

A Novel of Tibet

Tents

AGAINST THE

Sky

by **ROBERT EKVALL**
Author of "Tibetan Skylines"

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*To the memory of Dave, my son, who was
with me—all interest and help—when this
was being written.*

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I

THE ACOLYTE

AHWAY WAS RIDING her sorrel horse up the long green slopes towards the lamasery to meet her younger son. He had entered as a seven-year-old boy-monk some months ago. She had been to see him once before, during the winter festival when the women had been allowed in the cloister. This was not now permitted and he must come to meet her outside the gates. Led close behind her was the old white horse which would soon be carrying Dorje Rinchen homeward for a visit. How would the child feel to come back to the summer encampment of the tribe, to the black tent of Jatsang, his father? Would he be shy of his dingy sacred red robe and the complete destiny it represented? His older brother, Duggur, was already parading about with his sword thrust through his girdle and beginning to use one of the long-barrelled matchlocks of the tent; but for Doka, as the family called Dorje Rinchen, such things were now forbidden, or at least out of order. What would the small child-priest be thinking?

She found herself dreaming her now forbidden dream, the dream she had cherished for years before they sent Dorje Rinchen to the lamasery, of seeing him handsome, desirable, wearing a djakwa trimmed with leopard fur, with all the trappings of a Tibetan brave. She had given a son to be bound with strange and hard vows indeed.

He would now never know the drama of existence as a member of the nomad Shami tribe, as shepherd of Bodyul, with a life sharp with gunfire, terror and exultation. This was his older brother's right now. It would be Duggur alone who would help tend the herds and flocks, master the skills of nomad life, move from the summer pasture lands to harvest the hay in autumn, then on to the sod walls and black roofs

of the winter encampment, battle the raids of enemy tribes and robbers out for loot or the far threat of the Chinese on the border. Nor would Dorje Rinchen ever bring a woman and children to the black tent. He must remain a monk undefiled, or become a wanlog, a monk who has broken his vows.

Even as a baby he had always seemed simpler, more intent than his brother and sister. She wondered if this directness would hold him chaste and contemplative or, in some violent moment of the future, impel him to worldly action.

Although she was saddened as she rode along, she was also proud, for had not she and Jatsang decided as Doka's parents that at least some of the wealth that increased the tent of Jatsang because the grass was long and the cattle in good health could be spent on religion, ministered with special grace by the younger son? It had long since been settled. She must not dream her forbidden dream, but forget and make ready to greet proudly her dedicated son.

2

Dorje Rinchen wriggled his impatient, rebel toes. All his excitement could find expression and release only in their frantic motion. They were hidden as he sat cross-legged in the proper attitude, demure as any one of the little bronze Buddhas that filled the image cupboard at the far end of the room. Presently all ten toes played an irregular tattoo on his bare thighs as he watched, through the latticed window, a line of moving figures cross the distant pass. For an instant they were outlined against the sky before they scurried like parti-coloured ants down the slope of the mountain. Among them, riding swiftly towards the lamasery, he felt sure, was his mother.

For long weeks he had looked forward to this day in what was almost a frenzy. Outwardly, he was a little monk: one of the "like ones"—a miniature Buddha sitting correctly with his toes turned up within his thighs as the Jewel in the Lotus sits on ten thousand image scrolls. Inwardly he was a little boy waiting for his mother to arrive.

He ducked his head as the Superior Monk's eyes lifted

from the half-turned *Prayer for Wisdom* and rested on him. Aku Lobzong seemed godlike to Dorje Rinchen. He was the oldest, richest, most powerful monk in the lamasery, though not quite the holiest. However, each of his other attributes enhanced his very real sanctity. Behind the great rock crystal lenses of his old-fashioned but highly prized Chinese spectacles, his eyes seemed the only part of his face that was alive: the rest was immobile, lost in the years of the past or set in the mould that wealth and influence had formed out of the present.

“Are they nearly here?” the old man questioned.

For a second Dorje Rinchen’s throat closed entirely, but opened again as he gasped, fishlike, and, robbed of speech, bobbed his head. How did the Superior Monk, sitting far from the window and buried in the *Prayer for Wisdom*, know about those figures dropping so swiftly down the mountain’s long slope? Did the Superior Monk know *all* a little boy thought?

“You may go to meet them at the edge, for none of the women can come within the limits now.” The eyes behind the glasses dropped as the page of the *Prayer for Wisdom* was turned. Again nothing mattered but words of prayer written into a pattern, whose chanted periods were designed to make men wise.

Dorje Rinchen was through the doorway and into the courtyard like a shadow: a dirty little shadow with brown feet moving fast below the hem of his dingy red robe, topped by an even rustier red mantle that trailed in the dust, or billowed like a sail. He ducked and turned between the white walls of the cloisters, skirted the great mass of the principal image house, and came to a sudden stop between the court of the chanting-hall and the dark juniper grove of Tamdrin, the red three-eyed demon god.

Somewhere just beyond the edge those riders were coming. They would certainly be near the ford, thought Dorje Rinchen when he hesitated between the courtyard and the shadowed grove. Through each was a short-cut to the place where the trail came to the edge of the lamasery area, but one, the wide paved courtyard, was forbidden to all, except when the monks gathered for chanting services. The grove of Tamdrin, although open to everyone, was dark and fearful to the boy.

Haste overruled every other consideration and Dorje Rinchen turned into the gateway of the wide, empty courtyard. A dash of fifty yards would take him across.

As he stooped to get a start the courtyard seemed haunted by the stern face and awe-inspiring figure of the Ke-bke, whose long rod was always looking for offenders in the ranks of the restless boy monks as they sat through many hours of chanting service. Aku Lobzong, too, seemed to be looking at him. He whirled in his start and scurried through the grove instead, trying to shut out of his mind the flaming figure with the girdle of skulls, Tamdrin, the three-eyed one. But Tamdrin did not leave his darkened shrine, and a moment later Dorje Rinchen almost fell into the arms of his mother as she met him at the edge.

He noticed, freshly, how handsome she was; how alive her eyes were. He saw the draped mantle of her hair spread in a hundred and eight braids on her back, and hung with silver, amber, and coral. He felt her arm around him, and heard too the throaty quaver of her voice. She was dressed in her best. He saw the richness of the multicoloured border on her sheepskin gown as his cheek rubbed against the leopard fur collar.

Then he noticed the horses. The sorrel was sleek and trim. His mother was riding the best saddle too: the worn Jan-koma tree that had been an heirloom for three generations, covered with wapiti skin trimmed with Lhasa broadcloth and red Russian leather, and hung with the heavy iron stirrups with gold filigree that had come from Peking. The old white horse pricked his ears expectantly at the capering child priest as though asking for a handful of the lunch that Dorje Rinchen had many a time shared with him. For a moment it was as though he had never left home.

His mother's voice called him back to a new self-consciousness. "Do you know all your letters? Can you read the prayers? Does the Ke-bke ever beat you?"

There was so much to tell: all about the letters, grammar, and the prayers he could say, and how the Ke-bke did not beat him much because he was bright and also because he was the acolyte of Aku Lobzong. As he talked, it suddenly

seemed to him that his mother was almost a stranger. She had changed and moved away. She didn't know about the wonders of the Ka-kha and the staccato cadence of the spells that must be shouted at the burning of the evening incense offering. He felt a momentary irritation followed by something that stuck in his throat because his mother had changed. Suddenly, from his new life, there was something of immediate urgency that he must tell her, not pleasant yet a circumstance that made him feel faintly superior.

"Yes, but what shall we do?" Dorje Rinchen said. "Aku, the venerable one, says you can't come into the lamasery as you did at the time of the winter festival. No women can come within the lamasery during the summer."

She did not seem surprised. She must have known about it all the time for she went on telling him about the trip back. They were to start immediately because there was no grazing for the horses at the lamasery. Then she went to the horses and took down the saddle-bags to get out a pat of fresh butter wrapped in a piece of sheep's stomach. It was a gift for Aku, the venerable one, and Dorje Rinchen, walking alone, bore it back proudly, at the same time thinking how much nicer it had been at the winter festival time, when his mother had stayed with him in the cloister. During those festivities mothers, aunts, and other relatives of the monks had walked everywhere; swarming in the narrow alleys and crowding the court of the great chanting-hall. Now they must stay outside. He wondered why, even as he found a momentary satisfaction in the thought that no place was prohibited to him. His mother had undoubtedly moved away from him. There were two things she did not share with him: a knowledge of the sacred letters, and a right to be within the sacred circle of the lamasery in summer-time.

When he presented the gift to Aku Lobzong, he held it properly in both hands and was careful to stoop in the right attitude of respect, but for the first time since he came as a child monk to live in the cloister of the Superior Monk, he was not entirely afraid. Even the venerable one was only a monk and he—little Dorje Rinchen of the family of Jatsang—was not only his mother's second son, but also a monk. The fact

that his mother must sit beside the boundary path of the lamasery, forbidden access to the area where he ran at will, brought the first stirrings of a sense of class and privilege—of a destiny apart.

It was a momentary realization and quickly forgotten in the rush of carrying out Aku Lobzong's instructions. Ahway might have to sit by the boundary path, but she was none the less the old man's guest, and Dorje Rinchen raced back and forth carrying a kettle of tea, the tsamba cheese and butter box, and a platter of meat. Her hunger satisfied, there would be nothing more in the way of preparation to delay them. In addition to the clothes Dorje Rinchen wore, a thick felt raincoat was already strapped at the back of the saddle on the old white horse.

It had been months since he had been on a horse and he nervously patted it with a growing impatience to be gone. Would his mother never finish her tea?

At last she did finish and the boy returned the tea kettle, butter box, and platter. The venerable one's benediction was behind him, the horses splashed through the ford, the cloisters fell away, the dark grove of Tamdrin the three-eyed one became just a piece of woods, and the chanting-halls lost their dominance. The green slope led to the pass, and beyond was a camp in mountain meadows and a return to the unalloyed joy of life in a black tent. With the motion of the horse, Dorje Rinchen's impatience vanished, for that life had begun again.

3

Dorje Rinchen sat in the shady lee of the tent trying in a childish way to remake the past into the present or to force the present into the pattern of the past. The trip home had been all he could wish. Camp in a flower-patterned meadow had seemed an altogether new experience. After supper the men of the party had shouted warnings and threats into the black night until Dorje Rinchen's skin crawled with fear. The stars had swarmed in the blackness, dropping very close to the heavy eyes of a sleepy boy curled under his cloak and raincoat with his head on his saddle like all the other members

of the party. And then it was dawn, someone was shaking and calling him, and everyone was hurrying to saddle the horses while the "slap, slap" of the bellows promised breakfast.

That day they came out on to the great plain where the home encampment lay on the wavy line of the horizon with its distant peaks. At a ford where the horses were nearly swimming they crossed the river, and then the encampment was only a short distance away.

All was as he had anticipated and perfect as the cloudless summer day until they reached the home camp itself. At first it was only that the low, square, flat-topped tent of black yak-hair cloth, with its guy ropes and outside tent poles that looked like spider legs, seemed smaller than it had been. Inside, what had once appeared a great room on each side of the central fireplace had now shrunk to a cluttered space no bigger than a single segment of the chanting-hall porch at the lamasery. The very sheep pens and tether lines looked smaller, though Dorje Rinchen thought less about that in the excitement of seeing all the cattle come in for the night.

But when the welcomes were all said, and with the sleep of the first night behind him, he found that everything had changed strangely. Although he slipped easily into the old habits, such as taking care not to be caught unawares by the dogs of the nearest tents, the life of which those habits were a part held him at arm's length. He alone had nothing to do. His baby sister took, and refused to relinquish, his old place at pulling the cords that turn the spindle for the spinning of yak-hair thread. His older brother tantalizingly stuck a sword in his girdle and went about various chores. Both children made it clear that he was a monk, giving him status, but penalties as well.

His mother had been very close to him on the trip home. For a day and a night he had been her only child: cared for and loved as such. Loved too as a sacrifice made, an offering to religion, a gift already promised but held still in the hand and so more precious. But once back in the black tent Ahway was busy with many things and did nothing to help her monk-son find a place in the routine of black-tent living. He was

only one of three for whom she poured tea or ladled buttermilk when it was time to eat.

Sulking in the lee of the tent he was half tempted to find one of Duggur's cloaks and discard his own red robes. He would put on the dzakwa and become just a boy again. But he remembered hearing at the lamasery about monks who put on the dzakwa. Whatever it might really mean, there was failure and reprobation, if not actual penalty involved. Dimly, he felt a fear of supernatural punishment, of a kind of bigger Ke-bke. He was far from the lamasery and only a little boy digging his toes into the cushion of the turf, but a dingy red robe—now reduced to a brief skirt around the middle of his greased and grimy body—made him a monk nevertheless, set apart from the life of the tent and his home. There was nothing he could do about it but sulk. It would almost be better to be back at the lamasery.

One day Aku Dondrub, the priest uncle of their next-door neighbour, appeared at the tent door with a bundle of juniper boughs in his arms, and for a moment Dorje Rinchen wondered idly what he was doing there. Then with sudden interest he recognized the makings of a sacrifice. Hardly realizing why, he found himself running across the space between the two tents. No words or instructions from old Aku Dondrub were needed. The little boy monk knew just what was wanted. Fire—the coals and hot ashes of the cowchip and sheep manure fire—must be brought in an iron ladle, and then he could hold the various boxes and bags from which the components of the offering were taken. When the thick, fragrant smoke of the burning juniper boughs, flavoured with butter, meal, tea-leaves, salt and incense, rose against the blue sky, he could stand back and join his voice in the petitions the old priest chanted.

Here was something he could do, and neither his brother nor his sister could have a part in it! It was more important than spinning thread. His new-found sense of prominence steadied as he noticed how his sister had stopped pulling the cords of the spindle to watch him. His brother, too, watched him as he came back from the pen where the milling ewes were being separated from the rest of the flock. The boy

monk had come home, but he had also brought with him something that had not been there before.

Yet a deep aggravation remained. Duggur could wear that sword in his girdle and use the matchlock. Once his father had suddenly come into the tent to find Dorje Rinchen caressing with envious fingers the long straight blade of Damascene steel that was a prized family possession.

“A monk with a sword!” Jatsang shouted with laughter. “You’ll be wanting a gun next.” But he had frowned.

4

Of all the things forbidden him, the most fascinating was the rifle his father proudly owned and carried. It was called a Bora rifle and had been bought for two hundred ounces of silver from a renegade priest who had smuggled it from some far place called Urga. Few men of the tribe owned any rifles, and for beauty and shooting powers none had a weapon such as this. It was actually a modern Russian rifle in very fair condition. It was by far the most highly prized and valuable of all the possessions of the tent. Even the fear of his father’s laughter could not keep Dorje Rinchen from finding the opportunity to run his fingers over the silver inlaid stock and wish he dared take off the felt cover that hid the barrel and receiver. He did not dream he would ever hear it fired. A hundred shells had come with it when it had been bought five years ago and ninety-five were left. It was to be fired only in a last emergency, although his father carried it everywhere he went.

Once Jatsang yielded to Dorje Rinchen’s pleading and took the little monk with him for a day of watching the sheep, and he carried the Bora as always. Dorje Rinchen was up earlier than anyone in the tent and ready to drive the sheep off long before it was time. Each detail of preparation seemed to take much too long, but at last they were on their way; the sheep spread out before them like a great white fan against the green and gold of marshy slopes thick with grass and oxslips.

The flock scattered at will along the stream and lower slopes, but Dorje Rinchen and his father made their fire on a

shoulder of the mountain high above the meadow. They had to carry water from the stream and there were only scanty patches of short grass on the stony mountainside for their horses but the view was fine. No one could approach within several miles without being seen.

Their two horses were allowed to graze by turns, one kept saddled and tethered close by. With such precautions taken, father and son resigned themselves to the pleasures of a Tibetan picnic. Both discarded their clothes for a day-long sun bath. Indeed, Dorje Rinchen's father put on only his boots when he took his rifle and climbed the next shoulder of the mountain to head off some of the stragglers of the flock. Two squalls of rain drove them temporarily to clothes and the shelter of their felt raincoats, but by Tibetan weather standards only two drenchings made for a near-perfect day.

For the first time since he had come home from the lamasery, his father used his baby nickname, and called him Doka. And the boy's soul was filled with importance when Jatsang asked him to use the bellows and make up the fire, and sent him to hobble the horses; in all ways treating him as an equal. He showed him, too, the working of the rifle. He recounted landmarks in the recent tribal history, telling of raids, fights, and hunts, forbidden to one who wore the sacred red, but all the more exciting. It seemed understood by both that Dorje Rinchen—bare, brown, and scampering about like a new species of wild thing—was to forget for the day that he was a monk; discarding attitudes as easily and finally as the red robes spread out in the sun.

Once, early in the afternoon, he thought he might even at last hear and see the rifle fired, for a big wolf took up his position on a knoll about a mile away and while they watched the beast his father told of driving off packs of wolves when the snows were deep and hunger had made them bold. There were also wolves, his father told him, that no one could drive off: wolves born of the strange matings of she-wolves and demons whom no bullets could touch though some were vulnerable to silver bullets that had been blessed by lamas. Dorje Rinchen shivered with a pleasant terror.

It seemed there were other dangers, even more threatening

to the flocks, which were a sterner test of the bravery and faithfulness of the shepherd. Raiders or robbers might come. Against such, the shepherd must do his utmost, never fleeing no matter how great the odds, shooting it out to the last moment, hoping for the coming of the riders of the home encampment and tribe, fighting on until the rescuing ramda got started.

All his life Dorje Rinchen was never to forget the sudden interruption to this tale of the duties of a shepherd of Bodyul. In the very middle of a sentence his father stopped short. Something in the distance claimed his full attention. Dorje Rinchen saw a string of specks that grew larger. They came on steadily, then stopped, perhaps for a conference on horseback, and came on again; stringing out in a long line and riding towards the flock.

The tale had become reality. His father was already in action, moving down the slope at wild speed to skirt the edge of the flock, then driving it, by threat of his voice and the pounding of his horse's hooves, into a compact mass that headed towards a shallow hollow under the shoulder of the mountain. Dorje Rinchen sat motionless with fright until his father's horse scrambled back up the mountainside, coming to a gasping, staggering halt beside the fire.

"Hobble him!" shouted his father, flinging the reins to the boy and running on to a point where he could make the most use of what slight shelter the curve of the ridge gave him. There, he lay flat with the prongs of the forked rifle rest fixed firmly in the ground.

The yells of the horsemen, sounding like the far yelping of a wolf pack, carried across the plain, their echoes lingering along the mountainside at Dorje Rinchen's back. Then the riders passed into the sunken lower level and were lost to sight. When they next appeared they would be only a short distance from the foot of the mountain and the huddled flock. All strength drained from the boy's legs and body, he clung to the mane of the horse he had hobbled and waited. It was his father who saw them first.

So that was the sound of a Bora rifle? Again—and again. One of the charging horses swerved suddenly and faltered.

Then, as if at a signal, the riders wheeled and rode back, disappearing over the edge of the bank. Dorje Rinchen found his voice in a quavering yell that was mostly a scream. He thought it was over and they had been driven off. But his father's voice—sharp and urgent with an insistence in it he had never heard before—stopped the celebration.

“Doka, little Doka, hide—hide—from the bullets—from the bullets!”

A short distance from the fire was what looked like a gash of dirt and stone scarring the mountainside, where a big grey marmot had made an entrance to the underground galleries of his home. Dorje Rinchen pushed his legs into the hole, working his body down behind the rocky threshold of the den door. Sharp bits of rock cut and scratched his bare shin. As he held his head hard against the ground, he could hear the marmot scrambling far underground, whistling in fear and curiosity over the commotion.

No matter how low Dorje Rinchen ducked his head he could still see the edge of the bank where the raiders had disappeared. Though the grasses were long and the edge indistinct, flashes of movement appeared and then grey puffs of smoke. He heard the sharp whine of bullets and the grinding noise they made as they ploughed into the mountainside. The hobbled horse screamed in pain and terror, lunging wildly and then crashing and rolling down the slope. Dorje Rinchen wriggled hard, trying to squeeze further into the hole.

He watched the far right of the bank from where those who might try to encircle them could best make a dash towards the shelter of the next shoulder of the mountain and so put his father and himself between crossfires. There! They had started! Would his father know? At that instant he saw his father twist behind the meagre cover and bring his rifle to bear at a different angle. Above the confused noise of firing Dorje Rinchen now heard the voice of the Bora. The riders turned back, but he saw dirt fly from the very place where his father lay. Now the Bora moved to a new angle and spoke again. In the midst of his fright he remembered another part of the tale that his father had been telling. “Until the ramda get started——” The rescue party: would they come?

Dorje Rinchen did not see the first sign of their coming, but the raiders saw and heard. The edge of the bank was one long line of smoke and flashes of flame. The kettle of tea spun from its perch on top of the three stones. The still quivering horse gave another convulsive start, turned over again and rolled farther down the mountainside. Dorje Rinchen heard the tearing rip of a bullet ploughing grit close, very close, to the entrance of the marmot's den. Then it all ceased. A few minutes later a closely grouped band of riders moved into sight, gaining distance steadily, while the dwindling echoes of their yells drifted back. Again Dorje Rinchen found his voice and yelled defiance while his father's rifle grew hot with a last burst of shots.

"Come on, Doka, you little marmot, get out of your hole! The ramda have started. They will protect us and drive the enemy far. It is all over and the sheep are still safe." His father's voice sounded different. There was deep satisfaction in it. Something else too was there as he stooped to help the boy out of his hole and added, "Now we'll go home, little Doka—my little Doka."

There was blood on his father's face and blood trickled from his shoulder. It was only a scratch, Jatsang said, as he quickly gathered up their belongings. The sheep had already left the hollow and were on their way back to the encampment. With great pride in being the son of a valiant shepherd of Bodyul, Dorje Rinchen rode behind Jatsang on the remaining horse and, as he held on, slyly fingered the good Bora rifle, completely forgetting for a time that he was, or ever had been, a boy monk wearing the sacred red.

It had been a good feeling; it had been a good time. He had not really wanted to return to the lamasery. He had wanted to stay in that strong companionship with his father, come closer again to his mother. Yet, there was, too, that feeling of being special, a person set apart.

He had grown much older in those minutes in the marmot's hole, grown in pride, but a sort of double pride so that, as much as he wanted to put on the dzakwa and grow to be a man like his father, free to make war and have a family of his own, this pride would not allow him to retreat from the

life his parents had chosen for him. Then, too, he remembered the prayer wheels and the chants and the companionship of the other boys. In all the confused emotions he had felt in the lamasery there was a holiness that stirred him, there were holy men he admired. It was easier for the child priest to sense deity than to understand it. He could only dimly recognize the conflict in his own soul.

5

As he grew older the lamasery each year claimed Dorje Rinchen more completely for its own; to adolescence and to young manhood the black tent and all for which it stood moving farther away.

It had been the end of all roads. Now it slowly moved to the horizon and waited for total eclipse.

Chanting-hall and cloister had come now to be the centre around which his life revolved with ever increasing sureness and a stately rhythm. They lived in the cloister—shaven-headed, red-robed monks of all ages—and gathered in the chanting-hall to pray, seated in the dimly lit aisles like Buddha figures in bronze, only their speech showing them to be alive. Among them Dorje Rinchen was just another acolyte, but, with the years, now becoming a monk sure of his place. But his face was handsomer than most; in it one could see his father's strength lit by Ahway's beauty and smile. It was a sober, earnest face because he himself was intent on being a worthy monk, perhaps a leader.

That intentness Ahway had sensed in him had resolved his doubt and there was unity of allegiance to his immediate ideals. There were powerful primitive drives, too, behind his simplicity of character, a reliance on the magical that came from distant ancestors long before Tibet had become Buddhistic. The supernatural was almost as close to him as nature itself.

At lengthening intervals he visited his one-time home, learning gracefully to accept his position as privileged guest and even mentor; for in a detached way he influenced the life of the family, taking part in the discussions and decisions from the standpoint of one of "the set-apart ones" and so

blessed with special wisdom and enlightenment. The resentment between his brother and himself disappeared completely as Duggur's life no longer stirred Dorje Rinchen to either longing or envy. His seemed a much higher destiny. The very robes he wore proclaimed him a member of "the community" which in its entirety is one of the Three Perfections—deity itself.

He learned his lessons and the prayers and liturgy so that he could have a real part in the celebration of the mass and incantations. His voice, once a boyish treble but now a mellow baritone somewhat roughened by chanting in the cold, helped fill the vaulted darkness of the chanting-hall with the sound of the creed—another one of the Three Perfections. Each letter, indeed each sound for which that letter stood, was sacred but impotent and inactive until the voices of the community released it in blessing on all. At such times the echo of the incantation would reach even to the path of merit surrounding the lamasery, causing waiting pilgrims to bow in worship at the sound of such mighty praying.

In the question periods and times of religious debate, when the young monks gathered to display their knowledge and casuistry, Dorje Rinchen scored many a triumph through keen questioning and a certain gift of rebuttal. But with the sound of the first syllables of the day-long prayer his interest became fixed on his role in the endless drama of good and evil—reward and retribution. He was sure of his faith and of his vocation.

Not so his nearest neighbour who sat next him at the assembly, a young monk like and yet greatly unlike himself. Trinlan's thin, dark face reflected every shade of thought and fancy compatible with a crooked smile and a wide, audacious mouth that said outrageous things. He questioned everything: the right sound of the letters, the order of the prayer, even theology itself.

They were not only neighbours in the seating order of the chanting-hall, but had much in common. Trinlan came from a wealthy family of the Samtsa tribe. If all went well, he would succeed to his uncle's position of manager in the big house of one of the principal lamas. Like Dorje Rinchen, he

was favoured among the acolytes and enjoyed many privileges. In the feuds and undercover wars that went on among the younger monks, disagreements that often broke out in forbidden violence and bloody duelling with short swords or daggers, the two made up a team which none dared to challenge. Through bravado and an obvious ability and willingness to fight, Dorje Rinchen and Trinlan contrived for themselves a somewhat precarious peace.

Striking dissimilarities, too, linked their interest and constituted a true and enduring foundation for friendship. Trinlan's irreverent wanderings throughout all the mazes of Buddhist cosmology and belief fascinated Dorje Rinchen, who, while forced to acknowledge the basic reason in much the other said, yet rejected it completely.

This even shook his faith in Buddha. There were other religions. He had heard of one preached by a Yellow Head along the borders of China near the camp of the Samtsa tribe. The Yellow Head speaks of his Lord Yeshu's honoured blood; it washes white like snow.

"I do not understand," Dorje Rinchen said.

"Nor do I," said Trinlan.

"I do not believe there is such an one as the Yellow Head," Dorje Rinchen said. "You know, Trinlan, you cannot put doubts in me. My faith in the creed, the Community and most of all in Buddha, the source and beginning of all, remains unshaken."

One day, which Dorje Rinchen was long to remember, Trinlan was far more serious than usual. The time of the official yearly picnic was recently past. For three days the lamasery community had lived in tents, relaxed and happy in the sunshine. Now the tents were gone and only ash and smoke-stained kettle stones showed against the triumphant green of summertime mountain slopes.

Dorje Rinchen and Trinlan were enjoying an outing of their own far more completely than they had on those other days of rivalry and competition when every cloister had been grimly determined to display the best tents, prepare the best food, and achieve the fullest social success by attracting the largest number of guests.

Today the two young monks could really picnic, drenched in sunshine and a sense of space. They had set their kettle stones on the highest point of the ridge behind the lamasery. Each cloister and alley, shrine and hall, the dark grove of Tamdrin and the boundary path seemed near enough to touch, but the prayers of the pilgrims and the shouting of little acolytes in the alleys did not reach to them. The hilltop and distance gave both an odd feeling of detachment, and out of it Trinlan spoke. For once his wide mouth had forgotten its crooked smile and his eyes were darkened by some inner cloud.

“I’d like to stay here and never go down there again. Stay here for a while, at least, and then ride away. Wouldn’t you like to go too?” His eyes turned, as he spoke, towards the distant sky-line where the trail to the winter encampments of his own Samtsa tribe climbed out of a hidden valley against the horizon.

“And not be a monk any more?” questioned Dorje Rinchen.

“A monk——” Trinlan’s voice was thick with blasphemy. “Why a monk except to eat well, be warm, and grow fat? Who does more?”

The sting of the question drove a crowd of figures and faces through Dorje Rinchen’s memory. Oddly, many of them were fat; fat as no shepherd rider ever is, no matter what his wealth. But, of course, when always eating the best in cloister or tent, a monk may well become fat. Well-padded or not, they were yet the disciples of the enlightened one. Why not be fat?

“They keep the vow of Buddha. They are the Community. How could religion be if no one kept that vow? Aku Lobzong keeps it well; he even does more and he is not fat either.”

Years spent in the cloister of the venerable one had robbed the old monk of his godlike stature in Dorje Rinchen’s eyes, but he still remained a figure of wisdom and dignity, touched with kindness and even humour. Surely the prayer for wisdom had found fulfilment in Aku Lobzong. Then, too, had he not given the lamasery a new silken Buddha made up from more than thirty bolts of the best silk and satin brought from Chengtu?

The doubter's face lightened for a moment: he admired Aku Lobzong, but it darkened again as his thoughts pressed on with bitter logic. "Yes; but when he forced payment for money loaned to Lhamo Sjab, at fifty per cent. interest, he took the last cow they owned, and the little ragged tent from over their heads. Now the family is scattered and gone and another tent lost from the tribe, his own tribe too. Is that also part of the vow of Buddha?"

Dorje Rinchen felt he was on thin ice. True, it had often seemed to him that Aku Lobzong's love of wealth was strangely incompatible with the oft-repeated prayer for wisdom. Seeking an answer to Trinlan's doubts and his own momentary uncertainty, his thoughts raced through the lamasery from cloister to cloister, ranged through the ranks of the monks as gathered in the assembly: searching for rebuttal and conviction. Strangely enough, Trinlan now gave him the cue he sought.

"There is a girl back in Samtsa——"

Dorje Rinchen needed to hear no more. This was what was really on Trinlan's mind. However much the vow of Buddha might include truthfulness and poverty, only two things really mattered: the prohibition against taking life and the vow of celibacy. Only an accident—a sword or gun fight pursued too far and ending in a killing—could trip a monk into transgressing the prohibition against taking life. Even sword fights rarely resulted in killings. A monk had only to leave firearms alone and he was fairly safe. So, of the two, celibacy was the real issue.

"But," said Dorje Rinchen, "if you did that you would lose all right to a part in lamasery service. You would be a renegade, and we would no longer sit together to chant the holy creed. May the Supreme Perfection bless our prayers!"

Trinlan hesitated perceptibly. "I could do like my uncle Aku Dentzen and later on still become the proprietor of the lama's household. No; why do that for wealth and power? Far better to put on the dzakwa and have a tent—our tent."

To both the young monks Aku Dentzen was a figure of dignity and strange contradictory wisdom. Years before he had

left the assembly in order to acknowledge openly the woman who had borne him three sons. She, of course, could only live outside the lamasery, but Aku Dentzen spent most of his time in her house and beside her fire, bringing his youngest son back to the lamasery as his acolyte. In the strict sense of the word he was no longer a monk, but he still wore the sacred red, and his position as proprietor of the lama's household was secure. His shrewd, earthy wisdom and downright honesty spared no one, least of all himself. His generosity was boundless. He was a monk with a shattered vow, no longer a true disciple, yet Dorje Rinchen often trusted his wisdom more than that of Aku Lobzong, the venerable one.

The thought of Trinlan growing old within the lamasery like Aku Dentzen was bearable, but those words "our tent" meant something else. All the resentment against womankind that grows in every monk's thinking boiled to the surface in Dorje Rinchen's next words.

"Curses of the realm of death on a female demon who tempts a monk to break his vow! Aren't all the men of the encampment enough for them that they must strip a monk of the sacred garments? Trinlan, do not leave the eightfold path for a girl in Samtsa. Stay and sit with me to pray the holy prayers. Stay a monk undefiled by a broken vow and womankind."

"Undefiled!" Trinlan's exclamation was like a bark. "Think of all those monks down there with vows intact but—undefiled, did you say?"

This was a subject the friends tacitly avoided, yet everyone knew that their religion condoned, even in certain circumstances sanctioned, sexual practices and satisfactions that to the uninhibited cattle-breeding laity were unnatural and embarrassing. Some tribes, merely on the basis of practical eugenics, prohibited, with heavy penalties, such practices among the laity. But religion permitted them to the monks so that the vow of celibacy might remain intact.

In some cloisters, such as Aku Lobzong's, personal fastidiousness and dignity ruled out male attachments which provide sex without violating the vows of celibacy, and Dorje Rinchen had grown to manhood under that influence. Indeed, under

the drive of Trinlan's accusing voice, for the first time in his life he began to wonder whether such things might not be actually wrong.

"Why should what is natural with the beasts defile me if I go to my mate: yes, the woman for whom I long? And if I do, it will be best to put on the dzakwa and have my home and tent—become a renegade, if you like. Defiled? While you—I wonder what you will become?"

Dorje Rinchen realized clearly that whatever had or had not taken place, Trinlan was lost to the lamasery and to his place in the assembly. That realization stirred a number of conflicting impressions and impulses. His regret was sweetened by a heightened self-esteem and assurance. His own feet were still firmly on the eightfold way. Even in that satisfaction he found himself regarding the other with faint stirrings of envy. Nor could he restrain stereotyped, bitter comments on womankind as the supreme enemy of every soul that seeks salvation.

The other listened with a faint smile that helped to lift the shadow from his face. Evidently, from a new and sure appreciation of the meaning of life, he found Dorje Rinchen's strictures amusing. "She won't mind what you say." Trinlan's smile was sardonic. "But I wonder what will become of you? Has our lama—the presence of pure virtue—tried to invite you to his quarters yet?"

Along with anger vague impressions rose in Dorje Rinchen's memory: a heavy-lidded stare resting on him while the chanting service went on, the gibing of some of his more personal enemies. All of them added up to swift revelation in his mind. The blood rose quickly to his face.

"I'm going to ride to the tent of my family for a few days," he said with exaggerated casualness. "It is vacation time."

Trinlan laughed. "Well, go soon, for the lama—pure sum of the Perfections—will surely be asking for you to serve him for a time. You are a handsome youth. And all you can do is to ride away to a place where you do not really belong. Some day you must come back again. I—I shall ride to my own tent soon, and tell the lama to go to the hell where Shin-rje-chos-rgyal rules the realm of death."

Dorje Rinchen stayed at home for a longer visit than usual. He pondered many things, the things Trinlan had said and others that were stirring in his own heart. There were truly dark influences at the lamasery, but these did not need to touch either his ideals or his faith in action. None the less, he knew that Trinlan's talk had stirred old questionings and desires.

When he returned to the lamasery Dorje Rinchen had a new neighbour sitting next him, the monk Wanjur, whose irregular features and wide mouth full of protruding teeth gave him the nickname of "Fence Mouth." Trinlan had put on the dzakwa during the summer recess, dropped out of the lamasery life and became one of the "fallen ones," a wanlog. But in each community there are many renegades. Trinlan was not alone and he would not need to feel unduly ashamed or conspicuous when time brought a meeting with the monks who were once his fellows.

Dorje Rinchen did not have much peace when he returned. The very next day a monk from the lama's household came to see Aku Lobzong. The venerable one immediately sent for Dorje Rinchen.

"Do you want to go into the lama's household for a while?" asked the old man. "He will make you rich. No? I thought you wouldn't. You come of good stock. . . . But it is no sin. No, surely no sin——" Unsatisfied, his eyes journeyed beyond the ever-present pages of the *Prayer for Wisdom*. "Well, you are not forced to go, but the lama is very powerful and you will spend your life here where his power can reach into every cloister in hidden ways—ways that also may be very dark. . . . All right; for the present you will stay with me. That is settled. I will tell him so."

Hidden ways and dark. Freed from the distracting influence of Trinlan's impious bantering, he became increasingly aware of the lama's brooding stare as he sat on his golden throne at the head of the line of monks. The thunder of chorused statements about "virtue," "faith," "grace" and "salvation," whereby the law that once came from the lips of Gotama was set free in blessing for all, might fill the dark spaces of the

chanting-hall and promise untold blessings for the worshippers. But Dorje Rinchen began to sense more deeply the unfriendly darkness in the place. Yet in an attempt to banish it he became still more earnest and conscientious in his chanting, and he became close friends with Wanjur, who now sat next to him and who seemed really holy and undefiled. He represented another aspect of lamasery life from Aku Lobzong or Trinlan. He was poor but pious and already far along the road to monkish success. Although he was still young, his fame as a chanter was widespread and he was much in demand for prayers and incantations that had to be celebrated in the homes of the laity, who cannot pray too well for themselves. Love of argument, loneliness, respect and affection had a part in drawing Dorje Rinchen to his new neighbour. He spent much leisure time with him, gained new religious knowledge and learned to conform more closely to the life and ideals of the true monk.

It was through Wanjur that Dorje Rinchen was given a new and distinctive role in lamasery activity and one that unexpectedly led to what might well seem the climax of a monkish career. Wanjur was not only erudite and proficient in praying, he was also the chief of the Black Hat Wizards of Religion in the annual dance that was the climax of the Wishing Prayer Festival of the New Year's season. In roles of lesser importance, exchanges and last-minute substitutions were made whenever sickness or the enforced absence of a player required. But, for the all-important role of chief of the Black Hats, as a precautionary measure a special understudy went through a rigorous course of training. On Wanjur's suggestion, Dorje Rinchen was made his understudy.

Every Tibetan regarded the day-long drama as the supreme event of the year. It was the season when men were offered a new chance and religion ushered it in with rich pageantry and a ceremony designed to imprison all the curse of the coming year with the "dorma" or sacrifice. At the end of the dance the chief Black Hat Wizard, wielding symbolic weapons in weird and rigidly proscribed passes, stabbed at and made an end of the dorma preparatory to its burning. The sins of the year to come were thus destroyed.

There would be countless visitors at the festival, men and women from the tribes, relatives and friends of the monks from near and far encampments. They would stay, too, for the showing of the Butter Images the next night and the more romantic and profane festival that followed. It was a time of licence as well as worship. Dorje Rinchen hoped some of his own family would come, and he found himself wishing that Trinlan, too, might appear among his fellow members of the Samtsa.

Through the autumn months most of his spare time was taken up in learning his part. Not only must he learn to pivot and swing his body with faultless precision and rhythm, but he had to make the entire history and meaning of the play a part of his thinking so that the complicated ritual at the end would form a logical and inevitable climax.

Dorje Rinchen was only a substitute dancer, but as he rehearsed, carrying thunderbolt, bell, battle-axe, and dagger round the circle, he found life full of new importance and his dark moods were pushed back. He thought of Trinlan with deep regret as one whose destiny was broken and incomplete. Wanjur led him into the intricacies and holy rites that almost came to be visions to him.

On the night before the festival day something very much like destiny knocked at his own door. A messenger came to the cloister of Aku Lobzong to announce that Wanjur had suddenly been taken ill and Dorje Rinchen must take the part of the Chief Wizard in the dance of gods and demons. From that moment he lived in a new world in which even his thoughts seemed not his own. He had become great in the very inner circle of religion and dressed in that greatness his mind sought the future while his body was being dressed in the gorgeous trappings of the chief of all the Black Hat Wizards.

It was only when the dance had actually begun in the temple courtyard that he had time to return to the present. Hours would pass before the last act began and he would lead the wizards to their triumph. Though Dorje Rinchen had seen the dance every year since he could remember, he had never viewed it from the physical and mental viewpoint

that was his on this great day. Once, the sprites of death who began the dance had merely been brightly draped dancers who skipped and capered with comical abandon. Even the red and white skull masks had been only colourful trappings. Now it was Death himself who entered with a wild rush to claim first place in the year, Death with antic step whom no one could change or check. The representative of defeated mankind, the great ape and the female rock demon who had spawned the whole Tibetan race moved to the edge of the circle to let Death unchallenged flaunt bones and blood before the hundreds of spectators in the temple courtyard. The moaning of the trumpets, the thump, thump of the drums and the clashing of the cymbals beat for hours upon his brain as the rebel rout of the underworld filled the square and moved in an intricate figure round the black triangle of the dorma in the centre, where three ragged little acolytes, representative of the office of the community in guarding the sacrifice of the year, shivered in the cold.

When the last masker had left the hall, the intermittent interest and attention of the crowd tightened in fresh suspense and the great fifteen-foot trumpets moaned in frenzy when Dorje Rinchen started his dance. Taking practice whirls in the hall until all the Black Hats had caught the rhythm, he led them into the sunlight. To an onlooker, the line of whirling figures might have seemed to be moving without definite plan, but actually the Black Hats, spinning to the accentuated beat of the drums, were circling and surrounding Death. It was a long process, for each unwilling demon must be overcome by mystic passes, but finally the Black Hats swung triumphant around the entire body of the maskers and, facing outward towards the spectators, began to celebrate their victory.

Dorje Rinchen was scarcely conscious of personal existence: he was part of the supernatural pattern, he was the power of religion itself, he felt capable, himself, of overthrowing by his own integrity the forces of evil, and in the unwinking stare of hundreds of eyes there was no flash of recognition to call him back to personal existence. He knew most of the spectators personally, yet as he made the circuit not a sign of greeting

broke the hypnotic power of that massed regard. It needed but three more circuits until the play would move to its swift climax. He alone, of all the Black Hats, would break through the crowd of dancers and, making a magic way through death and hell, would stab the dorma with the three-edged dagger he carried.

He made the first circuit, but as he started the second round he became suddenly aware that something was different. Something threatened the rhythm of his dance; something in the massed regard of the crowd had changed. A single pair of eyes caught his. To Dorje Rinchen it was as though there were only one pair of eyes in the whole world—the eyes of Trinlan—somewhat mocking, somewhat wistful, as they sent their old message. Dorje Rinchen's dance went on with faultless precision and when his eyes again met Trinlan's the mockery of that brief exchange was keener than before.

The dance continued; the power of rhythm and a scarcely conscious sequence of motion whirled the young dancer on towards the appointed end. The late afternoon sun threw the long, dark shadow of his high, black-fringed skull cap before him and on to the ring of spectators as he spun again to the rendezvous, intent on giving adequate answer to the gibe in Trinlan's eyes. Suddenly the spell was broken. Eyes like Trinlan's, yet not his, fastened upon Dorje Rinchen's and broke the rhythm of his dance. With bobbed hair held back from her face by a beaded band, a girl of the tent peoples watched him with eyes that were windows of awe and wonder. The Black Hat Wizard was forgotten and lights were lit for Dorje Rinchen the monk. The end of a long spin again brought the two face to face and something new and strange called to a young man of twenty years. Dorje Rinchen, the monk, was forgotten.

With only that split-second break, the dance of the Black Hats went on and the leader proceeded to break through demons and death in order to battle evil and demolish the curse-filled dorma. The shouting of the crowd announced that triumph as complete and the roll of gunfire woke a hundred echoes when tribal riflemen added their part to the celebration. The rhythm of the dance ebbed to a faint ripple

of motion as maskers and wizards made a ring round the bonfire that marked the burning of the curse. Twilight rushed in, yet not so quickly but that Dorje Rinchen identified one of the riflemen as Trinlan. The girl, however, had disappeared. A score of bobbed heads meant only an equal number of disappointments, and Dorje Rinchen finally gave up the search.

It was difficult to bring his thoughts back to the meaning of the hour and the congratulations of the monks who helped him put off the trappings of his role. He had reached one of the peaks of a monkish career. Never were his feet planted more firmly on the way they should go: the way Trinlan had missed. But again the affectionate mockery in Trinlan's look challenged his thoughts along the highway of self-complacency. Of course he was right and most certainly Trinlan was wrong.

Yet even Trinlan's mockery was forgotten in his confused memory of the girl. He asked neither himself nor others whom she was. In one sense he was still completely the leader of the Black Hat Wizards. And the time was the celebration of victory. In outward form his destiny was still entire. However, the sense of something new and strange would not leave him. Wielding all the powers of religion in thunderbolt and dagger, he had vanquished death and hell in realistic mimicry. Now life had looked at him and something had changed.

7

With daylight came activity and forgetfulness. The character of the festival changed and so did the attitude of the pilgrims who crowded the lamasery environs. Among the guests in Aku Lobzong's cloister were a number from Dorje Rinchen's home encampment and two from his family. A bitter inter-tribal feud had closed the trail for the menfolk, but his sister and his mother had come to the festival. Both were starry-eyed at having seen him as the great leader of the Black Hats. Their praise helped allay the uneasy suspicion that the future might not be as simple and uncomplicated a matter as it had appeared a day and a night before.

His labours of the previous day did not, however, release him from other duties. The dance was past, but on the

following night, the night of the full moon, there was still the other festival, preceded by the showing of the Butter Images. Well in advance, the artists of the lamasery had been making images and tableaux in butter, dyed many shades, so that colour might add to the effectiveness of line. Each commune of monks within the lamasery had its own special display and made its annual bid for recognition. Most of the day was occupied with the setting up of the various scenes. They were placed against the four outer faces of the walls of the chanting-hall. At the time of the showing, the crowds would move clockwise round the building, offering prayers, commendation or even criticism. From among the members of each commune two or three guardians were appointed to watch at each stand and tend the torches that would light up the exhibits. Long before darkness came, the monks began a chanting service which would last until late at night. Dorje Rinchen took his place in front of the beautifully executed figure of Drolma, the Goddess of Mercy, contributed by his commune. With the assistance of another young monk, he cut and placed the torches that would be lit with the coming of night.

In the meantime, the tribespeople, intent on prayers or pleasure, had filled the environs of the lamasery. Friends gathered in noisy chaffing or argument while, as always, gossip and rumour combined to make life interesting. The tribe of Bul, it seemed, had gone on a raid during the Sacred New Year's Season. Majority opinion judged such temerity as near sacrilege and prophesied defeat. Dorje Rinchen's father, Jatsang, was reported in ambush at a nearby pass waiting for their long-time enemies of the tribe of Drangwa. There were stories of horses stolen and prisoners taken, there were tales of elopements, and the yearly argument over the finest costume worn by a woman: an argument that in itself sometimes led to the drawing of swords and blood.

The story most heatedly discussed was that of the fight which had taken place between a man of Trinlan's Samtsa tribe, and a Rzakdumba brave. The Samtsa man had been nearly killed and his tribe was reported to be preparing a bold stroke for the time when darkness and the confusion of

the display of Butter Images furnished the right opportunity. This report touched Dorje Rinchen closely, for he couldn't altogether suppress the feeling that if Trinlan should by any chance be in a battle he, too, should be fighting at his back.

Then Trinlan himself unexpectedly appeared. Though dusk had already settled like a deep pool along the valley floor and was climbing quickly through lamasery streets to the upper level of the chanting-hall, the afterglow still rested briefly on the hilltops and the torches had not yet been lit. While that uncertain light lingered on the heights, Trinlan stayed to talk, telling Dorje Rinchen of the fight and the certainty of trouble when darkness really came.

It was the first time the two had met since their picnic on the hilltop. There was much that each had to tell the other, but all that would have to wait until later, for the time of the lighting of the torches was near. Trinlan, however, was able to urge his friend to pay him a visit and Dorje Rinchen, much to his own surprise, found himself giving a tentative acceptance to an invitation he would never have considered two days before. He would not have consciously admitted the fact to himself, but somewhere in the still pool of his thoughts he associated the girl of the day before with Trinlan and the Samtsa tribe. At a signal from the leaders stationed at the chanting-hall door, the first torches were lit and the fire was passed from group to group.

With the lighting of the torches around the great multi-coloured figure of Drolma, the face of Trinlan quickly disappeared. He flashed one swift, crooked smile and was gone, yet not so quickly but that Dorje Rinchen caught the glimpse of a sword handle twisted to the ready in his girdle.

Sounds of laughter and shouting, vague noises, the echoing of furtive footfalls or the ring of metal against metal, set Dorje Rinchen to listening for the sound of blows, his nerves taut with an unusual expectancy until, with shouts, the worshippers flowed into the circle of light. The flare from smoky torches linked faces alight with wonder, adoration, or childish belief. The object of that adoration was Drolma of the barbaric colours but near-classic lines. Their reactions also had a certain religious basis. From the vanished religions

of Tibet before Buddhism was finally established in the seventh century, the tradition of the Lord of Misrule had persisted through each successive New Year's Season.

The night of the showing of the Butter Images was that of premeditated or impromptu romance and it had become almost a point of honour for most young girls to have a lover. Dressed in great sheepskin cloaks to protect them from the dry, piercing cold of zero temperatures, the crowds rioted through the streets of the lamasery. Arm in arm, men and women let the motion of the crowd, sufficiently intent on praying to follow the clockwise circuit of the exhibition, carry them from scene to scene while they bantered with those around them. Many of the well-squored women seemed to take a perverse satisfaction in flirting with the young monks who guarded the images, while their escorts grinned self-consciously or added their own rather shameless brand of persiflage.

On former occasions, Dorje Rinchen, looking more handsome in his red robes than a monk should be, had been well able to ignore such chaffing, easily maintaining the correct attitude of monkish superiority and detachment. Now at each gust of feminine laughter and challenge he half-started as if some inner and personal tumult had been touched. Again and again in the passing of the crowd he thought he saw the one face he remembered from the wall of countenances ringing in the drama of the dance and, as often with surprised disappointment, he would realize his mistake. She had not come.

Dorje Rinchen brooded on that fact with a sense of defeat. Not everyone visited the Butter Images. Both love and war filled the darkness with promise and threat. Yet the time was short, for very soon the full moon would be up and its light would end the display. It would end also the possibility of an ambushade or tryst, though lovers would wander on to hidden sleeping-places beyond the limits of the lamasery for a night under the moon. The prospect made him acutely unhappy: so melancholy that Trinlan had spoken twice before Dorje Rinchen realized who it was.

"There's no chance now of trouble," said Trinlan, "for

Rzakdumba has called all members of the tribe home and we have disbanded our ambushade. Not a chance of a fight, so what then? Now I have nothing to do and it's too late to find a girl. Of course, you do not think of such things, do you? Yet why should the newly famous Black Hat Wizard be so sad? Come here, sister, and see a truly sad and serious monk, even if he is my friend!"

Of course she was Trinlan's sister! That was why her face had such familiar charm, although now her eyes were not the pools of mockery that had challenged him in a hundred debates. What the gleaming light in them meant he could not tell. Nor was he sure it was entirely for him, for it would seem that no swaggering brave wearing dzakwa, sword, and high fox-fur hat had claimed her as yet. Surely someone would.

A fresh surge of worshippers and merrymakers interrupted both talk and that surer exchange of glances. Trinlan and his sister moved on, but somehow the monk who stayed behind as guardian of the goddess of compassion lost his uncertainty. The night of the Butter Images no longer had the power to hurt him. For the moment he was completely satisfied that the sister of Trinlan had no tryst. The world was one he had never seen before and its beauty was that of Trinlan's thin-faced, laughing sister.

8

Winter weather reached its climax of bitter cold and ceaseless wind that robbed mountainside and valley bottom of dirt and sand, and flung them high in clouds of dust against the blue sky. Chanting began long before dawn and lasted far into the night: the moaning of the trumpets and the clashing of cymbals gave notice to the world at large that the monks were serving the community and winning sanctity for themselves.

Early in the spring a change in lamasery organization brought about the choosing of another assistant to the leader of the chanting. It was customary to install a promising younger monk and Dorje Rinchen had been well assured by many that he would be chosen. Some days before the time when the older monks would make their final choice, one of

the leaders spoke to Dorje Rinchen as they waited in front of the chanting-hall in the last free moments before a service. It seemed that it would be much better if the assistant leader lived in the Janakwa lama's great house, where he would be nearer the chanting-hall and would have easier access to more of the sacred writings. In fact, it was made quite clear to the young monk that if he would move from Aku Lobzong's house to the lama's the office would surely be his.

As Dorje Rinchen went into the chanting-hall he again became aware of that long, compelling stare and was more certain than ever that the matter had not ended. There were many lamas in the lamasery. Did the lama from Janakwa own everything?

For the first time since he had been a monk, he gave back stare for stare. He did not move to the lama's house.

The outcome of the voting did not surprise Dorje Rinchen. He had known how it would result and in a way he was glad it was so. Wanjur was chosen as assistant leader. But Wanjur, the awkward Fence Mouth, did not move to the house of the lama. Aku Lobzong had spoken of "hidden ways and dark." As he recalled the words, Dorje Rinchen lifted his head in defiance and in the heavy gloom of the chanting-hall crossed long glances with the figure on the golden throne. He was of the house of Jatsang and unafraid.

9

Spring, with its changeful days of sunshine, snow and sleet, spread a veil of faint green over the landscape. Then suddenly the first days of early summer had come. The nomads again swarmed in the alleys and cloisters of the lamasery. Nearly every family had something to leave with the monks for safe keeping before the tribes started on the circuit of the higher summer pastures. Winter garments, extra supplies of grain and boxes of valuables totalling hundreds of yak-loads were carried to the lamasery. Dorje Rinchen's family brought fifteen loads to be piled in the storerooms of Aku Lobzong's cloister, and on the day they arrived Dorje Rinchen paid a brief call on his father and a servant of the tent.

Dorje Rinchen had not made his visit to Trinlan, but the renegade now came, bringing his cache to be stored with Aku Dentzen in the lama's big house, but delayed his return for almost a day in order to see Dorje Rinchen. At Trinlan's suggestion, the two friends wandered to the place of their picnic the year before and again sat at ease in the sunshine. Now Trinlan's talk had nothing to do with questionings about monkish vows and the demands of life. Rather it was severely practical, for he, almost alone in his entire tribe, was fearful of the upshot of the state of affairs between his tribe and the Chinese government.

For a number of years matters between the Samtsa tribe and the Chinese government had been strained. Within the last two years, as a result of one or two flagrant robberies and a bloody sword-fight in the streets of Taochow Old City, the border Chinese trading-post lying along the trade route for the annual buying of grain, the usual routes had been closed to members of the Samtsa tribe. By trading through neutral tribes, Samtsa, at great inconvenience and some loss, had managed to secure its supplies of grain. But recently a new Chinese commander, with additional troops, had come to the border city and was demanding the payment of fines and instant submission on the part of Samtsa. The tent-dwellers, confident in prowess, mobility, and counting on their distance from the border, had made no attempt to settle it. The next move was up to the Chinese and as yet they had done nothing. At the risk of being thought pro-Chinese, Trinlan was yet pessimistic.

"After all," he said, "the Chinese are of the Emperor's Household and can bring any number of troops and big guns against us. Of course, we are better fighters than the Chinese, but when you kill ten Chinese a hundred more appear. When you kill ten Tibetans, soon there are no more. And the Chinese never run out of ammunition. There are only twenty rifles in our whole tribe. The one my uncle Aku Dentzen gave me is one of them. All the rest are matchlocks. What are twenty rifles or even hundreds of matchlocks? Of course, we can move on and on to the high country and the Chinese infantry will have a hard time finding us, but we can't move

this lamasery on yak-back. Perhaps they will come here. If they do, Dorje Rinchen, you leave. They will kill all the monks they find and burn the place. Don't you listen to the talk of the older ones who say that the Goddess of the Tiger's Den will protect her lamasery. If you had no vow and had a rifle instead, you could shoot, but as you wear the sacred red you can do nothing. Don't you stay to be butchered, waiting for lightning to strike the Chinese troops. Lightning does not come because prayers are said in the chanting-halls."

The monk often thought of those words in the days that followed. With the coming of real summer weather a Chinese army did move across the border, at length fought its way to the lower portion of the Samtsa valley where the sedentary half of the tribe had its farms, and settled down to ravage the villages while the animals of its cavalry and transport units ate off the standing grain. The tribal troops of Samtsa took up positions along the mountain tops between that region of farms and the lamasery, loudly proclaiming, but with dwindling confidence, that at any cost they were prepared to stop the Chinese advance. But the Tibetan encampments moved steadily higher into the hide-outs and natural fortresses of the great limestone massif, where rise the multiple sources of the Tao River.

As the centre of interest, and the only fixed point in the pattern of life of the grassland peoples, the lamasery was the clearing-house for every report and rumour. With each rider who came over the sky-line a new crop of rumours swept through the cloisters, or started new movement among the "people of the edge"—the cloisterers, the pilgrims, worshippers, hangers-on, and traders of the surrounding hamlets and the official trading-post. In all the welter of opinion and contradiction, one fact was irrefutable. The Chinese troops were massed in such numbers that only unfavourable weather or their own inertia would stop them if they once started to move toward the lamasery.

Life in the cloister of Aku Lobzong changed to another plane. Prayers were forgotten, even the *Prayer for Wisdom*. Dorje Rinchen's father and brother arrived, driving forty oxen and, after gathering up the fifteen loads belonging to

the family, left the remaining twenty-five oxen as a loan to help Aku Lobzong move when he should finally start. Precious time was spent in packing and roping the loads. All the oxen owned by Aku Lobzong were gathered in and the entire caravan of eighty animals was kept saddled and ready, being pastured by day within hailing distance of the cloister.

Rumours became so alarming and yet so contradictory that the lamasery authorities finally organized an intelligence service of their own. The younger monks, with belted-up robes and carrying such weapons as could be found in the cloisters, were organized into patrols. The armament collected from the monks was not necessarily the poorest or scantiest. The need of the hour revealed the fact that many a holy monk had not been able to resist the allure of the new fire-arms, smuggled in increasing numbers from the Mongolian and Russian borders. The daily reports brought back by these armed monk patrols, if not less alarming than the rumours, were at least founded on fact.

So it came about that Dorje Rinchen, acolyte and monk, wearing a wine-coloured Lhasa broadcloth raincoat belted on his hips in layman style and carrying a single-shot Mauser carbine, spent days in the saddle watching trails and passes. The young monks comprising the patrol were under the leadership of laymen from the hamlets near the lamasery.

Dorje Rinchen returned from a patrol that had lasted three days and most of three nights. It had taken him as far as the encampment of the Samtsa chief in order to learn how vigorous a fight the Samtsa troops were prepared to put up. Now he found that still later news brought directly from the edge of the farming country indicated that the Chinese army was already on the move towards the lamasery. Though he had tired out two horses in the course of the patrol, and so could not start out immediately, it was unlikely that he would have a chance to rest. Wearing his belted cloak, cartridge belt, and short sword, his face freshly tanned by sun and wind, and with a most unmonkish light in his eyes, he was a very different person from the young monk who scarcely ten days before had chanted day-long prayers. Today he was ready for anything. Most of all, he hoped that

Aku Lobzong's orders would give him a part in the defence of the lamasery if an attack came. But Lobzong's plans all had to do with the saving of those many bales and boxes that contained the wealth of the richest monk.

Within the next few hours the valiant boasting of the young monks largely evaporated. Word came that the Samtsa troops had fought and after initial successes were in full flight. It was rumoured that the Chinese troops would surely reach the lamasery within two days. Panic seized the community. With their belongings hastily loaded on to such transport animals as they could muster, the monks began to join the groups of refugees that hurried towards the natural fortresses and shelter of the high mountains.

It was decided to send off immediately ten loads of the most valuable things in the care of Dorje Rinchen, Aku Lobzong keeping the other two acolytes to help him finish the sorting and packing. With what was either grim courage or its very effective substitute, avarice, the old monk was determined to stay on until the last, but would feel happier with ten loads of the most valuable property already on the way.

"Move towards the mountains," he said, "and somewhere you will find refugee companions to help you. No one will deny help to the acolyte of Aku Lobzong, and later you can get into touch with me. But start soon—start now."

The late afternoon was dimmed with a cold, driving rain. Dorje Rinchen tucked his cloak up to his knees and, carrying the Mauser carbine and his boots on his back, started bare-footed through the mud and long wet grass.

When he left the lamasery the landscape was dotted with parties of refugees. In addition to the monks and people of the edge, some of the Samtsa nomads were making this route into the mountains their line of flight. But now, with the rain clouds resting heavily on the mountain slopes and sinking even to the bottom of the valley, he could neither see nor hear any of them. He was utterly alone and there seemed small chance of joining a refugee group. Under the most favourable circumstances, driving and later unloading ten oxen was difficult enough for one man; now the rain made it harder, and with the coming of night his task would be almost

hopeless. Straining desperately, he tightened the ropes on one load, shifted another that seemed unbalanced and then raced breathlessly through the long grass to round up the stragglers.

His shouting echoed in the fog. Or were they echoes? The fog thinned perceptibly as the downpour increased and he caught a glimpse of oxen ahead of his on the trail. Someone like himself was driving a few loaded oxen through the rain; following them on foot and having a hard enough time to keep them moving in the right direction. As the fog again closed in he urged his oxen to a faster gait, intent on catching up. Whoever it was would surely help him and be glad for help. His shouts were clearly echoed by other shouts, and finally his hail was answered. Waiting oxen and a figure on foot loomed larger and sudden through the fog and the two groups merged. The driver of the yak turned towards him with a half-uttered question that was never finished, while for Dorje Rinchen the lapse of months was bridged with a sudden blinding emotion. The rain and the oxen were forgotten. His new companion was the girl: Trinlan's sister. Armed for fighting and now faced by the eyes that had watched the dance of the Black Hats, he felt himself carried along by magic, even somehow by the supernatural, towards the breaking of his monkish vows.

10

They had been face to face in the crowded temple courtyard when she was one of hundreds; yet for one bewildering moment they had been quite alone and he had seen her when his duties of torch-keeper, Trinlan's insistent banter and the ceaseless movement of the crowd were leagued to keep them in the world of circumstance; still, for that moment they had been completely alone.

Now she stood in the thick fog with the rain trickling from her cape-like cloak and hat brim, a solitary figure. Even the oxen she drove were disappearing ghosts, yet to Dorje Rinchen they seemed surrounded by all the world he knew: lamas, teachers, row on row of the monkish community and, last of all, Trinlan chuckling in wet pauses of the weather.

The nearest yak cringed sideways and, staggering off the

train, spilled its load in a tangle of rain-soaked leather thongs and ropes. If there had not been two of them, it would have been the ultimate disaster each had feared every time a load had shown signs of sagging. Now it was only a disagreeable incident. When he caught the yak, Dorje Rinchen, holding the animal's tie rope in his teeth, attacked the tangle of ropes and load with a will, often finding the girl's fingers ahead of his in settling on the right loop or rope end. As they pulled out the last tangles she said with a soft laugh, "You don't work like a real monk. I thought a true monk could only sit and chant and that only nomads were brave sons."

His tongue-tied fear almost wholly vanished at the sound of her voice, so much like his mother's, and he found breath to laugh until the load was retied and the ox moved off into the mist that had swallowed his fellows.

One load after another needed retying and, while he threw hitches and tied saddle girths, he learned to call her Lhamo Mtso, and also by her pet name, Lhate. He saw the beauty of her rain-wet face. Even his own name seemed a new one when she spoke it, reaching until her fingers found the loop which his hand held over the load. He marvelled often, with an admiration he dared not voice, at her agility when she threw herself at shying oxen, hanging on to the lead-ropes or trailing pack-ropes and she moved through the long grass with a grace the mantle-like raincoat could not hide.

Finally there were no more loads to be retied, and even those that did not need attention had been adjusted, their ropes tightened. The oxen, reassured now that the two were doing the driving, obediently moved on to shouts of "Mdzo—mdzo—mdzo-ee—mdzo-ee," to which Dorje Rinchen added lamasery oaths and Lhamo Mtso quaint epithets of her own making. Life had never seemed more completely satisfactory to Dorje Rinchen. He had little idea where they were or where they were going. Nor did he care. It would soon be dark. The rain showed no sign of slackening and he had no tent. The oxen had been half starved for days and now made persistent attempts to stray and graze, and there was no way of knowing when, for all their care and effort, one would be lost in the mist.

As far as his mind could range the world was chaotic; perhaps the Chinese troops had already reached the lamasery; perhaps the cloisters were already doomed; it could be that the venerable one, intent as always on taking adequate care of his wealth, had stayed too long. One after another the landmarks of his existence dissolved in uncertainty. All that was left was a series of questions, and he found he did not greatly care what the answers were. He felt neither triumph nor guilt. The actual world had shrunk to the compass of a few misty yards of rain-soaked meadow and time itself lost all relation to either the past or the future.

Drowned in mist and a sense of nearness, they drifted on; never close nor yet very far apart. He had never known a more satisfying companionship and, with new resolution, he shut out all thought of the future; even the near future along the mist-shrouded trail.

When the oxen straggled uncertainly at a bend in the path and the mist swirled in smoky streaks to let through glimpses of a narrow entrance into a side valley, they both sensed that a camp site was near. It was Lhamo Mtso who took the initiative. By voice and gesture she turned the cattle towards the opening.

“It will soon be dark and then we will be badly lost. As yet there is some light, and maybe there will be a bit of meadow in this small valley where the cattle will be safe. Do you know the place and trail?”

Dorje Rinchen did know the valley as a perfect hide-out under a wall of cliffs and, somewhere not far away along the tiny stream, the cliff shelved inward to give partial shelter.

“Have you a tether-rope?” she asked. “Never mind if you haven’t. Mine is long enough for all the oxen.”

So he went ahead to drive the stakes and stretch her tether-rope. Lhamo Mtso could not compete with Dorje Rinchen in handling the heavy rain-soaked bales, so she let him pile most of the loads while she coiled pack-ropes and tucked them under the rain-covers on the pack-saddles. They could not risk turning the oxen loose, but the grass where the tether-rope was stretched grew knee-high and thick. Within a few minutes the oxen cropped enough to let them settle into the grass to

chew a satisfying cud, their rhythmic crunching punctuated by explosive, gusty sighs.

With the coming of dusk the rain increased, falling in sheets that filled the darkness with sound and, washing down the wall of the cliff, it swelled like a flood underfoot. They had no tent, but the girl brought an old square of yak-hair tent cloth and, while Dorje Rinchen started a fire, she contrived a tiny shelter between the cliff and the piled-up loads where the monk placed his carbine to keep it out of the rain.

His tinder was damp, but rich enough in grease and gunpowder to catch and hold a spark, his fuel turned wet—the cow-chips sucking up the moisture as fast as the flame could catch on their edges—but once the smoke was rising at the nozzle of the bellows a fire was sure and, in time, tardy blue flames followed the cloud of smoke that flattened over their heads under the beating rain. Dorje Rinchen worked the fire-bag doggedly, coaxing the flames against the little kettle of tea and Lhamo Mtso found time to throw a spare load-cover over his shoulders to break the force of the rain.

When she had unpacked her own butter-box, tsamba-bag, and cheese bag, Lhamo Mtso rummaged in Dorje Rinchen's kit for his bowl to set beside hers, scooping yellow shavings of butter into the two and patting in small helpings of cheese and tsamba to season the tea in the way the tent people prepare the bowl. Then she rested, leaning forward in the fire-glow to watch the pot. Dorje Rinchen had some scraps of fried bread in his bag, but waited until the tea boiled and then, throwing aside the bellows, he chanted a brief prayer while he poured tea on the three kettle-stones; then he reached into his bag and spread the bread beside the fire.

Lhamo Mtso dipped her fingers into the melted butter now rising on the tea in her bowl and rubbed her face to make it shine, pushing back the hair that escaped from the restraining beaded band round her head. The cliff shut out most of the rain and the fire-glow built a small world of light and shadows to hold the two figures bending close over the pot of boiling tea. In the glow the girl shrugged her arms and shoulders out of her cloak, reached for the ladle, filled the

bowls and then raised his in both hands as she passed it to him, her eyes for the first time meeting his.

“Lags-so” (with reverence), she murmured with a low laugh and her teeth flashed startlingly white in her dark face.

“You look like Trinlan,” Dorje Rinchen said.

Her wide smile answered, and he went on to ask where Trinlan was and where the tents had gone; talking of the fight and flight that filled the hidden valleys and higher pastures with refugees like themselves. He clung desperately to the present, shutting out the future lest it be darkened by monkish fears.

Lhamo Mtso had no fears. She asked: “On the night of the Butter Images what did you think as you watched the crowd? Did you wish you could leave your place by the side of Drolma, the compassionate one? And why did you look so sad?” The monk had no answer and she added casually, “I went home with Trinlan.”

Setting down her empty bowl, she leaned into the glow and heat of the tiny fire, and Dorje Rinchen too leaned forward, drawn by the welcome in her eyes. “But tonight is not the night of the Butter Images, nor need you be sad.”

She waited, shaking the fringe of her hair round her face and once again whispered the words to the dying fire.

For hours Dorje Rinchen had been completely satisfied with the present. Now, with a decision that cut his life in two, forgetting doubts and fears, he accepted the future without reservation. It seemed clear and not like defeat. He remembered Trinlan’s words, “the woman for whom I long . . . go to my mate.” Why not? That was a part of the future that must be, he knew now. He accepted it with finality as the fire-glow died and her hair brushed his face, then was crushed damply against it.

They were alone. The roaring of the rain outside their shelter shut them in to each other all the more completely. The dark wet night was theirs, together with the complete joy of mutual possession, as was the world and all it could hold or ever mean. Only the dawn would end this night and dawn was far away, nor need it hurry through the fog and rain.

The dawn was rainless and it broke on a world washed clean. It smiled the sweeter because its face was still wet with tears and all things were new.

To Dorje Rinchen the newness of life had no form nor pattern. It simply was, and its form would evolve with continued being. He had as yet found no fixed point from which orientation might begin, but life itself was enough and needed no definition to enrich it. He watched Lhamo Mtso coming from the stream, carrying the kettle full to brimming with water for their morning tea and was quite content. He did not feel any embarrassment. Never again, it seemed, would he feel shy with her. Things were as they should be; as they had been for some time, except that he had been blind.

The attitude of the girl had undergone a change, although she, too, seemed to feel no embarrassment. Yet, as she set the kettle on the smoke-stained stones, her smile was shy. For all she knew, Dorje Rinchen might still be a monk in thought and ambition: a monk with a broken vow. In the fire-glow she had had all of Trinlan's daring, she had led the way along the new road, sure and light where Dorje Rinchen had floundered in bewilderment. Now she waited for him to speak, shaking back the hair from her face.

His smile disclaimed any regrets, though what he said was commonplace: "Get the tea from my bag. We will eat my food from now on."

Trinlan's smile—swift, heart-warming and heart-breaking too, but new as the rain-sweet day because it came from Trinlan's sister—answered the things he had not said, and she bent forward to put her hand on the bits of fuel that leaped away from the nozzle of the bellows, holding them firmly on the tiny, smoking fleck of tinder until they caught. They built the fire together and Dorje Rinchen, pushing back his cloak from round his shoulders, beat the fire-bag with a will, forcing the flames into a dancing wall around their pot of tea. The sight of his bare shoulders was reassuring to the girl. He had discarded the distinctive vest of a monk and, though he had no dzakwa, he wore the wine-coloured pulu as a layman would wear it.

“Doka,” she said, and again, “Doka, what will your family say, and the monks—and Trinlan?” Whatever the others might say, the thought of Trinlan brought her reassurance. She was quite sure of what he would say. “And you must call me Lhate,” she said. “My baby name.”

The husky sound of his childhood name and the musical sound of hers turned Dorje Rinchen’s thoughts back to long-forgotten things, and as he remembered his mother’s voice and the picture of her face he knew that Ahway, at least, would not mind. His brother? Perhaps. Even his father, now more interested in turning a prayer-wheel in the sunny lee of the tent than in riding on the exciting concerns of a true tent-dweller, might have some regret that the monk had fallen. But both would welcome him home. Once his present responsibilities for the valuable loads belonging to the venerable one were discharged, he intended to go there directly. What the monks—Aku Lobzong, Wanjur and the rest—would say could wait. He had not thought of remaining as a monkish hanger-on, wearing the red and living two lives as old Aku Dentzen had lived. Trinlan’s decision seemed much the truer. Now he, too, would have his own tent. *Our* tent, he thought. One more reflection in an accusing array brought a grim smile to his face. What the lama might think brought him a perverse pleasure. At least that problem was solved.

He felt clear on his path. Guilty, yes, but yet not guilty. Later, remorse would come, but now he felt possessed of all good things. Somehow he would be able to hold to the best in his religion as the black shadows of the lamasery receded and only his present love and happiness remained as though it had truly been his destiny that had guided him towards Lhamo Mtso in the mist.

While they drank their tea, conversation ran slowly, and with hesitant words and pauses they talked of the future. Lhamo Mtso’s unspoken apology vanished, while in Dorje Rinchen’s mind the low irregular outline of a black tent took shape as a goal of endeavour and the centre of living. But their forecasts of the future were never completed, for horsemen appeared on the trail.

They were Samtsa scouts, now riding to find their refugee

families and take them home, for it seemed that the advance of the Chinese troops had been halted by a peacemaking party and the war, in all probability, was over. Trinlan, they said, had ridden on earlier and even now might be on his way back with his sister's family and encampment. The monks, too, were out in search-parties looking for their friends who had fled in haste the day before and no doubt someone from Aku Lobzong's cloister was already well on the way to find and help Dorje Rinchen.

The girl's eyes searched Dorje Rinchen's face, but he only shrugged his shoulders further out of his coat as he beat the fire-bag. Everything was as before except for themselves. Twinges of uneasiness would come at unexpected moments, for he had indeed fallen from a high estate. In actuality he was a layman, though the scouts still addressed him as "Aku." In the confusion, his secular dress caused no comment nor did the circumstances of the two being found in the same makeshift camp tempt more than a sly passing gibe from two of the younger scouts who knew Lhamo Mtso well. The camp might mean everything or nothing. Until he openly donned the dzakwa, Dorje Rinchen was still a monk, and they addressed him as such while shouting sudden goodbyes. The men promised, if they should meet Trinlan, to tell him the location of their camp.

The two finished breakfast, drinking their tea to the dregs before pouring the leaves out on the kettle-stones to placate malignant hearth-stone spirits, and then they broke camp. They tightened girths and made the pack-ropes ready on the saddles, but they did not load up. Either Trinlan or the monks from Aku Lobzong's cloister or both must arrive soon. There was no point in breaking camp before they came. As they anticipated, the waiting was not long.

First came the monks; three of them, riding fast and spurred by Aku Lobzong's anxiety to find Dorje Rinchen and the precious loads. They were eager to tell the good news: the lamasery was no longer in danger. The monks' unspoken realization of what had come to pass under the cliff held far more definite and accusatory quality than the casual notice of the scouts. Three pairs of eyes made sneering indictments,

yet nothing was said beyond the recounting of news and the exchange of comment as they tied the loads. After all, Dorje Rinchen was, or had been, a leader. At least he had promised the exercise of leadership. He was well liked, although he had a reputation for recklessness in brawling. The girl was ignored. Lhamo Mtso had answered, glibly enough, the jesting of the tribesmen; but with the monks she was mute, their enmity being something she could not fight, only endure. Under the stress, the glow in her dark face was withdrawn to some far place.

The monk who had brought Dorje Rinchen's white horse gave him up to his owner when the caravan started down the little valley towards the main trail. Dorje Rinchen took the reins, but, restrained by an impulse he had never before known, did not mount. He wanted Lhamo Mtso to ride so that he could see her smile at him from the horse as she drove the cattle. Some instinct told him she would ride superbly even among the womenfolk of the tents. But now, shrouded in her raincoat, she was cloaked with inconspicuousness, scarcely to be seen as she followed behind her oxen. She never once looked at him. Disappointed, he mounted and rode silently apart from the other horsemen until they all came to the main trail.

Then, quite abruptly, he ordered them on with Aku Lobzong's oxen and all the old man's boxes and bales. He would stay behind until Trinlan found his sister. Then, he said, he was going home for a visit. Later he would be coming to see Aku Lobzong. The monks made no comment; none was needed. The oxen were separated and those belonging to the venerable one were driven downstream. Dorje Rinchen pretended a complete lack of interest in where they went or how, yet as the party moved off he could not help straining his ears for the remark he was sure he would hear.

"Fallen, yes, fallen—a wanlog now—fallen."

The fragmentary echoes of their talk carried clearly in the silence. He wondered, a wry smile twisting his mouth, whether he had once said those words as harshly and bitterly as they had just been spoken.

Lhamo Mtso, he noticed, was standing at his horse's

shoulder and her eyes were stormy and washed with tears. "Are you sorry you are a wanlog, Dorje Rinchen, the one for whom my heart warms? Are you sorry that you have fallen?"

"Fallen? Yes, fallen from my horse." He suited his action to the words and stood beside her. "No, Lhate; if the gods will leave us alone, I shall never be sorry. And now we'll go on to find Trinlan. He won't talk like that."

They needed to find Trinlan. The sky was not the perfect pattern of blue and gold it had been and the world had lost its well-rinsed cleanness: dirty streaks had begun to show. So they went on. There was no real need for hurry. They had only to keep on the trail and time would bring them to a meeting with Trinlan. It was not long before they caught sight of him. His sheep, herds of cattle and horses and straying oxen filled the valley with a confusion that needed Trinlan in a dozen places at once to do all that should be done. Nevertheless, he had time for a gay greeting, though his crooked smile became tender as he looked from one tell-tale face to the other. He, too, said the word.

"Wanlog! Wanlogs now, wanlogs all, until the towers of the temple fall and there's nothing left from which to fall, and so become a wanlog."

It was blasphemy, but Dorje Rinchen took it like a tonic. It was what he needed to hear. Later, as he rode his white horse up the long green slope of the mountain he remembered the words almost as vividly as Lhamo Mtso's hasty farewell. Happiness had flowed back into her face, she was content and unafraid, but Dorje Rinchen needed the scepticism, incomplete but utterly defiant, in Trinlan's dark speech. That defiance was something he could place like a strong frame round the picture of all the happiness he had seen in Lhamo Mtso's eyes. The frame seemed to promise security for the picture and so he held firmly to it, saying the mocking words over and over as he hastened towards the sky line:

"Wanlogs now, wanlogs all!"

II

THE YOUNGER BROTHER

THE PEOPLE OF THE Shami tribe had little fear that the Chinese troops, even if they ever should get to Lhamo, would come on through the mountains to the great plain. Even so, those in Jatsang's tent and the other tribesmen waited for news as though their own fate were in that uncertain balance. If the lamasery were destroyed it would be their loss, for it belonged to them as it did to a dozen other tribes.

Ahway thought of the lamasery in only an incidental way. Most of all she wondered what her younger son was doing.

Milk pail in her hand, she stood at the tent door staring across the encampment towards a break in the ring of black tents, where the Lhamo trail came in. Riders zigzagged purposefully through the dusk, cutting across straying colts or heading back wandering cattle.

If, as it was rumoured, the monks were riding the trails armed like laymen prepared to discard their vows, she wished Dorje Rinchen were at home and riding from the encampment as a layman wearing the dzakwa and carrying a rifle. For the sake of the lamasery, she had given her son. Now it might be that he had broken his vows and for the sake of the lamasery. As so often, she wished he could have stayed at home, by this time bringing another daughter-in-law into the tent. Such thoughts stirred in her mind as she mended the fire, gave instructions to Wochuck about a strayed calf, and then went back to the lines where the milch cows waited. The darkness came quickly and in that blackness the milking must be finished.

She was not alone at her task. Two servant-girls as well as Wochuck worked quickly along the tether-lines, milking, tethering cows and calves, and stopping now and again to drive straying horses and oxen to where the men were hobbling

and tying them in separate groups. The milking of even as many cows as belonged to the wealthy family of Jatsang was finally finished and the workers began to gather within the tent which, dark and monstrous against the sky, yet leaked flashes of light along the smoke-vent in the roof and through the flapping curtain that served as door. As the light failed outside so it seemed to grow in the tent. Ahway turned to fill the kettle on the edge of the ashpit with milk tea and then set out bowl, butter-box, and tsamba for her husband.

Dorje Rinchen's father had aged considerably since the time when he had taken the little boy monk to watch the sheep. While his bowl of tea was being prepared he reached for his prayer-wheel and started it spinning. His face—grave, handsome, lined with the marks of strife and of winter on the way—had a listening preoccupation with the burden of his petitions, as though he waited for an answer in the faint hum from the spinning cylinder.

“A good, big chanting service on the twenty-fifth of the next moon will be just right, just right,” he said. The first whine of the prayer-wheel seemed to echo the last two words a third time, but Ahway had already linked them to something in her own thoughts.

“That being so, this time we might as well have Dorje Rinchen to do the chanting. That is, if he can leave the lamasery. Unless . . . unless the Chinese have come. Hell-bent Chinese—the wretched ones!”

Ahway was seeing Dorje Rinchen, red robes and all, sitting by the fire with the sacred volume in his lap, calling up blessing from the pages upon the tent and all its inmates. And it would be nice to have him home for a day or two, at least. If only the unpredictable Chinese would stay away.

Comfort dawned in the face of the old man when he thought of Dorje Rinchen: a good monk, so everyone said, and apt at praying. There would be more reassurance in the measured intonations of Dorje Rinchen's rich baritone, not yet too husky from long chanting sessions in the cold, than in the thin whine of the spinning prayer-wheel. But the old man spoke again, uneasily.

“He is too handsome to have about in a tent family for

very long.” The remark was not intended to reach the ears of the two servant-girls and his daughter-in-law, occupied with the churning and other tasks in the part of the tent on the other side of the fire from where the two sat.

“Yes,” answered Ahway. “Too bad he should be the handsome one when he is only a monk. We have good sons: monk and layman. Duggur is a brave son among the best, a good trader who never loses. The women, too, like him well.”

A giggle rose from the other side of the tent and Ahway smiled.

The flap of the tent was pushed back now and Duggur came in, followed by the manservant of the tent. All the chores were done. Later the two would find their sleeping places on the edge of the encampment and then the night's rest would be broken by intermittent watchfulness. In face and figure he was the son of his parents, but of a sterner pattern, and his ownership and control of the tent, and the members that made up the social unit it sheltered, was so complete that he could be casual and unassertive as he jested with the three younger women.

When the rhythm of Duggur's hurried eating slowed to the more leisurely tea-drinking, he set his stamp of approval on the plans his father and mother had made for Dorje Rinchen. He was quite willing that wealth should go to his younger brother. Indeed, he added suggestions of his own about new furs and a brocade jacket for the monk. When the real right of choice and decision was his, he had no objection to giving Dorje Rinchen the best of everything. A monk missed so much of life; his younger brother was to be pitied. For all his grim mouth and ready jesting, religion to him was yet a fearsome thing with threatening terrors. Though his thoughts softened as his eyes crossed the face of his wife and he thought of what Dorje Rinchen missed, there was no feeling of superiority in his attitude towards his younger brother. Dorje Rinchen was a monk and therefore set apart.

“Have him come soon,” Duggur said. “We can well pay for many chanting services. The grace of the Perfections bless us! Someone told me today that the Chinese had turned back. I wondered whether that is really true. I hope so.

Dorje Rinchen knows how to chant, but does he know about fighting? I wonder!" He laughed at the thought and stretched his powerful arms.

"Sleep," said Duggur, stretching himself and speaking to his wife. "Come on, bring the zho so that we can drink and then make ready our sleeping places. I hope the curds are set thick and smooth tonight. If so . . ."

But everyone had stopped short to listen. Somewhere on the edge of the camp, dogs barked and rushed. A matchlock banged and the shouting rose; the peculiar wolf-howl cadence of the Tibetan yell rising high above the canine hysteria of forty mastiffs.

"Jatsang, Jatsang, someone coming—someone coming!"

Duggur shouted in reply, "This way; we're waiting."

A white horse broke into the long lane of light that poured through the dark from the open tent. Then Duggur was helping his younger brother from his horse and together they turned into the tent, where the women's voices gave a shrill, confused welcome. Even the stick handle of the old man's prayer-wheel poised motionless and the cylinder slowed to a squeaking stop.

Duggur took the short carbine from his brother's hands and waited while he took his sword from his girdle. Jatsang had risen to give him his old place of honour, but Dorje Rinchen appeared not to have seen him and took a place next to his brother in front of the fire.

"All is saved at Lhamo," he said. "The Chinese have turned back and all is safe."

The others scarcely heard what he said. The prayer-wheel stood like a startled question mark in the old man's hands. Ahway's eyes widened under her startled brows and even Duggur's grim face went slack with surprise as he stared. Dorje Rinchen had slipped his shoulders out of the pulu cloak and they showed bare and oddly light in colour where the close-fitting monk's vest had kept them from exposure to wind and sun. Whatever the story behind this change, Dorje Rinchen was no longer the monk, but only the second son of the tent of Jatsang, sitting by his family's fire. "All is saved at Lhamo," he had said, but all was not saved.

Ahway, her voice thick with conflicting emotions, spoke first. "That pulu cloak alone is too thin for the cold of the great plain even in summer-time. We must find you a dzakwa." There were always compensations. The forbidden dream of years was changing to reality. She would now see Dorje Rinchen, handsome and desirable, in the dzakwa trimmed with leopard fur. "We'll get out those extra sheepskins tomorrow and start work."

Faint giggles of excitement came from where the three younger women drank their tea at the side of the fire reserved for the servants and womenfolk of the tent, but they faded when Duggur scowled.

"Until then, wear my new light summer one," he said to Dorje Rinchen. "It will fit you nicely. For sleeping and riding you will need one without delay. You come just when we badly need one more to help with the herds."

"Whose gun is that you are carrying?" It was the query of one layman to another, equals in a way they had not been since before that time when a small boy, clad in red robes, had sat somewhat apart from the others in the group around the fire.

The circle now moved to make room for Dorje Rinchen. As it shifted, so did his family's attitude towards him. He had become part of the gathering about the fire, but, though its light flickered from face to face, it was quenched, too, by shadows that leaped from the tent walls. The prayer-wheel remained silent in the slack fingers of the old man. The signs of strife and winter on the way deepened in his wistful face.

2

Dorje Rinchen had come out today as a shepherd, but he knew his companions still thought of him as a monk. In a single night one might cease being a monk, but only after many days did one achieve full status as a layman completely adept in all the skills of nomad life.

It was on this identical point that he had once tended a fire and watched the sheep with his father and, as on that day, the sheep were scattering like a dissolving white cloud on the green meadow below him.

His companions—shepherds all, for the sheep of the encampment were being pastured in one flock—had ridden off to do some preliminary scouting before settling down for the day. It was Dorje Rinchen's task to make the fire at the camp site and at least he had the tea boiling before they arrived, even if they did not think him capable enough to ride with them.

He had resolutely forsworn the ease and softness of a monk's position. He had put on the dzakwa with zest and wore a sword as inevitably as he put on his boots, yet always, in those concerns of daily living, his brother was one step ahead of him. It was not altogether a matter of untrained muscles, but rather that his instinctive reaction to the movement of a falling load, a plunging horse, a charging dog, or a runaway ox was always a split second behind the hair-trigger co-ordination of his brother's big body. The difference lessened day by day until it was scarcely perceptible to an onlooker, but Dorje Rinchen knew it still existed and so, too, did his big brother. But, if doing could bring it about, Dorje Rinchen was determined to do, and unconsciously began to ape his brother's ways of eating and drinking in serious haste and to emulate his sublime unconcern with the state of the weather and the place where he would sleep. As the days went by his brother had responded, bit by bit putting more and more of the responsibility for tent concerns and the care of livestock upon him.

Dorje Rinchen fingered the rifle beside him. The famous Bora was now his. For years his brother had carried another rifle and, when Dorje Rinchen returned, his father had suddenly decided to relinquish the Bora. It seemed to the old man that the count of the prayers his son would no longer say must be made good by prayer-wheel and beads. If so, he would shoot no more. He was past that time of life. Now he must think of the life hereafter and renounce the firing of a gun. Only Dorje Rinchen knew that, among his things brought from Aku Lobzong's cloister, there had come the gift of a hundred Bora cartridges as a present from the old monk to the one who had lived with him as an acolyte. Dorje Rinchen had secretly practised and found that he did very well indeed.

He had the natural gifts: eyesight and co-ordination.

For Dorje Rinchen, riding with sword in belt and rifle across the saddle-bow was an adventure in which the layman was riding away from the monk. He had broken one vow; now there was a yearning to take his place among the others by bearing part in a killing. He found that he had not been brooding over his sins. Religion, for the time, was put aside by more active thoughts; nor did he feel guilty that he spent many hours of each day thinking of Llamo Mtso. He pictured her as part of a group of girls among the Samtsa and himself as with her. Yet he was aware, too, of the women in the tent, of their giggles and their open admiration.

Dorje Rinchen's companions arrived too late to see the guilty haste with which he put aside the gun and turned to the kettle. While they drank tea and ate with the calculated slowness men force upon themselves when time is empty, the scouts told of the large flock of gazelle they had sighted not far away. Two of the men, in their early twenties and eager to start out on the hunt, carried only matchlocks. The third, a neighbour of Jatsang and somewhat older than the others, had a rifle and an additional sense of caution.

"One of us should stay to watch the sheep," he said. "He need only signal if there is any danger and we can all get back. But the one who stays should have a rifle. I suppose that's you, Dorje Rinchen. Anyhow, you wouldn't want to have a part in the killing, would you?"

Dorje Rinchen still wasn't so sure about that, but he didn't want to be left by the fire a second time. "You have a rifle too," he countered. "Why don't you stay? I'll go and try a cartridge or two in mine. That is, unless you really want to fire your rifle," he added slyly.

One of the younger fellows chuckled, making no attempt to hide his amusement. "If the old man shot a single cartridge from his belt he would spend eight incarnations regretting it. Come along with us, Dorje Rinchen. You can be sure we'll teach you how to use up some cartridges. That is one thing we know how to do."

To the others it was merely an incidental bit of fun. Inclination whipped Dorje Rinchen on to the adventure, but

though deep-rooted inhibitions still tugged intermittently at the reins he could not halt the ride. In the distance, white and yellow against the green grass, the gazelle dared him on. They were wary and experienced and they kept well away from any inequality of ground that would give cover to a hunter. After several unsuccessful attempts to stalk, the hunters decided to try a drive and, as Dorje Rinchen still insisted he wished to use up ammunition, he was placed at a likely point. Together the three rode to the chosen spot and Dorje Rinchen, keeping behind the other two, dropped from his horse into a tiny hollow behind the debris from a marmot hole, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

The sound of their hoofbeats became a muffled rhythm and then faded into the vague hum that filled his ears. Between the blades of grass he could see his companions as they moved casually across the plain. Heat waves began to rise and the drive took an odd unreality as riders and game swam in the waters of a phantom lake, or loomed in strange distortion on the unstable horizon. Training his rifle in the direction from which he assumed the game would come, he dug the prongs of the forked rest firmly into the turf. The sun beat down and sweat dripped from his forehead into his eyes. Three feet above him the cool steppe breeze swept over pockets of heat like the one in which he lay. As he watched, the drive seemed without point and fruitless, his companions riding listlessly towards gazelle that refused to run in a straight line in any direction, but raced in a changing orbit round the riders, held to an arc by the power of curiosity, yet equally repelled by fear. His effort to watch through the grass and yet keep hidden caused cramps in his neck. Finally, he lay with his ear to the ground, content only to listen.

The turf under his ear was a sounding-board transmitting strange murmurs blended into a low-pitched hum, varied with the faint squeaks and underground rumblings of the marmots. A cautious look through the grass failed to give him even a momentary glimpse of the game. Again he put his ear to the ground while his thoughts reverted to his life as a monk. The cloisters and chanting-halls of Lhamo, the great central square itself—all came to mind, and he saw

himself in scene after scene. Faintly the temple drums began to beat and to the sound the courtyard began to fill with dancers. He remembered Trinlan's dark face in the crowd and then his first sight of Trinlan's sister. It had all happened to the beating of the drums. Suddenly he realized that the ground under his ear pulsed with sharp staccato strokes that stopped at intervals for a moment or two, only to recommence with a mounting crescendo, rolling faster than the cadence of the wildest dance. Cautiously he turned his head so that he could see the sights of the rifle; his fingers moved to the trigger guard. The thudding ceased and he found the sights squarely in line with what appeared to be the leader of a flock of gazelle whose movement, on the circumference of an ever-shifting circle, had brought them within range.

All thoughts of the lamasery vanished. Dorje Rinchen was filled with hot eagerness. More intensely alive than he had been since the night he had spent with Lhamo Mtso, his whole body stiffened with the effort of holding his breath, and then his finger lightly tightened on the trigger.

The gazelle appeared to fall in two, one part remaining on the ground while the other plunged away. Far beyond, a puff of dust exploded. The faint screech of a ricocheting bullet mingled with the sudden tattoo beaten out by tiny hooves as the gazelle stretched themselves in a panicky burst of speed. Dorje Rinchen had come to his feet and started forward before he realized that what he had thought was one gazelle was really two; one now a motionless blur of white and yellow, and one that rose and fell as it tried to run, but was dead by the time he reached it.

His companions suddenly appeared close at hand, but Dorje Rinchen did not wait for their help. He drew his knife nonchalantly. He set about dressing the carcasses. This was the first time he had killed, but not the first, by many times, that he had butchered. He was well on with the job when the others arrived. Little was said, although there was some satisfied chuckling and swearing as the two bucks were skinned and dressed.

Much had changed for Dorje Rinchen in the short time taken up by the hunt. He had deliberately broken the last

link of the monkish vow. Although it had not been legally binding since he had left the lamasery, it had exercised its power and threatened its penalties. Now, with a new sense of freedom, he lifted his head arrogantly as he gave directions to his two companions. Their manner, too, had changed in a way that gratified him. Dorje Rinchen was convinced that his friends would never again send him alone to build the fire while they rode armed and ready. Even now they deferred to him, and one of them flatteringly asked for the empty cartridge. Dorje Rinchen offered it readily enough, but with a faint hint of patronage in his gesture.

According to Tibetan custom, the meat was divided into four equal parts, but the two skins went to Dorje Rinchen as the owner of the gun that made the kill. The boiled livers and hearts, relished slowly throughout the rest of the day, seemed hardly more savoury to Dorje Rinchen than his mother's pleasure when he unpacked his saddle-bags by the evening fire in the tent. Ahway exclaimed, "Ah—good meat. We are just out of every bit. It will do for stew tonight."

The old man cautioned her, "Be careful about the blood and hair. Don't drop them near the fire lest the serpent devils smell the odour of scorching life and come to curse us."

Duggur grinned appreciatively. "Two gazelle? How did they get them with matchlocks?" He stared as Dorje Rinchen drew out the two skins. That would mean only one thing. "Or did you lend your rifle?" he asked, still incredulous.

"Both in one shot. I used only one cartridge," said Dorje Rinchen. "It was somewhat far, but I was well placed and waiting while the others drove the flock in my direction."

"When you fell from the priesthood, you fell well! Not like some I know. By the sacred magic, what good shooting!"

The prayer-wheel in the hands of his father began a new protest as it spun to the ceaseless mutter of the old man's praying. Dorje Rinchen, second son in the house of Jatsang and recently turned wanlog, did not heed it. At last there were no traces of merriment in his brother's face. Then his sister-in-law spoke:

"Give me the empty shell. It will make a good needle-case. You will give it to me, won't you?"

Dorje Rinchen had no shell to give. His triumph was complete.

3

Autumn came and the frequent rainstorms changed to snow with a shift of the wind. On clear mornings the frost lay heavy on the grasses. Green marshland and the purple waves of grass bloom took on the shade seen through amber glasses. It was time to harvest the hay before the creeping russet reached the grass roots and all the rich flavour vanished.

The tents moved to sites only a short day's journey from the winter quarters so that the annual harvest of hay might be gathered in. Although grazing lands were held communally, each tent had its own ranges, and all arrangements connected with the haymaking were made within each family group. The cattle and horses must get along throughout the winter as best they could on the winter-killed standing hay of the plain and mountain slopes.

Dorje Rinchen lived with most of his family in a temporary encampment among the hay. The old man and two servants had stayed behind in the main camp to get along with the herds as best they might. Duggur patrolled the area with a rifle across his saddle, on the alert against enemies or thieves. At this time of the year the poorer folk from the farmer tribes in valleys as far away as six or seven days' journey came to the land of the tents to earn high wages and enjoy the more varied fare of the nomads.

Dorje Rinchen spent the first two days of the haying season riding to find workers. Most of these were women who bargained shrewdly for wages of butter, sheep, and wool. The family had old friends who came year after year, but more labourers were always needed.

Because the family of Jatsang was wealthy—Ahway was known as a good provider who killed many sheep and provided generous portions of fresh butter with the tea—Dorje Rinchen had no trouble in persuading workers to follow him back to camp. His rare but compelling smile had its own part in winning workers for the Jatsang haying. Girls from the land

of the farms were quite frankly aware of the opportunities the occasion offered: one might become the mistress in a black tent. Such possibilities, when enhanced by the sight of Dorje Rinchen sitting his horse with grace, his shoulders bare and brown in the sunshine, made decision all the easier.

“We have more workers than we’ve ever had before,” Duggur commented as he drank tea and told the news of the home camp. “Dorje must have promised all the girls something special to get so many. We’ll have more hay than ever before. But we need it: we have more horses.”

“If only the skies stay clear and we have no snow,” Ahway said as she finished the count of the hay on her rosary and found it more than it ever had been. Dorje Rinchen nodded, though his eyes were glazed with sleep. All four were groggy with weariness.

“If only it doesn’t snow and we have to waste too many days,” repeated Ahway so decisively that Wochuck, whose head had been drooping dangerously near the fire sat up with a jerk, muttering sleepily, “One day wouldn’t be bad: just one day to rest a little.”

“Just one day is all right,” Duggur said. “It is when it rains and snows for days that the haying is ruined. Ah yes, one day would give Dorje a chance to get to know the girls he persuaded to work for us. If it snows I’m going to spend the day in camp, too. Who are they, Dorje?” Duggur wiped his huge face and grinned, relishing his younger brother’s confusion.

“Doka doesn’t know girls are about. You shouldn’t bother him about them. He is still a monk,” said Wochuck. She was fighting sleep as she spoke, but her slightly pop-eyed stare probed suddenly and insistently at Dorje Rinchen’s reserve. “He watches well at night. So far we have lost no cattle as we did last year. A good thing it is for the tent of Jatsang.”

Duggur’s keen glance encompassed his wife and Dorje Rinchen with a certain knowingness. “Ah, then I can sleep well at night,” he said. “If I only can keep warm, all alone as I am.” Wochuck’s habitually stolid expression changed. She swore cheerfully in response as she got up to get Duggur’s

horse. He was already licking his bowl clean before putting it inside the folds of his cloak. After he had mounted and ridden off, Wochuck stood watching until she saw him pull his horse to a stop among the haymakers, but she looked even more intently at Dorje Rinchen as she turned back to the fire.

That night the moon had a strange halo. Dawn beat its tardy way through a thickly falling curtain of snow. They were all at breakfast when Duggur, bigger than ever in a snow-draped raincoat that covered himself, his rifle, and most of his horse, rode almost into the tent before dismounting to join them. With his coming the meal took on an added degree of festivity. For all the wet snow in the air, underfoot, and eventually in everything, the day was a lark for the hired hands. They had food, the rudiments of shelter, and leisure for whatever might come. They could patch their clothes and boots, or sleep as much as they wished. The four members of the family of Jatsang accepted the snow as all such inevitable misfortunes must be accepted; in a determination to make the best of it. They could distribute fireside and food tasks among the others and relax into pleasantly personal existence.

Duggur, however, suggested more than mere passive comfort as he mixed humour and the giving of orders with his hurried eating. He intended to spend the day in camp. His servant was dispatched, armed with rifle and raincoat, to ride guard over the herds. It was to be a day of feasting, for Duggur had brought flour and rice from the home camp. Under his expert direction, a sheep was killed and made into coils of sausage seasoned with garlic. Generous quantities of fresh mutton-fat sauce laced with red pepper were put on the coals to simmer. One day was one day. They might as well have a good time.

The tent filled with smoke, the odour of cooking food, the smell of wet, drying leather. Duggur openly focused his attentions on one of the girls from the farm country. The pert haymaker had no scruples. Quite evidently opportunity had come her way. Her demureness became provocative. The prospect of life in a black tent was becoming a possibility and her eyes were bright. The others, occupied with their own private concerns, paid little attention to what was

going on. Even Wochuck's sultry good humour remained unshaken.

Dorje Rinchen, deep in the thoughts that came with leisure, paid little attention until he began to realize that Duggur was not content to leave him alone, but was manoeuvring him into a kind of participation. Dorje Rinchen also became increasingly aware of Wochuck and her steady gaze that found him wherever he was. In the somewhat heady atmosphere of the tent, Dorje Rinchen found his pulse pounding with desire. The clearing afternoon sky and a rising wind definitely limited the vacation to a single day. Duggur shivered. "It will be cold tonight, Doka. Much too cold for comfort when one sleeps on the edge of the hay. Only one thing will keep you warm—just one thing." With a quick, unexpected lunge, his big hand deftly lifted the thong of beads and bits of lapis lazuli from the neck of the little hay-maker. She squealed and made a half-hearted attempt to recover her property, but Duggur pushed her away and laughed.

"There's just one thing to keep you warm." He held the necklace high. "A string of beads like this has a certain magic. You don't think so, Doka? You don't know. No; you don't know!"

Again Duggur's big hand moved swiftly towards Wochuck. She let fly a stream of curses, but made no attempt to regain her prized string of coral and turquoises. Duggur pressed the bauble into Dorje Rinchen's hand. "Here! Take this with you tonight and see if the magic won't work for you too!" His laughter filled the tent and his audience shouted. Even Dorje Rinchen knew the significance of the play; knew that the accepted way for a girl to regain her property was to go and reclaim it when nightfall had come and sleeping-places were being made up. Though he had not personally snatched Wochuck's necklace he felt sure she would expect to claim her property in the time-honoured way. The string of beads in his hand gave fresh significance to Wochuck's stare from across the fire. His pulses hammered.

It was near sunset when the two brothers finally walked to the edge of the camp to plan for the morrow's hay-cutting,

and only then did Duggur amplify his action with words.

“There is no need for the tent of Jatsang to have more than one wife,” he said. “We can well share alike. Having only one wife will ensure the interests of the tent when the mother gets too old. Wochuck likes you. As for Yogmo, the little baggage from the valley,” a note of amusement thickened with emotion rose in his voice, “maybe she’ll make a good servant for a while if we need one more. But she needn’t think of having a tent of her own and so split Jatsang into two tents. Don’t forget the magic of the beads, Doka, you wanlog!” Laughing, he rode off to look after the cattle.

Out on the cold plain Dorje Rinchen could think more clearly than in the charged atmosphere around the camp-fire. Very clearly he realized that something more than a casual affair was implicit in his decision. If Wochuck claimed her beads in the traditional manner, he would have tacitly placed his approval on his brother’s plans. All day he had been thinking of Lhamo Mtso as part of the group in the haying camp. He pictured himself travelling the expanse of plain and mountain barrier to find her among the Samtsa hay-makers. He knew Lhamo Mtso’s place would not be easy as the wife of the younger son of Jatsang, but obviously it would be much harder if Wochuck came to him that night. His thoughts raced ahead to the coming days and months; fastening on the idea of a tent—the “tent of Dorje Rinchen,” not the “tent of Jatsang.” Against the afterglow, the sod walls of the winter encampment and the haystacks lay dark in shadow. Somewhere among those shadows he could stake a claim: perhaps even a share of hay, a part of the wealth of his father’s tent, his mother’s affection, and his brother’s goodwill. It was his old intentness and exactly at this point the seeds of worldly ambition were sown along with his loyalty to love. No. In time a black tent would be his; his and Lhamo Mtso’s. Tonight he must meet Wochuck with his decision.

As he made his way towards the camp, the rustle of dried-out grass and the squeak of snow under his heels reminded Dorje Rinchen that the boots he wore had been resoled by Wochuck. She had laughed oddly when she gave them to

him. "Some day you will do something for me, no?" she had said. He found Wochuck at the edge of the encampment. Dorje Rinchen did not look forward to the burst of profanity he expected would explode when she heard his explanation. Instead, he had the greatest surprise in a day of enlightenment. Wochuck was silent for some time. Then she questioned him in half-amused sympathy. "Your flesh longs for her, doesn't it? Well, keep her warm in your heart. I wonder you have stayed away from her so long."

"I wonder that I have," thought Dorje Rinchen as he made up his bed on the edge of the hayfield. When the haying was done he would ride to Samtsa.

4

From where Dorje Rinchen sat beside the smudge of his tiny fire, he could see the sod walls and black tent roofs of the winter encampment, deceptively near in the clear, dry air. The final move of the year had been made the day before and now the black tent was stretched over the sod walls of the winter quarters. The womenfolk patched and plastered the walls and built the double clay fireplace of the winter home. Its completion marked the end of wandering for some months, but tomorrow Dorje Rinchen promised himself he would at last make the trip across the skyline. He would go to find Lhamo Mtso.

His preoccupation, however, did not prevent his noticing four riders moving slowly along the trail in the direction of the encampment. As he had taken stock of other riders earlier in the day, so he now noticed that all four appeared to be carrying rifles and were exceptionally well mounted. They had come nearly level with the horse herd on the hillside above them when they stopped, two of them dismounting to knot up their horses' tails. Dorje Rinchen's mind worked lazily towards the significance of that precaution when there was neither mud, water, nor snow on the trail. Horses did run better with their tails knotted. But he could think of no reason for these to run. Far back in his consciousness a warning signalled action fateful and imminent. Two of the riders waited, their horses' noses touching, the men hunched forward

in their saddles, deep in discussion, while their companions rode on another two or three hundred paces.

Suddenly it began to happen and Dorje Rinchen heard himself shouting a futile warning towards the encampment. The two who had ridden on now reached the scattering horse herd. The other two wheeled up the slope to round up the flank. While Dorje Rinchen's shouts still echoed empty across the plain, the four of them, swinging ropes and hurling well-aimed stones, had started the horse herd up the trail. Far beyond the horse herd a rifle banged, followed by the dull boom of a matchlock. The sound rang like an order in Dorje Rinchen's ears and he turned to saddle his horse, which was grazing near the fire. Although the raiders, now riding on the flanks of the herd, would not come within range of Dorje Rinchen, his position gave him a head start over anyone riding from the encampment or the other herds. Hobbles, saddle pads, crupper and the girth buckle suddenly turned refractory, into things stubbornly unwilling and alien to his fingers. Hands numb with excitement, he finally co-ordinated each movement. The saddling was done. Taking up his rifle, he mounted and, while his horse crossed the hillside at a trot, his eyes linked up the interrupted action of the raid.

From a bend in the hills far up the trail, parties of riders had appeared. Strung out along a front some two hundred yards wide, they rode to meet the drive. As he watched, men and horses met and the riders moved aside to let the herd drive through, closing in on the flanks after it had passed. Back at the encampment, riders swarmed from enclosures like hornets out of a nest and strung out along the trail. Fortified by the sight, Dorje Rinchen changed his pace from trot to gallop and raced across the first hollow. The brow of the next slope would give him a position commanding the shallow pass through which the drive must go.

It was only a matter of moments before the rearguard of the raiders noticed him. A sudden chorus of yells, thin and clear, came down the wind and hurried his riding. The whine of a bullet, followed by the sudden screech of a ricochet rising from the nearby slope, was the first sign of something more. Four men were grouped on the plain, shooting steadily

to prevent him from reaching the shoulder of the hill. With the first sound of that firing, Dorje Rinchen's nervousness vanished. When his horse suddenly faltered he was conscious of only one thought: to reach the brow of the hill ahead of them. He was almost there when something hot and angry drove through his boot and the saddle seemed to explode under him. He was aware of turning in mid-air, blue sky and yellow grass slope blurred around him, then suddenly he found himself gasping for breath. The horse lay, a twitching heap, on the hillside. The firing had stopped. Dorje Rinchen scrambled to his feet and ran the remaining twenty or thirty yards to the brow of the hill; it might not be too late for one shot. For the second time in his life he found himself looking at a living target through the sights of his rifle. The crease in his leg where the bullet had burned felt like a hot brand on his flesh, but he forgot it when his vision focused through the sights. The drive and the wildly exultant riders appeared through a faintly reddish mist as he worked the bolt and trigger of the famous Bora.

They were none too near and rapidly gaining distance, yet with each shot they changed pace and direction like disturbed ants. He stopped to push up the rear-sight, and at the next shot the horse herd split, a closely grouped knot on the right flank swinging sharply outward. Again he raised his sight and at the following shot a spurt of dust appeared just ahead of the splinter herd. Before the riders could stop them, the horses whirled and raced towards home. Most of the riders kept on behind the main herd, but two of the raiders turned, obviously hoping to head the runaways back on to the trail. Dorje Rinchen pressed another clip into his rifle, his fingers slipping up on the hot barrel as he directed his fire towards those two. With each unsuccessful shot, his jerky, hurried praying intensified as he addressed beings located in the sky, on the earth, and in the water. By the Buddha he must hit them!

Which shot reached its mark he never really knew: everyone raised its own explosion of dust on the plain beyond. But suddenly, one of the riders slipped from his saddle. His horse went on, turning uncertainly yet running in growing panic at the banging of the stirrups that pounded a new strange rhythm

on his ribs. Dorje Rinchen worked his hand on the bolt feverishly and suddenly the second horseman turned and raced up the trail after his fellows. The final shot touched the trail and screamed into space.

It was done and the red mist cleared from his eyes. The sky was blue again, the grass slopes yellow as a lama's hat. But before his body could follow his mind's acceptance of something completed, he saw movement and the glint of sunlight on steel deep in the long grass where the raider had fallen. Assurance changed to a sudden premonition and, instead of jumping to his feet, he attempted to turn his rifle in that direction without raising himself from where he crouched, but the tips of the forked rifle rest were wedged deep in the turf. He suddenly felt naked and exposed: too boldly outlined against the hillside to bring his rifle into line. He tried to flatten himself against the slope like a partridge in the grass. Still nothing moved and no shot came from his enemy. Maybe he was waiting for some unwary move to furnish him with a more clearly outlined mark. The sweat pouring down his face, Dorje Rinchen tried again to pull his own gun round, keeping all the while close to the ground. His body was at once tense with expectation and slack with apprehension as he waited for the impact of the bullet. His head hard against the ground, he pressed close, unconsciously straining to bring destruction to his enemy.

The very taste of death was in his mouth, its drums throbbed in his ears. He remembered the costumed imps of death whirling in macabre frenzy, how Shin-rje-chos-rgyal had pursued the wild demons from hell, the whole mad rout stamping to the muffled beat of the drums. Those drums had once called Dorje Rinchen the monk, chief of the Black Hat Wizards, to battle and victory gained by the powers of religion. Now he was merely Dorje Rinchen the renegade, looking at death along a rifle barrel he dared not aim openly. So he crouched, tortured with fear and a sense of helplessness. It was as though he were held in the grip of a dream.

The drumming ceased. A voice spoke from a point on the hill behind him, "What are you shooting at now? Part of the horses are on the way home." His brother and many

others with him moved forward from where they had stopped. Dorje Rinchen sat up to answer, the leg with the bullet crease stretched out stiffly before him. "Nothing but what I hit before," he answered rather hotly. "Lend me a horse and I'll show you."

But the men of the encampment had left him and, shouting exultantly, were riding forward. Duggur pulled his brother on to the back of his horse and they followed the others to that spot where the grasses were long and a gun-barrel had flashed in the sunlight. The group parted for Dorje Rinchen. He looked down on a figure half sprawled, half crouched behind an incompletely aimed gun. There was the face of his enemy whom he had feared, and hated because of that fear. The raider had tried desperately to do one more thing. The twist of his lips showed that, and the grip of his fingers within the trigger guard. Now the wide-open eyes were empty of expression. There were shouts:

"Good shot!"

"Brave son!"

"Serves the dirty horse-thief right!"

"Ha, just to think our wanlog has such a true outlaw spirit!"

"This will make good telling!"

The words echoed empty in the cold spaces of Dorje Rinchen's mind. All the monk in him was hearing the drums of death and there was no exultation in his heart—only the grim acceptance of a shadow. The sunshine would never be as bright again. His mind took up a new wary position against time and the unseen world: taut against the blows that would come.

"Blue sky above us!" exclaimed his brother. "I know that fellow! He is Lhamo Sjab of Samtsa. The poor devil has been very reckless, riding on every raid since Aku Lobzong beggared him by exacting payment of his debts. Well, he'll ride no more. This proves they were Samtsa raiders. Too bad for us. It will be grim war. Our tribes live too close together to be comfortable enemies."

Samtsa! The future, for Dorje Rinchen, crashed. He had driven off the thieves, he had saved part of the horse herd,

he had revenged the crease in his leg and his dead horse, yet the shadow of frustration darkened. From now until the matter was finally settled, he must ride warily, ever suspicious of all. Was this the beginning of retribution? Would punishment follow him all his life? He had sinned and there was no forgiveness. On no account could he ride to Samtsa. Was this what angry gods did to a monk who had broken his vows?

5

Dorje Rinchen would never have come with the annual grain caravan if it had not been for the shooting of the Samtsa raider. It had decisively changed his life, filled it with new fears and sadness. By now, indeed, he would have been on his way to Samtsa, as he had promised.

Duggur, who had treated Dorje Rinchen as an equal since the raid, had been the first to suggest that he go with the barley expedition. It was true that Dorje Rinchen knew traders in the Chinese border trading post of Taochow Old City: men who had visited the cloister of Aku Lobzong and who would certainly make trade easy for the ex-monk. Then, too, in the matter of reckoning and figuring he was surer and quicker than Duggur. But those considerations alone would never have determined the choice.

The barley expedition was more than a mere trade venture, though trade was its immediate object. At least part of the year's income that accrued to the tent had to be converted into food: bags of barley for the making of tsamba, stocks of flour and rice, supplies of various luxuries, such as red peppers, dried jujubes, dried onions, and precious lumps of sugar and malt candy. Cattle, sheep, mares, horses, hides, furs, and butter must be sold to provide purchasing power, or exchanged directly for such foodstuffs. Dorje Rinchen was even testing out his ambition for business acumen and success by experimenting in a little cross-trading, carrying several bales of coarse Szechuan tea that a visiting tea caravan had given for the year's yield of wool.

The expedition was a trip fraught with danger. A season never passed without the robbery of at least one caravan. The round trip, lasting over a month, was a grim test of the

full measure of a tent-dweller's hardihood. When Duggur dispatched him on this trip, it was because he believed Dorje Rinchen a brave son in every sense of the term. The wanlog had won his position as a layman. On the trail his companions also deferred to him. He was a rifleman, and fast becoming famous as a good shot. Quite naturally the old, deeply experienced caravan leader chose him as companion to scout ahead on the trail and help pick camp-sites. So far the ordeal of the grain trip had been more like a picnic as the caravan made its way across the steppe. No snow had fallen and pasturage was still good. With only a few odd loads to take care of in each kettle group, travelling was a day-long lark of movement, feasting and practical joking at every camp-fire. Now, the open steppe behind him, Dorje Rinchen rode cautiously into the deep valley. He had never before left the steppe country, and the new, narrow prospect from the camp-site made him nervous.

Uneasiness changed to simple dislike as they made their slow way down the valley. The stream flowed from side to side, changing direction at each rocky point and at every turn the caravan, too, changed direction. The footsore cattle became increasingly unwilling either to cross or follow the stony stream bed. Buckthorn and scrub willow filled the valley bottom, making coverts into which the cattle strayed, places where a mounted man could not follow.

The dusty fields of the lower valley of the rongwa farming country replaced the last vestige of grazing ground and the banked houses of each village. The farmer folk of the rong, their skimpy garments kilted to above their knees, aroused antagonism and distrust in the nomads. Even their greetings in clipped and mutilated speech seemed foreign.

Every autumn thousands of nomads made the grain trip through the valley farmers' country. The custom was fixed: sanctioned by the weight of past repetition and mutual advantage. Often the rongwa profited when accident or change of plan forced the nomads to buy dear or sell cheap, yet a basic grievance lingered. Harassed and care-ridden as they travelled, the nomads were yet the élite, their mode of life the ideal, and a farmer could only vent his resentment by stealing ox-saddles,

ropes, or grain-bags when the oxen strayed deeply enough into the thickets.

Dorje Rinchen cursed the rong and all its people as he searched the brush at each stop. When they crossed the Tao River at a ford where the water swirled above the stirrups, the countryside changed again. The border had been reached and the terraces and fields of Chinese agriculture covered the hills as well as the valley bottoms. Countrymen driving ox-carts met them and held stubbornly to the middle of the road while the startled caravan oxen stampeded wildly. Dorje Rinchen felt amazement but no sense of inferiority at his first sight of the "wooden horses." If the Chinese—"miserable Chinese" was his private characterization of them—chose to save strength and animals by the use of wheels, that was their way. He was a Tibetan and his loaded yak could go where the wooden horses couldn't.

The complacency of the Chinese, who drove along stampeding his oxen without apology, strongly affected Dorje Rinchen. All the Chinese he had ever seen, the few craftsmen and traders in the Lhamo trading post, and the itinerant traders who had visited the cloister of Aku Lobzong, had always been servile and ingratiating. There was now something appalling to him in the calmness with which they drove their carts and took the right of way. Days of worry and the suddenly acquired sense of dependence on the goodwill and tolerance of even the Chinese added up uncomfortably. He could see that the nomadic bravado of his companions was wearing thin, but they went on, and the older ones held to the basic assurance of experience.

When they reached the border town of Taochow Old City, it seemed immense, streets and lanes everywhere filled with Chinese, walls and gates everywhere shutting off life and movement. There appeared to be no place whatsoever for a Tibetan yak caravan of four kettles totalling over four hundred oxen. Nevertheless, the old leader found the trader he knew and soon the three sat drinking tea while plans were made. From each of the four kettles suitable gifts were presented: the nomad's gesture of friendship and acknowledgment of need. Then a place was found where the caravan

could make camp on an enclosed threshing-floor in the outskirts of the city.

"We have camped here before," the old man explained. "Musa is a good friend. He will protect us and help us all the days we are here." The matter of protection, status, opportunity for trade and eventual success depended on friendship alone.

Dorje Rinchen's expression was both impassive and casual, but for once in his life the shelter of four walls brought comfort. Though strange Chinese might be all round, the camp would be walled in, a unit unto itself, and the sound of Tibetan oaths and talk as camp was made was that of his own people.

6

Day by day, as the slow trading and making of purchases continued, Dorje Rinchen regained his trust in the reasonableness of things. Flashes of nomad arrogance began to reappear in his face and bearing as he walked in the streets of the city. As was not the case of many of his companions, his trading was quickly and easily done. With the greater operating margin on which the wealthy do business, he had a wider choice in what and how to sell, and the matter of the tea turned out to be a very profitable investment. Yet his new-found interest could never quite drive thoughts of Lhate among the Samtsa from his mind.

His purchases of grain were finished early in the period of their stay. One of the two hired men with him could always relieve him in helping pasture the caravan cattle. As a consequence, much leisure was his and with the grain, flour, and rice packed into leather bags and stacked in camp he shopped for the long list of trifles he had been commissioned to take back. He bargained shrewdly. His rosary was never out of his hand: sums in addition could be most easily tallied with the beads. He began to savour deeply the role of man of affairs.

Dorje Rinchen, more than any of his fellows, could evaluate difference of viewpoint. He had once been a monk. Then he had become a layman, changing one scheme of life for another.

He contemptuously dismissed from his mind the life of the rongwa—poor farmer Tibetans who were farmers because they could not be tent-dwellers—but life, as fermenting in the streets of Taochow Old City was another existence. Men dressed, ate, walked, slept, and no doubt thought as differently from the accepted manners of a tent-dweller's life as their strange singsong speech was different from the speech of a nomad.

The goods they sold came from many places. Men talked of the price of furs in the capital of the world, the place called Peking where the residence of the Emperor's household was located, or even claimed origin beyond the seas for some of the wares they offered. A sense of something wonderful and strange in all he saw and heard would not leave him. Some things of this life, like the restaurant food, gained his approbation. Other things, like the fire-heated platforms for beds and the filthy habit of eating eggs only disgusted him. But more than his simple wonder at objects was his growing wonder at the strangeness of this life in its entirety. One day he stopped his saunter down the main street at the entrance to a building, where a crowd had gathered. Under the double pressure of curiosity and the crowd behind him, Dorje Rinchen found himself in a large, somewhat strangely furnished room.

Afterwards he could never remember why he had thought the furniture odd, for the strangeness and the compelling power of the man who stood at the other end of the room swallowed up all other impressions.

"He was just like one of the demons from hell, but, instead of blue hair and yellow eyes, this one had blue eyes and yellow hair." So Dorje Rinchen told his companions some hours later. "Mouth of hell, how he did scold the Chinese, for they all kept still and bowed their heads when he had finished!"

He did not tell how an old Chinese had plucked his sleeve and imperiously motioned him to a seat because he was blocking the doorway; nor did he tell how he had meekly sat where he had been placed, not daring to leave; nor about the strange noise that wailed from a box, making him grip his sword handle ready for any kind of horror; nor about

the reading out of little books. Nothing, however, could be more utterly bizarre than the "Yellow Head."

"Hair," said Dorje Rinchen, "just like winter hay—and a beard"—he gestured—"so." He remembered Trinlan's stories. He had not really believed them. He scarcely believed what he was seeing and hearing now. His kettle-mates roared with laughter and vowed they would find a way to see this new wonder.

It was more easily arranged than they had anticipated, for their host admitted he knew the outlander and quite gladly took them to the big house where they saw the yellow-haired one and his strange belongings: grotesque furniture, queer dishes, lamps, books, a black iron box so full of fire that they almost wilted with the heat, and the box that made a noise like men that shout. Long before all the wonders had been seen Dorje Rinchen's companions had dissolved into one long murmur of awe and amazement.

"The lama knows. The lama knows," they chorused.

"The lama doesn't know at all—not this," thought Dorje Rinchen irreverently.

His amazement was quite as complete as that of his fellows, but some of the superimposed dignity of the monk kept him silent. Only when the outlander invited them to tea did he refuse. The others were too dazed with wonder and would easily have accepted, but the ex-monk felt that the sights were enough in themselves. There was no reason why they should all become beholden to a stranger for entertainment, as though they were friends.

Surprisingly, the Yellow Head spoke some broken Tibetan and in the midst of showing them many things seemed at the same time to be trying to talk about a special subject; he sounded more and more like Trinlan's Yellow Head. Indeed, Dorje Rinchen wondered whether he had heard aright, or were memories of the past playing odd tricks with him? He was not ready to acknowledge that he liked this strange man nor that outlanders know about sin, merit, salvation, and the power of prayer? Such things belonged to the monks of Buddha alone. But when some books were brought out, printed with Tibetan characters of a clearness such as he had never

seen, Dorje Rinchen could not suppress the eagerness that brought him to the front of the group.

“None of us knows letters, but here comes Dorje Rinchen. He does. He was once a monk,” the old caravan leader said. “He knows all the letters. Come here, Doka, and see if these are correct.”

For a brief moment pride in the possession of special knowledge drew Dorje Rinchen out of his feigned indifference. He leafed through the pages. “Yes; beautiful letters,” he acknowledged.

“What do they say, Doka, brave son? You know letters. What do they say?” The crowd pressed close to get a look over his shoulders, questioning urgently.

Obligingly he read, “‘In the beginning was the word and the word was complete perfection.’” Then as the outlander’s finger pointed on to another page, “‘Complete perfection so loved the world that . . .’ But see here! Complete perfection was *not* in the beginning: it only followed self-existent world becoming.” The ardour of monkish argument for a moment carried him away, but the outlander’s finger was again pointing.

“‘Behold the lamb of the complete perfection that takes away the world’s sin’—mm—yes, sin. Now what is sin? What? Am I a sinner? Oh no, mouth of hell, no. I have only fallen from religion and killed a man.” With a quick movement, he shut the book and gave it back swearing hotly at the ripple of laughter that betrayed the amusement of his companions. Still they urged.

“Ah, but Doka, why not take one? The colour is bright and yellow like a lama’s hat.”

But Dorje Rinchen was resolute in his refusal. “No; I don’t want any book. No; not even if you give me one.” He had been a fool to reveal his ability to read. That was part of the irrevocable past. There were many systems of life in the world. The life of the nomads; the life of the poor farmers; the life of the miserable Chinese—miserable no longer, but rich with possessions, values, and strange power when seen in the mass. Even outlanders such as the Yellow Head had their own peculiar way of living, and wonderful magic like the box that shouted. Why should the life of the hereafter—that

world of spirit and fear and an uneasy consciousness of unkind fate waiting where the roads go down to darkness—demand thought and consideration? Uneasy moments had overcome him of late—the thought of punishment for his sins by never seeing Llamo Mtso again. But they were usually quickly banished by his desires for success at trading and in his relations with others.

“Come on; let’s go back,” Dorje Rinchen urged. His insistence won over the childlike awe of his companions, making them follow him from the house of marvels, but his thoughts returned restlessly to the book he had refused. What other things did it say? After all, the letters were beautiful. Later, he talked privately with their trader host, who could acquire anything, and, when at the last he came to pack all the odds and ends of his purchases, a thin yellow book was at the bottom of the bundle.

7

When the grain caravan started homeward there began for Dorje Rinchen such days of back-breaking, muscle-cracking effort as he had never known. He and the two hired men had thirty-five loads to look after: thirty-five loads—each comprising two one-hundred-and-twenty-pound bags of grain—to be loaded on shifting, plunging oxen in the deep darkness before dawn; thirty-five straggling oxen to be herded and kept moving at a steady rate; thirty-five loads to be re-roped as they slipped or shifted or fell as tiring oxen spilled them on the trail; thirty-five loads to be stacked into their section of the camp wall at night; thirty-five loads of food that should last the tent of Jatsang for the year.

In just the few days of travel past the crossing of the Tao River and through the lower farm country, Dorje Rinchen’s muscles swelled and knotted on back and shoulder as they never had before. His hands became blistered and cracked from throwing hitches in the bitter cold of pre-dawn loading, his eyes became red-rimmed from wind, dust and sleeplessness, for the nights were never quiet. The camp stirred the night through with uneasy surges of watchfulness, shouting, and imaginary alarms. Night after night thieves surely lurked in

the shadows waiting a good chance; otherwise, the dogs would have been more quiet.

The trail had changed since the outward trip. The frost of true midwinter had transformed the seepage from springs along the way into spreading iceflows that blocked the trail and filled the valley bottom. Everywhere the dust lay deeper than previously, stirred into a cloud that hung all day over the moving cattle. The stream had disappeared under irregular sheets of ice or welled—a half-frozen mixture—through the rapids to boil at fords, deep with dammed-up slush. Each time the caravan crossed it the cattle lunged and fell. Again and again Dorje Rinchen, stripped naked in the cold, had been in the freezing water to rescue loads. Yet, in spite of all these things, the party made its slow way, crowding the order of camp life and grazing routine into the day's short allotment of time. They could think themselves fortunate that so far they had only lost one ox, its back broken by a fall on the ice.

The aspects of their downward journey were reversed stage by stage like the turning of a bag inside out and back again, as the caravan moved out of the valley system. With infinite but unhurried coaxing, because yak will go on when unhurried but slow down and stop when crowded, the caravan climbed the last long slope to the edge of the steppe country. Again the skyline was nearly flat; a long line of snow and streaks of frost-bleached grass stretched like a parti-coloured ribbon under the afternoon sun. Wind and intense cold changed even the sunshine into a cheerless phantom of the real, yet the dreary prospect held no bleakness for Dorje Rinchen. It was the first glimpse of home.

The men shouted with excitement and exultation as they came out on the windswept meadows of the plateau. "The gods have conquered, the gods have conquered," they chanted as they threw their offerings of stones on the cairn that marked the summit. The horror of crowding forests and sharply tilted slopes where the rocks showed like broken teeth were left behind. Here only the grasses held thin reeds against the wind, making shrill music at their return to the steppe.

It was not until some days later when they had come in sight of the home encampment, the sod walls of the winter

quarters large and solid under the dust haze of early morning, that Dorje Rinchen began to sense the real climax of the month-long trip. The year's trading for grain was done and finished. Oxen and men had made a long, long journey, but were returned, and the life of the tent was assured for another year. Those thirty-five heavy loads would soon be stacked in the rear of the tent, the ample stores of the family of Jatsang. He was weary as he had never been before, his face cracked and scarred beneath the heavy mask of dust; but his eyes, though red-rimmed, were yet bright with pride. He piled bag for bag with Duggur in a tight race and muscles bunched on his shoulders with his new power. He would be a wealthy trader, and he sensed now that he had the ability. The gods were not unkind to him; perhaps they had forgiven him, for the caravan had not been attacked on the return journey. He had much to tell of trade, of the trail. He had things to show: all he had been commissioned to get, and more. For a while, at least, he was the centre of attention to a degree that he had not been since the time when he had been the monk of the family of Jatsang and of the cloister of Aku Lobzong. He could drink his tea and rest, though that was a matter of choice, not necessity. Now was the time to open the bundles and tell the tale of the things he had brought. Ahway, Wochuck and even Jatsang seemed proud of him and the servant-girls giggled at him more than ever.

When he came to the end he stared for a long while at the thin yellow book at the bottom of the pile. His monkish past had tricked him. The sight of the clear, beautiful printing had touched something in him strange to his fellows of the trail; strange to the life of the tent. This book had nothing to do with the annual barley expedition. Surreptitiously he covered it with wrappings taken from around the thread and the trinkets he had bought. He wanted nothing to spoil the fine perfection of the moment and the feeling of success that properly belonged to one who had safely made the annual trip to the Chinese border and back. Only a wanlog would be interested in writings. For the moment he wished to be all nomad: a tent-dweller of the tent-dwellers. The book could wait. But he knew that he would never forget the blue eyes

of the Yellow Head nor his strong, gentle voice, and that some day he would look at the book again.

8

They were twenty men of Shami: the youngest, best armed, best mounted and most daring, and they were riding again this year to see the dance of the Wishing Prayer in spite of Samtsa and what Samtsa would do. Small wonder then that they rode warily and with rifles ready, for the truce of the Wishing Prayer was not wholly sure and Samtsa are most dangerous foes.

When they reached the crest of the hill the group of horsemen came to a straggling halt. The dust of their going drifted past them and across the mountainside, a spreading yellow cloud anchored for a moment to their horses' hooves, then breaking away to float free in the sunlight. The riders sat in silence looking across the irregular contours of one-time glacial moraines to the dark grove of Tamdrin and the red-and-white patchwork pattern of the lamasery where people hurried along the paths and across the slopes like insects in some seasonal swarming.

The sound of drums and trumpets was intermittently clear in pauses of the wind and, as though in response to that summons, without speaking among themselves, the horsemen again rode on. Each one carried his rifle across the saddle bow with a caution ever alert and ready.

His companions had come to see the last of the dance and participate by being included in the blessing of the Wishing Prayer, but Dorje Rinchen rode with but one thought, for he tried to push back into some far recess of his mind all personal interest in every religious observance. His immediate concern was to see Lhamo Mtso. Rumour spread that Samtsa had come in force, and although he had received no personal message, something assured him she would be there: a face in the wall of faces watching the triumph of the Black Hats, a face that would also be looking for him somewhere in the crowd. Until the affair with Samtsa was settled he was a marked man and must ride with even greater caution than his fellows. As their horses went side by side down the trail

and the throb of the drums grew louder, he and Duggur talked.

“Dog-headed Samtsa,” Duggur swore, “they can’t keep us from seeing the dance. But we must act with a small heart; yes, the very smallest of hearts when the rifle-firing at the burning of dorma takes place. Someone might fire in the wrong direction. It has happened before. Yes; always act with a small heart.” Duggur’s reckless grin belied his words and he swaggered. “But anything, so long as we see the praying. Holy lamas bless us! We’ll get scarves of blessing from the big lama; scarves of blessing to wear with our beads.”

“Yes, lama bless us,” answered the younger brother perfunctorily, but his thoughts were elsewhere. “I wonder if the womenfolk of Samtsa have come.”

“What good if they have? We can’t be here the night of the Butter Images.” Duggur’s voice grew complacent. He too had memories. “I have slept with Abrang, wife of the Samtsa chief, every night of the Butter Images for three years. There is a woman! And this year—but you were such a good shot—too good. Whatever it is, we of Shami always win. Now we have to hide like rabbits for a time.”

“Perhaps,” suggested Dorje Rinchen, “if we took our horses to Aku Lobzong’s cloister for safe keeping on that night, we could manage to see the Butter Images.”

“Who wants to see the Butter Images? It is to do something. . . . What do you mean? Who? Ah yes; Lhamo Mtso. That would be it! By the sacred magic, yes! But Samtsa are dangerous for us this year. Yet, it would be good. And Abrang. . . .”

The three who had drawn lots for the first shift as guards for the horses took over. The others climbed towards the grove of Tamdrin coming through the trees to a place from which they could see the dance. A stir of excitement ran through the bystanders as people recognized them and friends from other tribes volunteered news or warning.

“It’s all right,” said one. “The great lama has tied the affair until after the festival.”

“Samtsa are here in force,” announced another.

“The affair is still tied, but Dorje Rinchen had better keep

out of sight," an old man advised. "Lhamo Sjab's relatives are here and looking for him."

Each whispered warning was like a swallow of strong Chinese whisky to the young blades from Shami. Never had the watching of the Wishing Prayer Festival been so spiced with danger. The order of the dance was more than half finished when they reached the grove, but they arrived in time to see Shin-rje-chos-rgyal make his entrance. The square was well filled and the drama half completed.

Only to the ex-monk would each move leading to the entrance of the Black Hats have specific meaning, but Dorje Rinchen gave it little heed. For the time he was neither layman nor monk. Yet as he noticed the greetings from some of the acolytes who pounded drums and banged cymbals and saw that monks sitting in their long rows recognized him he pondered. There was always the threat of future punishment, but he knew also that the lama, motionless on his golden throne, was watching him; of this he was sure. Could he not win the old man by success and wealth as time went on? He would pay for many prayers and would they not create a defence against the menace of that other dark world? The penalty of a broken vow, the accusation in a dead man's face, and the hundred and one uncertainties of the spirit world blew impotently against the cloak of his growing assurance. The lama's eyes were greedy as of old, but in a different way, Dorje Rinchen thought.

The dance gave him aid as he unobtrusively left his fellows and mingled in the crowd. Time had passed quickly and the light lessened. Shadows rose long and dark under the slanting rays of the afternoon sun and with that change the Black Hat Wizards moved into the square. At their coming it was as though a cloak of invisibility had fallen upon him. No one felt or saw him as he pushed into the crowd. They saw only the Black Hats, they felt only tension. If Lhamo Mtso were there at all, she would be in a certain place. At a point in the ring of spectators where the setting sun fell full she would be keeping a tryst. He felt sure of that.

It was true. He was invisible to all but her.

While the chief Black Hat Wizard worked through the

climax of the dance and gunfire and shouting expressed the joy of the crowd, Dorje Rinchen and Lhamo Mtso met in a sheltered place where the wall of the square came near the edge of the wood. Six months before, a shy tradition-bound monk, hedged in by all the inhibitions creed and caste could create, had been swept headlong from one world into another. Now, a man of the free life of the tents looked again at Trinlan's sister and found her dearer than ever: too dear to lose again.

They talked hurriedly. Plans must be made and the future settled, but the moments raced by and thoughts and foresight went wildly astray in the turmoil of reunion. Trinlan found them all too soon, his face anxious and his voice troubled.

"Well that I, instead of the relatives of Lhamo Sjab, found you, Doka!" he exclaimed. "What risks you run to be here at all and what greater risks to be separated from your companions—twenty men with rifles and swords! Brave sons of Shami, all right, but get back to them quickly."

"We must meet—we must . . ." stammered Dorje Rinchen. Lhamo Mtso's hand found his and pressed into it a string of beads.

"The night of the Butter Images—here when it is dark—black dark," she urged, and was gone with Trinlan.

Dorje Rinchen warily sought the shadow of the trees and the way to the place where the men from Shami were gathered around their horses. Yet even after he had arrived they waited, for Duggur too was long in coming. At last he appeared, his hand upon his sword, running through the dusk.

"Come on," he shouted, climbing into his saddle with his rifle held high in his right hand. "Samtsa were gathered to talk about us when I left."

He began to yell and the others took it up as they vanished into the dusk, the sound of splashing water and the confused staccato of horses' hooves trailing behind them. In spite of their haste, they had been careful to go by way of the regular ford below the long line of the prayer-mills. To cross the stream above them was unthinkable sacrilege. Before they were well out of the valley Duggur had ridden close to Dorje Rinchen, muttering low so that the others couldn't hear. "We

must make plans to spend the night of the Butter Images in Lhamo. Are you still willing? What was it you said about leaving our horses at Aku Lobzong's after dark?"

The brothers rode close together making their plans until it was time for them to say goodbye to the others and ride their own way wherever it might lead.

9

Twenty-four hours later Dorje Rinchen and Duggur again topped the brow of the hill just as dusk was beginning to fill the valley. Smoke from evening fires blew into their nostrils and the sound of distant voices—cries, laughter and the hum of praying—called them on. They alone of all Shami dared venture to Lhamo on the night of the Butter Images. If Samtsa found them, they could expect no mercy. With many halts and detours, they found their way to the door of Aku Lobzong's cloister.

The venerable one talked with the brothers in his little inner room. Neither would drink tea—the time was too short—but both paid their respects. Aku Lobzong was now very old, so old that his voice made the barest whisper as he turned the pages of the never-ended prayer; but his dim, withdrawn face lit up with a flicker of affection as his eyes, through the old rock crystal lenses, searched Dorje Rinchen's face.

"So you have broken all the vows, haven't you?" Aku Lobzong said. "First the greater and then the lesser. Though killing a man isn't the greatest sin, more trouble follows. Until the matter is settled, you can never be without fear."

For a few moments the quavering voice was busied with the *Prayer for Wisdom*, while his mind bent to the old petition or perhaps thought of all the deeds in a lifetime that are wisdom's arrears. Dorje Rinchen, too, was busy with thoughts about the snares of fate that are stretched in the dark for unwary feet.

A shiver of foreboding checked his impatience. What would Aku Lobzong—at one time a god in his regard and still of all he knew closest to final wisdom—what more would he have to say?

"Reckless—it was reckless to come at this time. You are a

marked man and Samtsa would pay well for information about you. Now that you have brought your horses I'll lock in my acolyte for the night. I trust no one when there is money to be made. I'll listen for your return. Make it before daylight at least.

"But, why should you riot the night of the Butter Images? Now that you are no longer a monk, don't live a bachelor life. Have a wife and your tent. That is best. The doctrine does not say so. The doctrine says nothing for you—nothing to direct your way. You are outside that realm, but you, my best of acolytes, should have the best. Have your own woman, not some other, the night the Butter Images are shown. Duggur is different; he does not care about the best. He is merely interested in living like a brave."

The old man's voice again took up the burden of the long, long prayer. The two young men bent in acknowledgment, murmuring, "Lags-so-lags-so" (with reverence) and left.

The brothers separated with a mutual warning. Dorje Rinchen, the wide collar of his great sheepskin coat turned up round his face and an additional felt cloak about him, believed himself quite safe from detection. He made his way quickly to the spot where the wall of the square makes a dark angle with the grove of Tamdrin. Lhamo Mtso was not there. For an instant suspicion flooded his mind; he shifted quickly and, his back to the wall, whipped out his sword waiting tensely for the flurry of blows and the onrush of attack. No movement came; there was only the vague whisper of trees in the dark. Crouching low, his head near the ground to place the slope on the skyline, he waited, sword in one hand and the little string of beads in the other.

The long minutes drew on to the breaking-point. Lhamo Mtso did not come. He wondered whether she had suddenly been taken sick, whether Samtsa had returned home in a body and—once—whether someone else. . . . But that thought barely flicked him with pain before it was gone as he turned her beads over in his hand.

"Doka—Doka—szu—szuu. . . . The sound was like an echo among the trees answering his thoughts. Lhamo Mtso's husky laugh welled in her throat as she felt the sword in his hand.

“There’s no need of fear tonight, my Doka. Because you of Shami dared ride to see the dance, Samtsa fear you plan an ambush for tonight. All are staying in their camp above the stream. I slipped away and no one knows—no one except Trinlan. He was on guard and turned his head when I was leaving. It means a fine of fifty ounces of silver if anyone is known to leave. Your brother will be angry, because Abrang is not coming. She couldn’t; nor did she care too much. But I—I *had* to come. We are safe, my Doka, and the night is ours.” She sang, “‘Oh you, for whom my flesh so yearns, when will I win my token back?’”

The lilt of the love-song was far too loud for safety, but they had dismissed fear. Dorje Rinchen pushed his sword into its sheath and wrapped his arm round the girl’s shoulder.

“Well then,” he said to her, “do we see the Butter Images—Drolma the merciful—all white and gold?”

“It is late, very late, Doka. We have so much to say. See, the moon is not far away. ‘When will I win my token back?’”

The night was white with beauty and brittle with cold. On the far, still edge of the hay racks of the lamasery, where Dorje Rinchen prepared privacy and shelter, Lhamo Mtso won her token back.

Later, the two talked long about milch cows, cattle, tent-cloth and churns until the future changed from wonder to a well-ordered plan that should begin when Lhamo Mtso could flee from her tribe and go to live with Dorje Rinchen.

“All will be very angry with me,” Lhamo Mtso said. “It is you who have killed a man from Samtsa. All will be angry but Trinlan. He, I think, will smile and be glad, even as he rides with the rest to chase us. That ride—ah Doka, when we make it be sure the horses are the best in all of Shami!”

The night of great daring had come. Twenty days had gone by since the night of the Butter Images and uncertainty choked him. But she had said, “just when the edge of the moon reaches the western hill.” Some time after the young moon had set and all was dark, Dorje Rinchen had left Shami and ridden until sunrise, coming to rest in a narrow

valley, a depression more like a rock-walled room than a valley. There he had made camp, letting the horses graze. He had tied them up, however, and made them fast towards the latter half of the day so that they would be partly empty and fit for fast going by nightfall. Now everything was ready, and he could but wait until the moon, reaching the rim of the western mountains, became the signal lamp of his tryst. He felt reasonably safe from discovery.

The two horses, closely hobbled and tied head to head, stood under the bank of the water-course without moving. Dorje Rinchen, stretched out on the edge of the bank level with the tops of their heads, could make the best of the limited visibility. As daylight had faded and the dim moon appeared overhead, he had left his hiding-place of the day and ridden warily in the shelter of the tangled hills and ridges that skirt the winter encampments of Samtsa until he reached this last hiding-place closest to Trinlan's encampment. It was still early, and after a cautious survey from the nearby shoulder of the last hill, he lay quietly waiting for the moment when action would come.

The horses, one dark and one white, fitted perfectly into the patchwork pattern of the winter landscape and the dim white iceflows of the now frozen stream. They were, he thought, the two best horses in all of Shami—that was why they tossed their heads—and nothing Samtsa would muster could touch them. Certainly, he had seen no one in the ride of the last few miles. Dorje Rinchen moved restlessly. If only the horses would stop throwing their bits, making that unmistakable tinkle in the still air.

He crept to the crest of the point in front of him and stared across the valley at the dark mixture of shadow, light, smoke haze and gleams of fire-glow of the encampment of Trinlan. Dorje Rinchen dared not risk attracting attention by moving too early. A few minutes' delay might be equally disastrous, because Lhamo Mtso could hope only for a small margin of time before her absence would be noticed. Knowing the encampment dogs, she could probably get out without being bitten, but not without rousing them to furious noise and excitement. Dorje Rinchen must reach the edge of the bank, a

bare two hundred paces from the encampment, before the members of Lhamo Mtso's family took alarm and started out, or, worse still, catching a glimpse of someone moving by the stream, began to shoot while the womenfolk saddled the horses for pursuit.

Now he watched the moon, trying to measure the time it would take to get his horses and ride those last few paces against that far-off space in the sky where it hung so obstinately. Twice he went back to the horses and then decided that it was too early. Finally, he unhobbled them and mounted, riding slowly to the point of the hill.

The moon reached the hilltop and its light began slowly to fade. Still the dogs continued their perfunctory bickering, snapping at one another, but showing no greater excitement: this meant that she had not yet started. The shadow was now much deeper and offered more protection where he rode, but at the ford—thick with slush and uncertain with traps and ledges of sun-rotted ice—the horses balked. A dog suddenly howled with excitement. It stopped and then started again. Now the camp was in an uproar. Bearing down savagely on the reins and using his feet and rifle butt recklessly, Dorje Rinchen clubbed his horse into the ford and after a moment of agonizing uncertainty while the other horse stretched the lead rope almost to the point of breaking, it too followed. They were across and moving towards the bank under the encampment.

The sound of thudding feet, the striking of metal ornaments on leather, met him as he reached the bank and a moment later Lhamo Mtso was beside him in the dark calling "Doka—Doka" in the loudest of whispers. Then she was in the saddle of the horse which he turned for her and, as quickly, he was back in his own.

In the deep shadow at the foot of the hill pandemonium had broken loose, shouting and the fury of the dogs. The alarm had come much more quickly than expected; they had the narrowest margin of a lead in which to get away. As they turned towards the ford the sound of riding, irregular and intermittent as the riders stopped to wait for others, made that lead seem even shorter. Then at the ford, just as they

were about to make the one mistake and, by the sound of horses crashing through ice and splashing through water, set the entire hunt hard on their trail, the shout of a familiar voice stopped him in time.

“Shami! Shami thieves are at the first encampment! All horsemen meet there and give chase—orders of the chief—orders of the chief!”

That pursuit gathering so thunderously in the dark was not for them. By waiting in the shadow of the bank, they could let it pass and then go their way in safety. Dorje Rinchen dismounted to hold the horses by their noses so they could neither nicker nor toss the clinking bits as the other horses went past. High above the noise Trinlan’s voice rang commandingly.

“All follow me along this higher road. Let no one spread out until we reach the encampment—the furthestmost encampment.” Almost with the words the sound of plunging, running, impatient horses grew fainter as the pursuit moved off along the level of the upper trail.

“Trinlan knew! I’m sure he knew it was tonight, the way he watched me all evening as if he wanted to laugh.”

Lhamo Mtso’s whisper barely reached him, though he was less than a yard away at the heads of the two horses, but instantly Dorje Rinchen was sure that Trinlan had known—had led the pursuit after the cattle thieves on the upper level of the long trail so that he and Lhamo Mtso might have a head start. Trinlan had shouted so that they might know what was up and which direction the Samtsa pursuit would take. In the greater confusion, Lhamo Mtso’s absence might not be discovered until morning or, if noticed, there was little that those remaining in camp could do about it.

All was quiet when they coaxed their horses through the ford and started the night ride. It would now be longer than Dorje Rinchen had originally planned. The trail leading directly to Shami, which he had planned to take, would be filled with the pursuit troops of Samtsa intent on catching the cattle-thieves unless they picked up the track of the stolen cattle on some other trail. They were safe for the moment, and in the relief and assurance of that knowledge they found

time to talk. Dorje Rinchen learned the details of Lhamo Mtso's escape.

"I was able to wear my biggest sheepskin coat—my new one—and all my silver and coral hair ornaments," rejoiced Lhamo Mtso. "Father had them made for me months ago, but I had never worn them. Today I said I wanted to see how well they became me, and Trinlan's wife helped me dress. Then they suggested I see how they looked with my new sheepskin coat, so I put that on too. Of course, I had wanted to, but didn't dare attempt it for fear someone would suspect. But when Trinlan encouraged it everyone urged me on. He looked at me so strangely and once he began to laugh. You know, Doka, a year ago I was wondering whether you would come to pay Trinlan a visit, but the days went by and you never came."

"A year ago I was hoping to become the assistant leader of the chanting." The old life had receded far into the past when Dorje Rinchen could speak thus, with a laugh that yet had something of Duggur's grimness in it. "Then I couldn't even ride to Samtsa for a visit and now—by the blue sky—now I ride in a black night when raiders and pursuers are in the saddle. I ride with a companion too; not alone in the night any more."

Most of the time they were content to ride without speaking, linked in that peculiar closeness of companionship that envelops two people when they ride knee to knee. A tie almost as intimate as an embrace bound them one to the other as they went on without a stop on this, their wild bridal night. Dorje Rinchen thought there would never be another woman for him. At this moment, at any rate, of this he was sure.

The last bit of reflected moonlight faded from the sky and the shadows darkened even the patches of snow crunching under their horses' hooves. Then the stars thickened and a strange half-light helped outline the contours of the mountain land. The great slopes that seemed to block their way began to lengthen into that highest steppe where the tents of Shami are pitched in summer-time. Just as the eastern sky began to turn faintly grey they rode into the midst of creatures that snorted and ran in the dark. Yet the few cattle seemed glad

to gather where horses and the herdman's call assured them of human companionship in the night. There were six milch cows and three great yak, together with four half-grown yak calves, and they lumbered along ahead of the drivers for a short distance. However, they could not be driven as fast as the two had been moving and Dorje Rinchen started to pass them and go on. On this night of nights only one thing mattered: getting Lhamo Mtso safely to the Shami winter encampment. But Lhamo Mtso objected. Quite obviously the cattle were a strayed part of the herd driven away from Samtsa by the cattle-thieves and, in the present state of warfare between the two tribes, they constituted a prize even more than lawful.

"Doka, they are ours," she insisted. "Ours for the time when we have our own tent. Whatever your brother gives you for our separate tent, it will be little enough, and we can have these cattle for our very own. It will all be reckoned up when the affair is settled, but for the time they will be ours if only we can get them to the tents. Let's drive them till dawn and then if we see pursuers we can leave them if we have to. On such horses as these we need have no fear. Come on; we'll drive them. Yak-rgan—oh yang-la—yang-la—whee-er!"

Daybreak found them on the edge of the great plain. Though they rode with their faces turning anxiously towards the bleak mountains through which they had come, no pursuers appeared. The sun gleamed coldly through crystals in the morning frost haze, and horses and cattle moved in a cloud of steam of their own making. With the coming of the sun Dorje Rinchen could make out specks of black on the rim of the world that would be the Shami herd moving from the encampments to the pasture of the day. He shifted their course slightly, and not long afterwards they found themselves approaching the freshly lit fire of the herders. It was Duggur who greeted them as he rose from behind his rifle when they had assured him of their identity.

"A woman and cattle at the same time! How do you do it, Doka?" His appreciative glance raked Lhamo Mtso. "You're well worth breaking a vow for, anyway. Did you bring the

cattle as a present to Doka or as payment for the fine of having made him break his vow? Too bad Doka doesn't like Wochuck so that some time we could—well, well. The tea is ready and you must be thirsty, newest daughter-in-law in the tent of Jatsang.”

Lhamo Mtso's eyes saw only Dorje Rinchen as they dismounted and took their places by the fire while the cattle they drove scattered to graze among the other herds of the tent of Jatsang.

III

THE TENT-DWELLER

THE SCOUTS OF Shami had taken a prisoner, and brought him back to the encampment. He stood, defiant yet pitiful, while Duggur and several others put iron hobbles on his ankles. "Two pair are enough," one of them said, but Duggur was not satisfied until three pair were locked on, weighing the man down so that he could scarcely move his legs. Then they untied his hands.

"Better treatment than I had when Kanggan held me prisoner," said Duggur. "But we'll put hobbles on his wrists at night just to make sure."

Dorje Rinchen stood by shaken by alternate hope and fear. Was this, perhaps, a man of Samtsa? He thought so. Or was this thought only vague hope, for, if it were, here might be a way to escape the consequences of his sin, the physical ones, at any rate, for life money is a recognized atonement and this man's life could be bargained for as a freeing of Dorje Rinchen from the penalties of revenge? With his new ambitions, with his growing power, the deep consciousness of possible retribution was often with him. Would the men of Samtsa kill him, or steal Lhamo Mtso? Would the gods deny him the child, the son he so much desired? They had called out for Lhamo Mtso to join them. She would know.

The captive stiffly rubbed his swollen hands, his eyes searching the crowd for some sign of sympathy or recognition. There was a smear of dried blood across his cheek and the dust was thick on his face. He was a prisoner among his enemies, but his eyes now widened with recognition and appeal when they rested on Lhamo Mtso as she moved through the crowd to Dorje Rinchen.

"Doka, this is the younger brother of Lhamo Sjab. He has

been away at Lhasa for years and only recently returned. I am sure he is Lhamo Sjab's own brother and no other."

They were at first incredulous, then grimly exultant.

"Next to the chief of Samtsa, he is the one man worth catching," Duggur said. "Now they'll make a settlement. It's a matter of a life for a life: a life given back, not to the tribe alone, but to the very same family. Now the peacemakers will ride without delay! We mustn't forget to lock the iron hobbles at night and frighten him into thinking we'll beat him to death. Then when peacemakers come he'll beg and plead! With the threat of being beaten he'll be eager for a settlement. His life is already forfeit. Black-hearted brute to be lurking near our flocks! No doubt for a shot at you, Dorje Rinchen. But now his family will be ready enough to settle!"

Hope was now really easing Dorje Rinchen's heart. He had wanted his own tent, he had loved the feel of his new-found layman's life, but neither Lhamo Mtso's love nor wealth was enough. He longed to throw off the shadows that clung to him as a wanlog. Duggur, he felt, and the others did not understand; Ahway perhaps did, and Jatsang surely, sitting sometimes abstracted and strange at his prayer-wheel.

The men of the tribe of Shami, and more particularly of the encampment of the family of Jatsang, needed only to keep a good watch over the prisoner for the next weeks; taking care, too, that the hardships of captivity did not menace his life. They could relax in the first breathing-spell of security they had known since the day of the raid on the horse herd. The arbitrators as yet had not put in an appearance, nor had anyone authoritatively declared a truce, yet Samtsa riders would certainly not attempt a raid while one of their number was held as a prisoner, for reprisals could be immediate. They set rumours going from tent to tent and on to other tribes—rumours of tortures about to be inflicted on the captive—and Shami waited in peace for the next move that Samtsa must make.

At last one day the representative of the Lhamo lama, along with the head of the monkish commune of the lamasery, came to say that the lama was trying the affair for one month and making arrangements within that time to call together

the heads of the twelve tribes to arbitrate and make peace. The principal monk told them this as he sat in the tent of Jatsang, sipping his tea and rounding out the sonorous roll of his periods with gestures taken from the preaching scenes of Gotama the enlightened one. The "shadow of the Presence" was no ineffectual preacher himself, and the sermon he delivered, between sips of tea, fell upon attentive ears.

Jatsang himself, his face more than ever lined with the sad signs of shortening time, was doubly glad to hear of settlement. Death, retribution, and the ever-present menace of an unsettled affair were actually bearing heavily on him.

"Lags-so, Lags-so," he answered with his palm turned up, but the whine of the prayer-wheel whittled at his words until they were thin and blurred.

Only Duggur was absent. When the monks had first spoken he had left the tent, picking up a stick and hurrying away. But he was back in time to hear the monks declare that they must see the prisoner before they left so that they would be assured that he was still alive; they had heard the man was dead or near dead. It might be too late to arbitrate the affair on the basis of a live prisoner of bargaining value.

"Oh yes, the prisoner is still alive," admitted Duggur as though acknowledging a fault. "How long will he be alive? Well, who can tell? A captive life is hard, especially in mid-winter. If you really must see him, come with me."

With the others, Dorje Rinchen had often taken his turn watching the prisoner or taking him food, but he had never before seen him look so wretched. The hut was cold, with one of the tiniest and smokiest of fires to fight the frost of a Tibetan winter. With only an old, worn-out summer coat round him, the captive shivered disconsolately and his piteous face showed the marks of blows. Indeed, as the party entered, he had cowered. Battered, fettered with chains and iron hobbles, his face showing the sickly pallor of suffering and fear, he could only beg the monks to help with the settlement before time grew too short and he would die.

However, after the monks had gone, Duggur brought out the man's own heavy coat and tossed it to him.

"Just once more we give you a chance to live," Duggur said.

“We mustn’t let him get sick and die,” he said to his younger brother after they left. “His is the life we expect to trade for the one we took, and it would do us no good. I hated to beat him as I did, but he looked too comfortable and well to be shown to the monks. They will now have a great story to tell his people. Did you see that lump over his eye? That was the way they beat me when I was a prisoner in Kanggan. Don’t tell the father or the women. Their hearts are too tender. Yes, and run back, Doka, and build up the fire. I tore it to pieces to make it smoke.”

Within the home tent the monks were saying goodbye with lofty condescension and tying up their robes with scarves and sashes against the winds of the open steppe. They urged an early meeting and promised to be back within a few days. “For the sake of the lama and the commune of the monks, stop beating the prisoner, at least until we return,” they begged at parting and rode off well pleased with Duggur’s grudging assent.

The person of the captive fascinated Dorje Rinchen. In the smoky half-light of the hut the sullen and pinched face, grimed with the ashes and soot of the closely tended fire, strongly reminded him of another face, sneering with futile hate over a gun barrel suddenly too heavy for failing muscles.

Dorje Rinchen, sitting in the doorway of the hut, wondered about the twin horsemen of life and death. In this miserable, fettered creature the chance of life had come back and the paying of his debt might become effective. Until Shami had caught this prisoner lurking in an ambush and could use his life as bargaining value, even life money had been refused by the family of Lhamo Sjab, intent only on revenge. Dorje Rinchen roused himself. The fire in the hut had burned low. He hastened to bring fuel. They must not let him die, and Dorje Rinchen liked the assurance of seeing he was still there when the fire-glow filled the hut from sod walls to black tent top.

“Here is fuel. Keep warm,” he said and sat back to watch the light leap from the nozzle of the fire-bag, bringing into relief the face and form of the prisoner.

Dorje Rinchen brooded much on the past as they sat later in the guest-room of the lama's great house in Lhamo and listened to the argument of all the chiefs of the twelve tribes. At intervals, servants went the rounds and replenished the bowls of tea, set in a great ring reaching to the furthest limits of the guest-room. There the leaders sat and drank their tea day after day, while the argument unrolled replete with reference to tribal precedents and custom. Between sessions, friends, specialists in knotty points of custom, relatives of the parties included and the monks of the commune held special meetings with one another in the open, stoutly wrapped against the wind and heedless of the cold so long as they were assured of privacy from spying ears.

There Dorje Rinchen met Trinlan and the two sat at their old point of vantage, overlooking the lamasery as they had done on a day when they had been two monks talking about life in a cloister and life in a black tent. Trinlan's face, keen as of old, was now harder and more assured. Some of the bitterness had left it, changed perhaps to an even bolder defiance.

"So Lhamo Mtso's heart is still warm for her own?" he queried. "It would be. It would be. Our Lhate planned well. I had seen you two here, Doka and Lhate." He smiled as he called them by their nicknames. "And had turned my back on the night of the Butter Images because I knew something was up. To be sure, I made the suggestion about her new coat when she was trying on the hair ornaments. When she put it on I was sure. Strange we missed you that night we rode to pursue the cattle-thieves of Shami. Yes; very strange indeed!"

Dorje Rinchen's mind was heavy with foreboding about the affair of the dead man and his face failed to match the merriment in Trinlan's crooked smile. To be respected, feared, even hated, if that hatred were tempered with grudging admiration, was well enough, but the sullen eyes of the captive had said unforgettable things. He tried to relieve his mind by telling Trinlan of his experience with the Yellow Head. He was shy of saying much. Trinlan smiled knowingly.

“So you believe me now. Some day, we shall see. Perhaps he will come here. Perhaps we shall see him together.” But then he returned abruptly to the present:

“The affair will be settled soon enough. Do you see the chief of Tangkor over there talking to the representative of the lama? Listen well to him, Doka. When that fat old man begins to talk, the settlement is going well. . . . Next time we meet in the guest-hall, listen for Tangkor’s speech.

“And when all is settled bring Lhamo Mtso to see us. Aku Lobzong and my uncle Aku Dentzen have already undertaken to settle the affair so we may all be like relatives. My father yearns to see his only daughter. The difficulty is that he wants to have you come and be the son-in-law-brought-in in the tent.

“Look, the Tangkor has moved, and the orators of the lamasery have started towards the guest-hall. Time for us to go. Just one thing: be sure of your captive. You have brought him here, of course. Be sure he doesn’t get away.”

The preliminary negotiations had ended and the peace-making had reached a crisis. The manner of the tea-drinking showed that: drinking prolonged through taut moments that seemed to have no end. Added to that tense ritual was the presence of the lama, aloof on his golden throne and holy, his dignity stiff with the encrusted sanctions of religion, although he still looked sinister and hypercritical to Dorje Rinchen. For the first time since the peace parleys had begun, Dorje Rinchen found his palms wet, and he blew steam from the tea into the frosty air. The “Shadow of the Presence,” chief preacher of the lamasery, began to gesture with wide-open palms towards the golden throne as he spoke. “Peace is the goal of all men’s desire: peace now and in the hereafter. And that there might be peace and a way of peace the ‘Presence’ came, the lamasery was founded, and the path of merit made complete. So the towers of the temple stand, so the cloisters of the monks were built, so the monks keep their holy vows that the praying may never cease and the pilgrims may be ever blessed. There are the blessings of the eightfold way, there are the blessings of the fulfilled vow, and there are the blessings of perfected wisdom. But it is not fit that I should

“speak of religion now. Instead, I speak of peace. How can pilgrims worship and the service of the lamasery be maintained when the tribes ride at war and the pilgrims are afraid to spend their days on the path of merit that bounds the temple towers?”

His voice droned on, piling argument on argument, preaching the fears of the hereafter against the sins of the present and pleading that the tribes be at peace so that penance for sin might go on without interruption.

“As all men wish for peace so be at peace for fear of greater sin. I speak for the Presence Himself, my words are the words of the Perfect Mouth.”

The Presence nodded, and the echo of preachments, sounding very much like averted curses, lingered in the guest-hall.

The chiefs of the twelve tribes murmured their approval: “Lags-so, lags-so.”

But Shami and Samtsa answered instantly with negations sharp as swords. The lamasery was well within the realm of peace, but, for themselves, they reserved the right of war and all its toils. So said each brave tribe. “Our cartridge belts are full and our horses heavy with flesh even in midwinter.” That proud boast was the identical end of each speech where-with the challenge to peace was answered.

The servants again filled the bowls, the steam from each one rising like a misty plant flowering in the gloom, and all drank in agreement with either exhortation or protests. Against such sharp hates and bitter passions peace in the abstract had small chance. Peace was made to depend on fear and who would admit to being afraid?

The chief’s voice rose with fiery pride as the glories of the past were made to march again in the shadows of the guest-hall and parade before his hearers.

“Dare we saddle the horse, girth and crupper tight with stirrups waiting, put the great bit on the head-stall, lay the whip near and not expect the horse to be ridden and sweated as in a bath at the hot springs?” the chief asked his listeners. “Again the Chinese will hear we are at war, divided and weak, and again the Chinese will put the nose ring in and twist it

until the blood comes. 'Dumb brutes of Tibetans,' they say, and we are dumb—dumb like hairy yak—if we do that. You, Shami, live far away and have not felt their power in the memory of your oldest elders, but Samtsa, you must know it is true. And still you would rather fight Tibetans—born from the same wild mother—than be strong to fight the Chinese."

Though the Presence on the golden throne made proper endorsement of the speech, none of the hearers waited for that endorsement to determine their acceptance. It followed as a matter of course and it rang sharp and bitter with truth and disillusionment. Only Shami still answered defiantly, fearing neither Chinese nor any other foes that might come. Samtsa, remembering the campaign of the summer past, was silent for very shame.

The old chief of Doma spoke: "Whatever may come, it is but right that Tibetan law be the only law for the tent peoples. We the arbitrators offer a strictly Tibetan settlement. Life money paid to the family by all the tribe of Shami. Cattle paid back, head for head in kind, by all the tribe of Shami. Horses paid back, head for head in kind, by all the tribe of Samtsa. And the riders keep personally what they drove—hard riders that they are, may the Lha protect their riding—payment is to be by the tribe as a whole. The price of the prisoner's life is to be paid by Samtsa before he is released to them. Then there will be peace fixed and complete, to be guaranteed by the chiefs of the twelve tribes, witnessed by the Presence himself. Tibetan settlement as such we offer to you, tribe of Shami of the great plain to the south, and to you, tribe of Samtsa of the mountain meadows of the north. Speak, Shami, speak Samtsa, and undertake to swear the oath before the Presence on the golden throne."

Instead, stubborn silence grimly held its place and the servants refilled the tea bowls, steam rising from the spouts of the kettles as they poured. All knew it was Samtsa who were holding out. It was Samtsa who must speak or the deadlock would be complete. Some of the men from Shami began to rise from their places with a certain determination, grim and threatening. Duggur was swearing under his breath

about wasted kindness and wasted fuel, when suddenly a great voice imposed silence upon all and the chief of Tangkor began to speak. As Dorje Rinchen settled himself to listen, warming his hands around his bowl, Trinlan's eyes found his and he remembered the words of their conversation. "When that fat old man begins to talk the settlement is going well." It seemed to be going any way but well, Dorje Rinchen thought.

"The affair is broken already," began the obese one, "and we, the ineffectual arbitrators, are about to take our hands off. When we do, one thing we must beg. That the Presence will have no rage, nor blame us for blood spilled in the courtyard of the lamasery prison house. Shami took life: a life of Samtsa, a life of the Ongkor tents, a life of the family of Lhamo Sjab, so Shami must pay. But they have also a life to offer as a substitute: a life of Samtsa, a life of the Ongkor tents, a life of the family of Lhamo Sjab. In addition to the payment of life money, which is custom honoured, they offer a life for a life that Dorje Rinchen may be freed from the guilt of blood, a guilt that must otherwise weigh heavily on him for all his life. Now that offer is of no value, so the life of the prisoner is of no value. Yet in the lama's great house they dare not take life. Tonight when they depart they will leave him for whoever wants him. Yet as tokens of the atonement they once offered, they will take two ears, one hand, one foot, and a nose. What is left will be in the prison courtyard for whoever wants it. Shami will offer no further atonement, but will bear their guilt on their hands and their swords. We, the arbitrators, have failed and cannot intervene."

The silence held while the darkness deepened. It was broken by the murmur of the praying of the Presence on the golden throne, "*Om mani padme hum!*" The words "Oh, the Jewel in the Lotus!" seemed twisted to new horrible meanings, sounding different yet alike to each one that heard. Dorje Rinchen felt the tea he had drunk rise uneasily within him and the replenished bowl before him stayed where it was, its steam seeping into his nostrils with a hint of blood and gall. Duggur and the other men of Shami rose to their feet, and then the leader of Samtsa spoke:

“We will take the oath before the Presence that there may be peace.”

Dorje Rinchen heard the words with a quick lifting of his spirit, but only momentarily; one foreboding stirred in his mind. Why had the monks spoken so often and so pointedly of Dorje Rinchen, the wanlog, the ex-monk, the renegade? He was now only a tent-dweller of Shami. Must he be followed and followed by such words of ill omen? He shivered. Somewhere beyond, the great winds still blew.

3

Dorje Rinchen was now on his way to his wife's home to win a recognition of the state of affairs between Lhamo Mtso and himself. With that recognition would come a proper settlement and, he hoped, the final peace. He did not know that her family still wished him to come as the son-in-law-brought-in and become one of them. Of what she felt about this he was not certain.

Trinlan had come to Lhamo with a number of men of his encampment to meet the Shami party and was now acting as guide and host on the way back to Samtsa.

The three horses stopped to rest just short of the pass, their hooves slipping uncertainly in the trampled, partly melted snow on the trail and their breath blown into the frosty air like steam. Trinlan drummed with his heels, turning his horse's head off the trail. Just to the right of the pass a part of the hillside, a few square rods in extent, lay clear of snow because of its angle of exposure to the midday sun.

As cleanly as though it had been done with a sharp knife, a slice of the snow sheet had been pared away and the close bunches of winter-killed hay, though yellow and dry, looked clean and soft, for the blades were short and fine. Here Trinlan's one motion took him from the saddle to a sitting position on the bare hillside.

“Better hay for your boots here than anywhere else. Even the boot hay we have stored up in the tent is not as soft and clean. Off your horse, Dorje Rinchen.” His eyes moved on to the third rider. “Lhamo Mtso should see that your boot hay is fresh every day. Why don't you look after him, Lhate?”

The others joined him and began to unfasten boot-straps. "I do," said Dorje Rinchen's wife. "Look at those boots. Even the ones Duggur's wife made for him aren't as good. He likes them well enough. Don't you, Doka? I do take care of him."

Lhamo Mtso suited action to words by reaching for one of Dorje Rinchen's boots and, taking out the worn pad of matted fibres, tossed it away. She filled the space inside the oversized sole with a new, carefully selected cushion of the dry grass.

"There—now the other one."

Dorje Rinchen put his boot on and held out his foot with an exclamation of pride and satisfaction. The stitches along the puckered edge of the sole where it was fastened to the boot were as fine as stitches could be and the bold curve of the heel had a bulge like a half-moon. He pulled the boot-top taut, binding the strap tightly above his calf to keep that shapely boot heel from slipping down in shiftless fashion. Dorje Rinchen contemplated the effect.

"Best boots in Shami," he said. "There you have appearance—real appearance, Trinlan. Everybody in the tribe will be wanting a pair like them, wanting Lhate to make boots for them. I wonder whose she will be making next."

"If I were in my own tent, I wouldn't have time to make boots for anyone else." Lhamo Mtso was very demure, but her eyes shifted from one to the other while she went on changing her own boot hay with dispatch.

The three remounted and rode after the rest of the party. Though nothing further was said, each one was thinking about that matter of a tent. Dorje Rinchen had only vague hopes as to how it would turn out. Duggur, on the other hand, as he rode ahead with the rest of the party, probably assumed that Dorje Rinchen would stay on as the younger brother in the tent of Jatsang, by so doing keeping the family wealth intact and making the tent of Jatsang in Shami more powerful than it had ever been.

Lhamo Mtso rode eagerly, her body swaying to the rhythm of the pace Trinlan set so that they might catch up to the rest of the party, her eyes bright with the pleasure of coming home

and the added joy of having Dorje Rinchen with her. Once over the pass, the encampments of the tribe were in plain view. In each hollow they crossed she had camped or ridden when watching the flocks. The hillsides and mountain meadow were home. It was here too that she had ridden knee to knee with Dorje Rinchen on the night of her flight.

Sometimes she thought of staying in the mountain country for good; secure in her own home, yet having Dorje Rinchen too. Her immediate feelings, reinforced by a rush of crowding associations, welcomed the idea. Yet as the trail took her back to her childhood she was uncertain. Whatever would be best for the future of Dorje Rinchen was what really mattered. Where would he best become a great figure in the life of the tent peoples? Where would he become a man at whose tent door as many as fifty guests would tie their horses in a single day, a man rivalling chiefs in importance? Perhaps in another tent, where he alone was the master, he would become greatest. At odd moments her eyes shifted sideways under her hair, peering through the one hundred and eight braids, questioning what her brother's face had to show. Much depended on what Trinlan would say, but Trinlan rode without a word and his faint half-smile was of things far away.

The three caught up to the rest of the party at the ford and all rode together into the dogs, dust, and shouting that came out of the winter encampment. Though the pens and refuse heaps are much the same everywhere in Tibet, the Samtsa tribe, unlike Shami, live throughout the winter in roofed huts that are permanent structures.

The main hut had board floors and additional fixtures: very much a house. The members of the Shami party, as they sat by the fire and took their tea, were somewhat disagreeably aware of that fact. The floor was boarded, there was a bit of panelling at the rear behind the family altar, and the high roof was most surely like the ceiling of a house among the valley farmers. It was airy and well lighted, they noticed. A broad shaft of light came through the high, window-like opening where the smoke from the fire escaped. However, the guests thought of their black, haircloth tent tops, stretched from sod wall to sod wall, and privately pitied Dorje Rinchen

if it should turn out that he would have to live in a house like this. They themselves built sod walls to break the wind. Only the Goloks camped the year round without building any wind-breaks—the most truly nomadic tribe of all.

“How light and warm, and big too.” Duggur suavely gestured with wide open palms. In his heart he wondered whether Dorje Rinchen would really be willing to live in a house. If he were, that came of having been a priest and living in a cloister.

Trinlan’s winter hut might be like a house, but the feast which he spread for them was truly of the tents. The parched barley flour was freshly roasted and ground. Its rich fragrance drove the odour of stable-yard dust and cow-chip fire smoke from their nostrils. Their bowls, ranged in front of the fire, were filled with butter and fine white cheese till there was scarcely room for the tea. The great wooden platters were piled with steaming assorted cuts of every part of fat beeves and sheep. When all had eaten and finished the tea-drinking, Trinlan’s wife filled the bowls with thick white curds, acid as green fruit from the ferment with which they were set. The guests “clapped lips” in token of their appreciation.

“Good fare, at least. Not like it is in the valleys,” they commented to one another as they left the hut. But as they piled their saddles and gear in the separate hut which had been allotted to them for the duration of their stay, they voiced their stubborn distaste.

“I wouldn’t want a house in Samtsa for any woman that ever lived,” said one. “I don’t care how fetching she is.”

“Are you really coming here, Dorje Rinchen?”

“A real nomad, are you going to live in a house during the winter? Astonishing, if so. Yes, astonishing.”

“We need men too much in our own tribe to give any to Samtsa—especially good riflemen.”

Duggur grunted his approval of the last comment. It expressed what they all felt.

So they piled their stuff, drew lots to determine who of their number would go out each day with the encampment herders to watch their horses, and settled into the routine of life in the making of the peace.

An elderly monk who had come as the personal representative of Aku Lobzong, Aku Dentzen in person, Duggur, and Trinlan carried the burden of argument on somewhat self-important shoulders. They met—two, three, or all four of them—by firesides in the huts, in sunny nooks of the cattle pens, and even on the peak-like top of one of the ash and refuse heaps in front of the encampment, where only prowling dogs had any chance of overhearing the secret discussion.

By policy and custom, Dorje Rinchen remained somewhat aloof and inaccessible, spending entire days alone on one of the rooftops; his cloak drawn close up around his ears as he stared into windy space and dusty sunshine, wondering when the long days would end. He was a piece with which others played a game. They talked in terms of wealth, flocks, the income of a tent, the maintenance of prestige and the gaining or losing of a man to the tribe; he thought of Lhamo Mtso, his small Lhate.

She had slipped easily and gratefully into the routine of her old home life. Each day fell into the pattern recalled from a well-loved past. There were cows to be milked which were like old friends, cows who turned their head to sniff at her head pressed close against their woolly sides. The half-grown puppies stumbled over her feet as they followed her from churn to feed-trough, and the older dogs crooned their pleasure in benign thunder when she petted them. There was also the careful ritual of setting out her father's tea and food, making each act something like a caress while the old man mixed endearments and thanks with the prayers he said. Only when commissioned to take milk or fuel to the hut did she visit her husband's fireside. But the nights were given to him, and under their friendly cover the two could compare notes on the day's debates and see how closely they approached their own hopes and plans. In the long nights, when only the stars could see them, an ideal and a resolution strengthened and grew clear.

As Dorje Rinchen, when in Shami, had come to wish for his own tent where Lhamo Mtso would be sole mistress, so Lhamo Mtso, in her own circle, came to see that Dorje Rinchen did not entirely fit into the scheme of life in a Samtsa home.

Dorje Rinchen, sitting one day with Trinlan on the roof of the hut, said to Trinlan:

"If either family thinks too much of the family tent and not enough of us we can always flee to yet another tribe. There are tribes which are enemies of both Samtsa and Shami: tribes where a good rifleman who knows their hide-outs, trails, and grazing habits would be more than welcome. There is always a way for a brave with a rifle—and for his woman, too."

Dorje Rinchen, the ex-monk, spoke as a brave should speak, and his woman's eyes shone with pride as she peeped through the braids of hair hanging like a veil on each side of her face. Perhaps Trinlan's eyes were faintly sceptical or maybe it was merely the rising of a dark memory that often came unbidden, but Dorje Rinchen turned it against Trinlan as a further argument.

"I, who have killed a man—what else is there that I would hesitate about? By the books, what else?" That experience at least placed him beyond Trinlan, whose crooked smile had faded to concern by the time he rose and left them.

One night Duggur, prowling about on some concerns of his own, blundered on their nest behind the sheep pen and stayed to talk. The darkness blotted out his burly form and grim face, his farcical expressions and waggish gestures; only his voice remained, slightly less sure than it usually was. As it tested and probed, finding out the strength of their desires and the scope of their half-shaped plan of life, it became still less sure. For the first time Duggur sensed something which did not fit into his scheme for the tent of Jatsang, something more than the size of herds and the seasonal yield of butter or wool, something his abrupt decisions could not change.

"You two are like a tent within a tent, either here or in Shami." That was something the wide roofs and extra ropes of Jatsang could not cover. "A tent within a tent—m-m, yes, maybe Trinlan is right after all," he muttered at last. They knew he had left them by the sudden barking of the dogs in the next enclosure.

Dorje Rinchen's reserve and implicit defiance were not a

pose. Whatever the arbitrators had agreed upon, he was as yet no party to it. He feared that his future or the future of his tent had been disposed of arbitrarily, but could console himself with the reflection that he always had the power of final refusal.

When all the prayers had been said and each spirit duly invited, the two monks, deferring one to the other and speaking alternately, announced to the gods and the principals the settlement of the affair of Dorje Rinchen, renegade monk of the tent of Jatsang of the tribe of Shami, and the eloping daughter of the younger branch of the manager family of the big house of the Janakwa lama.

“The wealth of Jatsang is to be reckoned in five shares,” intoned Dentzen. “One share for Jatsang, the old man with the prayer-wheel in his hand; one share for Ahway, the mother; one share for Duggur the elder son, who is responsible for all; one share for his wife, good daughter-in-law milking all the cows; one share for Dorje Rinchen, younger son come back from the lamasery. So shall the wealth of Jatsang be reckoned.”

“So shall the wealth of Jatsang be reckoned,” agreed the other monk, continuing the oratory. “The wealth of the younger branch of ombo’s family is to be reckoned in four shares: one share to the father, brother of the Ombo; one share to Trinlan, son in the tent; one share to his wife—good wife, churning all the butter; one share to Lhamo Mtso, now wife of Dorje Rinchen. So shall all the wealth of the Samtsa tent be reckoned.”

Like a persistent echo, Dentzen repeated the last phrase and went on: “One family does not wish to lose a son and brother; one family does not wish to lose—to give away—a daughter and sister. Therefore, it is best that both lose. Then, the loss is equal. Both families, therefore, give up to the new tent of Dorje Rinchen, the wanlog, whose black tent, new and small though it be, shall be pitched in the circle of the tents of Shami when the young grass is freshly green at the beginning of summer. To that tent shall go the shares of wealth belonging to Dorje Rinchen and Lhamo Mtso. Some day may that tent be great; a black tent like the tents of chief

and princes. We, the arbitrators, have spoken the settlement our wisdom has shown us. Answer, you principals—Dorje Rinchen first of all.”

Dorje Rinchen heard himself saying stiffly, “Your wisdom is great. My mouth can only agree.” And then turned his head to hear what Lhamo Mtso, who had moved round the outside of the circle, had to whisper in his ear.

Trinlan and Duggur, representing the two families, agreed with palms outspread, “Lags-so.”

“Hear, gods of the mountain-tops, protector gods of Samtsa and Shami, possessors of the earth, serpent demons of the springs, and every spirit of the air. The tents of Jatsang and of the younger branch of the manager of the great house of the golden throne are now related. Families of each, Trinlan and Duggur, men of Shami, men of Samtsa, say your oaths to be eaten in bitterness like poison in your bellies if ever broken.”

“Lags-so.”

“Lags-so.”

The wisps of bluish smoke wavered in the sunshine. Tea and the soup in the pots of boiling meat bubbled and heaved. The steam collected on the pot lids and ran down to the overhanging edges to drop hissing into the hot ashes. Dentzen’s matter-of-fact voice, now drained of all dramatic intensity and oratorical affectation, spoke again: “A new tent is to be set up. New hearthstones are to be blessed. New ropes are to be stretched. New tent-pegs are to be driven. To that new tent I bring my gift.”

He fumbled within his robes, brought out a shining ingot of old silver, spread a silken scarf of felicity over it, and passed it to Dorje Rinchen. The present was matched by a similar one from Aku Lobzong. Trinlan and Duggur unwrapped bulky bundles lying hitherto unnoticed nearby and produced rolls of fine new tent-cloth made from the black, silky hair of the yak. Only Duggur, the irrepressible one, said more than the customary words of well-wishing. He grumbled as he passed the roll to his brother:

“I rode all day and part of the night to get that back in time. It is the finest cloth in Shamsi. Wochuck may not

make very good boots, but she does make good tent cloth."

"Five sheep!"

"A young yak cow!"

"A churn!"

"Fifty fathoms of tent-rope!"

The men of Shami shouted promises of gifts, glad the tribe would not lose a rifleman. Then the lids were taken from the kettles and the feast began. It was none too soon, for bit by bit the wind began to freshen and dust devils started to spin on the ridges overlooking the mountain meadow. Soon clouds of dust and grit borne on the afternoon wind would be sweeping the valley. Till then, there were to be enjoyed all the delicacies of Samtsa hospitality, offered by one of the wealthiest families in the tribe.

For Dorje Rinchen, Lhamo Mtso beside him shyly sharing titbits portioned out to them by Trinlan, everything was near perfection. Only one forboding thought stirred in his mind: Would the omens now really continue good? The physical world might have given him peace, but what of the world of the spirit?

4

"The tent goes on the golden ox."

At the words, the ox, tawny and big with wide-spreading horns, swung uneasily in the half-light of dawn, shaking his head and moving away from the load, tugging at his nose rope like a ship at its moorings. Even a small tent, quite new, and not heavy with soot, made a full load: the biggest of all the loads for Dorje Rinchen's ten oxen that were tethered to one short rope staked out in the centre of the enclosure. The loading of the tent completed, they were ready to start.

Dorje Rinchen was well satisfied. The morning, the way, and the world were all good. Apparently, his little caravan was the first of all the parties of the encampment to get started on the trail that led to the first of the summer campsites. Their own tent at last, and the first on the trail. That was satisfaction enough for an ex-monk.

Far ahead, where the trail led over the rise, cattle crawled

like ants, and the trail itself was broken into segments of motion where the herds of the tribe were on the move. Behind them, men and cattle, also moving, flowed on to the trail from every encampment. The countryside was safe enough. Scouts had ridden for two days searching for signs of enemy raiders and found none. Dorje Rinchen rode on, driving the cattle, and calling to Yogmo, the smiling little servant-girl who accompanied them to keep up with the sheep. At the pass he turned. The big black horse was grazing at the end of the tether rope, and Lhamo Mtso was busy with the cow: too busy to give him any sign, though he sat his horse on the skyline until the cattle of their own accord were well down the farther slope.

He started after them, and then it was time to go ahead with the tether-rope and exactly locate the site of his own new tent in the circle of the Shami tents. His was finely sewn, carried on the golden ox fit to be the baggage-ox of a lama. The ropes, poles, and pegs were the best wealth and care could make, but at the first raising such things were secondary. The faces of the far-off mountains could reflect blessing or curse according to the way a tent was turned towards them. The slope of the sward that made the tent floor might bring vengeful earth gods if the corners were not set right. Far above, the sun and the clouds might presage either ill or a lifetime of good according as the moment of raising was related to the rhythm of destiny.

Dorje Rinchen hobbled his horse and stretched the tether-rope for the oxen near the appropriate site of the new tent. Then he warily crossed to the far side of the camp, for the dogs were already beginning to take control of the central space. No tents were up as yet, but riders were arriving to stake out tether-ropes. On the rim of the circle, piles of belongings showed where some families had already placed the first of their loads. At one of these tent-sites, where many littered loads indicated a family of wealth, he found the old monk whom he had engaged some days previously to read all the mysterious signs of mountain, plain, sky, sun and destiny so that no mistake would be made. The first time the ropes were stretched, the pegs driven, and the poles raised

was the time of times when everything should be done exactly right.

The monk was old Aku Dondrub, who once had offered a sacrifice while a little, ragged, but suddenly self-important acolyte had held the elements for him. Now the old man blew on his beads, started the slow, grumbling utterance of many incantations, took samples of the earth, drew patterns in the sand, faced the distant mountains with the oft-repeated request that the gods attend, and threw the future-revealing dice again and again. It was long before he was satisfied, for the dice seemed unwilling. He muttered of unkind fate, but finally assurance came and he showed Dorje Rinchen just how the tent should be set.

The cattle had arrived by that time. Dorje Rinchen and the little servant-girl, laughing together as they did so, unloaded the oxen and unrolled the tent on the exact spot. All was ready but, as he straightened up from the task and prepared to stretch the ropes, Dorje Rinchen looked down the trail again as he had done many times since his arrival. This time it singled out a rider on a black horse coming faster than all the other moving figures on the horizon. Here was Lhate! She would know better than anyone just how the ropes should be stretched. Even against the signs of time that would not wait, he would wait.

She carried the newborn calf on her saddle-bow, its gangling legs tied together with the end of her tie-rope. The cow followed at her far stirrup, lowing anxiously, and trotting to keep up. Lhamo Mtso rode fast, the struggling calf notwithstanding. When she reached the encampment, the calf was restored to its uneasy mother and the raising of the tent could begin.

Lhamo Mtso slipped her shoulders out of her sheepskin coat and wrapped the sleeves around her waist, strapping them tightly with a bit of thong. Then she was ready to wield the long, tongue-shaped stone used as a hammer. The eight principal ropes were pulled taut, and she pounded the pegs, insisting that they should be slanted well away from the tent and driven far in. Shoulders and breasts brown and glistening in the sunshine, she swung with all her might, rising on tiptoe

as the stone went back over her head for each blow that sank the pegs a hand's breadth into the sod.

Wiping the sweat from his eyes, Dorje Rinchen took time to notice that their tent, if not the first, was yet not the last to rise on the edge of the encampment circle. With the old monk he passed under the black roof. The yak-hair cloth, though fine enough to keep out much of rain and snow, allowed sunlight to filter through. Down the middle, from front to back, the foot-wide smoke vent let in a long bar of light that marked the centre of the floor space. The clay hearth was to be set up in that beam. Lhamo Mtso opened a bundle that had been carefully packed on the oldest and quietest of the oxen and found that the notched slabs of sod and dry clay were intact. They only had to work up the wet clay they had brought from a clay bed near the winter encampment, and set the slabs together. When they had plastered the joints tightly, the hearth would be complete.

First, however, the old monk must again make their peace with the unseen world. The hearthstone spirits are involved at the building of a new hearth. Strange, jealous creatures, they swarm at the rising of the smoke in a new tent, and take proprietary though at times perverse interest in the new hearth. Because of their displeasure, children die or are born dead. Their spiteful blows bring blindness, strange swellings, and the swift rotting of anthrax, the "earth poison." What tent can hope for peace if the hearthstone spirits are angry? Anxious thoughts filled Dorje Rinchen's mind while the old monk said prayers and incantations, made a thousand promises, and threw the dice again and again. The wanlog must be especially careful that all was well with the spirits.

Finally, the monk nodded. Lhamo Mtso set the three slabs in place, sealing the joints and plastering the whole with white clay. Dorje Rinchen bore down on a sodding-spade to cut out the ashpits on either side, and then, striking a light with flint and steel, he set the bit of smoking tinder in the stove and built fragments of fuel around it until they caught. With the first flicker of grey smoke wavering in the shaft of sunlight, the old monk leaned forward and added

incense and precious pellets of clay brought from Lhasa itself and the ceremony was complete. Then only could the cauldron of tea be placed on the flaring triangular top of the stove.

As Dorje Rinchen finished stacking their small array of grain-bags and belongings—bags and boxes at the rear of the tent to form a wind-break, and saddles at the front—a look outside showed him that the big tent of Jatsang hadn't even been unrolled.

"I'll go and help," he told his wife. "We'll all have tea here. Your pot will be the first to boil, Lhate. The little tent wins! Jatsang will drink their first tea here."

It was so. The family of Jatsang drank their tea in the tent of Dorje Rinchen, the younger brother, who did the duties of a host with a pride he did not hide. Among the guests each one of the family of Jatsang had a special interest in the event. Wochuck searched equally for the special quality of one strip in the tent roof that had come into being under her skilful hands, and for some change of expression in Dorje Rinchen's face when her eyes met his. Ahway, seeing the flare of the stove top and the carefully plastered surface—"smooth like the wall of a shrine"—decided that her daughter-in-law knew her business and was content. Purposely, with compliments and jokes, Duggur rallied the rosy-faced tent wife, yet could only win the most casual of answers to either words or looks. Jatsang found the tent the pleasantest of all. The prayer-wheel had become the aged man's inseparable companion and spun ceaselessly even when he spoke, as he did when the others were ready to leave. Yogmo, the inscrutably smiling servant-girl, watched quietly.

"Go on and finish getting settled," he directed. "I'll stay here and tell Doka how to arrange the altar. This spot is quiet and clean. The hearth is good. The smoke all goes upward. Doka, hang up the scroll of your protector deity and set out the offerings. Never delay in doing that."

Under the old one's direction, Dorje Rinchen hung the scroll of his protector deity in the upper right-hand corner of the tent and set out the bowls of polished brass, some filled with clean water and some with barley. With monkish skill,

he added some tiny "lotus towers" and pinnacles of butter to complete the display. As he fumbled in a bundle, hunting for a scarf of blessing with which to drape the scroll, a book with covers the colour of a lama's robe fell out. The old man lifted it reverently and questioned,

"What letters are these? Where did you get such letters, Doka?"

"They are some printings I got when I went to the Chinese city last autumn. At least I think they are printings. No one could write so clearly and so evenly."

"Ah! Very true. The beautiful letters!" The old man touched the book to his forehead and then handed it to his son. "Read some of the letters—religion no doubt."

Lhamo Mtso had gone to milk the cows, who ached for relief even to the extent of putting their heads under the tent roof to call her. Cattle, horses, and sheep drowsed under the noon sun. The grass of the new pastures, though still short, was thick and their hunger had been soon satisfied. The little servant-girl was spreading fuel to dry. The tent was empty of others except for the dogs lolling in the shade and the newborn calf tied in the corner.

In the rush of the first day, finished tasks, and tasks not yet ready for the doing, made for a space of present leisure. In that respite the old man's request waited. Dorje Rinchen was not sure that he wanted to read from the book. Reading always reminded him that he was a wanlog—fallen from religion. But the book did suggest a story: the tale of the outlander of the yellow hair and the blue eyes. During the telling, old Jatsang's listening, wistful face lightened for moments and the whine of the prayer-wheel died to a faint hum as his hand rested slackly on the handle. Yet again he questioned.

"But what of the letters in the book?"

The two, father and son, leaned into a shaft of smoke-filtered light to turn the pages.

"'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with the complete perfection and this word was the complete perfection.'" Dorje Rinchen's voice died away as his eyes raced along the lines and down the page to swell again in

such phrases as “ ‘And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.’ ”

“Doesn’t sound like either *duggur*, *gurrum*, *Monlam*, or any other writing of the creed.” A kind of puzzled uncertainty quavered in the old man’s voice.

Dorje Rinchen continued turning the pages, searching for a phrase the Yellow Head had shown him. He failed to find it. Once the word “truth” stood out on a page and caught his attention, “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” “Why free?” he questioned. “We aren’t prisoners. We don’t need to be set free.” But later he was often to remember these words.

The prayer-wheel was stilled as though the old man also awaited an answer that did not come.

5

“Dorje Rinchen! Dorje Rinchen! Guests are coming to see you—guests coming to the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*.”

They rode surrounded by a pack of dogs, yet using their whips skilfully to keep the brutes at sufficient distance from stirrup, flank and hock. They rode right to the door of Dorje Rinchen’s tent, two Chinese shouting their greetings and good wishes. One was Musa, the Moslem of Old City, who had been host to the grain caravan. It had been he who secured the yellow book for the ex-monk.

No augury of the future could be more auspicious; no sign more full of promise. The new tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* would surely become a tent rivalling those of chiefs: a tent at whose door fifty guests might tie their horses in the course of a single day. The spirits would bless it and Dorje Rinchen must strive for the wealth to support its importance. He felt indeed the stirrings of ambition and a consciousness of increasing power.

The horses of the two guests were tied and the riders settled on felts by the fire. Tea was ready. There was plenty of time before the caravan oxen would arrive. Dorje Rinchen and Lhamo Mtso did their utmost as hosts with all that the tent possessed.

Musa explained their coming and told the news. The

caravan consisted of two kettles, and that number was emphasized by the two lengths of satin covered with long scarves of felicity he presented, putting the caravan and all its concerns under the protection and patronage of Dorje Rinchen. The caravan, he explained, was on its way to Golok country with many loads of trade goods. For the present he hoped to stay for some days and trade among the Shami tents.

They talked of trade and current prices until the oxen arrived. The immediate affairs and concerns of the new tent now had little place in Dorje Rinchen's mind and still less claim on his time. His guests must be settled, arrangements must be made for the guarding of their cattle, and fuel and water brought to their tents. Even after their camp was made Dorje Rinchen was busy throughout the long afternoon, riding to the other encampments of the tribe to advertise the fact that "his Chinese" had come with trade goods to be exchanged for lambskins and wool. More important than the concerns of his newly raised tent were those of his guests.

Somehow Lhamo Mtso and Yogmo got the chores done and yet found time to carry fuel and water to the traders' camp. The milking was finished and milk for the evening tea had been taken to the guests. The cattle were herded and tied and the members of the family of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* found time too to drive in the traders' cattle, that all might be tethered.

Between such tasks Dorje Rinchen made time for the evening burning of juniper boughs, incense, grain, butter and salt. As the thick smoke broke before the evening wind and poured back over the encampment his prayers for the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* were mixed with satisfaction and complacency.

Dusk followed fast on the smoke of their offering and the tent fires began to show red on the rim of the encampment. Within his own tent his place on the right side of the newly established fire, although warm and bright against the frost, the wind, and the darkness that pressed so relentlessly near, was empty, and Lhamo Mtso, along with Yogmo, drank her tea in silence on the women's side of the tent.

Dorje Rinchen had gone to sit at the fireside of his guests, planning with them the trade and activities of the following day. Great prestige and perhaps some slight material advantage would come to him because of this. When the consultation was ended, he made his sleeping-place on the edge of the dark mass, where the even lines of the tethered carrying oxen merged with the more irregular outlines of his own tiny herd. He could see the fire-glow seeping from the openings of his own tent. Slowly, its light began to wane. Lhamo Mtso and the servant-girl were no doubt rolled up in their furs, asleep.

The encampment dogs began the night's long uproar and Dorje Rinchen whistled shrilly to his own mastiffs. Tonight of all nights he must keep awake or at least sleep lightly in order to guard the belongings of his guests. That camp of the traders meant good fortune. They had come on the first day at the first camp-site. The new hearth had been set up in a day of lucky omens. Shadowy fears and misgivings rising from the hints of an unkind destiny, a destiny that showed itself in the perversity of the dice which the old monk had been obliged to throw again and again, faded in Dorje Rinchen's mind to the vanishing point.

6

Dorje Rinchen was setting out now on a dangerous and mysterious expedition. His old singleness of purpose was intent on the profit that was essential to support his ambitions for the greatness of his own tent. He had pondered various schemes. He had thought of a wapiti hunt in the summer when the antlers are in the velvet. One good set of antlers would sell for at least two hundred ounces of silver. Wapiti hunting, however, was a task for experts and the big deer were growing scarcer year by year. Instead, he was now riding with brave and subtle Jigmet, one of the best scouts and raiders of Shami, as his one companion on a furtive mission.

Lhamo Mtso's words were pitched in a whisper but insistent: "Act with a small heart, Doka, truly. Truly with a small heart."

Dorje Rinchen turned from her and felt the saddle of his

horse to satisfy himself that raincoat and saddle-bags, bulging with supplies for days of travel, were lashed securely. She held the stirrup for him and then he was in the saddle, but, as the high-spirited horse began to fret, Lhamo Mtso stood close to his shoulder again to whisper, "A small heart, Doka; truly, truly, a small heart."

"Surely, sure," he comforted her, knowing that she did not really approve his scheme. "And when people ask where I have gone, don't fail to say we are off wapiti hunting in the Shekok. And now hold the two dogs. Perhaps then we'll get away without anyone being alarmed."

The black night swallowed both riders as they moved swiftly on to the plain and away from the rim of the encampment.

The night was not only dark but cold. Autumn had begun. The summer had passed without incident and for Dorje Rinchen it had been filled with the busy, successful routine of the nomad.

No sickness had disturbed the livestock. The yak had been stripped of their long hair, pulled out tuft by tuft, special care being taken of the belly fringe, hanging nearly to the ground, of which the tent cloth would be made. Shearing of the wool had been finished and the cows had calved without loss. Skin bags and sheep stomachs had been packed full of butter; adding to the belongings of the tent until, what with wool and the trade goods left by the Chinese traders, it took two trips of his ten oxen to move all the belongings of the tent each time the tribe shifted to new pastures. The matter of trade goods also promised profit. He acted as agent and, because he could write and keep accurate account, Musa had left more with him than he had ever before left with any nomad, hoping for a full toll of wool to be picked up in the late autumn when the trade caravan returned.

But in spite of all this, the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* felt the pinch of comparative poverty. The harvest of yak hair was scarcely enough to pay off loans of the precious hair secured in the early spring to hasten the completion of the new tent. The butter would not be much more than sufficient to last through the winter. The calves and lambs meant little

in immediate profit except as some of the latter were killed for the skins and the yield in wool from his entire flock was less than two loads.

Against all this was the fact that, because of family connections on both sides and because of a real and growing reputation, the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*, small though it was, had more than its share of guests. Chinese traders, Tibetans planning to trade in their wool crop, heads of encampments seeking news, monks riding the rounds of the encampments and wishing to see their old companion: all these and more tied their horses from day to day at his tent door. It signified fame; it was the token of prestige, but it took tea, butter and grain to entertain as he should. When his guests camped with him there were sheep that must be tied at their tent doors for killing, so that the best traditions of hospitality might be upheld. Although gifts and many presentation scarves were displayed on the little wall of his piled-up belongings at the back of the tent, they did not change the fact that the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* was on a somewhat insufficient economic base.

There was one other thing that nagged at his mind. Throughout these times Lhaso Mtso once and again whispered to Dorje Rinchen at night: "When will we have a child—a little man instead of a little one of yak or sheep?"

Was this to be another fear? He shivered, then put the thought aside. He was embarking on new dangers now.

He regulated pace and direction by the blur in the darkness that was his companion. The night was so black that he missed a sense of distance covered and so had no accurate knowledge of time. Then the night changed to a ghostly half-light and the tardy moon broke through the clouds at their back. Shortly after, they turned down a steep slope and the sand, sliding past them, stopped somewhere beyond with a splash. They were at the edge of the Peacock Waters, the river that takes its lazy, lordly way in loops and bends across the plateau country of north-east Tibet.

"We cross here." His companion's voice was a whisper and Dorje Rinchen fumbled in his saddle-bags to get out his "swim-bag," an entire skin stripped from the very largest

ram in the flock and oil tanned to make it waterproof. Into this bag he stuffed his saddle, saddle-pad, saddle-bags, raincoat, sheepskin coat, boots, cartridge belt and sword. To the best of his ability and with his lungs nearly bursting with the effort, he filled the spaces with air and tied up the mouth of the bag. Then he shortened the sling of his rifle to make it hang high on his bare back and joined his companion in the water. The horses were somewhat unwilling, for the water was cold, but they were not panicky and soon swam away from the shore, their riders half out of the water on their swim-bags, getting a tow by holding on to the tails of their mounts.

How far or how long the crossing was he could not tell. Dorje Rinchen was numb with cold when they reached the far bank and he stumbled drunkenly on the shingle beach where they made a landing. Dawn must not find them in the open plain.

With the coming of day, the horizon and every hilltop turned a ceaseless regard upon the two. At length a sunken, brush-filled watercourse gave them shelter and they made camp among the bushes. They were oddly assorted camp-mates. Everything about Dorje Rinchen—his leopard-fur trimmed coat, neat boots, raincoat of wine-coloured pulu and saddle trimmed with Russian leather—was of quality and new. His face, too, was handsome with the good looks of both Ahway and grave-featured Jatsang and young. Jigmet, on the other hand, was grizzled, dark with the dirt, sun and wind of fifty hard-lived years and a strange, lowering reflection in his face of dark adventures and deeds. His scalp was patterned with tell-tale scars; one ear was partly gone where the blow that had drawn a seam across his cheekbone had finished its work and the wrinkled, leatherlike skin of his shoulder was puckered by the scar of a wound that must have laid bare the bone. His coat was worn to tatters, his raincoat patched and grimed. Lacking a rifle, he carried instead a long-barrelled matchlock and a twelve-foot spear, but his iron-grey horse matched Dorje Rinchen's in bone and flesh if not in looks.

“Now that we have crossed the Peacock Waters on swim-bags we have saved two days of travel round the long knee

that reaches to Soktsong," Jigmet said. "But we must cross it again tomorrow before daybreak. Then we'll be near the country of Kanggan. Once in the mountains there we can travel by day without much fear of being seen until we are nearly to the Kanggan tents. That country is all hills and valleys—valleys filled with brush. It is bad country in which to live, but good for us. One can hide anywhere. But always act with a small heart."

They mounted at sunset. Sometimes they seemed to follow trails, at others they skirted ridge-tops, keeping off the skyline, yet riding on the upper level of a jumbled world black under the ghost of the far-off moon. Daylight gave them better direction and they went on until even two such splendid animals as the grey and black began to lag. With his head barely showing over the edge of the saddle at a steep valley head, Jigmet stopped and studied the prospect.

"Nyin-bur-yur-tsi," muttered Dorje Rinchen in astonishment as he too looked over. "*Om mani padme hum!* What a mountain! What a house of everlasting snow!"

The snowclad triangle of a mighty peak reached far towards the zenith of the blue sky. Occasionally, from mountains near Lahmo, he had seen on the horizon the white cloudlike ghost of Nyin-bur-yur-tsi. But here it seemed near enough to touch. Jigmet, however, gave it no thought except as a landmark. Somewhere in the rough, mountainous country between the place where they stood and the rocky foothills of the snow peak, the tribe of Kanggan herded their cattle in the summer pastures. To go on in daylight was not to be thought of. Without a word he turned his horse and, Dorje Rinchen following, they made their camp in the brush-filled hollow at the foot of the pass.

While they drank their evening tea at sunset, Jigmet rehearsed the purpose that had brought them to skulk and hide on the edges of the Kanggan summer range. A pilgrim from Lhasa had told a monk, who had told a Chinese trader, who had told him as an incidental bit of news—not realizing its importance—that the chief of Kanggan had moved his camp some distance north and away from the rest of the tribe so that his thousands of cattle might have the very best

grazing. If so, that placed him nearer to Shami. For all their mutual enmity, there had been no raid for a number of years. The chief might have disregarded the risk of such a move for the advantages of better grazing.

Whether this was really true, and, if so, how long the chief's encampment would remain in so exposed a location, were the questions to which they must find answers. Such information would be of solid value in some market. That much was easily explained. But the expression on Jigmet's dark face hinted that other considerations entered in: it had been riders from the Kanggan chief's encampment who had carved the scars in his shoulder and cheek on a foray forgotten by all but the participants.

For days the two skulked through the valleys and haunted the hilltops, learning the location and grazing habits of the chief's cattle. Like all Goloks, the chief evidently had few sheep and fewer horses, but his cattle numbered thousands. At least so it seemed to Dorje Rinchen, as they lay in the grass on the hilltop and did a counting that was never finished. The first night they even rode to within sight of the "black nests" of the camp and counted the firelit tents in order to discover how many families made up the encampment. On the next night, a dark one filled with rain and storm, Jigmet crawled almost within earshot of the chief's tent, in an effort to learn when the camp would move. He suspected that move would not be made for some time as the pasturage was comparatively untouched and fresh. Still, he could not be sure.

On the following day, before dawn, Jigmet hid himself in the brush and long grass within earshot of the kettle stone where the herders made their day camp. All day he lay under brushwood and twigs, not daring to move, fearful lest some straying cow find him and with one wild snort of fright betray his hiding place, straining to hear the talk and laughter of those who if they had found him would have cut him to pieces without delay. When Dorje Rinchen brought him his horse at dusk Jigmet was satisfied with the result. He had learned that the camp did not expect to move for another twenty days or so. After one more day of scouting to check on the usual grazing position of the horse herd in relation to

the cattle herd, Jigmet declared himself satisfied. They could start for home.

Huddled over their tiny fire and eating their evening meal, their horses saddled and ready tethered nearby, the two argued out the only differences of opinion they had had.

"Five days and four nights we've lived near the snow throne of the greatest *but one* of all the mountain gods of Amdo," Dorje Rinchen said. "We should certainly make a juniper bough offering, sweetened with incense and seasoned with salt. Perhaps we should have offered before, offered when first we came to this land under the white shadow of the mountain."

Jigmet's face became darker than ever. "No," he protested, "no burning now! What a sign the white smoke would be, as it rose over the hill. I'll risk the anger of the mountain god rather than Kanggan scouts coming to see who made the fire. I asked you to come because, ex-monk though you are, you are a brave son and have the best horse and finest rifle in Shami, but let me plan our going."

As they retraced their steps in even greater haste—after the first day's ride there was small need for concealment and they did not have to travel entirely by night—Nyin-bur-yur-tsi faded into clouds and distance and the mountain god failed to strike. Jigmet had no doubt been right.

When they camped on the bank of the river at the second crossing, the small symmetrical peak that rises from the plain where the Shami mountain god has his throne was in plain view. They were near home. Neither of the two showed themselves in the fire-glow that streamed from the door of the tent, but the chief came to answer their shouting and meet them in the darkness, where they sat ringed by the fury of the dogs. At least no other could hear the words said or the plans made. The raid that should turn the information into victory and wealth for Shami, into confusion and loss for Kanggan, was actually under way when the chief turned back to his tent. Messengers would be riding throughout the tribe before daybreak. Dorje Rinchen and Jigmet had marketed their information, gleaned at such risk, for the best of prices. When the booty of the raid on which they were soon to ride

would finally be divided each one of them was to receive ten times as much as any other member of the raiding party. That was the reward agreed upon without question.

Then again they were riding. Dorje Rinchen was numb with drowsiness and fatigue and scarcely knew when Jigmet left him.

"You've come!" said Lhamo Mtso. "How good! How good! Go on first. I'll bring your saddle and things."

"Yes, Lhate, we always acted with a small heart. Truly, truly with a small heart," answered Dorje Rinchen, and preceded her into the light and warmth of the tent's interior.

7

The raiders moved fast. Dorje Rinchen had not dreamed of such speed. Leading a spare mount apiece, each rider changed horses as they began to tire and the entire party travelled night and day with only brief halts for eating and resting. One hundred and fifty men had ridden from the encampments of Shami just after darkness had fallen, but only one hundred and forty riders took up their positions on the morning of the fourth day, for ten picked men led by Jigmet had left on a special errand. Until that mission was accomplished the main body waited, watching the herdsmen of the chief of Kanggan drive the cattle to the day's pasturage. The horsemen were all ready for the attack, but the moment for it to begin awaited action by the men who had ridden with Jigmet.

"There are the horses," Jigmet had said. "We'll drive them first along the trail that leads round the long knee of Peacock Waters at Soktsong. The rescue party must follow far before we are in danger and then they can have their horses back. It is a good plan."

The words had not made sense, much less a plan to Dorje Rinchen. However, the chief had grunted in agreement and continued the calculation of a problem in arithmetic on his rosary.

In the clear, clean light of morning the great snow cone looked out from the western sky more watchfully than ever. Dorje Rinchen, again lying on the hilltop beside the chief and

watching the herds as they scattered through the pastures, found time to wonder with vague, half-formed misgivings whether the mountain *amni* (old man) of Nyin-bur-yur-tsi, protector deity of Kanggan and rival of Amni Machen himself, was aware of the designs of the raiders. Surely the mountain god could see the horsemen waiting for the signal and the moment to attack.

“*Om mani padme hum!*” he muttered.

The chief nudged him. “Be still! The quiet mouth. No sound until it is time to start.”

Again Dorje Rinchen turned his attention to movement on the far left of the herds. There, the horse herd was scattering for the day and there Jigmet and his men would make their appearance. They were long in coming.

Presently, the faint sound of rifle fire came to the ears of the watchers on the hilltop. The chief grunted and raised himself on his elbow, the better to watch as the attack developed. A brisk fire held the herders in whatever place or position they had taken shelter while three or four horsemen who appeared, riding at full speed, rounded up the horse herd and started the drive. When it disappeared up the next valley the sound of firing slackened and then disappeared.

One of the herders, crouched low in the stream bed, raced from his place of concealment to where a number of hobbled horses still made fruitless attempts to stampede and got his bridle on one of them. A moment later he was riding for the encampment, flattened low on the horse’s back to present the smallest possible target. But no shots came. The raiders were all following the horse herd drive. Other herders got to their horses and followed, some turning to the right to take the news of the raid to the cattle herders. The thin, clear echo of purposeful shouting reached to the hilltop where the Shami chief and Dorje Rinchen still waited and then a number of shots fired at regular intervals sounded from the hollow where the encampment lay hidden from view.

There was nothing more to see or hear. Only the aimless wandering of the herds scattered across the slopes and hollows and the agitation of the herdsmen on the hilltop below broke the stillness.

The chief spoke. "Unhobble your horse and ride. Tell the men to move. They know how and where."

The horsemen climbed the slopes in wide turns, resting their horses every twenty paces or so. There was no need to let the horses get blown as yet, for the barrier of the mountain still hid them. No one spoke. Halfway up the slope the band divided, one half turning to the left and the other to the right. Like two horns closing to a circle, the attack flowed over the skyline and at breakneck speed moved down the green hills towards the grazing cattle. Part way down a few of the better armed riders dismounted and began firing at the herders while the rest rode on.

Dorje Rinchen was conscious of a tingling in every part of his body and his muscles worked rhythmically to the powerful action of his horse. With the faster riders, he found himself at the far tip of the encircling movement, intent only on rounding up all the cattle. Shots and shouting came from the direction of the herders' camp-fire. Never once did he stop or slow down.

As the herd poured over the top riders cut in, dividing it into segments. A long echo, passing from mouth to mouth shouting his name, drew Dorje Rinchen out of the rush to take his place with a group on the hilltop chosen for the excellence of their horses and guns. The drive filled the valley from wall to wall and frightened or rebellious stragglers climbed the steep slopes trying to turn back, but two lines of reckless riders hemmed them in. Others crowded them from the rear, their plunging horses pawing and trampling at the heels of the stubborn yak cows.

Dorje Rinchen and those others chosen as the rearguard could save the strength of their horses as they rested near the hilltop, each man sitting or lying near his horse while a lookout watched for whatever pursuit might come. The horsemen of Kanggan were far away on another chase and the valley remained empty throughout the long forenoon. Early in the afternoon a flock of big grey vultures dropped from their hiding places in the sky and began their suspicious, uneasy approach to the two figures lying in the grass near the still-smouldering camp-fire.

Now it was time to follow the rest of the party and they,

the rearguard, rode fast to catch up by nightfall with the cattle. From then on time passed in confusion, blundering and uncertainty amid the hazards of unseen bogs, waterholes and steep hillsides broken into ledges and rock slides.

Something else rode with them through the darkness. Dorje Rinchen sensed it with a quickened foreboding even as the answers came back to the first startled challenge. The words were right—names, identification, the unmistakable intonation of tribal dialects—but the voices seemed hesitant, sombre, half concealing something grey and cheerless as the uncertain dawn. Suddenly Dorje Rinchen realized that the clipped speech and assured voice of Jigmet was missing and a moment later, as the dim outlines of the newcomers loomed close, he noticed the low, strange silhouette of a horse, riderless yet burdened. Before the tale was told he knew. Jigmet would ride no more. Packed on his worn saddle like a sack of grain, he was taking his last ride with the stirrups tied back and empty.

“The shooting of a scout at long range . . .”

“. . . rifle as good as Dorje Rinchen’s own . . .”

“Just five shots, yet one hit.”

“Dead when we picked him up.”

Dorje Rinchen scarcely heard them. A great white mountain rose on his horizon and looked at him alone; looked at him and for him with insistent regard among a hundred and forty-nine raiders. Remembering an offering neglected and a campfire unhallowed with incense to make Nyin-bur-yur-tsi turn his face away. Dorje Rinchen rode with the others, but alone with his thoughts, wondering what might come next. Jigmet had paid and he, Dorje Rinchen, was left. But for how long?

The sun brought the sharp outlines of the day’s activity and swift action to banish foreboding and thought. The ford of the Peacock Waters was to be crossed, not only by horses and men used to such crossings, but by hundreds of tired yet nervously panicky cattle, most of which had never forded swimming water. Almost everything else could be anticipated to assure success, but the real turning-point was the crossing. If the horsemen and watermen of Shami, famous for riding and swim-bag navigation of great waters, could persuade

two thousand cattle to make the crossing they would have made that success sure and added another tale to the stories that are told within the black tents when the glow of the evening fire shuts out the night and cold.

By an almost superhuman effort it was done. Drove after drove, increasing in size as bawling cattle in growing numbers stood on the far shore and called their fellows on, were forced into the water, driven from their footholds on the shelving bank and herded across.

Then the pursuit caught up. Rifle fire from the far side increased. To Dorje Rinchen it seemed that the bullets singing above him were just over his head, yet their whine was reassuring. Under that protective fire, he and his fellows took their turn at crossing, herding the last little bunch of cattle ahead of them. For some distance the bank protected them but in midstream the fire of the men of Kanggan, now edging their ways to points of vantage along the river bank, began to take effect. Just in front of him Dorje Rinchen saw a bullock kick with an awkward lunging motion and turn over, to be pushed under by the oxen behind him. The sharp, ripping noise of bullets striking the water accompanied the splashes that leaped high out of the yellow eddies in front of the herd. Suddenly the leaders turned and began to circle, the herd milling behind them. Desperately Dorje Rinchen and his companions tried to change that mad merry-go-round motion in which the stronger cattle began to push the weaker under and heads began to disappear.

The third time round one of the men shouted, "Let them go! We have enough, anyway."

Throughout the raid Dorje Rinchen had been hesitant and uncertain, trying to drive gloomy forebodings from his mind. Jigmet's death had intensified this feeling. He had begun to wish he had never become involved in the raid on Kanggan. However, in the cold waters of the river with the ripping splash of bullets round him, the agonized bellowing of the cattle filling his ears and the grey becoming restive and weakening against the tugging current, he found heart to shout.

"No!"

Something more than a few head of cattle seemed at stake. Perhaps, by riding a-tilt at fate one could gain more than by wary flight? Again he turned his horse on the fringes of the mad whirlpool and his companions followed, shouting and trying to straighten out the drive in the right direction. Dorje Rinchen pulled himself higher on his swim-bag and, balancing himself precariously, managed to get his rifle off his back and take a shot at the leading bullock as it started to turn the fourth time. Hit, or nearly hit, the big yak swerved sharply, the others immediately behind him swerved with him and, like a ball of yarn, the drive unrolled in a long line of horned heads making for the far shore. The dull whack of a striking bullet rolled another bullock over in the water just ahead of him. The air seemed full of hornets, but Dorje Rinchen knew only a sudden exultation.

They had won.

His exhilaration lasted throughout the packed days until the black tents of Shami rose to meet them and they were home. It stayed with him as he sat with Lhamo Mtso at his own fireside, and made a calculation in approximate figures of just what his share—the special share—would be. It filled him with prideful anticipation and assurance for the future when he realized his tent would be moderately rich from this one venture alone. He glowed in the light and promise in the eyes of his wife.

Nevertheless, the tent curtains blew back to show a grey horse still tethered at a nearby tent.

“*Om mani padme hum!*” he muttered with a half-shiver and blew back the butter on his tea before he drank. “I will ride to Kanggan no more.”

8

Dorje Rinchen and his father sat together in the sunny lee of the big tent. Both were busy with their rosaries. One of old Jatsang's hands clutched the handle of the prayer-wheel; the fingers of the other hand told off the beads to the hurried rhythm of his praying. Dorje Rinchen too clicked his beads and muttered, though not about the Jewel in the Lotus. He talked in whispers of milch cows and butter, bales of wool

and loads of tea and the even more complicated count of lambskins and squares of trade cloth, while his fingers did problems of arithmetic with the beads.

There was a new sense of companionship between the two as they hunched the collars of their coats around their ears—the wind sometimes reached over the tent roof with sharp fingers though the autumn sunshine was warm. Their comradeship was partly due to a misconception on Jatsang's part which made him interrupt the rhythm of his praying to question, "Of what prayers are you doing a toll, Doka? *Gurrum* or *duggur*?"

Dorje Rinchen pushed five more beads down the string and answered the words that first reached through his pre-occupation and made sense in his mind.

"Yes, to toll. The toll of the lambskins is quite complete and more than the number Musa expected. I shall be able to tell him soon when he arrives. Oh yes, *gurrum* or *duggur*," he added, a smile softening the expression of lips already learning to be a bit hard. "They will come later when my rosary is emptied of this count."

Perhaps the old man's sigh had power too to reach through Dorje Rinchen's arithmetic: he added as a matter of interest, or maybe even by way of excuse, "That yellow book I have has neither *gurrum* nor *duggur* and only one or two very strange prayers—one at the door of a tomb where a dead man came to life again."

The prayer-wheel whined with sudden excitement: an echo of the horror in the old man's mind. "What a horrible thing that a dead man should come to life again out of a tomb! It's just like an awful spirit of the next world! Our way of burial by the vultures stops all chance of such happenings. Rebirth is much better. But what else did it tell about—the book, I mean?"

". . . and seven more black ones makes two hundred and seventy-seven in all," murmured Dorje Rinchen. "Yes, just let me finish this and I'll get the book and read some of it to you. It is very strange." But the call, "Dorje Rinchen, Dorje Rinchen, guests at your door!" took him away, even before the reckoning was complete and he went to buy a last bale

of wool with the most recent bale of tea Musa had left with him.

As Dorje Rinchen made up his final reckoning, again counting his beads, but this time alone in his own tent where no one would mix prayers with business, he fought an odd battle in his mind. Musa had told him the maximum price to be paid for lambskins, and Dorje Rinchen was sure that at that figure Musa made a very handsome profit. Throughout the months, however, Dorje Rinchen had bargained very shrewdly. Many of the skins had been bought for less. Most Tibetans when acting as agents assumed that the goods left with them were somewhat in the nature of capital and felt that anything to be gained within the prices fixed by the trader belonged to that agent. No other provision for remuneration was ever made. The traders knew perfectly well that something was made on their goods, but were well content to let it go at that.

The final arrangement of the beads and the rings on the special tally-strings of his rosary told Dorje Rinchen again that at the rate fixed by Musa the trade goods left should bring in fifteen hundred lambskins. Actually there were sixteen hundred and sixty skins in the pile, all of acceptable quality and size. What should he tell Musa when he arrived? As he sat in his tent his thoughts were busy asking for an answer. What had the past to give him as a guide for the future?

He thought of Aku Lobzong and the accounts he had with many traders. From each one he took the inevitable gain to add to wealth already so great that the venerable one alone could reckon it. Dorje Rinchen well remembered the mastering passion of that cloister. He remembered broken debtors begging for time in which to pay off their debts and begging in vain. Wide-open eyes in a strangely set face looked at him from a past he would gladly forget yet must always remember. Because of insistence on a profit, Lhamo Sjab had been beggared and shot during the raid on the Shami horse herd.

"What greed! What greed! Greed too great!" he thought and at the same time admitted to himself that ever since he had ventured a little cross-trading on tea when the grain caravan went to Taochow, something of that greed was in

him. Samtsa cattle had become his, Kanggan cattle in even greater numbers accrued to him and barring accident or cattle disease the annual yield of milk, hair, and calves was sure. But trade in goods and livestock or the changing of risk into tangible wealth were something more than a sure annual yield. A feeling of obligation to Musa and, even more, bitter pride checked his calculations.

"Mouth of hell!" he grumbled, stuffing the lambskins—sixteen hundred and sixty of them—into leather bags, "Why should I do something for nothing even for Musa? Yet, on the other hand, why should I take something from him when he doesn't offer it?"

Lhamo Mtso, pouring fresh hot tea into his bowl, remarked, "We don't need trade money. The cows are milking well. Look at this butter." She shaved off golden chips from the lump in the butter box and slid them into the bowl. "We make almost a skin a day. The Golok cows are more than ordinary."

For the Golok cows he owed a debt to no one, unless it would be indeed a debt to Jigmet. And never could that debt be paid in personal service. Now those cows, with Lhamo Mtso and Yogmo and her younger helper to milk and tend them, would make the tent rich without taking something from Musa that was neither gift nor pay. Musa had made no profit on the grain caravan when it had been in Taochow.

Dorje Rinchen put the dirty bits of paper on which the record was written in one of the few places among all the belongings of the tent where they would be safe, between the leaves of the book with a cover the colour of a lama's robe, and resumed his turning of the pages. Words leaped at him: words in letters black and beautiful against white paper.

"Sin . . . lie . . . truth . . . believe. . . ."

He mumbled them half consciously just as his fingers fumbled with the beads of his rosary. Some day when all this business was done he must take the book over to the big tent and slowly read it. Perhaps the two of them, father and son together, would be able to understand more surely just what the words meant.

He still did not know what he would say to Musa. Nor did he seem to know more surely some days later when Musa

sat at his fireside. Musa had news of Golok, reports of the pilgrim caravan from Lhasa, and stories to tell of the Kanggans' rage and shame.

"It is well known," he told Dorje Rinchen, "that you were one of the scouts who planned the raid. It is even known how many cows you received as your share. You are becoming a great man very quickly, Dorje Rinchen. How fortunate we are to have stopped at your tent door."

The eyes of Musa, bright, slightly amused but friendly too for all their shrewdness, watched his young host's self-conscious smile. *A great man.* Somehow when he heard those words Dorje Rinchen knew what was to be done with the tale of skins. After all, Musa had been the one who had arrived bringing guests to the new tent on the first day at his encampment. Dorje Rinchen replied, "And your trade left with me has gone well."

Suddenly he was in haste to get out the lambskins and count them over. The leather bags were opened and the skins, classified according to size and peltage, were arranged in neat piles.

"Yes," Dorje Rinchen repeated; "gone well. I paid less than the price you fixed so there is a good number. Six hundred—m-m—fifty and fifty-one—fifty-seven—m-m." His voice grew slightly oratorical as he finished, "—fifty-eight—fifty-nine—sixty. One thousand six hundred and sixty. That is all." He brushed his hands together and took his seat beside Musa to pour tea for his guest and then fill his own bowl.

The rhythm of the churning—the dasher making a sucking, gurgling noise as it moved up and down through buttermilk and forming butter—faltered and almost stopped. Dorje Rinchen was satisfied, when he looked across the sunlight and smoke that hung above the fire, with what Lhamo Mtso's brief regard told him. She bent again over the churn.

Musa fingered his curly, thick beard, fingers tangling in it as if he too were doing problems in arithmetic. To break a suddenly self-conscious silence, Dorje Rinchen listed details of price and purchase, referring frequently to the smudged bits of paper he took from between the pages of a book.

"I knew I was right"—Musa's eyes were very bright as

he spoke—"to come to your tent. You will be a great man. You *are* a great man, Dorje Rinchen." His regard became puzzled. "But don't you want to be rich too—or merely great?"

Dorje Rinchen knew again there were two things greater than wealth: Lhamo Mtso as she faced him, her eyes shining with an ardent blessing, meant something far beyond wealth. Again, there was something better than mere wealth: the sight of respect in the depths of Musa's merry eyes and the knowledge that he, Dorje Rinchen, could not be bought and paid for.

Aware of both these things, Dorje Rinchen spoke quite simply, "Truly, truly I must be wealthy else how can my tent be great, and how can I treat my guests as the guests of a great man's door should be treated? Certainly I want wealth. I want to be a rich man. But the cattle do well and now there are enough."

"There are never enough," interrupted Musa with finality. "And sometimes they die."

A young neighbour entered the tent, breathless with dodging the dogs and full of questions about the traders camped at Dorje Rinchen's tent. Musa waited, but when the man left he abruptly emptied the dregs of his tea into the ashpit and put away his bowl.

"I have," he muttered to Dorje Rinchen, "something to say. Let's talk in the open." The two walked beyond earshot of the encampment. For what seemed to Dorje Rinchen a long while, Musa talked about all kinds of irrelevant things: the price of butter, the price of cloth, the demand for oxen, and the price of grain. At last he questioned, "When does the Shami grain caravan leave here and when does it plan on reaching Taochow each year?"

Dorje Rinchen sensed an important turn in their talk. His collar hitched up around his ears, he leaned into the wind and watched the encampment. "The grain is nearly eaten off," he explained. "In five days we move to our last camp-site and stay there for perhaps twenty or twenty-five days. Then we move to winter quarters and three days after that the grain caravan starts. When does it reach Taochow?"

About the middle of the tenth moon. Yes, at about the same time each year.”

“What do young mares cost?” Musa asked, seemingly at random. “Not the best ones—you want to keep them for breeding—but ones like this. . . .” He held up his middle finger.

“Not more than ten ounces of silver—maybe a little less. They don’t bring much of a price. Nobody wants them.”

“And what price will a Bora rifle bring? Oh, not one as good as yours, but also like this or this. . . .” Musa raised his middle finger and then somewhat doubtfully snapped his first finger up and down.

“About a hundred ounces of silver—white silver,” said Dorje Rinchen. “Maybe a little more if payment is accepted in cattle and livestock.”

Musa leaned close and dropped his voice. “What I am going to tell you, tell no one. You are the only one to whom I am revealing it. A year from this autumn when you come for grain, drive down a drove of mares in addition to whatever livestock you bring for buying grain. Bring them to me. I will have a herd collected by that time. I can get you a Bora rifle”—again his middle and forefinger signalled the quality of the rifles—“for every five mares. One rifle for five mares. But do not bring more than one hundred. Get your mares this winter or next summer, but say nothing about driving them to Taochow.”

Excitement and incredulity fought for place in Dorje Rinchen’s eyes. “A Bora rifle for five mares,” he repeated slowly. “But who wants so many mares and who has so many rifles? Maybe someone has lied to you, Musa. How do you know for sure?”

Musa hesitated and half regretfully combed his beard with his fingers. If he could bind this keen, careful Tibetan—the man who could not be bought—to his interests they both could go far.

“My brother,” said Musa, “lives in Si-ling, far down in Chinese country. Now he is buying mares for the Chinese Army. They want to breed mules. With government protection he can bring rifles from Mongolia without trouble and he

will be in Taochow next year in the tenth moon. I have promised him five hundred mares. I will depend on you for one hundred and you will have all the profit on that one hundred. Just"—his brown, weatherbeaten face wrinkled in a surprising smile—"as I made all the profit on those lamb-skins. But tell no one, Dorje Rinchen, no one."

The ex-monk nodded. His eyes held a faraway look. The poorer Golok cattle would have to go, perhaps all of them, to make payment for a hundred mares even at the cheapest price. When it came to bartering away the milch cows, Dorje Rinchen knew of one person whom he would be forced to tell: Lhamo Mtso. Lhamo Mtso was like part of himself; she was not, for example, like Wochuck. Wochuck, like most women, could never be trusted not to tell many things when she spent the night with a man. . . . Oh well, Lhamo Mtso must be told.

Like a grass fire before a high wind, his thoughts raced through the coming year. They paused at the time of the spring snows in April. Mares died then because no one ever planned on feeding them hay and they had less resistance than the sluggish yak. If by that time he had saved a stock of hay, who wouldn't trade half-dead mares for cattle—several indeed for one yak cow about to come fresh and sure to live through the time of heavy snow? Yes, that would be it. Unfortunately, the haying was over.

On went his reasoning. The tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* had more hay than most, yet if he had to feed starving mares in the third or fourth moon he would have to buy in hay through the winter. This could best be done with Chinese trade goods: red cord, tassels, gold thread, silk and cotton thread, and beads, quite as though he were buying for a trade caravan that would spend the latter half of the winter with him and wanted plenty of hay to force the feeding of horses worn from a long journey. Getting in hay would mean that he would have to put up another enclosure, and then he jolted back to the present when Musa said, "Do you remember the foreigner? The Yellow Head, you called him. Well, he has left Taochow, but there is now another one there who is younger. He travels a great deal, rides a fine horse and wears

a dzakwa bigger than yours. He is large like his horse. A brave son, I think, truly a brave son. He wants to come along with me so he can visit the tribes—yes, Samtsa and Shami and others.”

Dorje Rinchen’s attention shifted back and forth uncertainly like a horse crossing a two-board bridge: thinking of hay and remembering a man with hair and beard the colour of hay. Yes, and the book was yellow too. Musa went on:

“He has been good to me, and though I don’t believe his faith, I believe in him. Do you think it would be safe to bring him to Shami? Would you sponsor him?”

On the whole the men of Shami had laughed about the Yellow Head. What would they say if a yellow head came to the encampment? As far as he could make out from Musa’s rambling and very apologetic talk, the Yellow Head neither sold Bora rifles nor bought mares and lambskins. What did he travel for, anyway? To talk about a creed was so useless when any one of the monks from Lhamo could talk a day about the eightfold way and never say the same thing twice. Even to talk about a new creed was the most senseless thing of all. Dorje Rinchen pushed the matter aside and concentrated on the hay to be bought. His mind settled to the business at hand. “Let’s get the mares sold this coming year,” he said to Musa. “The Yellow Head can wait. Could we drop his coming for now?”

As the two walked back towards camp a half-formulated but persistent idea rose to the surface for a moment. The Yellow Head would probably know what the words in the book meant. That too, however, could wait. For the coming year the matter of the mares would take all his spare time and attention. “Drop it for the time being,” Dorje Rinchen repeated to himself and went about the evening chores.

9

The year passed without mishap, much as Dorje Rinchen had planned it should on the day when Musa told him of the mares. Throughout the winter months he bargained unobtrusively and shrewdly for hay, while older tribesmen chuckled at his unnecessarily large stacks. When, on the other hand, at

the time of the heavy snows that come in the late spring he began to trade good cattle for half-starved, useless mares, both Jatsang and Duggur remonstrated. Any slight envy Duggur may have had over the sudden affluence of the new and smaller tent was swallowed by genuine brotherly concern.

"But you can't milk them! We aren't Mongols!" cried Duggur. "Wochuck would kill me or leave me—probably both—if I traded away good milch cows like that. Wouldn't you, Wochuck?"

The actual selling of the mares in Taochow went just as Musa had said it would. Dorje Rinchen distributed the rifles among the unarmed men of the grain caravan. They would carry them for him and so too be armed. On the return trip the caravan felt so well equipped that the peacefulness of the journey was an actual disappointment.

Once back home, Dorje Rinchen found the selling of the guns at enormous profit extremely easy. There was a special demand for Bora rifles. Feeling sure of extra ammunition, Dorje Rinchen himself had indulged in more than a few shooting bouts demonstrating the accuracy and power of his own rifle. A good many people had been made to wish that they too had Bora rifles. Existing feuds with other tribes had been neither tied nor settled throughout the year, and two or three new ones had begun.

Dorje Rinchen took most of the payment in cattle—at least Lhamo Mtso should have her milch cows back and many more besides. He also acquired a few good horses, purposely selling two rifles to the famous horse tribe of Soktsong in order to get some first-class mares. From now on he intended to develop a superior horse herd. He had heard talk in Taochow suggesting that the market in horses promised to be good in the near future. Aside from his new absorption in amassing wealth for his tent, a genuine love of fine horseflesh fanned his enthusiasm.

Nevertheless, he had his troubles, too, that winter. Cattle he had bought from other tribes persisted in straying from his herd. The milch cows wandered perversely at every opportunity until after they had had calves on the Shami range.

All winter Dorje Rinchen rode the steppes searching for lost cattle and, while seeking, became a scout and watchman for his own tribe. A certain resemblance to Duggur, Jigmet and other night riders, growing beyond consciously assumed mannerisms, intensified into habit and instinct. His rather contemplative face, for all its youthfulness, seemed to age and harden. He kept his herds intact and satisfied, and knew without reserve that the venture of the black tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* was an admitted success.

One day a matter concerning strayed cattle brought Trinlan to see him. It was one of the worst days of late winter, when the wind scoured the plain for everything it could grasp and hurled great volleys of dust and grit over the winter encampment.

Out of the dust-storm and through a pack of encampment dogs lunging at the end of his whirling tie-rope, its end weighted with an oaken whip-handle, came Trinlan. Dorje Rinchen, who was throwing out the first sacrifice, went to meet him at the ashpile, where the wind caught the grey powder that stirred under their feet as they moved, and stretched in ragged streamers against the sunshine.

As always, Trinlan spoke first.

“Ah, offerings. It must be that the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* is having a day of formal chanting. Many chanters?”

“Four Akus,” replied Dorje Rinchen. His voice was complacent. Most tents would have two, but the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* could well afford four.

They turned back under the long string of newly hung prayer flags that flapped in the wind and so ever prayed for the tent the two entered. Trinlan took his rifle off his back as he stepped under the partly raised curtain of the door.

“The lama knows—Complete Perfection knows—*Om mani padme hum!*” Trinlan’s voice reflected faint but definite amusement. “How good it is to be rich! Then one can buy all the prayers one needs as well as all the milch cows one wants. Ah, Lhate! How is the milking? Some? All our cows are dry. No more white butter from day to day—only the yellow butter from the skins. Ah, with reverence, Akus all. Are you well—the praying successful?”

He took his place at the lower edge of the ashpit. Crowded in the upper part of the tent were the four chanters, grouped around the altar, equipped with all the regalia of the *gurrum* service. There was a score of butter lamps, each one pointing a tiny spearhead upward towards the scroll of the protector deity. Among them were set out the brass bowls of water and barley and the tiny towers and figures made from tsamba dough and butter.

"They intone well—very well," whispered Lhamo Mtso as she poured tea into her brother's bowl. "We should have good luck all the time because we have more praying than anyone in the encampment."

The sharp edge of Trinlan's regard changed subtly as he nodded to his sister, but he remained silent. The praying ceased and heavy, hoarse voices asked Trinlan the news while the four shifted to the fireside and brought out their bowls. Dorje Rinchen moved to serve them, but again voices and the clamour of the dogs drew him outside. A moment later he brought in yet more guests: two monks bundled and tied up against the wind in coats and scarves. As they dusted themselves with a great shaking of scarves and slapping of garments, Trinlan's slightly crooked smile became more askew than ever: one of them was the newly elected "hji-wa" or business manager for the monk commune of Lhamo—he was one of the monks, in fact, who had found Dorje Rinchen and Lhamo Mtso in their camp the day after the panic in Lhamo.

The hji-wa was unctuous to all in the tent, exchanging comment with the chanters about the *gurrum* as one of the monkish fraternity would, flattering Dorje Rinchen about the comfort of the tent, and even allowing his smile to tell Lhamo Mtso that the tea she poured was the best and that the bowl of stew—swimming with mutton-fat and red peppers—was something he would remember.

"Ah, Dorje Rinchen," he exclaimed. "You have all the earthly happiness of the wealthy. How well off you are! And it is good my fellow monks can chant *gurrum* for you. It is effective, very effective in warding off evil."

With the arrival of the hji-wa and his companion a

change had come over Dorje Rinchen. Their coming suddenly brought into focus vague thoughts that had been growing stronger for months past. His wealth had brought him a new relationship with organized religion. Though he would never cease being a wanlog, he realized that less and less would be said about it as, with his wealth, he contributed to the religious service of the lamasery. Wealth had brought him a certain standing and with it fears and dim misgivings might be laid for ever, never to haunt him again. If deeper spiritual fears remained, they were receding far into his unconscious thoughts. Decision and satisfaction mingled as cause and effect showed in his face. All was well except for Trinlan's gravely decorous but none the less tell-tale face. Well, some day, perhaps, he would even make a pilgrimage to Lhasa, find his true horoscope, banish the curse for ever.

When the feast was ended, but before the chanters took up the burden of voice, horn, and drum, the hji-wa came to the point. "Many tribes, encampments, or clans undertake to boil tea for a great chanting of one day or more, for it takes much to boil tea for eight hundred monks and, in addition, give each one his two catties of butter. It takes two thousand catties of butter, a bale of tea, and at least one hundred ounces of silver for rice and meat." From the start they intended that there be no mistake about the actual expense involved.

"All that makes a great 'boiling of tea' when the monks chant the creed through the long, long day. Much sin is atoned for. Generally, days in the schedule of chants for the year are quickly taken by tribes who want the privilege. Seldom even chiefs undertake a boiling alone. Yet you, with great wealth and the power of making more, could best assume such a burden. Such wealth as yours comes not from years of calving and milking, but from your heart and courage. Always there will be wealth for you, always and everywhere, no matter how fast you spend it. You know the power of religion; maybe, too, the need."

A sly threat showed like teeth behind the lifted lips of a dog that does not even growl. "Yes, you know the need of religion to drive evil fortune and disaster from your year and

to keep the members of your tent in health and all the flocks and herds in peace throughout the months. Seldom can a new tent attempt so much. Great is the power of religion. Sins many and great are atoned for."

"Very well said. For that fellow, very well said indeed," muttered Trinlan to his own impish thoughts as he drank his tea, smiling. "But if he gets it, how rich Dorje Rinchen has become within the year. Marvellous!"

The four took up the *gurrum* chant. There was no rivalry between them and the Lhamo monk commune. Dorje Rinchen's gifts to the lamasery would hardly affect his use of them. The more religious anyone became the better served all would be. In the meantime they had their prayers already paid for, to finish in a day. They took up the task importantly. Drum and horn made conversation of any length impossible within the tent.

Dorje Rinchen and the lamasery representative went outside to finish making the arrangements. Even before they left, Trinlan was certain from the set of his friend's face that acceptance was sure. Later he listened with a minimum of raillery when told about it. The afternoon wore on and the two friends found time to finish discussing the matter of the strayed cattle and talk about many other things. Trinlan said no more about the boiling of the big tea. Why mar the satisfaction that looked out with a new assurance from Dorje Rinchen's face?

The day's chanting came to a close after dark. To the accompaniment of a terrific crescendo of sound the last page was turned, the offerings presented to the idol scroll, and the evil that might come safely imprisoned in the dorma. The members of the family followed with the prescribed number of prostrations. Even Trinlan joined in, though his teeth shone whitely in the dark, and all was finished. Again the chanters and all in the tent gathered to eat and drink: eat not only the good things that the wealth of the tent might provide, but eat, with a certain fearful awe, that part of the dorma known as "dough of the gods" for the blessing it would bring.

Rifle in hand, Dorje Rinchen carried the rest of the dorma,

together with burning juniper boughs, out into the night. The wind had died at sunset and, though dust hung heavily in the still air, the stars were bright in the black sky.

“Thrown out, thrown out—away for ever—ahum—ahum!” he shouted, tossing the accursed mass as far as he could towards the refuse heap. Then he crouched, straining eyes and ears to learn what would follow. Out of the darkness something blacker than night came on stiff wings that scraped the air with harsh sound, and hoarse voices fought and choked with eagerness around the dorma. The “birds of the gods,” the great ravens themselves, had come and taken their share before the encampment dogs found it. It was a sign among a thousand. Dorje Rinchen lifted his triumphant yell over all the encampment: a sound that quavered like a distant wolf howl over the plain. It was well worth a cartridge or two, and shots followed before the echoes had fairly died away.

Somehow he had joined forces with the powers of religion to meet whatever the future might bring. He was forgetting that he was a wanlog, forgetting his sin and doubts, forgetting the Yellow Head and the brooding concern on his father’s face above the prayer-wheel.

Wealth, possibly, might raise ramparts of blessing around his tent and all its members. Perhaps Dorje Rinchen, wanlog, but now rich and able to buy and pay for the praying of eight hundred monks, need no longer fear the fate that threatened from a troubled, broken past and an uncertain future. Wealth had not only brought prestige and handsome ways of doing, but forged a new link with the religion he had broken with in the past. In that forging, religion seemed to come to meet him halfway.

For an instant the immensity of the night seemed to crowd close and almost smother him, until voices from the tent called.

“What came? What came?”

“The birds of the gods. All is well,” he answered and left the night outside as he dropped the curtain of the tent door behind him.

Another year went by and no bad luck marred the seasons or broke the eventful rhythm of pastoral life. With the spring, dust, riding on furious gales, changed to snow and then to rain. The livestock haunted the hollows where the faint promise of new grass grew day by day.

Summer arrived with its uncertain skies and sudden thunderheads in the blue. Underfoot the grass was now lush and thick, filling vast meadows with yellow, lavender, and purple bloom. The livestock changed their ragged coats for sleek, short-haired garments. The cattle wandered restlessly, the young males fought battles and the horse herds ran races because of the wild challenge that spoke from springy turf and wind-cooled sunshine.

Autumn came in with snow, but that soon dried, and under clear days and nights the world was a russet-coloured land of plenty. Mornings and evenings were cold with hoarfrost, thick as snow, or with an evening wind like a breath from the glaciers of Nyin-bur-yur-tsi itself. The days were the finest of the year; a time when the life of the tents was at its best.

Finally, winter grew to bitter intensity and tiny springs spread over the landscape in icefloes a mile long. The glassy cover of Peacock Waters bent and cracked in the torture of the frost. Then the stock stood in the early morning under clouds of steam rising from their own breath and warmth. They barely moved through the brittle yellow grass of the winter pastures, seeming to depend more on their stored-up fat than on the winter hay.

So the season changed. The year's reality for the tent was marked by lambing, calving and the time when the long-legged colts staggered drunkenly on shaky legs. It started with puppies before the first signs of spring even hinted the end of winter.

"The grey bitch has puppies," announced Lhamo Mtso, pressing a squealing bundle of grey fur against her face.

"When will we have a child," she often repeated. "When will we have a man child?"

Then the lambs were dropped, often in the pens at night,

but more often in the open where the sheep made the best of grazing in the first beginnings of spring. On the heels of the lambing the first woolly yak calves made their appearance and Lhamo Mtso was busier than ever helping life into the world. The hands that touched anxious mothers and bewildered young were tender; most of all when stroking the desolate "dzo-mo" or hybrid milch cows whose young are not allowed to live.

As the rhythm of multiplying life was felt through the changing year the wealth of the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* increased. Yogmo and the other servant-girl helped Lhamo Mtso with the milking, the churning, the making of cheese and the preparing of cow-chips for fuel. One young relative was attached to the tent as herder, and later in the year Drokwa, a refugee from one of the Golok tribes, found shelter, food, and safety with Dorje Rinchen, giving in return his time and talents to the service of the tent for such time as he chose to stay.

Lhamo Mtso, with all the experience of a rich man's daughter, managed well, always insisting on special care in the making of cheese and butter. She kept the servants busy without nagging them and never spared herself. Most of all she loved the milch cows that would follow her right into the tent.

Honeymoon days—if there had been any in the tempestuous meeting and mating of Dorje Rinchen and Trinlan's sister—were past, but the two partners in the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* were more closely joined than ever. Little was done in the course of ordinary trade and management that was not referred to a dark-eyed, laughing girl now changing into a handsome woman. The daughter of the younger branch of the ombo's household made a famous hostess, speaking pleasantly and well to all the guests who came, serving tea and carving butter with the gracious assurance that well fitted her position in the tent of Dorje Rinchen—a man already great among his fellows.

"She has wisdom too, as well as beauty," thought old men and gallant blades alike as they drank their tea with Dorje Rinchen. He was proud with a fierce, hot pride that could

deny her nothing. Next to the chief's wife she was the one woman in Shami who discarded silver plaques in the one hundred and eight braids on her back and instead carried lumps of amber hung in rows in the style set by the famous queen of Ngawa.

11

On a winter day when the cold was intense the two were alone in the big tent, Dorje Rinchen in a rare period of rest, savouring the flavour of his tea and the happiness of his fireside, and Lhamo Mtsö seeing to the scanty churning of a time when the best cows only gave a trickle at a milking. The dasher of the churn seemed heavy none the less.

"Let it be till Yogmo comes; she can do it," Dorje Rinchen advised. "You don't even drive a yak cow too fast at certain times."

Lhamo Mtso's face lit with a flash of amusement. "Ah, yes. I almost need another girdle to keep my coat together, it is stretched so far round. I feel just like one of the cows! But the days are few and short now. Oh, how I hated to miss the Wishing Prayer a few days ago. Remember the first Monlam, Doka? And now look at me—like a yak cow or a mare!"

During the birth-time of the steppe life, when there had also been a cessation of frequent and furious riding, and with the arrival of extra servants, conception had come to Lhamo Mtso. Dorje-Rinchen-*tsang* waited for a child.

"Are you all right? Leave the churn alone," he urged.

"I feel very well, and more comfortable now than for some time," she answered. "And how is your tea? Not white enough? Let me add more milk."

She crossed to the men's side of the tent and hunched herself at the edge of the ashpit. Slowly dusk filled the room. Lhamo Mtso roused herself to fill the fuel shelf behind the fireplace and stir the fire for added warmth and light, then went back to her seat at the edge of the ashpit. The servants came in, the few winter-time chores done. The older servant-girl took over the churning without being told, making no comment. Dorje Rinchen, glancing from time to time at his

wife's half-hidden face, was conscious of a sharpened sense of the suspense of waiting.

"Get out some of the best flour and let's have a better meal than usual," he ordered.

The servants' tongues were loosened as they prepared the feast. Little was said, however, as they ate and drank, but when the dumplings had been eaten the illusion of waiting seemed stronger than ever to Dorje Rinchen.

"Come on, Drokwa, sing something for us," he said to his Golok servant.

Drokwa's oddly one-sided face, sharp and ugly under shaggy, untrimmed hair like all the Goloks, had been remote and unsuspecting. Half hearing Dorje Rinchen's order, he snapped back to the present.

"What? Who said I sing?" he muttered.

"Oh, I heard you. Yes, I heard," insisted one of Lhamo Mtso's servants. Both of the handmaidens began to giggle.

"You heard wrong, then. Besides, the wind has hurt my voice."

"But, Drokwa, do sing something tonight, or tell a tale at least. Sing tonight of all nights, Drokwa." Lhamo Mtso's voice sounded somewhat muffled. "Do you know the song about *A Tak Lhamo*?"

Drokwa's face warmed slightly and he looked at the mistress of the tent.

"All right, *A Tak Lhamo*—his history . . ." His cupped hands beat out the measure of a line and then he hummed the melody. "All right, *A Tak Lhamo* ah—so——"

Then he sang the ringing ballad of the bold sinner who fought and died unforgiven:

A Tak Lhamo rider bold;
Rode with hand upon his sword,
Rode through days and nights of war,
Rode to hunt, and rode to fight,
Rode to feast, and rode to tryst,
A Tak Lhamo, what you are!
Oh yes, A Tak Lhamo.

and on and on to the final ringing stanza—

“A Tak Lhamo,” Yama said.
“You are sinner damned for sure;
You will burn a million years.
You atonement do not have.
You have given what is free.
A Tak Lhamo, what you are!
Oh yes, A Tak Lhamo.”

Dorje Rinchen found himself shivering and wondering.
Would the spirits bless the birth of his child. He did not like
this waiting.

“Sing *Dremi Ganden*¹ for us. You know that, of course.
But it is long, drink well before you start.”

Drokwa hummed another air; slow, somewhat solemn.
He began:

Hear the tale of Dremi Ganden,
Dremi Ganden son of Rgyal-wo.
When his friend was taken captive,
For his sake he took the jewel:
Jewel precious like a diamond:
Jewel treasure of his father:
Paid the ransom they demanded.
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

But his father's heart was bitter
When he couldn't find the jewel,
So he took his son and bound him.
Bound him with great chains and fetters,
Till the blood ran down like raining,
Till the bones were near to cracking,
And the flesh was bruised and broken.
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Dremi Ganden's wife came pleading,
His two sons with childish weeping,
And the elders of the people,
Groaned and moaned to show their sadness,

¹ This is an informal nomad version of the famous Tibetan play translated
by Bacot into French. It is one of the Jakata or pre-Buddha series.

Women wept like splashing raindrops,
Dogs were howling, cattle lowing,
And the skies were black with sorrow.
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

But the king's wrath unrelenting
Ordered blows and fiery burnings,
Torture—to break down his spirit.
Hunger, cold, and prison darkness—
All the trials that should make him
Show his fear and fleshly weakness;
Could not break his prideful silence,
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Then the king pronounced his sentence.
Twelve long years his son must wander
In the poison land of evil:
All alone with none to help him.
He could carry there no money.
All unarmed and all defenceless,
With a wooden bowl for begging.
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Still his wife refused to leave him,
Said she'd follow all the journey,
Said she'd beg beside him always,
Sleep beside him in the coldness,
Make him shade against the sunshine,
Tend his fire, and change his boot hay
In the poison land of evil.
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Then his sons with childish weeping
Said that they could only follow
Where their father's way might lead them.
They must go that lengthy journey
Where the mountains reach the cloud-wrack,
And the valleys reach the bottom
Of the poison land of evil.
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Then the elders and the people,
Women crying, and the children,
Brought him food, and yak, and saddles;
Bags to pack in, ropes to tie with,
Covers fitted for the saddles,
Even tether-rope of yak-hair,
Kettles, and the goatskin bellows.

So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

So they journeyed on that pathway
Where the mountains reach the cloud-wrack,
And the pass is veiled in storm-clouds,
Where the valleys drip so steeply
Shin-rje-chos-rgyal must be waiting
At the foot of each long downhill,
In the poison land of evil.

So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Robbers of the lonesome mountains,
Hairy men with apeish fathers,
Rushed upon them, took the cattle;
All the loads, the food and saddles,
Kettles, and the goatskin bellows,
Raincoats, and the felts for sleeping,
Took them all, and left them bruises.

So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

But they bravely travelled onward,
Dremi Ganden always leading,
Then his wife and children after,
Stepping in the footprints left them;
Through the frost and through the rainstorms,
Through the burning sun, and snowstorms,
To the poison land of evil.

So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Next he lost the two young children,
Taken by the mountain giants.
Taken, and he could not stop them,
Only stand and hear their crying

Growing fainter in the distance,
On the road that marches onward
Toward the poison land of evil.
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Where the dog-head dwarfs foregather,
There his wife was taken from him,
Taken for her goddess beauty.
Goddess taken by the demons.
All alone, was Dremi Ganden,
On the bitter road of sorrow
To the poison land of evil.
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Said a beggar, crying blindly,
"Give me both your eyes for pity.
Give because you will not need them
When you end your days in exile.
Give, or you can never pass here."
So he gave him eyes all bleeding,
Leaving both the sockets empty.
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

When the months and days were ended,
Came he to the southern forest
Where the trees shut out the sunshine,
Earth of poison, leaves of poison,
Grass of poison, trees of poison,
Dew of poison, rain of poison,
In the poison land of evil.
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Where the wood was dark with shadows,
'Neath a tree with many trunk stems,
Dremi Ganden sat and waited.
All the beasts had smelled him coming.
Licked the blood drips of his weeping;
Tigers, leopards, bears, and foxes;
All the hungry beasts were gathered.
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

When their eyes like fires ringed him,
And their breath, as bellows angry
Beat upon the flame of longing,
To them, hungry for his life-blood,
Dremi Ganden told his story;
Of the way, the loss, the anguish,
Of the years of exile ordered.

So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

With their tongues they licked the bleeding
Sockets where his sight was darkened,
Poured their tears to wash his fingers,
Brought him food of every flavour,
Heard the law his wisdom taught them,
Served him—meditating sagely—
In the poison land of evil.

So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

When the long twelve years were ended,
Sudden, through the gloomy forest,
Cried a voice to Dremi Ganden,
“Rise and go, your exile’s ended!”
Tigers, lions, bears and serpents;
All the beasts, weeping greatly,
Set him on his homeward journey.

So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Came a beggar, as he stumbled,
Tapping with his stick, still tapping
For a foothold on the pathway.
“You’ve come back, O Dremi Ganden.
Take your eyes with added blessings.
Take your eyes and walk uprightly.
Quickly make your homeward journey.”

So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Where the dog-head dwarfs foregather.
There they stopped him on his journey.
Brought his wife of goddess beauty.
“You’ve come back, O Dremi Ganden,

Take your wife to walk beside you,
With these gifts we bring in blessing.
Quickly make your homeward journey.”
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Mountain giants in the pathway
Waited with two youths beside them:
Two young men like heroes holy.
“You’ve come back, O Dremi Ganden.
Take your sons to build your camp-fires,
Take these gifts atonement making.
Quickly make your homeward journey.”
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Then the lonesome mountain people
Brought his oxen, brought his kettles,
Brought his felts, his packs and saddles,
And a tenfold restitution.
“You’ve come back, O Dremi Ganden.
We will drive the oxen for you.
Quickly make your homeward journey.”
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

And a thousand chiefs came, bending,
Palms outspread, and tongues protruding,
Bringing gifts in goods and horses,
Bringing weapons, bringing tribute,
Bringing tents and lowly service.
“You’ve come back, O Dremi Ganden.
Quickly end your homeward journey.”
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Thus they came to Rgyal-wo’s tent-ring,
Dremi Ganden riding proudly
On a black horse like to thunder.
Like the hay in autumn hayfields
So the people fell before him.
“You’ve come back, O Dremi Ganden.
Ended is your homeward journey.”
So 'tis said of Dremi Ganden.

With a scarf of triple Buddhas
Woven in the shining satin
Spread upon his palms so humble,
Waited Rgyal-wo to receive him.
“You’ve come back, O Dremi Ganden
From the poison land of evil.
Ended is your homeward journey.”
So ’tis said of Dremi Ganden.

Rule the poison land of evil.
Rule the beasts that haunt the shadows,
Rule the grassland braves and riders,
Rule the people of the forest,
Rule the farmers of the valleys,
Rule the treasures of the Rgyal-wo,
Dremi Ganden, Rgyal-wo only!
So ’tis said of Dremi Ganden.
So ’tis said—so ’tis said.

Without a break the story had been sung to the end. No one moved. No one even whispered and the fire, untended, burned more and more faintly until at the last “So ’tis said—so ’tis said” the shadows were all around, close to the ashpit itself where a red glow made unwilling surrender to the darkness.

“Thank you, Drokwa. What a brave son was Dremi Ganden; yet how strange a story,” said Lhamo Mtso, her voice more subdued than before. Then a servant girl spoke.

“Just one more song—a short one. Don’t the Goloks sing any love songs?”

“The Goloks don’t need to sing love songs. They love,” said Drokwa. “Oh well then, just this: Oh-oh, ah.” His voice quavered on a long minor prelude and then he sang:

At the water hole where the waters rise—dark and dee-eep:
At the water hole where the cattle drink—slow and dee-eep:
At the water hole where my sweetheart bends down so dee-eep:
At the water hole.

At the water hole where the water spills—all arou-und:
At the water hole where the young girls stand—all arou-und:

At the water hole where an answer mocks—all arou-und:
At the water hole.

At the water hole where the ice will melt—nevermo-ore:
At the water hole where my sweetheart comes—nevermo-ore:
At the water hole—nevermore—nevermore.

Drokwa's voice held brokenly to the wail of the refrain until one of the dogs in the tent door began to whimper.

"Such are the love songs we sing. Better still is love itself," Drokwa added.

Dorje Rinchen stirred uneasily. "How sad it is. Oh pitiful indeed! Lhamo Mtso, you sing one just to show what the Shimdrok sing. You know one not so sad. Remember 'Oh you for whom . . .'"

Lhamo Mtso shook her head and then changed her mind.

"All right, but I can't sing like Drokwa. This is what the Shimdrok sing: happier than the Goloks."

Oh you for whom my heart so yearns,
When will I win my token back?
Oh you for whom my flesh now burns,
I gave a token, now I lack.
Now I lack—I lack.

Lhamo Mtso's husky alto quavered, but the lilt of the melody covered most of her breathlessness. "Wait. There's an answer." She breathed deeply for a few moments and then went on:

Oh you who seek me in the night,
And ask to have your token back,
Take what is yours—and all delight—
I give my heart. Still do you lack?
Now I lack—I lack.

"Well sung, by the living Buddha, well sung!" For all its heartiness, Drokwa's commendation was faintly patronizing.

"Now I lack—I lack," hummed Dorje Rinchen ruefully.

A servant girl scrambled to her feet and mended the fire. The awakened flames filled the tent with light by which they drank their bedtime curds. Then the circle broke up. Each went to make up his sleeping-place.

Lhamo Mtso spoke to Dorje Rinchen. "Help me to make up a good bed in the little tent and bring fuel for a fire. Perhaps Ahway too had better come." She was attempting to be casual. Her voice was troubled yet held a shy pride. "I wonder if, like Dremi Ganden, I will 'quickly make the homeward journey.' "

Later, as they built the fire in the little tent that had been pitched and waiting for days, she spoke with tender laughter in her voice. "If it would only be like puppies. But you know, even a yak cow sometimes has trouble with the first one."

Dorje Rinchen set a smudge fire burning at the entrance of the tent enclosure as a sign that guests were taboo. Even the chanting monks were to be barred for days from both the big tent and Lhamo Mtso's little one.

It was a very private matter. Most of that night, Dorje Rinchen spent outside, moving restlessly in the dark, tending to the smudge fire, or simply outfacing the cold. He did not like to see Lhamo Mtso's startled agony. Just at dawn a new sound called him out of the cold into the fire-glow. Lhamo Mtso's face wore a new beauty. A son had been born to the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*. When Ahway left the tent on an errand, Dorje Rinchen's wife spoke tremblingly, "Ah-ya Doka, it was not like puppies. But he looks more like a puppy than a yak calf!"

12

"We have got appearance. With a horse like yours and a fox-fur hat like mine, to say nothing of two such rifles, of course we have style." Trinlan sighed. "It seems hardly possible that another Wishing Prayer Festival has ended. How quickly they pass! How many, Doka, since the one when you danced as leader of the Black Hats?"

"Five," answered Dorje Rinchen.

Although Dorje Rinchen put one foot in the stirrup and his hand on the saddle cantle, the horse was through the scattering crowd of loafers grouped round the gate of the lama's great house and a hundred paces up the trail before his other foot found the offside stirrup and he could settle himself to the task of checking the big piebald. Even then it went

sideways up the trail, twisting its head and fighting the bit.

Ngoncha was a famous horse of Soktsong and he knew it; knew that he was famous as a courser of wolves and a horse that could make astonishing speed over rough country as well as run like a wild thing on level ground. Now the whites of his eyes showed slightly bloodshot as he rolled them back at his rider. He did a kind of tap-dance, stirring up clouds of dust. Trinlan galloped up, settling the hang of his rifle on his back as he rode sideways in the saddle and the two friends went up the trail, the shouted farewells of the crowd at Llamo fading against the wind and distance.

“Only five years and you ride a horse like Ngoncha and have sponsored ‘big boiling’ for all the monks and a day’s chanting; once last year and once this year. The lama knows how you do it. The lama knows.”

There was puzzlement quite unmixed with envy in Trinlan’s voice.

To his agile, sceptical mind, Dorje Rinchen’s simple acceptance of things as they were seemed almost childish. He was secretly amazed at his friend’s sudden rise to a position of wealth and prestige. He did not realize that Dorje Rinchen, as a layman, brought the same intensity of effort to the task of achieving success by accepted standards that he had once brought to the task of becoming a good monk in those days long past when they had been boys under the shadow of the chanting-hall.

But Trinlan half-guessed this as the two went up the trail, hurrying toward the pass. Yet, he thought, in one thing perhaps that singleness of purpose had begun to . . . Trinlan’s teeth showed against the wind for a moment:

“I didn’t know you ever stayed for the night of the Butter Images. Who was it you slept with? Is she a famous beauty or the wife of some chief? Someone famous enough for a man as great as Dorje Rinchen, who hires all the monks to chant for him and sits next to the Shami chief in the lama’s great house?” There was no malice, only amusement in his voice.

Ngoncha tossed his head impatiently at the change of

pressure on his bit, lunged sideways over a stream of ice poured across the trail. His rider balanced in the stirrups to swing him back.

"I never expected to see our servant-girl Yogmo at the Festival," mocked Trinlan. "Little baggage, she asked for time to go home and fooled me by coming here instead."

He chuckled, and Dorje Rinchen said, somewhat embarrassed: "She has been looking at me for a long, long time, and she's prettier than most. Why should I want the wife of a chief like you? I don't need the prestige of having had a famous woman."

The words sounded complacent and worldly wise as if women were an old story. Actually, Dorje Rinchen was thinking of his disloyalty to Lhamo Mtso and they were stormy thoughts. He tried to talk of other things, but guilt prevented it. He felt uncomfortably sure that she would ignore the issue, although she was sure to know of it. He half hoped she would ignore it.

Now Lhamo Mtso had the child. This made her less his wife at times. To be sure, sometimes during the past year he had caught one of her heartwarming glances, a flash from out of a thin, dark face like Trinlan's but different. Then her eyes would turn away towards the place where little Drashi lay bundled in furs.

When he thought of Yogmo on the night of the Butter Images it was with regret, though he well knew he had remained faithful longer than most Tibetan husbands would have, especially any of wealth and prestige who were as handsome as he. During the past two years a good many tent wives, flirtatious daughters and other all too obviously complaisant servant-girls had looked at him more than once when he travelled and visited among the tents of the tribes. Then that little baggage of whom he had been conscious for so long in the tent had bumped into him with such assurance and so provocatively on the night of the Butter Images! He found himself thinking that Wochuck would probably show more immediate anger than Lhamo Mtso. Then he became aware that Trinlan was speaking:

"The night of the Butter Images, yes. But you don't plan

anything more, do you? Or do you think of a second and smaller tent?" For once there was no laughter in Trinlan's voice and his face was grave.

Ngoncha responded again to his rider's mood and stirred a rising cloud of dust on the trail. Dorje Rinchen answered, his face averted from the dust. "No, of course not. The night of the Butter Images means nothing." Means nothing—means nothing—the echo of the words made him pause as images rose from the past. His voice became unsteady.

"She is just a servant-girl still, and servant-girl only, unless she wants to leave. The wealth of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* stays in one tent: Lhamo Mtso's tent, the tent for which the monks of Lhamo do a big chant once a year. The lama knows." He was eager to escape the subject of the servant girl and even more the mention of such a distasteful subject as a second and smaller tent—"The lama knows, the price is dear; a big chant like that for just one tent. But when I sit as guest and oversee the distribution of pay in butter they forget, I think, that I am wanlog. Even the lama treats me . . ."

"Thunderbolt of hell, no! They never forget that, the lama least of all. The chiefs and big men with whom you sit at Monlam may, but the lama and monks, no. Not they." Trinlan's voice cut like the dust-laden winter wind that leaped at them as they topped the pass. For once, it left Dorje Rinchen unscathed. Bowing his head against the gale, and turning his horse towards the yellow and white plain that was so bleak and cheerless under a wintry sky, he settled himself into his great coat. He considered at length the recognition wealth had brought him.

That regard was not only the tangible expression of his fellows' esteem; it seemed like a cloak in which he could wrap himself against the bitterness of Trinlan's voice and the old, even colder, winds of fear and an uncertain fate. Monks had greeted him with deference. Little acolytes whispered as he passed. Their talk was about Dorje Rinchen, the honoured guest of the great house, the man who boiled tea for eight hundred monks. They did not, he was sure, talk of Dorje Rinchen, the renegade.

This acceptance by the monks, and he especially remembered Wanjur's flattery, was more than the symbol of worldly success. Did not the prayers he paid for create a defence against the menace of that other dark world? The penalty of a broken vow, the accusation in a dead man's face, the ghostly regard of a great snow mountain, still haunted him. Yet even the lama blessed him for his wealth. The lama's eyes . . . A lingering doubt persisted. "Perhaps," he said, turning on his saddle towards Trinlan, "the monks and all at Lhamo don't quite forget the wanlog, but evil fortune—*Om mani padme hum!*—that one should have to mention it—has passed me by. The merit of chants and prayers guards the tent of Dorje Rinchen-tsang."

Trinlan's reply was a trifle sardonic: "A good rifle and good hard work guard the tent, to say nothing of Lhate, who would make any tent prosper. She loves the cows and all the little things of springtime."

"She loves little Drashi most of all," thought Dorje Rinchen, and with a quick revulsion of feeling he broke out: "By all the towers of the temple and the body of the holy lama, if she says so I'll send Yogmo home!"

"Lhate won't say anything," Trinlan said with conviction. "She is proud and wise and she knows your heart. She's a fine tent wife for you, Doka."

The day drew on towards cold winter evening. For the most part, the men rode in silence.

Dorje Rinchen's thoughts moved in a wide circle. Wealth, religious protection, and a sense of spiritual security were not final in themselves . . . he decided, but only important as related to the whole of tent life happiness, prosperous herds, assurance, Lhamo Mtso, and now last of all, Drashi: fat, shaggy-haired and certainly getting ready to walk in a "man bear of the mountains" fashion. He was stirred to speech.

"Now since Drashi is born Jatsang spends more of his time in my tent than in the big tent. Drashi is his only grandchild. He had a special chanting-service for him the other day. The horoscope for the child was very good—long life and no trouble. What great power our doctrine possesses to dominate the other world and foreknow the future!"

Riding with his head half turned away from the wind, Trinlan's eyes were never long away from the segment of the horizon that was his special responsibility. Dorje Rinchen felt too secure, he thought. Somehow, he wanted to warn him, but he found argument difficult. He himself was never quite sure whether he distrusted simply his own religion or all religion. He knew little enough about the others. He turned his face into the wind and asked Dorje Rinchen, "Have you read any more in that book of religion you got from the Yellow Head in Taochow? You know, the one you showed me with the words 'In the beginning was the word.'"

Dorje Rinchen had not looked at the book for months. It had spoken about the truth, about making people free, about salvation. It had told many stories, but his life had been too full of newly gained prestige to consider such things. Trinlan's words recalled certain phrases with all their power to nag and probe.

"No," Dorje Rinchen replied, "that book has nothing to do with me. Like all the other marvellous things belonging to the Yellow Head, it is for him; it is his religion, not mine. Why bother reading it when it doesn't help to say the prayers of our religion and merely talks of another?"

"Yes, yes, certainly. But what is that religion like?" Trinlan persisted. "You read something of it, then. You have read it since. What does it say of life, of marriage and family, of sin, of the vows of the monkhood, of lamas, and of the life after death?"

"How can I . . . ? Mouth of hell! How this horse pulls with his mouth when he gets on the open plain! There, I can pull too!" Ngoncha raised a flurry of dust from the bleached frozen marsh over which they travelled, but his rider pulled him level with Trinlan's mount. "It says all kinds of things—strange things. Yes, the Yeshu one, he is the lama and saviour of that religion, I imagine—went to a wedding and so must have blessed it, though I didn't read of gifts. He made some wine. Sometimes the book or the lama talks of religion, but again of things like water, bread and a flock of sheep. And often about coming alive again. The Yeshu lama stayed dead only

a short time. It was all quite strange and the very idea frightened my father. The book is confusing, though the letters are clear enough—beautiful letters. It would need that Yellow Head to explain it if one really wished to know. And I have no reason to see the Yellow Head again.”

“I should have asked him when I saw him.” Trinlan pulled close to Dorje Rinchen and the two rode crowded together as they talked.

“The Yellow Head came to Samtsa,” Trinlan explained. “Oh, just for a few days last autumn. And not the old one you met in Taochow—a younger one. Still, he was a Yellow Head with no beard. Yes, it was the one Musa spoke of. He wears a dzakwa with very good style and rides a big chestnut mare. She can run like a gazelle. I saw her. Just like a deer. The Yellow Head may have a strange religion, but he’s a brave son. Rides and shoots well and he is big in his dzakwa. We rode races with him and had a shooting match the morning he left. The next time he visits he is coming to my tent.”

Trinlan shifted in his saddle, leaning closer to Dorje Rinchen. “Funny thing, he won’t tell lies. He even wouldn’t lie about the day of his leaving and that is dangerous. He gave one date and Musa gave another! But I was certain Yellow Head’s day was the right one and laughed at Musa. Musa was disgusted.

“The Yellow Head must learn to keep quiet, if he won’t lie, or that will be the end of him. All the Samtsa were yellow-eyed about his beautiful horse. But they were a bit afraid too because he seemed so sure of himself. He even laughed at our shooting and he uses a rifle without a rest. Think of that! And he could talk religion, too! I heard him prove that Complete Perfection was before the beginning of the world, not afterwards. Wanjur from Lhamo was there and could only answer with some phrases from the creed and make fun of the Yellow Head’s poor Tibetan. He couldn’t touch the argument.”

Dorje Rinchen was fascinated. “He sounds different from that other Yellow Head I saw in Taochow, though he was very good to us. Maybe if . . .” But a premonition seeped into Dorje Rinchen’s thinking and he stopped. Trinlan didn’t care

if a Yellow Head from horrible lands disproved the Enlightened One's creed. However, he, Dorje Rinchen, was securely sheltered behind all the defences of that creed and lived in peace. He had no particular desire to hear the Yellow Head say things to break it down. Indeed, what business had he to come and talk another religion?

"No, you needn't bring him to see me," he said. "Though I would like to look at that horse. Musa told me about it, too."

"Maybe you will," Trinlan said. "I heard a rumour that the Yellow Head is hoping to live at Lhamo."

"They'll never let him live at Lhamo." Dorje Rinchen was scornful. "They are. . . . Look, Trinlan! Look at that dust rising far beyond the Yellow River! A big band rides fast."

Against the lighted sky of late afternoon the moving dust-cloud hung its sign for whoever could read and understand. But Dorje Rinchen and Trinlan could only know part of that message.

The dust-cloud was ominous. Dorje Rinchen fancied he could see a ghostly snow mountain in its billows.

"Come on," he urged. "Let's ride faster. And watch the plain for riders." The two hastened away from the dusk that followed them. Even so, the cold night moved faster than they, pouring over the plain. The dust-cloud was no longer clear.

"Already riders are coming!" Trinlan spoke suddenly and the two turned off the trail to give them a wide berth. Instead, the riders turned too, changing pace and direction to meet them.

"Ah, Dorje Rinchen—ku-hu-u! Dorje Rinchen, ku-hu-u!"

At the summons Dorje Rinchen turned the big piebald and rode to meet them, nevertheless carrying his rifle across the front of his saddle while Trinlan covered him from a short distance behind. At Dorje Rinchen's signal, Trinlan too rode to join them. Horsemen of Shami, Duggur among them, were gathered around Dorje Rinchen, speaking all at once: no one wished his voice alone to break the news.

"Ah, Trinlan! You too . . ."

"Kanggan raided the sheep herders this morning and took

Lhamo Mtso and her baby captive. The raiders got away before we even knew of it. Did you see the dust? Pursuit is hopeless even if we dared. They would shoot her as soon as we caught up.”

The darkness rushed over them and, reaching out, tore the afterglow and the dust sign from the western sky. In that blackness Dorje Rinchen rode to his camp and his fireside.

“Om mani padme hum! Om mani padme hum!”

His lips worked automatically. Actually he neither hoped nor prayed. The fate that had always threatened had struck at last and his security—fool’s confidence in existence that had been his—dissolved in gloom and fright.

He found himself doing long sums on the prayer beads, sums showing the tale of his wealth, and wondered whether Kanggan would consider ransom. He remembered two still and bloody figures lying in the grass as thousands of stampeded Kanggan cattle raced past. What might not Kanggan do now? Dead men looked at him from the past, the lama’s deep unfriendly stare showed in the flames of the tent fire, a great snow mountain grew to monstrous size, the firelit interior of the tent and a wildly tearful servant girl seemed to shrink in the grasp of the cold night. Somewhere in darkness Lhamo Mtso and little shaggy-haired Drashi were riding, unfriendly lances all around them.

“Om mani padme hum!”

His lips formed the words, but he could not speak them, and his prayer beads showed only the sum of the wealth of the tent.

IV

THE CAPTIVE

LHAMO MTSO HAD SEEN them first: a group of horsemen who suddenly appeared from the lower meadows and, spreading out in a long line, closed in on the camp-fire. Her companion, a girl in her teens, gave a choking gasp as she turned at Lhamo Mtso's exclamation. Lhamo Mtso's quick wits were already at work. She spoke rapidly to the shaking girl: "Too late to go for our horses out there—but you can run back towards the encampment—along this watercourse behind us. Quick! Hide! And run bending over. I'll run the other way. Perhaps you can get back to camp with the news."

She herself could only hope to go a short distance, for little Drashi was asleep inside her coat. The watercourse led somewhat sharply to the right and towards the encampment, but she started across the plain to the left and Drashi came awake with a quavering protest as she began to run. Already she could hear the faint drumming of hooves on the frozen turf and the dust was steaming away from under that irregular beat. Without looking at them, Lhamo Mtso knew they were still trotting; the rhythm was confused and short. After that, she could hear only the thud of her own two feet and a pulsing that welled in her throat.

Drashi began to cry in earnest. She shifted him higher on her hip and ran on, though her breath rasped out of bursting lungs and a hot, bitter taste burned in her throat and mouth. Drashi weighed twice his size, clutching her breasts in angry protest, and her legs threatened to buckle again and again. Suddenly, above the roar in her ears she heard the regular thud of hooves beating out a gallop, rolling closer around her, and cries, "Stop or we cut you down!"

The voices sounded somehow familiar and Lhamo Mtso

realized that the men spoke in a dialect like Drokwa's speech. The butt of a spear thudded against her ribs.

"Stand up and show your face."

The raiders sat their horses in a close irregular ring round her.

"And with a child too!" one exclaimed. "We had better take the amber from her hair and be riding. Who wants to capture a woman with a child? Come on. Someone get down and cut off the amber. That's worth taking."

But before anyone could comply one of the men spoke excitedly:

"By the old man mountain of Nyin-bur-yur-tsi, do you know who she is? She's the wife of Dorje Rinchen: the scout Dorje Rinchen. She's the famous Samtsa beauty! If we can't get him, we can take his wife. They say his flesh burns for her always. Quick! Someone go and get her horse and let's start. The ramda will be riding after us soon."

"Not when we have as hostages Dorje Rinchen's wife and child." An older man who seemed to be the leader spoke decisively.

"Come there—you with the child—get on your horse. Is that your raincoat and rug?" Someone had brought the things that had been left at the fireside. "Tie them on and ride. If you do just as you're told you're all right. If you don't, we leave you pinned to the ground with a spear sticking through both you and the child."

As she picked up the raincoat and roll of felt, her head lowered within the curtain of her braids so that no one could really see her face, Lhamo Mtso had already accepted captivity as a fact and ceased to think of it any more. Her mind leaped to the future fact—to her inevitable—of escape. If anything from her past life interfered it must be discarded. If anything would help—her beauty perhaps—it must be used. The men of Kanggan knew of her as a beauty. There was no need, even if it were possible, of hiding that. But did they know of her reputation for wisdom, decision, and courage? Of her physical prowess and skills? Pride tempted her to parade all three, but pride would not help her to escape. She would fool them!

She tied the raincoat and felt rug behind her saddle with bungling fingers that made loose, awkward knots. Then she placed her foot in the stirrup and attempted to mount. Twice she hung drunkenly to the saddle seeming about to arrive and each time dropped back. The raiders began to laugh. On the third attempt someone placed the end of a spear shaft against her and pushed, while laughter grew into a shout. Uncertainly, she arrived and settled herself into the saddle, picking up the reins.

"It's the child," she explained. Her face among the braids of her hair showed vague and pitiful for all its beauty. "Generally I can get on from the level without help—but not always."

"Thunderbolts of hell, how can we take a woman like that on the five days' ride to camp? As long as they belong to Dorje Rinchen, it would be better to drive a spear through the two of them and leave them."

The speaker made his disgust clear, and the comment that followed showed that some at least of the other raiders agreed. Lhamo Mtso had a moment's panic. Had she overdone it? Unobtrusively, but with seeming ineptitude, she started her horse with the others and bowed her face over Drashi's little black head which stared out of her coat like that of a baby kangaroo. Behind her and around her half-amused comment persisted.

"She may be a beauty, but what would a man do with a woman like that?"

"All beauty and nothing else."

Then a younger voice, "Perhaps she'll never dare go back and will stay in Kanggan."

Their talk died away as the party faced towards the westering sun and the ice bridge over Peacock Waters. Lhamo Mtso had made the first cautious but successful step toward the new goal of life: escape.

Her real interest was in the location of the ice bridge and the landmarks of the new country towards which they rode, a cloud of dust moving behind them. For bitter moments she wondered whether Dorje Rinchen, who at this very time should be riding home from the Festival, was seeing that sign.

If Yogmo hadn't gone home for a visit *she* would have been watching the sheep that day and all would have been well. Possibly Yogmo would have had a scare and would have lost her hair ornaments (they weren't worth much) and her coat, but that would soon have been fixed. When she was rescued she would have forgotten her fright by looking again at Dorje Rinchen as she did.

The raiders evidently felt quite safe from pursuit. They built a good fire and then Lhamo Mtso was assigned to her place in the ring round the blaze. With the food given her she received a warning. "You had better say many prayers that Dorje Rinchen isn't too much of a brave son and begins pursuit. If the ramda comes the first to die will be you and your child. You sleep here in the fire-glow. Who has an extra pair of iron hobbles? Clamp them on her, but not so tight that her feet will freeze."

In the fire-glow with her felt and raincoat around her, Drashi stretched comfortably beside her in the folds of her ungirded coat, Lhamo Mtso pretended sleep. Actually, she was awake for a long time. For long black moments she thought of Dorje Rinchen's homecoming and wondered what he was doing. It seemed scarcely possible that he would not be riding after her, coming along that trail in the dark. But Dorje Rinchen was wise as well as brave. Her life and that of Drashi depended on that wisdom, and if they lived through the night there was escape. She tried to recall the lay of the land across which they had travelled. If they did not start until after daybreak she should be able to link up the place of the start with landmarks she had noted at nightfall and thereafter, she judged, there would be little travelling after dark. She must remember to veil with her hair or her tears the looks she gave to trail or landscape. The tears would be the hardest of all to continue.

Escape was a long way off—not for this night nor for any of the nights on the trail. Among the voices and words which had blown around her ears all day in the queer Golok accent that had seemed friendly, but wasn't, she searched for a sign. Then she did remember one admiring young voice saying, "Perhaps she'll stay in Kanggan."

In the clear morning light, through the veil of her braided hair, she took a long look at the watcher's face. He was younger than Dorje Rinchen, she thought, and with that she began the day.

Five days of hard riding followed. Each night as she lay watching the fire she tried to remember and fix in her mind the details of the day's route and bring the plan she was making up to date.

Every day she bent all efforts to create a certain definite impression in the minds of her captors. She fell from her horse, doing it rather well and without injury to Drashi though he was surprised and angry, making appropriate noises. She girthed her saddle so poorly that it almost went over the horse's rump at the first steep slope. She rode like a sack of wool. That was the hardest task of all: to ride awkwardly and stiff when it made her back ache. Only at the fireside, when tending the fire or making red pepper sauce, did she show any aptitude.

Once she thought that perhaps her chance had come long ahead of schedule when one evening she heard the leader remark, "No sense putting hobbles on the Shami woman. She couldn't run away if someone pushed her. A beauty yes, but she has nothing else. Oh well, put them on if you have them, but loosely, so that her feet won't cramp."

In the middle of the night she tested the loose hobbles to see whether they would come off. They wouldn't. In any case, the man at the fire was awake. Still, the remark proved she had marched one stage nearer the great goal—escape.

Although they reached the Golok encampment after dark, Lhamo Mtso had already placed it on her mental map. She had seen it from the top of the last pass. As they rode towards the sound of the dogs and the shouts that began to rise, a voice she had come to know said, "We lost two brothers killed at the one fireside in the raid your husband led, so you are *our* prisoner, until all is settled with that man Dorje Rinchen. But the five days are ended. I still don't see how you stood it. You are so weak and helpless."

There was scorn in the tone of his voice—pity, too—but it didn't sound like that of a man whose brothers had been murdered, except when he said the words, "that man Dorje

Rinchen." Now the dogs and womenfolk were all round them and a few minutes later Lhamo Mtso was within the firelit tent of the family that must be avenged on Dorje Rinchen for the death of its two sons.

There was an empty place at the foot of the ashpit on the women's side of the tent and as Lhamo Mtso swayed weakly in the doorway, Drashi's startled face under its tangle of black hair staring out of her coat, someone pushed her forward and said shortly,

"Sit."

She dropped to her knees. As the heat from the glowing ashes rose into her face and the sound of the dasher moving up and down in the churn came to her ears, real tears filled her eyes for the first time. She must soon look at the father and mother of two men killed. Knowingly, she nursed those tears so that when an old man from the upper side of the tent ordered, "Look up!" her face was streaked and her eyes watery and full.

"And you are the wife of Dorje Rinchen?" There was incredulity in the voice. "Strange; yes, very strange. I wonder if that little one is like father or mother. Well, have something to eat. Drink tea and eat. This will be your fireside for a long time, unless that brave son Dorje Rinchen wants you no longer. If such should be the case, *we* could certainly find someone who would want you."

She sniffed loudly and muttered a scared "Thank you" as a bowl of tea was passed to her. Already the atmosphere within the tent seemed to be changing. Something harsh and strong was fading to a half-pitying contempt. Through the braids of her hair she checked off the members of the fireside group and wondered if they all thought alike. She sniffed again and stared keenly through the veil of her braids, trying to read each face as the fire-glow found it.

2

Daylight came and Lhamo Mtso, finding a slit in the wall of the tent near where she had been told to make her bed, set her face against it and looked out at the Golok encampment. It had no sod enclosures, nor sod walls as windbreaks

for the tents, nor were there many tents set in a regular circle. In that land of deep valleys and steep mountainsides only a few families could camp together through the winter. These few had set their tents in a haphazard pattern on the narrow valley floor. The parched, frozen turf of the meadow had been beaten into thick dust by the hooves of hundreds of cattle and dried manure for fuel was piled in great heaps that would never be used up. Ash heaps set at random added to the confusion of a camp that had no regular centre and no definable rim.

Escape from such a camp should not be so hard, thought Lhamo Mtso, but her assurance faded as a pack of dogs appeared. "It must be the very land of dogs: dog-headed Goloks," she muttered.

Four or five of the great black and tan Lhasa mastiffs seemed to regard the tent and its vicinity as their special preserve. They jealously stopped any pilfering from their private bone piles. Lhamo Mtso moved her hobbled ankles with a premonition that the dogs would cause her more trouble than the hobbles.

A foot prodded Lhamo Mtso and then someone bent over to fumble with the lock on the hobbles. An old wrinkled face peered into hers. In the firelight the stare of the old mother of three sons—two dead—had seemed malevolent and hostile. Now it was partly curious and softened when Drashi's wide-eyed regard met hers. The old woman's eyes travelled over Lhamo Mtso's coat with its broad trimmings to the embroidered cloth that hung from her back, weighted with good-sized lumps of amber.

"You look more like someone at a festival than like a prisoner," she observed. "But we can take those things off later. Keep your coat: no Golok girl would wear one trimmed in that style, anyway. Get out. And get your mouth and hands washed and drink tea."

Lhamo Mtso complied and as she hunched by the ashpit sharing her food with Drashi, the old mother's wrinkled face softened further.

"I never had a woman prisoner before." The flavour of joking was in her words. "Let those who took a woman

prisoner say what to do with her. *I don't know what to do with one.*"

Lhamo Mtso wanted to giggle, but smiled weakly instead. Most of all, she was interested in a daylight view of another member of the family. The two stolid servant-women didn't count, but the hard-faced young woman drinking her tea with the two servants counted very much. Lhamo Mtso had been sure of that the night before when the firelight had brought into relief lines of determination, passion and greed in a face still young and very handsome between the double braids of the Golok style of hairdress.

Lhamo Mtso realized that this was the widow of one of the dead sons—perhaps of both—who had stayed on to find her future and fortune in the tent of her dead husband's family. Of all the members, she alone had looked at the captive with a seeming lack of interest, but as she finished her meal and scraped her bowl with impatient fingers, she asked Lhamo Mtso, "What can you do? Spin, churn—or what?"

With nimble fingers, Lhamo Mtso set herself to win favour in the eyes of the real mistress of the tent. The first skein of yak-hair thread that she made settled the matter of what she should do. Also, she managed to do some of the churning. The day came when she was told to take the trough of buttermilk out to the dogs, though the order was more in mischief than in real intent. Lhamo Mtso's fear of the dogs was almost a proverb in the tent, and therefore one more defect in the wife of that brave son, Dorje Rinchen. However, she obeyed and the dogs were fed. Later she did it again until it became a part of the routine of the daily churning.

The first time she watched the son of the family come into the tent Lhamo Mtso knew something else. And it would be an additional complication for her. It had been perhaps arranged that the third son should marry his brother's widow.

But it was something more than becoming the acknowledged, as well as acting, mistress of the tent that brought the sudden glow to the bold beauty of the Golok woman's face. It was this that Lhamo Mtso feared the day the son of the tent turned to banter with the poor, scared captive. She had counted on his interest: perhaps by means of her own beauty here was a

way to escape. Now, the glow in the tent mistress's face called a halt to such thinking and planning.

As the days passed, Lhamo Mtso found her part in the round of tent life. She was treated more like a servant-girl than anything else. Indeed, except for the matter of the iron hobbles, she might have been one of the servants, though she always begged off from outside tasks, pleading her fear of the dogs. She often wondered, half hoping, when they would forget or discontinue the hobbles. Alas, they never did and the old mother locked them securely each night.

Lhamo Mtso always had an enormous appetite. Of course, there was little Drashi to feed, but her bowl seemed always empty, waiting to be filled with whatever there was. The mistress of the tent watched her strangely at times and once said, "You eat well. Quite as much as a man who rides in the cold."

"It must be because of Drashi," answered Lhamo Mtso, her face, as always, nearly hidden among the braids of her hair.

Actually, Drashi took scarcely anything from her breasts, now nearly dry, but it was for him that she begged a single bell from a collar of mule bells. She sewed it on the back of his garment so that it tinkled when he moved about in the tent. He was beginning to walk in a "man bear of the mountains" manner.

Day by day Lhamo Mtso began to feel the increasing interest of the son's look whenever it turned towards her and began to hear something in his voice that was neither scorn nor pity. He was younger than Dorje Rinchen, she felt sure: a pleasant boy, well pleased with himself and with life. Perhaps his mounting regard would prove the lead for which she sought. She lifted the braids slightly back from her face. Just what would come of it she did not know, but she could ill afford to disregard anything that had even the semblance of promise.

Then one day the mistress of the tent intercepted those glances and Lhamo Mtso knew at last that she had one bitter enemy in a tent where she needed only friends and neutrals. In preoccupation over that menace she was more careless

than usual in the doing of a daily task she had set for herself. She had forgotten, too, that someone would be watching her more closely. Suddenly she became aware of this close observance as she sat beside the dogs' feed-trough, throwing titbits of meat saved from the meal of the night before to five big mastiffs that drooled ludicrously as they waited their turns.

As the older woman looked at her, Lhamo Mtso gave up all pretence. It was good to drop the reins and leap to the bitter challenge of that stare. All the pride and courage of the ombo's daughter, of Trinlan's sister, and of Dorje Rinchen's wife looked back and dared the other to do her worst. But the mistress of the tent only stared, realization showing in her bold eyes. Whatever she might or might not know, she realized why Lhamo Mtso was feeding the dogs. Some of the smouldering rage went out of her face, changed by the grim appreciation of a joke she alone knew. Knowing it, she turned away, saying nothing, as if she had not seen. But that night she reached for Lhamo Mtso's empty bowl. "Here, have some more. You need to eat well because of the child."

Lhamo Mtso could almost hear echoes of the dark and silent laughter in the other woman's eyes. This jealousy and hatred might help rather than hinder. She felt closer to escape than ever before, though each night the hobbles were locked on her just as securely. Surely as time passed, when everything else was ready, there would be a way to unlock them.

In the comforting assurance that events were slowly heading up towards escape, Lhamo Mtso let the days slip by. There was plenty of time. But suddenly one day she awoke to the realization that there was hardly any time at all. Guests at the fireside of her captors were talking of many things, including the weather.

"Spring seems early this year. The ice bridges of Peacock Waters are already badly sun-rotted. They may go any day; at least within a month."

Time that had seemed without end, like the fine yak-hair thread she drew between her fingers as she set the spindle whirling, was suddenly shortened to a matter of a few days. In all her scheming she had always accepted the ice bridges

as part of the plan of escape. Now they would soon be going.

That night, when the son came into the tent, she pushed the braids still further back from round her face. She knew his eyes never wandered far from the smile she unveiled.

With the passing of days captivity had lost much, if not most, of its fearfulness. No immediate harm threatened either her or the child and there were times when the conditions of her captivity seemed to suggest that escape might not be finally necessary. Some way or other, perhaps, a ransom could be paid and Lhamo Mtso and her child restored to their own fireside. It might be best just to wait for that.

One night a number of Golok headmen were gathered in the tent. With ears made sharp by worry, Lhamo Mtso managed to overhear much of the discussion. It was about herself and Dorje Rinchen. Mostly, the headmen talked about herds and flocks and the known wealth of Dorje Rinchen of Shami, seemingly considering a ransom, yet when all opinions had been voiced they waited for the old man of the tent to speak. He was the one who had lost two sons and his choice would be final. Lhamo Mtso had grown accustomed to the drily ironical tones of the old man's voice. Sometimes that voice had even seemed grudgingly kind, but now when the old man spoke it was with a voice she had never heard before: that of an old man who had lost two sons:

“Will cattle and horses bring back my sons? Will white silver—ingots with ears and the Emperor's Stamp—bring back my sons? Or rifles, or bolts of Lhasa broadcloth or any other wealth? No. Nothing will bring back my sons. But, before my eyes are too old, I want to see that brave son Dorje Rinchen, the brave Dorje Rinchen. And before my eyes are too old I want to hear him groan. All I want is the person and life of Dorje Rinchen.”

It was final. For the headmen, the prospect of indemnity paid in herds of cattle and prize Shami horses vanished. The man who has lost two sons, the tent which mourned its dead, had the final say.

“It is possible,” the old man said. “Those who know say that Dorje Rinchen, brave son though he be, is nearly out of

his mind. He has promised half his wealth to the lamasery if his wife and child can be brought back. He rides the plains of Shami by day and by night on a great piebald horse, worn to skin and bones by this endless patrol. And he watches the ice bridge for a messenger or word of his wife.

“When he is offered the safe return of his wife and child, not even the amber from her headdress missing, or the alternative—all that can be done to a woman before she finally dies—he will come. He will come. And I will see that brave son Dorje Rinchen, who caused the death of my sons. I will know how brave he really is.”

The picture of a restless sentinel on a gaunt piebald, watching the ice bridge and the cloud-hung, dust-filled track of the western sun for a messenger or news; the grim finality of the hatred in the old man’s voice; all this made Lhamo Mtso suddenly impatient for the day. Only one thing mattered—escape; but she could do nothing about that until daylight. With dawn, there might come the chance to look into the eyes of a young Golok, already somewhat impatient. The hobbles must be left unlocked for one night and then, come what might, she would escape.

3

Lhamo Mtso sat by the fire eating her evening meal, her face more closely hidden by the braids of her hair than ever before. She no longer needed to keep her smile unveiled for the young Golok. The biggest lump of amber from the row attached to her braids was missing. She knew where to go to get it back. She wondered whether anyone else did; the group seemed so still.

For three days fury had burned in the tent mistress’s face. Lhamo Mtso had expected it to break about her ears. Many times she had been on the point of explanation in order to forestall the outburst. Now, one curt question gave her the chance.

“When did you lose the largest piece of amber?”

“I haven’t lost it,” Lhamo Mtso said casually, confident of what she must do. “It is safe. But the whole piece of cloth needs attention.” She began to unfasten the strip from her

hair. "Will you put it away for me? It is so hard to keep anything in my sleeping-place because of Drashi."

She had made an offer. For a few minutes neither woman was conscious of anything but the other's eyes and what they said. There was half-incredulous comprehension fighting with desperate grievance in the woman's eyes as Lhamo Mtso spoke again. "The best piece is safe. . . ." Her voice was a whisper as the two heads bent close together. "I will leave it tonight where you can find it later."

The tent mistress's answer was commonplace, but while there was still jealousy in her eyes there was also understanding and relief. "Here, mix up more tsamba—a big mixing. You will need it." A tacit agreement had been reached. Lhamo Mtso mixed her tsamba and slipped it inside her coat, to be added later to the store of food hidden so carefully in her sleeping place. At least one person in the Golok camp would be wishing her success in the night's attempt!

The tea-drinking was finished and as the servants passed the bedtime curds, Lhamo Mtso could see the young Golok whispering urgently in the old woman's ear. He had said his part would be easy. Malicious amusement made the mother's wrinkles deeper. She was filled with pride at her son's conquest. However, after she had nodded agreement, she drank the zho absentmindedly, her eyes fixed on the widow of her dead sons. Perhaps she too was making plans for the future.

"The zho is good tonight," remarked the old man. "Let's have some more." Again the bowls were filled and the drinking prolonged through silent moments marked by the progress of the flame along the edge of the freshly piled fuel. To Lhamo Mtso it seemed that the long, slow moments were posing questions to which someone, of all who sat around the fire, must shout an answer. She, alone, knew the true answer that fired her with an eagerness greater and far different from that of the young Golok who stretched his arms, yawning widely, and said, "Sleep." When he rose to go to his sleeping-place near the tethered cattle, he could not keep his eyes from Lhamo Mtso.

Rolled up in her coats and felts, she waited until the old woman had come to her and locked the hobbles, fumbling so

realistically that for a moment of despair Lhamo Mtso thought she was playing a joke on all of them as she said, "Sleep well."

Movement of her feet reassured Lhamo Mtso they were free. The hobbles lay beside them. She had only a few minutes. She wrapped the little store of bits of meat, mixings of tsamba, and such odds and ends of food as she had been able to collect in a piece of old cloth. Then she folded Drashi in some sheepskin, although he protested sleepily at the disturbance. He and the little bundle of food were all she had.

The dogs bickered at one another throughout the encampment and then there was a sharp sudden yell:

"Ku-hu-u, ku-hu-u, come on, come on."

It was the traditional call into the dark and at imaginary enemies. Lhamo Mtso smiled. The young Golok was getting impatient. She pushed Drashi and the bundle of food through a hole under the edge of the tent wall and then wiggled through herself. She dragged a felt through behind her, wrapped the food and Drashi together, and put the bundle close to the tent wall. Not far away an eager young voice said urgently:

"Szu, szu this way—here."

Lhamo Mtso turned, taking her first actual steps toward escape. "He is younger than Dorje Rinchen," she said half aloud, but she could not forget a lonely horseman who rode the plains of Shami, watching the ice bridge for a sign.

"Ah, Doka, Doka . . ." Lhamo Mtso whispered.

"What's that?" the young Golok questioned, but she was silent with her thoughts.

* * *

"But now I must go. Little Drashi will be cold without me. Yes. I must," Lhamo Mtso repeated.

Her insistence grew. Yet she dare not leave him piqued or distrustful.

"But perhaps because—because—here, I'll leave the amber with you tonight. Maybe tomorrow night you will give it back to me."

So he let her go.

Hidden by the cattle, Lhamo Mtso stopped to gird up the lower edges of her coat as far as her knees. She found Drashi still warm and soundly asleep, though he gripped her flesh with a sleepy sigh of pleasure when she put him inside her coat. She pushed the bundle of food to the rear inside the fold that hung down her back over her tightly drawn girdle.

The night was entirely dark. Heavy clouds shut out even the starlight. The sky, mountains and encampment were all merged in a black void that had neither dimension nor direction. The dogs: where were the dogs? For the moment only one thing mattered: the location of the dogs. Just fifty paces away was an ashpile. She had counted the steps the servant took each time she poured out the ashes often enough to know. Then slightly to the left, and thirty paces beyond, was the first big mound of dried cow-chips. From there on she wasn't so sure of the distances, but there would be the faint pallor of an ice-floe to guide her and when she could reach the point where the stream gurgled under an ice dam, high-arched and half-empty, that would be the edge of camp. The dogs seldom prowled there unless their suspicions had been directed there.

A call disconcertingly near startled her, "Ku-hu-u—come on—come on." He was covering what he supposed was her return to the tent, but the voice was faintly sleepy. A response came from near the farthest tent and for the moment, following that, all the dogs seemed at the far side of camp.

It was time to start. Very carefully she began the passage of those first fifty paces. It was still completely dark, so dark that she tripped against one of the tent-ropes just at the peg where it was fastened. The rope hummed with the vibration and the tent itself must have quivered, for an old, querulous voice complained, "Jahmar, fool dog! Don't you know enough to keep away from the tent-ropes? Get, evil hound!"

Lhamo Mtso moved faster. When her feet kicked into the ashpile she stopped to get her bearings and listen. She could see nothing; not even vagrant gleams from the dying fires. The only sound was the faint, gusty breathing of cattle chewing meagre cud. The dogs were still. They might be on

the other side of camp or at arm's length; she could not tell. Again she set herself to count her steps. Was she bearing slightly to the left?

Some instinct warned her to stop. She reached out her arms and felt the rough irregularity of the cow-chip pile. Instinct, still unsatisfied by her groping touch, kept her still, hardly breathing. Then a dog barked close at hand. The sound was like a hollow, grunting cough: the deep bell tone of the true mastiff voice, yet neither suspicious nor angry; merely curious.

"Jahmar—Jahmar—Jahmar . . ." she coaxed.

The bell ceased to toll and something sniffed close at hand, begging. She pressed a tiny bit of meat against the slobbering lips and, with Jahmar beside her, went on. The dog bore slightly to the right—he knew the way to the water-hole as well as any. Then a ragged clamour broke out somewhere behind them—Lhamo Mtso had lost an exact sense of direction—and Jahmar growled deep in his throat. They weren't his pack and he resented their impudence. Her hand resting on the scruff of Jahmar's neck, Lhamo Mtso crouched at the edge of the ice-floe waiting for the clamour to fade.

"Ku-hu-u—come on—come on. . . ."

The cry urged the dogs, but the voice of the young Golok now sounded very sleepy indeed. Lhamo Mtso patted the dog as if she would share a brand new joke with him. Yet she waited; hiding herself behind him, but feeling as conspicuous against the ghostly ice-floe as a figure on the skyline when rifles begin to crack. The members of the pack argued the matter among themselves, came to no decision, and presently the bickering died away. Lhamo Mtso went on across the ice-floe. Above Jahmar's sniffing and the catch in her own breath that roared in her ears, she heard the gurgle and drag of water under the ice.

"At the water-hole——" The melancholy refrain of that sad song floated in her mind—almost in her ears, it seemed—as she came to the water-hole. Jahmar became uneasy. He waited for her to turn back and growled his perplexity. Other matters demanded his attention. Maybe someone of that noisy impudent pack was investigating his private bone pile. With a final grumble he turned back.

Whatever might come, she was the worthy wife of Dorje Rinchen, brave son. With that assurance she faced the night, darker than ever, beyond the ice-floe and, carrying hers and Dorje Rinchen's child, began the long journey that could only end where he waited on the great, gaunt horse.

"Ah Doka, do you ride tonight?" she said, and began her flight.

5

At the end of the long night Lhamo Mtso found a place that would do as a hideout. She certainly could get no farther. She crawled behind a fringe of low bushes at the foot of a rock that promised shelter.

From the water-hole, she had skirted the steep valley wall to go halfway around the camp—the barking of the dogs had told her when she was on the opposite side—and then she had set herself to climbing the steep slope: slipping on the dead hay, many times losing her footing on the patches of snow that had remained hidden away from the spring suns, and making her way on hands and feet through bushes or up the rock slides.

Day and the sun brought new fears. She was terrifyingly near to the camp. She had no way of knowing that the horsemen who rode out of it at daybreak, led by a grimly furious old man and a shamefaced younger one, had luckily for her picked up, not far from camp, tracks of horses on the trail to Peacock Waters. Assuming a prearranged meeting and rescue, they had ridden far; following those tracks without question, but with little hope of success.

"How she fooled us all," the old man said as they rested their jaded horses. "I wouldn't mind if she had deceived me the way she did you. But what a woman! To think you did not know that you had no taste of her real thoughts even though you slept with her!"

The young Golok was pleased at the admiration for the woman in the old man's voice, but kept silent. He might grind his teeth with chagrin, yet he had memories.

Lhamo Mtso could only wonder why the first round-the-country search had not brought riders to her hiding-place.

The sun, breaking a path through the clouds westward from dawn, made the snowfields of Nyin-bur-yur-tsi so near it seemed she could reach out and touch them. It was not the distance before her—the days and nights of travel to the rotting ice bridges of Peacock Waters—that appalled her; it was her nearness to the camp and to the herders who chased cattle within earshot of her hiding-place that made her press close all day long in the cave-like hollow at the base of the cliff.

With the coming of dusk Lhamo Mtso again began to hope. After the herds had disappeared on their homeward way, she cautiously followed the shadows along the route she had selected through the day. She moved fast through the half-light, intent on getting round the camp and into the valley of the trail to the Peacock Waters before the gloom of a moonless night made the going hard. With movement and action hope grew stronger. She had been free a day and a night.

When night fell it seemed quite as black as had the first. Once on the trail, however, she travelled with far greater assurance. Halfway down the valley beyond the pass, or was it halfway through the night—she could not be sure, for fatigue did strange things to time and distance—the sound of voices cut through the fog of weariness that seemed to shut out everything. The voices came from somewhere ahead, mingled with laughter and the irregular beat of hooves on frozen turf and rocky trail. Lhamo Mtso had a sudden panic, thinking that, whoever those riders might be, they were coming spread out across the narrow valley bottom, combing the shadows for her. . . .

No rider, she reasoned the next moment, would send his horse along the treacherous ice of the stream, where holes of unknown depth showed in the rotted covering over the dark waters. As Doka had once flung himself into a marmot hole, so Lhamo Mtso now dropped motionless on that treacherous surface, at a place where the bank made a shadow on the faint whiteness of the honeycomb ice. The riders passed very close: hoofbeats, voices, jeering laughter and the fragments of an endless discussion drifted near.

“No use looking further.”

“They must be at the Peacock Waters by now.”

“What a woman!”

“What a woman indeed—well worth having.”

“No wonder son and father still ride to look for her. I would look for her too if I had lost her!”

“Brave wife of a brave son!”

Not since Jahmar had left her at the water-hole had Lhamo Mtso felt such assurance of freedom. Her legs were strong again and her back straightened out of its ache. She brought Drashi tight against her breasts so that her arms could take up the drag of his weight, and went on.

The inner world of consciousness and the outer world of reality were strangely blended: Lhamo Mtso sensed things without knowing why, nevertheless sensed them strongly enough to govern her actions. When she did have to cross the stream, she took off her boots and waded at a ford that was black and wide between the ice bridges so deceitfully smooth from bank to bank. So too she sensed the dawn, long before there was any sign of its coming and, turning up a side valley, she was safely hidden before the shadows began to fade.

With the coming of the second day she could rest as she had not previously been able to. Relaxed and drowsy in the soothing warmth of the sun, she was free.

Long before the sun dropped over the mountain-top skyline in the west, she was eager to be on her way, yet waited until she was but one of an army of shadows on the valley floor. She remembered two riders who might be looking for her.

Soon after her start she heard the wolves. Her mind was so full of forebodings and fears of recapture that the first weird echoes only brought a sudden assurance. No riders could be near when wolves were so bold. She went on, matching her strength against the length of the trail. But the wolf howls changed, becoming localized and closer, no longer asking a question, but making a statement. Two were somewhere ahead and one was behind. Again, was it now two behind and one in the dark shadows of the valley ahead? The long minor cadences grew shorter, punctuated by eager yelps.

Suddenly Lhamo Mtso was afraid. Drashi, wakeful after

the daylong sleep, began to whimper. Her resolution kept her fingers steady against all their mad impulse to fumble and go astray as she untied the little bell from the back of the child's coat. In a very short time she would know whether the story she had once heard was true or not.

She remembered the firelit tent and herself among the group, listening as a shepherd told of keeping wolves away by the tinkling of a bell. A short howl sounded from the shadows of the bend she had just traversed. Shaking the bell free from the tangle of thread and wool, she began to ring it; trying, too, to keep her footsteps even and unfaltering, though the faint outline of the next turn in the trail beckoned her to safety if only she would run. Resolute, she kept her steps measured as before and went on.

It was such a tiny tinkle of sound: frail and clear in the frosty air. She was not conscious of hearing it, for she only listened for the next howl. It came. She could not tell if it was farther away or not, but she was sure it was no nearer. Her arm tired until the ringing blurred to a chain of echoes and she changed hands, shifting the other hand under Drashi so that she could keep the bell shaking in some sort of rhythm. Then the howls seemed to fade with increasing distance or a growing uncertainty.

Starlight made the trail clear—she even recognized landmarks in the half light—and she marched steadily. As the howls faded they seemed to grow increasingly sad, voicing a longing that wrung a response from inside Lhamo Mtso's own being. "They are hungry too," she thought and rested by the trail.

Lhamo Mtso's third day of rest was uneventful, but when she started at sunset she feared for a while that she could not go on. There was danger of being seen, but she must reach that mountaintop and see Nyin-bur-yur-tsi in order to get her bearings before it was too dark.

That fourth night was the best since she left camp. All the stars in the sky gave their light. She could see surely and clearly to take each step. She finished the night in a staggering stupor of fatigue, dawn all around her, before she finally hid away for the day.

There was little enough food left, but she still had approximate rations—as she had divided her tiny store—for two days. With the fifth night of travel, and by all the landmarks that night's travel should take her to the ice bridge over Peacock Waters, her hopes that reached the highest level were yet challenged by the most heartening fears and feelings of discouragement. Days of travel still lay ahead.

Most of all, doubt of her own strength began to haunt Lhamo Mtso. Sometimes the trail, the shadows, the stars in the black heavens, all moved round her like the whirling of dancers at the pageant of the Wishing Prayer Festival and she was obliged to rest until the mad dance ceased and the world settled back to orderliness.

As the stars paled and she finally moved across the brush-covered flats of Peacock Waters there was, however, one thought she had not dared admit. It was only when she stood on the edge of the river and looked at that dark, churning ice and water in that still narrow, but completely final gap where the ice bridge had been, that her defences broke and seemed about to crush her. It was doubt no longer, but realization of the fact as final as death itself. Under the sun of a spring that came too soon the ice bridge had gone. She stood with the ice-filled Peacock Waters between her and home.

“Oh Doka, why don't you come?” she cried out.

6

It was no longer hope but a grim acceptance of despair that caused her finally to turn from the edge of the river ice where the mocking black waters hissed past and retrace her steps to the brush-covered flats. She gave up all hope of reaching home.

One thing only remained: she must make sure of not being recaptured. Because of that, she must not linger where the ice bridge had been at a time when dawn was already stealing the stars from the eastern half of the sky. At the edge of the first terrace that promised freedom from the thorny thickets of the river bottom, she mechanically turned to the left, following the downward course of the great river.

With the clearing of the early morning frost haze she hid

away during a day that seemed longer than ever. Hunger began to be a pain—something fiercely alive that would not rest. Drashi, too, would not rest. He whimpered and fought, questing always for food. There was little enough of it, for she had again divided what remained into two shares and each had to last a day for the child and herself. She started again before the sun was fairly set and she was already planning. In her thoughts she was aware that somewhere along her route she must come to where the Shab Chu flows into Peacock Waters. She wished she knew just where that was, but could not remember. Somewhere ahead its waters—of unknown depth—barred her way. More than that she did not know. The determination that drove her came from the simple will to struggle and to keep walking without reference to distance covered.

She knew it was nearly dawn, though no sign showed as yet in the sky, when she came to the banks of the Shab Chu. Two wide borders of ice, pale in the starlight, bordered the dark waters that barred her way. Again Lhamo Mtso tried to remember about the Shab Chu. It was crossed without the use of swim-bags, she was sure. But did riders sometimes have to swim their horses a little?

Far down in the eastern sky a narrow band began to brighten and then widen, lapping over the banked stars. That drove Lhamo Mtso to action, and she stripped off her great sheepskin coat, rolling it into a bundle to which she strapped her boots. As she was making these preparations she chewed the last tiny bit of meat she had and, strangely enough, strength seemed to well from the depths of her being. She moved to the edge of the ice, carrying Drashi and the bundle of her clothes. Which should she carry first? She did not know. She did realize that she must make the crossing twice, which meant three trips through the icy waters. Three trips—unless the waters were too deep the first time. That thought decided her choice of burdens. If she went down she would carry Drashi with her: not sink to leave him on the bank until wolves or the cold stopped his crying. She put the bundle of her cloak on the edge of the ice, set Drashi—already protesting against the loss of his warm lair and most scantily clothed

with his one little garment—on the bundle, and let herself into the water that rose to her hips. Then she swung the child up on her shoulders, wound the mass of her braided hair around him and started for the far shore.

The near bank receded, but the far one came no nearer. The chill of the water climbed from her hips to her waist—her pounding heart—her breasts—her armpits. The footing was firm and there was little current, but what there was nearly swung her from her feet. Drashi's feet dipped into the icy slush and he began to cry louder than ever. Lhamo Mtso took each step thinking it might be the last, watching the faint light of the stars in the ripples that spread around her so close to the level of her face. Then the pale line of the shore ice reached toward her and her shoulders began to rise out of the water. She gripped the ledge of ice to make sure it was sound, drew herself out, and ran to the dark bank.

The river was not too deep; it could be crossed. Again she pushed at the water, holding her hands clasped at the back of her head to help balance herself and strained towards the shore, churning through the last twenty paces where the water was barely to her hips.

When, however, she turned back with her bundle on her shoulder strange things began to happen. She waded into the river, but she waded too into a strange still world. In that world there was no need of effort; one could perhaps rest if only the persistent echoes of thoughts that cried of Drashi, Doka, or a firelit tent would cease and let one stop. Even the stars were black. Suddenly, water filled her mouth and she started to choke. She had no sense of movement, but the white line of the shore broke into that vague darkness as a goal suddenly set, and something within herself—not Drashi, Doka, or anyone else—something inside ordered her on until her hands gripped the rough edge of the ice.

It took three attempts and the pain of the sharp crystals cutting her flesh to get over the edge, and after that the delayed arrival of Drashi's sorrowful wail in her ears, to get her to her feet and running stiffly on someone else's legs, unstrapping the bundle and the boots as she moved. Even after she had girded on her coat, and Drashi's howls had

turned to shuddering sobs as he settled in his lair, that far world without bourne, where the stars are dark, still haunted her.

During the day she soaked up warmth from the bright sunshine that was thrown back in heat waves from the bare earth, though great clouds of dust rode on furious winds throughout the afternoon. She and Drashi both slept until the sun was low. Then they ate the last crumbs and scraps of food that she had. At least there would be no more worry about how to divide the day's rations.

The world through which Lhamo Mtso stumbled was unreal. Only that twisting thing within her and Drashi's sleepy insistence touched reality. She might even have stopped—in the vague unreality that surrounded her there seemed little reason for going on—but the voices of the wolves again began to gather round her. At first faint, but growing stronger momentarily, they seemed to be the true voice of the black void that pressed so close, and they spoke with assurance, answering from several directions in orderly sequence.

She had the bell, but uncertainty and even a strange apathy seemed to bind her. The experience of a few nights before was like the echo of a once-told tale, not an actuality. Then the faint rustling of the grass and the stealthy padding of quickly moving feet broke the spell with alien sound. With a jerk her hand came free and the bell began to ring.

The wolves dogged her through the night—mostly silent—but at intervals asking each other the meaning of that clear, brittle tinkling, then coming close only to lose courage. Yet they gave her hand no rest until the coming of dawn brought the heavy, uneasy sleep of exhaustion to Lhamo Mtso, while Drashi wailed fitfully.

At sunset both she and the child were thirsty and went to the edge of the river for a drink before starting on. The country on the far side of the river was flat, the low hills—the frayed ends of ridges and valley walls—were behind her on the near side. That smoothness was like the plain of Shami; actually it was a part of it, but the hiss of the river only mocked her, telling her she must follow it to the great bend.

After drinking, she huddled by the white ice and watched the blue shadows reach across the snow and ice, blotting out the red glow of sunset while the green river changed to a strange steely blue and then to black.

When Lhamo Mtso began the night's travel she was shivering from the chill of her icy drink and the sudden coldness of a night perfectly still and completely clear. It was a long time before she became warm, for all the thickness of her new winter coat.

She sat and listened, fighting a confused struggle with fears, new hopes, uncertainty and the attempt to remember something important but illusive. Lhamo Mtso knew by the heavy barking of the dogs that some tents were not far away. Were they, however, tents where the wife of Dorje Rinchen of Shami would find safety? And if she did not find refuge then all was lost: lost not only the hope of escape that came to life every time she rose to her feet and found she could keep on walking, but lost the even more important hope of keeping Dorje out of the hands of the Goloks. That thought again sent her on. The barking of the dogs grew fainter and finally stopped.

Each time she had to rest she gave up all hope but that of saving Dorje Rinchen, yet whenever she came to her feet she wondered afresh just how many steps remained to the tents of Shami. The country all round seemed quite flat though she could see low hills ahead. Lhamo Mtso clamped her teeth on the thought that the great bend must not be very far away. She dared not go on in the daylight, for the people of the bend—Soktsong tents and lamasery—were at odds with Shami.

At the end of the day she did go on. Her stops were more and more frequent as she moved through the blackness. Again all the stars were out and the very air seemed brittle with cold. Now Lhamo Mtso knew what it was that had haunted her. The Ga Chu, biggest stream of all, flowed into Peacock Waters right at the bend. She saw it directly ahead: ice, snow, and dark water underneath, now and then showing in places where the ice had gone.

Lhamo Mtso was only conscious of curiosity as she made

her journey toward the ice. She remembered the cold of the last two nights. She remembered that at the place where the Ga Chu flows into the Peacock Waters the current is so sluggish it is no more than an eddy in the flow of the larger stream. But that knowledge hardly stirred her to hope. She was only curious as to whether there was ice all the way across or not.

There were places where sun-rotted surface ice crumbled under her weight, but the lower layers held, and then she came to the star-flecked surface of glare ice and had to rest. Finally, she dropped to her hands and knees, because her feet slipped wildly from weakness. Now the old glare ice ended and she came to a gap covered with ice so new that it looked black with the blurred movement of the water showing through. She sprawled carefully on this, sliding on as best she might. A few moments later she rose to her feet on the crusted surface that reached to the far dark bank.

Somewhere beyond the temple and tents of Soktsong, Lhamo Mtso turned off the trail and found a sunken stream-bed. In that shelter she came to rest, her body slack with weakness yet stiff with cold; waiting for the sun and wondering why she waited, for it could bring nothing to take away the cramps that bowed her nearly double when she tried to walk. She turned up the well-battered leather of her coat and sucked and chewed what she could get between her teeth. Drashi moaned and stirred in his sleep, searching for her breast that was quite dry.

7

It was day. Again it was night. But there were blanks in between. Sometimes she walked by day; sometimes resting at night.

Instinctively she abandoned the trail and kept near the river, for she could only keep on when the world ceased its mad merry-go-round around her. Afterwards, she could remember walking away from the trail for fear someone of Soktsong might come. That was after her first dream of food. After the shattering of that dream she had started on in blind frenzy.

That awakening had seemed one of the bitterest experiences of life, outranking in poignancy the disappointment of finding the ice bridge across the Peacock Waters gone. She had been churning butter in her own tent; each article of the furnishings had stood out as clear, if not clearer, than life. Yogmo had set out bowls of stew on the edge of the ashpit. The odour of freshly cooked meat flavoured with onions and spices filled the tent: she could see bits of meat and cubes of fat in each bowl. Yet for some unexplained reason all must wait until the churning was finished though the odours clung to her famine-sharpened nostrils. To hurry the churning she drove the dasher up and down till her stomach muscles cramped and ached. As she churned that pain seemed to fill up the dream and overflow into a half-consciousness with the bitterness of reality. Yet because of the odour of stew that came with every breath, she kept on with her work; driving the dasher up and down against the cramps that gripped her. Little drops of buttermilk and globules of butter collected like a ring around the moving dasher. She hooked her finger around the dasher handle, wiped off the mixture, and raised her finger to her mouth. But before she could taste the buttermilk she came awake, bowed with pain and with her forefinger caught between her teeth. In a frenzy to reach that tent, she moved on with drunken steps.

Once, in an interval of light between two periods of darkness blacker than the blackest night, she heard a great rush and beating of the wind above her; a gust that rose to a shrill whistling as if someone played on giant pipes. Then all was still—or was it that something, things—moved and rustled around her? She opened her eyes and at even that slight movement, the great bird which almost completely filled her field of vision, sidled away with a startled widening of the yellow eyes in its grey head. She turned her own head and three more of the great grey and tawny birds moved away, ruffling their feathers like startled barnyard fowl and voicing a certain indignation at having been deceived.

Her detachment vanished. It was time she and Drashi were getting to the Shami tents. With the thought she was on her feet and moving among the lumbering birds which

stared at her, too surprised to fly. But when she again stopped to rest, they reappeared, dropping out of a lighted blue sky. At night they posed as black shadows in the light of the moon.

If her limbs finally refused to bear their burden, at least she would have the "burial of heaven," a true nomad burial. The great vultures with their beaks would make a bloody opening through which the soul would pass from the body to its long trial and search for rebirth. She would go, and Doka, Drashi and a tent, set in an upland meadow and black against the sky, would all be left.

A blow and a sudden rude pulling of her collar brought quick instinctive action, as she shielded Drashi's black head with one hand and fought off blows with the other. It was only for a moment, then the great bird backed off, ruffling his crest and snapping his beak angrily. His large cruel head was still close and she remembered the vulture face of one of the demons who follows Shin-rje-chos-rgyal in the dance of the Wishing Prayer Festival. Unlike the dancers, the birds in the circle around her stayed in their places though sky and earth whirled dizzily.

Her knees refused this time to stiffen, but Lhamo Mtso moved on somehow, again breaking through the ring. Later, when she finally stopped, she wondered vaguely why her hands were bleeding, though the cold deadened any pain. But that was at the end of effort. She dully heard the fanning of the great wings and drew her head far inside the collar of her coat as though cowering from an expected assault.

In a blur of weakness and despair one clear picture from the past came into focus. Around the rout of demons—some of them vulture-headed—moved the Black Hat Wizards to the rumbling of the drums. But the face of their leader, caught in the strange radiance of light that rested on him alone, was for a moment a face most dear.

"Ah, Doka, why don't you come?" she said, her head bowed low, waiting for the end.

She would not go farther, even on hands and knees. The sound of wings was in the air and the drums beat in her ears louder than before. Again something pulled at her collar and

again she turned to fight. In the light of sunset she saw, not the vulture head, but a beloved face. A great piebald horse spread his trembling legs to rest them and snorted his suspicion of what was huddled on the ground before him where his rider knelt.

Doka had come.

V

THE FUGITIVE

DORJE RINCHEN SAT IN his tent staring out at the grassland scene under a summer sky. The prayer-wheel in his hand hummed insistently, but his eyes saw little of the beauty that stretched to the horizon. The curse was following him now in its most dreadful aspects. Why had he not gone to Lhasa before on the pilgrimage? Lhamo Mtso had said to him often of late, "Does the lama always know?" Must this curse, if it was a curse, follow him for ever? He was thinking of the joyful life before, after the joy of his restoration with Lhamo Mtso, with his beloved Lhate.

Together they had watched Drashi learn to walk as a man-child should. Walking, he had discovered how to play with the dogs and calves, venturing farther and farther afield in the unexplored tracts of each new camp-site, although Ahway worried about him. His fat legs had become steady and his hands daring as he reached toward each new thing that life brought across his errant path.

The contradiction of obedience and failure set against disobedience and success mocked him. He sometimes dreamed of the mad whirl of the Wishing Prayer Festival at Lhamo, of the great white mountain, of devils pursuing him for his sins; but also of the Yellow Head of Truth of the sins that could be forgiven. He remembered when he was without hope when the lama forbade him to search for Lhamo Mtso, to dispatch arbitrators for him. He had met with only malignant refusal. Yet, disregarding all omens, disobeying all religious counsel, he had yet found his wife and child. This paradox tortured him never more than now when again the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* was at grips with fate.

Drashi was a very sick child. That was why Dorje Rinchen stared out of his tent, seeing nothing but a great bird poised

in the blue. A faint moan called him back from the past to the threat of the present. Prayer-wheel in hand, he rose and walked out of the tent. He could endure that moan no longer, nor could he meet Lhamo Mtso's anxious eyes. Beyond the smudge fire, the sign of sickness in front of the tent warning visitors to keep away, the men of the encampment were gathering. Some were already seated in an irregular circle and others were coming with their heavy-footed horseman's walk.

It was only a short council session. Jatsang and Duggur sat in it solemnly. They had already decided that the men of the encampment would ride with him in force to Lhamo, where he would secure the lama's blessing and the benefit of the monks' prayers.

Once in the dark hours, before daybreak started him on his way, Lhamo Mtso said, "I wonder if the Yellow Head is in Lhamo. Musa says his medicine is good." And again: "But doesn't that yellow book with the holy printing, so beautiful in black and white, have any words that make healing: healing for just a little child not yet old enough to belong to any one religion?"

He would surely ask after the Yellow Head in Lhamo, but Dorje Rinchen had no answer to her question about the book and its healing of Drashi. The faint whine of the prayer wheel was an endless repetition of that question until the dawn set him on the Lhamo trail.

At Lhamo there was much talk about the coming of the Yellow Head. Strangely enough, permission had been given for his visit, but he had not yet arrived. It was aggravating not to find him, for in spite of much loudly expressed hostility toward the outlander, there were many stories of healings he had effected earlier in the year when he had visited the tribes of Samtsa and Rzakdumba. But the search for the Yellow Head, the search for medicine from the Chinese traders of the trading post, and even the details of arranging for a "big tea" chanting-service by the monks were all of small importance compared to the meeting with the lama. It was a formal audience in the big guest-hall of the great house. Forty men led by Dorje Rinchen made their reverence to the

Presence. As each one performed his genuflection the lama took a prepared loop of thin silk—the scarf of blessing—blew upon it to sanctify it, and placed it around the worshipper. “This is indeed a special blessing for us,” whispered Dorje Rinchen’s neighbour, looking down at his scarf as he took his place in the circle. “See, they are yellow—holy yellow. A good omen for you—yellow as a lama’s hat.”

The suppliants drank their tea and partook of the hospitality of the great house, but while they feasted nothing was said of their mission. The lama, however, questioned one and another about the news of the tribe, the state of the grazing and the condition of the cattle. The questions swirled like eddies in the smooth current of his half-audible praying: the neighbourly attitude of a god leaning from the western heaven to talk with men, his great face as expressionless as a bronze idol’s and as dark above the many layers and folds of his fur-trimmed brocade robes. His eyes, however, turned with his questioning, flicking Dorje Rinchen, whom he queried not at all. Once or twice his gaze lingered on the gift placed before him: folds of wine-coloured satin like a pool of blood in the half light.

When the drinking was ended the old headman of the encampment made his speech. While he talked the lama’s stare rested, never wavering, on Dorje Rinchen as the story of the vicissitudes of the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* was told, down to each detail of little Drashi’s moaning breath and the fever that flared hotly day and night. The speech ended in a chorus of endorsement from all the men of the encampment. All spoke as one: “May the Presence extend his grace and mercy.”

The brocade-swathed idol nodded gravely. To the barely audible mutter of prayers from between lips that did not seem to move was added the yet fainter click of beads as a rosary moved slowly and smoothly in and out of a fold of the satin robes. Again the long minutes stretched to the breaking-point before the grizzled Shami spokesman added, “And if the Presence of his wisdom will forecast what is to be, we will ride content in our faith and reverence. The lama knows—the lama knows.”

The dice were brought and thrown, shaken and thrown; many times. At each casting the lama blew his breath of blessing on the cubes and said his prayers, but all the while his eyes were on Dorje Rinchen. Then he spoke:

“The child will die. The forecast is fixed. But there is more—there is more.”

“Lags-so—lags-so.”

It was a whisper of respectful assent, but a murmur of sympathy and sorrow also went around the ring as the men of Shami rose to go. The forecast of death is so abrupt. The forecast of life waits for explanation: amplification of what to do, what treatment to give, what directions to follow. Death admits no qualification. It is final.

As the others left the lama signalled for Dorje Rinchen to remain.

“There is more—there is more——” he repeated and then fell silent waiting until the room was cleared.

After everyone had left, and for some time, only the whisper of his praying and the faint click of the beads broke the stillness, while the light seemed to drain out of the room, leaving shallow shadows. At length the lama spoke :

“There is a curse gone out against Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*, against the tent of Dorje Rinchen the renegade. The hearth-stone spirits are angry, and the serpent spirits of the springs and sources are stirred. There are dead men; there are cursings; and the bad fortune that comes to the family of a renegade. The child will die, will die, will die. There is evil fortune; maybe to you, maybe to your wife and always to your children if there are any more.”

The soft voice filled the room. Then it changed slightly: “There is sin—sin of begetting and sin that follows the breaking of a vow—sin of begetting and the stain of blood’s desire. Only when you come back to the lamasery as a half-monk and give up the wearing of the dzakwa, let go all family ties, will the curse lift. Hard words, Dorje Rinchen wanlog, but there is more—there is more.”

An ancient recognition ruffled the dark depths of eyes, lately so expressionless in the face of a bronze Buddha; and, too, an old and answering antagonism stirred in Dorje

Rinchen and called to battle, but his courage seemed to have no armour against the indictments brought from the past. It was defenceless against the retributions the future threatened. Even the endurance of a brave son could not bear the thought of Drashi's tortured breathing or its cessation.

Somehow there must be a way to answer the charge and to battle the curse. Even as Dorje Rinchen said a mechanical farewell he was searching his memory for a weapon that would fit his need. Suddenly he seemed to see clearly before his eyes the words from the book with the yellow cover.

“‘Ye shall know the truth itself and truth itself shall set you free.’”

When he had read those words before; secure in a sense of material well-being and good fortune, he had wondered how or from what anyone would wish to be free. Now he knew the impotence of fettered resistance against fate and the dark powers. Against this new awareness he tested the words, saying them over and over like a charm as he mounted for the homeward journey.

If truth itself were against the lama and fact proved all he said was a lie then he, Dorje Rinchen, would be free. It seemed a weapon fitted to his needs; he used it with all his might.

In the grey light of dawn without promise he looked into the still face of his child, knowing that one thing the lama had said was true and his defences crumbled. What else had the lama said?

“There is more—there is more.”

The tear-wet face of Lhate was raised to his and he was afraid as he had never been before, with a fear that dwarfed even his grief over little Drashi. Evil threatened all the members of the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*. He could hear the lama's words, piling one on the other like enemies crowding to the kill. Against that attack he was weaponless. Truth had turned in his hand, for the lama had spoken a truth. Drashi was dead. There was no use looking in the book any more. Its words had no power.

In the following year the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* gained added renown as an abode of piety. Monks, riding the rounds to collect gifts of butter for the great house, never left the tent without the greater part of the day's churning in their bags. More prayer-flag lines were draped from the up-ended lance in front of the door than at any other. His fear of the curse drew him day and night to efforts at piety, to effect a truce with the powers of darkness that beset him. Always the brooding eyes of the lama haunted him

Outwardly he lived as before. More and more traders came to his door, assured of a hospitality that was becoming famous and trusting an integrity of character that made every promise certain of fulfilment. From a multitude of transactions made without effort and satisfactorily concluded, wealth flowed into the tent. He was great in the esteem of his fellows, and of his family; mother, brother and father took great pride in him, only Jatsang seemed to understand his depression.

He continued to enjoy the freedom of layman existence and rode to hunt, when the Shami tribe moved to where game was plentiful. Days were spent riding the steep slopes of the high mountains: keeping like a true nomad to his saddle on the steepest of grades, yet a growing sense of guilt rode with him on every hunt. His guilt made him constantly terrified of sacrilege.

One day Dorje Rinchen straightened up from the bloody task of dressing a big ram's carcass and carelessly wiped his hands on a clump of grass, pressing them hard against the sod as he turned them. When a spreading red stain mingled with a slight seepage, he realized he had actually plunged his hand into a marshy, half-hidden spring. "*Om mani padme hum!*" he prayed hastily.

The prayers would not come to his lips fast enough as he rode from the spot where he had polluted a spring with blood. The serpent spirits of springs and sources are so easily angered. What was it the lama had said about them; that they were mindful with a dark purpose of the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*?

Then there was the incident of the burned meat. One day Yogmo carelessly dropped a small chunk intended for the pot into the fire and the odour of burning meat filled the tent just as Dorje Rinchen entered.

“Who burns meat in the hearth?” he thundered. “Don’t you know about the gods and spirits, you foolish one from the mouth of hell, or is it usual to call them here? Do you mean to bring down the curse upon Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*? If so, take this—and . . .”

He had seized a tent-peg and as the first blow fell Yogmo dropped to her knees crying out innocence of all intent and begging for mercy. Lhamo Mtso quickly moved to intervene. “Yogmo didn’t mean it,” she said. “It is only a tiny bit of meat that burns—not too much. Things like that happen in every tent and the hearthstone spirits do not stir. Why be fearful over just a little thing?”

“Just a little thing—just a little thing,” muttered Dorje Rinchen as he sat down to drink his tea, but his fears would not rest. The spirits would be angry at the odour and the insult. His uneasy prayers filled the tent. “*Om mani padme hum! Om mani padme hum!*”

He and Lhate had found a deep but faintly uneasy happiness throughout the year; but, actually, for the ex-monk, all passion and affection had been overlaid with a sense of guilt because of the lama’s words.

Now Yogmo’s blunder and the fears that had lain in ambush against his dearest joys and happiness became a burden that must be shared, for Lhate confided that once again the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* waited for a child. The lama’s curse could remain a secret no longer. One by one he told her its terrors; forbidding happiness to the wanlog, and to the woman who had caused him to break his vow. For Lhamo Mtso, the curse seemed a lesser threat. For her, the life she carried was stronger than death or the curse and again she felt tempted to laugh at Yogmo’s weebegone face as she went about her tasks, to laugh also a little at the fear in Doka’s face because a piece of meat had shrivelled to a blackened shell in the flames and the odours had not been polite to the hearthstone spirits.

Yet, as they talked, she came to share some of her husband's fears. "We will spend the months at Lhamo," he said. "Among the people of the edge we will find a hut and by day we will walk the path of merit where the praying of the monks is heard. Under the shadow of the halls of religion and the towers of offerings, we will be safe. Yes, we will live at Lhamo."

It was a well-known ruse for outwitting fate. With this decision Dorje Rinchen became preoccupied with all the planning and making of arrangements.

For Lhamo Mtso, Lhamo was a place of interest and excitement. It was the scene of great spectacles, of processions and the colourful assemblies of the monks. She was in a hurry to be gone. But when the milch cows came in at noon, nosing into the tent itself to look for her, she began to regret. The milch cows would not be at Lhamo.

The wealthy Dorje Rinchen, friend of chiefs and sponsor once a year of a "big tea" chant, easily found a hut at Lhamo for his use—new, clean, and private—in one of the edge-people settlements nearest the lamasery. When the last load of fuel had been stacked in the fuel shed and all supplied for a stay of many months neatly piled in the hut, Dorje Rinchen went to the door and gazed out on Lhamo. For the first time since he left the lamasery, Dorje Rinchen had no horse or animal to look after. Lhamo Mtso, too, who now came up from the stream with water for their first tea and in haste to get the fire started, had no cows to milk.

He moved aside to let her enter the hut, then turned towards the lamasery, where towers and masonry cut straight lines and sharp angles across the curves of the mountain slopes and in to an undulating skyline. A rigid and arbitrary observance cut across and through it all. Over the slope, at the foot of the towers and along the brow of the hill, the track of the merit path waited for their feet. For months, at least, that was to be their life. He turned back into the hut to hang up his rifle and lay aside his sword. A prayer-wheel in hand was now more fitting.

The lama blessed him with a scarf—this time a green one. He read the future for him and prescribed the routine to be

observed. Every day, rain or shine, Lhamo Mtso must make the long circuit of the lamasery along the path of merit five times at least. And each day she must complete one hundred circuits of the Shrine of Tamdrin. Then too, she must make one hundred prostrations at the place of prostrations within the shrine, a dark room faintly lit by butter lamps set as votive offerings by those who worshipped.

“Nor may she drink milk all the months; neither milk nor zho. And, of course, she may not eat fresh meat, only that which is dried.” The lama’s voice was weighted with unutterable wisdom, its mere surface current overflowing into speech designed to help a poor mortal in his attempt to outwit malignant fate.

So began the stay of Dorje Rinchen and Lhamo Mtso as members of the edge-community of the Lhamo lamasery. The days were full of interests and events; but, actually, the sojourn was a campaign against invisible foes. Every day Lhamo Mtso must circle the shrine of Tamdrin a hundred times. It was a pleasant enough place in the sunshine and a hundred rounds was not too hard, though sometimes the wind tore with savage fingers when one turned the outer north-west corner to begin another circuit.

The long, well-beaten track of the merit path was level enough for most of its length, but climbed steeply among the boulders behind the lama’s great house, and descended from the brow of the hill more as a steep slide than a path. It was a slide in all reality when rain or snow had fallen. At its foot one came to the great flagpole that marked the beginning of another circuit and so continued until the five circuits had been completed. Autumn snows piled difficulties along the path, winter winds hurled dust and gravel in the climbers’ faces and at last the cold of midwinter threatened frostbite to any who rested too long, halfway up the steep climb. They might rest, but eventually the five circuits must be completed.

At the shrine and the path of merit there was nevertheless companionship—women who clicked their beads and said their prayers in pauses halfway up the rocky climb, men who kept their prayer-wheels turning even on that slide where

footing was so insecure—and always Dorje Rinchen was somewhere near. He too was fighting the battle of prayer and merit with all the singleness of purpose with which he had fought other battles.

Within the shrine of Tamdrin, however, it was Lhamo Mtso's battle alone. The room was totally dark except for spearheads of flame dancing in the butter lamps. After lighting her own lamp, brought with care from the hut, Lhamo Mtso's bare feet found the deep, hollowed-out impression where other feet had stood on the plank floor. She knelt to let her knees sink into the two depressions in the wood made by countless pairs before her and, her hands pushing in front of her along two deep grooves until her body pressed close against the floor, she finished the prostration. Her finger-tips touched the prints of her predecessors: other women who had fought the battle in the dark. With a deep breath she would rise to begin it all over again and so to the hundredth time.

As her body grew heavy the merit path grew long and the ordeal within the shrine of Tamdrin became harder. Her spirits grew heavy too. She missed the excitement of the cattle coming into the camp at dusk, the exciting rhythm of nomad life.

Milk, even the small quantity in the little jugfuls brought by friends, was forbidden to her and the tea of the fire of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*, for the first time in its history, was "black" instead of "white." She missed milk more than many things. The old, dried meat tasted like rotted wood soaked in rancid oil when others were eating freshly butchered mutton, red with juice and white with fat. However, the battle must be fought and so the months wore on. The Wishing Prayer Festival days went by and Lhamo Mtso began to plan for their return to the encampment, barring unfavourable omens and prophecies that might intervene to keep them longer at the edge.

One thing was lacking in all that had been promised to Lhamo Mtso when they planned the stay at Lhamo. She spoke of it one night to Doka as they bent over the evening meal. "If only the Yellow Head had been here and we could have seen him. Yes, and the foreign wife, whose head is not

yellow. They have a child, too, did not Trinlan say? They talk religion and have a child.”

Silence intervened—alive with questionings in the minds of each. “I wonder,” she continued, “if hearthstone spirits bother them when birth-time is coming. And I wonder whether foreign women bow before the shrines and go on the path of merit. What do they do?”

Dorje Rinchen made no attempt to answer. Assuredly people of the Yellow Head’s religion did none of those things. That much he felt but he did not know what rules they followed.

“Next year,” he answered, “they will come. Then you can see what they are like. Ah, things to see, Lhate—things to see! In Taochow I saw a box that. . . .”

But Lhate had lost interest. “I was tired today. Tired with the same tiredness I felt when I crossed the Shab Chu the third time. The shrine of Tamdrin was blacker than before. And tomorrow comes so soon like every other day.”

But tomorrow did not arrive as every other day, for Lhate’s time came before. The hearthstone spirits must have come too, because no cry broke through to life at the end of labour and pain. Lhate and Doka, looking down at their child—born, but dead—knew the battle of the months had been lost.

3

Dorje Rinchen climbed through the cloister alleys with the dead child in his arms. Beyond the ridge that overlooked the lamasery was a flat-topped knoll where the vultures gather whenever one of the “edge-people” dies. Though he carried only a tiny weight, he stopped now and again: once at the grove of Tamdrin where the black outlines of the spruces swept away most of the stars in that quarter of the blue-black sky; once above and behind the chanting-hall where the hoarse chorus of the midnight chant sounded the loudest, stirring the echoes on the hillside above him; and last of all at the brow of the hill, so far removed from Lhamo that the wind strained out the noise of chanting, the barking of the dogs and all lesser sound, letting only the sudden clamour

of the drums and the long, hoarse moaning of the trumpets reach him as if from another world. He went on until the last sound became an echo and he was quite alone.

The vultures would hardly come in the dark. Dorje Rinchen was determined that neither wolves nor dogs should get at the body and so had come prepared to watch, his sword in his girdle, its handle turned conveniently to his hand and his rifle across his lap. He would wait until daylight and the coming of the birds. He laid the body—faintly white in the starlight—in the proper place and at the proper distance under the flapping prayer-flags that overhung the spot, and took his seat nearby, close enough to distinguish the body from the other white objects that marked the place: skulls and scattered bones.

Lhate, too, weak from pain and sick with disappointment, kept a vigil in the little hut on the edge: so near the sound of the midnight chant and the blowing of the trumpets. The fire flared from time to time, and, like the fire, life seemed to flicker uncertainly for Lhamo Mtso, weak from a fruitless agony. Could she, in the shadow, find Drashi or a little soul, that had never learned to cry, wandering in the dark?

What the monks said, or failed to say about those shades that close triumphantly in on life, gave her no promise or hope. The fire died to the ghost of its red self and she could hear the sound of the trumpets, harsh and menacing like a summons from the realm of Shin-rje-chos-rgyal himself. She shivered with sudden cold and, reaching out, found a stick and pushed fuel along the storage shelf to the fire. The shadows fell back and life again seemed to burn within her.

As warmth returned and with it the will to live, her thoughts reverted to the tent and its life. For her Lhamo would never again be the place of festive excitement and pleasure. Now it was the site of the long merit path, of penance and a lost battle. She would return to the tent soon; to her own fireside and the push of the churn-dasher handle against her hand as she beat butter out of the day's milking; to the cattle that followed her into the tent at milking time.

There had been perfect days in the short history of the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*: days when a summer sky,

sunshine, and flower-thick meadows had been the background to complete happiness. There she had waited the months through for Drashi, without fear or the need for penance on the merit path and in a darkened room. He had been born to life—not still and dumb. She felt a fierce determination to recapture the assurance of those first days. She would return to love and life—and by her own fireside—in spite of the hearthstone spirits. The next child she mothered would be born on the Shami plain. She stirred the fire again, waiting for Dorje Rinchen; eager to tell him her plans. The lama did not know all, her heart told her.

No pain touched Dorje Rinchen as he kept his vigil. He felt only the chill of the frost-filled night. His mind turned back far more slowly than had Lhamo Mtso's to thoughts of life and love. For a time he could think of nothing but death; it swallowed him like the night and fear blew a cold wind to congeal him with foreboding. He asked no questions about death. He knew the answers, such as they were: the darkness and confusion, the varied pains of hell; the suspense of waiting for the turning of the wheel that would mean final release and rebirth.

In the yellow book he had read that there was no death and even that one could be re-born without death. But this he did not understand and it seemed far away in the light of the still reality and tragedy of this moment and place.

To him, now, however, life was a small lighted space in the black void of purgatorial confusion. When fate was strong with the power of an evil destiny, even the lamasery could give no security. The monks were chanting, the trumpets sounded, but only faint echoes reached the hilltop. Death was there in all its power. Now that there was no child, would Lhamo Mtso be the next victim? It was no longer a battle. Life had become a retreat. While he waited for day and the end of his watch, he planned the next step of that flight.

A black tent against Shami skies offered no refuge, a hut for two on the edge of the lamasery promised no safety, but far beyond the Golok mountains, the turbulent Dri Chu, beyond the snowy heights of Tang La and the tents and villages of Nag Chuka, lay the Potala itself and Jowo, holiest

shrine of all, in Lhasa—the place of gods. As pilgrims, might they not successfully flee from fate? He would at last make this trial to avert fate. The distance, the strangeness, and all the blessings attendant on pilgrimage seemed to promise temporary safety and, when they returned, a final truce. His mind raced ahead to the details of such a move. It was months before the annual pilgrim caravan would start. The horse herd could be left with Duggur as well as the best milch cows. All other livestock could be sold. They would take Drokwa with them and fifteen good oxen. Yes, and in Lhasa he could replace the lost amber of Lhamo Mtso's headdress. He would have to take quite a lot of wealth: there must be an offering for each shrine.

Dorje Rinchen was now in haste, but the dawn came slowly. The great birds gathered still more tardily, though their actual work was quickly finished. In consciousness of defeat and from the place of death, Dorje Rinchen saw the sunlight touch the pass at the top of the long slope. For him that trail no longer led to the tents of Shami, but to the Potala at the end of the pilgrim trail to Lhasa. To make a truce with fate, Lhate and he would ride that way soon.

The great birds were already high in the sky by the time he reached the hut where Lhate waited.

4

Again winter gave way to spring. In a hundred tents and by a hundred tent fires, the annual pilgrim caravan to Lhasa began to take shape. The call of adventure, as old as time, was heard. Lhasa, the place of gods, awaited the pilgrim. Could those who travelled there leave their old selves at the journey's goal and come back to a new life? At least, they could leave their sins. So much of renewal was promised. Throughout all the months of preparation, hope grew in Dorje Rinchen's heart that pilgrimage would take both Lhamo Mtso and himself so completely out of the old life that the curse would never again find them.

The flocks were sold, the horses turned over to Duggur, the milch cows distributed among friends who were glad to pay the yearly hire of fifty catties of butter per cow and the

caravan equipment prepared with a thoroughness and care that made it almost a rite. Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* was a family of importance among the tent people and so it was a matter of prestige—and even more, of piety—that his little caravan should be equipped with the very best. Even the tie-ropes and tether-lines were decked with red tassels and the pack-covers bore designs pricked out with coarse embroidery.

The argument about the shape of the tent had been a long one. Most of the tent dwellers preferred the “four corners level” tent, which is simply the square home tent of the encampment adapted to conditions of travel. The roof is nearly flat and made of yak-hair cloth, the sides are made of cotton drilling or a similar material and it hangs from outside tent-poles that hold up the guy-ropes. Such a tent is roomy in ratio to its weight and well-lighted, but unsteady in a high wind and time-consuming to pitch. The many poles, too, make an awkward load. When finally set up, however, it is very much like the home tent of the grassland tribes.

Dorje Rinchen chose instead the “saddle-on-horseback” tent with a ridge-pole and low walls. It can be pitched in less time—a very important asset when camp is being made in driving rain or pelting hail and sleet—hugs the ground against the wind, and, if not roomy, is at least snug. With only three people comprising the kettle, space was of no special consideration, but convenience and compactness were essential to Dorje Rinchen’s party.

“It’s big enough, too. Big enough for five people if the loads were well stacked,” commented Drokwa, standing inside the tent the day it was completed and pitched on trial. “And we shall be only three.”

The day came when the golden ox was again cast loose from the tether-rope and, shaking the great red tassels in his ears, headed outward from the rim of the encampment: the leader of a caravan of eighteen prize oxen starting out on the Lhasa trail. Dorke Rinchen-*tsang* was the only family from that encampment, but there were other groups from other Shami tents and, as the forenoon’s gold changed to silver under clouds drifting in from the west, several parties coalesced. Gradually, the Shami caravan took shape as one

party after another fell in behind the cattle of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*. Pilgrimage had begun.

The pilgrims rode clothed in gala attire. Even the labour of keeping the packs straight and the loads balanced on frisky oxen did not change the holiday spirit, though it did do damage to new sashes and ornamental jackets. Ahway said a gentle farewell, but Duggur and Jatsang, himself, were there to accompany them to the Peacock Waters.

Escort and pilgrims rode together; wearing the same clothes, carrying the same arms, yet already there was a difference. Though Dorje Rinchen and Drokwa carried their rifles, prayer-flags and banners fluttered from the long, forked rests. To complete the picture of a nomad riding to Lhasa—even on pilgrimage—those guns must be carried, although they would never be used throughout the months.

At the first noon halt there came a division. Each pilgrim kettle was set up by itself. The Shami group set their tents on the rim of the pilgrim's rendezvous encampment. Then the chief of Tangkor would finally organize the great caravan, for he was the most important and powerful pilgrim of the current year. One after another the tents appeared on the rim, but a long arc at the honourable side remained empty until noon, reserved for the chief and his followers. When his party finally appeared, the pilgrims already settled in camp rushed to help with the unloading. His tents went up with unbelievable speed and the loads were stacked. The chief's personal tent was also a "saddle-on-horseback." Its peaked outline stood exactly opposite Dorje Rinchen's on the far side of the circle.

Here and there a man could be found—one who had made the trip before—who by right became a veritable oracle, sure at least of the favoured seat by each fire and the first serving of tea. In talk and anticipation the trip was made by stages: the crossing of the Peacock Waters; the oxen-killing mountains of Golok country; the flat, cold wastes of Dza Chuka; the reorganization of travel means and routine at Nag Chuka, where one first had to strain towards an understanding of the Lhasa dialect; and at last the Potala against the far blue sky—red like a mighty cliff and crowned with cupolas of gold.

Throughout the long sunny afternoon, the friends and relatives who would escort the pilgrim caravan to the crossing of the Peacock Waters came to the tent. In addition to pouring tea, Dorje Rinchen was kept busy receiving gifts—most of them lumps of silver—from friends who wished him well and yearned to have a part in his pilgrimage. He carefully recorded each one, for the gifts represented a material investment as well as a token of friendship and an investment in piety. Each was tied up separately and bore a brief note for identification. When he returned a year later, he was bound by custom to bring the donor a gift of equivalent value. Nevertheless, the presents were welcome, because the value of what he would bring back was reckoned according to prices in north-east Tibet. Broadcloth, amber, coral, leopard-skin collars and such goods could be bought at half that price in Lhasa.

Along with the others, Trinlan suddenly appeared. The Samtsa contingent had arrived. He led an unwilling, resentful ox—golden like sunshine—that lowed uneasily for its fellows and pulled hard on its nose-rope as he tied it to the tent-peg.

“It’s an exact match for your golden one,” Trinlan said to Dorje Rinchen. “The two will race each other all the way to Lhasa! You will travel like a lama, not like a pilgrim.”

The word “wanlog” was in the minds of both, but for once Trinlan trimmed his speech. “How thirsty I am! Ah, tea! There you are, Doka—the gift of the tent of the ombo’s brother, but particularly of the tent of Trinlan, the wanlog.” The word was out and a slight grin flickered over his face. “It is all right, too, if you should only be able to bring back a golden tail, having had to leave the rest somewhere on the trail. I should at least have some part in pilgrimage. The Lhasa trail! Ah, *Om mani padme hum!*”

“But the trail is long and hard,” Doka protested. “Perhaps I *will* bring you only a golden tail at the end of the year. It’s a long way.” His voice shook slightly.

Trinlan flipped a stray yak-hair out of his tea, started to say something and then hesitated, changing his mind before he finally spoke. “Yes, long and hard. And after? But never mind the after. At least it is a long trail and you will see

something. Yes, things to see and goods to buy, too. I have not only brought an ox, but this too for the mother of wealth while you are on the pilgrim trail. May it have many sons." There was an undertone of amusement in his voice as he produced an eared ingot of Chinese silver. "What is pilgrimage without trade? I wish I were going too, but I'll have to wait. Maybe after you get back and I see what it does to you, I too will go. We all get older with each year. And at least you will be able to replace Lhate's amber hair ornaments at half-price, in the place of gods."

Three days passed: each day a stage of the journey that began at dawn and ended when the sun was scarcely halfway up the eastern sky.

So they came to the ferry across Peacock Waters. The night before, a great burning of juniper boughs was made on the bluff above the camp overlooking the place where the crossing would take place. Everyone prayed: to the gods of the mountains—to the spirits that roam the wastes and lurk near the high passes; to the earth gods of many a plain and valley; to the spirits of the springs and waters; to the great Peacock Waters itself, for tomorrow they would cross it and, separating from their friends, would become finally, irrevocably, pilgrims. The climax of their praying rose and steadied to a rhythmless hum without a break: "*Om mani padme hum—Om mani padme hum.*" It was a rite and a consecration.

The river had been jade green in the afternoon; it had been black—polished to gold where the firelight found it in the night; but it had changed to olive green with an angry tawny crest by the time the pilgrims came to cross it on the following morning. Trinlan and Duggur had both crossed to help carry the loads to the new camp-site. On the wide meadow that extended right to the river's edge, the tentative outline of an encampment began to appear as piles of travel gear and provisions were carried up from the shore. On the far side of the circle quite a few tents were already in position. At the sight of them Drokwa began to mutter about some Goloks having come to join the caravan. No one paid any attention to him—there was too much to do in making camp, but later Dorje Rinchen remembered. Duggur and Trinlan

could not linger any length of time, even for tea, because the ferry had been again pulled up to the starting-point and they were forced to recross.

Dorje Rinchen stood on the bank and watched them go. Once or twice they shouted, their voices bouncing on the water like skipping stones, the sound seeming to come from a great distance and yet astonishingly clear. Old Jatsang had everything ready for the start and not long after the ferry reached the bank all three were mounted and ready to ride. For a moment they showed in clear relief on the edge of the high river bank. The thin echo of their shouts skipped across the whispering water, but the words were lost. For Dorje Rinchen there remained only pilgrimage, and whatever of miracle, wonder, or peace it could bring him.

He turned back towards his fire. The smoke was already rising and tea would soon be ready. From the midst of those who lined the bank with him or hurried back and forth, busied with making camp, an old man spoke to him: "Ah, Dorje Rinchen of Shami, brave son. How is Lhamo Mtso? So Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* makes pilgrimage to Lhasa too." Dorje Rinchen had never heard that dry, ironical voice before, but from a tale he had once relived in the hearing he knew it nevertheless and turned to face an old man who had lost two sons. Was the curse over him here, too! There was enmity held in abeyance in the weary eyes and a burning curiosity.

"How is Lhamo Mtso?" the voice repeated. "She once lived unrecognized at our fireside for a month. Unrecognized—unrecognized. Perhaps the old woman and I will get to know her as we travel to Lhasa together in the same caravan, although"—the words came a little more slowly and the voice was faintly mocking as he turned away—"we might recognize her back by the lack of hair ornaments, unless they have been replaced."

One of the grimmest tragedies of his life again met Dorje Rinchen. But on the pilgrim trail it turned for the time being into an empty gibe uttered by a taunting voice. Whatever threat that episode of the past had for Dorje Rinchen, tribesman of Shami, the pilgrim was able to push

it aside. With a sudden access of faith and zeal, Dorje Rinchen reached for his prayer-wheel as he sat down to tea and the telling of the news.

The Lhasa trail had already produced a miracle of sorts for him.

5

It was a year later almost to the day when Dorje Rinchen again saw the tawny flood of Peacock Waters at the place where the river slackens between two meadows to let the caravans cross, provided the Ngura ferry is running. He, the Tangkor chief, and three others rode round the bend and came to a halt. Confused shouting and a medley of hails, thin and fragmentary, drifted across.

“Tangkor—arjoba—peaceful—completely . . .”

Then one sounded more full-throated than all, above the murmuring of the water. “Ku-hu-hu, Dorje Rinchen—completely in peace—are you completely in peace?”

He could see them—Jatsang, Duggur and Trinlan too—hurrying from a tent at the upper end of camp, and there were others of Shami and Samtsa—red-robed monks, too, from Lhamo—one and all gathering on the bank to welcome him back from Lhasa.

The tent was set up more quickly than ever before with a score of helping hands pulling on the ropes. The black hair cloth of the centre section was bleached brown, the pieces at either end were faded to a horizon blue and the ropes were frayed, but it was snug and trim as ever.

Duggur cut golden shavings from a pat of fresh butter, yellow as the oxslips of the marshes. Trinlan had brought hot boiled mutton, someone else offered cheese, another a pouch of freshly roasted and milled tsamba, and Wanjur drew back his priestly scarf to produce a small platter of fried bread. Now the tent filled with a crowd that grew until those on the edge were pushed tight against the bulging walls, pulled out of shape for the first time since they had been made. Beyond the first greeting upon arrival no one spoke. Each observed something especially interesting about the three pilgrims.

Jatsang wondered not so much at the assurance and complacency in his son's face as at his increased gravity in manner and speech. He told him that his mother was eagerly waiting him. Yet he was well: no doubt of that, and handsomer than ever.

Trinlan wanted to ask many things of his sister, but kept his silence. He saw, however, that though her face was darker than ever from the fierce suns and winds of the Lhasa trail her skin shone clear.

Duggur's eyes wandered restlessly, noting the stacked loads, the worn spots in the tent, the new piece of coral in his brother's necklace and the special soles of wild yak leather sewed in the Lhasa fashion on the boots of all three. But first of all he had noticed the rows of amber hanging on Lhamo Mtso's back. Probably that, he thought, was what made her eyes so brilliant.

The meal soon ended and silence waited on Dorje Rinchen. For each one in the group he had brought a present in return for those given him on his pilgrimage. The giving could wait. This first meeting was formal, almost impersonal, and no one in the group spoke. It was time for Dorje Rinchen to tell the tale of his argosy; all the events and wonders of his pilgrimage—his, and Lhamo Mtso's and Drokwa's too.

He set down his empty bowl, picked up his rosary as though making reference to a record inscribed on the beads, and began:

“Here is the tale of our days and travels since our faces last met: I will truly, truly tell all we encountered, all we saw, all we heard, all we endured and all we gained. *Om mani padme hum!*”

“After leaving Peacock Waters we travelled through Golok country in days and days of rain. For nine days no one could get fires started. All fuel was wet. All the landscape is bare as the beaten dust or trampled mud of corrals in the winter encampment. Grazing? There is none. But the Goloks travelling with us showed me how to give tea and tsamba to the animals so that we lost none. That was true benefit: true benefit from good trail companions.”

Gratified murmurs filled the tent, but Duggur questioned

rather sharply, "What Goloks? We heard Kanggan . . . ? You mean Yimba-*tsang*? The family that lost two sons? Perfection of blessing by the lama himself! And they told you how to save oxen? The Goloks know, the Goloks know."

Trinlan's attention focused on his sister. "Was the son also there or only Yimba-*tsang*—the two? Oh, only the old ones. But they helped you? Pilgrimage is pilgrimage, after all! It does have power." There was a trace of real astonishment in his voice.

"The old woman's heart yearned over Lhate," Dorje Rinchen resumed the telling, "and we shared our milk with them until our own milch cows died: they could not stand the trail. So we came to the place where Peacock Waters springs from the two lakes. Where we crossed it the water was only stirrup-deep. It took the caravan five days to cross: five days' stay where the hillsides are bare of grazing. How the cattle died! But none of ours—*Om mani padme hum!* none of ours."

Again a murmur of satisfaction that all had gone well with the kettle of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* went round in the slight pause.

"We rested for some days on the plains of Dza Chuka. The Dza Chu is only a small stream, but the plains of Dza Chuka have good grass even though they are so high and cold.

"So we came to the long plain that leads to the Tang La, highest of all the passes; Tang La, where the trail leads across the snows and ice that never melt, where the cliffs are carved with the sacred words.

"From there it was not so far to Nag Chuka, where we left our oxen with the Nag Chuka nomads. The hire for a whole season is not much—only a catty of butter per ox. By that time we had only seventeen, for we lost one on the Tang La. From Nag Chuka on it was not so hard for us as for some. We had two mules and an extra horse and so could pack our baggage. Some had to load up their horses and walk. What a penalty for the sins of a previous existence! Some had even to carry their baggage on their own backs. Worst penalty of all! But not for long. It was only seven days to Lhasa.

“We were among the Bodpa at last. Their speech is Tibetan, but so ridiculous! They talk in different voices, depending on the words they use—a man speaks in a woman’s voice for some of them—and they say *ndro-i* for *njo-gi*—somewhat like the Choni Tibetans. But they are all liars—all. Seven days we travelled through a countryside of villages and great forts. They call them ‘dzong.’ And then—yes, then—this.”

Dorje Rinchen fumbled in a carefully wrapped bundle and produced a photograph, already considerably soiled, of the Potala—a great cliff against a white sky.

“Merit was completed. Truly, truly there was merit then—*Om mani padme hum!*—when we saw the Potala: tall like the Lhamo cliff, red like the walls of the chanting-hall, white buildings surmounting it, the roofs holding golden crowns against the sky. That was the end of the road. That is where the Rgyalpa Rinpoche rests in blessedness.”

Dorje Rinchen let the echoes die and was still. He clicked his beads. Jatsang’s praying was audible. Duggur’s eyes were wide and staring as though he too saw the Potala itself instead of the picture. Even Trinlan was stirred by some inner feeling.

“Lhasa! What a place of wonders it is! Everything is arranged in order—the market of meat, of horses, of cloth, and of hardware. Everywhere there are the great buildings like canyon walls to guide one. The quarters of the butchers are houses built of horns. What sinners they are, for they use the knife and let out the blood and life instead of strangling! And there are the lamaseries—Drepung, Sera, and Galden; each one having lamas, shrines and holy places; each one surrounded by a perfect path of merit. And always the Potala—house in the sky for the saviour of men—the all-loving one. Most holy of all the shrines is that of Jowo, the Jo Kang, dark and small, but the place where merit really comes: merit gained when one lights his butter lamp and worships prostrate on the floor, which has been carved into waves and ripples by the flesh of palms, and knees and bodies that have been stretched full length in worship.

“We visited every shrine, though it took many days, and there was merit gained. We followed every path of merit, and there was merit gained. We saw a chanting in every

chanting-hall, and there was merit gained. We saw the great dance of the gods on the Wishing Prayer Festival, and there was merit gained. We watched the cursed sin bearer run for his life with the sin of the year, and there was merit gained; the more so as he did not get away this year, but was killed. We saw the human birds fly down the rope stretched across the valley, and there was merit gained, for no one fell or was killed. We saw the monks of Sera and Galden fight for the honour of their lamaseries the night of the Butter Images and there was merit gained. We had a horoscope cast by the Rgyalba Rinpoche himself. The future was read"—Dorje Rinchen stopped abruptly and then went on more slowly—"and it was good. Yes, it was good. *Om mani padme hum!* And there was merit gained."

Again Dorje Rinchen was content to let the click of the beads sliding through his fingers fill the silence. From the religious point of view, his story had ended, but his audience did not stir.

"What things there are to see in Lhasa!" he went on, "There are little lighting-lamps in some of the streets and they burn without oil in a ball of crystal—not rock crystal, but fire crystal. And the Rgyalba Rinpoche has a thunder chariot. It runs on a special road built out from the Potala. We saw it once. It goes faster than the fastest horse. And all over Lhasa men ride on two wheels that roll when the rider moves his feet. Two wheels—not like wheels of a cart—but one behind the other. There must be a special magic that one must use to keep from falling over. In Lhasa there are soldiers who wear Pehling soldier clothes, their legs tied up like those of the Tebus. But they can't shoot very well.

"Not all the Lhasa people are Bodpa. Strange people, are the Bodpa; short and ugly—the men with their hair knotted on the tops of their heads, and the women with coloured ointment on their faces. Many of the Lhasa women are tsong-ma who sell themselves. For a single silver coin—the one with a woman's head on it—they will sleep with a man. But they, too, are ugly compared to our women. Besides the Bodpa there are Kacha, who are Moslems and trade; there are Chinese; there are Indians with their curly beards and

black faces, and even some Pehling—like the Yellow Head. I don't know if their speech and religion is the same or not, but they look like him. The monks do not like them and they will all have to leave. The monks say that all outlanders must go and they made a big riot about it after the Wishing Prayer. But they do that. The monks of Lhasa are like the Bodpa—black-hearted. Still, there is merit in Lhasa for the pilgrims. How many there are—from Ladak, from Sikkim, from Mongolia, and from all the scattered tent peoples of high Bodyul!

“The journey back was made mostly in winter-time and much more slowly, but there is no rain and no snow; only cold, dust, and wind. Now we are back wholly safe, wholly in peace—grace of the Complete Perfection. We lost no pilgrims from sickness, and few cattle. That our faces meet again is merit too, merit gained and merit enjoyed.

Still the audience showed no signs of breaking up, though heads nodded in approval, either of the tale or the manner of its telling. Dorje Rinchen clicked his beads, then cleared his throat. He went on in a reflective tone, while Trinlan's eyes grew brighter, and many of the crowd seemed to give an added degree of attention:

“Trade is good this year, for though food prices are high, goods are reasonable. Only broadcloth—Hassa, they call it—is scarce. Lhasa broadcloth is very reasonable. I brought back quite a lot. Leopard skins are good, but some Chinese traders bought up most of them. The best values are in stones, especially coral and amber.”

His eyes shifted to Lhamo Mtso's bowed head, then swerved for a moment towards Duggur's face.

“Perhaps soon the Pehling Bora rifles will be coming here. They shoot well and are very reasonable in price, but I was afraid of not being able to get ammunition for one. And they are not well shaped and long like the other Bora rifles. I bought some books, too, in Lhasa; the *Prayer For Wisdom* printed in golden letters on black varnished paper, the *Ten Thousand Songs of Milarepas*, and others. But best of all are the medicines and charms. I brought back many, especially sacred earth mixed with the sacred water of the Rgyalba

Rinpoche's holy mouth. It will cure anything. And I have many charms. The charms of this year are specially powerful for the Shimdrok and all who live within the influence of the Taktsang, because this year is the year of the tiger—the year of our pilgrimage. Thus we went and thus we came back. This was our pilgrimage of the kettle of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*. I have said all.”

Again he paused and this time it was final. Almost immediately the gathering broke up and in a short time only the three pilgrims, and Jatsang, Duggur and Trinlan, were left in the tent.

“The golden ox came back,” Dorje Rinchen said to Trinlan. “Maybe he will head your caravan next year on the Lhasa trail. He knows the way. Many thanks.”

Trinlan smiled. “Perhaps; but first I must know. Was the merit only gained, or did it give your heart full peace? And what did the horoscope say? What about your future?”

Dorje Rinchen's face was expressionless. Whatever else the pilgrimage had or had not done, it had forced his manhood to full stature. There was no exultation in his manner, scarcely assurance, but simply acceptance and the evident will to endure.

“The pilgrimage, our pilgrimage most of all, was a success—wholly a success. See what I have got—the only one to get it in the whole pilgrim caravan—that is why I did not show it when I told my tale. Look at this.” Again he was busied with the wrappings of the bundle and produced another photograph. “The Rgyalba Rinpoche himself—gracious saviour of the world, the manifestation of Chenrizig. Look! The first one to come to Amdo! Do you know how I got it? I traded the book with yellow covers to a high Lhasa official. Dangerous, that, for those books are prohibited there, but I had talked with him; telling him what it said about the world being made by the word which was the Complete Perfection itself. He wished to read it, and I already knew much of what it said, anyway, though I do not understand. I do not understand.”

Again silence was a pool hiding all their thoughts. Trinlan's face was sombre, with only a ghost of mockery left in his look.

His first question about peace had passed unanswered, even though the likeness of the Rgyalba Rinpoche himself had come to the tents of Shami in the family of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*. His silence still pressed the second question he had asked, and to that Dorje Rinchen answered:

“The horoscope, by the highest and holiest himself, was good.” Even in the firm utterance of the words there was no exultation. “All would be well with the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*, he said, if—if always I heeded the advice and followed the forecasts of the Taktsang Lhamo lama. Because the lama knows. Pilgrimage is merit gained. *Om mani padme hum!* The lama knows.”

Dorje Rinchen’s face was grave and set. At least he was prepared to take up once more the life of a tent-dweller, to set up his tent against the sky. However, Trinlan’s face had broken into lines of the bitterest mockery.

“Mouth of hell!” Trinlan swore, “horoscopes are all alike! No. If I go on a trading expedition, I go to Peking and I trade—only. Well, come to my tent soon and be prepared to meet the man that in Samtsa they call ‘Trinlan’s Pehling.’ The Yellow Head is camped with me and he can give you another yellow book. Also a red one, and a green one, and a blue one too. Each is different yet the same or nearly so, you might say, when you look inside. Things to read about, Doka! Come soon. I want to see what gift you have brought me.”

6

Dorje Rinchen’s doubt was nearer than it had been before. Pilgrimage had brought that dark mystery of death, retribution, suffering, and a rebirth full of hazard very close. He had no peace. What he did have was menaced by a growing uneasiness. Even merit gained—counted up in good round numbers—could not cancel those vague fears. Perhaps that imposing record of “And there was merit gained” had cancelled the curse, but it did not appear to have blotted out “digpa” sin, whose corollary is suffering.

Such thoughts had clung to him when he and Lhamo Mtso had followed Trinlan to his tent in the camp by Peacock

Waters. There, after giving Trinlan his gift of fine Lhasa broadcloth, they had met the Yellow Head: a being as strange as the one Dorje Rinchen had seen in Taochow years before and yet almost immediately less strange because of a dzakwa worn easily, and fluent Tibetan speech that was approximately correct.

The Yellow Head had been properly interested in the events of the pilgrimage so successfully completed. The Yellow Head had asked: "And because of all that merit gained, do you have peace?" Trinlan's eyes had twinkled oddly at that, but the Yellow Head did not press the question against Dorje Rinchen's unwilling silence. Instead, as darkness had come on, and the group around the fire became more closely one in its shared light, he began to sing. Sometimes the word "peace" echoed among the songs. Dorje Rinchen could also associate other words and the name of the Saviour of the Yellow Head's religion with half-forgotten phrases in the book he had once possessed before trading it for a photograph of the Rgyalba Rinpoche.

The singing had ended and in the dark the voice of the stranger, still a little hesitant and unsure in phrases that were nevertheless rather well said, had begun to talk of pilgrimage. Dorje Rinchen's mind had been full of the thoughts of his own pilgrimage and the attention he had given was by no means undivided. For a time he had thought the story was that of a pilgrimage or a pilgrim's progress, he called it, in some outlandish place beyond the sea. Parts of it were so strange; a pilgrim on foot with a great burden on his back fleeing from a city; talk of lions in the way, of giants, of arms and armour, and of a great battle in the valley of the shadow. But some of it was familiar: a vast slough for unwary feet, the hardness of the uphill trail, the rushing waters of a great river crossed, however, without a boat, and last of all a city—golden white and precious. It was not the red ramparts of the Potala against the horizon, but a city of peace high in the sky. As the Yellow Head's voice filled the darkness of the tent with scenes and visions, it had suddenly occurred to Dorje Rinchen that the city was in the hereafter and its golden light filled the dreary realm of Shin-rje-chos-rgyal.

Or was it the sky home of the gods? The river was dark death itself, but soon and safely crossed by the pilgrim who followed the trail to the end.

“When one follows the right way life is a pilgrimage to the city of peace and to houses more wonderful than even the Potala.” That last sentence had clung to Dorje Rinchen’s thoughts. How, he wondered, does the Yellow Head know about the Potala?

Dorje Rinchen had talked of this to Lhamo Mtso as they walked back to their tent. The night was very dark and there had been little inducement to conversation as they stumbled along, but his questions had persisted above the voice of the river that filled the night.

“Has he ever been to Lhasa?” asked Dorje Rinchen. “And what a strange pilgrimage he told about—never to return home.”

“Perhaps his magic has informed him,” Lhamo Mtso ventured, “but he talks only of a pilgrim. Did the pilgrim have a wife and children? Yet the Yellow Head has a wife and child. Trinlan will take me to see them the next time we go to Lhamo.”

Months of intense activity followed Dorje Rinchen’s encounter with the Yellow Head. Once the home tent had been set up, everyone came to his door. He had no time to think of going to Lhamo, nor did he feel any immediate need. He was content with life as it was. He was a dutiful son to Ahway and Jatsang. He was exemplary in seeking to perform his religious duties. He filled the bags of the monks who rode from encampment to encampment collecting butter for the lama and he again assumed the burden of two days of chanting—two big teas a year. The evening burning of juniper boughs was made with unfailing regularity, his prayer-wheel became as much a part of his life as wearing a sword in his girdle had once been, or more recently, the carrying of his prayer beads.

Dorje Rinchen rode no more to hunt. He turned his head so that he could not see other riders coming into the encampment with carcasses of mountain mutton behind their saddles, but he still carried his rifle. Might he not have to fight and defend

the sheep? And there were always the enemies from Kanggan. Yes, maybe he would have to kill. But he no longer noticed the smiles of Yogmo or the younger servant-girls. At such thoughts the whine of his prayer-wheel would rise in shrill insistence as prayers were multiplied by the spinning cylinder.

7

The summer's cycle of movement ended with the haying and the return to winter quarters. The year died in the cold and wind of midwinter, dust in his nostrils and the thickened smoke of stoked fires flattened by the gale and thrown into his eyes as he stood to make the evening offering. The beginning of the new year passed in ritual and excitement. Spring turned into summer. An entire year had gone by since the return of the pilgrims and the meeting at the crossing of the Peacock Waters. It had passed as smoothly as the turning of the prayer-wheel.

Above the whine of the prayer-wheel Lhamo Mtso's voice broke into Dorje Rinchen's preoccupation as he sat in the tent. They were alone:

"Ayah, Doka, hear me this time. Hear me. At the end of the months we will have a child. This time I will not go to Lhamo. Truly, truly, no."

Dorje Rinchen had heard the first time, but for moments, only the intensified hum of the prayer-wheel filled the silence.

"Truly, truly, no," she repeated. "A filthy hut and the shrine of Tamdrin all day? No." She drew back her braids.

Dorje Rinchen had no ready-made plans. He had paid a year of life and half his wealth to be deprived of the privilege of decision and choice. The horoscope had instructed him to follow the advice, the future-revealing, future-solving advice, of the Taktsang lama.

"The lama knows. The lama knows." He spoke mechanically the words of the current phrase for expressing wonder.

Lhamo Mtso's answer was sharp with panic. "The lama *doesn't* know." By his words Dorje Rinchen had handed her over to a fear greater than she had ever known. "The lama doesn't know," she repeated, her eyes searching his face for a decision and an answer.

He had none: only a blind adherence to the word of the Rgyalba Rinpoche and a half-unwilling acceptance of the maxim, "The lama knows." At the end of that phrase silence came again, a conflict weighted with fear to make the rest of the day unbearably long.

The following day the phrase echoed in his mind and he mixed it up with his prayers as he rode toward the Lhamo mountains, Ngoncha throwing his weight against the bit. The encampment was black against the sunset behind him for the trip to Lhamo must be made at night. Even with the companions who would join him before he left the plain, the trail over the mountains round Lhamo was too dangerous for daylight travel. The year had been one of feuds and too many enemies might be abroad. He settled the rifle securely against his thighs as it rested across the saddle and ordered his companions to do the same, for the foothills were dark with shadows and the threat of ambush.

"The lama knows."

He muttered it to the hum of his prayer-wheel and the changing rhythm of hoofbeats in the dark. What actually did the lama know? He had known of Drashi's death, it was true, and a dark threat had followed: "There is more, there is more." Yet he had wrongly advised against action when Lhamo Mtso had been taken captive. And what had the lama known when he had advised worship in the shrine of Tamdrin—that long penance which had been so fruitless?

Out of the memory of her unavailing vigil, Lhate had cried, "The lama doesn't know!" Perhaps she was right. So the endless succession of contradictions beat a weary way through his thoughts while the night passed to the hum of the prayer-wheel and the rhythm of Ngoncha's impatient hoofbeats on a trail half-lost in the darkness. When daybreak drove the stars from the sky and he wearily shifted in his saddle to watch the part of the skyline that was his assignment, Dorje Rinchen had emerged into a half certainty. As pilgrimage had been the high point of existence, so he would accept the guidance bought by pilgrimage. The Rgyalba Rinpoche had commanded him always to follow the advice of the lama of Taktsang Lhamo because the lama knows.

He reached the top of the last pass and came to a first glimpse of the red and white buildings of the lamasery.

8

They had breakfast in the guest-hall of the lamasery business house and the manager himself did the honours. Dorje Rinchen was an important guest. He realized it and, young though he was, accepted the place of honour with little more than a token protest. Meat, sausage, fried bread, and honeycomb were piled the length of the low table, yet he ate little and was done long before his companions.

"All is well in Shami?" the manager said. "Good. The prayers of the monks of Lhamo guard you well. And now this time you have come on important business, no doubt. How can we help you to get it done?"

"The Presence, does he repose well in the big house?" asked Dorje Rinchen.

"Very well. You wish to see him? My acolyte will take the word."

The manager tilted the tea-pot and settled himself to talk. He scented some trouble in Dorje Rinchen's mind. It was on troubles that the lamasery grew great and he did business. Maybe he could persuade the ex-monk to undertake three big chants for the coming year instead of two as previously.

"The lama truly does marvellous things. They say his spirit body rides by night when he himself is in a sealed room. The other day he was locked in his room for a day and a night, but in the morning his horse was found sweat-soaked and streaked with lather and the saddle-pads were still wet. That was the night of the great thunderstorm, but the lama's raincoat was tightly rolled and dry when the acolyte took him his first tea. His powers increase. His powers increase."

"And horoscopes," Dorje Rinchen probed, "what about them? Are they clear?"

"Most wonderful of all. *Om mani padme hum!* He reads the future as we read the words on the pages we turn. We were out at Samtsa when the Samtsa chief's famous black horse was lost. But the Presence drew a circle and pointed in one direction—west. 'Ride in that direction fast enough and far

enough and the horse will be found.' The lama knows how they rode in that direction and the next day the horse was found. Wonderfully clear are his horoscopes now."

The manager broke off to order more meat for his Shami guests, who by this time were scraping ribs and shank-bones with their knives, and then turned back to the one who only held a bowl of tea to his lips and waited.

"But the clearest horoscope of all was about the monk who used to be Aku Lobzong's acolyte. You know him—the big one with the squint eyes. He had a sword-fight with another monk and received eight terrible wounds. The Complete Perfection knows—they were dreadful wounds. Five were in the scalp and the smallest was the breadth of a palm. One on his breast had cut away all the muscle from his ribs. He lay in his blood and we all thought he would die. But the lama knows. The lama knows. He said if the Yellow Head treated the wounds he would live. And he did, after all that! The lama truly, truly knows."

"Ah, the Yellow Head. What did he do?" With the question Dorje Rinchen's attention seemed to shift and come to rest on something near at hand, and the rim of his silver-bound, silver-lined bowl went to his lips again.

"He, too, was wonderful," replied the manager. "The Yellow Head is a great magician even if he does talk another religion. If his religion succeeded, there would be no more lamasery. It will not succeed. Still, he is a healer and shows a good heart. He used medicines, but most of all he stitched up all the wounds with curved needles and magic thread, keeping hands, needles, and thread soaked with strong wine while he worked. The wounds healed without pus. You can still see the stitch marks, but the wounds were closed within twenty days. Truly, he is a great medicine man, but it was the lama who knew what promised life and what threatened death. What faith we have in him now! His horoscopes are wonderfully clear."

The story retold itself again and again in Dorje Rinchen's thoughts as he slowly climbed toward the lama's great house. It battled with memories and prejudices out of the past. Yes, it could easily be that the lama, who meditated day and

night, had perhaps reached the true peak of his destiny; linked in mystic understanding with the Rgyalba Rinpoche in the place of gods. The lama here, and the Rgyalba Rinpoche there; they could speak from a wisdom greater than all. As never before he could say in faith, "The lama knows." He thought briefly of finding the Yellow Head. But he was weary of magic. This was magic, too, and the lama was stronger. He had understood the Yellow Head's kind of magic.

He climbed on and entered doors, leaving the day and sunshine behind him until he could have audience with the Presence himself. Wanjur met him in the courtyard and greeted him with deference, but it was an acolyte—a handsome youth with an odd manner of privilege and assurance—who pulled aside the curtain of the last doorway to let him in and then poured tea. A scarf of blessing, red like spilled blood, was placed around Dorje Rinchen's neck as he made his genuflection. Though his knees were bent his heart was high with pride at the richness of the gift he offered: a length of Indian brocade spread across his two hands. He was sure the lama's eyes widened with interest at the sight of it. So the audience began.

Although Dorje Rinchen declined all but clear tea, pleading repletion, the lama continued to eat, his smooth, sleek hands picking titbits from the platter in front of him. A tiny watery-eyed spaniel begged fretfully for food and attention. As he spoke, the lama let his beads lie idle. His dimpled fingers threatened the dog to make it sit more erect.

"The best spaniels, they say, are only found in the vultures' nests; truly dropped from heaven," the lama observed. "But this one, I fear, is not of such magical or holy origin. The little beast is too much interested in the bitch Wanjur keeps. It is not a good dog for a lama to have. We can't teach him to keep the vows."

Greeting, benediction, and questions about Shami news and the state of Dorje Rinchen's health had flowed mechanically from the lips of that idol face: flatly and without interest. Only when speaking of the dog was there any change in the monotonous voice. There was a flash of animation in the

heavy-lidded eyes as he cut a tiny cube of fat and fed it to the quivering little beast.

Dorje Rinchen watched the by-play and wondered. Antagonism from the past no longer bothered him much. The figure in front of him was not just the lama of Taktsang Lhamo, but part of the complete scheme of saviourhood that had its climax in the person of the Rgyalba Rinpoche enthroned in the Potala. To him Dorje Rinchen spoke in measured speech; assured of his own position, assured of his rights, and confident most of all because of the length of brocade that had been laid on the low table near the lama.

“The horoscope gained on my pilgrimage, a special one in a private audience with the Rgyalba Rinpoche himself, linked all the future of my tent with the wisdom of the Presence. The Presence knows, the Presence knows. . . .”

With these opening phrases he began his speech, expounding the hopes and fears of the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*. To Dorje Rinchen, as he talked of a child, there came memories of passion and possession and another audience with the lama in this same room. The refrain “The sin of begetting—the sin of blood’s desire—there is more, there is more” beat against his hope and prayer. Then the room had been alive with conflict, but this time his words and his need seemed lost in a still pool of indifference. Even the answer he received did not stir those depths. He was simply told to come the next day and he would hear what the unseen powers had to say.

After the ex-monk had left the room the lama still held the quivering spaniel to attention, his plump finger held high, until the dog could stand it no longer and shattered the silence with staccato appeals for the morsels with which it was being tantalized. Suddenly it was pushed aside and the lama clapped his hands as though he had reached a decision.

“Call Wanjur,” he ordered when the acolyte answered the signal. His hands took up the prayer-wheel. Beads and his lips began to move. Wanjur, who travelled constantly, visiting all the tribes, could tell him things he wanted to know. Once he stopped the flow of the beads through his fingers to touch the brocade, and the beginnings of a smile flitted across his broad face.

“The child of Dorje Rinchen,” he muttered. “Yes, the future—we shall see.”

The next day, after his second audience with the lama, Dorje Rinchen sat in the summer room of Aku Lobzong’s house desperately trying to fit together the pieces of that future. He had no clear idea just why he had come to that house of all the houses that were open to him. He knew that the squint-eyed acolyte, who had fallen heir to the house when Aku Lobzong died, was on the lookout for a buyer. However, no word of that passed between them and the squint-eyed one—the pattern of the Yellow Head’s surgical embroidering showing red and clear on his shaven scalp—served tea with only a desire to please a patron of the lamasery with whom he had a special link of fellowship. Both of them had been acolytes together in the cloister of Aku Lobzong. To both, the memory of the old monk, his great rock crystal spectacles and the never-ended *Prayer For Wisdom* being turned leaf by leaf, was very real.

This time the lama’s forecast had left nothing unsaid or half said by such phrases as “There is more, there is more.” From the time of the broken vow there had been nothing but evil and misfortune impending for Dorje Rinchen, the wanlog. Prayers, big chants, and the merit of pilgrimage itself had not arrested evil; only postponed it. The grace of the Rgyalba Rinpoche himself brought warning; the gift of knowing the unseen brought a way out. If not heeded and obeyed, death would come. Death was truly very near, very near, so the lama had said.

“Your wife, carrying the child within her or on her breast, will die of the ‘earth poison’ sore which will disfigure her face. And the child will die too, because she caused a monk to break his holy vows.”

The threat had been terribly convincing, and in the gloom of the audience-hall that morning Dorje Rinchen had pleaded for enlightenment about the way he should take. That too had been clear.

“Leave wife, tent, and all. Come back to the lamasery. Wear the sacred red and, though ever debarred from the chanting, live as best you may, a monk all your days. If you

do that, your wife and child will live. But you must leave them completely.”

Sitting in the room where he had before sat as a red-robed boy monk, it already seemed an accomplished fact. Whatever of evil he could endure, death for Lhamo Mtso was one thought he could not bear. That the body he had held in the ecstasy of possession should be dismembered for the vultures from which he had once saved her? No. That could not be, not while her body was still lovely with the beauty of young womanhood. That the eyes should be closed in her face? That her face should be changed to a sightless sore by the dread plague of the “earth poison”? That her spirit, brave and loving, proud and tender, should wander lonely in the dark realm of Shin-rje-chos-rgyal when anything he might do could gain for it years of living in the light of day? No, death must not be. Not yet. His decision had been instinctive and final.

Dorje Rinchen found comfort in the assurance that the lama’s horoscopes were clear. This time the curse had been definite. So, too, he found himself believing that the solution promised was sure. “The lama knows,” he muttered into his tea and, looking at the scars on his host’s head, recognized them as another proof of the lama’s foreknowledge. Yes, and the lama had even known that the squint-eyed one wished to sell the house.

Dorje Rinchen would not come back to the cloister and to the room where he had once sat as an excited little monk waiting for his mother to take him on his first vacation. Now he would wait for no one, unless it might be for Shami tribesmen to bring news of the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*—perhaps of the child and ex-wife of Dorje Rinchen the wanlog. Dorje Rinchen was now both wanlog and wande: renegade from religion and renegade from life.

There would be much to arrange. Drokwa would, no doubt, manage the herds for Lhate. Perhaps she would go back to Samtsa. He focused his thoughts on the details to be arranged, for he could not bear to think of Lhate’s tears or her wrath. If only he could fight against the unseen, but there were no weapons with which to do battle. Life was a flight, until one

was cornered as he had been in a dark room where the lama's voice had rambled on and on with the tale of transgression and retribution. Was it already too late to ward off that retribution? At least he could try. Dorje Rinchen set down his bowl of tea and spoke.

“How much do you want for this cloister if I persuade the commune to let me buy a house within the lamasery limits?”

He saw, without any desire to smile, how the squint-eyed one's irises went almost straight in sheer astonishment.

VI

THE CONVERT

“I DON’T BELIEVE IT!” Lhamo Mtso had said. “The lama doesn’t know! He doesn’t know that I shall die, and the child too.” Her words rebounded flatly from the unyielding staunchness of his acceptance. Her own sureness and defiance weakened. “At least, probably he doesn’t know,” she went on. “Maybe he is wrong. I am willing to risk all on that chance here in our tent with you, waiting for our child. I am not afraid. Perhaps . . . oh, maybe, Doka, the lama is wrong.” Lhamo Mtso was willing to stake life itself in order to gain a shared future.

She had repeated, “Maybe he is wrong. Don’t you think so too, Doka?”

He did not think so, yet his tortured mind reached here and there for some other hope. He could not find it in the teachings of the lamasery. He remembered the many things he had now read in his new yellow book: of the death of Yeshu, of the supper in the upper room, on these things his mind dwelled at moments in hope, only to flounder again in the realms of dark and superstition. “Ask and it shall be given, seek and it will be found, knock on the door and it will open,” the book said. He had sought at Lhamo. As a child monk he had not found truth in magic nor even in the chanting-hall, nor at Lhasa either. What was the door to the new religion? he despaired of finding it if, indeed, it were there.

When his decision still held firm, Lhate spoke again and he was startled. “Well then, if you don’t want me any more, if your flesh doesn’t burn for me because I have a child within, there are others who will be willing to wait for me. You say Drokwa can look after the flocks for me. Maybe Drokwa can do more than look after the flocks. He can sing

me Golok love songs. Oh yes, he can look after the flocks and herds—and me too.”

He was amazed that her always gentle voice became hard and her eyes stern as she went on bitterly: “So you want to keep everything in the family! We can find another head for Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*. If not Drokwa, I can easily take Duggur away from poor Wochuck if I try. She has so wanted you all these years, it would not be too unkind to take him away from her. Even if I did not do that, he could still come to me at the times I felt lonely for his brother, the wande Dorje Rinchen. Then you can be sure he will take special care of your herds and the children of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*. It would all be kept in the family—and myself too.”

Picking words from her own agony, she flung them where they would strike deepest, “All right then. I will leave. No. I won’t go back to Samtsa. I don’t need the belongings and wealth of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*. I know where someone will give me a place: someone who will keep me warm when the nights are cold—even if I have a child. He is rich, too. How angry the Golok beauty will be! My amber headdress she got will do her no good. It’s not so far to Kanggan when one does have to walk, carrying a child. And the Goloks know well how to love!”

And when he was ready to leave, her voice dry with despair, she said, “You are a brave son, Doka, but now you are afraid. Now you are a coward. And I—what shall I do after the child is too old for my arms? Shall I do all I have said or shall I do nothing? How long shall I remember you, Doka?”

This was the saddest moment in his life, but he persisted. He must save her and their child at any cost.

2

Somewhat recklessly, ten men of Shami relaxed at the noon halt, spreading their effects and themselves around the fire. It would be a long stop because the horses must get a good meal before they went the rest of the way into Lhamo. They were unsaddled, saddle-pads set to dry in the sun and they made adequate preparations for a good lunch. The men had

little fear. They were a well-armed party, spoiling for a fight rather than seeking to avoid one. Tea would soon be ready and in anticipation cold boiled meat began to appear from several saddle bags.

Mechanically, Dorje Rinchen went through the motions of doing his part to set up the noon camp. He scarcely knew what he was doing, though he turned his saddle-pads as carefully toward the sun as if they had his full attention. It was early autumn, the haying was finished and he was leaving the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* behind, mother, father, brother, Lhate—all, and riding towards the lamasery of Taktsang Lhamo. From his place in the circle around the fire he could see the point on the skyline where that tent should be. Abruptly, he got up and changed his place to sit where he could see only the mountains of Lhamo. His companions laughed and shouted round the fire, but he hardly heard them. He was listening to another voice—husky, beloved—reaching into his vitals and twisting.

Remembering Lhate's taunting words, Dorje Rinchen's eyes looked over the faces round the camp-fire and rested on Drokwa's hawklike, slightly one-sided face under his tousled hair. For a man who was a wanderer, self-confessed, he had stayed in the tent of Dorje Rinchen-*tsang* a long time. It was true that his rare, crooked smile had become more of a habit with him as time passed. Dorje Rinchen wondered what he was thinking of as he sat by the fire and waited for the tea to boil. His eyes would not meet the questions in the ex-monk's stare.

And remembering, too, Dorje Rinchen glanced at his brother who sat facing him and wondered what the heavy roguishness in his face might signify. Duggur's eye caught his and the smile broadened. Perhaps all that would be arranged.

Lhate's words turned in Dorje Rinchen's memory like a barbed lancehead torn out from a wound. Against this taunt there was no face among the circle of men waiting for the tea to boil that he could probe, trying to uncover what thoughts it masked. Only days and nights out of the shared experience of Lhamo Mtso and himself, the memory of

sacrifice and bravery that had brought her back, confronted him. Now he had left her.

The joking and laughter of his companions never reached Dorje Rinchen. He kept hearing those words his memory would not let go, and he was aware of nothing else until a rifle banged not far off beyond the nearest hill. The men by the fire, himself included, scattered to take up positions behind the best cover they could find. After a time they began to stir restlessly.

Then Duggur spoke from behind a block of turf that winter's frost had pushed up on edge. "There's nothing. Or, perhaps we'd best saddle and ride to find out who's shooting. Ah, no. Here they come. Nothing to be afraid of, but keep them covered."

Two riders came over the curve of the skyline. The first one was astride a beautiful chestnut which even at that distance appeared larger and more shapely than the ordinary Tibetan horse. Once across the skyline the two horsemen pulled up short. Both were carrying rifles and the dangling feet and horned head of a gazelle behind the saddle of the first one perhaps explained the gunfire. Evidently they were not at all reassured by what they saw, for they turned from their course which would have brought them straight to the camp and started climbing the hill bearing away towards Lhamo, keeping everyone within sight as they closely skirted the hilltop.

"That's the Lhamo Yellow Head on his Pehling horse, and Drashi of Bu with him." Duggur was on his feet. "Call him down to drink tea with us and then we'll all go to Lhamo together. Ku-hu-hu! What's his name? Sherab—Sherab—Sherab something! Ku-hu-hu! Sherab! Come on down! No need of fear. Doka, you know him best. Call him down."

Dorje Rinchen laid aside his rifle and moved towards the hillside. At his shout the two riders stopped to listen. "Come on, Sherab Dzondri. We are of Shami. Dorje Rinchen-*tsang*, friend of Trinlan! No need of fear! No need of fear! Drink tea with us—drink tea—drink tea."

The rider of the chestnut horse dismounted and, putting

something to his eyes, looked toward the Shami camp. Promptly, he remounted and without hesitation rode toward them at a smooth trot, his companion following. The two pulled up short at the fireside.

“Well, O friends, are you in peace?” asked the outlander. He swung from the saddle and half a dozen pairs of hands took over the unsaddling and hobbling of his horse.

“Oh, the gazelle buck?” the Yellow Head acknowledged the questioning gesture of one of the Shami. “Yes; just killed beyond this hill. Ah, you heard the shot? It is merit to meet you here! Now we can drink our tea without fear. It would have been frightening for the two of us alone to boil our tea in this region.”

The Yellow Head might have been a Tibetan—his speech seemed much improved—except for his hair and eyes and the fact that his shoulders showed a somewhat redder tan than those of his hosts’ as he let his dzakwa slip down and settled to his tea. His bowl was like Dorje Rinchen’s own and he dipped his finger-tips in the melted butter floating on his tea to grease his face. Yes, he was almost a Tibetan like themselves. For all that, at his suggestion for broiling the meat, a strained silence blanketed the group round the fire. Presently Dorje Rinchen spoke, somewhat hesitantly.

“Thanks for the meat, but we’ll boil it, though it does take time,” he hesitated. “The . . . the . . . mountain gods are fearful in this region and they would smell the scorching meat. And—danger there truly is.”

He finished somewhat abruptly. Never before had abstinence from the process of broiling meat seemed in the slightest degree ridiculous or needed any explanation. The fire belonged to him. He was not going to have any vengeful mountain gods camping on his trail.

The Yellow Head smiled and gestured briefly with one hand. For some inexplicable reason, his smile reminded Dorje Rinchen of Trinlan, although otherwise the two had no resemblance to each other.

“Call it my fire, then,” the Yellow Head said. “Here, it is my fire! I am the owner and put my fuel on it—so. On my head be all the wrath of the mountain gods, but let us all eat

broiled meat. It is much quicker, and tastes better too.”

“Fair enough!” Duggur’s laugh answered the Yellow Head’s smile. “I’ll eat broiled meat at any time on those conditions. Get some of the ramrods from the rifles. Here, let me help cut the meat.”

Dorje Rinchen shrugged his shoulders. He was more than a little scornful. He had thought of consulting the Yellow Head: had hoped that possibly he would know something helpful about the mystery of sin and salvation; but at this moment the Yellow Head seemed more a layman than himself, carrying freshly killed meat on his saddle, disregarding the mountain gods and scattering no tea from his bowl as an offering. Dorje Rinchen was not altogether sure about who owned the fire, though his companions evidently accepted the arrangement without question. Without further ado, they began to broil the meat. He might disregard the mountain gods, but the Yellow Head was still a guest. Dorje Rinchen leaned forward to slip an additional piece of butter from his own private box into the Yellow Head’s bowl. He added a slice of cheese.

“Some of my own cheese, Sherab——” He stopped abruptly. The outlander’s head was bowed, his eyes were closed and his lips moved. Dorje Rinchen stared. What was the matter? Then Drashi spoke in a hoarse whisper.

“Keep still. He’s praying. He does that before eating. Keep still. It will be soon over.”

It was only a few moments later that the Yellow Head smiled at Dorje Rinchen, saying, “Your cheese? Yes, surely. It is whiter and finer than what is in my sack. Many and great thanks.”

Dorje Rinchen had forgotten about the cheese. “You were praying?” he questioned, half incredulous. “You pray about your food? For what and to whom?”

“I say ‘Thank you’ to Complete Perfection for the tea, butter, and cheese you give me as well as saying ‘Thank you’ to you. It all comes from Him. I have to say ‘Thank you,’ don’t I?”

“Yes. *Om mani padme hum!* Yes. And the meat you killed? *Om mani padme hum!*”

“His gift to me if I need it: if we all need it,” the Yellow Head amended. “He gives us all things to enjoy abundantly!”

“But the sin—*Om mani padme hum!*—of killing?”

“It is no sin to kill animals for food and clothing. What about you and your big new dzakwa? Is it sin to wear that? And if so—yes, you say it is sin, I know—what other thing could you wear? And for food . . .”

A half-dozen answers broke from the circle around the fire, but Duggur’s heavy voice drowned out the others: “Mouth of hell! We have to eat, don’t we?”

Dorje Rinchen said nothing. A sense of the whole dreary inevitableness of sin in existence—sin as an integral part of it—swept over him. Only in complete non-existence could there be any peace and that was not to be attained in any one cycle of living or renunciation.

“Surely you have to eat—I have to eat,” continued the Yellow Head. “I eat gazelle meat broiled—better watch and pull that ramrod out of the fire—and thank Complete Perfection for His good gifts. He is a Father who sits in the heavens, having love.”

“Then you believe there is no sin—none whatever?” Dorje Rinchen carved a broiled steak with his sheath knife almost grudgingly. He well knew the mere eating of that meat was sin.

“None in eating this. The kingdom of heaven—that part in the realm of peace that assures a home in the sky—the kingdom of heaven is not in eating and drinking but in rightness of heart and peace. But sin—ah yes, all men have sin: such sin that, if it is not cancelled by atonement, will press one down to destruction, to the misery of hell. It is true religion to have such atonement. That is the Yeshu. . . .”

“If killing and eating meat is not sin (that’s not bad, is it?), is it sin to have a woman? By the Buddha, that is something I need to know!” Duggur’s chuckle, as he interrupted, was almost drowned out by the laughter that came from his fellows.

The Yellow Head waited until they quieted and then said laconically, “Sometimes,” and laughter at Duggur’s expense again swept the group.

But Dorje Rinchen's only remark was, "*Om mani padme hum!* The lama knows!"

The meal went on: equal parts of talk and food, both in ample measure. Dorje Rinchen realized that the outlander was speaking to him.

"If you are coming to Lhamo for a few days, come and stay with me. There's room for you, room for your horses and hay for them too. Come on and stay—all of you. Ah, no? Well, then, the three of you who are together, at any rate."

Dorje Rinchen remembered that Lhate had wished to see the Yellow Head's home and possessions, but most of all his wife and child. He had promised to take her there some day. He felt guilty that she was not here and a refusal was on his lips, but Drokwa interrupted with—a rare thing for him—unbidden speech:

"Ayah, Sherab . . . Sherab . . . What is the rest of your name—with respect? They say you can draw music from an instrument with string, and your wife, the Pehmo, draws it from a box: tunes like the ones you sang that night in Trinlan's tent. Can you? Is that all true?"

"Ah yes, that is so. Come and stay, and in the evening I will draw music for you from the strings and we will sing words to tunes. My wife will draw music from a box. And then we can talk religion every night after the evening soup."

"But we will trouble you. We have so many horses." Duggur sounded more than half-persuaded. "Besides, we have enemies. We will trouble you."

"Not at all. At least you will be safe behind my walls and there are seven dogs. Your horses will be sheltered at night. Yes, and Dorje Rinchen, whatever troubles you have, come to Lhamo. Although I am not a lama, I am not a ruler, I am not powerful; whatever I can do to forward your affairs I have a heart to help if I can. Stay some days. I have plenty of hay. Your horses will not lack. Stay some days—the three of you."

Dorje Rinchen's acceptance of the invitation came more from his companions' eagerness than of his own desire. For Drokwa the bait of music was irresistible. Drokwa had assumed a new importance in the general scheme of things, but the

unwitting irony of the Yellow Head's offer of help was a bitter jest that Dorje Rinchen found hard to swallow or forget.

The meal ended. The second making of tea was boiled and drunk. The horses had begun to rest from their grazing with satisfied sighs. It was time to go.

3

On the afternoon of the day following their arrival in Lhamo, the three kettle-mates sat in the Yellow Head's guest-room and lazily discussed their plans and affairs. So far nothing had gone as expected. The lama had been in meditation. His door had already been sealed for two days and would be for two more—maybe three—and nothing could be done until he came out.

One day in Lhamo was enough for Duggur when there was no festival; he wanted to get back to the tents. Dorje Rinchen, too, was in a hurry. His desire strained towards finality and the cutting of every tie. The change, he felt, could be no worse and might be an improvement on his present condition.

Only Drokwa was really content. He sat nearest the stove, cross-legged on the felts spread over the floor. His bowl held to his lips, he watched the boiling tea escape from the spout of the pot and run hissing, in drops that had the persistence of quicksilver, across the stove top to disappear in the ashpit. He scarcely saw what he watched. He was trying to remember a melody, several melodies, the Yellow Head had sung the evening before. The sudden clamour of seven dogs, howling their distrust as voices and hoofbeats swept in through the big gate, and shouts of greeting, arose in the courtyard.

"Guests. More guests to see the Yellow Head." Drokwa looked around somewhat ruefully. "Just when we were nicely settled at the fire. And probably people we don't know." Dorje Rinchen was already on his feet when the light through the open doorway was blotted out by two men who entered, dragging saddle-bags, raincoats, and rifles.

"Best yet," he greeted them. "So you have come, too. Are you wholly in peace, having met no trouble?"

It was Trinlan who answered, his face shattered by a grin.

“Yes. All roads are open to the brave sons of Samtsa.”

The Yellow Head was out, but his wife played the role of hostess well. She differed from her husband. Indeed, Dorje Rinchen, watching her and thinking of Lhate, wondered if she were truly an outlander, for her eyes and hair were dark—not blue and yellow like those of a demon escaped from hell. Her hesitant Tibetan was bolstered by her smile. Trinlan, evidently, approved of her most heartily. His face lit up as he answered her greeting. He turned to Dorje Rinchen:

“Ya, Doka, so you pour tea for me! You, yourself! And where is Sherab Dzondri while his guests sit in the guest-room?” Then to the others, “When are all of you coming to stay with us again? It will be a long time before we reach the winter huts and the grass is still good at our last camp-site. We still have tea to give you, as white as this you pour, if you will come. It is not too cold yet. Oh you’ll come, I know. I am going to get Sherab to come on a hunting trip with me.”

So the talk went on: of friendship, of mutual regard, of family and community interest, of the life that Dorje Rinchen had already left behind. From time to time Trinlan’s glance probed at his reserve and finally, when he had wiped his knife and put it away, had finished with tsamba and bread, his words followed, oddly indirect:

“Are you thinking of the religion that the Yel—that Sherab Dzondri”—Trinlan’s swift interjection of the outlander’s name instead of the nickname Yellow Head was a tribute to the presence of the Pehmo who still offered tea for their empty bowls—“is talking every night after the evening soup? You, who can argue so well, have you argued about the Complete Perfection and who made the world?”

They turned to gossip and shared memories of religious maxims. At times they referred questions to the Pehmo, asking what her creed had to say. For the most part, they talked among themselves about sin and she was silent; seeing to it, however, that their bowls were kept brimming with white tea. It was clear that, for all four, sin had been newly defined as wilful, a thing of choice, rather than the inevitable sum total of existence. Only Dorje Rinchen seemed to fully sense the additional result of increased accountability and guilt.

Dusk swept in upon their talk, broken at intervals by attention to the necessary chores of feeding the horses and taking them to water. Only Drokwa seemed to lose interest. He was trying to recall the Yellow Head's songs. At length feeling sure of one phrase, he tested it softly:

"My sin, what can cleanse it?" It echoed, a haunting question, in the dark room once—twice—three times.

"Lord's . . . Lord's . . ." But he could not recapture the reply in the second line. Dorje Rinchen broke in, "If you can't remember the answer, don't sing a question over and over again. That doesn't make a song to listen to. Sing a Golok love. . . . No, never mind."

Drokwa with unusual docility said nothing and gave up the attempt to sing, but when the Yellow Head returned Drokwa found the words easy to follow the second time he heard them.

My sin, what can cleanse it?
Lord Yeshu's honoured blood only.
My iniquity—what can cancel?
Lord Yeshu's honoured blood only.

"That verse again, Sherab," he begged and, with repetition, made it his own. The refrain was the easiest part of all

O honoured blood so precious,
Me white like snow it washes.
I other springs do not know;
Lord Yeshu's honoured blood only.

Evening soup had been served and eaten. The guest-room was filled with members of the Yellow Head's household, the guests and one or two Lhamoites who found their way inconspicuously to the outlander's place when the time had come for music and religion talk. Almost everyone tried to take part. Drokwa, at last sure of the tune, settled himself to hear more talk about sin. Instead, the Yellow Head, putting down the instrument with strings, and pushing the books on the low table in front of him to one side, leaned closer to the light until his shadow covered half the wall. He asked a question.

“Why must the Gurdu lama—he is twelve years old, isn’t he—have an instructor? Doesn’t he already know the letters and creed of the enlightened one?”

“He doesn’t know them and has to learn them like any other little acolyte.” Trinlan spoke first out of the general astonishment. The others gave their assent to what he said.

“But in his previous existence, was he not the Gurdu lama even then, and didn’t he know the letters and creed at that time?”

“Mouth of hell! Passage through the eighteen hells would make anyone forget!” Duggur’s attempt at pleasantries was laboured. “I can’t remember anything of my previous existence. Can you of yours, Doka? I must have been in hell a long time.”

Doka knew the answer for that—an argument hammered out in many a religious debate: “Remembrance is burned out by the suffering the soul must undergo.” That was easy, but a dawning uncertainty showed in his next words. “But as to the Gurdu lama, he is always reborn immediately. Yes; he knew letters and the creed before, but . . .”

“Ha!” Trinlan’s exclamation was like a bark. “And he suffered nothing in hell. So, how did he come to forget? He was reborn immediately, yet why did he forget? All right, Sherab Dzondri, you tell us why he forgot what he knew in a previous existence.”

“Because there is no previous existence on earth for anyone.”

“But the wheel of existence turns and life goes on endlessly in a circle.”

Dorje Rinchen was in his element. It was as though he were a monk and about to clap down a vanquished opponent. At any rate, the battle of words and wits helped shift the burden of sin from that painful point in his consciousness.

“One is born, one lives, one sins——” Ah, there it starkly pressed its claims even in his argument: “One dies, one goes to the eighteen hells, one suffers, one wins release, one is born again and, slowly going round and round, one may win salvation.”

Trinlan took up the argument. “But it is true that a lama knows nothing of his previous existence,” he said. “I know

very well all the things a little lama knows and does not know. Not having suffered the pains of hell, he should know something! But a lama is as stupid as any little acolyte. He remembers nothing."

"Ah yes," the Yellow Head interjected, "and by going round and round you reached Lhasa, the place of gods. By going round and round I crossed the great ocean and came from the land beyond the sea straight to Bodyul. By going round and round? And tomorrow, Duggur and Drokwa here will get to Shami no doubt by circling the merit path here in Lhamo."

The Yellow Head's voice was gentle but the words he spoke were, nevertheless, sharp.

"Yim, by the twelve books, the lama's honoured corpse, and the towers of the temple!" The length of Duggur's oath was the measure of his tribute. The shortness of Trinlan's laugh was also appreciative but somewhat noncommittal. Drokwa still hummed the refrain "Oh honoured blood. . . ." "But the eightfold way *is* round and round. The attainment of merit *is* by going round and round—hence the path of merit. Existence must be an endless cycle. The wheel of life turns round and round. And so the soul tries again and again to escape from existence and be saved. Again and again we can try."

The Yellow Head's voice gained in earnestness as he said: "And on earth we go straight as the mountains, rivers and bogs will let us when we wish to arrive. Only when going to the sky home do we go round and round to arrive. Or do we arrive?"

"Listen to the word of the Complete Perfection who made the sky, the earth, the sun, the stars, the moon, men, and all living things—grass and trees, too. We need only hear His words. If I argued with you till the fire burned out in the stove and the dawn lightened the sky it would mean nothing for you can argue quite as well as I can—better at least in Tibetan.

"But listen well to this, 'It is ordered for man to die once and after that to be judged.' That word *once* makes the road of life a straight line. We cannot change it. The Complete

Perfection that made all things, the great powerful one has ordered it. His honoured order stands. We must die once. Not many times, between many rebirths, but one. After that we must be judged from the sins I told you about last night—the sins and the sin—leaf, branch, and root. Life is no succession of circles, but a straight line, leading from one time without end to another time without end. It is but once: once to live, once to choose, once to win or lose, once to be saved, or once to be lost.”

Once—one time—once. Again and again that word was driven into the consciousness of those who heard as the Yellow Head told of death and judgment. He told of death that has a thousand different ways of coming to chill the blood, stop the heart and lead away the soul, yet that comes to each but once. He spoke of judgment until the room seemed filled with accusations, indictments and the low thunder of an irrevocable sentence. Again he took up the instrument and found a melody entwined in the strings:

Yeshu, my only hope,
Saviour risen to life again
Thinking of the pains of death
I sometimes of them am very fearful.
I, that Christ is alive,
Recall, and am happy again.

They all followed as best they might, Drokwa begging for its repetition. Dorje Rinchen did not sing, nor did he remember the music afterwards as he tried to sleep and waited for the dawn. To the monotonous accompaniment of Duggur's snores he went over the whole long argument. There could be but one conclusion. To the burden of existence had been added the hazard of a single chance. Once—once—his thoughts added the word “only.” Once only it was ordered for man to die and after that to be judged.

“*Om mani padme hum! Om mani padme hum!*”

“Once only—once only.” The urgency of his need drove him as never before. When he became a monk again—as much of a monk as he could ever be—he would devote all his time and strength to meeting that need. For the present,

he must wait two more days while the lama finished with his meditations.

“*Om mani padme hum!*”

He could scarcely wait.

4

At daybreak, Dorje Rinchen stood outside the big gate of the Yellow Head's house watching Duggur and Drokwa ride to the ford to join the Shami horsemen who waited there. They had said little at leaving. An odd constraint seemed to lie between all of them. Even Duggur had been silent.

Dorje Rinchen turned back into the courtyard, feeling that he had cut the last tie. Ngoncha whinnied at him. When he offered a twist of hay, the piebald rolled his eyes less wickedly than usual. He had not sent the horse back to Shami, for the Yellow Head had spoken of buying it. Maybe the transaction would go through. The Yellow Head's price might be good, and Ngoncha would be well taken care of.

The day dragged on. Dorje Rinchen had a long, indefinite talk with the squint-eyed one about the Cloister of Aku Lobzong; enlightening, but inconclusive. He spoke to the Yellow Head at length about the excellencies and virtues of Ngoncha and early in the afternoon the outlander went for a short ride to try him out. He came back with a guest whom he met on the way and all further talk of the horse deal was dropped in entertaining the new arrival.

Trinlan and Dorje Rinchen became somewhat reserved while sharing tea and fire with the newcomer. He was a Tebu—a villager from the land of farms and forests.

Word came that the lama would be in meditation another three days, seeing no one. At that, even the distraction of inspecting some of the Yellow Head's belongings and examining his firearms with appreciative and critical care, failed to keep Trinlan quiet.

“Three days of meditation! Three days of death! Let him meditate. Go back to your tent, Doka.”

Doka's only answer was, “*Om mani padme hum!*” Dorje Rinchen too was conscious of a new suspense. He waited the long day through—for what he did not know. At last when

the Yellow Head began to turn the pages of his book, bending close in the uncertain light of a flickering candle, and started to sing, it all became clear. He had been waiting for the Yellow Head to sing and talk of death and judgment. Disappointingly enough, this song was not of sin. It was a new one: "Sheep ninety and nine within the sheepfold were hid, from danger and harm they were safe. . . ." The word "sheep" stirred the nomad's heart as he listened, hunched in his sheepskin coat and thinking of his own flock; hundreds of the great, white-fleeced sheep of Shami. He could almost hear the bleat of a lost ewe in the mournful refrain. Nevertheless, he was disappointed. He wanted a clear-cut answer to every one of his questions. A sheep story promised nothing.

"Religion is not words and thoughts; spoken, stamped in beautiful letters on paper, and then read." The Yellow Head hesitated, as though feeling for words or perhaps trying to come to some decision. His fingers gently plucked the strings. Suddenly he laid the instrument aside and spoke:

"Religion is life—life of the heart and the spirit and life is best explained by the facts, experiences, and pictures of life. Because of that the Yeshu Good News has many stories and illustrations. Yeshu Saviour, His honoured self, gave many illustrations: of fishing, of sowing and harvesting, of trade and building a house.

"This time I will tell about the sheep and the shepherd who came from the sky home to find us."

Regretfully, Dorje Rinchen gave up, for the time being, his thoughts and questionings about death and judgment and settled himself to listen. Evidently the Yellow Head would talk about sheep. The story unrolled scene by scene: a story of wilful folly, danger, hopelessness, and a sure doom impending in a land more desolate than the country of the wild yak. Through it Dorje Rinchen seemed to hear the bleating of a bewildered, fear-stricken creature: or was it the faint echo of his own terror? In the first pause he politely voiced his interest and approval of the tale's authenticity.

"Sheep are like that—dumb creatures with no sense, and wilful, too. When they get lost they sometimes die of fright. I have lost many, just that way."

The Yellow Head went on: this time of a shepherd going through the dark, fording streams, climbing mountains; soaked by the storm and chilled by hail and wind. In stark danger himself, he was mindful only of the peril threatening the bleating sheep.

The homecoming part of the tale did not greatly interest the nomad. In a confused way, he wasn't sure whether the sheep was carried on the shoulders of the shepherd, or tied behind the saddle on the horse. It seemed to him that the Yellow Head had mentioned the shepherd's shoulders. That of course must be wrong. It must have been carried on the horse, if the shepherd was a true shepherd of the grasslands and a brave son on horseback.

What he heard was also strangely mixed with his remembrance of a little naked boy half-hidden in a marmot hole, his bare skin scraped by bits of rock as he ducked to the roar of gunfire and watched his father defend the sheep as a brave son of Bodyul should. Memory added pathos to the words of the Yellow Head, like the appeal of childhood scenes recalled in a new land far away. The past, the present, and the future were strung together and tied to the word "sheep." But what about the sheep?

"We are all like sheep gone astray." The outlander turned all the power of the tale, unwittingly reinforced by memories the ex-monk suddenly found precious, on Dorje Rinchen himself.

"You are the sheep lost on the wild mountains in that desolate land with the night, danger and doom all around. We all have wandered, wilful and foolish. Truly, we are the sheep and someone must come and find us or we are finally lost. But who is the Good Shepherd and where?"

Dorje Rinchen remembered his father, his body flattened behind insufficient cover, using the Bora against heavy odds. He had fought like a brave son of Bodyul and a good shepherd. But what the Yellow Head said was different. Where was the reality behind those images and that drama of the lost sheep?

"The Good Shepherd is not the one who eats the flesh and wears the pelt of the sheep: taking the lambs for their skins

to make a warm lining for his shirt, the milk to make white his tea, the body of the ewe as his food, and the pelt for his cloak. Such are not the marks of the Good Shepherd.”

As the Yellow Head proceeded to tell of sellers, buyers, and killers of the sheep, Dorje Rinchen remembered the shouts of the monks who rode to collect butter for the lama: the arrogant shouts of those who went from tent to tent sure of their right and privilege. He saw a great face, expressionless in the half-light of a darkened room, and eyes that turned toward a length of Indian brocade, widening with interest at the richness of the colours.

It was Trinlan who interrupted, unable to contain himself: “By the twelve books, that’s the lama, himself, who eats the old and wears the skin of the young! Well said, Sherab—well said. But who is the Good Shepherd?”

“Even the one who raids and fights for the sheep: risking his life, but riding unscathed and triumphant on his way, even he is not the Good Shepherd——”

Dorje Rinchen’s father, a shepherd of Bodyul, lying behind a fold of the hilltop and using the Bora, risking his life, but riding home safe and triumphant: even he had not been a good shepherd. Who was the Good Shepherd? What his mark? Dorje Rinchen turned toward the speaker, forgetting his studied air of aloof indifference and the debate habits of the Tibetan casuist, to follow more closely what the Yellow Head was saying:

“The Good Shepherd, the supremely Good Shepherd who can truly seek and save, is known by one strange sign, borne by none other. He gives his life for the sheep. Only in this way can he save them.”

Dorje Rinchen remembered some of the story as it was told in the yellow book: a story of love—infinite love—marching steadily towards sacrifice. Throughout the confusion and turmoil of hate, the bitterness of betrayal and cowardice by those who should have been true and brave and in all the agony of suffering and death, Yeshu the son of the Complete Perfection—one of the Holy Three—justified His claim to the title of Good Shepherd.

“He offered up His gift; not wealth covered with a scarf

of felicity, but life covered with spittle, sweat, and blood. Only in this way could he carry home the sheep that was lost.”

From the depth of his fear of death and judgment Dorje Rinchen could not suppress the question: “Why should He give His life and spill blood? Why couldn’t He save by power alone and the sheer force of religion? Could not the Complete Perfection have cast a potent spell over evil and won without sacrifice?”

For long moments, not of silence but of music, the Yellow Head did not answer. He was singing:

My sin, what can cleanse it?
Lord Yeshu’s honoured blood only.
My iniquity—what can cancel?
Lord Yeshu’s honoured blood only.

No one attempted to join, though Dorje Rinchen and Trinlan knew it quite well by now. The Yellow Head finally spoke:

“Blood”—the hateful word was the most distasteful of words for all of them—“blood must be paid, for blood is life as you well know, and life must be paid. Life, our life, the life of the wilful foolish sheep is forfeited because of sin, and so life must be paid before the sheep can be taken home. Just as in a life and death feud when all attempts at settlement fail, the life of a prisoner, paid rather like a substitute, may bring peace when atonement is being made.”

“*Om mani padme hum!* The lama knows!” Dorje Rinchen was not conscious of having spoken, not once but twice. “Ha, *Om mani padme hum!*”

He remembered two faces out of his past: one with twisted lips and wide open eyes—the face of the man he had killed; the other, a face completely alive, yet showing a strange resemblance to the first through its mask of suffering and fear—the face of the prisoner whose life, traded in the settlement, had saved Dorje Rinchen from the fear of immediate punishment and had brought peace for all the tribesmen of Shami when nothing else could. What was it Trinlan had said? “A life for a life: that is the most complete atonement of all.” One man’s life for one. Now one man’s life for many. Atonement! He heard the Yellow Head saying,

“So Lord Yeshu’s honoured blood was spilled for us, and His life paid in atonement that we might have peace and freedom from fear. So the lost sheep—you, the lost sheep on the wild mountains of this uncertain life—was saved and brought home by the Good Shepherd who gives His life for the sheep—for you.”

O honoured blood so precious,
Me white like snow it washes.
I other springs do not know;
Lord Yeshu’s honoured blood only.

That refrain kept Dorje Rinchen’s thoughts company through the long night. Towards dawn he slept.

He dreamed of being taken up into the mountain, like Lord Yeshu after the fast in the wilderness, up to the vast, snowy mysteries of that mighty peak, Nyin-bur-yur-tsi and there he felt the scorching breath of the devil, himself, Shin-rje-chos-rgyal. He felt it searing his back. He was tempted and he had sinned. There was judgment for sin, but forgiveness through sacrifice and the blood of the lamb. Blood? There was terror in this dream, as always, it was confused and cold all around him and again he did not understand. Yet as he woke, briefly, there seemed a kind of peace in his heart that he had never known before, and then he fell asleep and dreamed again.

5

The Yellow Head had a strange way of eating. The next morning Dorje Rinchen watched him and the Pehmo take their early tea. The night before, the Yellow Head had sat beside him in the guest-room, sipping a soup from a bowl exactly like his own and Dorje Rinchen had ceased for a while to think of him as an outlander. Now, however, he drank a strange-smelling tea without cheese or butter in it, from a peculiar bowl with a handle. Most marvellous of all, he ate with an odd assortment of instruments.

“It is of great importance, Sherab Dzondri, great importance,” Dorje Rinchen replied to the question in the outlander’s face, “but finish your early tea. Finish it, with respect. No;

I won't drink. No; Pehmo, thank you. Not now, nor in the guest-room, until after we have talked."

"Is it about Ngoncha your horse," the Yellow Head began. "Certainly, he is a brave son of a horse and I——"

Dorje Rinchen had forgotten about the proposed sale of the piebald. "No; it is not about the horse. But it is important. Can we talk outside in the open where no one can hear us?"

Suddenly the Yellow Head seemed to have finished his drinking. At least he was ready to go. He rose. "We'll go up on the hilltop," he said.

They climbed through a morning that was like wine laced with sunshine, flavoured with the faint scent of nearby fires and iced with frost crystals that still drifted downward through the air.

Dorje Rinchen seemed to be immersed in them, their moisture touching his hands and face. His breathing became quick for a time and then, with a kind of overwhelming peace, clear and deep. Everything seemed suddenly to become transfused, a light pouring over him and drenching him like wine.

They reached the hilltop without meeting anyone or exchanging a word, pausing not far from where Dorje Rinchen and Trinlan had once picnicked. As then, the world of Lhamo lay below: newly stirring to the morning, while acolytes and worshippers went their ways among the cloisters and the sound of the morning chant came like the faint hum of a distant hive. The Yellow Head was silent waiting for him to speak.

"It is very important . . ." Dorje Rinchen hesitated, the practised orator for once uncertain of his words. "I have heard all you have said about the Yeschu religion, and know at last it is true. I know I have sins and know I have only one chance for the sky home. It is true—it is true. I believe. And last night. . . ." Again he paused. "Last night I had a dream. I dreamed I was falling—falling far, and bleating like a frightened sheep. Someone caught and held me, and then I knew. I am the lost sheep and Yeschu is the Saviour. But now, what do I do to obtain safety—final and sure? To accept salvation's way, what do I do now?"

“What do you do to settle any affair when all is arranged? How do you cut it short for good?” the Yellow Head asked.

“By speaking with the mouth and sealing it with words.” Dorje Rinchen’s answer was prompt, almost without conscious thought. Actually, he was still asking his own question over and over again in his mind.

“If you believe with the heart and confess, speak with the mouth and seal it with words, you are saved: a lost sheep no longer.”

“Speaking with the mouth and sealing it with words. Yes. But to whom—how—when? *Om mani padme hum!* How is it done?”

From the merit path below, the praying of the pilgrims was like the persistent echo of Dorje Rinchen’s exclamation. The Yellow Head cut through it:

“By praying to the Complete Perfection now, and saying it later before men for all to know. By praying now. But you must leave those things out.”

The Yellow Head leaned forward and touched the tangled assortment that reached round Dorje Rinchen’s neck and hung on his chest: his charm-box filled with tokens of the Lhasa pilgrimage and consecrated to his tutelary protector deity, his rosary with the toll of his prayers recorded on thong-hung record rings dangling from the cord, and the scarves of blessing that had accumulated with his piety and zeal until they hung, a great multi-coloured assortment of enormous value as far as merit was concerned.

Dorje Rinchen lifted his hand and fingered them. He realized that he was faced with a choice.

“*Om mani . . .* No. That is not the prayer.”

He must take them off. Until he did, he was still the lost sheep. With a sudden movement he lifted them from his neck and dropped them in his lap. He bent his head as the Yellow Head had bowed his and listened to a prayer. Yes, the Yellow Head did it most adequately. That was a very complete introduction to the new Triune Complete Perfection, especially to the Lord Yeshu, Saviour and one of the Three. And then? Yes, then it was his turn to speak with the mouth and seal it with words. He began,

“Triune Complete Perfection—Father, Holy Spirit Self, and Lord Yeshu. I am Dorje Rinchen of Shami, wanlog and a great sinner. A great sinner with many, many sins. I truly, truly have no hope and am like a lost sheep. The road lost, the way lost, the hope lost, and soon the life to be lost. This is what I am. *Om mani . . .*”

He stopped in confusion. That was not it. Those words belonged with the rosary and charm-box. He was praying another prayer.

“That is what I am, Lord Yeshu. You Honoured One have made atonement for me, You Honoured One came to seek me; now You Honoured One take me and keep me safe: lost no longer, but saved. Forgive my many, many sins, for the atonement You have made it great enough for them. Give me a place in the sky home. I promise myself to You, Honoured One. I’ll only pray to You, Honoured One, and I’ll never wear these or trust them again. I am Yours, Honoured One. I obey Your honoured word any time whatsoever. With respect and great thanks. That is it—with respect. I have spoken with the mouth and sealed it with words.”

The mountains still listened in the clear air that brought them so close, but Dorje Rinchen knew that another also heard—someone besides the Yellow Head. From the depths of that assurance, with a sudden comfort, he added one phrase culled from the half memory of something he had read or heard, his heart’s true expression nevertheless, to make his prayer complete:

“Our Father, sitting in the heavens and having love—with respect—with respect.”

6

They walked back down the hill. Now Dorje Rinchen could drink his early tea. Sherab Dzondri seemed thirsty too. Brimming bowls, scraps of meat and sausage left by Trinlan and the Tebu waited in the guest-room. Beside the food sat Trinlan, curiosity and bewilderment mingled in his expression.

“You’re late,” he said. “Where have you been? Ah, wait.

Do you realize you've lost your rosary and charm-box? Can you think where? Amazing for you to lose it! If it were me, now . . . but for Dorje Rinchen, the prayerful wanlog to be so careless!"

Dorje Rinchen didn't answer. He dipped his fingers in the melted butter floating on top of his tea and polished his face. Then he lifted the bowl to his lips. No; he had forgotten something. He set his bowl down and bowed his head. He must say "Thank you" to his new "Father sitting in the heavens." A few moments later he looked up and answered Trinlan's astounded stare.

"I have chosen and taken the Yeshu religion. I am now a Yeshuwa," he announced. Then he waited for argument. There was none.

For once Trinlan was too amazed to say anything. His dark face was more contradictory, more at war with itself than ever.

Always, Trinlan mused for the third or fourth time that he had entertained the same thought, always life is easy for Doka. I was the first to leave the lamasery—he much later—but since then he has always been ahead of me on the road. I have known the Yellow Head longer, yet Doka has changed his religion for the Yellow Head's. I am still uncertain: always uncertain of my own religion but doubtful too about the Yeshu faith. For Doka, it is simple and certain. Such were his thoughts but he masked them well, and all he finally said was: "It is good. It is good."

The meal progressed. Dorje Rinchen, on his part, was in no hurry. A little later he would have to finish negotiations with the squint-eyed one for Aku Lobzong's cloister. Living in Lhamo would make it easy to learn more of his new religion. He thought of that for a few moments and inevitably his thoughts wandered to the lama, the curse and the spirits—hearthstone, spring or mountain-top—that are so ceaselessly and maliciously active. And then the amazed stare that he could not contain challenged Trinlan's attention.

"It is gone," Dorje Rinchen gasped. "It is gone."

The spirits had gone. The curse had gone. Did those spirits exist? He did not know, but they seemed to fade—at

any rate, and were powerless to hurt him. He had once wished for arms and armour with which to do battle against unseen fate. Now someone did battle for him and the power of the unseen was gone.

"It is gone," he repeated the words a third time and saw the lama's face growing more and more indistinct in the gloom of a darkened room. As always, he marched simply and directly along the path; even the new path he had just found. Again he spoke, this time to Sherab Dzondri.

"If you don't mind, I do not want to sell Ngoncha. I'll need him for my ride back, and for guarding the horse herd. That is, unless you really want him very badly. . . ."

There was a shout. "By the blue heaven, the lama doesn't win after all! The lama loses!" In his triumph, Trinlan's smile was more crooked than ever. "He loses at last. He meditated too long. By the Twelve Books, too long! But have a care, Doka, about what he will say and do when he finds out he has lost. Act with a small heart, oh you brave son. Act with a small heart."

But the Yellow Head answered Dorje Rinchen's question. "Keep Ngoncha, by all means. I have my own mare. You'll need a good horse."

Hearing the words, Dorje Rinchen went out into the sunlight of the best day he had ever known.

7

Ngoncha pranced through the gateway of the Yellow Head's place, the sound of his hoofbeats like the roll of a drum as he went over the threshold, while seven dogs, tugging at their chains, bayed a farewell. Then, as the piebald hesitated a moment on the rim of the descent and danced under the insistence of the sawing bit, two farewells reached Dorje Rinchen:

"Go in peace. Go in peace."

It was the farewell he had heard all his life. And then another:

"Go in peace—go in peace—the Lord's grace."

But it was Lhate's smile that flashed from Trinlan's face and sent him on his way. That resemblance no longer caused

him pain and regret. He went on, thinking of her as he had thought many times throughout the last two days; thinking of her as he had been used to think and yet differently.

He had suddenly come to the realization that the love and ecstasy he had known had yet been tarnished by a persistent sense of guilt. Remorse—the unquiet ghost of his broken vow—had haunted his best moments. Now that shadow was gone and he thought of Lhate's face with tenderness. He had thought of asking Sherab Dzondri questions about that, but after one glance at the Pehmo's face when she met her husband, the answering look she received had made the questions unnecessary. And then they had looked at their child! Some day he and Lhate would have a child, too. He thought of the hearthstone spirits as one thinks, in broad daylight, of an unpleasant dream.

Ngoncha had reached the edge of the stream and wavered. The regular ford where everyone crossed was a hundred paces or so downstream, below the creaking prayer mills along the water's edge. To cross above was shorter, but sacrilegious. Dangerous. Dorje Rinchen's fingers tightened on the reins to swing Ngoncha downstream. It was then that the prayer-mills came into a new focus in his vision: rolls of writing, impotent prayers turning because the water flowed against the wheels—and to him of less value, by far, than the grist mills further downstream. Under the impulse of that illumination transmitted without thought to hand and knee, Ngoncha plunged straight forward by the shortest crossing and, with the splashing of the water, Dorje Rinchen's spirit had crossed another river.

The chanting-halls, the white cloisters, the dark grove of Tamdrin the three-eyed one—suddenly powerless in his shadowy shrine—fell away behind him as he rode on. It was a place of colour contrast and interest, but that was all. It was only scenery. The praying of the monks at a chanting-service followed him—the sound of many voices saying words—that was all. That sound grew fainter as he rode, a murmur that had been brushed aside by the whistling wind long before he had reached the pass.

Once at the summit and with all his force and skill as a

horseman, he held the horse to immobility and looked back. He was not waiting for companions. He was alone, starting in the late afternoon on a night ride. He was riding alone for the first time in his life since the time he had ridden to Samtsa for Lhamo Mtso. Yet it was not that he had gained any new assurance in either his horse or the rifle he carried—a gun borrowed for the trip from Sherab Dzondri. He would not be altogether alone. In that consciousness he sat on his horse, staring back at the lamasery as at his old life.

The scene was exactly as it had been when he had ridden away—a little boy monk of seven years—to a black tent for his first vacation. The lamasery of Taktsang Lhamo filled in the face of the opposite mountain with a red and white pattern of shrines and cloisters. In the distance the pilgrims looked like ants, yet they might have been the same as those of over twenty years ago. Now all had become incidental, clear, and commonplace. Lhamo was a shrine no longer. The pilgrims were merely men walking across a distant landscape. One feature had been added to that picture: the new scar made by the walls and terrace of Sherab Dzondri's dwelling, carved on the hillside.

Dorje Rinchen's eyes rested longest of all on that point, tracing a wisp of smoke that climbed against the sky. That would be from the guest-room fire and Trinlan no doubt was still sitting there, listening or arguing. Why should he make such trouble about believing? He, Dorje Rinchen, had no arguments though he had tried to make Trinlan understand. As yet, what had happened was too fresh to be put into argument. It simply was.

Ngoncha fought stubbornly for his head and suddenly wheeled to face toward Shami. His rider held him to a standstill and listened. The whine of his prayer-wheel was lacking, and to fill the silence Dorje Rinchen began to hum scraps of melody, using the tune to link unfamiliar words to each other. "Yeshu to me makes love . . ." The words formed a comforting prelude to the life he would have in the sky home hereafter. They carried, too, the assurance of a new life awaiting him in the distance where the plains of Shami marched to the edge of Peacock Waters. Lhate was there, waiting for him

and the new life he was bringing: waiting in a black tent raised against the sky. Again he hummed the words:

Yeshu to me makes love,
Yeshu to you makes love,
Yeshu to me makes love;
In the Holy Creed it is written.

“She will be glad to hear about that,” he said. “*Om mani—*ah no, that it is not it.”

Stumblingly his lips began to say another prayer, as yet half learned:

“Our Father, sitting in the heavens . . .”

Dorje Rinchen gave Ngoncha his head and, following the Shami trail, passed beyond the skyline.

