asked for my papers. I produced my Inner Line permit, that sacrosanct piece of scrap authorizing me to go to Bhutan's border. Surely they will find fault . . . Then I had to recite everything that was on it by heart, taking care not to make a mistake.

'And what are you going to do there?'

'Tourist study.'

'What do you mean?' asked the man. 'Are you a tourist or a student?'

'Yes,' I said.

'How can you study and what will you study in one month?'

'The language,' I said hopefully.

'And you were born in Paris?'

'Yes.'

'And you were born on the 11th of February?'

'Yes.'

'Where are you heading now?'

'Phuntsholing,' I sneezed, proud at having at last caught the name right.

'Your baggage,' the man said severely. 'How much did this camera cost? Very expensive?'

'Yes, sir,' I said, adding hastily: 'No, not very expensive, very old.'

The sun was hot, my Bhutanese started walking away and I became nervous.

'Oh, I say, never had a crash yet.' A tall man with freckles, pale arms and pinky-blue knees and an air of frigidity was trying to conceal his red elbows and knees with a large grin. Two English men and an unmistakably English woman had found their way on to the concrete. Tea planters, amusing tea planters. One was leaving. He was called John. JAM Air had never had a crash, I overheard. Maybe mine was an inaugural flight, I thought, remembering the open door.

'You are French!' said the Indian, as though talking to my luggage.

'An old, inexpensive Frenchman,' I wanted to add, hoping that the questionnaire might end. I knew I would never reach Bhutan.

'Tell Joan to write,' said the man with the knees.

My Bhutanese were out of sight. The tea boxes were being loaded. My beige suit was damp, my hair wet with perspiration.

With great reluctance the security police official returned my documents, leaving me the pleasure of shuffling them back into order. Three men with turbans picked up my bags and headed for the weeds. I followed, almost fainting from the heat. Fifty yards and I had made it. Hassimara seemed a nice place all of a sudden. A gate, a shed, four jeeps with BHT written in yellow on bright orange. Bhutanese jeeps. I found my two friends, to whom I clung in desperation. Had the Government not sent a jeep for me? No! Could one of my friends take me to Phuntsholing? Yes, he could. The bags were piled in. I sneered at the security officer:

'Yes, I am French. I am a Tourist Study. Yes, I know I'm the first Tourist Study to go to Bhutan, but I do have an Inner Line permit—so there!'

The Inner Line, what a name. I felt as if I had entered some paradise for initiates. I could have sung a spiritual in pidgin English to the glory of Hassimara within the holy Inner Line,

except that the heat made it feel like hell and I could not forget the way the Englishman's shorts hung above his hairy knees. Maybe I was becoming queer. I felt strange, that was for sure.

My eyes were wide open. The Bhutanese understood my Tibetan now. It was a short drive. I sat 'front seat'—everything now bore a profound significance. This was the great day, the day I had dreamed of, that I had thought impossible, the day in which I would, soon, be entering Bhutan at last. Check post. We had hardly driven a yard before it all began again.

'Your name is, man?'

A bamboo pole was raised.

The road ran through tea plantations, appropriately called gardens or estates. Neat bushes, cropped as in some fine park, stood in graceful rows beneath solitary, great trees. I thought of nanny. Tea gardens were somehow bound up with her in my mind. This at last was English India, the kind you can trust even in your cup. Little black and white poles carried little red triangles, the road signs of my childhood. There were no dirty cows, just good tea and, round a bend, the true dream house of those who love Kipling: a thatched Cornish cottage on stilts, set in the plantation.

'Oh look, nanny! They really exist, the civilized tropics.' It had taken me ten years to discover it.

The trouble was that everything looked so tame, the neat lane, the bushes, the thatched hut, the road signs, the small, smooth tarred road and Bhutan only a few miles away. A few miles away 'the most closed country in the world', the 'last uncharted country in Asia', 'wilder and less known than New Guinea and the Amazon': all that a stone's throw from a Cornish thatched cottage. I remembered the hairy knees. There was another road block, another mild heart attack, another shuffling and the jeep continued. The tea plantations stopped and before me lay lazy green hills in the morning sun. I craned my neck. Yes, this was Bhutan. I actually counted the yards.

The Indian border.

'Tourist Study.'

I passed without trouble. I felt disappointed.

'Are we in Bhutan?' I asked in Tibetan.

'No! Soon.'

My friend showed me a small white building crowned in dark red, the monastry of the King's mother. Twenty yards to go. A gate. Yes, there was actually a gate, a bamboo pole closing it. This was the entrance to Bhutan. Above was written 'Bhutan/ Phuntsholing'. I remember saying '15th of August' to myself. I could not believe it. I had entered Bhutan after all. Was it possible that in ten years I had been so stupid as to have failed to do so before? I felt disappointed.

When I had first seen Rani Chuni in 1959 the road to Bhutan was a mule track that led across the Tibetan Chumbi Valley from Kalimpong. Even Nehru had had to plod six days on ponies and yaks to reach the summer capital, Thimbu. Now the Chinese had closed the mule track and technology had decided that Phuntsholing was the entrance. Things had changed. Where and how much?

'The guest house?' I asked. The driver led me to a green-painted gate, flanked by flowers, which led to a little bungalow, like a small chalet. Its porch was supported by red, carved pillars like those of Tibetan monasteries. Nobody rushed to greet me. Doubt set in.

From the porch of the empty bungalow I looked upon Phuntsholing Bhutan. Birds whistled in the morning sun, radiant orange and yellow irises flowered in a neat garden with a well-kept lawn. A tarmac road passed by the bungalow to disappear in a curve into the hills that now rose abruptly overlooking the village. This was composed of neat army-type barracks and a small Indian-type bazaar of sheds. It all looked like England, quaint – after all Cornwall was a stone's throw away. It was warm, but not stifling. Nepalese and Indians strolled past in the street. A small Nepalese in western garb came from the kitchen. The servant of the bungalow. He showed me a room. He asked me if I was a guest of the King or the Queen. I evaded answering, as I was not sure. I had my bags put down in a neat room with a mosquito net over a bed. Little did I know or suspect that in that very room Jigme Dorji, the Prime Minister, had been assassinated, shot through the window while playing cards with his brother and sister-in-law. Murder seemed so removed from the peaceful, tame surroundings vibrant with the little echoes of the congratulations I had been privately bestowing on myself at having at last succeeded in entering Bhutan. I did not realize then

that my worries lay ahead. I was rather too tired to think of anything so I went to sleep.

The crickets were droning peacefully when the Nepalese came in with tea. Outside, the sun beat down with considerable force on the lawn. The birds were asleep. A jeep whizzed by in the lazy silence, whining long after it had disappeared. All was still. It was noon and I had not yet seen a Bhutanese. I must, I thought, go to Thimbu right away, to the royal Fort Tashichho Dzong.

There lived the King, the Druk Gyal-po, himself, while the Gyal-mo, the Queen, lived at Paro, the home of the Paro Penlop. Dasho Duncho was my man according to the Paro Penlop. The situation was involved, since to see him I should first meet the Phuntsholing Trimpon (Lord of the Law). But I only met a Bengali, the joint Lord of the Law, a man by the name of Data, whose concern was also whether I was a guest of the Gyal-po, the Gyal-mo or of the Gyal-ru, the King's mother. I nodded, uncertain. Was I then a guest of Ashi Degi or Ashi Choki? I stared, bewildered. They were the sisters of the King. When I understood, I explained that I was a friend of the deceased son of the Doom of Ha, of Jigme Dorji (the fearless thunderbolt), the late Prime Minister. Nobody stirred.

'Then you cannot have a jeep,' I was told.

The best I could do was to recall that I had met the Paro Penlop. Only then did people smile, but after all the Paro Penlop was only the half-brother of the King and he had not so much as smiled at me. I myself was now intrigued to know whose guest I was. I had not the slightest idea, not even an invitation, only a letter I had received from the Indian Government, whilst in Spain, one year after seeing Mrs Gandhi and ten years after seeing Rani Chuni, saying that I could now proceed to Bhutan. Who, I wondered, was my patron? Who was behind my being admitted to Bhutan? It became imperative to discover this when lunchtime arrived. JAM Air had whetted my appetite.

'Are you a guest of the King, or of the Queen, of his mother, or of his sisters?' the Nepalese housekeeper asked again, adding: 'Who will pay your bills?'

'I will pay,' I said with a smile, thinking that at last I had understood the reason for all these questions. But immediately the

Nepalese frowned, crossed the hall of the bungalow and got busy with a field phone.

'Dasho Duncho.' He was calling the Royal Palace, the Lucky Fort of Religion, to speak to the Assistant Secretary General, the only high member of the Court of the Dragon to speak English. He, and he alone, so it seemed, could decide whether or not I was to have lunch. He was out.

I was very hungry, but the Nepalese just would not hear of feeding me. Suddenly I spotted a Bhutanese, a strong, sturdy fellow, draped in a vast *ko*, as the local dress is called. He came up the steps of the bungalow and at once the Nepalese bowed, his hands cupped before his face in respectful salutation. Without the cotton wool and in such handsome garb, I did not recognize my fellow passenger at first. Having confronted with me the perils of JAM Air, he was, I realized, my only friend; and it was in this quality, as a friend of the bodyguard of the Paro Penlop, that I was at last allowed to eat. I was relieved that at least his Majesty the King had not been disturbed.

I now recalled what a friend had told me before I set out: 'Until you see the King you are nowhere.'

Phuntsholing might look like an ordinary little English garrison town. The Indians might have just completed a strategic road for the Bhutanese, the first to link the Lucky Fort of Religion with the outside world, and installed a field telephone linking the King and his family with the Court, but Bhutan was Bhutan and the economy one of honours and privilege. Money meant nothing. Rank was what counted and until I could establish my own I soon realized that I would be treated in the way that a porter of the Waldorf treats a penniless beggar. Money I could now throw away but to eat I could, at worst, name drop. Whatever happened, I would have to reassure my entourage speedily that my credit was good, prove my royal backing or starve to death.

As a friend of the bodyguard of the Paro Penlop I received only a poor meal: boiled rice and chillies.

In the afternoon three very important people came up to the bungalow. Portly, handsome men with open, friendly faces. They smiled politely. All spoke Tibetan, but hardly acknowledged to my credit the fact that I could speak a language akin to their own. They had only one aim in mind: to discover whose guest I was. I was unable to answer, so they left, puzzled and surprised, asking

how it happened that I was in Bhutan and at the bungalow in the first place and, of all things, had been given food. I felt like a guilty schoolboy. The rice stuck in my throat. I really began to wonder what on earth I was doing here. One of the lords helped clarify my position:

'You are not', he said very clearly, 'a guest of the Queen.'

It was concluded that I would have to see Dasho Duncho at the Lucky Fort of Religion, as he alone might be able to figure out who I was. As for reaching the fort, there were no means of getting me there, as all the jeeps belonged to the King and were only available to those who were his guests.

'We might have a truck going to Thimbu,' one of the lords suggested, 'but you will have to pay.'

That day no truck came. The next day no truck came.

Nobody, in the meantime, had even bothered to come and see me or speak to me, except for the bodyguard. I remembered that odd expression '*non grata*'.

That evening I looked at myself in a mirror. Did I look like a *dasho* (a lord)? Did I have the appearance of a royal guest? Who was I? I wondered. Maybe nobody? Nothing very glorious or important, nothing, in fact, at all. For the second time I remembered that the Bhutanese had spat upon the Honourable Ashley Eden.

On the second day, the tall and distinguished uncle of the Paro Penlop arrived at the bungalow. I was immediately informed of his rank. He came surrounded by a group of very civilized young men, no doubt the élite of the aristocracy of the Dragon. Wearing olive green *kos* that draped them in splendid pleats, they wore the best shoes from London and long grey socks up to their bare knees. They laughed and stomped about the bungalow, smoking and chatting with three pretty, highly sophisticated-looking Bhutanese girls, who also smoked. They asked whose guest I was and then ignored me, retiring to a more elegant bungalow next door, the Queen's own, where they sang all night. Nobody had thought of inviting me. I felt humiliated. My experience of the East had brought me to take almost for granted the habitual kindness thrust upon those of the white race. Had I been a Negro in a southern country club I could not have been snubbed with greater indifference. I was dying to make friends but nobody so much as considered my advances. Just as nobody was interested

to learn that I had been ten years in the process of visiting Bhutan, that in that period I had covered three hundred thousand fruitless miles just to get here, that I had learnt Tibetan so as to be able to get along with the people, that I had done all this out of sheer good will, on my own money, that I had no ulterior motives, had risked my life on JAM Air and walked over two thousand miles across the Himalayas' most rugged trails, all because of my love affair with their country.

'They are not as friendly as Tibetans,' Betty-la had said. How right she was! – or was she? Had I not in my time slighted people in an inferior position to myself? Was I not, on my home ground, a bit of a snob? I found myself confessing to my mosquito net, searching for *mea culpas*. In two days, for the first time in years, I had acquired an inferiority complex. My beige suit looked cheap. My whole appearance was sloppy, my manners uncouth, my camera gave me the professional air I so disliked. I was not a guest of the Queen. This was a serious offence and I would have to answer for it.

At 7 a.m. on the third day a truck stopped by the rest house, a large new Mercedes with 'Government of Bhutan' inscribed upon its dark blue bonnet. Its licence plates were written in Tibetan. The driver was a sticky Nepalese.

The road was 141 kilometres of hairpin bends that would take ten hours to negotiate. In Phuntsholing I had only been on the border of India. Bhutan is a Himalayan kingdom and I had yet to penetrate the Himalayas. For ten hours, eyes wide open, I lurched in the seat next to the driver who spoke neither English nor Tibetan. In that time I understood what made Bhutan the last unexplored country of Asia.

Nowhere do the Himalayas rise so suddenly as from the Douars into Bhutan. A hundred yards from the bungalow the truck took the first bend and, shifting into low gear, started climbing. In less than a mile the temperature had changed and the plains of Bengal and Assam were a hazy carpet beneath us. The first wisps of mist were soon on us as, rounding curve after curve, we slowly scaled the first rungs of the gigantic ladder which, in less than sixty miles as the crow flies, rises from the sweltering heat of the plains to the snow-capped 24,000-foot peaks of Bhutan's northern border with Tibet.

I was soon surrounded by jungle, mist and more jungle pene-

A keen archer, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, King of Bhutan

Equipped with modern weapons and traditional *kos*, the national dress, these soldiers of the Bhutanese Royal Army wear the white sash that is compulsory when inside a fort

Short hair, characteristic of Bhutanese women, is a reminder of the country's monastic origins

Like a Tudor village—the houses of the 'serfs' of Tongsa

trating into the lower, ravined, southern belt of Bhutan. A realm of damp heat and fever, a kingdom ruled by tigers, elephants, snakes and monkeys. If the world has heard of the jungles of Bengal and those of Assam, little does it realize that these, frightful as they may sound, are but the overflow of Bhutan's southern jungles on to the plains of the Brahmaputra. Far more impressive is the continuation of this jungle into Bhutan. It has rightly been estimated that Bhutan is the land that harbours the greatest density of wild elephants in the world. All the southern part of the country is a natural game reserve larger than any in Africa, where beasts roam and multiply under the sacred protection of Buddhism, which considers that to take life is a great sin.

In Bhutan two worlds meet. For the customs of Tibet, the land of the snows, overlap the warm world of the tropics. This first jungle belt that covers the southern third of Bhutan is inhabited by Nepalese squatters, runaway workers from the tea plantations of the Douars and fragments of the Nepalese population explosion following the trends of the Ghurka kings' conquests. Here few or no Bhutanese are to be found, as the climate is too hot for a race bred of temperate stock.

Like monkeys sitting on ledges, squatters are found facing the south and the perpetual haze that smothers India. A little, ragged race of men, the Nepalese cling to these hills unseen and anonymous. They are timid refugees in the Land of the Dragon, whose sturdy lords live beyond the jungle belt.

Damp with mist and shaded by gigantic trees netted in vines, the road wound its tortured way ever upwards. As we reached the first ridge, the hills closed in behind us and we were surrounded on all sides by the impressive tide of uniformly forested peaks. Occasionally a dead tree struck by lightning showed on the horizon like the desiccated hand of some giant. Not a soul, not a village was in sight. Nothing seemed to live here in the open. The animals like the squatters were inhabitants of the shade. Only an occasional waterfall seemed alive and these grew more and more numerous. Some were huge, booming in the distance, emerging from the jungle to leap a hundred feet before being swallowed again by the green ocean of the valleys.

I was reminded that we were in the monsoon when the road itself became a river, the overflow of the thousands of little brooks and streams perspiring from the undergrowth. This jungle

is also the wettest in the world. Was not Cherrapunji a few miles away in Assam? There, in exceptional years, up to sixty feet of rain may fall in the monsoon. No doubt it rains as much a few miles away up on the jungle hills of Bhutan. Sixty feet! Thirty-nine feet is the average. And the rest of the world measures its rainfall in inches and millimetres! At Cherrapunji thirteen metric tons of water per square metre falls in three months. Enough to submerge a four-storey house. All this rain falls from the leaves to the ground and runs away at once, bounding from rivulet to stream to the raging torrents of foam that carve gutters to the great plains which are inevitably flooded, year by year, by this avalanche.

I could not help admiring the Indian engineers who, against all odds, had blasted a road through this inferno. It was a road constantly menaced by landslides and still in the last stages of completion by thousands of Nepalese workers. We passed them every twenty miles or so, wrestling bare-handed with recalcitrant boulders. These stones would eventually be pushed over cliffs to the accompaniment of splintering trees shattered by the impact. No wonder the monks thought it a sin to build a road. Do we not, in the West, use the word 'scar' to describe the gash made by a path that bleeds the harmony of nature?

I had seen many mountain roads, but nowhere any to rival this one because nowhere in the Himalayas are the foothills so steep and so formidable as in Bhutan. It was little short of a miracle that the road had been possible. It had cost millions of rupees and thousands of lives and it had been built for strategic military reasons when at long last the Prime Minister, Jigme Dorji, in the face of Chinese aggression in Tibet, had reluctantly conceded a small opening to technology in Bhutan. Why is it, I wondered, that only war or fear can jolt man to great actions and break the cycle of inertia inherent in peace?

Having crossed three passes over eight thousand feet high, climbed up and down gigantic, uninhabited mountains covered with amazing virgin forests of tall oak and walnut trees, we now entered the highlands of Bhutan proper, the higher altitudes where pine-trees replaced the other species. How right the British had been! Bhutan was, to all intents and purposes, inaccessible to an army. Even today, the road perched over incredible gorges on its shaky foundations is hardly of strategic value. It was down more frequently than not and could be closed by rolling a stone.

The scenery had changed. Gone was the heat and the mist was cold, very cold. At one point, the road ran beside a torrent whose waters smelt of glaciers. I had now reached the middle rung of the ladder that rises from the plains of India to Tibet. Calcutta was no more than a dream in the night, Lhasa was the pole to which this universe belonged. This became evident with the first prayer flags and the first *chortens*, monuments to the universality of Buddha. At one point the truck ran round a bend into a caravan of laden mules. One of the drivers, draped in a voluminous home-spun *ko* of brown wool, looked at the truck in horror and fled screaming up the embankment. Obviously he had never seen a truck before.

Pastures dotted with fir trees began to crown the near-by summits. For some time, we followed the tortured course of a river of swirling white water and then suddenly the first *dzong* rose before us. How can I say what I felt at that moment? Until then, despite the border, I had not felt as though I had truly entered Bhutan, but now I rubbed my eyes. Upon a crest, I could clearly see the massive form of a fort. Its barren, gently sloping walls rose as if in continuation of the crag on which it stood, proud and erect, dominating the valley, a silent and awesome sentinel of the Lords of the Dragon. The fort came as a surprise. Until then I had seen only villages. The fort's Tibetan architecture, noble and sober, recalled that here I was entering a land of warriors, or sturdy men who despised the crouching valley people, a race quite different from the starved souls of the purgatory of India's delta.

Horses now became more numerous, led or pushed by stout Bhutanese bent under heavy loads and shouting after their laden animals. The mules panicked at the sight of the truck so that we passed the jingling caravans slowly. My heart beat faster as I heard the sweet music of those bells again. How many days had I travelled to their tune? Would I, I wondered, be able to experience the charm of their accompaniment again in Bhutan? More than ever I felt sorry for the truck and angered at the road that allowed three thousand years of customs, and traditions to become suddenly obsolete overnight.

I was exhausted but excited when at last the driver made me understand in sign language that we were about to reach Thimbu.

'Overtakers, have you arranged with your undertakers?' 'Life

is short, do not make it shorter!' The two signs borrowed from Indian colonialism bordered the road. Ridiculous slogans, written for men who, at best, could only read the script of the Tibetan canon. Messages as mysterious to the Bhutanese as those mantras, so sacred but incomprehensible, that all recite. 'Overtakers! Undertakers!' How revolting! I was ashamed of the road that thus soiled for me the land of my dreams. The revolutionary road project was frowned upon by many, and by all the hundred thousand monks of Bhutan while Jigme Dorji, the initiator of so diabolical an invention as a road, paid in the bungalow of Phuntsholing with his life for this ambitious innovation.

I had reached Thimbu, without knowing it. It was then I learned that, in the Kingdom of the Dragon, there exists not one single town, not even a large village. The capital was, as yet, no more than a plan in the royal mind. At this stage it was simply the Lucky Fort of Religion and a dirt track where the road ended and where stood four large Bhutanese houses in the process of being built, the corner-stones of a town, the first Bhutan would ever have. The total population of Thimbu, by far the greatest centre of population in the land, was four thousand, of whom three thousand lived in the gigantic fortress which stood alone among the terraced fields leading to the pine forest that crested the hills enclosing the minute valley.

The dzong, the fortress, of Thimbu was immense, set at the head of the valley, its pagoda-like roofs of new corrugated iron gleaming in the setting sun. It contained two thousand rooms, thirty chapels and three cathedrals and was lit at night by butter lamps. There over three thousand men live a life which we in the West imagine only exists in history books and tales of the past.

I stared with awe at the fort, and at the barracks with disappointment. So, at last I had arrived. Around me rose tame and pleasant hills where civilized pine-trees tumbled to the valley floor. High above me, glittering in the evening sun, were the white dots of six monasteries. More impressive was the huge fort, so large as to appear unreal, with its hundreds of black windows set in a white fortified wall framed by massive rectangular towers supporting golden pinnacles.

There are no hotels in Bhutan, for there are no visitors or

tourists, only guests. The guesthouse at Thimbu has three bedrooms. I had one. I was not a guest. Maybe that was the trouble. Then it was the road that bothered me, also the barracks, the corrugated iron and the telephone wires looping from pole to pole and the whine of the jeeps. Royal jeeps, which were forbidden to me. I had to explain again, or rather answer for the fact that I was not a guest of the Queen, or of the King, or of Ashi Degi, Ashi Choki or of the King's mother, the Gyal-ru. Pasang, the official in charge of royal guests, listened with mild interest. His smart jeep purred at the door. Thunderbolts were painted in gold on the walls of my room and a red sisal rug covered the floor. A comfortable bed, chairs and a desk all glared at me with an insolent look. Newly arrived, they must have felt odd in this land where the position of the lotus is the only chair and dragon-festooned carpets from Lhasa the beds of all. Three rooms in all the capital and I was in one.

'Ah!' said Pasang when I had recited my curriculum vitae. I did not see him again for two days. I was left with the cook and had boiled rice and chillies. It was Friday and I was told that I could not see the Lord Deputy Chief Secretary, Dasho Duncho, until Monday. Meanwhile, it was clear that I had better stay with the cook. At least he would give me food. I desperately wanted company, somebody to cheer me up, because I was disappointed, terribly disappointed. The guesthouse was empty. I had tea and for the first time in weeks emptied the bags I had crammed with such unlikely things: Bell's grammar of colloquial Tibetan, a rough inaccurate map of Bhutan drawn ten years earlier by my brother – I knew of no better one, a pair of brown riding boots, the product of the now rusty craftsmanship of Morrison and Tuttle, bootmakers to the viceroys, presently reduced to selling sinks a stone's throw from the Grand Hotel, and, lastly, the two cups of finest Sèvres porcelain which were the only gift I had thought worthy of His Majesty the King of the Land of the Dragon – maybe I could exchange them for a cup of Tibetan tea. I hoped His Majesty would appreciate my wholly unoriginal gift. I had also brought perfume for the Queen, for Ashi Degi, Ashi Choki and for the Queen Mother, together with a couple of painted silk scarves and a silver bowl. Perhaps these would be the key to my reception?

My tent, a Roman tent of green canvas, looked odd and rather

underdeveloped in the guesthouse whose bathtub, although unconnected, was shiny and new. That was a word I did not know how to say in Tibetan – bathtub. Bhutan was catching up and overtaking my Tibetan grammar. Bathtubs are unknown in Tibet.

The cook was a nice Nepalese. His assistant, Norbu, was a Sherpa from Nepal who gave me a long hard-luck story and then lied about having been on Everest. There was also a young Bhutanese with a cough, a cook-helper, who slept in the central dining-room, which was painted with virtues – silver ones.

The King had sent the cook-helper to India to learn English. The shoes of Pasang, the young noble in charge of the royal guests, had been brought back from Switzerland by the King. According to the proclamation hung beneath a portrait draped in a white ceremonial scarf of his grandfather, the King had also ordered that no alcoholic drink be served in the forts or guesthouses of his kingdom. It was a good thing I had brought teacups. I suddenly remembered how different it all was when, having climbed over and beyond the Annapurna range, I had presented the Gyal-po of Lo, the King of Mustang, with a bottle of whisky, explaining that it was medicine for the soul. At least there the world had been flat, or so believed the King, and nobody had bothered to remind me as I made my way along the edge of bottomless precipices that 'life is short'. As for overtaking – it was impossible at the slow pace of my yaks. But what was infuriating here in Bhutan was that I did not have so much as a jeep at my disposal. Boiled rice and chillies signified that I was not a royal guest. The polychrome Columbus in search of new horizons I considered myself to be was disappointed. Would I even be able to wear my new boots? I suddenly hated the road, the bath and the jeeps that smeared my private kingdom. I thought with envy of the first visitors to Bhutan.

Two Portuguese missionaries who had set out from Calcutta to Tibet, Father Stephen Cacella and Johan Cabaral, crossed Bhutan in 1626. They had not, so it seems, enjoyed very much their passage, but at least they had had the pleasure of walking. Nearly a hundred and fifty years elapsed before another foreigner set foot in Bhutan and then he only walked seven miles and left. A few years later, in 1774, that enigmatic Scotsman Bogle came through Bhutan on his way to visit the Panchen Lama. I liked

Bogle; he spoke Tibetan and even married and had children by a Tibetan wife, although his heirs eventually tried to erase this union from the record. After Bogle came Turner, travelling up the same route I had driven along. He reached the Lucky Fort of Religion in 1783 and left a brief account of his visit which, besides Thimbu, only extended to Punaka and Paro. Then came my old friend Boileau, Captain Robert Boileau Pemberton, in 1838. I say 'friend' but had we met I imagine that I would not have liked him. Nor did he finally like Bhutan. He was an officer and, save for the exquisite style of his report and the fact that he became 'by accident' the first person actually to explore Bhutan to any extent, he must go down for me as a remote friend. He set out with twenty-five sepoys, a botanist, Dr William Griffith, and the Ensign Muirson Blake. He claims that, in all, with porters and orderlies, his party numbered one hundred and twenty or so. The fact that he lost only one man confirms, as he claims so eloquently, 'that no better proof could be afforded of the wonderful facility with which the human constitution adapts itself to the most dissimilar conditions of atmospheric influence'.

He mentions neither when, where nor how he lost that man incapable of adapting to the atmospheric influence. His was a big party and no one spoke any of the native languages. The natives themselves emerge from his report as rather unpleasant. He goes on to say: 'The habits of all classes are most disgustingly filthy, and the man [I am still quoting, I repeat] . . . and the man must be endued with more than an ordinary share of nerve, who would willingly interpose any member of their society between the wind and his nobility.'

Strangely, only Pemberton and Sir Ashley 'the spat upon' had unpleasant remarks to make about the Bhutanese.

Sitting alone in the bungalow at Thimbu I wondered where I would end up. Siding with Bogle and Turner or alongside Ashley and Boileau? I wondered if I would be able to 'adapt'. Already I was harbouring dark thoughts against those who had snubbed me: Rani Chuni, the Paro Penlop, the young nobles at Phuntsholing and Pasang at Thimbu and yet I had only just arrived.

I craved company. I was lonely, back in purgatory. I had lost all my illusions. It was like waking up to discover that the nightmare that had haunted me was, in fact, only a stupid dream, one in which I played the role of the fool. I was simply an

overgrown romantic and those horrible road signs had been the limit. I was suddenly clearsighted, calm and collected. I no longer cared about thunderbolts, not now that they could be reached by jeep. My journey to Thimbu after ten years of frustration had proved too easy. I now doubted whether Bhutan would ever live up to my dreams.

It was then that I spotted in my baggage the 1914 issue of the *National Geographic* written by Jean Claude White. The whole number was devoted to his 'Experiences and Journeys in Unknown Bhutan', to 'exploring the hitherto very little known but most interesting state of Bhutan'.

After Boileau he was the only person to visit and travel to some extent in the country. This he did between 1905 and 1907 as Political Officer to Sikkim.

After him there was nobody until the road was opened, nobody, that is, save the very few who came to visit the royal family and they had not travelled the country extensively but stuck around Thimbu and Paro. I looked at White's map. A little black line showed his journeys. They stopped half way across. He had, therefore, never actually crossed the entire country.

My mind was made up. I would try and cross all of Bhutan, push into the corners never seen by westerners. I would get away from the road, walk for miles, for days. I could hardly contain my excitement. Now that I was in Thimbu I would really begin my journey. Despite the road, never had an expedition set out to explore and study interior Bhutan. If I hurried I might not be too late. I might still be one of the first. My vanity consoled, I looked closer at the maps of Pemberton and White.

Bhutan lay there shaped like a fish, cut by six deep valleys separated by six high passes, the highest 12,500 feet. The rivers of each of these valleys had their sources in the eternal snows of huge peaks. The tallest peak, Kula Kangri, is claimed to rise 24,700 feet, higher than any peak in America, Europe or Africa. Northern Bhutan is but one glittering mass of unclimbed, uncharted mountains. No Sherpa had ever led the white sahib there. To the west the valley of the Wong opens into three separate valleys: the valley of Ha, the valley of Paro and the valley of Thimbu. These I now knew were the valleys of roads. I would visit these briefly as any royal guest or any tourist may do in the days when there will be more than three bedrooms for

guests in Bhutan. Then I would proceed to the valley of Punaka, the ancient capital, still inaccessible by road, and from there I would cross the Ri-nak, the Black Mountains, a gigantic chain cutting Bhutan in two, dividing the western portion from the unknown eastern side. From there on the names on my maps were contradictory (a good sign). There beyond the Black Mountains was the great fort of Tongsa, then the valley of Bumthang (one hundred thousand plains), then other mysterious valleys, crossed only by Pemberton in 1838. I would go by the north, in the highlands close to Tibet. I wanted to be off already. Once again I was tortured by the delights of anxiety. Would I be allowed to go there? If Thimbu was the end of the road, it was also the beginning of the trail, the trail that would lead me into the unexplored hills described by Pemberton as the most 'inaccessible' reaches of the Himalayas. I only hoped I would be able to 'adapt to the most dissimilar conditions of atmospheric influences'. After all I had not come all this way just to have a bath. I fell asleep to the coughing of the Bhutanese cook. The thunderbolts glowed pale above my head as mist descended on the isolated valley of Thimbu, the capital of the Land of the Dragon.

2

Bruised by an Elephant

ON MONDAY MORNING I made my way on foot to the dzong. The sun was shining mildly and drifts of mist alternately veiled the white cells of the monasteries overlooking the valley. Thimbu was alive with caravans, monks, peasants and soldiers. The men were all wearing kos, the sort of overcoat or gown, loosely overlapping, belted and hanging down to the knees, which is the national dress. Some were black, some olive green, but the majority were striped red, yellow and vivid green patterned with white designs. These gowns gave the soldiers a mediaeval appearance that contrasted with the modern machine guns they carried around with a total disregard as to the direction in which the firing end was pointed.

In two days of solitary meditation I had become reconciled to Bhutan. I did not mind the jeeps so much now that I knew they all belonged to the King and that the drivers like the jeeps themselves had had to be imported because no one in Bhutan had yet mastered the magic trilogy of clutch, brake and accelerator. There were more ponies than vehicles, which numbered less than a hundred in all. All day Sunday the valley had echoed with the chants and cries of joy of archers as in three places in the valleys the national sport had tested the talents of the people: the nobles near the dzong, the soldiers near the stalls of Tibetan refugees and the peasants down in the valley.

Despite the road nothing had changed in Bhutan (or so it seemed) and slowly I began to feel the excitement and mystery of this race, a product of these mountains fashioned by centuries of isolation, a world unaware of the universe beyond its hills.

Near the dzong, I passed large numbers of monks, young and old, out for a stroll, draped in red and maroon homespun cloth over sleeveless shirts of red and gold brocade. They walked in pairs or in groups, smiled on seeing me and carried on chatting. Despite Boileau's observation, what struck me first was how clean

they all were, in contrast to the usual Tibetan monks, whose tunics, although the same, were generally dirty. After India, an air of quiet prosperity lay on Thimbu, which was most evident in the remarkable good looks and physical strength of the Bhutanese men. A healthier race could not be found. Their strength is self evident, at least, to quote Boileau, 'to anyone who places one of them between the sunlight and his nobility'.

The Bhutanese seem to combine all the best physical features of the Tibetans with a long thin nose and lighter skin; they have eyes like almonds, but without the epicanthic fold. It was, nevertheless, too early for me to generalize as I still could not even suspect the dimensions of this land which, I was soon to find out, cannot be considered a petty kingdom but which constitutes a respectably large nation.

The dzong of Thimbu was one of the largest buildings I had ever seen and for size and symmetry can best be compared with the Escorial in the West. It is a gigantic rectangle, a mass of sober Tibetan architecture, revealing endless rows of windows on three storeys, the first storey situated more than thirty feet from the ground. The side walls abutted on to huge rectangular towers rising another three storeys to pagoda-like roofs. These roofs, unfortunately, contradicted Boileau's remark that the wooden slatted roofs traditional to Bhutan have a tendency to leak, since they were of corrugated iron. In the year before my arrival the dzong had been enlarged, traditional architecture and techniques being used in its construction apart from the roof. Not one nail had been used in the gigantic structure of wood, Tibetan cement and stone. After the Potala in Lhasa this, together with another Bhutanese fort, Tongsa, is beyond doubt the largest building in central Asia, if not in the whole of Asia.

Dwarfed by this gigantic mass, too huge to be taken in at a glance, thousands of workers laboured like ants with baskets and shovels levelling off the platform on which the fort rose above the river that ran at its feet. Two armed guards draped in white scarves stood by one of the two entrances to which I had been directed. This was a wooden loggia of bright red pillars encrusted with gold carvings in which designs of dragons mingled with the emblems of Buddhism.

Here lived not only the King, his Court, his officials, his servants and slaves, but also the head of the Bhutanese church and over a

thousand monks. No woman could sleep within this great sanctuary, which was not only a huge monastery and a gigantic fortress but also the capital, the Gyalsa, the royal seat of the Dragon King, last of the absolute monarchs of the world, the home of the austere yet accessible head of a nation which lives under strict monastic rule. Bhutan is still a religious state. Until 1933 the King shared his power with the reincarnate lama, head of the Bhutanese church. These lamas, known as Dharma Lamas, had ruled since time immemorial over Bhutan, which had originally been a federation of monastic estates. With time the religious rulers favoured certain members of their families so, alongside the monks, an élite of lay administrators emerged. Until 1907 these laymen elected, for periods of three years, a secular leader for all of Bhutan. The Deba, as he was called, was the ruler. Each fortress tried to have its own chief elected and remain in power. This brought about countless wars until, in 1907, the secular leader of the fort of Tongsa imposed himself as hereditary Deba and King of Bhutan, to rule alongside the lama, the Dharma Raja. Then in 1933 the father of the present king got rid of the religious ruler by putting an end to his reincarnation. At least, since then there has been no Dharma Raja and the Lords of Tongsa now rule single-handed in consultation with the chief abbots of the land and the leaders of its principal forts.

It is requested that all who enter the fortress of Thimbu or any thirty-two of the fortresses of the land should drape themselves in white shawls symbolizing in their folds the red shawl of the monks and lamas. I was unable to comply with this edict, but nobody found it strange. After all, the King had just pronounced and made law a decree forbidding 'the inhabitants of this land to ape [the word is not mine] either the hairstyles or clothes of the west'. The Bhutanese are a proud people as I had already noticed, and so I was equally proud of my new blue suit.

I turned into the vast courtyard, neatly paved with huge slabs of light grey stone. Young monks were sitting around the base of an immense building, the Uchi, the religious centre of the fort that rose over eighty feet in the middle of the courtyard. Its austere white façade was brightened with painted windows of pale blue, yellow and red. I was looking at this tower temple when suddenly I saw all the young monks scuttle away and heard the tinkle of a bell. At the same time, from one corner, a monk

emerged into the sunlight leading an important abbot. The monk tinkled a bell with his left hand and with his right waved a nasty-looking whip. Everyone fled before the pair. In a second the courtyard was empty: the abbot was not to be seen by his small pupils.

I stared at the whip before being led up two flights of steps by a chamberlain wearing a sword and a white sash. He drew aside a curtain concealing a door adorned with brass below a representation of the Dragon of Bhutan and led me into the antechamber of Dasho Duncho, the Deputy Chief Secretary of His Royal Majesty the King of Bhutan.

Having been snubbed for four days by everyone I had met and having noted the great respect with which the nobles were treated and the panic caused by the approach of a high religious dignitary, I was very nervous. I felt some apprehension about this interview with the man who not only had the power to decide about my entire stay in Bhutan, but even the power of dictating whether I be allowed to eat or not. Furthermore, the plans I now secretly harboured of exploring the interior of Bhutan made it imperative that this first contact be a success. Not being a guest of the Queen, I was curious to discover whether I was a guest of somebody or whether I was just unwelcome. All this was quite tricky and was not made easier by the fact that, for some unknown reason, I was suffering at that very moment from an ailment, which I later attributed to the altitude. My right eye was periodically going blind.

A Nepalese secretary of the Dasho, who spoke a little English, asked me to wait. The room looked out on the river through unglazed wooden window frames in the gothic manner characteristic of Bhutan.

'You may now enter,' I was told.

I walked up three steps, pushed aside a curtain and found myself in a larger room with a crude desk and a couple of western chairs. Behind the desk stood a short jovial man with a round face and friendly eyes. He came towards me, his hand outstretched, while I attempted the customary bow, my hands cupped before my face.

Rectifying my salutation, I noticed the yard-long silver sword with gold motifs which dangled rather menacingly from the Dasho's belt. A red stole was slung round his shoulders, red being

the colour of high officials, corresponding to the white one which everyone was obliged to wear in the dzong.

I fumbled with some high honorific Tibetan, doing a bad job no doubt. The Deputy Secretary smiled and welcomed me in the language of Shakespeare devoid of the Welsh accent so common in India.

'Do sit down,' said the Dasho, relieving himself of his cumbersome weapon and drawing up his ko to reveal hairless knees and the usual Bhutanese legs, powerful and muscular. He sat down beside me. My eye was bothering me but I soon forgot that when the little man rubbed his back as he sat down and, after complimenting me on my Tibetan, casually explained:

'I have not been feeling too well lately.' A pause. 'Ever since I fell off that elephant.'

I took this in my stride and made some compliment about Bhutan. Then suddenly I began to feel alarmed. 'Fell off an elephant? How?' I could not help asking.

'Oh, a stupid affair,' said the Dasho, as though he had merely sprained an ankle.

I had wild visions of how one could fall off an elephant and began to sympathize at once. After all, I had often fallen off a horse, so I could imagine only too well what falling off an elephant was like.

'Oh, it was the elephant's fault,' said the Dasho, just in case I might have thought his fall a poor reflection on his gentlemanly upbringing. 'The elephant was improperly tamed,' he added to clinch the matter.

I looked at his back, half expecting to see a great hole, then at his face wondering whether I might see a scar, some secret sign peculiar to such an unusual accident.

This subject being apparently closed, I attempted to find out whose guest I was. It rapidly became clear that I was nobody's guest. If I had entered Bhutan it was really off my own bat, a kind of mistake on the part of the Indians to embarrass the Bhutanese. Anyway I was cordially welcome. The only problem was, I was told, that Bhutan was not yet equipped to entertain foreigners. The guesthouse was small and that month the Queen had a number of personal guests, five in all, and there were only three rooms in Thimbu. The Queen's guests were on their way so it would be a good idea if I stayed a few days in Thimbu and then

went to Paro when they arrived. This sort of musical beds, I realized, was the price I was going to pay for not being a guest.

'Then when you have seen Thimbu and Paro . . .' said the Dasho. He did not have to complete his sentence. '. . . you will have seen nearly all there is to see.'

In other words, in about a week's time it would be diplomatic for me to leave.

I had, of course, no intention of being diplomatic. After ten years of waiting and six trips to Bhutan's border I certainly did not intend to stay no more than an extended weekend in Thimbu and Paro, not now that they were easily accessible by road to royal guests.

'How about Bumthang?' I said out of the blue after a short silence.

'Ah, Bumthang,' said the Dasho, rubbing his back, 'that is where I come from. Yes,' he went on, 'it is quite different from here, so beautiful. A high, cool land.'

'Jakar?' I now added hopefully.

'Ah, Jakar (the white bird),' said the Dasho, smiling.

'Tongsa?' I ventured.

There was no answer.

'Would it be possible to go to Bumthang?' I pleaded.

Dasho gave me a Paro Penlop look. 'First visit Thimbu, then go to Paro and after that we shall see.'

I began to hate that nasty elephant as my heart warmed to the Dasho.

Before leaving I mentioned my journeys in Nepal and in Mustang, stressing that there was not so much as a bungalow there, that I ate *tsampa* and loved it and was in fact perfectly happy in the greatest discomfort. As far as I was concerned, I was allergic to sleeping in guesthouses. The Dasho smiled and repeated that I was to come and see him on my return from Paro.

I asked if I could meet the King but was told that he was unwell. The Dragon suffered from heart trouble. My present, I thought – and what about Ashi Digi and Ashi Tegi? The Dasho closed the subject. Realizing that I would not get very far, I rose and left. I had at least one friend in the kingdom. I was concerned about his health. Fallen off an elephant indeed!

From the Deputy Secretary I was ushered to the Tsi-dpon, (the lord of accounts), the Minister of Finance. He and he alone

in the kingdom could solve my greatest problem. I had to cash some travellers' cheques. It seemed I was the first to import foreign currency into Bhutan. In fact, being a non-guest I was also the first person to have any need for money at all in a land where money is still frowned upon and hospitality is a most lavish word for those who come as guests.

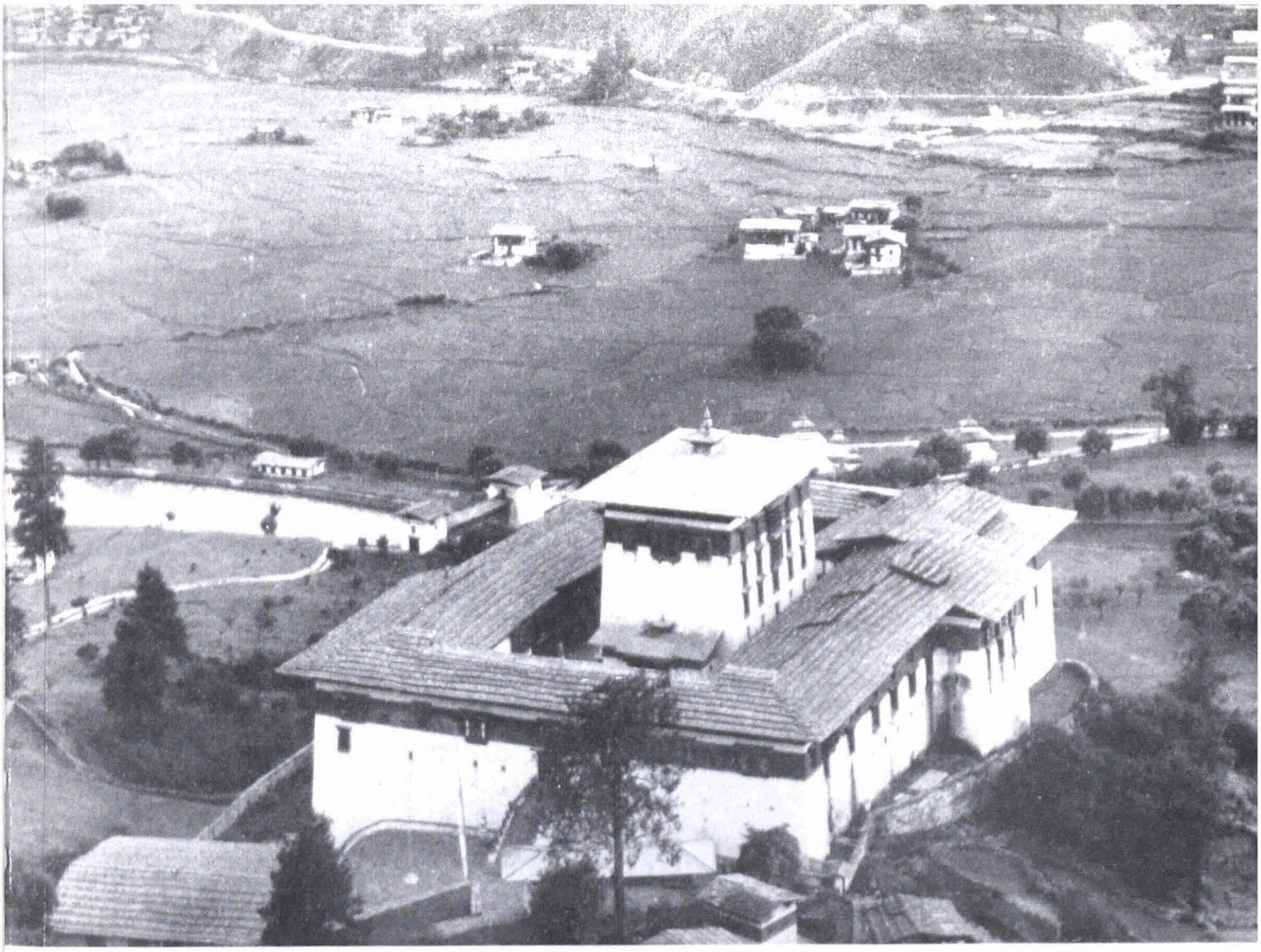
Under a 'wheel of life' in the Minister's office was a very small safe and on his desk beside his sword was a small pile of stamps, the latest to be printed in the name of Bhutan by some firm abroad that was cashing in, along with the Bhutanese, on our western philatelic mania, regardless of the fact that Bhutan does not belong to the International Postal Union and that there was still no need for stamps in most of the country. I was also a little surprised to see that the latest Bhutanese stamps were a series entitled 'world masterpieces', miniature full-colour reproductions of works by van Gogh and other western painters in three-dimensional relief prints on cardboard showing the brush strokes! Beyond doubt these stamps printed in the name of Bhutan are among the most modern and original in the world. Unfortunately, I was told I could not buy them in Bhutan.

The safe was empty except for a small roll of Indian rupees which were exchanged for my travellers' cheques. I found out from the minister that Bhutan would soon print notes, but that for the time being only a small nickel coin with the portrait of the King's grandfather and the eight emblems of Buddhism was local currency, together with the Indian rupee, the currency in general use in Himalayan Asia.

After three more days in Thimbu, I set out for Paro but not before having visited the dzong in detail and caught my first glimpse of that incredible mediaeval world which I prayed would soon be mine to investigate.

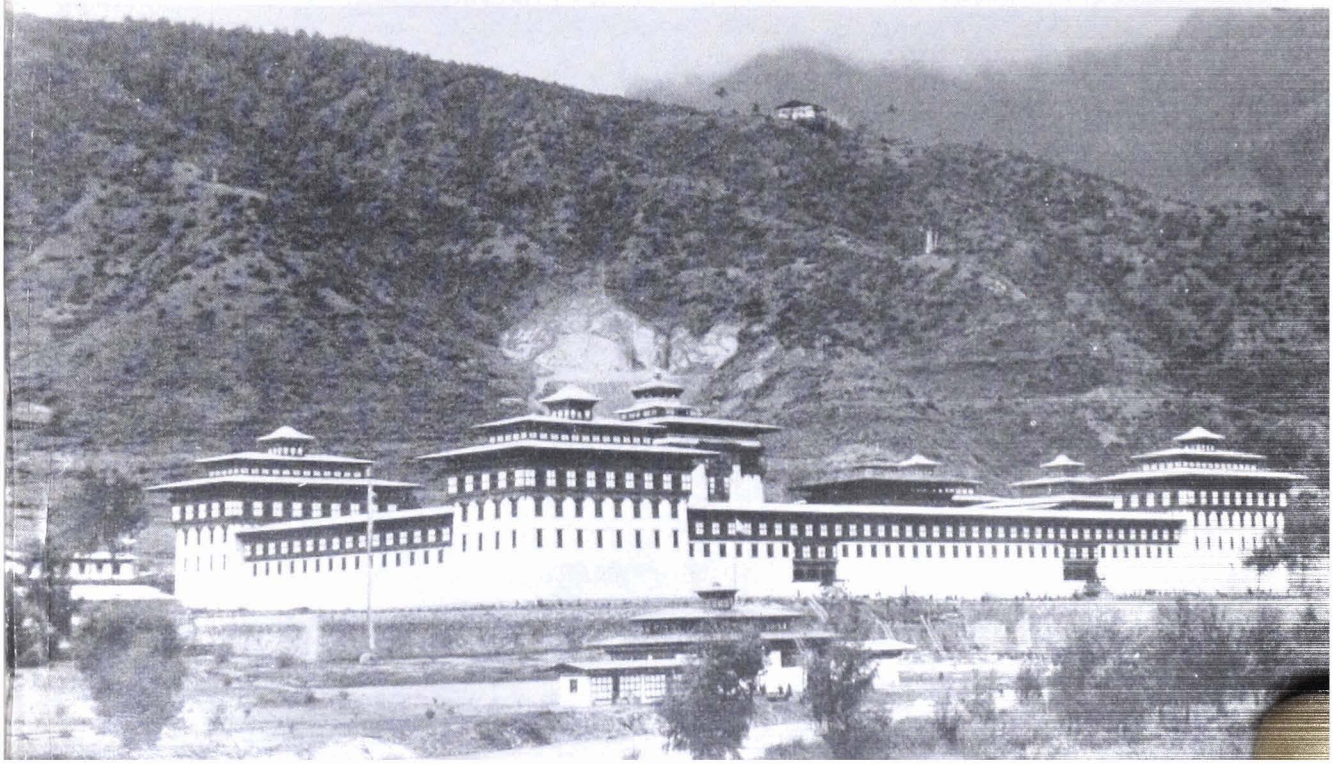
It was without regret that I left behind the wooden stalls of the refugees which composed the greater part of the capital, which was still just a dream, although a few barracks and petrol drums had been laid out at the feet of the colossal Lucky Fort of Religion.

Differences of a nature it would be indiscreet to investigate have led the Queen to live apart from the King. Consequently, she has chosen to live in Paro, in a palace set at the foot of the fortress of



Paro Dzong above its pretty valley. Note the covered bridge over the river

Thimbu Dzong, the Lucky Fort of Religion, capital (royal seat) of Bhutan. Of harmonious yet gigantic proportions, only the antlike figures along the foot of the great wall give an idea of its incredible size



The author with Tensing, his cook and servant, on the day of departure from Thimbu

The author's camp, before which two small trees have been staked for a sign of honour—an old Bhutanese tradition

that valley thirty miles from Thimbu. I now headed for Paro, this time in a jeep I had been accidentally authorized to use. There was, I had been told, one room free in the Paro guesthouse so that 'I had to go', Pasang explained, since my Thimbu room was needed.

First I drove down the floor of the Thimbu valley to the confluence of two rivers, driving thence up the other branch into a narrow gorge bordered with thin alpine grass and great boulders. Eventually, after fifteen miles, this gorge fanned out into the Paro valley.

This valley is, beyond doubt, one of the most romantic and beautiful I have ever seen. At first sight I imagined myself transported into a small idealized world of a not very imaginative story-teller. A Saxon story-teller talking of the Alps and the mediaeval British past. Paro looked like a childish illustration to the *Canterbury Tales*. Dominating the valley stood a huge fortress upon a mound accessible only by a solitary drawbridge over which, as in fairy tales, horsemen rode. A cool brook shaded by weeping willows and majestic fir trees rushed past the foot of the fort. To cross the river there was a little covered bridge with whitewashed gate houses at either end. The handrails of the bridge were gaily painted, pink, blue and yellow. Towering above the great fort was another castle, more military still, with rounded towers recalling the days of chivalric wars.

At the foot of the castle and protected by its mass stood the little palace, belonging to the Queen, a four-storey affair somewhat like a pagoda but neither exotic nor Asiatic. Set in a grassy loop of the river it was surrounded by two rectangular whitewashed walls, the first of which enclosed a paved courtyard where neatly clipped orange trees grew.

The second, outer wall enclosed a grassy meadow surrounded with willows and there were two little stands like the ones erected at the sides of mediaeval tournament grounds, just the kind of place where the Queen of Hearts would sit to watch her archers. This was, in fact, the purpose for which these little pavilions had been built, for the narrow lawn was the archery ground of the palace. Around this outer wall was a 'magic' wood of willow trees, their feet bathed in bubbling streams which found their way among patches of wild irises. Beyond the wood and partly adjoining it, more willows marked the village archery ground of

sheer cropped grass. The grass sloped up to a small rise at either end to catch the flying arrows. Here the targets were placed, white wooden boards with the bull's-eye painted in pastel hues. All around the valley lay the pale and dark green of thinly wooded terraces and shimmering rice fields with, here and there, little sprawling hamlets of three, four or five houses, peasants' homes that looked like Tudor cottages with dark wooden frames filled in with whitewashed plaster. All these, like the fort, the bridge and the palace were roofed with wooden slats weighted down by stones. Further brightening the scene, though needlessly, were pink and white chortens, square monuments to the universality of Buddha. Smoke rose from the Tudor houses, ponies with bright saddles filed along the lanes between the willows, while on either side of the valley rose pine forests dotted with white monasteries shadowed in turn by the great peaks glistening with snow which marked the Tibetan border. The one exotic note was the prayer flags which were everywhere, in clusters or in lines, looking like gigantic white feathers planted to give the scenery a slight butterfly flutter. Archers in gaily coloured gowns, monks in red robes and children in equally gay dresses moved around everywhere at a leisurely pace from the drawbridge of the fort to the covered bridge, around the chortens, over the footpaths, on the greens where the ponies mingled with cattle. Slowly I crossed this enchanting valley towards the guesthouse.

'You are not a guest of the Queen,' its sly keeper explained to me with a malicious twinkle in his eye the moment I arrived.

Having thus established my non-credentials, he showed me to a dirty room in a dilapidated bungalow. I noticed later that I shared this bungalow with him. I was now reduced to the rank of a servant.

As I meditated that evening on the characteristic, unpleasant receptions I had received from Bhutanese of all ranks, I began to understand the mechanism underlying the attitude of the Bhutanese to foreigners.

Everyone and everything in Bhutan, I now understood, is related by one and all to the King. All his subjects are, in fact, truly his, their existence and meaning in life is directly equated to their relation to the King. This relationship is clearly spelled out by everyone's rank. One is either a secretary to the King or the Queen, or the keeper of the King's bungalows or the keeper of his

law or his horses or his fields. One belongs to the King, and thus all social considerations are brought down to the yardstick of one's rank in the official hierarchy. This rank dictates all formal attitudes and commands all privileges. Every act, from the way one dresses to how one lives or travels, what one can do or even eat is regulated by rank. Since this is a country without a monetary economy, money means nothing; privilege issuing from rank is the source of all those comforts and amenities which in our western world are generally considered the by-product of money.

The social system of Bhutan is not unlike that which prevailed in Europe until a hundred years ago. We have in our vocabulary all the words to describe this system. Yet I realized that in the West we have forgotten some of its implications.

The ranks sanctioned by titles in a mediaeval society like Bhutan's are rather unstable attributes, completely dependent on the King and on his moods. The highest duke is nothing in regard to the King himself and the respect due to him depends on his personal relations with the King. Rank is always interpreted in function of honours, favours and attitudes of the monarch. In the same way, all down the social scale a person's rank is interpreted in relation to the attitudes towards him of people of higher rank. Thus a duke who had just had lunch with the King and to whom the King had been friendly was treated by everyone down to the poorest peasant with more respect than a person of the same formal rank but less in favour. This explains the necessity of appearing at Court, the stock exchange of one's social status.

It was only natural that I, as an outsider, a foreigner in a land where foreigners are practically unknown, should perforce be incorporated into the system. If in many other countries the white man automatically enjoys a privileged status (or an unprivileged one) simply as a white man without regard to his personal qualities, in Bhutan – which was never a colony or in contact with the world of the white man – this attitude is unknown and the first thing that everyone wanted to know was what was my relation to the King or Queen. This was what they meant by asking if I was his guest. Now when I said I was not his guest, which was technically true in our western sense, everyone assumed this to mean that I was a sort of outlaw because in Bhutan everyone must be something in regard to the King. By saying I was not the guest of the King I was in other words proclaiming that I was a

border-crasher, a kind of invader with no reason for being in Bhutan in the first place and so not entitled to any amenities or services. I now realized that when I was asked if I was a guest of the King or Queen, I should reply I was the guest of the Secretary of the King, as it was he who was responsible for me since he had given me authorization to visit and stay in Bhutan. Thus only could I hope to establish my status within the local hierarchy. Once I had understood this my life was made much easier.

On my first evening I roamed about the Paro Valley before retiring alone to a dreary meal in the guesthouse.

I was bordering on depression from the gloom and loneliness that had assailed me since parting from the cottonwool bodyguard of the Paro Penlop in Phuntsholing. I, therefore, approached the menial servants and soon made friends with two of them; and although my rank was higher than theirs we soon passed the formal barriers of respect to reach truly friendly communication. I was reassured that behind their official formality the Bhutanese are like the Tibetans, gay and amusing and totally uninhibited. Even so, I was quite relieved and delighted to meet a fellow European, although I had never felt this urge in my past solitary journeys.

Instantly we became friends, not so much as a result of the inevitable bond that draws together people of the same race in a remote place but because in Michael Aris, the young tutor to the royal children, I found an echo of my own passion for Tibet, Tibetans and their culture.

Thanks to Michael Aris and a letter I wrote recalling my relations with the Queen's brother, the late Prime Minister, I received, two days after my arrival in Paro, an order to come at 7 p.m. to have dinner with the Queen.

Anywhere else in the world I would not have been quite so intrigued and excited but in Bhutan, after what I had so far witnessed of royal power, and being aware that a royal smile could make or ruin a man's career, I was both delighted and apprehensive. At the guesthouse it was as if I had suddenly become a real person, and for the first time people were noticing me. I was even entitled to a bucket of hot water and a jeep. I had brought a dinner jacket for such occasions, but Michael Aris told me that it

would not be necessary. The Queen, I knew, had nothing in common with other oriental monarchs I had either met, seen or heard about. This I knew because of Tesla the late Prime Minister's wife and my few contacts with Tibetan aristocracy. Women in Bhutan as in Tibet are the very opposite of what most women in the Orient are imagined to be. They are never locked up or obliged to play a secondary role. On the contrary, the Tibetans are possibly the only Asians who give women a very high place and an active role in society. Tibetan women have been important in politics and usually run households with more authority than men. In many cases within the Tibetan Himalayas entire villages are run by women, and there is nothing quite so frightening as a powerful, intelligent woman, except one who is also beautiful, like the Queen of Bhutan. In a flash I recalled with apprehension Rani Chuni, the Queen's Mother, her blood-freezing stare and impeccable poise. Then I thought of Betty-la and of her grace and charm, of Tesla, with her elegance and *savoir vivre* that would leave the most sophisticated western hostesses in the shade, and could rival the most exacting French *maîtresse de maison*. I was, therefore, slightly apprehensive. I realized that now I was going to penetrate a little way into Bhutan, only a little because in my mind I dreamed of a lot more to come beyond these restricting guesthouses. I had not come to be pampered at the Court or for a royal interview, nevertheless I was fairly nervous as I drove up in a jeep to the Gyal-mo's residence.

It was a warm evening. The small fires of caravans flickered beside the tracks in the valley and altar lights glimmered through the little windows of monasteries, oratories or private houses. A pale moon shone, throwing into black relief the mountains enclosing the dark valley, crushing it with all the mass of the Himalayas that surrounded us on every side.

However impressive and important the Queen might be, I thought, how small and insignificant she, her Court, her country and our planet is in the universe. I thought of the purgatory of Calcutta, shut out from moonlight, from the charm of dew and mist, glued in its heat, and I wondered if I was not thinking of another planet. Only science assured me that all these places were, in fact, set upon the same revolving globe, but in my mind there existed hundreds of planets in which I had lived, some bordered by pale blue sea, fringed by palm trees set upon coral sands, others

set out upon vast snow-fields nailed down by scraggy pines and laced together by the ice-covered roads that wind their way across Canada, others, like New York, of cement and brick with vertical cliff-like buildings and rivers ploughed with incessant sea traffic. In these worlds had I been the same, I wondered? Had there been any link between them outside myself? I felt I had lived as many lives as the places I had been to. Nothing from my past worlds had any significance here on this evening. I was rid of all context, my past meant nothing and indeed I felt as though I were starting life again without friends, without honours, without background, without rank – since I could hardly tell the Queen that I was not her guest.

The jeep passed under the doorway in the outer wall, down a willow-lined paved drive and stopped at the entrance to the inner wall. Barefoot servants holding pine torches loomed out of the darkness. I crossed the inner paved yard to the dancing flames. The flat stones glowed, the orange trees pranced about me and suddenly the little palace loomed ahead. In a moment I was standing in an empty room opening on to a dark staircase. As I looked round I saw some twenty barefoot men lining the walls, royal retainers, attentively waiting the royal wishes. Upstairs was the Queen. I adjusted my *kadda*, my *ashi kadda* (*ashi* means princess and an *ashi kadda* is the more elaborate variety of the ceremonial silk scarf reserved for nobility).

The Queen's Private Secretary, a roundish Tibetan dressed in an ample ko of fine silk, came down to lead me into the Queen's presence. Leaving the royal retainers, one of whom carried a huge copper chalice in which burned fragrant juniper twigs, I followed the Private Secretary into a dimly lit corridor, its floors padded with carpets and its walls reflecting red and gold designs. I was greeted by a slight fragrance reminiscent of incense, accompanied by the quiet chatter of hushed voices interwoven with the smell of American cigarettes. Abruptly I emerged into the living-room of the palace. The warm light of candles and oil lamps fluttered over an assembly of some twenty people seated upon magnificent carpets and leopard skins set upon low cushions before small, gilded, bench-like tables. These were the Queen's guests: three distinguished-looking lamas in great scarlet robes like three cardinals in an old masterpiece, four Europeans, personal friends of Her Majesty, one of her English Secretaries in Bhutanese dress

like Michael Aris, and two young Bhutanese lords. Their soft voices were slightly hushed by the carpets, the skins and the dark red beams supporting a painted and gilded ceiling. The decorated walls, half veiled in shade, gave the place an atmosphere of comfort and luxurious charm quite remote from the marble frigidity usually associated with royalty.

As my eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness I saw the Queen seated a little apart, so it seemed, from her guests at one end of the room before a gilt table on which rested two glasses. By her side sat a monk whose fine features were the incarnation of saintliness. She bade me approach and I bowed and presented my scarf while a servant relieved me of my presents, which the Queen acknowledged with a smile as she asked me to be seated by her side. Her Majesty had returned my kadda as a sign of friendship.

For a moment my embarrassment was great because suddenly I had before me not only the Queen of Bhutan, the land of my dreams, but an exceedingly beautiful woman. Her Majesty wore a Tibetan gown, a long, narrow, sleeveless dress. The bodice was of bright silk with an open neckline and the blouse underneath had ample flowing sleeves. Unlike the women of Bhutan, who from custom wear their hair short in a boyish cut, the Queen's hair was done in Tibetan style, long and braided with the braids wound around the crown of her head in the fashion so unflattering to German fräuleins yet so becoming to the fineness of oriental features. This concession to Tibetan dress and hairstyle was a reminder that the Queen was, in part, Sikkimese, her mother Rani Chuni being the sister of the late Maharaja of Sikkim, and in Sikkim Tibetan customs and dress prevail among the aristocracy. All the Himalayan aristocracy has intermarried considerably and looks to Lhasa for refinement and customs. The Queen's features had that porcelain quality more commonly associated in the West with Japanese women, yet her bearing and her disarmingly sincere smile had nothing of the artificial composure so characteristic of Japan.

The Queen's charming appearance could not entirely conceal a strong character which beyond doubt could, when provoked, be as rigid and frightening as her mother's.

By the time I had nervously exchanged a few banal words with the Queen, I easily discovered that we shared a common passion

for Bhutan. I explained to Her Majesty the long road I had taken to reach her kingdom, how because of Bhutan I had been led to travel all across the Tibetan regions of the Himalayas. Her Majesty, like Tesla, her sister-in-law, and her late brother, Jigme Dorji, spoke perfect English. She even knew a few words of French, and informed me she had often visited France, although I knew that Switzerland was the European country she preferred. Indeed Switzerland is similar to Bhutan in so many ways: in its scenery and in some aspects of its political position. The Queen was most eloquent and enthusiastic about all that was going on in Bhutan and the minor technological revolution that was just beginning under the wise rule of her husband. Grapes had been planted in Thimbu and the experiment seemed encouraging. Thimbu and Paro were adjusting to cars and trucks and what they meant to the local economy. Our conversation went on to Bhutan's history, which for scholars in the West is still veiled in mystery. The Queen and the saintly monk at her side enlightened me about battles fought and won against the Tibetans in the seventeenth century and about the tumultuous wars that until so recently had pitted dzong against dzong as each lonely valley of the land had sought to conquer the others. As in a dream, the monk (speaking in Tibetan) and the Queen brought to life for me the fascinating past still so closely linked with the present and gave a vivid meaning to the great fort of Paro that gleamed in the moonlight through the windows of the Queen's palace. In the course of the conversation the name of Punaka came up often, as it had until recently been the capital. Such names as Tongsa, Jakar and Tashigang, forts in Eastern Bhutan, were mentioned, names which spelt for me all the mystery of the inaccessible parts of the country lost behind the great Black Mountains. I explained how I hoped to be allowed to visit all these places, but my indirect plea was met by silence.

After a while I left the Queen's side, but not before I had been offered a drink. I asked for orange juice although excellent whisky was being served. At the Queen's side I sipped this orange juice from the southern hills of Bhutan and thought that here was my revenge for that bitter glass that Rani Chuni had offered me ten years before. In those ten years I had at least learned the meaning of patience and suddenly I knew that it had all been worth while.

Rising, the Queen gave us all the signal to go to the table. The

warm informality of the assembly and the charm of the Queen, and the whisky no doubt, helped breed an atmosphere of intimacy. Nothing that evening, so it seemed to me, was exotic or unusual, while in reality everything was incredible from the furniture to the guests, that included an old Danish couple along with a Franco-American gentleman from Paris, intimate friends of the Queen. People whose mere presence here seemed to me as remarkable as the folds of the gowns of the great abbots. The meal was, perforce, a candlelight dinner, which we ate seated upon chairs, the only apparent concession to western customs apart from the whisky and the knives and forks. It was my good fortune to sit next to a charming Japanese botanist who had been living in Paro for two years under the Queen's protection, studying the local plants and agriculture. He was I discovered the only foreigner to have travelled extensively in Bhutan. I gathered from him much information about central and eastern Bhutan, areas I hoped to be allowed to visit. More than ever, I dreamed of setting out into those forbidden valleys, where according to Pemberton there were innumerable forts and countless monasteries of great interest. Of eastern Bhutan the Japanese botanist was full of fearful accounts of the difficulty of the terrain, and how different were the people, their architecture and their dialects.

I left the palace, anxious to quit Paro and Thimbu and set out alone east. Yet I had trouble in chasing away my deep fears that I would never be allowed to do this. Even if the Queen had been kind, I was still far from having royal patronage and, in fact, all the Queen ever did for me was to invite me to join a party of her guests who were setting out the following day to visit the cliff-top monastery of Taktsang.

'You'll have good ponies and plenty of servants,' Michael Aris assured me and went on to describe the amazing pageantry which accompanies the Queen's own journeys and how a week before my arrival he had travelled with the Queen to the valley of Ha, the valley immediately next to that of Paro and closest to the western border of Bhutan. On this trip it had taken the royal party two days to cover fifteen miles. The Queen, and her guests, were accompanied by no less than a hundred officials and retainers. In each village the party was joined by groups of peasants.

Magnificent tents were erected for the nightly halts, and before raising them land was cleared and planted with flowers. By day the royal route was bordered with little trees cut from the forest and stuck in the ground to make a shaded avenue for the party. Monks left their adjacent monasteries in ceremonial robes to greet the Queen as she passed. Everywhere she went it was a cause for celebration.

I was not surprised then when ten retainers and as many horses and mules, along with one of the Queen's personal servants, took me and some of the Queen's guests up the valley of Paro to the foot of the steep cliff on a long climb to Tiger Nest monastery. Jean Claude White had visited this monastery in 1906 and there is little I can add to his description:

'The main temple is built on what is practically a crack in a perpendicular rock over 2,000 feet high. It is unquestionably the most picturesque group of buildings I have seen . . . The only approach is by a narrow path and a series of steps where a foot misplaced would precipitate you to the bottom, a thousand feet below.'

My visit had been little different except that the Queen had made sure that we should be taken special care of, and every half hour of climb was broken by a halt during which cold orange juice was served. When we reached the monastery we were given a four-course meal of Chinese rice and eggs, various kinds of meat and chicken and curries and excellent peaches. For me the picnic had too much the feel of a western Sunday outing and my companions took away all the quiet and charm which was the true meaning of Taktsang, a place made for worship, a temple built upon air so as to help men meditate on the fragility of life.

Every morning during my five-day stay in Paro I set out to visit a different monastery or fort, mostly strolling alone, occasionally with a pony accompanied by a surly youngster. In the course of these trips I visited the great fortress of Dugye Dzong. Twenty years ago this mighty fortress that lies at the head of the Paro valley and guards the access to Bhutan from the Chimbi valley of Tibet had burned down. All that remains is the battered crenellated towers and mighty walls cresting a rugged rocky outcrop on the floor at the valley's head. Five round towers descend from the rocky ledge protecting a covered passageway that was

once the way down from the fortress to a well on the valley floor. Gigantic weeping cypresses stood around the fortress shading a few chalet-like houses belonging to serfs and retainers. I also, of course, visited the dzong of Paro itself, a gigantic, impregnable, rectangular building enclosing countless chapels and assembly halls. The workmanship was of the finest, particularly in the grand assembly hall. Built at the end of the sixteenth century, this vast fortress boasts an assembly hall 'larger than the one in the Potala at Lhasa' according to White, and I had to agree that until then I had never seen a building so majestic.

On the sixth day I set off for Thimbu once more, leaving behind the fairy valley of Paro, the beautiful Queen, the impressive drawbridge, the fort, the majestic towers of Dugye Dzong and the dream-like silhouette of Tiger Nest. Archers were competing at the foot of the fortress when, not without great difficulty, I secured a jeep back to the capital.

On my return to Thimbu I went to see the King's Deputy Chief Secretary again. His back still ached from the elephant fall and he announced that he was himself about to leave for the interior. Again I pressed my wish to go to the East and to support my request I recalled hopefully that I had mentioned the matter to the Queen. My heart sank when Dasho Duncho began to explain that of course I did not realize, but I would have to excuse the fact and understand that there were no guesthouses, hotels or any tourist facilities so that travel in the interior was quite impossible. I immediately again tried to correct such misgivings, explaining my dislike for guesthouses, hotels and tourists and that I was not only prepared but actually dying to set out on foot with a servant and to sleep anywhere.

'I have a folding bed,' I explained hopefully. Dasho smiled. 'And a tent,' I added. 'And medicines and a primus stove and everything.' I thought that maybe I had persuaded my man, but with the obstinacy of one who has a hide strong enough to stand an elephant fall he seemed to persist in thinking that any idea of my going east would be out of the question. My heart sank and I embarked on a horrific description of my travels to Mustang. When I had finished the Dasho adjusted his sword without saying a word.

'Just to Bumthang,' I pleaded. 'To Tongsa and Bumthang. I could visit your home village!'

This brought a slight reaction. 'I will be going to hot springs,' said the Dasho, 'four days' walk from my village.'

Hot springs. I remembered Vichy, then thought: How delightful it must be! A spa good for elephant falls. . . .

'You will have to have a cook,' said the Dasho. 'This will be difficult. You see, nobody in Bhutan knows how to cook for a European, we do not have Sherpas here as in Nepal.'

'Anyone will do,' I said, recalling that even a Sherpa, after years with a British expedition, is no cook, at best having mastered the art of opening tins. Suddenly I recalled there was a Sherpa in Thimbu – one of the cooks at the guesthouse.

'Could he come with me?'

To this suggestion, and against all probability, Dasho's face lit up; he would try and arrange that he come along.

'You will also need a *kashag*.'

'A *kashag*?' I asked. (In Tibet *kashag* is the name for the government.)

Dasho went on to explain: 'It is what we call a road letter to the lords of the fortresses you will visit *en route*. You cannot go anywhere without one.'

I left in great excitement. It seemed that I would really be allowed to leave, maybe in a few days the Dasho had said. Back at the bungalow I remembered that Dasho himself was leaving in a few days – what if he forgot?

He did not forget and two days later I was called to his office. I rushed to the dzong. By now it had become for me what it was for all Bhutanese, the symbol of power, the seat of all authority in the land. I looked at it with awe and apprehension, rather as one looks at a police car at the side of the road. In the dzong were blended all the elements which composed the realm of Bhutan. Here, in the dark rooms half underground, prisoners lay chained to the walls by their feet, shackled in steel, mouldering in the name of the King's laws written in accordance with the moral edicts of fearsome tantric divinities.

I passed the guard and turned up the stairs, through the curtain. Out of the window I could see monks running to their sacred duties, serfs toiling in silence, orderlies with swords, ministers with red sashes as the dzong bustled with activity.

Dasho smiled as I came in. 'I have the kashag,' he said, handing me an envelope.

'Here also are the wireless messages I have sent to Wangdu Photrang, Punaka, Tongsa and Jakar dzongs (Bumthang).'

I read the cables:

> 'Mr Peissel, a French national and independent visitor to Bhutan, is to travel and visit your dzong, please kindly give him any assistance he may need.'

I could hardly believe my eyes. The Dasho then handed me the kashag letter: 'This you must present to all the Trimpons [Lords of the Law on your route.]'

The letter, written in Tibetan and sealed with the royal seal showing two dragons framing a symbolic thunderbolt, read:

> 'Mr Peissel is a French national and independent visitor to Bhutan. Please give him transport facilities. He has the right to requisition a riding horse or mule for himself and such pack animals or porters as he may require. Please assist him on his journey and provide him with stores and food according to his needs at government rates.'

'Without this letter you would not be able to get food or transport in the interior,' explained the Secretary. 'The only food available is that in the government granaries of the dzongs and the peasants will not part with food for money.'

I now had the magic sesame, the letter of travel, that document the Tibetans called a *lam yig* and without which all Himalayan travel is impossible. For lack of a *lam yig* Sven Heddin spent nine years wandering in the wastes of Tibet covering thousands of miles dodging government posts always in the end to be turned back from his goal, Lhasa. Without a *lam yig* you are as good as dead in the Himalayas. Such are the ways of a well-administered kingdom where lords rule from castles.

This explains how Bhutan and Tibet have managed so successfully to repel all foreigners and remain secret kingdoms only visited by the very few fortunate enough to secure a letter of requisition or those who manage, in disguise, to slip in and wander around without being caught. For indeed there are few or no kingdoms in Asia as well administered as Tibet or the Land of the Dragon and I knew already that it was impossible to escape

the attention of the Lords of the Land who all wanted me to produce my credentials on sight. Instead of our western 'how do you do', in the Himalayas one asked: 'Who are you?' The kashag that now lay on Dasho Sangye's desk was my passport, one that would be required at every moment and without which I could not hope for so much as to eat.

I was ready to jump with joy, when I remembered that I would like to cross the entire land so as to leave not one corner of Bhutan unvisited. After all, I said to myself, if I have waited ten years I could not now afford to leave one stone unturned in Bhutan. I remembered the Bhutanese reputation for diplomacy, so with a sly smile I explained to Dasho Sangye:

'Once I am in Bumthang I will be half across Bhutan. Rather than walk all the way back here, could I not just as easily go on to Tashigang and the far eastern provinces?'

Dasho Sangye rubbed his back. He did not quite seem to follow my logic.

'From Bumthang,' I explained, 'if I carried on I would reach Tashigang just as quickly as if I had had to come all the way back. I could then leave for India from Bhutan's south-eastern border into Assam.'

There was a silence, then the Deputy Chief smiled. 'It would be a very long and tiresome journey, you know.'

I agreed with him. 'Well, I am not sure, of course, that I could get as far as Tashigang, but I can try,' I added meekly.

Indeed I realized that what I was planning to do was nothing less than to walk over four hundred miles across the most barren, rugged and unknown part of the Himalayas.

'You must realize that it is the monsoon now. The road is very wet and the rivers very high.'

I had forgotten the monsoon and what this meant to the mule trails, the little paths and the mighty torrents which crashed down the hills sweeping away fields and villages, bridges and tracks in their mad rush for the plains. Eastern Bhutan, I had been told, was the wettest part of all the Himalayas, and I remembered Cherrapunji, sixty miles from Bhutan's eastern borders, where it had in exceptional years rained twenty-two metric tons of water in three months. The monsoon had just begun. Fortunately, I did not know then that 1968 was to be the worst and heaviest monsoon of the century. Twenty-two tons of water and I did not even

own an umbrella! I dared not think what effect this might have on four hundred miles of footpaths up and over the most rugged mountains of the eastern Himalayas.

'Well,' I said, 'just in case, could you write down the name of Tashigang on my permit?'

Against all probability Dasho Duncho added the names of Lhuntse and Tashigang to the kashag. It was evident that he did not believe I would ever get so far. I was filled with joy. Although I doubted whether I could manage to cross the entire land alone, at least I now knew that I was allowed to do so.

'There is,' said Dasho Duncho, 'a radio transmitter in the fortress of Tashigang. If you do get there I will arrange for you to cross Bhutan's eastern border into India.'

I remembered suddenly that my 'inner line' permit would expire in fifteen days, long before I could hope to cross the country, even before I could reach Bumthang in fact. Trembling, I mentioned this, but now it seemed I had a firm friend in Dasho Duncho. The Bhutanese, I realized, were not like the Indians. Bureaucracy had not made its sultry inroads into the dzongs of the Dragon King.

'You can stay as long as you choose,' said Dasho with a smile. 'We are an independent country.'

It was pouring when I left the dzong and again I had no jeep, but I hardly noticed the rain on my face, the rain soaking my blue suit, my shoes and my body. My mind was filled with excitement and a faint tinge of anguish as I hugged the letter in my inner pocket. I had now overcome, or so I thought, all political and diplomatic barriers. Suddenly I was faced with having to pass from dreams to action.

On my return to the guesthouse I got undressed and lay on my bed. My mind whizzed about furiously; everything seemed changed. I suddenly noticed my bags. I could hardly believe it was true – I was off, about to bury myself in the mysterious labyrinth of interior Bhutan, the true Bhutan of my dreams, that dark spot on the map I had contemplated so many times in my nightmares, that forbidden territory that had haunted my nights and days for ten years. The rain pattered on the tin roof of the bungalow. Soon that roof would be only the frail cloth of my tent, I thought, and I would be launched like a small ship upon a monstrous sea of jungle-covered peaks, of deep ravines, of frothing torrents,

crawling along ledges, down gullies, up endless slopes like an ant wandering amid a petrified tempest drenched by torrents of rain. And now, for the first time, I began to doubt whether I would be able to adapt to the 'dissimilar conditions of atmospheric influences'. Boileau, I recalled, had had a party of one hundred and twenty, and had been well equipped. He had been clever enough to choose the most favourable time of the year but in spite of this it had taken him over two months to cover the distance from Tashigang to Thimbu. Moreover, he had lived a hundred and thirty years ago in an era when there were no jeeps, no planes and no airconditioning to weaken a man's constitution, yet he remarked that: 'the whole of Bhutan presents a succession of the most lofty and rugged mountains on the surface of the globe'. Nothing in the intervening years had changed this fact, or rendered easier the land I would now have to cross in my turn. The difficult terrain, Captain Pemberton had explained, obliged him to take two days' rest for every day of walking. I now read his report over again, thinking how strange it was that the only existing guide book, if one could call it a guide book, should be a one-hundred-and-thirty-year-old manuscript.

Jean Claude White, like Pemberton, had had a large escort of trained Indian soldiers and even took along a musical band on two of his visits to Bhutan. I could not hope to equal the material advantages of these travellers or even supply the minor requisites which I had, in the past, considered the bare essentials for Himalayan travel. I did not even possess a good pair of walking shoes as I had not dared to presume that I would be allowed to roam to any great extent inside Bhutan. The few other foreigners since White who had dared to travel in Bhutan beyond the reach of jeeps had done so as royal guests, which in Bhutan I now knew had entitled them to red carpet service, access to royal ponies, to trained cooks from India, European food, orange juice and the unanimous support of all the local lords. In two weeks I had found out that, on the contrary, I as an independent visitor would be given little or no assistance or sympathy. On the other hand this was what I truly liked and wanted. I knew now that most Bhutanese spoke reasonably good Tibetan and that I could get along entirely on my own. I would have no interpreter or companion and so would be able to get to know the Bhutanese better than any traveller before me.

It is, I was aware, one of the greatest luxuries of our century to have to walk for days and months as a means of transport. I was to travel beyond the realm of machinery in a land without preconceived ideas of and reactions to westerners, and without those prejudices that inevitably plague all contacts between Europeans and the local population in most parts of the world.

Such thoughts, though, did not dispel my small twinges of fear. I recalled the hazards of my previous journeys and so was better able to contemplate the inevitable dangers of travelling alone in the Himalayas. The slightest illness, the smallest fall, I knew, could mean death. Fevers and illnesses of all kinds from smallpox to plague are still common in Bhutan, a land where leprosy is the greatest killer, where malaria has never been checked and vaccination is unknown, a country where there are only two doctors for one million souls, a young Indian physician just out of medical school living in Thimbu and a German missionary setting up a leprosarium. There were two doctors in the whole country but, of course, none in the valleys and regions I planned to visit. I tried not to dwell on these thoughts, or on the thought of all the strenuous physical exercise the journey would involve.

I had always dreamed of living in fortresses with arrogant lords, of sleeping with the serfs and slaves, of praying with monks and sweating with porters. I had always wanted to turn back the clock to that fairy-tale life I had envisaged based on children's stories written to provide an escape from the dullest of lives, the one we have to live, dull because it is inescapable. Now, it seemed that once again my fantasies would prove true, as beyond doubt living for months alone in the great forts and monasteries of Bhutan could not fail to exceed my wildest wishes. I could hardly imagine the interior of a kingdom where, even in the capital, no western newspaper ever penetrated to remind the King's archers that somewhere people were pointing a steel arrow at the moon.

There was no one to whom I could turn to dispel my fears. The would-be explorer is rather like a person wilfully entering a labour camp. He will have only himself to blame for the unpleasantness he invites and I was now entirely responsible for my present situation. To find courage I re-read the short list of diseases I would not be allowed to catch. Those for which I had been vaccinated. I checked also the list of medicines I was taking

along, a list so much shorter than the one I knew I should have had. But one was always overburdened with the paraphernalia considered essential when in reality there is no place in the world where man lives in which any other man cannot live, regardless of his race. One million people lived in Bhutan so I had little doubt as to whether or not the land could support one more. But then I thought of rolling stones; if they gathered no protective moss they certainly increased the probability of a head-on crash, for moving objects are more bound to collisions than still ones. Maybe I was tempting fate once too often. I had rejoiced too often in the past at my good luck in avoiding all the classic dangers people dangled before me every time I left the beaten track. Maybe I would die in Bhutan: it would be so appropriate after all those years of dreaming. I had set the stage so there was every reason to think that I had also sealed my fate. I was very depressed, or rather certain that I would enjoy every moment of my journey, but not survive to tell the tale.

Such gloomy ideas, which are so easily dispelled when one has a companion, become intolerable when one has nobody with whom to share them. When at length I ventured to tell the cook-helper that I was rather nervous about the difficulties and dangers of the journey he simply sympathized, cheering me by saying flatly that to undertake such a long journey was indeed a most foolish and dangerous thing. This is the kind of thing said everywhere by those who stay behind, people who, like sailors on the Mediterranean coast, only set their sails when the wind has fallen.

I had to dispel such depressing considerations, because of the sheer necessity to get materially organized to leave. Regardless of what I thought, I would have to eat, sleep and dress. I also needed at least one servant, a cook or general helper. It was clear that no one person could cope with all the business involved in travelling great distances in a land where geography alone makes any move an operation involving hardship and danger and a constant state of exhaustion.

There was, as Dasho Duncho had recalled, one Sherpa in Bhutan. That is to say, one man able to appreciate a white man's habits and customs when travelling in the Himalayas.

This man, called Norbu, whom I had met on my arrival at Thimbu, was a rather unpleasant individual. However, I had no

choice. Dasho Duncho had appointed him to accompany me and so with him I got ready to leave. This involved exploring in detail the stalls of the market at Thimbu (little stands run by Tibetan refugees) in search of any objects which might be useful. These shops seemed to sell exclusively dresses, Tibetan chubas and Bhutanese kos, yak-hide boots, colourful Tibetan belts, occasional pony harnesses, wooden saddles, ceremonial white scarves, bows and arrows, prayer flags of every size and description, Tibetan tea bricks, goat bladders stuffed with rancid butter, copper bells, silver butter lamps and brocade tassels. The stalls made of old planks, gleaned from the Indian road builders' camps, were crowded along the newly built artery of what was to be Bhutan's future capital and first town. Although every object there could have found a worthy place in our museums, they had little connection with what I planned to buy. However, I had unearthed a storm lantern and some kerosene before I discovered the only true shop in Thimbu, a slightly larger wooden house which boasted the name of the Bhutan Trading Corporation. It was a government organization set up by the second brother of the late Prime Minister, a one time reincarnate lama married and gone 'black', Rim Dorje. Here I found such treasures as powdered chocolate, a pair of glorified tennis shoes and another pair for Norbu, who was already pestering me in true Sherpa fashion for baksheesh and constantly reminding me that such and such a Himalayan expedition had outfitted all the Sherpas with quilted sleeping bags, Austrian climbing boots and the latest windcheaters. Of these, fortunately, there were none, but I purchased some candles and a few pots and pans, some rope and that was all. This, added to the little material I had taken from Europe and bought in Calcutta, made up the entire practical equipment for my projected journey.

I was so eager to be off that I had fixed the date of my departure for two days later. These were two days of frantic packing, sorting clothes, sleeping bags and tent and distributing this between a steel trunk, two kit bags and three jute potato bags. At last all was ready and I looked upon Norbu in his new tennis shoes and the sweater I had given him.

'Tomorrow we leave,' I said.

Norbu smiled and then explained that he could not leave tomorrow because he was getting married. I laughed, but he was

adamant. His marriage was all arranged and he wanted me to go to the reception which was to be held in the guesthouse.

When I realized it was really true I was furious. So Norbu had been lying all along. He had never, it was evident, had the slightest intention of coming with me. I took the matter to Pasang, the sophisticate in charge of the guesthouse, the son of the Lord of the Law, supervisor of royal constructions. Pasang, as always impeccable, clean and elegant in a brand new ko, came up to the guesthouse in his jeep and explained something or other to the effect that Norbu would come but that it was all made difficult by his getting married, adding that he could leave the day after the wedding. I, rightly, did not believe a word that Pasang had said. I immediately tried to contact Dasho Duncho. After all, he had given orders that Norbu was to accompany me. On the 'phone I was told that Dasho Duncho had left for Bumthang and would be absent for two months.

I was particularly furious that Norbu should have lied to me. I was sure now that he had never had the slightest intention of coming along with me, but what angered me was his cheek in having begged me to buy him shoes and the comedy he had enacted in purchasing with me all that I needed as if he were really coming.

It seemed now that I would never leave. The following morning I got up to find Norbu busily decorating the drawing-room of the guesthouse, putting out sweets and cigarettes in little saucers and supervising the cooking of what seemed like a feast. At around twelve o'clock three jeeps pulled up at the guesthouse and out came five very handsome and distinguished Tibetans, the representative of the Dalai Lama, a fat and dignified Khamba warlord in charge of a large refugee village in northern Bhutan and three other equally sophisticated Tibetans. Then came a thin, intelligent-looking Tibetan merchant accompanied by a small beautiful girl, the bride, who seemed almost a child and with her was a lanky, Texan-looking young Tibetan in a rather dirty black gown. He was the bride's brother, Tensing. Despite my rage Norbu came and begged me to attend his wedding. I found it so comical that Norbu was actually getting married that I partially forgave him for misleading me about coming with me to eastern Bhutan. In the living-room I was seated next to the representative of the Dalai Lama and had a pleasant chat with him and the other

Tibetans, while Norbu passed round almonds, sweets and cigarettes, acting both as the bridegroom and maître d'hôtel at his own wedding. The bride sat next to me, very shyly, hiding her face in the green brocade sleeves of her dress. At a given signal, Norbu sat by her side. The Dalai Lama's representative then addressed the young couple, making a speech in soft, stern tones, explaining that marriage was for life and that as Tibetans in exile in Bhutan they had traditions to respect and a dignity to uphold. The ceremony was becoming quite moving. The child-like bride blushed and hid her face, while Norbu sat stiffly and listened attentively. When the Dalai Lama's representative had finished, the great burly Khamba spoke a few words of friendship as did one of the other Tibetans. When all the talking was over, while Norbu got up periodically to offer more sweets, the Dalai Lama's representative rose and presented the bride and groom with a ceremonial scarf and an envelope (containing, I was told, a gift of money). After this the other Tibetans in turn gave more scarves and more envelopes. Then Norbu got up and thanked everyone and gave ashi kaddas (silk scarves) to all the dignitaries, including myself. Afterwards Norbu disappeared to put the finishing touches to the banquet. I remained sitting next to the bride. Pasang, who had joined the group, suddenly turned to me and said:

'You may leave tomorrow with Tensing, the bride's brother.'

I protested immediately, but there was little I could say or do with my mouth full of sweets and my stomach soon to be contented with an exquisite Tibetan meal in the grand style, just as in the Lhasa of the good old days. I scowled at Norbu, gave his wife one of my hand-painted scarves and asked the representative what he thought of young Tensing. He told me his father was one of the best of men and called the son to his side telling him to serve me well.

In this way, I inherited Tensing, a young man of twenty-one who claimed he could cook rice, as indeed he could, though nothing else. I told him to come the following day at six.

That night I slept badly. I was worried about Tensing. He had never been east of Thimbu, spoke only Tibetan and had no idea of the dialects of the interior. Nor had he ever met a European before. On the other hand, he could not be as unpleasant as I now imagined Norbu to be.

The guesthouse looked very comfortable when I got up the next day. I felt like an astronaut about to fire the third stage of his rocket. I had come a long way since boarding a plane in Paris. The first journey had been to Calcutta and its putrid purgatory, the second to Bhutan, land locked and mysterious, haughty and unfriendly, and now I was at the point of no return, about to enter the chaos of interior Bhutan, the recesses of the world's most rugged peaks. They might have seemed awesome viewed from the plane or from the comfort of a jeep, but it would be another matter to toil over them, one's feet glued to the soil and to rediscover that travel was not simply idleness while waiting to arrive but constant expenditure of energy in which each inch was gained at the cost of sweat and worry.

At 6 a.m. Tensing knocked on the door of my room. In five minutes the kit bags were closed, the steel trunk locked and Tensing had added to my effects a quilt, his bed, and a pair of shoes.

'Are we ready?' I asked.

Tensing stared. 'I hope so,' he said.

I hoped so too.

3

The Ramjam of Punaka

IN FACT, I had never been less ready in my life.

I had briefly outlined on my map the route I planned to take. First we would set out for a place with the strange name of Wangdu Photrang, a large dzong situated some twenty miles from Thimbu at four thousand feet above sea level. A dirt track was being cleared to Wangdu Photrang. This was the first part of an ambitious project which would, in time to come, link East and West Bhutan. Because of the rains this track was officially declared to be closed to vehicles, but the day before my departure rumours circulated to the effect that the road was open. I had asked Pasang, the guesthouse attendant, to come at 7 a.m. Infuriated by the downright superior attitude of the young Bhutanese, I had made it a point of honour that he be there on the morning of my departure to place his services at my disposal. At first sight the number of my bags excluded the possibility of taking a jeep to Wangdu Photrang, so I had asked Pasang to find a truck, telling him I counted on him and considered it his duty to get one for me. At seven o'clock he had not shown up but at eight he arrived, impeccably dressed, with his Nepalese driver and good jeep. What about my truck? I asked him. He stammered some sort of excuse and said he would go down to try and find one. I watched his jeep make its way across the little wooden bridge, one of the two spanning the river which runs down the floor of the Thimbu valley. Soon the jeep returned. There were no trucks, Pasang declared, and the road to Wangdu Photrang was down in fifteen places, but maybe a jeep could get through. It would be a risk to take. 'Then I shall take your jeep,' I said crossly. Pasang smiled and said he needed his vehicle. By now I had become over-sensitive about jeeps and never being allowed to use them. It is my motto never to walk when I can drive and never to drive when I can fly. If I was ready to cross Bhutan on foot, I was not

prepared to walk along a road to Wangdu Photrang. At least I would go as far as physically possible by jeep.

Here Tensing came to the rescue. He knew somebody in the bazaar who had a jeep but warned me that it would be very expensive, nearly fifty dollars for twenty miles. I thought this slightly excessive, but I knew I would have no choice and after all I was more than two hundred miles from the first small petrol pump, jeeps in Bhutan being filled from loose drums. I agreed and Tensing set out at a run down to the bazaar, while Pasang, as usual, escaped any form of work by departing with a smile saying that everything would be all right. I thanked him and told him that if it was it would not really be his doing. He drove off convinced it was a good thing such an unpleasant and difficult non-guest was about to leave.

Somehow I felt I would never leave, but I was wrong. Half an hour later Tensing appeared seated next to a handsome Tibetan, a Khamba of some twenty years of age, driving a grey jeep. The steel cases and bags were piled in the back and reached up to the canvas roof. Tensing and I got in the front and suddenly I knew that we were really off. Thimbu vanished round a bend behind us as we made our way down the valley. I did not even turn round to see the dzong before it went out of sight.

It was a bright morning. The sun was shining and melting the last wisps of mist that clung to the pine-trees. Birds sang and ponies galloped beside the road. Below us clusters of houses nestled by the river's edge, tiny hamlets surrounded by prayer flags fluttering gold in the morning light. There were villages of little chequered Tudor houses, white and brown, and occasional baronial halls, three storeys high, surrounded by courtyards where lay oxen and clusters of goats and sheep.

The wind beat on my face. I closed my eyes. I had never been so happy. Decidedly, true bliss, for me, is only to be found in movement. I felt free as I had never felt free before. My troubles were all behind me, or so it seemed. My links with people, places, governments, houses and objects were broken. I was now my own self-contained universe. I could sleep where I pleased and do what I pleased, or so at least I thought. I began chatting to Tensing and the driver, surprised at how normal and natural I now found speaking Tibetan. I could hardly believe that just over a month before I had been sun-bathing in Spain, speeding through the

waves at the wheel of a motor boat, talking of skin-diving with friends and of pretty girls in bathing suits on sandy beaches. There in Europe, when I occasionally mentioned that I spoke Tibetan, people had laughed. Now I laughed at that other world, which seemed so unreal. I had drifted beyond the grasp of my other self.

'Motor di la shita yapo du.' This is a really good car, said the young driver, the Khamba, explaining that he could do a full fifty miles an hour. He had to use such words as 'motor' and 'mili' for miles. For him it was like talking of magic. I realized that Tensing and he, like all young Tibetans and Bhutanese, were embarking on a great adventure. For them cars, roads and the few signs of western technology were as much an adventure as sleeping in a tent or living in monasteries was to me. Our conversation soon drifted to Tibet. The driver spoke of Kham and of the terrific horses his father had owned, of the cool, cold plains and of the Chinese. Tensing spoke of his home village of Tromo, just on the other side of Bhutan's northern border. They both agreed that people were kinder in Tibet than in Bhutan. We all agreed that the Bhutanese were a difficult lot. Tensing then described to the driver the marvels he had seen at the guesthouse, the carpets and the bath, and the young Khamba listened amazed.

After about half an hour we turned suddenly right, leaving the Indian road for a dirt track. Above us, looming on a steep rise, was the massive feudal fortress of Simtoka guarding the point where a lateral stream came down to the Thimbu river. I had visited this fortress a few days earlier. In it lived over two hundred young boys, monks and students. It had been transformed into a school of sorts where pupils in red robes and black kos learned the art of engraving in reverse on pine boards the Tibetan texts of the sacred doctrine. Four storeys high, the fort rose around a central tower with vast chapels on three levels decorated with bronze and gold-covered images of Buddhist saints flanked by figures of attendant divinities of very ancient origin standing larger than life. We now headed east and the narrow dirt track soon became a pit of mud. The young Khamba advanced slowly in first gear. Huge trees crowded the track that wound its way up the narrow valley. Soon we were entirely enclosed in a deep forest of pines from which we caught occasional glimpses of the valley below us, looking like a Canadian travel-poster landscape. I was

struck by the way in which this one small track gave this part of Bhutan such a civilized appearance. There is something that lanes and roads do to a landscape which is similar to the effect on scenery of gigantic throughways. They seem to remodel the countryside, giving it all a uniform appearance. I felt as though I was perhaps making my way to a large estate lost in the woods or to some little hunting lodge. The muddy track twisted around fallen trees and over log bridges with little streams bubbling underneath. We passed through patches of light and shade as we climbed slowly ever higher above the valley. Wild flowers crowded up to the road where it emerged from the dense wood into little clearings. One of these turned out to be a sloping meadow of vivid green spattered with bursts of buttercups and other wild flowers. A wooden fence reminiscent of a New England homestead bordered this pasture where large black and white cattle grazed. Beyond a doubt this part of Bhutan was the most unexotic part of Asia I had ever seen. I could have been in Switzerland, or indeed anywhere in the temperate lands of the West. When, suddenly, I caught sight of a small chalet, its wooden roof weighted down by large stones, I felt sure that I was soon to reach some Swiss ski-ing resort. Only when the prayer flags signalled the perimeter of a larger chalet-like monastery did I feel sure that I was in Bhutan.

I wanted to stop, but the driver insisted that we carry on. Our pace had become exceedingly slow and, even discounting possible obstacles, many hours' driving lay ahead. A few miles farther on we came upon our first landslide, which all but obliterated the road. Keeling over dangerously, roaring with all four wheels, the jeep slithered across to the other side. The track continued upwards. The trees were taller now, huge Douglas firs with the first lacework of weeping moss visible on them. We were entering the lands of eternal mists at ten thousand feet. Occasional boulders blocked our path but the three of us managed to roll them away. We were evidently the first vehicle to pass that morning.

We then penetrated the dark fronds of a damp forest where all the trees seemed like a dark green cascade of moss clad in damp festoons reminiscent of the Spanish moss of Louisiana. Little streams bubbled down over the road, heaping it with stones and mud. After endless bends we reached a pass. Here was a little shack, a cluster of prayer flags and two long walls, walls inscribed

with the ritualistic Tibetan Buddhist prayer, *O mani padme hum*, a magic incantation with no meaning in the spoken language, but whose every syllable is heavy with sacred implications. Some have tried to translate this phrase and have rendered the meaning as 'hail thou jewel of the lotus flower'. But if, in fact, this sentence is praise to Buddha, the jewel of the lotus, the syllables themselves have no evident meaning in the Tibetan language.

We stopped at the pass. Tensing and the driver went to have a cup of bitter tea in the little hut, while I stayed outside contemplating the mist that trailed about the countless white, blue and red rags, the old prayer flags hung by pious travellers in the days before jeeps, when to reach such a pass was the result of prolonged effort involving considerable risks. In the one year since the road's construction all the effort and toil of attaining the col had disappeared; and with the effort some of the religious sentiment that it had inspired had also vanished.

The valley on the other side was veiled in mist. My heart beat faster at the thought that here lay the first of the inner valleys of Bhutan, the valley of the Ma-chu.

We had climbed up the northern face of the mountain to the col. Now we set out down the southern face, more exposed to the sun and the rain. Here the trees were truly gigantic. Walnut and oak mingled with rhododendrons and pines larger than any I had seen elsewhere. Boileau and White and all other travellers had been struck by the Bhutanese forests which are certainly among the finest in the world, virgin clusters of gigantic trees spreading their immense boughs, lost in the mist, with roots entangled in the rock of the precipitous hillsides. Slowly we descended the steep loops of the rocky ledge blasted from the side of cliffs overhanging an invisible canyon. On two occasions we passed caravans slowly and painfully toiling their way up. After two hours we emerged on to the upper slopes with their cultivated patches of corn. Our descent was very rapid. In a matter of hours the vegetation became tropical. Trees bloomed with brilliant orange flowers, banana leaves appeared between the great trees and ferns taller than a man began to cluster at the edges of the road. We passed a few abandoned houses whose large eastern walls had been riddled by erosion and then we sighted terraced rice fields. On reaching the first of these we came to an abrupt halt. For three hundred yards the road disappeared under

tons of yellow clay. The hillside had slid down to the foot of a precipice. Some thirty workers were attempting to clear the road. Caravans of ponies were halted, and half capsized in the quagmire of mud, a command car of ancient make blocked the semblance of a path which the workers had been trying to clear.

For two hours we watched as with that exasperating nonchalance characteristic of so many Hindus an Indian road contractor tried in vain to organize the workers to push and pull the truck which had stuck axle-deep in the landslide. Tensing and the driver, like myself, were amazed at the man's inefficiency. Exasperated, the three of us decided to take over and, latching on to some workers, we managed to drag the truck a few yards. The Indian driver then got out of the vehicle frightened that the truck would roll over the cliff and refused to co-operate further. Long parleys followed while the caravans slithered up the landslide on their way. It was an hour later when the driver was eventually coaxed back into his vehicle and hauled backwards down the landslide. No sooner was he out of the way than the young Tibetan gave a remarkable demonstration of his driving skill by taking his jeep through the mud, slipping dangerously to within inches of the lip of the cliff. All the workers cheered and we carried on. I was amazed at the dexterity and ease with which this young man mastered his vehicle and had trouble in believing that he had been born in a tent upon the windswept, barren plains of Kham in a wheelless world of horsemen and brigands.

Wangdu Photrang being at only four thousand feet, it was a sheer six thousand that we descended from the pass to enter a stifling hot universe and eventually burst out into the barren valley of the Ma-chu. It was as if we had changed lands. This valley is subject to a strange natural phenomenon. Closed to the south by damp jungles, bordered on all sides by great rain forests, its low level and seclusion, surrounded by high mountains, have made it a barren desert island in a world of water and rain. Not a tree could be seen on its floor where red earth showed through scanty grass burnt by the sun. A dry, burning wind raged up the valley blowing clouds of dust up behind us. As we took the last bend the fortress of Wangdu Photrang came suddenly into sight. A huge, tall, narrow building, it stretched two hundred yards along a ridge dominating the confluence of the Ma-chu and another river. At its foot stood an elaborate bridge formed by

three towers painted red and white from which huge beams sprang, cantilever fashion, spanning the river. This fort has always played a great role in the history of Bhutan, commanding as it does the way to India and that of possible invaders to the old capital, Punaka, situated twelve miles upstream. What surprised me most here in temperate Bhutan was that the foot of the fortress was defended by a hell of cactus planted as a defence against all enemy approach up the sheer hill to the great wall of the fort.

The small road ended here by the river and with it our link with the rest of the world. By means of this road I felt one could communicate with the entire world, but here died the most advanced post of our wheeled civilization; beyond this point the marvels of Ford had no meaning. Wangdu Photrang was the new frontier of our modern world. Beyond it stretched the immensity of our planet reduced to the dimensions of man, to the pace of his feet and the size of his body.

I went straight up to the dzong. Tensing reminded me to present my kashag, the government letter. One entered the fort by a solitary doorway at the top of a steep flight of steps.

Passing between the thick doorposts, I emerged into a vast paved courtyard. There by the door sat a man, his feet bound in steel chains. He smiled at me. A lazy dog got up from the empty yard where the sun beat down with incredible force. There was nobody in sight. Eventually a youthful monk appeared and I asked him in Tibetan where the Trimpon was. The child led me out of the gate and down the flight of steps towards a small, low house nestled at the entrance to the fort. As we approached a huge, burly man, built like a wrestler, his fat, round head shaven to the bone, came out. A long white scarf was draped round his neck and at his side hung a silver sword. Without so much as a welcoming smile, he asked if I had a kashag. I handed over my letter. He read it slowly, and while doing so was joined by two retainers. Having read the letter, he folded it, put it back into the envelope and asked me in Tibetan what I wanted. I explained that I would like to spend the night in the fort and some assistance in assembling provisions and porters for my journey overland. The burly man grunted and one of his retainers led me back into the dzong. Tensing started taking the bags inside but a man with a blue sash over his ko reminded him that he could not enter the fort without a white ceremonial scarf round his body. Tensing

had none and only after borrowing one was he allowed, with the soldier's help, to carry up my bags.

The courtyard was surrounded by a two-storey gallery built of great beams. In the yard the retainer handed me over to an elderly monk. We clambered up a steep flight of stairs, worn smooth by the bare feet of countless monks, to the first-floor gallery. Innumerable doors on wooden hinges opened on to it. One of these led us into a bare, whitewashed room.

'You may sleep here,' said the monk. 'The public kitchens are downstairs. For provisions you must see the Nyerchen [the chief steward].' Every dzong, I now knew, was headed by a Trimpon, the Lord of the Law, with, as second in command, a Nyerchen. The Lord of the Law administered justice in the district around the dzong. The Nyerchen saw to the levy of taxes in kind and the storage and redistribution of the goods amassed in the King's name. It was he who held the keys to the royal granaries and to the immense dark storeroom of the dzong.

The chief steward was away, we were told, so we could get no food before evening.

Soon I was seated in the barren room whose two unglazed windows could be closed by a sliding wooden shutter. From these windows I could see down the cliffs to the river below. A warm, howling wind which soon grew very much colder rattled the shutter. Tensing sat down beside me and an eerie silence set in. I felt like a child on his first day at boarding school. Suddenly I realized that this would be my life from now on: strange places inhabited by even stranger people and this young Tibetan, Tensing, as my one constant companion.

I looked at him more closely, wondering what was going on in his mind. Who was he and what was he like? More even than landscapes, people are fascinating and mysterious. I knew nothing of Tensing, yet now I was to share everything with him. How would we get along? At a second look, he was not as thin as I had thought but, in fact, was quite strong and well built. On the night of his sister's wedding he had shaved his head for our journey and this small detail struck me as favourable, proof that he was aware we would be on the road for a long time. I myself had forgotten that I would not be seeing a barber for months. So far Tensing had proved eager to please me, having cared well for my bags. He also seemed honest, since he had agreed that his new brother-in-

law, Norbu, ought to pay me for the shoes I had bought him. At first sight, I infinitely preferred Tensing to Norbu. Tensing's face was pleasant, indeed handsome, except for a slightly bloodshot look about the eyes which, at first glance, gave him a rather sinister air. I thought he had probably been ill. He was cleaner now than on the day of the wedding. Unfortunately, he had changed his Tibetan *chuba* for black trousers and a ruffled white shirt, which gave him a rather modern look. I knew now that his little bundle of clothes contained one pair of socks, another shirt and an old quilted khaki zip jacket which had seen better days. These things together with a pair of boots, he kept in a navy blue canvas bag with B. S. Bradley written on it in white letters. No doubt the bag had belonged to an American soldier, had been stolen in Calcutta, peddled in Kalimpong and purchased by some Bhutanese merchant or Tibetan trader to be carried on a pony to Thimbu. I wondered who B. S. Bradley was, and whether he was dead. The bag could hardly have been from the wreck of a plane, although I knew that during the war the first American clothes, and indeed the first western objects to enter Eastern Tibet, had been taken from the wreckage of the hundreds of planes which came to grief in the Himalayas and in Kham flying the Hump from near the foothills of Bhutan in Assam to China during the last world war. I had once met a Tibetan who had found a whole wad of American dollar bills in this way, and, not knowing what they were, had sold them for practically nothing to a Khamha merchant going to China. B. S. Bradley . . . What was his Christian name? That insignificant bag had now become part of the world of Tensing. In it he kept his boots and the unfamiliar western clothes he felt obliged to wear to honour me.

A few days later he told me that his father had given him a long lecture, telling him to serve me well and obey me and that this was an excellent chance for him to grow up and to learn the ways of the West. It did not take me more than a few hours to realize that Tensing was not of the servant breed. His wretched condition as a refugee and the fact that his father ran a small Tibetan tea-and-beer stall in Thimbu had not destroyed all evidence that his family had been one of high standing in Tibet. He could read a little and his manners were, if not sophisticated, at least more sophisticated than could be expected of a cook even in Europe. He would, I felt, prove a good companion even if a bad cook.

Tensing, like myself, was very excited on this first day. He marvelled at my kit, the Bunsen burner I had brought from Calcutta, my clothes and my quilted jacket. He touched all my belongings with inquisitive fingers, feeling for the first time such new materials as nylon and aluminium and looking in amazement at my meagre medical kit. On seeing my medicine he immediately bared his leg and showed me a horrible sore, asking me to cure it. He was delighted, like a child, when I bandaged him up.

Since the Nyerchen had not arrived and we had no rice with us, we could not eat. I therefore went over what we had in the way of provisions and equipment, teaching Tensing where everything should be packed on future occasions. In an attempt to make the Bunsen burner work I discovered that, although it was new, the washer was broken and efforts at making a new one were vain, so that eventually Tensing and I made our way to the public kitchen, a huge dark room beneath the fort, its walls lined with rows of little clay fireplaces. Here all the young monks came to cook their food. One such monk on seeing us offered me a copper bowl of water saying that, as he had finished, we could use his fire, which was still burning. Others, children barely ten years old, came and gave us pieces of wood. The news of our presence in the fort and particularly in the kitchens having spread to everyone as if by magic, three dozen monks were soon crowding into the smoky room to look us over. The younger ones smiled and laughed, rubbing their noses as they commented on mine, so long and large by local standards. Although they might occasionally have set eyes on other foreigners, they marvelled at my clothes and Tensing explained that I was not an Indian but a very learned man from the West. The word French meant nothing to Tensing or to the monks. I left Tensing to do his job and went out into the open. One young monk volunteered to take me around the dzong. Following him, I visited various chapels around the main courtyard and then passing through another gate penetrated two other narrow interior courtyards. These, like the first, were surrounded by wooden galleries giving access to the various floors. All were of thick, sturdy, axe-hewn beams painted dark red and decorated with lotus symbols. The fort was shaped like a gigantic wedge, the three courtyards of decreasing width occupying the flat part of the summit on which the dzong stood. Every room in the fort opened on one side on to a gallery and

looked over the cliff on the other falling sheer down to the river. Between two of the courtyards, a tall rectangular building of thick masonry rose like the superstructure of a ship. This was the Uchi, the inner sanctum of the fort. It contained three chapels, one upon another and all superbly decorated. The beams were painted red and overlaid with carved and painted dragons, flowers and various Buddhist symbols, thunderbolts, the lotus, a parasol, a conch shell and an endless knot, symbols which, as I had seen, formed the major decorative themes not only of the monasteries but of all buildings in Bhutan.

Like most dzongs, the fort was divided into two sections, the part reserved for the monks, which contained most of the chapels and large sanctuaries along with the vast assembly halls, and that reserved for the lay administrators and containing the suites of the Lord of the Law and the Chief Steward, their private chapels, the various storerooms and below ground level the kitchens and strongrooms filled with arms.

It was in the lay part that we were accommodated, although nothing prevented us from wandering all over the dzong. Women, on the other hand, besides being forbidden to live inside the dzong, are also restricted, when they come to bring loads of grain to the royal granaries or on some other business, to the lay part of the dzong. Next to the Lord of the Law and the Nyerchen, the Abbot of the dzong is the third most important person.

In Wangdu Photrang, as in Thimbu and Paro, I was impressed by the talent of the architects who had constructed such a massive, finely decorated edifice. I was only just beginning to realize fully that the dzongs could not be compared with anything we have in Europe either in size or for what they represent. Dzongs are more than mere fortresses, or monasteries, or both combined. They are, in every meaning of the word, cities, centres of civilization, small towns in which hundreds and (as I was soon to see in the larger forts) even thousands of individuals lead thriving, independent lives locked behind the single massive door of these citadels. Here are artisans, butchers, cooks and abbots along with all the hierarchy of lords and barons, their servants, soldiers and stewards. Passing travellers also stay there, and lords of other regions, for the dzongs are at the same time hostelries, markets and prisons. The life of every inhabitant of Bhutan is tied to the dzong socially,

politically and religiously. They reminded me of huge trans-atlantic liners, self-contained universes enclosed and protected, independent yet supported by the sea which was replaced here by the surrounding countryside, the valleys from which to the dzong came monks from lesser monasteries or criminals destined for the dark underground cells next to the storerooms. Also to the dzong flocked village chieftains to attend administrative councils, peasants with their goods and warriors to be armed, all these people housed under the same gigantic roof, acting out their comedies or tragedies on the narrow stage of the stone paved yards in the sight of all. Everyone was a spectator of the others' dramas, witness to their mutual joys and pains, which were exposed to all and overlooked by the stern gaze of the Lord of the Law, the Lord of Provisions and the Lord of the Men's Souls, the Abbot. This intimacy gave a particular intensity to social life and to the meaning of political power. It is little wonder that the very word dzong sends shudders down the spines of all the peasants when it is mentioned in their little lonely, unprotected homes lost in the remote reaches of the isolated valleys. Nothing in the peasants' lives escapes the watchful gaze of the dzong just as the King's subjects cannot fail to look up and see the formidable mass of the forts which physically dominate their homes as they dominate all their lives. In a few hours I had myself fallen under the awesome fascination of the dzongs.

Not forgetting that the arduous and uncertain journey I had imposed upon myself now lay before me, I sought to speak with the Lord of the Law again that evening. The Lord of the Law of Wangdu Photrang had chosen to live with his wife, whereas most lords simply abandon them in their homes and live as bachelors within the dzong. For this reason, the Lord of the Law lived in a small house by the gate of the dzong and so combined his duty with his family life – which would have been impossible within the fort, where women cannot reside under any circumstances. I told this rather arrogant and unpleasant man of my plans and expressed my wish to have two horses to set out for Punaka the following day. He listened to my request in silence and when I had finished grunted before turning to walk away.

Punaka lay off my route across Bhutan so I had decided to take

the minimum of baggage and spend a couple of days there before heading across the Black Mountains to the fort of Tongsa, the first halt on my journey east. Not at all convinced that my request would be met, I returned to the dzong and found Tensing, who handed me a cup of muddy water which he had the nerve to call tea. '*Inji cha*' he explained: in other words 'English tea' as opposed to the salty Tibetan tea soup, a devilish brew of rancid butter, salt, milk and the rotten branches and occasional leaves of second-grade Chinese or Indian tea. I had with me some of the best Indian tea but once it had been boiled by Tensing in a dirty pot with dirty water from the monastery's great communal copper cauldron it was quite undrinkable. I began, with the utmost pessimism, to give Tensing an elementary lesson in hygiene.

'Is the tea not good?' Tensing asked naïvely.

'No,' I said irritably.

'I agree,' Tensing answered to my surprise, adding: 'only Tibetan tea is good. Shall I make you some?' Taken aback by this, I declared that I would show him how to make tea 'my fashion'. I then gave him my recipe. It began something like this: First, wash your hands in clean water, then rinse and clean both the pot and a cup. Place the clean water in the pot on the fire . . .'

I finished, feeling I had done a good job. Tensing nodded and said he would make some more. He took my cup, threw away the tea and wiped it with his dirty shirt. Then he wiped the pot, then his hands and then the cup again. He said he would fetch some clean water from the river at the foot of the dzong. He seemed quite surprised when I told him one could use water to clean a cup and looked at me reproachfully. I realized that cleaning to him meant simply wiping with a dirty rag. The fact that the rag got dirtier and dirtier was proof that everything else was getting cleaner and cleaner.

'That is not clean enough,' I said. Tensing gave me a strange look and I understood that I had better not be too difficult on the first day and that if I carried on it would only convince him I was mad. It was getting on for five in the afternoon and neither of us had eaten anything since dawn. The monastery now echoed to the beat of drums and before the dozen different altars of the dzong monks were changing the water in the nine silver offering bowls laid out before the placid Buddhas or beneath the frightening masks of the fearful divinities. The man with shackles on his feet

stood in the doorway of our room, staring at us in amazement. He seemed a good fellow but, in fact, he had tried to assassinate the King. On learning this, I decided that his punishment was rather milder than I had first thought. After all he was allowed to sit in the sun and enjoy the life of the dzong. I wondered why he had not been locked up.

The Nyerchen (the Chief Steward) had a son who now appeared in our room. A lanky youth of about sixteen, he explained shyly that he spoke a few words of English since the King had sent him to school in Kalimpong and he would be, so he said, pleased if I would speak English to him. I agreed, but suggested that if we got some food it might help my conversation a little. The youth apologized for his father's absence and called a servant to show Tensing his father's kitchen and to give us rice and eggs whilst we awaited his arrival. I thanked him and he sat down and stared at my cameras in silence.

At last he spoke. 'Will you take a picture of me?'

I assured him I would and he went on to ask abruptly about my journey: 'We have nothing modern here. Why did you come?'

I explained that I wanted to visit Bhutan. He seemed puzzled.

'You speak good Tibetan,' he remarked.

I acknowledged this compliment modestly.

'Why do you speak Tibetan?' he went on, adding point blank: 'My brother plays good music. Do you want to hear him?'

I said yes, that when we had eaten he could come and play. At this point my young visitor got up and left, although not before telling me that he was in class 7B at school and asking if we had 7B in France. He seemed very disappointed when I said I was not sure.

An hour later Tensing appeared with a saucepan full of steaming yellow rice, the variety that had only been partly husked, and on it four steaming chillies. He extracted four eggs from his pocket and asked if I could show him how to cook them, explaining: 'I do not know how to cook eggs.'

I got a little annoyed. 'What do you mean? Aren't you a cook?' I asked.

'Yes, I can cook rice,' came his answer, as though to close the subject. At that moment I scarcely foresaw the implications of what he had said; however, I was soon to fathom the grim reality of this simple truth. Tensing, my cook, could cook rice, rice and

nothing else, nothing, absolutely nothing. Of course, this hardly bothered him as he, in fact, ate nothing else. Reluctantly, I made my way back to the kitchen and introduced him to 'the black stuff'. 'Black stuff' (*jalla nakpo* in Tibetan) became our common appellation for pepper. This, together with a jar of curry, tabasco sauce and a tin of mustard powder, were all the condiments I had with me. Apart from chillies, which could be found locally, black and yellow stuff (mustard) were soon to be the sinister, recurring notes in the gastronomical fiascos which kept me alive from day to day. To these I soon added 'white stuff', a greasy fat made of palm oil. I taught Tensing how to put white stuff in a frying pan, then break the eggs, put black stuff and salt over them and cook just a little. Horrified by such a complicated recipe Tensing stated flatly what was the simple truth: 'You had better do the eggs.'

So I did the eggs while Tensing watched, handing me the stuffs and remarking that we had better buy some dried meat.

Back in our room, Tensing wiped the plates and spoons on his shirt, which was getting dirtier and dirtier. Alas, in spite of Tensing's logic, the plates and spoons were not getting any cleaner.

As I chased my eggs and the coloured stuffs around my plate with my fork, my mind filled with affection for Calay, the Nepalese cook I had along with me on my expeditions to the Mount Everest region and to the kingdom of Mustang. I remembered how he had made me noodles from flour in a rain storm and how he had baked cakes on glaciers, even though the first one had been made of chocolate and garlic. I now realized fully that I had struck hard times. The arrival of the Nyerchen's eldest son with a Tibetan guitar hardly made my *dîner en musique* more palatable.

I added a little more black stuff, and got up hurriedly as soon as I had swallowed the last morsel, doing my best to forget what I had eaten.

The next morning at dawn, against all probability, a gruff-looking man arrived. The sun was barely up and it was freezing cold. Sitting down on the floor the peasant, who had been conscripted by the Trimpon to take us to Punaka, stared as I got dressed and gasped in amazement as my sleeping bag was folded

until Tensing told him that it was made of bird hair. He got up when he saw the marvels my steel trunk contained and promptly informed us that we would have to pay a special rate for his two horses.

Tensing protected my interests energetically and closed all the bags. Some were left behind as we took only the bare essentials. In a very short time we were ready to leave, although not before Tensing had discovered how to make 'red tea' (as he called the chocolate which I produced from a red tin). Not wanting to waste time, I opened a packet of what Indians call 'thin arrow root' a travesty of some weird breed of English biscuit and tasteless even when not damp.

The Lord of the Law saw us off with his customary blank expression. The horse man screamed after his ponies because on the way out they profaned a sacred chorten by going around it anti-clockwise (a true sin). We lagged behind a little, just enough to let the pack horse and my riding pony out of sight, whereupon they simply disappeared into thin air.

We looked left and right, we ran ahead and we ran back, we climbed up to a vantage point, we interrogated a stray monk, ran ahead again and back again and had just about given up when we saw a little house hidden behind a small bluff. There we found our bags lying near the door of the shack, the ponies unsaddled and our driver quietly eating his morning meal. He had covered exactly two hundred and fifty yards. We raised a great row. The horse man's wife smiled, she was very beautiful. Soon the bundles were tied on again, the saddle set upon the carpets, another bright red carpet placed on top, a bell tied around the neck of the beast and in a minute I was trotting off down towards the river heading north.

Tensing followed behind, reverently clutching my cameras. We reached the river's edge and stopped beside a large house-like monastery flanked by two gigantic sacred trees. I hailed the keeper and we went to inspect some fine carved slate reliefs set inside little niches on the outside of the building.

Returning to the ponies I saw that our party had been joined by a seven-year-old child who was deaf and dumb. The track now ran close to the east bank of the Ma-chu. It being the monsoon, the river was full to the brim, a raging torrent of milky grey water fifty yards wide, laden with silt and sand, gushing along its

banks with a creepy ripple that betrayed its truly tremendous force. The banks were unshaded and burned by the sun. Every hundred yards or so they opened out into incredibly beautiful, absolutely bone-white beaches of the finest sand. I have never seen a river bank so like the sea coast. Coarse grass grew on the dunes which bordered these crescent-shaped fresh-water beaches. The pony floundered in the hot, thin sand which, farther upstream, spread in vast flats like miniature Sahara deserts. The valley was truly like an oven in the crushing heat. The roar of the river was a perpetual reminder that beaches were made for swimming and loafing but not for walking. I had dismounted, the terrain being flat and the wooden saddle, in spite of the carpets, highly uncomfortable. In the past in the Himalayas I had used horses only very rarely and as I feared this privilege would be short-lived I had to get used to using my legs again. For nearly three years they had been reduced to decorative appendages, good at most for patting an accelerator or occasionally jamming a brake. They soon reminded me of the lazy life to which they had become accustomed. Quite suddenly they began to ache in all sorts of places. By then I felt the time had come for us to have a swim. It occurred to me also that this might induce Tensing to take what might well be the first bath of his life. After three hours of slow progress we stopped on one of the most romantic of these beaches. Tensing proved to be less dirty than I had expected while I discovered that I had gathered an enormous amount of dust. The water was freezing cold, as was to be expected of a torrent fed by a glacier barely thirty miles away. The swim was a success. I nearly lost face by sinking into quicksands, Tensing nearly fell asleep, the horses went out to graze and the horse man disappeared. The deaf-and-dumb child could not respond to my shouts when, at last, with my 'great white man' authority, I suddenly decided we must leave. After all, I reminded myself, I had not come all this way to waste my time on a beach. Yet how pleasant in the months to come would be the memory of the banks of the Ma-chu, the 'mother river', which the Indians farther south in Assam have baptized with the sluggish name of Sankosh. Kosh, indeed! I used a similar expression to get the deaf-and-dumb boy to find his friend the horse man who had been fast asleep under a distant bush. My polychrome image was getting scratched. Surely Columbus would not have stood for such slackness.

The valley narrowed and the track led up to a ledge overhanging the river. It was a wide track with steps cut in the rock and marked by occasional small whitewashed chortens and long prayer walls.

We were making for Punaka. How many times had I uttered that name, the first Bhutanese name I had ever known! On every atlas in the world this name is surrounded by two little rings, like some malicious eye sneering at the other capitals. Punaka is in everyone's atlas, yet it had been impossible for me, as it was for anyone in 1968, to find one photograph, one single little photograph of this town, Punaka, whose name is written in millions of books in the same bold type as those of Washington, Paris and London. For four years Punaka had ceased to be the capital as this title had been given to Thimbu. In fact, Punaka had always been the winter capital and Thimbu the summer capital because the Bhutanese, like the Tibetans and, to some extent, that dead breed of moustachioed civil servants so dear to Kipling, were among the only people in the world whose governments understood that bureaucracy should not necessarily be synonymous with drudgery, and so took their offices on holiday, New Delhi moving up to the polo grounds of Simla, Calcutta retiring to the cool hills of Darjeeling, the Dalai Lama to his summer palace and the government of Bhutan with all the monks and royal servants leaving Punaka for higher and cooler Thimbu.

The sun was now at its zenith and the heat was quite unbearable. I understood why cactus grew in Wangdu Photrang and why the monks of Punaka went to Thimbu in the summer. The difference in altitude between Thimbu and Punaka was not alone capable of explaining the difference in temperature. The upper valley of the Ma-chu is a sort of death valley, a natural oven whose clay embankments catch the rays of the sun and heat the strong winds which never allow this region to receive the cool rain which falls so plentifully all around during the monsoon. In winter, Wangdu Photrang and Punaka become, I was told, a kind of magical warm paradise surrounded on all sides by snow, a climatic freak where bananas grow below the snow-fields.

The valley began to fan out again as we advanced and sandy strips and beaches stretched once more along the banks of the foaming Ma-chu. Then Punaka was suddenly unveiled by a shifting green curtain of mountainside.

Before me lay a wide, flat valley covered with green rice fields, dotted only by a few houses, five or six in all. It was nothing like what one would have expected for the most famous place in a land of one million inhabitants. In the distance, squat on the floor of the valley, I saw the dzong. Like Thimbu, the ancient capital was only a fortress with no town, no village, no other settlement of any size at all.

Only as we got nearer, and the ground rose slightly away from the river, did I grasp the unusual magnificence of the dzong. It looked like some monstrous ship, a floating ark of stone. Its feet were bathed by the foaming waters of the Ma-chu running along its very walls while another torrent equally broad rushed by it on the other side. The entire fortress was standing in water, a moat made by two rivers which met and mingled their turbulent waters beneath the walls of the dzong. A small branch of the Ma-chu cut behind the fortress so that the entire dzong was surrounded by a roaring sea of foam, not on an island, but itself a tremendous stone ship cruising dangerous waters. As I approached I began to grasp my first impression of its tremendous size as it rose over a hundred feet above the water and stretched some three hundred yards in length. Punaka was like some gigantic architectural mistake, a wholly urban monster rearing up suddenly from the pastoral landscape. The walls, sloping slightly inwards, gave to the fortress an air of permanence like some sturdy rock rising from the sea. The sober, massive lines of Punaka were one more proof that the Bhutanese are, with the Tibetans, beyond doubt the greatest architects of Asia. Nowhere in China or India or in South East Asia are there buildings with such sober proportions. The architecture of most of Asia hardly deserves that name being, on the whole, merely a superimposition of sculptures and decorations, set one on top of the other without consideration for the interior living space of the building or for its overall appearance. One must not confuse decoration with form, and by such standards the architecture of Bhutan and Tibet (both closely related) is beyond doubt among the most elegant and harmonious in the world. The use of slanting walls, of windows of varying sizes and the clear-cut line of the flat roofs underlined by dark friezes creates a harmonious opposition of horizontals and sloping verticals. If the Potala of Lhasa is the best known of all the countless elegant structures of the Tibetan world,

one must not overlook the many other equally graceful and often monumental buildings which, like the dzongs of Punaka, Paro and Thimbu have always struck me as surprisingly modern, especially when I think that some of these buildings date from the sixteenth century while the style itself goes back to the tenth or twelfth century.

At last I had before me the enigmatic, long elusive and mysterious capital of Bhutan. Punaka, even more than Lhasa, was the forbidden city of the Himalayas. Even today one can count with little difficulty every one of the few dozen foreigners who have ever been there. Punaka is still an unknown citadel, the elusive sacred winter seat of the religious and secular rulers of the Land of the Dragon.

Although, four years before my arrival, the King had chosen Thimbu to be the new capital it would take more than four years to rid Punaka of its prerogatives. It was still the residence of the greatest assembly of monks in the land. Yet as we were at the height of the summer I was not surprised to find Punaka practically deserted. All the monks had left in June for their summer residence in Thimbu, setting out on foot down the valley and spending one night at the minute monastery of Chime just north of Wangdu Photrang, before crossing the high spur leading to Thimbu.

We crossed the ricefields and came to a hazardous cable bridge. Here we abandoned the horses, since they could not be expected to cross. Punaka, surrounded by water, was impregnable but it was also menaced by that same water which defended its access. Three years before my visit, the Ma-chu had swept headlong into the dzong's foundations creating, in the process, the branch of the river which now completely isolated the fort from the mainland. The sturdy cantilever bridges of wooden beams anchored to stone gatehouses at either end had been washed away. Active work building up the foundations of Punaka had consolidated the banks and preserved the dzong but so far only makeshift suspension bridges had been erected to replace the massive bridges which had given access to the fort for hundreds of years.

After crossing the first perilous swing bridge we reached a narrow strip of land, a low island, on which were half a dozen houses and six little stalls of dark beams. Here in these houses those officials who chose to live with their wives had their homes.

Once again, I was amazed by the complete absence of any important village near by. Punaka, although for centuries the capital, was nothing more than the dzong. A whole city enclosed in one building. On arrival I enquired as to the whereabouts of the Trimpon, the Lord of the Law. He was away; so was the Nyerchen, I was told. Since it was summer the dzong was practically deserted. There was only the Trimpon Ramjam, the title of Ramjam being that given to the elected heads of the districts into which the region dependent upon the dzong is divided. The ramjams are usually four or six in number. Two are required to work in the dzong, one as assistant to the Lord of the Law and the other to the Chief Steward. The Lord of the Law's Ramjam turned out to be an old man with white hair and a rather scraggy frame. He welcomed us with the usual indifference (to which I had by now become accustomed), not so much as offering me tea or water to drink but demanding to see my credentials. This done, he said that we could occupy a room in the royal pavilion, a large Bhutanese house set on the edge of the river. We were starving, so Tensing immediately began to cook rice in a little hut next to the bungalow. The Ramjam disappeared and I returned to the stalls where to my surprise I found a basket full of pomegranates, a fruit which until then I had not encountered in the Himalayas. Eating these I ferreted around the stalls and stumbled on the Ramjam again. This time he was more amiable. He wanted me to take his photograph, so I arranged to visit the dzong after I had eaten.

After paying the horse man and saying goodbye to him and his young companion I joined Tensing, who was perspiring in front of a roaring fire. I found him playing around with the black stuff, the white stuff and a little yellow with the greatest of ease and realized that even if he was not a cook he was quick to learn, except that his shirt was dirtier than ever and he had still not discovered how to make the plates cleaner.

I inspected our quarters, a large chalet set in a walled garden where tall grass was strangling beautiful flowers. An old woman with a toothless grin, the caretaker, came in to fiddle with my equipment and find out who I was. I sent her away promptly when Tensing came in with his rice and the two of us sat down to huge heaps of it, tasteless in spite of the salt and pepper and the bowls of hot water with curry powder floating on top. From his

trouser pocket Tensing pulled out what looked like a lump of dried shoelaces and handed me a few strands saying:

'Eat this, it is excellent dry meat. I bought it in Wangdu Photrang.'

He had hardly spoken before the entire room reeked with the smell of decomposing flesh. Hastily I returned the shoelaces to Tensing, muttering something about the dry meat not being quite dry enough –

'But you know it is very good,' he kept saying.

I told him I knew that but that I was not really hungry. Tensing popped the meat back into his trouser pocket and attacked the rice with gusto. I did the same, but with less enthusiasm and in morbid silence. So I ate my second non-meal.

Leaving Tensing, I set out to visit the dzong. With the old Ramjam I crossed a second perilous bridge and came upon a little platform facing the solitary and impressive entrance to the huge fortress. Two very steep flights of steps rose twenty feet up the massive north face of the dzong. In the event of war these steps could be destroyed or hoisted up, leaving the gateway hanging in mid air and further closed by a colossal door ribbed with steel. At the top of the steps I found myself in a dark tunnel leading into a courtyard. On either side were little guard houses with small windows from which a watch could be kept on all who entered the dzong.

I walked under the great barrier of the outer part of the building to find myself looking at a mass of towers and buildings built around connecting courtyards. Before me rose the central tower of Punaka, a tall seven-storey building which dominated the surrounding structures. The four-storey buildings around the tower opened on to galleries which rose in a huge tangle of beams above wide courtyards. Entering the tower and climbing six dangerous flights of steps I visited floor after floor of chapels. I also saw large assembly halls, a description of which alone would merit an entire book: their frescoes, gold and silver vessels, carved and gilded idols would fill the largest museum in the West with treasures of the greatest beauty and antiquity.

Leaving this tower I followed the Ramjam through to another courtyard and another tower with still more assembly halls and chapels dominated by gigantic Buddhas, some over twenty feet high. In all there were more than thirty-six chapels and some

seven large assembly halls. I visited all these one after the other, stunned by their beauty and size. Punaka Dzong, the Pentagon of Bhutan, the royal seat of the Faith and of the Law, is beyond description. Like Alice in Wonderland I followed my guide, panting up perilous flights of steps, winding down dark, narrow corridors, occasionally catching glimpses of the river through small windows or looking down from loggias. Each room, each chapel, inside this sober dzong was resplendent with gold, blue and yellow walls and ceilings. As I paced through this dream so staggering in its implications I saw not one single soul. It was like roaming a dead city dedicated to calm, placid divinities standing cheek by jowl with fearsome, silent demons. The dzong seemed to have fallen under the spell of the fearful spirits of the tantric pantheon. Eventually, after about two hours, I emerged into a large room some fifty yards wide supported by a forest of pillars and open at one end on to the southern wall of the dzong overlooking the foaming water where the two rivers met. This was one of the principal assembly halls of the dzong, but not the largest, which was contained between it and the second of the fort's towers. This was the place where, in the past, assemblies of state were held. It was a vast room gilded to the rafters and rising in the centre to a great rectangular skylight. Here was a tall, elevated throne, a square, isolated wooden tower upon which the King used to sit, dominating the assembly of lords and lamas of his kingdom. Large circular silk hangings of fine brocade which overlapped like the monstrous scales of an enormous fish were suspended from the rafters. Despite my visits to Paro, Thimbu, Wandu Photrang and Simtoka dzongs I was totally unprepared for the splendour and awesome majesty of this city fort. It would take days, if not months, I thought, to investigate in detail even a few of the treasures housed at Punaka; treasures amassed there over the centuries, gifts and works of art brought by emissaries and ambassadors across the great peaks from China, Mongolia and Tibet. This place had been the focus for all the wealth and skill of Bhutan. Craftsmen and artists had flocked to the court of the religious co-rulers, the Deba, the elected kings and the incarnate lamas who had resided side by side in Punaka. It is little wonder that from Punaka's solid walls the Bhutanese dared to challenge the Tibetans, the Assamese and even the British. Hidden in its hot, secluded valley defended on all sides by snows in winter

and in summer by the same mountains drenched in rain, Punaka seemed impregnable indeed. It is certainly a fact that Punaka has proved the most secure fortress in the world, having never suffered capture and having resisted until well into the second half of the twentieth century, the mischievous inroads of technological civilization. Indeed all Bhutan has resisted physical and moral conquest and preserved its own form of government, its own religion and its own art well into a century in which the art and religion as well as the political life of all other lands have fallen victim either to foreign ideas or financial alienation. What country other than Bhutan could, in 1968, boast indifference to the power of the dollar and the controversy between democracy and communism? Punaka was still the seat of a free state, the capital of the last truly independent country in the world.

On leaving the dzong and crossing the rickety bridge I was asked by the Ramjam to have a drink at his house and later that evening the drunk Ramjam drew me aside and showed me the instruments of his power. Drawing out his long sword he pointed to the blade and declared with a smile:

'With this nobody bothers me. To all my words they answer "yes" and so yes it is.'

Then, taking out a nasty-looking old rifle, the Ramjam continued:

'If the people are not obedient I also have this. Oh yes, they say, yes thank you, and I have no trouble.'

Putting down the rifle, the Ramjam unexpectedly drew a pistol from his blue ko. I was getting fairly nervous myself by now and assured the old man that I quite realized and admired his power. For a moment I had forgotten that this man was not just an ordinary bureaucrat, some obscure government official, but the person on whom the safety and lives of thousands, and the peace of an entire province depended. In a land where such devices as telephones, cars and a modern police force are unknown, respect for the law can only be induced by fear, by the very sight of the instrument of punishment. Alone, in the absence of the Trimpon this petty Ramjam was to act as a one-man tribunal, a one-man tax collector, postmaster general, keeper of government stores and supervisor of royal treasures, responsible for the arsenal of arms in the dzong, in charge of granting land and administering justice to the peasants, responsible to the King, in fact, for every-

thing. He was like a solitary captain alone at the helm of a province of over fifty thousand souls. His task was a far from easy one, and I saw now that the sword, the rifle and the pistol, like the man's arrogant attitude, were all essential to his office, not mere symbols. When the great doors of the dzong were closed that night it was not just a ritual but a necessity and tonight, as every night for hundreds of years, a watch would stand in the uchi tower, a drum at his side, and in the dark, deserted courtyards sentinels in silken gowns with sashes across their chests would pace barefoot up and down the galleries, the King's men, representing the rule of the Gyal-po of Bhutan who could thus retire as he did every night to the royal apartments in the eastern tower of the great fortress of Thimbu assured that his land was well guarded.

In Bhutan, where money is not the mainspring of men's ambition, it was natural for the Ramjam to display to me the emblems of his pride and rank: his silver sword, symbol of office and effective reason for the respect shown him. His sword, rifle, and pistol, along with a tasselled silk needle pouch and similarly adorned money bag were, I now discovered, the official emblems of the Ramjam's rank. These last two surprising items the Ramjam extracted from a large paper bag of Bhutanese make and showed me proudly how they should be worn.

The Ramjam's wife, a rather down-trodden-looking woman, attended us and made sure that we were well supplied with *arak*, alcohol made from rice or wheat and much stronger than *chang*, a beer made chiefly from barley, which is the national drink of Tibet and Bhutan. I drank the *arak* from a small silver bowl, sitting cross-legged opposite the Ramjam who, by this time, was fairly high. He insisted that I stay the next day, saying that he would organize an archery contest in my honour with the valley's best archers upon the ground which stretched out at the foot of the dzong.

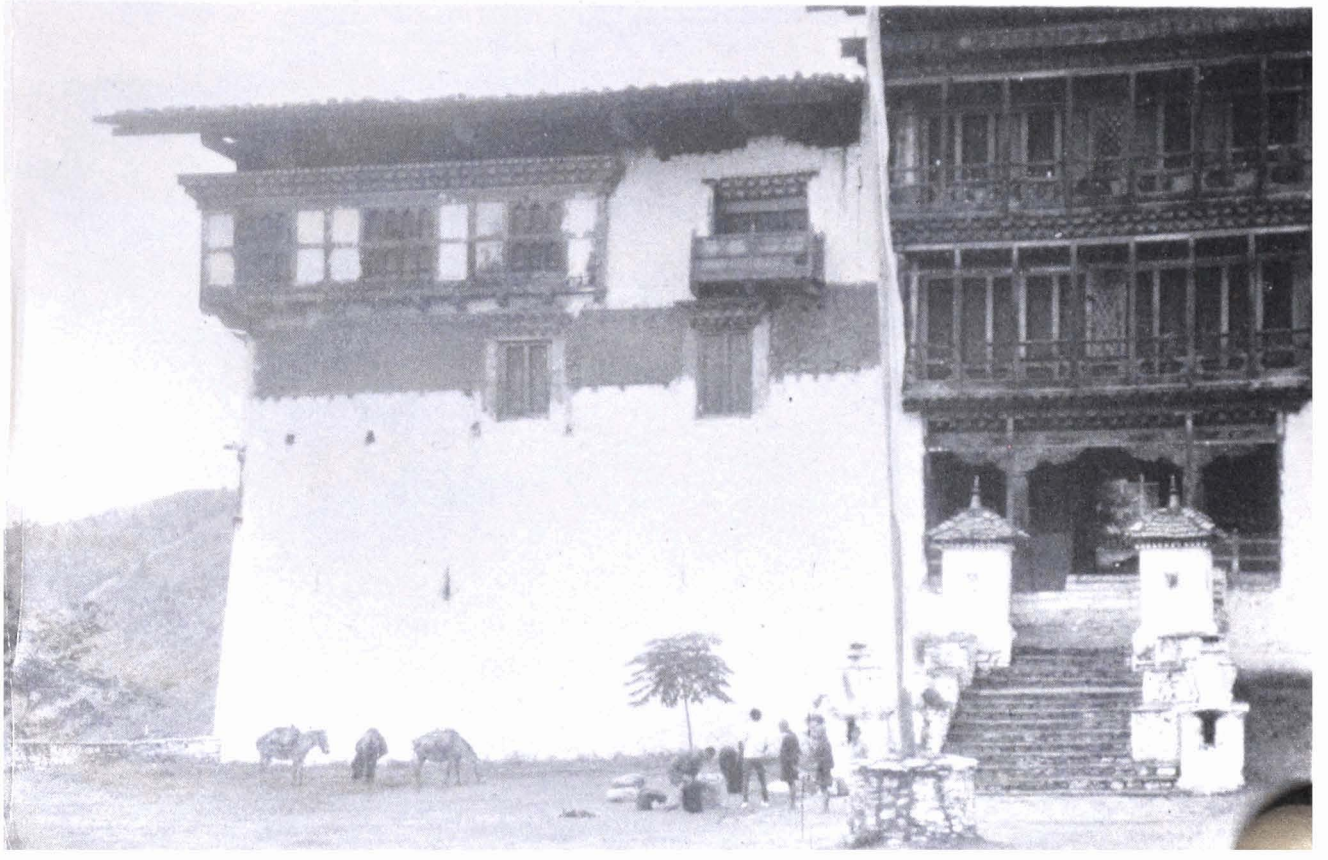
Suspecting this offer to be only the effect of the *arak* I declined politely, much to the annoyance of the Ramjam. I had made up my mind to leave the next day. I did so, partly because while Punaka was deserted I had little chance of obtaining any valuable new information and partly because with all the journey that lay ahead of me I was anxious to return to my route. In two days at Punaka I could do little more than I could have done in one and

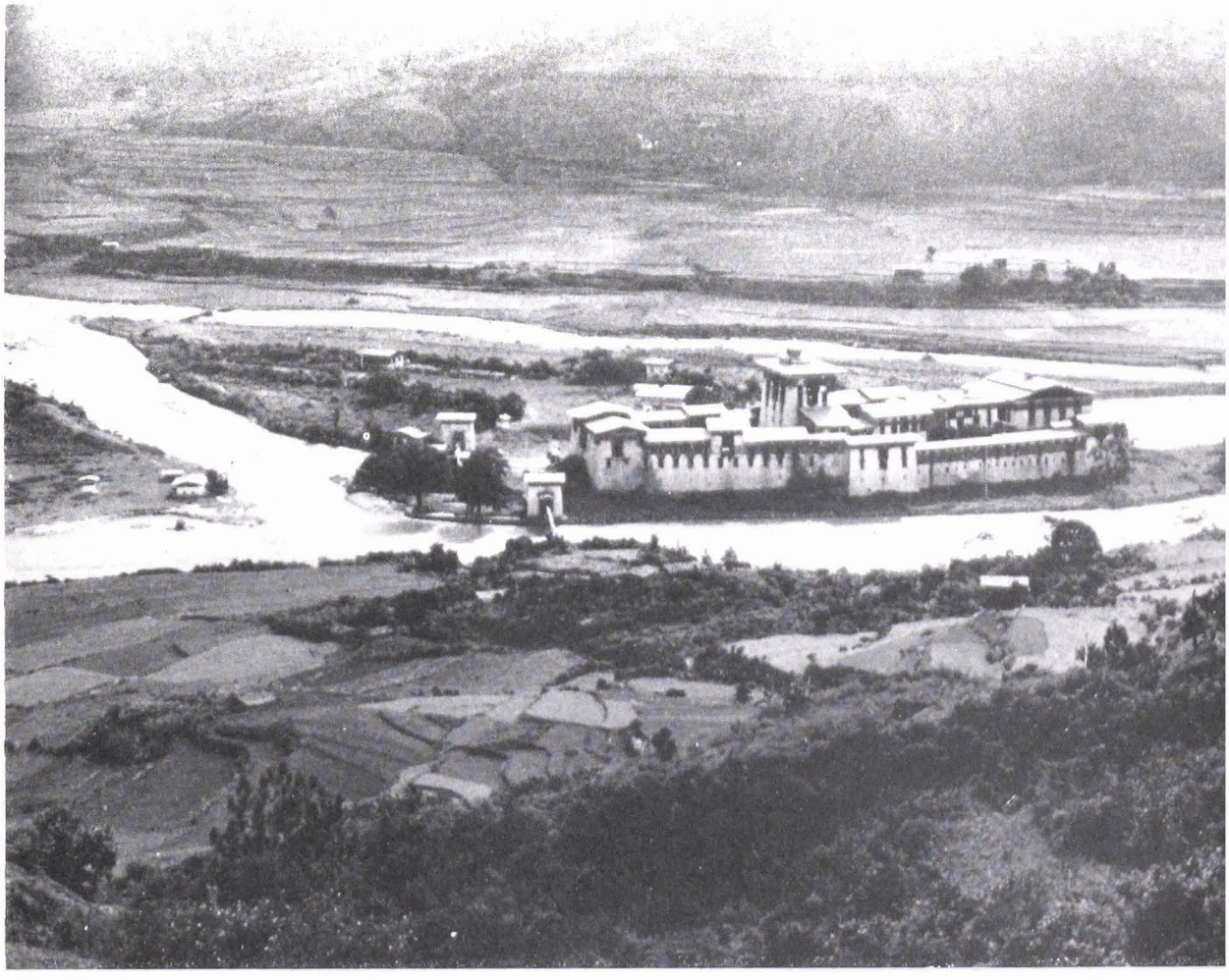
would never do more than scratch the surface of all that was to be learned, seen and recorded there; I therefore decided to leave the next day at dawn. I made arrangements with the now quite drunk Ramjam for a horse to be brought in the morning along with one porter and a guide to take me to the two monasteries which I had been told were to be found on the opposite bank of the Ma-chu. I planned to visit these and then return to Wangdu Photrang to arrange my true departure across the Black Mountains. It was dark when I left the Ramjam's house. He kindly delegated a servant with a torch of pine branches to light my way past the stalls and across the archery green into the yard of our quarters.

Mosquitoes kept me from sleeping. In the dark I could distinguish the boyish face of Tensing asleep on the floor by my side. I lit a cigarette and then got up and went out to the veranda. The moon shone palely on the overgrown garden and all was quiet save for the rushing of the river beyond the wall above which the great mass of the dzong rose like a mountain. For an hour I sat on the steps of the room looking at the dzong and interrogating the silence.

The Queen's palace at Paro

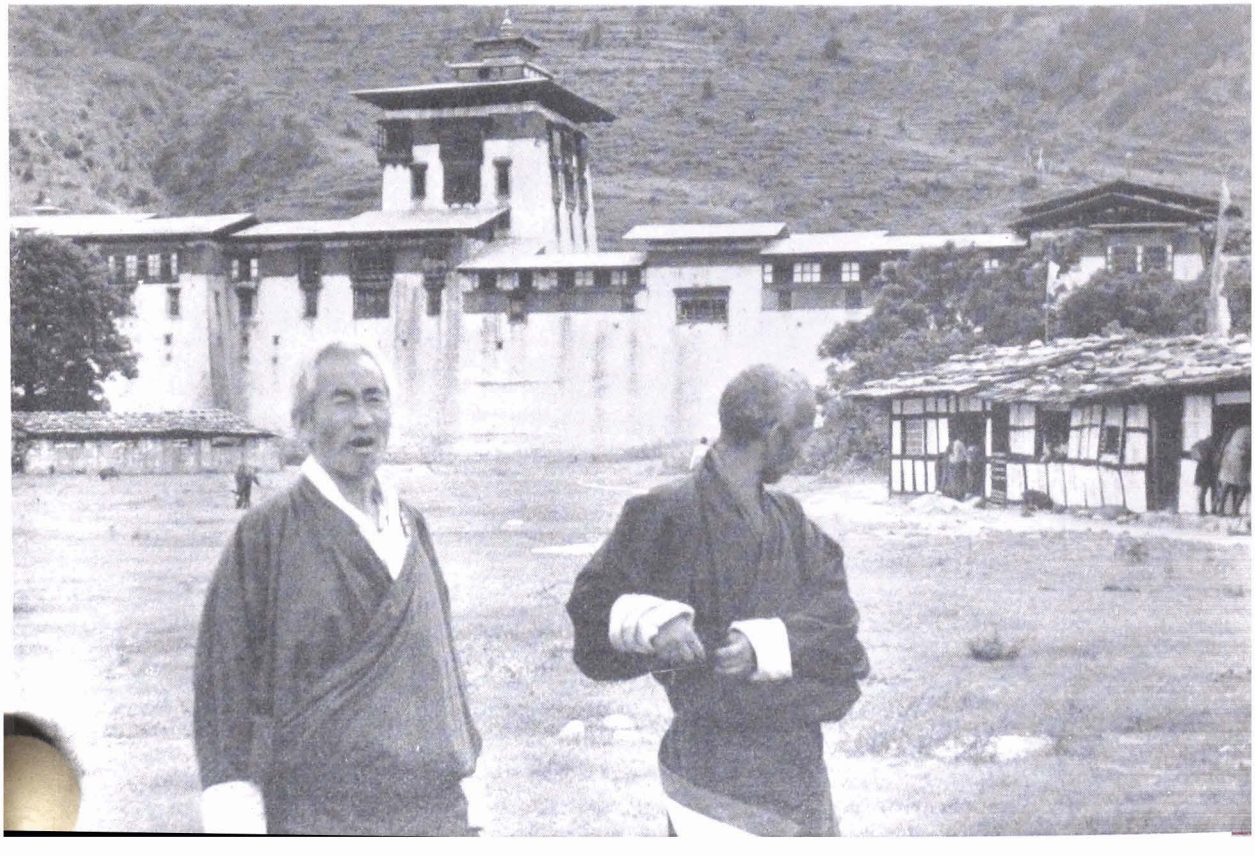
The entrance to Wangdu Photrang. At the foot of the fort Tensing supervises the distribution of the packs for the mules

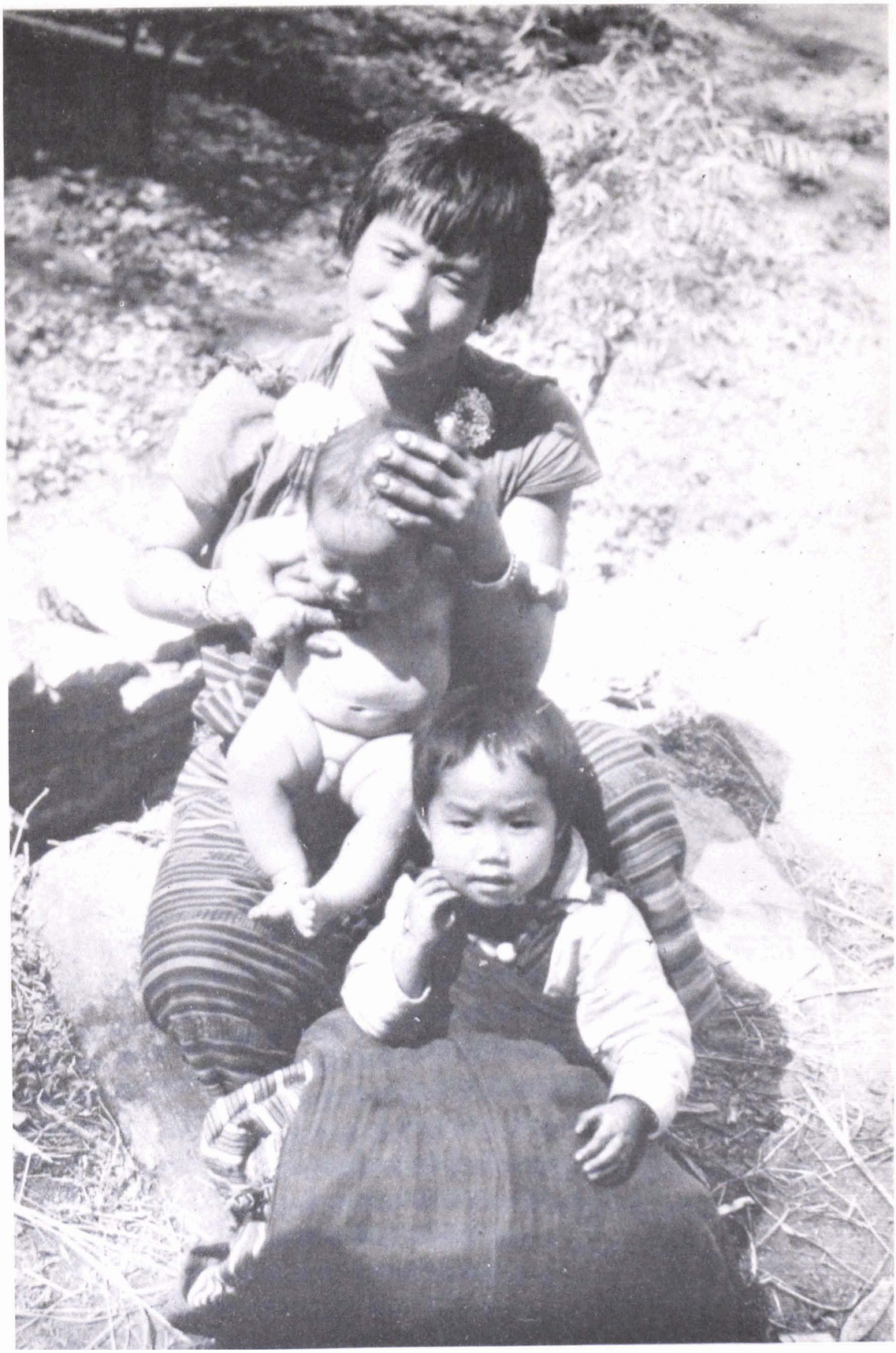




Punaka. This great fort was for centuries (and until 1966) the winter capital of Bhutan—the most secret and inaccessible capital in the world

The Ramjam of Punaka standing in front of the dzong





A young reincarnate lama rests on his way to pay a visit to the King of Bhutan

4

Beyond the Black Mountains

IT WAS DARK and the gates of Wangdu Photrang Dzong were just about to close when, the following night, exhausted and drenched, Tensing and I stumbled up through the cactus maze to the fort. We had been climbing since six that morning, rising slowly at first up above Punaka to reach the monastery of Ngor. I had hoped to carry on up to the famous monastery of Talo, the most sacred of Bhutan's monasteries outside those contained in the dzongs, but I was misinformed by my guide and learned later that we had stopped only an hour short of this monastery.

Nevertheless, Ngor proved most interesting. The monastery stood on a ledge dominating the valley of the Ma-chu surrounded by pine-trees and beautiful, gaily painted houses. From there, following a narrow ridge, we toiled down to a tributary of the Ma-chu to climb up a steep knoll where stood another monastery, a very small one, but famous in all Tibet and Bhutan as the home of Druk-pa Kunlegs, a saintly Bhutanese lama of the sixteenth century known for his practical jokes, and immortalized by his long and amusing autobiography. Here we found a solitary old keeper who showed us the venerable relics of the saint and gave us a rather distorted version of his life. Fine statues of him, his brother and another lama decorated the central altar of the monastery. It was around this tiny monastery that every year the two thousand monks of Punaka halted on their annual journey to their summer residence in Thimbu.

On leaving this monastery we made our way down the western bank of the Ma-chu where we were suddenly caught in a terrible thunderstorm. Flashes of lightning rippled through the torrents of rain whipped along by a strong wind. The hills suddenly disappeared in clouds and it was quite dark long before sunset. Bhutan has been called 'the Land of the Dragon' and since, as in Tibet, thunder is believed to be caused by a dragon rumbling in the skies (the word for thunder in its literal translation is 'the

voice of the dragon'), some believe that Bhutan owes its name to its violent thunderstorms.

The next day in Wangdu Photrang we prepared to set out eastwards. The Nyerchen had arrived at last and taking a bunch of heavy keys led us aloft to one of the dzong's granaries. He broke the royal seal which closed the door and penetrated inside with a servant bearing a wooden measuring bowl and a little round stick. Filling the measure with rice and smoothing the grain flush with the stick, the servant began a sing-song count of the number of measures he poured into the bag Tensing was holding. My kashag allowed me to buy rice from government stores at a fixed rate. From now on nobody else on the route would sell us food or, if any could be induced to do so, they would only part with it at outrageous prices.

I asked the Lord of the Law to provide four ponies or mules for the next day, one for me to ride and three to carry the six loads that now made up our equipment and stores. I found the Lord of the Law in a large elaborate room in the dzong. The wall was hung with a row of swords, three nasty-looking whips and two measuring sticks like the one which had been used to level the grain. With these he dealt out his stern justice. With a sly smile the habitually placid Trimpon showed me the instruments of his power, explaining that two measuring sticks tied together made a useful little instrument for crushing fingers to obtain confessions. I smiled uneasily and for the first time the husky man laughed.

That evening I was treated to a meal by the Nyerchen and his two sons. It was a simple meal of the typical Bhutanese fare shared by lords and peasants alike, unhusked rice and steaming chillies, washed down with countless cups of buttered tea. The Nyerchen, a fine-looking man, described the course of his career. He had been in the King's personal service at Thimbu for many years before being appointed to his present high position. After eating he showed me all the different weights and measures of Bhutan and the Roman-type scale used for weighing butter. From his son I gathered that all important posts, such as Lord of the Law, Chief Steward and so on, were appointments made by the King:

'It's just a question of luck,' the boy added. 'If the King likes you, then it is all right.'

The name of the King was on everyone's lips, his presence was

both admired and feared everywhere. Not a pound of rice, not a single act of anyone's daily life was undertaken, or so it seemed, without reference or relation to his wishes and his name.

The next morning the sun was breaking over the eastern hills above Wangdu Photrang when we left. The Lord of the Law, the Chief Steward, two dozen monks and the prisoner in shackles all turned out to see us off.

One after the other my bags were loaded on to three mules by a sturdy-looking old man dressed in a red and dark blue plaid gown. This was Wangdu, a wealthy peasant who had been requisitioned the previous day by the Lord of the Law's emissaries. Accompanying us was one of the innumerable taxes in kind he owed to the dzong. He was performing *ulag*, one of the most unpopular services due to the King. Every peasant is bound to do *ulag*, that is to place both his person and his horses at the disposal of the King or his lords and emissaries to serve them. From now on, thanks to the letter with the royal seal, I would progress from dzong to dzong with the help of such peasants forced into my service by the laws of the land.

Wangdu took little time to explain that he hated to do *ulag* and that he was coming along with us only because obliged to do so. He had, I discovered, brought along his worst animals, not wanting to risk spoiling his good ones on the long journey we were about to undertake.

'It is the wrong time of the year to travel,' he explained to me curtly while he made us undo our bags to balance the loads for the mules.

'There will be much water,' he went on, 'and it will take us at least six days to reach Tongsa.'

'Six days!' I protested. 'The Lord of the Law said we could reach it in five or even four.'

'The Lord of the Law,' grumbled Wangdu. 'What does he know! I tell you it will take six days.' This was not a promising start and I hoped that Wangdu would not simply abandon us on the way. I was slightly apprehensive about spending six days in his company. Tensing, though, seemed quite unconcerned. He was too excited at the idea of striking out at last.

'I have never been much outside Thimbu,' he said, 'and now,

thanks to you, I will know all Bhutan.' At least he seemed eager and to my delight every day I found new reasons to congratulate myself for falling upon such a charming young man as Tensing.

Even if he was a poor cook, I had now bought him some white cloth to clean the cups and so spared his old shirt and I hoped that he might even go so far as to wash the rags to keep them clean.

Before leaving we went to the little stalls at the foot of the dzong. These, we had been told, would be the last shops in the whole of Bhutan. Here I took in a fresh stock of cigarettes, damp little weeds imported from India. Tensing insisted on buying more dried meat. I tried to dissuade him, saying in a categorical way that meat was the root of all evil and that Bhutanese dried meat was world famous for being very bad for the stomach and not at all, as Tensing thought, good for the health. Tensing was sceptical and pleaded to be allowed to take along just a little. I agreed reluctantly, chasing away the flies that clustered round the shapeless, smelly, leathery meat, as Tensing with a look of relish took possession of a handful of the revolting stuff.

At last we were ready to go and, saying '*kaleshu*' to the lords and onlookers, we marched away from the dzong along the crest on which the fort stood to a small sacred pine wood and slowly down the valley of the river which joined the Ma-chu below the dzong.

We were now heading along the trail to Tongsa. What the track would be like and how long it would take us was a mystery to me.

We progressed along a little ledge overlooking the deep valley where, after covering barely six hundred yards, we came upon a cluster of vultures making a brisk feast of the carcass of a pony which had fallen over the cliff and lay, some fifty feet below, its stiff legs pointing to the sky. A good omen, I thought to myself, hugging a little closer to the side of the hill.

'A great shame,' said Tensing, peering at the carcass which sent up whiffs reminiscent of Bhutanese dried meat. Such a reminder of the frailty of equestrian life made me put off my decision to ride the bony, aggressive-looking mule which Wangdu had brought along for me.

The dzong disappeared and I found myself alone, strolling beside the mules, three of which were heavily laden with our precious little cargo, my self-contained world on the move at

last. At every step my heart beat with excitement as the name Ri-nak (Black Mountains) came incessantly to my mind, a name recalling the visions I had always had of Bhutan as a dark mountain mass on the map. To cross these we would have to climb up to eleven thousand feet into the cold lands where oxygen is scarce. This pass would open up a new world to us, the mysterious world of central Bhutan, a land visited by a very few, perhaps three or four, Europeans.

I was constantly jolted from my reveries by Wangdo shouting '*dro!*' to his animals, which persistently strayed or stopped near the edge of the path to steal a blade of grass. The sun beat down mercilessly on us, there was not one wisp of shade and I began to yearn for the higher regions. For three hours we plodded along the barren, grassy slopes overhanging the small stream.

Eventually we descended slowly towards the river, reaching it at a point where it was joined by another stream. On the opposite bank, less exposed to the sun, tropical forest grew and above it were terraced fields of corn and lonely houses. As we crossed the wooden bridge, the scenery suddenly changed. The track which was the main route across the Black Mountains and which up to now had been some two or three feet wide, became just a little path a few inches across, scarcely visible on the yellow ground. We began to climb steeply, zigzagging across the nearly vertical hillsides. Wangdu declared that the mules were overladen and had to stop every fifty yards to rest. Perspiring, I began to want to ride but Wangdu insisted that this was out of the question as the hill was too steep. We crept at a snail's pace up the sunny spur. I was feeling the first ill effects of fatigue. There is, all told, nothing I dislike more than climbing. Like all violent exercise, it is tiring and, what is more, pointless, since going up always means that one has to come down again. But now, to make matters worse, there was no more going down. We all stopped exhausted in the shade of a lone pine. The mules were unloaded and sent to graze. I sat down to rest. We were joined under the tree by two fellow travellers who lay down beside us whistling to catch their breath.

They looked at me with the usual curiosity which my western dress aroused and asked if I was Indian. When Tensing explained that I was from the 'far West' and was the 'most learned man in the world' they simply stared. Where Tensing got this from I do not know but he insisted:

'Yes, he knows everything, really everything.'

I smiled bashfully and closed my eyes again, wishing that I did indeed know everything, including when and how we would ever manage to make it across Bhutan at this slow pace.

As we toiled on upwards I heard Tensing explaining to Wangdu that I was really a great genius and knew all about Tibetan history and customs and I heard the old man grunt in disbelief. He was perspiring heavily now and stopped to complain that it was inhuman for a man of his age to be expected to climb mountains.

'*Oh apa*,' said Tensing, 'I quite agree,' and both of us got together to have a little fun with Wangdu.

'It is bad enough that you should still be walking around, but what about the mules? They are twice as old as you,' Tensing went on, giving one of the lazy beasts a great whack.

With our joking the old man began to smile and tell us about all the journeys he had undertaken. He had been to Lhasa six times, so he told us, and came originally from near Tongsa, the town for which we were making. He had been to Lhasa to carry rice, the principal export from Bhutan before the Chinese occupation. This accounted for his speaking such good Tibetan. The language used in Thimbu and Paro and with slight variations in the upper valley of the Ma-chu is called *Dzong-ka*, in other words, the language of the forts, since it is commonly used by educated lords and all administrators in Bhutan. Dzong-ka is closely related to Tibetan. In the valley of Tongsa, however, and in all central Bhutan they spoke, I was told, a different language.

It was about four when the mountain flattened out at last. We were now looking down on the valley of the small river we had followed in the morning and could see all the way south to the dzong which was a little white speck in the distance. We had reached some isolated houses surrounded by corn fields, but these soon disappeared as we came up on to the crest of the ridge. It was covered with thick grass and here against all expectation on the edge of a slight depression we found a small lake filled with lotus flowers and bordered on three sides with magnificent pine-trees. This lake was so beautiful that I hardly protested when despite the early hour Wangdu declared that we would stop here for the night.

After the barren slopes we had climbed and the torrid bed of the river this wood of majestic pines sheltering a beautiful

carpet of tall lush grass sprinkled with pine needles seemed quite heavenly.

This spot was known as Samtengang and was, we were told, a halting place of the King, one of the official stages on the route to Tongsa. I was glad that the day's walk was over, being still tired from the two-day hike to Punaka and crushed by the thought that this was the first of countless days of walking to come. Wangdu explained that we had to stop here since there was no more water for nearly a day's march ahead and that if this was where the King stopped it should be good enough for me even if I was 'the most intelligent man in the world'. The old man smiled wickedly. He took me into the wood and showed me the royal camp site, a grassy clearing, cut into three large platforms shaded by immense pines under which local villagers had planted borders of wild irises. Large moss-covered boulders rose beneath the great trees like the stones of a Japanese garden and the sight of the lotus flowers through the trees made this spot one of the most beautiful I had ever seen.

This wood was sacred. I had already seen various clumps of especially fine trees declared to be sacred woods, but now the old man explained why: Here he said, dwell many Lus, divinities of the earth, and one special Lu which inhabits trees. Taking me away from the royal camp site he showed me a particularly large outcrop of rock in which was a small cave a few feet above the ground. This was festooned with prayer flags and the old man said it was the sacred residence of a very important Lu. This was my first introduction in Bhutan to these strange divinities that are neither Buddhist nor Hindu but belong to the ancient magical Bon religion which, as I was soon to witness, survives strongly in Bhutan even today.

I was looking forward to pitching my new tent near the lake, but the old man would not hear of it. He had no tent, he announced, and I should sleep where all important people stayed: at the school.

'The school?' I asked.

'Yes, the school,' answered Wangdu. 'It is just here.' He led the way through a natural gateway between two rocks and down a steep muddy path to the head of a dark green valley dotted with houses and dominated in the distance by the two white monasteries.

'This,' he said, 'is the school,' pointing to a large Bhutanese house just below us. And so it was, a new two-storey building with wooden shutters and small Gothic windows on its Tudor-like façade which had recently been built by the combined labour of the inhabitants of the valley.

'Five years ago Jigme Dorji decided to set up more than a hundred similar schools in the countryside,' a stocky young Bhutanese, the Lopda Dakpo, as a schoolmaster is called, explained to me.

The schoolmaster gave me details of how these schools operated and how they had come into existence. First the King had chosen, from all over Bhutan, those children who appeared to be bright youngsters and had sent them to Kalimpong, the Indian village on the border of Bhutan, Sikkim and Tibet, where they had learnt English. Then all over Bhutan, even in the most inaccessible valleys, schools had been built by royal edict. The Lords of the Law had persuaded the people that this was a good thing.

It all sounded so simple yet I recalled how Nepal, despite its millions in foreign aid, despite its long acquaintance with the English language, and despite literally hundreds not to say thousands of technical assistants from the West, had been unable to set up any schools worthy of the name in its remoter regions.

'As many of the boys live far away,' the teacher said, 'they stay here and sleep in the class rooms. They do their own cooking.' Thus for the majority of the pupils the school was a boarding school. 'The King gives rice to those who stay at the school,' said the master as he led me into one of the classrooms. This was like all the other rooms, bare with a wooden floor. The teacher chased away a few young boys in little black kos who all said 'Hallo, sir,' to me in English and ran into other classrooms from which more children peered down at me.

'We teach Dzong-ka and English. We do not have many books but some are being written at Thimbu.'

From one room I could hear the children chanting aloud in Bhutanese. There is no real Bhutanese written language. The monks of Bhutan use Tibetan in their books and in official government records but at present scholars are classifying the spoken language. They are using Tibetan characters but simplifying the spelling, which in classical literary Tibetan is very intricate.

I was quite surprised by the brilliant young school teacher and wondered that he chose to live here, isolated in this remote valley. When I asked him if he was lonely he explained: 'It is the King's wish and for the good of Bhutan,' adding: 'we are very few, the Bhutanese professors who can speak English so that in many schools there are Indians.'

I learnt later by meeting some of these Indians that they are all from Kerala State in southern India. The Bhutanese do not like the Indians, especially the Hindus, whose caste systems make them scorn all Buddhists, and also because of the Indians' expansionist views of Bhutan. Therefore, to prevent Indianization through contact with Hindus, all the teachers are chosen from Kerala State where the language is not Hindu but Malaiyam, a language as complicated as its name is difficult to pronounce. Kerala State, which counts the highest number of Catholics and Communists in the whole of India, is very remote in mentality from the classic Hindu India. Thus there is no risk of Bhutan, like some of the other Tibetan areas of Nepal or Northern India, becoming Hindu or influenced by India. The only drawback to this wise policy is that the poor Indians from Kerala, born near the Equator, suffer very much from the cold, seeing snow and experiencing temperatures below 60°F for the first time in their lives. A salary four times higher than that paid in Kerala, one of the poorest of the Indian States, induces these young men to migrate to the Himalayas where they have to learn Bhutanese in order to be understood.

I realized how an absolute monarchy on Bhutanese lines had so many advantages over the pseudo-democratic systems of other under-developed countries and how Bhutan, ignoring anything like a social caste system or a money-grabbing bourgeoisie, was so much better equipped to modernize its institutions and so much more efficient in its administration than any land I had ever seen. In Bhutan an order was an order. When the King wanted schools he got the best and the best brains were ready to serve. I recalled how in Nepal when a young man had been sent abroad to train he would return with a contempt for his own people and refuse to set out into the isolated valleys of his land, preferring to live in a city with cinemas rather than do his duty by going back to his village to help his fellow men. In the same way many of the élite of under-developed countries, having tasted the comforts of

the West, become avid for profit and are eventually a total loss to their countries' backward areas, where they refuse to work. In Bhutan such problems did not arise and I felt that the whole country responded to the King's wish to modernize. Bhutan in six years had achieved nearly as much as Nepal in twenty with a population nine times smaller and much less financial resources. Yet in modernizing, Bhutan plans to preserve its customs and institutions intact. I recalled the King's ban on 'aping' the West. How right he was.

Bhutan was run rather like a large private estate, yet its unusual form of government avoided both the pitfalls of European feudalism and of capitalism. Since promotion was not based on blood or money, family and wealth were not instrumental in achieving a high position in the governmental hierarchy. Positions were gained on the basis of talent, and promotion somewhat as in our western armies. The higher officials were nominated by the King from an élite elected by the people. This combination of democracy and feudalism in a moneyless society is one of the greatest assets of Bhutan. It is a truly original and remarkable system and, at the same time, qualified to adapt to our technological world without suffering the woes of financial or bureaucratic dictatorship.

If one adds to this the fact that internationally Bhutan, unlike most countries of the world, has preserved its absolute independence from foreign political or financial pressure groups one might think that I was describing a Utopian society, especially when one recalls that the moral and religious side of man's life is given as much consideration by the King and his administration in Bhutan as his material welfare.

Nothing, though, is perfect and neither is Bhutan. Since the title of King became hereditary in 1907, and is no longer a nomination through election as in the past, the King might possibly in the future assume too much power and create a dynasty as in mediaeval Europe. So far this tendency and the pitfall of true feudalism has not extended beyond the heir to the throne and the immediate family of the King. A year after my journey in a remarkable gesture the King decided to make his throne elective once more. Every three years, starting in 1969, his position is to be confirmed by a two-thirds majority of votes by the general assembly of the lords and principal abbots of the land.

Bhutan has therefore achieved one of the most perfect systems of government based on merit recognized by all and free of favouritism due to wealth, bribery or hereditary privilege.

In the meantime, I daily discovered that the prevailing system was remarkably better than most of those in the rest of the world. In Bhutan the principal motivation of individuals, once their elementary needs of food have been satisfied, is status. Although in the West status is also important, unfortunately it has become tied, more often than not, to wealth, so much so that we in the West have trouble in considering a very rich man as being of less importance than, let us say, the head of a local post office, although the rich man may hold no rank in the official hierarchy and thus, in practice, be less important than the local postmaster. In the same way it was difficult for me to understand and believe that the Lords of the Law of Bhutanese dzongs could be poor, which is what most of them are. Everything I took for wealth was, in fact, only the outward proof of their office; as though the amount of gold braid on the general's uniform were a sure proof of his being richer than a private soldier. Prestige and privilege are the true difference. In Bhutan, where they had never known a monetary economy, nobody attached any value to wealth.

Bhutan is possibly simultaneously one of the most democratic and the most socialist of societies. Everything is dependent on the State, represented by the King, but all officials are elected. It is the villagers who elect the *gap* (headman) and the headmen who elect the ramjams and the King who makes the ramjams Lords of the Law, each lord holding office for only a short time or, if maintained, he is moved from one fortress to another but is never sent to the fortress of his home district. Thus the poorest peasant in Bhutan can aspire to become a Lord of the Law, all of whom are, in fact, of peasant origin. In the same way, through the process of reincarnation, the leaders of the Bhutanese church, who are as influential as the Lords of the Law, are taken haphazardly from poor families, selected like the Dalai Lamas of Tibet on the basis of oracles.

If this system appears nearly perfect, I was soon to see that like in any human organization Bhutan's administration was inevitably plagued with those vices inherent in all mankind. The Lords of the Law are far from being all saints, although the majority are men of great value, self-made leaders recognized for

their personal qualities by a system not blinded either by money or prejudice stemming from considerations of birth.

In such a light the importance attributed to rank and the privileges of high officials has a valid meaning because they are deserved by those who enjoy them. I discovered that the highest ambition of most Bhutanese was to attain rank, to serve the country in the highest possible capacity, just as the dream of every private in the West is to become a general. Just as anywhere else in the world, everyone in Bhutan wants to be important. Status is a universal ambition but, unlike the rest of the world, status in Bhutan can only be achieved in service to one's country and not by amassing wealth or inheriting it or by inheriting one's father's status.

It was raining and misty when, the following morning, we climbed back to the magical wood, passed the lake and proceeded along the same ridge as the day before. We soon reached an area above the level where cultivation was possible, where grew a tangled mass of small rhododendrons. For four hours we plodded along. Wangdu showed us some little berries like blueberries which were edible so we cut some branches and munched as we went.

Tensing told me about his childhood in Tromo, a Tibetan region whose name means 'warm', which borders Bhutan to the north-west. Despite its name, this region was not at all warm, but a cold barren area where grazing was the main livelihood. His father originally came from Kham and Tensing was proud of his link with the fierce eastern Tibetans who are famed for their strength, their height and their elegance as well as for their brutality. A race of warriors, they were feared by the milder central Tibetans, who are peace-loving and devoted above all to religion.

For two years after the Chinese attacked and seized Lhasa, Tensing and his family remained in Tibet misled by Chinese promises and the particularly good treatment which the Chinese reserved for border areas. Tensing's father was a prosperous farmer and, like all Tibetans, was also a businessman. In winter he went with his pack animals to Lhasa and to Kham or to Kalimpong to trade.

With one repressive measure after the other the Chinese tightened their grip on his village. They were trying to create a class struggle in Tibet, to pit the peasants against the lords. They did not understand the local form of administration in Tibet which, although it had weighed heavily upon the peasants, had never curtailed their personal freedom. Most peasants in Tibet owned land or rented it. There were practically no serfs in the European sense as the Chinese had claimed, that is to say people who could dispose neither of property nor of themselves. All Tibetans were free, their only bond to the lords being an economic one. There were, of course, abuses in settling the amount of taxes – but where in the world are taxes not considered abusive?

When the Chinese failed to create a hatred for the ruling class, they realized that force would be required to convert the Tibetans to Chinese communist ideals. And so began the slow process of so-called voluntary communization, in which all the peasants' lands and belongings were gathered and pooled under Chinese control. Since, as I have said, most Tibetans were landowners and had a high respect for property, the Chinese reforms, which had pleased them at first because of the promise of schools, hospitals and better roads, suddenly became thoroughly unpopular.

When Tensing's father saw his land and cattle taken away to serve a so-called common interest, which was really only that of his traditional enemy, he decided to leave.

By night, with Tensing, his sister and his mother, he crept up over the pass which led them to northern Bhutan. There the Bhutanese welcomed the refugees but redirected them to India because Bhutan could not risk angering the Chinese, being unable to defend herself single-handed against any possible attempt at conquest by the communists of Mao. As Tensing's father had contacts with influential people in Bhutan he obtained permission from the King for his family to remain there and enjoy a tax-free status.

Thus, ever since he was fourteen, Tensing had lived in Thimbu. There his sister's beautiful voice had attracted the attention of the King and on various occasions she had been called to sing Tibetan songs before the King and his Court. The King, I learned from Tensing, loved music very much and often called groups of singers and dancers to the palace. Tensing showed me his watch.

I had been intrigued by it because it was a very fine Swiss waterproof diver's watch.

'The King gave this watch to my sister,' he told me. I wondered later how many tons of watches the King brought back every time he went to Switzerland because I met over a dozen officials and people of lower condition sporting the best of Geneva's craftsmanship and claiming that they had received their watches as a royal gift.

'I was just too old when I came to Bhutan to go to school,' Tensing said, explaining why he had gone to work as a servant of the Paro Penlop, following him on various journeys north of Thimbu. After one of these trips Tensing had fallen sick and had from then on helped keep the miserable little tea shack which belonged to his parents in Thimbu.

As we walked, most of our conversation centred on Tibet and on the thousand and one little problems of our journey, comments on the pack animals and their Bhutanese owners, on the land and its houses and fields, and talk about girls. Tensing had quite a few girl friends, he explained to me, but did not consider getting married for 'a very, very long time'. He added: 'Without a house, without land, what would I do with a wife?' I agreed. Later on he quite surprised me when I asked him what it was that young Tibetans most desired of life. Without hesitating he answered: 'A son.' That remark certainly put me in my place. I was thinking of what we in the West most desire: wealth, a home, a car, a good time. What young European or American would, like Tensing, have said immediately 'a son' which I believe, is in fact, what every truly mature man and woman desires most.

How many simple facts of life, how much truth about the human condition is overlooked and forgotten in our world in our frenzied quest for the unnecessary. Just two months before I came to be plodding behind Wangdu's mules, I had been caught up in the midst of the Paris student riots. Among all the slogans, and all the theories for or against our technological society, I had never heard one request for a son. In our modern world the issues are often too remote from the immediate problems which are truly ours. For generations past parents have worked for the future of their children. Now that this future is assured young people want to know what it is all about. Students all over the world are now questioning the meaning of planned stability and

material prosperity. Possibly only because they fail to understand the true cause of our material surfeit probably to be found in man's eternal desire to provide for his greatest treasure, his children.

All morning the trail wound its way upwards in slippery steps covered with trickles of water and eventually flattened out on to a ledge from which the ground fell steeply into thickets of rhododendrons. We could not see the surrounding mountains and it seemed as though we had reached the top of a misty heaven. Wangdu was for ever lagging behind his animals and protesting, when I wanted to ride, that I would kill his mule. This annoyed Tensing more than me and he would ask me every few minutes:

'Please, do you want to ride?' just to hear Wangdu repeat over and over again:

'No, not now, wait a little, the track is very bad here.'

After a long while we reached the summit of the ridge and the rhododendron forest opened out into coarse, high-altitude pasture. There in the mist we found huge black cattle grazing, dark smudges moving mysteriously in the eerie whiteness which enveloped us on all sides. A light breeze soon dispelled the mist and a sharp ray of sun swept through the clouds. Here Wangdu called a halt and we sat down on the damp grass by the side of the road, Tensing and I having a smoke. Ten minutes later we were joined by the men we had seen on our way the day before. They too were making for Tongsa. One of them was particularly handsome with a thin nose and closely shaved, narrow head which gave him an almost European look, or rather a Yul Brynner type of Asiatic face. We were soon joined by four other men and a child who stood a few yards away from us and stared in amazement. These newcomers were huge and muscular with very pronounced Mongolian features and short ugly noses. Instead of the traditional brightly coloured kos, they were dressed in thick Tibetan-style gowns of dark brown homespun cloth. They were, I learned, Drokpas, nomad cattle herders. I had heard a good deal about these Bhutanese nomads and was much intrigued to meet some.

Of a different race from the valley people, they live all their lives on the lofty peaks and ridges of the steep mountains over-

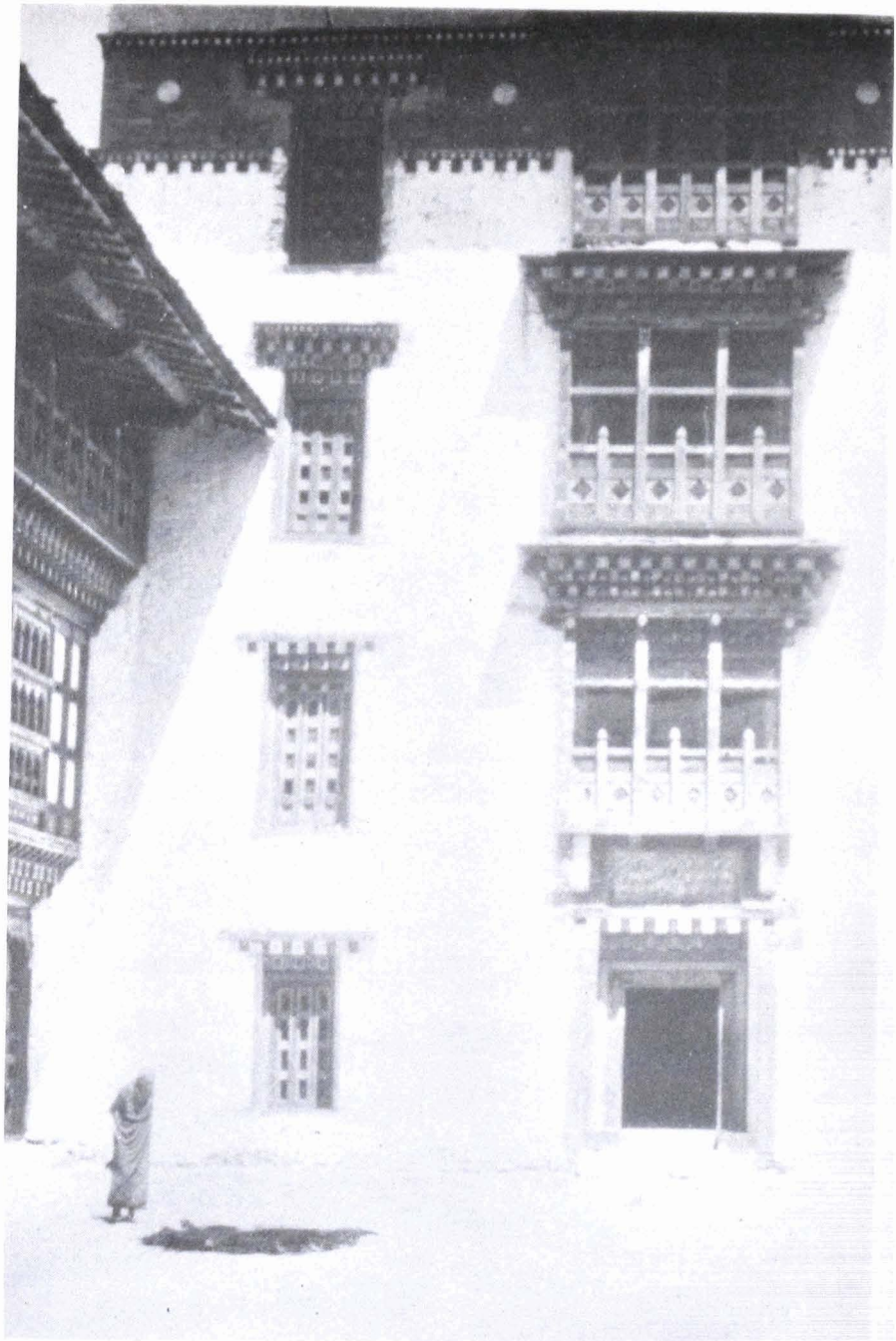
looking the valleys. They never come down the mountains to the lower agricultural lands but stick to the ridges where they keep herds of sheep, cows, yaks and *dzos*, a crossbreed between yaks and cows. They are always on the move following a strange cycle of migrations. In summer they follow the narrow ridges northwards right up to the foot of the snow-fields and glaciers of Bhutan's highest peaks, living at altitudes of up to fifteen and sixteen thousand feet. Then as winter approaches they retreat slowly along the crests of the mountains, moving southwards for nearly a hundred miles, passing above all the valley villages, camping in their brown cloth tents made from yak hair.

In this way these nomads of western and central Bhutan escape the snow, not by changing altitude but by changing latitude. Thus, according to whether one is on the heights or in the valleys, Bhutan is peopled by two different races each with their own customs and languages yet living only a few thousand feet apart vertically. For these nomads, the only fixed points on their journeys are the monasteries situated on the high ridges. There they have their rare contacts with the agricultural people of the lowlands when they deliver to the monasteries the taxes they owe to the local forts and which are paid in butter, milk and meat. The nomads also take care of the royal herds and the cattle belonging to the dzongs.

These elusive people are cruder than the valley men. They are tough burly fellows and compared to the villagers they look quite prehistoric. Since there are two crests to each valley and as each crest has its particular nomad tribe with its separate dialect one is confronted with a most unusual ethnic pattern. From now on we would meet different nomads every time we climbed a ridge.

I would have liked to study these as yet unrecorded nomadic tribes, and investigate the strange lives they lead confined to their ridges, living in sight of the sturdy homes and rich fields of the valley people yet never coming down to mingle with the lords of the land and the peasants to whom they turn over the products of their work through the agency of the monasteries.

When our animals were saddled again, we set off down a steep slope into a dark, wooded valley. The mist had cleared and, for the first time, I could see before me a part of the mighty mass of the Black Mountains, the colossal chain which cuts Bhutan in



The Bhutanese are fine architects and builders and especially skilful carpenters. Not a single nail is used in the assembly of the intricate window-frames and loggias

Stern, handsome, but kind, stands the Lord of the Law of Tongsa beside his armed escort. Here he was about to leave on a tour of his district

Dinner. The author with the women porters on the flank of Ruto-la.

In Bhutan the whip is still used to enforce discipline among schoolchildren and the serfs who are taught the Tibetan dances of the dead

A shackled and yoked prisoner is a public example that crime in Bhutan does not pay

two, a uniformly high barrier extending right down to the Indian border. Within a day and a half we would reach the crossing point of this range, a pass whose name now recurred frequently in our conversation, the famous Pele-la, over eleven thousand feet high.

We now left the summit of the ridge we had been on since the day before and the Black Mountains disappeared as we entered a thick jungle which became more humid and tropical as we descended. Eventually we reached a rushing stream at the bottom of the valley which bore a strong resemblance to those dear to photographers of the Amazon, its water filtering through the branches of fallen trees and the fronds of dense tropical vegetation.

In a few hours we had left the cold universe of mist behind and exchanged the high pastures for a torrid tropical world. It was as if, in two days, we had travelled from the barren, cactus-covered valleys of Mexico to the pine slopes of the Alps, through the rain forests of New Guinea down to an Amazonian valley. Since morning we had not seen a village, a house or even a soul save the nomads and the fellow travellers bound, like us, for Tongsa. Alternatively shivering and perspiring, we traversed this gigantic botanical museum. Nowhere in the Himalayas had I seen such a variety of plants. There is perhaps nowhere in the world that affords such extravagant contrasts as Bhutan. In the small state of Sikkim, which is quite similar in climate and vegetation, botanists and entomologists have found more varieties of orchids, trees, plants, butterflies and insects than in any other single country in the world, although in all the world there are few smaller than Sikkim. Bhutan, I am certain, harbours even more wonders than Sikkim, as the climate, mountains and general topography are more varied and extreme than those of Sikkim, but these marvels still await discovery.

This natural exuberance and variety is explained by the hectic combinations of altitude and exposure and their effect upon the winds and rain. Thus two valleys at the same altitude will be entirely different according to their exposure to the sun, while the wind might turn a third valley at the same altitude into a desert. The hot winds and rain clouds sweep up from the Indian ocean and the Gulf of Bengal to reach Bhutan, which is the first obstruction after the thousand miles of flat plains. All this rain, wind and heat beats against the impossible barrier of the Bhutanese

Himalayas, destined never to reach Tibet because the last gusts of wind and the last barrels of rain fall on the southern flanks of Bhutan's great peaks. The western and central Himalayas of Kashmir and Nepal are not as exotic as Sikkim or Bhutan, because they are drier and less exposed to the full force of the monsoon.

We now followed the Amazonian torrent along a muddy track, slithering through pools of stagnant water and oceans of hot mud beneath trees through whose boughs a pale green light and snaky vines descended. Undergrowth of palms and ferns clustered at the bases of slimy trunks of the seemingly endless trees speckled with orchids and dozens of other exotic parasites in a world where plant eats plant.

Our mules appeared dwarfed like cats in cathedrals as they advanced in single file beneath the great green dome through which we caught not one glimpse of the sun which was steaming us in our enclosed oven. Gone were the dry, sandy beaches of the Ma-chu, the fragrant air of the pine needles beside the lotus lake, gone, too, was the alpine grass of the nomad haunts. When, I wondered, had I passed through these places? Was it really only yesterday, only a few hours ago?

It was getting late and, apart from a short halt when we had eaten biscuits and watched Wangdu unpack a cheese that both for its smell and appearance would have put to shame the most pungent and exotic lactic concoctions of France, we had not eaten since morning.

One must have walked a whole day or, better still, days on end, to understand the strange torpor into which the mind falls from walking so long. I advanced for miles on end like a robot, forgetting my body as it repeated the movements of progress. My mind swayed to my pace and peered with curiosity at the film which passed before my eyes. Little blades of grass grew suddenly familiar, intimate, and were then forgotten as another object attracted my gaze and set a thousand thoughts adrift in my mind. In these first days I thought often of the world I had left behind, a world which ended in Thimbu and which had begun somewhere in the nebulous past of my childhood memories.

Brought up in England, I had, since my earliest days, been taught to believe that reality was elsewhere. More than one

thinks, the Anglo-Saxon mind is built on dreams and fantasies, possibly because it draws a darker line between work and pleasure, between fact and fancy, unlike the Latins who mix pleasure with business and religion with love, reality with dreams. Not so in the damp lowlands of England, where duty is duty and Sunday the Sabbath. So when it rains in England one has only to close one's eyes and the sun shines, and the conservative bankers all water their flowers in the evening. British gardens are adults' fairy kingdoms and nowhere do grown men take such pleasure in reciting nonsense rhymes as in the land where no nonsense is the rule of life. In England, cars and houses, clothes and furniture can be ugly because everyone carries around a pumpkin and a fairy castle, a golden wand and a toadstool and there is always time to dream of the tropics where the never-setting sun of Empire shines in the imaginations of all the fog-bound Islanders. I myself had been brought up on dreams and this self-defeating process meant that by the age of twenty nothing but the most exotic forms of reality could have stirred me to the slightest enthusiasm. This was because I had already lived a thousand lives, being pampered for two decades by fairy godmothers, I had killed countless dragons in the most adverse conditions, courted and won more princesses than I had won battles on the fields of my never-never lands. In like manner I had frozen with Scott at the silent South Pole and beaten the Trade Winds with Columbus, flogged around the Cape and barely survived the Horn. I had conquered Peru with Pizzaro and Mexico with Cortez and like so many others churned the dust of the Far West. All told, there was, I discovered, little left for me to desire when I emerged, worn and dazed, from my dreams to face the full reality of the fact that now, at twenty, I could begin life.

There was little or nothing to tempt me in the classic sphere of banking or the worn routine of industry for I had wallowed in luxury through *The Thousand and One Nights* and had savoured in abundance all the earthly joys of mythical oriental courts.

At the wheel of a galleon I had discovered America with Columbus. That had been my finest hour when, clad in scarlet and grasping the flag of Castille which fluttered in the breeze, I planted the cross and took possession of a new world.

This trite polychrome image had been with me ever since and was no doubt the true reason why I travelled, why I was in

Bhutan, reliving a reality that rivalled my dreams. Some people regard travel as an escape; for me it is a return in flesh and blood to that universe of a child's mind nourished by the imagination. It is a return to the marvels which so many of us dismiss as we grow up. It is we who have killed the fantasies with which we made our world of dreams and if castles and lords, kings' horses and their men are never to be put together again it is because we have broken and killed the Humpty Dumpty inside us, tearing down the castles to replace them with factory yards when beautiful princesses became dissatisfied with the dream which was their reality. We have destroyed most of our fictions. Yet here inside the dzongs of Bhutan in 1968, the King's horses and men, archers and peasants could still live in a happy world made to the measure of man's fantasies instead of one tailored to his greed. Alas, how many of the workers in our factories, our ulcer-plagued businessmen, the masses in Calcutta and in the other purgatories of the West would stand up and say that what they most desired in life was a son. So Tensing had spoken, and so the Queen, the knave, the Lords of the Law and even old Wangdu would have done in Bhutan.

The mules were exhausted, panting like dogs as they pulled their tiny hoofs clear of the muddy track. Tensing and Wangdu called for more and more stops to rest. Wangdu urged that we should halt where we were, in the jungle for fear darkness would surprise us before we reached the village where we had originally planned to spend the night.

'How far have we to go?' I asked.

Wangdu seemed pessimistic: 'Very far and uphill,' he told me.

Somehow, under no circumstances, did I want to spend the night in that mosquito-ridden tropical valley. 'We shall carry on,' I decided, loading on to my mule some of the enormous bulk his companions were carrying. I set out ahead on foot, alone, cracking the branches that lay across the path and stepping round the pools of water and mud.

Eventually the track left the riverbank and began to climb. The vines thinned out, the trees changed and began to look like those of more temperate zones and the jungle gave way at last to forest in which one by one pine-trees began to appear. Sud-

denly we emerged into sub-alpine scenery. A little field appeared above me and I caught sight of the white mass of a monastery framed by gigantic lone trees overlooking a little vale pink with the blossom of buckwheat. It was twilight when we came into the little valley at the foot of the monastery to discover a dozen tiny houses surrounded by the buckwheat fields glowing pale against a steep grassy slope which rose up to the side of the great mountain. We had reached Minje and the foot of the Pele-la Pass.

It was barely light when we set out the following morning. Just behind the village where the last fields of buckwheat bordered the forest like a pink fringe, the trail entered the dark underworld. Immediately the track began to rise, at first in steep loops that soon gave way to wide flights of steps carved out of the rock. This path, built years ago by the warlords, was covered in moss, slippery and damp, overhung with Spanish moss dripping mist from the majestic boughs of immense trees. As we climbed the trees grew larger and larger. Bend after bend, stair after stair, we rose in a gloomy world where birds were rare and cold droplets suspended in the air condensed to dampen trees and stones alike, covering them with slimy growth like seaweed. We had entered the lands of eternal mist. Here, summer or winter, the mountains are wreathed in clouds and the trees grow silently to the sound of dripping water muffled by the dense fog. The only inhabitants of this strange universe are bears, ferocious Himalayan black bears which live off berries and hide in caves.

For a full four hours the steps rose ever upwards, one thousand, two thousand, perhaps four thousand of them up which the mules slithered, gathering their weight forward, thrusting out their necks and pulling up their hind legs, their hoofs groping nervously for footholds they could not see. Exhausted, I decided to ride but even that proved painful as I panted with the mule, which stopped every few yards to summon energy for another hectic scuttle up more steps before halting, like a goat, perched dangerously on the slippery stones.

I looked up anxiously at every turn for some sign which might tell me that we had reached the summit but, like the watched kettle that never boils, mountains take an eternity to climb as one looks forward, perspiring, to the summit. Soon I noticed that I

was breathing more heavily; we were nearing ten thousand feet and still the stone steps continued as far as the eye could see between the trunks of huge trees whose tops were lost in the mist.

After four hours of toil I spotted the long-awaited sign that the summit was near: little pieces of cotton tied to the bushes, prayer flags hung up by grateful travellers to honour the 'horse of the wind', the war divinity which resides only in high places. On the summit stood a pile of stones thrown together by generations of pilgrims, by the armies of the warlords, by merchants and those solitary wanderers who had used this pass all through the ages because it was the only passage across the Black Mountains linking central and western Bhutan.

I added my stone and sat down exhausted at the foot of the cairn to await Tensing, Wangdu and the mules.

In time they appeared, Tensing smiling and tired and Wangdu complaining that at his age the pass was 'getting even higher'.

As we reached the crest of the Black Mountains, the mist on the eastern side cleared as if by magic, revealing to us at last the splendour of the range we had just crossed. As far as the eye could see, craggy peaks shrouded in dark trees scarred the sky. All round the horizon rose the jagged summits of a gargantuan black sea. Bhutan was like a vast, vertical continent where man could find refuge only in burrows nestling in the shelter of isolated valleys. A more rugged country would be hard to imagine.

From the pass, running down the south-eastern flank of the mountain we had climbed, stretched what seemed like an alpine pasture. To my amazement I found that it was covered not with grass but with tiny bamboos no more than six inches high, forming a compact bed of strong stems like needles.

Below the pass on our right stood a small village with, near by, some fine horses grazing on this unusual pasture. The people of the village were royal shepherds who tended the King's horses and cattle. We stopped for a while to rest and three men came to join us and marvel at my cameras. From them we learnt that a large bear had been shot that morning as it romped on the bamboo lawns near the village. I went out to inspect the jet black animal with white 'V' markings under its neck. It lay on its back, its stiff limbs pointing to the sky.

Tensing looked away. 'What a sin!' he said. Killing is strictly

forbidden by Buddhist doctrine, although it is tolerated in the case of dangerous wild animals.

By crossing the Pele-la Pass I had entered the territory of the fortress of Tongsa, the greatest in Bhutan and for centuries the most feared and the most respected dzong in the land. The Tongsa *Penlops*, as its rulers were called, had been the boldest and greatest warriors in Bhutan and were elected more frequently than the heads of the other forts to the title of Deba, ruler over the entire land, until in 1907 the Tongsa Penlop, Urgyen Wangchuk, the grandfather of the present King, had himself proclaimed Gyal-po, King and hereditary ruler of Bhutan. On this occasion, Jean Claude White, the British agent in Sikkim, and his wife were invited to attend the enthroning ceremonies in Punaka Dzong. There, in the largest assembly hall, the Tongsa Penlop sat to receive presents from the heads of every one of the thirty-two dzongs of Bhutan and from the abbots of the principal monasteries. According to White, the donors flung their gifts proudly on the floor as their names were called out aloud. Bales of silk, elaborate cloth from Bumthang, sacks of wool, cotton, heaps of precious Tibetan tea and little bags of gold dust were heaped before the King. Each ruler paid his tribute and offered the King a ceremonial white scarf. After this ceremony the King blessed a cauldron of beer which the Dharma Lama also blessed before it was distributed to the assembly. Thus the Tongsa Penlop was recognized King of every fort, convent, hamlet and person in the Land of the Dragon. J. C. White for his part presented the King with the order of a K.C.I.S. (Knight Commander of the Indian Star), one of the highest honours of the British Empire. Sir Urgyen, as White always refers to him, had been knighted in 1905 also by White and made a K.C.I.E. (Knight Commander of the Indian Empire) so that to the long list of titles of the Gyal-po of Druk could be added those initials so dear to the British; much, no doubt, to the surprise of the Bhutanese, who have not reached our degree of civilization which has created honours that entail no further privilege than that of gracing one's visiting cards with the corresponding letters of the alphabet. The Tongsa Penlop was none the less well pleased, according to White, who, with Victorian assurance, felt certain

that thanks to him Sir Urgyen had crossed the rigid line that separated a 'native prince' from a gentleman.

On the other side of Pele-la, we had left behind for good the 'new' Bhutan of Thimbu and its road and the part of the country most influenced by Sikkim and southern Tibet. Now I was entering a different land, central Bhutan, locked in on all sides by great peaks, completely isolated from all contact with the outside world, a land very different from the western part of the country and with its own languages and traditions yet unknown to the western world.

Coming down from the Pele-la Pass, we followed a little stream. For ten miles we stayed by its side. At first its banks were lined with majestic cedar trees which would have been the envy of Lebanon. We passed two small villages, their approaches marked by rectangular buildings painted red and white and containing prayer wheels.driven by water, little cylinders inscribed with the prayer '*O mani padme hum*' and connected to a shaft which was joined in turn to a wooden propeller on to which a small rivulet of water was directed. Grinding slowly round and striking a bell at each turn, these little cylinders were filled with prayer sheets and at each revolution they obtained merit for those who had made them. They now became familiar sights all along our route and their placid chime with the accompanying splash of water and the calls of the birds that clustered beside them was like a concerto.

The valley we now descended was charming with its stately pines, its river and its grassy clearings. The villages of neat white-washed houses might have been painted by artists. I found myself a little disappointed and surprised at the same time that this valley was so unexotic. I could have been anywhere in Europe except that here nothing marred the landscape: no pylons, no cars, no rush, all was peace and quiet, grass, ponies and wooden bridges upon which little Bhutanese children sat staring at me in awe as I passed to the tinkle of the bells on our mules.

Someone I had spoken to in Minje had told me that a three-day festival of sacred dances was about to begin in Tongsa, so I hurried my pace, hoping that we might reach Tongsa in four days instead of five. Wangdu was cross when I prodded his animals and when, towards five o'clock in the evening, I refused to stop in a village which he declared was the last for nearly a day's walk.

'I will sleep in my tent,' I insisted, but Wangdu, who had no tent, was furious. The problem of where Wangdu was to sleep was solved by the three men whose small caravan had joined ours just below the pass. One of them had a tent and could put Wangdu up. Thus we walked on until dark and it was half past seven when in the grey light of dusk we came out on to a grassy ledge above the river where there was a huge chorten, a massive structure some thirty feet high shaped like half a sphere and crowned with a spire. Enigmatic eyes were painted on the four sides of the steeple, peering at the four horizons. Leading up to this chorten were rows of parallel walls whitewashed and embedded with stone slabs carved with the images of seated monks and divinities.

Seen in the twilight, the eyes of the monument loomed above us in stern reproach. It began to drizzle and we decided to pitch camp. Half an hour later it was pouring with rain and Tensing and I were still battling to erect my Roman tent. I held the soaked instruction sheet in one hand while Tensing brandished the storm lantern. My Italian being what it is, and Tensing's understanding of the intricacies of jointed aluminium poles what it was, we made a mess of it We lost the pegs in the dark and floundered inside masses of orange and green canvas which wound itself up in the guy ropes like a soggy sail. To add to all our problems my tent, one of the '*piu moderno*' according to the manufacturers, used rubber bands instead of rope to keep it taut. These flew off the pegs and catapulted into the undergrowth, and the rain ran down our necks as we scrambled after them.

'*Appoggiare il batone*. Push the button – I mean the stick!' I shouted to Tensing. He did not understand – I had spoken in English.

'*Chak dong*,' the metal wooden post, I translated quickly. 'Push on it.' Tensing pushed, then pulled, then I got inside then Tensing got inside and I got out. The tent rose. It was inside out.

'Never mind,' I said. Then the storm lantern blew out. I heard someone laugh. All this was painful enough, but it was made all the more unpleasant by the fact that the performance was taking place in front of four spectators, Wangdu and the three other men who, while we wrestled with our sheets, sat dry and happy in a large Tibetan tent they had taken thirty seconds to erect next to mine.

'Your tent will never be any good,' Wangdu remarked. I stood back and looked. I saw a baggy, lopsided mess of damp green cloth and the dripping figure of Tensing fumbling in the bushes looking for rubber bands. Angrily I got inside, only to find that every post was a different length and the whole structure on the point of collapse. Contrary to all the guarantees on the instruction sheet, the interior was a small lake.

I had jumbled my Italian/Tibetan translation somewhere. I hauled the now soaked bags in with me and summoned Tensing to the rescue again. I re-read the instructions carefully, sneering at the opening sentence: 'Let me congratulate you on your choice of the X Princess tent.' I read the complicated instruction sheet over and over again and then abandoned it in disgust at the final phrase wishing me a 'pleasant holiday'.

In Europe I had never camped in my life nor even been a Boy Scout; as for my past two Himalayan expeditions, they, I remembered regretfully, had been more grandiose affairs with servants aplenty, coolies, a cook and a cook helper and even, once, a liaison officer. All I had to do in the evening was to clap my hands and the tents would rise in seconds, the coolies would rush to take off my shoes (a custom introduced into mountaineering by the British), and tea would always be boiling before I had time to think. . . . Where was Calay? I moaned. And the luxury of Everest? As the years had gone by, the standards of my expeditions, I noted sadly, had fallen. From thirty-two porters on my Everest expedition, I was reduced to a dozen and no liaison officer on the way to Mustang and now this: Tensing and the '*bharah sahib*', the great white man, putting up his own tent. I was in for hard times and such a gloomy thought was scarcely cheered when, after an hour spent failing to make a fire in the rain, Tensing capitulated and declared that we could not have rice. I had not eaten since five that morning and had walked for fully eleven hours. Since the eggs I had eaten in Wangdu Photrang, I had had nothing except rice and Colman's mustard powder and tasteless arrow (damp) root biscuits. I was dead tired, furiously angry and starving hungry. It was ten o'clock at night when Tensing, after borrowing Wangdu's fire, produced rice, watery curry-powder soup and palm-oil dressing.

'We will have tea tomorrow,' he added to cheer me up.

'Tomorrow,' I echoed. 'Why not today?'

'It is too difficult,' Tensing said.

He too was exhausted. I, after all, had ridden part of the way.

These are the great hardships of Himalayan travel, I said to myself, recalling that the crew sailing under Columbus used to eat in the dark so as not to see the maggots. Little did I suspect that I myself would soon be forced to adopt such a method. Fortunately I did not really realize then what hard times lay ahead. I had just crossed the Pele-la. Little did I imagine then that I would look back on it as the easiest part of the journey.

Tensing and I sat shivering side by side. I had forgotten to bring a hotwater bottle. On every expedition I had sworn I would take one on the next and I have always been surprised that one never finds this item on the list of essentials to be taken to the remotest corners of the world. In fact, I had overlooked everything. In spite of the ten years I had been planning to explore Bhutan, I had managed to arrive at last quite unprepared. I had none of those amenities that make life bearable for those who flog it into the unknown: dehydrated peaches, flasks of brandy, all the elaborate gear prepared with such care, bottled and packed gratuitously by over-keen manufacturers bent on having their raisin cakes munched up the Amazon or their sweets sucked in New Guinea. Somehow I had never had the heart to get organized in the traditional way. Even my best-equipped journeys in the past had been ridiculous when compared with the nine hundred porters of the American Everest party and the six hundred of the British. I had always resented being too well equipped, feeling that each object and each tin can was an obstacle to accomplishing my goal, which was to share the hardships of the 'natives' (to use a word I dislike) and really get to know them. But here I was freezing, wet and hungry, while a few yards away the 'natives' were happily toasting their toes and eating cheese by their fire on which chillies, tsampa and buckwheat cakes sizzled appetizingly.

Hunger is excellent for the imagination. My mind seethed with all the most delightful menus of my life. Later, not content, I began to improve on them: lobster stuffed with caviar and baked in smoked salmon, I thought.

No, no, said another voice inside me. One-inch steaks. Only one inch? How stingy! Two inches, six inches . . . more? I paused, wondering if I should cut them crosswise. I could hear the crunch of the spoon as it broke the surface of a soufflé.

'*Yapo shita yapo.*' Good, very good, I heard Tensing mutter aloud.

'What are you saying?' I asked.

'You pig,' I whispered to myself when I saw that his mouth was full of his dry shoelaces.

'Give me some,' I said, swallowing my pride and taking a deep breath. Against all probability, I found my mouth watering. Was it yak? That was the question I asked myself as I fell asleep.

Next morning we broke camp at dawn. I wanted to reach Tongsa that day in spite of the fact that Wangdu and the other men all declared it to be impossible. All morning we walked down the stream we had seen rise in a trickle from the Pele-la Pass. Now it was a huge river, its green waters bounding over rounded boulders. We soon left the pine-trees behind and once again entered the uninhabited jungle with its hothouse slime, pale greenish light and snaky vines. Again, in a few hours, the climate had changed.

We stopped at two o'clock for a quick meal of rice and tea to which Wangdu added some excellent little red berries he had gathered *en route*, a kind of redcurrant which now grew in abundance beside the track.

It became evident that at the slow pace of the mules we would never reach Tongsa and, not wanting to miss a minute of the festival that I had been told was to start the following day, I decided to leave Wangdu and Tensing and strike out ahead on my own. I hesitated a moment before doing so, wondering if it was safe for a foreigner to travel alone across large tracts of a land peopled by men unused to the presence of outsiders. I had noticed that all the people we had encountered wore large knives, like daggers, in their belts and I had been told in Thimbu that these eastern people were quick-tempered.

Curiosity won and with only a camera I struck out alone. According to my estimates, based on a poll taken among our now enlarged caravan, I should make it before dark if I walked at a pace double that of the mules. Lightheartedly I sped off in leaps and bounds through the jungle with one eye out for the bears I imagined nervously were peering at me. Before long I came to an open pasture from which, looking south, I could see

down the gorge we had been following as it opened out into a wide valley bordered in the distance by fields and a few villages. Here I left our Pele-la stream and, turning right along a shoulder which was partly cultivated, soon reached a village whose entrance was marked by a little spring sprouting from under a stone. Meeting some peasants, I checked to make sure that I was on the right path. They directed me to keep going to a distant chorten which marked the corner of the open cultivated hillside. Three hours later, at about four o'clock, I reached the chorten, which I now noticed marked the beginning of a steep descent through more jungle to a narrow gorge. A few hundred yards farther on, I saw between the trees, far up the valley, the white mass of a distant dzong. Tongsa.

The track now became a series of descending steps hewn from a vertical cliff. Here I passed a caravan and asked in Tibetan how far I had to go to Tongsa. The men stared, surprised to hear me speak a language they could understand.

'In three hours you will arrive,' they said. 'Are you alone?'

Just in case they might have any ideas, I replied that my servants were just around the corner and carried on hurriedly down the steps.

A little farther on, I ran into a handsome young man and an exceedingly beautiful young girl leading two heavily laden mules. They told me that they had come from Thimbu. I walked a little way with them but their pace was too slow and again I carried on alone. In a bend through the trees I caught occasional glimpses of Tongsa Dzong getting larger and larger.

I marvelled to think that a mule could go down such steps without tripping. For man and beast alike, a foot misplaced would have meant instant death – but fortunately there was no poster to remind me of undertakers. At last the track levelled off just above a rushing river and continued upstream along a ledge. I had now lost sight of the dzong. Bright pink flowers bordered the track, which was steeped in shade. I feared being caught by nightfall when at last, unexpectedly, I came upon a bridge. Two rectangular stone houses with a doorway between them marked the end of the bridge. It was covered in bamboo matting. Huge wooden beams projected out of stone bases under the gatehouses and were joined by more great beams to make a hundred-foot arch above the swirling river.

On the far side I found myself at the foot of a very wide staircase which rose up a practically vertical hillside shaded by trees which clung to the rock. For forty-five minutes I clambered slowly up, stopping every now and again to catch my breath. I wondered if I would ever reach Tongsa. It was now quite dark under the trees.

I was fully exhausted when there appeared above me a fine whitewashed chorten enclosed in a rectangular stone structure. Looking up, I noticed above me a gigantic wall. I had reached Tongsa. The fort rose vertically above my head so that I could not grasp its size or features until I had climbed up three long flights of steps built against the side of the dzong.

Planted on this dizzy ridge I could see a cluster of roofs and the last steps as they disappeared through a small side entrance to the fort. All travellers, whether they wanted to or not, had to pass through the dzong. Catching my breath by the door, I heard a bustle above and saw three soldiers leaning over the parapet. One of them drew out a whistle and began blowing it loudly as I passed through the door while a man wearing a white sash banged a drum. And so, with feudal grandeur, they announced my arrival in the mightiest dzong in Bhutan.

5

Lord of Tongsa

THE NARROW GATEWAY through which I had entered brought me into a dark corridor which turned at right angles before emerging into a sunken stone yard. There I paused in amazement. On all sides rose the wood and stone façades of buildings five and six storeys high. Windows and open galleries gaily painted with flowers in pastel colours looked down on me. Two large doorways led out of this yard and a steep staircase rose on my left. Here were seated five men in fine green and orange kos, all wearing the white scarves which were compulsory when in a dzong.

I suddenly noticed how dirty my clothes were and, although I had shaved at lunchtime, after four days of arduous trekking I felt quite shabby and unfit to go and greet the Lord of the Law. Approaching these men, I asked to be led to the Trimpon. They stared at me haughtily, then one beckoned me to follow him. I climbed up some steps and found myself in another large courtyard at a higher level, surrounded on all sides by fine buildings and dominated at one end by a large platform off which opened a huge rectangular building itself as large as the dzong of Paro.

Slowly, following my guide and stared at by dozens of men and soldiers, I crossed this second yard, then climbed up more steps and along a narrow corridor to a small door which led to yet another yard surrounded on two sides by a thick wall pierced with loopholes. Passing through a door I eventually emerged from the fort on to a flat ridge some ten yards wide, one side overlooking the great river I had just crossed. From this high ridge, the river looked like a small white ribbon so far below that its roar failed to reach up to where I stood. On the other side of the ridge, a few hundred feet down, flowed a stream on the banks of which stood a dozen houses, the exact replica of a mediaeval English village. From the fort the ridge led to a low solitary

house. This I entered and found myself in a sort of antechamber crowded with men all craning their necks towards a door. I was asked to wait. Through the wooden walls I could hear voices in the adjoining room and their hushed tone told me that the Trimpon was inside and warned me that he was not a person to be treated lightly. After a few minutes a young man came out of the room, asked for my kashag and disappeared again. I was kept waiting still longer and then another man came and bade me enter the room.

Inside, ten men and two monks were seated on carpet-covered cushions set against the walls at one end of the room. At the other end of the room stood a small crowd of retainers. A servant was busy filling silver teacups on silver stands placed before the officials. At first an embarrassing silence filled the room, then a very handsome man, who I swiftly gathered was the Lord of the Law, begged me with his palm outstretched to sit down before him between a thin monk and a hefty, fierce-looking man on whose sword I trod clumsily. Again an uneasy silence fell on the assembly and they looked at me with stern, inquisitive glances. This silence was broken by a man sitting next to the Trimpon who held in his hand my kashag, which he proceeded to read aloud. Everyone listened and seemed to approve. I was then offered a cup of Tibetan tea and the ice was broken when I said 'thank you' in Tibetan.

'He speaks Tibetan,' I heard a man next to me say in Dzong-ka.

'Yes,' I ventured timidly. Silence again fell on the assembly, only to be rudely interrupted by shouts from the antechamber. There was a scuffle and in burst a little old monk with a silver cup in his hand and saliva drooling from his mouth. He was obviously quite drunk. The assembly rose respectfully whilst the stumbling monk approached us. Noticing me, he mumbled something, made a funny face and tripped again, spilling part of the contents of his cup on the floor. One of the monks present took his arm and steered him to a seat next to the Lord of the Law. There were giggles from the antechamber. Embarrassed, I looked at my cup and took a sip. The drunken monk then began raving about something. Looking up, my eyes met those of the Trimpon; his face expressed helplessness and disgust at the lama's condition.

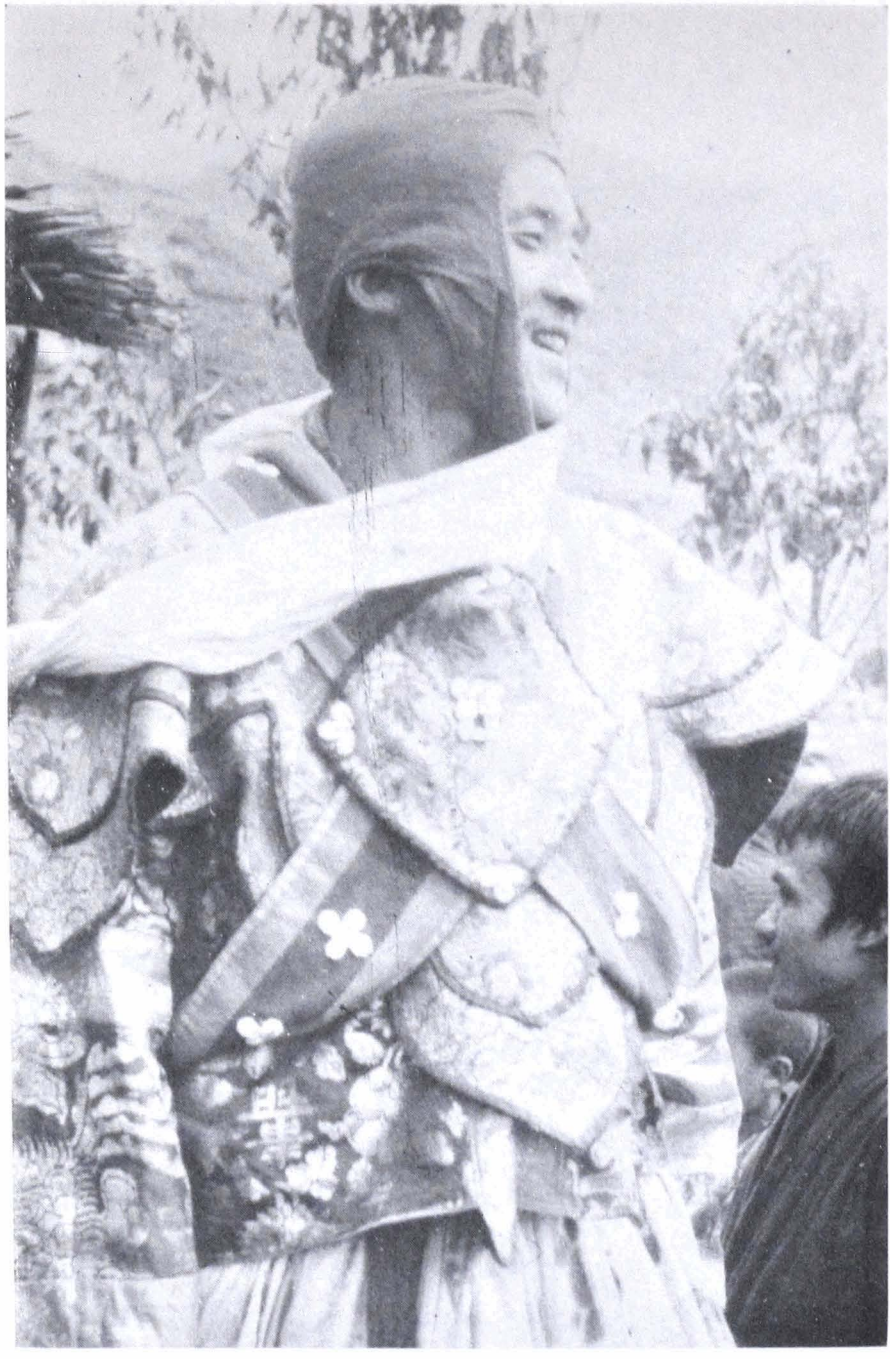
'Where are your servants?' the Trimpon asked in a soft voice.

'They are on their way,' I ventured. 'I do not know whether

Drum in hand, a masked dancer at Tongsa. For the child the author's camera and strange western face were more disturbing than the demon mask

One of the slaves of Tongsa represents Death in a sacred dance

Silver horns of the 'orchestra' of the Tongsa dancers. The plaid dress is characteristic of the Bumthang region



Fine brocades adorn a dancer about to put on his mask

they will make it tonight,' I added, not wanting to launch myself into lengthy explanations as to why I had left them behind.

The Trimpon called a servant and whispered in his ear, then, getting up and adjusting his sword, he bade me follow him out of the room.

Leaving his house and its mediaeval crowd I went back to the narrow ridge, where in a few minutes a table and two strikingly western chairs were set up. There, for all to see, I was seated with the Trimpon. Sweets of a rather sickly Indian kind were brought and so was more tea. From where I sat I was able to admire the view all round. Over to my right the ravine plunged in a spine-chilling drop to the great river; to my left I could see the village nestled at the foot of the dzong and ahead of me rose the massive back wall of the fort itself. Everyone passing through the region and the dzong was obliged to pass along this ridge to the door of the fortress. In this way the impregnable dzong commanded all trade and travel in the valley. It was hardly surprising, I thought, that from such a stronghold the King's grandfather, Urgyen Wangchuk, had been able to impose his authority on all the land. Never had I seen a more imposing war machine than Tongsa Dzong. Its sheer size and amazing location dwarfed even the most majestic crusader castles I had seen in Europe.

As men came and went in and out of the dzong they inevitably passed a few feet from us, bowing respectfully and cupping their hands as they went their way. Three servants stood to attend the Trimpon who, while he chatted with me, occasionally beckoned one to approach. The servant who had been called placed his right hand before his mouth so that his breath would not contaminate such a noble lord and, bowing deeply, received his instructions from his master, then hurried off to bring more tea or on errands of a more official nature.

A number of peasants stood around waiting to catch the Trimpon's eye and then came forward with pleas concerning taxes or a request for some favour. With aristocratic ease the Trimpon dispatched his duties and entertained me at the same time.

The Trimpon had short hair and a full but stern face. He was dressed in a bright elegant gown of the finest silk, impeccably clean, and radiated a calm authority which was further increased by his measured tone. His voice was pleasant and his words polite

but they allowed no contradiction. Not for one minute did he seem to forget that the eyes of all were upon him and that with one word he could condemn a man to death, to chains or hard labour. His was the hand which moved a whole province into action, his face the emblem of fear and the symbol of trust for thousands of souls living among the isolated hills. He was the authority which shut the doors of the dzongs at night, that decreed days of rejoicing or of hard work. Not a pound of rice or a lame pony was sold without his consent.

I admired this man, so conscious of his responsibility and so sparing with his power. He had a kind word for all and it was evident that he had sacrificed his personal life to his duty.

I felt like a schoolboy before this man whose manners and charm, austerity and power radiated in his every feature. He ruled from this ridge seated before the fort like the sovereigns of my childhood dreams, overlooking the land he governed, overseeing all the activities of his charges.

In our western countries authority is all too often locked behind doors, entrusted to anonymous persons without faces and to councils or boards without features. Here in Bhutan everything was public and in exchange for his power and the trust of his followers the Lord of the Law, like the King, had to sacrifice his privacy and identity. He was never alone, never apart from those he ruled. They could come and watch him eat, drink and sleep because he was truly theirs.

I believe that the public aspect of such men's lives accounts for much of their integrity. Their peasant origin and permanent contact with the humblest men of the crowd also explains the intimate understanding the Lords of the Law have of the people for whom they are responsible.

The Trimpon was not just a representative of justice, of order and of the law, he was that justice, that order and that law. All institutions were combined in his person and since morality and law in Bhutan are one he was also expected to be virtue and good incarnate as we in the West expect a judge to be impartial and moral.

I explained to the Trimpon how, wishing to attend the festival, I had come ahead, leaving my men to arrive the next day. He was pleased, but concerned as to where I should sleep and what I should eat. When we had drunk our tea, as dusk was throwing

a veil over the dzong, and a cold mist rising from the valley at our feet, the Trimpon got up and led me back to his house. The assembly had dispersed except for the drunken lama, who sat shouting and addressing rude remarks to the servants. I was really relieved when the monk withdrew.

'A great shame,' the Trimpon said. 'He is quite drunk and drinks all the time. So sad for such an important lama!'

Unfortunately, I had not seen the last of this monk.

The Trimpon then asked me questions about my country. I answered as best I could. I felt as if I were myself talking of another planet. There was little I could say since so much of what goes to make up our world is trivial or simply meaningless outside our complex western social structures.

Later the Trimpon introduced me to his daughter, a pretty girl of sixteen whose short hair gave her such a modern look that, forgetting the ankle-length gown of chequered cloth which was wrapped around her body and pinned together at the shoulders with two decorated silver clasps, I fancied that she must be acquainted with all the things beloved of our modern youth. Yet she had never seen a car or heard a radio and was ignorant of everything that we consider normal. She would never benefit from a clinic or the presence of a doctor in childbirth, had never imagined the existence of newspapers for women or envisaged the possibility of lands where fashions changed overnight. Yet nothing, or so little, in her manner, in her ways and in her mind could differentiate her from a girl of her own age in the West. In her company and in that of her father, as with most Bhutanese, I clearly saw how little technology and all the trappings of civilization have in fact changed human nature. People in Bhutan react in just the same way as those in Europe. What I would find amusing amused them too; what, here in the West, would inspire pity would inspire the same feeling there. Casual conversation is the same all the world over. In the West we tend to think that the gadgets we wield in our hands have changed us, yet what was the difference, I wondered, between this young Bhutanese girl and those of Europe or America? Weren't their ideals the same? They wanted to have a good time, to be pretty, to love and be loved, to eat well, chat with their girl friends and impress them. What did it matter what dress the young Bhutanese was wearing? What did it matter if she cooked food on a wood fire instead of a gas

stove, that she ate chillies instead of ketchup, that the clothes she wore were checks instead of stripes, that her music was live rather than taped? Never did I have to search for words to make myself understood in Bhutan, nor did people seem at all puzzled at the way my mind worked. At most, we queried the quality of cloth, the silk of their kos, they the Terylene of my trousers. But we never wondered what made us laugh or what made us happy or sad. Where, I wondered, was that progress that should have marked me as a special man? Where were those signs that made me a product of a more advanced civilization? Was it my knowledge that silver nitrate was sensitive to light or that petrol refined was an explosive solution, that turbines are faster than pistons, that penicillin combats other micro-organisms – did such detail make me special? I would have liked to be able to say that we in the West had discovered the cure to unhappiness and had found in life a meaning more sublime, answering all those questions and doubts that assail men in Bhutan as in the West.

But before the Lord of the Law of Tongsa I was but a child, and pale seemed the knowledge I had accumulated at Oxford, Harvard and the Sorbonne. That evening I shared a modest meal of boiled rice and chillies with the Trimpon and saw that except for the honours due to his rank his life was little different from that of the common people and was also marked by the rigours of the dzong's semi-monastic discipline.

With great concern for my comfort, the Trimpon sent a servant with some of his own rugs and a carpet to lead me up above the dzong to a small house where, by the light of a resin torch, I arranged my bed on the floor and fell asleep immediately from sheer exhaustion.

At dawn, opening the sliding shutters of the little windows of my room, I gazed out upon a lawn planted with two immense weeping cypress trees on which was a rectangular snow-white chalet with beams decorated in delicate colours. This was the residence of the King when he came to Tongsa and here, I was told, he had been born in 1925. Below me a steep incline led to the narrow ridge linking the fortress to the side of the mountain. The fort extended all along this ridge, ending in an isolated semi-circular tower. Dominating this immense maze of masonry was

a second building known as the *ta dzong* (the lookout fort). This was a 'V'-shaped structure with a central tower and four little round defensive bastions in the extension of the arms of the 'V' forming an inverted wedge that excluded all possibility of attack on the fortress from the hill above. The dzong and the lookout post were brilliantly whitewashed on the outside, with a wide red band running below roofs that were like a field of wooden slats weighed down by thousands of rounded stones.

I had slept in one of two very small bungalows set on the lawn where the King's residence rose beside a delicately painted water-driven prayer wheel. Wondering how Tensing and Wangdu were getting on alone, I set off down to the Trimpon's residence. There I found a large crowd. Some were seated with the Lord of the Law, others standing watching while more still clustered in the narrow antechamber. I was given tea and the Trimpon explained to me that in an hour the three-day festival would begin. He had ordered this feast to celebrate the creation of a market at Tongsa. This market was part of the King's plan to convert Bhutan's economy into an economy of exchange in which money could be introduced; the market was being set up to induce the peasants to sell their surplus produce among themselves. For the occasion the Lord of the Law had invited wandering merchants from distant places and had erected bamboo-matting stalls for them. The news of this fair had spread all over the district of Tongsa, up the most remote valleys, to all the lonely monasteries and villages, and in order to attract more people it had been decided that the sacred *chams*, the New Year dances depicting deeds of the spirits of the dead and the conquest of evil by the first preachers of the doctrine in Bhutan, should be performed. After two days of dances, there was to be a great archery contest in which the best shots in the land, including the high officials of Tongsa Dzong, would take part. Already hundreds of Bhutanese were arriving at the fort, the men dressed in their finest kos and the women in bright silk blouses and slim elegant gowns fastened by elaborate, turquoise-encrusted silver clasps. In a gay mood, they passed along the narrow ledge between the fort and the Lord of the Law's small house to climb up to the field set out for the fair. Ponies wearing bells and tufts of red wool and carrying ornate saddles also passed by ridden by older people or by two or three youngsters. In the crowd I could distinguish

some rough, tough nomads dazzled by the finery of the peasants, for they themselves wore but rough homespun gowns of brown wool. All had long knives sticking out of their belts.

After drinking countless cups of tea, the Lord of the Law gave the signal to leave. Surrounded by the crowd, the Lord of the Law, the Chief Steward, various lamas and myself, made our way on foot above the dzong, past a cluster of large houses to a flat field, by which stood Tongsa's new school building.

As we arrived the crowd of peasants who had gathered there parted to let us through. With the Trimpon in the lead the officials approached the little stalls of the new market. Tibetan merchants with long hair braided and tied by red ribbons stood up to salute the lords and press their wares on them and me. The first stall was a drink stall, where a merchant gave us cups of chang to taste. The Lord of the Law declined but I and the Chief Steward accepted. We sat down for a few minutes and in the meantime the Lord of the Law took some sweets from the fold of his ko and gave them to the shopkeepers' children. Then, all together, we passed on to review the other stalls, ten in all. I felt as though I were in the train of some Venetian prince as I inspected the mediaeval market, its stalls stocked with hand-woven silk from Bumthang, bows and arrows from the south, needles from India, and Tibetan brick tea.

Next to the stalls stood three especially fine white Tibetan tents, one of which was bordered with a bright red fringe. Seated on carpets in these tents were the abbots and monks of distant monasteries who had come down for the occasion. These visiting monks were soon joined by about two hundred from Tongsa Dzong.

A contagious, festive mood prevailed. At one end of the field men were busy attaching long strips of bright green, orange, and red cloth to thin bamboo poles, making banners to be planted before the dais from which the lords were to watch the dances. A small tent behind the flagpoles contained a table on which was a portrait of King Wangchuk, partly veiled by a ceremonial silk scarf. Beside these flag-poles twenty small trees had been planted to shade the officials.

In a far corner was a small hut around which a crowd had gathered; this was the dancers' dressing-room.

The Trimpon toured all this handing out advice, receiving

the respectful salutations of members of the crowd, giving orders and bestowing an air of importance on the festival. Little children ran all over the grounds while their parents tied their ponies to stakes on the hillside. Around us rose the dark jagged hills, forming an impressive backdrop to the scene. Peasants, eyes wide, moved from stall to stall as the proceedings got under way. I was asked to sit next to the Lord of the Law on his left. On his right sat the Nyerchen, a tall sturdy man in a yellow and green ko.

These two heads of the dzong cut fine figures in their brilliant flowing robes with their swords flashing in the morning sun and their tasselled needle pouches dangling at their sides. I felt particularly embarrassed by my dirty clothes as I had not been able to change and I could not help thinking with regret that in the West we men have lost the art of dressing up. Our drab suits are so shabby compared with the flamboyant gowns of the Bhutanese.

I had scarcely sat down when a group of girls began to dance; pretty lasses with short cropped hair singing in muffled tones and gyrating in a circle, swinging their hands in rhythm. The crowd began to gather and people sat down on the ground. The day had begun. Men left the tavern, the merchants came forward to look. At that moment the drunken old lama, the local spiritual authority, more tipsy than ever, stumbled up to the young dancing girls, imitating their gestures and joining in their dance. It was a painful scene, but no one dared to restrain such a high cleric, not even the Lord of the Law. Eventually a young monk dared to coax him to sit down. Tea was served to all the officials and since the peasants had offered the lords peaches I was given one to eat. Considering my diet of the past seven days, I ate it with gusto.

The blast of two long silver horns and the clash of cymbals suddenly quietened the last murmurs of the crowd. All eyes turned towards the dressing room. A drum began to beat a hollow rhythm. The first dance was about to start.

In a flourish, a white form raced from the hut followed by three more. Silence froze the assembly. Death had appeared, menacing, gruesome, hideous and majestic. The drum beat was a slow pulse, bringing the four masked monsters to life.

So began the tale of the *cham*. These dances are in a way what the passion plays were for the people of the middle ages. They are a sacred performance, heavy with tragic and religious significance, sacred dances of the departed spirits enacting what

saintly lamas have witnessed when sitting beside funeral pyres. What we saw was four men dressed in loose white gowns with sleeves ending in oversized glove-like fingers that flopped around as the twirling skeletons entered into their trance. These dancers were indeed a terrible sight, wearing larger-than-life hideous masks of death, skulls with sunken eyes and lipless teeth, each crowned with a tiara of five smaller skulls. They gyrated before us in slow motion, the skulls moving at an unnatural angle owing to the fact that the dancers peered through the mouths and not the eyes of their masks. To the sound of cymbals and the drum, they enacted the fear and terror which all those present would experience upon their deaths. The fear of souls prior to their re-incarnation in one of the six hells through which the spirit must toil awaiting that perfection and fusion with the Absolute called Nirvana. For only Nirvana can break the infernal cycle of man's life in the wheel of existence held up by the god of death. Only going from death to death can man hope to achieve his liberation.

For over an hour the roll of the ever-increasing drum beat continued and those present were chilled to silence. Usually such dances are enacted only once a year. The sacred masks and magnificent costumes are taken out for the occasion from the chapels of the war gods, the *gung khangs*, secret chambers in which all the sinister symbols of death are concealed.

For 'life is pain', the Buddha had said, and for the tantric Buddhists of Tibet and the old 'red hat' sect of the Land of the Dragon this pain is managed by fearful spirits which mingle with man, watching his every step, spying on his life and awaiting his death to follow him for ever; that is until at last through the accumulation of merit and the living of subsequent lives as man, animal or demon in the hell of hells pain may one day be overcome, the illusions of the senses mastered. Only then will man break his earthly links as he reaches that perfection characteristic of the Buddha, that Nirvana in which the individual loses his sensory identity, the cause of all pain.

This first dance finished. Young girls and boys took over the floor, dancing in two circles and singing the nostalgic chants of Bhutan. In the meantime I visited the hut where the dancers were preparing for the next dance. This one was to be gayer and fully thirty-five men were donning their costumes, skirts made of hundreds of vivid orange, red, blue and green scarfs tucked into a

belt. They were to dance barefooted, their chests covered only by an elaborate silk brocade cape. What I did not know then was that these dancers were *zaps*, serfs or slaves belonging to the dzongs, the descendants of prisoners of war taken in the course of battles fought against Tongsa or men kidnapped as hostages in the winter raids that had brought the Bhutanese down from their lofty mountains to the edges of the Assam Douars. It was with a whip that these men had been taught daily to enact the pageants of their captors.

Today was their moment of glory. What I would witness was the outcome of months of practice, the result of a long rough training during which they had suffered countless blows from the Chief of Serfs' whip. This 'slave driver' was a tough-looking man who now supervised the dancers from the dressing room. The mouths and chins of the performers were covered with a long white scarf, as they protruded below the masks, whose mouths were level with the men's eyes. These masks represented hideous demons with bloodshot eyes and crowns of human skulls.

Into the sunlight they leapt and once again silence fell on the fascinated crowd. For hours they twirled to the strange music, fighting demons with their wooden swords, stooping and rising, leaping on one foot as they twirled around to the rustle of their silk skirts which exploded in bursts of colour.

Despite the light shade of the trees, the sun beat down through the banners with incredible force as I sat watching the gyrations of this hoard of demons, perspiring under their suffocating masks, churning the dust and rasping the short grass with their bare feet. The sturdy feet of slaves.

The day passed quickly, punctuated by visits to the Tibetan beer stalls. At about four o'clock Tensing appeared with the news that all was well, the equipment set out in the bungalow near the dzong and Wangdu waiting to be paid.

That evening, before we dispersed, the Lord of the Law addressed the assembled crowd, expressing his hope that every two weeks merchants would come in greater numbers and that the villagers would bring down any produce they might have to sell.

The next morning I got up at dawn and with Tensing set out for the dzong to replenish our stores. We found the Nyerchen

down in the small valley below the dzong. We entered the fort through the side door and climbed four flights of steps to a dark corridor running under the roof. Here were the rooms in which the taxes in grain paid by all the peasants of the district were stored. The Nyerchen broke the seal closing one of these doors and we entered a room full of great wooden chests twenty feet long and five feet tall. Taking a key shaped like a chorten, the Nyerchen opened the padlock of one of these. From it Tensing collected six *bre*, six fat measures of rice which, to the chant of one of the attendants, slithered into a bag we had brought along. The Nyerchen then moved to another chest containing rice of an inferior quality. Fifty measures were taken from this and loaded into a wooden barrel which two monks came to collect. This was the daily fare for the monastery of the dzong. In a corner was a mound of butter. Like a schoolmaster, the grave and dignified Nyerchen supervised as the monks cut off lumps and weighed them, using a stone measure.

Leaving the granary, we passed other storerooms with doors locked by a strip of cotton bound by the seal of the silver signet which swung from the Nyerchen's belt. Clambering down a steep ladder we reached the Nyerchen's office, a room with walls painted yellow and dotted with orange flowers. The carved ceiling beams and pillars were resplendent with red, blue and yellow designs. One wall of the room was an elaborate altar, a large cupboard affair in steps on which rested fine copper images of lamas. The whole cupboard glowed with gold carved flowers and dragons. The Nyerchen bowed to the altar and sat cross-legged on a carpet before a low table. One of his attendants drew a roll of brown paper from the folds of his ko and inscribed on it what grain had been taken from the granary. On the wall behind the Nyerchen were six fine swords in silver scabbards decorated with gold designs. Some of the swords were protected by bright silk sheaths. Alongside them were three whips, one of braided leather thong with three long thick strands, another with a similarly braided handle ending in a flat swat-like leather pad and the third a tough stick with a silver pommel. I recalled my boarding-school days in England and shuddered slightly. The Nyerchen took a particularly fine sword and hung it from his belt explaining that he had to be smart for the dances.

These would not begin again until later in the morning, so I

set out with Tensing to visit the dzong in detail. The main courtyard was bustling with activity. In one corner thirty men in ordinary clothes danced to the sound of a small cymbal. They were practising for the day's events. In another courtyard one of the ramjams was giving orders to a crowd of peasants who sat on the ground clutching their tools or leaning on large wicker baskets. In single file across the yard came a procession of porters bent beneath the weight of great wooden beams which they set down beside four men, carpenters, who were chipping these beams into thin planks with axes. They were restoring one of the chapels. The dzong was alive with activity, with men running all over the place on errands, carrying drums, loads of rice, mounds of hay.

In a far corner sat a strange figure, a man who wore around his neck, like a monstrous wooden frill, a heavy circular wooden board. This was a criminal, a handsome man made ridiculous by the grotesque wooden collar from which his head emerged as though on a platter. Seeing me staring at him, he got up and I saw that his feet were chained together at the ankles by a thick steel bar. Slowly he turned his back on us and waddled away, his collar jerking at his neck.

It was painful to behold and made all the more tragic by a little girl, hardly three years old who ran after the man. This child was probably his own. A soldier soon came to stand by the criminal's side, not to guard him but because he was one of the man's friends. The man in the stocks, I was told, was himself a soldier who had been caught stealing. All things considered, his punishment, however humiliating, was a light one when I recalled that robbers in Tibet have their eyes put out or at best their right hand cut off. Nevertheless, the very sight of this man with his head clapped in the wooden stock, struck me as a vivid reminder that if elsewhere we were in 1968, in terms of justice Bhutan was centuries behind.

This was only one of the rougher aspects of life in Bhutan which were to startle me. As I watched the dancers rehearse in the yard, I saw the dancing teacher come forward with his heavy whip, place one of the slaves at arm's length and let the whip fall twice with great force on the poor man's back. A hollow thump echoed round the yard, then, as if nothing had happened, the victim and the other dancers took up their positions again and carried on in a circle twirling and leaping lightly, perhaps a little

more lightly than before. I was shocked because, although I had in the past seen grown men whipped as a punishment for criminal behaviour, it was quite another matter to see one beaten to make him dance. Somehow art and brute force had always seemed incompatible to me.

The simultaneous vision of the man with the yoke and the dancer being whipped brought home to me the real authority and power in Bhutan. If my more tender self was a little shocked, I could not help but feel that such punishment, publicly given, is a far more efficient and preferable means of redress than the moral torture of our prisons. Prisons may be ideal for keeping dangerous criminals out of harm's way as a threat to society, but I cannot help feeling that a lengthy or even a short confinement is the most cruel and, all told, the most unmerited form of punishment for petty offenders. Six months, or even a few weeks in jail frequently breeds thoughts of revenge and causes moral and psychological degradation of far greater and more distressing consequences than any a whip could inflict. People consider flogging cruel, but suppose we imagine a father who would lock his son up for a week instead of giving him a beating. Who would not call such a father a monster? Yet for all that, the whip echoed in my head for a long time. Probably the uncomfortable feeling I had was the very proof of the value of such punishment. Such a sight inspires a respect for the law far greater than the distant contemplation of possible solitary confinement.

I wonder why we in the West have such aversion to physical brutality, yet so little regard for psychological torture. Surely it is a sign of degeneracy when man fears pain, bans pain and hides in clinics all that could remind us of our mortal bodies, yet allows so many evils which alienate our minds and fill our asylums to thrive in the open? The fact that the dancers were slaves had nothing to do with their being beaten. In Bhutan the whip is for all men who do not respect the law.

I learned much of the social organization of Bhutan from the Lord of the Law of Tongsa. In Bhutan all men are equal, or rather, to use a western expression, all are equal but some are more equal than others. There exists in Bhutan no merchant class or artisan class, everyone is basically a peasant. There is not even a nobility outside the immediate family of the King.

This one-class society is, however, divided into three parts. The

peasants who own land, called the *treba* (tax-payers) and those who farm land belonging to monasteries, called *tra-ba*, and thirdly, those children of these two types of peasants who do not inherit their fathers' privileges but enter into a religious order or go and work in the dzongs as 'civil servants'.

The first of these peasant classes, the tre-ba, own large homes and land, they pay taxes in the form of a percentage of their crops and services to the dzong, which can include two or three months' labour. These tre-ba make up the great majority of the inhabitants of Bhutan and it is they who elect the village headmen, who in turn elect the ramjams who are eventually nominated by the King to the high posts of Trimpon and Nyerchen.

The peasants who do not own land, the tra-ba, own houses, but they work particular plots of land belonging to monasteries, not the monasteries attached to the dzong, but the innumerable smaller monasteries which dot the land. They cannot sell their plots but farm them as if they were their own, paying the monastery a rent representing a large portion of the crop. They do not fall immediately under the authority of the dzong, owing service only to the monastery to which they are attached.

The third group is composed of those who own neither house nor land, the younger sons of families who do not inherit their fathers' estates, which go to their older brothers. These either become monks attached to a monastery or servants of the dzong.

As is fair, the richest peasant, that is the tre-ba (the tax-payer) is the one who owes the most to the State. The taxes are not owed by the individual but by the household. These services, and taxes in kind (for money is virtually non-existent), are very numerous. As well as giving a percentage of their crops of rice, barley and buckwheat, the tre-ba's household also gives many loads of wood to the dzong, wood cut from the great forests which all belong to the State. They must also give three men's loads of 'hearth earth', a mixture of burnt clay and ashes taken from their fire places. This 'hearth earth' is used in making paper, used for printing sacred books. They must also collect and give to the dzong loads of a special bark which is used in making this paper. Hanging above the butter lamps in every house is a flat stone on which smoke-black accumulates. Once a year, the tre-ba must give one full measure of this dust to the dzong to be used in making ink. In some areas they must give butter, but usually this is provided

by the nomads whose specific taxes include milk, meat and other by-products of cattle such as hides. To these taxes, which vary from valley to valley, and according to the size of the household, must be added that of ulag, about which we have already spoken, by which the peasant is obliged to furnish transport animals to the Lords of the Land.

In Bhutan there are no professional craftsmen or any specific merchant class, so that all manufactured objects such as clothes, tools, paper, swords, etc. are made by the peasants. In every family the peasant specializes in some handicraft in addition to his skill as a farmer. Thus some peasants are also carpenters, others painters, still others masons, blacksmiths, wood carvers etc. Once a year each household must send one man to the dzong to perform craftsman's duty. For this they are paid only their daily food. This compulsory specialized labour may last up to three months and is the most resented of the taxes. By means of this labour tax, the peasants are put to work building forts or enlarging monasteries, making bridges and painting houses for the State.

It is customary in Bhutan for the oldest child to inherit all his father's property. This often leaves the younger children with no place to live or means of subsistence. They can then either become monks, which is what a great many do, joining the local village monastery or the larger ones of the fort where they can hope to achieve high positions, since the monasteries are still very powerful and active in the running of the country; or they can, as I have already said, go to the dzong and enter the service of their country. There they may become soldiers, clerks or storekeepers, running the various aspects of the dzong's business. Like the monks, they receive food and clothing.

There is also a third possibility for these disinherited younger sons. This is to marry the only daughter of a tre-ba who will inherit land so that they can become tre-ba after all; or if they choose and their brother agrees they also can marry his wife and stay in his home as co-husband. This custom of polyandry is widespread in Tibet but not quite so popular in Bhutan. Its justification is economic. Although the elder brother shares his wife with his younger brother he keeps the upper hand in the household. The children produced from such 'triples' call their eldest father 'father' and their younger father 'paternal uncle' even if he is quite obviously their true father. Alongside polyandry in

Bhutan one occasionally finds polygamy, men with two or even three wives.

At first sight, the system of Bhutan's family organization (polyandry apart) is much like that of mediaeval Europe: the second son becomes a man of religion, the third and other sons becoming soldiers or servants of the fort. But on investigation one discovers that the Bhutanese system is far more democratic. This is because none of the three different types of peasants ever forfeit their personal freedom. Providing they pay their taxes they are free to dispose of their persons and their property, whereas the villeins and serfs of the middle ages could not do what they wanted with their land or even with themselves being bound body and soul to the lord of the manor. The peasants (tre-ba and tra-ba) in Bhutan pay taxes in kind and perform services just as we in our modern world pay taxes, but they retain the freedom to do as they like with their fields and their crops, and indeed with their lives. If they choose, they can leave a monastery or the service of a dzong. Nowhere are they tied down by force of a hereditary contract to a lord. Further, their overlords are not individuals but the dzong as an apparatus of state which, as we have seen, is made up of men elected by the peasants all of whom come from peasant stock.

This difference between the mediaeval European peasant and the Bhutanese accounts for the fact that although taxes are high there is, on the part of the people of Bhutan, no feeling of resentment against the lords and no feeling of oppression. This is what makes the Bhutanese and Tibetan systems of government both original and free from the problems of social strife which in the West led to the French Revolution and eventually to the Russian Revolution and Communism. It is important to understand that if Bhutan looks similar to mediaeval Europe in its social organization, the foundations are basically different. The lords do not boss the peasants nor have anything to say in how a man runs his private life. Their only contract with the lords is in the matter of paying taxes and this is a business contract and not one binding the persons of the peasants like the contract of infeudation in the West.

This sets Bhutan, like Tibet, apart not only from feudal Europe but from most of present-day feudal Asia, not to say most of the world. All Bhutanese are free men, free to live the life they

choose within, of course, their financial and intellectual capacities. This explains why Communism has never had any success in Tibet and why the Chinese could never create any feeling of class hatred. There is no class hatred because there is no exploitation of individuals by other individuals as in other lands.

Of course there are always exceptions and in Bhutan this is the 'zap' or the 'ku', as the slaves are also called. Zap comes from *za-pa* and means 'the doers'. They are the equivalent of slaves, or better, the serfs of the middle ages, being people who cannot run away or dispose either of property or of themselves. These zaps are a small minority in Bhutan. They are, for the most part, the descendants of prisoners of war, men captured by the various dzongs from adjoining valleys in the days, not so far gone, when each large valley was engaged in petty chivalric wars so like those wars that had sent me on my pillow to the rescue of fair maidens locked up in the towers of the innumerable small dzongs of England, France and Spain.

Many of the zaps also come from the Douars, the regions of India south of Bhutan into which almost every year the Bhutanese lords would send out military expeditions to capture prisoners and some of the commodities they envied from the low lands. These were the military expeditions which remained unpunished in spite of Sir Ashley Eden and Boileau Pemberton's anger and the wrath of the British crown.

Many of the zaps, since they originate in India, can easily be recognized for their dark skin and smaller stature as members of the Assam tribes.

To me the word 'slave' has always been joined to the picture of a naked man crouched at the feet of an aggressive master with a whip who speculates on how much he can sell his man for in a flesh market where you could pinch a girl as you would feel an orange before buying it.

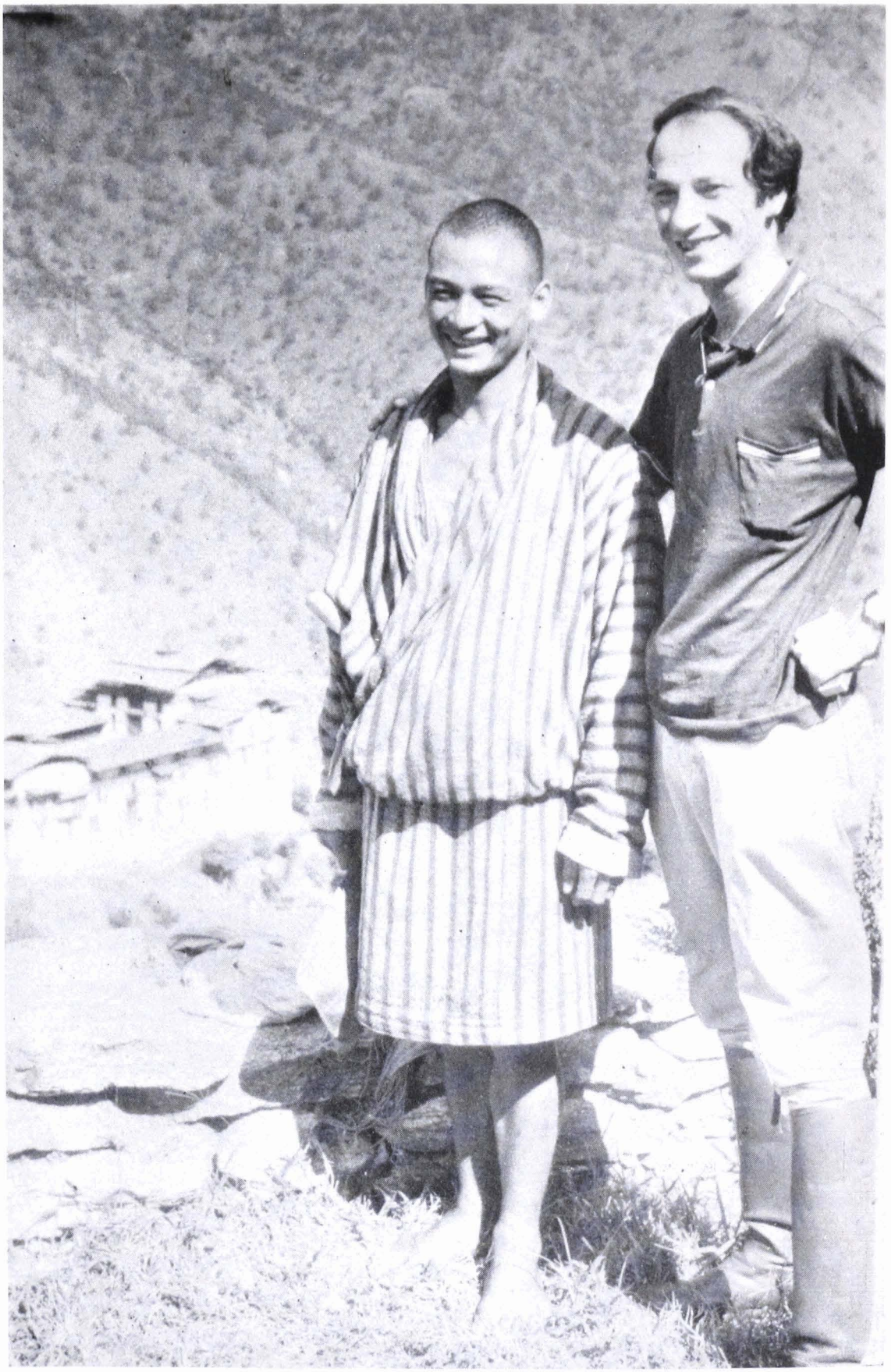
By such standards, the zaps are not truly slaves. To begin with they wear clothes, and if they are victims of the whip as I had just seen, they could not, in Bhutan, claim to be exclusive in this respect. Also they are never bought or sold, as they do not belong to individuals but to the State and to the dzong. They have houses and families and they are given food whether they are good or bad, sick or healthy. Each year they receive a new ko. In fact, they receive the same material benefits as any civil servant

A partial view of Tongsa Dzong, the mightiest of Bhutan's thirty-two citadels

The lonely fort of Lhuntse and (*lower right*) the archery ground with one of the targets upon a small platform

Ropes of twisted bamboo support countless bridges in Bhutan. There was a near disaster when two mules tried to cross the lower one, at Lhuntse, at the same moment

The Ramjam of Lhuntse, sword at his side, takes part in an archery contest



The author with one of his muleteers in Tashigang on the last day of his journey across Bhutan

or monk. The only difference is that they cannot run away. I also advise any hopeful visitor not to try and pinch them, because like any self-respecting Bhutanese they would not hesitate to cuff you on the ear. So, although their condition is not a very enviable one, they are not really slaves as I had always pictured them.

I could not help thinking in Bhutan about how thin is the line which we draw in our world between freedom and slavery. If to be a slave is by definition not to be able to run away, like the zaps of Bhutan, then all of us are slaves, bound as we are to our respective states. In Communist countries which close their borders one could call everyone a slave, people who have no choice but to serve their master, the State, as the zap serves the dzong. Are we in the West any better off? A man who refuses to serve a state becomes an outlaw on the run. Take, for example, a draft-dodger or a man who has not paid his taxes. At best, our freedom is only as big as our wallet, often small and always at the mercy of some crisis. Perhaps we are all zaps and especially so in our technological society where men are for sale. Money is quite a secondary factor in the lives of the Bhutanese; so, in fact, a zap is not as badly off as many of us. Long ago, modern man, having shaken off the yoke of his mediaeval masters, sold his freedom to employers and to the State, while most of Bhutan's population, once they have paid their taxes, can do just as they please without anyone entering the realm of their private lives to tell them what to do, what to think and how to act. In Tongsa I remembered the freeways, the bumper-to-bumper traffic, the schedules to be met, the slavery of punch-cards and time clocks, the pay cheques and the unemployment of Europe, America and the rest of the world. I saw again the thousands of bodies lying in the gutters of Calcutta, lining the streets, the walls of the factory yards, the emaciated faces of the starving, the empty staring eyes of India so little different from those which toss to the rumble of the metro, the tube and the subway every morning in Paris, London and New York, a cargo of anxious flesh never to be whipped but tortured by the insanity of petty existences, ravaged by nights of counting pennies, dodging disease, reading nervously of impending catastrophes, spending one or two hours a day underground, eight hours a day under tin roofs, morally underfed. I could again hear the hollow whip-like thuds of the steam hammers as they echoed in those factory yards, while the grey ants were busy

Our performance was followed by Tibetan dances staged to the amusement of all and the nostalgia of Tensing by the merchants at the request of the Lord of the Law, who was determined that they should have a good time so that they would come back again and Tongsa market be a success.

Night began to shroud the great hills around us and it was time to begin the final dance, a ritual of good luck performed by all the young girls and young men present. A small table was set up in the centre of the grassy field upon which a wooden pail of barley beer was placed. On the sides of the pail were four slices of cucumber. Cucumbers grow in abundance in Bhutan and are eaten somewhat as we eat sweets. All through the day the Lord of the Law had been handing out pieces of cucumber to the little children who, unimpressed by protocol, had crowded up to where the lords were seated.

These slices of cucumber around the beer pail represented the lumps of butter that one places on the rims of the drinking cups of distinguished guests in Bhutan as a sign of respect. 'Butter beer of good fortune', as they call it. The young men danced, singing a soft chant to which the girls responded, then three drops from a copper ladle were spilt on the ground for the gods and the ladle taken to the Lord of the Law, whose head was touched with the handle before a drop was poured into the palm of his hand for him to taste. Then all present were served with beer, the dancers first, then many members of the crowd who were given drinks from other pails of chang. By the time the last songs had died away it was practically dark. Ponies and mules had invaded the field and were led off by happy peasants going home. All eyes were on the Lord of the Law as he too rose and started off down to the dzong.

It was quite dark and few people had brought along torches of pine wood to light the way. The Lord of the Law, however, had a powerful Indian paraffin lamp and he gave orders to his retainers to hold it up high. The descent was very steep and difficult to negotiate in the dark. With paternal solicitude the Lord of the Law worried that the small children did not fall or get lost, scrambling in all his finery to help little toddlers momentarily separated from their mothers, and suddenly I understood that the great dzong, the mighty lords, the long sharp swords were not instruments of terror or of war but the reassuring symbols of

peace, calming the fears of all men on cold nights when the hills become suddenly hostile beneath the moon and man's own insignificance more striking beside the immensity of the universe.

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All morning and part of the afternoon we puffed up the Dong-la, one more of Bhutan's great passes. It was raining and the staircase track often became a cascade of rolling stones wallowing in orange mud, as slippery as ice. The pass with its prayer flags came as a relief. Hours of sweat, so it seemed, had allowed me to turn a new page of Bhutan. Before me, as far as I could see, stretched a great sea of rounded mountains one behind the other, melting like ice into high flat valleys. Gone were the eroded canyon-like gorges of the Tongsa region. We had reached high country and before me stretched alpine valleys where jungle growth was unknown, a land of snow and long winters. Beyond the valleys rose forbidding mountains. I shuddered at the thought that all these ranges which stretched before us would soon all have to be crossed by our party. I felt momentarily discouraged by their size as I peered into central Bhutan and saw afar on the horizon the jagged peaks of the first ranges of eastern Bhutan.

Dusk was near when I emerged with Tensing at the head of a broad valley dominated by three white monasteries overlooking the little smoke patches of five hamlets. We approached the first of these, six large sturdy chalet farmhouses around a massive tower-like chapel.

As we reached the first houses, I heard cries and shouts which burst into a strange nostalgic chant. Mist, like a thin veil, was rising over vast fields of pink buckwheat. In the distance, along the edge of the field, an army of men, maybe a hundred, was ploughing and breaking up clods of earth as they advanced in line, singing. These were the serfs of one of the King's private estates whose white mass and gilded pinnacles loomed above the mist in the distance. The valley was some nine thousand feet high and

telling themselves: 'I am free.' It was not three lashes, but a thousand, a hundred thousand, that workers received in most of the free world as they bend over the assembly lines, blows that they partly accepted because every man told himself: 'I am not a slave, I am not a slave.' No, in the West our masses are not zaps gorgeously draped in brocade as they were on the second day of my stay in Tongsa, when they danced upon the green grass in the warm sun that made the surrounding hills shine with beauty and the birds sing, while the monks, the civil servants, the Lord of the Law, the tra-ba, the tre-ba, the little children, old men and women and I stared in admiration.

Attara, the clown, with his red face and long western nose, danced at their sides making funny gestures, rousing peals of laughter, mocking the gods, chiding the Lord of the Law, coming up to me and pulling my nose to the delight of all. Surely this was not the purgatory of the plains and slavery here was a bright picture of the pale shadow which we think of as freedom in our lands.

Or was it? For all the flowers and the smiles, for all the twinkles in the eyes of a race whose sheer muscular beauty has no equal, for all the joy that surrounded me, I could not help seeing, above the little merchants' stalls, the searchlights and a monstrous balloon with a trailing banner, loudspeakers barking, the fields churned up by monster bulldozers that crushed the trees. The words 'money' and 'save' came back again and again. The Trimpon looked at me and smiled. I thought I heard the word 'supermarket' but he had just said 'market' and something about the benefit of a monetary economy. I gazed ahead of me and now, as on the previous day, the faces of death were before us and the slaves pranced and nodded beneath the skulls of universal terror. Maybe, I thought, purgatory, heaven and hell are not of this world. Secretly I hoped the Lord of the Law's attempt would fail and that this day might not mark the beginning for Bhutan of that consumer society with its gutters and its factory yards.

As in a Shakespearian tragedy, the jesters relieved the tension of the dances. They swayed clumsily behind the pompous demons festooned with the masks of hideous animals, horned eagles, dragons, pigs and green-faced deer, that fought mock battles among themselves.

Even the lords submitted meekly to the jesters' jokes, which

spared none of their personal characteristics, their way of walking, talking, and behaving. The jesters were beginning to steal the show, which was becoming tediously long for the village folk. They staged a mock funeral and then dragged an old woman out to dance; they mocked the Lord of the Law, walking behind him and imitating his every gesture. Everyone laughed. The dances came to an end. The school children began to sing and there were some games amongst which, not without a certain sadness, I recognized a wheelbarrow race. Everyone looked on amazed, nobody had ever seen a wheelbarrow and I saw the first distressing inroads of our civilization. The school-teacher, along with his English, had brought the wheelbarrow race to a kingdom without wheels. Small are the first signs of impending change.

I thought of the cargo cults, and wondered how much of the death dances were not but simple misinterpretations of trivial games and activities of more sophisticated societies of the past built up into a ritual laden with obscure symbolism. For me the wheelbarrow race was already laden with symbols. For the Bhutanese it was only another occasion for laughter.

Everyone laughed louder still when the Lord of the Law, the Chief Steward and four other dignitaries, along with myself, were forced to perform a Bhutanese dance. I was wearing a Bhutanese ko and my boots from Morisson and Tuttle.

'You should not wear the ko,' Tensing had said when I asked if I should put it on.

'Will they be offended?' I inquired.

'No, not at all. They will like to see you dressed in Bhutanese clothes.'

'Then why shouldn't I wear it?'

'Because', came Tensing's direct reply, 'you are a great lord and your ko is cheap and too short.'

I overruled this objection. Perhaps they would understand that I had bought it short in ignorance that in Bhutanese dress fullness is a sign of rank. I dared not admit to Tensing that I could not, at the time, afford to buy a fine ko like those of the lords, the best from Bumthang, woven in thick *endi* silk as warm as a fur coat and costing the same price as a mule, one hundred and fifty dollars. It took a woman more than six months to weave those intricate stripes of bright yellow, red and green silk over-patterned with white designs of swastikas (a symbol of longevity).

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As we reached the first houses, I heard cries and shouts which burst into a strange nostalgic chant. Mist, like a thin veil, was rising over vast fields of pink buckwheat. In the distance, along the edge of the field, an army of men, maybe a hundred, was ploughing and breaking up clods of earth as they advanced in line, singing. These were the serfs of one of the King's private estates whose white mass and gilded pinnacles loomed above the mist in the distance. The valley was some nine thousand feet high and

here there were no ricefields or any trace of the terraces which divided the rural landscape of western Bhutan. Never had the landscape transported me closer to my conception of mediaeval Europe. Oxen were hauling wooden ploughs, answering to the whip of roughly clad men who sang as they worked and wore rough bearskins on their backs. Cows churned their dung in the courtyards of the houses as Tensing and I went hopefully from one to another asking for refuge.

Women peered at us from the wooden balconies of their homes, which one could enter only by climbing a notched tree-trunk ladder which could be drawn up at night to make every little homestead a fort. The women in small bonnets and dirty dresses stared at us, a few old men sent us on from house to house until one wise old woman agreed that the 'fair lord' could, if he wished, enter her dwelling.

Slowly, the chants of the serfs grew louder as they came up the field, their songs mingled with cat-calls and bursts of laughter, their voices telling of a more rugged race than that of the West. In no time the serfs had cleared and ploughed an entire field and now in little groups, still singing, they struck out towards their villages, some departing down the valley to more distant hamlets. Only the tops of their bodies showed above the low veil of mist and like a noisy convoy of little grey boats the workers drifted out of sight.

It was quite cold and the farmhouse we entered seemed all the warmer. Three holes in the square clay hearth roared red with fire stoked by the old woman. The orange flames lit up the room, a vast, beamed hall with two walls lined with clay pots and copper cauldrons, wooden ladles and barrel-like buckets. Leather pouches of sheep's lard dangled from the roof, milk lay still in open pails by the door, flies afloat on the white liquid. In a corner lay some bearskin rugs, dark brown, like the oblong skins which covered the women's backs as protection from the cold and also from the heavy loads that these industrious peasants were always carrying, water from the stream, milk from the fields, wood from the hills and grain to the mill.

Every object in the house was worthy of examination, the little clay butter lamp, the circular stone to collect the smoke black for the dzong, the hundreds of short pointed sticks tucked under the beams, the plough shares of this race which would not let steel

sour the earth. After looking us over with the cautious suspicion of all farming people, the woman who had let us enter her house seemed satisfied. The 'young lord', she said, could sleep in the storeroom, but not Tensing nor my porters, whose ponies were now jingling their bells at the door. My men came in with the loads, the steel trunk and the kit bags. Next came the wooden pack saddle and the saddle carpets. The porters would sleep on these.

'Where are you bound?' the old woman asked.

'For Tashigang,' I said proudly. I was beginning to believe that I would succeed in crossing Bhutan after all. The old woman looked at us with admiration.

'*Ona*,' she said. 'It's a long road.'

She treated the porters with little kindness, showing them dark corners where they could sleep. Then she led me to her storeroom. Taking an old key, a flat piece of metal cut into angular shapes, she slipped it into a slit in the bottom of a padlock and drew it across the length of the metal box, closing the springs that released the door.

I found myself in a dark room. Two sliding shutters were pulled back and a cold light seeped into the place. The room was empty save for three tall circular bamboo vats containing grain. The walls were dark, covered with smoke black and bespattered with the eerie outlines of white human handprints.

'What are these hand marks?' I asked.

'*Ona*,' the old woman answered, 'it is our custom here. The *pau* [magician] ordered them to be made when my husband was sick, to keep out the demons.'

Not trusting me entirely, the woman picked up a few odds and ends and then, taking another key, opened a smaller side room which was the farm's larder. Here she rummaged about amid a hundred hanging meats which dangled over chests of the finery that is worn on those days when festivals call the peasants away from their daily tasks to the yards of the dzong or to the doors of the monasteries. Here too were kept salt and pouches of fat.

'*Ama*,' called Tensing, 'sell us some eggs.'

'I have no eggs,' came the reply. 'I am a poor peasant woman. Ask the dzong.'

'Come on, *ama*,' pleaded Tensing, teasing the old woman. 'Why, you are so rich you will choke with all your goods.'

The old woman grumbled. 'I've got some potatoes,' she

answered finally, bringing out a handful. Tensing gave her a Bhutanese half rupee. The woman smiled and came back with eggs, for 'the young lord', she said, closing the door with a bang.

'Now, you young rascal,' she said. 'You and the men, you sleep next door.' Back in the hearth room, I warmed my hands.

'The loads are mighty heavy,' said Dawa, one of the porters, as he flopped down on the saddle mats to rummage in the bulging pocket of his ko. He took out a wooden bowl: '*Chu*,' he said to the old woman.

'Go and get it yourself,' she answered. 'The water is outside under the awning of the gallery.'

The porter did not move. One of the other men took his bowl and filled it up. In the meantime Dawa had opened a dirty cloth bag and, mixing a white flour like tsampa into the water, he began to eat this frigid porridge made of ground roast barley. Twitching the flour into damp balls with his dirty fingers, he popped them into his mouth.

One of the porters came back from setting the horses free to graze.

'*Yapu du*? All well?' he asked with a smile, adding: 'the worst is over tomorrow. One more pass and we will reach Jakar in the afternoon.'

'Wash the potatoes clean, then wash a pot, then put a little white stuff in the water, then cut the potatoes and put them on the fire,' I told Tensing. 'I'll do the eggs.'

'Are we having rice?' asked Tensing.

'No,' I said, enjoying this first change in our monotonous diet.

'What, eat potatoes and nothing else!' Tensing looked disappointed. He preferred rice, which is a luxury in Tibet, and I realized that in his eyes our diet was one continual orgy.

The old woman built up the fire until it roared and spurted tall flames through the pot holes. A clatter of hooves and a tinkling of bells announced the arrival of the old woman's husband. He parked his cattle under the house then, huffing, he clambered up the ladder, made a respectful bow on seeing me and passed on through the storeroom to a door I had not noticed which led on to a wooden gallery, in one corner of which was a crude altar. This was the chapel of the house. There he banged on a large drum and bowed before three statues.

I was tired out, yet there was all to see and everything at which

to marvel from the white handprints on the dark wall of my room to the smallest pot, the products of a thousand years of obscure traditions repeated endlessly here on the edge of Bumthang, traditions unrecorded and doomed to disappear one day, soon maybe, with the introduction of aluminium pots. The beauty of all these details comes, no doubt, from the accumulated love spent by the craftsmen who perpetuate their trade like a religion until shapes and designs become a ritual, not dictated by efficiency, the standard of our unromantic world, but fashioned by hands performing a rite. Carving bows, turning ladles, hammering pots were all trades with their songs and their history. The whole house seemed to hum that night with all these chants, and these strange tunes from a distant past as poetic and as mysterious as the present echoed in my mind. It seemed months since I had left Thimbu and years since I had departed from Europe, yet I had not covered half the distance I would have to walk to reach the end of my journey. I was plagued by worries of all kinds about the immediate future and the outcome of my solitary journey.

Brought up in a world of schedules and telephones, of statistics and instant news, I found it hard to adjust to the uncertainty that characterizes daily life in a mediaeval land. Telegrams, detailed maps and books have, in our world, reduced the unexpected to a minimum. On the other hand, uncertainty is the dominant factor of life in Bhutan. When a man sets out on a journey, he knows neither when he will arrive nor when he will return, where he will sleep or what he will see. For these people tomorrow is always a slight cause for fear. In Bhutan there is no life assurance, no 'medi-care', none of those gimmicks with which we learn to lessen the few elements of risk which remain in our already too-well-planned lives. Permanent uncertainty breeds in such lands as Bhutan, as it did in our own years ago, a peculiar philosophical outlook which at first I had some trouble in understanding. Once a Tibetan had remarked to me after visiting England that what struck him most was the way we all seemed to know what we would be doing a year ahead. People talked of the future as if it were the past. And he was right. We have killed much of the unexpected in life and this more than anything, I feel, accounts for the boredom of many people in the West, just as it weakens our capacity to deal with the unexpected, so that nearly all major crises find us unprepared. One consequence of our over-

confidence is that we lose our tempers frequently, giving vent to the inevitable frustration which comes from always planning things in advance. Frustration rarely bothers the people of Bhutan because, unlike us, they rarely expect anything specific of the future and thus hardly know the meaning of disappointment. On the other hand they appreciate the present moment more than we do, accepting pleasures as they come and making the most of whatever good fortune comes their way. More than anything, I discovered, this question of uncertainty sets us apart from so many races. Consequently we often misunderstand people's reactions when these are dictated by their acceptance that the future is unpredictable. Even knowing this I could not help worrying in Bhutan, always attempting to cross obstacles before they arose; in fact, inventing them in my mind in a desperate effort to predict the unpredictable. Yet there was no one who could give me any clue as to what hardships I might yet encounter in the weeks before I reached my destination.

One minor unpleasantness was that on rising the next morning I found out that our pack animals were lost. For three hours my four men beat the countryside, describing their mounts to the peasants who only shook their heads.

I took the opportunity to examine the hamlet in which we had spent the night. All the houses surprised me by their large size and again, as in Paro, I was struck by the incredible similarity of all the things around me to those which can be seen in the small alpine villages of Europe. The artefacts that we often believe to be the products of our culture I now understand are really only products of our environment. In Bhutan, man had invented the same agricultural tools, pots, barrels and architecture as those which are found in European regions with the same climate. Had I been an Asiatic from India or China, I would have been surprised by the milking stool, the wooden pails, the roofs of the houses, the hinges on the doors, the long-handled spades and rakes, the shape of the ploughs, the dung-filled yards trampled by large cows so different from the Brahma bulls and water buffaloes of India or southern China. As it was, all these objects were familiar to me. Yet there had never been any contact in the past between Bhutan and the West and, dividing the Alps from Bhutan, lay great distances, miles of exotic India, Turkestan, Persia and the Middle East. All these countries are so different

from Bhutan and from Europe, even in the smallest details. It has long been claimed that climate and ecology determine a civilization, but never had I seen a more startling proof of this than here in Bhutan.

One wonders if there is not a certain element of instinct in what we call intelligence, and if everything we make, all the trappings of our technology, are not simply the unconscious products of that instinct rather than inventions of the mind. Left alone, I felt certain Bhutan would eventually produce its Newtons, re-invent the automobile and reconstruct all our western civilization in its own natural course of development in the same way as it had invented spades and ploughs, slatted roofs and hinged doors exactly like those of the West. One has to wonder why, in Bhutan, one sees spades with long handles which are shaped like the spades we know when all over Asia the peasants use short-handled tools quite unlike any of Bhutanese or European design. These comparisons are also valid as far as many of the Bhutanese political and social institutions are concerned, since these are much closer to those of Europe than any such institutions in other Asiatic countries. Nowhere else in Asia had I felt so much at home. Here I found none of those traits and attitudes which characterize most orientals. People here were friendly and outspoken and reacted in a predictable manner to humour or distress. Gone were the barriers which set most Asiatics apart from Europeans. Here East and West did meet, but there was nobody to witness the encounter.

Much as I despise the traveller who is always comparing what he sees to what he knows already, I could not help feeling that in Bhutan I was not so much visiting and studying a foreign land as getting a fresh glimpse of my own, free from those recent encumbrances which have, since the turn of the century, rocked our institutions and spoilt our landscapes, upsetting our traditional ways of thought. Not that I was ever against the many marvels of our times and beyond Calcutta I like to think that I am a spokesman for the most advanced theories and ideas.

What I found and admired here in Bhutan was that world which was once ours in the middle ages, a world in which customs and institutions were in harmony with the lives of the people, and these lives in turn in accord with the land's technology. Confronted with that harmony, I understood the true meaning of

those times that we know only from distorted fairy tales and history books, and I suddenly felt that where we had failed most in the modern West was perhaps in separating our daily lives from our souls. Man can be at ease in his world and in his civilization only when the every-day acts of his life have a religious and moral justification. The peasant who tilled his fields knew that his hard work was worth while, not only because it was useful to him and his family but also because his work had been declared moral by his religion and in accord with the wishes of his god. In the Christian world of our forefathers in Europe, prince and peasant performing their duty were also performing a moral act, the prince ruling in the name of God and the peasant tilling the soil of the Lord. In those days no one had needed to question the validity of his daily activity. Today we have divorced God from our daily lives because no one in our consumer society has had the courage to declare that to purchase goods and to produce them are truly moral activities. Yet we need to sanctify our technological consumer society because only thus can we hope to find that peace of mind and harmony of the past we so often envy. But how many of our Christian clerics have sanctified or praised the act of earning money and spending it? The young therefore today are faced with a future of activities which no moral creed has yet justified as valid acts of goodness and virtue. Little wonder, therefore, that the young everywhere are rebelling against the yoke of the technological stampede of our times. Yet our present world cannot survive without its cycle of production of material goods and the consumption, even to surfeit, of these goods. The making and purchasing of television sets, spending, whether on trivial gadgets, holidays, or outboard motors, are all essential and necessary acts for the survival of our modern society and, therefore, as moral as, in other times, was considered the sowing of a field or rising at dawn to fatten a pig. The fact that our daily activities include leisure and are more removed from the basic needs of the stomach does not necessarily make them in any way less worthy of praise or give them less value in the eyes of God. Only when we can erect altars and, I believe, Christian altars, to glorify the smallest of our technological and social activities will we in the West find that peace of mind that can reconcile us to our society. Unfortunately we still present the children born into our technological age with the moral and

ethical values of an age of agriculturalists. The young who protest in our society are reacting, in fact, as would have a mediaeval peasant asked overnight and without explanation to manufacture transistors after being told all his life that only the tilling of the Lord's good earth was worth while and approved by God. We are still more influenced by the doctrines of the middle ages than by Cape Kennedy, and in consequence our modern society and way of life has little meaning.

When at last the horses had been found, we forded a narrow brook and headed northwards, passing some fine chortens on our way up to the pine-trees. As we climbed, the valley spread out at our feet to the south-east, pink and green, with neat, well-defined fields rolling up to the dark forest which covered the feet of the majestic mountains around us.

Perspiration, aching legs, and shortness of breath, my constant travelling companions, were with me once more as we clambered up our third pass. Climbing and walking breeds different concepts of distance. We who measure it in jet hours forget that distance once had a yardstick in man's bones.

The reward came at last. The pass was crowned with large cedars, undoubtedly the stateliest of trees.

After we had followed the ridge for a short while, I caught my first glimpse of the valley of Bumthang.

6

Purgatory and Beyond

IT WAS THREE O'CLOCK when we emerged from the forest on to the high pastures which gave us an uninterrupted view of the central Bumthang valley and the fortress of the 'White Bird', Jakar. Built at the turn of the century upon the ruins of an old fort which had been burnt down, it is a typical example of Bhutanese military architecture. It stands on a narrow ridge sticking up from the relative flatness of the valley floor and comprises a huge semi-circular tower whose rounded side defends the fort's most vulnerable approach facing the mountain. From this tower the dzong extends two hundred yards along the ridge and is divided into three sections. The first of these is a narrow court framed by two symmetrical houses, the residences of the Lord of the Law and the Chief Steward, and from it a thick door leads into another courtyard ending in a square, four-storeyed tower, the *uchi*, with its chapels. Passing under this tower one gains access to a third courtyard reserved for the monks.

On the northern side of the dzong a crenellated wall tumbles down the steep hillside like a miniature Great Wall of China, punctuated by four towers. This is the fortified passage leading down to the fort's water supply, a well in the valley.

Rumours had warned me that the Lord of the Law here was a 'difficult man', 'a friend of drink and concerned more with archery than law'. This slighting reference rather intrigued me. I was pleased at the idea of meeting a villain, but I was won over at once by the handsome man he was although his stern features and reserved manner disappointed me a little. I had hoped for some comical drunken brute living a gay life. To be sure he liked drink – but so do I. He was exceedingly courteous and not such a bad administrator, judging by the way he settled a case involving two peasants before my eyes. Both men were apparently furiously angry, shouting at one another as they stood before the Lord of the Law who remained quite calm and collected, listening in-

tently. His ramjam and a servant were both there to advise him as he cross-examined the two at great length. He went over the details of the case quietly and in the end, judging from the men's faces, succeeded in reconciling the pair, or so at least I presumed, because I was unable to understand the dialect of Bumthang, which is quite different from that of western Bhutan. In Jakar I acquired a large vocabulary of this language, which apparently derives from that of the rough tribe which inhabited this region before the introduction of Bhutanese law and the Tibetan faith. Possibly this tribe was related to those which once inhabited Assam.

It was in Bumthang that I first encountered the legends about the enigmatic King, Sindhu Raja, who, so everyone claimed, hailed from Assam and had built a steel fort nine storeys high in the Bumthang valley. This Sindhu Raja had lived sometime in the ninth century but his memory was close to everyone's hearts and his portrait adorned the walls of the small chapel that stands on the ruins of his skyscraper fort. He had, so the tale goes, helped to introduce Buddhism into Tibet and provided the great lama Urgyen Rimpoche with paper from his Bumthang domains to write the sacred Tibetan books of the Doctrine.

Higher than any valley I had yet visited, Bumthang offered a marked contrast to the western regions of Bhutan. The hills enclosing the valley were more rounded, less tortured by erosion. Despite the legends of Sindhu Raja and the strange language, the valley resembled Tibet, which was only a few miles away and easily accessible from Bumthang, Lhasa lying only one hundred and fifty miles due north. Twice a year the valley had been the site of a great market to which Tibetans flocked and from which hundreds of Bhutanese set out northwards, carrying rice to the Court of the Dalai Lama along with the famous blankets and silk woven in the region. The cool, prosperous valley of Bumthang was selected by the first King of Bhutan as the site of his personal residence and below the dzong and above it were two great mansions belonging to the royal family.

Shortly after my arrival I visited the higher of these, Lame Gumpa, a large, three-storey building of dark beams enclosing a flagged courtyard in the middle of which was the massive square block containing chapels and libraries. As with most Bhutanese buildings, the severe outside contrasted with the magnificence

of the interior decorations. There was not a wall or a door that did not bear witness to the labours of painstaking craftsmen who had carved, gilded and painted every beam and every panel of the palace. I had come to visit Lame Gumpa uninvited and was greeted at the door by giggling girls and stern retainers. In the yard I ran into a very handsome young man who, to my surprise, spoke English. This was the lord of the manor, a relation of the King. He was twenty-three years old and had been to India and studied in Kalimpong. His manners were courteous, although marked by the cool arrogance characteristic of all Bhutanese nobles. He asked me to have some tea. 'Western tea,' he specified with pride as he led me up a narrow flight of steps into a finely decorated room littered with brilliant carpets and boasting a gilded altar.

'Western tea' was brought by a silent, ragged servant and with it a large silver platter piled high with peaches. My mouth watered at the sight and my host pressed me to have as many as I could eat. Picking off the velvety skin I listened as my host talked with enthusiasm about his own genealogical tree, his hopes of receiving a commission in the King's army and his love for Bumthang, his home valley. In the seventeenth century, he explained, the valley had been the site of a bloody battle when the Bhutanese opposed a Tibetan army. Many times in the course of its history Bhutan has had to repulse invasions from the north as warriors have attempted in the name of the Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas to gain control over Bhutan's rich and secluded valleys.

The first of these invasions from the north, however, was not of a military nature. Six centuries ago, the first monks came from Tibet into the valleys of Bumthang, Paro, Thimbu and Punaka, bringing with them the doctrine of Buddha as understood in Tibet, along with their prayer flags and wheels, their rich red gowns and their art, and settled in Bhutan to convert the people. At first these monks had some trouble winning over the hill tribes and (as in Bumthang) they never succeeded completely in eliminating their original language or their native arts and skills as hunters, makers of arrows and weavers of bamboo mats, skills quite foreign to Tibet but all of which still survive in Bhutan as reminders of the ancient tribes' forest life. An intimate knowledge of plants and poisonous roots, of the paper-producing bark and of

the art of archery are characteristics of the Bhutanese, inherited from their hunting forefathers of the seventh and eighth centuries. These tribes gradually accepted the Tibetan faith. The first monasteries were built in Bumthang and in the Paro valley. Eventually a small group of converts congregated around these monasteries, the *Chu-je* (religious ones), an élite which was later to form the basis of an aristocracy. Dependent on the monasteries, they soon made them into estates which grew in size and power until they became religious forts and eventually the dzongs of today. In each valley the process was similar yet every valley retained its own characteristics, acquiring its own shrines and favourite divinities, its own great lamas and noble families and eventually its own warriors, who fought each other from valley to valley and with the great lamas spun intrigues and counter plots to unify Bhutan. Yet despite these feuds and differences the country bore an indelible mark of unity in its buildings, its religion and most of its customs. The warlords never called in foreigners for assistance. In the past, as today, the Bhutanese were too proud to think of settling their quarrels with the help of outsiders.

As I sat in Lame Gumpa I could not help marvelling at the way this land had managed to survive unspoiled in all its mediaeval splendour right up to the present. Our western world seemed so remote from this great mansion with its bare-footed servants, slaves and retainers, acting what we in the West would think of as an historical play of Elizabethan times. Yet it was no play and the young lord draped in his fine red ko was serious, deadly serious, as he described to me a particular plant found in Bumthang which was both grass and worm and which grew in fields which moved by themselves. To prove it he produced a dried-up worm-like creature with a blade of grass projecting from its head. He was serious also when he suggested that I should taste a typical Bumthang delicacy. The servant then brought in a great bowl of popcorn, which I found out was indeed a speciality of Bumthang. The young lord spoke in all seriousness of the Chinese menace, fingering his elegant silver sword, unaware that even the greatest archer of the valley and the best blade in the Kingdom of the Dragon could do little or nothing against a nation seven hundred million strong which had exploded its first hydrogen bomb. But in Bumthang how could this have mattered? That day, as every day for centuries, the monks prayed before the gigantic

Buddhas and from where I sat in Lame Gumpa I could see below me, through the window, the timeless picture of two oxen hitched to a wooden plough. Following my host downstairs, I saw a dozen girls in the young noble's service chattering as they wove brilliant kos and other clothes; the seamstress girls of the manor, explained my host. They toiled for bed and board like the silversmiths and craftsmen attached to this great house who hammered at silver boxes and reliquaries to be carried round the necks of soldiers as charms against evil spirits. I was shown, under the rafters, the dried deadly poisonous roots of the blue flower which in an emergency could anoint the tips of the fine arrows to be shot from slender bows which other craftsmen were shaping from straight bamboo poles with knives whose handles were engraved with the emblems of Buddha.

This great house was a world of its own; not a dying world or a dead relic but a busy hive as young and vital as its lord who was as dynamic and ambitious as any young western youth. I could detect nothing in his way of thinking that was old-fashioned or marked with a trait that I could call inferior or could smile upon or scorn.

'In France, I too live in a castle,' I found myself saying, slightly needled by my host's arrogance. I surprised myself by competing for his admiration. 'I have many horses, but mine are much stronger and faster than those of Bhutan,' I added, thinking of my father-in-law's stables and bragging a little. 'Bhutan is very much like France,' I concluded, 'but we killed our king in the end.'

The young noble listened, interested; then, turning what I had said over in his mind, he smiled. 'To be governed by the peasants,' he said with surprise and some contempt.

I wanted to tell him my Alfa Romeo could do two hundred kilometres an hour, but the young man interrupted me to call a servant to saddle one of his best horses. We went downstairs. I looked down at the pink buckwheat fields, the ploughman and the towers of the dzong in the distance overshadowed by the majestic mountains. The sky was pale blue and I could hear the girls singing softly as their shuttles scurried across the weft.

'I must go to the dzong to send a message to the Happy Fort of Religion,' the young lord said and left me in charge of the caretaker to visit his splendid home. Watching him gallop off in a

flurry of silk, as handsome as James Dean and probably as reckless, I wondered how cars, the telephone, television and typewriters showed the greatness of the white man. Our ugly little wire machines put together with perhaps less skill than it took to wind the filigree hilts of a dasho's sword! As the young man disappeared from sight I once again felt slighted; I had never dared to believe that in the middle ages of my dreams nobody was really expecting me, that I would have little to say and would warrant so little attention.

Over lunch in the little house near the fort where we had our quarters Tensing informed me: 'The yellow stuff has been lost.'

As I gulped down the rice covered with mustard powder I remembered the peaches and the popcorn and thought how delightful were those specialities of Bumthang, but that afternoon when I tried to purchase some I was told that they were only for the lords. Then suddenly I knew the difference between this mediaeval world and my own. 'In France,' I told Tensing, 'we have the best food in the world.' Perhaps I was right, perhaps that was one of the most significant differences. Yet, I thought, what is better than a ripe peach – I had never cared for popcorn.

Most of my stay in Bumthang was spent visiting monasteries. Since my arrival in Bhutan I had seen more monasteries, chapels, oratories, shrines and altars than I could possibly have imagined to exist in a single country. In Italy and in Europe generally our village churches, country monasteries and city cathedrals are our principal public artistic monuments, yet, however numerous, they appear few in comparison to the monasteries in Bhutan. Every village has at least two or three monasteries and a dozen chapels, each one a living testimony to the talent of Bhutanese masons, painters, carpenters, gold- and silversmiths, all of them men from peasant families. These buildings speak highly of the civilization of this remote land. Unlike our churches, they are not the silent witnesses to a great spiritual and artistic past but the very living tokens of a faith and art which is tremendously dynamic. Everywhere I saw new monasteries being built, chapels being redecorated and new idols carved or hammered from copper and silver plate.

I would visit these buildings not like a pilgrim witnessing a dead past but as in the West one would visit the studio of an artist. In most of Asia, not to say in most of the world, the buildings and objects of art that one goes out of one's way to admire are only dead relics of masters long forgotten, mementoes of ancient times when art was once the living expression of a way of life. Some of the monasteries in Bhutan dated from the sixteenth century or even before; but they were still being adorned, repainted, redecorated, enlarged and embellished. Bhutan has no traffic in antiques because the past is still present and the skills of today are still related to those of yesterday.

In so many lands folk art has become fossilized and reduced to the mechanical reproduction of objects and designs from the past. One has only to look at the handicrafts which crowd the souvenir counters of Spain, India, Russia or Switzerland to realize that the hideous boxes, vases and paintings are merely mummified reproductions of what was once art.

Art in Bhutan is not so much the expression of an individual artist but the reflection of a collective state of mind. Buildings and paintings are unsigned because neither the architect nor the painter has any idea of doing anything remarkable, since the creation of beauty is the goal of all, from the woman who weaves a fancy cloth to the peasant who shapes a clay jar. Everyone seeks to incorporate beauty into their daily lives in the same way as we in the West try to make our lives pleasant through comfort. Happiness and beauty are synonymous in Bhutan and often expressed by the same word. We in the West pursue happiness but forget that beauty is a part of happiness and so we have relegated the creation of beauty to a few specialists, a few celebrated individuals whom we call artists. But all the Picassos and all the beautiful paintings of our modern world will never erase those eyesores which surround us everywhere, the symbols of a civilization that in its rush for happiness has forgotten that there is an inner happiness of the soul and of the eyes that can only be found in beauty. I understood more clearly the great harmony of our lost mediaeval society, a society that kept art in its place, not on the walls of museums but in man's daily life.

For three days in Bumthang I chased around the valley with Tensing visiting the old monasteries, paying my respects to the abbots and joking with the young monks who upon my arrival

would flock to stare at my clothes and my strange western face, patting their noses as they looked at mine. Scribbling notes, I tried to take in as many marvels as I could, elements of history and references to the organization of the monasteries.

Most of these monasteries are filled with the young second sons of peasant families who enter them at the age of nine. Contrasting with the sternness of the faces of the demons and Buddhist divinities, the monasteries echoed with the shouts and laughter of mischievous, smiling children, chasing each other round the pillars of the assembly halls, scrambling up the steep ladders, peering from balconies, scuttling across courtyards, congregating around small puppies or cuddling tame pigeons. Shining clean faces, little figures draped in red, themselves looking like statues when their expressions took on that sudden seriousness characteristic of children.

At Jakar I had to decide whether to continue my journey eastwards or turn back. Seventeen days had elapsed since I had left Thimbu. Already it seemed to me like many months and I was beginning to feel the inevitable weariness of eating poorly, sleeping in the cold and the fatigue of long marches. My gaze was nevertheless incessantly drawn east: there lay the unknown, the most inaccessible portion of Bhutan. But if my mind was made up to proceed, my conscience came up with a hundred worrying arguments. Would I stand three weeks' more climbing, eating only rice? It was raining and the monsoon was not yet over. Descriptions of my route were far from encouraging. Leeches, great passes, cold and rain and bridges washed away, all these lay ahead. Now, so everyone told me, I would run into the most difficult and rugged territory of Bhutan. As I pondered all these facts by the light of my little petrol lamp, Bhutan seemed to close in on me. I imagined myself weathering more trails, heading for those forts whose names were not on my map. Strange names I had learned from the Lord of the Law and the old Nyerchen of Jakar. There were moments when, from sheer weariness, I felt like giving up, content to have seen more of Bhutan than most foreigners. In such moments of depression those magical names would return to my mind along with the memory of my nightmares. No, I would say to myself, I must push on and see every

corner of that dark portion of the map which had haunted me for so long.

Four days after reaching Jakar I sent Tensing to ask the Lord of the Law to find three horses and four porters. The decision made, I began to fear its implications but I could share these apprehensions with nobody. Ever since leaving Calcutta I had experienced a strange loneliness which now weighed on me more than ever before. The following day, as I left the dzong where I had procured two dozen eggs (most of them bad) from the fat, jolly Nyerchen, I found the porters who had been collected by the Lord of the Law. There were five in all. A plump spinster of thirty-five with a great hollow, booming voice was apparently in charge of the group. With her was a sweet teenage girl with a pretty face and disarming smile. She twisted her fingers in her brilliant dress and looked anything but capable of carrying a heavy load. She was accompanied by her boyfriend, a young man with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, and a younger boy. There was also a man of about thirty, a strong bachelor from a lonely monastery who, I soon gathered, was both terrified and fascinated by the portly spinster.

The moment I saw them I knew that they would turn out to be either troublesome or inefficient. They had brought a small pony or, more accurately, a foal and announced that this was my riding horse. Had they a saddle, I asked? No, they said, explaining that they could get one from their village which lay on our route a day's walk from the dzong. It was quite evident that the pony had never been ridden and so I asked the mischievous boy to ride it in front of me.

'You ride it,' he answered. When I insisted that he get on the animal's back he refused and confessed with a laugh that indeed it had never been ridden before. This put me in a fury.

'Get another horse,' I ordered, but the young man said they could not as there were no horses in their valley since all had gone to the high grazing grounds. Although I had, by now, no fear of walking, I preferred to have a saddle horse or mule since it would take at least five, perhaps six days to reach Lhuntse, the next fort which lay beyond a pass described to me as higher than any we had so far crossed. I therefore dragged the mischievous young man, much against his will, up to the dzong and burst into the residence of the Lord of the Law.

'I must have a riding horse,' I explained angrily. The Lord of the Law gave me a bland smile which reminded me of Pasang, the unco-operative keeper of the royal guesthouse in Thimbu. Knowing that nothing but the threat of the royal wrath would stir the Lord of the Law, I explained clearly that it was the Royal Family's wish that I be given every kind of assistance. The Lord still seemed unmoved. The mischievous young man, seeing that I was getting no co-operation from the higher authorities, smiled his own malicious grin.

Eventually I told the Lord of the Law that I would not leave unless a riding horse was found.

'Give me one of the dzong's mules,' I said, recalling the marvellous tall animals I had seen around the fort.

'They are the King's mules,' said the Lord of the Law, meaning that it was quite out of the question. 'I will arrange something tomorrow,' he said finally, leaving me convinced that he would do absolutely nothing.

As expected, nothing happened the next morning, so I stamped off to the dzong and located the Lord of the Law drinking beer with a stout young man who was the Ramjam of the district through which I would pass on my first day's journey east.

When the beer had calmed my temper, it was eventually agreed that I should ride off on the Ramjam's pony. He would accompany me on foot and requisition a horse at our night's halt. Satisfied, I sent the porters ahead with Tensing and sat down to a few more cups of beer. It was an unusual hour to drink as the sun was barely up and the valley was half veiled in mist through which the massive contours of the fort loomed faintly.

The Ramjam changed his mind about walking and secured one of the 'king's horses' and at about ten we both set off at a brisk trot with a servant running behind.

Leaving the dzong, we came to the sacred wood that tumbled down to the valley floor. There we stopped as I wanted to take photographs of the small paper-mill I had visited the day before.

A low hut made of bamboo matting stood by a stream where two peasants on forced duty to the dzong were making paper. Paper manufacturing, although performed in the vicinity of all the large forts of Bhutan, is a true speciality of Bumthang, indeed Bhutan and especially Bumthang produces much of the paper that is used from Darjeeling to Ulan Bator and all the paper on

which are printed, by means of wooden blocks, the sacred and secular books of Buddhist Tibet and Mongolia.

This paper is light beige in colour. Its silky finish ill disguises its flecked appearance yet its qualities are hardly beaten by our modern western papers. We in Europe were still using donkey-skin parchment for centuries after the first paper made of wood pulp had been invented in Bhutan.

The paper is made from the bark of a small bush which grows in abundance on the hills of Bumthang. The bark is stripped from the bushes by the peasants as part of their duty to the dzong.

To manufacture the paper the bark is first put to soak in a stream. Then it is peeled to remove the dark outer skin. This peeled bark is then boiled in great cauldrons filled with water that has been strained through 'hearth soil', the combined clay dust and ashes stocked up by the peasants, who are all required to bring three loads to the dzong.

This hearth soil mixed with water bleaches the paper. When boiled the bark becomes soft and mashy. The lumps are then beaten with wooden mallets which loosen the fibres and reduces the bark to a pulp which is then diluted in a large trough of water.

Sitting over this trough, which is churned occasionally with huge wooden paddles, the papermakers scoop up a film of pulp with a square reed sieve that looks like those Chinese blinds made of thin bamboo slats sewn together.

The pulp scooped up in this way is placed on a broad, thick board where it falls off the screen-like sieve. Over this mushy page other pages are deposited in a similar manner. When the contents of thirty scoops of pulp have been laid one on top of the other, they form a mushy rectangular pile which is weighted down by stones. This primitive press takes out the water and when it is dry what is left is not, as I expected, one solid cake of pulp, but a laminated block of paper that can be torn apart to produce fine sheets.

The Bhutanese paper has among other qualities the virtue of being worm-proof, as the bark used to make the paper contains an insecticide. In Bhutan and Tibet bookworms of the insect kind are unknown.

The finished sheets are sent to monks and scholars all over Bhutan and Tibet. There, in the monasteries, they undergo various treatments. They are cut to size and glossed by being

rubbed with stones, some are dyed black or dark blue to be written upon with gold or silver ink. But for the most part they are simply cut into narrow strips three inches wide and seventeen long to be printed on both sides with wooden blocks, rubbed with butter and smoke-black ink.

Leaving the papermakers, we galloped past a little village at the foot of the dzong and across a buckwheat field to the edge of the large river that ran down the floor of the valley. Here a cantilever bridge of wooden beams sent an arch seventy-five feet over to the other side. This bridge was not covered and, although we dismounted, it was amazing that the horses crossed it without flinching.

Over this bridge, we passed the main trade route coming North from Tibet and heading down the main valley of Bumthang. To reach Tashigang, my ultimate destination, a large fort ruling the extreme eastern portion of Bhutan, I had the choice of two routes. The most travelled was the southern. This was the easier, taking the lower valley down from Bumthang to the fort of Mongar and following this valley as it turned south-east and later crossing two spurs over to Tashigang. By this route I could hope to reach my destination in nine days. I had chosen to ignore this way, which seemed too easy, for a more northerly one that would take me to Tashigang in twelve or thirteen days by way of the lonely forts of Lhuntse and Tashi Yangtse. I had been warned that this part of Bhutan was the most rugged and dangerous. To reach Lhuntse I would have to cross the Ruto-la, a pass some twelve thousand five hundred feet high, and then two other passes of a similar height to reach Tashi Yangtse from where in three days if all went well I could reach Tashigang.

Consequently we now left the main route and taking a little footpath began to climb slowly up the steep eastern slopes enclosing the valley of Jakar. We soon had to dismount, in spite of the Tibetan and Bhutanese adage that says: 'A horse that cannot carry a man up a hill is not a horse and a man who rides a horse downhill is not a man.' After an hour of strenuous climbing we reached the summit of this ridge that separated us from the higher valley of Bumthang Thang, 'the Plain of the Hundred Thousand Plains'. This high alpine valley stretching at our feet in a north-easterly direction was dotted here and there with small clusters of houses surrounded by pink buckwheat fields fringed by

pine-trees and interspersed with pastures. At the head of the valley could be seen the large royal estate of Urgyenchuling, a manor belonging to the husband of the King's second sister. All the inhabitants of this beautiful secluded valley paid taxes either to the dzong of Jakar or to this royal estate.

Once we had reached the pass the young Ramjam became talkative and explained to me the innumerable taxes it was his duty to collect, wheat and buckwheat, wood and smoke-black, paper bark and hearth soil. We soon caught up with the porters who joked and laughed as they sweated under loads which would have wiped the smile off any but such hardy faces.

The mist had lifted and the sun now shone on massive craggy mountains that stretched up before us covered in dark mysterious pine forests. Looking north, I caught a glimpse of the snow peaks that marked the border of Tibet less than ten miles away.

Descending, we reached the first hamlets, clusters of three or four large houses set on little rocky outcrops overlooking the valley floor. The presence of the Ramjam in my party attracted the inhabitants, who came out to greet us carrying copper and silver jars of arak (barley alcohol).

I benefited from these offerings, sipping the heart-warming drink while the peasants explained to the Ramjam some of their problems, reasons for delays in paying taxes, or complaints about the Government's inconsiderate demands.

Most of these villages were inhabited by tre-bas, the peasant class which pays duty to the dzong.

We began to descend slowly in a diagonal line to the bottom of the valley where in a hamlet we purchased eggs while the Ramjam drank more arak. Evening was closing in by the time we came to a halt in a large house near the grassy bank of a river.

The next day at dawn the Ramjam left after finding me a fine horse. Along with it our small party acquired a young couple who had asked leave to join up with us to cross the feared Ruto-la. At 6 a.m. we stopped in a hamlet of three fortified houses overlooking a rocky canyon, to the sheer sides of which clung a pink monastery suspended above the foaming waters of a large stream. This was to be the last inhabited place we would see for days.

The porters I had been assigned proved to be the gayest group I had ever known. The heavy boom of the spinster's laugh, the giggles of the teenage girl, the jokes of her boyfriend and the antics of the bachelor were to enliven the lonely slopes for five days. To the general merriment Tensing added his sharp wit. Cat-calls and gibes mingled with songs and jokes as we panted ever upwards, rising inch by inch, yard by yard, mile by mile. As we entered a desolate landscape with jagged mountain ranges closing in around us, I suddenly understood that this merriment was something more than simple joy. It was mingled with a strange kind of fear, a fear against which we all found comfort in the laughter of the others. As we went on, we entered a world that grew more and more hostile, an eerie forest, more fearful and sinister than the great open deserts of Tibet. The Ruto-la had a bad reputation and if for me it was only populated by solitude and mystery, for my companions it was one of those lands inhabited by countless evil spirits and demons who were just as real to them as the ground we marched on. We were intruding on the territory of the Lus of the Ruto-la, the demons of the cliffs, trees and water that ruled upon the ridges leading to the pass. From this great mountain where neither nomads nor any living soul had ever succeeded in settling, a silent menace arose which called for a counter-attack that we found in laughter so as to give the evil spirits the illusion that no one was afraid. But all my companions knew that death had overtaken many a traveller who had ventured before us into these most lonely parts of Bhutan. My porters were leaving behind not only their village and their province but were striking out beyond what had always been for them the limits of their universe. Their faith in their gods had bred in them an equal faith in the spirits of evil and when at times their voices and laughter died away it was an eerie silence populated by all this unseen underworld that accompanied us, that listened as we meandered slowly up into this no-man's-land.

Towards noon the dark forest grew thicker and swallowed us up in a dreary shade of slimy moss. Here the cracking of a twig echoed like gun shots and our voices grew hushed as if in fear of offending those who were the true masters of this uninhabited land. The slopes were too steep for riding and I walked behind the panting pony prodding it with the little energy I had left to spare from climbing. There was no lingering behind, and every

few minutes we turned to look at one another, in silence now, seeking in the twinkle of an eye reassurance that each one was not alone in his efforts. There were no chortens here to sanctify the track, not a sign that could remind us of man or of his faith. Even the monks of Bhutan, so addicted to establishing their monasteries in the highest and most remote places, had shunned the great slopes of this mountain which lay deep in snow for nine months of the year.

It was quite early when we came upon a small clearing where grass emerged timidly from what most of the year must have been a snow-field. On all sides our horizon was blocked by the forest which formed a forbidding palisade so dense that one wondered how we had managed to push through it out into this open place. Beyond the fringe of the forest, rising above it on all sides, were the jagged crests of mountains reaching up to seventeen thousand feet.

Busily we set up camp. The porters erected my tent facing theirs and cut great logs to make a fire so that we could cook our first and only meal of the day and also to frighten off the bears that here are a menace as real, if not as fearsome, as the demons of the night. The men cut two small pine-trees and planted them before my tent, giving to this hasty settlement an illusion of permanence. Our activities were interrupted by the frightening sound of cracking branches when suddenly from the dark forest emerged with a roar two huge, wild mountain yaks. Great scraggy beasts twice the size of any yaks I had ever seen, larger than Spain's most ferocious bulls, fully the size of the great bison to which this breed is related. They were covered from head to foot in long coats of black hair caked with mud and their immense horns looked dangerous, to say the least. They are very ferocious for they survive only by battling against wolves and are the most respected beasts of the great Tibetan plains and the dark forests of northern Bhutan. Only the wild yaks can survive in these forests where, the porters told me, all other cattle die from eating the poisonous leaves of a certain type of rhododendron bush.

I was well acquainted with yaks from my other journeys and knew that their huge size and weight was only a blind for their amazing agility and speed, which are best compared to that of a ram, a ram weighing more than two thousand pounds. Seeing us,

the wild yaks snorted and stared in frozen immobility. We all crowded nearer the fire until they moved back into the forest, where we could hear them crashing about like bulldozers. The ponies were staked near the tents and when night fell on our lonely clearing we all crowded around the dancing flames, fighting the intense cold that rolled out of the forest.

The women of our party began to mix buckwheat flour with water, shaping the dough into great balls that they flattened into round loaves which were set in the embers to roast. This would be their only food – buckwheat, the most indigestible of cereals. Nobody likes buckwheat in Tibet or Bhutan because it is known to be bad for the stomach, but my men were poor and these young people had long known that to be poor meant having to suffer the bad dreams that accompany the painful digestion of buckwheat cakes.

When we had all finished eating we gathered together inside the porters' tent, a simple piece of cloth slung over a wooden pole. Open at both ends, it afforded little or no shelter from the cold and since the sides did not touch the ground these lateral gaps had been roughly blocked with my cases.

Slowly, in a very soft voice, the young shy girl began to sing. I could not see her face; indeed none of us could see each other in the dark, although we rubbed shoulders in a compact mass. Verse after verse came the ballad, sad and restrained, lulling us all and bringing us together. When at last the song ended a cold silence swept over us, and I am sure everyone shivered as I did, relieved only when the bachelor took over in a trembling untrained voice that warmed us all again.

That evening I understood how miserable is mankind beneath the stars, under that terrifying void of space. How small and pitiful are our mortal bodies and how even more frail our minds which at best can only fathom our own significance yet do nothing about it. Nothing, perhaps, but sing, sending our feeble lamentations into space and secretly hoping that out there somewhere was a God who might hear us and have pity. Never before had I felt more man among men or so fathomed the true depth of our insignificance. I wondered whether despair were really a sin. That night I felt more lonely than ever before, although for a month solitude had been my constant companion. It was not physical loneliness I suffered from, because I was for ever surrounded by

people and perpetually in contact with them, investigating their culture and their way of thinking. It was not lack of friendship either. Already deep bonds of affection united me to Tensing, and in such circumstances as overcoming shoulder to shoulder the same hardships of a common trail I had established strong affinities with most of the porters who had accompanied me. No, it was not this loneliness that bore down upon me. It was a strange vacuum of the soul as, day by day, I was losing contact with the one who, all my life, had been my closest companion. Somehow I was becoming a stranger to myself. At night I could no longer turn to my own mind to find an echo to my thoughts. Something in me seemed gone and in the emptiness that took its place I found that deep loneliness of despair. I found myself faced with none other than what was perhaps my true self, the one that I had never been given to see. And all of a sudden everything appeared futile, the very motives of my being here, the very essence of all that had been me, both in reality and in my imagination.

On these lonely vigils, while the last embers of the evening fire died down, I would contemplate the sky and feel the depth of my insignificance and wonder if somehow in the paradise of Bhutan I had not encountered again the purgatory of despair as I contemplated the thin thread that binds our lives to reality.

Next morning we were enveloped in mist, and it began to rain as we pulled out the pegs of the tent, packed the bags and set off. As we left I looked back and saw that nothing recalled that here one night men had eaten, sung and slept. There was not so much as a scratch on the surface of the place that had been for one night the site of our existence, yet that same night had left in my mind marks that time could never wash away.

We advanced in silence in the rain. The track was a narrow gutter down which pranced rivulets of freezing water. Five hours later we emerged, soaked to the skin, above the tree line into a gigantic rock garden, a terrain where loose stones presented dangerous traps for the ponies' feet. The air was thin and each step required considerable effort. The Bhutanese attribute the effects of altitude to gases coming from the soil. Timid alpine flowers peeped through the moss that covered the stones.

At last we reached the summit of the pass where, ghostly in the

mist and whipping in the wind, stood many prayer flags flapping from the great poles carried up by travellers who like us had been for days under the spell of the great mountain, and had thanked the gods of war in this way for their protection against all the physical and spiritual dangers that inevitably accompany those who dare challenge the monsters of Nature. This was the highest pass I had crossed in Bhutan and so far the most difficult not only of this journey, but of all the journeys I had undertaken in the Himalayas, although it was only about thirteen thousand feet high. (No one has ever measured it exactly to my knowledge.) On reaching the summit we had only scaled the mountain's more docile side. Now began a descent the like of which I had never seen anywhere in the Himalayas, down a sheer drop of nine thousand feet. It took us a day and a half to reach the western foot of the Ruto-la. There are no words fit to describe the hair-raising goat track we followed. From noon, the hour at which we reached the top of the pass, until six in the evening we walked down one vertical staircase carved into the sheer face of a cliff. Time after time, the ponies' feet had to be placed by hand to prevent them plunging to their deaths and every inch of the descent the men clung to the animals' tails. It rained all day so that the rock was slippery, which added to our pains. Through the mist we occasionally caught a glimpse of rocky outcrops keeling dangerously into the void of the gorge down which we were heading. The scenery had lost its alpine aspect to become a nightmare of rocky spurs mocking all the laws of gravity and fashioned after the most tormented imaginings of Chinese artists.

At dusk we reached a small abandoned house on a spur dominating two ravines and here we lay down for the night, exhausted and frozen in the wet and damp.

The following day we carried on down for six more hours until we entered a tropical forest where mud and slime and leeches presented new difficulties. At long last the roar of water could be heard and towards three, still in the pouring rain, we reached a small bridge leading to a miserable hamlet. We passed this and crossed another larger bridge on to the shoulder of a mountain where we came to the first cultivated fields of the village. These fields were sown with corn and despite my protests I could not stop the porters from going to pinch some ears of corn, a plant that to them was an exotic luxury as it did not grow

in their high valley. The men also cut some corn stalks which they peeled to suck the sweet marrow rather like sugar cane. That evening we pitched the tents on a small flat terrace. As we were doing so, the jingle of bells announced the arrival of a caravan. Around a bend of the track came a stout Bhutanese with a rifle followed by a fine mule covered with the most flamboyant orange, red and blue carpets. Its saddle trimmings and buckles were of silver and ivory. Behind the mule marched a finely dressed old man, followed by six porters, bent beneath heavy loads. The old man was the Lord of the Law of Lhuntse, the lonely dzong for which we were headed. I went out to greet him and by the side of the road showed him my kashag. He explained to me that the King had ordered an assembly of all the Lords of the Law in Paro Dzong and that he was going west to attend this durbar. He expressed his regret that he could not, therefore, welcome me in his fortress but informed me that the Ramjam who had taken his place would attend to all our needs. This old Lord of the Law seemed a fine man. We were to meet again later owing to unforeseen circumstances brought about by the rain, and I was able to witness what marvels were contained in the packs carried by his porters. He was taking to the King as presents and tributes the skins of the finest leopards killed in his district and the most beautiful embroidered cloths woven by the women of his lonely province.

We wished him a good journey and watched him disappear with his armed guard down the track. Secretly I pitied the poor man having to face the great pass over which we had come. Not for all the gold in the world would I have returned by the route along which we had travelled.

Bad weather on the pass and a miscalculation on the part of my gay porters made the following day's march the longest of my journey. We set out at dawn. The mist and rain had cleared to reveal landscapes quite different from any of central or western Bhutan. For miles we followed the sides of a deep valley making our way slowly northwards along a great river that roared below us. All around rose immense mountains veiled in thick forests through which emerged great boulders and spur-like rocky outcrops. The slope along which we were walking was covered with

thick grass dotted with pale green wispy pines of a kind I had never seen before and which I was unable to identify. Since reaching the river the day before, our path had turned north. By noon we reached a small col from which we had a view of the precipitous gorge of the Kuru river, a mighty torrent coming down from Tibet and the only Bhutanese river to cut across the Himalayas. This gorge, rather like the upper valley of the Machu, was drier than the country around us. We walked for fifteen hours that day, eventually passing the villages and continuing along a ledge overhanging the river where the gorge narrowed into a terrifying cleft between two huge mountains. The porters lagged behind, my pony became lame and the other little one which had so far carried a sizeable pack had to be unloaded, the men shouldering the additional burden. We stumbled on for hours, always hoping to see the dzong that would spell the end of our pains. Five days had elapsed since I had left Jakar. The high cool valley of Bumthang seemed like a remote dream of the past.

Dark caught us still on the track. Despairing of ever reaching Lhuntse I struck out alone, making my way with difficulty, twisting my ankles on stones that I could barely see.

At long last I rounded a shoulder and Lhuntse came in sight, its massive white walls shining eerily against the black outlines of the gorge. The fort was built on a sharp spur that rose unexpectedly above the river at the bottom of the gorge at its narrowest point. There was not a village in sight, the fort being a solitary sentinel guarding this narrow passage. For half an hour, in the dark, on all fours, I slithered down the track that dived towards the dzong. Surely, I thought, the porters would never make it that night, yet they could hardly be expected to sleep on the track, for we had not seen a trickle of water for several hours. As I came within a hundred yards of the dzong I heard wild shouts and war cries. The last festivities of an archery contest were under way.

Haggard, I stumbled out on to a small platform below the fort, Here, under cut branches, lit by a resin torch, sat the Ramjam. attended by servants, contemplating the wild prancing of fifty archers who were leaping around one of the targets, brandishing their bows above their heads. In a few minutes I was seated next to the Ramjam drinking chang from a silver-lined cup and explaining that I needed men to help recover my porters, who were stranded somewhere along the track. The Ramjam, a rather

plain, blunt character, said he would see that someone was sent to fetch them, and then showed me to a chapel where, 'if I did not smoke', I could spend the night. Much to my surprise, my porters arrived only a short while later. Fatigue had wiped the habitual smiles from their faces as one by one they scrambled up the stone steps of the chapel, banged down their loads and dropped to the floor. I ordered some arak from the Ramjam and after they had had a drink they began to regain their spirits and untied the packs. The teenage girl fell asleep at once, her boyfriend found the energy to make a joke and the bachelor mumbled some prayers before the altar, under which, all together in our sweat-soaked clothes, after a hasty dinner we soon fell asleep.

I woke next morning to find that I was running a low fever and had a bad cough. Secretly I wished I could have set out for two or three days farther north, up to the Tibetan border into a district called Kurteu, but for the first time I lacked the energy and decided to rest for two days in Lhuntse. I lazed around all morning, then paid the porters. By now we had become such good friends that they did not want to leave me and offered to come along with me to Tashigang. But I could see that they too had reached the limits of exhaustion and their pony was lame. With great regret, we had to part. They were now in foreign territory and behind their keenness to remain with me I thought I could perceive a certain uneasiness about straying so far from their own valley. Since crossing the Ruto-la we had entered a region whose language is different from that of Bumthang but very similar to Tibetan. Strangely, above Lhuntse in the district called Kurteu the language was again similar to, although not exactly the same as, that of Bumthang.

From the dzong I procured large quantities of rice and gave it to my friends, a present which delighted them since I was told that nobody was allowed to purchase any from the dzong and for my friends from Bumthang this was a great luxury, as it does not grow in Bumthang.

That afternoon I attended the second day of the archery contest. Since my arrival in Bhutan I had witnessed a number of these displays of the national sport. The most elaborate was at Tongsa but the archery grounds at Lhuntse were more spectacular than

any I had yet seen. The dzong rose menacingly upon the summit of a sheer rocky outcrop, reached by a steep, wide, paved stairway that, winding its way up from the chapel in which we had spent the night, passed under a rectangular door chorten then skirted two semicircular towers. These four buildings guarded, as it were, the steep approach to the dzong. A small platform had been carved in the side of the outcrop on which the fort stood. Here one of the targets was set up, while the other was planted in a terrace beneath our chapel. Between the targets the arrows flew across a small ravine. Archery contests in Bhutan are team affairs. Each team stands behind its opponents' target; these are a hundred and forty yards apart – one hundred and one arms' lengths, to be exact. The arrows are made of stout reeds straightened in the fire. For contests, they have pointed copper arrow heads, and barbed steel for war. The bows are carved from a piece of split bamboo of a thick resistant variety found in the jungles of southern Bhutan. They measure about six feet and the string is made of the fibres of a variety of our stinging nettles. This string, I found out later, is stronger than the best corded nylon of the same thickness. Each archer takes two shots at the opposing target and every shot that hits the target counts for two points, those falling an arrow's length from it for one point. The contest can last for a whole day.

Such contests are very animated affairs since each team has its cheer leaders, young girls who sing songs of encouragement for the teams all through the contest. When an archer hits the target the opposing team stages a wild dance in which they spin round twirling their bows in great swoops, sweeping the ground and letting out wild cries to chase away bad luck. These war dances have a strange savagery, reminding one that archery in Bhutan is not just a sport but practice for real warfare. At Lhuntse, beneath the massive walls of the dzong pierced with its loopholes, I felt that only a small margin separated this festival from war. As the teams faced each other, the arrows, when they missed the target, occasionally hit a man in the other team. Twice I saw this happen but fortunately no great damage was done, thanks to the ample kos of the contestants which saved the victims any serious injury.

As I sat next to the Ramjam watching the archers I began to feel more and more, as Boileau would have said, that 'my human constitution was losing that wonderful facility to adapt itself to

the most dissimilar conditions of atmospheric influence'. In other words I felt distinctly unwell. In another place or at another time I would have been less concerned, but here at Lhuntse, a fortress to be found on no maps, I was quite frightened. The nearest doctor was now sixteen days' climbing away and to reach my destination I had yet to cross two more passes of considerable height, one of which I was now again told was the most arduous of Bhutan. As I had heard this said of nearly every pass I had climbed I was sceptical. After crossing the Ruto-la I thought I had seen the utmost of what Nature could produce in the way of obstacles in a land known to harbour the most forbidding mountains in the world.

Lying in the cold chapel beneath the fierce divinities we could do no more for my physical condition than light a butter lamp, which Tensing immediately did to help me recover. A better solution was offered by all when, from a near-by village, a young Pau arrived, one of the magician healers of Bhutan who obtain their powers not from the lamas but from ancient secret traditions inherited from the pre-Buddhist Bon religion. I was delighted to meet this man, not so much on account of my own woes but because I was keen to learn some of the secrets of his magic art. This I was now told relied greatly on the spirits of the earth, water and trees. From the Pau I was able to collect some fascinating details on his craft. I did not, though, call on him to perform his magic rites on me and was only later to witness one such Pau enter his fearful trance, brandishing a drum made of human skulls as he screamed the commands dictated by the demon that had entered his body.

Not being superstitious and perhaps being slightly afraid, I also refused to place my case before the local *tsipa*, the district's official oracle, who could there and then have predicted my death or my recovery. I preferred to turn to aspirin, and prayed that I had not caught pneumonia, leprosy, typhus, cholera or any other of the dainty ills that had been wagged before me by the friends and relatives I had left behind in Europe to battle with the less fearful 'flus and coughs that plague the health of the inhabitants of more temperate climes.

I nevertheless went to pay my respects to the abbot of the monastery of the dzong, an old and very wise man. He offered me tea when I had bowed and presented him with a ceremonial

scarf and the last of the dozen fountain pens I had brought along with me as gifts for abbots and Lords of the Law.

The venerable Lama of Lhuntse somewhat scorned my fountain pen as a gift since it was instantly outshone by the silks he received a few minutes later from a monk who came from a nearby monastery to pay his respects. Nevertheless I gathered some interesting information about the history of the region and the lives of virtuous lamas, one of whom was particularly famous for having built steel suspension bridges all over Tibet and Bhutan.

More than any of the dzongs I had yet seen, Lhuntse appeared like a spearhead of Bhutanese civilization in this region so naturally given over to the savagery of Nature. The rough military appearance of the dzong concealed some fine ancient chapels whose gold-outlined frescoes glowed in the twinkling light of butter lamps or shone palely in the semi-darkness within. Like the other dzongs it had its criminal in chains, a young man who had invented an ingenious device which enabled him to totter round at great speed in spite of the steel bar clamped to his ankles. He had tied a rope to this bar so that he could support it with his hands and it was a painful marvel to behold how he scurried up and down the two hundred steps which led to the dzong.

For two days it rained and if this did nothing to dampen the spirits of the archers, neither did it do anything to improve my health since courtesy obliged me to sit for hours in the rain beside the Ramjam, uncomfortably close to one of the targets. I watched each arrow with apprehension as it flew, so it seemed, right at me, fortunately turning at the last minute.

Having rested, my gay friends from Bumthang set off back home singing at the tops of their voices. It was a sad parting and I was losing real friends.

As luck would have it, the very day they left a caravan of ten mules arrived from the fort of Tashi Yangtse, the next place for which I was heading. This caravan was driven by a handsome young man and a boy of fourteen. The fact that the handsome young man was a crook never entered my mind, or not until it was too late to do anything about it. What counted for me on the spur of the moment was that his mules looked very strong and he was about to return home. In fact, he planned to leave the next day.

Thanks to the help of the Ramjam and the magic of my kashag I struck a bargain with him to take me and my now reduced baggage to Tashigang, my ultimate destination. This now lay only seven days' climb away behind two passes one of which, the Dong-la, was twelve thousand five hundred feet high according to Pemberton and the other eleven thousand; in other words, two passes nearly as high as the Ruto-la, which we would have to reach climbing up from relatively low-lying Lhuntse.

I am afraid a detailed description of the journey that followed would be tedious in the extreme. History will record that in that week in September 1968 it rained in Bhutan, in Assam and in West Bengal more than it had ever rained before, and since it rains more in Assam than anywhere else in the world . . . It rained for the next seven days on my sickly self more than it had ever rained on anybody since Noah left all those poor people behind. To enlighten anyone who may not believe the hardships we suffered following our mules over the Dong-la in the rain, I should mention that all the railways of Assam were washed away that week by the rivers flowing down from Bhutan and a state of emergency was declared in West Bengal. Also the road to Thimbu was down in forty-five places, the bridge of Wangdu Photrang which had stood for four centuries collapsed, the two bridges of Thimbu were washed away, the foundations of the new dzong menaced. In India Coronation Bridge below Darjeeling near Bhutan's western border, one of the great feats of British engineering, the link between Sikkim and India, was damaged after standing up to over fifty monsoons, while Jailpaguri became an island and thousands lost their lives. For two months Bhutan was once again inaccessible to any vehicle and the front pages of the world's newspapers put these obscure parts of Bengal and Assam into the headlines. Of course, nobody worried that in the meantime I was to cross the Dong-la, the most frightening of Bhutan's passes.

For four days I floundered knee deep in mud, losing my shoes and part of my equipment as even the mules collapsed and had to be dragged up with ropes, each hoof extracted separately from the quagmire of mud. How a vertical slope can become a marsh is a prodigy that I still have trouble in understanding. At night I slept in a damp sleeping bag, fighting the thousands of fleas I

had collected on the first night's halt in a village hut below the pass. Sometimes we slept in the tent, which floated in a mud pool; sometimes in a cattle shelter, where the mud was amply mixed with dung. In the intervals our way was always upwards. We crossed a suspension bridge with a span of one hundred feet, made of twisted bamboo rope, a construction that required two men in perpetual attendance, one at each end, to maintain such unusual and untrustworthy rope in good condition. The sway in the middle of such a bridge was slightly more than impressive. We nearly lost two mules which, against the rules of the game, stupidly tried to cross together, eventually falling to their knees in the middle and rocking dangerously over the pounding torrent.

Riding was out of the question since even the mules were barely capable of progressing. I had never been wetter or more exhausted in my life, nor had I ever been closer to believing that death would eventually catch me up somewhere in that darkest portion of Bhutan, confirming my sinister fears in Thimbu.

There were no heroics. For me it was a scramble for life and I plodded on, tearing off leeches as I coughed my soul out, up to the summit of the Dong-la and then up the second, nameless pass covered with wild rhubarb. This I ate as if it were caviar, much to everyone's amazement. They said it would make me sick. I felt no worse for it but that may have been because I could scarcely have felt worse anyway. Tensing was concerned that I might die. As for the handsome young man who led our caravan, I found him more and more delightful but, unmoved by my affliction, he took advantage of the chaos to steal a pair of shoes, a knife, and one of my sweaters; until on the last day, after I had given him a large tip, he ran off with one of my cameras.

In such conditions it is useless to explain that a week is much longer than seven days and seven days' climbing is a lot, especially after one has been on the road for thirty days already. Needless to say, as I plodded on my mind kept turning to jet planes, to the comfort of my sports car, the delight of Cook's sleepers, and all the many ways in which, in other lands, one can cover hundreds of miles with a book on one's lap. I also thought constantly of undertakers, and the death dances of Tongsa that now took on a new significance for me.

In spite of my health, my eyes feasted on the strange rain-drenched land we had entered. Gone now were the three-storey

houses of central and western Bhutan. We passed tiny hamlets of one-storey houses perched on the steep sides of great canyons.

Here lived the farmers who set fire to the forests and planted their crops between the charred stumps of the trees they had burned down.

On the other side of the two fearsome passes we reached Tashi Yangtse, a small dzong that did not boast a Lord of the Law but which like all the great forts of Bhutan controlled a strategic point, a bridge over the mighty Manas river, the great artery of eastern Bhutan. On arriving at this fort I mustered the energy to follow the Manas upstream towards Tibet to visit an unusual shrine called Du-rong Chorten, the main feature of which is a huge chorten in the Nepalese style, the largest in Bhutan. The name Du-rong means poisonous valley and indeed malaria plagues the upper reaches of the Manas river. At Du-rong Chorten I saw a Pau enter a trance as he recited to a dying man the names of the demons he had offended. The ceremony bore all the tragic horror of the most devilish witchcraft. The poor victim it seemed was not to be allowed to die in peace. The narrow room in which he lay echoed with brain-choking drum beats and the sinister howl of the possessed Pau. As an anthropologist I took in the details, whilst as a human being I prayed that death might terminate the victim's torture.

That night as on most nights over the past two months I was haunted by solitude, the constant companion of my long and lonely journey, but somehow now, as I neared my ultimate destination, I began to wish that I might never arrive. In that state of weary anticipation of a destination about to be reached I would have liked to have suspended time for ever. For a month the name Tashigang had echoed in every step of my long pilgrimage across Bhutan and had kept me advancing; it had taken on magical proportions yet I knew now that what I had sought had been the going and suddenly Tashigang spelt what I had begun to fear, the end of the reality of ten years of dreams.

For three days we descended the valley of the Manas and twice, by perilous rope bridges, we crossed the mighty river swollen to bursting point as it prepared the floods that in the plains of India that same week brought death to thousands. The last bridge set me at the foot of a cliff upon which stood the magnificent fort of Tashigang, one more resplendent example of the art and genius

of a race that has no equivalent on our planet; one of the thirty-two jewels in the crown of the King of the Land of the Dragon.

I climbed the last steps and passed beneath the door of the dzong. There a stranger stretched out his hand and without a word shook mine. In that simple western greeting I understood that I had arrived. In that instant I crossed the gap of time and came back to a world I felt was no longer mine, for I had left my soul on those horizons I could now call my own, in that lost paradise of Bhutan beyond the purgatory of the plains.

The person who shook my hand was an Indian road contractor. Both of us had reached the end of our trails, the limits of two worlds. For me, Tashigang meant that at last, weary and exhausted, I had arrived. Even so, a hundred and twenty miles of tortuous, hair-raising roads still separated me from the remote border post between Bhutan and Assam. From there twice that number of miles across Assam separated me from Hassimara and the first air link with the world outside. But from Tashigang the history of Bhutan had already, for two years past, been written with jeeps, and could be compared with that of all frontier regions of our civilization. Like my porters, I stared at the incongruous vehicles my mules passed, and coming out of the great door of the dzong I suddenly understood that it was all over.

Looking north and west at the great hills and lofty mountain ranges I could contemplate from afar the tortuous regions I had crossed, that dark smudge of my nightmares that had now become a pleasant reality surpassing my childhood dreams. There, I knew now, lived the Lords of the Law and the grand, red-robed abbots in their ornate forts and elaborate chapels set upon the steep ridges above the rivers over and across which the thin thread of the trail wound its slow way. It had taken me thirty-one days to cover on foot and mule the distance between Wangdu Photrang and Tashigang. In that time I had walked over four hundred miles, crossed six passes above eleven thousand feet and yet covered a distance of only two hundred miles as the crow flies. Since visiting Dugye Dzong in the upper Paro Valley I had crossed Bhutan from end to end. Sadly I thought that a day might come when all the places I had seen would be mere flashes in a windscreen, but until then I shared with Captain Pemberton

the privilege of having visited one of the most remote corners of the globe.

Now I understood what over the past ten years had drawn me to the borders of Bhutan, what had taken me beyond the beaten tracks of convention to seek, in our times of jet transport and space exploration, the antiquated hardships of obscure mule trails. It was not only the pursuit of childish dreams, but the quest for what our new world can no longer offer, a civilization made to the measure of the individual, the lost harmony of a land where men's souls are reflected in all their deeds, a world in which beauty is the measure of happiness. Beyond the new horizons I had contemplated as my own in Bhutan I had caught sight of new perspectives in my universe. I would never be the same in the damp low lands of the plains.

In my torn and rain-drenched bags I also brought back more concrete treasures. I had been able to record two new languages and study yet unknown tribes. I had also unravelled many of the artistic and cultural mysteries hidden for centuries, locked in the deep unexplored valleys of central and eastern Bhutan. I had been able also to study and be the first to record in detail the interesting complexities of Bhutan's original political and social organization, and determine with a certain accuracy the ethnic and linguistic divisions of its population.

To the scientific interest of Bhutan to linguists and anthropologists must be added the remarkable fact that Bhutan is the only country in the world to undertake entirely on its own the intricate process of evolution and modernization. This is surely one of the boldest experiments of our times and deserves wide recognition and applause. I knew now that Bhutan was a land of proud and highly intelligent people. It is my hope that the modern world around it will respect its autonomy and learn to admire and approve the fact that at least one country today remains free from international financial or political alienation. If Bhutan appears to scorn many of the techniques and theories of the modern technological world, we in the West should understand that this is not in the name of backward traditions but with the intelligent understanding that technology is not the answer to all man's problems and often entails sacrifices that are not worth while, such as the loss of pride and identity.

'Bhutan has few problems,' one of the Lords of the Law had

rightly explained to me, 'and none that it cannot solve alone.' By the intelligent introduction of modern free education, the efficient organization, now under way, of medical dispensaries in the remotest corners of the land, and the clever but cautious transformation of certain aspects of its economy, Bhutan is proving that it knows the shortcomings of its own system and that all changes are not incompatible with a way of life based on religious and social ideals and methods so remote from those of the rest of the world. In the same way Bhutan's age-old system has also proved its qualities; the peasant of Bhutan, as I had been able to witness, has a standard of living possibly higher than that of the average citizen of any state in Asia and the greater parts of Africa and South America. Famine is totally unknown, abundance, a surplus of food, good health and happiness are the most striking characteristics of the inhabitants of the Land of the Dragon. There are no slums, no beggars and, in Bhutan's one-class peasant society, one encounters a true minimum of exploitation of man by man, either through the abuse of political power, the abuse of wealth or the ravages of ideological clashes.

I do not believe particularly that Bhutan has any great message to transmit to the world, any more than I think we have much to teach the Bhutanese. My only wish is that the account of this journey, undertaken alone and unsponsored, uninvited and unexpected, may objectively clear some of the mist which obscures our minds when we in the West think of those remote, inaccessible lands of lords and lamas.

Cadaques 1970

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