

# The Sacred Mountain

*A Picturesque Tibetan Pilgrimage by*

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Away in the remote fastnesses of Eastern Tibet is a beautiful snow-peak—the Sacred Mountain of the Tibetans. Every year thousands of pilgrims, travelling on foot from far and near, make the toilsome circuit of this mountain, thereby, they believe, acquiring much religious merit and ensuring another year of happy life. The Author made the circuit of the Sacred Mountain, and illustrates his description with some very interesting photographs.



OWN in parched, dusty Mandalay, in the neighbourhood of the lovely Arracan pagoda, you may at any Christmastide, during that short three weeks of what in Burma is facetiously called the "cold weather," meet with certain incongruous horse-dealers, barbarously contrasting with their surroundings.

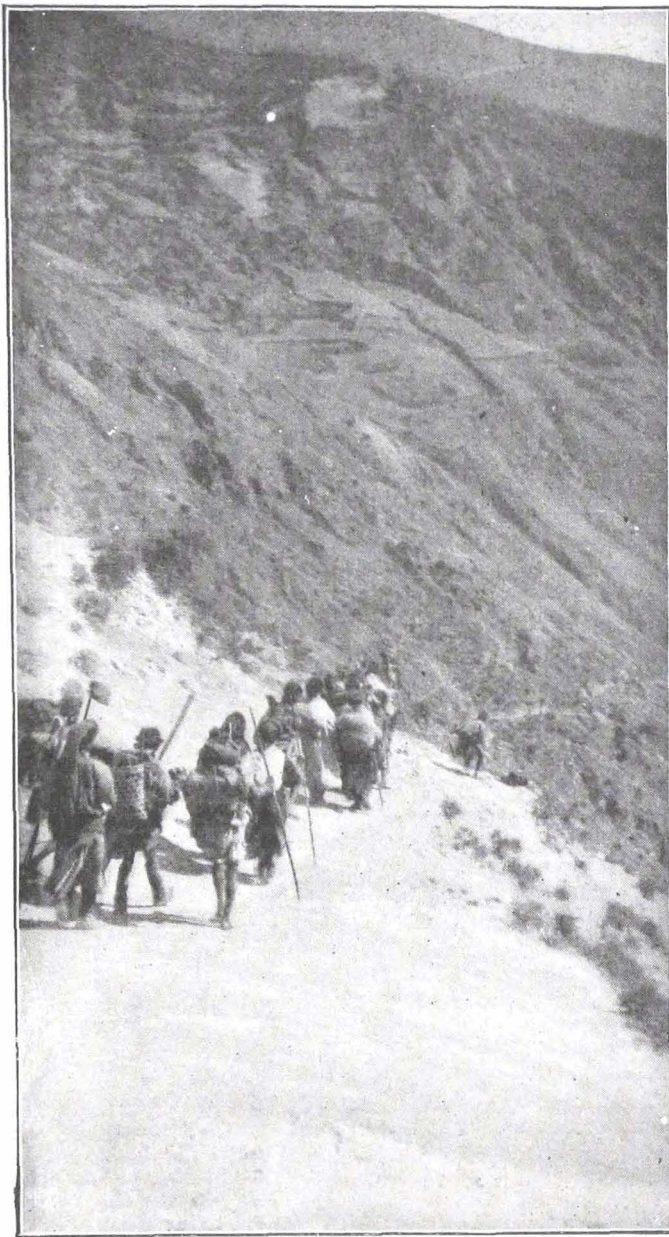
They are tall men, swarthy of complexion, monstrous dirty, disdaining water even in this mild land, with greasy unkempt locks tied in a short pigtail. Their dress is shepherd-like—a loose gown of coarse cloth, low-necked and wide-sleeved, reaching to the ground, but tied up above the knees by day with a girdle from which hang flint and steel, and maybe a short sword thrust through; shapeless, tight-fitting cloth boots, reaching to the knees; and to crown all, perhaps a bashed-in Homburg hat picked up with childish delight at a local auction!

How ill these scarecrows contrast with the daintily-gowned Burman, cleanly and debonair, and with his sparkling, flower-decked wife!

But speak to them in Chinese—or better still in their own tongue, if you can command its intricacy—and you will find them the most charming and simple folk. They will greet

you with smiles of welcome, showing rows of milk-white teeth, spreading out their hands, as the custom is, to prove that they grasp no treacherous weapon. They will certainly ask you to share their frugal meal, for they are a generous and hospitable people; and when their tongues have been unloosed with a little of the dangerously-fiery spirit which the Chinese miscall *hsiao-chin* or "small wine," they will open their hearts to you and tell you of the great green grass plateaux, blue lakes, wide windy spaces, and snowy mountains beyond the hot monsoon jungles of Burma. Their talk makes you long to get away from the dust of royal Mandalay, away from the scented evergreen jungles, away even from the tranquil peace of dreamy Burma, into the free solitudes beyond, where the silence is broken only by warrior rivers fighting their way through the mountains, by shrieking winds, and the thunder of the avalanche. So, with your head in a whirl, you bid farewell to your hosts who are starting homewards on the morrow, and at parting they pay you the friendly roadside compliment of their country, by sticking their tongues out at you!

The secret is out with the tongue, and you all know now that our uncouth horse-dealers can only be Tibetans!



A party of pilgrims in the Mekong Valley.

There came a time when I set out to see these people in their own country and make the circuit of their Sacred Mountain—though I acquired no merit thereby, walking round it the wrong way, with the mountain ever on my left instead of my right. I went in the first instance to collect plants—alpines from the high Tibetan ranges, and became a pilgrim out of curiosity.

It is a far cry to the Sacred Mountain of Eastern Tibet—forty long marches across the most mountainous country in the world, Yunnan ("Land of the South Cloud"), from the last British outpost on the banks of the Irrawaddy.

Here in Bhamo, or "New Market," as the Chinese inaptly call our Shan-Burman village, with its handful of Englishmen, its native regiment, bazaar, pagodas, and swamps, we hire mules, and set out down the white dusty road which leads to China.

Passing through shady teak forests, by villages of thatched huts, where Shans in wide flat hats of woven palm-leaf urge lazy buffaloes to the plough, we reach the edge of the plain and, entering the jungle, begin to climb. So long as we are in British territory the road is fair. One might, in fact, ride a motor-cycle along it—preferably someone else's.

Soon we are high up in the hills, passing through a fine gorge, our ears filled with the glamour of the river below. Hark! the silver notes of a gong ring through the forest. Look to the mules! The road is narrow and a caravan is approaching us.

On the fourth day the frontier is crossed, and, leaving the Burmese jungles behind, we emerge into the open cultivated valleys of China.

Now we have our first experience of Chinese "mule inns." The mules are tied up in the courtyard, from which open bare rooms—dark, dirty, and malodorous. A solid square table, a hard chair without arms, and a filthy wooden bedstead, with boards for springs and a straw pallet for mattress, comprise the fittings. So I set up my camp-cot.

As we travel east the mountains grow higher, the scenery wilder. Cultivation is confined to a few isolated plains, all of them over five thousand feet above sea-level. We cross the great Tibetan rivers, Salween and Mekong, by suspension bridges built of iron chains hung from stout masonry towers, across which boards are laid. Though several hundred years old, they are quite strong, but only two mules at a time venture on them, and they sway heavily in a strong breeze.

There is much to see by the wayside now. It is market day in one village, and on the raised platform of a gaudily-coloured open pavilion, in the courtyard of the little white Buddhist temple, a troupe of wonderfully-dressed actors are

performing one of those unending plays (with several morals, but no plot) beloved by the Oriental. Since women are not permitted to act in China, their parts are taken by men, with shrill-edged falsetto voices.

Hard by, the crowd are noisily buying and selling, arranging marriages, casting horoscopes, discussing crops and prices, telling fortunes, gambling and quarrelling.

Here and there, on the steep boulder-strewn tracks which do duty for roads in mountainous China, are wayside stalls where thirsty muleteers sit sipping bowls of weak tea. For less than a penny—say twenty or thirty brass "cash," the currency of rural China—you can have as many cups of tea (*sans* milk, *sans* sugar!) as you will drink. One always carries a few "strings of cash" for inn money; a thousand threaded "cash" (each has a square hole in the centre) go to a "string," which is worth

in English money perhaps half a crown, and weighs several pounds.

At the end of the twenty-first day's march we reach a lovely city with a deep blue lake on one side, and towering mountains dusted with snow on the other. All round us are waving fields of beans, flax, and pulse, with the beautiful opium poppy in out-of-the-way corners. It is a great surprise coming through the mountains on to this lovely plain, six thousand feet above sea-level. If the great triennial fair is on, you will meet men from half Asia here; now is the time to buy curios. It is a long business buying anything in China, and the following conversation ensues over a pair of earrings on which my fancy rests.

Of course you will not do anything so *gauche* as to pay up, without a murmur, the price asked; that would disappoint the seller terribly—for not having asked more.

"How much do you want for these earrings?"

"These, *ta-jeu*? five *taels* of silver."

"It is too much; I will give you two *taels*."

"*Ta-jeu* is a great official, therefore he is rich."



Mules crossing the Mekong suspension bridge.

"Only Chinese officials are rich. Yun-nan is a beautiful country, but there are many bad men. Where do you come from?"

"From Li-kiang. How much will *ta-jeu* give for the earrings?"

"I have been to Li-kiang during the great fair, at the Temple of the Water Dragon. Will you sell that bangle?"

"This? No, I do not want to sell it."

"It is a poor bangle, but I will give two *taels* for it!"

"How much for the earrings, *ta-jeu*?"

"I do not want them—they are poor earrings."

"Yes, it is getting hotter every day now. Very well, you shall have them for three *taels*, *ta-jeu*!"

"What, the bangle? I do not want it! I cannot wear it."

"The earrings, *ta-jeu*?"

"Oh! two *taels*! I will give it you, but they are not worth it."

"Very well, two and a half *taels*. Take them!"

Travelling on, now northwards, we come in a few days to the last cultivated plain, the last Chinese city, before entering on the green pastures of the Tibetan country.

In the narrow cobbled street crowds stare at us till, parted by the cry "*Sunko-lai-le*" (mules coming), our caravan



A group of Tibetans.



A pilgrim crossing a stream.

splits them in half, bells jangling, mulcteers shouting strange oaths. We notice that the women here, though garbed as Chinese, no longer distort their feet, and are, in fact, quite different in appearance. They are Mosos, a strange tribe, once a power in the land, whose chief claim to notice is the fact that they have a picture-writing like Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Leaving the last city in China, we climb up to the green grassland plateau—green in summer, that is, but in winter white and frozen. There are no more suspension bridges, and when we come to cross the Yangtze, here called the Gold Sand River, we find only a great clumsy flat-bottomed scow.

How the mules hate jumping the high boarded side of this awkward-looking craft! It is with the greatest difficulty that the muleteers goad the last of them over into the already-crowded scow, where they are packed like sardines. In mid-stream, when we are rushing down with the swift current, they become restless, and one, jumping up, puts his forelegs over the free-board, as though he intends to commit suicide. The scow lurches, and I hold my breath—and my tongue, for our boatmen are skilful and experienced. The wayward mule is coaxed back with a stick, and we are safely landed, despite alarms. We have been swept four hundred yards down-stream in crossing.

Up on the plateau, herds of shaggy-haired yak, annoyed at being disturbed, raise their heads menacingly, and glare at us through bloodshot eyes. Huge rug-headed dogs, almost as big as the yak, guard the substantial houses, and bay fiercely at us, straining to be at our throats.

Over the brow of yonder hill glitter two golden domes, where endless roofs and walls, painted red and white in stripes, and pierced with small

window-frames, rise in endless array. Several red-robed men of coarse features scowl at us none too pleasantly, for the lamas are suspicious of Europeans near their great monasteries.

It is all so like mediæval England, I cannot help thinking. When I see these thievish monks in their secluded mountain monasteries I am reminded of Merrie England, and Shakespeare's plays, and the Wars of the Roses, as though it were all in real life again.

Now we have another experience of Eastern Tibetan country—the hot, arid, almost lifeless

gorges of the great rivers. Bare brown cliffs tower up for thousands of feet, a hot wind blows incessantly, and after a few miles of this we are thankful to stop at a village perched high up above the river, and drink sour yaks' milk with the kindly Tibetans in the large dark kitchen.

You, reader, must realize that we have been marching now every day for five weeks, and are slowly, but surely, nearing the starting point of our pilgrimage round the Sacred Mountain.

To-day we are faced by a peak which rears its head fifteen thousand feet above sea-level. For two days we toil up the steep path through forests, till on the third day we are above the trees, and the wind from Tibet is blowing straight in our faces. On our left rises a grand range of snowy peaks, apparently but a stone's throw distant. At last we reach the pass, breathing hard, and, looking ahead, see, across wooded valleys, a clear-cut pyramid of snow and ice rising proudly above all the surrounding mountains. It is the Sacred Mountain of Eastern Tibet.

Dropping down into the valley, we presently reach a poor little village of flat-roofed, mud-walled houses at the head of a glen. Mountains tower all round, and groups of buxom Tibetan girls are out on the house-roofs amongst shocks of barley, singing to the rise and fall of the flails; the mountains fling back their voices and the slanting sunshine stains their faces a deeper red. Through this village every year, from the north, so as to keep the Sacred Mountain on their right hand, pass all the pilgrim bands from Eastern Tibet; men, women, and children, dirty, ill-kempt, ignorant, and cheerful. They begin to arrive in October, and thence almost daily, in long lines, till the passes are finally closed in February; for there are four passes over twelve thousand feet—two of them over

fifteen thousand feet—to be crossed during the ten or twelve days' march round the mountain. In autumn and early winter, however, the weather is at its best, the snow peaks ever in view, the night vivid with stars, and by day the turquoise sky of Tibet is undimmed by a single cloud.

Sitting under the rhododendron blossoms, high up on the mountain-side, looking across a deep rent torn through the mountains—the Mekong Gorge—to the glittering snowy pyramids opposite, a great longing came over me to become a pilgrim as well. So when autumn came, and the crops were gathered in, and the merry Tibetans gave themselves over to pilgrimage, I packed a few things, hired a few baggage animals, and set out.

Daily minstrels were coming into our village, to sing and dance; the rains were over, the forests gorgeous with orange, red, and yellow livery; and daily strings of pilgrims marched sturdily down the steep cobbled street, packs on their backs, staves in their hands, loose sheepskin coats flying open in the breeze. Save that on their heads they wore conical sheepskin caps, with large ear-flaps, they were dressed very like our horse-dealers of Mandalay.

By day a bare arm and shoulder are thrust out of the coat for coolness' sake, and the heavy fold in front serves as a receptacle for various articles, such as a sword, a wooden eating-bowl, a fowl or two, and a pipe. It is like a grotesque conjuring trick to see these men dive into the recesses of their huge coats and produce a miscellaneous collection of articles. At night the girdle is undone, and the long robe shaken out till it reaches the ground, when the pilgrim, wrapping it round him, sleeps on the ground beneath rock or tree. The women do their share of the work, each carrying a load like a knapsack on her back, and a good weight of silver, also heavy earrings and an amulet box slung round her neck in which is an image, or written prayer.

So the pilgrims move on day after day, the men twirling in their hands the little prayer-drums in which lie coils of paper covered with prayers; children march bravely along, sometimes holding their mothers' hands, sometimes being carried; and all mutter as they go: "*O mani padme hum! O mani padme hum!*" ("Sacred jewel in the lotus!"). Our party, marching in the opposite direction, stopped at night where the pilgrims camped, under cliffs blackened by the fires of generations; and here, seated round the fire with our friends—for all pilgrims were our friends—we watched the big iron pot bubbling.

Into the pot had been cast herbs and a pinch of salt, to make broth, and tea was being churned in a tall wooden brass-bound cylinder, in which someone stamped a piston up and down, to emulsify the butter. The Tibetans, by the way, make their tea with butter and salt instead of milk and sugar. Save that the butter is apt to be hairy, owing to the playful method of manufacture, which consists in kicking around a yak-skin of milk (hair inside), buttered and

salted tea is pleasant enough, though really to appreciate it, such is the association of ideas, one wants to look upon it as soup, and not as tea.

The frothing, chocolate-coloured fluid is drunk liberally from wooden cups and kneaded with *tsamba* (parched flour) to form a bolus. These are the staples of Tibetan fare, and no Tibetan ever travels without his rawhide bag of *tsamba*, a wooden box of butter, a brick of tea, and a little bag of gritty red salt—the last three, perhaps, carried within the ample folds of his cloak.

After supper there is music—soft haunting airs such as the Tibetans love, while the mothers fondly croon their children to sleep. Then the men will comb out the women's hair for them, and butter it; and the women will attend to their menfolks' matted locks. Grease is the great feature of Tibet, as it must be in all very cold countries. Everything is greasy—men's hair, women's complexions, but most of all, clothes; for in winter they wear but one garment apiece, the sheepskin coat, hair inside, next the skin—and what a fine temperature that greasy, matted sheepskin maintains!



A Tibetan girl of the Mekong Valley.



Sacred prayers and Buddhas carved in the rocks of the Salween Valley.

of pear, walnuts, rice, or *tsamba*, set on them.

Crossing the mountain range and coming down from the snow and ice into the tropical warmth of the Salween Valley, we find the limestone cliffs beautifully carved and sculptured. In past ages, concavities have been worn in the rock; and with a patience fitly to be compared with the works of geological agents, devout pilgrims have carved

Gradually the men begin to nod. One by one their heads fall on their breasts, and, leaning against each other, feet to the blaze, cloaks wrapped round them, they fall asleep in strange attitudes.

Towards dawn, someone awakening replenishes the dying fire; at last day breaks, the white ashes staring into the limpid sky. But the men soon blow new life into them, a red spark springs to life, and the fire is soon burning merrily again. How welcome is the hot buttered tea now, with twenty degrees of frost on the ground!

And now comes the crossing of the Mekong. There are no chain suspension bridges here. Instead, the passage is effected by means of a bamboo rope sloping from bank to bank, one each way, down which you slide, suspended helpless in a leather loop hung from a bamboo slider. With a push you are heaved off the platform into space, trussed like a chicken. A quick rush through the air, a view of the river roaring below, a smell of burning, and you are being untied on the far bank, none the worse for your adventure. Animals and baggage are sent across in the same way, but are even more helpless; if anything goes wrong, they remain suspended in mid-air till a Tibetan, working his way out along the rope, can aid them.

Crossing the first high pass, we find the summit crowned by a heap of stones, to which, if we would acquire merit, we must each add one; in the centre of the pile, which we pass on the left side, is stuck a bundle of bamboos from which flutter ragged flags and pieces of paper, wafting prayers to heaven. There are a number of altars set in the cliffs, too—each a slab of stone laid flat, with offerings of food, such as slices



A "chorten" on the pilgrims' road in the Mekong Valley.

long prayers and pictures of the Buddha inside these hollows.

There is also a small *chorten* here, with rows of big leather-bound prayer-drums—five-foot cylinders attached to iron spindles, carrying literally miles of paper, on which is written the sacred prayer. The pilgrims walk round these in procession, setting each one groaning and squeaking in turn, thereby acquiring merit; for this twirling of prayer-drums is equivalent to saying the prayer many thousands of times, and repetition, vain or otherwise, is the secret of religious success in Tibet.

Presently we come to the hot springs, where a patch of green, with shady trees, stands out in the bare gorge like an emerald in a brazen setting. At this spot warm water gushes from the base of the cliff, forming a tiny oasis in the khaki-coloured valley, and here the pilgrims halt and wallow.

All around the rocks are covered with neatly-executed inscriptions and pictures, testifying to infinite patience, for the spot is surely sacred. Hot water from solid rock in a desert—it is a miracle!

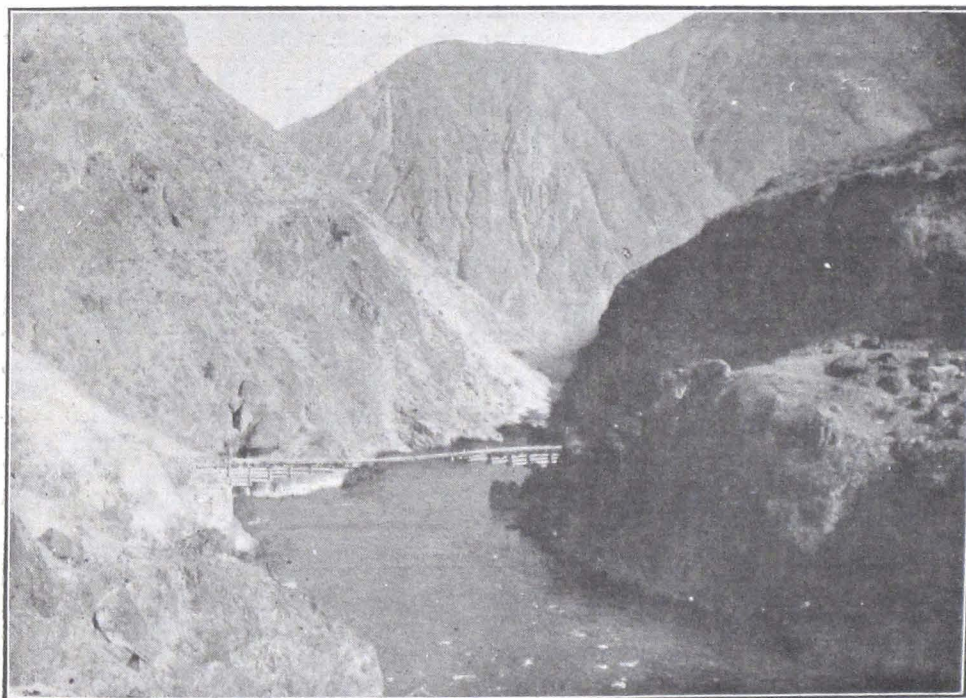


Lamas outside a temple.

After crossing another high pass we reach the swift little Wi-chu. Stark and grim, colossal walls of rock rise all round us, culminating at last in the glittering twin peaks of another snow mountain, standing sentinel over the awful solitudes. Between these mazes winds snake-like, coil against coil, the Wi-chu; and from the next pass we look down on it both ahead and behind, flowing in opposite directions and gleaming blue as a Damascus blade.

At last we reach the monastery of Pitu, a fine big building, white-washed, with a large central temple, hung with heavy black cloth in front. On the steps leading up to the doorway, and round a *chorten* close by, loll a number of dissolute-looking yellow-robed priests, who eye us with disfavour; but the villagers welcome us.

Next day we attend a service in the monastery. Rows and rows of yellow-robed priests sit cross-legged on the floor, and



A native bridge over the Wi-chu River, on the pilgrim route.



Tibetan minstrels.

on a dais above, supported by high priests, sits that awesome figure, a "living Buddha," or reincarnated priest. Rapidly, in a deathless silence, he drones a prayer, while the little butter lamps on the altar flicker and scarcely penetrate the gloom of the big hall. Then the voice ceases, and immediately the answer is caught up by a hundred guttural throats, and as they too sink into silence there comes a sudden blare of trumpets and conch shells, the roll of drums, and the clang of cymbals.

And now cups of tea and rolls of bread are handed round by silent monks—the interval for refreshments has arrived.

On our way out we are set upon by an enormous mastiff which has been unloosed by some playful monk. There is a scramble for back seats, someone hits the brute over the head with a stick, and before any damage is done order is restored.

Night finds us round the fire again. Someone brings out a bamboo whistle and plays a sad air in a minor key, while another twangs a bamboo comb, very like a "jews' harp." In the cold dawn they churn the salt tea in the big wooden cylinders, and pack up their belongings.

Nearing the last high pass, a great dome of glittering snow suddenly pops up its head close at hand. This is the nearest we ever get to the Sacred Mountain, and for a few minutes we gaze at it entranced. Even from the deep Mekong and Salween Gorges we have seen that pure summit, and it has rarely been completely hidden throughout our tour.

Descending to the Mekong once more we must go very slowly, for the snow above, melting in the bright sunshine, has trickled down into

the forest below and, freezing again, glazed the path with ice. We reach the river, and cross by a rope bridge. Toiling upwards once more, we look back and see the mouth of the glen blocked by the white peaks—our last view of the Sacred Mountain. Here is a pretty village with large flat-roofed houses hidden beneath spreading green trees and scattered amidst cultivated slopes; there is no winter here, only autumn, and presently those slopes will be emerald green, and the pear trees freighted with blossom. Continuing to climb, we are in the grip of stern winter again, and soon reach the last pass. Below, mellow in the afternoon sunshine, nestles the village from which we set out ten days ago.

From a neighbouring roof comes the jingle of bells and the wail of a Tibetan fiddle—yak hair stretched across snake-skin. Some strolling minstrels are amusing the crowd. The man, wearing an apron of bells, is dancing as he scrapes the fiddle, while the woman, dressed in a brilliant blue skirt and emerald-green jacket, sings in a quavering falsetto. Two children, who complete the troupe, are banging cymbals and performing strange antics; from time to time the leader fires off old, old gags, in a loud voice, and the crowd roars with laughter.

Just beyond, a wild-eyed, rug-headed sorcerer, sitting cross-legged on the ground by a bed of sickness, is ringing a hand-bell and mumbling prayers. He is casting out a devil on best Old Testament lines.

But our pilgrims go quietly to their homes. Their pilgrimage is over; they have acquired much merit along the hard and narrow way, and will live happily, so they believe, for another year.