

# ASIA

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## AND THE AMERICAS

THOSE TIES OF EMPIRE

CHINA FIRST

EDGE OF TIBET

AN APPEAL TO CALIFORNIA

THE NEW NORTHWEST PASSAGE

SPARE ASIA'S MONUMENTS TOO



JANUARY 1944

35 CENTS

ON THE TIBETAN HIGHROAD

# EDGE OF TIBET

By ALEXANDRA DAVID-NEEL

I am not a newcomer in the East. Since long ago and for many years I have haunted the Himalayas, the Far West of China and the Central Asian lands which extend beyond them. I have known the time, fertile in adventures, when white foreigners, in these regions, played the part of demi-gods. Now, in a small market town in the eastern Tibetan borderland, a kind of Chinese mercantile outpost, I witness the time of the abolition of "unequal treaties." It is just as if I had lived on two different planets.

The former World War came as a shock to many of my friends of Tibet, Mongolia and the neighboring regions, but after all they considered it as a fight between "beings of the same species." Their mythology expatiates a great deal on such battles taking place among the Titans (the *Asuras* of the Hindus; the *Sha ma yin* of the Tibetans). No discredit accompanies defeat in these struggles. But now for the first time the whites had faced yellow foes, and they had been unable to crush them in the first encounter. This looked new.

Some days ago, I heard a Tibetan, a man still living in the first "planet" of my experience, giving vent to his perplexity about the matter.

"What have these foreigners been doing," he said. "Why did they not use their supernormal powers to exterminate the Japanese? It looks as if they had lost these wonderful powers." He paused a little while and added, pensively, "Or could it be that they are not genuine magicians, and that we were stupid enough to believe they were. . . ."

This is the very question that thousands of simple-minded folk put to themselves in the middle of Asia. They had never liked the foreigners who infringed on their land and who, they thought, defiled it, but they feared them. While, on the coast, the civilized Chinese who had seen warships and witnessed landing expeditions had developed realistic notions regarding the source of the white men's power, the benighted folk of the Far West borderlands ascribed it to proficiency in occult art. Every one of the few travelers who happened to skirt the fringes of the bewitching Asian solitudes took on, in the minds of the in-

habitants, the character of a suspicious, dangerous scout connected with multitudes of white supermen living beyond range after range of inaccessible mountains or wide expanses of ocean.

Foreigners, it was said, could see through the hills, and when I was taking photographs, herdsmen looking at my camera asked me if this was the implement which helped me to see through the mountains. Frequently they wanted me to tell them about cattle, game or encampments that were in neighboring valleys, behind the hills which confronted us. To answer truthfully that I was incapable of such a feat was of no avail. They thought that I did not want to oblige them or that my refusal concealed some malevolent purpose.

In Sikkin, in the Himalayas, a man belonging to the local gentry was said to have greatly helped the Englishmen during their expedition against Tibet and, this, in the following way. A peculiar implement had been entrusted to him, and with it the man wandered across the country. Stopping at some places, he looked into a mirror. In this mirror he could see where the Tibetan soldiers had assembled, beyond several mountain ranges, many miles away. He could count their number and the number of their weapons. This and various other details, he reported to the British officers. In fact, the man was a surveyor. He had studied in English schools in India, and his job was connected with the building of roads. But such a commonplace explanation was not accepted by the hillmen. They held to the magic implement and the occult art of seeing through the mountains. The element of wonder which these carried appealed more strongly to their childish minds.

As for myself, I had more than once to invent stories to satisfy the thirst for miracles on the part of those who asked me questions, and also to avoid hostility. Sometimes, again, I played on local credulity in order to avert nasty tricks.

I have related in my book *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet* (published in the United States under the title *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*) how I caused a thief to bring back the money he had stolen. I persuaded him that I had seen the stolen coins in his tent while looking into a bowl full of water which served as a magic mirror. This was one of the powers with which foreigners were credited and the scoundrel readily

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believed my words.

At about the same time, rumors were spread regarding a foreigner's wizard dog. This animal could understand all that people said in any language; it could even read their thoughts. Whatever it learned, it faithfully reported to its master.

The Roman Catholic Bishop of Tatsienlu was said to be most expert in the occult arts. It was rumored that he went to sit near the rivers or the lakes, plunged his hands in the water and lo! when he drew them out, they were full of gold. He could also extract gold from the earth by laying his hands on the ground. It was explained that he supported his Mission with this inexhaustible source of wealth. The Bishop died during my present stay in Tatsienlu. He did not appear to have benefited much by the fabulous riches which he had landed.

My innocent camera was often looked at with suspicion, for many believed that it could be used to catch the souls of men. In order to make this more intelligible, I must say that Tibetan exorcists use a horn to catch devils. Muttering secret formulas, they compel the devils to enter into the horn; then, presto, they close its opening with a lid and the unfortunate spirit is prisoner. To regain his liberty he has to promise to accomplish whatever work the sorcerer requires from him or to desist from doing things which his captor forbids. Regarding extracting the soul out of a body, Tibetans believe that men, and animals as well, are composed, besides their body, of several spiritual or semi-spiritual elements and not just of a body and a single uncompound soul, as many Westerners believe. Consequently, if one of these principles, that one which I have called "soul," in order not to use a foreign word, is abstracted from a man, this operation does not necessarily cause his death. He may continue to live a diminished kind of life for a more or less long time. The sorcerer may use the abstracted "soul" for a variety of evil works, the description of which is beyond my present subject.

White foreigners were also believed to make themselves invisible at will, to have weapons that travel alone through the air to strike their enemies and, by riding on the wind, to transport themselves bodily from place to place with an incredible rapidity.

All these facts have been, and still are, ascribed to Chinese, Tibetan, Mongol and Indian magicians. The people invented nothing truly new, but credited the foreigners with the same powers to a superlative degree.

I myself enjoyed a rather flattering fame for a miraculous subterranean journey which I was supposed to have effected. The impression my

exploit had made proved to have been a lasting one and to have spread far away, for I was reminded of it about twenty years later, near the Mongolian border.

The facts were as follows: I was camping in Chinghai, the grassy solitary region that stretches from the borders of Kansu, Sikang and Sinkiang to Central Tibet. Not far from my camp, a longitudinal fissure existed on the side of a mountain. The neighboring herdsmen went there to offer homage to a deity who was said to inhabit it. However, the fame enjoyed by this opening came from the fact that it was considered to be the entrance of a subterranean corridor that extended to Lhasa. It was declared that those whose minds were perfectly pure could, by following this passage, miraculously reach Lhasa in five days—normally, a good horseman, starting from that place, would need two months to effect that journey. As for sinners, either they would not be able to slip into the small space between the walls of the corridor, or they would be attacked and devoured by the demons who guarded the way.

One afternoon I went to explore the mysterious passage. I had merely intended to take with me some packets of small tapers to light my way, but one of my servants begged me to carry also a little bag of *tsampa* (roasted barley flour) as provision. I thought to be gone only for two or three hours and had no wish to eat on the way; yet in order not to vex the good man, I slipped the little bag under my Tibetan robe. (Tibetan robes are very wide, and are tied at the waist with a belt, so that they form a pocket on the breast, into which Tibetans put all that they carry on them.)

The corridor in which I found myself after I had penetrated the opening offered nothing of interest, and before long my progress was made difficult by mounds of earth and stones which partly obstructed the way. I had slowly dragged myself up and down for a long time and was becoming exhausted when I perceived a feeble light ahead. There was an outlet there, and I emerged from under the earth very glad to breathe fresh air again.

My joy was of short duration. I had come out on a narrow terrace surrounded by steep rocks. I saw no possibility of descending from this eirie or of ascending above it. Twilight was already tinging with blue the crests of the distant mountains and shadows were lengthening on the tableland that stretched below me. The relief felt at lying down made me sleepy. It was summer, my thick woolen robe was as good as a rug. Weariness overcame my power of reasoning. I fell asleep before I could examine what would be best for me to do.

It was broad daylight when I awoke. Completely rested, I could more clearly judge the place where I was. Climbing the rocks seemed quite possible. I did it and reached the grassy summit of the mountain and from there, after a rather long walk, I came to a somewhat easy slope which brought me down into a valley. But there I realized that my camp was on the opposite side of the mountain. To reach it, I should have to skirt the foot of the mountain for perhaps a long distance. However, to walk on nearly flat ground was not difficult, though I felt a little stiff after my exertion of the previous day. The weather was fine. I strolled along in leisurely fashion, eating tsampa by the brooks and resting here and there. Evening came before I had reached my goal. I spent one more night in the open; to this I was accustomed. Finally I arrived at my camp, the morning of the next day.

I was saluted with exclamations, and the servants prostrated themselves before me while exchanging knowing looks.

Seeing I was long in returning, these foolish men, their brains stuffed with superstitions and tales of miracles, had connected my absence with the belief in the subterranean way to Lhasa. They just simply assumed that I had accomplished the marvelous journey, beating all records, for instead of requiring five days to reach the Holy City, the trip there and back had not even taken me two whole days. The superiority of the white foreigners had once more been manifested.

They did not fail to publish the wonder in all the herdsmen's camps where we stopped that summer, and those who heard the tale told it to others. It was in that way that nearly two years later, on the sacred mountain of Wu Tai Shan, far from the country where the extraordinary fable had been conceived, it was again narrated by a pilgrim who came from Chinghai.

We must not think that the era when wonders were daily bread in Asia is definitely closed. The faith in miraculous happenings is still very much alive among the uneducated multitudes, but the western foreigners have ceased to be the heroes of these fantastic feats. And this brings me to my experiences in a new East and the new mentality of its people.

I do like to observe the reactions of the local populace. In the East, as in any other region of the earth, the uneducated folk, free to a large extent of the restraint which education has made habitual to men of the upper class, exhibit candidly the contents of their minds, and most of the time the sight is not only original but also extremely instructive.

At present, on the Far Western border of

China, I witness the expression of the feelings which the renunciation of extraterritoriality by the United States and Great Britain has aroused. These feelings are given out in a single forcible sentence:

"Now, we are allowed to put the foreigners in jail."

The joy which such a prospect arouses in hundreds of small shopkeepers, workmen and similar people, the brightness of their faces when they utter, "We are their equals; we may imprison them," is inexpressible. I can guess that many eyes are following the few foreigners who reside in the region, with the inner, only half-conscious, wish to see one of them led between policemen to a local jail.

It is not that these Chinese are wicked at heart. Quite the opposite. They are peaceful, lovable people. They do not really hate the foreigners, though they do not nourish a very ardent love for them. What moves them is a spirit of pride and of revenge. They resented inequality though, being in far-away places, none of them had truly suffered the effects of it. They had heard about stern repression, punitive expeditions against their fathers who merely wanted to keep China closed to foreigners, as other countries keep out Asiatics and even some white strangers. They also had been told that opium had been forcibly introduced in China by foreigners, and though nearly all of them are addicts to it or trade in it, they do not cease to lay on foreigners the responsibility of having imposed on them the accursed drug. They remember the times, not so long ago, when foreigners, even those in humble employments, drove through the towns in beautifully decorated sedan chairs preceded by one or two servants bearing clubs who made a way, among the crowd, for the *tajen*, or great man. Of course, Chinese officials did the same. Such display is no longer to be seen. Rich foreigners own a car, as do rich Chinese, and less wealthy ones go on foot. Nevertheless, there remained a fact: these inconspicuous foreign pedestrians escaped Chinese jurisdiction; Chinese magistrates had no power to send them to jail. That was what most hurt the populace. They knew or had been told that their countrymen had been trampled down by the foreigners; they were eager to be able to trample down the foreigners in their turn. The foreigners had acted stupidly, the local people wished to imitate their stupidity. It may be absurd, but it is a natural feeling. We must be ready to understand it and even to sympathize with those who express it—while, of course, beware of the consequences.

Comic interpretations of the new treaties are not lacking. A Chinese physician offered me an

amusing one. "China," he declared, "will now rid herself of all foreign influences. In the future, no foreign physician shall be allowed to practise in China. As for these misguided Chinese youths who have pursued medical studies in America or in Europe they shall be compelled to learn Chinese medicine. Let us forsake all foreign education altogether and return to pure Chinese learning."

Unexpectedly, a patient of this worthy doctor who happened to be present wished to support his views: "What kind of science is that of these foreign physicians?" he said with marked contempt. "If you go to them, they ask you to describe to them the nature of your suffering. You must tell them if you feel pain in the stomach or in the head, or elsewhere. They are not able to know it. Our Chinese doctors do not need to put such questions. They look at you and at once tell you, 'You feel pain in your right leg' or they say, 'You feel pain in your chest. You have got such an illness.' This is knowledge indeed."

Do not hasten to laugh and ridicule these Asiatic Aesculapiuses. Some are witty and cunning fellows. They know the turn of mind of their patients and treat them accordingly.

My maid had taken cold and had sore throat. She insisted upon getting native medicine. The doctor gave her some. Two days later, since she still felt unwell, she returned to him. This time she told him that she also suffered from inactivity of the bowels. The physician looked at her narrowly, lifted his forefinger and uttered gravely, "Tomorrow morning, your bowels shall move." Then, changing his tone, he said lightly: "I shall give you medicine for your throat." The prophecy was fulfilled the next morning, and the girl came to me, full of admiration. "How wonderful is this doctor!" she exclaimed. "Only by looking at me and lifting his finger he caused my bowels to move." "You idiot," I replied, "can you not understand that he has put a cathartic powder in the medicine he gave you for your throat." But she did not believe me. The wonder element fascinated her.

Foolish people and rogues who play on their credulity in such fashion are to be found all over the world.

Since the news of the renunciation of extraterritorial rights penetrated the Chinese Far West, some Tibetans of Chinese-controlled Eastern Tibet have taken after their Chinese neighbors and go about repeating, "Now we are their equals." Equal to whom? They do not exactly know, but none the less, they rejoice.

In a shop, a very tall Khampa is seated. His straight nose, prominent cheek bones and un-

bridled big eyes would seem to indicate a common ancestry with red Indians. He drinks some spirits with the shopkeeper. He, also, exults and repeats, "Now, we are their equals."

A mischievous desire to tease the artless giant arises in me.

"Equal indeed!" I say. "Are now Tibetans the equals of the Chinese? Can a Tibetan become War or Finance Minister in China or President of the Republic?"

This reply leaves the Khampa silent. Living in that part of Tibet controlled by China, the equality he had in view was primarily equality with his Chinese neighbors. My reply has shattered his dream. I feel sorry for him. The Chinese merchant has a knowing, sarcastic smile. He feels himself the equal of white foreigners but does not accept equality with the Tibetans.

And, again, let us refrain from blaming him. Kindred feelings exist in most of us towards such-and-such members of the human race.

Another sample of the inner thoughts of borderland people was supplied to me by two men who were somewhat acquainted with Christian missionaries. I do not know whether they were really converts or whether they had merely been told some gospel stories. They also discoursed on the favorite theme. "We can send them to jail." I knew that both men believed in wonders and wonder-workers. I wanted to test them.

"If you put foreigners into jail, they will not remain there," I said. "They will escape through the closed doors or through the walls, or in some other way they will regain their liberty."

Both men laughed. "They couldn't," said the elder one. "Only a few lamas and Chinese Taoists are capable of such feats," added the younger one.

"How do you know it will not be possible to foreigners?" I retorted. "Have you not heard that the Apostles Peter and Paul, though tied in a prison with guards watching around it, went miraculously out of the prison walls."

Alas! My illustration had been badly chosen. Instantly the two men exclaimed: "We know! We know! But the Apostles were not white foreigners. They were Asiatics!"

I was left dumbfounded. I had not expected so much.

In spite of all this, Westerners still have an important part to play in the East. However, they must see to it that, in the future, their credit rests on more solid ground than senseless fairy tales and unjustified pretenses. They may again—and certainly they will—be esteemed as capable and mighty men, but it will be as *men* only. The glamour that surrounded the western demi-gods has faded away.